

Hawk's Story

by Jared Yelton



a **WINDS OF CHANGE** universe story
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“Bird is the Word”



Tiffani was starting to get tired, channels on the television were starting to turn off for the night, and I was having a hard time keeping my eyes open. I squinted at my watch, pressing the small light button to read the display: 4:00 A.M. It was amazing how much time you could kill when you weren't paying attention.

“Hey, it's really late,” I said quietly, realizing it was actually quite early, but too tired to care.

Tiffani raised her head from my knee and looked quizzically at me. “Oh, yeah, I guess it is.”

“Guess I'd better be going. I'm never going to make it to work on time tomorrow,” I explained.

Stretching, she stood up and turned off the television. I yawned and turned on the light, suddenly wishing I still worked second shift.

We walked up the stairs and out onto the front lawn. She still lived with her parents, so we didn't want to wake them by talking inside.

It was a cool morning, the slightest glow beginning to show above the mountains in the east. She folded her arms in response to the temperature and took a few barefoot steps on the wet grass. I looked at her warmly, thinking again how beautiful she was, especially in the shallow moonlight.

I reached out and held her arms, trying to take some of her chill away. At the same time I had the sickening feeling that we were growing ever closer to breaking up. Few words passed between us these days. Our interests seemed to be increasingly conflicting. She was reluctant to find work, and I could not support us both. It was difficult enough to make payments on my apartment as well as a new vehicle.

“Guess I'll see you Wednesday?” she said more than asked.

“Yeah,” I said, recalling my schedule. We had planned a trip to Salt Lake to visit some of her friends, and also to stop by HawkWatch to get some more mice for the Hawk I took care of.

Sky was an injured Red-tailed Hawk, whom I'd taken in three years ago. She was now part of educational programs that took us to schools and environmental conferences teaching people about birds of prey.

Frankly, when I'd first met Tiffani, I thought she was going to love that kind of work. But as I got to know her better, I found that while she loved animals, small pets and domestic animals were more her fortè.

But tomorrow morning was my regular job, a computer network technician at a printing shop. And I would get a healthy three hours' sleep if I was lucky.

“Okay, don't fall asleep driving home,” she warned, half-joking. Although as light as my head felt, I welcomed her advice. Already my knees were wobbling from lack of rest.

“I'll turn the radio loud.”

We kissed each other goodbye and I walked to my truck. Sometimes I just wished things were simpler. I had such a hard time figuring out girls. The evening had gone well. We'd watched a couple movies, ate popcorn, and laughed a lot. It had been fun. But somehow, something was missing. We just weren't right for each other anymore. She was more into parties and alternative music while I would have preferred to take her to the mountains and watch a good sunset. She liked the city and all the attractions. I guess I was more of a silent outdoor type.

But gosh, she was cute. Red-brown hair cut to the perfect length, deep brown eyes and a wonderful smile. She was as white as snow; for some reason dark tans just didn't do it for me. Thus, she fit my description of stunning.

I turned the key in the ignition and backed out of the driveway. The roads were still glistening from the mild rain, and the smell of clean air was great. I watched her in the mirror as she went back inside. Then my attention defaulted to the road.

I was in the unpleasant situation of liking someone very much but for the wrong reasons. It was inevitable that we would depart each others' company for opposite directions, but the agonizing questions were when and who would get the honors of announcing it.

Shaking my head, and opening my eyes wide to push sleep away, I turned onto the main road and headed for home.

As I shifted into a comfortable cruising speed, I shifted my thoughts to other matters. The new fiber op network equipment had arrived and the busiest week in my life was upon me. Yet, here I was staying up to the most ridiculous times and barely managing to stay on top of things. At some point I had to fail.

I realized I was going to need to buy a third alarm clock just to wake up on time.

I turned the radio on and browsed the stations. Nothing good was playing, so I turned it back off, noticing for what seemed the first time the sound of the tires on the road.

The dotted yellow lines never seemed to end, but finally I pulled into my car port and glanced at the clock. 4:34 A.M. With a lengthy sigh, I turned off the engine and headed straight for my apartment.

Once inside, I threw my keys and change into my desk drawer and gladly slipped off my shoes. I promised myself I would never stay up late on a Sunday again, although I knew I probably would.


I went to the kitchen for a drink of water, then stopped by the bathroom for a bit of last-minute business. Turning off the light, I headed for the bedroom, relieved to be home.

I looked for a moment at the computer, but decided not to bother checking for email. I could have cared less at that point.

I slipped out of my clothes and got into bed, making sure the alarm clocks were armed and ready. I contemplated with animosity the thought that it would only be a short while before they began their morning serenade.

Just before turning off the bedside lamp, I stared for a moment at the picture above my bed. A Red-tailed Hawk perched on a piece of desert wood. A very old poster, actually, but one that had somehow become an important reminder of what I wanted to do most. Helping birds and educating people were only part of my life, but it was a rewarding one.

I switched off the light, and hoped for dreams of flight and freedom.

 was rewarded superbly. My dreams were more vivid and intense than any I could possibly recall. Every feather felt real, every beat of my Hawk heart. I could hear the wind calling to my soul, saying I belonged to it. I could taste the freedom that beckoned from the clouds.

I was soaring above the world, not hunting or traveling, but flying for the simple reason that I could. I was navigating a wide thermal, adjusting my tail and letting my wings guide me, when quite suddenly a rather strange pain erupted within my body. For a brief moment I thought something I ate had caused sickness, but reasoned it would be much different. No, it was a jolting, weakening sort of sensation.

I lost altitude and began to swirl helplessly downward. I could not concentrate on my flying. The pain changed, and became intense through my legs and wings. Cringing, I folded my wings, which only led to faster descent. Quickly, I opened them to slow myself, and the pain intensified again. I was caught in some sort of strange paradox.

Barely able to glide, I approached the ground shakily and prepared for a rough landing. My tail began to hurt, and my beak ached. Something was incredibly wrong. I winced with the intensity of it all, and when I opened my eyes again, I was staring at a white ceiling.

It had been a dream after all. My mind tried to sort through the elements of the dream, which remained quite solid. Shortly, something became apparent; there were still residual effects: A gentle pain was emanating from my arms and legs. All over my body, in fact, when I tried to focus on it.

My mind snapped to attention and I awoke fully, trying to determine what was going on. Hoping that the strange sensations would cease when I sat up, fully conscious, I was rather worried when they instead increased. It was an itching sensation, almost like the childhood nightmare of chicken pox but not as aggravating. I turned on the bedside lamp with a familiar motion. I looked at my arm and noticed the small hairs on it were standing up. It didn't feel like goose bumps (all these conditions with bird names in them!), but when I touched them, they felt stronger and wiry.

I cocked my head in wonderment and breathed heavily. My lack of sleep must be having adverse effects on my imagination. I looked at the clock. 5:02 A.M.

I considered calling in sick to work. But with the network the way it was, I couldn't afford to. Neither could the company. Damn.

I turned my attention back to my condition, and was startled with my hairs' development into small 'shafts.' I peered closely at them, trying to match what I was seeing to a disease or problem I knew about. Nothing even came close. I wondered where my medical encyclopedia was, but then as the pain began to increase, I began trying to think of ways to make it stop.

I rubbed an arm, and felt seething pain where I touched. My arm was too sensitive and felt as though I'd been burned. I left it alone, but watched in horror as the shafts became longer and thicker. At the same time I noticed them on my chest and legs. It was as though every small hair follicle had suddenly decided it was on steroids. The pain subsided some, and as long as I didn't move much or touch anything it was bearable. I laid back again, slowly because the same weird phenomenon was occurring on my back. Staring at the ceiling revealed no answers and I could only guess as to what sort of fate I was destined.

The pain came in a few erratic tremors, but subsided within several minutes. I dared not move for fear it would return, but as I laid there, a warmth began to creep into my body, and a very comfortable soft feeling. I took a deep breath for the tenth time, and decided to explore once again.

I raised my right arm, testing for surges of pain. None came, so I moved it into view.

I didn't know whether to scream for sanity or in pleasure. My arm was covered in feathers. Not as though I'd dipped my arm in glue and tossed feathers onto it, but genuine, patterned, real feathers. They were evenly spaced, and as on a bird's wing, were smaller on the forearm and longer beneath. I noticed some larger shafts were still growing with feathers emerging.

The same was true of my left. I raised my head, and saw feathers covering my entire body. White down feathers were in some places still uncovered by larger contour feathers, but those were growing and fanning out at an amazingly fast rate.

I threw the bed covers aside and looked closely at myself. Brown feathers on the top of my arm, dull white underneath. Ivory feathers on my chest and mottled brown and rufous flecking on my abdomen; completed by more ivory feathers from my legs to my ankles. I felt my head and determined that my hair had been replaced by feathers as well.

My heart rate increased and my breathing quickened as adrenaline began to course through my veins. I didn't know what was happening or what caused it, but I was incredibly excited by it. The pain had mostly ebbed away, and the new feeling of warmth from the feathers was very intoxicating.

But it left me to wonder: Why was I still human? My body still resembled that of a human. I looked carefully at my hands. Definite fingers. My arms were not wings. My toes were human toes. My feet seemed a little yellow, but in the dim light of the lamp it was hard to tell.

I swung out of bed, standing up and feeling very different. The feathers were absolutely beautiful, but I simply couldn't understand why they would grow as they did. It would have surprised me less had I simply woke up as a Hawk. It was a private wish, anyway, one that I had come to hope would be realized. But this was totally unexpected.

I walked to the bathroom, not bothering with clothes. My reflection in the mirror startled me. It was still me, recognizable, yes, but it looked as though I had put on a form-fitting suit of feathers. Seeing myself fully as I did, I swallowed in freak satisfaction, realizing I had very close resemblance to a Red-tailed Hawk. But why would a thing like this happen? It was like a half-change or something. Maybe that was it. A change gone wrong. It figured. I was an accident waiting to...

Pain again. This time I didn't know where it was coming from. It wasn't as bad as my dream, but nevertheless, I knelt down and winced as it shook me. I felt a shrinking sensation and my limbs felt very sore. My head ached as though it were being squeezed.

I forgot about having feathers and began wishing for death. This was far too much. As I set my jaw and waited for ... something, I quickly considered all the possibilities.

Was I hallucinating? I didn't know much about hallucinations, so maybe they really did feel real and everything. If so, was it a drug or something? Maybe Tiffani had put something in my drink.

But I dismissed that idea quickly, knowing it was probably more unlikely than a sudden case of feather growth.

Was it really happening to me? I didn't believe in magic, but I was beginning to think otherwise. Other than a few misguided thoughts, I had nothing to do but try and cope with the apparent reality of the situation.

As before, the pain eventually subsided, and I opened my eyes. I felt very strange. The comfortable feeling of feathers returned, as well as a host of other types of physical information. I felt lighter. The floor of the bathroom was pressing into my side much less than when I'd first knelt and dropped to my side. Not slightly less, a lot less. It felt as though gravity had changed density by about half. I looked around, almost expecting objects to be floating away from their places. Everything was where it was supposed to be, though.

I also felt smaller. I had not spent much time lying in the bathroom floor, but I knew I occupied more space under normal circumstances. When I'd dropped to the floor, I'd been close to hitting my head on the wall, while my feet had been near the sink. Now my feet seemed just as close, while my head was a foot or so away from the wall.

Cautiously, I stood up, feeling stronger and lighter despite a growing headache. I looked in the mirror again, and knew I was indeed shorter. The relation of myself to the rest of the furniture and things was wrong. Or rather, different. I guessed I had lost a foot and a half in height.

Feeling like some kind of mad scientist who had forgotten he'd even performed an experiment, I looked at my arms again, and saw that they more closely resembled wings. Longer brown and white feathers trailed from their bottom edge and my fingers were getting smaller. It appeared that I might soon lose my smallest finger altogether. It was a condition that might have worried the ordinary person. But once the pain was fully gone, I experienced odd sensations of joy. Perhaps I really was going to get my wish.

So this 'change' progressed in stages... I became a bit frightened with the idea that the pain would return. But my fears were replaced by curiosity as I looked more closely in the mirror.

My eyes were orange-yellow. They had no resemblance to the human eyes I had owned just moments ago. I was thoroughly fascinated, and even more so when I discovered that my vision had improved as greatly as my eyes had changed color. Once upon a time they had been blue-green and seen images in relatively good detail. That was no longer the case. Where I had seen feathers before in the mirror, I now saw incredible detail. Without any effort I saw the individual barbs of each one. I could read the small print on the bottles of hairspray on the counter. With a wry smile, I realized I would not be needing *those* any longer.

I spent a few minutes poking myself and pulling on feathers and looking at things with new sight. It was filled with incredible discovery. My legs had gotten thinner and my feet more yellow. My arms had somewhat flattened from their round human shape. My neck was longer, my height reduced, and my forehead lower. My pelvis was smaller as were my genitals, but still not like a bird's.

I began looking around for a scale to weigh myself on, but realized I didn't have one, when a third series of changes began to happen.

This time the pain seemed less, but I knew where it was coming from. I felt distinctly my face changing, and knew without a doubt that my beak was forming. My neck elongated slightly more. My feet changed dramatically, a more digitigrade bone structure finalizing itself. My toes shifted and transformed themselves into an unmistakable four-toed bird foot. Yellow scales had appeared and covered my feet from ankle to toe. Long, black talons emerged from each, forever erasing the ugly, pink, useless toenails I had known for so long. A tail grew from the base of my spine, creating a brand new set of sensations. Muscles I had never before possessed became part of my body. Finally, I felt my insides quiver with internal changes and my reproductive organs altogether become internalized.

The physical changes alternated from nearly painful to almost pleasant (you probably can guess which). When I again tried to stand, I found that my legs were so different it wasn't going to be a simple matter. My knees were higher up and my toes and ankles were much farther apart. In addition, my raptorial feet, with their incumbent hallux, were designed eloquently for perching. I was sure I could stand quite comfortably, but I was totally unfamiliar with an opposable toe.

By grabbing furniture with the remaining four fingers of each hand, I was able to pull myself up and stand. Shakily at first, but with growing confidence.

My concentration was drawn from my legs quickly, however, when I caught a glance of my face in the mirror. A black and yellow beak had replaced my nose and mouth. My eyes and the ridge above them created a very piercing expression; one I had come to admire in birds of prey. My face didn't seem quite right, though. After a few moments I determined it to be because my eyes still were too forward-facing, and my beak had not become long enough. But the effect was dramatic enough to keep me staring at my reflection with a newfound appreciation for good looks.

One thing concerned me, though. My tail was pathetically small and the feathers only half-formed. But I realized I was probably in for any number of additional phases of Change. I sighed, somehow wanting to get it over with in one huge ordeal. But I realized that much physical strain would probably kill me.

There I was, almost a Hawk. An incredible, unbelievable thing had happened to me, and I had decided it no longer mattered how or why. I would savor the moment for the rest of my life.

A loud crash in my kitchen brought me out of my self-admiring mode and into a panic. And it wasn't as if some object had simply fallen. My hearing did not seem to have improved nor degraded, but the crash sounded horrible and unidentifiable. I walked, tediously, to the entrance to my kitchen, to find a wall smashed and my microwave on the floor in pieces. Through the hole in the wall I could see the next-door apartment, and in that hole... Was a very bewildering combination of human and elephant. The elephant morph seemed out of sorts, but soon stood up and realized what had happened.

It took us both a moment to gather our bearings and realize who each other was. The elephant was Eric, my neighbor. After a couple of minutes of regaining stamina, Eric found his ability to speak and apologized for the damage. Apparently he had just woke up and went berzerk when he realized what was happening was not part of a dream. I admitted that had I not been awake for most of the changes I myself might have had a crazy moment. (It took several tries for me to figure out how to talk with a beak. There were a few consonants I am still having trouble with!) But my strength could never have totalled a wall quite as effectively. Given the situation, we both thought the giant hole rather funny.

The pain and discovery of the Change forgotten for the moment, we talked about our own ideas and concerns. Apparently I wasn't the only one to have developed an incredible likeness to an animal. Eric was not quite as overjoyed as I was with the latest developments. At least he resolved not to be pessimistic about it: "Nobody's going to mess with me ever again!"

"It looks like your trunk could pulverize someone's skull!" I commented, wondering if that was really possible.

He shrugged, a strange sight with his huge grey shoulders. "I doubt it, but you could probably shred anything with that beak."

Now it was my turn to shrug. "I wonder what this will do to our eating habits..." I began to consider the consequences. They suddenly became quite numerous.

Eric was silent. He was sitting on my kitchen floor while I stood nearby. I looked around again at the room in general, trying to think how some things would be useless: My cups and glasses, probably. I doubted drinking would ever be the same with my beak. But I had no disenchantment with it. I noted that in order for me to look directly at something I had to turn my head. My eyes were much less mobile of their own accord.

"I wonder how many people this happened to?" Eric wondered aloud.

I considered the possibility of everyone in the world changing into something or other. It seemed like such a huge, impossible thing. But the idea of humans becoming extinct in this way was actually rather appealing...

"I don't know," I finally answered. I tried to think of something else to say, but nothing seemed appropriate. I wondered what Tiffani had changed into.

Eric went back to his apartment to "work things out" while I returned to the bathroom to stare some more. Several minutes had gone by since the last phase. I wondered if this were it.

Almost as soon as the thought entered my mind, it happened again. This time my face hurt slightly, causing me to close my eyes again. I had been expecting it, really, but it still came as a shock. My eyes burned for a while, as did my beak. Then my tail seemed to have caught on fire, for it grew and became complete with twelve large red tail feathers. Each had small brown bars on them, ending with a white band. Only a few seconds had gone by, but somehow I knew it was over. I felt different. Like something inside of me was telling me that I was better after a long sickness.

I looked at the last place of activity, my tail, and tried to smile as I discovered I was a western Red-tailed Hawk, exactly as I'd hoped. However, my smile was intercepted by a feature on my face called a beak. While I had some movement left in the corners of my gape, my beak was, for the most part, immobile. I opened it in the mirror, experimenting with facial movement. I was astounded by the awesome extent of the Change. My tongue was long and thin, and the roof of my beak (palate) was covered in an upside-down V-shaped line of backward-pointing 'barbs.' To this day I still don't know what they really are.

I closed my mouth with a satisfying clicking sound, and noticed my expression finally seemed correct. I almost scared myself.

I let my mind drift elsewhere, and understood for the first time that this was no game. It was real. I wasn't dreaming anymore. No more wishes.

Then I wondered if I was to change fully into a Hawk. My arms looked somewhat like wings, but I knew they were hardly going to bear me aloft. They did not fold against my sides as wings did, and instead of large primary feathers on the end, I retained four rudimentary fingers (counting the thumb), now a yellow scale texture that matched my feet. Each was equipped with a smaller talon. My thumbs had become much smaller, and while still opposable, I estimated that picking up objects was going to require much practice.

Just then, the telephone rang twice quickly. It was the priority ring I had programmed in for my work number. Habitually, I glanced at the clock. 7:22 A.M. Late again.

I picked up the receiver, and noticed I no longer fit the phone as it was designed. I held the speaker end to my ... well, where my ear was supposed to be.

"This is a prerecorded message from Jon B. Printing Company. Due to current situations beyond our control, all shifts have been suspended until further notice. Please do not be alarmed. Thank you."

I remembered that several times last year when the power grid was being updated work got called off. In fact, the owners had installed that calling system because it was so bothersome to get in touch with everyone. Apparently someone had decided this Change was worth taking the day off. I was quite relieved.

I hung up the phone and it became clear that everyone must have Changed. It was an overwhelming consideration. My own imagination faltered at the attempt to visualise the future.

I looked down again at myself. I looked just like an overgrown Red-tailed Hawk, except my wings were absent. I spread my arms and noted that they could almost pass as wings. The long primary and secondary feathers were present as they would be on full wings, but the width and length of my wing-arms was plainly too small to function. I was rather disappointed. Even so, they looked impressive.

I spent a couple of minutes checking myself over a final time. I seemed to have all the physical abilities of birds of prey, according to the books. I could turn my head very quickly and easily, and as far back as to look directly down my spine. My red tail feathers were there, long and unfanned. Thinking about those new muscles I'd felt earlier, I eventually managed to move it. I fanned the feathers and was amazed at how much surface area they had. I could feel the wind generated by my slight movements. Feathers covered me, and if I thought about it I could feel the tremendous warmth they provided. Ordinarily when I woke up and got ready for work, my apartment was kind of cold. Now I was comfortable, if not perhaps too warm.

I found the oil gland above my tail, present just as in normal birds. I wondered for the first time exactly how they used it. I knew that when preening with their beak they spread the oil through their feathers to keep them water resistant and in top condition for flight. I supposed those kinds of activities would eventually become routine.

I felt my head again, perplexed with the new shape of my forehead and beak. The sides of my head were feathered, ears internal. I poked around and found them behind my eyes, and functioning just fine. It felt strange not to have any sort of skin or cartilage surrounding them. But that's not to say I wasn't happy about it. I was quite ecstatic, in fact.

I confirmed that between my legs there were no longer the human parts I was familiar with. It was a difficult thing to accept in a way, yet satisfactory because I knew it could simply not be otherwise. The aerodynamics of it were great, even if I couldn't fly with my hybrid wing-arms.

I found myself looking at the phone. I wondered what my other friends and family had become.

I picked the receiver up and dialled Tiffani's number. I had to press the flash button once because I accidentally pressed the wrong buttons. It definitely was going to take some practice to become accustomed to having real talons instead of pointless (literally!) nails. I got a fast busy signal, meaning that the system was using all available lines.

I hung up and decided to try later.

I shuddered to think of her or my family as animals. It was not something I had pictured before. I was not as shocked by my own transformation given that it was something I had thought about before. But when I tried to think of my friends as something else, I drew a blank. Eric had changed into a morph I never could have imagined. It was incredible, when one considered the complexities, how everyone was so drastically altered. I questioned for the hundredth time what kinds of things could have caused such an event. Was it global? Maybe some kind of localized disease? A strange scientific project (secret, no doubt) that had been accidentally released? My mind could come up with far more questions than answers.

I almost laughed. I almost wondered if the solution was beyond my ability to think. Was my mind altered in any way? Was I really a bird brain?

There was too much to consider. I walked carefully back to my bedroom to sit on the bed to think things over. Almost as soon as I'd turned to sit down, I realized it wasn't going to happen when my tail feathers encountered the mattress and notified me of my error. Sitting was out of the question.

So I stood in the middle of the room, finding that it was really not tiresome as it had been before. My legs seemed suited for standing, just as a bird's were.

I was hungry for information, though. The questions kept adding up, and I had to get some sort of feedback. It suddenly dawned on me that my computer was probably my one best source of news. I turned it on and made a mental note to thank the apartment staff for installing a network node for the 'net in our complex. It was always accessible, and didn't rely on the telephone lines. It took me a minute or two of experimentation to get used to how different the keyboard and mouse felt to me. I accessed my email account first, and received nothing. I had almost expected as much. I clicked on the send button, and began entering a quick message to my friends who had accounts.

"Phone lines are tied up. Not sure if what's happening is just where I live or everywhere, but I am a Red-tailed Hawk. It's what I've always wanted! :) Not joking around. Reply ASAP."

I copied it to everyone on my list and started browsing the news sites. Most still had yesterday's information, but TNC's news page had a giant banner across the top that said 'NEWS FLASH!' flashing in red. At least they were on top of things.

There was a couple of paragraphs saying mostly what I already knew. It seemed everyone was Changing by various degrees into apparently random animals. It *was* global, and there were no reasons given. Not even any speculation. Then some usual safety-type information like not to panic and use the phones as little as possible, etc.

I logged off and looked towards the window. The world as I knew it was gone. What was going to happen now? Everyone Changing was enough to throw the entire concept of civilization out of balance. Or was it? People in emergencies seemed to pull together and survive.

I returned to the bathroom and looked at my reflection. A sharp-looking Hawk peered back. Hooked beak, orange-yellow eyes, brown feathers; the works. I wondered if it really was over. I didn't feel human anymore, but I didn't feel completely like a bird, either. I'd never conceived of an in-between transformation before, but that was exactly what had happened.


While I felt somehow let down about not becoming 100% bird, I was excited about the Change. My thirst for adventure had been effectively quenched, and yet my adventure had not yet begun.

All of a sudden, my apartment seemed like it was closing in. I had an intense desire to go outside. I felt like running around and stretching. I walked out the door and was stunned by everything I encountered. First, there was the detail in everything. The grass, the sky and the buildings. I could *see*! I had never known what I was missing. Then there was the sun on my face and feathers. It felt so inviting and warm. The wind was blowing a little, and I could feel it rustling my feathers. Lastly, there was the assortment of other animals ... er, people venturing into the outdoors. I was taken aback by what greeted me. A deer; a horse; another, smaller bird; and two dogs. Across the street a couple had come out to their lawn. One looked like a (incredible!) dolphin, the other was a panther.

I sat down on the steps of my apartment, overloaded with surprise, and screeched in pain. My poor tail. I just had to learn!

Several of the other tenants looked over, but in contrast to the morning they were experiencing, my situation was rather unimportant.

It was then that I realized I still had not put any clothes on. It was that habitual thing, causing a brief moment of embarrassment. But I noticed that I was not the only one appearing outside my house naked. Fur and feathers had more than made up for the need for clothing. I was content with that.

oon approached and I was getting restless. I was torn between wanting to stay and watch the news to absorb every tiny detail about this Change—and going somewhere. The problem was I didn't know where to go. Even though I realized *everyone* was different, I still felt strange at the thought of going somewhere in my present condition. Not that I was embarrassed about my looks or anything; on the contrary. I was quite proud of myself.

I'd turned on the news channel and heard pretty much the same thing over and over as they repeated things. But I did find out that younger children still remained fully human. I wondered why and if they would grow up normally.

The president came on at one point, with a short speech about how there was no conclusive evidence about why the Change had happened and how every top scientist in the country was working on the problem of understanding it. The usual "don't panic; stay calm" routine. The most fitting thing, though: He was a Bald Eagle.

He was similar to me in that his arms were a cross between raptorial feet and wings, but attached to his back was a set of very normal-looking wings. I examined my back more closely, wondering if I simply hadn't completed my own metamorphosis. There were no telltale signs of wings nor any indication there would be. I got a sinking feeling and for the moment forgot about how great every other change in myself had been. All I wanted to do right then was fly. That had been a good portion of my wish. And suddenly everything was granted except that one part.

I turned off the TV with an angry jab of a taloned finger. I felt shortchanged. Every other bird morph I'd seen had wings. And they could fly. I was never a great student in physics, but it seemed impossible that their wings could provide sufficient lift for their mass; but the fact that morphs of bluejays, robins, meadowlarks, magpies, and crows were flying about outside proved otherwise.

The feeling of being earthbound and left out had never been so complete. I walked back to my open front door and looked out across the lawn. Why did life have to be so unfair?

It struck me suddenly that I hadn't fed Sky yet. Birds of prey were capable of going for a few days at a time without food, but there was no reason why she had to.

I went to my fridge and looked for mice. Then I almost hit myself for being so forgetful. I was out. That's why I had planned on going to Salt Lake to get more.

So I opened the freezer and found some beef heart. It had no fat and was the next best thing to natural food, provided some bone meal or undigestible matter was mixed in. It was important for birds of prey to get bones and fur for their crops. In the wild, that sort of thing was brought up later as a pellet and cast aside. The whole process cleaned their crops and contributed to proper digestion.

Noticing the microwave in several large chunks on the ground, I decided to thaw it on the thermoplate. As I stared at the ice dissolving on it, I suddenly realized I was hungry myself. And the bright red meat on the plate was beginning to appear very appetizing. Before, feeding Sky was somewhat of a one-way understanding. I took mice and rats out for her, thawed them, and fed them to her. She'd rip them apart and for all purposes, appear to quite enjoy them. Needless to say, it was something I couldn't understand as a human, and consequently never really cared. In my desire to be more birdlike, however, it was something I had not overlooked. I figured I'd learn to like it if I ever got there.

And now I was.

I could feel saliva building up across my tongue. The red of the meat was uncannily homing in on my hunger. I'd never felt like that before. It was raw meat, for crying out loud!

But as the turntable stopped and beeped its completion, I picked up a warm slice and promptly opened my beak to consume it. I stopped myself, though.

What was I doing? Certainly I would get sick! I looked at it again, which was a mistake. I couldn't resist. I had to know.

I popped it in my mouth and swallowed.

There was little taste to it, really. I wondered if that was because it really had no taste, or if it was a result of birds not having as many taste buds as mammals.

I stopped at the thought that I was no longer a mammal. All the unusual questions and concerns that were popping into my mind lately!

I felt the warmth of the tender bite slide into my crop, just below my neck. It was an altogether funny feeling, but one that provided immense satisfaction.

Without thinking about it, I repeated myself with two more slices. There was only a small one left for Sky. I checked the freezer again. No others.

Thinking how strange it was for me to be eating my bird's food, I searched the cupboard where I usually kept the "seasonings" for Sky's food. I sprinkled some bone meal onto the last slice and then looked for some down feathers or something to add to it. They acted just like mouse fur and would help form pellets later.

The box I kept those kinds of things in was empty, and at about the same time I was giving up, I realized I could just grab a couple from myself! I shook my head at the irony of the whole situation, almost hysterical with it. I stuck my fingers under my chest feathers and pulled lightly on a white downy feather. It pulled against my skin uncomfortably, but came out without much effort. I looked at it for a moment, remembering how many times I had stared at Sky's feathers with envy. The fact that it was mine was intensely satisfying. It was large enough to practically wrap the slice of meat in, so I pulled it in two and used part of it.

I was eager to see what Sky would do when she got a look at me...

I walked out the door again, trying my best not to trip with the odd new movements of my legs. I found that the high-stepping, somewhat hopping style birds' used to walk actually worked best for me as well. Behind my apartment was the mews I had constructed for Sky to live in. I couldn't see her beyond the wooden slats, but I knew she would be anxiously awaiting.

I unfastened the lock on the door and heard her jump from one perch to another. I knew she would be on the closest one.

I opened the door and expected her to jump to the feeding block as usual when she saw the meat I was carrying. Instead, she saw *me* and stayed right where she was. I almost expected her to spread her wings, open her beak, and raise her feathers in defense, but she just stood there, staring right at my face. I wondered what was going on in her mind just then. Did she realize it was me? I was pretty sure that I was too convincing to be taken for some sort of costume. As I stared back at her, I realized it was sort of like looking in a mirror. Her plumage was a little different than mine in that she was rufous on the chest and in general. I was a 'typical' or in-between morph. Red-tails had several colorations that were fairly common. Dark, light, typical, and rufous. There was also Krider's Red-tail, a very light plumage, and Harlan's—very dark. Most rare of all were the albinos.

Finally, she angled her head one way, then the other, trying to figure me out. It was almost funny.

I did the same, finding out that I could copy her intricate head movements. That nearly confused her, and I could see for the first time a real expression of bewilderment in her eyes.

I set the food on the feeding block and stood back to let her do what she wanted. She glanced at it, but didn't seem very interested. I guessed if a Hawk two or three times your size walked up and set some food down in front of you, you'd be more interested in the oversize bird.

But at least I was glad she didn't get largely defensive and panic. I stepped back further, just outside the doorway, and leaned against the frame. Watching her was totally different now. Seeing her talons curled around the perch meant something new. I could feel my own toes' similarity. Seeing her feathers and knowing how they felt. It was strange and wonderful.

Finally, deciding to allow her some privacy, I closed and locked the door, walking away so she'd have a chance to eat.

I looked around at the world again. Cars and houses and trees. All looked normal. The grass was still green. But everyone was Different.

I felt a giddiness like a child; a happy euphoria. Something had Happened. I jumped up and spread my arms as though they were wings and let out a scream of bliss. Instead of being a "Whee!" as I'd expected, it sounded much more like the raspy call of a Hawk, which was even more exquisite.

But as I looked up at the same sky and the same clouds, I realized I could not go there. It wasn't meant to be. Much as I appreciated the new abilities and attributes I now possessed, flight was not to be among them.

A Western Kingbird Morph flew swiftly by, his yellow chest shining brightly in the sunlight. His arms seeming somewhat out of place, but nevertheless beautiful. I sighed, and thought again how nice it would have been just to be a normal bird...

...and encountered a strange sort of mental barrier. It was as though my thoughts abruptly stopped and an almost tangible wall was there. Like dredging up a memory where you can remember all the details except one, and you're struggling to recall it. I wanted to know what it was I had come up against. What was it about Hawks I didn't know? What couldn't I remember?

I pushed against the wall, trying to get to the other side, and felt much more than a mental burst of energy. My body lost weight and size at an alarming rate, my arms lost their small fingers and became...

Wings! As I looked at each of them, I saw fully-formed wings! And as I got my bearings again, I swallowed hard when I realized I was a true Hawk. There was nothing even remotely human about me any longer. I was less than two feet high, my feet, legs, and tail all smaller. The building to my right rose much higher and seemed much larger. I was the same size as Sky.

And then I felt something:

lowground—needheight—noground—badplace

I felt a contraction in my shoulders, a readiness to spring. Something was making me feel ... some way. I couldn't identify it. It was like a voice, but not using words. More like directly encouraging emotions and feelings in my mind and body.

getoffground—cannotstayhere—needheight—cantseeanything

I let go of my inhibitions and found myself looking for the nearest suitable perch. A simple lawn mower was carelessly parked near the back of the building, its handle making a perfectly good target. I ran closer to it, and SPRANG with incredible strength. Before I knew it, the slippery metal handle was grasped in my feet, and I was struggling to maintain balance by raising and lowering my tail crazily. I found my center of balance and let myself relax.

betterbutkeeplooking—mustgethigher—higherisbetter

I bobbed my head and tried to find the next reachable spot. I couldn't see any that looked close. Regardless, I was intent on finding something. I didn't care about anything else.

There was a storage shed at the other side of the grassy lawn. I would have to fly to it. It seemed easy enough.

yesflythere—betterplace

I spread my wings and pumped them hard, pushing with my feet to become airborne. It seemed almost natural and familiar.

I approached the shed and flapped hard three or four times to get high enough to land on its peaked roof. It was a slightly rough landing, but I did not falter. I folded my wings up, roused my tail and looked around.

I felt better. Something seemed strange about being too long on the ground. It made me nervous. From where I was, I could see much more, and that made me more comfortable.

I slipped a bit on the rough surface beneath me, and climbed to the very peak, looking out over the edge. I was in such a strange place. There were large structures all around and few trees with suitable perches. A variety of animals (or something) were wandering around below, most far enough away to not be of concern. Still, I felt conspicuous...

There had to be some higher place.

mustgethigher—higherisbetter

A skinny tree caught my eye, it looked just right, and if I gauged things right...

I took off again, flying with almost a natural ability. After all, I'd done it forever. I looked down and saw the ground far below. I hadn't realized I could gain so much height so quickly.

Height?

Suddenly I panicked. I had no idea what I was doing. I looked around quickly and remembered I was a Hawk. A normal Hawk. Flying. But how? I didn't know how!

Helplessly, I tried to steady out, but I was starting to lose the feel of the air. I was losing speed and altitude. Then I remembered I had been heading for a tree. It was still reachable...

If only I could keep enough momentum...

But the apartment complex was starting to loom closer and closer. I flapped harder, but it only made me slip more. The wall started to grow bigger in my field of view.

I couldn't slow down, I couldn't pull up or anything. There was only one course of action. Brace for impact!

I winced, expecting the surface of the wall to kill me. But I felt a strange softness and then a dull thump on my head and chest. I tried to breathe but I couldn't get a breath. My mind spun madly and I started to black out.



woke up startled and nervous.

whereami—whereami—onground?

I stood up and felt soreness in my wings and bruises on my chest. My head hurt, too. I shook myself carefully, trying to reoperate. I looked around, there were no immediate threats. Just strange surroundings and a soft, brown ground.

I blinked a couple of times and felt somehow familiar with things.

My apartment...

My mind shifted again, understanding once more. I was a bird. But how did... Why was I a bird? Oh, yeah. Changes.

It took me some time to review things, but eventually I cleared up things as best I could and tried to puzzle out what had happened last.

Apparently I had some strong instincts. I'd felt an incredible need to follow them. And it had felt right. Right and good. But somehow I'd gotten hurt. Moving either wing reminded me of it. I'd been heading for a tree, unable to stay in the air. And then, did I hit the wall?

I looked behind me, and saw a solid wall. Yet I knew that was where I had hit. Unless I*did* hit it and someone had brought me inside my apartment.

Impossible. No one knew me now. Eric had went somewhere a couple of hours ago.

A curious thought crossed my mind again. I wondered if I was really having difficulties thinking about things because of my bird mind. It was starting to make me wonder. I'd never been so confused in my life.

I decided to shift back to my Morph form. I found the mental barrier and pushed again, reversing the process. This time it wasn't nearly as disorienting. I knew what to expect.

Even so, I still had to stop for a moment to get used to my form. I'd been human for so long.

Feet, tail, wing-arms, beak, feathers. Balance. Yes, I felt okay.

My mind cleared a little and I decided to just sit down and think things over. Even before I approached the couch, I realized sitting was still not going to be an option. I fanned my tail and felt its muscles to verify it was still quite a part of me.

Right then I wanted to find some kind of perch. I looked quickly around the apartment, but couldn't find anything suitable. Everything was just too small or too big. Finally, I gave up. I was starting to feel very tired, the excitement wearing off and my lack of sleep coming back to haunt me.

I looked at the clock habitually. 12:58 P.M. I sighed and wondered if it was even remotely possible I could get some sleep. I had so much to think about my brain felt tired.

Without really thinking about it, I returned to my bedroom and crawled up onto my bed. I pulled the covers out of the corner where they had somehow gotten stuffed. Kneeling on the edge of the bed, I curled my big blue blanket into a sort of half-moon and then climbed in. Tucking my legs under me and lying on my stomach I found that I was extremely comfortable. I'd never known my legs in Morph form could fold up like a bird's.

I tried to reconstruct what happened again and again, but there was a weird blank space. The day had been strange enough by waking up to the Change. But the mental confusion that followed and the lack of memory about some details left me hopeless.

Slowly, I let my head down and drifted to sleep. I fluffed my feathers out and fell into a very restful sleep. Perhaps the best I'd ever had.



My dreams were varied and confused, just as my waking thoughts had been. But they were peaceful. Feelings and images of being a bird surrounded me, having much more realism than ever before. They were scattered and made no sense, but the overall message was obvious: I was a bird now; or at least mostly bird. There was no getting around that fact.

I woke up around 11:00 P.M. It was a strange sort of awakening. It happened quick almost as though I had been startled. But I didn't feel startled or tense. It was just as though there were no transition from sleep to wakefulness. It took only a moment to recollect my thoughts and let things sink in.

I looked at the clock and then at the window, verifying that it really was late by the darkness outside. My first thought was how I was ever going to get back on my day schedule. I'd spent too long trying to stay up late.

I had no real desire to go anywhere or do anything just then, so decided just to stay put. I felt warm and comfortable, and as though all my problems had been solved somehow. I knew, however, somewhere they were lurking. Lurking and Changed, just as I was. But for the moment—with no job to worry about; no obligations or overlooked responsibilities; and the fact I'd been granted a most powerful and awesome wish—I felt free and alive. I didn't care.

In the hours that followed, I preened my feathers, flexed my taloned toes (accidentally poking holes in the mattress), and discovered an urgent and distressing feeling building inside me.

At first I was worried because I didn't know what to expect from this new body, but I felt like an idiot when I realized it was nothing more than a call of nature.

But with that arose new questions and little time to answer them. So of course I got up and went to the bathroom, pausing briefly at my reflection in the mirror. Much as I might have wanted to, I couldn't smile. But it was the thought that counted.

The next few minutes were spent trying to figure out the best way to use a familiar facility in a new way. Needless to say, it didn't quite go according to plan, but that's another story.

Strange as it might sound, I was rather pleased to find out that I was completely bird. I thought: Hasta la vista, TP!

Eventually, I resolved, I would have to come up with some other sort of design for myself and other bird transforms.

Which made me wonder just how many others like me there were. I'd seen many "smaller" bird Morphs, but no raptors yet.

I wandered around the apartment, getting a feel for the digitigrade stance I possessed and the long, scaly toes I stood on.

I peered into Eric's apartment from the hole in my kitchen wall, but didn't see much. The lights were off and the place was stone silent.

I found myself back outside my front door, looking off into the dark sky. I momentarily considered sitting down on the steps, but remembered the new appendage I had. I decided I had nothing better to do than take a walk and look around. I'd try and find a good perch while I was at it, too.

So I stepped down and felt concrete under my feet for the first time. Eiich! The hard surface made my toes bow up and didn't feel all that great to the tips of my talons. So I sidestepped onto the grass and started walking towards the road.

It felt wonderful to be out on the grass with bare feet. The sense of power I got from having huge "claws" and strong, scaled feet was euphoric. I leapt forward, spreading my wing-arms and letting the wind blow across my feathers. I really did feel free.

And so I continued, walking beside the road on the grassy strip, absentmindedly heading towards the center of town. There was not much going on at people's homes. Most of the lights were out, which I thought seemed somehow strange. Once or twice I came across a big picture window with assortments of species framed within. A caribou, alligator (yike!), and feline in one; and a lizard, skunk, squirrel and a couple unidentified in another. There seemed to be no order to the Changes. I suspected that the houses I saw were families, but none of the inhabitants were even of the same genus! Some looked more animal than others, too. Leaving some more 'human' than others in appearance.

How was this going to change the world as I knew it? In remarkable and vast ways. I contemplated some of the problems it might have, like chairs, for instance. Humans had gone on for so long without tails that chairs and similar accommodations didn't have that particular design feature in mind. I wondered how long it would take before such things began to be modified. In my own case, I figured if I could find a large branch to curl my toes around I would be quite satisfied. I was quite content to stand; my legs didn't get tired as fast. But I was getting somewhat uncomfortable with always standing flat-footed: Something I never thought would happen. Besides, I didn't have much of a posterior left for sitting purposes, anyway.

Other things, though, like restaurants. If I was already eating different foods and liking them, then certainly the population was going to cause some severe shifts in the food-related economy. For economy in general! I thought of all the clothing shed for good, the shoes that would either disappear or be redesigned, the entire way of life reshaped. Heating and air conditioning would all shift direction considerably. It had been quite cool inside my apartment, as it was now outside. Just the other night I'd worn a sweater and had the heat on a little. Tonight I was perfectly fine, if not just a tad warm. I figured furry and feathered species like myself would probably be turning up the air conditioner more often, and leaving the heat low in winter. But some others out there were going to be the opposite. With so many built-in 'features,' people were going to cause a lot more changes besides the One that had just happened. Personally I thought of it as somewhat of a huge joke. Like for some reason humans had been just some sort of a 'test.' 'Back to normal!' I thought whimsically.

And it felt nothing short of a fantasy. I could have cared less about the rest of the world at that moment, taken up with my new self..

"Hey!" came a harsh, forced voice.

I stopped prancing about in the grass, looking about. I noticed for the first time that I couldn't see as well at night as I could before. I saw well enough to get where I was going, but beyond several yards it was blurry blackness. And the moon was better than half-full! Thank goodness I had such acute vision in the light to make up for it.

"Aat?" I asked, finding I still couldn't pronounce some things with my beak. It was going to take some effort before I could adapt to talking fully again—assuming it was possible at all.

I couldn't see anyone, and was waiting for them to speak so I could pinpoint their location.

"What kinda bird you?" the voice was gruff and sounded almost mean. It was off to my left, probably behind some bushes and trees. I backed off a step or two, unsure as whether to be scared or calm. Fight or flight!

"Uhh," I started.

"Sorry," the voice said again. A shape moved from beyond the trees, and a patch of brown fur emerged from between two junipers. It was what looked like a huge rat. When we saw each other, we both gasped in recognition of the other. Predator and prey.

But was it to be in this Changed state?

The rat held up his paws, stepping back, whiskers quivering and a look of fear in his black eyes.

"Oh, don't urly! I loln't eat ya," I managed to say.

There was a long pause, but finally the rat seemed to accept that. "Hawk?" he asked, tentatively.

I nodded.

Another pause. "What are you doing?" he asked.

He seemed full of questions.

I was at a loss for any exciting explanation. "Alt lalking. Guess I'm getting used to my neul self."

The rat seemed to understand: "Me too."

We spent a few moments looking at each other. I had a hard time seeing him clearly in the darkness, but I was almost glad, for I was salivating as I examined him. For some odd reason that I couldn't identify, I was made hungry just by the sight of him. I had never had such a reaction to a person before, and what almost frightened me was the pure possibility that I was getting hungry not for some kind of food, but for a person I was talking to! I shook my head, feeling the slight weight of my beak, to try and dispel such thoughts.

I noticed that it didn't take him nearly as much time to figure me out. I suspected his vision was more adapted for the darkness. It was obvious by the way he flinched and stepped back a bit that he'd seen my feet. It was unnecessary to point out that both of us were feeling instincts to a degree now. It was just a matter of allowing them only so much influence on our minds.

In a way it was quite thrilling, to have feelings and urges much stronger than any before, that welled up from deep inside somewhere. To have instincts that directed you and made you feel a certain way. At other times, like now, it was disturbing to think that they were going against every ethical lesson you'd learned as a human.

I pushed it aside, and extended a wing-arm very slowly, "I'm Jared."

Ever so cautiously, the rat came forward and extended a short arm which terminated in a paw. "Frank," he announced.


Not actively grasping his paw, I let him touch a long toe-like finger and we carefully 'shook' hands.

A moment of truce, perhaps, between Hawk and Mouse. An incredible and unbelievable step. My mind was dizzied by the idea. I didn't know how to feel, being a Hawk doing what I was doing. I almost felt like some kind of ambassador for a nation of species.

"Isn't this crazy?" I asked, lowering my wing-arm.

Frank started to laugh, which sounded very peculiar. "Very!"

We both felt more at ease, and with that, after a moment of identity, we began walking towards nowhere.

 t figured that there was no stores open in town. First, it was rather late, and second, nobody was quite themselves. Frank and I talked quite a bit, needing a friend more than anything.

"...it's really strange, this whole thing," Frank was saying. "Every person in the world, halfway turned into an animal. I wonder what did it? Some kind of wierd radiation from the sun?"

I chuckled slightly, "I don't know. But halfway wouldn't be quite right."

Incidentally, I had figured out how to approximate sounds I knew before and was speaking a little more legibly. Birds' didn't have the same kind of voice-making ability that humans do. I now had a syrinx, in addition to a now smaller and noiseless larynx. I paused to consider all the stuff I'd read about birds. It amused me to think that they could now almost classify as a medical encyclopedia for myself.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, earlier on I somehow turned into a Hawk all the way."

"What's 'all the way' mean?" Frank stopped, his black eyes looking puzzled.

I turned and looked at him. Noticing his tension build with my gaze, I quickly looked another direction. "I mean completely, as in the real thing."

"Woah, how did you do it?"

"I honestly don't know. I was thinking about it, and all of a sudden I just 'felt' like I knew how."

Frank looked up towards the faint stars. I did the same, trying to consider all the possibilities. A cool breeze blew up and I felt its touch on the feathers of my neck. I closed my eyes and let myself feel the wind. I was reminded of flying. I felt a great euphoria then, realizing that I could. Tomorrow... I promised myself.

"Hawk?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you happy being what you are now?"

I sensed a hint of unhappiness in his voice. "Well, I've only been this way for about a day, but I would say so."

"I can tell. I was watching you standing there. Can you fly?"

"Not like this," I admitted, looking back at him.

"When you're completely a bird?"

"Yes."

He looked saddened.

"What is it?"

"Nothing, just that... I would have loved to be a bird, too."

I suddenly realized how lucky I was. The reality hit me full force and I knew I had been fortunate. The random nature of the Change was beginning to make itself known. If he knew of my long history admiring birds, it would have been worse.

"I'm sorry..." I said.

He didn't say anything, but a thoughtful expression came into his eyes after a while. "I wonder if I can do it too?"

"Fly?" I asked, my mind lost in thought elsewhere.

His teeth bared in a grin, "No, you birdbrain! You know, change completely."

"Oh," I said, feeling dumb. An old insult with new meaning! I wondered just exactly what my brain was like now. Some odd combination of the two? More bird than human? I felt instincts, much more than any gut feeling before, but I could still reason fully and think about complex things. I didn't feel much different mentally, really. I was still me. But new thoughts kept rising to the surface and I couldn't ignore them.

Frank lowered himself to the ground, his face twisted up into some strange expression of concentration. "Errrh!"

"Uh, Frank?" I asked.

He opened his eyes. "What?"

"I don't think that's how you do it."

"Well how then?"

"I don't know. I was just wishing... I can't fly like I am now, and someone, er, somebird flew by. So I started wishing I could have just changed all the way. And that's when I hit upon the weird mental wall."

The rat's eyes lost their focus, and I could tell he was trying somehow to replicate my story.

I was surprised when all of a sudden he said, "There! I can feel something!"

"Really? Okay, now just 'push' on it. Just let yourself feel like what you think it's like to be a normal rat."

And right before my eyes, he began to shrink and rather quickly became a normal, average, ...appetizing, delicious, savory, juicy, plump rat.

I closed my eyes and put my wing-arms to my head and tried to get ahold of myself. "Whoah, what just happened there?"

I heard a series of faint squeaky noises and looked down. The rat was running around in circles and apparently excited about something.

I couldn't get over my uncontrollable desire to catch and eat it. It was totally unexpected. I'd never felt that way about any kind of food. I was ravenous.

"Frank, change back!" I told him.

Another couple of squeaks and the rat looked up. Then a really loud squeak and the rat bolted for a nearby bush.

I resisted the immediate impulse to run after him, and reminded myself that it wasn't just a rat. It was my new friend. Crazy as it might seem.

I realized as I analyzed my feelings that I was still hungry. I hadn't eaten enough before—what with all the excitement, and it had been a while anyway. I wondered if there was anything left in the fridge at home I could eat.

A figure emerged from the bushes, considerably larger than the one that had vanished into them. Frank was in Morph again.

"Holy hell is all I gotta say," he muttered.

The way he said it, I wanted to break into laughter, but there was a serious edge to it. "What was it like?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Well, it was pretty cool, actually. I felt like I could go anywhere. I mean, I was so small and fast! But then I heard you, looked up, and realized I smelled bird. I never felt so scared in my whole life. It was like someone had lit a fire under my tail. I mean, somewhere I knew it was just you, but I totally felt like I was going to die."

I nodded in agreement, "I know what you're talking about. I was so hungry when I saw you I had to fight myself to not do anything. That was me telling you to shift back. I have got to somehow learn how to deal with these new feelings."

I could tell Frank felt less comfortable around me. The knowledge that your best friend had wanted to kill you was definitely cause for concern.

"I'm sorry, Frank, I would never intentionally hurt you," I offered, hoping it would make him feel better.

"No, it's okay, really. I have a lot to find out, too."

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

"Starved, actually," he admitted.

"Let's go to my place and see what we can find."

So we walked back to my apartment, a little more tension between us, but at the same time, more understanding.

Taking a different route, I found some tree trimmings that some people had in their front yard. I figured they wouldn't mind if I took a large branch from it at about one in the morning. It was hard finding just the right size. After all, I had no idea just how big my feet really were—until I started checking them out. They were a good foot long from the tip of my longest front toe to the talon on my hallux. When I curled a foot up, it made a circle about five or six inches wide. Which meant I was looking for a pretty big branch.

I couldn't see very well in the dark, but with Frank's help we finally managed to locate a suitable size...tree trunk. Apparently the trees that had been pruned weren't that big. And it was rather lucky that everything had been cut into seven or eight foot sections. I hefted the largest piece up and carried it along. It was fairly straight so I'd have to mount it on some kind of stand or other, but at the moment wasn't too worried.

I showed him my apartment, explaining the huge hole in the kitchen wall. I took the tree trunk into my bedroom, trying to decide what to do with it while Frank rummaged around in the refrigerator. I returned to find him eating Captain Crunch and drinking a glass of milk.

It was a funny sight, this large rat perched atop a stool with a box of cereal on his lap. It felt like I'd walked in on some commercial shoot for a bizarre advertisement.

My laugh sounded like a couple of mutated chirps. "Is that good?" I asked.

"Actually it is," he said, taking a drink and dribbling milk all over his fur. "This isn't easy," he explained, reaching for a paper towel, "drinking with a muzzle like mine."

"You should try a beak."

He laughed, and shoved a paw into the box again.

I started looking around for things that looked appetizing, but found that almost nothing did. Only meat. In a way I felt disturbed by that. Switching from omnivore to exclusive carnivore was not something I had quite prepared for, at least with my mind still considering things like fruit and bread to be food. Curiously, I grabbed a slice of bread and tore into it with my beak. Frank didn't seem to notice the peculiarity of it all.

I let my tongue moisten it for a bit, trying to taste it, but could only feel its odd texture. I decided what the heck, and promptly swallowed it. Another new aspect of myself: The swallowing of things without first chewing them.

After a moment, I began to feel a bit queasy. I wasn't sure bread was going to be on the menu anymore.

So I looked in the fridge and found some hamburger meat; not much, really, and I was afraid it was too old.

"Eww!" Frank exclaimed, smelling it. "That stinks."

"Like it's old?" I asked, holding it like it was about to explode.

"I'm not sure. My nose is so sensitive to everything. I can smell your breath across the room."

"And?" I asked, prying the humor from him.

"Well, you've got bird breath."

"Thanks."

"Any time."

I took the hamburger to the opposite counter and opened it cautiously. It didn't look old. I poked it with a taloned finger. It didn't feel funny. I discovered I was salivating again. My mind was full of confusing thoughts. Dozens of reminders from my mom about how raw meat was full of bad things like bacteria. An incredible urge from my body to just dig in. It was pinkish in color, and looked both disgusting and delicious. I huffed a breath of indecision. I was hungry and there was nothing else.

I was unsure exactly how to go about eating it. All my silverware was pretty much out of the question. I didn't exactly feel like tearing it to pieces with my fingers, so I stuck my beak down and tore off a chunk. This time I got a much different feeling than that the bread had produced. I swallowed and felt immediate satisfaction. It was like somewhere in my throat I knew what stuff was. Of course; my crop.

Frank had accidentally looked up, and quickly turned around, my eating habits apparently not in his best interest.

I finished what little was left of the meat, and threw away the wrapper. I felt much better, and the hunger I'd felt around Frank went away.

"You know what?" I began, "You can have pretty much whatever you want around here." I gestured towards the cabinets and fridge.

Frank seemed lost for words.

"I mean, it's no good to me now. That bread I ate made me feel sick. So you might as well take what I don't want."

He realized the truth in it, and started going through the rest of my kitchen. I cleaned up some of the debris from the hole in the wall, and peered again into Eric's apartment. Still nothing.

Then I noticed something. His bathroom was just down his hall a bit, but I could see into it well enough to see a scale. He'd left some lights on, so I had no doubts about it.

I figured he wouldn't mind if I just checked it out for a second. So I wandered over and stood on the scale, taking a moment to get my toes to agree on where they wanted to be.

I was startled at the needle's position. I jumped a bit to see if maybe it was stuck or something, but it didn't move much. 85 pounds? Half what I weighed before... I blinked and made sure I was completely on the stupid thing. Still 85.

Well, unless Eric's scale was broken... Yee-hah! I felt a happiness and bounded back to my own apartment, turning off Eric's lights on the way.

Frank was still looking through my cupboards, and I couldn't have cared less. I needed to clean them anyway. I felt very excited about everything. It was a whole dawn of Change.

"Bird bird bird... Bird is the word... do dee dah dah..." I found myself singing. Like most songs, I didn't know all the words.

I decided since there was nothing else to do, to start going through the place and sorting what I could and couldn't use now. Frank helped and we had a lot of laughs about things.

"Look, Frank! A hairbrush!"

"Hey, I might be able to use that."

"Here you go."

"Oh look," he said, amused, "toothbrush!"

"Chuck it."

He tossed it into the garbage.

I laughed, "this is great!"

He nodded, pulling another drawer from my bathroom.

I stood up and turned on the stereo, letting the DVD changer play whatever was in.

"Hmm," Frank looked puzzled, "deoderant?"

I cocked my head at it, then decided it was certainly no good to me. "I don't care."

He tossed it, too.

And so it went, we were having fun mocking all the stuff we used to need. I felt a renewed joy in myself and the things we'd been missing. Things that animals had all along.

At one point, I got a sick feeling that maybe this was all just temporary. Maybe in a couple of days I'd wake up and be human again. I thought about bringing it up, but decided against it. That was too awful a thing to think about.

We cleaned the entire apartment of all non-bird things, except for stuff I'd still want like books and my music collection, timing it all to the beat of Crash Test Dummies. Then things slowed down a bit and I put some Enya in, trying to get over the excitement. It was very easy to get caught up in the euphoria of it all.

Finally, Frank and I retired to the living room where I turned on the TV. He sat on my sofa, a feat that didn't seem to bother his long slender tail. I laid down on the floor, quite content and comfortable.

We watched the news, which apparently repeated the same stuff over and over. Nothing new had been discovered about the Change, only that it had happened everywhere and suddenly. Apparently young kids hadn't Changed, though. They were still completely human. Babies were still human. I was confused, wasn't this supposed to be the end of all humanity? Wasn't this our extinction? A rebirth? That had just been my opinion, anyway.

I zeroed in on what was being said.

"...so it remains unclear at this point as to whether they will go on to continue human DNA or if they will one day Change, as we did, in this brave new world.

"Thanks, Deena. In local news, a number of reports have come in about people going berzerk, apparently in response to the Changes they've underwent. Everything from crazed destruction of private property to complete disappearance. It has been estimated that not everyone retains their human mind. Apparently in some extreme cases the person in question succumbs completely to the animal's mind and body which they resemble. We'll have more details on this later."

The reporter was a big yak, which I thought was rather fitting, but I was too interested in the story to think much about it.

"To recap once again, for those who have not, for some strange reason, noticed: All humans in the world have genetically and physically transformed into a new hybrid species that appears in all rights to be a cross of human and animal DNA. So far, every conceivable species has been seen except insect and other invertebrates. This includes some rare cases of otherwise extinct species. The cause for this Change is as yet unknown. Worldwide panic has been incredibly avoided, and while there are many localized disturbances and social concerns, there has been relative peace. Again, young children do not seem to be affected by this phenomenon, and retain their human features.

"In a message from the President yesterday, it is advised to remain calm, and be assured that scientists from around the world are at work on trying to answer some of your questions.

"No patterns have been found nor have any exceptions to the rule. There has been some initial findings on what appear to be 'special powers,' but no concrete evidence yet. As always TNC will keep you informed."

The newscast continued, showing unusual scenes from around the world. The most crowded cities and the impossible-looking array of species on the sidewalks. Some unusual shots of a vulture-morph alone in the desert, a polar-bear morph that had been on assignment in the Antarctic, and a group of horse-morphs who had found each other and formed a 'herd.'

Then some interviews started. The media was fast! No one family had changed into the same thing. And not everyone had changed into what they thought they should have. Some hadn't really considered ever changing into anything, and didn't really care, apparently. Then there were those that wouldn't exactly be considered animal lovers, and they hated what had happened. I felt sorry for them. There were a few people who were very depressed for other reasons, like they had always wanted to be one thing and wound up as something else. I was reminded of Frank, who seemed absorbed in what was being said. Finally, there were a couple of interviewees that couldn't have been happier. They'd got what they always wanted. There was a horse-morph and a cougar-morph. I would have fit nicely into that category.

So the Change was for the most part random. I felt very relieved that I was what I was. It could have been very different. I was quite grateful.

A commercial came on then the news was repeated. We turned off the TV.

"Frank?"

"What?"

"So are you okay about things?" I wanted to know if he was still a bit disappointed.

"Yeah. I'm liking things better as time goes."

"Say, how did you wind up out on that corner? Do you live around here?"

"Actually, no. I was driving an all-nighter from Phoenix to my parents' house in Montana. It was about five or six in the morning yesterday when I started getting really sick. So I pulled into town thinking I'd just stop and rest at a convenience store or something. But the lady that was running the place was starting to get really crazy about something. Her face was getting all contorted. It was really unnerving. Finally, she started to look like some kind of bat, and started running around wildly. She was breaking things and screaming nonsense.

"I got out of there before I knew what was happening. Then I started noticing the same kind of thing was happening to me. I started getting scared and ran off, but eventually collapsed behind someone's house. I didn't know where I was and actually, I was more concerned about *what* I was. I guess you were going through the whole Change routine, too?"

"Yeah," I agreed. I explained to him briefly how I'd woke up and started turning into a Hawk.

"Sounds a lot nicer to me," he mused. "Anyway, I've been kind of hiding out ever since, because I thought I was one of the only ones. Like some kind of freak accident or something. But I noticed there were more and more people around that looked like animals.

"It was about that time that you came along and I wasn't feeling quite as spooked out." He sipped at the last of the milk that I had.

"Hmm," I contemplated things. My brain was getting too much of a workout. This was the kind of stuff I figured advanced trig would have in store.

I checked the time. 4:00 A.M. Geeze, I was *never* going to get back to normal. I thought jokingly, if I'd been an Owl I wouldn't be so concerned!

"Well, Frank, it's all right with me if you stay here for a while. I've come to think of you as a good friend."

"Hey, thanks a lot."

Suddenly I was reminded of Tiffani. I needed to call her. Without thinking about it, I picked up the phone and dialled her number. Again, I had to try a couple of times because I slipped using my long talons.

Finally, it rang.

"Hello?" the voice didn't sound all that sleepy. Or all that strange, either.

"Hello. Sorry to be calling so late, is Tiffani there?"

"Oh, yeah, hang on." It sounded a lot like her mom. I wondered what she'd turned into. It didn't have any 'accent' as to provide a clue.

"Hello?" came a new but familiar voice. I sensed an odd whine to it.

"Tiffani?" I asked.

"Um, Jared?" she asked back.

"Yes!"

"Hey, how are you?" she said excitedly, as though we hadn't talked for ages.

"More like what am I..." I answered.

"Yes, of course... I meant that," she was falling all over herself.

"Guess."

"A Hawk?"

"Yep. An official Red-tailed Hawk."

"Oh my gosh, isn't that... I mean, woah. That's cool!" She sounded quite happy for me.

"What about you? I can't figure it out."

"Oh, I'm a fuzzi-ball. A grey wolf, actually."

"What's Benjamin think of you?"

Benjamin was her white rat.

"I ate him."

"No you didn't."

"You're right," she giggled, which sounded rather funny. "I didn't. But what's Sky think of you?"

"She thinks she died and went to bird hell or something. There's giants running around all of a sudden."

We laughed together and I decided I wanted to see her again. Especially now that we were Different.

"Hey," I said, an idea suddenly coming to me, "we could do a remake of LadyHawke!"

"Yeah, and you're quite a lady, too!" she giggled again.

"Huh? Oh, nevermind. You know what I meant."

She just laughed some more.

"I just had to know, sorry for calling so late," I apologized.

"That's okay. I haven't been able to sleep much anyway."

"Yeah, me either. Except I'm going to try and get back on a regular daytime schedule."

"Okay. See you tomorrow?"

"Sure," I agreed.

"Goodnight!" she said, sounding rather happy.

"Night," I echoed, and hung up.

Frank was looking at me quizzically.

"My girlfriend," I said.

"What's she?"

"A wolf."

He smiled. "That's really cool!" Then he seemed to think for a few minutes as I turned off the rest of the stereo and TV system. "Hey, wait a second."

"Huh?" I asked, looking over my back at him.

He started. "Yipes! That's really bizarre."

"What?"

"You looking at me like that."

"Huh? Oh. Sorry," I turned the rest of me around. "Guess I'm just getting used to being a bird." Another attempt to smile failed, so I shrugged my wing-arms.

"What were you saying?" I asked.

"I mean, if she's a Wolf and you're a Hawk, well... you know..."

He stopped dramatically, an odd tone in his voice. It didn't take me long to catch on. And when I did, the same confusion hit me.

"Cripes. I don't know... Now you've got my brain twisted another time around."

"I think we'd better get some sleep."

"Yeah," I admitted. "Want to help me with my perch?"

"Sure."

We returned to the place of my Change, to examine the perch situation. I looked around for some kind of way to attach a log, basically, to a couple of things that would be high enough yet sturdy enough to support me. I considered a couple of chairs, but didn't know how to keep it from rolling back and forth.

Finally, Frank appeared with a hammer and some really huge nails (I still don't know where he found them). "Anything goes?" he asked.

"Uhh, to a point, I guess." I really wanted to get a perch up since my feet were desperately wanting to curl. I began to get an idea of what he had in mind.

He hefted the log up and put an end on my bedpost. Then he started pounding a nail into it. So far, so good. Then I realized the log was the right length to go from one end of the bed to the other. And the bedposts were strong and square. Perfect! I helped him nail the other end down, putting a few nails in each side, until the perch was as sturdy as a rock.

Eagerly, I hopped up to it, and immediately fell in love.

"I may never leave this spot!" I declared, elated. My toes curled around the rough bark and it felt great. I let myself balance and felt my own weight keep my grip. It was a new experience, to a point. I remembered perching somewhere else...

My dreams? Oh, no, it was earlier on, when I'd become a normal Hawk. The lawnmower handle. But it was too small and slippery. It hadn't been the same.

Then my thoughts sorted out and I remembered waking up after my 'crash.' Suddenly I started remembering little details about the approaching wall and the imminent crash.

It became clear to me in one half second. I'd passed through that wall. I don't know how, but I'd done it.

Frank noticed I seemed more than content with the new perch, and left the room with a subtle "Goodnight."

As the lights turned out and I settled down into my natural coat of feathers, the comfort of tree bark under my feet; I let my mind come up with as many ideas as it wanted about everything, because as far as I was concerned, I was too tired to care.

“But Wait! There’s More…”



At some point in the night, I’d turned my head back to rest on a shoulder. I awoke somewhat surprised, momentarily forgetting myself. I’d never slept on a perch before. But I was still balanced on one foot and actually quite comfortable. I seemed designed from toe to beak for this, and it felt good.

I peered out the window, noticing I’d only slept a short while — it was just after sunrise.

I took a deep breath and yawned, feeling the newness of my beak in its length and size. I crouched forward and stretched my wing-arms, then stepped down from the perch. I stretched again in the middle of the room, drinking in the sheer bliss of being what I was. I’d never felt so alive.

I emerged from my room to find Frank sleeping on the couch in the front room. He was curled up into a ball, his tail wrapped around him. It seemed strange, this giant rat asleep on my furniture. A week ago if I’d walked in to find such a thing, I probably would have run out the door screaming. I never was afraid of snakes or mice or anything; maybe spiders; but a rat that size was too much!

I let him alone as I visited the bathroom again. I was finding out pretty quickly that my metabolism was starting to stabilize and settle on a more birdlike one. I felt warmer, too. In fact, I was panting slightly. The spring weather had been comfortable or slightly cool before. Now not only did I have a wonderful covering of feathers, I was burning up more energy. My heart beat faster and my breathing was more rapid. It felt normal to me, though. I would never have noticed if it hadn’t happened practically overnight. I wondered that the intense summer heat was going to be like.

I wandered around a bit, looking at things almost as if they weren’t real. The kitchen seemed like another dimension. Excluding the fact there was an elephant-shaped hole in the wall, all the counters and shelves seemed high. Everything looked bigger. It figured, of course, since I was smaller and shorter, but the kitchen was where I noticed it most.

I got a pitcher of water out of the refrigerator, after reaching for the milk out of habit. I’d made the mistake of trying milk during last night’s cleanup effort. I coughed up what little I drank a few minutes later. I had many habits that were going to be difficult to change.

After dribbling more than enough water on my chest feathers, I finished getting a drink and looked around some more. I made a mental note to get some sort of a deep water pan that I could drink more easily out of.

I found myself back in my room, and realized I was getting bored. Without work my life had little activity. I was beginning to get more and more used to the fact I was a sort of hybrid creature. I felt as though I had been one all my life.

Lethargically, I opened the closet doors, and saw the rows of shirts and slacks, shorts and sweaters. With an almost evil-sounding laugh, I took a few favorites out and looked at them from a new perspective. Funny to think Frank and I hadn’t thought of them last night. Amused, I picked out a Red-tailed Hawk shirt and tried it on. Amazingly, it fit just fine. While I was overall a lot smaller, my feathers effectively added to my size. It was very perplexing just then, looking down to see my dumb old shirt with feathers poking out the bottom and all around. My feathers.

I took it off again, trying to avoid pulling feathers out of place. Putting it into a “keep” pile, I began going through my closet, overjoyed that I’d rid myself of a requirement of clothing. I tossed just about everything, “No more looking for socks!” I said happily, emptying a sock drawer. I laughed, “And no more mornings without clean underwear!”

Frank entered just as the pile reached the door. When he saw what I was doing, a wry smile crept upon him, exposing his sharp teeth.

"This looks fun," he commented.

I laughed and stood back to admire my work. One clean closet ready for immediate storage of other, more useful things! I had no idea just what yet.

After a while, Frank said, "I think I'm going to go and retrieve my car, I don't want to leave it parked at the store. Do you want to come?"

I considered it, then remembered the open sky I had yet to explore. "Actually, I'm going to experiment a bit more with my normal form. I haven't had much of a chance to, yet." I looked out the window again, feeling a small lurch of excitement.

"Norm form, eh? Then what's this?" he asked, indicating himself with a downward sweep of his paws.

I was at a loss for words. He had a point. "I don't know. I've just been thinking of it as a half-metamorphosis. A morph I guess."

"Norm and Morph. Makes sense to me." He shrugged. "Okay then," he said, still tired. "See you in a while."

"All right," I waved at him, then followed him to the door.

He started walking along the road, looking about almost as if he thought someone was following him. I stepped out and closed the door, feeling the morning sun on my back. I didn't see very many people out, just some of the other apartment renters I'd seen before.

I looked up, seeing no bird-morphs. The morning sun seemed to have some sort of silencing effect.

Almost expecting it to be gone, I probed my mind for the odd mental barrier between my current form and the true Hawk. I found it surprisingly easy, but was somewhat scared to try it again. Something strange had happened last time. I couldn't remember it very well. In a way, it was as though it never happened.

Another glance at the sky, however, made my decision. I thought about becoming smaller; about being a complete Hawk, and abruptly I felt the odd sensation of shrinking. I felt lighter and stronger yet, something I hadn't counted on. My breathing increased slightly and I felt the uncanny wildness I only dimly recalled from my previous experience.

ongroundagain—whatdoinghere—mustgethigher

This time I paused, trying to find out what was making me feel that way. It was coming from my heart, it seemed. Somewhere inside me I couldn't identify. But it was more than a passing feeling. It was like I yearned to; I wanted to. I couldn't resist.

I looked around nervously. There was a flower pot nearby, which I leapt to in short order. At that point I somehow realized what was happening to me. My instincts were breaking through! So strongly, in fact, that I did not question them. I didn't think with my brain like I was used to, I listened to my heart - or some place. Whatever made me *feel* this way. I totally believed what I felt. It was *me*.

I lowered my head to gaze at myself. I was much the same as before, only smaller and more refined. My legs felt proportionally longer yet more compact. In morph they didn't bend as much at the knees and the tarsus was shorter. Now my knees were comfortably tucked under my feathers, bent more in the fashion like all birds.

Sky would be impressed.

The wild feeling came back into my mind, pressing against my calm thoughts. I suppressed them, feeling somehow guilty. I wanted nothing more than to listen exclusively, but I had to concentrate. I had to *think* about this. I wondered what would happen if I just followed them completely? Probably something similar to what happened last time—something I remembered little of.

I spent a moment getting used to my newest form, which I quickly became very proud of. All my life I had taken care of birds of prey, always sick or hurt. Sky had been shot many years ago, leaving her two-thirds of her left wing. She would never fly again.

Now here I was, looking at things from the inside, stretching my wings and seeing a perfectly healthy bird. From *within* those deep brown eyes! My greatest dream come true.

I stood tall and stretched to my full length, a newfound confidence washing over me. Then I remembered I was perched on a lowly flower pot. That squelched my pride for the moment.

Then I felt the slight morning breeze and spread my wings without even thinking about it. The wind was not enough to provide any lift, but prompted me into a flapping takeoff.

I rose, the push against the air unbelievable. First I felt a strange lightness come over me, then my feet lifted up from the ground. I pumped my wings hard, rising very quickly. I was airborne!

Relying on my instinctive ability to understand the wind and control my body, I turned into the gentle wind, using it to help direct me into a steady glide. The ground and trees below started passing by with increasing speed. I was still rising, flapping less and using my innate skills somehow. I felt my tail fan and angle almost automatically with my wings, like how one simply balances when walking. My body was at home in the air. I was quite in control, able to feel every adjustment and movement. But somehow things were automatic enough that I didn't have to think about them.

I knew I was a bit shaky, but I was amazed at how well I could fly my first time. I flew higher and stretched my wings out fully, gliding effortlessly over everything. Fences, trees, roads, houses... It was all so simple! There were no obstacles! It was one thing to imagine something like flight, and quite another to actually do it. I'd had no idea. I turned, getting a feel for how my feathers reacted to changes in the wind, fascinated with how I could feel every individual one. I felt so small and light.

I powered my wings again, angling sharply upward, feeling the adrenaline saturate my veins for the millionth time. I was higher than any of the buildings, and able to see... Wow! Now that I noticed, my vision was remarkable. I simply hadn't thought about it before. I could still see the little details of the ground below. Sprinklers in the front lawns of homes, numbers on street signs... The grass itself! It didn't look like a big patch of green as I'd expected from this height. The little clumps of weeds were distinct. I couldn't believe it. I mean, I'd known Hawk eyes were superior, but not like this!

I felt the air become warmer, and felt consequently lighter. It was interesting to feel exactly how much the air changed as I flew. I felt every small movement it made and compensated exactly. I could not have been more impressed. This was the ultimate way to exist.

I circled in the warmer pocket; a thermal. Just a current of rising warm air, but it made flying effortless for raptors. I rose within it, doing little more than balancing my speed and angle so I didn't move outside the thermal.

Raptors. The word came back into my mind. *For raptors. Raptors like me! I'm a raptor... Me! I'm a bird!* I felt giddy. Simple. That's what I was, *simple*. It was all so simple...

Below, the city spread out more as I climbed higher, the details still clear to me. I could see for a few miles in every direction. The routes from my apartment suddenly seemed mundane. The drive to work pointless. I would never drive anywhere again!

The feeling of being completely separate from the earth was immeasurable. The tremendous height seemed easy now. I could go anywhere. Anywhere!

Something caught my eye, and I noticed Frank crossing the street a few blocks from home. I wondered what he would think if I flew by.

Activity was picking up outside in general, with more and more people coming out to check on the world. A few were even driving. If I hadn't been having such a great time, I might have made a pastime of watching the strange things going on below. There were deer driving trucks, sheep crossing the street, a group of raccoons climbing into a van, a zebra running with some horses, and a fox happily talking to a rabbit.

Talking! The tremendous irony of it all. The flood of knowledge that would certainly result from this complete alteration of the universe was stunning. I knew things about birds I'd never hoped to learn. I *felt* things I never knew existed. Emotions were different, my mind calculated things in a new way, ideas formulated in new ways.

I saw Frank at an intersection, waiting for the light to change. There were no cars right then, but he seemed content to wait. He was busy looking at his arm (front leg?) or something.

I climbed with newfound energy and speed, then circled about once, turning sharp enough to feel the centrifugal force. The stress on my feathers was thrilling. I called out, smiling in my mind when I heard the all-too-familiar sound of a Hawk.

Frank looked up and back, trying to spot me. I pulled up, almost stalling, then tucked my wings and dove straight down. There's nothing quite like looking directly at the ground as it rushes towards you faster and faster. I aimed for Frank, closing in with incredible speed. A dozen feet above his furry head, I spread my wings and circled back up, feeling the powerful tug of momentum on my wings.

After recovering from his initial fright (he was trembling visibly), Frank grinned and waved at me. I spiraled down and landed near him. Or tried to; I'd been overconfident and twisted my right foot a little, coming down too fast. But it only hurt for a few moments before I looked up to see Frank's huge face hovering over me.

"E-eeeeee!" I screeched, stepping back. A feeling of stupidity washed over me as I realized both of us were having troubles adjusting to all the new details of life.

I closed my eyes, finding the mental door to my Morph form, and went through. The shift was painless, but the sudden growth and gain in height and weight was a bit dizzying. I blinked a couple of times, and saw a grin full of Frank teeth.

"You birdbrain," he taunted.

"You dirty old rat," I retorted.

He laughed, and I joined him, my own laugh sounding again like a peculiar screeching.

We walked across the street together. I couldn't help but think we were just as peculiar a duo as the fox and the rabbit.

Outside of ourselves, though, everything seemed normal. There were normal songbirds chirping in the trees, normal dogs barking in yards, and normal flies buzzing around. I wondered for a moment if animals other than humans had felt anything with the Change. Yet every time I tried to figure something out about the way things were, I came up empty handed.

I looked at my 'hands' as Frank and I walked down another block. I stayed off the sidewalk on the grass since the hard concrete was annoying to walk on. My wing-arms were an extraordinary combination of many things. They were like wings, with what looked like neatly lined up flight feathers, but instead of continuing into a complete wing, the primaries tapered off and my wrist, like my feet, was scaled. And instead of an alula or anything remotely resembling a bird wing, my hands mirrored my feet, with four long digits - my thumb opposing the other three just like the hallux on my foot - ending with

long, curved, black talons. I made a fist experimentally and noted that the joints were a little different than the foot. I had a little more dexterity and movement in my hands; apparently some human features were still there, just hidden.

Frank didn't seem to be very preoccupied with himself. He was striding forward with an air of confidence, determined to get where he was going. I wasn't sure if it was because he was trying to ignore things, or if he really was feeling renewed in his life. But everything about him seemed to indicate the latter; from his tall stance to his buoyant stride, long tail swaying in balance.

And then I had a curious thought. I was looking at Frank's grey fur and wondering whether he was as satisfied with it as I was with feathers. And then I wondered what fur was like. I realized then that I knew a vast amount more than I ever did before - having been a bird, but the amount still unknown to me was limitless. I knew two worlds; two ways of life. Everyone now knew two as well. Surely humans, or the beings we now were, would learn something from all this. Having at least one more insight should give us even more respect for things. I knew I did.

"What's the matter? Can't keep up with me?" Frank turned and said.

I abruptly noticed I was falling behind as I got lost in thought about everything. Without thinking about it, I hopped and flapped my wing-arms once to catch back up. I guess I'd expected to land right beside Frank, but he hadn't, by his surprised look. And that made me pause to consider that I'd just jumped about fifteen feet. It all made sense, though. As I was getting more used to being what I was, unusual things for a human were becoming easy for me. At the same time, I told myself, there were going to be some more difficult things, too. I would have been fooling myself to pretend there weren't.

We crossed another intersection, waving at a huge hamster driving a yellow pickup truck. I think it was a hamster, anyway. I might have found it funny if I weren't halfway an animal myself. Or more than halfway.

I was happy to get back on the grass after the smooth asphalt. I found the brushing sound and cool grass on my bare feet quite enjoyable.

We were on a city block now, with a long strip of grass in front of commercial buildings. Frank's car was in a small parking lot in front of the corner 7-11 store. I noticed there was little activity and only two places were even open.

"Haircut Hut... Guess I won't be stopping by there again," I said passively.

Frank laughed. "I don't suppose I will, either. Rats just shed their fur."

"I guess the whole economy will go through a wild shift, huh?"

"Yeah," Frank agreed. "But I think businesses will adapt, too. They're not going to just close overnight."

I thought about it and realized he was right. "Oh, so you mean that haircut place will start doing, like, fur combing and feather preening or something?" I joked.

"Or something," Frank said.

We passed a theatre and a dry cleaner. Every place evoked a lot of new ideas I hadn't considered. Movies would be forever different, of course. I chuckled, wondering what some of the big-name actors and actresses had turned into. But all would adapt, just like Frank said. The dry cleaners, I supposed, would find some way to stick around.

Frank got to his car and crawled in, moving the seat as far back as it would go. It was a blue Honda Accord, and Frank was apparently a little bigger than Before. I wondered why he'd grown and I'd gotten smaller though both our norm forms were smaller than human by a good amount. Plus, I'd noticed that some people still looked quite human while others were almost identical to the animal they'd become.

I approached the passenger side door and stopped short, facing a problem. I wasn't exactly able to sit down any more, and though smaller, I knew I couldn't stand on the seat and still fit in the car.

Frank had figured out a way to somewhat sit, with his tail looping around the seat and his short legs barely reaching the pedals. He looked up at me after locating his keys, and realized my situation.

"I'll just fly back," I said, and he nodded, starting the car.

Frank backed up and maneuvered the car around the gas pumps and back to the entrance to the road.

"Damn, I just love saying that!" I said to myself.

I closed my eyes, still unsure of my own ability to change. I willed myself to be the smaller, wild bird I felt inside, and felt myself quickly transform. Opening my eyes and looking upwards, I gladly leapt forward and spread my wings to once again fly.

I kept up with him easily, circling around houses and brushing past the tips of branches on trees. He pulled into the driveway near my apartment and I circled around one last time before gliding down.

I noticed that my living room window was open, which I thought odd, since I never leave them that way. But Frank must have gotten hot and opened it. I'd ran an antenna wire outside last week and never put the screen back, so, on a whim, I thought I'd just fly inside.

Frank walked up to the front door as I turned and glided as slow as I could towards the apartment - which was still about fifteen or twenty miles an hour. I tilted my tail just a bit and straightened out, heading right for the opening. And just as I was getting ready to close my wings for the window, I had a sickening lurch in my gut as I saw a white glare. *The window was closed!*

I couldn't possibly stop... I flared my wings and tail as hard as I could and braced for impact. But the second after it should have happened but didn't, I opened my eyes quickly to see what was happening. If I'd managed by some miracle to slow enough, I'd need to turn and fly or my momentum would just carry me into the brick below the window. But what I saw was not what I expected: the sofa, television and chairs of my living room.

I flapped again and corrected my stall, and landed shakily on the carpet. It took me a while to just breathe and get over the panic I'd felt when I realized I was going to get myself hurt. But then humor cured me as I realized birds *always* have trouble with windows... I turned and looked up at the window, realizing that of course the glare must have been from something else. But I was almost frightened when I saw that the window was closed and even locked.

I chwirked, puzzled, thinking *What the hell?* Frank came around the corner, looking bewildered.

"Hawk? I..." he breathed hard for a second, "I ran back outside when I saw what you were going to do. I was going to yell at you, to let you know... But..." He panted for a second, sort of cooling down from his panic.

I shifted back to morph and stood looking at the window in silence. I still somehow expected to feel at any time the cuts and bruises from crashing through glass. I extended my right hand and touched the glass with a click from my talon. It was rather solid.

Frank approached me and said, "Now I *know* I was fully awake when I saw you come flying through here..."

"Me too," I replied, recalling the horror I felt when I discovered the stupid window was closed. Even flying 'slow' was faster than I'd ever gotten used to making distance judgements.

I cocked my head, perplexed by this new twist, and reached out to touch the glass again. Click. Remembering what I felt when I was gliding towards it from the other side, I tried to recall what exactly happened when I closed my eyes for the crash.

And that's when my hand pushed through the glass. Startled by my sudden loss of balance, I jerked my hand back and looked at Frank to find him staring at me. I didn't know a rat's eyes could get so big.

I felt a tiny bit of hysteria. "Will someone please tell me what's happening in the world today?" I said, only half joking.

"What did you do?"

I looked back at the window and then at my scaly yellow hand. Nothing unusual, if you didn't count being half-animal unusual. Touching the window again revealed that the glass, however transparent, was still there and unmoving.

"I don't get it," I said, but as soon as I said it I knew my mistake. "Wait a second..."

In knowing that all I had to do was think and I could turn into a bird, I realized that perhaps a bit of that same...magic...might apply to everything else. I purposely tried to push my hand through the glass, mentally pretending it was not a physical barrier. Miraculously, I watched as my whole hand went through the glass and I could see it *through* the glass.

I heard a little gasp from Frank and I was quite excited myself. I looked at where the glass seemingly ended to accommodate my wrist, expecting it to have some sort of pain associated with being cut in two. But there was no feeling whatsoever. No tingling, no warm or cool sensation. I didn't have nearly the same sensitivity I did with human hands, but I could feel the wind blowing a bit on the outside of the glass.

I pulled back again and looked carefully at my own fingers. I tried pushing my fist through my other hand, wondering if perhaps some sort of anomaly was going on with my body, but nothing happened.

For a moment I froze, thinking about it. I'd flown through a window that was closed. Then I'd stuck my hand through it as though it were so much air. I shook my head just a bit and chuckled - though it wouldn't sound like it to anyone else. I had to laugh at how funny it sounded to say that "I'd flown through a window." Not at the window part, but that I'd flown! I was only starting to accept things and that I was a bird. Much as I liked the Change, the adventure, and the discovery, my mind demanded answers. After only a day of getting used to myself, I didn't need a whole new puzzle just yet.

"How... how exactly did you do that?" Frank asked.

I looked at him, wondering how he expected me to know.

Some silence passed, then Frank stood next to the window, and repeated the same experiment. But his own claws clicked on the glass and nothing more. He looked at me questioningly.

"I don't know," I said, still in shock, "I just think about it and it works."

Frank sat on the couch and pondered. I looked down at myself, seeing for the hundredth time the ivory and brown feathers of my chest, belly and legs. I looked back up at the window, then through it, eyes unfocused.

The implications were overwhelming.

I turned towards my bedroom, facing the wall that separated it from the living room. Mechanically, I stepped forward and pressed my hands against its smooth surface. I breathed deeply, feeling the cooling effect of the air sacs that I knew were throughout my body. Closing my eyes, I stepped forward again, thinking of the wall as nonexistent. There was no resistance.

I opened my eyes and lowered my wing-arms and found myself standing between my desk and the printer stand just inside my room.

A strange feeling built inside of me as I looked around at all the things in my room. Once important things seemed not to matter. There was a sense of separation I felt from all that I had once known.

I looked out the window at the blue sky and felt an odd happiness and pride.
Softly, I said, "You cannot keep me in a cage... I am a bird that cannot be held."

The Powers that Be

Briiing! I jumped at the sound and had to think for a moment before I realized it was the phone. I hopped to my desk and picked it up in the middle of the second ring. I suddenly realized as I started to pick it up that I didn't have a natural feel for where my ears were yet, and I had to move the phone around a bit before I could tell it was in the right place.

"Um, hello?" I said, feeling suddenly askward holding a phone to my head.

"Hiya!" The voice seemed familiar yet I couldn't place it. I probably wouldn't even recognize my best friends' voices for a while.

"Hello," I repeated, absent-mindedly.

"Hiya!" There was almost a giggle.

"Um, Jared?" I asked, wondering if it was a friend of mine who had the same first name.

The voice changed a bit, with a weird accent. "I understand that you do education programs for schools, is that right?"

I wasn't exactly sure whether to approach the question with humor or not. "Yeah," I said, still running every possible person's voice I knew through my mind.

"How far will you travel?" the caller sounded fairly legitimate. Maybe they'd just been somewhat unsure at first. But wait, *nobody* would be calling me about that *now*. Not with the Change so recent.

"Just within the local towns, actually. Who is this?"

"Oh, so I guess you couldn't come to Ohio, then, huh?"

It dawned on me suddenly, and I felt like an idiot. "Matt! What the hell!" I couldn't believe I hadn't thought to call him first. I'd met him on the internet in one of the bird-related areas. We shared an interest in raptors, and had been emailing back and forth for a few months. We'd talked on the phone only once before.

"Like, whoah, dude," he said, sounding kind of like an old cartoon voice. But it didn't sound quite right.

"Sounds a little forced. All right, tell me..."

There was odd laughter, then, "Care to guess, Bird?"

"Hey, how did you know?" I asked, genuinely impressed.

"Your memory must already be deteriorating. Duh, you sent an email out, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," I said, feeling rather puzzled. But judging from his enthusiasm, I almost dropped the phone. "No way..."

"Yes way," he said.

"A Red-tail?"

"Well, actually, no."

My spirits dropped.

"I'm a Harris Hawk now."

I picked up where I'd left off. "Really? Whoah..."

There was a second of silence while I again wondered what exactly dictated what species people became.

"So are you flighted or not?" he asked me. I had to mentally kick myself for not paying very good attention. I was still awed at just having discovered I possessed a rather powerful ability to walk through walls.

"No, my arms are kind of like false wings is all, but..."

He interrupted, "Really? Same here. I've been watching tons of other bird morphs though that have wings on their back."

"Me too. But I've been out flying today though. In my normal form."

"Damn! That's what I was going to ask you next. I haven't been able to shift yet. And I'm starting to get a little bit po'ed, if you know what I mean."

"I'll bet. Well... Hey, you know what I am suddenly thinking?" I asked.

"What?"

"That it's the perfect time to actually meet in person!"

"In bird?"

"Uh, yeah!" I literally felt giddy in thinking there was someone else I could relate to a bit more. Frank was about the only person I had talked to since the Change, and I didn't even know him. I decided that if the phones were working now, then I should get started on the long list of people I needed to call.

"Cool! Well, I simply *had* to give you a ring, but looks like there's some commotion going on over here, so I'd better go."

I heard a beep just then on the line. "Okay, I just got a call waiting, so I guess I'll talk to you later!"

"Yeah, well, see you later bird brain!"

I had to laugh. "Bye!" I pressed the button on the phone base and looked up as Frank wandered into the room again.

"Hello?" I said into the phone.

"Hey, how are you?"

I knew it was Tiff. "Good. Looks like the phones are a little less screwed up."

"Yeah. I had to try a couple of times, though. I've got to see you," she said.

"Same here! A wolf, huh?"

"Uh huh. Suddenly I want to stare at the moon at night."

I laughed again. Frank was leaning on the perch, apparently checking that the nails were holding it securely. "I went out flying a while ago. Actually *flying*."

It sounded like she sighed. "Wow. That must be so cool. Are you still planning on going to Salt Lake?"

"I guess I was." Actually I hadn't thought about it for a while. I *was* out of rats and I'd probably need to get some for myself now, too. I was perplexed by the notion. I turned away from Frank. "I guess life must go on, huh?"

"Well, it's supposed to. But I hear the interstate is jam packed. There are a lot of abandoned cars and still a lot of confusion."

I nodded, saying "Dang, that's probably right." Briefly, I wondered if I could fly down, but knew it was pointless in light of having things to carry back. Then I pictured myself driving, and suddenly wondered how that could even be possible now. I was built rather considerably different. Frank still retained a lot of his human posture, and indeed was sort of sitting on the edge of my bed listening to my half of the phone conversation. I, however, was for the most part an oversize bird. I stood digitigrade like

a bird, on my toes, but my tarsus was shorter and my knees were visible, which allowed me to walk more effectively, without having my tail touch the ground like Sky's would if she stood on a flat surface. Then my arms were an odd combination of wings and human arms. From my shoulders to my elbow I had a very wing-like appearance, with feathers arranged the same as a wing, but from my elbow out, the feathers diminished in size instead of grew, as on a true wing. Just before reaching my wrist they were reduced to small down feathers and then were gone altogether, leaving my hand very much like my feet, with yellow scales, gnarled, rough pads on my palm, and sharp black talons on my four digits - I'd lost my smallest human finger. When I'd slept curled up on the bed, my legs folded under me like a bird's, but my feet had been under my tail instead of under my belly. My wing-arms folded against my sides like a bird's wings, but my taloned hands came to rest near my throat, instead of having a wrist joint that continued 'backwards' as in a true wing. In any case, I didn't really have much of a posterior anymore, and my center of gravity was such that I could be comfortable perching. I knew I'd be uncomfortable trying to sit down and run the pedals in my truck, though I was certain my legs were long enough to reach them even though I was maybe half the size I'd been Before. Very quickly the idea of going very far in an automobile seemed less appealing than ever to me.

My thoughts swirled as I contemplated the possibilities. Frank was noticeably silent, musing over our recent discovery of my ability to walk through walls.

"Are you going to be home for a while?" Tiff asked.

It took a second for me to get back to the conversation. "Yeah. Yeah, I'll be here."

"Okay, I'm coming over. Don't fly away on me."

I felt so elated. "I love you," I said.

"Bye."

I hung up the phone slowly, turning to look at Frank with as much a perplexed look in my eye as there was in his. I shook my head. "Can you believe all this?"

Frank grinned a toothy grin and scratched at one of his pink ears casually.

"So, uh, when are we going to Fort Knox?"

I had to laugh at that one. But as I thought about it, I wondered something. "I'd have to be able to carry stuff with me. I wonder if that works?"

So Frank and I started experimenting. Over the next half hour I found out I could pretty much go through anything I wanted. The refrigerator, which was eerie, walls, counters and shelves, furniture, anything. When I tried to take something through with me, like a pencil from my desk, it just stopped at the object surface. If I pulled hard, I just broke it. I found that kind of disturbing, but it made sense. I was the only thing with ability to pass through objects, not the pencil or anything else. Although I did find, when I put half of the broken pencil in my beak, that it came through with me just fine. I found out that I couldn't see or feel anything when I was passing through something. If I walked through the kitchen counter, I couldn't feel my legs and tail, but I could see just fine. Frank found it extremely bewildering to see me 'merged' with the countertop, just this upper part of a bird sticking out. I couldn't change directions once I'd started into something, either, which kind of had me perplexed. It was like walking through some kind of thick gel that had little resistance in front of me, but total resistance to each side. I could back out the way I'd come in, which was a comfort. I didn't relish the thought of becoming stuck within some huge object.

I supposed that being unable to change direction was a good thing. If I ducked under the shelves in the front room, then thought about passing through them upwards, I could go through them vertically, but not move away from them horizontally. That also turned out to be a startling experiment, because as I poked my head up, I also lost my footing with the floor, and wound up falling through it to the ground beneath the foundation.

Quite suddenly I found myself standing with just my head above the carpet and the rest of my body hidden somewhere below the floor of my front room. Frank jumped and tried to help me out. I couldn't get any leverage against anything. It was as if everything was liquid against my efforts. I concentrated on the ... concrete? ... whatever was under my feet being firm, and slowly, with some flapping of my wing-arms, was able to get above the carpet again, and allow it to become solid once again for me.

"Geeze, I thought you were going to wind up in China," Frank told me as I inspected myself and made sure I was all there.

"I did too! That was weird. But, I could feel dirt under my feet. It was solid."

So Frank and I went outside, where I started trying to pass through the ground, but I never got more than a half-inch past the grass. Apparently my ability didn't apply to the earth itself. I felt sort of relieved at that, not wanting to see the fiery mantle, but I hoped I was never headed for a collision course with the ground.

Tiff drove up by herself in her yellow car just in time to find me jumping up and down on my front lawn, with Frank, the huge rat apparently cheering me on.

I stopped and stared as she parked and got out, seeing for the first time my girlfriend forever Changed by the most awesome universal event known. Her fur was luxurious grey, long and silky just as beautiful as any fur I'd ever seen. She was wearing a pair of maroon oversize shorts, which almost seemed to go with her fur, but at the same time seemed out of place. Her face was adorned with the same graceful features I'd known from the most wild wolves, but still retained an almost recognizable quality that was still her. She walked up to me, almost seeming not to notice the differences, her bushy tail balancing her walk eloquently behind her. I smiled inside at her presence, knowing it was her, but just as she approached me for a hug, I jumped back, startled and tense. Something wasn't right.

She seemed surprised and withdrew cautiously. "Jared?"

I felt my rapid heartrate slowing down again, and realized I'd just had a natural response to a large predator running at me. I sighed and tried to calm down. Frank just seemed kind of paralyzed by the whole thing. He was surrounded by rodents' worst enemies.

"I'm... okay. Just, not quite the same old me, you know?"

Her voice was more raspy than I'd known, but still familiar. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to scare you!"

"You didn't, really. I just have, I don't know, instinctive feelings I guess."

She nodded and for the first time seemed to take in my new body with a look of wonderment.

Now over the initial shock, I approached her with my high avian steps and threw my wing-arms around her. She did the same with hers, which were a hybrid cross between lupine forelegs and human arms. We hugged each other tight, for the first time finding a strange comfort in our new world. It was at the same time a most incredible and odd feeling to have several inches of feathers and fur between us, like a warm pad of air that separated us, but at the same time we were separated by nothing.

After a moment I stepped back and took another long look at her. Her eyes were dark brown and baleful, but delicately beautiful. An irresistibly cute black nose sat at the end of her compact snout, moreso than a normal wolf's. She was about the same height she'd always been, five and a half feet, which made me about a foot shorter than her.

"You're... feathered!" she said hysterically.

I never thought I'd care whether I smiled again or not, but just then, as I felt a subtle giddiness, I wanted to. "I guess I am, yeah," I said, looking at her and wondering how I was still so attracted to her. We were completely different species, yet I still found her intensely beautiful. Was there some deeper magic at work here?

Her pointed ears wiggled atop her head as she looked me over more carefully. I could tell she felt the same way, somehow loving me though I was entirely different from her.

She reached towards my face with a unique grey arm and touched my beak, running her black-padded finger down the hooked curve and back up to touch the point at its end.

Oddly enough, I found it tantalizingly wonderful. I reached back and felt her strange new face, too, both filled with curiosity and lightheartedness. There was definitely something more to it than a dog's muzzle, hers was strong and ... just hers. It was indescribable.

"Okay, you two. Stop it, you're making me sick," Frank said, approaching.

I laughed and spread my wing-arms. "Ah, excuse me!" I said to Frank. "Introductions, of course. Tiffani, this is Frank, one of the rats of Nymh, and Frank, this is Tiffani, my girlfriend and greatest nose in the forest." As stupid as it was, we all found it funny and laughed as we tried to act civilized despite being so nearly animals.

We talked for a while, getting updated on what we'd all seen and done since the Change. Tiff's mom was a whistling swan and her brother was a hedgehog. I still couldn't believe how random it seemed, outside of my own lucky alignment. Was it really purely random?

Tiff's ears perked up at about the same time I heard the phone ringing inside my apartment. My own hearing hadn't improved a great deal with the Change, but so far I noticed a certain clarity I hadn't possessed before.

I turned to go back inside and felt a strange tug, which I discovered was Tiffani pulling on my tail when I looked back at her. I hopped forward out of her reach and allowed her to give chase. Frank sighed and followed, slowly bringing up the rear. I hopped up the steps and decided to give Tiff a real surprise. She expected to catch me as I stopped to open the door, of that I was sure. So instead, I simply ran through it. At about that same time, I heard an odd yelp from outside. I laughed, then thought better of it, hoping she wasn't hurt.

I turned around and opened the door to find her holding her nose and looking quite seriously bewildered.

"I'm sorry!" I said, and approached her with my wing-arms open. She looked at me as though I were some hallucination, but allowed me to hug her close, and bring her into the front room. Frank followed and shut the door, chuckling despite himself.

The phone rang again, and I nodded to Frank to grab it. He went off into the bedroom to answer it.

"What...?" she managed, sniffing and letting go of her head.

"It's my ability. One of a couple it seems. I can change into a normal-size, normal-looking Hawk, and apparently walk through walls."

She seemed a little mystified at that.

"And refrigerators," Frank added, coming back around the corner. "It's for you, Birdbrain."

I glanced in his direction, "Thanks, I think," then back at Tiff. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just... Well, for one, I'm not used to this body. You know? I've never had a four-inch snout before. And I thought you'd pushed the door open, not ran right through the damn thing!" She rubbed her nose once more and gave me a look as though everything were my fault.

I shrugged and ran my fingers through the fur on her back, avoiding poking her with my talons. "Well, apparently there is a bit more to our lives now than just adjusting to a decidedly more animal nature to ourselves," I said, walking away from her. "Frank and I both can shift into normal animal forms of those we basically are now, plus," I started walking through the couch, "I've found a bonus in that I can do this."

Tiff stared with disbelief, but seemed to accept it quickly.

"Well, that's quite impressive. I hurried over here because I found something out, too. But you'd better get the phone first."

I nodded and went into my bedroom and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Heya, Bird!"

"Matt! What's up?"

"Well, I told you I hadn't figured out how to change into my normal form yet, right?"

"Right."

"I guess I figured out how!"

"That's great! How did it go?" I asked, thinking of my own confusing experience.

"It was really strange. I'll have to tell you when I get there."

"You're coming out here?"

"Sure!"

I was a little dumbfounded at that. I couldn't think of any sort of response except, "Okay."

"Hey, see you in a while, okay?"

"Um, all right."

With that, he hung up, at about the same time I started to ask him whether I should meet him at the airport or something. I opened my beak, but too late.

I hung up the phone slowly, starting to get a little overwhelmed by things, and returned to the front room. Only, it wasn't my front room any more. It was completely gone. The clear blue sky had replaced the dull white ceiling above. I looked at Tiff to find that behind her there was no longer a wall. I looked around and was startled to find that the whole apartment complex was suddenly gone!

"What...? How?"

Tiff smiled, sharp teeth evident in her jaw. "The enchantress waves her arms dramatically..." she said, giggling and waving her furry arms poetically, "And away goes the world!" The air shimmered and the walls of my apartment replaced the view of the outdoors, as did the ceiling.

"You made it all vanish?"

"Well, not quite."

She looked around for a moment, then tilted her head just a bit, and suddenly my front room was a vast, echoing lobby of some huge castle. There was a winding staircase a few hundred feet behind me, beyond where my kitchen would have been, and elegant tapestries hung from the walls. Marble columns stretched up to a high ceiling with sparking chandeliers and immense stained glass skylights. I looked around in awe then back to Tiffani. "Wow, very impressive!"

Frank walked around a bit, admiring the marble tiled floor and the two oak doors that served as an entryway. Just as suddenly as it all had appeared, it was gone, and we were back in my considerably smaller apartment.

"Was that all real?" Frank asked.

"No," Tiff replied, "I can only create the illusion. I don't know yet how it works. I just think about changing things around me, and will it to happen, and it does."

I nodded and felt a tinge of jealousy. But I remembered my own ability, then shook my head. "I wonder if everyone has some kind of new... magic or whatever?"

"So I can go through objects, you can create vast illusions," I said looking at the most beautiful wolf I'd ever seen, "and you..."

"Have yet to find something special about myself," Frank finished for me. "I feel like I've been put on the set of Sliders or something, but nobody's acting."

I laughed. "You'll find something, Rat-boy."

At about that precise moment, an almost mirror image of myself appeared between Tiffani and I. It took me about two seconds too long to open my beak and say something.

"Hi Bird!" Matt said, flapping his own wing-arms excitedly.