

The Feathered Quest
by Jared Yelton and Matt Polak



Chapter 1
Matt's Encounter
— Jared Yelton

The laser light danced off the water at SeaWorld playfully, flitting in and out of existence. From the booth where it had emerged came a loud sigh as a tired Matt wiggled a cable for the last time.

“This thing needs an overhaul,” he said to himself as he looked at an old laser array.

He stood up from his crouched position under the table and turned off the power to the control deck. He paused momentarily to admire his work on the newer, computer-controlled set across the room, but somehow he hated to let things die simply from age. The old laser set was entirely optical and mechanical, but he had put many hours of careful work into making it a reality, all those years ago.

He sat down in a rolling chair and pulled himself towards a table with the last of his evening snack, a couple of doughnuts. He picked at it lazily, his mind somewhere else.

“Well, at least the computers are all ready for tomorrow’s show,” he mused, looking around. He glanced at a clock, wondering if it could possibly be time to leave yet. He still had another half-hour.

He ate a couple of bites in silence, then went around the room putting scraps of wire and assorted pieces of hardware into boxes, shoving the whole mess into a closet. But somehow, nothing seemed real. His mind was lost in a different world...

The Wild Wings show was gone until Spring, and an entire cold winter awaited him. The raptors would be back soon enough, of course, but somehow he missed them more every year. For years he had been gradually drawn to them, in admiration and perhaps envy. But in a quest for meaning and purpose, he’d discovered a frightening realization: He wanted to be one of them.

It wasn’t just a passing fantasy, it was a building desire. A strange, fantastic connection with the freedom and wild life of the birds. N’dume’s graceful flight, Timagen’s beautiful feathers... The whole world was so elegantly simplified for them. Everything he knew about wavelengths of light, photons, and geometry was pointless in the scope of such a life.

More and more he found himself lost in thought; daydreaming about an impossible life. Contemplating the sacrifices that would have to be made and the rewarding possibilities of it all. And, too, came the wonderment if he was the only person in the world who dared contemplate such dangerous things.

But recently that wonderment seemed to have ceased, because he had found someone who apparently shared his unique outlook on things and even his ultimate dream. The internet was a strange and powerful tool. Some guy in Utah had almost the same exact list of hobbies, likes and dislikes. His whole presence on the net had to do with Red-tailed Hawks, in fact. Indeed, that was his nickname, “Redtailed.” His name was Jared, and not only did he share many viewpoints, but he also housed an injured Hawk named Sky.

So Matt was anxious to get back home to check and see if any more mail had arrived from him. The clock dragged on forever, but finally he turned things off, punched out and walked out to the parking lot.

It was dark; he'd worked a lot of overtime this week. The cold Ohio air was crisp but definitely not welcoming for someone contemplating a future in its constant presence. He pocketed his hands and thought of feathers, walking quickly. Why they'd designated the employee parking lot the farthest thing from the building he'd never know. Stupid humans...

Suddenly he thought he saw a flash of light by his car. He looked closely, but couldn't see anything. There was a light over the parking lot that was flickering, though. Maybe it had reflected off the bumper or something.

But then he heard a definite sound, from the same general direction. Sort of like someone was hurt.

He walked a bit slower, considering, then decided to run. He got to his car to discover a strange old man sitting down, leaning against his back tire. The guy was dressed in a plain black trenchcoat, wearing a nondescript hat and gloves. He was staring at something in his hands and cussing to himself.

Great, another homeless bum... But he approached cautiously and slowly nevertheless.

"Are you all right?" Matt asked him, trying not to startle him.

The guy seemed startled anyway, but much to Matt's surprise did not respond like he thought he might.

"Oh, yes yes. I'm fine. I'm just... thinking for a minute."

Matt figured he'd become irate or something like a lot of street people seemed to in movies or television. But instead he'd looked up and talked with a certain commanding tone.

The man went silent again, turning some kind of pen or something over and over in his hands. Matt wasn't sure what to do. He didn't want to get any closer to his car with the possibility that the man was some sort of murderer or worse, but he did need to get going.

As if the man realized this, he suddenly stood up and brushed himself off.

"I'm terribly sorry. I didn't realize... Is this your car?"

"Yes," Matt answered slowly.

The man stepped away from it, looking up again. His eyes were like those of a kind old grandfather, understanding and wise. But they were afraid of something. He was wrinkled with age and his beard was bone white.

"It's just all so maddening... Every time I try... Oh you must be positively confused. I'll find somewhere else to be a worthless old codger..."

Matt couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for him, but somehow it seemed like the man wasn't serious. It was as though he were lying. But not for attention or sympathy, it was more like a disguise. Maybe the guy was in trouble or something.

"Oh dear," the man suddenly gasped. "He's coming! I don't know how he found me so fast!"

He was staring at his watch, or at least what looked like a watch. It was glowing red with some bizarre sort of indicators.

"Listen," he hissed, stepping closer to Matt, "you have to help me."

Very quickly, Matt wasn't liking the situation at all. He tried to back away just a bit, but the old man was right next to him.

He pressed a gold colored pen into Matt's hand. "Take this. Whatever you do don't lose it. Just keep it. Hide it somewhere. Don't give it to anyone or tell anyone about it."

The voice was serious. Whatever the man was doing, he believed it.

"I only have a few minutes," he continued. "Kern never gives up. He's always at my heels, looking for secrets to the universe... Well, no need to bother you with all that. Just please trust me. I'll find you again when I need to."

The man started walking towards the bushes that lined the parking lot.

Matt had never felt so strange in his whole life. He looked at the pen thing, but couldn't see anything special about it. There was no clip or tapered shape of any kind. It was more like a small cylinder without any markings or function.

"Oh," the old man said, turning around again. "Listen, you're doing me a great favor. Please understand I don't mean to cause you any harm. Just take care of the gold pin. I can only repay you by granting you some sort of favor in return."

The man reached in his pocket to retrieve some sort of tiny device. It looked a lot like a calculator.

"Please hurry, though, I only have a few seconds left."

"What?" Matt asked.

"What would you wish for, Matt?" the old man asked plainly.

He was taken aback. The old man knew his name? But seeing the man in such a hurry, he couldn't think of anything. He smiled and blurted out without thinking, "I wish I was a Hawk."

The old man didn't act like it was a strange request at all. He merely pulled his beard in thought and replied, "Well, that should be easy enough."

A couple of seconds of silence went by. The man pocketed the calculator thing and looked at a confused Matt with a careful gaze.

"Well, I can't rewrite history. But I did what I could. You should have no trouble becoming one now, at any rate. Just think and it shall be, my friend. And the same to return to your present state. It's the least I can do to repay you for your kindness."

Suddenly a light flashed and the old man was gone. Matt shook his head, feeling as though he'd just had a very stupid dream.

But the weight of the gold object in his hands was a definite reminder.

What the hell was going on?

That and many other questions ran through his mind as he drove home.



Unable to come up with any answers, Matt put the gold thing on his desk and logged onto the internet. While he waited for the modem to dial and the connection to start, he looked closely at the strange pin. There was nothing to it, really. Just a long gold rod, about like a pencil. It was polished smooth and had a couple of indentations on one end. There were no marks or words on it though. He set it down and tried to figure out what had happened.

He couldn't convince himself it was all just some sort of ruse. There was a tone to the man's voice, a whole demeanor for that matter, that was impossible to describe. It was like the guy was some sort of important person. Like how you feel puny sometimes when your boss is talking to you. But it was a lot more than that. That old man he'd seen was something unknown.

The computer finished its business and Matt launched Eudora to check his mail. A couple of messages had come in from Jared, and he went about answering them sort of blankly. There was just too much on his mind.

He was on the last message, about to send it and log off, when he thought, 'What the hell, I'll tell him about it.'

He typed up a quick outline of his evening encounter, partly for his own records.

Return-Path: <simba@prairienet.org>
Date: Mon, 10 Nov 1997 01:24:59 -0700
From: Matt Polak <simba@prairienet.org>
To: Redtailed <Redtailed@sisna.com>
Subject: Something weird happened this evening...

He asked me what I'd wish for. But I blurted it out before I could even think. Then he said something about how he did what he could. Really weird, you know?

Anyway, I'll keep you posted if anything turns up with this stupid gold thing.

— Matt, the Feathered Fury who really hates practical jokes and hopes this gold thing isn't a bomb.

He logged off and turned off the computer. He walked to his window, staring out into the trees of his backyard.

"What a weird day," he sighed. "If only I could just be out there... With none of this confusion and just plain weird stuff.."

He smiled a sort of wistful, contemplating smile, shifting his mind to thoughts of what it could possibly be like... closing his eyes to imagine... to live out there... to have feathers... to perch...

He thought he felt sort of strange, like when you have a falling dream and your stomach freaks out. But he hadn't had much to eat. Maybe he'd go to the kitchen and see what sort of midnight snack he could find.

When he opened his eyes, the window was several feet above his head. And now there was the black tip of a beak in his peripheral vision, instead of the blur of beige nose he'd always known.

He looked down. Yellow toes. Talons. Feathers. All his.

He was standing on his pants and shirt, quite fully a Red-tailed Hawk.

He took a step, feeling the complete newness of his body for the first time...

...and passed out.

Chapter 2
Novus Ordo Seclorum
— Matt Polak

The rabbit sat completely still in the field, his head locked closely to the ground and his ears drawn tightly back against his head, hoping that he hadn't been seen.

He was quite mistaken.

Jared perched on a high branch in a barren tree across the field - a barely noticeable black spot upon a limb. The rabbit was a good thousand feet away or so from the base of the tree, and try as he might to stay concealed in the grass below, the brown spot was quite visible from the hawk's location.

Jared sat as noiselessly as possible, his muscles tensed, ready to spring his wings open in a flash and leap out of the tree. But now just to wait for the right moment... This was not something that was to be rushed - prey like this was not easy find in this season, and indeed Jared had been following this particular rabbit for nearly an hour, waiting to line up the exact position and attack pattern so he could make a perfect cornering of the rabbit; executing the maneuver in such a way that his dinner had no possible means of escape. And so he sat there, thinking how delicious that little brown spot would be! So filling and rewarding, why he —

The rabbit sprang and shot across the field. Instantly Jared was in the air - the tree disappearing behind him as his wings carried him through the air.

The rabbit began to zigzag quickly away from the approaching hawk. Jared felt quite smug, as he knew his prey had no chance! As usual, he had calculated everything too carefully; he had far too much speed at his advantage, and it was only a matter of time till his talons would be deep within his supper.

Try as the rabbit may, now darting in an absolute blind panic, it was impossible to escape from the wind - or those carried by it.

Jared closed the distance to the rabbit in a matter of a few seconds, and in a quick flaring of his tail the animal was directly below him. His talons flashed out and grabbed soft hide of the rabbit and began to lift it into the air.

It would all be over quite soon...

But, unfortunately, Jared didn't realize that it was instead over for *him*. That is, until he was overcome by a quite sickening feeling which gripped his whole existence, and threw it into a turbulent confusion. Things flashed by his eyes, his wings didn't seem to want to work correctly and he plummeted towards the ground, his vision becoming distorted and growing quite dim... Until it had vanished completely...

What the hell had just happened? All he could see was darkness.

And then a tired and quite depressed sigh emanated out from under the covers of Jared's bed.

"Why does it ALWAYS have to keep ending up like this? Why always at the good part? Doesn't a guy deserve to know how the story ends?" Jared wondered out loud. Grumbling, he got up and switched the alarm off - no need to have that damn thing blaring while he was awake; it was quite bad enough when it yanked him from his dreams each morning. Ironically, though, he had woken up only a few minutes before the clock was set to go off. Odd.

The dream was still quite fresh in his mind, and he decided to jot it down. Indeed, this was one of the clearest and most interesting hawk dreams he had experienced lately, and he reflected on it's main points as he fumbled for the desk lamp.

He had been having these kinds of dreams more and more frequently now, but this was by far the most vivid. He had written down many of his dreams in the past, and because of the increasing frequency of them, decided to compile a journal instead of dealing with the growing stack of papers sprawled over his desk. It was quite coincidental, though, in *when* he had started having these dreams. Of course he'd had a few minor hawk dreams years ago, but nothing like these recent ones! These dreams had started occurring only about two months ago, and oddly enough they had started (upon looking back at the first dream log he had created) the night of October 7th, 1997, the night in which he had gotten a request by someone for the first part of an old story he had posted to the TSA.

This mysterious soul had ended up revealing himself to be Matt Polak, some guy from Ohio who had originally written to comment on the web-page Jared had recently put up, and to point out the interesting similarities in hobbies, music, and just about everything else. And this included an absolute fascination over birds of prey.

Jared though that this might just be another fellow transformation enthusiast who couldn't hope to understand or agree on his personal Dream, but he figured that he might as well tempt fate (and possibly his better judgment) and slowly unravel many of his thoughts. Ah well, he probably wouldn't get very far, and figured some large hiccup would develop eventually; they *always* seemed to...

But it never came.

Rather eerily, Matt seemed a mirror of almost every facet of his beliefs down to the most minute details, and indeed he was quite skeptical over this issue. How in the world could someone possibly even HOPE to understand his viewpoints? No one else did or could. But, yet, here was someone, thousands of miles away, who had fallen into the trap he had rather subtly set in his online works, and appeared to be genuine.

The skepticism took a while to diminish, but after seeing some of the things Matt was writing back, he finally began to accept the similarities. In a way it was very much like someone almost invading into a part of your life that had remained sheltered away for so very long. Well, 'invading' was probably the wrong word to use here, but it was just such a strange feeling! Almost like discovering something that filled a void in your life that you never knew you were missing, yet, you subconsciously had always wished for. And, for the first time being able to open the communication lines to their utmost capacity seemed the next best thing to The Dream itself.

There just seemed to be some sort of uncanny bond between the two of them; almost as if they had been hatched from the same nest. Maybe fate and destiny really did exist...

And ever since they had met, both of their email programs and word processors had worked overtime in trying to exchange an incredible number of ideas and to discuss so many topics. Unfortunately, Matt always seemed to have something stupid happening on his end (that he would usually repeatedly curse in his emails!) but he seemed awfully hard to be trying to change that.

Opening his journal, he scratched down a brief paragraph and tried his best to draw a little thumbnail of the general landscape the he had flown over. (There was something about the landscape that seemed awfully familiar, but he couldn't make any sort of direct connection in his mind.)

It was still dark, everything was quite covered in snow outside, and yet more was falling. The wind whipped the snow across the land in large sheets, depositing it in large drifts against any obstruction in its path. Visibility was not more than a few hundred feet in either direction, and he remembered the forecast from last night - 'ontinuing snow squalls throughout the night and early morning hours, with increasingly bad weather as the day moved on.' Great.

And, as much as he would have loved to stay home and work on the seemingly endless stream of raptorial projects he had on his mind, he unfortunately knew that he couldn't call off work today - Watkins was moving to their new building, and he had to do some major wiring and work in getting the new network backbone set up to accommodate the move. But heck, he'd gotten his truck not too long ago and it performed quite well - driving in even the worst weather sometimes didn't seem all that bad. The drive to work might be a bit slow, but he'd get there eventually. He grabbed a CD from his collection and put it next to his keys.

Grabbing one of his favorite shirts from the closet (it was one of several HawkWatch T-shirts) and a pair of jeans, he headed for a quick shower and to grab something to eat. He was anxious to get outside and check on Sky and the mews this morning; although he knew she was perfectly fine, he always just felt that much better in truly seeing it for himself. And besides, looking upon and having direct contact with The Dream itself was a great way to start off the morning - With a day of battling the cold and weather ahead of him, he surely appreciated being able to.

Before leaving his room, Jared booted his system to check email. He really didn't expect to see anything from Matt since last night's correspondence, but heck, Matt was occasionally known to stay up quite late and ramble off email messages. And besides, the whole series of events Matt had described to him were quite intriguing, and he was anxious to hear more.

Because he often didn't have much time to read over email in the mornings before work, he had decided to write a short script in Win95 which would open his email client and connection, and print any new email that had arrived so he could simply grab the hard copies and review them at his leisure. And so with the script executing and the modem dialing, he went about his morning business.

Sky was, of course, doing quite well. Jared smiled as he lightly stroked the bird's feathers a bit. Ahh, what he wouldn't give to be one... To have feathers of his own, to only worry about survival, to be away from the crazy society of humans. To simply perch somewhere in a tree, rain or shine, dependent on nothing else, and just be free...

And though he would have liked nothing more to have stood there with his feathered companion just thinking and wishing and pondering the mysteries of life, he knew that he'd better get a move on - the weather wasn't getting any better, and Watkins depended on him to get things ready at the new building.

As he closed the door to the mews and trudged back through the falling snow, his mind wandering off toward thoughts about hawks. This time, it was again stuck on the appreciation of a hawk's foot as he noticed how clumsy his boots were. Besides being yet **another** stupid covering to account for the strange design of the human body, the boots collected water and snow and ice and just about everything else and consequently had to be removed when entering a dwelling. How stupid!

He sighed. Four yellow toes with four black talons were certainly much more appealing. It just made so much more damn sense.

Upon entering his room once again, he noticed his clock-radio was now on. Obviously he hadn't slid the switch quite far enough when he turned off the alarm.



“... Heavy snow squalls continuing throughout the day with further accumulation as the day continues. Again, all schools are closed today, and it is recommended that you avoid travel on all surface roads if possible. We will continue to keep you updated with further weather conditions as they develop...”



Jared groaned, and switched off the radio. He *wanted* to avoid travel on all surface roads - he'd rather just FLY wherever he was going, or else just be perching somewhere out there. But, since this wasn't an option at the present moment, he instead grabbed the few papers that had been printed and stuffed them into a red binder (which contained some of his network layout materials for work), grabbed his keys and the CD, and headed out the door. Might as well get going before any other crazy people got out on the roads this morning and begin causing traffic problems.

The drive out to Watkins did indeed take much longer than normal, as the snow squalls began to pick up their intensity and reduce his visibility. But upon pulling into the parking lot of the new building, he actually felt a sense of accomplishment. “I guess that even as human I never let the weather get the best of me...” he thought to himself, grinning slyly. He parked, grabbed his binder, and exited the truck.

Since the Watkins building was still very much new and not yet completely finished, Jared instead went to a side maintenance door, unlocked it, and entered the building. Various boxes labeled “Deliver to: Watkins Printing” were stacked against the wall inside the door - they contained the new routers and hubs and network goodies that had just arrived and were waiting to be installed. Jared picked up the stack of boxes and carried them to a nearby table, then carefully began to unpack them and arrange the components in front of him.

Over the next few hours, Jared double-checked the inventory list of new network components, noting which ones still hadn't arrived, and what he could do today given the pieces he had to work with. All the actual network wiring had been installed for the building a few weeks ago - it was now up to Jared to attach all the fun RJ-45 connectors to the leads so the hubs could be connected and configured, then linked into the new fiber-optic backbone running throughout the building. And so he started by working on the connections at one of the hub locations, all the while humming the theme to LadyHawke, as well as a few Tangerine Dream tunes. And everything was going fine, until the lights went out.

Staring blankly at a connection which he could no longer see, Jared was stunned for a second until he realized that the power to the building must have gone out. It was probably the weather. Sheesh!

Stopping his work, Jared left the hub connections and moved towards one of the building's windows to have a peek outside. Or, at least an attempt to peek outside; the weather had gotten a lot worse, and it was a complete whiteout; he could hardly even see his truck in the empty parking lot!

And that's when it hit him - he was still the only one here! Though the majority of the staff had still been back at the old building packing up, there had usually been various deliveries of equipment to the new building, and there were usually a few people hanging around working on preparations.

... But not today - he was the only one here. Obviously everyone else had probably stayed at home, why hadn't he? Oh well, he was here - might as well get the job done. And the work was rather fun, anyway.

But he couldn't very well work efficiently if the power was out! There were no windows where that hub was, and he didn't have a flashlight. Now what was he supposed to do, besides wait?

Aww hell, since everyone *else* was at home, he might as well relax a bit and read over the printed email messages while he waited for the power to come back on. And so he grabbed a nearby chair, pulled it over to a window, and sat down with the binder.

There were only a couple pages of mail, but anything was better than nothing... And what had he been expecting? Unless Matt decided to have some sort of late night writing-fest, it'd be unlikely there was much of anything from him since last night's mail.

Looking at the three pages, Jared was upset to find that the first two were simply two spammed bulk-email messages. Gads, were those things annoying! And pointless, too; they clogged up network bandwidth and storage space, and were always downright stupid. These kind of messages were just yet another thing that helped him affirm just how very much he disliked humans - give humans ANYTHING, and they always quickly find a way to badly abuse it. And these damn emails were a direct result of this fact!

Frustrated, Jared crumpled up both pages and pitched them into a nearby barrel full of cardboard scraps, guessing that he'd have to modify the script on his system to print only filtered email messages, rather than whatever happened to come into the box.

Well, one last page to go - hopefully it was from Matt, and hopefully it was something good.

It was infact from Matt, but the page seemed awfully empty on first glance; just an email header and footer, and nothing in the middle. No multiple paragraphs, and oddly enough, no signature. He'd been hoping for more details concerning Matt's encounter yesterday evening, but he guessed he'd still have to wait. But then his eye caught the three words written in all capital letters that made up the sole body of the message. He froze and instantly forgot about everything else upon reading them...

NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM

Jared sort of trembled a bit. It was the three words that he never seriously though he'd ever see from Matt, or ever use himself. It was a Latin phrase which meant "A new order is established", originally used by our founding fathers to describe the new constellation of 13 stars in the heavens, representing the United States. But Jared and Matt had created a different personal meaning for this phrase - They chose it to represent the idea that 'change was upon us' and that something had *seriously* happened to either of them regarding The Dream. It sort of functioned like an emergnecy code-phrase that they and they alone shared.

And now here it was...

For a bit, Jared wondered if this whole episode was some sort of big elaborate joke on Matt's part - the whole story about the gold pen thingy and the guy and everything. But still, the phrase itself... He and Matt had completely agreed to NEVER use it unless something had actually happened, and they both made this decision quite adamantly and promised to support it above anything else. No... He knew Matt; and though Matt tried to poke fun into just about everything, this was something that would always remain a serious issue. No, he was definatly not fooling around this time.

But what in the *world* had happened? This was all there was! No additional pages... Nothing... Maybe more email had arrived after he had left? No. The timestamp on the message was for late last night.

Jared was rather stunned by the whole thing, and without thinking brought his hand against his head in a gesture of disbelief. He sighed. This just couldn't be true; there was no possible way! To be a hawk... To simply be feathered and free...

And that's when he felt something strange stuck in his hair.

Jared disgustedly brushed his hand quickly across his head, figuring it was more of that damn plaster or insulation that was still occasionally drifting about or dropping from above as all the drop-ceilings hadn't yet been installed. But when he looked down to see what he had brushed from his hair, he nearly fainted. It just wasn't possible! But... Perhaps Matt had indeed been telling the truth?

Suddenly, Jared was almost convinced that something indeed HAD happened as he again lowered his eyes to the feathers which were now lying on the ground at his cramped feet.

Hawk feathers...

Chapter 3
Birdy
— Jared Yelton

There was quite suddenly the deafening pierce of a Hawk's cry. Matt woke immediately, alert, searching the room for the source with unerring vision—but the only Hawk he found was himself. Checking his confused memory, now quite fragmented from recent adventures, he realized that it had come from his computer speakers: Eudora announcing incoming email.

He shook himself, feeling awash with emotion. The incredible things happening to him weren't a dream. Somehow he'd expected to wake up and find things back the way they were just a day ago; for one, himself human again. But reality had indeed changed for him: The two small down feathers floating gently to the ground were most definitely his. The taloned, yellow feet gripping the rail of the ladder to his bed were his own. And the two magnificent wings folded neatly at his sides were a part of him as well. Reality had changed because he had changed.

Only last night he had been standing at the window, gazing beyond and wishing to be what he now was. He couldn't explain how or why, but that moment of wishing had been quite effective.

He'd passed out at first, completely overcome. Nothing could quite compare to actually feeling and seeing himself be something else, something he'd always dreamed of. Stories, thoughts and even dreams seemed quite ludicrous in contrast to the realism he'd felt in just breathing through new lungs those first few seconds. A short while later he awoke and slowly began to absorb the new truth.

Hours more, he'd explored every feather and muscle, oblivious to time and his growing weariness. Such a momentous thing to have wings—great, broad beautiful wings—instead of arms. Who needed hands and fingers when they could climb into the very air of the sky itself? He had marvelled at them, feeling his light weight and unexpected strength. And he had realized, looking at the rows of airy feathers, that now he could, in fact, fly. The sudden urge to find the quickest way outside had been quickly subdued, however, when he had seen the dark night outside his windows. But he had occupied his time getting used to his new self; fanning his tail and flexing his powerful feet.

And then he'd begun to grow tired. As much newfound energy as he'd acquired in pure excitement, the long day caught up to him, and he had to resign himself to sleep. But not before he had accomplished one important thing...

He'd turned the switch on to his computer and waited for it. He'd pressed just enough keys to connect to the internet. And he'd slowly and meticulously typed a single message to his friend consisting of but three words of highest priority.

Feeling almost weak from lack of sleep, he had hopped up three rungs of his ladder and drifted comfortably into unconsciousness, listening to the quiet hum of the computer fan, then realizing at the last moment... that his wish had gone afoul.

He was truly a Hawk, but his mind was the same as always. He thought in nearly the same way. To be fully a bird was his dream, and to be completely so required the release of his human memories and thoughts forever. But he had been so tired he didn't feel discouraged for long, for his mind drifted into dreams unlike any he'd ever had.

And now, awake, he pondered again what he felt: His heart beating, rapidly compared to what he had once known, hidden inside him behind the light feathers of his chest. Every breath and every movement felt new and different. The kind of things he could barely imagine before were now so completely real. None of them were as he'd imagined, but not one disappointed him.

He'd slept well and felt incredible—and he was certain that sleep wasn't the only reason he felt lively. He was drawn almost immediately to the view beyond the window. The fall colors of the trees were backlit by a beautiful blue sky, cloudless and inviting.

Inviting. I can respond to the invitation now... I belong to the sky.

He roused his feathers, lowering his left foot, noticing almost absently that he had slept with it pulled into his coat of feathers. He felt cozy and secure, the wood beneath him warm under his right foot and still cool under his left. Noting a couple of feathers standing between his body and wings, he experimentally preened them back into place.

Such beautiful feathers... So warm and simple. This is life...

A noise from somewhere in the house startled him just then, and he listened quietly for anything to accompany it. There was only silence. But he had been reminded that there was actually a realm beyond his avian self.

Stupid bird, all caught up in yourself! What about that email? Maybe Jared wants to know. What will you do when your mom comes in to greet you? Ah—what then?

He felt a wild urge to burst outside and just fly somewhere. Someplace he could live forever from now on as he now was. It didn't matter much where; he'd find a place.

But his mind nagged at him of responsibilities still left, of family that cared about him, and of friends that simply could not be left behind. A sudden, horrible thought occurred to him just then:

What will Jared think? When he discovers what has happened to me. I wonder if it's possible that he could have had his incredible wish granted, too.

Another noise outside his room; his dad closing the door to the bathroom. They were waking up and soon enough he would have to decide what sort of involvement he wanted in his previous life. Should he be gone? Hide? He remembered the words of the stranger in the parking lot only vaguely, "...return to your present state." Things were different, yes; but did anyone else need to know?

Only that one person...

He looked at the computer again. The monitor was dim, but looked huge and ominous. The keyboard seemed strange and out of place. He felt that way about everything as he looked about. Nothing seemed real except himself. His perception had changed. Everything else was suddenly wrong and out of place except him. *He* was right. How ironic.

Without even thinking about it, he scratched his head with a foot, then hopped down to the ground with a brief extension of his wings. He felt more natural than he could possibly imagine in his whole life. How torturous to even contemplate becoming a human again.

But he knew he had to somehow finish a few last pieces of his life puzzle.

Had he been granted his wish completely; had it been as he had most wanted; he would have been gone from human life forever—maybe dead or just vanished. There would have been no opportunity nor ability to end his affairs and tie up loose ends. He would have simply been beginning life anew—breaking through the shell of an egg somewhere with all the strength he could manage. But it wasn't that way, and he cursed himself for being so weak as to be unable to just let it all go.

He forced his mind to concentrate on being human again. His emotions reeled, his very soul gripping tightly to what he now was and not letting go. He forced himself to will the change to happen, hesitantly. But he felt nothing and was rather relieved when he found he was still a bird. Deep in the back of his mind though, he knew he had not really tried. He didn't *want* it to happen. He closed his eyes. It took a long period of thinking strictly of those who cared about him—of weighing their importance to him, and he finally managed to transform yet again. It was sudden and rapid, almost with no sensation at all. But as it was, it still took a moment for his mind to adjust.

He crouched there, feeling the cold chill of the room on his bare skin, almost ready to scream with anger at himself. He felt so horribly different. It was like becoming a monster. All the weight had returned, along with ungainly arms and legs. His tail was gone. The new muscles, gone. Wings and feathers—all gone.

For a moment he wanted to just break down and cry, for he felt like he'd given up something, or as though he'd betrayed himself in his own quest for truth. But somehow he knew - he could feel it - the potential was still there. Tearfully, he paused and let his mind wander. And he found a sort of self-confidence; a hidden comfort; lingering within himself. He realized that he was as much avian as he had been, just not physically. His mind still had instincts and feelings that had materialized when he'd first changed.

Sudden footsteps outside his door brought him to the present. He dashed quickly for his bed, climbed in and pretended to be asleep.

There was a brief knock and then his mom's face appeared around the door. He watched from behind one barely-open eyelid, still trying to adjust to the overwhelming changes.

"Matt? It's almost ten o'clock. Are you still asleep?" she wondered aloud to him, testing how coherent he was.

He propped his head up slowly, as though he'd just awoken. "Mmm?"

"It's almost ten o'clock," she repeated. "Come get some breakfast and don't just sleep the day away."

"Okay," he said, voice rasping.

The door closed quietly and the hum of his computer fan once again became the dominant sound. He breathed a sigh of relief, feeling tension from a strange mix of excitement, secrecy, and nervousness subside. He let his eyes wander the room for a moment, noticing seemingly for the first time the difference between moving his eyes and moving his head to look around. He looked at the many raptor sketches hanging on his walls, the bird books stacked in various places, and the Hawk photos near his desk. A chill went down his spine as he considered them now, looking at the hooked beaks and knowing — not wondering — how it felt.

And for another uncounted moment, every situation in his life seemed to fade away into insignificance. His mom requesting that he have some breakfast seemed so small and ludicrous. The tuning of the lasers downstairs . . . so pointless. There were much greater things happening now.

But his mind floated back to a nagging reminder that he did have at least one important thing to do.

Reluctantly, he climbed back down out of bed and put minimal clothing on, comparing every movement and every feeling to the latest knowledge he possessed. Pulling a shirt over his head, all he could think of was disgust compared to the sheer freedom and natural feeling of feathers. Nothing could compare to them. It was about all he could do to keep from smashing a window and leaping over the sill.

The monitor buzzed as he turned it on and waited for the screen to light up. It was something he had done so many thousands of times, but now seemed so alien. His mind had changed, too. If before he thought he understood his standpoint, he was beyond a doubt confident now.

The familiar face of Eudora displayed a new message from exactly who he'd suspected: Jared. His fingers did the typing almost by themselves, he knew the setup so well. Which was a good thing, because he hardly consciously remembered a thing about it. The window expanded and the message was displayed:

Novus Ordo Seclorum??? I know you too well to think this some sort of joke, and so I hurried as fast as I could to get some sort of computer up and running enough to reply. I'm at work, with computer boxes and wires all over the place.

I am surprised and overwhelmed that you wrote this short, but obviously meaningful message. I write with an uncertainty and don't know whether to expect a quick reply with more details or to never hear from you again.

In the deepest place of my heart, I hope that I do never hear from you again, if indeed a certain destiny has been fulfilled. But even as I know this, I also would be greatly saddened to not hear from my friend and possibly injured worse still by having my own wishes remain unrealized.

So I hope this message finds you, and if not, then the next words are for whomever reads this:

Do not worry over Matt's disappearance, for I assure you he is far from unhappiness. There is a great destiny and freedom that he has dreamed of and finally found. And however you choose to take this explanation, place your concerns aside. They are quite wasted, for Matt is not even of our kind anymore.

And if this message does find you, and things are somehow less than I imagined, then allow me to finish with a brief note of humor:

As I read your cryptic message, I got shivers in trying to contemplate what sort of things could have prompted you to use the reserved phrase. Then I got a real bizarre feeling when I discovered Hawk feathers in my hair immediately after reading the email. I suppose there's nothing quite like a bit of special effects to go along with reading a bunch of email in the morning, eh? I guess I picked them up when I fed the bird this morning.

Here's to whatever happened, and I hope somehow you will know of my best regards.

—Hawk

Matt smiled upon reading his friend's words. It had been worth checking after all...

Damn! he thought. *How unfair.* Jared had mentioned nothing of such magnitude happening to him.

Forgetting for the moment his excitement, Matt pondered a bit, staring at the monitor. He found himself staring at an icon that meant more mail was waiting. When it finally hit him, he almost greedily clicked it to find with dismay a returned email. The one he'd wrote about last night to Jared, about the weird meeting he'd had in the parking lot, didn't make it. That left him to wonder for a moment, what exactly did all that have to do with this? He picked up the gold

pin again and looked at it with no more answers than before. What exactly had happened? How did that strange guy and his chance meeting with him wind up in such an incredible reality? The past almost seemed like a hazy dream, almost as if it were years ago instead of just yesterday.

He looked over the returned email to find that he'd entered the address wrong with a simple typo. He fixed it and sent it again, trying to think of how he could possibly reply with details. He shook his head, realizing email had suddenly lost his support for carrying on a conversation about such a momentous thing. He would definitely have to call him... or visit in person—his mind spun—and he laughed. *In bird!*

Nearly hysterical, laughing about the whole of his sudden life details, he hit the reply button, but could think of no words to type.

His mom came into the room just then. "You are crazy, Matt. That computer seems more important to you than anything else... Are you coming?"

Matt felt subtle anger begin to build. She had no idea. The computer... It was just a means to an end. "Yes, just checking something," he said quickly.

She left once more, leaving him to his thoughts.

Bird thoughts.

That's what he was now. That's what he could be. He was two things. A juxtaposition had developed in his life, and he was more than eager to get back to trying his new life out. But there were a few more loose ends to tie up.

Damn.

Chapter 4
Buteo
— Jared Yelton

Jared stared for a while at the feathers near his feet. After reading such a prominent message from his friend, he expected something more to happen. A strange tingle traveled up his spine as he turned to look around him. Nothing happened except that the snow continued to fall outside the window. Slightly bewildered and frustrated, he picked up the two small feathers and held them for a moment.

“Must be from Sky,” he said to himself quietly.

For a long while he dared not do anything. The words on the page of the email continued to repeat over and over in his thoughts. He walked to the window and leaned against the cold glass, staring blankly out into the grey and white world beyond. The cold, unforgiving winter that perhaps his friend was now a part of. He had to remind himself that those three words were serious, and he knew well what they meant. It took great effort to suppress tears of sadness and joy both, as he stood watching the endless snowfall.

Slowly, he returned to his work, soaking up the solitude. The building was eerie at this stage of completion. The cement floors and hallways echoed some sounds but not others. — Making cables by the light of the window, Jared grew more and more curious to the point he could no longer stand it. He was sorely tempted to walk to the restaurant on the corner and call his friend. It was roughly that time that the power decided to come back on.

Without thinking about it, he began putting together a makeshift workstation computer, searching through piles of discs to load only what he needed: A way to answer. In moments he heard the squeal of the modem as he logged into his account. Robotically, and without dreaded computer hassles, he typed up a brief reply message, only able to guess how the message would be viewed at its final destination.

Feeling slight ebbs of depression, he turned off the computer, the message sent and his thoughts clear. He looked again out the window, into that greater realm of life, and for the first time felt a pang of jealousy he never hoped to encounter.

The eerie silence in the building continued. Still no one had arrived at work so he decided he might as well leave. There was nothing to do but wait and see what developed, both of the winter storm and his friend’s unmistakable announcement.

Grimacing against the bitter wind, he locked the building door and walked in powdery snow to his truck. He started it and brushed the thick cover of snow from the windshield, looking thoughtfully into the barren trees.

How do they live out here? He thought. Climbing in and trying to get warm by the heater, he wondered, *how will **he** live out here?*

He shook his head and tried to ignore what he knew was true. Slowly, he backed out and drove towards the road. The snow was thick and hard-packed beneath the soft appearance, making it deceptively dangerous. Feeling a little left out and considerably out of place on the impossible roads, he drove cautiously home, fighting the truck’s tendency to slide into the ditch.

Neither the music he brought nor the radio could distract his thoughts, and with disdain he switched off the player to succumb to comforting silence once more.

Squinting into the brightness of snow outside, he barely recognized landmarks through the ice and fog. After an unfamiliar corner, he realized he'd missed a turn. Disgruntled but not dissuaded, he started to back up. The truck was long and, admittedly, a pain to turn around. It only took a few feet and a significant bump for him to realize he'd not been paying attention and backed up over a snow drift. Becoming increasingly irate at the weather, he shifted to first gear and tried to go forward again. But there was no hope, he'd become rather stuck.

Jared didn't count on anyone coming along soon. The temperature was perfectly happy at freezing, and the wind was blowing from the icy north. He chose that precise moment to feel the envy that had been building up, and cried heavily against the steering wheel.



"Hey! Are you okay?"

Jared awoke somewhat abruptly, not realizing that someone was rapping on his window. He rolled it down and looked up to discover a strange old man dressed in about five layers of clothing and breathing thick clouds of vapor into the air.

"Yeah. I fell asleep, I guess."

"Looks like you're stuck."

"Oh," Jared said, remembering, "I guess I am."

"Need some help?"

Jared blinked a few times and got out of the truck, thankful that someone had come along. He looked down the road but couldn't see the man's truck or car. He followed him to the back of the truck where he discovered that the snowdrift wasn't as big as it had seemed. There was hope.

"You try pulling out and I'll push," the man said with a certain degree of confidence.

Jared couldn't help but feel comforted by his presence. He returned to the wheel and started the truck, giving it a little gas as it rocked back and forth. On only the second try, he was free and back on the road.

"Hey, thanks!" Jared called.

"You're welcome."

Jared hesitated, looking around again at the dismal sky. "Are you on foot?" he asked.

The old man seemed not to hear as he tightened his scarf and repositioned his hat. "Well, I'll just be going now."

"Do you need a ride?"

Again, the old man didn't seem to hear a word he was saying. He started walking along the curb, footsteps crunching in the snow.

Jared called after him, "Hop in!"

Obligingly, the man couldn't resist any longer, and approached the passenger door.

"I thank you, young man."

"It's the least I can do, honest!"

They started down the road once again, almost crawling in the swirling white powder and whistling wind. Jared turned at the right spot and was halfway home when he realized that may not be the same destination as his guest.

"I'm Jared. I just live a few miles from here. Where do you need to get to?"

The man smiled and pondered for a moment. "Just call me Tallis."

Jared looked back at the old man, who seemed happy just to be there. He assumed that if the man had a place to go, he would have said so. So if he needed a place to stay, then he was sure that there would be room at his house. Besides, even with as few words as the man had spoken, he already had a likable quality that Jared couldn't quite place.

They inched along, surrounded wholly by a dismal white world. Tallis seemed a bit nervous, looking frequently out the back window, but otherwise satisfied in having transportation. Jared stared at the road until it practically blinded him, determined to have no further incident.

Finally, Jared's house came into view through the fog, and they turned into the driveway with a breath of relief.

"You are quite welcome to stay the night and wait out this storm," Jared said, turning off the ignition.

Tallis smiled and nodded, brushing back part of his long white hair with one withered hand. Somehow, Jared sensed that the old man was far more important than just some hitchhiker or passerby.

"Do you have a car or something that we can help you find? Were you stranded?" Jared asked, picking up a couple of CDs and a book he had with him.

"No, I was just ... walking... but I got caught by the storm."

Jared found that somewhat odd because the storm had been gradually building up for at least a couple of days, but he let it go at that.

"Well, here's where I live," Jared said, opening the back door and motioning for Tallis to enter.

Jared showed him inside and introduced him to his parents, explaining how he'd helped get him out of a snow drift. They served him a warm dinner of barbecue roast, for which he seemed grateful. In every way, he seemed quiet and needy, but somehow conveyed a sense of importance. Like they were helping a forgotten child who would one day become a prominent leader.

Tallis said very little, but finally, as the house was quiet and the darkness outside was complete, he approached Jared and placed one hand on his shoulder. He was in the storage room getting some things for Tallis to spend the night.

"I cannot thank you enough," he said. "You will never understand what you've done for me by taking me into your home and showing that you care."

Jared shrugged and turned away, feeling slightly uncomfortable. "Aw, I would have done it for anyone. Nobody should be stranded out in the freezing winter." He grabbed a few blankets off a shelf and started walking for the guest room.

Tallis followed, silent as a cat, and waited for Jared to leave them on the bed.

"There, now you'll be warm down here. I apologize for the bare walls and cold cement, but we've never had the money to finish the basement."

Tallis didn't seem concerned. "No need, this will be fine."

"All right, then, I'll leave you alone for the night. The bathroom's just at the top of the stairs," Jared said, turning to leave. At the door, he turned and leaned on the wall, "Tell me, weren't you in some movie? You look familiar," Jared smiled, trying to spark some more conversation with the mysterious guest.

Tallis smiled a little, "Young lad, your kindness has shown that there is still hope for life on this planet. I am, admittedly, feeling somewhat helpless at the moment. Maybe it is my age," he mumbled slightly, then spoke up again. "I am, however, in your debt."

Jared shook his head, “No, don’t even think about it.” He got the feeling that the man was perhaps a bit eccentric. “And I am pretty sure anyone would care enough to help you out, what with the season and all.”

Tallis pondered for a moment. It was almost as if he was listening, but concentrating on an entirely different thing.

“What can I grant you in return?”

“Grant? What? Oh, honest, don’t worry about it. You helped me get out of the snow drift. You know, ‘you scratch my back I’ll scratch yours?’”

Tallis shook his head. “Kern and I... I mean, I... must always... repay favors done for me. It is simply part of the... my... conscious.” He stumbled a bit, as if something was bugging him.

“Really, consider us equal. Get some rest,” Jared smiled again, and turned and went up the stairs.

Tallis smiled and looked around the crowded room. He sat quietly on the edge of the bed for a while before finally turning off the light and lying down.

Jared went back to his room, thoughts circling around the strange person downstairs. *Why the hell would anyone be walking around outside? We don’t exactly live in a city. He doesn’t seem to have much of a personality. Strange dude.*

He looked around his room at the pictures and feathers of Hawks, his mind returning to his friends’ words. He looked at the computer and thought about checking for a reply, but he almost didn’t want to see the empty email box. The time glowed from the clock above his computer, “10:00 PM.” He sighed and turned off the light, got into bed and went to sleep.



It was about 3 AM when the stairs creaked quietly under the weight of someone’s footsteps. Jared was restless and cracked one eye open and listened intently. *Probably going to the bathroom,* he thought.

Sheer terror went through him a moment later when he saw Tallis’s silhouette entering his room and pausing above him. *Is he a murderer? Do I yell?*

Tallis spoke, “Perhaps I have more talent than I knew, to encounter two of you; or perhaps this world is entirely full of people like yourself...”

Jared froze in fear, something he never thought he’d do, expecting to feel the pain of a knife or a bullet any moment.

“But I suppose the wish for freedom as you envision it is a pure one. Speak to no one about me. It is important that I am never found. For your kindness and help, I have granted you the ability to become the animal you dream about. Farewell.”

Jared opened both his eyes and sat up, staring ... at nothing. Tallis was gone. The fear had been tremendous, but abated quickly with those last words.

“What?” Jared said into the dark empty room.

Chapter 5
Sick Leave
— Jared Yelton

Matt ate breakfast in silence, his mind completely preoccupied.

“Honestly, I don’t know why you spend so much time on that computer. It’s the first thing you do in the morning and the last thing you do before you go to sleep,” his mom nagged at him as she moved about the kitchen.

Matt suppressed his anger and realized that she was right to an extent, prior to last night. But it was so often used for talking about birds... He got lost again at the word.

“Are you even listening to me?” she asked.

Staring out the deck doors, he saw the grey winter sky, threatening to snow any time, and the few songbirds still present in the yard, searching for seeds and fruit. They were suddenly more important in his life. He *noticed* them—he had to; they were his cousins now. The strange relationship he felt was so difficult to describe. They were these small...

“Matt!”

“What?” he asked, torn from his reverie, looking at his mom with a perplexed look.

“Geeze, are you in dreamland or what?”

Matt was silent, feeling distraught. Caught between two worlds. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Like what? Anything wrong?”

“No, no,” he said, trying to think of something. “It’s just, well, you know, the end of the season at SeaWorld, and just a lot of things to get taken care of.”

“I know how that goes,” she said, leaning on the counter. “Work stress is the undefeated champion of stress in the world.”

Matt nodded, but he was really thinking about a stress he’d never known before. A huge decision loomed before him. *What to do with the rest of my life? Do I just... disappear? Or do I try and keep things the way they are, but somehow live that way, too?*

The phone rang, and Matt saw it as an opportunity to finally be by himself again and do some thinking. His mom answered it as he stood up and waved ‘goodbye’ to her.

He went back into his room, looking around in wonderment, knowing he had actually perched on the ladder in front of him last night. Knowing that he had stood in this very place for the first time as a bird. He shook his head, mystified by the situation it had all happened within.

Automatically, he grabbed his SeaWorld shirt and got dressed for work. He picked up his keys and leatherman from the desk, and headed for the back door.

“See you kiddo,” his mom called, holding her hand on the phone.

“Bye, Mom,” he said, smiling quickly back at her.

He stepped out into the cool, humid air from the breezeway and looked around. There was a new smell, a new perception, in the air. He felt different. He wasn’t sure if it was directly because of what happened, or just how he felt about it, but there was definitely something new to the grass, sky and trees.

He looked at his car with disdain. How could he drive to work knowing that he had the ability to leave the roads and the ground behind, and indulge in the life he’d always wanted? How could he even continue as he had for his whole life?

He closed his eyes, and forced himself to just go through with it. *This will be the last time*, he thought. *Just until I can get some things taken care of...*

He started the car and put in a Tangerine Dream CD, and turned it up. One way or another, he was going to make it through the day, and right now he felt a distraction was all he needed.

As he turned onto the interstate, a strange feeling came upon him. He never expected to feel it, but he realized with almost certainty he would see a Hawk on the way. Perched in a tree or on one of the road signs, he was nearly guaranteed to see one. What would that do to him now? He was fighting the incredible urge to be one again. How ironic, to wish for it for so long, and now that he had it, delay it.

He turned the music up louder, and hummed along with 'Catwalk,' trying just to concentrate on the white lines on the road and the other cars. He forced himself to think about getting the laser booth ready for winter, and all the miscellaneous wiring projects that would need to be done at the stadium.

Before he knew it, he was turning off at his exit, and he realized he hadn't seen a single bird. Just as quickly, he cursed himself for realizing it in the first place, for it was bringing his thoughts back where he didn't want them to be at the moment.

He searched his mind for something else to ponder, and came up with one of Scott's latest stories. He ran it through in his mind, and started laughing insanely. Not that it was so funny, but moreso that he was doing everything he possibly could to keep his mind off the most important thing in his life. It was almost hysterical.

He drove onward through the backstreets, thankful for the lack of afternoon traffic. The corridor of trees and houses made a perfect place to escape the possible sight of Hawks. "I'll avoid you, yet!" Matt cried out, 'Change of the Gods' playing in the background.

With quite perfect timing, Matt turned onto Brewster road, and slowed to a stop. He looked off to the right, past the rear-view mirror and into the trees. Fixated by one thing, he realized everything he was doing was completely ridiculous. He was denying it, for what? *Just a few more things to take care of... What few things?*

He pulled off on the side of the road and stared for a while, turning off the music and feeling the peace of Nature come back to his soul. What else could it be but a Hawk, perched high in the tree, that caught his attention so well? And only a few more minutes from SeaWorld's back entrance.

Without taking his eyes off the small silhouette, he reached for his cellular phone. Glancing down just long enough to push eight buttons, he dialed work and leaned back in his seat.

"Hi, this is Matt Polak. Uh huh. Right. I won't be in today. Mm hmm. Uh, sick leave, please. Okay. Thanks."

He set the phone down and got out of the car, looking around in awe at the trees that seemed so new to him. Walking around to the passenger side, he once again found himself looking at the bird in the tree. There were no sounds but a steady breeze and cars on faraway roads. He knew he'd been fooling himself all along. There was no resisting it. He looked with newfound understanding at the Hawk on the branch, perhaps not knowing the world as it did, but at least knowing to an extent how it felt.

He looked around cautiously and saw that there was no one around. Quickly, he opened the passenger door, and tossed his shirt inside. He finished stripping and closed the door, and without a moment's hesitation, willed the change to happen again. It came and he embraced it

with great appreciation, for the grass beneath his feet and the air he breathed, he now felt a part of. Opening his eyes, he saw the world with avian clarity and felt a sense of pride that he belonged.

The Hawk in the tree was still there, and now he saw instead of a black silhouette, the shape of the bird's head and beak, and the ridges that were the tops of its wings.

He stretched his own wings and felt the joy in having something new, in being as free as they were. The same wings he had learned were his own last night, were now outside where they belonged. He spread them out wide and fanned his tail with exuberance, and caught up in the pounding excitement, he flapped and ran ... and felt his body become even lighter as his feet left the ground.

For the very first time in his life, he felt what he'd always dreamt of: The simple pure flight of a bird. Across the grassy field, he turned into the wind and felt the lift carry him higher. Higher still, he turned and circled back, learning what it felt like to be avian. To see the grasses and mounds of dirt pass below him. To stretch out all of his body and feel the air, flapping energetically to climb ever higher. The wind itself no longer a thin, wispy, intangible substance; instead a force that carried him aloft, and he felt his soul joyfully reaching out to it.

The things on the ground slowly melted into color as he circled and felt the rising power of a thermal. The trees with the other Hawk perched alone; his car, unnecessary and huge; indeed the whole of SeaWorld's buildings and pathways became a geometric web of patterns as he flew. The altitude he had reached was easily three thousand feet, the unusually warm air reaching its limit and cooling with the atmospheric breezes. There was no better way to live than so far above the earth on a warm autumn afternoon. Maybe the last warm day of the year, it was his triumph to fill his feathered wings with the sky and call out, liberated and wild.

Not knowing how, but perhaps sensing impulsively, he dived and climbed, finding the warmest air to gain majestic height, then dropping hundreds of feet each time and traversing easy miles. The pitiful roads and brown squares of the human world below fell to disregard as he became caught up in a new landscape of trees and lakes.

The reality of being so ultimately singular, with no machine or cloth surrounding him, was so peaceful. The living connection between the trees and the wind and himself was a blessing of energy, contentment, and hope.

"Screee!" his voice faded away into the distant sky.



Hours passed and the sun began its gradual descent, disenchanting the warm air currents and bringing a silence to the evening. Matt, too, descended and glided silently through the air, with no direction or desire other than to live. *Fly to live. Live to fly.*

His flight, even in one day, was steady and beautiful. A part of the gift? A blessing of nature? His silhouette over the ground made small animals scatter, a swift and sleek bird of prey, guided by a predatory agenda. As the sky turned to magenta and then deep violet with the setting sun, Matt felt the air turn thick and cool. He angled his body to turn, and sought out a place to land.

In the fading light he was able to find a tree with long, exposed branches, to which he flew and landed with near-precision. His breathing was quick and he felt his heart racing madly—a state of grace. He roused his feathers and shook himself, feeling a subtle heaviness after such a long flight. The cool wood of the tree felt good beneath his feet,

As the night became more full, he repeated what he discovered the previous night, running feathers through his beak to preen and becoming ever more comfortable with his new ... life?

In time, his thoughts dissolved from blissful repose to acknowledge the decision he had procrastinated before. In the dim light of the half-moon, he saw far across the field, the ugly shape of his car, and realized that the juxtaposition had only just begun.

So was that his decision? A combining of lives? For now?

It took a great long time, but finally he spread his wings and made one last silent flight over the field, landing near the car and silencing the few crickets that had been chorusing there. With meticulous consideration, he looked back to the trees he had come from, and knew that some day he would forever join the wild. But now, there were still lives he could not dismiss.

The change back to human was even more painful than the first. The loss of feathers and gain of so much mass was terrifying and violating. The cold night air struck his skin and with haste he stood and gathered his things from within the car.

His mind a turbulent cauldron of thought, he strode to the driver's side door and leaned in silence on the frame. Looking back at the rows of trees and up into the starlit sky, he felt the glory in having responded to the invitation, and the agony in leaving it behind, if even so temporary.

The car started without trouble and he turned around on the small road, his headlights shining across the black asphalt, to drive the way back home. All the time thinking he had already been home and was wrongfully parting.

Shadows loomed under the glint of the moon, stretching across the lawn of his house, as he rolled up the driveway. He parked and got out, feeling the eerie chill of the night again and wishing he hadn't forced himself to return. He glanced around before opening the breezeway door, an odd feeling that he didn't belong, like he was an intruder.

Butterscotch ran up to him as he entered the door, and he jumped a bit in surprise, then knelt down and patted his old friend on the back. "I've..." he began, "been... a Hawk today..." he whispered to the cat, who arched its tail and pressed harder against his shin. The words struck him and echoed in his head as he went into the house and headed for his room to ponder.

"Hey, how was work?" his mother's voice came from behind him. She was sitting on the couch in the front room reading a novel by the light of a lamp. Apparently he wasn't the only one who stayed up late often.

"Uh... fine," he managed to say.

She smiled and held the book loosely. "Did you get anything much accomplished?"

He smiled and paused in his steps. "Oh yeah," he said dreamily, "Oh yeah."