

Science
By David Benedict

Copyright 2007
Page 1 of 102

Science

By David Benedict

11/1/2007

50,187 words
COMPLETE

Update 11/29/2007

Author's notes follow the main text.

CHAPTER ONE

Jarod sat atop his rented bicycle, staring out at the bridge. He was already winded, but he'd told himself for months that he was going to do this, and he wasn't going to back down now. A strong breeze blew across from the nearby ocean, threatening to take his hat off, but he pulled it down more tightly over his head and got ready to head out. This vacation was exactly what he needed. Fresh air, bright sunshine, and none of the stresses of his usual grind.

He thought about a conversation he'd had in the week before he left. It had been an extended conversation taking place amongst about half a dozen of his friends and had spanned most of the available media. Blogs, IM, email, and verbal components had all gone into it, and for the most part it had been a civil discussion, which was pretty amazing considering the wide range of topics they had covered. Politics, society, science, religion, and their social lives. Everything had to come back to their social lives. Some interesting points had been raised, but essentially nobody had changed their minds. He still couldn't understand how people could believe some of the things they said they did.

He acknowledged that there were things that science couldn't explain, but the solution to that, Jarod maintained, was to file them carefully into an "unexplained" category, gather evidence, and then assign an explanation once one was forthcoming. It sometimes seemed as though everyone else in the whole world couldn't wait that long, though, and that's how you got nonsense like alien abductions, crop circles, ESP, UFOs, satanic worship, complete with human sacrifice, and a host of other cockamamie nonsense that there was absolutely no evidence for. He liked his friends, he really did, but sometimes some of the things they said really made him angry. How could they go through their lives thinking those kinds of things? Because at the root of it all was some kind of vain hope that someday the aliens...or God, or the devil, or what have you...would come down to Earth and bestow their gifts upon humankind, ridding the world of illness, oppression, lies, theft, murder, and bad hair days. Please. He'd believe it when he saw it.

He sighed and pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. It was a warm day and he was sweating profusely. He wasn't in as good of shape as he'd thought, but that was ok. This would help, and it would jumpstart him into a new exercise regimen when he got home. For now he had a bridge to ride across.

The bridge was one of the most famous in the world, the Golden Gate Bridge. He'd been told that riding across it was a 'beginner' level ride. You could rent the bicycle at one of the many cycling shops in the city of San Francisco, ride through Fisherman's Wharf, through Fort Mason, and then across the bridge with what they said was only a "small hill" in a city that had some of the steepest in any major city in the world. He wondered how they could get away with such lies after the third such "small hill". And of course the bridge had a slight arch and was slightly uphill for the first half as well. But, he said to himself, nothing for it but to do it and he shifted his weight on to the right pedal and began to work his way up the last incline before the actual bridge began.

When he reached the top he noticed all the usual traffic on the bridge. He took out his camera, a little point-and-shoot that had served him well on the trip so far, and began to take a few pictures. The brick-red of the bridge's paint contrasted with the blue of the sky and he tried a few experiments to see if he could get the sun to provide a little lens flare for effect. He examined the result in the little LCD screen, decided it was good enough, and set out again. The traffic zipped along, seemingly oblivious to the pedestrian on the designated part of the bridge, and he trudged slowly up the incline, taking comfort in the idea that when he reached the middle that it would be all downhill from there, straight into Sausalito...unless the guides had been wrong about that, too.

The wind whipped stronger. Being so close to the ocean meant a strong breeze, and the fog that the city was so famous for was hovering nearby, threatening to ruin his day by bringing a soft, chilling mist instead of the sunny skies he had been so fortunate to enjoy on the previous three days of his trip. Jarod trudged up the incline, his legs aching, his breath coming in gasps, the chill of the cold air around him constricting his bronchial tubes, making his breathing more difficult still. He tried not to think about it. He thought about the gears in the bicycle wheels, the transfer of power from his legs to the pedals through the chain to the back wheel, about the diameter of the gear and whether he should switch to another one. Doing so might mean he wouldn't have to push as hard on the pedals, but he'd had to pedal faster to have any power to transfer. Neither appealed, but he took comfort in the fact that while he was thinking about that he traveled about another twenty five feet. Inch by inch, slow but steady, and then a gentle coast down the other side.

He reached up with his bare arm to wipe the sweat from his eyes. He'd started out with a jacket, but the physical exertion and the fact that the day had gotten warmer as he'd gone along had made him come out of it. As he wiped his forehead he accidentally dislodged his glasses and then the wind gusted. He slammed on the brakes of the bike, grabbed both hands onto his face, but it was too late. Given momentum by his hands and direction by the wind, his glasses assumed a vector that took them out of his hands, over the side of the short railing of the bridge, and straight down into the turbulent water below. Several seconds later, at least. The world snapped out of focus into a muddy blur.

Jarod lunged for them, and in the back of his mind he could imagine two possible scenarios for how this must look to other observers. One, the theatrical attempt to catch an object long gone, the melodramatic act of futility, the funny gyrations of someone desperate to change history. Or, two, one of the many suicides that annually went over the bridge. In any case he gazed at his outstretched arms, grasping feebly at the air where he was silently willing his glasses to be, and where they were resolutely refusing to actually be. He could no longer see them falling. In fact, he could no longer see much of anything. Jarod's vision was so bad that anything further away than about six to twelve inches was a hopeless blur, nearly impossible to make out any detail. He squinted anyway, trying to see if they might possibly have fallen onto a boat or some small rock where he could theoretically go and retrieve them, but all he could see was a blur of blue

and green that made up the colors of the San Francisco Bay. To add insult to injury, his hat had gone over the side as well.

In his lunge for his glasses, he had turned the bike over. It was early and there weren't many pedestrians about, and those that were there were engrossed in their own conversations, ignoring him. He didn't know yet what to do. He had come on vacation alone. He had no spare pair of glasses. He hadn't been to an eye exam in ages, but he was pretty sure he had his prescription...at home. He was on a bicycle, in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge, he couldn't see, he had no idea where he was going, going back wasn't much better, and he was seriously starting to panic. He disentangled his legs from the bike and stood it upright. Sitting here wasn't going to solve anything, he was going to have to walk the bike down the bridge and try to figure out what to do afterwards. He looked out across the bay, where a moment ago he had been treated to the sight of the Bay Bridge, Oakland, and the eastern portion of San Francisco. It had been pretty, but he hadn't lingered over it. Now he wished he had, because even after he got out of this stupid mess he wasn't going to have time to come back to see it again before he went home. In a flash of inspiration he took out his camera and pointed it in the general direction of the view and clicked the shutter. He could see it later through the magic of digital photography.

He returned his attention to the matter at hand. He had multiple choices, none of which were very good. He had left his cell phone back at the hotel...wasn't the whole point of being on vacation so that other people couldn't bother you? Wasn't that why he was up so early so that more pedestrians wouldn't be on the bridge with him? So he could try to make it to another phone or find someone who would let him use theirs and phone for help. Phone whom? His co-workers at the office? He'd have to get Gary to go to his house, break in, and find his prescription. No, that was pointless. He'd have to go to the doctor anyway to get new glasses made, he might as well have an exam while he was there. So he could get a taxi to take him to the nearest eye examiner, take the exam, get new glasses, pay through the nose for them, and then he'd be ok again. That seemed the best plan. He began walking the bike down the bridge again, trying to keep the strong, solid lines of the railings parallel.

The cars whizzed by on the bridge. There were no other pedestrians in sight but the morning rush hour was in full swing. The "thump-thump" of their tires as they hit the dividers was vaguely comforting to Jarod as he continued to examine his predicament. How could he have been so foolish? He owned a little tether for his glasses, why couldn't he have worn it? He made his way down to the other side of the bridge and began looking around, squinting, for any sign of life, but the gift shop for the bridge was closed and that usually meant no shoppers. Then he saw it. Movement. Blurry movement, but he made for it anyway.

As he came over a rise he saw the indistinct outline of a car and the source of the movement appeared to be a man practicing some kind of martial art in the early morning hours. He'd noticed this before, usually older men or women up early, going through poses and routines in the chill early morning, usually in secluded areas where they could

be more in tune with nature and meditate on their solitude. Jarod didn't go in for that sort of thing, but figured that if it helped them then there was no harm in it. Now he was positively grateful for the habit. He approached the figure.

"Hello? I'm sorry to interrupt..." he began, but the figure paid him no heed. The fuzzy outline of the person continued to move, stop, move again, in the rhythmic motions of the serious practitioner. Jarod tried again.

"Hello? I'm in a bit of an embarrassing situation here, can you help?..."

Again, no response. Jarod squinted, but he felt as though getting close enough to actually see what was going on would be invading his personal space. At last the figure seemed to pause for a slightly longer time and then relax. The arms raised up to the head and removed the headphones that Jarod hadn't been able to see before.

"Sorry about that," said the figure, now clearly a male with deep, smooth tones. "When I practice out here I need the iPod to drown out the traffic and I couldn't hear you."

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Jarod said, grateful that he had at last gained the man's attention, "but I've got a bit of a problem. I was on the bridge..."

"...and your glasses blew off?" said the man.

"Yeah," said Jarod, surprised. "How did you know?"

"With a squint like that? You must be blind as a bat."

"Well, yeah, and I was wondering if you could call me a cab or something so I can get a new pair made."

"I'll do you better than that, I'll take you myself. Hop in."

Jarod was wary about getting into the car with the total stranger, but he didn't have much choice. "What about my bike?"

"Give it here, I'll lock it up to the bike rack here and you can come back and get it after you've got your eyes all fixed up. It's gonna jack up your rental rate, but I don't have a bike carrier so there's no other way."

Jarod couldn't argue with that, and so handed the keys to the man, extracting his camera from the front carrier bag that was attached to the bike as he did so. "I'm Jarod. What's your name?"

"Oh, I'm Carl, sorry I didn't introduce myself, Jarod, but I must admit you startled me a little."

"No problem, Carl, I totally understand. Thanks so much for doing me this favor."

"My pleasure."

Carl took the bike from Jarod and walked it over to the nearby building. The two blurry shapes paused for a few moments and Jarod heard the clink and ratchet of the key, the bike lock, and the chain, as Carl secured the vehicle to the iron fixture. Then the crunch of gravel as he walked back to the car, the key sliding into the key hole and the door opening. A moment later Jarod saw a bit of movement that looked very much like someone unlocking the passenger side door. He reached out, found the door handle, and opened it with a clunk. He slid into the dark brown vinyl interior. He hated vinyl seats in cars, but he wasn't in a position to complain. Besides, he was wearing long pants and therefore couldn't stick to the cursed stuff. As he slid into the car he put his jacket back on. The wind was starting to turn chilly. He closed the car door as he heard the jingle of Carl's keys in the ignition and then the car turned over and roared to life.

Carl backed up briefly, putting his arm over the passenger seat as he did so, and then faced forward and began to drive. The car was loud, and all Jarod could see was the dash...the exterior was not only blurry, but moving fast, so it was a fast-moving blur, even more blurry than usual. Jarod settled in and tried not to think about it.

"Here on vacation?" Carl asked.

"Yeah," Jarod answered. He hated small-talk, but he couldn't deny that the guy was doing him a massive favor and decided he should be polite instead of brooding in his own mistake. "Came out to see the city."

"It's a great place to live. I've been to Chicago, and I gotta tell ya, I'll take this place over there any day. Too cold in the winter, too hot in the summer, but here it's just right."

"Yeah, the weather's been great here," Jarod answered carefully. He tried to remember when he'd mentioned to Carl that he was from Chicago and didn't think he had.

"Mind you, if the money was right I could probably persuade myself to live anywhere. Dunno if I could hack it in advertising, but if that's where your passion lies then you gotta follow your heart."

"Yeah, it can be pretty intense, but I love that kind of thing." Jarod was getting even more nervous now. He certainly hadn't mentioned his profession to this guy. How could he know?

"And after a while I guess you just put down roots whether you meant to or not. Take me, for example, I love it here, but I always meant to move to Los Angeles to be in the movies. So I can totally get how people can get attached to places without really meaning to."

Jarod didn't answer. He had moved to Chicago fifteen years ago because the advertising community was better there, but he had always thought his future lay in New York where the really big accounts always seemed to be attracted just because of the sheer reputation of the place. He'd eventually decided that he was comfortable where he was and that uprooting himself at this point wasn't going to be a productive way to lead his life. If he'd found a girlfriend or wife it would have cemented the deal, and he'd had a long string of potentials that kept him in the city, but nothing ever came of them, so he was constantly thinking about changing his mind and moving but never seemed to get around to it.

"It's tough being alone sometimes, but you get used to it," Carl continued.

"Look, I appreciate the favor, man, but could you just let me out here?"

"What for? Look, I know where this great eye doctor is, he'll give you a great deal on some new specs and have you fixed up in no time." Carl shifted in his seat slightly, as if uncomfortable.

Jarod thought quickly. He had to get out of this car. But without his glasses he couldn't see, didn't know where he was in any case, and was pretty much at this guy's mercy. Would it be better to play along and try to talk his way out of it rather than pushing the point and risking making him mad?

"I just don't want to put you out," Jarod said, making up his mind.

"No trouble at all," Carl said, the smile returning to his voice. "It's on my way home anyway. I'm not going to be able to stay with you, but you'll be fine with my friend. Great prices."

The car rumbled along with its occupants silent for a few moments. Jarod stared out the window, watching the fuzzy landscape move by at a blur. He tried squinting again, but there was nothing to see. They were heading through the Marin Headlands, which Jarod knew to be some pretty good views, but he was missing them. Maybe on the way back he could see them from the taxi.

"So what do you do for a living, Carl?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," Carl said mysteriously. "I do a lot of odd jobs for a lot of odd people."

That sounded about right to Jarod, so he let it drop. The car ground on for a few more minutes. Jarod began to wonder how far away this eye doctor was. The silence began to get uncomfortable, and Jarod cleared his throat.

"Do you have any good radio stations here in the bay area?" he asked, hoping to prompt Carl into turning it on.

"Nope," said Carl, cheerfully, "and I won't have one of those things in the car even if we did. All those radio waves mess with my ESP."

Carl chuckled as if he'd made a clever joke. Jarod didn't chuckle, remembering the conversation of a few moments ago. He opened his mouth to say something, but then thought better of it.

"Actually," said Carl, "we're going to be making a small detour before we get to the eye doctor. I hate to do it to you, but this is the chance of a lifetime and if I'm late I'll miss out."

"I really need to be getting back," said Jarod, really beginning to panic now. "I have some friends I'm supposed to be meeting later and they're going to wonder where I am."

This was a bald-faced lie, Jarod didn't know anybody who lived for 500 miles of here, but he thought if he could convince Carl that he did, maybe he'd let him out. He hadn't figured on getting kidnapped today. There were a few seconds of silence.

"I suppose you might," said Carl carefully, "but they're just going to have to get along without you for a bit. I'm telling you, this is the chance of a lifetime and you're going to be glad I brought you along."

His voice seemed energetic and cheerful. He didn't sound nervous at all, so either he didn't buy Jarod's lie or else he just didn't care. Jarod reflected on how much of the conversation he missed by not being able to see body language. He'd always taken it for granted before.

"What is this opportunity?" Jarod asked, fishing for anything he could find out about Carl that might help him get away.

"Oh, no, that would be telling. Besides, we're almost there, and with five minutes to spare. This is going to be fantastic, we're going to make history! Not to mention lots and lots of money. You should be glad you're here, you really lucked out."

Yeah, thought Jarod, I'm really lucky. First I lose my glasses off the Golden Gate Bridge and now I'm being carried off to who knows where with a lunatic while half blind.

The car turned slowed as Carl approached a road to the left. He made the left turn, and then a right, and another left about a hundred yards further on. Then the road ended, turning to gravel. Not built for this kind of terrain, the journey suddenly became much bumpier. Carl made another left, a right, and then stopped the car.

"We're here!" he said, unnecessarily. Carl got out of the car. Jarod stayed put. "Come on, you don't want to miss this!" Carl slammed the car door shut and walked over to the passenger side door. Jarod sighed and got out before he reached it. His shoes crunched on the coarse gravel. Carl, apparently satisfied, started walking briskly towards the

nearby building. To Jarod, of course, it was nothing but an indistinct blur, kind of a murky brown with green highlights that he assumed must be shutters, along with a metallic gleam here and there along the surface. The building seemed to be one of those avant-garde constructions because the roof sloped at an odd angle and seemed to overhang the side walls a little more than was strictly necessary.

Jarod saw Carl walk up the front steps of the house and the door slid open. He saw movement, which looked very much like Carl motioning him to hurry up. Reluctantly he quickened his pace, reached the stairs, and met Carl at the top. They walked through the door together into a dark interior with a strange humming sound and a few blinking lights.

"This way," said Carl, "wait'll you meet him. This is going to be great!"

They walked through the room, which Jarod couldn't see anything of because of the darkness and his near-blindness, and into another room where the contrast was stark. The humming sound continued, but instead of darkness there was a harsh, glaring light illuminating a table with a sheet on it. Standing next to the table was a shortish figure with a lot of grey in the head area, which Jarod took to mean that he had a lot of graying whiskers.

"Carl, thank you for coming," said the figure. The voice was slightly higher pitched than one would expect for a male speaker, but lower than most females. The inflections, however, identified the figure as most likely being a man, which, Jarod chided himself, only made sense since the grey color around the head was whiskers. Although it could have been a mask, or even makeup. Now that he said that, he had the distinct impression that he could smell stage makeup somewhere nearby. This must be some kind of film set or something, he thought.

"Good to see you again, Isaac," replied Carl, moving over to embrace the figure. "I'm so glad you called me in on this one. This could be the culmination of all our work. Oh, this is my friend, Jarod, he's going to be helping us."

"Wonderful!" said Isaac. "The more people who can witness this and verify it, the better. In fact, this will free you up, Carl, to help with the procedure itself."

"Can I really?" asked Carl, breathlessly. You could tell from the tone of voice that this was going to be a dream come true for him.

"Of course, of course," said Isaac, "and Jarod can run the camera."

At this point Jarod felt it was time to speak up. "Um, I don't know what you're doing here, but I've lost my glasses and really need to get to a place where I can buy some new ones. And I can't see anything without them, so you probably don't want me running a camera for you."

"Carl, is this true?" asked Isaac.

"I'm afraid so. I was going to take him to the place to get his new glasses, but we have to get this done first. It won't last forever."

"Yes, yes," said Isaac, in a thoughtful tone. "But we have no other choice. It's going to take three of us to do this and he certainly can't help with the procedure itself if he can't see properly. We'll set the camera up on the automatic settings and hope for the best."

Jarod had been hoping to sneak out the door while they were doing whatever they were doing, but if he was going to have a camera in his hands there was no chance of that. In the end they gave him a small hand held camcorder and instructions to just point it at the table and the autofocus would take care of the rest.

Carl and Isaac stepped out of the glaring light and into the shadowy corners of the room. There was a sound of rustling, zippers, and snaps. When they stepped back into it they had evidently changed clothes and put on white aprons and white masks of some sort. They arranged a few shiny instruments on a few shiny tables nearby made some kind of motion and then waited.

"That was your signal to start the camera," said Isaac.

"I told you, I can't see anything," said Jarod impatiently, pressing the button on the camera to start the recording. "You have to verbally tell me these things."

"Duly noted," said Isaac irritably. "Very well, we're rolling? Good. Welcome everyone to a historic event. Rather than bore everyone with preamble and explanation of something that will soon be only too evident, we shall allow events to speak for themselves. My assistant and myself will be conducting the procedure and we shall all learn together that we are not alone in the universe."

With that, Carl whipped the sheet off the table. Under it was, by Jarod's reckoning, a small grey blur. He could just make out two large-ish black splotches near the far end. Other than that he had no idea what he was looking at. He peered into the viewfinder on the camera and saw total blackness. He flicked the camera back off.

"Hey, Isaac, this thing isn't working."

"What do you mean?" asked Isaac, pausing in the act of removing something from one of the small metal tables.

"The viewfinder is totally dark, I can't see what I'm filming."

"Ah, yes," Isaac began to fiddle slightly with the instrument in his hands. "I ordered the camera off of eBay and the viewfinder doesn't work. I put in a complaint, but it's too late to get another one."

“If the viewfinder had worked it would have been close enough to my eye for me to see it,” said Jarod, “but now I’m flying even blinder than before. I can’t even really tell where the camera is pointing.”

“Yes, yes, understood,” said Isaac, with a dismissive wave of his hand. “But, you understand that we have to do this now and there’s no time to wait for another camera. Just do your best!” This last sentence was uttered with a forced, false cheerfulness. Jarod sighed and flicked the camera back on, trying to line the lens up with the thing on the table.

“We begin with the vertical incision here,” Isaac intoned. “Carl, would you adjust that lamp for me? Thank you.”

Isaac placed the instrument in his hand near the object on the table and made a long, smooth motion along its length. Jarod wasn’t paying attention. He was squinting, glaring around the room, trying to find anything that might help him either operate the camera better or, for preference, quietly make his getaway. With neither forthcoming, he returned his attention to the table and noticed that Carl had moved in between the table and the camera. Jarod shifted position to his right, walking carefully in the shadows that encircled the table, trying not to trip on anything.

“As you can see, the physiology is not entirely unlike our own, but there are important differences that can be seen in the cardiopulmonary system with regards to the chambers of the heart and the placement of the lungs. The color of the blood is also of note, being a pale blue, suggesting a copper-based oxygen transfer system.”

Isaac was busying himself with the object on the table, which, now that he was paying attention, Jarod assumed to be some kind of creature. For them to be making such a fuss over it, it must be something new they’d discovered. This close to the coast, perhaps some new kind of sea animal, although he didn’t smell anything like fish. Carl, on the other hand, seemed determined to get in the way of both of them. He hurried from one side of the table to the other in his excitement, bumping Isaac’s arm, constantly getting between Jarod and the camera, and nearly knocking the tables full of instruments over.

“Carl!”

“Yes, Isaac?”

“...would you get me a small mirror from the other room, please? I need it for a closer examination of the teeth and the interior of the mouth and I didn’t bring it in here with the rest of the instruments.”

“Sure, Isaac!”

Carl hustled off through the shadows into the other room. Isaac muttered something under his breath about why couldn't the thing have landed on somebody else's back yard or something... Jarod couldn't quite make it out, and before he could ask, Carl came back with the requested mirror.

"Thank you, Carl," said Isaac, regaining control over his clear frustration with how the procedure was going.

"You're welcome, Isaac," Carl replied. A few moments of silence followed, broken finally when Carl spoke again. "Isaac, do you think I could, you know, help with the cutting at all?"

Isaac froze. Jarod was having a hard time deciding where the camera was pointing and kept fidgeting slightly, but he could tell that Isaac had stopped moving.

"I don't think that would be a very good idea," began Isaac, clearly choosing his words carefully. "You're much too excited and this is a very delicate operation."

"That's not it, Isaac. You don't think I can do it. But I can!"

"No, no, I'm quite sure you're completely capable..."

But before he could finish the sentence Carl had gone into a rage.

"You've been thinking this whole time that you wish it hadn't come here, that if it had landed just a hundred yards to the west that you wouldn't have had to include me in it at all! That you could have just walked in and claimed it for yourself, despite all the research we've been doing all this time! Well, that may be so, but that's not what happened and I'm going to put my name on this discovery if it's the last thing I do!"

And with that, Carl lunged at the table of instruments, knocking several of them to the floor with a cacophony of clangs and clatters. Isaac seized him and tried to throw him back away from the table, but Carl found purchase with his shoes on the floor and pushed back. The two of them spun on the spot briefly, each trying to unbalance the other, and as they gyrated one of them kicked Jarod in the ankle. Hopping with pain, Jarod dropped the camera and heard it rattle away into the darkness, and as the camera went it was like a spell was broken. Jarod realized that this was his chance to get away while Carl and Isaac were fighting.

Jarod stumbled around the shadowy edges. He needed to find two things, both in the dark and both without his glasses. He found the first fairly quickly, which was the door that led back outside. But without the second thing that wasn't going to be much use. He went back in, grateful to find the two men still tussling on the floor, two blurs flopping and fighting inexpertly. Jarod groped around the walls of the room, listening to the muffled arguments the two men were still trying to have in the midst of their fisticuffs.

“I know you always hated me...”

“You're crazy, incompetent...”

“I don't need you...”

“I never needed you...”

“You don't mean that...”

The argument was winding down, whether by insight by the participants or by fatigue, but it was definitely slowing slightly. Jarod quickened his pace, kicking the discarded camera in his search. He considered briefly picking it up and taking it with him, but then he discovered what he needed. The table where they had put their clothes after changing into their surgical gear. He groped around the garments, patting pockets and listening for the telltale jingle, and at last he heard it. Car keys. He extracted them and then retraced his steps, keeping out of the light, moving quickly, but as quietly as possible, as the argument seemed to be reaching its endgame. Carl and Isaac still had a firm grip on one another, but it was merely because they didn't trust each other and not because of murderous intent anymore. At last Jarod reached the outdoors.

The sun blinded him briefly, but he knew approximately which direction the car was, so he squinted into the harsh glare and stumbled in the correct general direction. He could see the brown blur straight ahead and made a beeline for it. Once there, he knelt down, took out the keys, and began to try each one in turn. He had no way of knowing the make and model of the car, and none of the keys looked like the manufacturer's original in any case, so he couldn't go by the markings. At last one of the keys fitted and he gave it a turn, popping the lock on the door. He wrenched it open and slid into the driver's seat.

The dashboard was a blur, just like everything else was. He fitted the key into the ignition, cranked the engine, and it roared to life. And at that moment Jarod realized what he was about to try to do. Drive through the twisty Marin Headlands, with no knowledge of where he was, without his glasses. He looked at the blurry image of the structure he had just escaped from and caught a glimpse of two figures in the doorway starting down the stairs towards him. He put the car in gear, closed his eyes for a moment, opened them, and hit the gas.

CHAPTER TWO

Jarod drove as fast as he dared along the gravel road. It was easier than he'd expected with the trees along the side making the path a little more clear, although he couldn't remember which turns they had made. At this point he was less nervous about driving off the road and more nervous about running into a dead-end, which would mean backtracking, which would mean a greater chance of running into Carl and Isaac, who were no doubt looking for him. He had no idea whether they had another car or weapons of any kind, but none of that mattered. He had to get away and get help...different help.

The gravel path came to an intersection with a paved road. Jarod stopped and breathed a sigh of relief. He'd found the way back. Or at least A way back. Or at least he was putting distance between himself and those two lunatics. New deep sea creature or not, those two were crazy and he didn't want to be a part of it. He looked at the new road in front of him, stretching out in both directions but quickly turning around bends in the road, preventing him from seeing what might lay along it. He weighed his options. They were a bit light. So he turned right on the grounds that if he didn't know where he was going it didn't matter how he got there.

Once on the paved road, driving got more difficult. The double yellow line down the center was a bit of help, but the bends in the road were much harder to follow since he was having to stare directly in front of the car in order to have any clarity of vision whatsoever. He wondered how far ahead of Carl and Isaac he was. Could he risk stopping and trying to flag down another car? It seemed horribly risky, especially since he hadn't seen any other cars on this road yet. How could he tell if the one he flagged down would have them in it? He couldn't. He kept driving. He squinted down at the dashboard, wondering how much gas he had. Not able to tell, he returned his attention to the road.

The road was especially twisty in some areas, straighter in others, and Jarod probably drove for around thirty minutes before he finally was able to discern some blurs in the distance that didn't look like the usual trees. It looked like civilization. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof. He began looking for the usually bright colors of a service station. Surely someone there could help him get to the eye doctor and replace his glasses.

He drove slowly, not wanting to miss what he was looking for and also wary of hitting a pedestrian. He hadn't seen any so far, not that he could unless they were jumping up and down, but it would be his luck that one would jump out in front of him. He wondered whether "running from crazy people while unable to see" would be an adequate defense against involuntary vehicular manslaughter.

At last he thought he saw what he was looking for. A bright, round, colorful sign that just screamed "buy gas here". He pulled in, opened the car door, got out, and squinted at the closest large object he could see. It sure looked like the convenience store that so often accompanied gas stations these days. He headed for it.

When he walked in the door a bell jangled his arrival. He was also met with the stench of motor oil, engine grease, a slightly metallic odor that seemed to permeate every gas station he'd ever been in but which defied identification, and some other scent which, while faint, seemed definitely rank.

"Hello?"

The voice had called out from the back of the store. It was light, slightly lilting, and definitely young and female.

“Hello,” Jarod answered. “I need some help.”

“Don't we all?” answered the voice which, accompanied by the 'clap-clap' of hard-soled shoes on a tile floor, was approaching. There was a cheerful sarcasm there.

“I suppose so,” said Jarod, feeling a little more at ease now. “But I need a little more than usual. See, I lost my glasses and I can't see without them. I need somebody to call me a taxi that can take me to an eye doctor.”

“Whoa, that's a pickle and no mistake!” said the voice. She had approached close enough now that Jarod could see a red blur with black outlines, indicating that she was wearing a black outfit of some sort with a red apron over it. She also had a yellow blur at the top of her head indicating blonde hair, but he thought he could see just the barest hints of red streaks. Possibly she had them, but also possibly it was a reflection from the apron. Not that it mattered. He wanted to squint and get a better look, but he elected not to in case she turned out to be attractive.

“Yeah,” said Jarod. “So, can you help me?”

“Sure! Although you don't want a taxi way out here, it'll cost you an arm and a leg. Why don't you hang around here for a while and when my shift is over I'll take you myself?”

“When's that going to be?”

“Not too much longer, 'bout an hour or so. I work the night shift so I'm about done. How'd you get here anyway, blind man?”

“In that car out there. Don't ask how I drove it, but you can have it in exchange for taking me.”

“Really?” the voice was skeptical now. “Maybe we should take a little detour to the police along the way, see if that car's been reported stolen.”

Jarod paused. Would they report the car? Wouldn't that draw attention to what they were doing? Did they care? People who discovered new things usually didn't want the news to get out before they were good and ready for it to. But on the other hand...

“Ok, I borrowed the car without the owner's permission, but...”

The voice laughed. “Borrowed without permission...that's a good one. Ok, why don't you have a seat over there and I'll let you know when my relief gets here.”

“Over where?” asked Jarod. “I can't see, remember?”

The voice laughed again. "Oh, yeah, sorry. Just over here..." She took his hand and guided him over to a small semicircle of red blurry chairs.

After recovering from the electric shock of her touch, Jarod said "My name's Jarod, what's yours?"

"Margaret," Margaret replied. "Now you just sit down here and I'll be back as soon as I can. And you can let go of my hand now."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry."

Jarod let go, slightly abashed. But he had heard the smile in her voice as she'd said it.

What felt like a few hours later, but which was really only about 45 minutes, Margaret came back. In the meantime a handful of other people had come into the little shop, each one causing Jarod to jump in anticipation of her relief showing up...maybe she could get off a little early. Maybe she could come with him to get his glasses. Maybe afterwards he could take her to dinner to thank her for helping him out. Yes, that's how it would go.

"Ready to go?" Her voice was smooth, pleasant, and had no accent that he could detect. He could imagine hearing it for a long time to come. He shook himself slightly. He was getting ahead of himself. But didn't it sometimes work like that?

"Yeah," he replied. He got up and turned to face her. Her blurry shape moved into view and he fought the impulse to squint. He could probably get away with it in his current condition, but he had no desire to look even a little unattractive right now. She took his hand.

"Right this way, sir," she said with a hint of mocking in her voice. He followed obediently. "We have to make a run by my house before we can go to the doctor," she continued. "I need to freshen up just a bit and change clothes."

"How far away do you live?"

"Not far, we can walk there. Just leave your car here...or whoever's car...we can take mine into the city and come back. I have a few errands to run there anyway."

They went out the door together, the bell jangling their exit, and turned right to walk down the road. Once outside she let go of his hand, much to Jarod's disappointment, but he supposed it was too much to ask for them to keep holding hands all the way back to her house.

"Turning into a real nice day, isn't it?" she asked.

"I suppose so. And the weather is nice, too" he said, determined to make a pass at her, no matter how clumsy.

“Yeah, I thought it was going to fog up for the duration a little earlier, but it seems to have burned off nicely.”

Either she hadn't noticed or she didn't care. They walked on in silence a while longer, Jarod keeping as close to her as possible partially because he didn't want to get lost but mostly because he just liked being near her. He kept telling himself that he hadn't even seen what she looked like yet, hadn't even known her for more than an hour, hadn't talked to her for more than ten minutes altogether, but there was something about her that he felt drawn to. It was like love at first sight...or in this case love before first sight.

Eventually they turned off the main road, if you could call it that. Traffic was very light and they'd only passed a few people as they'd walked. They proceeded along a side street, a light breeze blowing through Jarod's hair, and he imagined it blowing through hers as well. He could hear birds chirping and even the low rumble of the highway that seemed to be everywhere even though the highway was actually nowhere near this little town. The area they were walking through now was shady and Jarod saw the giant green and brown blur of trees all around him, their branches swaying gently in the wind. The place seemed idyllic, close enough to civilization to hop over for an evening of partying but far enough away not to be bothered with it in the course of everyday life. A small orange blur darted out of some nearby hedges and across the street. He supposed it to be a cat.

“Here we are, come on this way,” Margaret said at last, breaking what had turned into a lengthy silence. “Sorry to be so quiet, but after working there all day it's nice to be able to shut up a bit.”

They walked up a short driveway to her front door, a bright red blur obscured slightly by the storm door that had been mounted in front of it. She opened the storm door first and Jarod heard the jingle of a key ring. She fitted a key into the lock, turned it, and he heard a heavy deadbolt slide away into the door. The door opened with an ominous creak and Margaret went inside, leaving the door open for him. Jarod followed her over the threshold, eased the storm door shut, and closed the main door behind him.

“Sorry about the mess.”

“I can't see it, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Well, sorry about leaving so many things around for you to trip over, then. Have a seat on the couch there. I think it's big enough for you to find without my help.”

Jarod smirked at the sarcasm in her voice, walked gingerly across the room, being careful not to step on any of her possessions if he could help it, and plopped down on the couch. Despite the floor being covered in random objects the couch was remarkably clean with a green vinyl upholstery. Running his fingers over it he detected small rips in the fabric that suggested that at one time either Margaret or a previous owner of this couch had

owned cats. He could hear Margaret in the other room, the thump of her footsteps on the thin padding of the carpet suggesting another floor below rather than just the slab of the foundation. Closet doors opened, closed, dresser drawers also. After a short while she re-entered the room.

“What do you think?” she said in a suggestive tone of voice. Jarod looked up. The red apron she'd worn at the store was gone, and the overall blur was now a uniform pink color, more or less. He stared for a moment, simultaneously wondering if losing his glasses had suddenly led to one of the luckiest days of his life and cursing the fact that he couldn't see well enough to fully appreciate it.

“I think I can't see,” he said, lamely, trying to find just the right tone of voice to indicate just how much he wished that wasn't the case.

Margaret laughed and Jarod's heart fell into his stomach. “I'm sorry,” she said, still giggling. “I couldn't resist. It's just a body suit anyway.”

“Oh.” Jarod tried not to sound too disappointed.

“I'll be ready in just a second...” Margaret began, but at that moment Jarod heard the screen door open. He realized that neither of them had bolted the door back and was just beginning to wonder if that bolt indicated a greater crime rate than he would have expected for this neighborhood when the front door burst open revealing a tall blur wearing a black and white suit.

“Margaret!” the newcomer cried. The voice was older, slightly raspy, and definitely impatient. “Margaret!”

“Coming, I'm coming,” called Margaret from the other room. “Have a seat next to Jarod. I'm almost done.”

“Jarod? Who the hell is Jarod? Maggie, we're late.”

Margaret padded back into the room, this time her blur showing the full color of someone completely dressed in something dark blue. “Late for what?”

The new figure paused. “You know...” it said, jerking its head in Jarod's direction. Margaret paused a moment herself and then let out a small gasp.

“That's today?” she whispered.

“You know damn well it is, we've been preparing for it for two months. He ain't gonna be kept waiting.”

“No, no, of course not,” Margaret said. Turning to Jarod she continued “Jarod, I seem to have forgotten something really important. Would it be ok if you came along with us for a bit before we got your glasses?”

“You're not bringing him along!” said the new voice angrily.

“I'm sure not leaving him here!” Margaret retorted. “Besides, he's lost his glasses and can't see a thing. It'll be fine. You go back outside and we'll be there in a second, ok?”

The second figure grunted, clearly indicating that it wasn't ok at all, but turned and walked back out the storm door, leaving the front door open. Margaret sighed and went to close it.

“Born in a barn, I swear,” she said. “Now Jarod, don't mind Edgar, he's harmless. A grouchy old coot, but harmless. Well, for the most part,” she said, after a thoughtful pause. “It's all for the greater good anyway.”

“What is?”

“Well...maybe I'll explain it later. But for now I'm afraid you're going to have to come with me for a bit and then we can go into the city and get your glasses.”

Jarod considered this. On the one hand he liked Margaret and trusted her as much as you could trust anybody who you'd just met under strange circumstances. On the other hand, not being able to see was getting on his nerves. He had no idea what time it was, but it must be approaching mid morning at the very least and the longer this dragged on the less time he'd have for sightseeing, and seeing as how one of the sights he wished he could be seeing was right in front of him he was a little eager to get on with it. But even though her face was a fuzzy outline with dark spots where her eyes, nose, and mouth were, he could tell that she was anxious and he wondered if arguing was only going to delay the inevitable.

He weighed the logical alternatives. This was something he was good at. In fact, his co-workers at the ad agency always wondered how he'd been attracted to the industry in the first place. True, he worked in Media Buying and had as little to do with the Creative department as possible, but he figured it was a perfect fit, a natural blend between his recognition that advertising was inevitable and his personal desire to make sure as little as possible appeared on his television set. So he'd make up the advertising schedules for all the firm's clients, making millions of dollars for both the networks and the advertisers, and then studiously make sure he watched other channels where he'd sold less advertising. He kept it all written down, nice and neat. But he wasn't a robot. He had a soul. He loved nature, for example, and it was a pet project of his to make sure that the Discovery Channel had some of the highest ad rates of any other network so he could be sure to make plenty of money by selling less of it. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

So faced with this dilemma, he put his logical mind to work. If he went with Margaret he was sure to get his glasses eventually, but he had no idea how long it would take and there was always the risk that Carl and Isaac were going to eventually find him. Especially with their car sitting at the service station. This last thought gave him some pause. He could ask to stay here, although she seemed to have already dismissed that idea. Or he could set out on his own again, blind, and with no idea of where he was. His logical mind slapped him for taking so long to reach this, the only conclusion possible.

“Ok,” he said at last. “Lead the way.”

“Great,” Margaret said, the smile returning to her voice. “It's not that far away anyway, just around back and down in the cellar. Shouldn't take too long.”

Jarod got up from the couch, the vinyl crackling dully as he did so, and once again threaded his way blindly through the debris that lined Margaret's floor. As they reached the door he wondered why, if this activity was so close, he couldn't just stay in the room. Or why it was such a big deal, for that matter. Why couldn't whoever couldn't be kept waiting just come here? They emerged from the house and discovered that Edgar, who was leaning against Margaret's car in the driveway, was not alone. About half a dozen or so other blurs of various heights and builds were standing casually around the yard.

“We've been talkin' it over, Maggie, and we're agreed. He ain't comin' with us for it,” Edgar rasped.

“Well I'm not leaving him in the house. You know what happens in there when we do this,” Margaret said.

“Yep, I reckon we do, and I reckon we don't care.”

“He can't see, I don't see what the problem is.”

“The problem is that he can still hear, you damn fool.”

“Fine, how about if he waits at the top of the stairs?”

There was a short pause as all of the figures shuffled and turned to glare at one another, silently communicating amongst themselves the fact that none of them liked this solution either but that they couldn't think of a likely alternative.

“Well, come on then,” growled Edgar, pushing his way through the small crowd and crunching through the leaves on his way to the back of the house. The others followed him solemnly, with Margaret and Jarod bringing up the rear.

“This won't take long, I promise,” Margaret whispered, but Jarod could detect a note of nervousness in her voice. One of the figures in front of them turned to glare at them and Jarod elected to keep quiet for the time being.

Once around the back of the house Jarod saw a large dark spot in the middle of the yard. Even without his glasses he could tell that this must be the door to the cellar, and the other figures were slowly descending the steps down into it. Eventually it was just Jarod, Edgar, and Margaret standing at the top.

“You wait here,” Edgar said, giving Jarod a rough shove. Margaret shot him a look but said nothing, merely turning and going down the steps. Edgar went last, pulling the large double doors closed behind him.

With that motion Jarod was able to discern what kind of cellar this must be. It was one of those old storm cellars that was basically just a hole in the ground with doors on top. Jarod speculated about the wisdom of having such a shelter this close to the coast, and then realized he had no idea whether major storms ever got anywhere near this part of the country and that maybe it didn't matter. He did, however, think that this thing was probably prone to flooding if it rained at all.

He stood, bored, waiting for whatever was going on downstairs to be over. Staring around he risked a bit of a squint, but saw nothing unusual...just the basic fuzzy, blurry, indistinct shapes that he always saw without his glasses. He heard the wind in the trees and the occasional chirrup of some bird or other. He found himself wishing that out of all the nature programs he watched he could identify one lousy bird, but he couldn't. He also heard the crunching of leaves nearby, but dismissed them as some woodland creature.

A short while later, his mind drifting far away, he was brought back from his reverie about Margaret by a strange sound. A rhythmic, low frequency sound that he couldn't identify nor place from which direction it came. It went on for several seconds and then stopped. He wondered what it could have been and whether he might have imagined it when it started again, that same rhythmic sound, lasting for several seconds, and then stopping. It was punctuated by another sound, this one even more unexpected than the first.

“Psst!”

Jarod froze. His eyes looked around out of habit, but the rest of his body stood stock still. He waited, the rhythmic sound having stopped, all was quiet.

“Psst!!”

Jarod considered his choices. As usual he was not used to dealing with life without being able to see it, and that limited those choices. At length he made up his mind. Just one more time...

“Psst!!!”

“Ok, I hear you,” said Jarod. “But I can't see you because I've lost my glasses. What do you want?”

“Not so loud,” the new voice wheezed. It was gruff and seemed to have a lot of phlegm involved in the speechmaking process. “I'm directly behind you, just take three steps back.”

Jarod did so, nearly tripping over a tree root as he did so.

“Ok, now what?” he asked.

“Now you listen to me,” said the voice, quietly. “You have to get out of here.”

“Can't,” said Jarod, also quietly. “I just told you I can't see.”

“Doesn't matter. Blunder along. In this case distance is more important than direction.”

Jarod considered this. It sounded like a similar situation to the one he'd been in previously. With one major exception. This time it was someone else who wanted him to go. He wanted to stay.

“No, I think I'll stay here. Margaret said she'd take me into the city later to get me new glasses.”

There was a cough, which Jarod wondered if it might be a kind of strange laugh. “If you could see what they were doing down in the cellar right now you'd have reason to doubt her honesty,” growled the voice.

“Look, who are you...” Jarod began, but he was cut off by what sounded like a distant scream coming from down in the cellar. He felt suddenly nervous.

“No, you look,” said the voice. “I'm doing you a favor here already, but if you want to do it the hard way then you feel free. When they come back up in a few minutes you get as close a look as you need to at your precious Margaret's hands. Then you make up your mind...you either stay here with them or you come with me. I'll guide you somewhere safe and then you can make your own way.”

“Sounds like a raw deal to me,” Jarod said. “Have you lead me somewhere I don't know where is, while I'm blind if I may remind you, or stay here where I have a guaranteed ride into town.”

“You may not know where it is, but at least you'll be safe from...shhh, here they come!” And with that, the voice vanished. Jarod took three steps forward, back in position just before the cellar doors swung open, Edgar leading the way back up, Margaret close behind.

“What were you doing?” Margaret asked.

“Nothing, just wanted to have a look around while I waited. I have to get really close to things to be able to see them without my glasses.”

“What did I tell you?” snarled Edgar. Margaret sighed.

Jarod suddenly had an idea. He took two steps forward and purposely tripped over where he knew the cellar doors were lying open. Fighting to regain his balance, he lurched in the direction of Margaret. She reached out for him and he felt her hands grip his for just a moment before he hit the ground a little harder than he'd meant to. Pushing himself up he took a close look at his own hands and saw that they were covered in blood.

“Did you cut yourself down there, Margaret?” he asked as he regained his feet.

“No...not exactly...” she replied miserably.

“So what were you doing down there?”

“I think we should take him to see, don't you, Maggie?” said Edgar meaningfully.

Jarod saw Margaret's blurry silhouette nod very slightly. He glanced in the direction of where he'd heard the voice a few moments ago, but saw only the fuzzy outline of a shrub.

“Hey! Get up here and help with the stranger!” called Edgar down the cellar hole. He then grabbed Jarod roughly by the arm.

“Hey, get off!” Jarod jerked his arm away from Edgar.

“Jarod, I'm so sorry...” Margaret began, but she was cut off by the emergence of the other figures who had descended into the cellar. They quickly surrounded Jarod who began looking this way and that, uselessly.

“You keep away from me!” he said, even though he knew and they knew that he was currently entirely at their mercy. He adopted a fighting stance and wondered what was about to happen to him.

“Jarod, just go with them and it'll all be over soon...”

“You said you were going to help me! Help me!” Jarod called. Margaret began to sob, thinking that he was talking to her, but in fact Jarod's current thoughts were entirely with the disembodied voice he had been speaking to not long ago. And, as if waiting for Jarod to swallow his pride and actually ask for the help that had been offered, the voice spoke again.

The difference was remarkable. Whereas before the voice had been soft, if gruff, it was now more of a roar that threatened to shake the entire countryside. Jarod had a fleeting remembrance of avalanches and the fact that he was currently very close to a fault line, but those thoughts were driven from his head by the violence that suddenly was visited upon the figures surrounding him. A dark blur, growling, snarling, and lashing out at everything nearby was tearing through the small group, knocking them all out of the way and onto the ground where they lay without moving. Jarod felt himself grabbed around the waist and was bent double by a sudden, unexpected acceleration that carried him away from Margaret's house. The journey was rough and all he could discern of his surroundings was a close press of trees that scraped and scratched him as they went and a repetitive thumping, as of two large objects hitting the ground in rapid succession in their turn. He gripped the arm that was holding him and thought he felt a little more hair than he might have expected, but he was being bounced around so much that he couldn't really concentrate on it.

Eventually they stopped and Jarod was thrown roughly to the ground.

“You idiot,” growled the voice. “Why couldn't you have come with me when I told you the first time?”

Jarod, winded from his rough treatment, found himself unable to answer.

“Now they're looking for us,” the voice continued, its tones rough and guttural at times. It was also pacing, each footfall landing with that same terrible, heavy thud that had accompanied them throughout their retreat from Margaret and Edgar and the rest.

“I'm sorry,” Jarod managed eventually. “Thanks for helping out there...that's the second time today somebody's been chasing me. Not my day, I guess.”

That same cough of a laugh followed Jarod's remarks. “Maybe more than you think.”

“What's your name anyway?” Jarod asked.

There was a pause as the figure stopped pacing. He heard the figure open his mouth to speak, then shut it, then an exasperated sound, followed by a soft muttering in which Jarod heard the words 'glasses' and 'blind as a bat' and thought he also heard 'moron' but he wasn't sure about that. Eventually the figure replied, “You can call me BF.”

“BF? As in the tire guy? BF Goodrich?”

“Yeah, the tire guy,” the figure coughed. Now that Jarod was getting his wind back he was able to look at the figure more properly. He still saw nothing but a fuzzy outline, although this outline seemed even fuzzier than usual. It was tall and there was a smell coming from somewhere nearby that Jarod couldn't quite identify.

“Where you from?”

“Oh, I get around,” said the figure with a smirk in his voice. “But I spend a lot of time in the Pacific Northwest area.”

“Oh,” said Jarod. “So now what?”

“Now break time is over, but I'm done carrying you. We have to get going. You follow me.” And without another word or any opportunity for Jarod to argue, the figure set off through the forest again.

Jarod followed, wordlessly. BF kept up an ambitious pace, his steps thudding along, which was lucky for Jarod because with all the trees around he was having a hard time following the outline of even BF's bulky frame and kept having to resort to following the sound instead. The trees were dense, the area choked with overgrowth, and vines snagged Jarod more than once, nearly tripping him. BF, on the other hand, strode ever onwards, passing through the closely grown trees like vapor. Jarod stumbled on, getting scratched, cursing slightly, and wondering how the day could possibly get any worse and trying not to imagine how much worse it had nearly been with Margaret. Or with Carl and Isaac for that matter.

Jarod emerged from his reverie and realized he couldn't hear the reassuring thud of BF's pace ahead of him anymore. He stumbled on in the general direction that they'd been traveling, but all remained quiet. He began to get panicky. In desperation he took out his camera from his pocket and began shooting in random directions, taking picture after picture. He held the little LCD screen up to his eyes searching for anything that looked familiar, but saw nothing. In one of them he thought he saw an indistinct figure in the distance, but it was too far away to matter.

Exhausted, he sank to the forest floor and put his head in his hands. He had no idea what time it was, but figured it to be nearly midday. He was on vacation. Nobody was expecting him to check in until he got back. Nobody even knew to look for him, let alone where. He'd been promised by two people so far that they would help him get new glasses and he'd had to actually escape from both of them, and now a third person had led him off into a dense forest where he could barely even see the sky. In fact, it dawned on him now just how dark this little area was. And he'd had a hard day. And he was so tired. And with this thought the fatigue suddenly washed over him and he felt his eyes growing heavy and soon he was asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Jarod slept fitfully. He dreamed. He dreamed of a slug and a beetle, and the slug crawled inside the beetle and he could see it crawling around in there, oozing slime, and he saw the slug eat the beetle's brain, and then the slug crawled to the rear of the beetle and excreted the brain at the back of the beetle and the beetle merely started walking in the other direction. He dreamed that he was cradling one of his friends who was unexpectedly pregnant, someone he hadn't seen in several months. He dreamed that he

and his high school friends were parading into a restroom and then leaving without actually using the facilities. He dreamed of a bright light in the sky and himself in the spotlight, blinded by the light as well as his lack of glasses. He dreamed of floating. And then all was darkness.

He awoke to bright sunshine, lying not in a forest but in a field. He blinked into the sky. He'd heard of overzealous development of areas, but this took the cake. There wasn't a tree in sight, just acres and acres of a fuzzy brown color that reminded him of grain. He took a close look at the ground on which he lay, almost putting his nose on it to get close enough, and discovered that it was, in fact, grain. What wasn't flattened into a circle around him was waving gently in the breeze. He stood up and the aches and pains of the previous night became known to him. His wrists hurt, he assumed because of sleeping on them. His neck hurt from the uncomfortable position he'd been in when he awoke. His rear end hurt for reasons unknown, but he was prepared to guess that he had sat on a rock somehow.

He squinted into the distance. Nothing but grain as far as his eye could see, which, he reminded himself, was probably only about 20 feet without his glasses. He glanced up at the sky and wondered how long he'd been asleep. The sun seemed to be a lot lower than he would have expected. He listened hard and tried to discern anything that might help him determine a location for about where he might be. It was certainly miles away from where he'd fallen asleep as he could see no trees anywhere close by. In the far distance the landscape seemed a little fuzzier, and he wondered if that might be a distant treeline. Deciding there was nothing else to do, he started walking in that general direction.

After some distance he made his way to that treeline and the area turned decidedly more arboreal. Rolling hills also played an important part of the terrain. He also thought he could hear water running. He trudged on, wondering what had happened to BF. And with that thought he suddenly remembered his camera. He checked his pockets and was reassured by its presence. He turned it on and took a couple of shots at random, examining the result in the small LCD screen, but unable to glean any additional knowledge of his whereabouts. Jarod sighed. He liked the scenery, but he was preoccupied. He needed his damn glasses.

Trudging on he passed a few more trees, although the density was not as great as it had been before. These were clearly not the same trees he had fallen asleep under earlier in the day. They weren't even really dense enough to justify the word "forest". And the sound of the water continued to get louder. The air was cold and Jarod shivered slightly in his jacket. The thing about San Francisco was that the days could be warm, but the nights were almost sure to be cold. He wondered again how long he had been asleep. It wasn't evening yet, but it was approaching faster than he'd like.

"What a miserable day," he said gruffly aloud.

"Shhh!!"

Jarod startled. He had thought he was entirely alone.

"Who's there?" he called.

"I said shhhh!! Are you trying to scare it away?"

The voice was whispered, urgent, and the inflections made it almost certainly a man. There was also a moderately strong accent...Scottish, Jarod thought, although his knowledge of accents wasn't the best.

"Can you help me?" Jarod said, a little more softly, to appease the voice.

"In a moment, in a moment," said the voice, impatiently. "I've got a good feeling about this right now. It should be any minute..."

Jarod wasn't sure what was happening, but after the morning he'd had he decided he didn't want to take any chances on annoying this new voice. He wanted to find an eye doctor and he wasn't going to be deterred from that path, and the best way to do that was to make sure that this voice was appeased to a certain extent. So he held his tongue.

Several minutes passed with nothing else happening. Jarod fidgeted slightly, but continued to say nothing. He looked around, just for something to do, but was greeted by nothing more than the same green blur of the countryside that he'd seen since he'd gotten here. At last he could stand it no longer.

"Can you tell me where I am?" he ventured, softly.

"Shhhhhh," said the voice, gently, "almost there..."

Jarod stayed silent a few more minutes. At last the voice sighed. And then cursed.

"Bloody hell, I thought I had it that time."

"Had what?" asked Jarod in a normal tone of voice.

The voice was silent for a moment, as if considering how to answer. "Never mind," it said at last.

"Look, I've got a big problem, and I need you to help me," Jarod said, throwing caution to the wind. He didn't care where he was anymore, nor who he was talking to, nor about anything except getting his vision back. He couldn't stand it anymore, this constant feeling that he was missing out on something and feeling his vacation frittering away because he'd been so stupid as to lose his glasses on the Bridge.

"Sure, sure, what can I do for you?" asked the voice cautiously.

"I've lost my glasses and I need to get a new pair."

"You can't see without them?"

"Not much. Everything is a blur. Can you help me, please?"

"Certainly, my good man. Follow me," and with that, a largeish man stood up from behind a bush and began striding off. Jarod hurried to follow, wary of his previous experience with BF and not eager to repeat it. The last thing he needed was to get lost again, fall asleep, and somehow wake up in the middle of a desert with other body parts aching.

"Thank you so much. My name is Jarod, by the way."

"Thing nothing of it," said the voice. "You can call me Steve."

"Where are you from, Steve?" Jarod noted the strong Scottish accent, now nearly unmistakable.

"Edinburgh," came the reply. Which didn't help Jarod at all. They were walking along the shore of what appeared to Jarod to be a rather large lake. They were about fifty yards from it, but the size of it and the sound of the water made it very distinctive. As he watched the water he thought he saw movement, and stopped to squint at it to see if he could see what it was.

A long, curvy object was protruding from the surface of the water, moving slowly but steadily along in parallel with them. He was about to ask Steve what it was when suddenly Steve gave a cry, pushed him to the ground, and lifted a large black object to his face. Jarod heard the clicking of a camera's shutter taking many shots in rapid succession. After a moment it stopped and Steve examined his results, sighing after viewing each shot.

"Well, it'll have to do, won't it?" he said.

"What was that?" Jarod asked.

There was a pause. "A swan," came the answer. "Look, let's not hang about, sorry about pushing you down like that, but I'm a birdwatcher and that was...an extremely rare swan. Had to get the shot, you understand."

"Of course," said Jarod testily, holding out his hand, but Steve made no motion to help him up so he just got up himself. They walked a bit further, but before long Jarod heard a strange sound. A whirring, humming sound that might have been a helicopter with a silencer. He glanced at Steve and saw him standing there bathed in a bright light, staring up into it, mouth agape. Jarod looked up as well, blinded by the intensity of the light. The sound grew louder. The light grew brighter.

Jarod opened his eyes and found himself in a very dark space. His head hurt. He blinked, which didn't really help, nor could he really tell much difference. So he did what he'd been doing so much of lately, he listened. He could hear a vague thrumming sound which created a kind of background noise for the whole area, but he could also hear a slightly stronger, slightly lower-pitched rhythmic sound that matched what he normally thought of as speech. He also heard a sigh from just to his right and froze.

“Who's there? Steve? Is that you?”

“Ik glomma bizzoo,” replied a voice.

“What?”

“Sooooorry, ees thees bettir?” said the voice.

“...a little,” Jarod admitted.

There was a cough and then the voice said “Test, test, the quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dogs. How's that?”

“Weird, but I can understand you now.”

“Good. Welcome aboard.”

“Welcome aboard what?”

“Nevermind, bad joke. So do you hear them?”

“I hear someone talking besides you, if that's what you mean.”

“Yeah. Do you understand them?”

“No...can't really hear them, it's just a bunch of noise to go with the rest of the noise.”

“In a nutshell they're arguing about navigation. It seems they don't really know where they are.”

“They can join the club. I don't know where I am either.”

“Funny you should mention that. Part of what they're arguing about is where to put you.”

“Huh?”

But Jarod never got an answer to that question because at that moment he opened his eyes again and found himself in a very dark place. The thrumming sound was gone and he

could feel a slight breeze, which hadn't been present before. He also experienced a stench more foul than he could ever remember smelling before. It smelled like a toilet in a landfill that specialized in the disposal of rotten eggs. He stood up carefully and looked around. It was slightly more well-lit than the previous space, and definitely more airy, but it was still so dark he didn't think he could have seen anything even with his glasses. Without them was a hopeless cause. He put both hands out in front of him and, encountering no immediate impediment, carefully put one foot forward. He made his way in this fashion, carefully, testing each step before putting his full weight on it, for several feet before he found a wall. He ran his fingers over rough stone blocks, cut square and mortared together, and followed the wall for a bit until he came to an intersection. He chose to keep his hands on the wall and as soon as he had turned the corner he kicked something that rattled away into the darkness a few feet away. He knelt down and began feeling around for whatever it was, and finally put his hands around the welcome cylindrical shape of a flashlight.

He clicked it on and looked around. The beam was dim, the batteries were weak, and he couldn't really see anything that his hands hadn't already told him was there, and that so blurry that it was useless, so he clicked it back off to conserve the battery for an emergency. As the light was extinguished he thought he heard a scratching sound from a little further ahead. He stopped and listened hard, but heard nothing more. He crept forward a few feet, but halted again with the occurrence of the new sound.

It was a hiss, but it was more than that. It was a sound that tapped into a primal part of Jarod's psyche, a hiss that spoke of an old dominion that had not been forgotten. It was a hiss that put real fear into Jarod's heart, a fear of teeth and of water. He fumbled with the flashlight and clicked it on, shining it in the direction of where that reptilian sound had come from and he saw it. Fuzzy, blurry, but somehow unmistakable. Long and green and moving towards him. He stumbled backwards, threw out his hands to the wall to steady himself, and dropped the flashlight, which went out as it hit the ground, and he ran. His heavy steps echoed along the long tunnel and he couldn't see where he was going, nor did he have any sense of direction down here. He was fighting an impulse of disbelief when suddenly he was blinded by an intensely bright light. Jarod stopped running.

Jarod opened his eyes and found himself in a moderately dark place. He squinted and saw underbrush under his sitting legs. He straightened up and felt the bark of a tree against his back. He looked around and found himself in a dense forest. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Weirdest dream ever," he concluded. He got up, noting the aching in his body, and cursed whatever rock he had been sitting on. "At least I know where that part of the dream came from," he mused to himself.

"Where have you been?" demanded the gruff voice of BF.

"Sorry, I dropped off for a few minutes," Jarod replied. "It's been a long day."

“Come on, we haven't got time to waste,” BF said, loping off again. Jarod hurried to keep up, looking up into the sky as he did. The sun was exactly where he remembered it being before he went to sleep. Funny thing about dreams and how they can seem to take forever when you weren't even asleep that long.

BF must have been worried about losing him again because he went a bit slower this time. The thumping of his footsteps stayed within earshot and Jarod could even see the blurry form striding purposefully ahead of him just a short distance away. They were going uphill, which made the journey a bit rough, and the trees were still very dense and tore at his clothes and his skin as they walked. It was getting warmer as the day wore on and Jarod absentmindedly wiped his forehead with his forearm, remembering as he did so what happened the last time he had done that. His glasses had gone flying off his face and strange things had been happening to him ever since. Why couldn't someone just take him to the eye doctor and let him get back to his vacation?

He had done most of what he'd set out to do on the vacation. Riding the bicycle across the bridge had been one of the last things on the list. Of course he'd intended to spend all day doing it, enjoying the scenery and the fact that he wasn't indoors working as he was nearly every other day of the year. That had been a large part of the point of the vacation in the first place; get away from it all, pick a nice place with good weather and spend as much time as possible outdoors. He'd done a few indoor activities in San Francisco, including a few museums and local bookstores, but for the most part he'd done a lot of hiking and bike riding. Well, now he was doing even more hiking. He had to admit that he was outdoors and so the trip wouldn't be a total loss even if he didn't get the glasses until that evening.

And what stories he'd have to tell when he got home! He could talk about the crazy people with the marine animal and the weird woman with blood on her hands. Which reminded him, he'd held her hand for a moment and still had blood on his own hands which was drying rapidly, caking up and starting to look really gross. He unzipped his jacket and wiped his hands on the white undershirt that he had on, but as the blood was drying it didn't do much good. He spat on his hands, rubbed them around a bit, and tried again, wiping his hands on his shirt. That worked a little better. He zipped his jacket back up, making a mental note to just throw the shirt away when he got back to the hotel, and continued on after BF.

As they continued on, Jarod thought he heard something. A rhythmic thrumming sound, but airy, not electric like the one he'd heard on the ship, in his dream. He tried to place where he'd heard it before, but the thrumming mixed with BF's pounding footsteps and disrupted the rhythm and his ability to think about it. He was also concentrating on keeping the blurry form of BF in sight, keeping his thoughts on the footsteps, not losing his companion again. But the sound persisted. Under the footsteps, the rustle and crackle of the underbrush, under the sound of his breathing, which was becoming more ragged and forceful, under all of that was the incessant thrumming, serving as a constant distraction until finally he couldn't stand it anymore.

"What is that?"

"Just keep moving," came the gruff sound of BF's voice from up ahead.

Jarod obeyed, although he increasingly wanted to know where they were going. Perhaps they weren't going anywhere, but merely running away from wherever they happened to be at the time. Jarod could relate. He'd been doing that all his life, although not in geographical terms, but in emotional and intellectual terms. He hadn't wanted to go into advertising, but he'd been put in a position where he had to make a decision on a major in college and chose the one that seemed least offensive to him.

He reflected for a moment on what an odd time it was to think about a thing like that and what made him do it. Perhaps the thrumming sound was lulling his mind, making it wander. And a moment later he realized that he could no longer hear BF's footsteps. He stopped. He looked around, uselessly. He listened. And he screamed his frustration. Lost again, alone again, still blind, and still helpless. He sank to his knees, squeezed his eyes shut, and crouched there for several moments before he heard it.

"That's good, son, now just stay right there and put your hands on your head."

Jarod froze in panic. Slowly he obeyed the order, lacing his fingers together behind his head. Instantly he heard several large people surround him, grabbing his hands, forcing him to lay face down on the ground, pulling his arms behind him, and snapping cold handcuffs around his wrists. They hauled him upright and he opened his eyes long enough to see the blurry shapes of several men, all wearing black suits, before a hood was placed over his head. Hands frisked him, going over every inch of his body, and his camera was extracted from his pocket. He felt bad about losing it...it had his vacation pictures on it, not to mention a few things he'd snapped while he couldn't see and was looking forward to seeing later. The men finished their search and he was marched forward.

He tripped over several roots, but was held upright by the strong men and did not fall. The group of them crashed through the underbrush, breaking branches as they went and making a tremendous din. Jarod wondered where BF was. He had rescued him before from Margaret, maybe he would do so again from these men. Or maybe it had all been a trap. After the morning he'd had he wouldn't be surprised to learn that BF had saved him from one group only to lead him to another. Maybe they worked for Carl and Isaac. He did not cry out. His spirit was nearly completely broken and he was resigned to his fate, whatever it might be. The branches of the dense forest continued to tear at his clothes, even moreso since their journey was more haphazard, quicker, and he had less control over his movements, not even able to see blurry images but only a hazy blackness with the hood over his head.

Eventually the trees thinned and the terrain changed to first grass and then gravel. Jarod was hurried forward in silence. The men had not been talking to each other all this time, choosing to communicate either silently or not at all. Their footsteps crunched over the

gravel for several moments and then he heard a car door open and he was pushed roughly into the back seat. Two of the men took up positions on either side of him. His hands were still cuffed behind his back and getting into the car had been a hurried affair and he was now sitting painfully on them, the cuffs digging into his wrists. He tried to shift to make himself more comfortable, but one of the men pushed him back into the seat. He heard the engine start and the rumble of the tires over the gravel for a short time and then he felt the bump that indicated the transition to pavement, making the ride much smoother and quieter.

Still no one spoke. Several times Jarod was on the verge of asking who these men were and where they were taking him, but each time he opened his mouth to speak, as if they could tell what he was about to do, one or the other of the men would grunt roughly and Jarod would be cowed back into complete silence. He lost track of how long they were on the road, but the trip was full of twists and turns. At every curve he would feel his body shift, first left, then right, then right again, back left and on and on. For a while he tried counting lefts and rights in a vain hope that he might remember how to get back, but he eventually gave up because, as he reminded himself, getting back to somewhere you were lost wasn't going to be an improvement later. He heard very few cars traveling in the other direction, the sound of the air they pushed in front of them dopplering away quickly, their drivers giving no indication of even a backward glance at his predicament.

His mind wandered. He tried to think of when he had been more miserable, his thoughts finally landing on a time nearly eight years ago when one of his co-workers had passed away. The man, whose name he could not even remember now, had committed suicide at the age of 73. Jarod had just graduated from college and was about to begin his first job in advertising, an entry level position at a midsize firm that he was hopeful would help him advance quickly. Even back then he'd been unsure about his chosen career path and consoled himself with the idea that he could rise through the ranks quickly through sheer hard work and force of will, becoming wealthy within ten years, and earning a little more flexibility as far as how he spent his time. It hadn't quite worked out that way. The man, who Jarod's memory was somehow assigning the name Alfred or Albert...perhaps Arthur, no, Alfred would do...but whatever his name, he was supposed to train Jarod in his new job. Show him the ropes. Give him assignments. And, with any luck, a bit of career mentoring.

And then the old coot had gone and jumped off a bridge one night. Everyone was completely flabbergasted and nobody knew how to cope with his loss. He'd been with the company for nearly forty years and knew things he hadn't bothered to pass down to anyone at all. Everyone had assumed that Jarod would be the recipient of all that accumulated knowledge and that this would be Alfred's last task before finally taking retirement, a well-deserved rest after sticking it out with the company for almost ten years after he could have left. But there was always something left to do, he'd said. Some campaign that needed a tweak that only he could give it, some copy that needed a little extra oomph, some layout that, with just a minor alteration, could be an award-winning piece, bring the craft of advertising a little closer to perfection, and help along the career of whoever had designed it in the first place.

That was the part that had rankled Jarod the most. The man had lived for advancing careers, and after a lifetime of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, after an age of sabotaging his own efforts both professionally and socially, Jarod was finally going to be on the receiving end of the kind of knowledge that could be applied towards something good for himself. He remembered going in on his first day in the office and seeing everyone crying as soon as he walked through the door. There had even been talk of shutting the office down for a day of mourning, but everyone knew that Alfred would have pitched a screaming fit if anyone had suggested such a thing while he was alive. And he hadn't even left a note. No indication that this was coming, and everyone wracked their brains trying to think of something they had done to set him off, but to no avail. In the end he was buried on a sunny weekend with hundreds of mourners in attendance, many of whom were executives that Alfred had helped along the way to the riches and fame that Jarod had assumed he was next in line for. He had regarded the great weather during the service and subsequent interment as the final insult that the world had to hurl at him.

Unfortunately he had been wrong. Everyone had assumed that Alfred would be teaching Jarod everything he knew, and so key personnel had been reassigned to high-profile accounts on the assumption that Alfred and Jarod would be taking care of certain specific, technical tasks themselves. With Alfred gone that left Jarod in charge of those things. Jarod had met Alfred only one time and the meeting had not been informational from an advertising point of view. Before settling on advertising, Jarod had dabbled in a major of hard science. Physics. Chemistry. Astronomy. This career path had been derailed when it became clear that Jarod detested all the math involved. He could do it, and he appreciated the cold certainty that came with pure mathematics, but it bored him. He craved the ability to predict the future that physics offered, but wasn't willing to go through the effort of doing the math necessary to achieve that accurate prediction. He adored balanced chemical equations, knowing how much of a given substance would yield how much of another given substance in specific, predictable reactions, but hated the idea that he would have to do the actual balancing himself.

So he had switched majors, knowing that statistics were commonly used in marketing and advertising. He resigned himself to the fact that math was going to be a necessary part of nearly every career he chose, but he was determined to avoid the higher level number crunching required of the pure sciences. And he was also determined to bring a greater precision and predictability to the advertising world. You can take the scientist out of the science, but you can't take the science out of the scientists.

He had expressed as much to Alfred on their one meeting and it had eventually led to a brisk argument. Alfred's contention that advertising was a craft and therefore above pure science offended Jarod. He couldn't accept it, wouldn't hear of it. He could bring certainty to advertising. Alfred believed that the uncertainty, the trial and error, and the tendencies of human vagaries were the most important reasons to work in advertising in the first place.

“Who really wants to spend their whole life selling things to other people?” he’d asked. “Nobody. There is nothing more boring than trying to convince someone to do something from afar. Some people will get a power trip from being a salesman, convincing people on the spot to take a certain course of action, thinking on your feet, improvising in the face of random, sometimes nonsensical objections, but when you work on an ad campaign for six months you become immune to that kind of thing. The only joy possible is from taking a wild guess and having it turn out to be correct. There can be no certainty in this business.”

Jarod had disagreed. There had to be a way, he’d insisted, to bring scientific scrutiny to the process of advertising. There had to be a way to run the statistics, adjust the numbers, and get the same result every time. Perhaps, he thought as the car made another turn to the right, that was what had attracted him to the profession in the first place. It was actually harder. Planets followed precise rules and you could predict their exact position with almost full certainty for hundreds of years in the future. But convincing millions of people do something simultaneously...the only other profession that he knew of with that kind of influence was the clergy, and he had no interest. Besides, there was a difference between influencing people and predicting how they would react to certain stimuli.

After Alfred’s death, all those responsibilities were heaped on Jarod, and he was way in over his head. He’d gone to his boss and explained that he couldn’t do it, but the man had merely apologized, said he’d have to make the best of it, that all the other resources were being used elsewhere, and that there was nothing he could do. Oh, and if Jarod wanted to quit that was fine, but he hoped he had another career in mind because the firm might be mid-sized, but the owner had worked for most of the majors, despised quitters, and carried a grudge. Not to mention the fact that just quitting would be a black mark on the old resume no matter what else happened.

Jarod had mentioned his conversation to many of his co-workers as a possible reason for the untimely passing of his supposed mentor, but they had all dismissed it. Nobody was willing to believe that Alfred had jumped off the bridge over a philosophical argument with a neophyte adman.

Jarod had been miserable for over a year trying to do his job, unwilling to quit, unwilling to compromise on why he’d taken the job in the first place, and he practically lived at the office. When it was all over he’d been promoted and he’d thought for a fleeting moment that it had all been worth it. Since then he’d made a series of lateral moves within the agency, shifted companies, and moved to Chicago, but success always managed to stay just out of his reach. His friends said he was too closed-minded, that he should open up a little to new possibilities. He always retreated to the safe, comfortable, familiar, and above all, predictable. This was the first vacation he’d allowed himself to take since Alfred’s death, the first time he’d ventured out of his comfort zone in such a radical way, and look what had happened.

He compared that year of misery to his current state, hooded, being driven by unknown people to an unknown location, probably being hunted and tracked by weirdos, potential

murderers, and his dreams were all screwed up. The comparison was a tough call, but since he didn't have his glasses he was tempted to give the nod to the current situation for severity of misery.

At last the car slowed and came to a stop. Jarod strained his hearing, but detected nothing for several minutes. Then the car pulled forward a few feet and he heard the power window going down and a couple of deep voices speaking in clipped tones. Another moment of silence and then he heard the rattle of a chain-link fence on a sliding gate opening, which was cut off by the power window going back up. As it slid into place in the door frame the sound of the gate was silenced completely and the car started forward again, resuming a speed very close to what they had been using on the main road. This lasted for several more minutes until again the car began to slow, finally coming to a complete stop, and the parking brake engaged.

The doors opened on either side of Jarod and he was greeted with a chill wind that smelled of salt, indicating his proximity to the ocean. He was surely miles away from San Francisco by now as he could not think of anywhere close to the shore in that city that could be secret enough to require a fenced gate. The men on either side of him got out and the one on his right side reached back in and extracted him roughly from the seat. Someone shoved him in the back, indicating that he should start walking, but still nobody spoke. Jarod began walking forward, two strong hands gripping his elbows, directing his footsteps. He walked on a hard, unyielding concrete, and the wind whipping around him told him that they were still out in the open, not yet near a building or other shelter. The sun shone steadily on him, he could see its light through the tiny holes created by the weave of the fabric of the hood. And then they walked into shadow, the warmth of the sun stolen from him, and now only the chill wind remained.

Jarod felt isolated and alone. None of the men had spoken to him, he was too afraid to speak himself, and the comfort of the sun's rays was now gone as they approached a tall building whose shadow they were now walking through. He felt the change in air pressure as they neared the building's walls, noting in his dull panic how he would never have noticed such a thing before, but now he was acutely aware of it. They stopped and Jarod could hear fingers pushing buttons and a card was swiped through a magnetic reader. He heard the door slide open and he was pushed through it, but the men did not follow. He heard no noise to indicate that anyone else was in the room, and then he heard the door slide shut. With the outside sun now blocked by the door, the room and Jarod were plunged into darkness. He stood there several minutes, shivering in fear, but not from cold. The room was pleasantly warm and, he noted, strangely scented with a cinnamon air freshener.

From across the room he heard a conventional door open and close with one set of accompanying footsteps. The footsteps clicked across the room, hard soled shoes tapping on the tile flooring, stopping just in front of him. He heard the swish of fabric as someone raised their hands and removed the hood from his head, but the room was still nearly completely dark. A small night-light burned in the far corner, enough for a person with good vision, not nearly adequate for someone with no glasses. In front of him he

could see the vague, blurry image of someone who was about a head shorter than he was, studying him, but no details were forthcoming. After a moment, the figure moved away, across the room, stopping by the door they had come in.

“Blee snootick altentul henk,” said the voice. Then a pause. “Sooorry, I forgot. Welcome, Jarod.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“I’m still dreaming, aren’t I?” said Jarod, a touch of relief entering his voice.

“What do you mean still?” asked the voice, it’s inflections entering Jarod’s head as out of a nightmare.

“Well, I mean when last we met I was asleep and dreaming. Therefore I must still be dreaming.”

“What makes you think you were dreaming before?”

“I fell asleep in the woods. I dreamed. I woke up.”

“No, you woke up long before that.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I talked to you. Look, I’m not really into this existential nonsense...”

“Neither am I, but I’m telling you I dreamed you.”

“I assure you I’m very real. What is it you humans do, pinch each other?”

“You keep away from me!” Jarod’s mind wasn’t capable of dealing with this. If he wasn’t dreaming then he’d been captured by some foreigners, probably terrorists, who were so degenerate that they didn’t even regard themselves as human.

“As you wish. But we’re going to have to have a long talk, you and I.”

“What about?”

“About the things you’ve seen today.”

“I haven’t seen anything! That’s been the whole problem!”

“Ah, yes,” the voice continued. “And thus why we have to talk. The usual solution for your case is just to kill you outright. But I maintain, and a few of my colleagues agree,

that you have mitigating circumstances and that we should merely erase your short term memory.”

Jarod considered this. “Would I get new glasses?”

“Yes, very probably.”

“Then go ahead. I have no desire to remember anything about today.”

“Ah, sadly it isn’t up to me. It’s before the committee now, and our long talk is going to come a bit later, but I wanted to say hello again...once I remembered how you humans say hello, that is...and to point out that there is a chair in the corner behind you. You may wish to have a seat, it may be a while.”

“Can I get the handcuffs taken off?”

“No.”

And with that the figure opened the door, stepped out into the area beyond it, closed it, and was gone. Jarod heard the latch click shut and then a deadbolt falling into place. Jarod walked carefully across the room, swinging his feet side-to-side in front of him to try to detect any barriers. He encountered none until he reached the chair that the voice had told him about. He sat down, careful not to sit on his hands again.

He squinted around the room, but could make nothing out except the dim night light on the far side. He listened, but could hear nothing except the fans from the climate control. He was trapped in a room with electricity and, presumably, air vents, but he couldn’t see to find either of them. He sat in the darkness for several minutes wondering when and if the voice would come back. Despite its rather discomfoting reassurances, Jarod felt as though getting out of here was a better option than waiting around to be either killed or having his memory erased, which he suspected was some kind of terrorist code phrase for having his head cut off. But try though he might he couldn’t figure out how to do it.

He tried everything. He tried doubling up and slipping the handcuffs under his feet, but he wasn’t flexible enough to get his hands in front of him like he’d seen people on TV do. He got up and went to look at the night light, but it was just an LED, no way for him to break a bulb and use the broken glass for...something he hadn’t worked out yet. He walked around the room, feeling for the air vents, but as far as he could tell they were set high up on the wall, unreachable, even if he had his hands free. He sat back down in the chair, utterly frustrated, and tried to wrack his brain for any possibility he might have overlooked. In the end he decided that his only chance was to wait for someone to come get him, rush them at the door, and hope they were alone. It was a long shot, but better than no shot at all.

Jarod waited.

He was shaken awake some hours later by someone kneeling by his chair.

“Time to go, Jarod,” said that same familiar voice.

“Go where?” Jarod asked sleepily, momentarily forgetting where he was.

“To meet the committee.”

And with that the hood was placed back over his head. Jarod heard several footsteps enter the room and felt strong hands grasping his upper arms, heaving him upright, and guiding him towards the door. As they exited the room their footsteps began to echo, indicating a long hallway, and they traveled down it for several strides. Jarod considered trying to elbow his way to freedom, but the hands gripping him, as if anticipating his intentions, increased their hold and they continued inexorably down the hallway. As before, no one spoke. At last they stopped and Jarod heard the jingle of keys being inserted into a lock, the deadbolt sliding out of the way, and then a swipe card, followed by a numeric key pad, a short pause, and a beeping sound. High security, thought Jarod. The door slid open almost, but not quite, silently, and Jarod was shoved through it by himself. Someone behind him whipped off the hood and he heard the door shut quickly behind him.

He found himself in a well-lit room facing a large brown blur with several greenish blurs behind it. The greenish blurs all sparkled and shone in small squares on their left sides.

“Sit down,” said a voice.

Jarod looked around and saw a blur that was sort of chair-shaped, walked towards it and sat down.

“Earlier today were you in the company of two individuals, one named Carl and the other Isaac?” said a different voice.

Jarod closed his eyes. So they were involved. “Yes,” he managed.

“And where did you come across them?”

“I was biking across the bridge when a gust of wind blew my glasses off. I walked the bike to the other side and saw Carl practicing martial arts poses. He offered to give me a lift to get some new glasses, but he took me somewhere else instead.”

“And do you know where that was?”

“Wait a moment,” interrupted a third voice before Jarod could answer. “He just said he saw Carl. I thought the entire reason we were having this discussion is because he couldn’t see anything.”

Jarod felt panicky.

“I’ve explained this to you before,” said the voice of the person who had visited Jarod in his cell. “He can see light and dark, fuzzy images, nothing in detail further away than about a foot, by your measurement.”

“So you say and so he claims,” retorted the third voice, “but how do we know that for sure?”

“You must believe it on some level or else you wouldn’t be sitting here in a perfectly well-lit room,” said the first voice.

“Not at all,” said the third voice. “It’s my intention that he should never leave this room alive, so what do I care if he sees my face?”

“Because you are not the deciding vote any more than I am,” said the voice Jarod recognized.

There was a grunt that sounded like the third voice giving up the argument.

“Now, returning to the question, do you know where Carl took you?” asked the second voice.

“No. I couldn’t see anything. There were trees and a gravel road, that’s all I know.”

“I see,” the figure made a motion and Jarod heard the sound of a page turning. “And how did you part company with them?”

“They started to argue and I slipped out of the house while they were distracted. I stole their car.”

“This is preposterous!” shouted the third voice. “Are we expected to believe that he drove a car when he can’t see any further away than one foot?”

“I drove slowly and I was scared to death the whole time!” interjected Jarod, fearing that his fate was resting on this line of questioning.

“Be silent unless spoken to!” spluttered the third voice, clearly in an incoherent rage.

Jarod shut up.

“This entire charade is pointless,” continued the third voice. “We all know that the secrecy of the project is of utmost importance. Carl and Isaac are eluding us and now you are suggesting that we should let this one go with little more than a slap on the wrist. The memory erasure technology is still being reverse-engineered, it isn’t guaranteed. We need to continue the interrogation with less attention being paid to the ridiculous question

of what to do with him and more on what he actually knows that will help us capture those two morons who don't know what they've gotten themselves into."

There was a pause, which was ultimately broken by yet a fourth voice. "I agree," it said, simply. And there were murmurs of agreement from the remainder of the figures in the room, with much nodding.

"Very well," said the voice who had visited Jarod, coldly.

The interrogation seemed, to Jarod, to go on for hours. They asked the same questions over and over again. Despite the objections of the third voice, Jarod was given an eye exam. He asked for new glasses, but was shouted down by the third voice. Their entire focus was on Carl and Isaac, where they were, what they were doing, what had he seen or heard, how did he get away, had he seen them since. This, of course, was crazy, because Jarod had been actively avoiding and running away from the pair and was, in fact, fearful of them finding him. He answered their questions in leaden tones as he began to realize that getting new glasses was the least of his worries now. He was going to die. They were going to kill him. And he wouldn't ever even get to see their faces.

He wondered how long he'd be gone before anybody back home missed him. He was on vacation, hadn't called or emailed anybody in days, how long would they think he'd just decided to stay a few extra days. Or, he thought, that he might have just picked up and left. He'd been very discontent in the weeks prior to leaving and had even gone as far as to confide in a few people that he was dissatisfied with his life. How many of them would just conclude that he'd decided for a radical change and had just stayed? Would anybody ever file a missing persons report or would they just let it go?

He applied all of his predictive powers. He ran the sequences of events through his head, all the while answering the same stupid questions from his interrogators, telling them all he knew, knowing it would be enough to condemn him, but not enough to save him. He eventually decided that someone would eventually miss him, but it would be about a week after he was supposed to have gotten back. Someone would call the local police, who would call the San Francisco Police Department, who might or might not even find the bicycle he'd rented. If Carl and Isaac had reported the car stolen then someone might put two and two together on that point, but since they were both on the run from this group then it was unlikely that they had done so.

In the end, thought Jarod, it would all come to nothing. The trail would go cold after BF led him away from Margaret. BF would probably have made his way back to wherever he called home and would be untraceable.

He was shaken from his thoughts by a silence in the room.

"We asked you a question, Jarod," said the third voice, menacingly.

"Could you repeat it, please," Jarod replied, resignedly.

“What do you believe happened to you today?”

Jarod sat confusedly. Surely this question was nonsense. “I believe I was riding my bicycle, lost my glasses, was picked up by Carl, was taken to see Isaac, was forced to film their dissection of some new marine animal, escaped by stealing their car, and met Margaret. They were hunters, I believe, and were slaughtering animals...Margaret had blood on her hands...and then a man named BF led me away before her friends could kidnap me. I think they may have been poachers. I fell asleep, had a number of strange dreams, and then woke up where some men captured me and brought me here.”

“I see,” said the third voice thoughtfully. “And you think those lies are enough to save you?”

There was a warning grunt from the left side of the room.

“Oh, very well,” said the third voice impatiently. “But you all know it must still be done. Take him back to the cell while we make the arrangements. They will want to study him afterwards.”

Two hands gripped Jarod on each arm, lifting him up, turning him around, and propelling him back towards the door. When they reached the threshold, the hood was thrown over his head again and he was steered back down the echoey hallway until they reached his cell. The door was opened with a simple key and he was thrown in. The hood was removed and the door was shut. Jarod found the chair in the darkness mostly from memory and sat down. He hung his head, but did not cry. He felt resigned to his fate and was numb, quietly willing the seconds to pass more quickly so that he could just get it over with.

He tried to think of other things to make the time pass more quickly. He thought of his accounts back at the ad agency and who would get them. He thought of Mary, who was handling them in his absence, and whether she would resent him for dumping all that work on her for longer than she'd expected, just as he'd resented Alfred or Albert or whatever his name was. He wondered briefly whether Alfred had met the same fate he was about to meet and that his jumping off the bridge was just a cover, but he didn't dwell on it. It was useless and it reminded him too much of the predicament he was in now.

He also thought of his time at college. The arguments he would have with his professors about the necessity of math and science. Many of them thought that science was grand and that it had many everyday applications. Jarod disagreed. Jarod felt that science was everything and that it should be integrated into everyday life for everyone all the time. He'd been much more passionate about it then than he was now. Now he was tempered and jaded enough that he'd taken a job that was more business related and tried to apply science to it. Part of that was to prove a point, but some of it was that they'd worn him down. Made him try other things. Forced him to do things without applying scientific principles, just to see what it was like. He had always hated them for it. And now he'd

hate them for the rest of his life because it was one of his old science advisors that had encouraged him to take this vacation in the first place.

“You’re too wrapped up in it,” he’d said. “You need to get away from it all. Look at yourself, you’re stressed out because you’re trying to apply science and predictability to an industry that thrives on trends, polls, and guesswork.”

“But where would I go? I don’t travel,” Jarod had replied.

“Anywhere. Just get out there, and try to spend as much time outdoors as you can. See the beauty of nature, the unpredictable patterns that emerge, and don’t think about science. Just see it and experience it for its own sake.”

Well, see how well that had worked? Jarod grunted derisively to himself. This was a little too far away from it all for his tastes. His back began to hurt and he straightened up in the chair, keeping his eyes shut and trying to relax. The chair was made of metal, bolted to the floor, and was not the first word in comfort. It would all be over soon, he told himself. He opened his eyes and jammed his legs into the floor, trying to scoot the chair back away from two glowing green eyes that had suddenly appeared in front of him. With the chair bolted down, however, he only succeeded in straightening his legs out and sliding his back up the back of the chair, ramming the back of his knees painfully into the edge of the chair. He was about to cry out when a voice said, “Shhhhh...”

Jarod obeyed out of sheer shock. The room was totally quiet, how had the figure gotten in without his hearing? There was silence for a moment and then the figure spoke again. “I’m motioning for you to follow me,” it said.

“It’s dark and I can’t see without my glasses,” Jarod replied. So far they were both speaking in whispers and it was difficult for Jarod to tell anything about this new arrival.

There was a sigh and the figure said “I’m helping you get out of here, make some effort.” Then it walked over to the door. Jarod got up and stood next to it. The blurry beams of light hit the door handle as the figure fumbled in its pockets, finally extracting a set of keys. The key was inserted into the deadbolt lock, turned, and then the door was opened.

Jarod had never seen the hallway before, having been hooded both times he had been in it. He didn’t see much of it now, either, as the entire length of it was dark with the same small night lights he’d seen in his cell spaced every so often. His judge of distance, never very good to begin with, was unable to determine how far apart they were.

“You know the other door leads outside,” said Jarod, hopefully.

“It’s guarded,” said the figure, its lit eyes sweeping side to side. Jarod could see now that they were goggles of some kind. “You have to go this way. I can’t go with you, I’m going to give you directions.”

Jarod couldn't believe his ears. He was being helped to escape...but only sort of. And escape to where? Even if he made it outside, he had no idea where to go after that. On the other hand, staying here wasn't an option either. Some chance was better than no chance, he reminded himself. Simple statistics would tell you that.

"Here's what you have to do," the voice went on. "Are you listening? You have to go straight down this hall. Pass twelve of the lights and then turn right. It's a false wall, so just walk straight through it. After that you'll pass twelve more lights and you'll find a door on the right. Open it, but don't walk through it. Just leave it open and keep going straight. After you pass the fifteenth light you'll find another door on the right. Open it and go through. Go straight until the end of that hall and you'll find another door. Open it and you'll be outside. After that you're on your own. Got all that?"

Jarod stood silently. He had no idea what the figure had just said. He said so. The figure sighed and repeated it. "I have to go now, Jarod. I hope you got the directions that time because it's now or never. I hope we never see each other again, because if we do it'll be because we're both about to meet the committee again, and they won't be as kind to us this time. Helkina grusture, Jarod. Oh, and here."

An object was pressed into Jarod's hands, and with that the figure switched off the lights on its goggles, went back into the cell, and closed the door, presumably to return the same mysterious, silent way it had entered.

Jarod felt the object in his hands. It was his camera! He felt a little better for having it back. The corridor was long and he wasn't sure he'd gotten the directions correctly. But he knew that standing here wasn't going to help anything and so he set off. He counted off the lights he passed and when he got to the twelfth one he turned right and looked at the wall. It looked solid, but the figure had assured him it was false. So he put out his hands and reached for it. When his palms met the wall it still seemed solid, but a moment later, as if melting under the heat from his touch, the wall flowed away, leaving a hole big enough for him to enter. He stepped through and the wall flowed back into place, leaving no trace that it had ever been anything other than completely solid.

Jarod walked on, counting lights as he did. Looking left and right he found that doors were set into the walls in this hallway, whereas the previous one had been smooth. He wondered if any more false walls were present here. Or, more accurately, how many more. It was all becoming too much for him, really. After the twelfth light he found the door that the figure had mentioned and opened it. Nothing happened. He peered into the darkness inside the room, but did not enter. He wanted out of this place, not to explore it.

He turned and looked back down the hallway. The figure had said to open the door after the fifteenth light, but did he mean the fifteenth from the beginning or the fifteenth starting now? He decided to go with the fifteenth from the beginning and moved down three more lights and opened the door on the right, stepping through it quickly.

The room was pitch dark, not even the little night lights to provide their dim illumination. All was quiet, and the echo of his footsteps suggested that the room was quite large. Jarod was just beginning to suspect that he had chosen the wrong door when suddenly it slammed shut, blocking out the tiny amount of light from the hallway, immersing Jarod in utter blackness. Suddenly he heard a deep, menacing voice.

“Who are you?” it asked. The voice was so low that Jarod could feel his body vibrate as the sound waves passed through him. He was so scared now that he could not find his voice to answer.

Then there was light. Flooding into the room, blinding him, painful amounts of light emanating from the floor. Jarod shut his eyes instantly, but in that fraction of a second the blurry, out of focus image had been burned onto his retina. A vaguely round shape with what looked like five points sticking out around the edges. Jarod saw the red of his own blood through his eyelids as the fiery image continued to put out insane amounts of light, and then suddenly all was blackness.

“I am the overlord, the master, the all-powerful. I am the one who swallows light and leaves nothing but blackness. None may look on me,” intoned the voice again. “Do you come to worship me?”

“I...I made a wrong turn,” Jarod managed. It sounded even more feeble and lame than it was, and he knew it. But his brain had shut down. In the background he thought he heard a rhythmic chanting, not unlike what he had heard when he was waiting for Margaret by the cellar door. The chanting grew louder, and he heard the footsteps coming. Hundreds of them in a ragged march, keeping time with their chanting, but he could not make out the words. He had to get out of here, there was no way this was what the figure who had given him directions had had in mind. He turned in a panic and began rushing back the way he'd come, running face first into the wall and rebounding so hard he fell backwards. He stood back up quickly and stepped again towards the wall, feeling along it desperately, trying to find the door handle and freedom, but the walls were smooth. There was no door handle on this side.

He turned to face the oncoming footsteps which were much closer now and gazed, wide-eyed into the blackness. There was no light, only the chanting, growing ever louder, ever closer, and the deep boom of the Overlord laughing lightly. The sound was becoming unbearable when Jarod felt something grasp his leg and then his arm, but it wasn't hands. It was tentacles, wrapping themselves around his limbs and beginning to gently pull him forwards into the chanting mass of blackness. He recoiled, jerking away from the grip of the tendrils, dancing backwards, trying to stay out of the reach of something he could not see.

And then the door opened. Jarod saw the sliver of light out of the corner of his eye and lunged for it, yanking it fully open, turning as he walked through it, and slamming it shut behind him. He looked around wildly, but saw nothing that might have caused the door to open. He paused, breathing hard, and then moved further down the hall.

He reached the fifteenth light and stood facing the door for a moment. Had he miscounted? It had been a harrowing experience. But he felt confident that he was at the correct place and gently opened the door. Inside he saw another hallway, small blurry lights near the floor, just what he had been led to expect. He walked through, closing the door behind him, checking for a handle before he did so. Finding it, he continued down the hallway, his footsteps echoing slightly as he went.

At last he reached the end, facing a door with a horizontal push handle. He stared at it apprehensively. What was on the other side? And if it was freedom, what then? Where should he go? Staying here isn't an option, he reminded himself yet again, and with that thought he pushed the door open and was met by a cool breeze and dimming sunlight. The day was ending, night was coming, and he was going to have to make his way to wherever he was going in the dark. But, he reflected, since he couldn't see, maybe he'd have an advantage over whoever was about to be chasing him.

And then the alarm sounded. A loud, piercing klaxon, pulsing over and over again. Jarod froze for a moment, then remembered himself, and broke into a run. He ran straight over open ground, which he knew was foolish, but he also knew that that way was the way to freedom. Sticking close to the building would provide better cover, but he'd have to make his way across the compound eventually, and better to do it now in the immediate confusion than to wait until everybody got organized in their attempt to look for him. He pelted across the concrete, his shoes making a flapping sound as he went, the rubber soles touching the surface for only a fraction of a second before he lifted his feet again, rushing headlong he knew not where. He ducked into the cover of the shadow of a nearby building, but did not slow his pace. In the distance the barking of dogs started up and Jarod's heart froze in his chest, but he did not stop.

At last he reached the edge of the area, and he nearly collapsed in despair. He should have expected it, but a part of him had held out hope that the way would be clear. Instead there was a chain link fence topped with razor wire. They showed up to his unaided eyes as grey blurs, but there was no mistaking the glint of the setting sun off the edges of that deadly impediment. He looked around wildly and listened, but all he heard was the klaxon. There were no footsteps yet close enough to drown out that dreadful siren.

And then he heard it. Just on the edge, in a frequency that the klaxon miraculously wasn't occupying, a voice, a whisper, a fragment of the wind.

“Over here!”

He whirled to look, but saw nobody. He went in the direction of the voice, his nerves jangling, his helplessness more evident than at any other time during the day. He saw nothing, not even the blurry outline of the speaker, but he was sure he'd heard it.

“Over here!”

He continued on, the klaxon continuing on as well, and now he fancied he could hear the rough voices of more conventional speakers. For one horrifying moment he wondered if that's what he had heard the first time...the call of a hunter to his fellow soldiers to come over here, the quarry had been sighted. He took two more steps and tripped over something on the ground.

He landed on his chest, knocking the wind out of him briefly. He lay there a short moment before remembering he had no luxury of rest at this time, and rolled over and looked at his feet. There was nothing there, but the nearby fence had an odd look to it. He stood up and walked over to it, and there it was. A place where the fence had been bent up, the earth beneath it dug out a little, just enough for someone to squeeze through. A security lapse. He knelt down and began to crawl under the fence, his scientific self noting that the dirt was freshly moved. This security lapse had been created recently, and the look of the nearby fence showed that some work had been involved. Now that he was close enough he could see that the chain in the fence was thick, did not bend easily, and had been sunk deep into the earth to prevent exactly what he was doing now. And yet someone had taken the time to do it and then helped him to find it. He would not repay them by being captured.

He wriggled under the fence, stood up, and ran for it. There was open meadow ahead, the grass coming up to his knees, but there was nothing for it. He would have to chance it, running again headlong, squinting as he went to try to find any available cover. He tripped more than once, but did not fall, and ran and ran as he had never run before, his sides aching at this point, his legs rebelling at the idea of each step, and his lungs gulping the chilled air a little less each time as his asthma asserted itself. His asthma was only a factor when he exercised in cold weather. He knew he'd pay for this later.

At last the landscape looked taller ahead. He hoped it would be trees, the safety of the woods, the cover of branches, but he'd take whatever he could get. The sounds of the base were fading behind him, and even the piercing, carrying call of the klaxon could only barely be heard now. He continued to run, although he was reaching the limits of his physical ability and was slowing considerably. When at last he reached the treeline, he collapsed at the base of a tree, despite his instincts insisting he keep going. He panted and wheezed until he began to cough a deep and violent cough, his lungs attempting to eject phlegm that had not yet formed, but which would follow shortly. He gagged and coughed some more as his mind caught up with what had just happened.

This went on for several minutes, Jarod on his hands and knees, trying not to vomit onto the forest floor which would be a dead giveaway that he had come this way. Jarod knew very little about tracking, but he knew that leaving behind physical signs was a bad idea. At last he felt well enough to stand and continue, stumbling on into the forest, looking for a place to hide.

He had mixed feelings about his next move. On the one hand he felt that working through the night to put distance between himself and his pursuers was a good idea. On the other he thought that finding a place to hide and rest would be a good idea as well.

Adding to his confusion was the fact that he hadn't eaten since breakfast and the day was nearing its end now. What would he do for food? He had no idea where he was, although he thought he could hear the ocean nearby now that the klaxon wasn't drowning everything else out. The sounds of the surf were distant, but audible. He squinted around uselessly and that made up his mind. He would keep moving until he couldn't anymore.

The darkness enveloped him as the sun made its daily trek over the horizon. Crickets sounded all around, a lonely sound he thought. He crunched through the underbrush blindly, his only goal to keep moving and try not to go in circles. He shivered at that thought. His stomach growled and he felt the first pang of hunger now that the immediate danger had passed. He also felt light headed and knew that his blood sugar was too low. He was not diabetic, but his thinking was usually cloudy if he hadn't eaten recently and he could feel it now. He also felt adrenaline ebbing away, taking much of his energy with it. Adrenaline is greedy, he thought, it carries energy with it and only comes for a visit. It never leaves you with any for yourself.

He stumbled over a root, but stayed upright, and stopped briefly to regain his balance. He stood there, leaning against a tree, when he thought he heard a fluttering sound, a kind of flapping. He dismissed it and continued on. A moment later he nearly fell over from shock.

“Good evening,” a smooth, masculine voice said from out of the darkness.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jarod didn't want to know. He'd had enough for the day. He judged that the voice had come from somewhere on his left, so he turned right and plunged into the forest at top speed. His muscles rebelled, stiff and sore from his earlier escape, and his head began to hurt from the exertion and lack of food. He blundered on for a few yards before stopping in exhaustion and turning to face his pursuer.

But he could detect no sign of them. In the darkness and without his glasses he couldn't see anyone, of course, but he heard no sound and detected no scent that would give away anyone who might be chasing him. He allowed himself to hope that he had escaped and sat down, his back against a thick tree trunk. He closed his eyes and listened hard for approaching footsteps, trying to quiet his own breathing as he did so. He'd read about monks who could stop their breathing almost completely. He didn't know if that was possible, he hadn't done the research or any experiments of his own, but he was certainly giving it a good try right now.

He heard nothing but night sounds. Crickets mostly, with the occasional frog, and a kind of flapping sound nearby from some night flier.

“Good evening,” said the voice again.

Jarod startled. He remembered how the voice who had helped him escape in the first place had snuck up on him in his cell. This voice was different and he wondered if the whole group had been specially trained in stealth and now one of them was taunting him, safe in the knowledge that he could not get away. He weighed his options. He could run again, but his body told him that doing so wouldn't get him far enough away to make any difference. Plus, whoever this was had already proven that they could keep up with him and sneak up on him at any time. Running seemed foolish. His head began to ache a little more. He needed food. Maybe going back wouldn't be so bad, if that was what was about to happen.

"Hi," said Jarod, eventually.

"A lovely night, isn't it?" said the voice smoothly. A coyote howled in the distance.

"Yes, quite pleasant," Jarod replied, still sitting.

"And yet, I must ask why you are out at this time of night with no camping equipment or companions."

"Ah, well, that's an interesting story," said Jarod, listening hard, trying to determine exactly where the voice was coming from. "But there's no time to tell it now so I'll just give you the essential detail, which is that I lost my glasses earlier today and I can't see."

"I see," said the voice.

"I don't," said Jarod.

"Yes, you said."

"I don't suppose you could help me out?" asked Jarod, grasping at a thin straw of hope.

"Not in this regard, no, I am sorry I cannot. Is there anything else you require?"

"Well, since you asked, I'm really hungry. I don't suppose you have any food."

"In fact I do not have any on my person, however my home is not far from here and I would be delighted to have a guest tonight. Come."

Jarod stood up. There was a tiny voice in the back of his head that said that, after everything that had happened today, trusting this person was a mistake, but his headache and his hunger drowned out its protestations. He heard the crunch of footsteps ahead of him, which he thought odd since the figure seemed to have the ability to appear out of nothing, but, he told himself, perhaps he was foregoing stealth so that Jarod would be able to follow.

The voice allowed Jarod to catch up and they walked side by side. Jarod tried to steal looks at his companion, but his poor vision, coupled with the darkness of the night, foiled his attempts to learn anything more than he already knew, which was that the speaker had a smooth, masculine voice with no discernable accent. Crickets chirped all around them.

At last the figure beside Jarod stopped. "Here we are," it said, stooping down and grasping something in the underbrush. Straightening back up it pulled a short length of rope which was attached to a door, hinged into a frame in the ground and revealing a pitch black hole in the ground. Jarod stared at the blurry outline of the hole, barely able to see it in the surrounding darkness.

"What kind of house is this?" Jarod asked.

"Experimental," replied the voice. "I am one of the few people, especially in this area, to live underground. This is actually the back door. The front door is slightly more inviting, but is some distance away. One of the advantages of my home is that it stretches far in many directions, sometimes under the property of others, but deep enough that nobody notices or minds."

"Ah," said Jarod, continuing to stare down into the inky blackness. A current of air was escaping from the hole, as if it were breathing.

"I shall go first and provide some light," said the voice, climbing down a previously unseen ladder. A moment later a dim light could be seen from below. It flickered in the breeze, indicating that it was a candle. Perhaps, thought Jarod, a disadvantage of an underground house was lack of electricity. On the other hand, finding him down here would be tougher. Might be a good place to spend the night and shake certain people off the trail, if he could convince the owner to let him stay. His head throbbed, he hoped food was coming soon.

"Enter freely and of your own free will," called the voice from below. The light was now showing up the ladder a little more clearly, its blurry rungs just visible enough for Jarod to find the first one which would enable him to descend. And so he did, climbing down through the hole, which he noticed was lined with a kind of netting to keep the dirt from collapsing into the tunnel. When he reached the bottom he turned and found a spacious, neatly kept side room, complete with sheet rock walls and ceiling. There was a single candle burning, its dim, flickering light casting long shadows over everything.

"Just a moment," the voice said, climbing the ladder, shutting the door to the outside, and climbing back down. "Now, I have just the thing for you. Follow me."

The figure, which Jarod still could not make out any details about, picked up the candle in what appeared to be an old-fashioned candle holder, and set out for other parts of the house. Jarod followed the light as they wound their way through sitting rooms, family rooms, dens, storage rooms, rec rooms, complete with pool tables, and finally a kitchen.

“Please, sit,” said the voice.

Jarod stumbled over the chair trying to find it in the dark and sat down. His head ached dully all over and he was reaching a point where he really wanted to go to sleep.

His host crossed the room, setting the candle down on a countertop, and opened a door. The light from a refrigerator spilled into the room, a carafe was removed, and the door shut again. Next the figure moved to a nearby cabinet, opening the doors and extracting two glasses which tinkled slightly as they bumped into each other. In the part of his brain that was still functioning Jarod determined that the glass was moderately thick because of the resonance of the collision. These were likely cheap, but serviceable, drinking glasses. The figure poured the contents of the carafe into the glasses, filling each one almost to the top and leaving only a small amount in the original container, and then moved to the table where Jarod sat, placing one of the glasses in front of him.

“A special concoction of my own preparation, good for those who have had a hard day with not enough nourishment,” said the voice. “Your good health.” And with that it took a long, sucking drink of its own glass.

Jarod picked up his serving and examined it in the flickering candlelight. Even after the figure had closed the back door, a persistent breeze had continued to blow throughout the house and the candle guttered periodically, making seeing anything even more difficult than it already was for the nearly-blind Jarod.

The contents of the glass were red and thick. Jarod sniffed it and detected a rich, heady bouquet. He took a drink and found it heavy, filling, and just a touch salty. The savory taste filled his mouth and for a moment he could taste nothing else, in fact he could not remember the taste of anything else he had ever eaten or drunk, so complete was the drink’s mastery of his senses. He finished the first mouthful and held his breath for a moment, letting the air out almost as a gasp.

“That’s strong stuff!” he said.

“Indeed,” replied the figure. “It is one of my favorites.”

“What’s in it?”

“It is an old family recipe which I could not possibly divulge,” said the figure, taking another drink.

“Secret formula, eh?” said Jarod. His headache was fading slightly, to be replaced by an intense fatigue. He took another drink. He had to finish before he fell asleep or else it would be ruined. “You should sell this...” he went on.

“I could not possibly,” said the figure calmly. “Besides, I have all I could ever wish for here, I have no need of more money.”

A thought occurred to Jarod. "Hey, why are we sitting here with a candle when you have electricity?"

"I will explain all later. Finish your meal, you were without food all day."

Jarod couldn't argue with that. His head was drooping and he still had half a glass of the wonderful drink...food...whatever, left. He took another long drink, feeling a portion of the liquid dribble down his chin in his greedy and sleepy attempt to consume it. At last he felt the last drops slide down his throat and his intense fatigue finally caught up with him. He set the glass down on the table and allowed his head to drop beside it.

Jarod opened his eyes and looked around. This was a pretty pointless thing to do since it was completely dark. His head was still on the table where he had been sitting the night before and he raised it up carefully, listening hard. He heard nothing, he saw nothing, and he felt nothing, not even the constant breeze that had so permeated the house the night before. Or tonight. Or whatever time it was.

He tried to get up and found that his arms and legs were tied firmly to the chair he was sitting in. He struggled briefly, but eventually decided that tipping himself over was not going to accomplish anything. The wood the chair was made of was stout and sturdy, he was not going to break it by thrashing around on the floor, nor was he going to be able to untie the knots of the ropes.

He bowed his head until his forehead met the top of the table and hit his head gently against it repeatedly. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have thought trusting anybody today was a good idea? And what was going to happen now? How many miraculous escapes could he expect to have? He cursed his luck.

"Good evening," said the familiar voice of his host turned captor. Jarod startled.

"How long have you been sitting there? How long have I been asleep? And why do you have me tied up?"

"I have only just arrived, you are still asleep currently, and you have yourself tied up," replied the voice, enigmatically.

"What are you talking about? And who are you, anyway?"

"My name is immaterial, so you may call me whatever you wish. I am here to help you. Your mind is closed to the wonders of the world and you are therefore tied to your own belief system, a system that is not working for you."

"I asked you for food, not for help with my lifestyle," Jarod shot back, struggling against the ropes slightly.

"It is not on your behalf that I am acting."

"Fine, tell me what I need to know and let me go."

"It is not as simple as that, as you should well know. Nothing ever is. I cannot simply feed you information and hope it will effect a change in your life. You must see the need for it yourself."

"And how am I going to do that when you've got me tied up here?"

"Again, I have not tied you. You have been tied all your life. Tied to the dogma of science and your belief that it should be the center of all things."

"It is!"

"It is not. Science is important and skepticism is noble, but there are things in this universe that the human mind cannot even fathom the existence of, let alone the nature or causation of."

"Why is this happening to me?" Jarod asked, slamming his forehead back onto the tabletop in frustration.

"I could tell you," said the figure, "but you wouldn't believe me, so why should I bother?"

"Why am I still asleep?"

"You were exhausted. I gave you a rich nourishment and your body reacted as would be expected. There was nothing unusual in what I gave you, although I must confess that you might not have ordinarily drunk it."

"And when will I wake up?"

"When you have rested. Our time here together is short, and when you awaken you will be angry and resentful to me, which is why I chose to have our conversation here. I have taken advantage of the fact that you refuse to move from the here and now, will not entertain any notion that is not rooted firmly in fact and evidence. And I hope that my ability to appear here to you thusly will encourage you to entertain...extreme possibilities."

"You're crazy," Jarod retorted. It was a feeble retort, but it was all he could come up with on the spur of the moment. He struggled against the ropes fruitlessly.

"Perhaps," the voice conceded. "But arguing that point would consume much of our time."

"Why won't you turn on the lights?"

"You continue to labor under the delusion that I have any control here. You can turn on the lights, but you choose to live in the dark. You could break the ropes at any time, but you choose to remain tied to your outmoded, rigid beliefs."

"And you're going to help me with that." It wasn't a question. Jarod was growing impatient and defiant rather than scared.

"It is my hope to, yes. As a favor to a friend. Although I must say I am rethinking my decision to do so. You are proving much more stubborn than I had been led to believe."

"Just because I like a few facts with my reasoning doesn't make me stubborn. It makes me principled. It makes me accurate. It makes me smart!"

"No, it makes you needlessly ignorant, closed-minded, and boring," said the voice languidly.

Jarod struggled with renewed effort against the ropes holding him to the chair, but the result was the same. He decided to play for time.

"So what do you suggest? That I start believing in stuff and nonsense?"

"Not at all. But many great scientific discoveries were made by people who opened their minds to possibilities. You won't even do that. Your ultimate goal seems to be able to predict the future and manipulate outcomes with sheer science. Not only are those mutually exclusive goals, they're both completely impossible."

"They aren't!" Jarod shot back. He was tired of being told what he couldn't do and it had been happening all his life. "You don't think that wanting those things counts as opening my mind? Who else would even try such a thing?"

"I will concede that trying to bring scientific principles to advertising is an unorthodox approach, but it is beyond the capabilities of any one person or even a thousand people with a thousand of the most powerful computers. You waste your time, you tilt at windmills, and you miss the things that are right in front of you."

"What do you mean?"

"Let us begin at the beginning. What has happened to you today?"

"All the worst things. I lost my glasses, I got kidnapped by two weirdos, I nearly got kidnapped by some strange group of people, captured by terrorists, led through the woods by some know-it-all like you, and now I'm tied to a chair and I've been having weird dreams."

"And at no time did it occur to you that Carl may have had ESP, or that they were performing an autopsy on an alien being, that you could have been abducted by those same aliens, that you were nearly the victim of a Satanic cult, that the military was in on the conspiracy, or anything of that nature?"

"Why should they? Those things don't exist."

"And if they do? What would that mean to the world? What if those things go on all the time? What if someone or something were helping you bring that knowledge to the world?"

"Why me?"

"Why not?"

Jarod sat dumbfounded. This was insane. He couldn't believe it was even being suggested that UFOs and Satanic cults existed and were operating actively, but the part that really struck him was the notion that he was being 'chosen' to bring this momentous news to the world. It was beyond absurd. It was tripe. It was grotesque.

"And who are you, then?" asked Jarod, spitefully.

"I already told you, I am a friend of a friend and my name is irrelevant. Our time is nearly over, but I will be seeing you again. And I forgive you for the treatment you are about to give me as your gracious host."

Jarod opened his eyes. The flickering candle threw shadows around the room, but he could see the blurry image of the mysterious figure sitting across from him, sideways since his head was still on the table. He raised his head up and squinted at it, but the shifting light kept anything from being even remotely in focus. "What just happened?" he asked at last.

"You fell asleep," said the voice. "A natural reaction to a rich meal after a day full of exercise and no food."

Jarod sat and thought for a moment. The figure was acting as though he didn't know what he had just seen. And the idea that he had been in Jarod's head was pure nonsense. That smacked of extra sensory powers and there was no evidence of that. Jarod checked his surroundings. He was not tied down. The room was not pitch black, it was lit by that infernal flickering candle. He was angry, but he couldn't figure out why. What he'd just seen was a dream. It had no basis in reality. But he could feel the figure staring at him, his frustration building, his need to lash out at the world in general and the voice in particular nearly overwhelming. He picked up the empty glass that he had been drinking from and hurled it across the room, listening to the satisfying shattering sound it made as it hit the opposite wall.

After a few moments of silence the figure said, "I forgive you."

Jarod's rage only increased at these words. "How are you doing this?" he shouted.
"Who are you?"

"You are not yet ready, Jarod."

"I just want to go to bed," Jarod said, sagging into the chair, what little energy he had been given by his anger now draining away as quickly as it had come.

"Ordinarily I would say that would be a wise decision, but now is not yet the time. The drink I gave you will fortify you for several hours, but it must be given time to take effect. Let us sit here and talk a little more."

"About what?"

"About whatever you like," the figure said generously.

"Why is this happening to me?"

"Ah, again you are not ready."

"You sound like some kind of mystic sage. That stuff is total crap."

"Is it? Is wisdom total crap, as you put it?"

"Wisdom? What's wisdom? Intelligence, facts, knowledge, those things can be measured and are definite. How do you measure wisdom?"

"I might say that wisdom is the capacity to see one's own faults. To admit when one is wrong, sometimes even if you aren't. To realize that other points of view are valid and do not necessarily need definitive explanation."

Jarod had had enough. He stood up and turned to try to find his way back out. In the dark or with the candle made little difference since he still couldn't see.

"Before you go," said the figure calmly, "might I remind you that there are a number of people out looking for you, that you don't know where you are, that it is night and there are coyotes about, and that you owe me a debt of gratitude for saving you from all of that?"

Jarod hesitated. "You might," he said at last.

"I urge you to stay."

“Fine, I’ll stay,” Jarod said. “But I won’t just sit here and talk to you about stuff that is total nonsense.”

“An excellent idea. Perhaps we could continue the tour of the house.”

“Fine.”

The figure rose, picking up the candle and turning. With the candlelight blocked by his body, the figure stood in silhouette, but Jarod’s vision permitted him only to see a blurry outline, rather tall, but no other details. The figure walked out the door on the far side of the room, his shoes crunching on the broken glass that Jarod had created.

“Watch your step on the glass,” it said as they continued to the next room.

Jarod followed.

“This is the sitting room,” the voice said as they entered. “A pity you cannot see the décor, it is among my finest, if I do say so myself. Medieval tapestries on the walls, Oriental rugs on the floors, and Turkish ottomans for the couch. That last was a joke,” the figure went on, evidently seeing the puzzled look on Jarod’s face. “Surely you are not against humor as well.”

“Of course not,” Jarod said through clenched teeth.

“Good,” said the voice, and it sounded as though he had a smile on his face.

They proceeded from room to room, the figure making comments that were, to Jarod, snide and taunting. Always returning to the same theme, that Jarod should abandon everything he had ever stood for and believed in in favor of rumor, hallucinations, false memories, and a variety of other bits of nonsense. It sickened him. He wanted to go to sleep, he wanted his glasses, and he wanted to go home. Not necessarily in that order. But the voice wouldn’t let him do any of those things. It just kept leading him from one room to another, on and on, through the house that wouldn’t end, that wouldn’t die, and it wasn’t until the fifteenth room that Jarod finally realized that there was now no possible way that he could find his way out without help. He cursed his stupidity for allowing himself to be led this deep into this maze.

“Look, I wish you’d just give it up,” Jarod said after yet another comment from the voice about how he should believe in things there was no way he was ever going to believe in.

The voice paused for several moments and then turned.

“Very well,” it said. “I have done all that was asked of me. I will take you now to a bedroom where you may get some sleep and when you awaken I will show you out of my house.”

“Good. Thank you,” Jarod said, although his tone was clipped and short, showing his obvious impatience and displaying bad grace.

The voice turned and led Jarod through five more rooms before finally stopping and saying “Here.”

Jarod could see, by the dim, flickering light of the candle, the fuzzy outline of a bed made with warm blankets. He moved towards it and began to turn it down. The voice turned and left without a word, closing the door behind it, leaving the room in darkness as it had taken the candle with it. Jarod didn't care. He could feel his way around the room well enough to turn the bed down and go to sleep.

Jarod laid down on the very soft bed and covered up with the very warm blanket and closed his eyes. And then he opened them again. He suddenly sat up in the bed. He didn't want to go to sleep. He just wanted to be left alone for a while. Every time he'd gone to sleep lately, strange things had happened and he didn't want to think about those for a while. He sat up in bed and tried to think of other things. When was his plane out supposed to take off? What day was it? He was pretty sure it was the first night since he'd lost his glasses, but now he wasn't sure anymore. How long had he been in the house? His eyelids began to droop.

Jarod forced his eyes open with a jerk. He took a series of deep breaths and tried to wake up. He slapped his face. He thought about what his next move should be. Clearly after he left the house in the morning he should try to make his way to the sounds of the ocean. Once there he could likely travel in either direction and eventually find people. Beaches were popular, even in this part of California where it was sometimes too cold to go swimming. Surfers would go into just about any kind of water. He could try to determine south by the position of the sun and head that way...he estimated that he had been taken north by his previous adventures and so south should take him closer to his ultimate destination. New glasses and a seat on the next flight out, back home to Chicago.

Jarod forced his eyes back open with another jerk. They were drooping again against his will. He would not go to sleep tonight and tomorrow the sun and the cool air would help him stay awake long enough to find help. Perhaps he would close them just for a moment to rest them.

Jarod forced his eyes open yet again, but they drooped again almost immediately. He slapped his face again. He considered getting up and walking around, but the room seemed chilly. Far more sensible to stay under the covers. In fact, maybe he should just snuggle under these a little more. No sense catching a cold. He felt warm and safe, which was, he had to admit, probably only about a half-correct assessment of his situation. He jerked his eyes open, but closed them again immediately, and gave up.

Jarod found himself walking along a lengthy corridor. There were no doors on either side of him, just the long hallway. Amazingly he could see perfectly clearly. He couldn't

remember getting new glasses, though, which struck him as odd. He reached up and touched his face and found that he wasn't wearing glasses. Even stranger. But as he walked he saw a door in the distance and thought no more about his suddenly perfect vision. He approached the door and reached for the handle, but it was just out of his grasp. He stopped, puzzled. He could see the door clearly just in front of him, surely no more than a foot away, but every time he reached out his hand he found it came just short of being able to grip the handle and open it. He leaned forward and nearly fell over, but still could not reach the door.

He took two steps forward and bumped into the door, reaching for the handle as he did so, but continued to find his reach lacking. He stopped and examined the doorframe. The hinges were on the other side, so if he couldn't open the door the usual way, maybe he could break it down. He backed up several paces back the way he'd come and turned to face the door. Bracing his shoulder for the impact he broke into a run, running, running, running...but somehow never actually reaching his destination. He slowed to a trot and then stopped, again a mere foot from the door, but unable to reach it with his hands or to break it down by running. He walked into the door once again and made a dive for the handle, landing face down on the floor for his trouble.

Pondering the situation, Jarod began to hear the soft approach of footsteps in the distance behind him. Closer and closer they came, but the figure that was making the sounds remained indistinct, even as it approached. Jarod rubbed his eyes as the figure drew nearer. The rest of the hallway and the door were in perfect focus, but the stranger walking towards him was as blurry as if he were not wearing his glasses. The figure passed him, made a nodding motion in his direction, reached down, and opened the door, stepping through. Jarod made a lunge to follow, but the figure had already shut the door and Jarod hit it face first, nearly breaking his nose. He rebounded off the door from the impact and landed on his back. A moment later the door opened and the fuzzy outline of the figure's head stuck through it. Jarod heard a derisive chuckle and the door slammed closed again.

Jarod sat on the floor and tilted his head sideways. What could be on the other side of the door? The question dominated his thoughts and tore away any other considerations. He did not even consider for a moment turning around and seeing what was at the other end of the corridor.

Jarod awoke in pitch blackness and he stared into it for several long minutes before remembering where he was and how he had gotten there. He sat up in bed and threw the covers aside, piecing the previous evening together in his head as he did so. He felt safe here, but he wondered if it was all an illusion. His dreams lately had been so vivid and strange that he was having difficulty telling dream from reality.

He got up and fumbled his way across the room to where the door ought to be, half expecting it to be locked or, worse, for him to not be able to touch it. But as he walked around he first found the wall and then the door and the doorknob turned easily under his grip, swinging open into a suddenly brightly lit hallway. Taped to the front of the door,

Jarod found a note. He removed it and held it close to his eyes, his nose almost touching the paper, straining to read the tiny handwriting.

"Good morning," it read. "Please make yourself at home. I will be with you in a few hours. In the meantime, please feel free to help yourself to any food or drink you may find, as well as any books on my shelves. It is not yet safe for you to leave my house, but by nightfall the search for you should have moved on and I will direct you to the nearest exit and place you in the hands of one of my associates who will guide you back to the city. Yours sincerely." and it was unsigned.

Below the body of the message was a detailed instruction and a small diagram of how to get from his bedroom to the nearest kitchen, complete with landmarks. Jarod set out immediately to follow them, as the mysterious drink his host had given him the night before had long since worn off and he was famished. The directions were a series of lefts, rights, and long paces down extensive corridors and he feared getting lost in the maze, but also held a slight hope that he might stumble upon the exit and get out of here. He knew and understood that the note had said it was not safe, but he didn't know if he believed it and was vaguely inclined to take his chances.

At last, though, he reached the kitchen without incident, and proceeded to squint into each of the cabinets and refrigerator, looking for something that suited his fancy. Not wanting to try to cook anything in his nearly blind state limited his choices, but he was eventually able to locate and consume a plain bagel with butter and a glass of milk. It would have been better toasted, he thought, but at least his stomach was no longer rumbling at him menacingly.

His appetite sated for the time being, Jarod began squinting around the room. He had to find a way to pass a couple of hours until his host returned and he couldn't see. He hadn't noticed anything that looked like a television when he came in, and even if he had he wouldn't have been able to see it, but the noise would have been nice. The house was, by Jarod's estimation, too quiet. It was several minutes before he realized something else that was bothering him. The lights were on.

He had already established the night before that the house had electricity, but his host had been curiously reluctant to turn on any electric lights, preferring instead to use that infernally frustrating candle that caused the light to jerk around nauseatingly, preventing him from getting a good look at anything. Now the lights were on full intensity. He got up from the kitchen table and began to feel around the walls for the switch.

He made it all the way around the room and found no switch at all. He checked on the other side of the doorway in the other room, but still no switch. He squinted up at the ceiling and could not see the blurry outline of any kind of lamp hanging from it, nor had he seen desk lamps of any kind, nor windows. Of course being underground would limit the usefulness of windows, but their absence still added to the eeriness and wrongness of the whole structure.

Grumbling under his breath about how much he hated being without his glasses and vowing that when he got back he was going to look into Lasik, no matter how much it cost, he went back to the table and picked up the note. It mentioned books, presumably a library. He scrutinized the diagram of the nearby rooms and finally found it, the word written in such tiny type that he had to actually touch his nose to the page to read it. Not far away, he thought. Might as well.

He got up and made his way out the door, passing through three rooms and one moderately long hallway before finally finding himself in a respectably sized library, books lining every inch of every shelf which consumed every wall except for where the doorways were. To Jarod it looked like a cacophony of tiny, blurry dots as the colors of the book's spines melded together to form a general mishmash punctuated by the occasional book that was particularly brightly hued. He stepped inside, the carpeting muffling his footsteps. Most of the rest of the house contained hardwood floors and his steps had echoed with the gentle tap-tap of his sneakers, but now on the carpet there was only the faintest sound of the pile being compressed under his steps.

Jarod made his way over to the shelves and began to read the titles on the spines. In normal circumstances he could have just browsed them as a group, but now he had to read each title individually. He found such titles as:

"Light From Nothing: Eldritch Illumination for Around the Home"

"Underground Living: How Deep Do Property Rights Go?"

"Modern Witchcraft: Moving Beyond"

"Mythical (and Not So Mythical) Creatures of Our Time"

And on and on they went, each title more fantastic, each one titled as one might title critical essays, and each one turning Jarod's stomach a little more. The bagel he'd eaten was threatening a return visit. Sheer boredom kept Jarod reading these insipid little books and he began to long for a television, or even a radio, even more than before. At last he could stand it no longer and broke off from the shelf he'd been reading and crossed the room, hoping for better fare over there.

He was disappointed. More books of the occult, false or speculative histories, astrology, books about aliens, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster, and even more tripe, stuff, and nonsense. He gave up again and turned back to the center of the room. In the middle of the floor were two plush chairs separated by a low wooden table. Jarod flopped himself down into one of the chairs and put his head in his hand, massaging his temples gently. When was it all going to end?

He opened his eyes again and glanced at the table. There was a book on it. He would have sworn there was no book on it a moment ago, but with his eyes in their current

condition he couldn't really be sure. He picked it up and looked at the cover. It was black with a single word embossed in silver across the front.

"Proof"

Now this was more like it. Something definitive, something solid, something that, if done correctly, was irrefutable. He opened the book eagerly, ready to kill the few hours it would be until he could get out of here.

The first page was blank. Jarod held it close to his face, just in case the type was small, but it was utterly blank. He turned the page and the second one was in a similar state. He riffled through several pages at once, all blank. He turned to a random page in the middle, held it close, and squinted. Completely blank. He closed the book and looked around. Was he dreaming again? This seemed to have similar qualities. How could he even tell? Or was what he had been experiencing before the dream and now he was finally awake.

He derailed that line of thinking. Philosophy wasn't his strong suit...too woolly. He'd always avoided conversations like this apart from the occasional religious discussion, which he only took part in because some people insisted. You could usually get out of general philosophy, but people generally held strong religious beliefs and many loved to tell you all about them.

In frustration Jarod reared back and hurled the book entitled "Proof" across the room where it struck the books on another shelf and fell to the floor. The other books sat undamaged, and Jarod could see them in his mind's eye glaring reproachfully at him. It wasn't their fault, after all, that he was in such a strange situation as he was. They resented him. They hated him. No, he reminded himself, they were inanimate objects. They had no feelings at all. What a strange thing for him to think at all.

He squinted around and noticed that the lights were slightly dimmer than they had been a moment ago. It was subtle, but he could swear that the lights had gone down just a tiny amount very suddenly. When would his host return and rescue him from this madness?

As if on cue the lights went out altogether, throwing Jarod into pitch blackness. This was followed by that smooth, masculine voice.

"Good evening."

"If you say so," replied Jarod wearily. He just wanted to get out of here as quickly as possible.

"I am sorry if your stay here has not been pleasant. I wish you luck on your journey."

"The only journey I'm interested in is the one that ends with me getting my glasses back and on a plane home where I can forget this particular part of my vacation."

"I forgive you," said the voice, although Jarod thought he detected just a hint of a note of sadness there for the first time. "Please follow me."

The figure lit the same terrible candle which threw everything in the room into a moving, shifting, and for Jarod, blurry environment of high contrast and long shadows and then turned to go out the door. Jarod arose from the chair and followed. They proceeded through seven more rooms in a pattern and configuration that Jarod could have sworn involved them walking in a circle and which he would certainly have never found on his own, and eventually got to a ladder.

"I will not be coming with you, I have other business to attend to. Good luck, Jarod."

Jarod held out his hand to shake, but the figure instead turned and disappeared into the house's inner depths. Jarod shrugged and climbed the ladder, finding the door at the top unlocked, and emerged into an area with sparse trees, very unlike the forest he had been in when he entered the house. It was night again, he had spent all day indoors. Nearby he saw a blurry orange dot and smelled the unmistakable scent of burning tobacco. The smoker must have seen him because it stubbed out the cigarette on a nearby tree and Jarod heard the crunch of leaves and grass as it strode towards him.

CHAPTER SIX

He had been half expecting BF, but this figure was nothing like the fuzzy image that he had followed through the forest twice before. It was marginally shorter, but the most striking difference was visible as the figure was silhouetted against the waning moon. While still blurry because of his lack of glasses, the figure managed to look pressed, with sharp edges making up the dominant feature of the frame.

"Who are you?" asked Jarod. He was in no mood to beat around the bush after the experience he'd had in the house.

"Sebastian," grunted the figure. The voice was slightly accented and sounded vaguely German. It was soft and hoarse, but had an edge of gruffness that told of shouted commands that were obeyed without question.

"Hi, Sebastian, I'm..." Jarod began, but he was cut off.

"Come," said Sebastian, turning away and striding off up a steep hill.

"Wait," said Jarod, "You're taking me to get new glasses, right?"

Sebastian said nothing, but kept striding on up the hill purposefully. Jarod followed for lack of anything better to do, but the entire situation was beginning to get on his nerves. Nobody would answer his questions, nobody would just take him for new glasses, nobody would call him a cab, it was dark all the time, and he couldn't see in any case.

The steepness of the hill made him short of breath very quickly, however, and he couldn't voice any of these complaints to Sebastian. At last they reached the top of the incline and paused.

Sebastian gazed out over what would have been a panoramic view if Jarod could have seen it.

"Magnificent," he said "is it not?"

"I wouldn't know," replied Jarod testily.

"Ah, yes, he mentioned your problem."

"Who was that guy anyway?"

"His name is forgotten. He is very old and ceased using it long ago."

"Some kind of weirdo, I'll tell you that much."

Sebastian paused and lit another cigarette, exhaling the smoke as a kind of sigh. "He said you did not understand, and I see now that he was right. But it is not for me to make you understand. I have my instructions."

"And what are those?"

"To take you back to the city. We will make a short stop along the way, I have a small errand that cannot wait. And then you shall have your precious glasses," Sebastian said, and Jarod could hear the slight sneer in his voice.

"Good. And about time, too, I might add," said Jarod with bad grace.

Sebastian, who could have taken great offense at that statement, merely grunted and stood smoking his cigarette. Jarod could see the orange embers glow more brightly with each drag and then subside to a mere hint of color in the darkness. He did not ask for one himself, nor was one offered. Sebastian seemed to regard Jarod as another 'small errand' and paid little attention to him, gazing instead out at the vista before him. Jarod couldn't see how he could see anything what with it being nighttime, but there was a bit of moon left so it was still possible. He squinted out just to be sure, but it didn't help.

Sebastian finished his cigarette and stubbed it out on his boot, carefully placing the butt in his shirt pocket, and then said "Come," and set off again down the other side of the hill. Jarod followed, grateful that the downhill side was less steep than the uphill side and made for easier going.

"Where are we headed? What's this errand?" Jarod asked after a few minutes for the sake of conversation. Sebastian didn't answer, but seemed to glance furtively around

every few moments. Jarod listened intently but heard nothing but their own two sets of footsteps. As they headed down the hill the trees began to thicken on either side, but a clear path remained. This eventually became paved with gravel and it wasn't long before they came upon a car.

Jarod actually didn't see the car at first and walked right by it, turning only when Sebastian slid the key into the door lock, the sound alerting Jarod to the vehicle's presence. The car was jet black with a matte finish so that it did not reflect the ambient light much if at all. Sebastian opened the driver's side door and slid in, hitting the power locks as he did so. Jarod backtracked and found the door handle with some difficulty, opened the passenger's side, and climbed in himself. Both men closed their respective doors, plunging the interior into a deeper darkness. The windows were tinted and the car had been parked facing into the trees so as to cover the windshield with the deciduous leaves of the branches. The rear windshield had been covered with a black cloth which Sebastian had removed prior to entering the car and was now throwing into the back seat. The camouflage stowed, he inserted the key into the ignition and the car turned over quietly. Sebastian set the reverse gear, backed up to clear the trees, and then shifted into drive. The car moved almost silently, even over the gravel, and when the small stones gave way to actual pavement it was as if they were driving a ghost.

Sebastian lit another cigarette. Jarod wished he wouldn't smoke in the car, but the vehicle already reeked of it and so he figured it would be a lost cause to suggest rolling down a window. They drove in silence for some time along a twisty road, each turn causing Jarod's stomach to lurch just a little. The drink his mysterious host had given him the previous evening seemed to be coming back for revenge upon his digestive tract and he could hear it gurgling and churning unpleasantly. There was no radio in the car that Jarod could detect and the car ran so silently that Sebastian must have noticed the rather loud sounds that Jarod's stomach was making, but he said nothing, continuing to smoke as if it were all that mattered in the world.

At last the car began to slow. Jarod squinted and could make out lights ahead, some kind of building they were approaching. They stopped outside a chain link fence and Sebastian got out. By the light of the headlamps Jarod saw Sebastian take out a set of keys and unlock the gate. He then got back into the car and drove forwards, getting back out afterwards to close and re-lock the fence. He then got back into the car and they cruised quietly up a slight hill for a short distance before he shut the car off for good.

"Come," said Sebastian as he got back out. "It will be educational for you."

Jarod hesitated, but decided he'd rather have the freedom of walking around than the entrapment of being in the car. He wasn't harboring feelings of escape yet...driving in the daytime without your glasses was one thing, driving at night in a car that was difficult for other drivers to see was another. He got out, closed the door behind him, and began to follow the fuzzy orange dot that marked Sebastian's figure walking in front of him.

They reached the front door of the building together and Sebastian took out his keys again, unlocking first a deadbolt, which made a loud ‘clack’ as it receded, and then the main doorknob. The door swung open and revealed itself to be rather thick and made of metal, moving noiselessly on well-oiled hinges set into a metal frame. This was also high security, though Jarod, but a different kind from what he’d encountered at the base. Sebastian indicated that Jarod should go first, and after a moment’s cautious hesitation he did. Sebastian followed, shutting and locking the door behind him.

The room was dimly lit and Jarod cursed under his breath. He’d been hoping for some light for a change. He could hear a faint, high-pitched humming and also a bubbling sound. He looked around but saw nothing he could make out a definite shape for, just a bunch of the usual blurs and fuzzy images that were all his near-sighted eyes were capable of rendering unaided. He looked up and decided the ceiling must be high overhead, a theory which his ears confirmed as they adjusted to the acoustics of the space. Sebastian didn’t seem concerned about giving a tour, despite his earlier claim that it would be educational, and instead strode off into the shadows.

Jarod followed, his pace slightly quicker than Sebastian’s in order to catch up, but not too quick just in case he tripped on something. As he went he passed several large, rectangular objects, but he didn’t have time to examine them. At last he caught up and they both proceeded at an easy walking pace, although brisk. Jarod noticed that Sebastian wasn’t smoking. He also felt a little short of breath, as if his asthma was being aggravated. The small amount of exercise he had just done in catching up wasn’t sufficient for this kind of reaction, so Jarod presumed it must be something in the air. The bubbling sound was getting louder as they walked.

Abruptly, Sebastian turned left and began walking along a separate row. Jarod had to backtrack as he had overshot the turn and hurried to catch up again, his breathing becoming slightly more labored as he went. As he walked he noticed that the rectangular objects along the row had been replaced by small cylinders. Jars, Jarod decided. Jars containing what he wasn’t sure, but he felt as though he was about to find out. Sebastian continued on, quickly but carefully, just slightly ahead. And then he stopped in front of a door.

“You must wait here,” Sebastian said in his low rasp. “I wish you show you something, but I must ask permission first.” And without another word, or to wait for Jarod’s reaction, Sebastian opened the door, stepped through, and closed it behind him. Jarod assessed the situation. The ceiling in the room was indeed high, almost like a warehouse, but the wall that the door was set into did not reach all the way to the top. Nor did it appear to have a ceiling of its own, making it more like a cubicle than an actual room. The bubbling sound that Jarod had heard upon entering was especially loud here and he guessed that they were near a peak in the roof which was channeling the sound to all parts of the warehouse. There was no other sound audible for several minutes and then Jarod heard Sebastian’s voice.

“...he felt it was important.” Sebastian seemed to be finishing a sentence that he had previously been whispering. More silence and then Jarod heard a strange sound.

“I do not think it would be prudent.”

The voice was artificial, created by a synthesizer, and therefore without accent. Coming from speakers, it had no capacity to whisper and Jarod was therefore able to catch every word.

“Mein Fuehrer, ich bitte von Ihnen,” said Sebastian’s voice. The German accent was now unmistakable.

“Do not call me that with the foreigner so close,” admonished the voice. “You know secrecy must be observed. I do not care what that creature thinks is important, it has no mastery over me.”

“This one,” continued Sebastian in English this time, “he must be made to...” but he trailed off into a whisper that Jarod could not make out over the bubbling noise.

“You dare bring such a trivial matter before me when you know what we must do? Give me my nutrients and get out of my sight or I will have you both hunted down.” The voice was harsh, stark, and even without inflection you could hear the threat and knew it would make good on it if pressed. There was a moment of additional silence and then the door opened quietly. Sebastian stepped through and closed the door gently behind him.

“It seems your visit will not be as educational as I had hoped,” Sebastian said matter of factly. “Come.” And without another word he set off back down the row of jars. Jarod followed.

“Whats...in...all...the...jars...?” Jarod asked in between breaths. Now that they were moving again his breathing was becoming more labored again.

“Not here,” was all Sebastian said, and he said it so low that Jarod nearly failed to hear it at all. The two of them retraced their steps back to the front door, which Sebastian unlocked and opened. They stepped through, the bolts were refastened, and they headed back to the car. Jarod was about to ask again what was in the jars but Sebastian silenced him with a “Shhhh”. They stood by the car for a few moments, Sebastian standing very still as if listening. Jarod listened as well but heard nothing. Eventually Sebastian was satisfied and entered the car. They drove the short distance back to the gate, unlocked it, and drove through.

“Here, take this,” Sebastian said. He handed Jarod a small memory card.

“What is it?” asked Jarod.

“Answers.”

“To what?”

But Sebastian didn't answer. He got back out of the car to lock the gate and then suddenly fell to the ground. Instantly he was swarmed by a group of people dressed all in black. They subdued him and began to lead him off. At the same time more people were surrounding the car. Jarod quickly slipped the memory card into his pocket. One of them hit the power locks on the door that Sebastian had left open and the passenger side door was yanked open, hands reaching in and gripping Jarod, pulling him bodily out of the car. Jarod saw more blurry figures racing up the hill to the building as he was forced face down on the hood of the car, his hands pulled behind his back, and the cold steel of handcuffs once again chilled his wrists. He was pulled upright, turned, and pushed forward. He didn't know who these people were or what they were doing, but he couldn't believe his luck. Once again he was on his way to get his new glasses and once again he'd been taken prisoner and once again he had no idea what was going on.

Jarod was marched along for what he estimated to be about a hundred yards, although he had no way to really know, before they came across a truck. He was pushed up into the back of a military personnel transport style vehicle where he saw a handful of other people. The darkness and his near blindness prevented him from seeing if any of them were Sebastian. He wondered if any of them had weapons...this group, unlike the last one, hadn't searched him at all. He still had the memory card Sebastian had given him as well as his camera, but neither would help him now. A couple of the black-garbed figures got into the back of the truck with them and Jarod heard the engine roar to life, felt the truck lurch forward.

They drove in silence. Jarod felt as if he might be going into shock from this latest misfortune. He wondered if they were going back to the base. He wondered vaguely where in California he was right now, but not for very long. It seemed to make little difference. He seemed destined to be shuffled from one mysterious situation to another. It had only been two days since he'd lost his glasses and he wondered whether he should just get used to it. Assuming he would live through this next ordeal, whatever it might be.

The truck rattled and jerked as they transitioned off the pavement and went off-road, first onto a gravel road and then onto the bare earth. Jarod wondered if it was the same gravel road, and in fact whether it was the same gravel road he'd been on with Carl earlier. Maybe his life was just going around in a big circle and he was trapped in this hell of weirdness and nonsense. He snapped out of it. That was woolly thinking, even fuzzier than his vision. He squinted around the truck, but could not make out any details at all. Could Carl and Isaac be here? What about BF? Would any of them recognize them? He had no hope of recognizing them without his glasses, of course, but they could be here. The irony of the situation made him smile grimly...earlier he had tried so hard to get away from them all, and now he was hoping he'd find them here. Maybe this group was rounding up strange people, in which case he could just explain to them that he was perfectly normal with a scientific bent and everything would be ok.

He chided himself for being so foolish as to think such a thing. Nothing was going to be ok until he was walking through the door of the eye doctor on his way to 20/20 vision again. He thought of his glasses and his hat, sunken by now to the bottom of the bay, or possibly even deeper if the deep ocean currents ran that way. Perhaps they were swept out to sea, skimming along the silty ocean floor, the temperature dropping as the pressure increased, and being subjected to scrutiny by stingrays, shrimplike creatures, and other bottom dwellers. Perhaps his glasses would focus the light from a lanternfish, his hat might cover the head of a wrasse or get snagged on some coral like some benthic hat rack. He chuckled lightly to himself as he imagined it somehow ending up on the head of a shark, but that moment of frivolity lasted for only an instant as the truck lurched to a halt.

The black-clothed figures lowered the gate, the ones in the truck with them descending first, and then they began to direct the other people in the truck to come out and follow them. Jarod hesitated at first, but saw the other people moving quickly to obey and got up as well. As he exited the truck he heard the unmistakable sound of the shore. The surf was moderate and the breeze coming in was strong and consistent. They had parked the truck in a thinning forest that was giving way to the beach, unwilling to drive it onto the sand. In the distance Jarod saw the blurry orange glows of campfires and other figures milling around them.

The group of people he was with was herded forwards towards the beach and the fires. He saw a few of the figures steal furtive glances around themselves as if trying to find an opening through which to escape, but none actually tried it. The fires were a fair distance away and walking to them through the sand took some time and was quite a bit of work. Jarod could feel his legs tiring and his breathing become more ragged. He had still not quite recovered from whatever had been in the warehouse. He wondered about the figures that had detached themselves from the group and what they had done or discovered in the warehouse, whether whoever had the synthesized voice had also been captured and what they would do to him or her if so. He also wondered what had become of Sebastian. He had not seen any sign of him since they had been separated at the car. He put his hand in his pocket briefly and found the memory card he had been given as well as his camera.

As they approached the shore, Jarod began to make out the general outline of structures of some kind in addition to the fires. The fires also began to show signs of specific placement, rather than the random dot pattern that frequently emerges from people camping on the beach. An organized gathering. Jarod decided this wasn't going to be good for him and began making his own furtive glances around, but in his case he couldn't see any openings for escape even if there had been any. He cursed under his breath and received a shove in the back for his trouble. He nearly stumbled in the soft sand, but managed to keep his feet.

At last their captors indicated they could stop. Jarod found himself facing a high platform, almost like a stage, its blurry outline rising to about eye level, its dark form

silhouetted against the ambient light that was still visible at the horizon. The fires burned to their right, arranged in a nearly straight line, and in front of each fire rose a high spire, about three times as high as a man, with a wide base. He heard the crackle of the logs in the fires as they all waited in silence.

The silence was broken by the thumping of heavy footsteps up wooden stairs leading up to the top of the platform. Each step was punctuated by an additional tap, indicating that the person ascending was using a cane or walking stick for assistance. Once at the top they began moving towards the front of the platform to address the crowd.

The blurry silhouette that Jarod could see told him almost nothing about the figure who was about to speak. They were silent for some time, as if surveying the crowd, examining each of them individually, taking their measure. When at last they did speak it was with the faltering words of someone with a greater physical impediment than just the walking stick. The croaking voice of the woman filled the air, however, as she made herself heard despite her physical condition.

“My people,” she began, “this is a momentous day for us and our movement. We have finally tracked down one who has eluded us for so long. He has already been brought to justice for his use of, and consultation with, occult powers.”

Jarod dared to hope. If he could just convince them that he was of like mind with them then perhaps he could get away.

“We stand now on the high ground,” the woman continued, “Our moral authority is in ascendancy, our way of life is the future, our truths shall be preached and confessed across all lands!”

Jarod began to notice that despite the stirring speech there were no cheers, no rallying cries, no sounds of any kind from the assembled crowd of followers. He wasn't expecting it from the prisoners, as he still didn't know what was in store for them, but the eerie silence from the black-clad figures was disconcerting to him. It spoke of fanatics and true believers, people notoriously difficult to negotiate with, and negotiation was critical to his getting out of this alive and getting them to take him to get new glasses.

“Too long have occult forces dominated the lives of men,” the woman went on, her raspy voice went on, clearly tiring but unwilling to let the limitations of her body rob her of the importance of this moment. “Too long have public affairs been ruled by the macabre influences. From the mundanity of politics to our most holy religions, there are always those who think that they have powers above it all, that they have tapped into abilities beyond the ken of mortals, that they, through spells and rituals and other such atrocities, can have visions of the future and impose their will upon it!”

Jarod wasn't sure what was going on now. The woman seemed to be preaching against occult forces, which he could sympathize with, but on the other hand she had referenced religion. He had always had trouble telling the difference. They both involved calling

upon unseen forces to fulfill requests and the failure rate on the summoning of angels and demons was about the same.

“Tonight,” croaked the woman, “we strike a blow for all that is good and right, for all that we know to be true, and we sound the first clear, strong note of our triumphant fanfare!”

She paused, whether for effect or because she physically could not go on without a break it was impossible to tell, but her labored breathing could be heard all around, so still were the spectators.

“Many of you know me,” she said in a lower voice, as if attempting to have a private conversation with the assembly. “You know my history. You know that I was accused of witchcraft in my native land. They tortured me and reduced me to the shell I am today. But I was innocent and my righteousness won out in the end through my escape.” She coughed violently at this point, but rallied and went on. “Through my ordeal I learned the habits of the witch and how to tell the innocent from the guilty. And I have used my gift to further the goals of my followers. We will stamp out witchcraft and the occult in this world. Tonight was a major victory, and we celebrate with the burning of the witches that followed the one who is already twice dead now!”

At the climax of the speech there was finally an acknowledgement from the assembled crowd, which was a single, simultaneous shout, staccato, short and brief, but unmistakably triumphant. Jarod couldn't stand it anymore. He'd thought he was one of these people but it turned out they were just as misled, just as mistaken, just as ignorant as anyone he had ever met.

“There's no such things as witches!” he shouted into the air. There was a gasp and instantly there were two groups in motion. The black-shrouded witch hunters surged towards him while the other prisoners shrank back, eager in their attempt to disassociate themselves with him.

“Bring him forward so that all may see him before we burn him at the stake,” croaked the woman calmly.

Jarod was hurried forward across the sand and up the stairs to the top of the platform. He was shoved across and nearly overshot the edge of the stage, which would have had him falling about five feet down to land on his face. Luckily he rebalanced himself in time to prevent that, but he found himself nearly nose-to-nose with the woman who had been speaking. In the time that he had been manhandled up the stairs she had picked up a torch and so her features stood out in sharp focus by the firelight. So close was he to her that he saw every detail in just a few nauseating seconds.

He sprang back, his stomach churning in its reaction to what he'd seen. For the first time all day he was glad he couldn't see, glad he could distance himself from this horror and reduce it to a mere blurry mass, and the thought of being burned at the stake suddenly held no terror for him in comparison. The woman had been brutally tortured for her

supposed crime of witchcraft. The croaking voice and the need for a walking stick were the least of what had been done to her. Bits of flesh still hung off her face, elongating her features and giving the impression of an extremely fat person who had lost all the weight instantaneously, leaving the skin too large for the body. Scars criss crossed every inch of exposed skin, her nose showed signs of having been broken in multiple places, then reset, and broken again. This was no weekend session for an amateur. This woman had clearly endured agony beyond imagining for years before her escape. Jarod wondered how she'd done it, how much pure willpower it took to crawl away from such a scene, knowing that if you were caught that it would only go the worse for you. He feared her and admired her at the same time and his previous questions about how any one person could command such fear and respect from followers and enemies alike vanished.

"Hold him," she rasped, and arms grabbed Jarod and held him firmly. The woman stepped closer. Jarod closed his eyes, unwilling to take the chance that he might have to look upon her visage again. Through his eyelids he saw the glow of the torchlight grow nearer, he could hear the wheezing breath of a woman who must have been alive by virtue of having stared down Death itself, and he smelled the burning wood.

"Remove his jacket," she wheezed, and there was an odd grunting sound which Jarod decided must have been all the laughter she was capable of. "He won't be chilly for much longer."

Jarod felt hands around his body groping for the zipper of his jacket, felt them find it, and unzip the jacket, pulling it from his arms roughly. As soon as it was gone the atmosphere changed. There was a gasp and a murmuring amongst the assembly. A few cries of "Look" and "What does it mean?" could be made out amongst the general rumble of astonishment.

"Silence!" cried the woman, as loudly as she was able. The sound subsided a little, but Jarod could still hear some of the previous mutterings continuing. "He is clearly a heretic! His guilt is now beyond any doubt!" she wailed.

"He has the face of the savior upon his chest! How can that be proof of heresy?" shouted a voice from the crowd. The next sound Jarod heard was the clomp of footsteps coming up the stairs and over to join the rest of the group on the stage. "There it is, plain as day!"

"It is an abomination!" the woman shouted, finding some reserve of strength in her voice. "It is a trick intended to lead us astray!"

"No," said the new voice in loud but measured tones, "it is a sign. A signal from above."

"A sign of what?" sneered the woman.

"A sign that we should be careful in our hour of triumph not to allow ourselves to become overzealous. A sign that we should consider being more moderate in the means

to our ends. A sign,” and here the voice became noticeably more cunning, “that we may need new leadership.”

And suddenly Jarod understood. He was petrified. He was in the middle of a power play and, having looked into the eyes of the woman, he knew who was going to come out on top. She would win by sheer will and she would make an example of him and he was doomed. The feeling brought upon him a feeling a relaxation, of acceptance, and suddenly the fear flowed away from him and he felt a light sensation. He could hear the argument around him fade into the background as he rose up above the crowd and looked back down on the scene. The fires burning in muted colors all in a row, the stakes standing nearby, waiting to receive their victims, and the stage with the assembled crowd before it and the contenders on it. And it was all in sharp focus.

He looked first at the crowd of prisoners and followers. Each looked uncertain, some afraid, others hopeful, and there was an equal mix between both groups. Some prisoners were looking again for signs of escape opportunities, but most were fixated on the scene on the stage. Jarod next turned his attention there. He saw the newcomer, tall and proud, dressed in black like the rest of the witch hunters, with blonde hair and a square jaw. He looked, Jarod thought, out of place amongst the rest of these people. He couldn't say exactly why. And in other circumstances he might have risen to be a great leader of the group. But then he looked at the woman. Floating as he was above the crowd her torn and broken body lost much of its horror and he felt no fear of it, but her stance radiated strength, power, and a will that would bend iron. This potential usurper had no chance in the face of that woman whose soul clung to her body with a tenacity that was awesome to behold. And as he looked upon her he found his mind climbing into hers and he understood how she had survived and why. He saw her faith as clearly as if it had manifested itself physically before him.

And he saw his own body. Held tightly by two of the witch hunters, it had a serene look on its face, as if he didn't have a care in the world. He looked at himself and saw the scratches from the trees in the forest, the tatters that his clothes were in, the mud that had caked on his shoes. And he saw the white T-shirt he had been wearing for the last two days under his jacket smeared with the blood that he had picked up from Margaret's hands. The lines and smears and sweat stains had formed themselves into a perfect image of the savior of these witch hunters, the same as if it had been a burial shroud, the features unmistakable and instantly recognizable.

And then he felt himself falling again. The landscape rushed towards him and he spun, as if he were going down a drain, and then there was darkness and a great impact.

Jarod opened his eyes. He had a vague feeling that something very strange had just happened, but he couldn't recall the details. All he could remember was a strange floating sensation and the feeling that he was looking down on himself. The scene before him was blurry and fuzzy and chaotic. He could hear the argument between the woman and the newcomer.

“The time has come for you to step aside and let fresh leadership come to the fore!” shouted the man, having abandoned reason and cunning and gone for the direct approach.

“Young fool, you haven’t a tenth of the wisdom and experience I have. Were you ever locked in the tower awaiting a death you could only wish for? Have you felt the white hot knives on your flesh? Have you touched your bones? Mine is the way and we shall not deviate from it!”

Jarod squinted around and felt a sudden sense of loss. For the last two days he had been without his sight and had undergone ordeals stranger than anything he could imagine. All he’d wanted was to be able to see again. And he suddenly remembered that for just a moment he’d been able to. His mind was fuzzy, the details of what he had seen still would not come to him, but he remembered the sharp focus the scene had been in.

“I can’t see...” he mumbled, despairingly.

“He speaks!” cried the man. “Pass on your wisdom to us!”

“I...I can’t see...” Jarod said slightly more loudly, and the people in the front rows of the crowd in front of the stage heard him and muttered to themselves.

“He can’t see...he can’t see...he can’t see...” the message was relayed throughout the crowd.

“He cannot see!” shouted the man, trying desperately to seize control of the situation. “It is proof that this is a sign! He is being shown up as an example to us all! The mark of our savior is upon him, he is an effigy of all we stand for, and he cannot see! He is telling us that we have lost our vision, lost sight of our goal!”

With any other adversary that would have been enough. But the woman would not be beaten tonight, not by this upstart.

“A sign, is it?” she breathed. “A sign we’ve lost our way? I say he is an effigy not of us, but of those we hunt! He is an outsider, a representative of the rest of the world, and his lack of sight represents the waywardness of all who do not follow our way! It is an endorsement, not a condemnation, of my stewardship of our movement, and the fact that it comes on the night of my greatest triumph only cements its significance!”

She paused, the protracted speech clearly having taken most of her remaining energy. There were a very few that night who noticed that it was ‘her’ triumph, and not theirs collectively, but that fact was wiped from the memory of all present by what she did next. The woman raised her walking stick and slashed at the would-be usurper, cutting a gash along his face with razor blades embedded in the sides.

“Take him,” she rasped, and her tone would not be disobeyed. Two more of her followers clomped up the stage and held the man alongside Jarod. “He will be burned

with the rest. And let this be a lesson to us all that witches and heretics may be found anywhere, even amongst our own ranks. But the first to burn will be this witch before me whose power was enough to corrupt one of my devoted followers, nearly enough to depose me and stray me from my holy mission.”

Jarod glanced lazily in her direction. He saw the blurry outline of her face and his mind's eye filled in the horrific details and he cringed slightly. The torchlight reflected in her eyes making her, if possible, even more menacing and terrible when she said “Burn him.”

The two men holding Jarod jumped to obey, turning him and guiding him roughly across the stage and down the wooden stairs and then over to the first stake, his feet sinking into the sand as they went and making the going tough. They forced him up the kindling, the wide base he had seen on the stakes before, and once at the top of that pile of wood they tied him securely, his hands behind the stake, his feet bound firmly to the base. Once satisfied that escape was impossible they descended the mound and Jarod could hear the slosh of liquid and smelled the scent of gasoline as they soaked the fuel for the fire.

The muttering and murmuring that had gone on during the attempted coup had ceased and the crowd was now just as eerily silent as it had been during the terrible woman's speech. Jarod saw the torch applied to the wood as a blurry, moving blob of orange color and as the gasoline ignited the blob grew bigger. He felt the heat as the flames moved closer and began to lick at his ankles. His fear had passed and he now stared glassy-eyed, unseeing, straight ahead. He did not scream. He saw a bright white light. And then Jarod died.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The air was dry and gritty. There was no light, no sound, and very little sensation other than the dryness, the overwhelming dryness, which seemed to blot out every other sense. It could be that there was light and sound, and even taste and smell, but the dryness overpowered every other detectable characteristic of the environment.

Jarod tried to roll over to be more comfortable, but found that he was bound from head to foot, entirely wrapped up in some very dry material. No matter. He drifted off into unconsciousness again. He awoke again a few moments later long enough to wonder what he was waking up from. His mind rebelled at the idea that he might have somehow survived being burned at the stake and so he dismissed that notion. It must not have happened, he told himself. It had been a hallucination, an illusion, a trick of the mind. Satisfied with that line of thinking, he tried to roll over again, failed again, and lay there trying to relax. Lying on his back had never been his preferred way of sleeping. He lay there for several long minutes, strange thoughts and ideas creeping through his semi-awake mind.

He fancied he was not lying on his back, but that instead he was driving a car. In the passenger seat was a snake, a poisonous snake he suddenly realized. He would have to do something. He reached over and grabbed it by the back of the head, which he

remembered was the safe and proper way to handle snakes of this kind. It was a cobra, he somehow knew. He could see the fangs sticking out of the sides of its mouth. But that wasn't right. The fangs shouldn't angle up like that.

No, of course he'd been mistaken. He wasn't in a car, he was in his house. With a small dog. Where had the dog come from? Had he always had it? It was in his oven. Dogs didn't belong in ovens. Someone had left the oven on! He wrenched open the door and there was the dog, looking up at him expectantly. He snatched it out and ran for his car. The dog appeared to be in perfect health, but it had been in the oven after all, he had to get to the vet! He got into his car and started to pull out, but another car pulled in behind him, blocking his way!

Jarod awoke fully and opened his eyes. Some feeble light was seeping in through some unknown opening. The air was in fact extremely dry. He was in fact bound from head to foot in an extremely dry material. His glasses were still missing and all he could see was a faint beige haze from the insufficient light. He flexed his muscles against the material binding him and discovered that he was in great pain. He passed out.

He began to have delirious hallucinations. He saw giant purple and yellow spiders building their hellish webs along the back deck of his old house. He and his high school friends were standing in line at a bathroom, but once they got inside none of them used it, they merely circled around and waited in the line again. He saw his father sitting in a chair across the room from him in their old house. The image was pale and ghostly and suddenly his father threw back his head in silent laughter and faded from view. He revisited an old car accident he'd had where he rear-ended another car and finally awoke from his mind's prison whispering "not again, not again, not again, not again."

Realizing he was awake again, Jarod calmed himself and opened his eyes. The light in the room had increased only slightly and so most of what he saw continued to be the vague hazy beige, although now he thought he could also detect the occasional golden glint off of some metallic objects in the room. All was quiet. He chanced another test of his muscles against the material binding him and promptly passed out again from the pain.

The delusions returned. He had experienced these before. When the mind was on the edge of wakefulness and sleep it could play tricks on you. He had also had them when he was extremely sick and dehydrated and he called them fever dreams. You couldn't trust anything you thought was true during these times. He had invented wild paranoid, vast conspiracies, and had awoken trying to logically and scientifically figure out how to deal with situations that had never transpired. Currently he was surrounded by several blurry grey shapes. Even in his hallucinations his glasses were missing. The shapes were all around him, speaking in a language he could not understand, and suddenly he felt his limbs free from their bindings. He thrashed about in his newfound freedom for a moment before the shapes held him down. And then the delusions stopped for a time.

Waking yet again, Jarod rolled over. He settled in to get more comfortable before he realized what had just happened. He lay there for a moment considering the implications of what he had just done. He could still feel the dry material touching his skin but it no longer held him in place. He cautiously rolled over in the other direction. The surface he was lying on was hard and gritty, it ground against the material around him. The material seemed to be wrapped around him, not merely lying on top of him like a blanket. The light in the room had not changed since the last time he had opened his eyes, the hazy beige still dominated and the flecks of gold were still there, but nothing was bright enough or close enough for him to make out. He rolled back onto his back and stared at the ceiling trying to make sense of what was happening.

He had died, hadn't he?

He was no longer bound and rolling over hadn't caused him to pass out again, and so he decided to risk sitting up. He did so with some difficulty, finding his body stiff and sore and the wrappings very tight around him, but he managed it and took a closer look at his body. He was wrapped in bandages from head to foot. He examined them very carefully. They were dry, but supple and moved with him to a certain extent. He ran his hands over the bandages and finally located an end around his left hand. Steeling himself for what he might find he carefully began to unwrap his hand. After two layers of bandage he finally began to see what was underneath.

The bandage came away from his skin with a sticky, thick, almost glue-like substance, leaving strands of it behind like melted cheese. The substance was translucent and under it he could just barely see his skin, red and inflamed, slightly blistered. As if it had been burned. Had he passed out from the flames and then been rescued? But if so then where was he now? He rewrapped his hand and lay back down to think.

Should he get up and look around? It was dim in the room, but he decided it was unlikely to get any more light by waiting. Now was definitely the time to get up and look. He lay there a while longer. He was afraid. So much had happened to him the last two days...or longer, since he had no way of knowing how long he had been in this place. What would he find? He had always been scientifically curious, always wanting to know what was going on in the best possible detail, sometimes to the point where he had been called nosy. But now he wanted nothing more than to return to sleep, even if it meant more of the fever dreams and hallucinations. Nothing was solid anymore, everything seemed to be some horrific delusion to him. He shuddered as he thought of the woman, the leader of the witch hunters, and he found himself hoping very much that he had indeed hallucinated that part.

He decided to get up. After another few minutes. A few more. Maybe just a bit longer.

As he lay there he procrastinated. His mind occasionally wandered away to think about where he was and why he was there, but inevitably he refocused on deciding to get up and explore the place, and then he found ways to justify lying there a bit longer, and then the cycle would repeat. At his core, which he would never admit, he was hoping that he

would awaken from some nightmare and that his wakefulness would bestow upon him the gifts of comfort and calm that none of it had been real.

At last he sat back up. He turned and dangled his legs over the side of the stone platform he had been lying on and squinted down at the floor. It seemed to be only a few inches from the bottoms of his feet and so he hopped down and immediately fell forward, stumbling once or twice, and then landed face down. It hurt a lot and he wasn't sure if he had blacked out or not, but when the pain subsided he was still face down on a stone surface. As he moved to get back up he noticed that the stone was divided into blocks, each seam filled with dust and sand.

Jarod arose and felt his legs shaking. Clearly his muscles weren't up for this. He considered going back to the stone slab, but then remembered the short hop down and realized he'd never be able to get back up there without injury, leaving his options with continuing on or sitting on the floor. A pang of stubbornness ran through him and he decided to keep going.

Shambling, limping, and occasionally having to stop to rest, Jarod shuffled along, the bandages on his feet beginning to come loose from the friction on the floor and trailing behind him. He groaned occasionally from the effort and the pain, although the going seemed to be becoming easier and less painful as time went on. Eventually he found a wall.

The wall, upon close examination, turned out to be made of the same stone as the floor. Hanging from the wall, held up by small metal brads and some kind of thin, clear cord that reminded Jarod of fishing line, but not as stiff and plastic, were small crystals. Every few feet down the length of the wall as far as he could see. He spent several minutes examining the string, wondering at its suppleness and flexibility and its transparency. It was attached firmly to the wall, however, and he was forced to leave it where it was despite his desire to bring some with him.

He felt his way along the wall, noting how the small crystals focused the dim light of the room, dividing it up into its component parts like a prism, until he reached a corner. In the corner was a series of shelves. On the shelves were several small jars, empty as far as Jarod could tell, except for a strange liquid with a smell that reminded him of the warehouse where all the other jars had been kept. He could feel his breathing being affected by it again, and so he replaced the lid he had removed and put the jar back on the shelf. He squinted at the shelves to see what else might be there and caught a glimpse of silver in amongst the liquid and the beige of the stone. He reached out for it and found his camera.

The device was blackened and useless. All his vacation pictures had been on there and he felt a momentary pang of loss. He had nearly forgotten in all the chaos that he'd even been on vacation and he wondered how much he'd remember apart from the strangeness of the last two days. He felt a sensation that he would be spending the rest of his life trying to scientifically explain away everything that had happened, because he couldn't

just let it go. He had to know. He replaced the shell of the camera on the shelf and felt along next to it and discovered the memory card that Sebastian had given him, similarly melted, charred, and useless. Sebastian had said there were answers on the card. Now those answers were lost. His sense of loss increased as he put what was now just a piece of plastic back on the shelf and began to shuffle along the wall again, away from the shelves.

Along the way he found a few more small shelves with small golden works of art mounted on them. Fixed in place just above eye level it was difficult for Jarod to get a good view of them, but he surmised that they were the source of the golden twinkles he had seen while lying on the slab. Further along the wall he found a doorway.

There was no door, there was merely an opening in the rock. It was clearly put there on purpose, as there was a doorframe, also made of stone blocks, and the room beyond was just as dimly lit as the one he was in now. He proceeded through the door and continued to cling to the wall like a security blanket. This wall was bare stone, no shelves or other adornments. When he reached the corner he turned left to continue along the wall and found that this wall had writing on it of some kind. He got close and the figures moved into focus. He saw bird's heads, ibis, depictions of crocodiles, and other strange characters. Egyptian hieroglyphs. His head swam. He couldn't deal with this. He traced the glyphs along the wall for several feet before he hit his head. Stunned, he fell back to the ground.

Getting up painfully, Jarod began running his hands along the stone wall. Covered in bandages as they were, he could not feel the texture of the stone, but the cloth wrappings passed smoothly over the surface. When he reached an edge he discovered that the wall to his left was sloping up and becoming the ceiling. This is what he had hit his head on. He was pondering the implications of the sloping wall and what it meant for the architecture of the building when he heard a noise behind him. Turning, he squinted into the dim light and saw nothing but two glowing points of light across the room at about eye level. And then they blinked. Jarod took a step back and backed into the wall. He stared at the eyes, which stared back at him in turn. The light was too poor for him to see any other details at this distance. The eyes blinked again and then descended rapidly down to floor level and began moving towards him.

As they approached, Jarod began to see the blurry outline of the figure approaching him. It was short and elongated. He squinted to get a better view, but by that time the figure had reached him and was rubbing around on his ankles. A cat, thought Jarod. What's a cat doing here? He tried to bend down to pet the cat, but his body was too stiff for that kind of motion.

"Prrrrrow?" said the cat.

Jarod opened his mouth to speak, but his throat was so dry no sound came out, not even the faint groans he had uttered before, only breath.

“Prrrow?” repeated the cat, and began to move away. For lack of anything better to do, Jarod followed. The cat’s tail, even fuzzier in Jarod’s eyes than it had any business being in real life, stood straight up as it led the way, not looking back, just walking straight ahead. They reached the doorway that Jarod had walked through and re-entered the original room. The dim light was growing slowly fainter and Jarod suddenly realized, now that he was out of an investigative frame of mind, that he ached. Lying back down suddenly seemed like such a lovely idea and he shambled across the floor, glancing back and forth between the cat and the large stone in the middle of the room that he had awoken on earlier. Soon those two images coincided as the cat jumped up on the slab and turned its glowing eyes back on Jarod.

He shuffled on, arms held straight out in front of him to catch himself if he should fall. He was in great pain now, his joints stiffening, his muscles rebelling, and he knew he had to get back on the slab now while he felt he still could. He finally reached it and flopped his bandaged body across it and, by reaching across and pulling while standing on his tip-toes, Jarod was able to crawl onto the slab and roll over on his back. Not normally his favorite sleeping position, Jarod nevertheless slipped into a deep, dreamless sleep. The cat jumped down and disappeared into the growing darkness.

He awoke some time later and sat up. He felt much better. He tested his limbs and found that, while they still had bandages on them, they were much looser and his range of motion much improved. He swung his legs easily over the side of the slab and hopped down to the floor without stumbling. The dim light had returned and he held his hands close to examine them. He was vaguely surprised to discover that his bandages had been changed while he slept, but he felt so much better that he paid this little mind. He wandered around the room some more, looking at the crystals and generally scrutinizing the whole place. Eventually he made it back to the doorway and went through into the other room.

Remembering that he had been interrupted by the cat, Jarod chose to go the other way through the door this time, feeling his way along the wall. Just as on the other side he came to a section of hieroglyphs, although these were much different than the ones he had seen previously. Whereas the first wall had contained the stereotypical Egyptian hieroglyphs, these new pictograms much more closely resembled cave paintings that he had seen in books. He examined them closely, not that he had much choice, and found that the simple stick figures seemed to have halos and other circular devices pictured around their heads. He found this quite strange, but his mind was on other things. He had a bounce in his step that he hadn’t had in quite some time and he felt the loss of his glasses most acutely because if he had had them he could have gone skipping around the room.

Continuing on past the hieroglyphs, Jarod came to a small table set against the wall. It must have been this object that the cat had been sitting on, he thought, and he examined it thoroughly, running his hands over it to find any other objects that might have been placed on it. He was disappointed to find none at all, but then had a thought. He bent down and examined the floor around the table and found several small objects including a

small broken stone chest, a few more crystals, a miniature astrolabe, and a razor blade. These items were curious to him, and he considered taking a few with him, but he had no pockets and so he merely picked them up and set them back on the table.

Continuing around the room he came to the slanted wall. He knelt down and crawled to where the wall met the floor, but found nothing of interest and so came back to a place where he could stand comfortably. His mind fizzed and raced and he was finding it difficult to concentrate on much of anything. He felt as though he could fly and was vaguely frustrated by his continued grounded state. A small part in the back of his mind wondered about this new attitude, but was stifled by the general good feeling.

Coming full circle, Jarod finally came back to the shelf he had been inspecting the day before. He saw the blurry silver outline of the case of his former camera, a blue spot on the shelf next to it that was the burnt memory card. On an impulse he reached out for the worthless sliver of plastic, picked it up, and held it up to his eyes.

He stared at it. He turned it around. He looked at it there in his bandaged hand and he felt a strange sensation, as if his heart had risen up into his throat. There it was, what yesterday had been a melted, worthless plastic bit of trash and was now the memory card that Sebastian had given him, somehow restored. His mind, which so recently had been wandering aimlessly, was suddenly brought crashing down to earth to bend all its contemplative powers on this one fact, that the memory card looked brand new again. The spell lasted for several seconds before he realized the implications of this and he snatched at his camera with his other hand, gripping it firmly and holding it up for a similar inspection. It, too, looked brand new. His hands shaking, he pressed the power button and felt the lens extend, saw the LCD light up, ready to frame a picture. He turned and snapped a picture of the interior of the room he was in, the flash filling in all the shadows that the dim light created.

Jarod sank to the floor, the camera in one hand, the memory card in the other. What did this mean? He thought back. His life had been so normal for so many years. Nothing extraordinary had ever happened to him. He had focused all his energies on science to the point that he had tried to apply scientific principles to a discipline that everyone told him had very little relation to hard science. Everything could be explained and, with sufficient data, predicted or controlled. And then he'd lost his glasses. From that moment onward his life had been completely unpredictable, uncontrollable, and strange and extraordinary things had dogged him ever since. In a daze he placed the objects on the ground next to him and fumbled with the fresh bandages on his hands, eventually finding the ends and unwrapping himself just a little.

There, underneath, was fresh skin. Unburnt, undamaged, soft, and pliable. He dropped his arms to the floor and felt his fingers close over the camera and the memory card again. He sat there for a long time, his mind blank, unwilling to consider the implications of what he was seeing and feeling. Answers. Sebastian had said the memory card contained answers. He felt as though he was hearing the word in his head for the very

first time, because the definition had suddenly changed to something much bigger than he'd ever imagined.

“Prrrrrow?”

Jarod's head shot up. He'd been looking down at the floor and hadn't noticed the cat approach. He looked at it. It was much closer than it had been the night before and he could see now that it was a brown cat, a siamese, with a bright red collar. The eyes glowed brightly at him.

“Prrrrrow?” the cat repeated, and just as it had done the previous night, it turned to go. Jarod sat on the stone floor. He was tired and in shock. He did not follow the cat this time, but sat and watched it saunter out of the room before letting his head hang again, staring at the stone floor. He felt the fatigue hit his body all at once. The ache of the previous day was not there, but the overwhelming feeling of tiredness made him long for the stone slab. But though his body nudged him gently in the direction of rest, his mind stubbornly refused to let go of the extraordinary things he held in his hands at that moment and what they meant. He thought back to the strange man in the underground house. What had he said? That Jarod should open his mind to extreme possibilities. He had a suspicion that he had only just barely touched upon how extreme those possibilities might be.

“Prrrrrow!”

The cat had returned and was now rubbing against him. He reached out a hand to pet it, but it shied away from his touch. He lowered his hand and the cat meowed at him again, this time insistently. Jarod tilted his head and squinted at the creature. It seemed like an ordinary cat to him. He must be imagining things. He could go to bed and think about this some more in the morning. He grabbed the camera and memory card and stood up shakily. He was suddenly more tired than he'd ever been in his life. He shuffled out of the room, the cat leading the way as before, and made his way to the slab. The cat was already on top of it, waiting for him with glowing eyes. He crawled again on top of the stone, placing his newly restored treasures on either side of him within arm's reach, and lay back, closing his eyes, and sinking once again into sleep. The cat jumped down and wandered away.

Jarod's sleep was not dreamless this time. He had an intense feeling of flying, of freedom, as if the chains that held him to the earth had fallen away leaving him with the ability to go where he liked when he liked for as long as he liked. No responsibilities, no cares, no worries, just flying along forever. Along the way he passed Carl and Isaac, also flying, also without a care in the world. They waved as they went by. He looked down and saw Sebastian and the mysterious man from the underground house plodding through a swamp. They were mired down while he flew free! And then he felt another hand grasping his. It was Margaret, and she was flying with him as well. He allowed himself to enjoy it for a few moments before he looked down and saw her hand was covered in blood. He snatched his hand away and Margaret fell screaming to the ground. His hand

now had blood on it as well and he tried to shake it off, but it began creeping up his arm. He was beginning to panic. His idyllic world was crashing down on him as the blood continued moving up his arm, threatening to engulf his whole body if he could not find a way to get it off. He shook his arm over and over, but still the blood flowed.

“Prrrow?”

He looked and saw the cat at his hand licking at the blood. The crimson fluid receded as the cat lapped it up, looking at him with glowing blue eyes. At last the blood was gone and the cat evaporated, turning into mist before Jarod’s eyes, and the scene dissolved as well, fading to blackness. He felt his body becoming heavier, sinking back down to the ground, and he heard a voice.

“T’nilt brank itanis horgis bavinico.”

And another voice.

“Pewist arlinica heshicip.”

And a third.

“Hee kant heeer oos, cane hi?”

And then all was silent.

Jarod woke up on the side of the road near the Golden Gate Bridge, behind some bushes. Cars whizzed by him, not seeing him where he lay. He opened his eyes and immediately closed them again, blinded by the midday sun. He rolled over on his side and tried again with better success, although the first images he saw reminded him that he still had no glasses. The leaves of the bush next to him started out in focus but quickly blurred into obscurity as he looked at ones further away. He sighed and rolled back onto his back. His body ached slightly, his muscles behaving as though they had been through an intense workout the day before.

He sat up suddenly and looked at his body. He was dressed as he had been the day his glasses had disappeared. Grey sweatpants, an off-black jacket, black shoes, and white socks. He unzipped the jacket to reveal a white T-shirt, sweatstained but otherwise perfectly clean. He felt his pockets and found his camera. He put his hand to his head and winced as he touched an open wound. Had any of it happened? Had he merely fallen off of the bicycle and hit his head, hallucinating everything else? He got up and dusted himself off, squinting at the passing cars as he did so. He looked around and saw his bicycle not far away, resting on its side. He walked over to it and inspected its fuzzy image. The front wheel was bent and the chain had come off the gears. He stood back up and tried not to think about what this was going to do to his deposit. He felt slightly dazed and wondered if the blow to the head had given him a concussion. He needed to

get to an eye doctor and a hospital, preferably in that order. He had a vague feeling that he had been without his glasses for days.

He squinted around and realized he was on the Sausalito side of the bridge, not far away from the visitor's center. With an inexplicable feeling of dread he walked over to it. The sun was high in the sky and the parking lot was thronged with visitors gawking at the bridge. He located the small building that served as the gift shop and went inside.

A small bell rang as he crossed the threshold and he jumped slightly at the sound. Why should that startle me, he wondered. He walked up to the counter where the blurry form of a cashier stood.

"Good afternoon, sir, may I help you?"

"I hope so," said Jarod, wearily. "I lost my glasses over on the bridge and then I seem to have fallen and hit my head. I was hoping you could call me a cab or something so I could get to a hospital or an eye doctor or something."

"Oh, certainly, sir." The voice was female and young. Ordinarily this would have had Jarod wondering if she was attractive and single, but in his present condition it was merely trivia that his brain picked up on. She bent down behind the counter for a moment and then stood up and plopped a thick telephone book on the counter. "There you are," she said cheerily.

Jarod waited a moment to see what she would do and, when it turned out to be nothing, said "I don't think I made myself clear. I lost my glasses on the bridge. I can't see without them. Could you look up the number and call for me?"

"Oh!" said the clerk. She had clearly never heard of such a thing in her life and Jarod wondered briefly if she even knew how to use the phone book. She opened it and began skimming down the pages. Jarod turned away and squinted at one of the shelves as he heard her pick up the phone, dial it, and ask for a taxi to be sent out to their location. "He said it would be about twenty minutes," said the clerk.

"Fine," replied Jarod, dazedly. "I'll just wait out front." And he made his way back through the shelves to the front door and opened it, setting off the bell again, heading back out to the parking lot.

He sat down on a nearby bench that faced the bridge. He squinted again and the image became slightly clearer, but it still didn't convey the grandeur of the structure, the engineering marvel that it was. He sighed. He heard the crunch of gravel as someone approached and sat down next to him.

"Quite a sight, isn't it?" said a man's voice.

"I guess," said Jarod. He was in no mood to talk to this guy.

“You guess?” said the man, incredulously.

“I can’t see it right now,” said Jarod impatiently. “I lost my glasses riding my bike over the thing and I’m almost blind without them.”

“That’s a shame,” said the man. “Say, I know something that might help.”

“What’s that?”

“Ever heard of the Bates Method?”

Jarod sighed and rolled his eyes. “Yes,” he said.

“Ever tried it?”

“No. It has never been scientifically proven, and in fact most ophthalmologists have conducted many tests and experiments to disprove that such a thing has any hope of working. The whole idea that the muscles around the eyes have a greater impact on vision than the lens itself is absurd.”

There was a moment’s silence. Jarod knew he had come across as rude, but his patience with that sort of thing was very thin.

“Sorry,” said the man eventually.

“No problem,” said Jarod. He wondered how long until the cab got there.

There was more silence in the conversation, although there were many tourists having their own private conversations nearby. Jarod closed his eyes to rest them and listened to what he could hear. He overheard snatches of dialogue between friends, spouses, and whole families. Some having a fantastic time, others letting the stress of the vacation overwhelm the fun they had intended to have. He felt himself slipping into that latter group. He also wished the man sitting next to him would leave.

“By the way,” the man began. Jarod screamed on the inside, raged with an intensity that would have frightened many people, and cursed the man viciously, but on the outside he remained perfectly calm.

“Yes,” Jarod said, his teeth only slightly gritted.

“I was wondering if I could talk to you about a product I’m selling.”

“Oh, do tell,” said Jarod, as sarcastically as he could. This was clearly lost on the man, who continued.

“Well, I couldn’t help noticing that your clothes are a little dirty.”

“Yes, that happens when you exercise and then fall off the bike.”

“Quite so. So you’ll be needing to wash those clothes later.”

“Among other clothes which are also dirty by virtue of having worn them, yes.” Jarod had a sinking feeling he knew where this was going.

“So you probably do a load of laundry about once every week or two?”

“About that, yes.”

“And detergent costs a lot, doesn’t it?”

“It does indeed.”

“So what you need are some laundry balls,” said the man. Jarod could hear the smile in his voice, see the teeth flashing even with his eyes closed.

“Laundry balls,” said Jarod.

“Now I know what you’re thinking...” began the man.

“I’m thinking that laundry balls are some of the worst science I’ve ever heard of. They don’t work.”

“Of course they work.”

“No, they don’t,” said Jarod testily. “And as long as we’re on the subject, what level of the pyramid scheme did you come in on?”

“It’s not a pyramid scheme!”

“You’re near the top, aren’t you? Near the end, where there’s no more money to be made.”

“Look, I’m trying to sell you something that will save you thousands of dollars every year!”

“If you say so,” said Jarod. He’d heard a car pull into the parking lot and was hoping desperately that it was the taxi. He heard the door open and a woman call out.

“Somebody here call a cab?”

“That would be me,” said Jarod, opening his eyes. He went over to the driver without saying goodbye to the man and explained his situation. After some discussion they elected to try to fit the bike into the trunk, which failed, and then decided to just lock it up nearby and Jarod could come back for it later. He had a sinking feeling at that idea, but went along with it for lack of a better one. A few moments later and Jarod was in the back seat of the cab being driven to the nearest hospital where he hoped to finally get his glasses. He relaxed during the ride.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jarod relaxed in his hospital bed. He had been diagnosed with a mild concussion and given a bed to rest in for the time being while an eye examination was arranged. The pillows and the sheets in the bed were so soft and warm and even though he regretted having to spend part of his vacation in the hospital, he was so comfortable that it didn't worry him very much. He fell asleep in total contentment.

“Mr. Hulse?” said a voice.

Jarod opened his eyes.

“Mr. Hulse, it's Dr. Taylor,” continued the voice.

“Ah, Dr. Taylor,” said Jarod, yawning. “Are we ready for the eye exam?”

“Yes, we are, Mr. Hulse. If you would just come this way.”

Jarod swung his legs over the side of the bed, wincing slightly as he did so and his muscles twinged. He hopped down off the side of the bed and sat down in a wheelchair that was nearby. He had already been told that he would have to be taken up to the eye doctor's office so that he could take it easy while his concussion cleared up. Dr. Taylor pushed him out into the hall.

Jarod watched all the blurry images go past as he was wheeled down the corridor and savored the fact that this was the last time for a while that he would have to put up with this. He was going to have a spare pair made and when he got home he was going to look seriously into getting LASIK and just ditching the stupid things altogether.

They turned a corner and faced an elevator that would take them up to the fourth floor. The doors opened and Jarod was faced with a pair of glowing eyes.

“Prrrrrow?”

Jarod awoke with a start and sat up quickly. He felt dizzy and flopped back onto the pillows. A dream. It had just been a dream.

“Mr. Hulse?” said a voice, “Are you alright?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine, Dr. Taylor,” said Jarod, still orienting himself after waking from the dream. “Are we ready for the eye exam?”

“Yes, if you would just come this way.”

Jarod felt the strong déjà vu as he swung his legs over the side of the bed, his muscles twinging in the same way as before, and sitting in the wheelchair. He felt apprehensive as they went down the hall and sat in dread as the elevator doors opened, but there were no glowing eyes. They got on and went to the fourth floor in a perfectly normal way.

Jarod sat patiently during the eye exam. He’d always hated the things, but in this case it was like a breath of fresh air. The puff of air into the eyes to test for glaucoma, the bright light shining into his eyes that allowed the examiner to look at the retina. His eyes always watered during that part of the exam and he had always felt that it was unhealthy to have that kind of bright light introduced directly into the eye that way, but weren’t these the guys who looked after your eyes? Wouldn’t they know if it were really bad for you?

After the physical exam came the most tedious part, the determination of the prescription. Jarod longed for the day when doctors would be able to measure your eyes and lenses and prescribe just the right kind of correction without having to go through the whole monotonous decision-making process that the patient had to undergo.

“Is this better...or this...?”

“Can I see them again?”

“Is this better...or this...?”

“The first one.”

“Ok, do you like A better...or B? A...or B?”

“They’re about the same.”

“Ok, C...or D...?”

“C.”

And on and on it went until at last the doctor was satisfied that you could see and wrote the prescription on the little pad and sent you away. Jarod stared at the paper. He wished he could remember what his last prescription was. This one didn’t seem as strong. But whatever.

They had one of those one-hour lens places in the hospital and so Jarod returned to his room to wait. He had taken the word of one of the sales assistants as for what frames looked good on him. He had no patience today with the usual procedure of trying several of them on and then getting really close to the mirror. He tried reading a magazine, but having to hold it so close to your eyes makes reading difficult. He put the magazine down and closed his eyes and tried to will the passage of time to speed up. He reflected that this is probably a great way to get it to seem even longer.

He heard the tap of footsteps coming down the hall and allowed himself to get his hopes up, but they passed him by. He sighed, but then heard a second set of footsteps approaching and turned to the door in time to see his doctor enter the room.

“Mr. Hulse, your glasses are ready.”

“Hallelujah,” said Jarod, “let me have them.”

He held his hands out and received what was, to him at that moment, the greatest invention of humankind. The triumph of science, the direct application of human ingenuity to a problem perceiving the world. Evidence suggested, Jarod knew, that use of corrective lenses may have occurred as early as the first century, with wearable eyeglasses following in the 13th or 14th century. As with many early inventions, the details had been lost to time, but as far as Jarod was concerned this was the pinnacle of civilization, the thing that made it possible to be human for a good portion of the population. He felt the frames in his hands, lightweight and rigid, but flexible enough to withstand the pressures of everyday use. The lenses were light and thin, an impossibility for someone with vision as bad as his just a few decades ago. Previously correcting his vision would have required thick glass, but the miracle of plastics and other polymers now made it possible for him to see better than ever and he barely noticed their presence. None of this diminished his desire for corrective surgery when he got home, but for now the idea of placing this wondrous device on his face seemed like pure ambrosia, utter bliss.

He put them on at last and the world moved into focus.

He blinked and looked around him. No, he thought, this can't be right. He took the glasses back off and rubbed his eyes.

“Something wrong, Mr. Hulse?”

“No, no, just something in my eye,” muttered Jarod. He couldn't reconcile what he had just seen. It made no sense. It must have been a trick. He put the glasses back on and looked again. And there it was again. The view out the window. The room looked entirely normal, a hospital room like any other. And everything he had experienced while he was here was entirely normal. But the view out the window was anything but normal.

He was on the second floor of the hospital and whenever he had gazed out that window before he had seen the green grass of the lawn on the grounds, the grey ribbon of the road that passed close by for people to drop off those who needed medical attention. He had seen the blue sky and the multicolored checkerboard that was the cars in the parking lot. That's what those blurry, fuzzy images had to be, wasn't it? With his new glasses he saw something entirely different.

The green was a swamp. Stagnant water as far as the eye could see. The grey was an old wooden bridge, wending its way through the marsh, and the blue was a massive awning, blocking the view of the sky. The cars in the parking lot now appeared to Jarod as a campsite, littered with tents and lean-tos and all manner of other shelters, each a different color, each one a panel on a giant quilt. It was like another world. He stared incredulously as he now saw clearly the people living down in the swamp, each tent pitched upon a floating raft, each raft tied to its neighbor to prevent them from drifting away from each other. Campfires were positioned strategically along the network of wooden islands, carefully built so as not to throw ashes into the extremely flammable little village. On each corner stood a tall figure with a long pole, steersmen and oarsmen, simultaneously guiding the village through an unseen network of underwater roots and vines as well as propelling it onward when they were on the move.

Jarod turned to face Dr. Taylor, but he was gone. The room was empty. He had not heard him depart. He stared at the hospital doorway for a moment and then turned back to the scene through the window. He jumped out of the bed and lunged for the window, scrabbling for the pull cord that would close the curtains, but there was none. To prevent patients from hanging themselves, the facility had removed them. Jarod snatched at the curtains themselves and tried to pull them shut, but they were stuck open. He pulled on them until he feared they would break loose from the wall, but they remained resolutely open. He closed his eyes and sank to the floor in despair. Getting his glasses back had solved nothing.

What was happening to his life? He looked up and was able to see clearly all the way out the door and down the hall, but nobody was there. He listened, something he had had to rely on more and more recently, but he heard nothing. The usual busy turmoil of the hospital had gone silent and still. Confused, he got up and walked out into the hall. Still nobody in sight, no sounds, no smells. He felt a slight breeze and he saw the hospital's corridors and equipment, but all his other senses reported no stimulus. He was seized by a sudden resolve. He would find out what was going on.

He turned back into his room and changed out of his hospital gown. He had intended to get new clothes delivered from somewhere, perhaps ask someone in the hospital to go and buy him a new shirt at least, but there had been no time for that. Putting on his sweat stained T-shirt, his grey sweatpants, and his off-black jacket, Jarod made a mental note to wash them all thoroughly when he got home. Two trips through the washer at least. They must be filthy. As he put on the pants, he felt his camera in his pocket. He considered briefly taking it out and looking at the pictures he'd taken while he was blind,

but decided it could wait and instead walked resolutely out the door into the hallway and turned towards the elevator.

He took the elevator down to the ground floor and walked past the reception desk. Nobody was there. This no longer surprised him. He looked straight ahead through the sliding glass doors at the front of the hospital and saw the mysterious floating village outside. Striding purposefully towards the door, it slid obediently open and he felt a slight tingle as he went outside. He paused briefly, but dismissed it as some strange part of the air conditioning.

The air outside was humid and rank, the stench of rotting wood filling the air. He stepped onto the bridge just outside the hospital and looked up. A great blue awning provided shelter to those who would use the bridge as a walkway. It reached as high as the third floor of the hospital, which was how he had mistaken it for the sky. The sky itself was the reddish pink of a sunset, although the sun itself was not visible. The wood from the bridge was old and splintering and badly in need of repair. Rust had consumed any bits of iron that held the bridge together and ropes were thin and fraying. He felt some of the planks give way slightly as he stepped on them, and he quickly stepped off to prevent himself from falling through into the swamp water.

The village must have decided to stay a while because there was a thick, sturdy plank of wood spanning the distance between the small rafts and the platform. Jarod walked across it carefully, but it held his weight easily. Once on board the first raft Jarod could see how the entire structure was designed.

Each raft was approximately ten feet square, made of the same sturdy planks that he had just walked across. These must have been in high demand because, unlike the bridge, they were well-maintained. No rusty nails, no fraying ropes, and only a hint of the everyday wear and tear that must befall wood put to such a purpose. The rotting smell must be coming from the bridge, he thought, because this wood has been sealed and protected from the water.

In the center of each side was a stout iron ring bolted to the wood firmly. Connecting one raft to the other was a length of rope. Jarod knelt down to examine it and found that it was a loosely woven hemp, thick and strong, but also flexible and slightly elastic to allow the rafts to drift freely to a certain point. The knot holding them was strong and encased in a thick tar that had hardened to the strength of concrete, but had somehow resisted becoming brittle. It bent and flexed as the rafts moved slightly in response to the daily comings and goings of the villagers.

The rafts had been arranged to allow the easy passage of people, the ropes holding them together being only about a foot long, and therefore within easy stride of even small children. Streets, after a fashion, had been integrated into the design and even on ground level you could see the grid that the tents and other shelters had been set into. He estimated that the whole thing was about 100 rafts on each side, and therefore about 1100 feet square including the anchoring ropes. He marveled at the engineering of it, but also

wondered at how it had gotten here. He set off down the first street, his sneakers clomping dully on the wood. He surmised that the platforms were hollow underneath, perhaps containing floatation devices to keep the rafts more buoyant, but that they were not solid wood.

He passed many people, the village was evidently very busy, and everyone had a look of concern on their faces as if they had important business to attend to. No one paid Jarod any mind at all as he mixed with the villagers. They wore simple clothes for the most part. Drab colors of grey and brown, flannels and linens. He saw no denim or other tougher materials, and he also saw many patches, some matching the original material, others not. Occasionally he would spy a flash of color from a young woman's shawl or similar wrap. The air was cool, but not cold, and most of the inhabitants of the village wore light clothing over most of their body, but they were not bundled up. The rafts bobbed and swayed slightly as the people walked over them and Jarod could see the effects of a single step cause movement in the nearby rafts as well as the energy dissipated in several directions.

The atmosphere was tense, but peaceful, as if everyone were waiting for news of an event that was now beyond their ability to control. Jarod walked along the boards. He felt as though he were looking for something, although he did not know what. His earlier panic had abated and he turned his scientific mind towards finding out where he was, why he was here, and what he should do next. Thoughts of returning home did not occur to him as often as he might have otherwise expected. The place seemed familiar, as if he had been here before, although he would have remembered such a place more vividly if he had.

“Tell your fortune, mister?”

Jarod stopped and turned to face the voice. There, just outside her tent, was a young girl sitting at a table. She had on a thin shawl that covered her head, blue with brown streaks in it. Sticking out from underneath the head covering were wisps of tangled brown hair. She also wore a blue tunic that would have been better suited for a boy, but at her age it made little difference now. The table wore a deep purple cloth with a slight sheen to it, although Jarod could also see fraying around the edges and threadbare patches in places. Spread out on the tablecloth were several cards, each bearing a rune or a pictogram.

“You don't seriously believe in those cards, do you?” asked Jarod. His tone was kind, but the bitterness of the words cancelled out his intention to be nice to this stranger.

“Course not,” said the girl, gathering them up quickly, obviously abashed by Jarod's brusque words, but he could also tell that she was a professional at this. “I just use cards to get money from gullible people. For you, though, I use star chart. Tell your future. Accurate.” She nodded wisely and her eyes twinkled.

“How much?” asked Jarod. He had no idea whether his money would be good here. He suspected it wouldn't be. But he could always claim he had none anyway.

“We let cards decide, eh?” said the girl, shuffling the pack. “Show you they good for something.”

She shuffled the deck for a few more seconds, her hands deftly dividing the pack into two segments and then riffing them together, randomizing the assortment. She had clearly been doing this for some time, despite her young age.

“We do this in three steps,” said the girl, laying three cards out on the table. “Pick one.”

Jarod chose the card on his left. The girl flipped it over revealing a rune Jarod had never seen before.

“Seven,” said the girl. Jarod chose to take her word for it. She then counted out seven cards from the deck and laid them out in front of the original three. “Pick again.”

Jarod chose the third card from his right. The girl flipped it over. Again, a completely unfamiliar rune, but different from the first one.

“Four,” said the girl. Again she counted out cards, stopping at the fourth. “This one decide how much you pay. Pick.”

Jarod considered for a moment, then chose the card on the far left. The girl flipped it over and stared at the rune. Jarod had no idea what it meant, but the girl glared at him.

“Zero,” she said. “Ok, what are you trying to pull?” she asked, dropping the accent she had been using.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Jarod, mystified.

“According to this I have to do your star reading for free,” said the girl, clearly upset.

“It was your idea to use the cards,” said Jarod.

“Yeah, but I didn’t know you were going to cheat!” she said.

“But...I didn’t...” began Jarod, but the girl had already swept the cards from the table and stowed them under the table. She pushed the star chart into the center.

“Well, sit down, and let’s get it over with,” she said, kicking a small stool out from under the table.

Jarod, completely puzzled, sat down on the stool. The girl pored over the star chart for several seconds before turning her attention to her subject.

“When were you born?” she demanded.

“March 12, 1970,” said Jarod.

The girl stared at him for some time. Then, her eyes not leaving Jarod’s, she cried out “Mom!” A moment later a woman came out of the tent with a harassed look on her face.

“Yes, Marie?”

“This guy says he was born on March 12, 1970,” she said, her eyes not leaving Jarod, her look conveying intense dislike. “I don’t know how to do that calculation. What is he?”

The woman looked thoughtful for a moment and seemed to be absentmindedly counting on her fingers. At last she seemed satisfied and said “Bribek.”

“Thanks, mom,” said the girl. The woman looked at Jarod as if seeing him for the very first time, smiled and nodded, and ducked back into the tent.

“Ok, Bribek, Bribek...let’s see...”

The girl spent several minutes looking over the star chart and then she pulled another sheet of paper out from under the table and pored over it for some time as well. She frowned. She put her finger on a specific place on the star chart and reached under the table for what looked like a small astrolabe, spun the dials, and then compared it to the place she had marked with her finger. Looking up slowly, she fixed Jarod with a look of apprehension. She made a note on a small piece of paper lying nearby and went into the tent. She emerged a few moments later with what looked at first glance like an orrery, but as she manipulated the planets Jarod noticed that there were only six of them and that the sun was a lot bigger in proportion to the other planets than it should have been for an orrery. Jarod was about to ask about it when a man walked up.

“Hello, Marie,” said the man. He was tall with short cropped hair. It was still long enough to be styled, but hadn’t been in some time. He wore a leather vest and deep green pants, which, upon further inspection, probably used to be white before the wearer spent a lot of time wearing them in the swamp. You could still see a fringe of white around the top that had not yet been stained by the putrid water.

“Hello, daddy,” said the girl, distracted by what she was finding in the orrery.

“Where is your mother?”

“In the tent.”

And without another word the man stooped into the tent.

“Ok, you’ve had your fun,” said the girl. “Now why don’t you just leave before I tell daddy what this says?”

Jarod was dumbfounded. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about your star chart. I thought the thing with the cards was a bit of a funny trick, to be honest, but this is disgusting. And if you don’t leave right now I’m going to show it to daddy.”

Getting up, Jarod said “I don’t believe in star charts anyway,” and began to walk off.

The little girl gave a bit of a gasp, got up, and ran into the tent. A few moments later the man emerged and walked quickly over to Jarod.

“What did you do to my little girl?” he asked in a voice loud enough that several other people nearby stopped and turned to look.

“Nothing...” began Jarod.

“She says you don’t believe in the star chart.”

“Well, that’s right,” Jarod said, but it was the wrong thing. The man instantly took a step back and a few of the other nearby eavesdroppers gave the same kind of little gasp that the girl had made. Not letting that deter him, however, Jarod pressed on doggedly. “There has never been a shred of scientific evidence that such things have any ability to predict the future at all. It’s all total nonsense,” he went on, getting into his stride and ignoring the looks of horror on the faces which were now beginning to surround him. “I can’t believe anybody in this day and age still places any credence whatsoever in such complete and total...”

But he didn’t get to finish. The villagers, who had been closing in on him during his entire speech, suddenly had heard enough and grabbed him. They steered him down the street, almost picking him up in their haste to get to wherever they were going, and turned at an intersection. Jarod struggled, but there were at least two of them on either side holding him and two more behind pushing. He spent a good part of the journey just keeping his balance on the swaying rafts. At the end of the second street they reached an edge of the raft colony and threw him into the swamp.

“You are not welcome here!” shouted the girl’s father. “If you set foot on these boards again we’ll tie you up before we throw you back into the swamp! As if we didn’t have enough trouble around here without you coming along!” And with that the impromptu mob turned and stalked off.

Jarod looked around. The water was disgusting, green and stagnant with who knows what living in it. He looked up and could see the hospital, but it was fairly far away and to get there he would have to either risk coming back on board the village’s rafts or else he’d have to go the long way around by wading in the swamp. He took a few tentative steps in the muck and then heard a horrible hissing sound. Turning, he saw a large

reptilian creature that greatly resembled an alligator. It put fear into his heart as he saw the teeth, much larger than he would have expected on an alligator, and he leapt for the boards and safety. Scrabbling out of the muck he lay there, fully expecting the teeth to sink home in his leg, but the creature seemed water-bound and did not follow. Jarod stood up and looked around. Now that he knew what lived in the swamp, he dared not get caught by the mob again. He surveyed the tents and mentally mapped out the route he would take back to the hospital. Once there, maybe he could get someone's attention and reason with them.

He skulked furtively along, trying to keep his feet from clomping too loudly on the boards. He attracted the attention of several people as he went, but was able to duck around some of the larger tents before anyone got a good look. Unfortunately he had not counted on the fact that he was dripping swamp water, leaving a trail and emanating a reek that could be smelled for some distance. He turned a corner and saw the man who had thrown him in the first time, backed up by about ten other villagers, about three rafts away.

"We told you what would happen if you came back," said the man menacingly. "We told you to stay away. You should have taken your chances with the 'tiles.'"

Jarod saw the mob advancing, saw the rope in the hands of one of them, and turned to run, but saw another mob a few rafts away also advancing. He turned back and saw the original mob getting closer. He looked this way and that, but saw no route of escape as all the other directions were blocked by tents. He looked down at his feet, thinking desperately, and then came up with a desperate plan. He ran five feet to his left and jumped into the water between two of the rafts.

The ropes holding the rafts together were only a foot long, but Jarod chose a corner and pushed the wooden structures apart a little further to allow his body to squeeze through painfully. He took a great breath of air and ducked under the swamp water. His eyes burned and he felt his glasses start to slip off his face, but he grabbed them quickly. He wouldn't have that problem again if he could help it. He lifted his feet off the muddy bottom and swam forward, trying to estimate the distance until he could resurface. He felt the bottom of one of the rafts with his hands and traced it to the gap, sticking his face up long enough to get a breath and then diving back down, heading always in the general direction of the hospital. Three breaths later and he risked a look. The villagers chasing him were nowhere in sight. He had lost them.

He hauled himself out of the water and began sprinting, as fast as he could go in wet clothing, towards the hospital. He was almost there when the mob turned a nearby corner and spotted him. He was three rafts ahead, but the water was slowing him down tremendously and the hospital and safety were still about five rafts away. His muscles burned and ached and nearly refused to cooperate, but he lunged forward, staying just out of the reach of those grasping hands, and finally made it to first the plank, then the bridge, and finally the concrete of the hospital. He had expected the chase to cease when he reached safety, but he quickly realized that he was not playing Tag with these people,

and that he had not made it home safe. The mob was slowed somewhat by the plank, which was only wide enough for them to cross in single file, but they were picking up speed now that they had made the bridge. Jarod turned and raced for the hospital doors, which slid open as he approached. As he crossed over he felt the strange tingle again and was engulfed in darkness.

He saw a bright light which blinded him, and then blacked out.

Jarod woke up in his hospital bed and sat bolt upright. The room was blurry and out of focus. He squinted around, found a bedside table, and saw what he wanted. He reached over and grabbed his new glasses and put them on. He looked around at the newly-focused room and saw nothing unusual. The sounds of the hospital leaked in muffled but definitely there through the door of his room. He glanced out the window and saw the blue sky, the green grass, and the parking lot dotted with multiple colors, the cars of doctors, nurses, patients, and all the other people that make a hospital work or visit it. He relaxed.

Trying to go back to sleep proved futile as he merely lay there with his eyes closed. He chose not to take off his glasses, preferring to keep them as close as possible after the last few days. After a while an orderly came in with the newspaper. Jarod skimmed through the funnies and a few of the national stories, but skipped most of the local stuff. He didn't live here, after all. Things seemed to be moving slow on the national scene as most of the things he read had had no progress since the last time he had seen a paper, which had been the morning he biked the bridge. Out of curiosity he glanced at the date. It was the same as the day he'd biked the bridge.

He riffled through the rest of the paper and the date was the same on all of them. He rang the orderly and thanked him for bringing the back issue, but could he have today's paper. The orderly looked at him funny and said they didn't keep back issues of the newspaper, that that was today's paper, and then left. This confused Jarod, but he dismissed it. He'd had a concussion and a lot of strange dreams. That's all it had been. Dreams. Hallucinations. Nothing to worry about. He closed his eyes again.

After a while Dr. Taylor came by and told him he was doing quite well and that the concussion had been mild, after all, so he could check himself out and go home whenever he liked.

Lying there a while longer, Jarod reflected on the sheer relief of knowing that none of it had actually happened. Of course it hadn't. How could it? All that stuff was nonsense, no scientific basis to it whatsoever.

Reassured and relaxed he arose and began to change out of his hospital gown. As he reached for his clothes he realized that at least one part of the dream had been based on reality...he'd forgotten that he wanted to buy new clothes. But he was going to return directly to his hotel after leaving here, so there was no need for that. He had plenty of clean clothes there. He reached for his T-shirt and paused. There was still the strange

pattern of blood on it. From the cut on my head, he told himself. He put the shirt on. He reached for the sweat pants. They were a bit damp and had a greenish tinge around the edges. Some chemical here in the hospital and high humidity, he told himself, although a sense of unease had begun to grow in him.

He put on the pants and his jacket and walked out of his room, stopping by the reception desk to verify his insurance and other information before he checked out. They said they'd send him a bill for anything the insurance didn't pick up. He walked out the sliding glass doors into the hospital parking lot and reflected on the strange dreams he'd had during his stay. A floating village. Laughable. He hailed a taxi and got a ride back to the hotel.

The ride was a long one and Jarod enjoyed looking at the city as they drove through it. The architecture, the history. He hated going home, if it came to that. He had this feeling often when he traveled. But he knew it would be different if he actually lived in any of the places he visited. Part of going on vacations was just getting away from your routine. If you made the new place your routine, you'd want to get away from that, too.

They reached the hotel, which was technically about thirty miles outside the city, but it was all Jarod had been able to afford, and he paid the cabbie. He walked into the lobby, turned right and headed for the elevators, taking one up to the sixth floor.

He entered his room with the key card and took off his jacket. Rejecting the urge to flop immediately into bed, he instead began to extract new clothes to change into so he could go back out quickly. He still had another day of vacation left and he wasn't going to waste it, concussion or not. He got out a pair of jeans and a fresh shirt that said "Minnesota Summer Blood Drive" and had a picture of a mosquito on it and then took off his sweat pants. As he did so, he remembered his camera in the pocket. He extracted it and removed the memory card so he could transfer the pictures to his computer before he left. He always liked to start the day with a fresh memory card so he'd have room for plenty of new pictures.

He crossed the room and opened his laptop, waited for the login screen to appear, and clicked on his profile. While it finished booting up, he inserted the camera's memory card into the card reader and then began transferring the pictures into a separate directory. That process started, he habitually went through the rest of his pockets to make sure nothing else was in them.

In the left pocket he discovered a strange object. He removed it from the pocket and stared at it. It was a memory card. Separate from the one the camera used, small and rectangular. It was the one Sebastian had given him. Sebastian, who had been in his dream. He gazed at it fixedly for several seconds, his hands shaking, not sure what to do. He looked around the room. Was this real? Was he still dreaming? Where would he wake up this time? He felt the sweat pants and their dampness, he looked down at his bloodstained shirt, and the memory of the woman's scarred and hideous face loomed at

him in his mind's eye. He sat down before he fell down and noticed that the computer was finished transferring the pictures.

With a trembling hand he grasped the mouse and opened the new folder. He decided to start with the last picture he'd taken and opened the file. The image showed a beige room, stone walls and floor, hieroglyphs on the walls. The image made Jarod's blood freeze. But it could have been taken at a museum, he thought. And concussion is sometimes marked by memory loss. He must have been at a museum yesterday and just forgotten it. Yes. As he examined the picture more closely, though, he saw in amongst the hieroglyphs a brown cat in profile. Was it a pictogram? Or was it real? He hurriedly moved on to the next picture.

The next several pictures, in fact, as he moved backwards in the sequence, turned out to be blurry and mostly useless. They showed a forest with dim light, but it must have been that mid-grade light that cameras have difficulty with. Too bright for the flash, not bright enough for good quality pictures, and susceptible to motion blur. In amongst all the blurry green trees he thought he could see a vaguely human shape ahead and in the distance. BF? No, no, it had been a dream, he told himself. A Dream!

He rifled through the last few pictures of the forest and came to pictures of the bridge. He stopped and thought about the timeline. How could he have fallen off the bike, gone on to the forest and a museum, and then made it back to be injured on the side of the road near the bridge again? His mind raced. It was not possible. His eyes wandered to the memory card sitting on the desk near the card reader. Answers, Sebastian had said. But it hadn't been real.

He stared at the pictures of the bridge. He'd been alone, hadn't he? Then who was that man standing in the shot? This had been taken after he'd lost his glasses, it was the random shot of the skyline that he'd intended to come back to later. And there was a man standing there, posing against the city in the background. Jarod searched his memory. The man looked so familiar, but he was on vacation alone. He hadn't met anyone, he was sure of it.

The man was pale and wore a tweed jacket and brown pants, funny clothes to be wearing on vacation anyway. He had on a matching tweed hat, wore glasses, and was smiling. Who could he be? Jarod stared at the picture as if willing it to reveal some secret that it was reluctant to convey. He clicked on the imaging software and skipped back another picture. The man was there again, posing again. Smiling. And he hadn't been there when the pictures were taken, Jarod was sure of it. He had taken a bunch of trash pictures to try to get some photographic effects contrasting the bridge against the sky, but the man was in every single one of them, always smiling. Jarod tore his gaze away from the pictures and stared at the wall for several seconds. Who was this man? He was sure that he knew him. And then he remembered.

Alfred. His old would-be mentor. Alfred. Who had jumped. Off a bridge. And was dead. Which meant this would be a. Ghost. Ghosts don't exist.

Jarod returned his stare to the computer screen, willing the image not to be there, but there it remained. An old man in a tweed coat and brown pants smiling in every one of his pictures. Now that he was looking more closely at them, the images of the man seemed to glow around the edges just slightly. No, that was nonsense. Ghosts don't exist. None of it was real. It had all been a dream. What was it the man in the underground house had said? Open up to extreme possibilities.

But what was the point? Even if he somehow managed to accept that everything that had happened to him was real and not some hallucination or dream, so what? What could be gained? His eyes moved to the memory card. Answers. He picked the card up and looked at it. A small blue plastic rectangle. So light he could barely feel its weight between his fingers. Twenty years ago this would have been considered a remarkable technological achievement. A hundred years ago this, and the machinery that made the information readable, would have been considered miraculous. A thousand years ago it would have been magical. And what would bringing something like this back into that time have done to the imaginations of the people who saw it? Even if you didn't leave it behind for them to study, what if you took it with you and merely left them with the idea, something to aspire to, what then? Where would humanity be today?

Right where it is right now, said the cynical part of his brain. Belief in magic inhibits scientific research. This is where alchemy came from, this desire to work magic and take shortcuts. The constant desire for it all to somehow be easy, for the aliens or divine beings or both to come down and bestow their gifts and eliminate work, disease, poverty, and every other part of the human condition. He glanced back at the pictures on the computer and then put his hand on the mouse. Selecting all of the files he pressed the Shift key and then the Delete key and confirmed the dialogue asking if he was sure. He watched the files scroll off as they and the hideous information they conveyed were eliminated from his computer and from his life.

Satisfied that that mission had been accomplished, he returned his attention to the memory card. Curiosity ate at him. Answers, Sebastian had said. But answers he didn't want. And as long as this cursed object remained in his possession he knew he'd never have rest. The urge to plug it into the card reader would always be with him. He stood up and walked to the bathroom, pausing in front of the mirror. He looked at himself. He knew who he was and what he stood for and he wasn't going to be controlled like this. He made up his mind and acted, turning on the spot and hurling the memory card into the toilet, then taking a step forward and pressing the handle to flush. He watched with satisfaction as the little piece of plastic swirled in the bowl and then finally vanished from sight.

Jarod walked in a slight daze back into the main part of the hotel room, closed the cover on his laptop, and finished putting on his clothes. He elected to leave his camera behind, but grabbed his wallet and walked out the door. He had sights to see. Good, solid facts to read. And nothing was going to prevent that this time.

Miles away in an underground house a man sat before a flickering candle. He heard a bell jingle, but did not stir. A few moments later a pale, translucent figure floated into the room.

“I told you it wouldn’t work,” said the man.

“I had such high hopes,” despaired the new arrival. “I could have taught him to appreciate the wonders of the world, but I had to go. It was my time. I had hoped I could put things right. Instead I fear I’ve made him more bitter and cynical than he was before.”

“We did all we could. It is not your fault. Some people’s minds cannot accept how wonderful the world truly is.”

“Maybe I did it the wrong way,” said the ghost of Alfred. “Maybe I shouldn’t have knocked his glasses off on the bridge.”

“There was no right way,” said the man. “He makes his choice, as do we all.” The man picked up a glass of a red liquid in front of him and took a long drink. “Take my advice, my friend, do not attempt this again.”

“Yes, you’re right. It was all too much.”

“Good. By the way, what was on the memory card that my servant gave him?” asked the man casually.

“Science,” said the apparition ruefully. “Science.”

Author's Notes:

My third year of NaNoWriMo, and again I had no outline or plan, but this year I was able to finish for two main reasons. First, the plot here is much simpler than before and second, I was able to work on it away from home.

I have always said that I had no interest in editing any of my NaNo novels because they are writing exercises for me. I work on specific things to try to improve my first drafts of other things. Furthermore, I don't write much during the rest of the year. I like it, but not that much. It's a challenge for me, not something I aspire to do professionally. This novel, however, is a possible exception. I detest the character development that I did in Chapter Three because it makes no sense. A scientist who goes into marketing and tries to apply scientific principles to that field? Maybe, but not like this. I'm also fairly dissatisfied with the ending because I wrote the one I wanted and then had to pad it out a little more to make the 50k word goal. The meeting between the man in the underground house and Alfred was never supposed to happen.

On the other hand I did make the word goal and I finished the story, and that's progress in my book. Every year I say I won't do NaNo again next year, but next November...we'll see.

--
dB