

THE CATS' LAIR

C.H. FOERTMEYER



For my mother – for her never ending love and devotion.

What sometimes seems merely strange and out of the ordinary may be much more. There are worlds parallel to our own of which we have no knowledge or any idea of their existence.

Acknowledgements

It is with great appreciation that I acknowledge my brother, Tom Foertmeyer, for his great help in the editing of this work and the designing of the front cover. His interest in my projects is very gratifying and appreciated.

Many thanks to Digital West Media, Inc. of San Diego, California DBA DesertUSA.com for permission to use the bobcat photo my brother designed into the image seen on the front cover of *The Cats' Lair*.

Foreword

The characters described in *The Cats' Lair*, with the exception of the Father, and possibly the Guardians, are fictitious. The locations in *The Cats' Lair* are also fictitious, but again, with the possible exception of Father Mountain. I'll leave that for you to decide.

As to the concept of time put forth in *The Cats' Lair*—maybe? How else do you explain the phenomena of walking into your living room and—for a brief, extremely brief moment—seeing a person standing in the corner? Where do they come from? Where do they go? The answer: They live there—with you. There is only one world, but there are many time rings within it, concentric rings, converging on the beginning of time. You walked into the room and for some unexplained reason your vision penetrated one of the many barriers separating one time from another and focused in the next ring. There, before you, ever so briefly, was a *former* occupant.

Proof? There is none—yet. Do I believe it—perhaps? Does anyone believe it? — Big Red and Little Jimbo do. Ask them.

C.H. Foertmeyer

CHAPTER ONE

The Map

At Six o'clock Sunday morning, July 7, 2002, Jim Preston stared out his bedroom window to the street below. The streetlights still burned as the early morning sky had turned a deep royal blue and Rockaway, for the most part, still slept beneath it. Anxious for morning to arrive, sleep had eluded Jim for most of the night. *Today was the day.*

Jim had spent the entire day, Saturday, making the final preparations for his trip to the Colorado Rockies. This was not to be a vacation for Jim, or a business trip. This junket to Colorado was to satisfy his curiosity over an artifact he had found while treasure hunting with his metal detector on an old abandoned farm in the nearby Illinois countryside. Jim's father had taught him all the tricks and techniques to treasure hunting with a metal detector, and the most important one had paid off his first time out since his father's passing. *"Always check around the fence posts first,"* his father had told him. *"Farmers often buried their valuables to protect them, and they would frequently use fence posts for reference points."*

Jim had remembered his father's advice when he had arrived at the abandoned farmhouse outside Rockaway, and the nearest fence line was where he had begun looking first. Twenty minutes into his treasure hunt he had received a strong signal. *I guess Pop was right,* he had thought, and had eagerly begun digging at the point where the signal had been the strongest. As he had scooped up the loosened earth with his hands he had felt something hard beneath his fingertips. Jim had then removed from the hole, a glass mason jar with a rusty, metal lid. As exciting as the find had been, when he had peered through the glass, all that had been inside was a folded piece of yellowed paper. He had hoped for a jar full of silver or gold coins, *but maybe, just maybe,* he had thought, *this paper might be valuable.*

Now, standing at his bedroom window watching the sunrise, he looked again at the yellowed piece of paper. It was a hand-drawn map, but, *was this something some farm kid had contrived in some sort of game, or was it actually a map to something valuable and interesting?* Jim studied the map again, as he had a thousand times since finding it three months ago. There was nothing on the paper to

indicate what it was a map to, other than the words, La Tanière Des Chats and Montagne De Père, and an X drawn high up on the side of what appeared to be a mountain in what appeared to be a small valley.

Excited over the possibilities, yet still uncertain of the map's authenticity, he had made the short drive to nearby Oleander in an effort to find someone at the university who could translate the words on the map. He had been directed to Professor Carlisle who had translated them for him, Tanière Des Chats meaning *Cats' Lair* and Montagne De Père translated to *Father Mountain*. It certainly sounded like a child's game, but he couldn't dismiss it based on that alone. It was just something that had gotten into his head that he couldn't let go of.

Encouraged by the fact that the words actually meant something and weren't just gibberish, he had stopped by the U.S. Geological Survey office where he had inquired about the name Father Mountain. Much to his surprise, and delight, he had been informed that there was actually a Father Mountain, located west-northwest of Denver, Colorado near the Wyoming border. Jim ordered the most detailed map of the area that was available and it had been mailed to him the following week.

The hand-drawn Lair map had no orientation, no north or south marked on it, which made comparison to the topo map difficult, but the fact that Father Mountain did indeed exist had been enough to satisfy him that a trip out there was in order. *Why not? What else have I got to do? If someone took the time to draw a map to someplace, and then hide it away, there may be something very valuable there.* These were the thoughts that had set in motion Jim's quest for the Cats' Lair. *It may be a fool's folly,* he had thought, *but I'm going to do it!* The topo map he had purchased made no mention of a location called the Cats' Lair, but that made it all the more intriguing. He had then begun to think of the Cats' Lair as some secret place that only some old French explorer had known existed, and perhaps some long dead, Illinois farmer.

Jim's first concern had been to obtain time off from work. He had gone to his boss at Miller Foundry and had requested his vacation time at the first available opportunity. Mr. Miller found Jim's story very interesting, although in his opinion a bit of a lark, but Jim would now have two weeks to locate the Cats' Lair and solve the mystery of what it might be.

Having not been a camper in the past, Jim had visited the local sporting goods store in Oleander and had maxed

out his Visa outfitting himself with everything he would need to live in the mountains for ten days. He fervently hoped that whatever he would find in the Cats' Lair would be valuable enough to pay off the Visa balance, because there was no way he could make the payments upon his return. As troubling as that thought was, it was something that would have to be worried over when he got home. Maxing out the Visa was the only way he could afford to purchase what he would need, so he had done it, prudence be damned.

Jim folded the map, placed it in his shirt pocket, and turned from the window. His Jeep was already loaded and ready to go, so there was only one thing left to do before leaving. Jim picked up the phone and dialed.

"Miller Foundry. How may I direct your call?"

"Hi Ruby. It's Jim. Put me through to 167, please."

"Sure, Jim. Have a great vacation!"

"Thanks, Ruby. I'll do that."

"Hello. That you Jim?"

"Yep, it's me, Red. Are you ready to go?" Jim asked.

"Absolutely! Let's hit the road! I've never been more ready for anything in my life! Get on over here!" Red exclaimed. "I just finished up the last of my inspections."

Red Porter had been Jim's best friend since before he could remember. They had gone to school together beginning in nursery school and continuing through high school. They had both graduated from Rockaway High three years ago, but neither had plans for college. Jim did remember a little about their friendship in kindergarten, but before that point in time he had only photos that his parents had taken to verify that they had been close ever since they were each two years old.

Jim had realized right away that he didn't really want to go into the Colorado wilderness alone and it would be much more fun if he had someone to share the adventure with. So, he had asked his best buddy and Red had jumped on the chance to go and hadn't stopped talking about it ever since. It took some serious talking to get their vacations at the same time, but, with a great deal of persistence, they had finally convinced Mr. Miller to see it their way. He had told them, "No way-before Independence Day", so they had had to wait until now.

Jim double-checked the front and back doors, and then went through the kitchen to the garage. *This is it*, he thought. Climbing into his Jeep, he pushed the button on the garage door remote, and then fired up the engine. *I sure hope this Cats' Lair turns out to be real*, he thought. *It would be a damn shame to come home with nothing to show*

for it but an old mason jar and a worthless map. He backed out of the garage and headed for the foundry, thinking about the adventure, or misadventure, that lay ahead of them.

As he drove he thought about how he had wanted to get an earlier start this morning, but Red's shift at the foundry didn't end until seven a.m., when his vacation time would officially begin. It was now six forty-five and Jim would arrive at the foundry by seven, where he would pick up Red and they would head straight for Colorado.

They had already loaded all of Red's gear in the Jeep Saturday afternoon, so they could leave town directly from the foundry, Red sleeping a bit while Jim took the first shift driving. They planned to make the trip in two days, finding a campground to stay in their first night on the road and Jim had figured that would be somewhere in western Kansas or eastern Colorado.

So far, everything was going as planned and Red was waiting when Jim pulled into the parking lot.

"Hey, Red. Ready to shove off?" Jim asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be, amigo."

"Good, then the Cats' Lair awaits! Let's roll!"

Jim pulled the Jeep onto the highway and headed west. The adventure had begun and he was more than ready. He only hoped it would not all be in vain. He began reflecting on the map and why it may have been buried where it was. There had been no valuables in the jar, just the map. There had been no explanation on the map as to what the Cats' Lair might be. Jim thought how if the name had appeared on his topo map he would probably have dropped the whole notion of finding out about it. The fact of the Lair's omission from the topo map is what made it mysterious and intriguing. He had gone to the library in Oleander to see if he could find some reference to it, but there was no mention of it in any book on Colorado or the Rockies. Jim had even made a phone call to the sheriff's office in Clermont, Colorado, the closest town to where it should be, but the girl on the phone had no idea of what he was talking about, nor did the other person who was there with her. The Cats' Lair seemed to exist only on the one map that Jim had found beneath the base of an old fence post, and he hoped, somewhere on Father Mountain. Only time would tell.

Jim and Red had decided not to use the Interstates to make the trip to Colorado, but rather the old highways.

Although their destination of the Cats' Lair was the principal reason for their trip, this was their first time west of the Mississippi and they wanted to *actually* see the country between their home in Illinois and the Colorado Rockies. By six o'clock, as they pulled into a KOA campground, they had seen a lot and they were very impressed with the size and beauty of the country. They had made it all the way to Colorado the first day, but still had nearly the entire state to cross before reaching the Father Mountain area in the northwestern part of the state. Even though they had shared the driving, they were bushed and ready to settle in for the night.

The two friends built their first campfire and then sat and marveled at the stellar display overhead. It seemed not only brighter than at home, but also larger, by far, as well.

"Red-What do you make of the Cats' Lair?" Jim asked. "What do you think we are going to find out there on Father Mountain?"

"I have no idea, Jimbo. I suppose we may find a mountain lion or two, or perhaps a bobcat. The name had to come from something to do with cats. Beyond that, I haven't a clue."

"Why do you think there's no mention of it on any maps other than the one I found? Why does it appear that no one has ever even heard of it?"

Red looked at Jim with a curious expression and answered, "Why was it buried?" he asked. "That-is what puzzles me. That-and *who* buried it..."

"I tried to look into that and discovered that a man named Carter Elliott last owned the farm outright, but now the county has title due to back taxes owed on it by Carter Elliott. They've put it up for auction several times, but it hasn't been sold yet. I found that information in the public records. Beyond that, who knows who actually buried the jar," Jim replied. "Maybe Mr. Elliott himself, but that's just a guess. I wanted to get in touch with him and ask him if he knew about the map, but he's nowhere to be found. So, the big question is still, why was the map buried there in the first place?"

"True," Red commented, "But the biggest question is still-what is it?"

"And-that is what we'll find out in a couple of days-I hope!" replied Jim.

"When did this Carter Elliott give up the farm?" Red asked.

"He stopped paying the property taxes in 1930. The records state that he went west to look for ranch land and never returned. His family maintained the farm for years after that until the last of them died off in 1990. When the taxes went unpaid the county assumed title and it hit the auction block for the first time in 2000, just two years ago."

"Huh-Interesting. So the farm has been vacant for twelve years? Anybody could have buried that map during that time, or even before that."

"Yep. There's no way to know, but I think it was buried since the farm has been vacant. The jar is not an antique jar and the lid wasn't rusty enough to have been in the ground all that long."

"You know, Jim, the name Cats' Lair might be just a local name for something that is mentioned on your map," Red suggested.

"Yeah, I thought of that, too. The way the map's drawn though it is really hard to orient it correctly to the topographical map. The drawn map doesn't have any indication of what's up or what's down on it. I mean, no north or south. It's hard to know how to overlay it correctly, and the scales are different, of course. There are a bunch of names on the topo map for streams and valleys and such, but nothing I could find that has a thing to do with cats. If the Cats' Lair is a local name for something up there, it still doesn't appear to be known beyond that area."

"Well, that's what we are headed out there for. To *discover* it, right? Just like Hernando de Soto or Cabeza de Vaca. Ha! Now that's a name for an explorer-'Cow Head'! Maybe the Frenchman who found the Cats' Lair was named *Cat Head*," Red teased.

"Stow it, Red, and let's hit the hay. We still have a long drive ahead of us tomorrow."

Jim doused the fire and they slid into their sleeping bags for a night under the stars. It was, after all, a beautiful July evening and neither Jim nor Red had ever slept under the stars before. Neither of them had ever been much of the outdoors type, Jim having slept in a tent only once, and Red, never even that. This night under the Milky Way was quickly convincing them that their decision to take this trip had been a great one.

The drive across eastern Colorado was flat and tedious. Sure, the scenery was beautiful, with miles and miles of farm and rangeland to marvel at, but that was what Kansas had been all about, most of the day before. It was beginning to get old.

Clermont, Colorado was not much to speak of either, just a few run down businesses and several small homes. It was, however, the closest town to the jumping off point for Jim and Red's trek up to the Cats' Lair. Clermont was a sleepy little burgh at the east base of Father Mountain, and according to their maps, about twenty-two miles from the area in which they should find the Lair.

They had arrived just in time for supper at the Hummingbird Café, a small diner in the heart of Clermont's one street business district. Jim parked the Jeep in front of the little restaurant and they entered a world that seemed not to have changed since sometime in the 1950's. The Hummingbird was typical of what Jim and Red had both remembered seeing in movies about that era, and they were fascinated with it. Everything from the ceiling fans to the juke box in the corner was a delight to them.

"Damn, Red. Look at this place," Jim said, amazed at the sight.

"Yeah. This is awesome! I didn't know places like this still existed. Should we sit at the counter or in a booth?" Red asked Jim.

"Let's get a booth so we can try out one of those music things on the table. I've always wanted to use one of those ever since I saw them in that James Dean movie-ah- whatever it was called. You know the one I mean."

"I think so. Let's sit down and order. I'm famished," Red suggested.

Although the restaurant was small, and old, it was busy. Only two of the eight booths were open so they took the corner booth next to the jukebox. Only two or three minutes passed before the waitress came to their table and greeted them warmly, smiling a dazzling smile at them.

"Hi fellas. What's it going to be tonight? The special is roast beef and gravy with your choice of any two sides."

The boys stared at the beautiful waitress. Clermont was looking better already. She was about their age, perhaps twenty or twenty-one, and her hair was a striking blonde, long, straight, and shimmering with a healthy glow.

"Hi Laura," Jim replied, reading the waitress's nametag. *Boy, she's pretty*, he thought.

"Yeah, hi," answered Red, coming back to reality. "I'll try the special with a good hot cup of coffee, please. Mashed potatoes and creamed corn."

Red had finished his order, but continued to stare. He couldn't take his eyes off of her.

"Okay. Good choice. What'll you have," she asked, looking at Jim.

"I think I'll have the special also, but with a Coke, please," Jim answered. "I'll have the mashed potatoes, also, and green beans."

"Good. Two specials, a Coke and a coffee. You boys on vacation?" she asked, flashing a friendly smile their way.

"Well, sort of," replied Jim. "We came up to look for the Cats' Lair. Have you ever heard of it?" he asked, figuring now was as good a time as any to start their search. "By the way, I'm Jim, and this is Red," he said, pointing across the table to his buddy.

"Pleased to meet you both," she answered, smiling sweetly at Red. "The Cats' Lair? Sounds like a kids' game, doesn't it? What's it supposed to be, anyway, a motel or resort or something?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I'm not sure what it is supposed to be. For now it is just a name on an old map I found. I decided to take some vacation time and find out what it is, that's all," Jim told her, honestly.

"Well, good luck. I can't say that I have ever heard of it. Is it supposed to be near here?" she asked.

"About twenty miles from here, or thereabouts, up on Father Mountain," Jim informed her.

"Huh-Sorry, but I've lived here twenty years, all my life, and I've never heard mention of it. Good luck with your search. I'll get your supper out in a few minutes. By the way, where did you come from? Where's home?" she asked, turning back and smiling again at Red.

"Illinois," Red answered, beginning to blush.

"That's a drive!" she responded. "Supper will be out in a few."

Laura turned and headed back to the counter, flashing another smile in Red's direction as she went.

Strike one, Jim thought to himself. This was not a good start at all. If the Cats' Lair really existed, how could someone who had lived for twenty years within twenty miles of it, never have heard of it? *Not good*, Jim thought again.

"Let's try out this music box, Red," Jim suggested, dropping a nickel in the chrome plated music selector on the tabletop. "What do you want to hear?"

"To be perfectly honest with you, I don't recognize any of the songs," Red replied. "I don't think they've changed them since these machines were installed. What about that Laura though? I think she likes me. Did you see the way she smiled at me?"

"Yeah, I noticed that... Let's try A10. That looks good to me—*North to Alaska*—sort of reminds me of us, but for the fact that we came west—to Colorado."

Red laughed and added, "But I'll bet this Johnny Horton fella wasn't chasing some mythological place called the Cats' Lair!"

"No. You're probably right about that!"

With that, the two friends were silent, each taking in the ambiance of this quaint old restaurant and listening to Johnny Horton on the jukebox. Each was feeling that the trip was going to be a success, whether or not they found the Cats' Lair. They had seen a lot of beautiful country and they were each feeling more relaxed than they had remembered feeling in years. The Hummingbird Café was the icing on the cake. What a great little place.

"Excuse me," a voice said, from the next booth over. "Did I hear you boys mention the Cats' Lair?"

Jim turned and looked directly into the face of a very elderly man.

"I'm sorry. Harold Gillespie. Sorry to intrude," he added.

"No—that's okay, pleased to meet you. I'm Jim Preston, and this is my friend, Red Porter," Jim replied. "Yes. We mentioned the Cats' Lair. Have you heard of it?"

"Yes, but only once. I'd say it's a place to stay away from, if it exists."

"Why do you say that?" Jim asked, a little worried at Mr. Gillespie's comment.

"Well, I was just a boy, mind you, when I heard the name. I may never have remembered it at all if I hadn't seen with my own eyes what I saw. It was right here, in this diner, although it was called the Clermont Café back then, probably around 1930 or so. No, it was 1930. A fella, looked like a farmer to me, from Illinois or Indiana, forget which, came in asking questions about that place—your Cats' Lair place. Well, nobody had ever heard of it then, either, and the fella went off searching for it up on Father Mountain, or so he said he was going to do. He never came back."

"And—that's it?" asked Jim.

"No, that's not all," Mr. Gillespie, replied. "Around 1990, I saw him again. Came right back into this diner, big

as brass! Sixty years later! At first I didn't recognize him, but the more I stared at him the more familiar he became to me. I went over to the counter where he had seated himself and asked him if he had ever found the Cats' Lair he had gone looking for. That was the only way I could think of to verify that what I was seeing was for real and that it wasn't me that was going loony. Well, at first he looked totally dumbfounded, like I was crazy. Then, he tried to hide his recognizing the name by denying that he had ever heard of it, but I could tell, I was right on the money."

Mr. Gillespie just stared at Jim, like he was reliving the moment in his mind. He shuddered and slightly shook his head.

"So-he didn't want to reveal what he had found, you think-sir?" Jim asked.

"No, it was more than that. He didn't want to reveal that he was the same person that had come in here in 1930 asking about it. He didn't remember me, I was just a kid, and now I was seventy years old, so I was a total stranger to him. But, he knew I must have been in this diner that day back then. He put that much together, and he didn't want to acknowledge that it was him that was in here that day also."

"But-Why?" Jim asked, quite puzzled over the whole story.

"Because-he didn't look a day older than he did that day in 1930! That's why! How was he going to explain that? How was he going to explain remaining about thirty years old for sixty years time passed?"

"Naw. It must have been someone who looked like him. That's impossible," Red exclaimed before Jim had a chance to respond.

"Yeah. Red's right. It must have been someone else who just looked very similar to the guy you saw in 1930. After all, it *had* been sixty years since you first saw him," Jim replied.

"Nope. It was him, right down to the clothes he was wearing and the mole under his right eye. It was him," Mr. Gillespie insisted.

"Same clothes?" Jim asked.

"Yes sir, even the same clothes. Bib overalls, heavy, leather work boots, and a red plaid shirt. Even his sodbuster hat was the same. It was him all right, and that's why I say that the Cats' Lair would be a good place to stay away from!"

"If he ever found it," Red replied.

"Oh, he found it all right," Gillespie answered. "Whatever it is, it's the only explanation for what I saw here in 1990. The *only* explanation."

"But he denied any knowledge of it," Jim said.

"Wouldn't you? Anyway, that's the way I see it. You can draw your own conclusions and you can go up on Father Mountain if you want, but I hope for your sake you don't find that place you're looking for. That's all I have to say on the matter."

Harold Gillespie turned back into his booth and resumed his supper. Laura arrived shortly thereafter with Jim and Red's specials. Midway through their meal, Mr. Gillespie stood and began to leave, then turned and smiled at the boys. Then, turning slowly back, left the Hummingbird café. Red leaned forward and smiled at Jim, making a circling motion with his finger to his temple.

"That one's a loony bird for sure. '*He didn't look a day older than he did that day in 1930.*' Come on, where's he get that crap?" Red asked, snickering and grinning.

"I don't know, but it is a weird story. Too weird. Why would he make up something like that?" Jim asked.

"To string us along for kicks, that's why. He's a loony I'm telling you. What's he know? He just wanted to give a couple of strangers a hard way to go, that's all."

"Maybe, but that's a pretty wild story to come up with off the cuff, so to speak. Maybe we should find Gillespie and have another talk with him before we go traipsing off up that mountain. What do you think, Red?"

"Sure, if you say so. I can't wait to see what he comes up with next," Red joked. "Maybe he'll tell us that Father Mountain is inhabited by aliens from Pluto!"

"Okay, let's go," Jim said, laughing at Red's comments.

They stopped on the way to the cash register to ask Laura where they might find Harold Gillespie. They weren't prepared for her answer.

"Who?" she asked. "Do you mean the gentleman eating in the booth next to yours; the man you were talking with? I've never seen him before in my life. Why?" she asked.

"That's strange. He said that he's been in here before. We were talking about the Cats' Lair and he knew of it. We just wanted to ask him a few more questions about it before we head up that way," replied Red.

"Well, if he's been in here before, it has never been when I've been working. And-I can tell you one thing for sure, and that is that he doesn't live in Clermont, or anywhere else around here."

"Really? He just showed up for supper out of nowhere then? Red, this is..."

"Weird," Red said, finishing Jim's thought for him.

"Hey guys, we get people in here all the time that are passing through from Yellowstone to Rocky Mountain National Park. He may have been here before when I was off work. It wouldn't surprise me," Laura explained.

"Maybe, Laura. Maybe you're right. That's probably it, Red. He's just traveling through, got hungry and stopped for a bite to eat. - Say, Laura, is there a motel or campground anywhere around here?" Jim asked.

"Sure. There's a campground about a mile north of here. It's the Clermont KOA and it's right on the highway. You can't miss it. In fact you probably passed it on your way into town if you came by way of Denver," she answered.

"Thanks, Laura," Jim said. "If we have time we'll catch you at breakfast. Come on, Red. Let's get settled in for the night."

It was just like Laura had said and they had no trouble finding the campground. The Clermont KOA was quite a nice campground with flush toilets and hot showers, something both Red and Jim really appreciated after two long days on the road. After registering and locating their campsite, they took full advantage of the hot showers before retiring for the night. They decided to sleep under the stars again, but unfortunately, the evergreens at the camp were tall and thick. The wonderful smell of the pines, however, more than compensated for the lack of a stellar display. The two weary travelers drifted quickly off to sleep without further discussion of Gillespie or his fantastic tale.

CHAPTER TWO

The Trip

The third day of their adventure began, literally, in the front seats of Jim's Jeep Wrangler. Choosing to sleep under the pine trees, Jim had not pitched the new tent he had purchased for their trip. Inexperience is a great teacher at the school of hard knocks and Jim and Red had just received their first lesson. It was at about two a.m. when the rains came and washed out their otherwise perfect night. Fortunately, the rain was light and they reacted quickly before their sleeping bags and clothing became too soaked. By sunrise, thanks to the extremely dry mountain air, they were pretty well dried out again.

Jim awoke before Red and stepping out of the Jeep, heard his boots crunch on the still moist soil. *This is cool*, he thought. *It's not muddy*. He reached down and scooped up a small handful of the soil and examined it. *Sort of gravely and sandy*, he thought to himself. He looked up through the pine boughs to a perfectly clear blue sky in all directions. *Looks like it's going to be a nice day*. He dropped the handful of soil and rubbed his hands together, briskly, rubbing them clean and walked around to the other side of the Jeep. Red was still fast asleep in the passenger seat, leaning against the door and snoring loudly. Jim took hold of the door handle, and preparing to catch Red, whipped the door open in one fast, sweeping motion.

"Hey! Damn!" Red cried out.

Jim caught Red halfway out the door and shoved him back up into his seat. Jim was a strong and powerful young man, the work at the foundry forming him into quite a muscular specimen. Still, it took all of his strength to shove Red back into his seat. Red's job at the foundry was what they called a *lazy man's* job and he was on the soft and portly side of the physical spectrum, a rather round two hundred and ten pounds, to be exact. He was not sloppy or blobby looking, merely rounded, as opposed to chiseled, and soft around the middle, giving one the impression that he moved about life as little as possible, relying on modern conveniences to do all of his work for him. The impression conveyed by his appearance was pretty much accurate.

"What the hell are you doing, shitbrick?" Red cried out.

"Morning, Red. Sleep well?" Jim asked.

"Yeah, just fine until you came along. What the hell did you do that for? I was dreaming about Laura."

"Oh yeah, what was your dream about?" Jim asked, still laughing.

"I don't know. It had just started when you yanked the door. She had just served us at the diner and then asked if she could go along with us to search for the Cats' Lair. She said she had some time off coming and it sounded like a cool adventure. *That's* when you yanked the door open!"

"Sorry."

"Like hell you are. I just wish you had let me finish my dream," Red replied, shaking his head and frowning at Jim.

"If you had finished it, you would never have remembered it," Jim reminded him.

"Yeah, maybe, but I doubt I would forget any dream about her. She's a fox, to say the least."

"Yeah, well forget about her. We're not taking her along with us, even if she would agree to go. We don't know what we're getting ourselves into, so we're not going to involve a sweet chick like her in the plan."

"Are you still worried about what Gillespie had to say?" Red asked Jim.

"Yeah, a little. I was thinking about it last night before I fell asleep and I hit on something I hadn't realized before," Jim announced. "Gillespie said that the guy looking for the Lair was a *farmer* from *Illinois!*"

"He said Illinois or Indiana, he couldn't remember which," Red interjected.

"Whatever. Either is close enough. How would he hit on those two states out of fifty states to choose from? I found the map on a farm in Illinois. Doesn't that seem rather a strange coincidence to you, Red?" Jim asked.

"Nope; not at all. You parked the Jeep right in front of the diner. He saw us arrive with Illinois license plates and used that information to validate his tale. There's no mystery to that," Red explained to Jim.

"Yeah, maybe, but I still think there is something to his tale, as far fetched as it may sound. You don't just make up something like that on the spur of the moment to give a couple of strangers a hard way to go. It just doesn't make any sense unless he truly believes his own story. Besides, what would be his motivation for telling us something like that if it weren't true? What's he got to gain?"

"Jim-Some people are just like that. It's that simple. Strangers are who you screw with when they come into your town. It's as simple as that," Red said.

"But...Clermont isn't his town. Laura said she has never seen him before and that he doesn't live there. What about that?"

"So-maybe for some reason he doesn't want us snooping around up there?"

That's more along the lines of what I was thinking," Jim stated. "But why?"

"I don't know, so let's say he was on the level. So what? There is still absolutely no plausible explanation for what Gillespie believes he saw. So why worry yourself about it? Let's just go find the place, if we can, and see for ourselves," Red answered.

"Yeah-I guess you're right. Should we go to the diner and get some breakfast before we leave? I know I'm hungry."

"Now that sounds good to me," Red answered. "Maybe Laura will be working this morning and I can drool over her again," he laughed.

"You worry me, Red. You're thinking far too much about Laura and you're going to get hurt. Look at her. You know she has to have a boyfriend," Jim cautioned his friend.

"I know. It's just the way she smiled at me-twice. Maybe I'm reading more into it than I should, but she did seem to like me, didn't she?"

"I don't know, Red. Girls like her don't look at guys like us. You know that."

Not in Illinois, they don't, Red thought. *But maybe in Colorado-they do...* "Yeah, right," he answered.

Before leaving for breakfast, they laid their sleeping bags out over their gear in the back of the Jeep so they could finish drying out and then headed for the Hummingbird Café. Laura was on duty and Red did drool over her, again, but not overtly. He managed to keep his enthusiasm for Laura under control, but barely. Breakfast was good and quite welcomed by the boys, the bacon having been fried just right and the eggs, delicious, and the homemade blueberry waffles had been divine. They finished their meal, rubbing their swollen stomachs and feeling a little sleepy from the quantity of food they had consumed. Laura brought their check to the table, smiling, as it seemed she did constantly.

"How was breakfast, Red?" she asked. "Jim?"

"It was great, and way too much food," Red was quick to reply.

"You look like you can handle it, Red," she answered, smiling.

"Oh yes. No problem there," he said, firing back his sweetest smile at her.

"So, are you guys leaving for that Lair place you came to find?"

"Yep, just as soon as we digest a little of that breakfast," Jim answered.

"You know, I've got some time off coming. Would you fellas mind if I tagged along? I'm pretty good in the forest and I've done a lot of hiking on Father Mountain. I know where to find water and all."

Jim just stared at Red, who shrugged his shoulders in disbelief. Jim was beginning to get the feeling that there was something very strange going on around here. First the fantastic tale the mysterious Gillespie had told, and now, Red's dream materializing right before their eyes.

"Laura, why would you ask to come along?" Jim asked her, in an openly suspicious tone.

"I don't know-I had a dream about it last night; just the three of us up there on the mountain, camping and all. It sounds like fun, and you guys seem like nice guys, that's all. To tell the truth, I *am* kinda bored with this life of mine, waiting tables all day and going home each night to an empty house. It just sounds like a good change of pace for me. Something interesting to do for a change."

"Jim-Why fight it? It's in the cards," Red said. "Besides, we could use someone who knows her way around up there," he finished.

"I don't know, Red. After what Gillespie had to say, I'm not sure I want to involve someone else in this thing. Laura, did you hear what Gillespie had to say; his *warning*, so to speak?" Jim asked her.

"No. I didn't hear what he had to say. Why?" she asked.

"Well, he had a pretty far fetched story to tell related to the Lair, or so he seemed to believe. Something about a guy he saw here in this café in 1930 and then again in 1990. He said the man hadn't aged a day in sixty years! He told us that the first time he saw the man he was asking about the Lair. Pretty weird stuff, if you ask me," Jim told her.

"Cool. That sounds like a real adventure! There is a story though, like that," Laura told them.

"Really?" Jim asked. "What sort of a story?"

Laura thought for a minute, and then replied, "Well, it's about an Indian that wandered into town from Father

Mountain one day and freaked out right in the middle of Main Street! The sheriff had to arrest him for being a public nuisance because he sat down in the middle of the street and started chanting something about Chief Cleveland and broken promises. Nobody could figure out what he was talking about and he wouldn't get up and move out of the street, so Sheriff Cramer took him to jail."

"When was this?" Red asked.

"About four years ago, around '98, I guess," Laura answered.

"What happened to him?" Jim asked, fascinated with the story.

"The sheriff called in an interpreter because the Indian's English was poor and the interpreter talked with him for a while, getting his story. It seems that the Indian claimed that only six 'moons' before, President Cleveland had promised his people the land Clermont was built on. Now, he said, just six months later we had built a village and a stone road right on their promised lands. Crazy-huh...?"

"What ever happened to him?" Red asked.

"He disappeared. The sheriff decided to keep him for the night and try to find someone to claim him the next morning. When he went in to check on him in the morning, he was gone. The cell door was open and he was long gone. Sheriff Cramer figured someone snuck in the jail overnight and let him out. It was the only explanation he could think of."

"Too weird," Jim replied.

"Way too weird," Red confirmed.

"I'll say," Laura commented. "He was about eighteen years old, yet he claimed that President Cleveland had made that promise only six months prior to this!"

"See!" Jim said. "Laura, are you sure you want any part of this? First there's Gillespie's weird story, then Red dreams that you want to come along with us, and finally, there is the Indian story! And-it all seems to be tied to the Cats' Lair, somehow."

"Wait. How do you figure that?" Red asked. "Only Gillespie's story is directly linked to that place, and that's loose, if you ask me. The dream is just a coincidence and the Indian came down from Father Mountain, true enough, but no one said anything about the Cats' Lair, did they, Laura? You said you never heard of it before, right?"

"Right. No one said anything about such a place in regard to the Indian's story," she replied.

"See, Jimbo. There's no evidence to bear out your worries about the Lair. Let's just get up there and try to find it. We can deal with what we find, *when* we find it-if we do," suggested Red.

"Okay then, what about Laura? Do we take her along? Laura-when could you leave if we decide to include you on this expedition?" Jim asked her.

"Tomorrow morning. I'll get my friend Alice to fill in for me here at the diner. She's always willing to earn a little extra since she retired from here last year. Would that be soon enough?"

"What do you say, Jim? Yes or no?" Red asked.

"I say okay. Let's do it! You and I can go see how far the roads will take us and how far a field my Jeep will take us tomorrow when we actually go looking. It'll give us one less day to search for the Lair, but it won't be a total waste of a day."

"Okay then, it's decided. Laura, you get hold of Alice and make your arrangements and Jim and I will go see how much of a hike we'll have to get up to the Lair's location. We'll take the Jeep as far as is possible, but there is going to be some serious hiking involved in this. We'll find out today just how much and get a feel for the mountain."

"You won't get your Jeep any distance off the end of 27," Laura advised them. "The trees are too densely packed up there. There's no room for your Jeep to maneuver between them. There is an old logging road off of 27 that would take you further in, but I doubt if you'd ever find it. It doesn't look like a road anymore and you pretty much have to know where it is or you'll miss it every time, but go anyway and start getting your bearings if you want. Have a look around and if you find that old road, I'll buy your breakfast."

"Deal!" Red exclaimed.

"What's 27?" Jim asked her.

"Access Road 27. It's the only road up into the Father Mountain area," she informed him. "If you are going up Father, that's the only way in."

Laura cleared away their breakfast dishes and Jim spread his topo map out on the table. He followed Access Road 27 with his finger to its terminus. He tapped his finger on the spot on the map.

"This is as far as we go in the Jeep according to Laura. Okay, so where do we go from there? I think up and to the west judging from the Lair map."

After a few more minutes of study, Jim folded the map and the boys paid their bill at the Hummingbird, moving their discussion to the Jeep. They studied the topo map again, checking for any four-wheel drive roads that might lead off of the access road. After several minutes careful study, they determined that Laura had been correct. There were none.

Jim had no problem with hiking a bit, but Red was already having a problem with the altitude at seven thousand feet in Clermont. Comparing the old map Jim had found to the topo map, it appeared that the Lair rested in a small valley at approximately eleven thousand feet. This not only concerned Jim, but also brought up serious questions as to Red's ability to hike at those elevations. Jim was a jogger and in pretty good physical shape, but Red, on the other hand, was a bit of a couch potato. Actually, he was nearly totally sedentary. Even his job at the foundry did not require much movement on Red's part. Red's job at the plant was all a matter of paperwork and no physical activity, while Jim, quite to the contrary, lifted heavy steel all day long. Jim could easily see that Red might have a problem up there. As far as Laura was concerned, she would probably run circles around them both. Jim wasn't worried about her at all, considering Laura looked as fit as she did fancy and was acclimated to this country.

"If there are any four-wheel drive roads up there, Red, they're not on this map. This Access Road 27 gets us in as close as we are going on graded road. We'll just have to take it from there the best we can. Maybe we'll find a four-wheeler road once we get up there, but from what Laura said, that's doubtful."

"Don't worry about me, Jim. I'll be fine. Let's just get going," Red replied.

"Who said I was worrying about you, you buffoon?" Jim asked.

"I can tell what you're thinking. You think this is going to be too rough on a couch potato like me. Right? Sure it is, I can see it in your face and hear it in your voice. *'Why did I ever bring the doughboy along?'* is exactly what you are asking yourself right about now, isn't it? Fess up!"

"Gee, Red. Where did all that hostility come from? Yes, I'm concerned for your well-being, but I don't regret bringing you along at all. If there is something worth sharing up there in the Cats' Lair, you are the one person

that I want most to share it with. We're buddies, and always will be, so calm down a little, please."

"Well, you seem awfully intent on getting in as close as possible. I just thought..."

"Well think again, Red," Jim interrupted. "I want to get in close for my own benefit as well as yours. Neither one of us is acclimated to those altitudes up there. It would be rough on anyone from the Midwest flatlands. Let's just head up there and see what we find. Ready?"

"Ready, and-sorry I snapped at you," Red apologized.

Jim pulled the Jeep onto Main Street and drove out of town in the direction of Access Road 27, which they found easily, seven miles down the road. Thirty-five minutes later they were at the end of the graded access road, sitting at an elevation of about ten thousand feet in total awe of the size and beauty of the forest. They had truly never been anyplace like this in their lives and realized that the photos they had seen in books did not begin to do justice to country like this.

"This appears to be the end of the line, Red. Let's have a look at the map and see where we are," Jim suggested.

Red pulled the map from the glove compartment and they studied it intently. They located the end of the access road and determined that there would be about a two-mile hike to the Lair's valley and all uphill another thousand feet.

"That's going to be some climb," Red said, already exhausted at the thought.

"Don't let the sound of the thousand feet scare you, Red. It's not that much elevation over two miles of ground. It's uphill to be sure, but not *that* steep. And-remember, we'll probably have to walk four miles to cover the two miles on the map. I'm sure there is no way in hell we can walk straight to it. We'll be fine, you'll see. It just *sounds* like a difficult climb when you're thinking ahead to it."

Jim hoped he had allayed some of Red's concerns. It really didn't appear to be such a bad hike, and that was what concerned him. If the hike was as routine as it appeared on the map, why then, was the Cats' Lair unknown to everyone, apparently, other than Gillespie, the farmer from Illinois or Indiana, and whoever drew the map he had found? So far, no one else, including the U.S. Geological Survey seemed to have any idea that such a place, whatever it is, exists. Perhaps the Indian that wandered down off of Father Mountain knew, but there was no proof of that.

But, everyplace has a name, Jim thought. Some places have even more than one name. Some places have an official name and a popular local name, but there is no place that has yet to be discovered, not any more.

"You know, Red. Something is not adding up here," Jim said, climbing out of the Jeep. "Hand me the topo map and the Lair map. I want to compare them again."

"Sure, what are you looking for?" Red asked.

"I'm not sure, but I think I must have overlooked something. The Cats' Lair has to have a name, even if it's something different than the Cats' Lair. Nothing is *unnamed* anymore."

Jim spread the topo map out on the hood of the Jeep and placed the hand drawn Lair map over it. Although the hand drawn map did appear to be drawn roughly to scale, the two maps were not drawn to the same scale so there was no way they would fit neatly over one another. It was a matter of identifying the same points on each map and then superimposing the drawn map onto the topo map.

"Red, there's a small marker in the glove box. I want to double check some things here."

"Sure," Red replied, and fetched the marker for Jim. "What's the problem? I thought you had this all figured out already."

"So did I, but I think I've missed something. I know there's no Cats' Lair marked on this map, but there should be *some* name for the place. If we knew the accepted name, or local name for the place, people might know what we are talking about and shed some light on it for us."

"Who cares? We'll find out all we need to know when we get up there, right? I mean, why bother with the locals around here?" Red asked.

"I was thinking of Laura. If we could put a name to this place that she would recognize, she could probably take us straight to it. She said she has hiked all over Father Mountain. It could save a lot of time and energy if we knew exactly where we were going before we left."

Jim began with the first prominent marking on the Lair map, a switchback bend in a stream that cut horizontally across the map. He located such a spot on the topo map, and circled it. He then picked the crest of Father Mountain as the second point, which he again circled on the topo map. He oriented the Lair map to these two points on the topo map and projected where the X would fall on the topo map. If he was reasoning correctly the Lair should be on the west face of Father Mountain, high up in a small valley. Jim was pretty sure he had it figured correctly, but the

valley didn't appear to have a name. He looked more closely. This area of the map was cluttered with elevation lines all converging on one another at this point, indicating some pretty steep terrain. It also made it very hard to discern any names that may be hidden among the jumble of elevation lines, water features and what have you. He studied the valley intently, turning the map to different angles, until he saw the letter "V". It was the only discernable letter and it was very small.

"Look, Red! The letter "V"! This valley does have a name! I can't make it out with all the clutter in this area of the map. What I need is a frickin' magnifying glass. Let's head back to town and see if we can find a place to buy one."

"Let me take a look," Red replied.

Red leaned over the map and studied the area Jim had indicated to him.

"What you need-is a pair of glasses, Jimbo. It says, 'Lynx Canyon'. There's no frickin' "V" in there! Man, talk about the blind leading the blind. When was the last time you had your eyes checked?" Red asked, laughing.

"Shit," Jim answered. "I didn't realize I was that bad off. Lynx Canyon, huh-Let me see that again-Naw, I still don't see it. Are you sure?" Jim asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure. It's as plain as day. Lynx Canyon-Right there in black and white-Lynx Canyon, with no 'V'," Red confirmed, smiling devilishly at Jim.

"Cool! That has something to do with cats for sure! Let's get back to town and see if that rings a bell with Laura. Maybe she knows the place. Hell, maybe she has been there before. Come on, get in the Jeep and we'll go find out."

They scrambled back into the Jeep and headed back to Clermont, encouraged by their new discovery. Perhaps Laura would know something of Lynx Canyon, perhaps not, but it was something more than they knew a few moments ago.

On the drive back to town, Jim began thinking about the new name they had for the valley indicated by the X on the Lair map. Lynx Canyon. That certainly indicated the presence of cats, much like the name Cats' Lair. Perhaps they were one in the same. He certainly hoped so, but now that the valley had a name, which seemed official, it meant that it was a known place. He suspected as much from the start, but he had hoped he was looking for something not commonly known. Then it hit him. He had touched on it briefly before, but it hadn't registered. Perhaps the Cats' Lair was something *located in* Lynx Canyon, not the valley

itself. Perhaps the valley was generally known, but not the Lair.

Jim pulled the Jeep into the closest parking space to the Hummingbird's front door and jumped from the Jeep almost before it had stopped rolling. He flung open the door to the café and stood, looking around for Laura. He spotted her back at the last booth by the jukebox and rushed to her.

"Lynx Canyon. Ever hear of that?" he asked, in a breathy whisper.

Laura was in the middle of taking an order and held up her finger indicating that Jim should wait a minute. She continued taking the order while Jim waited anxiously.

"Thanks, folks. I'll have your meal out to you shortly."

Turning to Jim, "Now what's this about Lynx Canyon?" she asked.

"Have you ever heard of it?" Jim asked, again.

"Sure, it's lovely up there. Why?"

"Then you've been there?"

"Yes, Jim, twice. What's this all about, anyway?" Laura questioned.

"I think that the Cats' Lair is somewhere in Lynx Canyon," Jim explained.

"Well, if it is, I've never seen it. Of course, it would help to know what the heck the Cats' Lair is supposed to be. Honestly, Jim, I don't think what you're looking for is in that valley. I've spent the better part of five days camped in that valley and I never saw anything you might call the Cats' Lair. Is it some sort of landmark or formation or something like that?"

"I don't know, Laura. I can't tell you anything more than that according to my map it should be in that valley, whatever it is. That's all—Let me ask you this. While you were up there did you ever see any cats? Mountain lions or bobcats or the like?" Jim asked.

"Well, yes. I saw bobcats, quite a few. They seem to favor that valley for some reason. It's probably the remoteness and denseness of it. It's good shelter for them I imagine."

"Yes! See, Laura, I'm assuming the name Lynx Canyon comes from the fact that a lot of bobcats frequent the valley, but I would think the name Cats' Lair suggests that there are a lot of them born and living up there. Perhaps there is a specific part of the canyon where they breed and bear their young. Have you ever seen a place like that up there?"

"No, Jim, I can't say that I have, but then again, I wasn't looking for anything like that while there. I was just camping and enjoying the solitude," she explained.

"That's okay. At least you can take us directly there. That's better than I could hope for before. That will save a lot of time and trouble for us. You are still interested in going, aren't you?"

"Sure, tomorrow morning, early. I've already arranged for Alice to take my shifts for a week. I'm ready to go," she said, enthusiastically.

"Great! Where do we pick you up?" Jim asked.

"At my place, the last house on the left as you're leaving town to the south. It's a yellow brick ranch. You'll see it plain enough."

"What time will you be ready to go? I was thinking about six o'clock, if that's okay?"

"Six is fine, Jim. I'll see you then. Ah-Where's Red?"

"He's waiting in the Jeep, 'conserving energy', or so he says."

"Well, tell him I said hello, okay?"

"Yeah-sure, will do."

Jim went back out to the Jeep where Red had dozed off. He was conserving energy all right. Jim broke the good news to him about Laura knowing where to find Lynx Canyon and even having been there. Red just smiled a weak smile.

"What's wrong, Red. You're not getting cold feet are you? You're still up for this, right?"

"Yeah, sure, Jim. I'm okay. It's just that if Laura already knows about Lynx Canyon, what's the whole point? I mean the mystery is gone. It's there; she's been there, end of story. Nothing."

"No, not at all. She's still never heard of the Cats' Lair or seen anything up there that it might be. *That's* the mystery! It's not the canyon itself. It's the Lair," Jim explained, trying to be as up beat as he could be. "Really, Red-It's going to be cool-you'll see! And-ah-by the way, Laura says 'Hello'."

Red came immediately full awake.

"Really?" he asked.

CHAPTER THREE

The Observers

"Your move, Malic."

"Oh, sorry, Damon. I was thinking about the boys," Malic apologized. "I fear they did not take my story of Carter Elliott seriously."

"Yes, I fear you are right, and furthermore, when Laura told them of Little Hawk, again they were not deterred."

"Our best laid plans, Damon?" Malic commented.

"Yes, Malic. Our best laid plans seem not to discourage these young men," Damon admitted.

"But, still, your idea to involve Laura for her story of Little Hawk was a stroke of genius," Malic said, complementing his mentor. "But, I've been wondering about something. How did Little Hawk escape the jail? You never told me the end of the story."

Damon smiled and winked.

"Damon-You let him out!" Malic exclaimed. "Whatever became of him?"

"I took him far into the forest and told him that the Great Spirit did not want him back in that area again, which, was the truth. The Father didn't want him telling too many more people about his experience."

"Good move, Damon. Still in all, your plan to have Laura convey the story to the boys was a good one."

"It would have been had her story succeeded in dissuading them from continuing their quest. Now, however, I fear that all my cleverness has simply added another of the Kinder to the mix," Damon confessed.

"It might have worked, Damon. Don't be so critical of yourself in this matter. I am sure you'll think of something before it's too late. My move...Bc4."

"Ah-I see your own cleverness is improving...Qh5. Have you been to the window lately?" Damon asked.

"No, not in a while," Malic answered.

"Then perhaps we should go now. I feel a strange need to pay close attention to those two. I believe that if they gain access their youth will drive them further than Carter Elliott's efforts took him. We had better go see what they are up to at this point in time."

Damon pushed back his chair from the table and proceeded from the chamber, followed closely by Malic. They turned right, going down the perfectly cylindrical passage

formed through the smooth gray stone. Their passage was silent, not even their footsteps being audible. Another right turn brought them face to face with Otheon.

"Otheon, good day to you," Damon greeted. "What brings you down into this passage?"

"I have just come from your window, in search of you, Damon. Perhaps you can explain what I have just seen."

"Perhaps, Otheon. What is it that concerns you?" Damon asked.

"The two boys. I have just seen them in their campground and heard them discussing Lynx Canyon. *That* is what concerns me! Their conversation sounded for all the world as if they are still planning a search for the portal. I was under the impression that you were taking care of the matter, Damon."

"Yes, Otheon. Malic and I are working on a solution now. Our first attempts at discouraging them have failed, but we are not through trying by any means. We fully understand the importance of our success in this matter."

"Unfortunately, Damon, you may not use *any means*. As important as this is, please remember that you may only use mistruths, deception, and trickery to achieve your goal. So it is written and must be obeyed."

"Yes, Otheon, we understand the Father's wishes," Damon replied.

"Good. Carry on, Damon."

Otheon walked on, leaving Damon and Malic to consider his words.

"What now?" asked Malic.

"We proceed to the window and watch and listen. Perhaps the boys will give us a clue as to what our next move should be."

Damon and his aide proceeded down the smooth gray corridor, until they came to the Falls of Knowledge, a waterfall within Father Mountain, which separated the rest of Ahveen from Damon's windowed chamber. Damon passed through the falls first and Malic closed his eyes, and then followed.

"When will I ever learn?" Malic asked, facing Damon, dripping wet.

Damon, who was completely dry, smiled and said, "When you do, Malic. When you do. Then and only then will you emerge from the falls as you entered. The answer is within you. Reach inside and find it there. It is all a part of becoming a Guardian. When you have full control of your environment, then and only then can you hope to control

others'. Reach within yourself and eventually you will find the answer, my friend."

"But why must this lesson be so-so wet?" Malic complained, frowning at his inability to remain dry as Damon could do.

"It is simply motivation. When you become tired of getting wet, you'll find the answer."

"I am tired of getting wet, yet I still do. There must be more."

"There is no more, Malic. All the answers you need are within you. They will come," Damon assured him. "They will come."

"May I dry myself now?" Malic asked.

"Certainly, go ahead, but be quick. I wish to check on the boys."

Malic became the bobcat and shook himself profusely, sending droplets of water from his fur glistening down the corridor walls. As quickly as he had become the bobcat, he returned to his own form.

"Feel better?" Damon asked.

"Much," replied Malic, happy to be dry once again.

The Guardian and his aide entered the windowed chamber and looked out into the forest. There was no visible separation between the chamber and the outside world. One entire wall of the chamber was the forest. The appearance was as if one could take one step forward and be in the forest outside. This was, however, an illusion. This was merely the window from which Damon and Malic kept watch over the Kinder. Each Guardian had his own window, focused on the period of time for which he was responsible. It had been this way from the day of creation and would remain this way until the last Kinder breathed his last breath on Earth.

Although the window was a mere illusion, a tool for seeing all at all times, the portal was not an illusion. The portal was the functional means by which the Guardians could enter the world at whatever time in the world's history they chose to do so. Normally, this choice was made by the needs of the Kinder. In the case of the two boys, Red and Jim, the need lately had been to preserve the one-way flow of time.

Both Damon and Malic knew that this emergency had occurred before, once with Little Hawk and then again, with Carter Elliott. In each of those crises Damon's efforts had proved enough to preserve the proper flow, but the boys had him worried. His biggest fear was the obstinacy of youth. Little Hawk had been young, but superstitious. He did not

believe that these twenty-first century boys would have the same fears of the unknown.

Damon focused on the window and the image of the forest blurred, then almost instantly cleared to reveal Red and Jim sitting by their campfire at the KOA campground. Damon listened as the boys discussed their plans for the morning. It became quite clear within minutes that he and Malic had failed thus far to dissuade the boys from their chosen course.

"Malic, my trusted friend, I fear we must try harder. They are not the least bit occupied with fears of the unknown. They scoff at the stories of Little Hawk and Carter Elliott."

"That, Damon, is because they do not yet believe the stories. As you said, they are of the twenty-first century. Superstition does not run their lives. They are from an analytical world of science and proven laws of physics. If they locate the portal and have the courage to enter it, then-when they emerge, they will begin to understand that not all is explained through their science.

Damon stared at Malic. A broad smile slowly formed upon his face.

"Well Blessed Father! My dear Malic, I do believe you are well on your way to graduation. Your observation is worthy of the highest order of Guardians. But, it still behooves us to try to prevent their entry. It is the safest way. Come-Let us finish our game."

Damon turned and passed through the Falls of Knowledge. Malic followed and emerged dry. Damon smiled and turned toward his chambers and the conclusion of their game, while Malic stood motionless, marveling at his dry clothes, and then rushed quickly to catch up with Damon.

"Congratulations," Damon said, as Malic rejoined him.

"Thank you, Damon, but I still do not know how I did it," Malic confessed.

"I never said you would ever understand it or be conscious of how you achieved it. I merely stated that what you needed to know would come from within you. It is accomplished by attaining a higher level of understanding of how all things that are, fit together with one another. I believe your arriving at your understanding of the twenty-first century boys more than likely raised your overall awareness to the required level. Again, congratulations, dear Malic."

"Thank you, Damon. It feels good to reach this level, and-dry. But, Damon, I do have one question to ask about

something I do not understand. Why is it that we never see another Guardian or aide at the window?" Malic asked.

"Because that is my window, assigned to me by Otheon. There are many others, each assigned to a different Guardian, each in turn assigned to a different time period of the world, beginning at creation and continuing throughout eternity. It is very complex, Malic. Don't ask me to explain it. Don't even ask Otheon. Only the Father understands what He created when it comes to this. We merely utilize the gift in the spirit it was intended, to help worthy Kinder in time of peril. We understand how to do this, but we do not understand how it all comes together by the time our efforts reach what is known as the present. Only the Father knows this. We are merely the emissaries of His good will."

"Have you ever met with the Father?" Malic asked.

"I have not. Archangels carry out all communications between Heaven and Ahveen. But, when I am retired to Heaven I trust I will get the opportunity to meet Him. It is something I look forward to very much."

"And I."

Damon stopped and cocked his head as if listening to something in the distance.

"Ah-It is time for meeting. We will have to finish our chess game later, Malic."

"Exactly what is it you hear at this time each day, Damon," Malic asked. "I heard nothing."

"You will. It is the call to the meeting of Guardians. Otheon issues it at this time each day. One day you will hear it, too. Be patient, Malic. It will not be much longer."

Upon entering the hall through the main entry, Malic was overwhelmed as usual. In the relatively short period of time he had been in Ahveen he had not yet grown accustomed to the sight. The hall itself was massive. He envisioned it as occupying the entire center of Father Mountain, but of that he could not be certain. Never the less, it was immense and not unlike a gargantuan cathedral. The ceiling was vaulted of smooth gray stone rising hundreds of feet above his head. On the floor of the hall were rows upon rows of gracefully curving pews stretching for hundreds of feet in either direction forming concentric semi-circles to the sidewalls. There was one large central aisle, which ran from the main entry to the alter, and at least fifty lesser aisles radiating out from the alter like spokes on a wheel. It was an impressive site, but as thousands of Guardians

filled the hall the spectacle became overpowering and breathtaking.

The majority of the meeting itself was not unlike any church service Malic remembered from his years as a Kinder in his homeland of Olin. There were prayers offered, hymns were sung, and Otheon spoke from the pulpit the words of the Father as brought down to him by the archangels. More hymns followed and the meeting always concluded with an update on what was occurring on the outside among the Kinder. This was done for the benefit of the majority of Guardians who were responsible for time rings of the Earth's past. This was of great importance to these Guardians as it helped them understand the results of their efforts in their rings.

The actual nature of time within Father Mountain was simply that there was no past, present, or future. All time was concurrent within Ahveen. This was known as the Complexity, which only the Father understood. It wasn't that a particular Guardian, assigned to a time ring in the Middle Ages, was working in the past. It was simply that his vision was limited to that period. In an effort to help him understand what his deeds performed then, on the outside, meant to the world outside in the present, he needed to understand the state of the world outside which was beyond his vision. The Complexity, then, was the knowledge of how it all melded into a streamlined and even, forward flow of time on Earth.

Following the meeting, Damon and Malic returned to Damon's chambers and concluded their chess game. Damon, as usual, was the victor. Malic then did something that he had never done in the past. He offered to return to the window and check on the boys.

"Thank you, Malic. I'll remain here and work on my journals," Damon said, surprised at the offer. "Do you mind if I ask why you have made this offer for the first time ever?"

"No, not at all. It will be the first time I will remain dry upon entering and leaving the windowed chamber," Malic advised Damon, laughing.

"Oh-I see," Damon said, smiling. "Then by all means, go and enjoy your new talent."

Malic left Damon and traveled the corridor to the windowed chamber, passing through the Falls of Knowledge and emerging dry within the windowed chamber. He smiled. In his former life he never minded getting wet. He remembered swimming and bathing and wave riding in particular, so he never quite understood why he despised it so much here in

Ahveen. The only explanation for his aversion to water was that it must have something to do with his acquired ability to become the bobcat. He seemed to remember, once again from his life among the Kinder, that cats had an aversion to getting wet. Perhaps it was true of bobcats also.

He looked at the window and out to the forest. Concentrating, as Damon had taught him, he focused his thoughts on the boys. The image in the window blurred and then became sharp once again. Their fire had died down, but he could see Red and Jim sleeping peacefully by the fire's dim glow. Malic smiled at the boys and prayed for their salvation.