

## BOOK TWO - CHRISTMAS PRESENT

### CHAPTER ONE

Nothing to crow about



Flissy stared around the darkened room. The candle was still there, the flame guttering deep down inside, still casting a feeble, willowy semblance of light and warmth as though in a losing battle with the encroaching darkness pushing in from all sides. Even so, she was very grateful for the pinpoint of comfort it offered. She looked up at the window and shivered. The storm was battering outside, but for now at least it seemed to have abated slightly. She shivered.

“What a horrid dream! Maybe Grandma was right - I shouldn’t have had quite so many crisps on top of all that chocolate - she said it would give me nightmares.”

From somewhere near the foot of the bed, beyond the reach of the candlelight, came a muffled snoring.

“Rash - is that you?”

A scrabbling of long claws on wooden boards, a huffing and puffing and two faint red dots appeared in the dark, then moving closer resolved into a black, shiny nose, followed by a long hairy muzzle and two big brown eyes. Before she could react a giant pink tongue shot out and covered one side of her face in warm, gooey slobber.

“Yuck, thank yoo-oo. Well despite that I AM pleased to see you. I don’t suppose you had that horrible dream too, did you?”

Rashty shook her enormous head, her long ears flapping loudly like a pair of furry castanets.

“I’ll take that as a ‘No’ - good.”

"I wonder what time it is?" She was reaching for her phone when she remembered she hadn't been able to charge it since the power cut and it was dead as a Dodo for now. Just at that moment, though, she heard a faint, single 'bong' from the grandfather clock downstairs.

"One o'clock then - Happy Christmas Rash!"

The tongue flashed out again, but this time she was expecting it and managed to dodge the worst of the spittle and just caught a brief lick on the tip of her right ear.

"All right - good girl. Gosh it's freezing in here. Maybe, just this once, if I let you up on the bed, it might actually keep me a bit warmer - come on!"

Flissy shifted to her left a little under the bedclothes, shivering as she hit a patch of cold sheet, and tapped the flat of her hand on the bed.

Normally Rashty wouldn't have hesitated to take up such a rare invitation - she saw beds and sofas as much her birthright as any human's - but this time she didn't move. Instead she slowly sat and stared up at the window, her head cocked slightly to one side as though working on a puzzle.

"What is it Rash? Is the storm bothering you?"

Just as Flissy was turning to see what was so interesting outside, there was a loud 'tap, tap TAP' on the glass.

"Jeeeeeeee..." Flissy jumped. "What the h..."

To be fair, nobody expects someone to come tapping on your bedroom window at one o'clock on Christmas morning (not even Santa), and not in the middle of a winter storm, and certainly not when said window is on the first floor some 4 or 5 metres above the ground. Little wonder then, when she followed Rashty's gaze to see a single, black beady eye staring straight back at her, Flissy screeched like a banshee...

In one jump she leapt from the bed and crouched low behind the giant wolfhound, hugging her for protection.

The eye just stared, then turned slightly and there was a second, louder 'TAP, TAP, TAP' on the glass.

"Go away!" Shouted Flissy.

'TAP, TAP, TAP, **TAP!**' If anything it sounded even more insistent.

"Whoever you are, *WHATEVER* you are - what do you want?"

*"Well to begin with you could open this window - do you have any idea how hard it is to hold onto this stupid ledge when it's blowing like this?"*

"Rash? Is that you? Am I still dreaming?"

*"Oraiste has delivered her message of Christmases past. My name is Corvin. I have been tasked with showing you more of the present. Now, if you would be so kind, please just open the window before I damage my flight feathers..."*

"Oraiste? How do you know her Irish name? And why should I let some scraggy crow into my room in the middle of the night?"

The large, black bird (for she could now see that was what it was) shook out its wings, flapping against the glass.

*"For one, you already know why, since you have been on the first part of your journey. For two, I am NOT a crow. I am a Rook. For three our plumage is notably looser than our brother crows and I am trying desperately to hold on to a VERY narrow ledge in the middle of a storm so forgive me if I appear a little 'scraggy'. If we MUST have this conversation can we at least have it inside?"*

'Obviously I haven't woken up yet after all,' thought Flissy. 'And if I'm still dreaming I might as well go with the flow -'

*"Excellent decision. Now, if you WOULD be so kind..."*

Shrugging, Flissy stepped past Rashty and went to open the window latch. This time the wind was not quite so fierce but the window still flew open with a speed that caught her off guard.

"You know it's not very nice to listen in to people's thoughts like that..."

The rook hopped inside, stretched its wings a little and shook its feathers back into place.

*"That's better. Now, if you have an alternative means of inter-species communication to propose I am, in your language 'all ears' - otherwise I suggest we both accept the exigencies of the current situation and get on with it."*

"The what? And what current situation? And what, exactly, are we getting on with?"

The Rook sighed.

*"I had hoped Oraiste might have prepared the ground better for me."*

Here it tipped its head sideways to give Rashty a hard stare from one beady black eye. Rashty returned the stare with a particularly blank look.

*"However, I suppose it should come as no surprise if our undertaking proves fruitless. Humans sometimes seem to have **evolved** an obtuseness to anything outside their peculiar realm."*

"I don't actually understand half of what you are saying - but I DO get the feeling that it's not very nice. Also I am getting very cold standing here. So why don't you just tell me, in plain English please, what exactly is it that you want?"

The Rook hopped agitatedly from one leg to another and shook out it's feathers as if trying to regain some warmth.

*"Want - now there is an interesting word. In fact, if I were to choose one word that sums up all the trouble with humans I think I could do worse than choose 'want'. Want is a double edged sword. You 'want' so many things. Whether you get them or not seems to make little difference to how you behave afterwards. But the more you want, the more you take, the less satisfaction it seems to give you and the greater need it creates elsewhere. What you truly want, what you **lack**, it seems to me, is a better sense of your place in the world. But I forget myself. I am not here to explain - I am here to show you. So, what I 'want' is for you to climb on my back so I can take you to see what needs to be seen, then I can get back to my Rookery and try to weather this storm in a little more comfort."*

"Okay - I think we have very different ideas of plain English - but what I did get was the bit about 'climbing on your back'. Climbing on Rashty is one thing - she's massive, and it's not the first time I've clambered onto her to be honest. But you're well, you're a bird and...small. That's not normal."

*"A bird who can communicate by thought? That's normal? As I hope you might start to learn - all things are a matter of perspective. Take a step into my world and you may see things differently..."*

Against her better judgement Flissy found herself taking a step forward, as Corvin hopped down from the ledge and turned his back to her. Then, contrary to all common sense, she climbed up, and onto his back, locking her arms around his broad, feathery neck.

"I just hope you're better at this flying business than Rashty was..."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Weirder and weirder

Corvin hopped backwards a couple of steps, nearly bouncing Flissy straight off his back. He jumped and flapped his great wings twice. Each time Flissy felt a strong upsurge and marvelled at the power that seemed to flow through his body and out to the very tips of his wings. As they flew through the window, though, a sudden gust of wind caught them. Corvin tipped violently to one side and they dropped several metres before veering away from the house and starting to climb as he flapped hard to regain control.

"Whoa...I thought you were supposed to be the expert at this - I'm beginning to wonder if I wasn't better off with Rashty."

*"Rashty, in case you hadn't noticed, has the benefit of rather more mass than I carry. We have to fly with the wind, not in spite of it - though of late I must admit the air has felt rather less collaborative. Now hold on. We have a great deal of distance to cover if you are to grasp the significance of what you see."*

"So long as I'm back in time for presents. Promise me at least that you are better at landings than Rashty?"

*"I am not sure any promises I made would be worth anything, since there is no bond of understanding between our species. In any case, it does not signify since we will not be landing tonight - you can see everything you need to see from the air."*

As they rose, rather erratically, through the air, still being buffeted by the storm, Flissy clung tight to Corvin's neck and thought about what he had said. This surely must be one of the strangest dreams anyone had ever had of a Christmas Eve - it certainly didn't feel very festive. What was it, she wondered, that she was supposed to see this time. She still couldn't make much sense of what Rashty had shown her in the previous dream. She shuddered when she remembered the wasps swarming after them and hoped there would be nothing like that this time. And if the weather stayed like this she wasn't sure how much she'd be able to see from the air.

Flissy, however, was nothing if not practical - 'Since I'm in this dream anyway I may as well just go with it. If nothing else I'll have a good story to tell my cousin Rosie when she comes over for Christmas dinner' she thought.

After a while she felt the temperature start to drop, though at least the turbulence abated a little, and she tried to bury herself further into his neck feathers she settled into the rhythmic beat of Corvin's wings.

"It's a lot like riding a horse," she mused. "Maybe we should get some stirrups next time..."

*"There will be no next time," snapped Corvin. "Now try to remember why you are here and observe."*

Flissy looked down. She thought she could see outlines of fields and a narrow road below them. Suddenly the fields disappeared and instead there was a uniform darkness. She could just make out faint white lines making their way across it, breaking up and reforming.

"Hey, are we heading out to sea again?"

*"We are heading north, yes."*

Flissy looked down and watched the wave tops forming and reforming on the surface below. It was mesmerising in a way.

Suddenly, she felt herself slipping sideways and with a jerk pulled herself back upright as she realised she must have nodded off at some point. Corvin shook himself as though annoyed. She looked down again. Still the same waves and wave tops.

"How long have we been going exactly? Are we going back to see the Polar Bear? I don't see any ice."

*"As you have only just noticed, there IS no ice, or at least very little of it. If there are any bears they are confined to a few floes in the far north or around the edges of the great land masses."*

"So what am I supposed to be seeing then?" Replied Flissy, now getting more than a little cross.

*"You're supposed to be seeing exactly what you DO see. What you should be noticing is what is not there any more, what has been lost since your last visit."*

"But that was only a few hours ago - how can all that ice have melted in such a short time?"

*"As Oraiste should have explained to you - what you saw was from Christmases past - perhaps twenty or thirty years ago in your timescale, though you are right in one sense, it is still a very short time for the unfolding of such a giant catastrophe."*

Flissy looked down again at the great expanse below her and thought for a while.

"Well, I suppose at least its good news for the Seals?"

Corvin cawed loudly.

*"Hardly. The seals need the ice too, to raise their pups. If the floes break up too soon their young either drown or freeze from being tipped into the sea too soon. I suppose there may be creatures who would eventually benefit, but the pace of the change will cause huge devastation before then."*

"Ok, I get it. The ice is melting, but what does that have to do with me? With everything else going on in the world do you expect me, personally to be responsible?"

*"It's true, you represent only a very small part of the problem. But look around you, look at the sheer scale of it. Can you not imagine just one small part of all this as being your responsibility ? We are all small, and our individual actions are only small, but even huge consequences like this are ultimately made up of equally small events. It is just a matter of making the connection between one small action and another small outcome..."*

Flissy was quiet for a few minutes, staring blankly at the seemingly endless sweep of waves beneath them, while Corvin's wings continued their rhythmic beat, carrying them onwards - but to where?

"I just want to go home now."

*"I am sure. But unfortunately we are not finished. As reluctant as I was to undertake this task we have begun now, and I mean to complete at least my part in it. The Corvidae will not be accused of standing idly by."*

"Corvidae?"

*"The crow family - Rooks (of course), Ravens, Magpies, Crows - one of the five great chains."*

"Ok, you're still talking in puzzles. What chains and who is chained up?"

*"Not those sort of chains. I am talking of the Five Great Chains of Being. All life is ultimately descended from the same, simple creature where the spark began, so we are all, in fact family. The Great chains are those tiers of life who have achieved sufficient complexity to be self-aware, and with that self awareness the capacity to choose and direct their own futures - at least to some degree."*

"So what are they?"

*"I have just explained..."*

"No, I mean the Five - who are the Five, apart from Crows?"

*"Corvidae - not just the crows. Apart from us there are The Muridae, or rats, Hominidae, divided into Apes and Humans, and finally the Coleoidea, perhaps better known as Squid or Octopuses."*

"Squid?"

*"Yes, cuttlefish too, I believe - though I have yet to meet one."*

"So Squid are part of your 'Great Chains of being' but dogs, for example aren't?"

*"It's true dogs can demonstrate a significant level of awareness and intelligence. Rashty, in particular - despite appearances to the contrary - is known for her patience and depth of vision. However, it was decided some time ago that their status as domesticated animals compromised somewhat their capacity for independent thought and action and therefore they were not granted the status of Great Chain. I should also say that of late there has been increased debate as to whether Humans should retain their own status, given their ongoing behaviour."*

"And what has this got to do with dragging me all over the world the night before Christmas?"

*"It was the council of five who decided we should try one last time to intervene, to try to re-establish our relationship with humans."*

"And why me, particularly?"

*"Actually we were looking for your cousin, Primrose. Your Grandparents farm is very close to one of the key portals between our different versions of the world and we have communicated with her before. Unfortunately Oraiste got a little mixed up, and as you were sleeping in Primrose's bedroom picked you up instead."*

"So should I expect visits from an Ape and a Rat next?"

*"No. The Hominidae were unable to find a suitable delegate in time - which is why we seconded Oraiste to our cause. The Muridae voted against intervention - there are those who think they may believe they stand to profit if humans are finally ejected from the Great Chains but that would be a particularly short-sighted failure if it proves true. Your final guide will be Octavian."*

"A squid???"

*"Octopus. And among the finest minds I have ever encountered. You are fortunate indeed that they have found the time to try to help you."*

"Could this dream actually get any weirder?"

*"Perhaps not. But then, let me ask you this: what is weirder, talking to a bunch of 'dumb' animals, or watching your own species turning their supposedly superior 'intelligence' to self destruction?"*

For once Flissy was pushed to find an answer and so, for a while, they flew on in silence - Flissy's head full of ice and Rooks, Bears and Octopuses and the sea, always the sea, rolling apparently endlessly beneath them. Just as she was thinking this must be the least Christmassy Christmas she'd ever had something caught her attention.

Out of the corner of her eye she thought she'd seen something - something that stood out from the rolling darkness all around them. There it was again - a light!

"Look! Over there - there's a light! There must be somebody out here after all."

Silently Corvin banked toward where the faint, slightly greenish light flickered on the horizon."

"What do you think it is?"

*"What is it? The future. Something which does not really belong here, but it is one of the first of many that will follow."*

As they got closer the light, though still not very bright became clearer, one red, one green and in the middle...

"Is that a Christmas Tree?"

*"I believe so."*

"I don't get it, what is that doing out...oh, hold on - it's a ship!"

They flew closer and Corvin wheeled to circle the lights below.

"It's massive!"

The Christmas tree, complete with decorations and fairy lights was mounted on top of a giant superstructure, which in turn sat atop a vast ship, ploughing through the waves as though they were irrelevant.

"What's that doing all the way out here?"

*"It's a gas tanker, en route from Russia to China. There are those who see the loss of the ice as an advantage. For the first time such ships are able to sail via a much shorter, northern route, and will soon be able to do so all year round. As the ice retreats, commerce expands to fill the gap. Before long this will become just one more busy sea superhighway."*

As they circled Flissy could see a faint glow coming from a row of glass windows below the tree which she assumed must be the bridge, the control centre for the ship. Inside she could just make out three or four shadows clustered around dimly lit screens. As she watched they raised tiny glasses and clinked them together before tipping their heads back and draining their drinks in one go.

"It doesn't seem like much of a way to spend Christmas - how many people are on board?"

*"Remarkably few. In future perhaps none will be needed, everything will become self-directed. For now it might as well be - they don't really have a great deal of choice. Many have families to feed. What drives them most of all, though, is belief."*

"Belief in what?"

*"Belief in the future. Belief that they can shape it, at least in part, that they can make it, for themselves and their children, better than today...Come, we've seen enough, it's time to move on."*

As they wheeled away back towards the empty ocean Flissy glanced back over her shoulder at the tiny tree, disappearing into the distance. It looked both lonely and welcoming at the same time.

## CHAPTER THREE

In Plain sight

"I don't get it. Are we going to see the bear again or not? All we've done so far is fly over miles and miles of empty sea..."

Corvin sighed.

*"Have you heard of the concept of 'negative space'?"*

"Are you trying to make me feel stupid?"

*"I am trying to educate you. You can't learn anything if you don't admit what you don't know.*

*'Negative Space' is a term sometimes used in art. Perhaps you've seen that picture that sometimes looks like a candlestick and at others like two people facing each other?"*

"Oh yes! I know that one, we did it at school - some sort of optical illusion."

*"Not exactly an illusion, but definitely related to how we perceive things. Sometimes what we see is defined by what is NOT there, the blank spaces surrounding it, the gaps. If I found a bear, that would be all that you saw. What you need to see is the emptiness that now surrounds any that are left, though the sheer vastness of it is difficult to convey."*

Flissy thought for a while.

"So all that ice - you're saying it's just...gone?"

*"Precisely. Gone. No longer extant. Passed away. Ex-iced."*

"But it's still freezing where we are - you saw for yourself, it was trying to snow at Windmill Farm, and that's a long way south of here I'm guessing."

*"The weather, like the world, is a complex system. A huge part of human development has arisen from your abilities to link cause and effect - that's how you managed to take control of so many aspects of your environment. Unfortunately the power bestowed on you through that link has caused you to grossly overestimate your understanding. In the real world results can very rarely be traced back to a single cause, or even a chain of events - rather there is a complex matrix of actions and reactions, often crossing and interfering with each other. The Arctic has responded particularly strongly to climate change. Elsewhere, the increase in energy held in the atmosphere has led to greater instability in weather patterns..."*

"Meaning?"

*"Meaning observe closely some of the changes that have followed your past actions, but don't assume that means you are fully in control of the future...Speaking of which, I believe we are about to make landfall. Look, and learn to question what you see..."*

Flissy peered ahead and could just make out a smokey smudge on the horizon. As she looked closer she realised the sun was rising behind them.

"Damn! Grandma will be up soon. I should be sitting up in bed opening my stocking presents and getting ready for breakfast."

*"Time is more fluid than you think. Now, observe; tell me what you see, and what you don't see..."*

"I don't want to see those wasps again - that's for sure."

*"You won't. Sadly, the wasps, like the ice are mostly consigned to the past now."*

"What happened?"

*"First, look, then ask."*

As they approached the coastline Flissy saw a gap emerge and thought she recognised the entrance to the giant river she had flown over with Rashty. They were still high above it as they started to fly inland. As she looked down she saw again great swathes of green either side of the murky brown water. There was something different this time though. She thought the colour looked different and more...uniform somehow.

"Can we go down a bit? It's hard to see much detail from up here."

*"We can go closer, but as you'll see, I'm afraid the truth is there is not so much detail to be seen now..."*

Banking to their left Corvin descended towards the land on what she worked out must be the southern bank. They sped up as they got lower and flew over kilometer after kilometer of open grassland.

"The trees! The trees have all gone!"

*"Not all, to be sure, but most of them, yes."*

"I can see some cattle - so is this all farm land now? That can't be all bad surely? Grandma lives on a farm after all, and we need farmers to grow the food we eat."



*Not farmland - ranches. They only raise cattle here now. And no, it has not been bad for the large corporations who own and run the ranches. There were some farms, but they too have mostly gone or moved to the margins - we will see one before we leave."*

*"So what happened?"*

*"At first, when the forest was cleared the land was rich and fertile - it was possible to grow all sorts of crops on even a small parcel of land. But after a while the nutrients in the soil were depleted and rain washed away what was left. The only thing the soil would support was grass and huge tracts of land were needed to raise any significant numbers of cattle. Eventually the land may even cease to support that."*

*"But how did all that happen in such a short space of time?"*

*"I told you, time is fluid. Humans tend to impose a very different pace of change on the environment - one based around their own, relatively short individual lifespans. Nature generally works to a much slower clock and does not react well to being pressed."*

They flew on, the great grassy plains stretching out in much the same way as the sea had extended beneath them earlier.

*"Does it ever stop?"*

*"The plain? Yes, of course. We will reach the current edge of the forest soon. The process of transformation however shows no sign of stopping so far - if anything it continues to accelerate."*

*"So what will happen? If it carries on like this?"*

*"That is a question for Octavian, I'm afraid. My task is to show you what has already happened. You will have to ask him on your next journey. Ah - I see we are nearly at our destination - pay attention, and tell me again what you see."*

*"Over there! Yes. I can see some trees I think."*

Corvin banked slightly and they started descending towards where a thin scattering of trees was emerging in the distance.

As they got closer Flissy saw that the trees soon thickened into proper forest further in. Here and there she could see smoke rising from small fires scattered along the edges. As they got closer Corvin turned and started following the border of the forest.

*"What are they burning?"*

*"They are gradually clearing more and more of the forest. They fell the trees then burn them to free up more land. Farming is difficult here though - as I mentioned the land does not stay fertile for long. Now that the wasps are gone they have to use more and more chemicals to stop the other insects feeding off what they plant."*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"Wasps are top predators of the insect world. There are millions of different species. For every caterpillar or beetle out there feeding on plants there are probably two or three different species of wasp who prey on them - or used to, before they were driven out."*

*"So you're saying wasps are actually useful?"*

Corvin let out a harsh, mocking caw.

*"Useful! Does every species' survival always have to depend on its utility to the human race? They are neither useful nor useless - they are wasps. They live, feed, breed and die - the same as you, me and every other creature. Should there not be a place for them based on that alone?"*

Flissy thought for a while as they tracked along the edge of the forest. Though the fires were each quite small they seemed to be everywhere.

*"So you're saying it's like a vicious circle - they clear the land, but that makes it infertile, they drive out the wasps so they need more chemicals which kills more wasps - are you saying this is what's melted the ice?"*

*"I am not saying anything of the sort. I can only show you what is currently happening. In any case it is never going to be quite that simple. There are other aspects that you should be aware of."*

*"Such as what?"*

*"I am about to show you..."*



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Unforeseen

As she looked down again Flissy spotted a small hut in the middle of a clearing below. The hut was surrounded by a patchwork of fields and a number of pens for various animals. Corvin swooped low over the hut then suddenly banked left and flew directly towards the denser part of the forest.

"Where are we going now?"

*"To the battlefield. Life always gets more interesting at the borders of change. It's change, if you recall that stimulates evolution. I want you to see one of the ways in which life responds to the changes humans force upon it."*

Corvin ducked and weaved between the trunks of a few large trees then quickly climbed and landed on a thick branch just below the top canopy.

"Ok, what am I looking for? You did say the wasps had gone, didn't you? I really don't fancy getting stung again..."

*"They are long gone, I'm afraid. Look around you."*

As Flissy stared through the branches and her eyes adjusted to the dimmed light she started to notice a patchwork of shadows beneath some of the branches.

"Over there - those dark patches. Are they some sort of fruit?"

*"Not quite - most of the fruit has gone now. They are bats."*

"Err - they're not Vampire bats, are they? I've heard of those. Don't they suck your blood?"

*"No. Humans do love the macabre, don't they? I wonder if that forms part of your self-destructive urges... No, vampire bats are relatively rare and they generally feed off cattle rather than humans. These are fruit bats - purely vegetarian."*

"They still look a bit creepy. So what's special about..."

She caught a look out of the corner of Corvin's beady black eye.

"Let me re-phrase that. Why are you showing me fruit bats?"

*"Now look down and tell me what you see."*

"O.k. Not much. Some leaves, bushes, looks like some fruit that's fallen off the tree. Oh wait, hold on a minute. Look - there's a pig, isn't it?"

"Correct. The farmers graze their animals in the forest where they can find some of the fruit that falls naturally from the trees."

"So what else am I looking for?"

*"Something which is too small to see, but which can have an inordinate impact on the world as you know it."*

"I'm not following..."

*"Do you know how humans test their medicines? They begin by using mice. It may surprise you to learn that you share rather a lot of your physiology with the Muridae's small cousins."*

"And...?"

*"Bats are in many ways just mice with wings. Except these bats have been isolated in the wild for many, many years. In that time they have developed their own ecology and, in common with most species, learned to live with multiple other life forms - including some too small to see, even with a microscope - what you would call 'diseases'. As humans push further and further into the forest they are not just displacing visible species - they are pushing whole ecosystems into collision with each other."*

"I'm not following."

*"The bats carry a number of viruses, not previously exposed to the outside world. The bats eat the fruit. In common with most creatures who eat, they subsequently poop. The poop drops to the ground, some of it landing on the fruit which has already fallen. The pigs eat the fruit. The pigs share a space with, and are eventually consumed by humans. The clash of these systems creates an environment which offers new opportunities for viruses to mutate, perhaps even to jump species..."*

"So they can be introducing whole new diseases to the world?"

*"Exactly. Viruses want to live too, you must understand. If you push nature she will push back, and in ways which are often impossible to predict."*

Flissy looked around again, noticing more and more of the dark shapes hanging below the branches of the tree.

“Maybe its better if we don't hang around here too long...”

“You're right. And we have one more visitation to make before we take you back.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Crossing the line

Corvin stepped off the branch and allowed himself to fall vertically for a few seconds before spreading his wings and soaring back out towards the great plain. It was both terrifying and thrilling at the same time.

"I could get used to this flying business," thought Flissy.

*"Please don't," replied Corvin. "I much preferred humans when they were confined to the ground."* Going back they seemed to cover the ground much more quickly and almost before Flissy noticed they were back out to sea.

"So is that how the Pandemic started?" Flissy was still mulling over what she had learned about the bats.

*"By 'THE' Pandemic I presume you mean the most recent viral outbreak among humans. Possibly. I am certainly not wise enough to say. Quite likely something triggered an evolutionary jolt to the system which led to a new life form particularly well suited to exploiting your urban lifestyle. Perhaps it was always going to evolve that way anyway. Most of life is about probabilities rather than binary, yes or no events. It may be that your actions just made it more likely to occur in a shorter timescale. You don't like it much when you find a life form that refuses to be subdued, do you?"*

"It **killed** thousands, possibly millions of people!"

*"Just as many millions of birds have been killed by numerous outbreaks of avian influenza. The virus is only following the same principles of conquest and expansion as appear to drive you humans. Blaming something as unconscious as a virus for causing hardship is a peculiarly human response. At least there are signs that you are starting to learn you can't always simply eradicate another life form because it threatens your view of your own precedence."*

Flissy shivered. The thought of more deadly viruses was a scary one. At the same time she noticed the temperature starting to drop again as the sky darkened and the wind started to increase.

"It feels like we're getting closer to home again, at least."

Despite looking forward to being back home Flissy felt depressed and deflated by what she had seen.

"I'm still not clear what I'm supposed to do about all this stuff you're showing me."

"It's not my place to tell you what to do. My task is simply to make you more aware. Perhaps a view of Christmas yet to come will help guide your thoughts and decisions. But we are not yet finished with the present. There is something unfolding much closer to your own home which you need to see."

"Where are we now? I can still only see the sea, but by the looks of the waves it's much rougher now."

*"You call this the **English** Channel. The French call it 'La Manche' - the sleeve. The birds and sea creatures who inhabit it think of it in entirely different terms of course."*

Flissy held a little tighter and felt Corvin's wings flick up and down as he tried to compensate for the buffeting of the wind, gusting increasingly fiercely all around them.

"Surely there's nothing to be seen out here in this weather. I can't believe anyone (or anything) else is mad enough to be out here when it's like this, let alone on Christmas morning."

*"The demands of human commerce are unrelenting - especially when it come to feeding the festival of consumption you call the Christmas 'holiday'. These sea lanes are full of ships moving raw materials, food and manufactured goods from every part of the world to satisfy your desires for something special to eat, drink or gift to someone. But those are all large ships, relatively untroubled by the stormy waters. We are looking for something altogether different - a minuscule cog in the giant political and economic machine, a tiny spec in the ocean."*

"Well I can't see anything..."

For a moment, Corvin hesitated.

*"Nor I, in fact...perhaps we are already too late..."*

"No, wait - hold on - over there! I thought I saw something. A flash of orange. It's gone again now. Can we get closer?"

*"I will try. It's not easy to navigate in these conditions, and I am not used to carrying passengers."*

Flissy thought Corvin sounded annoyed - possibly because she had spotted something before he had? Whatever, it wasn't as though she'd asked to be taken along."

As the waves rose and fell beneath them Corvin manoeuvred in the direction Flissy had pointed, flapping hard against the force of the wind which whistled around them.

"There! Look!" A flash of orange again, bobbed up into view then dropped out of sight again behind the dark seas.

"What IS that anyway?"

*"Not what, who. It's a life jacket - though of rather limited value in these conditions."*

"You mean it's an open boat? Out in this weather? Did one of the bigger ships sink? Is it a lifeboat?"

*"Nothing has sunk, not yet at least. And I suppose it is a lifeboat of sorts, though launched for very different reasons."*

"There! Look, there it is. My god..."

Flissy looked on in horror. What looked like a giant inflatable dinghy was being thrown around by the waves like a toy in a child's bath. Worse, it was full - every square centimeter - rammed with people squeezed in on top of each other. Most, though not all, were wearing a motley collection of life jackets - the orange flash that Flissy had first spotted. As she watched the little boat climb a huge wave she noticed how low it sat in the water, water which was splashing in over the sides. Some people were furiously baling, clearly fighting a losing battle trying to empty the water out as fast as it was rushing in. Others held their mobile phones to their ears, obviously trying to call for help. A single small motor at the back appeared to give them some sort of steering but was completely ineffectual at making any headway against the wind.

"We have to help them!"

*"What do you suggest? I can't carry them. Would you like me to drop you into the boat so you can help bail?"*

"Now you're just being ridiculous - and mean. There must be something we can do. Isn't somebody going to rescue them?"

*"They are already in touch with both the English and the French authorities. I believe there is a debate currently ongoing as to which side of the line they are on."*

"Line, which line?"

*"The dividing line which separates the territorial waters of each country. The imaginary line which runs through the middle of the sea. The line which is used to judge whose responsibility they are."*

As Flissy watched she noticed a small group of figures huddled at the back of the boat, holding tightly to each other. A woman in a headscarf with three children, two slightly larger and one smaller, clasped tight to her chest.

"Those aren't...that's not the family Rashty showed me...is it?"

*"Perhaps, perhaps not - does it matter?"*

"Of course it matters! They were really happy. They had a nice home, they were cooking a lovely meal when I saw them - what happened?"

*"War, drought, hunger, politics, economics - who knows? It boils down to human beings' apparent willingness to destroy what they have worked so hard to create. Don't ask me why they do it - I'm afraid it's beyond my simple animal brain. All I know is the consequences. People like these find themselves clamped between despair and hope: despair that they have nothing left to lose, hope that there might just be a better life somewhere other than where they come from. Like most vulnerable creatures they are also victims of predators, who feed off them for their own gain. They are buffeted by mighty forces, way beyond their control as much as that small boat is buffeted by the wind and waves, and trying, in their own small way, to steer a way through it as best they can."*

"Time to go."

"What? Wait, no. We can't just leave them here!"

*"Why not? There are five, ten, twenty such boats making, or trying to make this crossing every day. What would you do? Most, though not all, make it across or are at least picked up by rescue ships. What happens to them when they reach the shore, of course is another matter."*

"Can't we at least wait and see if someone turns up to help them?"

*"Why? What difference will it make to you, or to them? You have seen what you need to see. Come, time is pressing and I have to deliver you to Octavian for your final visitation."*

## CHAPTER SIX

## A drop in the ocean

Corvin flapped hard and wheeled away from the small boat as they climbed back into the air.

"Wait! STOP! You can't just abandon those people there."

A cold black eye stared at her as Corvin turned his head slightly to look back over his shoulder."

*"You forget your place. I am a Rook. It's not in my domain to either abandon or rescue them. That's for humans to enact. In reality they have already been abandoned, and many times over. They were abandoned by the humans who started a war. They were abandoned by those who destroyed their economy through corruption, greed or incompetence. They were abandoned by those who sought reassurance or power in tribal, religious or racial affiliations, rather than in the common struggle to stay alive. They were abandoned by those who sought to make a quick profit for themselves whatever the cost to others. They were abandoned hundreds of years before they were born, by people who ruthlessly exploited the countries their ancestors came from, or innocently dug in the ground aiming to improve the lot of themselves and all mankind by burning reserves of sunlight - stored over millions of years and consumed in moments - improvements that they themselves still seek. They were abandoned by people who thought an imaginary line served somehow to divide 'us' from 'them'. If they are abandoned now, it is just a case of being ignored one more time in a long, long history of ignorance."*

Flissy turned and looked back, trying to spot any sign of the small, dark boat or the smallest flash of orange, but all she could see was line after line of long, dark waves.

She sniffed and used her sleeve to wipe a large, salty tear from her eye.

"I want to go home. NOW!"

*"I told you - we are not yet finished and we are already late. I will have to deliver you directly to Octavian or you are in danger of missing your final visitation."*

"I don't care about Octavian, whoever he is, or about any of your 'visitations'. I've had enough now. I just want to go back and enjoy Christmas with my family."

*"Of course, and you shall return in good time. But first you must see something of Christmases yet to come. Now, this looks as good a spot as any- farewell !"*

"What? Wait, what are you DOING?"

Without any further warning Corvin flipped over onto his back and started falling towards the sea below. Flissy clung to his neck, her feet dangling in the air, struggling desperately to hold on.

Slowly, though, her fingers started to slip apart.

"No, no, no, no, no, no NOOOOOO!"

Then she was alone, falling through the wind and rain. For a moment she thought she might have caught a glimpse of a pair of black wings, beating their way back into the air above, her, then it was gone. With a great crash she plunged into the sea. Had she been able to breathe the shock of the sudden, bitter cold would have taken her breath away.

At first she thought she might bounce back up to the surface. She watched as a line of tiny bubbles streamed up past her and disappeared into the night. But instead of re-surfacing, she just kept descending, further and further into the cold and the dark below.