

THE MAGPIE AND THE RAT

CHAPTER TWO

The Captain woke to a windless day, not even a ripple on the surface, yet the ship was sailing at eight knots. He went to the mess deck.

He took his meals with the crew except in the evenings, when he ate in his cabin. The old man was in the galley, sitting in the same place as he was the night before, his staff by his side, a faint green light coming from its handle. The magpie was perched on the ledge, watching the pot of breakfast bubbling.

The crew, who were normally chatty, were silent as the Captain took his seat. Together they looked at him, and then at the empty chair. Was the food bad? Had the sailor been poisoned? The confused Captain asked,

‘What is it?’

He was told the ship had been thoroughly searched. How could a competent sailor fall overboard on a flat sea? There hadn’t been a drunken brawl. The man was well liked.

A raven, croaking with short, high-pitched bursts, flew from the upper deck and perched on the back of the missing sailor’s chair. It was followed by the old man gliding to the table, his long coat flowing behind. He placed a bowl of porridge in front of the raven as it hopped to the table. It ate quickly, then flew to the main deck just as the magpie and black rat appeared.

The Captain was dumbfounded – and fearful. What was a raven, a portent of misadventure, doing on his ship? The sailors had warned him of evil when they sailed into port for repairs. With anger welling, he demanded they search again.

The magpie flew slowly around the mess deck. The Captain walked towards the galley and was about to ask if the old man knew they had lost a sailor, when the magpie told him that all was well, and to go on deck.

The crew were back at work. There was little to do. How was the ship able to make eight knots without wind? The raven was perched high on one of the cross members.

Ahead, storm clouds were building. The Captain hurried to the bridge and found the helmsman had been replaced by the rat standing on one of the spokes, occasionally adjusting the ship’s course. Together they watched the black cloud as it continued to expand. With a wrinkled brow, the Captain took

the wheel. The ship was sailing directly into the most active part of the storm where bursts of blue light flashed across the sky.

The black rat had grown to reach the size of a large man. It bared its teeth, and the Captain stepped back. Its eyes distended as they threw green rays onto his chest. The rat held the ship steady, driving it directly towards the most intense part of the storm. Following the instructions in his head, the Captain nodded as he left the bridge.

Arising from a deep sleep, he again went to the mess deck for breakfast, remembering nothing of the argument on the bridge by the wheel.

The only sound was the slurping of food. The men looked as one to the Captain as he entered, then to the two empty chairs. The Captain had barely made himself comfortable when two ravens flew past, each selecting one of the chairs to perch on.

The Captain's trance was broken by the old man gliding to the ravens. He watched as he filled their bowls with porridge. He returned with a very large bowl of steaming gruel which he gave the Captain. The magpie was circling the room just below the upper deck.

'Eat your breakfast.'

Breakfast finished, the crew filed out in silence to start the day's work. On arriving at the bridge, the Captain was met by the rat preening its whiskers as it balanced on the wheel spokes. The sea was flat, the sails slack, and the ship still sailed at eight knots.

The compass was showing the ship travelling on a course well away from Biddlecup. There was something not right, but the Captain couldn't put his finger on it. Was it the heading, or that the black cloud with the blue flashes had remained the same distance away? By now, the ship would normally be riding giant waves whipped up by the savage storm.

Or was it that he had lost his ship to the old man who used the magpie or the rat to give him orders, orders that he received in his head, not from his ears? Never once had he seen or heard the old man speak, other than through his mediums.

Every day after breakfast, he went to the bridge, and was met by the rat, sitting on the steering wheel, as it squeaked quietly, telling him to go to his cabin.

On the twelfth day there were twenty ravens at breakfast, each perched on the back of a chair replacing one of the sailors. The old man glided in from the galley and suddenly all the bowls were filled at the same time. The ravens, croaking in unison, flapped to the table and ate hungrily. The mess deck was lit with a green light. When the first raven appeared, the light was weak. Now it was strong, even the raven's black feathers reflected green. And the storm clouds were still the same distance from the ship.

Each raven ate its bowl of porridge using the mannerisms of the sailor that it replaced. In the chair where the Bosun would sit, the raven ate in a robust, hurried manner as did the bosun. One of the riggers was teased for his dainty manners, as indeed was the raven who ate delicately, almost sipping its porridge with an aloof attitude. There was a sailor who sat furthest from the Captain's chair. He was always annoying his neighbours, and so it was with this raven, poking its beak into the bowl to its left then into the bowl to its right. Through the squawking, The Captain recognized the voices of the sailors sitting either side of the bully.

'Eat your own, you've enough for two.'

Determined to talk to the old man, The Captain walked towards the kitchen. As if his mind was being read, the magpie chortled its commands.

'To the bridge, to the bridge, the rat is busy today. Steer the ship.'

The Captain obeyed. The sails had been furled. The rat hopped off the wheel and raced from the bridge, telling the Captain,

'Hold the heading steady. Soon it will be very rough, their first attempt to defeat the old man. We're relying on you – keep the faith.'

He grasped the wheel and immediately tried to turn away from the storm clouds and put it back on course for Biddlecup, but it wouldn't move. He wondered why the rat had told him to hold it.

Ahead, the black cloud, which now extended across the whole horizon, was enveloped by a pulsating blue light. It frequently emitted flashes of white light; shafts so bright that, to stare at them would blind any who did so.

The ship was now sailing inside a large green coloured bubble. The temperature was a little above freezing, but the Captain was sweating. Gentle

waves lapped the ship's hull whereas beyond the green there were huge waves everywhere.

It would be death for any that sailed in that sea. The deafening noise from the howling wind penetrated the bubble as the waves crashed against the green cocoon, its skin flexing to breaking point. The Captain thought many a time it would yield, but each thrust from the hurricane was repelled.

Ahead of the ship, the twenty ravens were flying in a tight group, inside but close to the edge of the bubble. The magpie was whirling, herding them toward the most active part of the black cloud, helped by the rat nipping at the tail feathers of any that fell behind.

Suddenly, inside the protected area, spikes of rock rose from the sea blocking the ship's path. The further the ship travelled the more numerous they became. Guided by the ravens, the wheel responded as the Captain steered around them. As well as multiplying, the spikes of rock moved with the ship, forcing the Captain to continually look for a safe passage. If the ship hit a rock at this speed it would be lost.

With no crew, he couldn't call for help and the rat had disappeared just when, together they might have stood a chance of threading their way through the jagged rocks.

In front of the ravens, the seas were running fiercest, massive waves almost blotting out the storm clouds which stayed always the same distance from the ship.

Fighting the sea as if something was working the rudder against him, the Captain lost his balance and fell to the deck. As he took hold of the wheel again he looked behind the ship.

The seas were calm. White clouds drifted over the ocean, the sun poured down, the water sparkled. Birds playfully flew through the clouds and dived, feeding from the water's surface. If he could turn the ship around they would reach safety. Try as he might, he couldn't move the rudder more than enough to go around the latest rock. In his head, he heard the voice of the old man speaking to him directly, not through the rat or the magpie.

'Don't look back, Captain, there is no salvation there.'

To his credit he never gave up the struggle though the rocks multiplied, and it was increasingly difficult to find clear water. The ravens from their high vantage point, were also finding fewer paths to guide the Captain to.

The old man glided up the steps to the bridge. Both he and his staff were glowing intensely, the green light almost blinding the Captain. The air had suddenly become warm like a mid-summer day. He had brought a bowl of piping hot meat stew. As he spooned the food into his mouth, the Captain heard the voice of the magpie.

‘Not long now. Keep following the ravens. The enemy is weakening.’

At that moment a massive black rock appeared dead ahead, a wall that couldn't be avoided. The Captain prepared for the collision by gripping the wheel even tighter, his white, knuckles a contrast to his weather-beaten skin. He looked for the ravens, desperate to find the path around this monster. The bubble was now striped in green and blue, the colours swirling around each other giving the image of many huge pythons entangled in a fight to the death.

All the rocks were covered in a deep blue. Where were the ravens to show him the safe path? Suddenly, they appeared at the very top of the bubble in the shape of a spear and dived, gathering speed as they drove deep into this wall of granite, splitting it in two. The Captain had his passage.

The blue light faded until it was but a memory, and the green strengthened. As the ship went through the gap made by the ravens, the rock, its shiny sides giving a canyon effect, subsided into the ocean. The bubble was no more, all was as calm as a mill pond, and there was not a rock to be seen. The Captain collapsed.

The next morning, he woke in his cabin. His arms were stiff, his shoulders hurt as he walked to breakfast. He was hungry. He vaguely remembered a dream with birds flying about, rough, multicolored seas, and big rocks. But why were his arms and shoulders aching, his legs too?

He had an uncomfortable moment thinking he would see ravens as he entered the mess deck. Nonsense, he told himself, but nonetheless was pleased to see all twenty sailors having breakfast, each with his quirky behavior; one bullying his neighbor's, looking for more food, one eating daintily and so on.

Each sailor's head was caked in dried blood, with a large bump on top. Their noses were swollen and bloody, their lips distended. Clothes were encrusted

with salt as if they had been exposed to spume over a long period. The Captain remembered his odd dream.

As he sat in his chair, the black rat gave him a large bowl of porridge.

‘Well navigated, Captain. We nearly lost her a couple of times. You did well. That was a test wasn’t it lads?’

The rat looked at the crew who nodded their damaged heads in acknowledgment. The Captain choked, thinking he must make more effort to remember his dreams as the crew gave three cheers.

The Captain asked the rat where was the old man?
Again, the voice in his head told him.

‘He’s resting. The enemy was strong. It exhausted him. He needs to regain his strength, before the next test.’

The Captain noticed the green light was very weak.