

THE MAGPIE AND THE RAT

CHAPTER THREE

Determined to challenge the old man, the Captain approached the galley, mindful of his contract to take him and his cargo to Biddlecup. With the omen from the ravens now past, and indeed the ravens no more, his crew returned, if somewhat the worse for wear – he must ask the old man about their damaged heads – he intended to exert his authority and remind the old man that he was on the ship as a cook, not to go waving beams of green light about.

With jaw set firmly and a resolute attitude, The Captain approached the old man who was seated as before, an ornament in the corner of the galley. The magpie was perched on a ledge, softly chortling, as it watched the pot quietly bubbling. Exquisite aromas sweetened the air.

‘We’re well off course for Biddlecup. You told me you wanted home to finish your days.’

The old man remained impassive, his gnarled hands loosely holding the claw shaped handle of his staff which, for the moment, was emitting very little light. The magpie chortled.

‘Not long now, Captain. Another challenge or two. Your men were brave. Get some rest.’

The green light from the staff intensified as the man-sized black rat scurried into the galley. The magpie fluffed its feathers as it perched on the rat’s head, its chortling sharp, a command.

‘Rest Captain, I need you rested.’

Fighting off an unexplained desire to return to his cabin, the Captain followed the rat to the bridge where, balancing on the spokes of the wheel, it continued its infuriating whisker preening habit.

‘Rest, Captain, rest.’ Spoke the rat, as its eyes shone a strange light on the Captain’s face.

‘We see the challenges ahead.’

Clutching onto anything he could reach, the Captain staggered to his cabin, his mind a blank.

Whilst walking to breakfast, having woken from an undisturbed sleep, the Captain paused to watch an albatross circling high above the ship. He recalled seeing a flock of ravens flying in a similar position. He knew they did something, but what? He could not remember.

Instead of receiving the sailors' greetings for the day, the Captain was confronted by huge bird like creatures busily eating breakfast in silence, each one sitting where a sailor would normally be.

Their oversized wings were tucked neatly against their bodies. Their powerful necks would lever tremendous force when their hooked beaks ripped their prey to pieces. Each bird's two arms, positioned just forward of the wing joint, was capped with five sharp claws. The two eyes, set wide apart and above the beak, swiveled independently. The Captain saw in the battle to come, that the eyes emitted a white light that burnt and blinded whatever it struck. Their feet had five extended nails, each razor sharp, and slightly curled.

He sat down in shock. The creatures hissed in harmony – gentle. Their shining eyes, the light now soft so not to blind, looked upon him with affection.

Trust, he thought ... trust. They know something. He felt no fear, though he should have. They were awesome fighting machines, and he didn't control them. He ate and left.

With some discomfort, as a sense of something in the past struggled to break through a wall of amnesia, he avoided the galley, and went to the bridge where the rat was in its usual position, atop the wheel.

'All good today, Captain. I'll call you. Get your rest.'

Glancing at the chart as he left the bridge, the Captain noticed objects, highlighted by different colours, placed separately along a thick straight line. The first drawing showed spikes of black rock. Seeing them jolted the Captain's mind, and a little of yesterday's battle peeked into his conscious. The next picture was of animals he had never seen before. After that, the items were blobs placed at various distances from each other. The bank of black cloud, drawn with bolts of blue lightning, was at the edge of the map. A symbol representing a ship was placed approximately half way between the black spikes of rock and the animals. The ship's compass showed it following the black line.

He left the bridge. The magpie flew around his head.
'Sleep Captain, you'll need your sleep.'

Before he was lost to sleep, the Captain wondered, was this preparation for the next battle part of the old man's salvation, or indeed his. He was asleep before he could think of past actions that might call for redemption.

He woke to the rat tugging at his sleeve, the magpie flapping over his head, and the green light brightening the darkest corners of his cabin.

'Quickly, Captain.'

The urgency in the magpies cawing, ominous. No lullaby or chortling now. Fury rained as he climbed to the bridge, the green light all but blinding him. The wheel was being forced violently from side to side as something bashed the rudder.

Inside the bubble, the sea was choppy and frothing. Outside it was calm, just gentle waves slopping against the membrane, the sun bathing all in its warming glow. The black cloud still blocked the horizon.

The bubble had been compromised.

The ship was indeed in peril as the Captain lunged towards the wheel. It took him several attempts before he was able to grab it, nearly snapping his left wrist as the spokes whirled past his grasping hands.

He steadied the wheel, needing all his strength to hold it against some extraordinary, unsighted force that fought for control of the rudder. One of the birds he remembered seeing in the mess room, flew past dodging around a mast with the strangest snake in pursuit. Another of his crew landed on the snake's tail. Using its clawed feet and hands, it shredded the animal before it could devour his sailor mate. This gave the first sailor time to turn and, cleverly avoiding its rows of needle sharp teeth, ripped out the single eye planted in the middle of its forehead above its cavernous mouth. It fell to the deck with a thud that wracked the ship.

The sailors, with their short bodies and powerful wings, looked to have the advantage, being more maneuverable than the snakes, whose smaller wings prevented them from staying aloft for long periods. Their bodies, measuring the width of a large man's torso and about the length of eight men standing head to toe, were often tangled in the rigging.

The bow lifted high then plunged to the sea, submerging for a moment as the Captain fought to hold the ship steady. The sky was crowded as the war raged above. The Captain now clearly remembered the rocks and the ravens. That was a child's game compared to this massive battle. What was being protected? Why was such power being wielded to stop a wizened old man from seeking to die in peace in his own country?

The Captain continued his fight for control of the rudder as many snakes dived under the sea. Fighting in pairs, two of the crew with wings folded, dived after them. The sea turned red with blood and lumps of snake bubbled to the surface.

The hull was being hit with powerful thrusts of the snakes' tails. The noise was deafening, screeches new to him, pierced his ears, making him momentarily deaf. Nearer the bank of cloud, the green light faded and turned blue, where the snakes dominated. Around the ship, the colour reflected the state of battle, sometimes strongly green, sometimes blue, but in the main, it was a mixture of both. Gradually the blue light faded, and the green light intensified. The damaged ship was again safe inside the bubble. Outside, whatever was driving the enemy's snake army, vented its rage. Its wrath was there for all to see as monster waves crashed against the green dome. They were so powerful that remnants of the snakes, used as missiles, were flung viciously against it, the final effort to stop the old man's advance.

A sore loser, but a powerful one, the Captain observed as he collapsed onto the deck. Early next morning, he woke to see the tip of the black rat's tail disappear through the cabin door.

Had he woken him? Were there more challenges today? The sky was clear, the green light, dull. He forced his aching body as he staggered to the mess deck. The ship's crew were eating silently. Today he remembered the detail of yesterday's battle with the snakes. The old man was cautiously introducing the Captain to his world.

There were only 18 sailors at the table. Two of them had arms missing, and three had their lower jaw ripped away. There was no raven, or creature at the empty chairs. As he sat, the Captain noticed half of his chair was bathed in blue light, the other half green.

After breakfast, the ship's company went about their tasks, the two one armed men, helping as they could. There was little to do as the ship sailed itself, but there was considerable damage to the hull where the snakes had thumped their massive tails into it. As he passed by the galley, the Captain saw the magpie

perched on the ledge, one eye cocked to the bubbling pot, his feathers ruffled. He wasn't chortling, and the old man was gone.

There was a bad list to port, and the Captain bowed his head as he walked to the long boats and started to call his crew to abandon ship. She wouldn't stay afloat much longer.

He was sad with a heavy heart as he remembered the two good men who had suffered an honourable death when valiantly fighting the evil. Or was it the good? The captain wasn't yet sure who had hired him.

The rat blocked his way.

'Not today, Captain. More work for you and your crew. We'll repair your ship.'

The ship was lifted out of the water. It now rested on dry land, propped up by stays. There were fresh cut timbers to hand. The Crew clambered down the ladders and, started repairs. The strength of the protective dome was being tested by a pencil thin ray of blue light coming from the bank of black cloud, as it probed for weaknesses.

The Captain went to the galley. Perhaps the old man had returned, but he hadn't. He went down the ropes and surveyed the damage to the hull. It was extensive and would take time to make good. The crew was silent and quick, the repairs taking much less time than normal to do such major work.

The old man sat on a shimmering green rock with his arms extended, holding the staff aloft. A deep green shaft of light from the heavens, penetrated the bubble, and was absorbed by the staff, which in turn reflected it back from its curved horn handle, enveloping the ship and all the workers. The magpie circled slowly overhead. The Captain caught the words of the old man.

'One more challenge, Captain, hopefully only one more before I reach my destination. You did well, you saved us all.'

'Two of my crew have lost their arms.'

'As I said, you did well. I will have time when the ship is under way to repair them. Go back to your cabin, Captain. I must concentrate, or my shield will weaken.'

‘And the empty seats? Dead?’ The Captain was surprised to find he could talk to the old man.

‘Yes, their flesh is gone, but I have their spirits with me. In time, they’ll come back to you, but it is difficult to create their image as I repair your ship. As I said, Captain, to your cabin, I must concentrate.’

It was only after the two sailors pursued the snakes into the water, that the Captain managed to get proper control of the rudder.

He turned to climb the rope ladder and saw the old man point the staff at his feet, and he floated to the deck.

Nothing more could surprise him. He took his pipe out and lent over the railing. The dome kept bending where the thin blue light pushed against it. All was black outside. There was no ocean, the blackness stretching to the horizon, except where he could just make out the shape of the cloud from which the blue streak came. Their work finished, the men, except the wounded, gathered at the ladder and came aboard.

The two men with the lost arms and the three sailors with the damaged jaws were with the old man. There was a burst of green light, so intense they all became invisible. In time the cloud dispersed, the men climbed aboard, using their new arms, their jaws mended. The Captain watched as the land was replaced by the sea, and the ship continued sailing at eight knots.

He went to his cabin, and started to write the log, but nothing came to mind, except to write one line. Sailing in good conditions and making eight knots. He flipped back through previous pages and saw the same sentence. The rat came and asked could he take over the wheel for the rest of the day as he, the magpie and the old man were exhausted from the fight and attending the ship’s repairs.

He climbed the ladder, took the wheel and steadied the ship on the same compass setting that it had been on since leaving port. Outside the dome there was a large sea running, but inside she sailed, eight knots, a flat sea, and no wind. Which God was it that the old man atoned to?