



THE BEGINNING

It was a very fine day, until something tried to eat him.

It was a black dog-like creature, but it was not like any dog he had ever seen. It had teeth as long as his arm, and claws that could tear apart an oak tree.

It says, therefore, a great deal in Christopher Forrester's favour that he refused – with speed and cunning and courage – to be eaten.



THE BEGINNING, ELSEWHERE

It was a very fine day, until somebody tried to kill her. Mal had returned home from her journey, flying back from the forest with arms outstretched and coat flapping, buffeted by the wind.

Mal Arvorian could fly only when the wind blew. The weather that day was perfect – a westerly breeze that smelt of the sea – and she was sky-spinning, twisting in the cold air. Her flying coat was thick, and too big for her, and she wore it with the sleeves rolled up four times. When the wind was up – it didn't need to be strong, but some wind was necessary – she could catch at the corners and open it, like wings, and feel the breeze lift her off her feet.

That day she had flown over treetops, her shoes brushing the tips of their branches, and swooped low, causing a herd of unicorns to scatter.

In the kitchen, her Great-Aunt Leonor had grumbled at her cold hands, and given her a cup of hot cordial, when there was a knock on the door.

It was the murderer.

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ARRIVAL

The day before the attack, Christopher sat on a bench outside the ferry terminal, waiting for his grandfather. He had travelled alone from his flat in North London to Scotland, and he was cramp-legged and ravenously hungry.

A squirrel leaped on to the bench, and watched him. Slowly it edged closer, quivering, until its whiskers were touching his knee. It was joined by another, and then another, until there were seven of them, clustering around his feet.

A woman waiting at the taxi rank turned to stare. 'How's he doing that then?' she said to the man next to her.

One squirrel darted to crouch on the toe of Christopher's shoe. Christopher laughed, and the squirrel ran up his shin bone to his knee. 'All right there?' he said to the squirrel. 'Nice day.'

'Feeding them, no doubt,' the man said, then called over to

Christopher: 'You shouldn't feed wild animals! It's bad for their guts.'

'I know,' said Christopher, and he smiled half a smile. 'I'm not.'

It was a joke among his friends that wherever he went, animals sought out Christopher. Cats on the street came to wind figure-of-eights around his ankles; dogs leaped up at him in the park. Football games had been interrupted when a small chorus of yowling foxes tried to get near him; there had been a day when insistent pigeons dive-bombed him during a school trip, and swimming in the outdoor ponds in Hampstead was almost impossible. The lifeguard had ordered him out of the water, because the sudden arrival of a phalanx of swans was making the smaller children scream.

Christopher had smiled, whistled at the swans, and led them out of the pond and into some nearby bushes. One young swan had tried to fly on to his shoulder, scratching at his skin with clawed, webbed feet. He had the marks for months afterwards. He didn't mind the scars: he knew that the attention and love of animals were no gentle thing. It often involved a certain amount of blood.

'Something in his smell,' his father would say stiffly. But Christopher didn't, as far as he could tell, smell significantly different from other boys his age. He washed, though not unduly.

As a small child, it had been the great delight of his life. As he grew older, it still gave him tremendous joy, but he

learned to hide it – because his father hated it. The animals drove him into an inexplicable anxiety. ‘Get away!’ he would say, and he would chase off the cats, the birds, the occasional mouse or rat on the underground. Christopher and his father never went to the countryside now, because there was always an outside chance that hares would chase him across fields, and swallows would want to nest in his hair.

It hadn’t always been that way. Before his mother’s death, he remembered his father differently. Animals had come to his mother too. He had a photograph of the three of them in Richmond Park, surrounded by deer, his father laughing with a baby Christopher on his shoulders. But she had died, nine years ago, and his father had contracted, as if a weight had settled on him and concertinaed him downwards and inwards. Everything in the house had felt smaller – diminished and less brave – after that.

So Christopher secretly opened his windows at night to let the birds in. He wore a long wool navy overcoat, and occasionally let sparrows investigate the patch pockets. He made detours to greet crows if he saw them, and allowed them to stalk on clawed feet up his arm and on to his shoulder. His friends were wary – ‘They’ll peck your eyes out!’ – but he only smiled and shook his head.

‘Nah.’ His voice around animals became softer, lighter. ‘They won’t,’ he said – and they didn’t. His face around them took on the look of a drawn bow: ready, waiting.

The crows brought him silver buttons and paper

clips, and coins which he dug holes in and strung on to a shoelace and wore round his neck. Some of the seniors at school jeered at him for the necklace, but it didn't stop him wearing it. It was a way of saying his allegiance was to wild and living things.

And so he grew older and taller – they were a tall family, with gangling legs and finely made hands – and he waited.

What he was waiting for, Christopher couldn't have explained: he only hoped, in a way that burned in his lungs and stomach, that there was something more than that which he had so far seen. The animals felt like a promise.

(He was right. It was an astonishment that would change his life forever.)



ARRIVAL, ELSEWHERE

The murderer arrived by boat. He came gently, with a soft tread and beautifully clean hands. He strode past a group of men and women hauling in a catch of fire-fish, his knife out of sight in his pocket. They glanced round at him, but he only nodded at them, and they forgot him as soon as he passed out of sight, which was as he intended. He was a professional: he had spent years perfecting the careful art of forgettability. His hair was neither long nor short, and his shoes had been polished to exactly the shine that attracts no comment. His eyes, which were as dark and cold as the bottom of the sea, settled on nothing for very long. Until, that fine day, they settled on Mal.

It had been easy, in retrospect, for the murderer to find her. It's easy to find your quarry if you've been told to hunt down a

flying girl and then you see a child, twenty feet up, weaving through a flock of seagulls. Human flight was an unusual sight, even in the Archipelago.

It had been years now since Mal had first learned to fly. A travelling seer had given her the flying coat soon after she was born. He had named her, and laid the coat at her small feet. He tried to say more – to explain why he had given the coat to her and her alone – but the house was in mourning, for Mal's mother had not survived the birth, and he'd been sent abruptly on his way.

So it was with no instruction at all that Mal took to the sky. The nearest neighbours had laughed at her, a small girl swamped in a coat running into the wind; so she'd flushed, and woken earlier the next day so nobody would see her. At first, when the wind dropped, she used to thump down to the ground with a bone-breaking crack; she had fractured both her ankles at different times, snapped a wrist and bent her little finger backwards to the wrist. Her big toenail had turned an interesting green-black and fallen off. But she had tried again, and again, licking the blood off her skinned knees, climbing up trees and jumping out of them.

And she had proved her neighbours wrong.

'No, I *will* do it,' she said, when the neighbour's boy laughed at her. 'You don't know anything about it.' She wore her chin high, on those days. People were difficult – she felt herself grow spiky around them, liable to say the wrong thing and blush right up to her forehead – but the sky made perfect

sense to her. She might be grubby and awkward on the ground, but in flight, the locals said, Mal Arvorian was a thing worth seeing.

By the age of nine, she'd learned to glide to a gentle stop. By ten, she could land on the tips of her toes, or on one foot. By twelve, she could tuck her chin to her chest and throw herself forwards, somersaulting in the wind. That spring morning she had flown over the sea with her bare feet skimming the water, her boots in her pockets, the ocean spray flecking her ankles, laughing with the speed and joy of it.

The murderer had watched her, and smiled an unlovely smile.

Mal was forbidden to fly anywhere except around the garden or across the fields: her Great-Aunt Leonor would have been horrified had she known how far Mal went. But her great-aunt forbade an immense, book-length list of things, and she couldn't obey them all.

'I can't', she said to Gelifen, 'just stay indoors and sit on a chair all day. That's how people turn to stone.'


So, forbidden to cut her own hair, she had given herself a fringe with a pair of nail scissors. It came out a little erratic and drunken, but she liked it, and plaited a gold thread she had pulled from an embroidered tablecloth into her braid to set it off. Forbidden to go to the forest, she flew there in the thin light of the sunrise, before Leonor was awake. She longed to know the green squirrel-like ratatoskas, and gradually came to be on speaking terms with them, listening to their gossip. She told

them stories in return, of how she'd found Gelifen (an egg, washed up close to the shore: 'I ran fully clothed out into the waves for it, and I hatched him in my own bed. He sleeps on my pillow now'), and heard it repeated by one young ratatoska, high and shrill, to another ('She swam halfway out to Lithia, she did, in full evening dress; had to battle a nereid for it, she did').

She spent hours running through the trees with Gelifen, looking for unicorns and gorging on waterberries. She had seen a family of al-mirajes go loping through the sun-dappled undergrowth, a trail of fresh shoots of grass marking their progress behind them. She had been bitten, once, by an avanc – entirely her own fault, Leonor scolded, for getting too close – and it had gone septic, and her great-aunt had had to sit up with her for seven nights running. As soon as she was allowed out of bed, she'd gone back to the forest. She had work to do there.

Most of all, though, there was the sky. If, as occasionally happened, someone in town shook their heads, and told her she was a little scrap of chaos, a burden to the old woman – then Mal would glare, and redden, and run to take refuge in flight.

The sky was Mal's freedom. She would angle herself to fly up through the clouds, soaring higher and higher in the white blur of them. She would open her mouth and stick out her tongue, and come back to earth drenched and red-cheeked and victorious. 'Cloud-eating', she called it. Some clouds tasted different from others; a different chill and flavour to different



shades of grey and white. Gelifen couldn't yet fly alongside her, so she tucked him into her jumper, his beaked face protruding from the blue wool at the top.

A few people, over the years, had suspected that the girl was rare in some way. Some of them thought it with a spike of jealousy for their own children, and others with a thrill of pleasure. But they were busy, and people mostly let her be, to run and eat and fly.

Except, that day, for the murderer.



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