

# NEW DAWNING



THE EDGE OF LIGHT TRILOGY

BOOK #1

A M DIXON







# CHAPTER ONE

Tonight, I will hear The Truth for the first time.

I'm sitting with Ren on one of the salvaged timber benches overlooking the outdoor stage. Corvus, my pet crow, is perched on my lap, pulling at the shiny buttons on my shirt with his beak. There's a strange atmosphere of anxious anticipation this evening, a tension that I haven't felt before at the Fire. Even Corvus seems tense; he doesn't usually snuggle in so close to me.

'Where is he, Merel?' Ren asks, leaning across to get a better view, searching the shadows around the stage for a glimpse of Albany Reese.

My heart skips as I feel the warmth of Ren's bare arm next to mine. 'I don't know. He should be here soon.' It must be awful for Albany, knowing that this is his last night as Voice of the Child. He will be sent off alone in a tiny boat onto the ocean, never to return. Tomorrow a new Voice will be chosen, and Albany will become part of the Histories.

A Beachcomber throws another chunk of wood into the Fire which is blazing behind the stage, casting a golden light over

the gathering. It crackles, sending streams of sparks into the air, and bringing the familiar smoky smell of Littleton evenings. The smoke will drift all the way up to the woven Covers which are almost invisible above us in the dark sky. During the day the Covers block out most of the damaging sunshine so it never reaches us. They protect the Earth from further warming, but they also keep us in constant twilight. It's perpetually warm, dark and damp. That's how it has been ever since the Climate Crisis.

Ren edges closer to me. 'Are you ready for The Truth?'

'Yeah. I think so.' It's the first time I've heard this story – the last in the traditional series of eight told by the Voice of the Child. The Truth supposedly binds everything together. It should represent the culmination of Albany's journey and celebrate our community beneath the Covers – it is intended to be about teamwork, obedience, and success. But I have heard rumours that tonight's Truth will be different.

'Can you see Albany yet?' I whisper to Ren, leaning towards him so our arms touch, just for a moment.

He shakes his head. 'He must be nervous. I would be.'

I scan the crowd, looking for familiar faces in the sea of shadows stretching down to the stage. I spot Ren's mum a few rows from the front. 'Look! Your mum's here.'

A frown flickers across Ren's face. 'I thought she said she wasn't coming.'

She must have come straight from work because she is still wearing her dark-blue overalls from the Printing Shop. She sits next to a friend, and they lean in to talk to each other, then glance at the stage.

'Are Albany's family here?' I search the heads in front of us. Corvus wriggles in my lap. He's given up on chewing my buttons and has started preening his wing feathers instead.

Ren leans the other way. His hair flops over one eye, and he tucks it out of the way. 'I'm not sure. I can't see them. You'd think they'd want to be here for his final Fire.'

'You'd think so.'

'Are your parents here, too?'

'No. They said it is too hard seeing the Voice at their last Fire. Bexley was desperate to come but Mum said he had to go to the rehearsal at school to practise the songs for tomorrow's send-off instead. He is too young to be here in any case.'

'He's going to have to wait another seven years for the next one.'

'Yeah.' Another seven years seems like such a long time. By then Bexley will be seventeen. The same age Albany is now.

'I wonder who they'll choose to be the next Voice of the Child. The Council must have decided by now. I just hope it's not Bexley.' My stomach suddenly feels sick and hollow. Bexley. He's the right age so it's possible he could be chosen. Surely he would have heard by now if he had been selected. But knowing Bexley he'd be excited to be the Voice. Imagining all those people listening to his every word. Mum and Dad would know by now, too, and I'm sure they would have said something to me. Neither of them have slept very well this week. I've heard Mum creeping to the toilet in the night, and there have been muted voices through the walls as they talk.

'It won't be Bexley.' Ren folds his arms across his chest.

'How do you know?'

'It should be a girl. They try to alternate.' He sounds confident though I'm not sure how he'd know for sure.

'Really?' I suppose it makes sense. I run over the list of Voices in my mind, trying to remember the order from the Histories. Ren's right, they do tend to alternate, but not always.

Before I have time to ask, Ren leans forward again and points to a group close to the stage. 'Look, there's Simeon.'

'Where?' I lean forward, trying to see, and Corvus hops onto the bench next to me seeming indignant at having to move. I spot Simeon amongst a cluster of people huddled together at

the front. I can't see his face from here, but it is obviously him standing head and shoulders above the others; there is nobody else who is quite that tall. Or that arrogant. The others all have their hoods pulled over their heads as if to hide their identities, so it is impossible to tell who they are from here. As far as I can see, they are just hooded shadows.

The group turns to walk to the right side of the stage, and I recognise some of them as the light from the Fire catches their faces. 'I didn't think Dylan was part of that crowd.'

'His mum is a Dockhand, isn't she?' Ren stares at the group, obviously still trying to figure out who they all are.

'Yeah. Do you remember those shocking stories he used to bring to school about the Main Island?' I can vividly remember the pictures of children with ribs sticking out and distended bellies from lack of vitamins. Things might be bad here but it is nothing compared to what the Main Islanders have to deal with. At least we have enough to eat. Most of the time.

'I wish I could recognise the others.' Ren watches the group shuffling into place in the semi-dark. 'I really hope they're not going to make things difficult for Albany.'

'I'd be surprised if they dared, especially with Simeon being the Mayor's nephew. He should know the rules better than anyone.'

Ren frowns. 'The Mayor isn't here tonight. He isn't allowed to attend the final Fire, so who knows what might happen.'

'Surely not even Simeon would get away with stirring things up. They'll all end up working in the Roach House if they're not careful.'

'Not if he's here on the Mayor's behalf,' Ren mutters.

'That's not allowed, is it?'

Ren shrugs. 'It's within the rules, but you're right, it doesn't seem fair.'

A man with greying hair slides onto the bench on the other side of me and sits closer than I would like. The earthy smell of the Mushroom House wafts from his skin and tickles my nose. It reminds me of the gardening classes we had at school.

The man is followed by one of the Librarians, but I can't remember her name. She has a shiny brooch pinned to her shirt and it catches the light of the Fire as she moves.

I give Corvus a gentle squeeze and shuffle him back onto my lap. 'Sit still, buddy.' Given half a chance he would be pecking at that brooch and trying to take it home to add to his collection of shiny things.

The man nods a hello, and I smile back. The two of them fidget, getting settled in their seats, then the gong sounds, signalling the evening is beginning.



There is a tense hush as we wait for what's about to happen.

The gong sounds again.

Albany Reese strides onto the stage.



## CHAPTER TWO

The grey robe that marks Albany as the Voice of the Child pulls tight against his broad shoulders, and he grips the carved, wooden ceremonial staff in his left hand. His short, brown hair sprouts up at odd angles, and the pool of light from the Fire makes his hollow cheekbones stand out. He is flanked by his Mentors – the two people who have provided guidance to him for the last seven years. Tonight, both Mentors are steely-faced with their arms folded across their chests. It will be their job to take Albany away after the Fire and prepare him for his send-off.

Albany stops in the middle of the wooden stage, his Mentors standing on either side. He breathes in, then bangs the staff twice on the floor. The thuds echo around the hills.

‘He doesn’t have to do this, you know,’ Ren mumbles.

I’m not sure what he means, but just then Albany bangs the staff again.

‘My name is Albany Reese.’ His voice rings out over the audience. ‘I am the Voice of the Child. Hear what I have to say.’

Silence settles on the gathering. The hooded group to the right of the stage fidgets anxiously.

‘I have told you the Seven Stories.’ Albany’s voice commands everyone’s attention. ‘The Flood, The Extinction, The Crisis, The Rebellion, The Diseases, The Wars, and finally The Darkness. Tonight, I will tell you The Truth.’

I lean forward expectantly.

Albany clears his throat. ‘We have achieved much in the last seven years,’ he begins. ‘There have been huge advances in our understanding, and we have done work that has been of immense value, especially in the fields of long-term climate monitoring specifically relating to tree growth, as well as the development of better systems for enhancing crop yields in the crop-houses.’ He glances behind him at his Mentors, then carries on. ‘We have exceeded goals across our research, and we should be proud of our achievements.’ The man next to me clicks his fingers showing support for what Albany is saying, and others in the audience do the same.

Albany continues. ‘The last few years have been some of the best in terms of dedication and focus. Thanks to several new initiatives we have seen many young people take on important roles in our community, and their achievements should be applauded.’

A smattering of clapping ripples through the crowd and there is a half-hearted cheer from the hooded group.

Ren nudges me. 'He's talking about you.'

'Shush.' I shake my head, embarrassed by his compliment. 'I'm not that special.'

'Sure you are, Bird-girl,' Ren grins.

Once the applause has died away, Albany goes on. 'Once, when the Earth was under threat, we were saved by science. We were given Covers to protect us, and we were promised a new life. We have harvested the consequences of our ancestors. But we, too, are the ancestors of the future. We will continue to thrive through teamwork and obedience. From Darkness comes Fortitude.' His voice trails off and there are more finger clicks from the front. I begin to think that maybe the rumours were unfounded after all and settle back in my seat, relieved. Corvus shakes his feathers and hops onto Ren's lap.

'Hey, buddy,' Ren whispers to Corvus, but his eyes are still fixed on Albany.

'I have been humbled to serve you over the last seven years, and I am deeply grateful for your support of me and our Council.' Albany's voice wavers. 'And now my time in this role is over.' He pauses to lay the ceremonial staff down on the stage in front of him. It wobbles from side to side before settling into stillness.

There's an anxious silence. This must be so hard. I can't imagine what he must be going through, and it seems everyone else is feeling for him, too.

Albany steps back and smooths down his robe. 'The last seven years have been a formative time for me and for our town.' He glances nervously at Simeon's group. 'But ... I also believe there has been another agenda.'

My ears prick and I lean forward again.

'This is what I was worried about,' Ren whispers.

'What do you mean?' I ask.

Albany takes a deep breath. 'Information has been kept from us. There is more you need to know ...' He speaks slowly and clearly as though he wants to ensure everyone understands. 'There is a complex web of lies that holds us together. We have been fed a stream of falsehoods by the people we thought we could trust.' He pauses, waiting for his words to sink in.

'This isn't The Truth,' the man beside me whispers to the Librarian. 'What's he doing?'

The crowd shuffles in their seats and people look around, gauging the reaction of their neighbours. It seems this isn't what they were expecting to hear.

Albany continues, 'We are not the only land to have survived

the great Flood after the Climate Crisis. It's not just our islands. There are other lands out there.'

One of Albany's Mentors draws him to one side and says something in his ear. Albany shakes his head and replies. I can't hear what they are saying, but from the expressions on their faces I can see it isn't a friendly exchange.

Somebody in Simeon's group shouts, 'Rubbish!'

Another shouts, 'Speak The Truth!'

Albany steps away, then turns to address the audience again. He is trying to act unperturbed, but it is clear the shouts are bothering him. 'There are other places beyond our islands. There are places outside of the Covers where the sun shines and birds sing,' he urges. 'I am the Voice of the Child. You must listen to me.'

'You're not the Voice of the Child any more,' Simeon sneers. 'We need The Truth!' he shouts and his yells are followed by a stream of cries from the others. 'Truth, Truth, Truth!' It quickly turns into a chant.

Ren leans forward, his elbows on his knees. 'I told him he shouldn't do this.'

'Do what?' I ask. 'Ren?'

But Ren doesn't answer. Corvus hops back onto my lap and nestles in closer, clearly anxious again.

‘You have to listen to me!’ Albany shouts, stepping away from his Mentors.

‘You’re crazy!’ A yell comes from behind us and I spin around, trying to see who spoke. ‘Who was that?’ I ask Ren.

‘I don’t know. It wasn’t one of Simeon’s gang.’ Ren sounds uncharacteristically worried. I’ve never known him to be bothered by people’s words before.

Others join in, shouting, ‘Get off! Off! Off! Off!’

‘Let him speak!’ The unmistakable voice of Carla Foster cuts through the shouts. I spot her to the left of the stage, in the place where the Science Board usually sits. She has pinned her grey hair back off her face, making her look older and unusually stern. Although she sounds angry, she looks as calm as ever, sitting straight-backed and composed. Next to her is Albany’s mother, obviously distressed and wringing her hands in her lap.

‘Let him speak,’ Carla repeats.

Someone at the front boos. I’m sure it’s one of Simeon’s gang again, but others are joining in too, booing and shouting, ‘Get off!’

Corvus wriggles in my lap. He pulls at my shirt, making that funny chattering noise he does when he’s anxious about something. The shouting seems to be upsetting him and I’m not surprised. It’s making me feel unsettled, too.

Albany claps his hands, trying to regain control of the situation. For a moment, things quieten. ‘You must listen to me.’ His voice shakes. ‘There is paradise out there waiting for us. We are being used by them. They don’t care about us. We’re some sort of –’

Then the crowd erupts into angry cries and another chant starts, ‘Off! Off! Off!’

‘Quiet!’ Carla Foster tries to make herself heard above the shouting.

‘Bloody conspiracy theories.’ The man next to me turns to me and Ren. ‘You young people think you can change things. The traditions are there for a reason. There’s no respect these days.’ He shakes his head.

‘You’re crazy!’ A clod of mud flies towards the stage from Simeon’s gang and it narrowly misses Albany’s face. His Mentors glance at each other, starting to look scared by the crowd’s growing anger. They both speak to him, gesticulating, trying to protect him and silence him at the same time. Albany pushes them away. ‘You have to listen!’

The crowd starts jostling towards the stage, chanting louder now. ‘Truth! Truth! Truth!’

‘Is Mum still there?’ Ren seems worried. ‘Can you see her?’



'I think so.' I can see her shuffling backwards as the crowd edges forward.

'She's not part of this. She shouldn't be here,' Ren mutters.

'Part of what?' But I'm distracted by Albany still shouting from the stage.

'We don't have to live like this!' He clenches his fists in desperation, but his words are drowned out by the noise. 'It's all a big lie. You're all wrong! Why won't you listen?' Another lump of mud narrowly misses Albany's face. He ducks and cowers. In a final act of defiance, he kicks the ceremonial staff sending it clattering across the ground.

The people at the front surge forward and clamber onto the stage, angry at this break from tradition, angry at Albany's disrespect ... angry at everything. 'Off! Off! Off!' they shout.

Albany's Mentors shield him as best they can, then bustle him away into the darkness just in time before the stage is overwhelmed by people.

'No!' Albany's mother cries out. She pulls away from Carla and rushes down towards the stage. She elbows through the teeming crowd towards her son and disappears into the melee.

Ren leans back and exhales loudly. 'That was tough.'

The man next to me stands and waits for the Librarian to

join him. 'Poor child has been brainwashed. There is nothing out there except endless ocean. He's gone mad. They've all gone mad.'

'It must be so humiliating for his poor mum.' The Librarian starts to lead the way up the steps to the exit, then turns back to me. 'Goodnight, Merel. Maybe we'll see you back at the Library before too long.'

'Goodnight,' I say, and I feel awful that she's noticed I haven't been doing much study. Sometimes this town feels too small; everyone knows everything about you.

Once they have gone, I lift Corvus onto my arm, his favourite place, and Ren and I begin to pick our way out of the circle of benches and into the slow-moving crowd.

Ahead of us I spot Kellee Burke. As soon as I see her, I shrink, and duck behind Ren. I am already late with last week's report from the Trees. She'll soon be asking me for this week's sparrowing counts as well as last week's, and I haven't even started on that. I have no idea how I am supposed to get all my work done. Every week I spend hours collating data and writing reports but it never seems to be enough. It's no wonder Mum and Dad are always so busy – their workload is at least twice mine. Kellee probably won't see me, unless she looks round. But I steer Ren towards the far exit, just in case.

'So, what do you think of The Truth?' Ren glances at me.

‘It can’t be true. There isn’t any evidence of another land. The science would tell us if there was anything else out there.’

‘You think he’s lying?’ He raises his eyebrows.

‘Has to be. Or deluded. There’s no way it can be true.’ I give Ren a playful push, but he doesn’t laugh or even smile. Surely, he doesn’t believe that nonsense. Of all people, I thought Ren wouldn’t be swayed by conspiracies. We all know it is just us and the Main Island. The two islands of Zealand. The Histories tell us the rest of the world was flooded after The Crisis and our islands are the only places left on Earth. Literally. It makes me feel lonely sometimes. If it wasn’t for the Covers keeping the sun out, the Earth would have kept warming, the sea level would have risen even more, and we would have gone underwater along with the rest of the planet. It’s crazy how far they let the warming go before they actually did anything. The whole world kept warming out of control, and it all happened over a few hundred years. It’s hard to believe they used to have frozen continents. Now we just have constant stifling heat.

Corvus takes off and flies above us, turning lazy circles in the sky as he stretches his wings. He seems more relaxed now the crowd is dissipating. His white wings are easy to spot above us, even as we move away from the light of the Fire and into the shadows of town.

‘What if it is true?’ Ren speaks quietly so only I can hear him.

‘What if there really is another land out there?’

‘You’re not serious, are you?’ Sometimes I think Ren would believe the world was flat if one of his friends told him. ‘If there was someplace else, people would have come back and told us about it long ago.’

‘I spoke to Albany this afternoon; he seemed so convinced.’

Ren stops to let a group of Growers from the crop-houses past.

‘What if - ?’

‘You’ll get into trouble saying things like that.’ I flash him a warning look. ‘You’ll be sent off if you’re not careful.’

‘Yeah, right.’ Ren rolls his eyes. ‘I’m too important for that.’

I give him another friendly push and this time he smiles for real. I wish he would be more careful though; people do get sent off for being troublemakers or ‘Upstarts’ as the Council officially calls them. The last time wasn’t all that long ago, either. Although I was only small when it happened, I still remember Tomos Wenlock and the way he used to march up and down outside the Town Hall with his banners, shouting, ‘Set us free.’ He refused to work and even went out of bounds. Then he started breaking the curfews. People called him mad and, when he wouldn’t stop, they sent him off. They engraved his name in the Stone

of Shame, to remind us of what happens if you dare challenge the authorities.

Ren and I keep walking towards town, keeping far enough behind the Growers to make sure they can't overhear our conversation. Even so, Ren still keeps his voice down.

'I hate seeing Albany like that. I can't believe I'll never see him again. It was always the four of us: me, Albany, Dunyel and Luka. We were inseparable. We used to play halo-disc for hours together on the games field. Do you remember when Dunyel broke his leg and Albany raised the alarm?'

'Yeah. Everyone called him a hero. That's probably why they made him the Voice. Such an honour.'

'It's weird to think it could have been me standing there tonight.' Ren seems wistful, almost as if he wishes it had been him instead of Albany.

'I'm glad it's not you being sent off.' I smile at Ren, trying not to blush. It's no secret that Ren was almost chosen to be the Voice seven years ago, but the Council changed their minds at the last minute, and then Ren was held back at school. Ren could probably have been better at school if only he'd studied harder instead of spending so much time playing halo-disc with Luka. He was always in the top team, but that didn't help when it

came to his grades. He once told me the academic stuff doesn't matter to him, but I can tell he feels a bit ashamed about it by the way he changes the subject straight away. In any case, that's how we ended up graduating together last year, despite the two years between us, and how we ended up being such good friends. I wouldn't want it any other way, and I think he feels the same. At least, I hope he does. It's pretty hard to tell with Ren.

A flock of wild crows flaps overhead, cawing on their way to their overnight roost. The white flashes under their wings seem to flicker in the air as they fly in swirling formations. *Corvus moneduloides novaezealandiae* – they self-introduced to our islands during The Crisis and are now a subspecies of their own. My Corvus lands back on my shoulder, gripping tightly with his toes and rocking forward and back with the motion of my footsteps. He tends to get anxious around the wild crows. They will soon be gone and he will relax again.

'Hey, buddy.' I stroke his head, trying to help him settle.

'You're good with him.' Ren tickles Corvus's head, too.  
'He's lucky you found him.'

'Thanks.' I smile. Ren must know how much that means to me. A lot of people think I am crazy having a pet crow, but I try not to listen to them.

'I'm lucky you found *me*,' Ren grins and I can't help myself from grinning back.

We slip into a friendly silence as we make our way down the track towards the docks, following the pools of light from one lumilamp to the next. Both of us are lost in our own thoughts. That's another thing I like about Ren: we can be together without either of us having to say anything. There aren't many people like that. Sometimes I think Ren and I are meant to be together, but I wouldn't say that out loud, not to anyone.

We stop in front of the wooden gates that close off the docks from the public. A lumilamp on the top of each gatepost casts a bright patch of light across the entrance, with many more lamps dotted around inside the docks so the Sailors can see to do their work. It's the brightest place in town, apart from inside the Library.

Corvus perches on top of the gate in full view, his white feathers shining in the lamplight.

'Go and have a look if you like.' I glance up at him, wishing I could fly, too. 'You can go wherever you want. Unlike us.'

Corvus flaps into the air, flies around me a couple of times, then soars over the gate. I peer through the gaps between the slats in the gates to watch as Corvus lands on top of the wooden bell tower. Beneath him hangs the metal bell that was rescued from the historic church before the old town disappeared underwater

in The Floods. It has been polished to a shine in preparation for the send-off and seems to glow under the light of the lamps around it.

Corvus peers down at the shiny metal. I'm sure he'd like to put that bell in his collection of shiny things but of course it is far too big. He croaks then takes to the air again, and glides down from the bell tower to land next to a group of Dockhands sweeping the wharf. One older guy with a rough beard turns to eye Corvus suspiciously for a moment before returning to his sweeping. The Dockhand is distracted for long enough for a rat to get caught under the bristles of his thick broom, and with one more sweeping motion the rat ends up in the water. It splashes for a second then steadily swims to the stone steps and clambers out again, wet and shaking. Corvus hops over to the wet rat. He pokes it quizzically with his beak and seems disappointed when it scurries away.

'Listen, Ren. The Dockhands are singing.' I touch his arm to get his attention.

'Singing?' He smiles at me and tilts his head to hear better. 'Do you know the song?'

'No.' I turn my head, too, so I can hear the words.

'*On the distant shore,*' Ren whispers and quietly hums along.

The song goes round and round in time with the sweeping



brooms, with some of the Dockhands adding harmonies where they can. *'On the distant shore, a hundred years ago.'*

Dad once told me if the Dockhands didn't sing when they are preparing for a send-off, they would cry. Both his parents were sent off before I was born and Mum's father, my grandad, went years ago. Mum's mother never got sent off – she died from a disease linked to lack of vitamins. Loads of people used to die from it – that was before they upped the dose in our daily vitamin pills. Kale and vitamin pills – the two things we are forced to eat to keep alive in this perpetual darkness.

The Dockhands work their way along the wharf towards Corvus who still seems puzzled by the rat. He stands there staring at the wet spot where the rat used to be, until one of the Dockhands suddenly sweeps his broom close behind him. Startled, Corvus instantly takes to the air with an indignant caw, then flaps over to the inner docks to land high up on one of the slim, white masts of the only ship berthed.

I am surprised I didn't notice that ship sooner. Perhaps I was too focused on the Dockhands and their songs, but now I have seen it, it takes my breath away. It is berthed on its own and it isn't like any ship I have seen before. The three masts stretch elegantly from the polished wooden deck up towards the sky. Even though I know Corvus is perched on top of one of those masts,

he's almost impossible to see, his white feathers blending in with the white of the mast. The whole ship seems sleek in a way that's hard to describe, it's simultaneously sharp, streamlined and smooth. In the dim light beyond the main docks it looks grey, and I can just make out its name, *The Miracle*, painted in white calligraphic letters on the side.

'Beautiful, isn't she?' Ren has his face pressed up against the gate, peering through the slats.

I smile and lean towards him, so close that we're almost touching. 'Yes.' I agree with him, even though boats scare me in a strange way. I can't imagine setting sail, leaving land behind, and being alone on that great expanse of water. I shudder. I don't want to tell Ren but there's something about that ship that makes me deeply uneasy. It's just another wind-ship, but there's something about its shape – it looks strange and kind of dangerous.

Ren can't take his eyes off it. 'I watched her come in yesterday. She cuts through the water like it is hardly there.'

'You love ships, don't you?' I give him a nudge, teasing him a little. But it's true. Ren used to spend hours drawing them at school. When we first became friends, Ren told me his dad was a Navigator on one of the wind-ships. Apparently, his ship disappeared when he was on a voyage and Ren is *forbidden* to talk about it. I don't understand why anyone would want to go

sailing off on the ocean myself. Not when there are trees and plants and birds here. I can't imagine a life without the sparrows, or Corvus – he would hate it on a ship on the open sea, though he seems happy enough perched up there on top of the mast while it's in dock.

Two Sailors walk steady laps around *The Miracle's* wooden deck, on patrol. From here I can just about see their freckled skin and thick arms. I've heard them talk in an odd language on previous walks past the docks. They are forbidden to leave the ships, so we never get to speak to them in person. It's a shame. I would like to hear their stories from the Main Island, and I think others would, too. One the Sailors spots Corvus and shouts something at him.

Corvus takes to the air again, and flaps quickly back towards me. He glides over the gate and lands on my head, croaking loudly.

'Shush,' I urge, but it's too late. One of the Sailors glances over and somehow his eyes find mine. He holds my gaze for a second and a shiver runs down my spine. I blink, pull my eyes away, and don't look back again. It's a horrible feeling. I tell myself it's just another Sailor from the Main Island, just another wind-ship. There's nothing to feel anxious about. But that doesn't stop that sinking in my stomach.

I turn to Ren. 'Let's go.'

He's still staring at that wind-ship. 'Such a beauty.'

I nudge him.

'What?' He laughs.

'It's just a ship.'

'It's not *just* a ship. It's a state-of-the-art research facility, and it's the fastest wind-ship in the world, designed by Davidson & Hind on the Main Island.'

'How do you know this stuff?'

'I don't know.' He shrugs and grins at me and my heart skips. Stupid heart. It's only Ren.

A pigeon buzzes overhead and both of us glance up at its heavy body hovering above. Its eyes scan side to side, as though it's searching for something. It probably won't pay any attention to us, but we still don't want to be seen. We're not really supposed to be hanging around at the docks. Nobody is. If you're caught in the wrong place the consequences can be serious, you can lose rations, lose your job, or even be sent off if you keep ignoring the warnings. Just like Tomos Wenlock.

Corvus gurgles and flaps down to my shoulder. He seems to hate the pigeons more than anyone, and he wriggles as close as he can, hiding his head within my hair.

'We should keep moving.' I instinctively step out of the pool of light and into the shadows just in case the pigeon is looking.

Ren does the same, even though we're not really doing anything wrong. But whatever the circumstances, nobody likes to be seen by pigeons.

Corvus gurgles again, desperate to get away.

'It's okay, buddy. We're going now,' I whisper.

Corvus stays hidden until we are well clear of the dock gates, then he peeks out to check the coast is clear before flapping furiously ahead, staying low in case that pigeon is still buzzing around.

A few minutes later, Ren and I are walking along the cobbled Main Street with its wooden double-fronted buildings. On market days this street is bustling with everyone visiting the stores for their weekly rations and supplies, but it's quiet now with just a few people still drifting home from the Fire. Corvus is waiting for us outside the Grocers', picking at a snail on the ground and trying to break open the shell. He often finds snails by following their glowing slime trails. Apparently the more lumiferns a snail has eaten, the brighter its slime-glow. After rain-days the paths become criss-crossed with glowing trails and Corvus gets to eat as many as he likes.

I step to one side to avoid one of the many potholes that have been getting worse for months as the cobbles shift out of line in the rain. The Mayor has promised road repairs but I can't see

that ever happening. Corvus has left the snail alone now and is flapping ahead from one lumilamp to the next.

We pass the Flour Shop on our left with its empty hessian sacks waiting in the doorway for collection and loading onto the next merchant ship to the Main Island. Flour supplies have been low again this year. Dad said the wheat harvest on the Main Island has failed for the third year running due to ongoing disruptions to weather systems. It's always too wet, or too dry, or too windy, and perpetually too warm for a good harvest.

I glance at Ren. 'Who do you think will be next?'

'What do you mean?' From the distracted look on Ren's face, I can tell he had been miles away thinking about something else.

'The next Voice. You said it would be a girl.'

'Yeah. I think so.'

He sounds preoccupied so I ask again. 'The Council must have decided by now. Who do you think?'

'I just - '

But shouts from outside the Library interrupt whatever Ren was going to say. A group of teenagers is huddled in the circle of light in front of the wooden doors, laughing at something they've got trapped between them

'What's going on?' I stop in my tracks.

‘It’s Simeon’s gang.’ Ren pulls me to one side. ‘We should probably try to keep out of their way.’

I recognise all of them. Simeon Hayes and the group who used to follow him around at school, just because he was the Mayor’s nephew.

Simeon laughs, taunting whatever they’ve got imprisoned between them. ‘You think you’re so special, don’t you? But you’re ugly and stupid, and nobody wants to hear your little squeaky voice. Ever.’

Zuri kicks into the circle, her tight ponytail flicking from side to side, and whatever’s inside yelps. She kicks again and the thing yelps louder.

‘They’ve got one of the little kids.’ I step forward. I can’t stand by and let them do this.

There is a guffaw of laughter before Simeon speaks. ‘You’re a waste of space. We’ll show you.’

Before I can stop myself, I’m marching over towards the gang. Corvus must be able to sense trouble because he flaps up to perch on the lumilamp on the opposite side of the street, out of the way.

‘Hey!’ I try to make myself look bigger than I feel as I near the group. ‘Stop it!’

Simeon faces me. He pulls himself up to his full height,

his sleeves rolled up above his elbows. His face is sweaty, with acne spots protruding from his cheeks and nose.

‘What do you want?’ he sneers.

I’m shaking inside. He is much taller than me, and he is smirking as though this is a game.

‘What’s going on?’ I ask.

Zuri spins round. ‘Go away, Merel.’ She draws out the vowels when she says my name, trying to make it sound stupid.

From the middle of the group, Estelle Wishart looks up at me, her pink eyes inflamed and tear-stained. I’d forgotten how tiny she is for her age, with pale skin, and arms that are so thin they look as if they could easily snap. Her long, white hair hangs in bedraggled curls around her face.

‘Leave her alone.’ My voice trembles. For once I wish a pigeon would appear. I am sure the gang would scatter if one came flying overhead. But no pigeons come. Simeon and the others all stand their ground, staring at me as if I am crazy.

‘Leave her alone.’ I try again.

Dylan spits on the ground leaving a spattering of bubbles on the cobbles.

I fold my arms across my chest defiantly, in the same way Bexley does at home when he doesn’t want to do his chores, pretending I’m not scared.



‘Let her go,’ Ren demands from behind me.

‘Why?’ Simeon sneers.

Dylan sidles up beside him, with his lip curled into a smirk.

‘What’s it to you?’

My legs are shaking. ‘Can’t you see you’re frightening her? She’s only small.’ I’m close to shouting, but somehow I manage to keep my voice steady.

‘Hey, calm down.’ Simeon shrugs. ‘It was only a bit of fun. Can’t you take a joke?’

He steps aside long enough for Estelle to rush out and throw herself at me. She buries her face in my clothes, her arms tight across my back. I wrap my arms around her tiny shoulders and get a waft of her grandmother’s essential oils; sweet, woody, and earthy.

‘The Prophecies. It is true. You will save me.’ Estelle lets go of me then runs down the street towards the school and into the darkness.

‘She’s pathetic!’ Simeon yells after her.

He nods to his gang, and they scuffle off in the opposite direction, laughing and pushing each other as if they own this town.