





## *The Limit of the World*

*It still isn't moving. Is it definitely what he thinks it is? Is it even alive? It has to be.*

He knows that they like perching on high vantage points, and this one has found the ideal spot, a weather-beaten warning pole marking the shore, rising high into the air to announce what's below it. That is, huge shards of igneous rock, lying in wait to grind boats into dust in the strong currents. The highest point all the way along the beach.

The sea churns in fierce wind, exploding against the rocks and whipping itself into white foam that blows inland like ghostly wingless birds.

He watches as it sits motionless above the carnage, still and black against the dark blue. Despite the extreme weather the sky still looks quiet, but after living here for so long he knows that a sky like this often means the worst. The cloud cover is like concrete, the wind skimming unimpeded across the water below it, until it meets land.

He folds his arms with the sleeves of his raincoat bunched in his hands.

*You'll need this if you're planning on living down there, believe me,* his mother had said a long time ago, *for the wind more than the rain.* She had been right, but he hadn't learned the other lessons, like the one about not wearing denim in the rain. His jeans are soaked, dyed from blue to nearly black.

But he's nearly there! He skips slightly as he stumbles over the pebbles on the edge of the shore (they're polished to amber and blue and green by the rain, but they'll look grey again in an hour if there's light to see them), but still in the front of his mind is the urge to be quiet, to not scare it away. It still sits on the pole, but he has no idea which way it's facing. It's a stoic formless shadow, and the rain stings the details from his eyes.

The light is dying too, but in a way that sneaks up on you. No black shadows stretching across the landscape, no cherry red sunset bursting from the horizon. The day had been dark and so would be the night. Only an agonising flattening of the light had announced its arrival, and now the colour of everything is draining away to blues and greys.

Then the crystalline form on the pole breaks slightly. A flick of black betraying its true nature. *The edge of a wing? Or was that a beak?* It had gone as soon as it appeared, retreating back into the monolithic figure. But he's sure of what it is now. In his jacket pocket one of his hands clasps around his camera, the one thing that he made absolutely sure not to get wet. In a tiny bubble of warm dry air. He wishes he could shrink and climb into his jacket pocket with the camera, throw off his wet clothes and stay there until he was warm and crisp. But he can dry off once he gets the photograph, and with a bit of luck he won't get too badly ill.

Up ahead is a ridge of the same shards of rock that line the shore, extending like an arm up through the beach, where they either get buried by the undulating waves of pebbles or maybe broken up into pebbles themselves. *There's no way of knowing.* The ones that block his path are carved into almost liquid forms by the water, smooth as glass in some areas but still rough enough in patches for oily seaweed and moss to cling to the surface. Slippery. Dangerous. His mother's face swells into vision again as he debates the climb, but going around is not an option. The light is dying quick, and he's in good shape. Good balance. She retreats back into the wind.

With a mournful sniff he brings his dry camera hand out of the cosy pocket, he would need both hands for this. One foot up onto the first rock, and it immediately slips off. Not a good start.

*Just go slow,* he tells himself. There's nobody else stupid enough to do this right now luckily, so nobody's around to see him die.

*Possibly die,* he reminds himself.

*Up!*

Okay he's on the first one. It's completely covered in moss, which spurts a mixture of rain and saltwater as he begins picking over its surface on all fours like a large crab. *A desert crab maybe,* he thinks to himself. *He's not in his natural habitat.*

But in reality he loves places like this. Places on the edge of being destroyed, or destroying themselves. Places that remind him how small he was, which seemed to, for some reason, make him feel more powerful than anything else could.

Traversing the rows of rocks, he sees his reflection in the rippling pools collecting in the smooth crevices. He looks more like a slug than a crab - shiny and smooth and dripping. He grins down at one of his reflections, which barely stands still long enough in the wind to grin back.

His boots are finding their holds more easily now and he doesn't feel like he needs his hands. He brushes them against his sodden jeans to clean off the sand and seaweed.

*Wait, was it still there?* He lifts his head as he steps carefully, and sees the great creature preening its feathers. It's still there but seems a bit more restless, jostling slightly in

the wind, maybe deciding that the singular most exposed perch is a bad decision. *Just wait for a few more minutes!* He silently shouts at it.

He looks back down just in time to see his boot slip from the edge of one of the rocks and drag him downwards between two of the boulders. He falls, his bones clattering on the polished mossen edges.

Shin, hip, elbow.

*Shit!*

He screams as his foot catches on something below and twists, and his hands find a grip just in time to stop the rest of him disappearing into the crevice. His fingers grip the edges, clumps of seaweed bunching up in his palms and he grimaces as he pushes himself up onto his stomach. As he does there is another pool below him, this time neither he nor his reflection grin. His left leg scrambles around until his foot catches, and his muscles scream as he wrenches himself back upright. His right foot sends a stabbing pain up his body as his weight shifts.

*Arrghh!* Twisted.

Standing with his arms splayed like a scarecrow for balance, he once again checks his quarry. Still there. He had been sure that his little gymnastics session would have scared it off, but he feels confident now, despite his ankle, that it wasn't going anywhere. So, no more skyward glances, because the next fall could be worse. Much worse. His forehead wrinkles with guilt.

He resumes with his crab-like approach, making sure not to knock the camera in his pocket against the rock as he clambers low across it. His palm is cut on his right hand, he can feel it without looking, the saltwater finds the opening again and again.

He makes it across the rest without further incident, and unceremoniously dumps himself into the sand near the foot of the warning pole. He affords himself a look upwards, and as he does the huge black seabird lifts its wings to the wind and its head whips around. The great beak opens and the familiar *hughughughug* escapes into the air.

*Yep*, he smiles. *Cormorant*. It's probably nesting somewhere in the nearby cliffs, or maybe even in these rocks somewhere. Cormorants are infinitely better than him at navigating this landscape, *this truly is where they belong*, they aren't just playing at it like he is. It will have found a nice cosy crevice somewhere, untouched by wind, rain or sea.

*Hughughughughughug!*

The waves are crashing across the rocks where the warning pole is driven into the earth, just a few metres away. It's only a few more after that to the spot with the perfect angle.

The light is now low enough to make the air seem thick. The edges of things are softening, including the cormorant. Its wings rise into the air once more, teasing an exit. *Please!* He says out loud this time, and he runs over the pebbles, right foot screaming, and vaults with his left onto yet another slimy boulder to the vantage point.

He steadies himself on his chosen rock and frames the cormorant with his fingers in a rectangle out in front.

*Do not move.*

He extracts his camera slowly from his pocket, shielding it with his body from the rain. Looking through the viewfinder he squints as he brings the cormorant into sharp focus against the darkening sky. Against the sea churned white and the mossen rocks.

He snaps the shutter, the click cracking the silent air like an egg. The view goes black, and when the shutter opens again and the pole appears on the camera screen, the bird is gone. An empty perch.

He buries his camera into the folds of his jacket and whirls around to see where it went. *West along the coast? Nothing. East? No.* He strains his neck back towards the road. *No, it wouldn't have gone inland.*

*It's probably skimming low over the water out to sea already, to a new perch. A better one.*

He jumps down from his own perch and hits the pebbles and screams.

*Fuck!* He forgot about his ankle.

He sits down hard on the ground and lets out a sigh. He's out of the wind now, the huge boulder affords him that. He removes his camera again and switches it on to see the photo. The camera boots up and shows the last photo and he gives a sad laugh.

The great black cormorant had already risen from its perch by the time the shutter closed. In the photo its massive shadowy wings are outstretched, beak lifted to the wind. Its feet are only barely touching the pole, already beginning to curl underneath it like a fighter jet. It's frozen forever, in-between staying and going.

It had evaded him, but he has something to show for the evasion.

*Maybe we'll meet again.*

He shuts off the camera, returns it to his pocket and heaves a deep breath.

When a gap in the rain comes, he stands and makes his way back up the beach to the road. He'll go *around* the rocks this time to get back home, and not over them.