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opening extract from

# The Mob

written by

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# CHAPTER 1

Move in, everyone. If you can't see me, you probably can't hear me either, so move in. Move up the tree, move up the trunk, move closer on the branch.

Now, you all know me, or at least have heard of me. My name is Kalum ru Kurea ru Kinaar and I am old. Old. It's thirty-eight springs that I've gripped branch, thirty-eight springs that the land has weighed my shadow, thirty-eight springs I've tested and bested gales, spread wings and made my way north in thirty-eight tiring, trying, shoulder-wrenching migrations.

Some of you have been here wing to wing with me and lost feathers and bone in these troubles. Some of you were delayed, arrived late and have questions. Some have lost

loved ones and, because you were separated, are only now learning of it. Move in. Move in and move up and you'll hear everything.

The sun has dropped into the final sixth on the horizon, and by custom it is time we began. Cousins, listen! A Gathering, a real Gathering is more than a simple reunion. A Gathering is a sacred, joyous and solemn occasion defined by ancient rules and obligations. It is the once-yearly opportunity for the Kinaar to assemble, recollect past events and make decisions. It is our time of lawmaking and law setting. It is a time when we recognize the passing of those who have completed the journey. It is only once we have added their names to the long record that their souls can leave the branch and fly satisfied to the Maker.

Now, you latecomers out on the edge, hush. All your questions will be answered. Those of you perched close, squeeze in and make room for those still setting down on the outer branches.

This particular Gathering has been unlike any other I have ever attended. The six great Clans of the Family Kinaar — Kemna, Kelk, Koorda, Kurea, Kark and Kush — have advised me, and I alone have learned everything that surrounds these tragic recent events. As Chooser, I have a duty to collect the separate strands of memory relayed to me, and from them weave the nest that will shelter and preserve our Family's history.

Now, all of you, rest your wing, still your feather, calm your beak. As is our custom, and with the blessing of the Maker, I'll tell it to you as it happened, word for sacred word.

I'll begin by saying that in all my thirty-eight springs, and all my thirty-eight winters, in all the time I have flown up the western seacoast, through the great midlands and here between the great northern plains and the forest, never have I seen such trouble strike the Family.

And experiencing that trouble was nearly the end of us.

# CHAPTER 2

The day we set out, a driving rain blew out of the northeast. I felt an ache under my right wing as we took up and remember saying to myself, "This Gathering isn't going to be easy." Of course, I was right, but for all the wrong reasons.

Still, once that spring duster had spent itself, you could see the Family begin to dry out, fly out and find its wings, and by Great Crow, that's a glorious thing. We Crows are, after all, first and foremost creatures of the *air.* There's nothing that brings out the best in a Crow so much as these yearly migrations. They are nature's invitation to return to the element that first breathed us into being, the element the Maker made us for.

And as the clouds broke, the day became as sweet and fresh as ever there was. The scent of fish, flowers, seaweed and salt swept up from the ground. Backs warmed by degrees as a bright westerly sun burned off the remaining mist. We flew most of that afternoon, stopped to rest and feed at a deserted span of pebbly beach — tiny fish, blue-gray mussels and delicate, soft periwinkles — then continued up the coast.

The journey always seems daunting at the onset, but by the end of the first day, you begin to see the world differently — the wind lifting you, the ground dropping away. Earthly things a speck below. The ocean a span of blue and silver, glittering and dancing out to the edge of the horizon. This is the perspective a Crow was made for.

We were in no particular hurry. Flying with me were maybe two hundred souls, everyone in good order. Draped across the sky in our classic formation, we presented a long series of loose, cresting lines, maybe five or six deep, with two drop-backs and a head. Flying lead was Ketchum — at twenty-odd years old, he knows the way north like claws to his talon. Kyra to the left tip, Kark to the right. Immediately to my side, newlings Kora and Kek flailed away, firing up one draft, tucking their wings and hurtling down. Laughing and shouting to do it again. It made me tired just watching them.

Kyrk, however, wasn't inclined to be patient. He clacked

his beak and delivered a withering glance in their direction. Blind in one eye, he never cared for things that jangled anywhere near him. He bunched up those powerful shoulders of his, leaned into an updraft and slithered right into Kek, blindsiding him. Kek tumbled through the air, head over tail, shedding feathers. A ripple of concern ran through the formation till Kek found his balance and silently dropped to the rear.

I drew up alongside Kyrk. I believe part of him already regretted what he'd done.

"What did you do that for?" I asked.

"You're in charge of formation," he growled. "You should know."

When I replied that it was beyond my understanding, he blustered some kind of nonsense about "lack of discipline" and "danger to the flock," then banked off right and took a position next to Kark on the tip.

It was early when we began looking for a place to spend the night. It's best not to drive anyone too hard that first day. We came to rest in a generous flowering plum tree with long, gnarly branches and smooth, silvery bark. The sun had only just slipped over the edge of the horizon and the sky was awash with color. Perched there among all those pink blossoms and their sweet-smelling fragrance, it was as if the sunset had actually descended into the tree.

The younger ones played in the updrafts off the ocean.

A few of the hungrier individuals flew to find forage. Most of the elderly settled in for quiet treetop conversation and a little rest. Klaryssa, the youngest in the flock, crouched on the branch next to me, head tucked in, exhausted. I was relishing the view — not performing Watch, Kymble was doing that — just looking, when I heard a low rumble above me. Kyrk again.

Had I, he wanted to know, put my mind to the security of this location? He fixed that one beady good eye on me. "There's a human roost," he continued, "only a short distance up the coast."

I'd seen it, I told him. A shabby, crooked arrangement as abandoned as a four-stick nest. That wasn't enough for Kyrk. He asked if I had actually checked it. Well, he knew I hadn't. We'd all just found roost.

"It's all very well to think it *looks* abandoned," he pressed, and I could tell he wasn't just talking to me but over me, to others in the tree. "*Looks* abandoned. Anything can *look* abandoned — until humans tumble out with their stingers."

I felt my feathers rise. "Go!" I told him. "*Go* and *check* for yourself if you're that concerned."

Kyrk clacked his beak at me. He had not *chosen* this roost, he reminded me. *I* was Chooser. *I* chose the route. *I* chose the roost. *I* was responsible for matters of security.

My wing ached, but I could tell that he'd go on all night if I didn't do something. Tired as I was, I was prepared to

go when Kyp appeared. He would perform reconnaissance, he declared. I hesitated as I saw all too clearly the trouble that presented — then accepted when I realized that the offer was already made and there was no avoiding the trouble. Kyp launched off the branch in that peculiar jump, hitch way he's perfected and swooped off in the direction of the human roost.

I'd given the human's roost the once-over when we'd flown by it. Like most of their shelters, it was square, with those smaller openings on each side and two larger openings at ground level. But the color had faded, the framework sagged, and the grassy area in front was unkempt and unwatered. Nor was there any sign of the moving boxes humans fire about in, and that's pretty much a giveaway that the human isn't around.

There was a time when the migration would pass day upon day and you'd not see a human or a sign of a human. Now, it's keep your head up all the time. Each year there are more and more Outcasts and Stay-at-Homers — individual Crows who don't migrate, who don't follow the rules or the old ways. They stay where humans stay, eat what humans eat and, in many ways, have more in common with humans than with Crows. The rules were created to protect us, but this brood has hatched in a time when it seems there are countless ways to break the law. Each year so many young Crows are expelled — twenty from within the Kinaar in the

past year! Twelve last year from the Kemna alone, and eight between the Koorda and the Kush. What will happen when there are more cast out than kept in? What use is purity if we are shattered and scattered? I suddenly felt a wave of impatience sweep through me.

"That roost isn't inhabited now, and I would bet it hasn't been inhabited for years," I said irritably. Kyrk sat still as stone, as if I hadn't said a word. We waited. I sighed and shifted from one leg to another.

"That new one who joined us today. That big fellow," Kyrk said abruptly.

"Kuper?"

"Yes, that one. What Clan does he eat with?"

I glanced over at Kyrk, but he didn't give away anything. It's hard to know what he's thinking sometimes. "He's Kerra's great-nephew, from farther south."

"Kerra's folk," he repeated, as if tasting the name on the tip of his beak. "Kemna, then. Was he Outcast?"

"No."

"Where are his parents, then, and those of the nest?"

"Dead. He's flown solo these past few years."

Kyrk gave a restless toss of his shoulders.

"You don't like that?" I asked.

"No," he groused, "and I don't like *him*. He took his time before declaring."

"Dead, Kyrk. All his nest-family, from the trunk out."

I looked straight at Kyrk. I couldn't understand what had so gotten under his feathers. "You *know* there are no humans at that roost."

He glanced off in the direction of the ocean, and for a moment all we did was listen to the surf sucking and slurping in the distance. I couldn't tell if there was something he was watching or whether he was simply refusing to look at me. "Maybe not," he said finally. "But how will newlings understand the need for vigilance and attendance on custom if you don't model it?"

There it was again, his doubts about my ability to lead. By all rights, Kyrk should have been selected as Chooser. My elder by two years, Kyrk has always been larger and stronger than me. His plumage has always been dark and rich — almost blue black — and regardless of the weather, he's always well groomed. Since I turned thirty, I've put on weight. No matter how I preen, I find I look a little wind-blown. For whatever reason, maybe only because I make the rest of the flock look good by comparison, I was selected to Choose six years ago, when our previous Chooser, Kendra, met the Maker following an encounter with a falcon. Kyrk was never able to rest easy with that decision.

I felt the branch sag, turned and saw Kyp just folding his wings. It was safe, he reported, the human roost abandoned, all its entrances open to the elements.

"Are you certain?" Kyrk interrupted, staring hard at Kyp. "Did you inspect according to law and custom? Unless three circuits around the object have been completed —"

"I flew inside," Kyp interrupted.

"Inside?" Kyrk repeated.

"Yes."

I knew that Kyrk was surprised, but when he spoke again, he had regained his composure. "I see. Of course, it will be necessary for you to perform purification then."

"It's late," I objected.

"The law is clear: after close contact, purification is required."

I opened my beak to protest further but Kyp interrupted me. "I don't mind doing it," he said calmly, then gazed directly at Kyrk. "It's just another rule."

"Certainly," Kyrk continued, frost under every word, "and by attending to these rules, each rule, we maintain the legacy passed down to us by our ancestors. So? You will purify yourself now?"

"Of course," Kyp replied evenly.

"Satisfied?" I asked Kyrk.

"The safety of the flock according to custom will always satisfy me. Nothing more," he replied in that rumbling voice of his. And then, as he flew off, "And nothing less."

I turned to Kyp. "You actually flew *inside*?"

"A quick pass," he admitted.

"That was unnecessary," I said, and shook my head disapprovingly. "And dangerous. Who knows what roosts in there now!"

"I didn't linger. And the three circuits wouldn't have been enough for him. Kyrk still would have found something to criticize," Kyp said, and then whet his beak against a tree branch. "The safety of the flock will always satisfy me," he mimicked. "Nothing more and nothing less." He snorted. "*Nothing* satisfies his bunch. And it's not so much safety that they're interested in as it is 'attending to the rules.' How can you listen?"

"It's my job," I said, shifting my weight to ease my hip, "to listen."

"But why?" he asked. "*You're* the Chooser."

"Being Chooser means a lot less and a lot more than you think."

"Just so you know," Kyp said, then he lowered his voice, "most of us younger ones are on your side."

I lowered my voice. "Just so *you* know — it's not about sides. Choosing means making every member of the flock feel each decision made was *their* choice. And that means respecting opinions, even when you disagree. So watch what you say and understand that *he* has influence enough to make life extremely difficult for you if ever he puts his mind to it."

Kyp laughed, kicked off the branch and sped into the

dusk. "Don't worry!" he called back over his shoulder. "I'm not about to do anything stupid."

"Don't worry?" I must have sighed heavily because little Klaryssa woke briefly before settling back down. I did worry. I worried because I knew what a long memory Kyrk had. I worried because I knew that Kyrk still had a dedicated following, especially among the Kurea and Kush. I worried because I knew just how close the Family was to a Splitting. And I worried because Kyp's last remark was just the thing someone said before he did something stupid.

I squinted up at Kyp, gliding in the tight, precise circles of prayer and purification, and then at Kyrk, high in the tree, and sighed again. Slowly, a silence descended. My forewings ached right up through the breastbone. I leaned against a spray of pink blossoms, inhaled their fragrance, tucked my head under my right wing and went to sleep.