

Judit Berg

ALMA

and the Dark Dominion



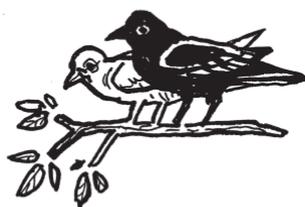
With a contribution from Judit Polgár,
the best woman chess player of all time

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I. A CURIOUS COINCIDENCE

The day had felt strange since early that morning. At first it seemed that nothing was going to work out, but then more and more peculiar things happened as morning moved to afternoon. Perhaps the most improbable thing of all had been the three of them meeting like that. They never normally spoke to each other at school, so the fact that they all ended up somewhere they would never normally go, and all at the same time, was a minor miracle in itself. Yet coincidence, or perhaps a series of coincidences, had gathered them together, as if someone had intentionally twisted the strands of time and space into the kind of knot that takes ages to untangle.

Felix didn't have the faintest intention of going to the park that afternoon. They'd played a basketball match against the Lakeside Leviathans that morning, and Coach Cochran had promised them a trip to the cinema as a reward for their well-earned victory. He was a tough trainer, but with a soft centre. Then, despite their plans to meet at a particular time, and regardless of Felix's stunning performance on the court, a crazy coincidence managed to mess everything up. His mum and dad had been invited to a posh wedding that would probably go on until dawn the following day, and so they thought it best their son stay at home. Gran said she'd come over and look after her abandoned

grandchild even though Felix had turned twelve and was quite able to look after himself, thank you very much! But he'd still have been happy to see Gran, and not only because she'd probably make pancakes for tea and he could talk to her about absolutely anything, but because his kid sister Bella wouldn't spend the whole afternoon following him around like a lost puppy.

His parents had their coats on ready to leave, when Gran called to say that a blackbird had flown into her flat and was flapping about from one room to another in a desperate attempt to escape. Gran said she'd opened all the windows but the poor bird simply couldn't find the way out. There was no way she could come away for the night with a frantic bird about the place: it had made an awful mess already, and even managed to fly right into the mirror and nearly knock itself out. Gran was waiting for the boy next door to come and give her a helping hand to drive it out. She'd be over the minute it had found its way out, and she'd had time to tidy up again. She'd definitely be there by teatime. So there was no need to worry about the pancakes or anything absurd like spending the night on their own, but Felix would just have to look after Bella until she showed up.

Felix simply could not believe that a brainless blackbird had stopped him going to the pictures with his pals. He was fuming inside, and with a bitter look on his face he took tight hold of Bella's hand and dragged her down to "play" in the park. Bella insisted on riding her bike so Felix decided to watch from a safe distance, because there was no way he was going to be seen out with a girl who still had stabilizers.

Drifter hadn't planned to go to the park either. He was the weird one in the class, who spent all his time glued to his computer screen playing some kind of strategy game that involved guns and bombs and points and plans and loads of complicated stuff you only understood if you knew the software inside out. He loved his computer, but he also loved his skateboard, and so he'd organised to meet his mate Saller. They were going to practise

some new moves in Market Square. Saller was a streetwise kid. He'd once come second at the local skateboard championships, and he knew the kind of tricks that made even the pros stop and stare. Drifter had decided it was time to catch up, and Saller had said he was willing to teach him all he knew.

The pair of them had agreed to meet in the afternoon, because the market traders had normally cleared their stalls away by then and the square was pretty empty. A few old cabbage leaves and broken crates couldn't stop two such devotees determined to perfect their flips on the bottom step of the battered fountain. Drifter was the first to arrive, and his head was buzzing after several solid hours of gaming. In fact, he was feeling pretty weird all round. A handful of fat pigeons pecked at the few edible things they could find on the ground, while two magpies hogged the spot where the hotdog van normally stood. Drifter went on a quick spin around the square to scare the pigeons and aimed for a grand finish with the magpies. Those birds were brave! They didn't as much as ruffle a feather when they saw him coming, and he had to swerve to avoid hitting them. Magpies are bigger than you think! The board turned, Drifter jumped, and the magpies hopped onto the top of a stall that had been left standing. Drifter could feel their eyes burning into his back like they were planning their revenge or something.

"Okay, sorry!" he muttered, then he reached for his mobile to check the time. Saller should have been there ages ago. He'd just got it out of his pocket, when it rang and made him jump. It was Saller to say that their plans were most definitely off. He was stuck in the cranky lift between the sixth and the seventh floors, and that thing wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. So he was sitting in the dark waiting for someone to come and set him free. Drifter said he was sorry and all that, then he made for the park because the plinth under the statue of a soldier was just the right height to jump from with little risk of a broken leg. Saller could always come and find him if he got out in daylight. Drifter was sure he could hear the magpies laugh as he left.

Alma was the third child to find herself by chance in Sycamore Park that afternoon. She was actually halfway through her fifth match by the time Felix appeared with his kid sis, and Drifter turned up with his skateboard. The trees sheltered a number of old concrete tables where old men in hats and a handful of young dads gathered to play chess on the warmer afternoons. Some of them treated this forgotten corner of the park like their second home and spent all their free time there when it wasn't raining.

The tables were one thing, but the best bit was a giant chessboard marked out on the grass, where the squares were big enough to stand on and the chunky wooden pieces were the size of toddlers. Next to the playground, it was a pretty popular place with the local kids. But everything was quiet that afternoon. The kids must have been off somewhere else, and the grown-ups were busy concentrating on their precious chess.

Alma had been playing chess since she was five, and she'd entered loads of competitions. Today, a warm afternoon in May, she'd been on her way to the place at the end of the road to buy her first ice cream of the season. She liked it best with extra sprinkles on the top. It was incredibly sunny for that time of year, and Alma didn't feel like walking the whole way in the heat, so she decided to take the route through the leafy park. Her family had only moved there a couple of months ago, and, what with school and chess, she hadn't really had any time to get to know that part of town. She'd only ever ridden through the other part of the park on her bike before, so she was delighted to discover the cool shade of the ancient sycamores and the winding path through a patchwork of colourful flowerbeds.

And then she walked right into what looked like an open-air chess festival! It only took a minute and she was already standing watching the closing moments of a game. The men were in the middle of an annual championship held between the real regulars. It was blitz chess, where the players weren't allowed to ponder for hours on end, and the whole game had to be over in



under five minutes. This kind of chess takes a lot of attention, concentration and speed, and it makes a great spectator sport. The minute a place became free, Alma forgot all about her ice cream with the sprinkles, and announced that she'd love to have a go herself. The men in the crowd – they were all men – didn't seem too keen to let a twelve-year-old girl join in the fun they were having, but seeing as they were a player short, they decided to let her play this once. Young Alma romped through the first game, and then she was in. Quite a little crowd had gathered by the time she stood facing her fifth opponent, and the onlookers whispered to each other about her daring challenges and unusual moves.

Alma was completely absorbed in her passion for chess and so she never noticed the man dressed all in black with a hat, who had his dark eyes fixed on her from the very first minute. The dappled shade of the sycamore trees masked the reaction on the dark figure's face as he watched Alma win one game after the other. As the furrows on his brow deepened with every victory, a shadow seemed to flitter over the tables. The only person in the park who had an eye for this sort of thing was still busy doing something else. That particular person was Drifter, who was hard at work perfecting his jump from the plinth of the soldier statue.

He bunny-hopped to the top, and took a look around as he stopped to catch his breath. Crows and blackbirds were pecking at the grass on the left, a clutch of confused seagulls bobbed on the surface of the pond to the right. Drifter's eyes then roamed further afield until they spotted something very odd in the branches of the sycamore trees that stood next to the path that ran down the side of the park. One branch in particular was packed with birds huddled close up next to each other. The peculiar part about it was that they were arranged crow, seagull, crow, seagull. Black, white, black, white. And there must have been at least eight of them standing like this.

“That’s impossible!” he thought to himself, and he gave his eyes a good rub. “Crows and seagulls don’t get on. They don’t even have stuff like that in a circus. Perhaps they’re all just magpies and I’m seeing funny,” he went on. “Mum might be right about me staring at my screen too much.”

Drifter kicked and flipped his board, and popped it under his arm before setting off to take a better look at this feathery phenomenon. He glanced up again as he made his way over, and was stunned to see that the branch was bare! Had he been seeing things? He decided to take a good look around and try to discover what had tricked him quite so convincingly. But when he got there, he couldn’t find a single feather of evidence of crows and seagulls having been there, let alone making friends and standing in line like that.

Drifter’s gaze wondered over to the chess pieces arranged on the grass by the park path. He looked over just in time to see a black shadow sweep down the path as one of the pieces moved forwards. Drifter gave his eyes the second good rub of the day. He’d slowly grown used to the sensation that animals were looking at him with human expressions, but a giant chess piece that could move itself was too much even for his rich imagination.

“Could it be sunstroke?” Drifter thought for a second, but he was quick to dismiss this. May sunshine really wasn’t that strong and, anyway, he never went out without his baseball cap on. He had to wear it to keep his curly hair back when he was on his board.

Drifter wandered over to the grass. All was calm down by the path, where the players were still deep in concentration. A brown-haired girl with a ponytail came pedalling towards him on her bike. She looked familiar somehow, and Drifter squinted to focus on her face as she came closer.

“That’s bighead Felix’s baby sister.”

Felix and Drifter had been sworn enemies since the first year at infants school. Felix hated the fact that Drifter never really

took part in class activities, was always forgetting his homework, and spent all his time on his computer or his skateboard. He thought the baggy rags he called clothes looked pathetic, and he just couldn't understand someone who had the kind of long hair that was always in his eyes. For his part, Drifter really wasn't into anyone who was good at school, good at sport, and good-looking all at the same time. He thought that Felix's success had made him arrogant, and he did his best to avoid him whenever he could. He turned away. The girl on the bike bore a disturbing resemblance to her big brother, and he didn't really want to bump into either of them.

A cold breeze blew down the tree-lined path. Drifter was sure he could see a long line of crows and seagulls marching along in perfect black-white-black-white succession. Then on the other side – and there was no doubt about it this time – another of the wooden chess pieces made a move. Drifter was just starting to fear for his sanity when the girl wobbled and rode into a bin. Drifter ran straight over and right into Felix, who had appeared from further back. Her big brother was quick to pick his kid sister up. He treated Drifter to a cool nod and then took a look at the bike.

“You should be more careful!” he scolded Bella. “Why go so fast when you can't even use your brakes properly?”

“That's not true! I use my brakes all the time! But one of the black pieces moved and it made me jump!” Bella bawled, and pointed to the giant chess set on the grass.

“Sure it did! And the litter bin just leapt out in front of you!” Felix barked.

“I saw it move, too!” Drifter butted in, suddenly overcome with curiosity to work out what this was all about. If the girl had seen it, it must have happened. He suddenly felt so much saner! Felix got back to his feet and stared at his longhaired, skateboarding classmate. He pulled a face.

“I always thought that you were on about the same level as my sister!”

This was a bit too much for Drifter, who drew a deep breath and took a definite step closer to his famous rival. Rather than back off, the school's best basketball player stood his ground and held Drifter's stare. Bella glanced nervously from one boy to the other, then she had an idea and pointed to the crowd clustered around the chess championship.

"There's that new girl in your class! She's playing chess with those old men!"

Felix and Drifter both turned to look over at the same time. Felix immediately recognised Alma, and he pulled the sides of his mouth down in a grimace. He really didn't like that girl and her chess prowess didn't impress him one bit. He was outraged by the idea that they called it a sport when all the players did was sit on their backsides all day and move little men around a board. Four sessions of basketball training a week – now that was what he called proper sport, with real running and jumping, stretching and sweat!

Drifter was slow to spot Alma because the man dressed all in black caught his eye first of all. The dark figure was staring hard at the girl, but then he looked up for a second and looked right back at Drifter. A cold shiver ran down Drifter's spine and he got goosebumps despite the mild weather. He had the sudden sense that Alma was in some sort of danger. He hadn't said a word to the girl since she'd started at their school, but he somehow knew that she shouldn't be left alone.

"Look at that bloke in the black hat!" he said as he nudged Felix. "There's something not right about him!"

Felix stared at Drifter as if to say "what are you talking about?" before turning back to take a better look for himself. Alma then gave mate, and the crowd murmured in admiration, some even applauded. Another dark shadow swept down the path. And the man in the hat was gone! Perhaps he was blocked from view by the rest of the players around the table, or perhaps he'd left the minute the match ended. Anyway, there was no time left to look, because there was a clap of thunder so loud that perhaps a

bolt of lightning had struck a sycamore tree. The people in the park all looked up to see that the spring sunshine had suddenly been replaced by black clouds. There was a second rumble and the battle in the skies commenced, bringing gusts of wind and buckets of rain that sent everyone running for cover.

Alma took a step back from the table and stared around for a second or two. She'd been so deep in concentration that she couldn't immediately recall where she was. She didn't recognize the park, and the sight of people dashing from the rain confused her completely. She stood hopping from one foot onto the other as she tried to fathom out which way she should run. Then she caught sight of her new classmates and made a beeline for them.

"The old bus shelter!" Drifter shouted, because that was the closest dry place he could think of. The four of them ran as fast as they could and came out at the main road that ran around three-quarters of the park. All they had to do was get over the zebra crossing and they would be out of the pouring rain and under the shelter on the other side. The same idea had occurred to plenty of other people, because running any further in that kind of storm seemed too risky for most folk.

The rain beat down so hard that the stripes painted on the wet road seemed to slide around and Drifter was convinced he could see black and white squares rather than the usual broad lines. None of them had any time to think about this though, because they had their sights set firmly on the shelter. Drifter was the first off the kerb with Alma, Felix and Bella hot on his trail. They got halfway across and all four of them stopped dead in their tracks.

It was impossible to explain, but it felt like the spring storm ended right in the middle of the main road. Black, white, black, white and then suddenly the wind, rain, and road, zebra crossing, and houses on the other side all vanished. The four children found themselves standing in a completely unfamiliar place with no sign of the bus stop, no sign of the town, and no sign to show them where to go.