Chapter One: Flittercrake

Darwen Arkwright

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And
The
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DEDICATION

To Finie and Sebastian,

with whom I discover wonders.
At first Darwen Arkwright thought the twittering he heard was part of a cheesy soundtrack piped through speakers—Woodland Sounds or something similar—designed to make the mall feel less like a concrete box in the middle of a city. But when he looked up through the plastic branches above him, he glimpsed a tiny bird fluttering between boughs of fake foliage. A sparrow or some kind of finch, he thought, as it disappeared from view. He stood up and tried to follow its call.
“There you are,” he muttered. The bird was perched right on top of a potted palm tree and was tweeting so madly that it was amazing nobody other than Darwen was paying it any attention. Darwen had seen birds trapped in malls before, and he supposed they survived pretty well—lots of scraps to eat from the food court, no cars to hit them, no hawks or owls to pick them off—so long as they didn’t try to fly through a window. They didn’t belong inside, he thought. They were outsiders—like him—but still, they did okay.

The bird’s song went up an octave and grew louder and shriller. Something big and dark shot across the mall’s glass domed roof, silhouetted against the sky. The bigger bird—if that’s what it was—slammed into the smaller one in a puff of feathers, and the sparrow fell completely silent. Darwen stared as the survivor adjusted its grip on the branch and began to eat.

Darwen had always been fascinated by birds of prey, so a part of him thought it was pretty cool that he had seen the attack, even though he felt sorry for the sparrow. He moved to get a better look at the bigger bird and saw that its head was quite bald.

No way!

It shifted, gulping down more of its dinner, and turned to scan the scene below, spreading its wings as it did so. It looked right into Darwen’s face. Instantly he knew that
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this bird belonged here even less than he did—even less than the sparrow—knew, in fact, that it wasn’t a bird at all. Its wings were leathery, like a bat’s, and there were what looked like arms underneath: arms with hands that ended in tiny little claws. At least part of the body was furry but the face belonged to neither bird nor bat.

It was a man’s face, or very nearly: a man’s face with a long, cruel-looking beak to which sparrow feathers now stuck. Darwen stared with his mouth open, and in that instant, the creature—he couldn’t call it a bird anymore—took flight. It leapt out of the tree with a beat of its leathery wings, swooping across the dome and off down one of the mall’s many corridors of stores. Darwen ran after it.

He made it about twenty yards before he slammed into a woman loaded with shopping bags.

“Watch where you’re going!” said the woman.

“Sorry,” muttered Darwen, still looking up to the ceiling where the winged creature was soaring unnoticed by the people below.

“You know,” said a girl emerging from behind the shopping bags, “it’s polite to look at people when you are talking to them.”

Darwen looked down and blushed.

“Right,” he said. “Sorry.”

“You really shouldn’t go tearing around in here,” said the woman. “You’ll break something.”
“Right,” said Darwen again, looking up to where the bird-bat-thing had been. “Sorry. I have to . . .”

He pushed past them, face up to the ceiling, and the girl exclaimed, “How rude!” loudly as he went.

It was a fancy mall. No dollar stores or book shops—the only ones Darwen ever found interesting—nothing but high-end clothing and jewelry. He ran on, desperately scanning the roof beams, window ledges, and potted foliage for signs of the flying creature. Nothing. He had lost it.

He paused for breath, turned all the way around and . . . there it was, high up on the sign of a store which sold handmade chocolates. The creature wasn’t so much perching now, as lounging, sucking what Darwen assumed to be sparrow blood off its long fingers. For a second Darwen just stared, and then the creature turned to look at him, grinned maliciously, and stuck its long pink tongue out.

Darwen gasped.

What was this thing?

Then it was moving once more, flapping in long even strokes over the heads of the crowd who—astonishingly—were too taken with themselves and the shop windows to notice the strange whatever-it-was flashing over their heads. Darwen began to run again, determined not to lose it this time.
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He had gotten halfway down the next grand corridor of stores—this one filled with brand-name handbags and electronic gadgets—when he collided with a fat man in uniform who sent him sprawling.

“Sorry,” said Darwen, still running.

“Get back here,” said the man, getting to his feet.

He was a policeman.

Darwen had never been a troublemaker, and if he had been back in England, there was no way he would have run from a cop. But the winged creature had a hold of his imagination and he wanted—needed—to see where it went. Darwen shouted “Sorry!” again and kept running, his eyes never leaving the flying beast, which had done a little loop in the air so that it could make a rude face at him. Then it was off again, diving and soaring, feinting right and left, then zooming down a different walkway. Darwen didn’t risk a glance back to see if the policeman was following.

This end of the mall was quieter than the rest. Darwen ran past a large department store smelling strongly of perfume, then a furniture shop with a sign advertising massive discounts, and then there was nothing, just a broad open walkway flanked by empty store fronts.

Well, almost nothing. There was one more shop, right at the end of the corridor beside the exit sign, a tiny ramshackle place that looked like it had been lifted out of an
entirely different location and dropped in. Even at this unfashionable and largely ignored end of the mall, it was out of place. The exterior was made of chipped brick and ancient wood—the varnish stained and peeling—and little windows crisscrossed with lead. It looked like a shop from another age. Above its door, suspended from two chains, was a faded wooden sign with gold lettering:

**Mr. Octavius Peregrine's Reflectory Emporium:**

**Mirrors Priceless and Perilous**

Clinging bat-like to the sign, its head cocked in Darwen's direction, was the little winged beast. It blew a raspberry at him, then hopped onto the wall of the shop and through a half-broken diamond of leaded window glass.

Darwen ran to the door but hesitated as he put his hand on the tarnished brass handle. There was something odd about this place. He could feel it. The window displays were dusty, full of antique mirrors in ornate frames, many of them faded, speckled, and scratched, some with obvious cracks.

*And how*, he wondered, *could mirrors be “priceless and perilous”*?

He peered at the hand-lettered price tags and his mouth dropped open. The store might not look like it belonged in the mall, but its merchandise was not cheap. There was nothing in the window selling for less than a thousand dollars, and that would only buy you a tiny,
old-fashioned hand mirror, not much bigger than the compact his aunt carried in her purse. The larger one next to it had a corner missing, but the spidery writing on the yellowing paper tag said that it sold for $4,600.

_They have to be kidding_, thought Darwen. It was no wonder the place looked deserted.

But he had to know what that bird-thing was. He just didn’t have a choice. So he pressed the worn brass latch and, as a little bell tinkled, pushed the door open.