

Far above the snow topped mountain, the lonely seagull flies.

Distant thunder rumbles, a remnant of the fierce storm that caught her, tossed her around like she was nothing; a piece of litter to be discarded, until it spat her out here, far off course and far from home.

She circles, calling into the now gentle breeze, and listens for a response.

None comes.

There is no ebb and flow of life up here.

Only bright white and cold, thin air.

With angled wings, she swoops along the snow softened slope of the mountain until dazzling light gives way to jagged rocks, dark and stark against the pale ice that glows silver in the moonset of early morning. The sun will rise again soon, bringing hope along with the dawn, but for now she flies; searching, yearning, for any sign of life.

Tiny tufts of grass appear, surviving in minute cracks in the rocks, the first indication that anything lives up here.

She follows them, lower and lower, tracing their path down off the mountain until, finally, there -

There's water.

A drip, echoing through the landscape.

Snow melt.

She angles her head, zeroes in on the sound, focusses on it, soars towards it.

Where there is water, life will follow.

At first, there is only the drip, the soft plink of water onto rock. It pools there until the small hollow overflows and becomes a tiny stream that runs down the rock until it meets another stream and they merge, growing ever bigger, ever faster, racing, gushing, finding new streams that become a torrent that carves its own path through the harsh terrain.

A river.

*Life.*

More tufts of grass which become a carpet of green that meanders through the rocks; smaller rocks now, boulders standing sentinel along the river with weedy trees pushing their way through the cracks in search of sunlight.

She soars onwards, searching, seeking.

The carpet of grass becomes lusher, greener. The trees become bigger; big enough to support life.

She calls again but receives no response. Her wing flaps slow, each beat taking more effort than the last. She pushes on. She must find her way home.

The river carves on, slower now but still tumbling over boulders in a cascade of stormy water until finally, finally, the landscape opens and the river widens and slows.

It's time to rest.

She lands on a large rock beside the river, catches her breath and stretches her tired wings. She can take a few moments here.

The water is clear as it bubbles over rocks and settles into pools. Small, silvery fish swim below the surface. Food. Sustenance.

Ever the opportunist, she waits and watches. She doesn't have the energy to chase down a meal but soon enough one of the fish is within striking distance and she clamps her beak down onto it with a loud crack that shatters the tranquillity.

Finally, she has found life. She could live here, beside this mountain river. She could *survive* here.

But it isn't *home*.

She needs to move on.

She flaps her wings experimentally, testing how much energy she has regained after her short rest and small meal.

Enough, she thinks.

She takes to the wing again, flapping to gain height before she can soar on the thermal updraughts once more.

The river is bright beneath her, snaking its silvery way ever downwards.

She follows it as the trees grow taller, thicker, a forest with birds; strangers who twitter in a language she doesn't speak. These are not her people.

She flies on.

The river will lead her home.

The trees become more sparse again, smaller, dwindling down to shrubs and then clearing to a covering of verdant grass.

The river slows, the water calm and quiet here as it winds its way through a meadow filled with reds and whites and blues and yellows of wildflowers surrounded by dancing butterflies in a kaleidoscope of colours.

All too soon, the colourful meadow gives way to pasture, the grass cropped short by livestock and bleached to a bone white by the bright sunlight. Sheep graze on one side of the calm water; cattle on the other. Riverbanks gently slope down to the water in an almost beach that reminds her achingly of *home*. Cows paddle in the shallows and drink deeply from the water as they swish their tails against biting flies.

She could stay here.

There is plenty of life and she's tired, so tired that each wing beat is hard.

But this isn't her place.

She must keep flying.

Livestock fields give way to parkland, dotted with people playing games and picnicking by the water. She swoops down, snatches a sandwich from the hand of a man who was too careless to pay attention, and then back up into the air again with his disgruntled shouts ringing in her ears.

The sandwich is gone in a gulp.

Buildings line the river now. Bridges cross it. Cars teem below her on tarmac roads, sending exhaust fumes into the atmosphere. She chokes on the poisoned air and gains height, wings beating as hard as she can manage to get away from the foul smells and heat.

She skirts the town, flying as distantly from the river as she dares. She can't lose sight of it.

The river is her only link to home.

Soon, it joins another. Clear blue water joins murky brown, simmering away until they merge to become one, larger, river and *there*, distant, she can smell it.

The ocean.

*Home.*

She follows the new-old river, the scent of the sea infusing her with new energy.

It widens from a river to an estuary, filled with brackish tidal water and lined with mudflats which are designed to trap unwary feet.

She is almost home.

So close.

She calls into the breeze and this time there's a distant answer. *Keep going*, it says. *You're almost there. Keep going.*

She does.

Below her, deep brown mud flats fade to glorious golden sand that stretches out towards -

Towards -

The sparkling blue water of the ocean.

She calls, triumphant, and now there are a hundred responses as her loved ones flock towards her.

She flies to greet them, her exhaustion forgotten now. She flies out over where the sea laps, clear and bright, at the sand; at the boundary between land and water. She flies out over the waves which crest gently, pushing new life inwards and drawing old water back into them.

She flies and she wheels above the shore, calling and calling until, finally, she's joined by her colony.

They fly beside her, far above the ebb and flow of the ocean, the rise and fall of the tides, and they escort her back to her clifftop nest where she settles into her cosy cup of twigs that's lined with comfortable grasses.

And then she rests.

She's home.

She's finally home.