

DERMOT O'LEARY

WINGS
OF
GLORY



ILLUSTRATED BY
CLAIRE POWELL

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HODDER

HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Hodder & Stoughton

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 444 96162 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The paper and board used in this book
are made from wood from responsible sources



Hodder Children's Books
An imprint of
Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

Prologue

A long time ago, but not so long that we've forgotten, a war broke out in Europe – and then the world.

It was the second time that a great world war had happened, so it was called the Second World War. No one had believed that such a terrible thing could happen again, and then it did.

It was 1939, and the leader of Germany, Adolf Hitler, had decided that he wanted more land and power for himself. Over the next six years, he would stop at nothing to get it, invading the countries around him and persecuting people without mercy.

At home, ordinary people prepared themselves for the hardships of war that lay ahead, while young sons and daughters headed off to join the Allied forces and fight the enemy armies who wanted to take over the world.

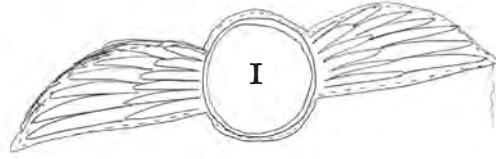


Dermot O'Leary

But, still unknown to most of us today, our animal friends also joined the war effort: helping humans in the skies, at sea and on the battlegrounds.

And in 1940, one small bird, barely the weight of an egg, was about to help shape the history of the world . . .





‘Bandits at two thousand feet below! Look lively and be ready to follow me to intercept!’

Linus’s orders cut through the rushing headwind like a dagger. Each one of the birds under his command answered ‘Roger!’ in unison, and, keeping in perfect formation, waited for his next command.

Linus, a tiny swift from the green fields of England, was squadron leader of an elite fighting unit of peregrine falcons, the fastest and most famous birds in the whole of the Royal Bird Force. They had said it couldn’t be done: a little swift commanding the best of the RBF, but here he was, at the head of his loyal unit who would follow him to battle and back.

He looked down at the formation of enemy bombers just



skirting the tops of the white fluffy clouds, heading for the British coastline, and smiled to himself. They wouldn't know what had hit them.

'Tally ho, follow me!' he cried, banking into a steep dive towards his quarry.

Moving as one, his squadron followed. Flying at almost two hundred miles per hour, the falcons and their leader made the distance in no time. They levelled off, undetected, flying just above the lumbering enemy bombers.

Directly below them, Linus could see that the lead plane, a Junkers 88, had its window open. The pilot was looking around, maybe trying to determine his exact location.

Linus knew exactly what to do. 'Squadron, begin intercept!' he ordered.

He dived next to the pilot's window, then suddenly banked right so that he flew straight into the cramped cockpit. Before the pilot had a chance to wonder what on earth was happening, the small bird landed on his head and, using his tiny claws, pulled the pilot's flying helmet over his eyes. The cockpit descended into utter chaos, the pilot trying his best to control the plane, which was lurching all over the skies, and the crew screaming and climbing

over each other, trying to shoo the pesky intruder away.

Gleefully flapping around to cause as much chaos as he could, Linus finally flew out of the cockpit, soaring steeply to safety. Looking back, he saw with delight that his team had followed his lead and every bomber in the formation was now either banking, diving or climbing. The whole German squadron was in complete disarray. As his squadron flew back to join him one by one, he heard the welcome sound of a Rolls-Royce Merlin engine and turned to see the imposing sight of a squadron of friendly Hurricanes coming over the cliffs to intercept the bombers. The slower enemy planes were now scattered and vulnerable, and the birds watched with satisfaction as the RAF either shot down or chased off the last of the enemy.

‘Well, Squadron Leader, sir, you’ve done it again!’ exclaimed one of his wingmen. ‘There’s not a finer bird in the RBF. It’s an honour to fly with you, Linus. Linus . . . LINUS!’

‘LINUS! Wake up! You have to come and see this!’

Ten thousand feet above the plains of central Africa, Linus was asleep on the wing, in the very clever way that swifts can, gliding on the rising air of the warm thermals. Half his brain was awake,

alert and making sure he wasn't tumbling out of the sky, but the other half was very much asleep, enjoying his favourite dream of being an RBF ace.

That is, until his big sister Ava gave his wing a nip with her beak that, quite rudely in his opinion, woke him up.

'Hey! That's the quickest swift-wing on two continents you're biting,' he said, yawning.

She rolled her eyes and banked away, barrel-rolling as she played with the currents. She didn't disagree though. Her brother was cocky, but he was right.

'You might be the fastest swift in the skies around here, but you definitely don't have the sharpest eyes. Look down there at the watering hole. Something's going on. Come on, let's check it out!' With that, she flew into a steep dive towards the ground.

'What do you mean? I've got good eyes! They're just a little small . . . Ava, wait for me, I'm coming!' Linus yelled over the wind, then turned his gaze to the dry earth beneath them.

A large crowd of animals had gathered around the watering hole they called home – and Ava was already halfway there.

'Hey! I said wait for me! You're supposed to be the responsible one!' Linus pinned his wings back and went after her.

Alongside the peregrine falcons, the swifts were considered the fastest birds on the planet. Sure, the golden eagles were quick, the albatrosses could put a shift in, and there was even talk of a spur-winged goose that was pretty nippy, but for out-and-out speed, it was all about the swifts and the falcons. Linus and Ava came from a long line of famous racers. Their grandfather Ernest had won the Paris to Dakar air race a record seven times, and everyone thought Linus had the potential to be even faster when he was older.

Linus caught up with his sister and gave her a friendly bump on the wing, then the swifts fluttered around the crop of trees that bordered the large watering hole to take in the scene. The whole neighbourhood had turned out and the treetops were awash with colour. Hoopoes, cranes, kingfishers . . . even the vultures had shown up.

‘They said there were going to be snacks, Sheila,’ one grumpily muttered to his partner. ‘I can’t see a single bone to nibble on!’

‘What’s going on?’ Linus whispered to Sheila.

‘Beats me,’ she chirped. ‘Some kind of announcement, apparently.’

Down by the water’s edge, there seemed to be a truce in the animal kingdom as everyone waited to see what the fuss was about.

There were lions, zebras, a pair of haughty-looking giraffes who appeared to think the whole thing was beneath them (which it kind of was, height-wise), a crocodile with a hungry smile, and next to him the local mayor, a quite pompous elephant, had shown up with his whole herd.

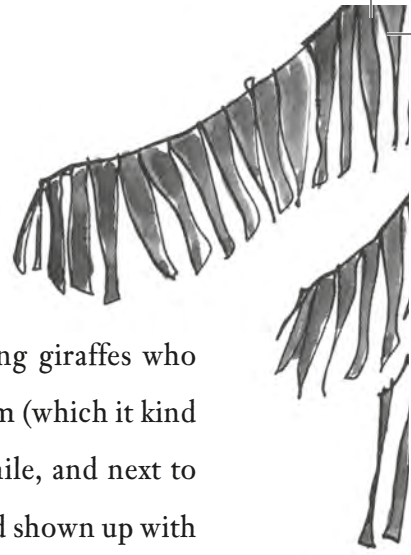
Suddenly, his loud trumpet brought the meeting to order. All the animals quietened down to hear what he had to say.

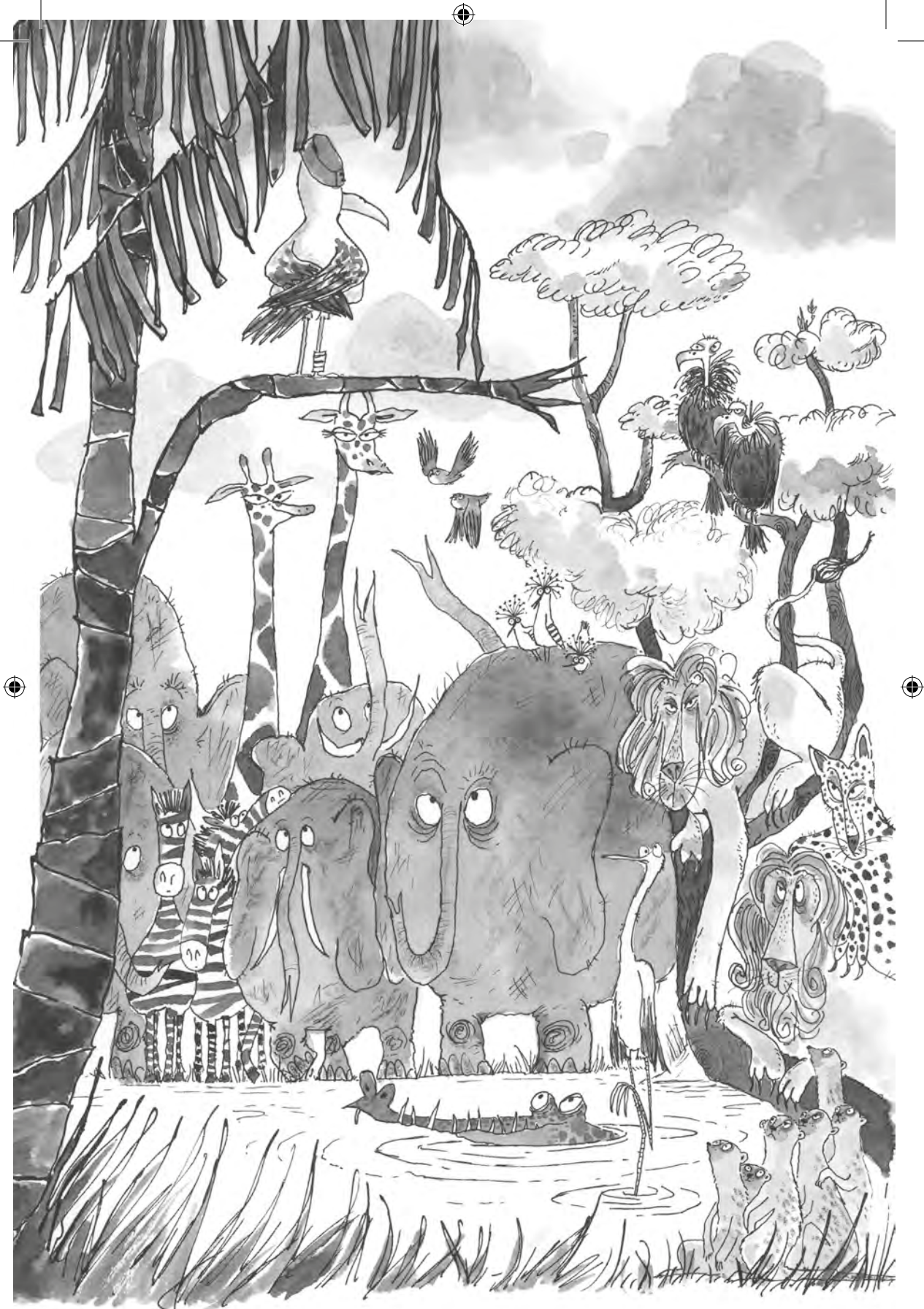
'Welcome, friends and, er, welcome, you animals who have tried to eat me, and also you animals that I try not to stand on,' began the mayor.

'That's us, Malcolm, he's talking about us!' a tiny meerkat said proudly to her husband.

'Thank you for gathering at such short notice. Our guest has travelled a great distance to be with us today. As your elected leader, I have granted him an audience. Let us hear what he has to say.' The elephant gestured with his trunk across the water.

All eyes turned to a lone albatross, normally unheard of in this part of the world, perched in the highest tree for miles around. On his leg he wore a band with three stripes that denoted he was a Flight Sergeant in the RBF.





'Thank you. I am Flight Sergeant Derek Pilchardton of the Royal Bird Force. I have a VERY important message to deliver.' His squawk was so loud it could be heard across the plains as he produced a parchment from around his neck, cleared his throat – 'Ahem' – and read with great self-importance:

From His Majesty's Animal Air Ministry:

Your Commonwealth needs you to join the fight against the enemy. We are asking all birds of flying age, the faster the better, to sign up and join the RBF.

Your mission will be to defend our shores, harass any invaders and help the human Royal Air Force defeat all enemy forces. You are to make your way to Britain as fast as the wind will take you. Godspeed.

Signed

Air Chief Marshal Sir Archibald Talon

Golden Eagle

The albatross rolled up the paper and tucked it back into his plumage.



‘I shall be here for the rest of the day. Birds, please come and see me to sign up. Land animals, please be on a high state of alert. You will be called upon to do your duty very soon.’

The animals started muttering to one another, some excitedly and some less so. The lions and most of the elephants were looking very sceptical about helping any humans.

‘This is it, sis!’ said Linus, darting around impatiently. ‘The chance I’ve been waiting for to prove how fast I am! Let’s go!’

‘Whoa, calm down, Linus! This isn’t just about being able to fly fast. We would be going into battle, with humans who are bigger, nastier and more ruthless than us. Who have big machines – planes that could chew us up!’

‘But, Ava, we can’t sit around here and do nothing. You heard Flight Sergeant Pilchardton – they need all the birds they can get! And I’ll finally get to fly with the falcons, in an elite RBF squadron!’

Ava groaned. ‘Linus, you’re a swift, maybe the fastest swift in all of Britain, Africa – maybe the world. Why are you so obsessed with the falcons?’

‘Because they are the best, and I want to serve and fly with the best. So, don’t you see, the better question would be: how can we NOT go?’



‘But what have the humans ever done for us?’ an old elephant trumpeted up at them grumpily. ‘They hunt us for our meat, our skins, our tusks! And they steal our land! No good can come from this, or any other human war. Best keep out of it. Trust us elephants – we’ve seen it all before, and we never forget!’

The elephant had a point. As every animal knew, as far back as any species could remember, most humans were far too preoccupied with their own lives to notice anything of how the animal world helped them.

Only a rare few humans (kings and queens, presidents, prime ministers and a few high-ranking generals) were allowed to know that the animal world understood everything they said and did, and could communicate with them.

Over time, trust was earned and pacts were formed, and an uneasy alliance was formed between humans and animals.

So when a message needed to be sent from the animal to the human world or vice versa, a select squad of carrier pigeons would act as the secret go-between for the two kingdoms.

And if a human ever betrayed this alliance . . . Well, let’s just say the same carrier pigeons would pursue the culprit for the rest of their lives, every minute of every day, and do what pigeons do

best . . . poo on their heads.

‘Besides, Britain is so far away,’ the old elephant continued. ‘What does this war matter to us?’

‘We were born in Britain! We migrated here for the winter last year, when we were no more than fledglings,’ said Linus. He turned to his sister. ‘Ava, you must remember the farm where we were born?’

‘Of course, Linus. It was beautiful. We used to swoop around the farmyard and the skies above without a care in the world.’

‘Exactly, and remember the young farmer and his family, who let us nest in their barn? Remember his children? A young brother and sister, just like us, who looked after us when we were fledglings learning to fly. The family waving at us as we swooped and soared above the fields, filling our beaks with as many bugs as we could eat. Birds and humans living side by side in harmony. If their freedom is in danger, then surely everyone else’s is too, including the animal kingdom’s. If we can do anything to help, then we have a duty to try.’

Ava nodded her head in resignation. She knew she was beaten, and there was no way she was going to let him go on his own.

‘I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this, but OK – on ONE

condition: you MUST listen to me. You're all I have in the world, little brother.'

'Thanks, sis. Come on, let's go!'

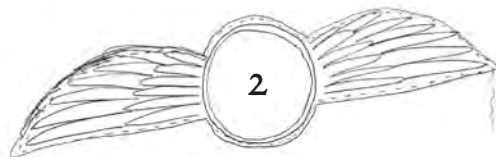
Signing their call-up papers with their beaks dipped in ink, they were instructed to report to Tangled Wood Airfield on the south coast of England in a week's time. 'Well done, you two,' Flight Sergeant Pilchardton said with a salute. 'Now, go and do your species proud!'



WINGS OF GLORY

And with that, Linus and Ava soared away into the vast blue sky to prepare for their long journey, excited for the adventure that lay ahead and blissfully unaware of the grave danger they would be facing all too soon.





Linus and Ava flew away in the early hours the next morning, just before dawn. Below them they could see the lights of charcoal fires beginning to burn like beacons, as the first humans stirred and started their day. The swifts headed north, using the southwestern flow of warm air to push them along. Even flying high, fast and hard, there wasn't a moment to lose. They would eat and sleep on the wing, and not land anywhere.

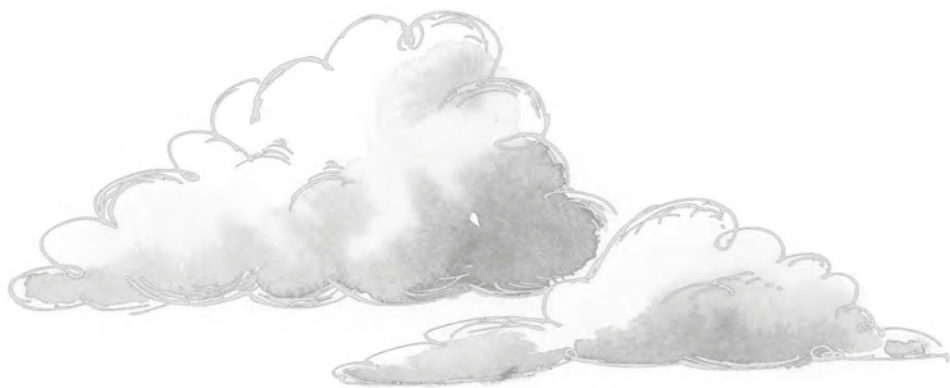
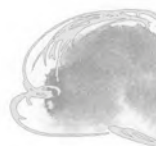
'We'll hug the west coast of Africa, like our parents and grandparents before us,' said Ava, 'then across the Mediterranean Sea and up over Spain and France. We should reach Tangled Wood Airfield in five days. Now, Linus, show me that speed you're famous for!'





Linus rolled over on to his back, stretched out, winked at his big sister and then dived into the clouds below.

‘Show off,’ Ava muttered fondly, and followed her younger brother into the steep dive.



They soared, banked and played in the clouds as they shook off the sleep of the night before. To the east they could see the sun start to rise over the plains, and the beautiful red earth below them began to reclaim its heat from the morning chill.

‘What do you think our first mission will be?’ Linus asked excitedly. ‘I want to get right in the cockpit of the famous German



Messerschmitt 109 and make those pilots turn right around. I want to lead my own squadron of birds, with medals on my wing. I want to meet our animal Prime Minister, Sir Bertie Bulldog himself . . . and I want my own statue in Trafalgar Square!’

‘You don’t want much then?’ his sister laughed. ‘Linus, we’re birds. Most humans have no idea we are coming to help, the enemy will be no pushover, their pilots and their planes will be tough to catch, let alone harass, and as for a statue! Good luck with that! The pigeons run Trafalgar Square; you’ll have to impress them if that’s what you want. Now, start by impressing *me* with less chatting and more flying!’

Gliding on the warm air, they picked up speed, and over the next couple of days they flew hard, skirting west Africa over the coast of

Nigeria, past Sierra Leone, then turning north over Senegal with the enormous Atlantic Ocean below, the huge waves breaking on the golden coast, until finally they were over Morocco and they could see the Mediterranean Sea ahead of them.

'We're making great progress,' Ava called to her brother. 'Two more days' hard flying and we'll be there!'

The birds were tired, but glancing below and seeing the Straits of Gibraltar spurred them on. They had finally reached Europe.

So far they hadn't seen many other birds, let alone any other animals. They were behind most of the swifts who had made the trip as part of their annual migration and who wanted to keep out of trouble, and they were too high and travelling too fast to see many other species of birds, but as they flew over southern Spain they hit an unexpected cloudy patch and had to go lower down to get their fill of insects for breakfast. As they descended, they spotted an Audouin's gull, a fisher bird common in this part of the world, its beak streaked with a familiar blood-red stain, and a squawk that could only come from a noisy, nosy seagull.

'*Brrrawwwkkk!*' the Spanish gull screeched, ascending from a dive in the ocean, a mouthful of sardines in his beak. 'Swifts? But only two of you, and travelling so fast? What's the hurry?'

WINGS OF GLORY



Ava wasn't sure they should be telling a stranger their business, but before she could whisper this to her brother, he piped up.

'We've signed up to fight for the Allies. We're headed for the south of England. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can see some action!'

Ava groaned inwardly, but the stranger seemed to warm to the birds.



‘Hey, good for you. But, my young friends, you must be careful. Today you have the good fortune to meet an ally, but not all animals are sympathetic to our cause. The wasps and the mosquitos have already sided with the enemy.’

‘So it’s true,’ Ava sighed.

There had been rumours around the watering hole that some animals might see siding with the enemy as an opportunity to get rid of some of their competitors and move up the pecking order of the animal kingdom, rather than uniting to fight for the freedom of humans and animals alike. Wasps had always had an attitude problem and were angry ALL THE TIME, and as for mosquitos, they were either biting you or you were eating them . . . which didn’t make for great relations.

‘Alas, yes,’ the gull answered. ‘But it’s not just them. I’ve heard of birds, mammals, even sea creatures siding with the enemy to get a leg-up – or a fin-up.’

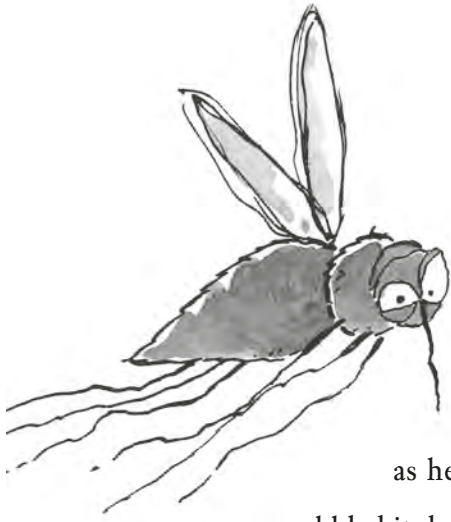
In other words, for all her brother’s bravado, they needed to be careful.

‘Ah, I wish I was a little younger,’ the gull continued. ‘I’d love

WINGS OF GLORY

to show those thugs a thing or two.
I see the dreaded U-boats off the coast
all the time and aim my droppings on the
captain's head when they surface. Scored a
direct hit last week. So much fun – the fool
was covered in it.





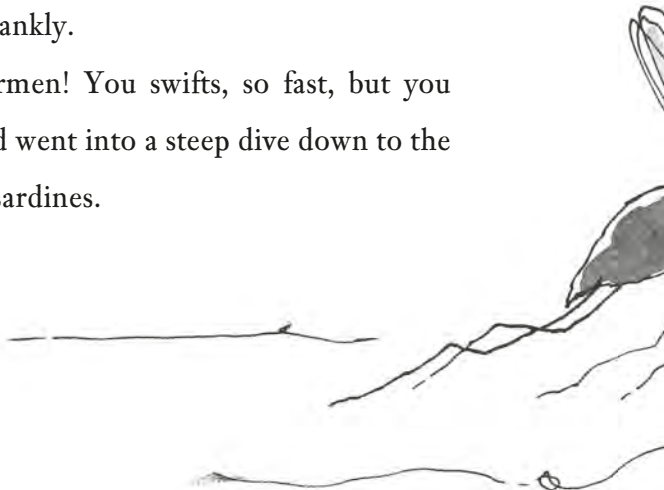
But I'm just one bird, and a simple fisher bird at that; what can I do! Speaking of which, would you care for some breakfast?' He offered up a severed sardine head.

'Err, no, we're good, thanks,' Linus said, as he snatched a passing insect out of the air and gobbled it down.

'Urgh, insects,' winced the seagull. He greedily finished the last of the silvery fish. 'I also heard from my cousin in Galicia that France has fallen and Britain will be next! Despite the best efforts of the Allies, they were pushed back to Dunkirk. Over three hundred thousand men made it out, but scores perished, alongside many seabirds shot out of the sky, and countless seals who tried to clear the mines. I don't normally care for seals, too greedy, but you have to say those are some brave mammals . . .' He trailed off. 'Anyway, Godspeed, and may La Virgen del Carmen be with you.'

The swifts looked at him blankly.

'The patron saint of fishermen! You swifts, so fast, but you know nothing!' He winked and went into a steep dive down to the shining sea in search of more sardines.



‘We need to be careful,’ Ava said to her brother. ‘Now we’ve reached Europe we’ll see more animals involved in the war and we won’t know which side they’re on. Until we get to England, if anyone asks us, let’s just say we’re migrating on our own as it’s faster that way.’

Linus nodded. He’d been carried away with the adventure of it all and hadn’t really thought about actually being in danger. Hearing the gull talking about birds falling out of the sky . . . For the first time in his life, he felt a tiny bit scared.

‘Come on, Linus, we’re expected at Tangled Wood for our first briefing in two days. We need to push on.’

The siblings pinned back their wings and sped off, eager to get to the safety of Tangled Wood Airfield as quickly as possible – not realising that where they were heading was one of the most dangerous places on earth for human or bird.

