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One

Things began to get bad over the last few weeks before the summer holidays. It was Ailsa's first year in secondary school, she hadn't long turned twelve, and her mum got ill. She began to spend every day in bed. The place became untidy, then outright dirty, and finally there was no food left in the fridge or freezer.

In the end, Ailsa had to phone Uncle Nod.

'It's happening again,' she told him.

'You hold tight, love,' he said. 'Pack your bags. I'll be there soon.'

He was there a few hours later. His truck chugged to a stop outside their flat. Ailsa ran outside to meet him, relieved. They half-carried Ailsa's mum out to the truck, lay her across the rear seats, and packed their bags into the back.

Uncle Nod looked over at Ailsa as they left the city. They took the motorway up to the harbour.

'Your aunt's getting your room ready for you,' he said. 'And Moxie knows something's up, daft old fool. He'll be dead excited to see you.'

'How long will we stay with you?' she asked.

'As long as you want to, love,' he said. He grinned over at her, though she could see how worried he was. She was worried too, but she felt safer now she was with him.

Uncle Nod drove them onto the ferry. He sat in the truck and her mum lay swaddled in a blanket across the back seats. Ailsa spent the whole time at the front of the boat, enjoying the sea spray and the wind. It was her favourite part of the journey. The choppy sea and savage wind, the bump and rock of the boat, and the salty, briny smell of the sea always made her smile. It always made her feel alive.

The island on which her aunt and uncle lived emerged on the horizon as she stood watching. It gleamed in the summer sunshine, and she relaxed a little bit.

Uncle Nod and Aunt Bertha would take care of things. They always did.

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A couple of days passed, then a couple more, and Mum stayed shut up in her bedroom. Ailsa spent every hour she could out and about, exploring the island's coast. Uncle Nod gave her a torch and she had packed her wellies in with her other things, despite the summer's warmth. It was everything she needed.

That and Moxie, of course. She always felt better with Moxie around. Everyone did.

There were lots of different paths leading down to the island's caves. Each one led to any number of thin stretches of rugged beach. The beaches were all rocks and heather and washed-up seaweed. The caves were carved through the high cliffs that overlooked the beaches.

'This whole stretch of coast is riddled with them,' Aunt Bertha always told Ailsa with a smile. 'Smugglers and worse used them for centuries as hidey holes and what-not. But you be careful down there. Places like that can be treacherous for a landlubber like yourself.'

Water pounded the beaches every day as the tide rose and the wind whipped up. It was only ever safe to try them at low tide, so Uncle Nod also gave Ailsa a chart with all the tidal times written down. She read the chart

every morning in bed as she worked out when to take Moxie out exploring.

About a week into her stay, Ailsa walked Moxie along a particularly rocky cove. She doubted many people came down here. It was overgrown and poorly trodden. She had only spotted the path by accident, and even then, it was only because Moxie had run over to it.

Moxie ran off again, halfway along the cove. His tail wagged and he worked his nose hard, sniffing at a thin cave mouth in the rocks. It was almost hidden from view by great ropes of seaweed that clung to its edges. A slab of moss-slick rock led up from the beach. Waves washed over it, even during the low tide. Moxie ran up to it, giving a few short, sharp barks as he did so. Then he disappeared inside.

Ailsa didn't want to follow. The cave's smell was overpowering. It smelled like the fishermen who came to Uncle Nod and Aunt Bertha's yard in their overalls and wax coats, covered in fish guts and worse. It smelled like the harbour on a hot day when they brought their catches in. But Moxie wouldn't come back when she called him.

Ailsa carefully walked up the stony slab and peeped inside. Jagged rocks stood up everywhere. Everything

was dark and clammy, despite the day's warmth.

It was horrible, and there was more to it than the smell and the darkness. Ailsa felt a deep-rooted sense of sadness in her belly as she peered in after Moxie. There was no explaining it. Ailsa couldn't have done so had she wanted to. But it was there, dragging at her, making her feel miserable just looking. It was too familiar, just like their house became whenever Mum got sick.

She shone her torch in. Moxie whined from somewhere inside and she found him with the light's beam. She heard something moving, something faintly splashing.

'Moxie . . . ?' she ventured, but she couldn't see him.

'Ailsa!' a deep voice called out. She jumped back from the cave.

It was Uncle Nod, away along the coast.

'What are you doing, love?' he asked as she scrambled up the cliff path and jogged over to him. He pointed at the sea. The tide was eating its way up the beach. 'Tide's turned, lass!' he said. 'You'll get yourself drowned staying down there!'

'Aye, Uncle Nod,' Ailsa replied. She had been sure she was meant to have another hour or so before the tide turned. She whistled and Moxie came bounding out of

the cave and ran up the track to join them. Bits of seaweed stuck to his fur, and he was dripping wet. Great gobs of salty muck clung to his muzzle.

'Did I not tell you to keep an eye on the tide times, love?' Uncle Nod grumbled as they walked back from the clifftops.

Moxie hopped nimbly along beside them, looking very pleased with himself.

'Well?' Uncle Nod asked, stopping and turning to face her. 'Didn't I?'

Ailsa faltered. She stood before him, sun-kissed and wind-blown, dirty from the day. 'Aye, Uncle Nod,' she began, 'but I thought—'

'Well, heed me, child,' he snapped. 'We've enough to be getting on with, your aunt and me, worrying about your mum. You think we want you washing out to sea and all? It'd finish us all off, love.'

'Aye, Uncle Nod.'

'And you be careful on those rocks,' he said. 'Those cliffs are crumbling, falling into the sea. More go every day.'

'Aye, Uncle Nod.'

'Well, then. Good,' he said. 'You keep a closer eye on these things. On the tides themselves. They can be fickle

when they want to be. Your grandad used to tell me often enough. Fool as he was, he knew the way of things. Keep an eye on the time and tide, and the rest will take care of itself, he'd say. You could do with thinking on that.'

'Aye, Uncle Nod.'

He glared at Moxie. 'And you, boy,' he said. 'You should know better too, dragging her off down there.'

Moxie hung his head.

'Aye, then,' Uncle Nod said. Then he smiled. His face split into craggy joy. 'Come on with you,' he said. He turned and beckoned for them to follow him home. 'I've got dinner to start, and an extra pair of hands never went amiss.'

'Aye, Uncle Nod.'

Ailsa and Moxie followed along. A sharp wind buffeted the coast and the caves as they left.

