War of the Wind

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Two Years Before the Turbines

The last sound I ever heard wasn't what I expected.

If I'd been on one of those stupid game shows risking a million pounds on the final question, I'd probably have guessed it would be the cry of gulls.

Those monsters haunted the skies above the island like pale ghosts, swooping down to steal fish from the trawlers coming home to the harbour before the teams could unload. Dive-bombing in unison, they tore at the nets bulging with fresh-caught herring, snatching the silver fish and swallowing them whole as they wheeled back into the sky for the next attack. They kept circling right up until the last crates had been loaded into the packing sheds. Then, once their bellies were full and their wings were straining to stay airborne, that's when they started to laugh.

I could still remember that noise clearly. It was a deep throaty sound that echoed across the scrublands of Pykeman Fell all the way up the slopes of Scarpa Brae. At night I used to hear the gulls circling our clifftop house before turning inland to hunt the burns and rain-swelled backwaters for smaller prey. They were always hungry, always calling out for food with their raw, mocking cry. So, if I'd had to guess the last thing I'd ever hear, the cry of gulls would be the sound I'd have picked to answer the million-pound question.

But I wasn't on a game show when it happened. I was on my dad's fishing boat.

It was just a training run to try out the new deckhand who'd arrived from the Scottish mainland. No way would Dad ever let me out on a real deep-sea trawl till I was old enough to help haul in the net during a storm or steer the boat through a fog whiteout if the sat-nav failed. Too dangerous, he said. The Atlantic waters were too cold and deep, and when sudden squalls rose up, the heavy boat was tossed about like a leaf on a windy day. I was a good head taller than the other boys my age on the island, but still Dad shook his head and said I was too young to be a deckhand. Back then he had hopes of bigger and better things for my future.

That day the Bay was calm, the wind whispering round the masthead like it had a secret to share. Maybe it was trying to warn me what was coming. I wished now I'd listened. The gulls were quiet for once, watching us lazily from the rocks that gaped from the entrance of the Bay like jagged teeth in the mouth of a stone giant. I turned away from the scarred cliffs, shading my eyes against the summer sun and gazing out across the open sea. Dad was leaning over the winch drum, pointing out the controls to the new guy as the trawler net disappeared below the waves.

That was when it happened.

There was a sharp crack, then a harsh whooshing noise, and the winch line suddenly went crazy. One minute it was uncoiling steadily from the drum, the next it was snaking across the deck at a million miles per hour as the heavy net was sent into freefall. Next came the high-pitched shriek of the warning siren, and the rumble of dying machinery as Angus cut the power in the engine room. Uncle Stuart came tearing down from the bridge just in time to see the broken winch cable whip across the deck, snatching at everything in its path and dragging a water pump, a twenty-litre storage barrel, and a spare net over the side with it.

The last thing the cable wrapped itself around before it disappeared below the waves was my leg. And that was when I heard it. It wasn't the gulls or the waves or the trawler's dying engine.

The last sound I ever heard was my dad screaming my name.