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The Raid

Cat puts up his nose to sniff the breath of wind barely filling the sail, and opens his small pink mouth to speak.

'Yow yow,' he says, and I know what he's thinking; we're nearly there.

He's in a funny old mood; twitchy and nervous, like when a bad wind's coming. Maybe it's just us being out a whole day with nothing caught, which ent like us. I'll get some stick for it from the captains when I get back: 'What have you done to that cat then, stuffed his nose with sand?' Another excuse to keep me off the big boats and stuck in this dinghy with hardly room for nets and baskets and us as well.

We're running along past the coastline, as fast as this little wind will push us. Round here it's all hills, cliffs and thin pebbly beaches. None of the wide brown marshes or fallen-in towns you get further east. Not long we'll be at the headland, and as soon as we peek round it, we'll see the little rocky harbour. And our village climbing up the hillside away from it.

Maybe Cat can smell fish? Fish guts curling off the harbour-side into the water; fish scales decorating the stones like pearls. Scrape, slice, pack; the daily chore of fisher folk. And Cat's a favourite, with his pretty grey markings and his seaweed eyes. Any one of 'em, man or woman, would give him a titbit, hoping to steal him away. He makes the most of it, gets a belly-full whenever he can, but it doesn't matter what they do, how much fish they give him; he'll thank 'em, eat it neatly, then come straight back to me.

I swing the sail out a bit more, trying to catch the sharp, salty wind. But we're only jogging through the water, jouncing over tiny waves, sparkle-bright in the sun.

Cat meows again.

‘What’s wrong?’ I ask him, but he won’t tell me. Just puts his front paws on the bow and stands there, flicking his tail, like he can’t get home soon enough.

Back home, Granny’ll be waiting. She doesn’t make it to the harbour these days, what with her rheumatics, but she’ll see us from the window.

‘I’m just watching the sails,’ she always says. Watching the boats go out and counting them back in again. Every day, she always counts them back. ‘Cos you can never trust the sea.’ And I reckon she should know, what with Grampy going down the way he did.

Granny was a fisher herself when she was younger – worked with Captain Greyhand on the *Annie May*. But she doesn’t want me to do it.

‘Wears you down and wears you out,’ she says. ‘Look at me – fifty-four and crippled with rheumatics. Is that really what you want girl? A hard windy life and not much more than rusty joints at the end of it?’

But what else is there? Life in a cobbledy old village, gutting and scraping and earning tuppence a week? Or having to marry a farmer and go and plough fields? Well no thank you! Not for me. Anyway, Cat picked me, didn’t he? That’s got to say something.

The little wind pushes us past station point, a dank green lump of land with the sea eating at its roots. In olden times, before the Collapse, there was a great building there with huge towers and steam coming out all day long. Used to make lights and heat for all the houses in all the land. But maybe that’s just one of Granny’s stories, cos the old power station’s nothing but mouldy old concrete now, and every winter a bit more falls into the sea.

Cat turns his head, and looks back at me.

‘Yow yow, prup yow,’ he says. But I still don’t know what he’s trying to tell me. He drops down from his perch and leaps daintily over.

‘Mee yow!’ he says, looking right in my face. And then he reaches up and sinks his teeth right into my hand on the tiller.

‘Ow!’ I cry. ‘What was that for?’ But all I can work out is he’s upset about something. Could be anything: a storm; whales; me missing a good shoal of fish; him thinking I’m not going fast enough.

‘Tell me what the matter is!’ I say. But he’s too worked up, just paces in circles growling.

I should be able to work out what Cat’s saying by now. That’s the whole point, cos a seacat’s meant to help with sailing and fishing, to tell what’s rumbling in the sea and sniff out good catches under the waves. But I still haven’t got it. Lun Hindle says that’s all the more reason why I shouldn’t be allowed to keep him. Went round pretty much everyone in the village, telling how Cat should be taken off me. But luckily Granny stood up for us, and there’s none of them captains who’d cross her.

‘He chose Lilly hisself. And you know it can’t be undone if the cat chooses.’ That’s what she said; hobbled her way down to the Old Moon where everyone was drinking and smoking and discussing it. I wasn’t allowed in of course, what with ‘being only a girl’, but I peeked through the window and saw all the captains nodding in agreement, like the wise men at Christmas. Lun kept on grumbling and whining though. He even went to ask the vicar about it – probably hoping I’d get cast out as a witch or something. Andy was clipping the grass edges in the churchyard and he told me about it.

Lun comes running up, ‘Vicar Reynolds! Lilly Melkun’s gone and swiped herself a seacat – lured it from the litter with fish!’ As if I did any such thing! ‘And I’ve been waiting for two years now, had my name down and everything!’

And ever wonder why you’ve been waiting so long, Lun? Probably no cat would have you, that’s why.

Anyway, Andy told me the vicar just said it was God’s will if it was anything, and then went off in a huff. I don’t know what else Lun was expecting; I should think the vicar would denounce seacats as the Devil’s helpers if he had a church inland. But he can’t hardly do it in a fishing village, can he? Not when everyone depends on them to keep safe.

It’s when we’re level with the tip of the headland I see it. An angel’s head, bobbing by on the water. It’s carved out of wood, not very well, and its hair is painted a strange reddish colour, like you’ve never seen on a real person. I only know it’s an angel head cos it’s usually stuck on the front of Andy’s dinghy, which he named *Angel*. But Andy’d never take it off his boat! He carved that head himself, sitting out on his doorstep, whittling away. Even when the old boys who sit down by the harbour laughed and said it looked more like a pig than an angel, he still kept on at it.

By now Cat’s growling and yowling and leaping about like a crazy thing. It’s all I can do to keep him from climbing up on top of my head. And while I’m fighting him off and staring open-gobbed at the head, which is floating south, headed for Espana, I hear a noise like ‘whump’. Up on the headland. And the old station’s on fire.

Of course, the station ent actually burning. It’s the beacon. A great pile of wood and kindling kept dry and stacked up on a raised platform. Cos a fire at station point can

be seen at Wytham, and then they'll light their beacon. And then the fires'll be lit all along the coast until they reach the garrison at Chichester.

But there's only one reason to light the beacon, and that's reavers.

Now I know why Cat's been in such a frenzy, and my hands go sweaty cold. And when we turn the point of the headland I can see the broken boats in the harbour, and the smoke rising from the village. Too much smoke, smoke like houses on fire.

I look from the smoke, to the wreckage of the village boats floating in the water, to the beacon blazing on the headland, and I can't hardly believe it. I only went away for a day! How could this have happened in just a day?

More scrips and scraps of wood come floating by, then a fish basket, then a slick hummock of something floating in the water. My breath stops in my mouth, 'til the waves move again and show it's just clothing, not a body. But it could have been. And there's probably bodies in the village right now if the reavers came down with no warning. Oh don't let it be Granny, or Andy, or Hetty or …

Don't let it be anyone, not even Lun.

I turn the tiller and head fast as I can, fast as this stupid little wind will take me, for home.

To get into harbour, I have to push my boat through a tide of broken wood. On the quayside there's a great gang of fishers – just standing, not sorting fish or mending nets. They're dressed in the browny woollens and raggedy trousers that every fisher wears under their oilskins. Like they jumped straight up from their beds and ran down to the

quay. And they're all staring out over the water, like they ent never seen it before. I'm staring too, cos there ent one boat left whole. The whole fleet is sitting half out of the water, or leaning with their masts broken. It looks like a giant reached down to the village and crushed all the boats for matchsticks.

'Lilly! Lilly!'

There's Andy, waving and shouting my name, his curly black hair sticking up like a mushroom over the other heads. First off, I'm so happy to see him alive and well, but then my stomach knots up. Cos why is he waving and shouting at me?

As we get in near the harbour wall, the only sound's the crunching and creaking of the wood-filled waves. I can't get close, what with all the wood, so I stand up and throw a coil of rope out. And I'm pulled in by half a dozen fishers, even Captain Ainsty who ent done any work himself for twenty years. I step out of the boat and climb up the stone steps to the quay, Cat trotting behind me. Everyone just looks at me with thin, pinched faces. A few shake their heads.

'Reavers?' I ask. And I get some nods.

'A terrible, terrible day,' says Captain Ainsty, and for once he doesn't sound full of his own importance.

'They just came in this morning, no warning, out of the early mist,' says John Greenstick. Everyone nods and moans.

Captain Ainsty claps his hand on my shoulder.

'Lilly, this has been a terrible day. You must be brave.'

Brave?

I look round panicky at the sea-roughened faces, but their eyes flick away from me. Only Andy holds my gaze, and I know he'll tell me.

'What is it?' I whisper, and the tears start dropping from his charcoal eyes.

'Oh Lilly,' he says. 'It's your granny.'

And he doesn't have to say any more, cos now I'm pushing and struggling my way out of the crowd.

'Let me through!' I'm shrieking, and then I'm running, feet pounding over the smooth grey cobbles, racing two at a time up the little steps. Past the black and charred front of the carpenter's workshop, around broken furniture, over a torn mattress, fluffy stuffing spilling out onto the flag stones. Behind me, Andy's calling my name, but I ent slowing for anything.

Then I'm home. Chest burning, lungs panting. And the front door's standing open, an axe-sized hole in its middle. And when I run inside, there's Granny lying out on the table: arms crossed, eyes shut, lips blue. Hetty's sat next to her on a chair, her face bloated from crying. She jumps up as I crash in, and for a moment she doesn't say anything, her mouth hanging open. Then she wails.

'Oh Lilly! They'd heard about Cat! Half a dozen of them broke off from the rest and came straight up here! You should have seen Granny – like a fiery fury she was! But there was one of them, young and nasty. He wouldn't believe Cat was out at sea. Kept going on and on; said she was lying and hit her with his sword … And she fell down, and she never got up again … Oh Lilly, I tried to save her, I did, but the blood just kept on coming …'

And she’s crying, and I’m crying, and Andy comes in and he’s crying. And Cat skitters in, and he’s mewing and mewing.

And I put my arms around Granny’s poor cold body; hold on to her like I’ve done so many times before. But she doesn’t hug me, or stroke my hair, or tell me everything is all right. And still I hold on to her, hold her tight in that dark little room, cos how can I ever let her go?