

1

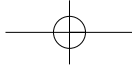
They came in the night in a long, black boat. They rowed out of the harbour at the south end of the island, past the breakwater, past the cottages and on towards the bluff at the north-eastern tip, still hidden from view in the foggy murk. They pulled in silence, their hands wet and cold in the chill before dawn, the only sounds their grunting breaths, the grinding of oars, and the murmur of water against the bow as it cut a path through the milky sea.

The breeze was cool and no longer smelt of summer. They pulled on, none speaking, and the rocky shore slipped slowly by, just visible through the gloom. More wind came, more mist, great clouds of it now rolling in from the north. They rowed on, their eyes on the sea, the shore, the grey haze, anything but each other.

At last they saw the bluff ahead, fog swirling around it like smoke. They gave the outlying rocks plenty of room, then brought the boat round into the cove at the top of the island. They stopped for a moment to muffle the oars, then set off again, past the rocky scar at the north-western point and away from the island itself. All sense of the land was gone now. There was only mist and sea, and themselves. They rowed slowly, watching, listening.

From somewhere in the mist came a deep, mournful cry.

They stopped. It came again: a long, eerie moan, no human cry, nor that of any normal creature. They



felt a swell in the water, a movement far down. The blades of the oars hung dripping. The cry came again, the same unearthly moan. It seemed to well up from the sea itself. But it sounded further off this time.

They rowed hurriedly on, a panicky new vigour to their strokes, but now the wind had picked up and the surface of the sea was rippling with misty life. They drove the boat on, searching the darkness beyond the bow, and suddenly there it was—the great rock rising fifty feet above them, stony teeth around its base.

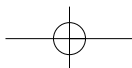
More mist rolled in, blocking the rock from view, but they had their bearings now and rowed on towards it. The wind freshened further; the swell grew greater. The mist parted overhead and they caught a glimpse of the moon, the first they had had since setting out. It was a cold moon, a dead, distant thing. But here, too, was the rock.

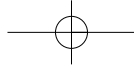
They could see the white water at the base where the seas washed over the teeth. They could see the gap that led between them to the tiny haven under the side of the rock. They entered the raging water, wrestled with the eddies that threatened to pluck the oars from them, then suddenly they were through and inside the sanctuary.

They moored the boat and started to make their way along the twisting ledge that spiralled up to the summit of the rock. Below them the sea moved and breathed like a fretful beast. They reached the summit and peered over the flat table of rock. The fog was so dense here they could barely see more than a few feet ahead. They took a few steps forward, then stopped, their eyes searching around them.

But all they saw was darkness and mist.

They linked arms and started to inch their way





across the top of the rock. Nothing at first but the clear flat floor, then, as they neared the southernmost point, a rougher, more broken surface: potholes, cracks, fissures. They slowed down, aware of the edge somewhere just ahead.

There it was, and closer than they had realized. They stopped, clutching each other tight. From below came the heaving of the sea, a deep, unsettling sound. They turned and made their way back across the surface of the rock. Then suddenly the mist parted and they saw the man at the northernmost end. He was utterly still, sitting on a stump of stone. But his eyes looked straight into theirs.

They pulled the clubs from inside their belts and rushed forward. The man did not move, did not speak. The first blow knocked him to the side. The second felled him. They crowded round with mad shrieks and set about him with their clubs. He soon stopped twitching but they carried on even so until they were spent. Then they stood back, breathing hard, and looked down at the body.

It lay there unmoving in a sea of blood.

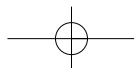
They stared at it for a long time, spitting on it one by one. Then they bent down, picked it up, and flung it over the edge. It cannoned into the water with a splash and vanished from view. They watched for a while, searching the space where it had fallen, but all they saw was foam.

From deep in the mist came the long, unearthly cry.

'What was that noise?' said Dad from the cockpit.

'Did you hear it?'

'Yes,' said Mum.



'A kind of weird cry.'

'I heard it.'

'What do you think it was?'

'Don't know,' she said. 'But let's hope whatever made it isn't interested in us.'

Kit listened to their voices from down in the cabin. He was lying, not in his usual pipecot up in the fore-peak, but in Dad's bunk with a blanket over him. He was supposed to be sleeping; and he had been sleeping. But he'd heard the cry, too. It had woken him from his dream. There was a long silence, broken only by the shiver of sails and the ripple of water against the hull. Then Dad spoke again.

'Wind's picking up.'

'Maybe it'll blow away some of the mist,' said Mum.

'Let's hope so. Can you ease off the jib a bit?'

'OK.'

Kit frowned, unwilling to doze off again. The dream that had fallen so fitfully upon him since he came below to sleep had been horribly disturbing. But what was more disturbing still was that he had had the same dream three times already on this voyage; and each time it had felt more real than the time before.

He rolled over onto his back, enjoying the extra space of Dad's bunk but little else; then he saw his father watching him through the open hatchway. Dad smiled and called down to him.

'Don't get any ideas about nicking my bunk on a regular basis. I'm only letting you have it this time because I'm feeling kind.'

'Don't want it on a regular basis,' Kit called back. 'Might catch something.'

Dad gave a chuckle, then Mum's face appeared in the hatchway.

'Kit?' she said. 'You're supposed to be sleeping.'

'I was but that weird cry woke me. What do you think it was?'

'Don't know. But nothing to worry about, I'm sure.'

'OK.' He yawned. 'Mum?'

'Yeah?'

'I had that dream again.'

Mum's face softened. 'It won't happen, Kit.'

'It might.'

'It won't. I promise.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I'm cleverer than you.'

'Oh, yeah?' He raised an eyebrow. 'How do you reckon that, then?'

'I'm older and wiser.'

'Older, yeah. I'll give you that. By miles.'

'Not by miles, Kit.'

'By miles!' He snorted. 'I'm only fifteen. You're at least a hundred and forty.'

'Give or take the odd century.'

'Yeah, sorry. I meant two hundred and forty.'

She laughed but was quickly serious again. 'It'll be all right, Kit,' she said, and moved back to her former position in the cockpit.

He closed his eyes but even now found himself reliving the dream: the restless water, the dark shape moving through it; the clear sense that he was drowning. He felt a tightness round his heart and opened his eyes again. This was crazy. It was only a dream. Mum was right. It wouldn't happen.

He rubbed his chest for a while with the flat of his hand, then sat up, put his clothes on and climbed up to the cockpit. Mum made a space for him between her and Dad. He sat down and looked about him. *Windflower* was still reaching on starboard tack as she had been when he first went below, but everything

else looked different now that the fog had come down.

'Sure you've had enough sleep?' said Dad.

'I'm all right.'

'That's not what I asked.'

'I've had plenty of rest. I've been down there for six hours.'

'But you weren't sleeping all that time,' said Mum.

Kit looked round at her.

'Have you two been spying on me?'

'Dead right we have,' she said. 'And we reckon you only slept a couple of hours in all that time. And that wasn't proper sleep either because of your bad dream.'

He said nothing.

'So what were you thinking of all the time you were awake?' she said.

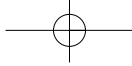
'This and that.'

'I know what that means,' said Dad. 'It means mind your own business. OK, we will.'

'It doesn't mean that. It means . . .'

But in truth he didn't really know what it meant. And he didn't know what he'd been thinking about down in the cabin. All he knew for certain was that he'd been worrying.

Maybe it was because this was *Windflower's* last voyage. Now that Dad was officially bankrupt, she was going to have to be sold along with everything else when they returned. But they'd promised themselves that her last voyage would be a proper one, not just coastal stuff but a real adventure. And so it had been, with weeks and weeks of almost non-stop sailing, most of it out of sight of land. They'd loved every moment of it, but the summer holiday was almost at an end now; and so, too, was the voyage, though they were still a good ten days from home.



But Kit knew it wasn't just the imminent end of the voyage that was bothering him. It was something else, something that had started a couple of days ago when the first of the dreams came. He'd felt frightened, not just by the thought of drowning, but by something in the sea itself. He'd never felt this way before but there was something strange about the waters round here. They were unfamiliar, to be sure, but that in itself couldn't account for his fear. Most of the voyage had been through unfamiliar waters—that was the whole point of the trip—and he hadn't had a problem. Until now. And he didn't like this night fog either. He looked round at Dad.

'Where are we on the chart?'

Dad glanced at Mum, then back at Kit.

'We're not sure,' he said slowly. 'The compass is playing up.'

'What?'

'It's been playing up for quite a while.'

'Quite a while?'

'Several hours.'

Kit stared into the binnacle and saw the compass spinning wildly.

'Have you tried the spare compasses?' he said.

'Yeah. They're all doing the same thing.'

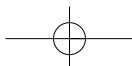
'So we could be anywhere?'

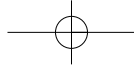
'Yeah,' said Dad. 'But we should be safe. The nearest land is at least forty miles away by my estimation. And we're not crossing any shipping lanes here.'

'But you don't know how far off course we've gone in this fog.'

'That's true. So we need to be cautious.' Dad glanced over the sails. 'I think we'll reef her a bit more. The wind's picking up again.'

It was indeed and the seas were growing larger,





too. Ordinarily *Windflower* thrived in rough weather but Kit knew that Dad was right. It would be foolish to go racing through the night, especially when there was fog and they weren't sure of their position.

'Would it be safer to heave to?' suggested Mum.

'Might be an idea,' said Dad. 'But let's shorten sail anyway. She'll be more comfortable.'

'OK. Jib first?'

'Yep.'

Mum eased off the jib sheet, then pulled in the reefing line.

'Enough?'

'Can't see,' muttered Dad, squinting towards the bow. 'This fog's getting worse. I'm going forward. Take the helm, Sarah, can you?'

Mum took the helm and Dad climbed forward to the jib, his body turning to a grey shadow as the mist engulfed him.

'Jim!' called Mum. 'Be careful!'

'I'm all right!' came the answer, then, 'Pull in a bit more!'

Kit took the reefing line and pulled it in.

'That's enough!' called Dad, and a moment later he reappeared. Kit felt a sense of relief to have his father clearly in view again. Dad stopped by the mast and clung to it, balancing himself against the heel of the boat.

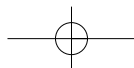
'How does she feel?' he called.

'Bit heavy on the helm,' answered Mum.

'She'll be better when I've taken more off the mainsail.'

'OK.'

'Any chance of fixing us a bite to eat?' said Dad, already bent over the reefing gear. 'Something we can nibble as we go along? I'm starving.'



'I'll make us some sandwiches,' said Mum. 'Kit? Can you take the helm?'

'Sure.'

'Just keep her as she is.'

'OK.'

Kit took the tiller from Mum and sat to windward, hunched against the cool air. Mum disappeared below and he soon heard the sound of her busying about the galley. Up at the mast, Dad was trying to ratchet the sail round the boom. Suddenly a squall struck. *Windflower* heeled sharply to port, her lee-rail under. Dad clung to the mast and bellowed at him.

'Ease off the mainsheet a bit!'

Kit was already doing so but it made little difference. The squall was growing stronger.

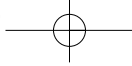
'More!' shouted Dad. 'Get her on an even keel if you can!'

He eased the sheet out further and *Windflower* steadied for a moment. But now more squalls were coming in, and with them great clouds of mist. He saw Dad furiously working the ratchet but the boat was heeling dangerously as the gusts swept over her.

Something hard knocked against the hull. Neither Mum nor Dad seemed to hear it but Kit caught the sound. Then he saw a piece of wood drifting past to leeward. It was barely a foot long and in a second it would be gone. Yet in that second he saw what it really was.

A tiny carved boat.

On an impulse he scrambled to the port side of the cockpit, switched the tiller to his right hand and reached out with his left to pick the model up. His hand closed round it; then he froze. Holding on to the carved boat was another hand, a hand reaching up through the sea itself; and below that, an arm, a



body, a face, staring up at him through the foam.

And then it was gone, swept past and lost in the wake.

He heard Dad yelling at him from the mast.

'Kit! What are you playing at? She's coming up into the wind! Get her back on course!'

He struggled back to the windward side of the cockpit and wrenched at the tiller. But his mind was in turmoil now. All he could think of was the watery eyes staring up at him. Dimly he realized that *Windflower* was still shooting round to starboard into the wind, that he was somehow clutching the little carved boat, that Mum was hurrying up from the cabin, that Dad was shouting at him to bear away and get back on course. In a daze he stood up and yanked the tiller towards him. *Windflower* started to bear away to port, bear away to port, bear away to port.

'Not too far!' shouted Dad. 'Straighten up or you'll gybe her! Sarah! Get the helm off him! Quick!'

From up in the bows came a crash.

