

“If We Die to the Flock”

Hollow’s Point was a picturesque, ramshackle fishing town, hauntingly abandoned. Its wooden docks splintered under the weight of years, and the sea air smelled less of salt than musk from decay. For years, the town had been wiped off maps and stripped from memory since the sea left it dry and tourism found brighter coasts. This was the perfect getaway, Charlie said, finding it marked in pencil on an ancient map his grandfather once owned. “A weekend away from everything,” he grinned, waving the map—the gleam of discovery in his eyes.

They arrived with the sun blushing behind a cloud-thick sky, their laughter loud enough to make nature pause. Five friends: Charlie, the adventurous leader; Lana, the skeptic with a dry wit; Marcus, tall and always filming everything; Jules, the optimist who brought marshmallows; and Nina, quiet, seeing the world through the strands of her dark hair.

The silence was the first omen. The tide lapped against the shore, too still, too practiced it seemed, as if feeling its bounds. A murder of seagulls, black-eyed and full-bodied, sat atop the fissured roofs and rusting lampposts, their beady eyes following every movement.

“Creepy birds,” she whispered, laughing, flicking a pebble at one. It cocked its head, and for a second she felt stupidly sure it knew she’d insulted it.

When night fell, in rolled the sea mist, thick as soup, and the world contracted. The fire Marcus built crackled defiantly, casting jumping shadows that made the skeletal remains of boats seem ghostly sentinels. Then came the stories—urban legends about sea monsters and ghost ships, and the mysterious “Mass Flight,” where birds suddenly abandoned coastal cities, returning more aggressive, darker, different.

“Why would birds leave like that?” Lana had scoffed, eyes half-closed. “They’re just stupid birds.”

A sudden flutter, then a thump. The sound of wings hitting something hollow.

Charlie stood up, staring into the dark, his silhouette framed by the orange light. “Relax. It’s probably just...

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The rustle grew into a cacophony of flapping—a hurricane of torn pages. The first attack came in the form of a peck to Jules' arm. Blood welled as she screamed, batting away the furious ball of feathers. Smaller and larger birds alike poured in like rain from the thick fog, screeching, their claws aimed at faces, arms, and eyes—not food.

They're just birds!" Marcus screamed out, his voice babbling with panic, the camera left to lie in the sand as his arms fought sharp beaks.

The small house they sought shelter in became a prison. No lights. No electricity. Just the resonating sound of thuds and claws scratching at wood, at glass, as the night wore on, each friend against the creaking door, eyes wide and wild.

The gulls gave no quarter. They roosted on the roof, waiting for weakness. Beady eyes peered in through shattered windows, unblinking. It was then Nina whispered, "It's us. We brought them here."

"What?" Charlie said, barely listened to, still panting, holding a broken chair leg in one hand.

"We ignore them. We feed them scraps. We poison the ocean, kill the fish. They adapt, become something else.

Morning came pale and cold. Seagulls, however, remained patient and knowing, watching them from the rooftop. Jules was feverish from her wound, mumbling about monsters with wings. Marcus dared to open a crack in the door, and the wind carried in a shrill call of hundreds that waited outside—a declaration of war.

They forgot how to respect the wilds, assuming themselves the pinnacle. Nature, underestimated and silent, claimed its right.

The morning sun gave little comfort. It revealed the reality in stark and unkind clarity. The seagulls sat like gargoyles, ruffled feathers, gleaming eyes with a predatory hunger. Charlie felt a knot twist in his stomach as he met their gaze—something calculating glimmering behind those black eyes, like plotting their next move.

Jules lay on the floor, shivering under a threadbare blanket, an angry red gash on her arm pulsating with each laboured breath. Nina knelt beside her, daubing the wound with the last of their bottled water. "We need to find antibiotics," she said, her voice thin, barely concealing her panic.

Where?” Lana snapped, pacing the length of the room. “This place is abandoned-we don’t even know if there’s a pharmacy, let alone anything useful left in it.”

Marcus turned to them then, his gaze having been set through a cracked window. His eyes were wide, pupils dancing with the same dread the others felt. “I saw something last night, before we locked the door. There’s a building down the road with a sign. Looked like an old clinic or something.”

Charlie’s jaw clenched. “It’s a risk,” he said. The muffled thuds of wings against the walls seemed to agree, a slow, menacing reminder of their prison. But the pale, sweat-slick face of Jules left little choice.

We need a plan,” Nina said, eyes darting between the shadows and the slivers of sunlight sneaking through the boards. She ran through stories she had read, of explorers using sound, fire-any distraction-to get them out of a tight spot.

“Smoke,” Marcus whispered, like he was reading her mind. “Birds hate it. We could light a distraction and make a run for it.

Charlie nodded. His jaw was clenched. “It’s a gamble, but we’re out of options. Marcus, see what you can find to burn. Lana, find anything we can use to defend ourselves-sticks, broken glass, whatever.” His eyes landed on Nina, softened for a heartbeat. “Stay with Jules.

The hour that followed was a symphony of nerves. Marcus piled old newspapers, broken chair legs, and whatever kindling they could find into a heap just inside the doorway. Charlie struck a match, the sharp scent of sulfur and the flicker of flame momentarily stealing their collective breath.

The fire roared, billowing thick, acrid smoke; Marcus kicked the door open, and they sprinted into the world outside. Like a veil, the smoke swirled, confusing the mass of seagulls whose shrill cries morphed from rage to panic. Wings beat through the smoke in search of air.

They ran down the fissured road, between skeletal fishing boats, their rusty hooks swinging from broken masts. Before them, the clinic loomed, its windows shattered, shards of faded posters clinging to the walls like peeling skin.

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Quickly!” Charlie yelled, pushing open the heavy door. The smell of mildew and old medicine enveloped them. The light inside was diffused and dim, and the macabre silence of the room sent a shiver across their skin.

Nina rummaged through broken cabinets, pushing aside expired bandages and empty vials until her fingers brushed against a small, familiar box. “Found it!” she exclaimed, holding up a sealed container of antibiotics.

It was a moment of pure fragility. Outside, the seagulls re-congregated, their shrieks growing into a chorus of fury. They flung themselves against the windows, beaks chipping at the glass as if they could taste the fear inside.

Marcus’s breathing was a series of ragged gasps. “They’re learning,” he stammered, in growing horror at the realisation. The seagulls weren’t merely attacking mindlessly; they were adapting, evolving before their very eyes.

Lana gripped a jagged shard of wood, eyes blazing with defiance. “We need to outthink them,” she said, voice steady in the face of chaos. “We need to remember that we’re more than just prey.”

Charlie’s mind raced. This wasn’t just a fight for survival anymore; it was a battle to reclaim their place in the natural order, to remind the world—and themselves—that humanity could still rise above.

The first pane shattered and a single seagull muscled its way through, wings spread, eyes black with intention. The wordless glances passed between friends were firm in their resolutions; they had underestimated the storm, but they would not be underestimating themselves anymore.

The first seagull shot into the room with the speed of a feathered missile, its wings beating in jagged, rapid beats as it dive-bombed them. Charlie was the first to react, lunging forward with a broken chair leg in his hand. He swung, connecting with a dull thud, sending the bird spiraling to the ground, stunned but not dead. Its beady eyes glared at him, filled with something disturbingly close to rage.

More wings slapped against the residual glass, and the shrill sound of shattered panes cut through the small clinic. Marcus retreated against a cabinet, his eyes darting from side to side, searching for anything remotely usable as a weapon. The others fell into a defensive stance, their breath held—as if that alone might ward off the inevitable attack.

“Here they come!” Lana shouted, her voice cracking with the strain of forced bravery. More seagulls burst through, filling the air with a frenzy of wings and screeches, pecking and clawing in an almost intelligent fury. One latched onto Marcus’s arm, its beak tearing into the flesh before he managed to yelp in pain and fling it off.

Nina hunched over Jules, protective, as he slipped into a semiconscious state. “Hold on, Jules,” she whispered, her voice sharpened by panic. She picked up the metal tray that lay on the ground and swung it at a passing seagull. The metallic clang mixed with the cries—a symphony of desperation.

Charlie’s mind was racing even as he batted away another attacker. Adapt or die, he thought. The words came to him ringing with terrifying clarity. This was not a fight of brute strength but one of wits. If seagulls had learned to attack en masse, they needed to shatter that unity.

“Marcus!” Charlie yelled above the din. “We have to separate them—off kilter them!”

Marcus nodded, his eyes lighting with an idea. He reached into his backpack fumbling around until he grasped what he was searching for: an emergency flare. The room seemed to pause as he pulled the cap off and struck it against the side, a sudden burst of red light and hissing flame flaring to life.

The seagulls demurred, their beady eyes catching the red light. Marcus was wildly brandishing it, inching closer to the broken window. “Come and get it, you winged freaks!” he yelled, voice tight with adrenaline. The attention of the birds turned, heads hypnotized by the light.

It did. A number of the flock dived toward the flare, and the others granted them a second’s grace. Charlie seized Nina’s arm, yanking her up. “We have to get Jules moving. Before they shift their attention.”

Together, they hoisted Jules between them and made for the rear door of the clinic, Lana covering their retreat with sharp jabs of her makeshift spear. Still brandishing the burning flare, Marcus backed out last, eyes never leaving the cloud of wings tearing through the smoke and confusion.

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They reeled into the alley behind, the morning light fractured through smoke plumes and the ominous silhouette of countless wings circling above. They stopped for no more than a few moments, breathing raggedly, bodies shaking.

“They’re not done with us,” Lana said, looking up at the seagulls regrouping overhead, circling in like vultures awaiting death they’d orchestrate.

But neither are we, Charlie said, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the tangle of alleys and abandoned buildings surrounding them. There had to be more than one way to outsmart a predator, even one that had learned around them.

“Come on,” he said, tightening his hand around the chair leg slick with feathers and blood. “We find shelter, we regroup, and we fight smarter.

The others nodded, faces set in grim determination. No longer were they just running—they were preparing for war. A war none of them had ever imagined, never thought they would have to fight, and an enemy, too, they never could have imagined. And the more they walked inside this labyrinth of a town, the cries of seagulls above seemed almost to tell of their being ready for round number two.

They pressed deeper into forgotten alleys of Hollow’s Point, wind slicing through like a warning. Seagulls circled above, shrill cries echoing like a siren song in the early light. Every step heavier than the last, every turned corner became an ambush. Charlie was leading them down a little path lined with crumbling brick and rusting nets hung from fishing, managing his breathing.

Marcus hissed; the last embers of the flare died, and the sharp smell of sulfur still clung in the air. He clutched at his bleeding arm and jerked his gaze skyward. “They’re gathering,” he whispered, as if fearfully of drawing attention to themselves.

“Keep moving,” Lana urged, eyes sharp with resolve. “If they come at us again, we need to be ready.

Nina looked back at Jules, her head lolled limply between them. “We need to find somewhere secure to patch her up,” she said, the tightness of her voice telegraphing the level of her concern. “If she goes septic out here...

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“Look,” Charlie said, interrupting him, pointing down to an old boathouse nestled between two large rusted trawlers. One side had collapsed entirely, but the front looked intact, the heavy wooden doors bolted shut. It was a risk, but the best shelter they’d seen since the clinic.

They half-ran, half-limped across the open path. The crunch of gravel beneath their feet announced their flight. As they reached the boathouse, Marcus used his good arm to wrench the doors open. The creak that followed seemed to go on forever, a metallic cry that cut through the morning air.

Get inside,” Charlie hissed, waving everyone through. Nina and Marcus laid Jules down on to an old tarp while Lana pulled a beam across the door, reinforcing their barricade.

Inside, dust motes danced in the poor light filtering through cracked, sea-stained windows. It was an oily space smelling of rotting wood, and old fishing tools everywhere—ropes, rusty hooks, and even a harpoon gun leaned against a pile of netting. Charlie’s eyes lit up as he spotted it, and hope glittered in his exhausted gaze.

“This might even the odds,” he muttered, lifting the harpoon and testing its weight. Solid, reliable.

Nina began to clean the wound on Jules with a bottle of antiseptic that she had found at the clinic. Jules flinched and let out a small whimper; her eyes fluttered open once, then slid shut again. “Stay with us, Jules,” Nina whispered, her voice shaking as she worked.

Outside, the cries of the seagulls had grown quieter, more distant. The silence that followed was thick, almost suffocating. Marcus leaned against the wall, eyes narrowed. “Why aren’t they attacking?” he asked, a thread of dread weaving through his words.

“They’re watching,” Lana said, more certain than she wanted to be. “They know we’re cornered.”

Charlie’s head was racing; they couldn’t just sit and wait for the next attack. Those birds seemed to have taken almost a sinister level of intelligence upon themselves, reacting to light and smoke with almost corporate efficiency in their second attack. That was a thought that triggered a sudden spark. “We need to turn their strategy against them,” he said suddenly, eyes locking with Marcus. “Remember the nets outside? If we can set a trap, something to catch them by surprise—

Marcus nodded, and the light of purpose was rekindled in his eyes. “We lure them in. Make them think they have it going their way.”

Lana snorted, the sound full of agreement. “Ambush the ambushers. I like it.

Working fast, with all the energy they had, they began hauling in the fishing nets and securing them around the entrance. Charlie loaded up the harpoon gun and placed it alongside the tarp where Jules lay, at the ready for when a time came. Nina checked the ropes; shaking hands tied the last knot.

Then they waited. Long, breathless minutes stretched out. The tension was an arcing wire between them, each heartbeat a percussive cadence in their ears. Then they heard the cries of seagulls, remote at first but soon near, a wall of sound that chilled their blood.

The first shadow fell across the cracked window, then a second. Beaks scratched against the wood and talons raked for entry. Testing a barrier, probing for weakness.

“Get ready,” Charlie whispered, grasping the harpoon gun. The others fell into their positions, muscles tensed, breaths held.

In swept the assault, an angry fury that shook boathouse foundations. Weight of wings buckled the doors as wings slammed against it. Marcus hit the net release, and down it dropped with a snap that ensnared a dozen seagulls that shrieked their surprise and rage, thrashing wings, flying feathers, trapped.

Charlie aimed his harpoon at the dark cloud pouring in through that broken window and let fire. It struck true, impaling one of the larger birds that seemed to lead the others. For a moment there was silence, save the sound of flapping wings growing more frantic, more confused.

The other gulls faltered, their formation breaking, the unified attack splintering. Charlie met Marcus’s eyes, the hint of a smile breaking through. Maybe they did have a chance, after all.

But this was only one battle, and the war for survival had only just begun.

That first success brought a glimmer of hope, but it was short-lived. Outside, the gulls mobilized themselves in an aggressive dance above the boathouse-their panicked screams settling into an icy, deliberating chant. Charlie's heart went thump as he reloaded the harpoon gun, one drop of sweat running down his forehead in that cold.

"Nice shot," Lana said, her voice tight, eyes still locked on the thrashing birds entangled in the net. Their wings beat at helpless angles, their eyes black with rage. But their struggle wasn't chaotic like it should have been; it was measured, as if they waited for the next move.

Marcus was white as a sheet and shaking, sliding down to sit beside Jules. The makeshift bandage on his arm was soaked through, lines of pain deep around his mouth. "We can't stay here forever," he whispered, staring up at the roof as if expecting it to burst apart at any moment.

Nina knelt beside him, struggling to keep the fear at bay within herself. She laid a hand on his shoulder, and the simple contact grounded them both. "No, but we need to think this through," she said glancing at Charlie. "If they're smart enough to regroup after a loss, they'll come back stronger. We need more than just a plan to outlast them; we need a way off this island."

Lana's eyes flickered to the cracked windowpanes and then out to the rusting fishing boats outside. "What if we use one of those old boats?" she said, already running through the risks in her mind.

"They look barely seaworthy," Marcus said, wincing as he shifted. "But it might be our only shot."

Charlie nodded slowly, taking in the peeling paint and rusted hulls visible through the slats in the wooden walls. If they could get one of those boats into the water, even a short distance out to sea, it might buy them enough time to at least reach the mainland or signal for help.

"Alright," Charlie said, voice firmer now, the weight of leadership heavy upon his shoulders. "Here's the plan: We divvy up into two groups. Lana and I will check on the boats, see if any of them can float. Marcus, you stay with Nina and Jules. Hold down the fort, keep an eye on the entrance. If anything comes through, you know what to do."

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Marcus swallowed hard, eyes dark but determined. “Got it.”

Nina bit her lip but did not argue, knowing she had to stay with Jules. Her eyes met Charlie’s, and wordlessly passed between them in that one moment: gratitude, concern, and the unyielding will to survive.

Charlie and Lana sidled towards the side door, which he managed to pry open wide enough for them to slip through. Outside, the air was damp and tight, the only sound the spasmodic flap of wings overhead. Above, seagulls tracked them, shadowed menace against the pale sky.

The fishing boats sat in various stages of disintegration, cradled by the tide and moored against the dissolving dock. The biggest, a trawler named The Sea Belle, was at least intact enough, its hull rising above the others like a beacon.

“That one,” Lana said, nodding toward it. Charlie followed her gaze, hope sparking in his chest.

They ran across the slick-surfaced wooden planks, the echo of their footfalls alerting the circling flock. The cries of the seagulls grew higher in pitch, a call to arms. A few dived low, but Charlie swung the harpoon gun like a club, batting them off as he and Lana made it to The Sea Belle. The old boat groaned under the sudden impact of their added weight, its deck slick with moss and salt.

“Check the engine,” Charlie said, scanning the skies as Lana ducked below deck. He kept his eyes locked on the dark swarm gathering above, their wings flicking like knives in the wind.

Lana emerged a moment later, her face pale but resolute. “It’s old, but it might work. We’ll need fuel, though.”

Charlie’s heart sank. “Of course we do,” he muttered, eyes drifting to the boathouse where the others waited. A sudden crash inside sent a jolt through him, followed by a muffled shout.

“They’re under attack,” Lana said, eyes wide. The seagulls had found their way in.

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Charlie's heart boomed in his ears as he sprang back to the dock, Lana hot on his heels. They sprinted toward the boathouse, the air erupting in a cacophony of wings and screams. Inside, Marcus was swinging wildly with a piece of splintered wood, eyes wide and desperate. Nina shielded Jules with her body, her face white with fear as birds dived at her, talons outstretched.

Back off!" Charlie yelled, charging in and firing the harpoon. It pierced through two seagulls mid-dive, pinning them to the far wall. The others hesitated, wings folding in confusion.

Marcus gasped for breath, collapsing to his knees. The reprieve was temporary, but it was enough.

"Change of plans," Charlie said, panting. "We've got a boat. But we need fuel, and we need it now.

Nina's eyes hardened into a determined glint. "I saw fuel tanks near the docks when we came in," she said. "It's a risk, but if we can get there—"

Charlie nodded, clenching the harpoon gun. "We go as a group. We don't stop for anything.

The gulls wheeling outside circled lower, as if sensing that the end was in sight, their dark forms blotting out the rising sun. The island itself was holding its breath as they gathered their strength and prepared for the break.

The moment's weight was upon them as they readied themselves to make their move. Outside, the cries of the seagulls grew louder—a storm waiting to break. Charlie's grip on the harpoon gun tightened as cold, unforgiving metal pressed into his palm. "Stay close and don't look back," he ordered, eyes locking with each of theirs in turn. The subsequent silence was a mutual agreement about what hung in the balance.

Pale and bloody, Marcus pushed himself upright with Nina's help. Jules stirred slightly, her eyes fluttering open for just a brief moment before falling shut again. "Hang on, Jules," Nina whispered, shifting her grip on their injured friend. She flicked a glance at Charlie and nodded, ready for whatever was next.

They burst out into the sharp chill of morning air from the boathouse. Lying before them were the docks, worn and splintered, with just beyond them the fuel tanks, their rusting

sentinels stood guard against the gray sky. The sea shifted behind them, uncaring about their plight.

The seagulls reacted in an instant, swooping from their lofty perches. Their wings sliced through the air with knife-like precision. Charlie turned and fired off the harpoon gun once more; the bolt whirred into the fray, depositing another of the birds tumbling mid-dive through the air. Marcus and Lana had make-do clubs in hand, swatting at birds that came too near, while Nina pressed ahead, her eyes glued to the tanks.

They reached the fuel tanks as the sky darkened with flapping wings. Marcus found an old hose and worked quickly, filling a plastic canister as fast as the rusty valve allowed. "Hurry," he muttered through gritted teeth, eyes darting to the flurry of wings closing in around them.

Lana shouted, "They're regrouping, we need to move!"

Nina snatched up another canister, hands wet with sweat, when a sharp cry from above made her stop. Larger than the others, the gull bore darkened feathers and a scar across its beak; it plunged straight at her. She ducked, and the wind whipped through her hair from the action of its wings as it swooped past and wheeled about in a second attack.

Charlie raised the harpoon gun, but suddenly the bird darted crazily sideways, as if in some way it knew what he intended. The bird shrieked and dived again in a steep attack aimed at Jules, who leaned against Nina's shoulder. Time seemed to slow as Charlie realized the bird's intent.

Charlie launched himself between them in a flash of speed, raising the harpoon gun at just the right time to divert the attack. The bird slammed into the gun and spun out, scattering its feathers it fell with a thump to the earth, stunned but not dead. Its dark eyes locked on Charlie, full of a murderous intelligence.

"It is done!" exclaimed Marcus, hefting the full canister. Turning without a waste of another second of time, they ran back toward The Sea Belle, the screeching of the seagulls deafening around them. The dock felt like it stretched forever, every step a battle against wings and claws, the weight of exhaustion pressing upon their bodies.

They reached the trawler, Charlie shoving the canister into Lana's hands. "Get it fueled," he ordered, standing guard along with Marcus as more seagulls dove with relentless assault.

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Lana worked her fingers fast, attaching the hose to the intake and tipping the canister. The smell of gasoline flooded the air.

“Almost there,” Lana said through clenched teeth. The trickling of fuel in the tank drowned out with chaotic screeching, yet every drop felt like a lifeline.

They reformed, more united, and dove in for another attack. Charlie fired again; this time, the harpoon deflected off feathers and into the splintering wood of the dock. Marcus swung his club in an arc and connected with a sharp crack as a bird fell, wings splayed.

“It’s full!” Lana yelled, wrenching the hose off and sealing the tank.

Get in, now!” Charlie shouted, pushing Marcus and Nina up onto the deck. He reached under Jules’s arms and pulled her aboard as Lana scrambled over the side. The birds became frenzied now, flapping their wings wildly as the party scrambled into the boat, swooping in after them.

Nina lunged to the helm, flicking switches, her eyes closed in a silent prayer that the engine would turn over. A tense moment of time was filled with desperate gasps from the group and screeches from the seagulls. With a disbelieving cough, the engine sputtered to life, shuddering as it roared awake.

Charlie spun the harpoon gun, taking one last aim at the flock descending on them. He pulled the trigger; the bolt caught another bird en route and sent the rest into a flurry of feathers as they scattered. The boat lurched forward, the dock slipping away beneath them as they pushed into open sea.

The seagulls followed, their cries piercing the wind, but the boat picked up speed, and the flock hung back at the edge of the waves. A distance grew between them, the screeches faded, until only the sound of the motor and their laboured breathing remained.

Nina let out a breath and steered them away from the island. Charlie turned to look back at Hollow’s Point, its island huddled like a victim under the dark mass of gulls hovering over it—a living cloud of vengeance—while they escaped.

For the time being, they were alive. But the memory of those eyes—black and intelligent—stayed with them like the reminder that nature had not only changed—it had learned.

