

## Snakes Alive!

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The snakes are curled up together on the path in front of me. Two European vipers, basking in the early morning sun. They stop me in my tracks; my stomach clenches, but I don't panic.

I've never liked snakes. Their coiling and writhing, the slippery tangle of them, how you can't see where one starts and one ends, used to fill me with panic even in a picture.

I never liked school either. I enjoyed primary school when the teacher read us stories, but when it came to reading them myself, the words slithered and curled on the page, never staying still long enough to reveal their meaning to me, tying my stomach in knots.

The teachers said I'd never amount to anything. Not like Kevin, my cousin, off to uni to do engineering. That felt unfair. Engines were my interest; I showed Kevin how to strip and rebuild a motorbike engine. How to invent a solution when the right part wasn't available. He learnt it from me. But uni and engineering were out of the question for someone who couldn't read, they said.

Which makes today's morning run all the sweeter. I'm standing on a sun-

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drenched Turkish hillside, overlooking a tiny harbour. A picture-book perfect island just offshore, and headland after hazy headland stretching to the southwest, beckoning me to adventure. I always said I'd bring my husband and children somewhere like this if my engineering business became successful enough. A flotilla holiday in the sun.

And the snakes in front of me remind me of the thing that made it all possible, including being able to stand here now, without panicking.

The thing that made me believe in myself.

Not the business. And not the apprenticeship, either. Before that.

Snakes were all I could see when I first stepped onto the boat. Snakes everywhere, in every colour and thickness. Coiled snakes, snakes dangling from bits of the boat, snakes on the deck so I didn't know where to put my feet. My stomach clenched and I wanted to be sick. To go home. To change my mind.

But over the course of four days, I mastered them. The bosun - who's really an engineer, but that's what they're called on a boat - showed me how to control the

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snakes, how to work them into knots to tie a fender to the side of the boat, or stop the end of a rope running through a jammer; how to coil them to winch a sail up, how to secure the boat to the pontoon when we came back to port.

He showed me the engine too. It was just like a motorbike one, only bigger. It all made sense in my hands - the snakes, and the engine.

And I learnt the most important thing. I learnt that I could learn; that learning could happen through my hands. Back at home, I applied for that apprenticeship. I was going to be an engineer.

All thanks to the snakes.