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Opening Extract from...

Sealskin

Written by Sue Bristow

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1

'You can't trust moonlight.' His mother set the lantern down. She hesitated, and Donald guessed what was coming.

'It'll be a grand night for fishing, with the full moon,' she said, looking away. 'Your Uncle Hugh came by this morning, and he says they'll be out overnight. They could do with your help on the boat.'

'They'll manage.' He moved towards the door, but she stood her ground, looking up at him, and he could not push her aside.

'Callum's not well. They're a man down, Donald.'

That made him pause. Callum Campbell was the worst of them. His uncle said it was only banter, but the sting of it stayed with him, sometimes, longer than cuts and bruises; and there had been enough of those, too, in the schoolyard and in other places where there were no adults to see. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if Callum wasn't there.

His mother saw the change in him. 'Hugh asked for you specially. You know, none of them thinks the less of you because of your hands. Here, let me see now. Wait while I fetch the salve for you.'

But now she had said too much, pushed him too far. What could she know, anyway? Women never set foot on the seagoing boats; it was bad luck. And nearly as bad luck to take a man whose hands cracked and bled on the ropes, who could barely hold a knife by the end of the night. Much better to make his own way, out of sight of their pity and their scorn.

He pulled his hands away, and shouldered the empty creels, making a barrier between himself and his mother. 'Leave it. They'll be fine. I'm more hindrance than help, and Uncle Hugh knows it.'

'Oh, Donald. A night like this, you shouldn't be out alone. Go with Hugh, just the once?' She was almost pleading with him; but now he only wanted to be off, away.

'I need to see to the crab pots. Anyway, it's too late to go with them

now. They'll want to catch the tide.' Armoured with his burdens, he made his way to the door, and after a moment, she came to open it for him.

He went out into the moonlit garden. His mother stayed in the open doorway, watching him out of sight, but he did not look back.

Picking his way down the path to the shore, on his own at last, he began to feel easier. A night like this! Where else would he be but alone? Cooped up on the boat with the others, there'd have been no time to look, to listen, to breathe it all in; but out here, with the vastness of sky and sea all to himself, a man might witness marvels. There was not a whisper of wind tonight, and no sound from the sea at all. As he walked along the strand to where his rowboat was drawn up, the waves were lapping at his boots, just stroking the shoreline, hushing it like a woman soothing her child.

The boat was silvered all over with tiny frost-flowers, sparkling in the moonlight. Donald paused, unwilling to lay hands on it, to spoil its perfection, to mar the utter stillness of the night by dragging it over the shingle and rowing out from the shore. Almost, at times like this, he could love the sea. But there were jobs that had to be done, and the tide was turning. He bent to the task.

2

Donald heaved again at the sodden, barnacle-crusted rope, hissed at the pain in his cracked hands and hauled the crab pot aboard. Cold water washed over his feet, but along with the sea wrack that somehow always got into the pots along with the crabs, there was movement. Hard to tell how many, in the shifting moonlight. He reached in, feeling past the slimy strands of weed for flat shells, crawling legs, and lifted out the first catch, its claws waving uselessly as he dropped it into a clean creel.

He was right in the moon's path, as clear as a straight road to the Land of Youth on this calm, windless night. Where the souls of the dead go, the fishermen said – not in church, of course, but in the bar on stormy nights when the boats were still out; there to drink mead and take their ease in the gentle fields rich with barley. Donald, flexing his sore and frozen fingers, doubted the truth of it. Drowned fishermen stay down, he thought; his father and all the rest who'd ever put out from this coast and not come home. Crabmeat, and anchorage for limpets and anemones, that's what they became. Pulling again on the rope, he moved on to the next pot.

There were seals on the skerry tonight, no more than fifty yards of black water and hidden rocks away, on the little strand that was only clear when the tide was low. They looked as though they were basking in the moonlight, though it was far too chill for that. As he watched, a couple more dragged themselves up from the sea, heavy and awkward, moving slowly up the sand. They were rolling, heads swaying to and fro, buffeting each other as they moved clumsily forward.

Moonlight silvered everything, casting doubt and shadow. So he scrubbed at his eyes and looked again, but they were still rolling, rising up, standing and stepping out of their heavy skins, helping

each other to get free. Six, seven, maybe nine young women, lithe and graceful, holding hands, beginning to sway and dance as though the moon had pulled them up and out of the sea, almost airborne, drunk with the joy of it.

Drifting silently by the rocks, he stared. All of them were up now, leaving their sealskins like wet rocks on the sand, running and leaping, barefoot and naked, gasping with hoarse laughter as they chased each other along the beach. He could not stop staring. Another bar story: the seals who are also people, who come ashore from time to time in places no-one sees. But he was seeing; he was drinking with his eyes, as full of elation as they were. Maybe the Land of Youth was true, too, then; maybe all those wishful, drunken tales were true. But he could not spare a thought for them. Only this was true, and real, and now.

Almost without thinking, he had taken the oars and begun to move nearer, staying behind the rocks though it meant he lost sight of them for a time, and rowing with hardly a splash, the way he'd taught himself on all the long nights out fishing alone. Weaving between boulder and boulder, he found a place to step out and drag the boat ashore. They were still out of sight. Inch by inch, he made his careful way onto the strand, hearing the creak of his boots and the shift of stones under them. But, after all, the beach was empty.

He only realised he was holding his breath when he took in the pile of skins, still lying where they had been shed, and let it all out in one great whoosh. His eyes had not been playing tricks on him; this was real. No sign of life; though now, as he listened through the thudding of his own heart, he could hear laughter some way off. As cautious as a hunter, he crept towards the skins, crouching low, watching for movement. There was none. They lay, mottled and glistening in the moonlight, abandoned.

He put out a hand and touched the nearest. It was warm, as though some of its owner's life still lingered in it. Bolder now, he pulled it towards him, running his hand along the grain of the smooth pelt. You could never get close enough to touch a seal, unless it were dead

or caught in a net, but the skins were useful to keep out the cold. And who knew what magic these might hold. Surely, this was a gift, just for him. Glancing around, he lifted it and pushed it between two of the rocks. He could come back for it later; right now, his mind was elsewhere.

They had moved off between the birches and rowans that grew above the tideline, into the places where the thick, unwieldy body of a seal could never go. They were picking rowan berries, eating them and spitting out pips, hanging the bunches over each other's ears, picking leaves and running them over their breasts and thighs. Those heavy pelts must keep out most sensations, he thought. They looked like children fresh from the bath, more naked than naked, like the white inner twigs of fir when the bark is stripped off. He had never seen a girl without her clothes, did not even know if these would pass for human; but his body at least was in no doubt. He stood there, rigid, the blood roaring in his ears, and wanted to weep for the glory of it.

And then one of them saw him.

She gave a sharp cry of alarm, almost a bark, and all their eyes were on him. The next moment they were streaming past, leaping and slipping on the hidden boulders, as he stood there with his arms outstretched, hoping somehow to hold them back. They jostled him as they fled, and he stumbled after them back down to the beach, where they were already melting down into their skins and heaving themselves towards the water, all grace gone. As he reached the water's edge, the last one slid off the rocks and was received into the gentle, swirling waves.

Donald stood there, exultant and desolate all at once. He could see their heads turning to look at him, but he knew they would not return. He watched for a few moments longer, seeing in his mind's eye their glorious, dancing forms. Then a small noise to his right made him glance up, and freeze.

3

There was one left. She was pacing along the edge of the waves, wringing her hands, uttering little short cries as she yearned towards the dark water. The heads of her sisters gleamed as they waited for her some yards off.

Donald understood in a moment what had happened. He started forward, hands held out, and she backed away, her eyes wide. A few more steps and she would stumble into the rocks where her skin lay hidden. He broke into a run and was upon her almost at once. She seemed weightless, slight as a child, and they fell together on the hard, ribbed sand.

She writhed like an eel under him, but he held on tightly, feeling her breasts crushed against his chest, one leg between her thighs. For a moment her black eyes stared straight into his, and there came a great rush of terror – the fisherman's last grasp at life as the hungry sea swallows him – and the stink of drowned things was in his nostrils. He closed his eyes and hung on. Then her defence was down. She cried out once as he entered her, and after that made no sound at all.

When he came to himself again and looked around, there were no more bobbing heads in the water. She lay still, her head turned away, but as soon as he began to get up she twisted aside and tried to run. Grabbing her wrist, he pulled her up and towed her towards his boat, avoiding the place where he had concealed the skin.

Once in the boat, he rowed hard for the shore. He was afraid at first that she might jump into the water, but it seemed that, although she stared across the gleaming waves and reached out to her sisters, she could not join them.

Soon they came safely to land, and now he took thought and stripped off his shirt. He tried to get her to put her arms into the

sleeves, then gave up and wrapped it around her, and so they came stumbling through the darkness, up to the cottage, where his mother had placed a light at the window to guide him home.

He pushed open the door and she was there, seated by the fire, stirring something in the big pot.

At once, he began to talk. 'Look what the sea cast up; there must have been a wreck, I think. I found her like this, down on the shore. She doesn't speak; it'll be the shock, maybe. Have you something to clothe her with?'

His mother looked at them both, and suddenly Donald thought of what she must be seeing: her son holding the wrist of this near-naked girl, wide-eyed in the firelight, with blood on her bare legs. He would not meet his mother's gaze. There was a long moment of silence, and then she was up, putting an arm around the girl and leading her into the bedroom, murmuring something soft and reassuring. Over her shoulder she said, 'Go and get water and put on the kettle. Now!' and then she shut the door upon him.

Donald turned away, letting responsibility slide from his shoulders. She was in charge now, as she had been all his life. She would take care of it all.

He went to and fro, filling buckets from the well, making up the fire and setting the kettle to boil – all the simple things he had been doing every day of his life as far back as he could remember. There was no room for what had just happened, no sense to be made of it, and so he did not try. He thought about the sealskin, bundled where he had left it between the rocks. It was safe enough; it was well above the tideline, and there were no storms due. His mother came through for hot water, and left without speaking to him. There was nothing to do but wait for what came next.

He was staring into the fire when the bedroom door finally opened again. His mother stood in the doorway, so he could not see past her into the bedroom. She put a hand up to the doorframe and rested her weight against it for a moment, as though she were very weary.

He started up, holding out a cup to her. 'Shall I pour one cup, or two? I wasn't sure if…' He faltered to a stop under her straight gaze.

'Donald,' she said, 'what have you done?'

'I found her like that, just by herself there. Will she be all right? Maybe there'll be others from the wreck; I'll go and look, shall I?'

She cut him off with an impatient sweep of her hand. 'For God's sake, boy, there's not a spar or a cask comes ashore but everyone knows about it. There's been no wreck. Now tell me exactly how you found her, and where.'

Resentment rose hot in his throat, mixed with a strange kind of relief. He had never been able to lie to her. 'Mother,' he said, his voice rich with the wonder of it, 'she's a selkie. They were dancing on the skerry, and I saw them.'

She nodded, once, as though she'd already guessed the truth of it, and came slowly forward to drop into the other chair by the fire.

The story came tumbling out of him now, all of it except the thing that he had done to her, the thing he could not bring himself to think about, here at his mother's hearth. When he had run out of words, she looked up at him, and there was something in her expression he had never seen before. Respect, or scorn? Elation, or fear? Or, somehow, all of those things at once. Donald was unnerved. 'What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?'

'Well,' she said. 'Where to start? I never thought I'd see you married at all, Donald Macfarlane, but it seems you've managed it in your own strange way, and we must make the best of it.'

'What? What are you talking about?'

'Use the brains you were born with, boy. That dance was never meant for you. They were maidens, ready for mating. If you hadn't come along, she'd have had a husband of her own kind by the end of the night. But you took her instead. You've made your bed, and now you must lie in it.'

He pushed back his chair, away from her and her senseless words. 'What are you saying? I can't marry that … that creature!'

His mother's eyes hardened. 'It's too late now. You can't undo what you did.'

'I'll take her back there, tonight! I'll give her back her sealskin, and there's an end of it!'

'Oh, Donald. You could have just left her there, let her go back to the sea. But you brought her home. Why?'

'I don't know! I don't know how it all happened; I never meant to…' He faltered to a stop, then tried again. 'It felt as though it was just for me. If you had seen them! I couldn't just leave her. They were so marvellous…'

His mother said nothing. Only watched, and waited.

'Well,' he said at length, 'I was wrong, then. I got it all wrong, like I always do. I'll go now, while the moon's still high.'

'Donald,' his mother said patiently, 'there will be a child.'

4

'You can't know that!' he shouted at her. 'How could you possibly know that? Even I know it's weeks before you can tell for sure. And anyway, how could you even think of such a thing? What sort of monster would it be, for God's sake? You're out of your senses. I'll take her down there right this minute.' He had risen from his chair and was starting towards the bedroom door, but his mother was there before him, and he could not bring himself to lay hands on her.

'Donald, will you sit down and listen to me? We haven't much time. The whole village will know soon, and we have to think out what we're going to say.'

Again, she'd caught him off balance. The whole village? What had it got to do with anyone else? He turned away and went to the window, to stare out at the moonlit garden. It looked just the same as ever, but he listened, despite himself, as his mother's words unmade his world.

'I don't know for certain, of course, but it's very likely,' she said slowly, as though she were thinking it out as she spoke. 'They would have been maidens, ready to choose their mates. It's the right time of year for that. And you're both young and healthy, so that's the way of it. We'll know for sure before too long. And in the meantime, people will be talking.'

'But there needn't be any meantime! I can just take her down to the skerry now, and no-one will be the wiser!' He had swung round to face her, but his resolve withered again at the look in her eyes. Not many people would cross Bridie Macfarlane when she was determined, and her own son least of all.

'I don't know if she could change back, with your seed inside her. And even if she could, would you condemn your own son or

daughter to be born out there on the rocks, when the time comes? You may find it hard to imagine what goes on in other people's minds, Donald, but you're not a cruel man. And in any case, I won't let it happen. This is my grandchild we're talking about, and I will do all I can to give it the best possible chance in the world.'

She saw a change in him, saw that she had won, at least for the time being. She came to sit down again. He said nothing, and after a few moments she went on.

'I was thinking it through while I was tending to her. The best way is to say she's some kin to me, say a cousin's child, back inland, where I grew up. That's fairly safe; no-one travels there much. We can say her parents have died recently, and when we visited last spring, you and she made … an understanding.'

Donald snorted. 'As if she could understand anything! How will you explain that she's wordless and witless too? And how could she have come here by herself, with nobody noticing?'

Bridie nodded at this. 'It's a problem, that's true. If we can keep her hidden for a few days, we can say you went to see her and brought her back with you. As for the way she is … maybe we can say she had the fever as a child, and it's altered her mind. But Donald' – and here she looked straight at him – 'you don't really think she's a witless creature, do you?'

'I don't know! No, I suppose not – how can I tell?' He thought of the selkies' playfulness on the skerry, the way they had helped each other. And he thought, too, of the terror she had put into him as she lay under him on the sand. Was that her doing, or was it his own sense of wrong that had given him those nightmare visions? He wrenched his mind away from that place. 'No,' he said again, more slowly. 'It's more like they were children, just doing everything for the first time.'

'That's how it seems to me, too. Her eyes are like a young child's who has it all to learn. And her skin is so soft, so fine; it's like Maggie Kildare's baby's, that was born before its time. But we'll know, soon enough.' Bridie got up again, and her weariness was stronger now.

'We must get some rest. And you must stay out of sight, if you can. The rest we'll have to leave until morning.' Without another word, as though it was all decided, she went through into the bedroom and shut the door upon him.