

# THE QUARRY

## Sealskin

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The sea hurled itself against the rocks. Water thrashed and churned, white foam flashing against steely waves. Thick clouds gathered on the horizon. On the beach, two figures walked alone along the shoreline.

‘These seas are dangerous, Eisla. You be sure not to go out there alone, especially when the tides are coming in.’ Mairi gestured to the narrow strip of sand that led between the shore and the rocky island that crouched in the water out beyond the headland. ‘Many a lad has been trapped there o’ernight and forced to wait til morn before they could come ashore again. It’s cold and wet out there. You’d be frozen to the bone by sun-up.’ She pinched her granddaughter’s cheek affectionately. Eisla’s eyes widened in horrified delight.

‘Couldn’t Pa come out in his boat and fetch us if we got stuck?’

Mairi picked up a shell from the edge of the water, rolling it over in her hands. Its creamy brown surface shone in the early morning light.

‘These seas are rough and dangerous, lass. At night the waves are dark and black, and hide the rocks beneath. The hull would shatter against them. Not even your father would dare to try.’

‘Not even to save me?’

Mairi laughed, handing her granddaughter the tiny shell. ‘You know your Pa would fight an army of Finfolk if it meant saving you, my girl.’ She stared at the horizon, at the smudged outlines of tiny fishing boats against the pale winter sky.

‘Jaimie says Finfolk aren’t real.’

‘And what does young Jaimie know about these things?’ Mairi asked.

Eisla scooped up a shell and slipped it into her pocket with the others. They clinked together as she skipped along, her dress weighed down by the laden pockets. ‘He says they’re just stories told by old fishers-wives to scare the children, so they dinnae do anything naughty.’

‘Well, you tell Jaimie that I’ll beat some fear into him with my broom, if he starts misbehaving.’

Eisla grinned.

‘But he’s right,’ Mairi continued. ‘You’re much more likely to be seeing selkies bathing in the sun, than worrying about any of those cunning Finfolk.’

Eisla squinted out at the island, searching for the sleek grey shape of seals lying on the rocks.

‘There’s been tales of reckless bairns like yourself getting caught as the tide comes rushing in, who would have drowned if it weren’t for a woman emerging from the water and carrying them to safety.’ Mairi smiled softly. ‘When their terrified mothers came to find them, all to be seen was a seal swimming away and the bairn alone on the beach, shivering and soaked to the skin.’

Eisla’s eyes widened. ‘What do selkies look like?’

Mairi smiled down at her, tucking a dark curl behind her ear. ‘They have beautiful long hair, just like yours. In the water they look like seals, but on bonnie days when the sun is warm and bright, and there are no earth-born men around, they come ashore and slip off their sealskins, and lie naked in the sunshine. Then they look just as humans do.’ She looked wistfully out at the horizon. ‘They’re deathly beautiful, with eyes big and black as night.’

Eisla grinned excitedly. ‘Like yours?’

‘Aye, and yours too, my love.’

‘Do you think we’ll see one?’

Mairi shook her head. ‘Even if you did, they’d grab their skins and disappear into the waves as soon as they saw you.’

Eisla rattled the shells in her pockets. ‘Why would they hide?’

‘Well, love, if someone manages to steal their skin, they cannae go back to the sea or they’ll drown. They’ll be trapped ashore and forced to live among the earth-born folk, until the day they can steal back their skin and go home.’

‘So if I found their sealskin I could make them stay and talk to me?’

Mairi crouched down beside her granddaughter, grasping her shoulders. ‘Listen to me, Eisla,’ she said earnestly. ‘You should never cross a creature of the sea. Selkies live long lives, and are not likely to forget.’

The girl looked at her, wide eyed.

Mairi’s expression softened and she took Eisla’s hand. ‘Now come, lass. We best be getting home.’ They turned and walked back along the sand, with the dark rocks of the island crouching in the water behind them.

Mairi settled into her chair, watching as the firelight sent shadows flickering across the walls. Her gaze shifted to her granddaughter. Eisla sat next to the fireplace, her legs swinging as she sorted through the seashells in her lap.

‘Pass me some of those shells, love.’ Taking a handful, Mairi rolled them between her fingers. ‘You know, your mama used to collect these,’ she said softly.

The girl smiled, the shells clinking as she played with them. ‘What was she like?’

Mairi leant back, unwinding a spool of thread. She took a handful of the tiny seashells, and began stringing them together as she talked. ‘Your mama was a wild lass. She would spend hours roaming the cliff tops or along the tideline instead of helping me with the chores. She longed for a boat of her own, like her father had.’

Eisla cocked her head. ‘You never talk about him.’

‘Your grandfather?’ Mairi was quiet for a moment. ‘He was a fisherman, like most men in this village. The bonniest lad I’d ever laid eyes on.’

Her husband had been charming, at first. He had a smile that made her heart thud and stormy grey eyes that flashed like fish scales in sunlight. She had been exploring rock pools at the base of the ragged cliffs a few miles down the coast when she first saw him. He had been so gentle, so kind.

He told her stories about his village, and showed her the sweet-smelling wildflowers growing along the cliff tops. And when the cold fingers of night crept in and she should have

returned home he coaxed a fire alight and entreated her to stay. She had watched the flicker of flames and the glowing of embers, entranced as the fire spat sparks up into the night.

‘But he was young and reckless, and didnae respect the sea.’ Mairi closed her eyes. ‘There came a storm, one evening.’

The water had thrashed dark and black against the rocks, and the clouds gathered thick and brooding in the sky. It had been bitterly cold, and the wind roared around the cliffs as she stood watching for him to come home. The boats had come in early, one by one, as the rain began to fall in great spattering drops and thunder rumbled through the night. But he had not come.

‘He stole from the sea, and so the sea stole from him. It smashed his boat to splinters, and without a boat a man cannae survive in the water.’ Her eyes had taken on a strange intensity. ‘The ocean is a dangerous thing, my love. Be wary not to anger it.’

Eisla watched her with wide eyes, not quite understanding, but recognising the gravity of her tone.

Mairi looked down at the string of shells.

She had been left with a belly swollen with new life in a village that was not her own, where the people eyed her warily and murmured as she passed.

The bairn was born midwinter. A tiny girl with a wisp of dark hair and eyes big and black as night.

Perfectly human.

Before the storm, when she had first discovered she was with child, he had been overjoyed. She kept it secret from her sisters, slipping away to meet him on starlit nights to lay with him beside the dancing fire. But as her belly began to show he grew restless. He had heard tales of bairns born of the sea. Clammy-skinned children with webbed fingers and toes.

He had begged to see where she had hidden her fur.

Early one morning she woke alone. Smoke swelled softly from the embers and a dusting of ashes had settled in her hair overnight. She crept barefoot along the cliffs. Silver dewdrops clustered on the grass and a thick grey mist swirled in over the ocean. A silent, still morning.

As she reached the familiar cluster of rocks at the base of the headland, she paused, her heart beating faster. Something was wrong.

She scrambled around the rocks to a narrow crevice in the cliff face, hidden behind a jutting shelf of rock. The hollow space was empty. He stood there, staring vacantly out to sea.

‘No.’ She shook her head, backing away. ‘Where is it?’ She choked on the words.

He couldn't meet her eyes. 'Think of the bairn. It will need its mother.'

'No.' She looked around, searching desperately.

He gestured at the ocean, his voice so soft she could barely hear it. 'You would have left us.'

Over the next few months she had raged, and wept, and begged, but he refused to tell her where he had hidden her sealskin. She searched everywhere. She hated his house, with the rough stone floor and the roof that leaked, and the walls that seemed to close in around her. At night she would lie awake beside him, listening to the distant crash of waves on the shore.

Everyday he would go out in his boat with the other fishermen from the village. She would stand at the edge of the water and feel the tide tug at her feet and the salt singing in her veins, but she could not follow.

Mairi's grip tightened on the string of seashells. The fire spat and crackled as the wood shifted. She blinked, eyes shining in the firelight as she looked over at her granddaughter. Eisla hummed quietly, examining the polished shells in her lap.

It was the thunder that woke her.

The fire had died down, and the embers glowed softly in the darkness. A thin haze of wood smoke filled the room.

Mairi pulled the blankets closer. Outside, the rain lashed against the stone walls.

She shivered as she rose, drawing her cloak around her shoulders. She added wood to the fire, stirring the coals to coax the flames alight.

The thunder rumbled heavily. She could hear the ocean raging, the waves crashing furiously against the cliffs. The door banged restlessly in its frame, the thin latch struggling to hold it in place.

Eisla rolled over, murmuring in her sleep. Mairi smiled, leaning down to stroke her hair. The string of seashells hung around Eisla's neck, tangled amongst her dark curls.

A loud crack tore through the air. Mairi looked up in alarm. She heard the crash of stones tumbling to the ground. A gust of cold air swirled down the chimney, scattering ash across the hearthstone.

Mairi rushed to the door. As she lifted the latch, the wind ripped it from her grasp and it battered wildly against the wall. She slammed it shut behind her. She shielded her face from the rain, making her way around the side of the cottage.

The old hazel tree had been torn up by the roots. Mairi stared desperately at the tangle of broken branches. The knotted trunk rested against the chimney, where a pile of thick grey stones had tumbled to the ground.

Mairi pulled at a branch, trying to dislodge it. Loose stones shook as the tree shifted. She was soaked, her hair clinging to her skin. Wood cracked and splintered, and the branch fell to the ground. Another stone toppled over, crashing down.

Something caught her eye.

The corner of the roof had fallen away, and a thick bundle was wedged beneath the exposed timber rafters.

Mairi climbed onto the pile of fallen stones, steadying herself against the tree trunk. She couldn't breathe. She lifted a trembling hand, pulling it down. The sealskin shone soft and silver in the starlight. Mairi breathed in the musty fur, coated in decades of dust and crusted salt. The wind swirled around her and the waves crashed frantically against the rocks on the shore below. Thunder rolled and roared across the sky. She looked down towards the sea.

'Nana?' Eisla stood huddled in the doorway.

Mairi looked back at her. 'Hush, my love. 'Tis only thunder. Go back to bed.'

The girl rubbed her eyes sleepily. Mairi kissed her head, stroking her hair, then ushered her gently back inside. She paused for a moment, her hand resting on the door, then turned to face the sea.

Mairi stood at the edge of the water, her hair hanging heavy and wet down her back, a dark silvery grey in the moonlight. The stone was cold beneath her feet. Water thrashed and churned, white foam flashing against steely waves. The sea called to her, the salt singing in her veins. She clutched the sealskin tightly.

And she remembered watching and waiting, as the rain fell in great spattering drops and thunder rumbled through the night, and the boats came in early, one by one.

But he had not come.

She remembered the scream that tore itself from her throat, raw and ragged, as wind whipped around her and waves crashed relentlessly against the rocks. And the smell of the salt, so close.

She remembered the wind whistling through her hair and the familiar embrace of the waves as she threw herself into the sea.

And she remembered the weight of the water. Breathless. Desperate. A thrashing of limbs. Each wave a wall of water, pushing her down, spluttering, guttering, gasping for air. Helpless, hopeless. One arm flung upwards, grasping the air and then under.

And she realised she was going to die. Even as her leaden legs continued to kick and she thrashed madly against the foam, she knew. And she fought. Fought the force of the water. Fought as she felt her strength fading, draining with every stroke as she struggled, sank, strove for the surface, for the shore.

The salty air filled her lungs and she shuddered. A new kind of hunger.

And she had laughed, laughed so hard that it hurt. She laughed for the sake of laughing, for the rush of air and the pumping of blood, and the ache in the pit of her stomach that told her that she was alive.

Mairi gripped the sealskin tighter, staring out at the dark water. She stepped forward to meet the ocean, as she had done the night her husband died, when she lost all hope of finding her fur again.

She thought of her home, and the sisters waiting for her out beyond the waves, the family she had left behind all those years ago. And she thought of Eisle, with a pocket full of seashells, and eyes as big and black as night.

And for a moment Mairi stood on the edge of the rocks, listening as the sea called to her, feeling the water spray across her cheeks and the salt on her tongue. Then she turned, walking back towards the beach, and the little house where Eisle lay curled up asleep, with a string of shells around her neck.

Behind her, the sea hurled itself against the rocks. The wind whipped at her hair, stinging her cheeks.

Droplets clung to her skin, shining silver.