

Skin

She lived by the black cliffs, where the sea met land in a constant violent clash between the worlds. The sheer dark walls of stone towered over the deep green maelstrom of water far below, and the waves pounded at them daily in vain, clinging longingly to the thin strip of beach as they were forced back to sea.

The waves made a terrible noise as they crashed and hissed below them, as did the bitter wind that blasted the land of all but the sturdiest of grasses and flowers. But Alice would bury herself under her quilt as her mother fastened the shutters against the cold and damp, and she'd light the lamp so that all the world seemed confined to the little patch of warm light inside Alice's bedroom.

Her mother never needed to read from a book, because she had an endless supply of stories that she knew by heart. She loved most to tell tales of the sea. She told of mermaids falling in love with sailors and drowning them as they embraced; she told of a glorious city sunk to the bottom of the ocean because of a princess' foolishness, and the sound of church bells that haunted a still night.

When Alice was lucky she would tell tales of selkies. She said that there was a race of creatures that went about their days in the shape of seals, and at that time they acted very much like any other animal. But at night they would swim to deserted coasts and strip their seal skins to turn into the loveliest of women, and they would spend the night dancing under the stars.

If a man managed to steal her skin, she said, the selkie would be trapped on land and compelled to marry him, forgetting her life in the sea but always longing for it. Even as she cared for her home and raised her children, the itch was always in the back of her mind to run wild into the embrace of the waves again. And one day, when she found where her seal skin was hidden, and she always did, she would leave her family and her house and the land and disappear into the depths of the ocean forever.

Old sea tales were always sad. Alice loved them even more for it.

The little house on top of the cliffs was home to Alice, her mother, and her father, who spent his days working on a fishing trawler. When the fishing season was over, her father took to combing the shoreline for washed-up goods from shipwrecks. On these days he took Alice with him, and she'd help him find little bits of "treasure"- often just bottles and splintered wood, but sometimes glass weights or coins, or a piece of the helm. She often found thick iron nails, bent double from when the ship descended groaning to the ocean floor. Once there was a whole figurehead, with carved wooden hair and mouth and fixed, sightless eyes. Time and water had washed them clean, so that all they could do was stare blankly from a salt-stained face. This was a rare find.

When she grew bored of this she'd go watch the seals. Most of the time they were out among the waves, splashing away if she got too close to the edge of the water. Sometimes they came on shore and lay in huge grey piles on the rocks, and while they let the salt dry on their fur Alice could get close enough to see them. They always sensed her presence before long, and the dark heads would turn her way, regarding her with somber black eyes. Alice was fascinated by a seal's eyes; there was no pupil or iris, just remote, glimmering black. She thought they looked very sad.

If she tried to edge closer they would slide, barking, into the ocean, and the last she would see of them was their shining skins.

When her father had business in town, Alice usually had her mother to keep her company. They could hunt for shells or make up elaborate stories of hidden faerie treasure, and these were Alice's favorite days. But every once in a while her mother would go for long walks on the beach, leaving without a word and coming back hours later, sometimes not until late at night after the stars shone sharp in the sky. She would warm her frozen hands by the fire and not speak to anyone. Sometimes Alice would curl up beside her and she would give a small smile and return to herself, other times, she would offer only an unfocused stare, and Alice's father would quietly shoo her off to bed. On the days that her mother was in this sort of mood, Alice had to keep herself entertained.

On one particular day she'd decided to explore the house. She'd done so before, but not so thoroughly. It was a sort of treasure hunt, after all. She found faded photographs of some strangers that she supposed were family in a box in her parents' bedroom, and a huge bunch of brass and iron keys in the kitchen drawer. She immediately set about trying to find the locks for some of them.

Alice was never supposed to go into the attic. There were too many old things that she could break, her father said, and mice. Her mother hated mice. But there had to be good things to find upstairs, because the rest of the house had been a disappointment. The best thing she'd come across was a handful of large tarnished coins with unfamiliar faces. She'd hoped to at least find some sort of secret, or maybe her birthday present. She'd be nine in a few weeks, and her father

must have hidden it somewhere. She figured that if she didn't move anything they wouldn't mind. And besides, they weren't here to stop her.

The attic was small and dimly lit, and packed full of crates and old furniture. Dust clouded the air as it was disturbed by Alice's passing, and it burned her eyes. Alice knew some of these old things. There was her old cradle, with the small quilt her mother had sewn out of patches of fabric. There was the trunk with her mother's dresses, ones with slender waists and ribbons at the hem that must have been from her younger days. She'd been dancing the first time her father saw her and knew he'd marry her, he'd told her one quiet winter night. The spray from the sea had hung from her dark hair and sparkled in the moonlight. "Just like diamonds," he'd murmured, pensive in the firelight.

As she neared the far end of the small room, she saw a dark shape half-covered by a sheet in the corner. There were so many pieces of furniture in front of it, she almost had to crawl to reach it. She dragged it out and rubbed the dust off the lid, sneezing as she did so. It was a plain seaman's chest, made of dull varnished wood with brass fittings. She tugged on the lid, but it stuck fast. It was the first thing she'd found in the house that was locked.

Now she'd found something interesting. It looked like so many other chests, but it had to be important if her father had bothered to lock it. It could have been her mother's wedding dress, or some treasure that he'd found on the beach. Or her birthday present! She eagerly started trying keys in the lock, thrilled to finally have a chance to use them.

She must have taken much longer than she'd thought, too excited to pay attention, because without warning a strong hand grabbed by the arm and yanked her to her feet. She gasped sharply and looked up into the frowning face of her father. She hadn't even heard him come home.

“What are you doing, Alice?”

“I was- I was just looking around,” she stammered, staring at her feet.

“I’ve told you to never come in here, do you remember that?”

“Yes...”

“Then what are you doing? What were you thinking of!” he shouted. He snatched the keys out of her hand.

Alice cringed. Her father never shouted, not in her memory. He was far angrier than she thought he’d be, and she wasn’t sure what to do in the face of this unexpected fury.

“I’m sorry, I promise I didn’t break anything and I wasn’t going to move anything. I’m really, really sorry.” She felt her eyes begin to prickle with tears, and the anger left his face. She thought he looked a bit ashamed.

“I don’t want to see you in here again. These aren’t your things, do you understand? Next time there’ll be real trouble.”

She nodded, relieved to have escaped punishment. But as he went to go back downstairs, her curiosity was aroused once again.

“Daddy? What’s in the trunk?”

She knew as soon as she’d asked that it was a mistake. He froze in the doorway, then sighed heavily.

“That’s not your business, Alice. It doesn’t concern you. Now remember, you don’t go through our things again.”

After Alice had gone back to her room, the way her father had reacted kept nagging at her. What could there be that her parents would want to keep from her? They didn't keep secrets, not real ones. And her father had had a face that she'd never seen before when he'd caught her with the old trunk. There hadn't just been anger on his face; there was just a brief shadow of fear.

The frost had started to melt from the grass in the next few weeks, and Alice was able to play outside again. The shoots of flowers pushing their way through the earth would bloom soon, and the normally bleak fields would become vibrant. Her father was working on the fishing boat with the arrival of spring, so Alice and her mother spent their days working the hard earth in hopes that some of their own flowers would take root this year.

But though she'd tried, Alice hadn't forgotten about the trunk in the attic. She was careful not to mention it, but it burned at her more each day. The whole mystery was more than she could stand. So she watched her father closely every day, hoping for a sign of the bunch of keys. Finally, that sunny morning, he'd left his coat at home. It was the sort of absent minded thing that he did often. As she had hoped, the keys were still in the pocket. So as her mother hummed quietly to herself in the garden, Alice dashed quietly upstairs. It was just where she had left it. She quietly pulled the trunk out and started trying keys again. It was a tiny brass one that finally fit.

The lock clicked open with a hollow sound. Alice hesitated for a moment. For the first time she was a little apprehensive. There couldn't be a real reason she shouldn't look, could there? Fairy tales of curses and ghosts and monsters hovered uncomfortably in the back of her mind. She dismissed the thought almost as soon as it arrived. Her father was just being no fun. She threw back the lid.

It looked like some sort of blanket, soft and dark grey. She pulled it out of the trunk. It was unusually heavy, and slippery. It wasn't the right shape for a blanket either. She picked up one corner of it, and as she smoothed it out, she saw two holes in the top of it. They weren't ragged, like rips or moth damage. They were smooth around the edges, and uniform. They looked just like empty eyeholes.

She let out a sharp sob and dropped the sealskin back into the trunk.

Alice didn't know how long she huddled in the corner, just staring at the ragged skin. There was nothing else that she could do. Her tears were silent, not even accompanied by a whimper.

Her mother's behavior made sense now. The long walks along the coastline, the hours spent staring out to sea even in the coldest winter breeze, long past when the chill should have driven her indoors. Like she was trying to recall a memory, or signs of the life that she'd lost.

Was that what her mother had been looking for all this time? This, then, was reason that her smiles were wistful and her eyes always had a far away gaze. They were always sad eyes, even when she smiled. Like a seal's eyes. She remembered what she'd said about feeling the pull of the ocean but never being able to return, and never truly belonging to either world, land or sea. The selkie would be lost in the middle, forever searching, forever longing and grieving.

Her father had kept this secret Alice's entire life. She didn't know if she'd be able to look at him again. After all, he was the one who'd kept her mother bound to the land. He'd locked away her true self, her freedom, and let it collect dust in their own home while he saw her pine for the waves without ever knowing why. He had to have seen her empty gaze and known he was the cause of it all, her sense of loss and sorrow from a hole she didn't know how to fill.

But he loved her. Alice could see it plainly, when he brought her new types of flowers every time he came home from the sea, when he wrapped her in his big strong arms against the cold, when his eyes shone as he talked about her dancing with the ocean in her hair. Yes, she knew how fervently he loved her mother, like the next day she might disappear forever. How could such a cruel deception spring from that?

Hadn't every story told her that love was completely selfless? They were wrong, Alice knew that now. Love was also selfish and painful and could lead one to do terrible things just to keep clinging to it, to keep from having to live a day without it.

And she couldn't help it. Even now that she knew this, she loved her mother, more than anything, even more than she hated what had been done to her. And she even loved her father, as much as he'd hurt her without ever trying.

She looked out the window at the familiar figure bent over in the garden. As she saw her mother, the woman who stayed up all night with her during a storm singing softly to drive away the thunder, who'd nursed countless scrapes and soothed fevers and tears, one truth echoed again and again in Alice's head.

A selkie always found her skin. And then she remembered only the sea, and left her family forever.

Alice raced down the stairs and back outside to the front garden. She was still there, it wasn't too late.

"Mummy!"

She straightened just as Alice flung herself at her and buried her face in her stomach.

"Darling, you're shaking. What's wrong?"

“Please don’t leave.” Her voice was muffled by her mother’s apron.

Her mother laughed. “Alice, I’m not going anywhere.”

“You promise?”

“Yes, love, why would I ever leave you?”

Alice squeezed her tighter. Her waist was soft and warm, and she seemed as solid and immovable as the earth.

“If you did leave, would you miss me?”

“How could you even ask such a thing?” Her voice was still light, laughing.

“Would you? Tell me.”

“Of course I would, my love. I don’t think that I could ever stop.”

Alice kept clinging to her mother, as if maybe she could never slip away just as long as she never let go. She knew in her heart that someday she’d be gone, without a word to her or her father.

There would just be an empty bed and a trunk full of discarded dresses, and by the time they realized that she was gone she’d have vanished into those cold, dark waves, just a shimmer of light on fur to show where she’d passed.

But right now she was here, and she loved her.

She would take every second she could, and love her back until the very moment that the sea claimed her again.