

Hidden Treasure

I think it's time I finally told my story. You've probably heard some variation of it before, but no matter. This is my story and I think only I am qualified to say. You might not believe it, or think that it's even possible. But every word I write here is true. Where should I start? Probably with me. Well, my name is Spray, and I was born somewhere off the island of Yell. Oh, and I'm a selkie. In case you're one of the few who don't actually know what that is, it's a seal that can shed his or her skin and become human. Where or when that happens all hinges on your clan. I, for example, am a member of the Shimmering Sea Clan. We shed our sealskins at every full moon and dance by the sea. That neatly brings us to the start of our story.

It was a small fishing village near Scalloway, I remember. My sisters, Cove, Tide, Ripple, Pool and myself were coming up to the beach. It was just the way selkies like it: a mix of rocky and sandy, with plenty of seaweed and a big shining full moon. I slid up to the beach and, with one graceful moment, shucked my skin. I flicked my long, dark hair over one shoulder and looked at my sisters.

Tide was already in human shape, her amber eyes glittering in the moonlight. In moments, Cove and Pool joined us, Cove's blonde hair shining, and Pool's ruddy skin setting her apart. Ripple was having difficulty with her skin, as usual. She hated taking human form; she said that it was unnatural, denying our selkie nature. I was the opposite. I loved shedding my skin, becoming a woman rather than a seal. It fascinated me.

We began to sing under the moon, under the stars, under the night sky, dancing and becoming one, binding ourselves to both Land and Sea. It was the loveliest thing, and I will never forget it. Every time a selkie dances it she believes it is the greatest one, but every time she surpasses the last.

I say "she", but male selkies do dance, just not with females. My own husband had danced the Dance of the Crescent Moon (the one males did) only a few nights ago. My husband...

As the Dance went on, little did we know we were being watched. A human man, sitting in the rocks, gazing at our dance. "HUMAN!" Ripple screamed, in our own language "RUN!"

I made a dash for the sea, but in the confusion I forgot my sealskin.

Big mistake, as it turned out.

I ran into the sea, just as my sisters dragged their skins on and leapt into the waves. I was left behind. I turned round to get it, when I saw the human clutching it, looking like he couldn't believe this windfall of fortune. Lucky for him. I thought sourly. The truth is, we selkies can't go back to our home under the waves if our skins are on land. And now this man had it. Damn.

"H-hello?" he said to me in a nervous tone. He'd better be nervous. If it wasn't for the fact that I might damage my skin, I'd pummel him. "-can y-you speak?"

"Of course I can speak, dolt." I said. Shouldn't have said that. I'd be kicking myself about that for weeks,

"All right." He sounded very worried, but also kind of proud. "I'm John. What's your name?" he held out his hand. I stared at it. Nothing like this had ever happened before. "You take it." This was all very confusing. "Do your kind have names?"

"Yes!" I replied furiously. "I'm Spray, and my sisters are Ripple, Pool, Cove, and Tide."

"Well...Spray, how did you come to my beach?"

"Your beach! All living creatures share this beach. Don't you dare claim it, human."

I said human with such ferocity that he looked shocked. "Now, give me back my skin and I'll forget this indignity."

"What? No! I came by this skin and I intend to keep it. What I do with it is up to me." I couldn't believe it. What kind of human would dare do this kind of audacious (not to mention dangerous) behaviour? This kind. "Now you can come down to my house with me and I'll give your food and a place to stay, or you could stay on the beach. It's your choice." He turned away.

I thought quickly. If I stayed on the beach, then there was a remote chance my sisters might come. I now saw there was no chance of John giving me back my skin, so even if other selkies did come (unlikely) I wouldn't be able to go with them. If I went with him, I could get hold of my skin, plus I'd be in a warm place. He might have lots of things I could use. So, on balance, I decided to follow him. "John! Wait!"

The years went on.

I spent most of them searching for my sealskin, to no avail. John was good at this kind of thing, though. He had put it somewhere I couldn't find it. We married, and had seven children, four lovely boys and three beautiful girls. I named the girls Ripple, Tide and Cove, and John named the boys Jimmy, Alf, Robbie and Tom. I liked John well enough, but I didn't love him, not the way I loved my selkie husband. My true husband.

Fourteen years since I had first been captured. By now they'd all think I was dead, my sisters, my husband, my mother, my whole clan, I settled into this place, but I never fit it, not really. It turned out that John had been considering the village's most eligible bachelor, and all the girls had been swooning for him. Rather than me. In any case, he'd shown no interest in any women at all, and when he married a mysterious and exotic young woman, they turned on me with spite. The irony wasn't lost on me. Selkies had lived in Shetland long before any human.

Anyway, John and the children were out fishing, while I searched for my skin once more. I no longer entertained any serious belief that I would ever find it.

"Mum?" It was Cove, my youngest. She had a broken ankle, and so would not be going sailing.

"Yes?"

"Well...what are you looking for?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're always going round the house, as if you're looking for something. I thought you might tell me."

"I'm searching for a sealskin, about this high and this wide." I made appropriate gestures.

"Oh, that. We all know where that is."

My heart soared. "Where? Where?"

"Come with me"

She took me to a shed by the beach. It smelled of rust, salt and rotten fish, and was filled with strange objects of which it was hard to ascertain the purpose: bits of lobster pot, mackintoshes, nets, and other mysterious items. She led me to an unremarkable heap of oilskins and unwrapped them. In the middle, looking like just any other piece of fishing paraphernalia was my skin. I stared at it for a good long minute.

I had waited fourteen years.

I could wait a minute or two.

"Is that it?" Little Cove asked.

“Yes” I murmured, “Yes, it is.” Why hadn’t John sold it? Its value must be above rubies. But then, there was the risk I might find out about it. He knew I would go any distance to find my sealskin.

“Cove...”

“Yes, mum?”

“Tell your brothers and sisters goodbye, and I love them – and you.”

“Where are you going?”

“Away” Cove looked like she was about to cry, and my heart sank. This was going to be the hardest part, leaving my children. But I had to go. I didn’t belong here on the land. My place was under the sea, with my sisters and my husband.

I couldn’t wait any longer. With a cry of joy, I leapt into the sea.

I heard the sound of a boat.

Ripple had of course remarked that being among humans sounded exactly my kind of adventure, but I had had my fill of humans and all their nonsense. Tide asked where I was going, to which I replied “Unfinished business.”

I surfaced with my husband, and removed the head of my skin.

“John!” I yelled, “I liked you some, but I love my man of the sea more! I’m sorry.”

And with that, I swam away.

That wasn’t my last visit on land though. I sometimes returned, when John wasn’t there. That would be too uncomfortable. My children grew, and lived, and my youngest daughter Cove one day came with me, and lived as a selkie. We all welcomed her, but I had no more children. Things were done, and lives were lived, and we all forgot.

Until I heard that my story had been circulated. People were speaking of it as “folklore” and “quaint”. The names were erratic, but the basic facts remained the same. But it is true, not some rural myth. I really lived, and there really are part human, part-selkies among you.

And next time you see a seal, just think. It might not be what it seems...

THE END