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Gill Hoffs

The Rescue

Ria could feel it cooling at her breast as she scurried with the others through the dark, down to the desperate shore. Her clogs skidded slightly on storm spattered rocks, life on the island schooling her in predicting the locations of larger patches of seaweed. White rimmed clouds, the storm silhouetted by a waxing moon, lent ease to her embarrassment. She was but one figure among many.

The menfolk were mainly spread along the fingers of raggedy rock that dug into the North Sea, their figures bent either into the wind or into the froth, rescuing casks, timber and oddments before the precious shipment was swept out to the hungry deeps. Without so much as a glance cast behind, her Douglas marched stiffly to join them, his blond hair catching the eye of the minister praying with hands protected in deep pockets, the wind not daring to tumble his hat away.

"Douglas! Ready yourself, there's a few still afloat. Go give Stevie a help," he shouted, pointing a pale hand to the left before masking the tremble again with his pocket.

Seeing her stumbling gait and clumsy waddle, rags stuffed thick between her legs to stem the flow, still her secret, hers and Dougie's, he called to her:

"Ria, you shouldn't be out in this, hen."

Acid burnt the depths of her throat, she could smell vomit approaching the back of her nose, and sniffed back the rising panic. If he should see ...

"No sir, I'm fine, I'm needed here. Please..."

There was a shout through the crash and fizz of waves dashing the shore. A tiny vessel, vulnerable and dainty on the swells surging past the wreck, was approaching the coastline, its oars splashing white in the moonlight. A gang of islanders ran to meet it, the minister joining them, praying for lost and losing souls.

Ria shuffled along the shoreline, allowing the fierce wind to guide her way, salt spray stinging her eyes and the abrasions on her face. Her breasts itched with milk, uncomfortably hot despite the chill night air. But she would not weep. It was not their way.

Handsome and hardy, Dougie rolled a large barrel with Stevie above the high tide mark, wedging it in place with the others using a lump of the grey granite that littered the area. Stevie's head bobbed with chatter, and the friends stood for a moment, slapping hands in happiness. Salt pork, she guessed, maybe water biscuits. Not rum or small beer anyway. The minister was right, the Lord shall provide unto the faithful few. Not that Ria had ever doubted this fact, but she knew her Dougie had been worried about the harsh winter ahead. Now the island's resources were more suitable, she was sure things would be better between them. And since it was just them ... well, it would get back to normal, wouldn't it?

She'd spoken with her mother once, about the mysteries of married

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life, and her mother had said with eyes that slid like melted butter to the chair, to the floor, that the meek would inherit the earth. Ria had been confused at the time. Tonight she better understood, though she couldn't agree. There was an ocean of difference between being quiet and cowed, a difference that her mother didn't seem equipped to fathom. Nor her sister who was 'in bed with a cold' as often as not. Ria had endured many a snuffle, but never one that involved a scald, or sneezing till your eyes purpled and your nose bled. But she never questioned, she never pried, for that was not the island way. In a community as remote as theirs, where little was for the individual, and most for the common or greater good, the illusion of privacy was valued as highly as that of their unswerving faith.

Grateful for the sea's bounty, she allowed her mind to slip away from the vessel nearing the hostile shore, and the thick rope the hopeful were casting through salt water, desperate for it to reach strong sand-speckled hands. Her swollen feet followed their usual path through a fault-line in the rocks, broken lumps acting as irregular stairs when she passed along them daily with the low tide, seeking driftwood, ropes, and the big skittering crabs sometimes stranded in the rock pools. Steamed on the fire then served with butter, they were her Dougie's favourite food. And she liked to make him happy. Wives do.

It was a quirk in the geography of the place that meant this little cove collected some of the better logs and trees washed from foreign shores and vessels to their barren island. The wind made some funny noises here, howling like abandoned children as it rushed through the gaps in the rocks. Some of the gatherers were more superstitious than the minister cared to admit, gossiping as they mended nets about kelpies and their kind. Ria had her faith in the Lord, and trusted that He would look after her, there at least.

Barnacles clustered rough under her hands but the cold damp air numbed her skin so she was barely aware of them. The cooling bundle was harder to ignore. Her sweet Scottish voice joined that of the storm, crooning a lullaby, comforting only herself in the lonely ink-blue bay. Bladderwrack popped under her feet, the seaweed less of a hazard here as she had damp walls of rock to steady her on her way and shield her from the worst of the wind. Soon her clogs crunched on the pockets of sand and shingle to be found there, where she had written her name with twigs as a child. Pausing for breath, exhausted by the day's events, Ria heard the clattering of tackety boots hastening after her on the rocks. His pale hair glowed as if lit from within, but shadows hid his features as the bruising hid her own. Despite the discomfort, her cheeks twitched a nervous smile of appeasement, a grimace in the gloom.

"What're you doing here? There's plenty to be done on the shore, I'll not have them saying I married an idle wretch."

His hand was rough on her shoulder, his tone as rough on her ears.

"Dougie, my love, this cove collects uncommon wreckage, and the minister was pleased for-" but here his other hand flashed quick in the black, loosening her teeth, quieting her from answering back. Lip bleeding against rough edges, her tongue quivered against the tiny wound, worrying at it as a bitch licks her new-whelped pups. Her eyes blinked

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against the salt, and the injustice.

Now he sneered in an ugly voice so unlike their wedding vows:

“An expert on the sea, are you? I’ll see you swim, if there’s nothing there,” and he hauled her in a halting fashion toward the waves dashing the shore. “I’ll not have you embarrassing me.”

She stumbled, unable to catch herself properly as his fingers made tight purchase on her shawl. But on they went, the master and his wretch, till the breakers blew brine in their faces. The wind whipped her heavy skirts between her legs, further hindering their progress as the storm clouds sped from the moon. The delay seemed to please him, the moonlight glistening on his bared teeth, spittle frothing from the corners of his grinning mouth. So cruel, she thought, so vicious, yet this is the mouth of the man I married, the mouth I kissed, the mouth that told me he loved me.

His boot slithered on the kelp lying in splayed fingers like a mermaid’s forgotten glove on the rocks at the edge. Breaking his gaze from her terrified face, his too-wide eyes saw a large basket in the rock pool to their right. The wicker was crushed on one side, the splintered weave snagging on the rocks, assisting in wedging it there till a higher tide. A last wrench of rough cloth, grinding her arm bone beneath, then release.

She stumbled, the wind catching her, righting her balance before she tumbled to the crashing depths, the shore dropping off steeply beside them. But he had loosened the shawl, and in one heavy gust, the billowing fabric soared free, releasing their delicate daughter to the deep. The hurt was bundled up inside her from before, swaddled from the afternoon’s events. Pale froth floated fragile on the wind, free from its mother the sea. Ria yearned to join it, to follow the tiny white bundle being dashed against the rocks to her left. Strands of hair whipped against her wounded face, punishing her for letting go, though she hadn’t, really she hadn’t; again he had forced a separation. Again she was made to let go.

Turning for a last look at the father of her child as he pawed at the wreckage, she felt him clawing her in the kitchen, hauling the baby out. Then the horrible heavy wet thud, forever in her ears, of her husband dashing it to the stone-flagged floor when he saw the absence between its legs. She released the rage. A clog came away from her leaden foot as she clambered down, no longer top heavy with the hours dead infant.

Dougie didn’t notice her in her fury. He raised a rock above his flaxen head, the disappointment on his face writ large about the contents of the crib below. He was as practical about his intended actions as if the child were merely a triplet lamb, a drain on the flock. Now she could hear the squalling, real against the deception of the rock-narrowed wind. One solid push and he had stumbled over. Over and down. His hair soon vanished beneath the waves.

Bending over the basket, Ria gently fingered the oilcloth protecting the baby. It was very small, face still squashed and red from the journey to meet its mother. She undid the rough twine lashing it to its vessel, and examined its hopeful face in the pale light of the moon. Scenting milk nearby, her breasts answering the child’s call for food with creamy drips, it

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wriggled in her arms, turning its face expectantly toward her chest.

She quickly scanned her surroundings for witnesses. Alone but for the baby, she tossed the damaged crib after her husband before replacing her clog, hurrying for the shelter of the stairs. She sat down, the wind moaning through the rocks around her, and loosened her top, milk spraying the baby's face with pale freckles before it latched on. She felt the release, her breast soon cool, and snaked her little finger into the corner of the nursing's mouth, swapping sides with ease.

The storm was passing now, the night clear and cold, the sky spattered with stars. Nooked in on the steps, she unwrapped the child with her free hand, enough to see its navel and gender. The dark, crusty little stump told Ria all she needed to know. What lay beneath told her she held all the island desired.

Once the baby had slowed in his suckling, she felt him grow warm, limp and contented in her arms as he drifted to sleep, eventually losing his mouth from her teat. Covering herself again, she rocked him in her arms, her own salt water spilling down her cheeks; for her murdered daughter, her marriage, and her decision. Stumbling, she carried her precious bundle up the stairs, along the coastal path to the rest of the island, finding them throwing back the ropes of the survivors. The minister was lending their hands strength through prayer, as the faces in the vessels realised the islanders' intent in letting them perish.

As the families were washed to deeper waters, her son nuzzled into her neck, eyes closed tight against the world.