

SELK-SKIN DEEP

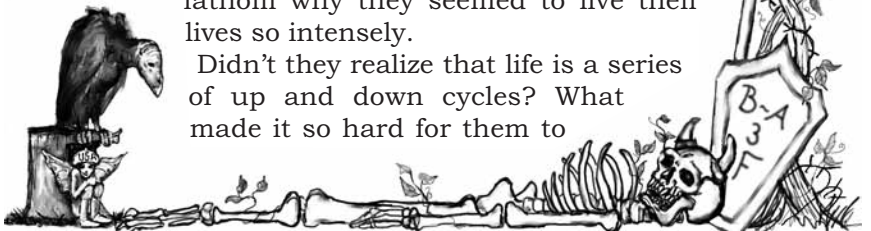
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C ADE OWEN STOOD ON THE FLIGHT DECK OF THE AIRCRAFT carrier *USS Livingstone*, watching the crew of an ammunition ship loading armaments on board. The night sea cooperated. Gentle waves in the Gulf of Tonkin lapped at the two navy vessels. Men from the other ship, the *USS Redoubt*, sent over bomb after bomb until a crewman from the *Livingstone* pointed to a large wooden crate and made a cutting motion with his hands, halting the transfer.

Cade itched to know what the man's agitation signaled. But from this distance, and under these lighting conditions, he couldn't make out the problem. The carrier needed those munitions. Without them, the fighter jets couldn't make their ordered strafing runs north of Hanoi in the morning, and he couldn't rendezvous with the other SEALs later in the week with the Biet Hai Commandos in Da Nang.

Thank Manannán mac Lir. And President Kennedy, he thought, who created the SEALs only recently. He hoped this special mission would grant him a reprieve from the boredom his nearly immortal life provided him, even if he had to live among humans to find surcease. Humans weren't a bad sort; he just couldn't fathom why they seemed to live their lives so intensely.

Didn't they realize that life is a series of up and down cycles? What made it so hard for them to



accept that and move on? How can there be anything worth fighting over—dying over—when all things circle back in the ebb and flow of life?

He would love to discuss it with Friedman, but that would mean telling Friedman his bunkmate wasn't human. Perhaps they'd known each long enough to swim that current. Long days confined together with the threat of war hanging over their heads had shaped their friendship far more quickly than a casual friendship might have. He'd give it some thought.

Until then, he would observe their intensity first hand. For now, he was just another man on the ship. And if he died serving? More the better, for it gave his life a purpose: something more than living and dying with the sea; yet, still living and dying *by the sea*.

The trident insignia of the Navy SEALs on his lapel gleamed in the moonlight. The brooding look on his face took on a more thoughtful aspect. He reached within his coveralls and pulled a small, rolled fur from around his neck. Shaking out the seal-shaped pelt, he moved into the darker shadow cast by an F4 Phantom and stripped out of his clothes. He draped the skin over his shoulders, letting the length of it drape down his back. Then, he grabbed the edges, pulling and tugging, smoothing the skin around himself until it grew large enough to cover him, turning him into a seal.

In an instant, the darkness disappeared, and Cade could see almost as well as if there were daylight. He opened his mouth, tasting the salty tang of the ocean on his tongue. He drew in a large breath, savoring the smell. He had waited too long to return to true form. It always felt this way to him, after the change, like the sea wooed him back. If he were his human self, he would have smiled from the pleasure of it.

He dove into the water, falling forty feet through the air, cutting into the sea in a graceful arc. He plunged deep into the water, then surfaced and made his way around the side of the carrier and closer to the argument.



Cade slipped off his seal skin. In human form again, he climbed the metal hand-holds on the side of the *Livingstone* and popped his head over the edge of the flight deck. The ordinance officer was purple-faced with anger. He shook like a terrier, his hat sliding back to reveal short-cut grey hair. He turned to face the small crew on the *Redoubt*.