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Opening extract from **Silverskin**

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Published by
Birlinn Ltd

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*Dedicated to Lindsey Fraser,
the best agent/editor/champion
a book or writer could ask for*

First published in 2015 by
Birlinn Limited
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.birlinn.co.uk

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ISBN: 978 1 78027 284 9

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset by Iolaire Typesetting, Newtonmore
Printed and bound by Grafica Veneta
www.graficaveneta.com

Mrs Trevelyan: Mid Victorian Age,
by the Bay of Skail, Orkney

She woke in the winter dark, still half in the dream. She clutched the covers and felt her heart thudding against her ribs as the wind shrieked and moaned round the house. *Lost souls . . . why does it sound like lost souls?* The window frames rattled as if shaken by desperate hands, trying to get in. Sand from the shore hissed against the glass. *Who are you?* She sat up. *I can't help you – I can't! I can't!* But the dream voices went on crying and wailing.

Sudden lightning slashed the blackness, thunder right on its heels before she could even begin to count.

The storm must be directly overhead. That's what woke me, she told herself firmly.

She lit a candle – there wasn't gas laid on, with the house being so remote. The flame flickered and bent in the draft from the windows.

It was a far cry from Edinburgh – *which is exactly what I wanted,* she reminded herself.

She thought of the day Mr Trevelyan first brought her to the island they called the Mainland, to see what would be her new home. He'd planned for her to have one of the big main bedrooms at the front of the house for her own – had even offered what had once been his mother's, God rest her – but she'd asked instead for the room that looked back towards the sea and the green hump so quaintly named the Howe of the Trows, out to the grey

headlands and the long white beach. When it was calm, she'd explained, she loved the soft sounds of the waves on the sand.

'Well, and when there's a storm, what then?' he'd said and straight back she'd answered,

'Better to look your enemy in the eye than to turn your back.'

She'd heard her father say things like that her whole life, and the words just popped out.

'Or so my father says,' she'd added quickly. Humbly.

She knew what Mr Trevelyan was thinking. *Now she's about to be a married woman, shouldn't it be MY sayings that she hears in her head? I never say things like that. Too fanciful. I'd have thought better of the old man.*

He was remarkably transparent.

'I love this house,' she murmured, watching him from under her eyelashes. 'And I do love this room.'

And he'd given it to her, just like that, all magnanimous. He'd even patted her arm. It was an odd sensation, but she found she didn't mind. Her father had chosen a decent man for her, even if there was a gap between their ages. Her mother had taken her aside on the wedding morning and given her some quiet information and advice – some of it quite surprising, though now she knew it to be almost entirely true.

The proposal and the preparations, the marriage ceremony itself – it had all passed by so quickly. Almost like a dream. And then her father kissed her on the forehead as he handed her into the carriage, and murmured, 'God bless you, Mrs Trevelyan.' That had been the moment she'd realised it was all . . . real.

She was a woman now. Twenty next birthday, lately

returned from her wedding trip on the Continent, with a husband and a fine house to run, on a fine island estate – a bit wild, a bit remote, it was true, but substantial. Something to be proud of. Something to build a life out of.

The house shook.

We never had storms like this in Edinburgh, she thought. *Nothing exciting ever happened there.*

She slipped out of bed and drew back the curtains at the window. There was nothing but blackness to see. Blackness, and the white smudge of her face reflected in the glass.

She shivered and retreated to her bed again. The draft from the window rustled the pages of the book she'd been reading. Not exactly in secret, but there was no point in waving it about in Mr Trevelyan's face. *Dante's Inferno*. She'd bought it on a whim, when Mr Trevelyan wasn't looking, in an English book shop in Rome. She knew what he'd say – *Fancies. And foreign fancies at that!* – but she was enchanted and moved by the story. It was so sad, so achingly sad, especially the way the poet wrote about the Second Circle of Hell, the one where lovers were punished, swept about forever in an endless wind, so that they could never find rest. It was clear Dante had suffered from the pain of love, the grand passion she'd read about, in other books Mr Trevelyan would not have approved of.

She gave herself a mental shake. No wonder she was having bad dreams, and hearing voices in the storm. Fancies. That was all it was. Nothing more.

The storm shrieked and moaned and beat about the walls. Mrs Trevelyan wrapped a soft shawl of fine wool tightly around her shoulders. She watched the little flame thrashing on the candle wick and waited for the morning.

**Rab: Age of the Alexander Decision, Tower Stack 367–74/
Level 56, Delta Grid, Northwest Europasia**

‘Oh, come on – not a storm as well!’ moaned Rab, but his friends just laughed.

‘You can do it, Rab!’

‘Bet you’re wishing you still had that knife, eh?’

Chillingly realistic rain was now drenching all the participants, but none of the others were having to wrestle with a wolf at the same time.

‘Com? Com! I could do with some help here!’ said Rab, desperately trying to keep the wolf from closing its jaws on him. It was growling continuously and its breath stank disconcertingly of half-digested meat.

‘As your friend suggests, your options at this point are substantially fewer since you broke the knife at the last level,’ said his Com. It was sounding smug, since it had advised strongly against using a knife on a rhinophant. It was also safe from the wind and the rain, lodged in Rab’s wrist unit.

‘Yeah, yeah. Get on with it.’

‘So at this point you could either a) strangle the beast, which, given the average historical thickness of wolf neck fur and the digital reach and compressible strength of your hands, has only a zero point six per cent chance of success, or b) engage Vulcanski’s Pack-Mind Manipulation Gaze. Since the Gaze is almost certainly fictional I have no statistics on the likelihood of its success, but it would certainly have the element of surprise.’

‘That’s all you’ve got?’

‘Yes.’

Rab groaned as the wolf arched suddenly and almost wrenched itself free.

‘Or . . .’ said his Com.

‘OR WHAT?!’

‘Or you could just let go and see what happens.’

Thanks, thought Rab. He tried to remember what he knew about the Vulcanski Gaze. *I think there’s no blinking*. He shifted himself round until he could see the wolf’s eyes. The close quarters made it go squinty. *And then I pour all my innate superiority into its skull – no doubts, no uncertainty – I’m the Alpha male – that’s me, not you – you are inferior – you are inferior – you are . . .*

The wolf burped, but showed no other sign of being intimidated.

‘Hey, Rab! Your mum’s here,’ one of his friends called.

Rab risked a glance over to the observation booth. His mum was waving something – a package – at him. But while the simulation programme was running, she couldn’t come in.

‘Work with me here,’ Rab whispered so only the wolf could hear. ‘My mum’s watching . . .’

There was a brief pause while the wolf thought about this. Rab had the distinct impression it was reliving moments of its own cubhood. A look passed between them, and Rab carefully loosened his grip . . .

In elaborate slow motion, the wolf lowered its head, tucked its tail between its legs, flattened its ears. Rab maintained his gaze. The wolf began to back away . . .

‘Look at that!’ said his Com. ‘It’s working!’

And the wolf disappeared.

Rab leapt into the air. ‘Yay! Ha! Me – ONE. Canis lupus – NIL. Rab is OFF the menu!’ And he pranced across the floor, doing a wild gangly victory dance. The others joined in, three young men who had momentarily forgotten their dignity.

From the observation room, Rab’s mum smiled at her tall brown son. He’d been working so hard, for so long – she couldn’t remember the last time he’d just taken the time out to be silly. His friends too, of course. They’d all been studying and researching and writing and analysing – whatever their chosen subjects, they were all desperate to acquire enough credits to move out of their parents’ spaces. Ever square centimetre of living space in every tower stack in the world had to be earned.

She glanced down at the package she was carrying.

Rab deserved the best chance, the best equipment his mother could provide. And the *Retro-Dimensional Time Wender with Full Cloaking Capability* – the one they called the Silver Skin – was it. It was the future of historical research. It was what her Rab needed to move ahead. To move out.

She tried to imagine what it would be like to have her space to herself again, after all these years, but her mind shied away.

Her Com heard her sigh. ‘I know,’ it said. ‘But it’s time.’

And then Rab came in, freshly sanitized and glowing with excitement.

‘It’s *come*?’ he yipped.

‘It’s come?’ echoed his Com, going squeaky.

‘It’s come.’ And she handed Rab the package.

He stared at it, his brown eyes wide. The reports

– *first-hand* reports, not just something from sources – he could produce with a cutting edge tool like the Silver Skin – it would be amazing . . . His studies in history so far had got him on the way to a tiny unit of his own, but with this, who knows – he might even manage a window!

‘Mum – *thank* you!’ And he enveloped her in a rare, rough hug. A tiny part of his mind wondered, *When did she get so small?* But the rest was too excited to do anything but repeat over and over, *My own place! I’m going to earn my own place!*

Rab’s Com had downloaded the extended manual and kept trying to read it aloud to him. ‘The suit will protect us from danger – weapons discharged, for example, even at close quarters, will not be able to penetrate our molecular structure because of the sideways displacement – projectiles will simply pass through the space we’ll be occupying, or *not* occupying – would you like me to read you the bit with the quantum physics?’

Rab raised a hand. ‘No, no. That’s fine.’

His Com sighed.

Rab sighed too. He was passionate about history and ecstatic about his new bit of kit, but he couldn’t care less about its innards. He knew enough about the new time travel to know that it was ridiculously technical, but the basic premise boiled down to this: a traveller’s position remained constant and time passed by them, rather than the other way around. So instead of Rab moving back and forth in time, time moved back and forth around Rab. Which was all fine and good, but so far he was just moving *himself* back and forth, in the tiny bit of his mum’s unit where he slept.

‘Come ON!’ he groaned. The Silver Skin was lying there on his bed, shimmering tantalizingly. His Com just clicked at him and went on with its calculations. So Rab went back to pacing – three up, three back, three up, three back.

Ever since they’d first heard rumours about the Silver Skin – first started fantasizing about getting hold of one – Rab and his Com and his friends and *their* Coms had been arguing about which period of history it could be best used on.

The others all liked the Catastrophe Ages best, when things fell apart and the world teetered on the brink of annihilation – and Rab was tempted too. The Nadir, the Flood, the time referred to as The Bulge, just before the Alexander Decision finally managed to put a cap on the world’s runaway over-population – near-disasters were always exciting, especially now that everything was so safe.

But the time for idle speculating was over. It was time to make a choice.

‘If we want this to get noticed, we’d need something that hasn’t already been done to death.’

‘Pre-Nadir, then, do you think? But that still leaves an awful lot of history.’

‘Something that’s far enough back in time that there isn’t a lot of vid evidence already available. Something like . . . Com! I did that project – remember? – on the First Industrial Revolution? That was Victorian – and they didn’t even *have* vids. Or wait, no, they were just inventing cameras and stuff, but they were rubbish. No sound, no temperature control, no colour, single point of view – nothing.’

They discussed it back and forth, getting more and more excited. There were so many aspects of the time period that would be utterly fascinating to study at first hand. How could they possibly choose just one?

It was his Com who came up with the idea of Victorian archaeology.

‘It was pretty much the beginning of that, wasn’t it? Properly, I mean, not just bashing in, looting the gold, making wild guesses?’

Rab was delighted. ‘That’s *it* – but we won’t do the sites everybody’s heard about already. Not Egypt or China or Atlantis. Someplace obscure . . .’

And then it hit them.

‘Someplace like right here?’

It was a brilliant idea. Every bit of the world had history of some sort – and the location of Tower Stack 367-74 was no exception. Fifty-six floors down was the site of the Orcadian Islands from long, long ago.

‘Right under our feet!’ His Com began to download co-ordinates into the Silver Skin’s arm panel. ‘Time: 1850, the year of the discovery of a Stone Age village which became known as Skara Brae. Place: what was then called Orkney and is now called – *here!* Stack 367-74, Delta Grid, Northwest Europasia. We’ll use the big storm that winter – the one that blew away the sand, uncovering the village for the first time in thousands of years – as the anchor point. Neap tide. Full moon. Factor in a test stop . . . mid Deluvian . . .’

Rab wasn’t really listening to the details. ‘This is going to be amazing – they didn’t have Coms or scanners or infra-beige – nothing! Just shovels and little brushes!’

‘And now, it’s time to download me!’

As the Com's download into the arm panel proceeded, the suit began to change. It shimmered more quickly, in and out of focus, like a heat wave or a mist. It was there, but only just.

Rab frowned. 'Are you sure it's my size? It's starting to look small.'

'What? Oh, don't worry. It will individualise to you when you put it on. It'll fit you like a second skin.'

Exactly like a second skin.

'I have to be naked?'

'Of course,' said his Com. 'The suit needs to make a perfect seal with your skin in order to function properly. It draws energy from your specific electrical field, for one thing, and for another, the cloaking mechanism is extremely finely tuned – even a millimetre out of alignment and it starts to fluctuate.'

'But . . .'

'Look at it this way – would you rather have a suit which makes you invisible, or one that leaves a pair of underpants walking about in history? I'm not at all sure Queen Victoria would approve.'

Rab was tempted. 'Is that *possible*?'

'No, of course not. Don't be silly. The suit just wouldn't work.'

'Spoilsport.'

He put it on. It was perfectly comfortable, and when he checked in the mirror, it covered him in mistiness up to the neck, while his head remained perfectly in focus.

'You won't be properly invisible until the helmet is on. That comes out of the suit when you press the button on the arm panel, there. The only tricky bit is making sure you keep your eyes open, otherwise you'll be stuck with them

shut. Since anything touching your eyes makes them blink automatically, you'll need to apply a short-term response paralysers to your eyelids . . .'

'But won't my eyes dry out?'

'No,' said his Com. 'The suit provides lubrication as required. I can explain how, if you'd like . . .'

'No! No, that's all right,' said Rab, reaching for the paralysers and applying it to the outer corners of his eyelids.

'Excellent, excellent,' muttered his Com. 'Now press the helmet initiator on your arm panel . . . Here it comes!'

Rab felt something cool, almost like liquid, rising from the neck of the suit, up under his chin and onto his face, but as it covered his mouth and nose he couldn't help struggling for breath.

'Calm down – just breathe normally.' He could hear his Com's voice through the helmet's earpiece. 'The helmet draws oxygen from the surroundings, cleans it, and expels carbon dioxide as you breathe out. There, the seal's complete . . . It's not bad now, is it?'

And, really, it wasn't. Rab found that once he stopped *thinking* about breathing, he could do it just as if he weren't wearing anything over his face at all. He moved his arms experimentally and walked up and down a little.

'This is great!' He could speak without difficulty.

'Right. Now, you'll be able to move about without being detected, as long as you're careful not to knock into anything – or anyone. Remember, the Non-Intervention Contract's no joke. You can observe but you cannot interact. The clause on fines – well, put it this way, you'll be living in your mother's clothes closet from now to eternity and still be in debt. Oh, and remember you won't be able to eat or drink anything

while the suit's sealed, or, um, excrete anything either, but since the recommended first session is no more than two hours, that shouldn't be a problem.'

'I know, I know – are we ready?'

'There *are* more checks we really should do, this being our first go . . .'

 But the longing in his Com's voice was clear.

Rab grinned and with a big theatrical flourish, he brought his right arm up and over, finger heading for the control panel on his left forearm, and –

– a high-pitched whistling sounded in his ears – his vision blurred – he felt his stomach drop –

The blurring before his eyes cleared abruptly and Rab found he was squinting into bright sunlight – and the floor had disappeared! He was suspended high in the air over an enormous expanse of sparkling sea. He yelped and reached for something to catch hold of, but there was nothing there to grab.

His Com sighed in his earpiece. 'What did I say? Test stop, mid Deluvian, remember? Time moves around you, not the other way around, so if you start out 56 floors up in a tower stack and you go back to a time before the stack was built . . .?'

'Yeah, all right. I forgot. This is – this is *amazing* . . .'

The Deluvian Period had taken place during the height of the ocean rise, when the part of the Northwest Europasian continent that he lived in – *would* live in! – had been completely submerged.

'Look!'

Floating settlements undulated on the silvery winter swell below him like vast mats of seaweed, anchored to the mountains lying out of sight under the surface.

‘Can’t we go in closer?’

But his Com was already humming to itself in the way it did when it was happily engaged in calculations.

‘Not today, not today. Here we go again . . . 19th century . . . 1850 . . .’

The blurring returned. Rab thought, *And next there’ll be the I-just-lost-my-stomach thing and the whistling and then . . .*

He swore. ‘SCUT! Com? WHAT—?!’

This was different – this was worse – much, *much* worse – the whistling was rising higher and higher, louder, a shriek that clawed at his ears – there was a blinding flash – a jolt that made his teeth rattle in his head – the shriek became a roar – Rab tried to shield himself but his arms wouldn’t move. Just at the edge of hearing, he could make out his Com crying, ‘*This isn’t right – this isn’t supposed to—*’ From nowhere something grabbed Rab in an enormous fist and squeezed, hard, so hard he felt his bones grind on one another and his eyes bulged and all the air rushed out of his lungs. His mouth opened and closed uselessly, like a stranded fish – darkness began to swallow him up – then, as if from far away, he heard his Com screaming into the black,

‘WE’RE GOING DOWN – 19TH CENTURY – MAYDAY – MAYDAY—’

Cait: Late Stone Age, Bay of Skail, Orkney

The sea fog was thick as wet wool. Cait turned back towards the village with a sigh. As she climbed the dune, the marram grass sliced at her legs and the gathering bag on her back leaked cold and wet.

She sniffed the damp air. The world was changing. It had rained all summer until the grain didn't even bother trying to grow or ripen, but just went straight to rotting in the field. And now the dark days had come again. It felt as if they'd only just left.

There was whispering in the village.

'Is it true?' little huddles of villagers murmured, looking over their shoulders. 'The times have never been so cruel – can you remember, ever? – not ever. They say the Sun is fading. Dying. What have we done? What can we do?'

The Old Woman heard the whispers too, but she just grinned her humourless grin and spent more time with the Old Chert's bones up at the cairn on the headland that overlooked the bay. She ate so little now she was starting to look like a corpse herself. Cait watched. She knew something was going on in the Old Woman's mind. She saw *something*. Oh yes, there was definitely something humping and twisting under the surface, but she didn't know what it was. And Voy – the Old Woman – wasn't talking. Well, not to her at least.

Cait flicked her wet hair away from her face. The world was changing all right. Except, it wasn't changing

much for *her*. If she looked back or forward, all she could see was more of the same. Working for the Old Woman. Wanting to be away.

She pulled a face.

It felt so good, she pulled another – a horrible cross-eyed, mouth-twisting, tongue-poking face.

‘This is what I think of *you*, Voy! And this! And THIS!’ She dropped the bag and used both her hands to make the rudest gestures she knew. She pulled down her breeches and wagged her buttocks in the direction of the village, and when that got too cold she pulled them up again and did a wild *I hate you* dance up and down the dune for good measure.

As soon as she was back with the others, none of this must show in her face. But here, no one could see her. No one could hear her. It was as satisfying as scratching a midgie bite till it bled. She kept it up until she was out of breath.

Oh well.

She was just bending for the bag, ready to swing it onto her shoulder again . . .

. . . when she heard it.

A high-pitched whistling that made her instantly crouch, her legs tensed under her and her heart beating hard in her throat. *Where?* It sounded as if something were dropping out of the sky – *there!* Out in the bay. It hit the water hard. Cait strained her eyes but the fog was as impenetrable as ever.

She half-uncurled, poised to run, but there was silence now over the bay. The tide was coming in as a greasy swell in the still air. There wasn’t a breath of wind to stir the white mist.

Sounds can travel strangely in fog. Maybe it was a sea bird, diving after fish. But she knew that wasn't right – no sea bird would be out fishing in weather like this. She shivered – but she didn't leave.

The fog condensed on her hair and trickled down her neck like cold fingers.

I'll wait till the tide's at the turn. It wouldn't be long now. And if nothing happened by then, she'd run every step of the way back to the village and say she'd heard killer whales spouting in the bay. With a fog this thick no one could prove she hadn't. *I heard them – a whole pod, it sounded like – spouting and splashing!* She rehearsed what she'd say in her head, getting the tone just right. Voy might beat her for not coming back to tell them sooner, but not as hard as she would if she thought Cait had just been shirking work. Or doing rude dances on the dunes . . .

She felt how her heartbeats had slowed again. Maybe it was stupid to stay even until the turn. Just asking for trouble. It wasn't as if the Old Woman needed an excuse to hit her. Especially since Gairstay, the Old Chert, died. She acted liked that was Cait's fault too but it wasn't. It wasn't! She'd done everything she could. She'd done everything Voy'd told her, everything she'd taught her, but the old man had just got iller and iller –

There!

Splashing.

Not killer whales, but splashing nonetheless. Something out in the bay, beating at the water, flailing, coming closer to shore. Her senses focused in on the sound. It felt wrong – it didn't belong. Animal? Bird? Fish? She listened – sniffed – she opened her mouth in case there was any

tang in the air she could taste – there *was* something . . .
it was odd . . . she didn't have any words for it . . .

Cait froze.

She could see it now, swirling the fog at the surface of the swell, dragging itself through the shallows, out onto the sand of the beach, and then . . .

. . . it pulled off its face.

Rab: Bay of Skail

Rab was choking on panic, thrashing, desperately trying to clear away the horrible grey blurring of the air. He began to claw at the helmet, managing at last to drag it away from his face, but it made no difference. He was blind.

I can't see! I can't see! Why can't I see? Behind the beat of that fear, other questions clamoured for his attention. Com? Where are you? Talk to me! Where am I? What's happened? Why can't I hear you . . .

And then all the words in his head disappeared as his arm burst into flames.

Cait: Bay of Skaill

Even before the thing came blundering out of the sea and onto the sand, a word was forming in Cait's mind like a shiny pebble –

Selkie.

One of the Fey. The First People.

Everyone understood that humans shared the islands with kelpies, trows, banshees, ghouls. You knew where you were with humans but the Fey were tricky and erratic, hard to predict and impossible to control.

And none more so than a selkie. A seal that could shed its silver skin and walk on land in human form. She knew from the stories how beautiful they were – how seductive – how whoever saw a selkie dancing on the shore was entranced, so that they couldn't bear the thought of it returning to its seal shape. They would steal its skin and hide it and for a time, everything would be well (better than well – ownership of a selkie's skin was a clear path to every luck and all prosperity) and the selkie would forget it had ever had any other form or home. Then, as sure as the sea beat on the shore, the wonderful new life would fall apart. The selkie would find its skin and vanish back into the waves, the days of good fortune and happiness disappearing with it.

Cait knew the stories – always starting with the luck, always ending with disaster. Anyone with any sense would think twice about walking into a story like that. Anyone with any sense would be running for the village this very minute and never look back.

Cait grimaced, made the sign against evil with her fingers, and crept closer along the ridge of the dune.

The selkie had collapsed on the sand. Even through the fog she could see the wetness gleaming on its strange, silvery skin. It was making ghastly, gasping noises. Then, impossibly, smoke began to rise from one of its limbs . . .

The scream it gave as it burst into flames made her heart flinch.

This can't be right! This can't be the way it happens!

The selkie was clawing at its silvery pelt, peeling it away, whimpering, frantic. It was skinning itself, like a rabbit carcass, right in front of her.

She wanted to help the creature – put it out of its agony – but she made herself pause for a heart beat.

Be smart for once in your life. Leave it – leave it –

Cait rose to her feet . . .