

Scott O'Dell

Island
of
the
Blue
Dolphins

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Scott O'Dell

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VB 50

For

The Russell Children

Isaac

Dorsa

Clare

Gillian

and

Felicity

and to

Eric

Cherie

and

Twinkle

1

I REMEMBER the day the Aleut ship came to our island. At first it seemed like a small shell afloat on the sea. Then it grew larger and was a gull with folded wings. At last in the rising sun it became what it really was—a red ship with two red sails.

My brother and I had gone to the head of a canyon that winds down to a little harbor which is called Coral Cove. We had gone to gather roots that grow there in the spring.

My brother Ramo was only a little boy half my age, which was twelve. He was small for one who had lived so many suns and moons, but quick as a cricket. Also foolish as a cricket when he was excited. For this reason and because I wanted him to help me gather roots and not go running off, I said nothing about the shell I saw or the gull with folded wings.

I went on digging in the brush with my pointed stick as though nothing at all were happening on the sea. Even when I knew for sure that the gull was a ship with two red sails.

But Ramo's eyes missed little in the world. They were black like a lizard's and very large and, like the eyes of a lizard, could sometimes look sleepy. This was the time when they saw the most. This was the way they looked now. They were half-closed, like those of a lizard lying on a rock about to flick out its tongue to catch a fly.

"The sea is smooth," Ramo said. "It is a flat stone without any scratches."

My brother liked to pretend that one thing was another.

"The sea is not a stone without scratches," I said. "It is water and no waves."

"To me it is a blue stone," he said. "And far away on the edge of it is a small cloud which sits on the stone."

"Clouds do not sit on stones. On blue ones or black ones or any kind of stones."

"This one does."

"Not on the sea," I said. "Dolphins sit there, and gulls, and cormorants, and otter, and whales too, but not clouds."

"It is a whale, maybe."

Ramo was standing on one foot and then the other, watching the ship coming, which he did not know was a ship because he had never seen one. I had never seen one either, but I knew how they looked because I had been told.

"While you gaze at the sea," I said, "I dig roots. And it is I who will eat them and you who will not."

Ramo began to punch at the earth with his stick, but as the ship came closer, its sails showing red through the morning mist, he kept watching it, acting all the time as if he were not.

"Have you ever seen a red whale?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, though I never had.

"Those I have seen are gray."

"You are very young and have not seen everything that swims in the world."

Ramo picked up a root and was about to drop it into the basket. Suddenly his mouth opened wide and then closed again.

"A canoe!" he cried. "A great one, bigger than all of our canoes together. And red!"

A canoe or a ship, it did not matter to Ramo. In the very next breath he tossed the root in the air and was gone, crashing through the brush, shouting as he went.

I kept on gathering roots, but my hands trembled as I dug in the earth, for I was more excited than my brother. I knew that it was a ship there on the sea and not a big canoe, and that a ship could mean many things. I wanted to drop the stick and run too, but I went on digging roots because they were needed in the village.

By the time I filled the basket, the Aleut ship had sailed around the wide kelp bed that encloses our island and between the two rocks that guard Coral Cove. Word of its coming had already reached the village of Ghalas-at. Carrying their weapons, our men sped along the trail which winds down to the shore. Our women were gathering at the edge of the mesa.

I made my way through the heavy brush and, moving swiftly, down the ravine until I came to the sea cliffs. There I crouched on my hands and knees. Below me lay the cove. The tide was out and the sun shone on the white sand of the beach. Half the men from our village stood at the water's edge. The rest were concealed among the rocks at the foot of the trail, ready to attack the intruders should they prove unfriendly.

As I crouched there in the toyon bushes, trying not to fall over the cliff, trying to keep myself hidden and yet to see and hear what went on below me, a boat left the ship. Six men with long oars were rowing. Their faces were broad, and shining dark hair fell over their eyes. When they came closer I saw that they had bone ornaments thrust through their noses.

Behind them in the boat stood a tall man with a yellow beard. I had never