

Foam on the Crest of Waves

by Silke Stein

CHAPTER ONE

ABALONE

The eelgrass sways. Kelp curtains shelter me. I sit among the leafy pillars of the serene temple, looking up at the shimmering roof of azure. Streamers of sunlight dance through the moving water. Floating algae touch my arms like loving sisters. The current's supple melodies wave by my ears.

Down here, we don't use words. Yet they lie in wait, in the niches of my brain, ready to crawl out and gather, unbidden, unwanted, whenever I try to forget them and become one with the world I love. How can I describe the peace surrounding me with blunt expressions that tarnish its beauty?

How can I praise the soothing cool, the colors of the anemones, my finned companions, without employing the only language I know?

During the last seven years, I have mastered silence — learned to ignore my tongue, as I could not rid myself of it. I never speak to the Props; however, I have no choice but to think their thoughts. That is, until I meet my people. They will teach me their ways and words, and call me by my true name.

Abalone Macklintock — I drag this tag around like an anvil chained to my ankle, though not for much longer. Soon, I'll be able to leave everything on land behind when the indigo gates finally open and my new life begins.

I stretch out my limbs, and my fin brushes past a holdfast next to me. It doesn't budge. Oh, to grab onto the ocean floor like the bull kelp with its tasseled anchors — to never let go again, to never leave this place. I suppress the urge to sigh. I still have about three more minutes before I'll need air.

Across from me, by the fissured rocks, the slender kelp stems part, and a small face appears. The diving sunrays reflect off smooth, speckled fur, turning the forehead and shoulders silvery white. It's a young one, maybe six or seven months old. Yet, it moves without the natural gaiety of a harbor seal pup. Dark eyes stare at me, mirroring my mood.

Contrary to mine, though, its unhappiness is curable, its predicament obvious: it wears a necklace — and not a pretty one. Choked by a Prop-made device, ensnared by

people who do not care that what they do brings pain to others, the little seal is facing death by slow suffocation.

It lingers close to me, only a few yards away. Holding its gaze, I hope understanding and compassion will show in my eyes. No words could ever soothe this suffering.

My knees bend; a quick dolphin kick propels me forward, and I thrust my fingers into the thick bright-green mesh tangled around the creature's throat. It trembles but doesn't attempt to bolt. I yank at the nylon netting, to no avail. Some of the strings are already embedded in the blubber.

I grab the small diving knife hanging from my weight belt. Usually it is employed to harvest kelp blades and stipe, but now it will give life. The seal keeps still as I fix its body with my thighs and start cutting the twisted ropes. I have to be quick; I don't feel the need to breathe yet, but I know with the physical effort it can't be much longer. With every string coming off, I envy the seal more, and long to slash my own ties to the world I have to return to. The seal's head pushes against my belly as the knife slides over its wounded skin. Carefully, I sever the last tightly wrapped cord.

I loosen my thigh hold and the seal zips upward, its belly grazing my face. Above my head, it performs a series of loops and rolls as if wanting to confirm its liberation. I wave my hand farewell, but it darts back to me, nuzzles my shoulder and then thanks me with the ultimate proof of seal affection, the nose touch, before it vanishes into the emerald wilderness of the kelp forest.

Flooded with joy, I dash to the surface for air. Soon I will be free as well. When I'm fifteen, the ocean will take me away.