

BOUNDARY WATERS

Dive in.

BY MARISSA LINGEN

She had not expected the howls. All babies cried, she knew — or at least she thought she knew. Somehow it was different when it was her own, and all her theories about calmly going about her business went out the window. But the modifications for gills were supposed to make time in the water a joy, a delight — she had pictured a cooing, fascinated baby, not this shrieking red monster.

She had pictured almost a modern selkie baby, large-eyed and at peace in the waves, wise beyond her days, able to cope with the modern world of rising tides and temperatures.

And that baby did come, eventually — after 20 minutes or so in the waves, settling into breathing in the water and then wailing like the torments of the damned *again* when they took her out.

“I wish she’d make up her mind,” she said, joggling the baby in the eternal parental soothing dance, still half-towelled and tangle-haired herself.

“Maybe we should just ... leave the swimming alone for awhile,” he said. “If she doesn’t like it.”

They took the baby to the doctor, and also to the genetic-modification counselor, to see if something was wrong with the amphibious changes they’d selected. Corvallis was close enough to the coast — even before the sea level had risen, there had been professors with beach homes — that there were others with the same modification package. The clinics were experienced.

They found no problems. They shrugged and told the parents not to let her skin get too dry, not to use harsh perfumed lotions on the gill region.

“Harsh perfumed lotions on a baby,” she snorted in the car.

“Some people don’t know,” he soothed.

“She needs to ... she needs to be comfortable with her heritage.”

“I’ll teach her to cook nopales so they don’t get slimy,” he promised.

This was not what she meant.

The requisite long bath times were a struggle at first. Then it was eerie and upsetting to find an eight-year-old lying perfectly still under the water for hours at a time. When there was a waterproof tablet in the bath, that at least



seemed like something. When it was just the child and the water, perfectly still, the laughing selkie baby of imagination seemed never more distant.

“Kids,” said her mother. “You shouldn’t think you know what you’re getting, because you never, ever do. You were just like that, hours at a time.”

“In the *tub*?” she said. “I never.”

“No, up in that tree, the big maple on the side yard.”

“That was different.”

Her mother snorted.

She was 22, and it was a long drive inland, parents and U-Haul and all. She had thought she would just go on her own, but her parents said there were no easy flights and the bus was a mess and ... there were all sorts of reasons to take her, and once they were taking her, why, may as well take the old second-hand kitchen table they’d outgrown, some chairs, all the things they imagined she’d need.

They’d never expected she’d go so far east, but once she’d tasted fresh water, she was home, and there was no going back to the harsh tang of salt, the familiar and foreign greeting of sea stars and kelp.

They helped her unpack, shelving her limnology textbooks in the duplex she’d found; brick and white clapboard up in the steep hills, identical to all the other blue-collar buildings perched there, shocking them with its cheap rent. They’d helped her stock up on all the food she’d need to keep her weight up, keep her fat stores up to survive in the water, even with the wet suits specially cut around her gills.

They wanted to tour the campus. They wanted to see the piers, the ore docks, the sand and black-stone beaches. They tried to talk about how the forests were like the forests back in Oregon, but they were not like. Nothing smelled like. The water, when they were gone, would not taste like.

When they drove off, she sat and cried, and her tears tasted treacherously, so unfairly, of salt. No matter how long she spent under the surface, spring through autumn, that wouldn’t change.

There would be others like her, in her graduate programme, others who were modified to be here, quiet and loath to speak, slow moving, large, glad of the cold, glad of the silences. They found pockets of zebra mussels. They fled the coasts. They analysed traffic.

Their parents had no idea what to do with them.

She walked down to the beach. Most of the people on it were unmodified, but there were enough like her that they were too polite to watch, used to it. She slipped into the waves, and they muffled her cries.

Even in her own kind of water, she still cried out. She had never stopped crying out, with the change. But the freshness helped, sliding into the depth helped. The quiet helped.

She crouched in the cool, cool corner and ate her fish, thinking about the shipping lanes and what to do next.

She had never been able to explain to her mother that all the modification could do was make the transitions possible. It could never make them easy. ■

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