

ALTERATION

The feel of the air was changing, not in degrees, but in texture. Light dwindled. Mirrored sky lamps blurred. Sounds faded. The last thing Braeg heard was Caiwyn's voice.

"You'll be alright."

She sounded hollow, caught inside a tunnel or something. She faded. Everything disappeared.

Awareness came, but no actual thoughts filtered through his head. They had ceased. He was aware of shifting. A continuous, unpleasant sound reverberated through him. Muted rumblings sounded far away...yet near. He did not have emotions and he did not know time, here, just existence. Lights flickered in his eyes. Eons passed. Braeg reached out and touched something soft. He could feel and move about.

Pain. He flinched. Something red flowed around him; now he was aware of discomfort and a sharp, cutting pain again. He writhed, opened his mouth, gurgling in the fluid, then closed it again. He never had such alteration as this before and a sense of aloneness washed over him, and exhilaration. His hands reached up and something firm clamped over his wrists and held them down again.

Pressure! He couldn't move. He felt sharp, excruciating pressure along his arms and legs, then more red fluid swam past his eyes. A loud shriek made him feel fear. It was coming from him. He struggled and kicked.

The feel of the fluid around him was changing, not in degrees, but in texture. A firmness. The pain receded to a distant thought. He tried to move his limbs, but the fluid had grown sluggish, like congealed pudding. Everything slowed down. An age passed and the stars wheeled overhead.

Braeg's memory began to return. He was lifted, laid upon layers of soft furs. His neck felt too weak and wobbly to turn his head. Light shone dimly, so it wouldn't hurt his eyes. He opened them in thin slits, then all the way and blinked several times. Blurred light; shadows passed. He

lifted the new limbs where his arms had been. He could flap them. Yes, he saw shiny black flippers. A new body, remade for a watery existence. For a time.

Something came close to his face and he felt fear again. The thing made a sound and two blue orbs opened and closed. In a corner of his memory, he recalled that it was a human face. *Caiwyn?* That name was familiar. The face smiled and her long appendages tugged at something on his neck.

“You’re almost finished,” she said. He understood her words. Yes, that’s what those sounds were. “You look great. Sky Wind will be impressed.”

Impressed? By what? Braeg opened his mouth to ask her. A strange sound gurgled from his own lips. Lips? He glanced down and saw a black snout with long, wiry whiskers. He looked up at *Caiwyn. Please don’t forget I’m human! Please!*

She smiled again. “We won’t. You’ll need the water, as soon as I adjust your gills. But not yet. Not until you’re strong enough. How do you feel?”

Scared, he admitted. *Wish I could talk.*

“That’s understandable,” she said and ran her warm fingers down his left flipper. Her touching him like that felt so odd. His flesh tingled. “Now rest. I’ll be back soon to release your gills. Promise.”

He lay on his stomach and gazed at the small lights in the walls. When he closed his eyes, he saw fish swimming in the ocean. Small, silver fish, the sort he loved—to eat.

Danger! It lurked in among the seaweed forest. *Don’t go there!* his friends warned. *Something dark and frightening lives in there.* He could see its shadow coming closer and closer—

His eyes snapped open. He had been dreaming, but something *had* woken him. A jolt. Where was *Caiwyn*? The hologram clock on the wall showed him that several hours had slipped by. But what was time when you were a—*sneal*? He’d laugh, if he could. His family would—

He slid off the table and crashed against the wall. Pain returned. *What's happening?*

Where's Caiwyn? The walls shuddered and pieces of ceiling and debris showered him. Then he knew that the thing he was in—a *sky ship*—had crashed into something.

What ... is ... happening?

He shuffled along the floor towards the door. The controls were too high for him to reach to open it. He tried to stand, but he was a sneal and couldn't.

He heard screaming outside, in the corridor. *Please, don't let it be space pirates! Not now.*

Not when I'm like ... this!

Suddenly the door slid open and Braeg glanced up as two men strode into the lab. They stopped when they saw him. This had to be his worst nightmare. Waist-length dreadlocks and looped earrings dangling from noses told Braeg they *were* space pirates. They smiled broadly when they saw him.

Noooooo! Please, I'm human! Caiwyn! Help me! The loud squeals came from his snout.

“Well, what have we here?” one said and licked his lips. “The captain *will* be happy with our find.”

The other raised his light gun and aimed.

No, Please, I'm human. You're making a terrible mis—