



[www.jdrewbrumbaugh.com](http://www.jdrewbrumbaugh.com)

[contact@jdrewbrumbaugh.com](mailto:contact@jdrewbrumbaugh.com)

## Shepherds by J. Drew Brumbaugh

### Chapter 1

Olga belonged to the sea. It owned her as surely as solid ground owned the rest of humanity. On land, the lubbers ridiculed her and called her an abomination, an ugly "thing" born in a devil's laboratory. But here, swimming in the vast Pacific, her body was beautiful with a grace no lubber could match. She drifted along peacefully, cradled by the warm water. The rocking caress of the gentle swells brought a sense of comfort, of belonging, of home. She pulled hard, breast-stroking with webbed hands and shot ahead, rolling over on her back to look up at the dark vault of the night sky. Off to the east, the pre-dawn glow hung at the horizon so that, overhead, only the brightest stars were still visible in the gray that preceded sunrise.

She glided backward through the tranquil swells, listening to the dolphins blow and dive as somewhere ahead they circled the tuna herd like sheep dogs. Twenty meters behind her, she could see the red, green and white running lights of the submersible raft, Homestead, cruising on autopilot.

Floating in her reverie gave her time to think about the radio message Ni had given her yesterday. The crumpled paper lay on her bunk. Star-Kist had offered to send Olga home to Russia – as if Russia had ever been her home -- to see her mother, a mother she'd never met. Why now? Did her mother ask to see her? Olga wasn't at all sure how she felt about meeting her mother. She'd thought about it before, dreamed about it, shed tears. And now to have a chance to visit her, to meet the mother who had sold her into servitude. For all of her life,

Chloe, the housemother at the St. Croix dormitory, had been Olga's mother. It was hard to think otherwise. Mostly she tried not to dwell on it. Her first R&R was months away and nothing could be done until then, so there would be time enough to decide how she felt.

She took another long, strong stroke, her hands pushing the water backward towards her feet so hard that miniature whirlpools swirled in her wake. The momentum carried her over the next swell and down into the following trough, gliding like a shadow in the feeble light, through the dark gray water. She slid her hands down her lean, graceful sides, feeling the smooth, tanned skin, skin that would never wrinkle no matter how long she stayed in the water.

She was naked except for the triangular patch of cloth between her legs, and even that small concession to the lubbers social mores she resented. Out here she could be proud of her body. She was a woman, but a woman like no land-dwelling lubber. She had been redesigned for a life on the open ocean. The genetic engineers had molded her body, streamlining her breasts and shoulders for faster swimming. Her strong arms and legs rippled with genetically enhanced muscles. Her hands and feet had long, slim fingers and toes that, unlike the earlier genetic designs, were fully webbed from fingertip to fingertip and from toe tip to toe tip. Only her blond hair, which she kept cut so short it barely covered her scalp, and her blue eyes had not been altered.

Even internally she'd been altered. Olga's lungs and blood stream had been modified to carry extra oxygen and she could easily hold her breath for thirty minutes, maybe longer. She was proud of her ability to swim faster and stay underwater longer than her older, genetically less sophisticated shipmates.

Sometimes she thought Ici and Ni, the first generation shepherd couple who ran Homestead, were jealous. Out here, away from the lubbers, her improved engineering was the one thing that gave Olga a sense of satisfaction.

Still, she envied the dolphins swimming beside her, their sleek gray bodies gliding effortlessly through the clear water, water that was changing from gray to blue with the increasing light of the coming sunrise. The dolphins could live in the open ocean on their own but without the Homestead and the regular visits from the factory mother ships neither Olga nor her shipmates could survive.

Homestead was the key. She was a forty-eight meter, tri-hulled raft built entirely of shiny, stainless steel. Homestead sat low in the water and waves often rolled across her deck. The twin outrigger pontoons were attached at the edges of the thick stainless steel main deck with the center hull forming a deep keel for stability.

A square-cornered cabin sat on top of the main deck slightly aft of center and directly over the keel. The cabin contained their living quarters, galley and control center. It was almost two-thirds as long as the hull. Three of the cabin's four walls were straight with the front wall slanted back to reduce drag while the raft was submerged. A steel-rung ladder went up the near side of the cabin and Olga could see it clearly now like dashed lines in a vertical row. Around the front half of the cabin roof was a waist high railing of welded stainless steel tubing. Along the side of the cabin ran a single row of four, small, round portholes that marked the individual rooms. The portholes were dark now except for the third one back. That was Olga's. Aft of the cabin, the low, round hump of the solar steam generator stuck up above the outer pontoon like a blister. Homestead

wasn't much to look at but she was functional and submersible, capable of diving to 300 meters to escape storms. In the four months since Olga had joined Ici and Ni aboard the raft, it had come to feel like home despite the sterile, utilitarian accommodations.

Olga rolled and dove under the surface, took a couple of powerful strokes and resurfaced fifty meters from Homestead. Off to the east, the huge gold-rimmed tropical sun pulled its way upward out of the Pacific. Olga rolled on her back and let the brilliant glow of sunrise wash over her tanned body. She floated for a while, motionless. The rhythm of the long swells seeped into her existence, like the beat of a life greater than herself. Swimming free in the open ocean was what she had been born to do.

She gulped in air, held her breath, and dove beneath the surface again. Long strokes combined with strong kicks thrust her farther away from the raft. She built up speed until she reached her maximum velocity, then tucked her arms at her sides and glided ahead like a torpedo, suspended effortlessly in the crystalline water. Sparkling shafts of light glittered around her.

Suddenly Sheriff, one of the larger male dolphins in their pod, shot past her, his sleek, gray body a blur of motion. Olga felt the pressure wave brush over her as the dolphin darted by. She started to race after him but Sheriff made a tight U-turn and stopped nose to nose with her. Olga rowed backward furiously with both hands and barely avoided crashing into the dolphin. Once halted, she reached out and stroked his smiling snout, looking him in the eyes, eyes filled with warmth and intelligence.