

# **Sea Changes**

**by Marta Randall**

It's been a long season, but I made my quota and now I come, with pleasure, down to the coast for the autumn curing. Season's end brings me far south of my usual cove, but this one will do just as well. Sandy hills covered with rough grass slope to a small crescent beach, protected by arms of boulders on either side; the great, warm ocean current piles fog along the mouth of the cove. It looks as though the end of the world lies just beyond the blue-gray rocks; even at mid-day the fog doesn't lift, lying dense at the cove's mouth and never entering the cove itself. In the sunlight, at the foot of the rolling, grassy dunes, it is quite warm.

The land slips gradually into ocean here. I strip and plunge into the sea, taking my spear with me. There is little to harm me on Greengate, but things still sting, or take occasional bites to find out what an alien tastes like; I've learned caution in three planet-years. Small blue fish pierce the water over a rock and sand bottom. I inspect sea plants with jointed fronds, opalescent crustaceans and, near the breakers, something I can't identify. Whatever it is sports a mass of waving, lavender arms set with brightly colored florets; the mass moves as I move, sideways to the spill of the waves. Those pretty, undulating arms look sharp. I don't like this. Fascinating creatures are of use, but cutting edges threaten my season's catch, fourteen perfect hides, and the high prices they will fetch at McCree's two months from now. I prod the lavender thing with my spear; I come too close and it nicks my hand. I surface, curse, and suck at the tiny wound, then submerge again and prod in earnest. I can't find the body of the damned thing, but it seems firmly rooted in the seabed and not likely to come free. Back on the beach, I stick a plaster on the nick, stretch the season's pelts on their curing frames, and anchor them securely under the gently breaking waves.

Camp goes up next, foam hut, fire pit, various articles of furniture created at random from the saffron-colored leftovers of the hut. Such luxury, after the long season following the herds, setting and baiting traps, searching for the perfect animal, the perfect pelt. Season of killing and skinning and wrestling heavy sacks from and up to Keam's sagging back, and dirt over everything, and hard rocks under my back at night. The area is cluttered with soft things, but come winter the foam will melt harmlessly into the sand, leaving no trace of my curing camp.

Keam watches my preparations with mild, silent perplexity. He shifts from foot to foot to foot to foot to foot to foot, six-legged curiosity slouching about the camp, nuzzling into the sacks and containers. As I work I

