

All 183 feet of the *RV Kalan* put out of Morro Bay Harbor at daybreak today, August 15, with a captain and crew of eighteen and six of us Patrick is calling scientists. We're heading up the California coast and spending a couple hundred thousand to investigate some rumors. The *RV Kalan* is set up as a marine biology research vessel along the lines of Cousteau's *Calypso*. Its name is the Tlingit word for "Sea Otter."

In six days, not counting Sunday, Patrick has rustled up the ship and crew, between assignments in San Diego, two divers, one photographer, two marine biologists, three naturalists and an oceanographer, and in a flash we're heading out. On this trip, I'm one of the naturalists, one of the divers and the photographer to boot.

For my money, what they've been seeing are a bunch of surfers so burned out that they're hanging around in that chilly water sans wetsuits.

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The *Kalan* sets anchor 500 yards offshore from the state park, about 50 miles north of Morro Rock. The other diver, Alex Parseghian, and I get into our wetsuits and put our gear together. The sun is bright and warm, barely any wind, just a slight chop on the surface of the water. The smoke from the ship's stack rises nearly straight up. All in all, a perfect day for a dive. Alex and I go into the water, look at each other and give an OK and down sign. I drop down under. The water is clear for California, and I smile at the sight of a sardine school below. The flight of the fish as a barracuda grabs into them is like a silver wave.

Twenty yards inland a patch of bull kelp gives cover to a variety of fish, and if I were spear hunting, I'd be heading over there. It's about 300 feet deep here, but we're searching much

closer to the surface. I turn down and head deeper, waving at Alex as he moves to his area.

We've set up a grid in advance and swim parallel routes at each of three or four different depths.

Lots of familiar faces: sculpin, white sea bass, Pacific halibut, a couple of small yellowtail.

Nothing unusual. I've brought an underwater case with my compact Nikon with its 30-power zoom but so far, I don't need it at all.

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Alex and I climb back onto the *Kalan* and we up anchor. The captain moves us 500 yards farther out, and we repeat the exercise. Nothing new to see, except some small reef sharks.

While we break for a short lunch, they move the ship to about a mile offshore. Nada. The captain, Dmitri Longevitch, worked like this back in the '80s with the Cousteaus, and he knows what he's doing. We had decided to move the ship a half mile north and repeat the three sets. It's already three o'clock, and this'll probably be our last dive for the day. Four hours is a ton of diving in one day. But there's no exertion unless we see something. And then it would all be worth it.

Back at 100 yards out but a half mile north of our first spot, we go under for the fourth time. I finish my third run, move up to twenty feet and turn west. That's when I see them. Two sea lions, both white. They're some distance away and haven't seen me, since I'm pretty much in black.

Sea lions are among the most playful of the world's animals, and these two are no exception. From a distance, they look like two young females, and they're playing. Rolling around each other. Ducking and dodging. Swimming for the pure joy of swimming. One of them heads closer to me, and I move back into the kelp forest behind me so I won't scare them. I put my camera up and set the zoom. What? This is a young female, but not close to a female sea lion. It's a young

woman! A young woman? Twenty feet deep? Without any gear? Not even a snorkel, let alone a swimsuit? And she swims like a...like a sea lion. I zoom in closer. Holy shit! This is a beautiful young female...I don't know what! She has all the requisite arms and legs. A pretty face with large eyes. Small female breasts and slender belly. Her long hair streams behind her head like liquid saffron. As she rolls over, a golden fluff shows itself on her pubic area. Her skin is the color of skim milk. Blue-white. And she's smiling and laughing as her companion catches up to her. A few little air bubbles escape from her mouth as she turns.

I'm shooting feverishly. Long. Short. Medium. Close-up. Her hands attract my attention, and I see translucent membranes connecting her fingers. Her feet have no heels. What for? They're for swimming. They're wider than human feet and like narrow swim fins. No fish tail on this honey. No way is she a mermaid, half woman, half fish. This lady is all marine mammal. Christ! Where have you been all my life?

The second one is more voluptuous than Saffron. Hips that won't quit. She's a true redhead, if you know what I mean. And she's covered with pale freckles on her blue-white skin, especially on her back and her chest. Her face is peppered with them.

As they get close to me, they put their hands over their mouths, laughing. And I realize that they've been playing with me. Suddenly, they're side by side, and they head up. When they're just fooling around, they flop their legs back and forth like humans, only better. But when they want to move, they snug their two legs up, and undulate their entire bodies, becoming swimming machines. I said they swim like sea lions. Sea lions can swim 25 miles per hour. These two are even faster. They shoot up and away from me, leaving nothing but the air bubbles that were trailing along their bodies, that spin and go out like so many tiny lights.

Knowing it's impossible to catch them, I start to follow them anyway, but ahead of me at the edge of the kelp forest, I see a third figure. In the shadows, it seems larger, and male, and not welcoming.

Shit! I take a couple of deep swigs of Nitrox. What in the hell have I just seen? Two female members of a new species? Freckles and Saffron? And a large male protecting them? Or just nitrogen playing with my brain? I have to find Alex. Fast.

I lumber north a hundred yards, and there's Alex waving like he just saw a ghost. Or two. We surface together and pull the regulators out of our mouths.

"Did you see them?"

"I'd take either one of them home to Mother, if only she were the right species," he laughs.

"You *did* see them, then."

"Christ, they shot by me like a pair of fountains!" shouts Alex. "About ten feet up they veered north, kicked their fins at me and disappeared. They were flying underwater!"

We head toward the ship, shaking our heads.

"You *did* take a few thousand pics, I hope," he says.

"You better believe it," I say. "Down to the the webs between their fingers. Neither of them was wearing a ring."

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On board the *Kalan*, all hell breaks loose when we tell them we have a new species to report. Not only a new species, but some form related to *homo sapiens*. The underwater variety. Maybe *homo neptunis*, if we need to invent a name. I download the photos from my camera into the ship's computer system, and folks gang around all six monitors to see what's going on.

Katrina Chopra-Smith is one of our marine biologists. Her specialty is pinnipeds. She's a very attractive 30-something who married Anthony Smith six years ago. Tony's an old buddy of mine who's a stuntman and fight choreographer. He's handsome and buff and could have his pick of women. He loves Katrina because she has beauty *and* brains. Katrina takes one look at the first photo and shrieks, "God, what I wouldn't do to look like that!" and everyone nearby cracks up.

Ray McKinley is our resident whale expert. He looks at the photos, and says, "Nice try, guys. Do you expect us to believe this shit? You just discovered people who live underwater? And, if you have to invent a new species, of course they better be naked and female, not to mention gorgeous."

Alex says, "No, these are real. I saw them, too. They shot past me like a couple of marlin ready to jump."

Bryce McNulty is the second mate on the *Kalan*. He says, "This stuff is great, but where did you really shoot these pics? Dmitri, are you in on this?"

Dmitri, the captain, answers, "Of course not! Jamie, this is in really bad taste! All these shots of naked girls with all of our female scientists."

I look at the others and say, "Alex is telling you the truth. We could never make this stuff up and make it look so real. Take a close look. This is what we just saw, down below twenty feet."

Now, everybody on board takes another look, and they're stunned at what they're seeing. Of course, now the most common response from the men is, "you *did* get their phone numbers, didn't you?"

Mary Anne Jacob works in the engine room. She looks over at Katrina and says, "There have to be some males around with females like these. I'd love to see just *one* of them."

I pick up my cell phone and call Patrick. After three rings, he answers.

“Patrick, it’s Jamie. There’s no easy way to say this. It’s major. Turn on your laptop. I just sent you some photos that’ll explain our situation. Go look. I’ll hold.”

In a minute, I hear Patrick repeat my exact words, “Holy shit!”

“I knew you’d say that. What’re we going to do?”

“It’s ten after five. I’ll be there by six,” he says and hangs up.

The whole group is finally beginning to realize what they’ve just seen, and the oohs and ahhs are now about the entire idea of an underwater race, never detected before.

While we’re waiting for Patrick to arrive, I call Mercy. I’ve given her the ultimate sign of my trust: the keys to the Spyder to drive home in. I make sure in advance that she knows how to drive a stick. And, of course she does. I’m beginning to think that there aren’t many things she can’t do or isn’t willing to learn. I tell her about our insane discovery, and like everyone else, she’s flabbergasted. I tell her I’m already missing her in spite of the excitement, and I’ll let her know as soon as I learn anything more. I give her a kiss over the phone. I’m not quite ready to use the L-word, though I think of it.

There’s still plenty of light at 5:57 when the floatplane touches down and taxis to the *Kalan*. Patrick climbs onto the wing and tosses his duffel to Dmitri, then follows it onto the ship and waves to the pilot, who moves his plane away from the *Kalan* and takes off. No wasted time. Under a minute from landing to takeoff. Then Patrick has to waste time of a sort and shake twenty-three hands eagerly reaching out to him. The excitement buzzes like ozone in the air.

Ninety minutes later, seven of us gather in the galley over dinner. Patrick calls the meeting to order with a toast. He’s brought out the good wine for tonight. “To new discoveries. And smart choices,” and all around say, “Hear, hear.”

He finishes the toast with a sip and says, “You all know what an unimaginable position we’re in. We have just made the discovery of a, no, of several lifetimes. Now, what do we do with it? Thinking from the scientific side, we need to study this new race. Being humans, and being curious and territorial when it comes to our planet, we need to learn all about them.”

He takes a forkful of chicken piccata and chews it briefly, “Are they somehow from Earth, and we’ve never noticed them before, or did they just drop in from another planet because they like our oceans? Do we welcome them with open arms, or are they a threat to our existence? Are there just a few, or thousands, millions? What happens when the media and the military and the corporate world hear about them?”

Murmur. Murmur. Murmur, between the rest of us.

“I am of the opinion,” he continues, “that this news is too hot to handle, as is. We need to know at least a little more before it gets out to anyone not on this ship. Six of you know how to dive, at least a little. I suggest we bring in gear for those of you who didn’t bring any and start combing the waters around here to find out as much as we can. Any other suggestions?”

“It would be helpful to find out not only how many of them there are,” says Ray McKinley, “but also to get some kind of idea of their language ability. So far, we don’t think they’ve seen us. We need to try to reach out to them and communicate.”

“We haven’t seen any individuals except two young females,” answers Patrick. “We need to be careful with that until we know how dangerous they might be, but in theory I agree with Ray’s suggestion.”

“Some of my close-ups show sharp, carnivore teeth,” I mention. “They’re not vegans, that’s for sure.”

Hiroko Watanabe, our oceanographer, adds, “I can’t imagine that there will be large numbers of them. Or else, we would have discovered them long ago.” She looks around the table, “Unless they are aliens, and then all bets are off.”

Dmitri says, “In all the years that I’ve searched the oceans of the Earth, I can’t believe that these creatures have never been spotted before. Of course, there are a myriad of stories about mermaids, sea nymphs, selkies, and the like. But nothing’s ever been documented like this before.”

Patrick raises his glass again. “So it looks like we’re going to dive and dive again, until we get more info on what’s going on down there. Here’s to the safety of all of us, and to finding the answers.”