

## Free

You were the one who taught me how to read stars. You were the one who told me that the clouds would follow us wherever we go, to make sure we are safe. You imitated the voice of waves, the way it would whisper with the moon at the night.

It was your birthday. You didn't get up even when the sun started tickling your belly. I thought it was normal because I told you to wake up late; I was preparing a surprise for you. Of course, I'm a tiny little creature who's afraid to sleep alone, but I could still remember how awesome my birthday was last year. The memories stood within the folds of my brain, like an intricate carving grafted that would stay there for eternity. The way you had decorated our home with corals every colour; how delicious your birthday treats were; the tightness of your hug and how it was overloaded with love, love and love. So, my brain was spurting out orders to make today a day that will be in your mind forever.

I didn't mean to go out for so long. I had gathered some plankton yesterday, but it was just not enough. And I had to find some more red colour corals so that the decorations weren't that bluish. For some reason, the waters were unusually hot. Or boiling. Or steaming. But I didn't stop for a second to think about it; I had more important things to do.

You had told me the story of dad, how I was just months old when he set off to find food; supplies were getting smaller and smaller. Your stomach was burning because you had saved every little speck of food for me. You wanted to go with him, but you knew I couldn't swim that far. We waited days for dad. Then it turned to weeks. Months. Years. He never came back. The only thing we heard about him was what Cruz (we usually rely on him for information because he's mum friend and he can fly – he's an albatross) told us. Some humans had come in from rusty boats and shot dad with spears. Dad's skin was punctured and the whole water turned red. The glisten of the blood diffusing to the water was so strong that the Sun had to hide behind grey clouds to protect its eyes from blinding. The humans tangled dad in massive nets and set off toward the shore, his muscles constricting, one by one.

Dad might be not here now, with me, but his memories remained with me. Even now, I can feel his smile following me, his smell embedded in the sea water.

I had collected more than enough corals and plankton when I decided to come back. The water was hotter than ever, and I was starting to get uneasy. Maybe this what you meant when you told me about ocean warming last week. You told me how every single one of us would disappear from the Earth, like the sound of lawnmowers dying after you have finished mowing.

I arrived where you were sleeping. It took me a minute of neurons trying to connect to my brain to realise that I was too late, that you were not sleeping. I knew it was not 'nothing' like you said, when you complained of a stomach-ache yesterday. I knew you

shouldn't have given me the fresh food and gone back to eating the stuff that floated on the water. I offered you some plankton, but you said no. I saw your face deforming with every bite you had.

As I choked on an emotional surge, you were starting to flow higher and higher. Your fins were paralysed but I managed to see your eyes for the last time, shining at me like the moon on full moon days, hugging me tight, and wrapping me in a warmth of love. As I took my final look at you before your body disappeared above the water, lifeless, I noticed a something floating out of your open mouth. It was small, very tiny. That's when I knew why you died.

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The people in the jackets were rowing toward the coast. They had just come to see that everything was fine.

Since mum died of her intestines getting hogged by microplastics, I've been alone. I swam everywhere, to find the place that was the best for me, but it turned out that I couldn't bear to leave mum's memories that hang around where we lived. Then, when I had made up mind, at last, to go explore the world, those people came. Not the ones who are now nearing the coast, but the ones who drilled the seabed.

I knew fleeing was what I had to do, but I just couldn't let them destroy mum's place. All they cared about was what they would find, not what they were destroying. So, I didn't leave, even when the water turned an opaque black and the air was so thick that it strangled my lungs. My whole body was dying inside out but I knew I had a duty to do this. And now, I'm starting to realise that it was not only about being with mum. It's about me being insecure, with so many people's brains being flooded with selfishness shouting 'me, not others.'

Then finally, after almost a year, the people in the jackets came and told the drilling people to go. Of course, they didn't like it, but after a long process that involved shouting, shoving white papers with tiny letters and talking in whispers, they went. Forever.

The albatross who talks with me every time he goes finding food (Cruz's best friend) has told me about others like me who are living way south. Every time he talks about them, I swim closer and closer to him, to hear him better, because as much as his squeaking voice threatens to burst my eardrums, I feel luckier and luckier. People zoom past them on their boats, not caring whether it would hurt them, he said. I feel sorry for them; I mean, would you like to live in a place where other creatures are passing by all the time? There are rules, I know, but it's more about choices people make. Choices whether they are not going to care about any other person or whether they are going to be kind, make decisions so that life would be easier for others. Like

people who choose not to disturb our natural habitats; like the people who help conserve them; people who spend even a second to think what would be best for others. Small things may not weigh the same as massive things on scales, but small actions of kindness make huge differences that will live in our hearts forever.

And now that I know this place is going to be safe, that I will be safe, I can go. Anywhere I like. To explore the world, to enjoy life. To make mum's and dad's dreams come true, to make my dreams come true. To live like I'm supposed to live.

Like a whale.