

Aydin

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THE WHALE OF DISCORD

The fishermen who found her called her “Aydin”, which means “Clarity” in Turkish. The 500 kilo beluga whale, which escaped from a Ukrainian laboratory on the Black sea last February, sought refuge in the Turkish port of Gerze, where she was fed by the local fishermen. Aydin had been used for unknown experiments at the laboratory and managed to escape thanks to a storm that broke the nets that kept her incarcerated. Soon the news hit the front page of the papers as she was being disputed over by three countries: the Ukraine, Turkey and the United Kingdom, where several groups of conservationists decided to do something to protect her. They wanted Aydin to be released in the Siberian sea, more than 3,000 kilometres away, where the waters are less polluted, and to do so, in just a few days they raised half a million pesetas, which has so far been used to ensure that Aydin is not lacking in fish to eat. The Turkish fishermen who have adopted her say that Aydin has used her freedom of choice and prefers to stay in Gerze. Legal proceedings are underway and in the meantime, the fate of the white whale, used to being handled by humans, hangs in the balance.

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Chapter one

And all of a sudden...

Through the water, she saw the grey darkness gradually filling the sky, just as when night falls early. That was the reason why she stopped swimming round and round her enclosure, at the end of the day's experiments and tests, and poked her huge head above the surface.

A storm was approaching.

The whale felt happy. She liked storms. Had she been able, she would have shouted. Had she been able, she would have smiled. She merely made one of her characteristic noises, similar to tiny bones knocking together, music in the water, and under she went again, recommencing her jaunt, the constant circles around the small area where the humans kept her encaged.

In storms, it rained. Rain fell upon the world, and the great beings in the sky that floated over her head boomed almighty, shaking the land and the sea. Sometimes, even, the storm, and all it brought with it, went on for several days, and during that time she wasn't made to work, they didn't experiment on her body or test her reactions; no human dived down beside her carrying ridiculous devices. They left her alone.

Although, she didn't even know if that was better. She knew nothing else.

The humans fed her, looked after her, played with her. She seemed to see something remotely resembling affection in that.

She approached the net which separated her from the open sea through which the almost unknown sounds from another world reached her, sounds of something that deep down inside her aroused all of her senses. She would spend much of the day there, watching the fish she could not catch, admiring the beauty she could not appropriate, begrudging the secret paths she, perhaps, would never take, and always, always, hearing those voices and sounds. She perceived the torment of her youthful instinct before their powerful enticement.

The whale had no notion of time, but felt it in her unrest.

That net kept her from everything, even from herself, because a part of her was already on the other side.

A flash of lightning lit up the air, beyond the line of the surface, and she poked her head out again level with the water to look and listen. The sky was black by now, despite still being day. The clouds pushed and crashed into each other, their wrestling progressively unleashing the storm. Another bolt of lightning, and another. They boomed deafeningly. A zigzagging icy wind whipped up the sea, lifting waves and crowning them with foam, so that the sea too would be a part of the great feast of nature.

The whale submerged. She went right down to the rocky bed of the cove and, once there, propelled the whole weight of her body upwards just as fast as her fins would take her. When she reached the surface, she leaped out above the water, contented, playing with the waves which she broke both as she exited the water and as she fell back down, at the same time creating an enormous ring of foam around her. Each time she did so, still without actually meaning to, she looked beyond the net that joined the two capes of land that rounded off the lagoon. And each time too, her instinct told her that that was where life was, real life, her place in it.

The tempest broke out in all its rage.

Never had she seen such a storm in her short life. Never had nature been so prodigious. Clouds, lightning, thunder, wind, waves... and there was she, going up and down, leaping and plunging back into the water, she peeped her head out and, almost in ecstasy, admired such incredible power, unleashed with the freedom of life. The same sea currents that were halted on the other side of the net, in the narrow neck of water boxed in by the land, now reached her, coming along the seabed, roughing up everything around it with indomitable fury. The net swayed, battered by such power that nothing could contain.

More lightning, more thunder. To her right, rocks began to fall and she had to get out of the way so as to avoid being struck. She stuck her head above water once more and saw how the headland snapped off, breaking as if shaken by an invisible hand. A rock of huge proportions rolled down the

gentle slope. The whale could sense the danger.

She swam to the other side and braced herself. When the rock fell into the water, everything would be stirred up. There was no danger, but nothing in her natural habitat would be the same any longer. The enormous boulder was to change her house, it was to reshape the surroundings in which she swam and moved about. A blinding light which reached the very depths, followed by the loudest thunderclap ever heard preceded the formidable impact of the rock onto the surface of the water.

She saw it enter, smash against an outcrop, split into two and fall: one chunk towards the bottom of her habitat and the other onto the net.

She didn't pay attention to the second one, just the first. When it hit the bottom, she swam towards it, not without first making sure that the shower of stones had ceased. She felt uneasy. It was an enormous rock, despite having broken in two. Once she had seen its inevitable presence for herself, she looked at the second rock. She thought that it had fallen the other side of the net, beyond the bounds of her reduced horizon.

And then she saw it.

The broken net, torn away by the stone, some distance from its usual place, leaving an open hole some five metres across, enough for... a size like hers, not excessively big.

The whale came closer. She had never swum more slowly. Her reason struggled against her instinct, but the one and the other converged at the same point: the door to her new horizon.

Her gateway to freedom.

The whale did not know words, or feelings. But she did know her instinct, because it was the sum of prodigies gathered by the marvellous hand of evolution throughout history, the insignificant speck of dust suspended in time, Universal Cosmic Time. And her instinct spoke to her of her joy, it

sang to her the music of happiness, it marked out her new path.

The characteristic little sound was heard, the voice of one who needs no voice.

The whale swam through the net, and as another flash of lightning and a deafening thunderclap shook the skies, the earth and the seas, she swam for the first time in a straight line with nothing to stop her.

Infinity was hers.

Chapter two

Godar secured the fishing rod in one of the hooks of the boatside and then proceeded to lie down in its bottom, his eyes fixed, staring at the clouds, just like when he was a boy and he would play a game with their shapes, imagining things through their changing outlines.

It didn't take long for the silence to fill him with stillness and calm.

At night, and at daybreak, when the men of the village fished together, they used the age-old nets and techniques they had always used.

At night, and at daybreak, they worked, they secured their sustenance, either food to live from or sell to other tables.

At night, and at daybreak, they formed a single multiform body uniting forces. Now, however, there was nobody but him and his sea, him and his fishing rod, him and his little space of time and life.

At night, and at daybreak, fish strayed in their hundreds of thousands into the nets. And it was beautiful to watch them come out of the water, admire their silvery shapes, contemplate their futile struggle, the beauty of their species and the diversity of their sizes. But nothing, nothing could compare with the true beauty of individual fishing, tradition, just man and the sea, the rod and the fish, when each bite was a victory, and each catch, pride brimming with satisfaction. Since the first time when, as a child, he had caught his first fish, the feeling had lived on, unchanging.

And in the silence of the calm sea, Godar felt safe, free, happy.

Calm sea?

He straightened upon noticing the swaying of the boat and he leant against the bow, expectantly. He thought he had seen an illusion, after all the sea was still calm, but he realised that the boat was still swaying from one side to the other, and not, precisely, due to his hurried movements.

It was strange. No wind brushed the surface of the water, no current was causing any movement in the inlet, even if he was in the part the furthest from the port, close to its mouth into the Black sea. Sheltered from the outside, there was no risk of danger or distress. He was now a man, but he wasn't allowed to go further than the harbour mouth alone. His mother still remembered his father, although it had been an accident, a lamentable, freak accident.

He looked in the direction of Gerze and followed the smooth line of the coast, with its houses, the mosque and the minaret which looked down on the floating postcard-like scene aroused in him as he admired the view. He was about to lie back down in the bottom of the boat when, again, he felt movement, this time more noticeable.

Godar looked for something around him, in the water.

Nothing, except...

He shivered. Was it an illusion? He could have sworn he had glimpsed a vague, fleeting silhouette to starboard, about ten metres from the boat, leaving an invisible, or perhaps not such an invisible trail below the surface.

A white trail.

The biggest fish that had ever been fished, there in the port of Gerze itself, was a metre long, and beyond the harbour mouth others had passed the two metre mark, almost touching three. But that silhouette had appeared huge, and as fast as...

He brought in the fishing line, not taking his eyes off the water, to bows, stern, to port and starboard. The hissing sound made by the reel was the only noise that could be appreciated. The water became still once more, the boat motionless.

Hardly ten seconds had passed, that's all. The elongated head of the small whale emerged from the water before him, about three metres away, so

suddenly that he was transfixed by the surprise. His eyes met those of the animal. His ears heard the sound that resembled the soft crowing of a booby bird.

Another, long, silent second passed.

The whale opened its mouth. It was as if it was smiling. It moved her side flippers, gained height, almost prepared to fly out of its environment, and then, with a flick, entered the water once more.

This time Godar saw its silhouette, its five or more metres in length, its slender white contours cutting into the water around it.

And he waited no longer. He threw the fishing rod to one side and sat at the oars, his back to Gerze. Hardly had he rowed three strokes than the animal emerged a second time, repeating its gesture, its odd smile, its noises and its flapping flippers before submerging once more. Godar used greater strength to row, but it did not suffice to get away from there, to leave the cetacean behind and reach the coast immediately. The whale's third ascent was yet more spectacular.

It jumped above the surface of the sea, twisted in the air and fell to the water, causing a huge wave that pushed the boat upon its crest.

Godar opened his big, dark eyes as wide as they would go.

And he continued to row without stopping, putting the strength of his young, vigorous arms to the test while the whale followed him as far as the beach, *terra firma*.

Chapter three

His shouting broke the calm of the afternoon.

—Grandfather, grandfather! It's enormous! Hey, everyone come! Come here! Grandfather...!

First to appear was Diyan, followed by Coruk, and in third place Badur, his grandfather. Immediately afterwards, all of the rest of their neighbours, Ezrum, Isia, Ikhstar, Eskeshir, Ordez ..., men, women, boys, girls, old men, old women. The houses of the fishing port of Gerze opened up and their doors spewed beings with faces tainted with expectation. Hardly anything ever happened there, and so what with the fear of some and the excitement of others, they encircled Godar who could not stop talking and shouting, waving and gesticulating towards the sea, beyond the boat which was beached any old how in the sand. A variety of emotions became evident in their faces.

—There, there! And it's whopping! It's the biggest fish I have ever seen! Come on everyone, let's go! Between us all we'll be able to catch it!

—Godar —his grandfather, tried to calm him down—, what are you talking about? In these waters there are no...

His grandson took no notice, urged on by his vehemence.

—It's big enough to feed us for a whole month! Enough to sell and buy new nets! Enough!

They looked at the calm water of the port that kissed the sand as it has done since the beginning of time. They were searching for the reason for such excitement, without finding an answer. And again they looked at Godar, some amused, some concerned. The lad continued to point to the water, expecting to see the head of the extraordinary specimen appear at any time.

But nothing happened.

—Oh, come on, come on, it's there! You've got to believe me! It's longer than my boat, and as big as a house! We must go to the harbour mouth and stop it from returning to the open sea, catch it!

—Are you sure of what you are saying, Godar?

—Grandfather, have I ever lied?

—What kind of fish is it? —asked Isia.

—A shark, a dolphin, a whale calf... I don't know! It was too quick! But I swear to you that we've never seen anything quite the same in these waters.

—You must have fallen asleep in the sun, Godar! —smiled Eskeshir.

—No! And if you don't head out there right now, I'll have to catch it by myself.

He displayed his anger by making a gesture of determination, turning around to head, back to his boat. Before, he grabbed the implements and the net from his grandfather's boat, the big, family boat. He could hardly manage everything, but his anger was far greater than any other reason.

—Wait, Godar!

And suddenly a voice could be heard:

—There!

Their faces looked towards the sea, they saw the water being beaten, a ripple in the calm, the fresh swell spreading out concentrically from a point half way to the horizon. Nothing else.

But when they looked for the perpetrator of the cry, in his face they discovered surprise and in his eyes tense emotion.

—Come on! —said Diyan first.

—To the boats! —Ezrum punched his fist into the air.

They ran towards them, forgetting their precautions and thrust into the water. Some pulled at the ropes while others pushed the keels that were sunk into the sand. In all of the havoc of voices and shouting, they gained their place in the sea, and one by one, set out across the water, filling the tiny fishing port that afternoon with life.

And leading the way, in his boat, was Godar, again rowing vigorously, wanting to be the first to locate his catch for the second time, to enter the history books as the greatest fisherman of Gerze, a worthy son to his father.

Life was always capable of smiling unexpectedly.