



URSULA'S

Journey

Home

MIROSLAV
BOČEK



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Jihočeské univerzity
v Českých Budějovicích



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South Bohemian
Research Center
of Aquaculture
and Biodiversity
of Hydrocenoses



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Preface

No fish is shrouded in mystery as much as the eel is. Its life takes place in secret. For a long time, we didn't even know how it reproduces. The Greek philosophers used to wonder about it. Aristotle, for example, believed that "eels spring from the depth of the earth". It wasn't until the beginning of the twentieth century that naturalist Johannes Schmidt confirmed with certainty that eels spawn in the Sargasso Sea, a place thousands of miles away from the rivers in which they grow up.

I once rescued an eel with my children from a drained pond. It was stuck in the mud and was gasping for breath. I gently took it into my hands and put it into a plastic bucket. Back home I suggested eating it. The children didn't like that idea. They began to make a fuss and screamed, "Let's save the eel!"

We released the eel into a private pond because the river was far away. Each pond has an outlet, though, and the eel knows it. It would do anything to snake its way through the various fish paths and trails to escape all the way down to the river.

We have been thinking of our eel ever since the day it managed to escape. Sometimes I close my eyes and imagine where it might be. And I also wonder why it behaves as it does. Why is it trying to cross thousands of miles instead of spawning in our rivers like a carp or a roach? Nature is to blame. Perhaps once the eels did something wrong and Nature decided to take revenge. Or perhaps having a challenging life and travelling such a long distance is more a question of honour.

The story I tell is a tribute to eel wandering. The determination and strength of eels fascinate me. Sadly, only a couple of them reach their dream destination. And we humans are to blame.



The scent

The number one rule for every eel is: *Do not get entangled*. There are several ways of becoming entangled. A simple knot is not so hard to untangle. It is much worse when your body is snarled up in loops that don't allow you to no escape.

Ursula, a girl eel, has witnessed this mishap several times when an overconfident eel youngster started showing off in front of the others, twisting its body into knots, mimicking shapes of water creatures or mocking Ouroboros, the mythical eel who allegedly puts his own tail into his mouth and bites it. And here is another rule: *Do not swallow everything you see*.

Voraciousness is one of the greatest eel transgressions. Not because it is disgusting – to be honest, it doesn't look nice when one devours everything at once – but because of safety.

Fortunately, Ursula was very cautious. She never swallowed any baits.

She had seen it a few times. After swallowing the bait concealing the fishhook, the body started thrashing about and an invisible line starts pulled it away out of the water.

This is how Ursula had lost more than one sibling.

Yet now her focus was elsewhere. When she first felt it, hot shivers ran down her spine. She first wanted to open her eyes and snap at it, but she stopped herself because she realized that whatever it was, it was happening right between her eyes, deep inside her.

It was a pressure that never stopped.

It was moving in her body and seizing control of her fins.

She couldn't understand what was happening.

Her blood, cold until then, started to boil and her organs were on fire. She wriggled on her muddy bed and rubbed her body against it as if she were ridding herself of unbeatable parasites biting into her skin.

She wondered what was causing it.

At first she couldn't figure it out.
She drew in water through her nostrils.
Then she understood.
It was the scent.

Strange phantoms

At first sight, the eel realm might seem unfriendly. For most of their lives, eels tend to ignore each other and don't like making friends much. They prefer to swim by themselves and if they bump into each other in the muddy water, they look away or yawn instead of saying hello.

The eel patriarchs say that this is the way it is and that it has always been so, that it is better not to cross each other's paths. It is useful because it helps to prevent fights that would only draw unnecessary attention to the eels and exhaust them before their crucial task.

"We eels," they proclaim, "are destined for a solitary life. We live in hiding. No ray of sunlight must touch our bodies. Darkness is our refuge. The deeper the better. There is food in darkness, and our enemies cannot see us. Living in darkness is the best way to survive."

There are only a few individuals in eel history who have dared to question the need for depth and darkness. Legends are told about eels who swam to the surface at noon and never returned. Not a single one.

Some of the eel sages talk about the life-giving power of the moonlight, while others disagree. They say that moonlight can be just as dangerous as sunlight, if not more so, because at night all sorts of phantoms seeking the lives of eels make their way to the surface of the water.

Even Ursula feared these phantoms. She hadn't met many of them yet and this made them all the more frightening.

Of all the phantoms, the Maw was the scariest.

The eel elders didn't speak much about the Maw, because it appeared many centuries later at a time when there weren't many eel sages left.

Ursula first learned about the existence of the Maw from other fish. They told her about it with a mischievous look on their faces.

“One day you will have to swim past the Maw – and you can be sure you won’t make it,” they taunted her. They nicknamed it “the meat cleaver”.

“You have a fifty-fifty chance of survival. And even if you do survive, it will cut your tail off or you will run into another Maw.”

“It will cut you into small pieces and put you on a skewer,” they teased Ursula. “Now, off you swim and stop bothering us.”

The eel doesn’t have a very good reputation among fish because it looks different.

“You snake!” the fish sometimes call it.

This puzzled Ursula. Why is it that other fish aren’t bothered by the Maw – but we, the eels, are? What makes the eels so exceptional that the Maw would go after them? What have we done?

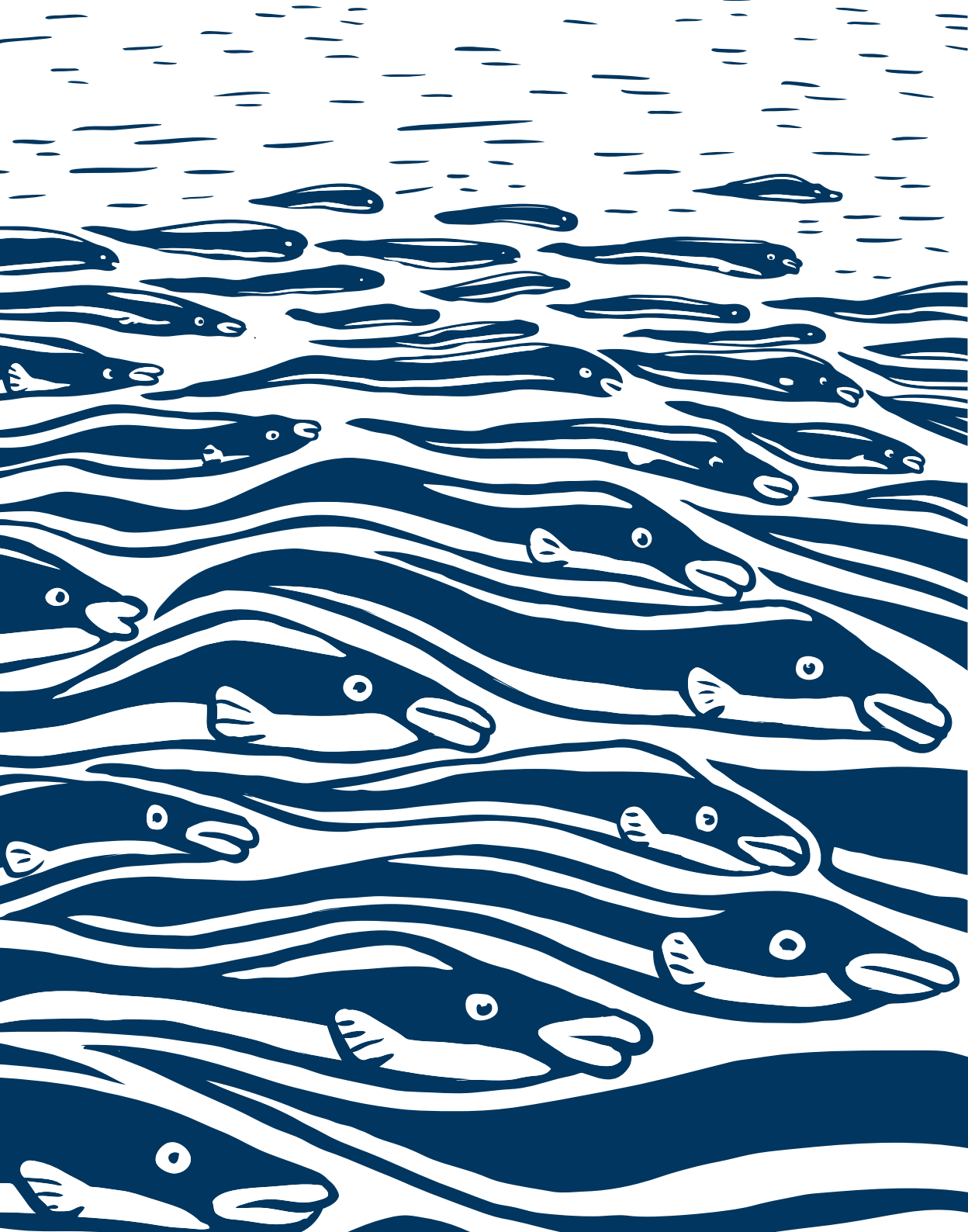
She tried to ask other eels these questions, but they didn’t know the answers. Their dumb eyes, bulging with terror at the mention of the word “Maw” spoke volumes.

The parade

Eels follow scents like others listen to melodies. The scent Ursula encountered that day was very faint to begin with but gradually grew stronger until it surrounded her from all sides overwhelming her with a force that was almost irresistible.

Ursula was resting in the roots of sweet flag. It was her favourite spot. She would bury herself in the mud and only leave a narrow vent above her for oxygenated water to flow into her nostrils. Eels have no eyelids, so her eyes were open, but she was asleep.

Suddenly she woke up. She felt a strange uneasiness grip her insides. Every autumn, adult eels stop being their former selves. They start to burn with impatience. Their instincts tell them to prepare for their journey



downstream. An unknown scent beckons and teases them until, after some time, they gather and set out.

When this mysterious force takes hold of the eels, the water realm is full of excitement. The other fish line up on the sides to watch the parade of hypnotised eels with amusement. Since they are not fond of the predatory eels, they swear and throw all the waste that has come downstream at them. They know that the eels don't notice them and that they are in no danger because eels in this state never think about hunting.

This is a golden moment for the fish to take vengeance on these muddy fish eaters.

"Just swim, off you go, the Maw is waiting," they shout while flapping their fins. At the same time, realizing that this moment is unique, they don't try to stop the eels from going into the unknown. This phenomenon is beyond their comprehension.

Then at some point, a religious reverence takes hold of the onlookers and the desire to join the eels on their journey creeps into their souls.

In the past, Ursula used to watch these parades from her hiding place. Unlike the other fish, she knew where the slithery caravan was headed for. She knew they had an extremely long way to go. Yet even for her the plot was shrouded in mystery. Terrifying, but solemn.

More than anything, she felt lonely when she looked at the fish. She too longed to make the journey with the other eels. But she would first have to make her way through the Throat.

The tales of the Great Eel

The Throat was downstream. It was an old rusty vacuum cleaner with a plastic hose sticking out of it. At the beginning of each spring the eels gathered at this place to try and squeeze themselves through the hose. Those that succeeded were not big or fat enough to take part in the parade and swim away. But for those who were unable to squeeze through the

hose and swim out of the Throat to the other side came the difficult time of preparation. For they had become the chosen ones.

Only one of the eels never left the river – the highly respected patriarch whose body was covered in tiny dark spots that earned him the name Spotty. He took the eel candidates aside and explained the whats and hows to them.

The eels who were in the river for the first time were called novices. They received the least valuable corners of the river and they had to work hard to catch enough food and to hide from the otters and the predatory waterbirds.

Ursula didn't like thinking of the years she had spent as a novice. Those years had been hard. Whenever she had tried to find a more advantageous spot with a better view of her prey or with a larger number of hiding spots, she had been chased away by her older eel siblings (because eels are all siblings – they are all brothers and sisters).

"Move away now! Come back when you're grown up. Now don't show your face or I'll eat you."

Ursula didn't take their warnings lightly for, as you know, eels are not very fond of each other. Several times she had seen an older eel eat or badly injure another smaller eel. She was careful not to cross their territory.

This spring was no exception and the eels gathered at the Throat. The current was strong, and Ursula had to hold onto a branch submerged in the water to wait for her turn.

"Next, next!" Spotty the patriarch called out to one eel after the other.

"We must not be here when morning comes!"

"My friends," he told them while the others were swimming through the vacuum cleaner hose. "Our eel family meets here every year for this important trial. Now, listen carefully! Yet again our tribe is burning with longing and will venture into the Prewaters where the secrets of our generations lie hidden in the bed of the river. Where the tissues of your agile bodies will turn pink with love and will hand down their legacy to the newly born eels. Then you will wake up in the Prewaters, and there you will rejoice and celebrate until the end of your days. Do you understand?"



Spotty looked around at all present and they nodded. So did Ursula, even though she didn't really understand what he was saying and was too busy trying to resist the strong current.

"We, the eels, are the chosen nation. A nation among nations..."

And while the eels were passing through the Throat one by one, Spotty continued to lecture. Or so it seemed to Ursula, because she had already heard it a few times before – and the end was always the same. She swam through the Throat and made her way back to her hiding place in the sweet flags.

This time, however, something felt different.

Something wasn't right. This something was her body. Only now did she notice how much stronger it had become. Last year she had found a much better position because of her age. The eel that had occupied the spot had swum off with the other adult eels to the Prewaters – and Ursula was allowed to use it.

At the time, she hadn't realized what it meant. Her turn would come much sooner than she had thought. For a whole year, she had devoured everything she had come across. Although she was cautious not to swallow anything suspicious that could be attached to an invisible string, she had started to forget the rule of the Golden Mean: *Don't stay in still waters for too long, but do not venture into the strong current either.*

Instead, she followed the main current and slithered in muddy pools overgrown with reeds and stones. She would flip them over with her long mouth and scrape off the water insects living on them.

"Well, then," Spotty pointed his ceremonial stick towards a tiny pale eel who was shivering right in front of Ursula. It was obvious that it would swim through the Throat, even if it tied itself into a knot.

"And couldn't we," she said almost inaudibly, "couldn't we do it some other way? Make it voluntary? So that only those who want to do it can set off on the journey..."

The moment she spoke she was terrified by her own words. She realized she had said something too audacious. Something that would upset Spotty terribly. Spotty's eye rested on Ursula angrily. Just the fact that Ursula

had dared to interrupt him was bad enough. But it was her words that outraged him far more. Yet another eel who doubts.

He became very angry, but then restrained himself. He looked at Ursula with probing eyes.

It has never happened before

Over the past years she had often intrigued him. She was more agile than the others, and also much smarter. Spotty could tell the difference. He had a nose for eels. He could spot the cowards and the simpletons among them. He knew that Ursula was no coward.

Instead of speaking, he raised his stick and motioned Ursula to move towards the Throat.

Slowly, Ursula untied the bow on her tail with which she held onto the branch and let the current carry her towards the hose. She peered inside. It no longer resembled the giant pipe she used to slide down like a toboggan. She turned to Spotty and the other eels.

"The pipe is smaller, isn't it?"

Several tiny eels burst into laughter.

"Okay, then..." Ursula said, timidly placing her head in the tube.

Swimming through the hose had its rules. It was a slow and careful process. Ursula ignored them and swam with all her force towards the tube.

She managed to push her head through it, but she couldn't go any further. She twitched, she jerked, she clenched all her muscles, but she didn't move an inch. She realized she was in trouble.

"Gosh! I think I'm stuck..."

"We had to bite you out of that pipe," she heard a voice say when she came to her senses. She immediately noticed Spotty who was hovering over her.

"This has never happened before," he exclaimed.

I have put on weight, Ursula thought, and I'm so chubby that no male eel will want me.

She was surprised. Such a thought had never occurred to her before. What strange feelings were those? She had never cared about her looks or about what eel males would think of her.

"I'm afraid, Miss Ursula," she heard Spotty's voice above her again, "that you didn't make it through the Throat."

"I didn't?" she blurted out. "But..." she said and looked around. There were chewed up bits of plastic hose lying everywhere. "That doesn't count, though, does it? There's no unanimous opinion about getting stuck in a hose, according to some..."

"Well, it's clear – getting stuck in a hose means not swimming through it."

"I see."

"Congratulations, Ursula, you are a chosen one. You will venture into the Prewaters in the autumn," Spotty announced solemnly.

She never returned to her spot in the sweet flags.

"From now on, you are allowed to swim wherever you wish, and no eel can twist a single whisker on you. You are protected. Your task now is to prepare for the great journey. You have the right to eat anything you fancy if it crosses your path, even small eels."

"Urgh, no way," Ursula shook her head.

"I'm glad to hear that" Spotty continued. "You're considerate to others but please remember that the slightest negligence in your preparation could cost you your life. A gruelling test awaits you. Only few are able to achieve the goal. Each milligram of fat can save you."

"Oh, you mean I should be even fatter than I am already?"

Spotty chuckled.

"It's not that bad," he said after measuring her from head to tail with his eyes. "But it's not just about fat and muscle. Wits also count."

"I'm not sure about that. I feel a little witless."

"Well," Spotty grinned, "we kind of... well... before we bit you out of that pipe, we tried to... how shall I put it?"

"You knocked me out."

"Yes, I guess that's what we did."

The cave I

In the days that followed, Ursula met Spotty many times. He gave her advice on how to find the most suitable parts of the river during the journey – and which to avoid. Where it was best to settle for the night and where to swim away as fast as possible and not to linger too long. He taught her to sense all sorts of dangers in the water, suspicious smells and scents, some of which, though strongly tempting, might lead her to her doom.

"Can I take some time off during the journey?"

"No."

"Or stop at a table full of fresh fish, frogs and mayfly larvae?"

"No."

"Or stop for a chat with someone?"

"Nothing of the sort," Spotty answered patiently. "Let me tell you a secret. You won't fancy anything on the way."



"I'd be willing to bet on that. Never an empty stomach, that's my motto," she said.

"Erm," Spotty rubbed his chin with his fins. "You know... How can I explain it to you? Follow me."

After some time, they reached a rocky shore. It was quite deep because the current of the river, crashing endlessly against the rock, had worn it down and carried the mud and sand from the bottom further down the river to where the current was less strong.

She had meandered her way through these waters several times, often stopping to rest in the tangled roots. She knew they were extremely powerful, but she never dared to weave her body deeper down among their sharp spikes, for fear that an older eel might be hiding in them.

She was now following Spotty who, swimming among the roots, would occasionally turn round to make sure Ursula was still with him.

After some time, the entrance to a deep cave appeared among the roots. They slithered in. Various ornaments and drawings of eels were carved in the stone along its walls. The eyes of some of the eels were sharpened into narrow lines, while others were open wide as if they had just had a vision.

"This is the Talking Cave. You will see several of such caves on your journey if you're lucky."

Ursula stared with her mouth agape. She couldn't understand why, but she was stunned by all those different pictures. Most of all, she was struck by a drawing of an eel cut in half. It terrified her.

"No worries, no one wants to cut you in half. Look here," Spotty pointed with his fin to where the eel's heart was.

"The heart," he said, "is the most important organ in your body. An eel that doesn't have its heart in the right place will never reach its destination. Memorize this sentence and repeat it every time you go to sleep. Promise?"

"I promise."

Spotty smiled contentedly. He told Ursula about the changes the body of an eel goes through when it sets on the journey. It will never be the

same again. It will be lighter and the eyes will grow bigger. The digestive tract will close, shrink and finally disappear altogether."

"You mean that I have to say goodbye to my stomach?" Ursula burst out and began rubbing her stomach with her fin as if she felt sorry for it.

"Don't worry, for now you can enjoy it to the fullest."

"I will. It's beginning to rumble," she announced.

Spotty shook his head and grinned. He then dismissed Ursula for the day.

Can you feel it, too?

Since the day when Ursula had been stuck in the Throat, the behaviour of the other eels also changed. It was as if she had gained a certain respectability in their eyes.

Whenever she passed another eel, it would nod a greeting and utter a polite remark. The smaller ones stayed out of her way, although she was adamant that she would never eat smaller eels – or any other eel, for that matter.

From time to time, the unfamiliar scent would overwhelm her again, but it didn't have such a strong effect on her anymore. She was now able to cope with it. When she asked Spotty about it, he told her that her sense of smell was becoming sharper and that she could now perceive smells that had previously only been *subliminal*.

"What do you mean?" asked Ursula.

"Subliminal. Your sense of smell just wasn't sensitive enough to pick them up before."

"So, is it possible that many more scents pass me by without me noticing them?" she asked.

Spotty just smiled in response.

"Let's do an exercise. Settle down over there and try not to think of anything."

Ursula tried but gave up a moment later.

"I simply cannot stop thinking. That's impossible. My head is full of worries. There's always something happening, from evening to morning. The thoughts are crowding my head, one after the other, and I get all confused."

"Concentrate hard. Empty your mind," he said.

Ursula looked at him. She now noticed a strange expression on his face – resigned and blank. His mouth, slightly parted, seemed to be receiving undetectable vibrations from the current and sending them out at the same time. Spotty's body first twitched and then relaxed.

"Can you feel it, too?" she suddenly heard him ask.

What am I supposed to feel? Ursula thought, but instead of saying it out loud, she decided to try again.

Well, then – let's concentrate. And suddenly it was as if something had drained all her thoughts away. For a moment, there was nothing in her head.

Then the cavity in her skull began to fill with something that sounded like voices, like distant echoes of echoes. They mumbled and drowned each other out. The most distant the voices, the more urgent they seemed, while the closer and more familiar voices receded into the background.

She could hear the gurgling of tiny trickles, the thudding of river boulders and the roar of weirs. The whisper coming from the mouths of other fish and the shriek of a muskrat. She was already familiar with all these sounds, but not in such polyphony.

Behind all this was a wall of other sounds, much more powerful and deeper, as if the whole world was spinning in a giant vortex. And Ursula suddenly remembered. She knew that this experience was deep inside in her. She felt it buried somewhere at the deep end of her thoughts.

She felt a strange taste on her upper palate and in her nostrils. She swallowed instinctively. Salt. After so many years, after such a long time, she finally remembered. She remembered what the ocean tastes like.

Deeper into the roots

"Hey!" something grabbed her by her fin while she was hunting the following night.

"Who's that?" she flicked her tail but before she managed to slap the rude stranger, he was staring at her in her face.

"Hasn't anyone taught you good manners?" She lashed her tail at him again. "About the observance of the zone of intimacy, which is exactly nine inches for eels?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to be rude but you know, the current works wonders."

"Don't use the current as an excuse, you brute," Ursula snapped at him while inspecting him closely. He was one of the eels who, like her, hadn't managed to swim through the Throat. Ursula had already noticed him a few times and had wanted to talk to him.

"It looks like we're on the same team this year. It might be worth discussing a joint strategy, you know what I mean? Well, sorry for not introducing myself. My name's Benedict. "

When she later told Spotty about this encounter in connection to the eel rule of disregard, Spotty simply nodded. He was responsible for all the eel candidates in this stretch of the river, and he knew Benedict well.

"Eel unkindness is a necessary thing. Friendship doesn't usually end well. At least not among eels. But there are exceptions."

"What kind of exceptions?" Ursula asked.

Spotty sighed. He made his way to a tangle of roots and signalled for her to follow him.

"It's a long story."

And then he told her.

"It's good for you to know, considering what's awaiting you. The glory with which the eels venture on their journey is totally justified by the extraordinary nature of that moment. It isn't an invention of the eel elders.



They didn't make it up because they were bored or because they wanted to torment the eels that would come after them. They didn't invent the journey. Neither did Ourobouros – even though he was the first to set out on the journey. No one knows for sure why eels cannot stay in one place like other fish, but we do *believe*," he said with emphasis, "that it has to do with the Unified Plan of the Universe."

"What on earth does that mean?" asked Ursula.

"It's a law that governs everything living and non-living on this planet."

Ursula nodded. It sounded really impressive.

"These are the laws that have to be respected."

"Did Ourobouros respect them?"

"Even Ourobouros. Everyone. The salty smell of memories reminds us of where our true home is."

Ursula closed her eyes (eels can do this even without eyelids, they simply delve into their thoughts so deeply that everything around them disappears) and remembered the images of the deep sea sealed inside her like treasures in a chest.

"You were tiny" Spotty drew her out of her reverie, "when you had to leave your parents and the place where you were born to return to the rivers. You let the current carry you and you didn't notice much because the distance in front of you would have made you dizzy."

"When I recall it," Ursula reflected, "it feels like I was in a dream."

"Yes," Spotty nodded. "A dream that fades away."

"What do you mean?"

"Order has been forsaken. The seal has been broken. Water, which was once bustling with life, has become desolate. The Golden Mean which says *Never take more than you can give* no longer applies. The world doesn't work the way it used to."

"But who's to blame?"

Spotty rolled his eyes and cast his gaze towards the surface. Towards the place where darkness ends and the summer day dreams in its blooming splendour.

"Yes," said Ursula, "I think I understand. Those who live on land and throw bait into the water have their finger in the pie."

"Yes, it's them. It's hard to find a name for them. We usually call them bipeds. Nobody understands the way they behave. They, too, are part of the Unified Plan of the Universe, but they don't seem to follow it."

"Hm, I guess they don't."

"Well," he looked at her a little suspiciously, "let's not discuss this, we cannot solve it anyway. The point is that there are fewer and fewer of us eels, and we must make changes to the principle of eel disregard."

"I see," Ursula nodded understandingly. "Oh damn."

"There's only a fraction of us now compared to the days gone. Our expeditions aren't as glorious as they used to be. Gone are the majestic throngs of eels setting out on the journey. Our fortune has changed. It's sad. We might be heading for extinction. That's why each one of us matters all the more. We must help each other. Before it wasn't a problem when a large number of eels didn't make it to the destination because there were so many of us. But today every successful eel counts. That's why it's important to help each other, not only Benedict but also other eels during your journey. Are you still listening to me, Ursula?"

Meanwhile, Ursula's thoughts had wandered off. She had heard something in the water.

"Quick, let's hide deeper down among the roots," she exclaimed interrupting Spotty.

They both looked round and saw the nimble body of an otter darting past the roots. They froze and watched its fidgety movements. The otter probably knew they were there. It glided past the roots and tried to untangle them with its paw. But the roots were too thick. The otter gave up after a while.

When Ursula left Spotty this time, she felt uneasy. The encounter with the otter had upset her. But not only. Spotty's words had troubled her. She now realized that the journey she was about to start would be full of pitfalls.

The right direction

"Today we're going to answer an important question," Spotty announced and immediately began to draw in the mud with his snout a circle the length of two eel bodies. "I will teach you about the four cardinal points."

"What's that?" Ursula asked looking at the circle in the mud.

"The world. It also has its laws. In ancient days, there was only one land washed by the ocean. It was called Pangea," answered Spotty with excitement as if he was in a frenzy-like state.

Lecturing about the Earth was probably his passion. He scribbled in the mud with his nose until a pattern full of signs and squiggles appeared in front of Ursula. Ursula couldn't keep up with him, and the drawing reminded her of a ball of wriggling worms. It made her eyes cross.

"The radius of the Earth is almost seven million eels long – which is roughly the distance you travelled to reach us – and you will have to travel it again."

Spotty's cheeks turned purple, and his trembling fins flicked backwards and forwards.

"But how are you going to know the right direction?" he asked solemnly. "The first time, when you were the size of a willow leaf, you just let the sea current carry you along. The way back will be more difficult. Fortunately, though, our bodies are endowed with what the bipeds have as a device and which they call compass. Your entire body is a compass needle, it is an arrow which can aim wherever it wants. An arrow which will never falter as long as it obeys the laws of the Earth. Now... what do you say to that?"

"Well... I cannot get my head round it!"

Spotty's face grew darker. He slapped his tail in disappointment and could only overcome the surge of anger in him by exerting all his will.

"I should have known. You young eels lack the proper basic education. It's all fun and games, but the standards..."

"Could you just tell me in which direction to swim? And how to get there?"

"Little one, this is no joke. It's seven million eels away, do you understand?"

"I do," Ursula muttered impatiently, realizing that it was getting dark and that she had a date with Benedict by the tree stump in under an hour. She was burning with impatience.

"Very well, then," Spotty said wearily.

"The place you need to reach is called Sargasso. It is in the west. There are no signposts. Seven million lengths. Follow what you have in here," he pointed the tip of his tail right in the middle of his forehead.

"This will lead you to your destination. Follow your instinct."

Bipeds

"Hey, you cheeky fish, have you learnt the rules of polite behaviour, yet?" Ursula approached Benedict.

"Well, have you been to see the old man? You look shattered."

"It's a bit too much," Ursula answered. "I think I'll fail at the first bend. I'd rather bury myself in the mud and sleep through it all."

"Don't hang your head," her friend encouraged her. "It's time for a little distraction."

"What's that?" Ursula asked as they made their way through a deeper stretch of the river where the mouths of pits with the twisted arms of long drowned trees gaped open beneath them.

It looked like a burial ground. Motionless water fungi glowed among the silent stumps. The girl eel felt as if they were speaking to her. They threatened her with clenched fists belting out lingering melodies she couldn't understand.

"Don't be afraid. But if you are, you'd better not look down. If it's the tune you're wondering about, it's not coming from there," Benedict indicated.

Soon they almost reached the shore where four wooden logs had sunk down into the water and embedded themselves in the rocky bottom. Now the music sounded much louder. It was alien to Ursula. Unfamiliar. She had never heard anything like it before.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked glaring at Benedict who started wriggling around.



"Dancing. Can't you see?"

Benedict's dance struck Ursula as ridiculous. She tried to mimic it, but she couldn't.

"It's in the hips! Give yourself a proper shake. And bob your head here and there, backwards and forwards."

"You can do so many things," she exhaled admiringly.

"Now it's time to look a little closer," Benedict exclaimed and headed up towards the surface.

"Hang on a sec. Don't be silly!" she tried to hold him back. "We can't go up, it's forbidden. No eel that has gone ashore has ever come back."

"Back off, old fossil," Benedict retorted. "I'm not stupid, I don't want to go ashore, I just want to have a look up there."

She couldn't talk him out of it. When he had almost reached the surface, Ursula was overcome with fear and darted up to Benedict with her heart pounding.

As they surfaced their heads, they saw something move. Right in front of them was a wooden pier with several bipeds dancing. They were making unbearable sounds and flailing from side to side. Instead of scales, they were wearing some strange fluttering leaves that resembled those of water lilies.

They watched this remarkable spectacle for a while, until Benedict shouted "Look out!"

Something heavy fell into the water. It fluttered about and, like a cork, came up to the surface again. And it didn't disappear after that. On the contrary, several more corks came bouncing up near the surface and then aimed for the shore.

Ursula was beside herself. She was out of breath.

"What on earth was that?" she blurted out.

"Nothing exceptional. The bipeds are taking a swim. They're diving off the pier. It's normal. You look terrified."

"That's hardly surprising. I've never seen a biped this close."

"You don't need to be afraid of these ones. They're harmless," he said, sniffing the water. "And it looks as if they've had a drop too much."

"Benedict, you're irresponsible. That was a very dangerous thing to do, and you also put me at risk with your behaviour," Ursula scolded him as

they were snuggling into one of the hiding places under an old oak which was leaning over the river.

"Calm down, Ursula. Nothing terrible happened. Those bipeds weren't dangerous. The bipeds who quietly sit on a riverbank waiting for nightfall and set baits for eels with hooks hidden inside them are much worse."

"I know," Ursula said more calmly. "But still, we shouldn't take any risks now."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because we eels have a great task to accomplish..."

"Ah yes, that," he interrupted her. "I see you fell for Spotty's tale, too."

"Benedict!" she shouted.

He turned round and swam off a bit.

"I'm fed up with his patronizing talk. All that business about the chosen nation and Prewaters and redemption. Nothing but tales for children."

Ursula was burning with anger, but she held her ground.

"No one's going to make it, anyway," Benedict continued. "And it's quite possible that there are no Prewaters at all."

"But - don't you remember?"

"Remember what?"

"All of us," Ursula looked around, "we've all come from that place to draw the sacred circle of our lives. And now it's time to close the circle. By going back to where it all began and where our parents once also went to give us life."

"Huh," Benedict noted. "A sacred circle, that's all very nice but I want to live! I don't want to be chopped up by the Maw, Ursula. And stop it now, or you'll spoil everything with that kind of talk."

Eel love

"Today's lesson will be exceptionally important, dear Ursula," Spotty spoke to her in a friendly manner.

After talking to Benedict, she began to look at Spotty with different eyes. Suspiciously. She sniffed his every word, examining his honesty.

No, he can't be lying to her.

Ursula trusted Spotty. But she had to admit to herself that her situation wasn't very promising.

Even the poor common roach fish at the surface would chatter about the miserable state of the eel species. Their silvery frolicking was full of joy. She envied them. For common roach are plentiful everywhere, and there is no danger of them becoming scarce like the eels.

She remembered what Benedict had told her afterwards. How one day he had ventured downstream to where the river widened and was less impetuous. He told her about the pungent smell of iron and about the loud din that spread all around him. How that noise squeezed him like an oppressive girdle and how he decided to go back.

"Today's lesson will be about the types of eel love," Spotty said clearing his throat.

"He-he," Ursula giggled.

"I think you're mature enough to talk about this topic without unnecessary secrecy. Soon enough, you'll arrive at Sargasso, and you'll become a mother."

Oh dear, she thought. "But if I'm not wrong, it takes two, doesn't it? A female and a... male?"



"Of course, my dear. You see, to become a mother, it requires certain, er... how shall I put it... certain bodily movements which are not in any way ridiculous or shameful."

"You mean sex?" she interrupted.

"Erm..." Spotty combed his fluffed-up fin, "you're obviously an expert in these matters."

"I have eyes, dear Spotty, and I can see the powers which move the universe. I also know that little elvers aren't brought by a stork, born out of mud or even born from under rocks like worms. I know the secret of fish spawning. The other day three weatherfish were spawning right outside my hide."

"Three?"

"Well, the third one kept bothering the other two, so I swallowed him. So that the couple could enjoy themselves. But you know, I have a problem. I'm terribly ticklish, so I'm not sure I can handle the rubbing."

"Dear Ursula," Spotty replied, "I'm pretty sure that you will find a way of overcoming this obstacle."

"I'll try my best."

"So, if you're already educated in the matters of eel love, let me give you this book – *The Rules of Eel Love*. Consider it a guide."

She flipped through the book and, at the sight of all the nude pictures, Ursula blushed a little. She just had to make sure Benedict didn't see them.

Truth and lies

She met Benedict the following day. He was drifting backwards and forwards and he looked furious.

"What a coward! What A hypocrite. Such a liar!"

"What's up, Benedict?"

"Urgh, I had an argument with Spotty. He's a dimwit. He thinks that if he's vague, we won't figure it out. He must think we are completely brainless."

Ursula felt sorry for him. She swam close to Benedict and gently touched his forehead.

"I told him I didn't think it was possible to reach our destination. That the way to Sargasso was closed and that he should finally tell us the truth," he confided "Instead of giving me an answer, he shouted at me. He told me off. He said he would have no sniveller interfere with his work and that I mustn't stick my blowholes in things I didn't understand. And that mine was exactly the kind of talk which would destroy the morale of the eels even before they'd set off. "

Ursula thought a while before speaking.

"I think I understand him," she mumbled. "You see, he has nothing else left. He lives in the past, in the glorious days when shoals of eels set out in such numbers that the river turned black with their bodies and the water quivered under the strokes of their tails. He once told me of those times. You should have seen how his eyes sparkled."

"I know," Benedict snapped and sullenly moved away from Ursula. But then he became aware of his silly reaction and snuggled up to her again.

"But why does he have to lie to us? Why can't he tell us honestly what our chances are of reaching our destination? What if he's sending us to our deaths?"

"Do you think I had never thought of that myself? But if we die, let's die like true eels. We mustn't go down without putting up a fight. We'll swim to wherever God allows us. Not a fin less."

"I don't know, Ursula. I'm sorry if I'm spoiling your fun. Do you know what? I'll introduce you to someone. His name's Mouldy and he's a naysayer," Benedict said.

"He's a what?"

"Follow me and you'll see."

They reached a strange object stuck in the mud. It was a small boat turned upside down. There was a hole gaping in its side.

Benedict peeked into the dark hole and then swam in. With the tip of his tail, he invited Ursula to follow him.

It was dark and quiet inside. The rotten sides of the boat were lined with all sorts of trinkets. All the things that the river had lost over the



long years. Cans, old worn shoe soles, shoelaces, metal strips and tinsels, watches that kept showing the same time, a chocolate wrapper, a piece of tire, a broken rear-view mirror, a sign with ENLIGHTMENT written on it, water pipes and a pitchfork wedged in the bottom of the boat.

Ursula naturally had no idea what the purpose of all these strange things was and she had never seen so many of them together.

Mouldy, lounging on a throne made out of a bolster full of holes, was already aged and decrepit. But his piercing eyes darted in their sockets. One was as pale as snow. The other eye glowed like fire.

Ursula was startled.

"It's alright," Benedict said touching her, then he swam towards Mouldy and bowed to him. A soft smile quivered on Mouldy's mouth, as if it were all just a game. As he lifted himself up, his body, adorned with metal bracelets, rattled.

"So it's your turn soon, too," he sized her up. "Hm, another misled sheep who thinks she's going to save the world. But why not sweeten up your life before you do?" he said and a thin water plant resembling chives fell out of a crumpled pectoral fin.

Benedict picked it up and passed it to Ursula. "Bite into it slowly, like this," he advised her. "No worries."

After a moment of hesitation, Ursula took a narrow strip of the stem and put it in her mouth. It tasted sweet.

"Staying here with us means having a good time," said Mouldy and abruptly swirled the edge of his fin, revealing the head of another smaller eel sleeping on the bolster below him. He wasn't alone. Grumpy voices flew out of the entangled bodies.

"Oh come on, girls," Mouldy scolded them, "show some respect to our visitor, this fine lady, who has surely come to see us for an important reason."

"This is my doing, highly respected Sir Mouldy," Benedict interrupted, "it was me who invited her to visit you. I've been very presumptuous."

"It's alright," Mouldy comforted him, "why, we've known each other for quite some time."

"Ah yes," Benedict nodded, "as you rightly pointed out, it's Ursula's turn soon. She intends to set out on the journey assigned to her by fate in just a few days."

"Fate! What rubbish!" Mouldy snapped at him startling Ursula. "Spotty and his tales. His nonsense about the eel paradise. Look at me," he turned directly towards Ursula, "look at how I'm doing now."

He stuck out his chest and fell back with such a force that the whole living mass made up of the bodies of the sleeping girl eels shook.

"Do you know how old I am, girl? Nah, you know nothing. If I'd listened to Spotty, I wouldn't have been here long ago. I'd have been chopped up to bits. Thanks, but no thanks."

Ursula instantly knew which way the wind was blowing. She now understood where Benedict's doubts came from. She looked at him and saw his eyes shining with excitement. How much he would have loved to join the wriggling ball of bodies, but didn't do it only out of courtesy to her.

"And why do you think," said Mouldy with a change in the tone of his voice, "Spotty doesn't go on the journey himself?"

"Probably because he's entrusted to tell others about the journey," Ursula objected.

"Entrusted? Entrusted by whom? Who gave him the right to lecture us about something he hasn't himself experienced and to send us to a sure death?"

"But the caves – the Talking Caves! It's written in them," she protested.

"And who do you think wrote it in there, my darling? Who do you think scribbled those hideous tales there? It was Spotty himself, so that he could fool you and lead you by the nose if you had one."

"What do you suggest, then?" Ursula's eyes flashed.

"I suggest nothing other than to gather your wits. Why bother dragging yourself so far when you can live in peace right here? I know many eels who haven't ventured on the journey, and they are living nice and peaceful lives just like before."

"But what about the new generation? What about our task?" she blurted out.

"Our task? Let me tell you something. It's something I've been repeating to your friend Benedict here – there is no task. The task is a fabrication."



"And what about instinct?" she cried shaking with unhappiness. "The instinct that guides us, that compels us, that turns us into arrows sent to the heart of the world out there in the depth of a sea called Sargasso?"

"You've learnt your lesson well," Mouldy interrupted her, "right by the book. Instinct, sure. Follow your instinct. Tittle-tattle. You're free and you can do what you want."

She turned to Benedict, but he was just nodding.

"Spotty doesn't force me to do anything, he only advises me."

"He doesn't force you?" Mouldy said sceptically.

"No," she retorted. "And keep this!" She threw back at him the leaf of the plant that was making her feel dizzy. She was angry with them for offering her the suspicious weed. It was making her head spin. And perhaps that was all they were after – to cloud Ursula's mind to make her do what they wanted.

In the claws

While she was going back to her hiding place soon afterwards, all those words began to swirl in her head as if she was on a merry-go-round. She was so immersed in her thoughts that she almost bumped into something soft, something...

She flicked her tale and dived deep down with her entire body. She felt the sharp points of an otter's claws carving a deep scar into her left side. She twisted her body and shot forward again like a spring, until her tail bounced off the snout of a surprised otter.

A chase began. Ursula sharpened all her senses. The river offered a plethora of escape routes. Some of them meant life. Some meant death. Actually, almost all of them meant death.

She made up her mind instantly. She didn't aim for the tree stumps on the riverbed, but she headed for the opposite shore. The otter was behind her.

When the otter almost caught her again, Ursula suddenly changed direction and squeezed through a narrow gap in a tree trunk that must have been rotting there for centuries. The otter hesitated a little, straightened up as if standing in the water, and looked around until it noticed Ursula's fleeing shadow.

It was now or never.

She crossed the deepest part of the river and dived towards the roots in the water. For one last time, the otter almost caught up with her and with a violent swing of its paw, tore a chunk off Ursula's fin. Ursula squeezed herself through the roots and found herself in the Talking Cave.

The rocks luminesced in the dark. Everything around her glowed. She was bleeding and slowly becoming weaker and weaker. She felt like in a dream. Everything around her was intertwining in a snake-like way, losing its outlines and fading into darkness.

She wanted to scream at the world, but only a few bubbles came out of her throat. She inhaled.

She drew water in through her nostrils and let the current carry her. Suddenly, the current felt warm. The river turned into a thousand-fingered hand stretched out to caress her. The river poured its memory into her.

The memory of the time when Ursula was drifting on the sea current came back to her. She was as translucent and fragile as a leaf. The ocean was pressing down on her with all its weight, and she eluded it.

On the way

A first drop hit the water. And after a while, another. A few minutes later, a downpour was lashing the surface. Flashes of lightning lit up the landscape.

In the roots of an old oak a few metres below the surface of the water, Ursula was resting. She was feeling better now. The wound on her tail was healing fast.



In the few days that Ursula was feverish, the river overflowed. It rained for almost a week. The stream turned fierce and swept away everything in its path. It uprooted several trees that could no longer hold their roots in the soggy soil.

From her hiding place, wounded Ursula could only hear a distant rambling. At first, she was terrified. She thought of the Maw. She felt as if she were right in the middle of it.

After a few of days, Benedict found her in this sorry state. He wrapped her body with his and kept her warm. By the time she started to feel better, the water had receded a little. The other eels must have swum away, taking advantage of the strong current. Ursula remembered Spotty's words. Every tiny detail can make a difference. Every swish of the tail can reduce one's strength. She knew she had to decide as quickly as possible, before the current disappeared completely.

"Where's Spotty?" was the first thing she blurted out.

When the eels set out for the great journey, Spotty would accompany them for a while. He would lead the way and spur them on. He would awaken their courage, dispel their doubts. He would convince them they could do it. Spotty never spoke of individuals of the like as Mouldy. They probably weren't worth talking about. He despised them, yet he never went as low as to slander them. He probably had his own doubts about the meaning of the journey from time to time. Ursula respected him all the more for this. But now it might just be too late.

She darted out of her hiding place followed by Benedict.

"Wait! Where are you going? You must rest some more!"

Ursula ignored him. The wound on her side still stung a bit but she could handle it. It wasn't her first injury.

They swam down the river with the other fish teasing them.

"Where are you off to?" they chattered. "It looks as if someone has overslept, hahahah."

"Shut up, you stupid fish," Benedict snapped at them.

Ursula turned on him angrily. "It's your fault. If you hadn't taken me to see Mouldy, this wouldn't have happened."

"Ursula," he tried to say.

"Shush!" she wouldn't have it. "I know why you did it. You're scared. You fear the journey."

"Me? Scared?" His eyes bulged.

"Yes. You can't admit it to yourself. You got cold feet. That is, if you had any."

"You know what?" Benedict said. "Go by yourself. Off you swim. I don't need you at all. We eels aren't supposed to look after each other. I was stupid to break the rule and get close to you. Mouldy, with all his flaws, at least doesn't lie to me, unlike Spotty. Why should I care about eels?"

"Think carefully of what you're saying," she snapped at him, "and you'll realize that it's nonsense."

"Nonsense that saves my life is better than the truth that kills me."

They were both petrified. They stared at each other unable to speak. Ursula hung her head in disappointment.

"I heard something when I was feverish, you know. At first I didn't know what it was, but then I understood. It was the voice of my parents."

"Your parents?"

"The voice lured me and called me to them. Home. They're expecting me."

"Ursula, your parents are long dead."

"I know," she answered and fell silent.

She didn't look at Benedict any more. She swam despondently to the middle of the river where the current was strongest. She had hoped this would be her special moment, that she would enjoy the resentment of the other fish, which did nothing but envy others. And that when she swam in the procession with the others, she would feel the mighty power of the eel species. But now the fish didn't even notice her. She didn't look like someone who was determined to venture on such a long journey.

The first obstacles

Dawn caught up with her after a couple of hours. She felt discouraged and she thought of giving up a few times or of waiting for more favourable circumstances. Eventually, she burrowed herself in the sand and stayed there until the evening.

During the night she reached a place where the water was still. The river, spreading out to the sides, resembled a reservoir. At one point, Ursula lost her bearings and started to head for the shore. She became aware of her mistake only when she reached the edge of a concrete step. Land stretched beyond the step. She found herself just below the surface and noticed the lights flickering across it. Then she heard a stomping sound and bipeds talking.

It startled her but she was overcome with curiosity. They could be the harmless bipeds she saw that night with Benedict. She needed to find out. Who were these bipeds?

She remembered a big, fearsome eel who used to live right next to Ursula's hideout when she was still a novice. She had called him Scarred because of the several healed wounds that gave him a ghostly appearance. No other eel dared to venture into his territory. He was the ruthless master of the river. He was so confident of himself that he forgot to be careful.

She once went hunting and she met him in a strange grip. He was holding onto the stump of a branch with all his strength, while a string, leading out of the water, was pulling him away. A trickle of blood was coming out of his stretched gills. It startled her at first, but his bulging eyes made her stop. He was trying to say something but couldn't. When she swam closer to him, she realized that he was crying for help. She didn't know what to do. She approached the string and tried to touch it. She wrapped the tip of her tail around it, but it didn't help. Scarred was losing his strength, slowly releasing his grip.

Finally, Ursula thought of biting into the string. She ran her tiny teeth over the string and it loosened. It sprang away and disappeared.

Ursula thought the eel would devour her. He swam to her and looked at her. He was bleeding profusely from his gills and mouth.

"Thank you," he said.

As he wearily returned to his hiding place, he left behind him a trail of blood which dissolved in the water. The rest of the severed cord was sticking out of his mouth. He disappeared into his cave, but after a couple of days he floated back out again. Dead.

Who are these bipeds then?

Ursula headed back down to the depths. She saw a thin line leading to the bottom. At the end, a ball of wriggling fat earthworms concealed several pointed spikes. Perhaps a few weeks back she wouldn't have resisted. Now they didn't tempt her. She knew that an eel which has embarked on the journey gradually loses its appetite.

She didn't go very far because she came across a concrete barrier. The stones stacked in solid blocks loomed before her like a water fortress. She couldn't go any further. She wandered around for a while to see if she could find a crack to squeeze through. She couldn't, and when she swam right to the end of the concrete block, she found that the water flowed over it in tiny rivulets bound downstream.

"Go on, don't be afraid!" she heard a voice coming from behind her.

It was a small perch with a ragged fin. He was fuming with anger and swimming backwards and forwards.

"How long do I have to wait here for? I have a date down there with my sweetheart and you're holding me back. What if she finds someone else by the time I get there?"

"But is it safe?" she asked.

"Safe? Nothing here is safe. I've lost two siblings today. They caught them on a spoon bait."

Ursula didn't hesitate much longer. It was now or never. She hurled her body over the edge. The surface of the stones was slippery and covered with algae. There was water right under the weir. As she rolled into the water and plunged down, she sighed with relief.

It was her first weir. Her first obstacle.



She slept the whole of the following day. When she woke up in the evening, she started to have gnawing doubts. How come she hadn't met a single eel, yet?

The answer lay ahead of her in the dark depths of the stream. Here the river was overgrown with reeds on both banks, resembling a sleeping hedgehog with fish swimming among its spines. Their eyes shone in the darkness. They darted around her and shot off to the sides. From time to time, she heard a splash, amplified by the silence of the night.

She thought of Spotty and of his instructions on how to cut the river bends properly, and how not to get stuck in the backwaters which should only be used for resting. How not to be tempted by a hiding place so comfortable that it would stop her from wanting to leave.

She was becoming more and more sensitive to the slightest movement of the water. She could sense the vibration of the current which wound itself almost imperceptibly around the stems of the water plants showing her the direction. She let the current carry her along.

She gradually found a way to travel the longest possible distance with the least amount of effort. She learned how to place her fin in the current so that it would push her a little further, saving her unnecessary movements. She only concentrated on her senses and learned not to think about anything else. The strange anxiety which had taken over her in the beginning started to fade away. She was becoming calmer and calmer.

As she lay in the dark bend of the river and rested, she sometimes thought of the past. She had already travelled through here before. Or had she not? It was as if someone had carved a crater in her memory and all her recollections of those days had fallen inside it. She couldn't remember anything.

They were probably painful memories and that is why they had gone lost.

Join the others quick!

The following night she heard a cry. Her heart began to race. The water was wide again in this spot, and Ursula expected it to be similar to the concrete edge of the river she had crossed earlier on. The sound came from

an eel. Her heart skipped a beat. She would finally meet one of her own species. It resembled the cry of a baby eel and it was growing stronger.

She approached a black grate from which protruded the body of a trapped eel. It resembled the sleeve of a long shirt. It was making long, heart-rending sounds. And that was all it had the strength for.

A metal trap.

The grid was not going to release its victim. It was holding the eel too tightly. There was another concrete wall running the full length of the river, but this time it was higher than the previous one. No water flowed over the top. Whoever wanted to go further had to swim through the grid.

"Help me. I can't go on. Help me," the eel wailed.

Ursula was alarmed. She approached the limp body and touched it. It was cold, whiter than normal. Ursula tried to push it several times. She hit it with her mouth trying to wake up the trapped eel's will to live. Yet the metal jaws had no mercy on their prey. The moans of agony turned into a rasp. The body shuddered now and then, but it was giving in to the current enveloping it from both sides.

Ursula was scared. She suddenly felt all alone. The voices that had advised her during her journey had disappeared. Her instincts resembled a badly wound-up alarm clock that just rattled and jiggled on the spot.

I cannot make it. I cannot complete the journey.

Inhale. Exhale. And one more time. Slowly, Ursula calmed down.

She realized it was sometimes better to face an obstacle headfirst with all her strength instead of thinking about it too much. She remembered the Maw, but she immediately put the thought out of her mind. She swam away from the grid and stopped. She found a gap that seemed the widest. She entered the strongest current, scrunched up and thrust forward like a spring. With a few fast strokes, she found herself at the grid, stretched herself as far as she could so as to narrow her body and plunged headlong into the hole. She jerked violently, and suddenly found herself on the other side. She had made it.

She turned to the eel which was stuck in the grate. She touched him. He was cold. She enveloped him completely, leaned against the steel bars, and tried to wrench him out. The grid resisted. Ursula began to wriggle,

twisting her torso from side to side until the prisoner twitched and his body gave way.

She lay the eel down in the gravel beneath the concrete embankment. The eel was delirious with fever.

"Calm down," Ursula urged him. "You must rest."

She thought for a moment of staying with him, but then dismissed the idea. It was not at all certain that he would survive. And if he did, it would be a long time before he grew strong again.

She pushed a few pebbles towards him with her muzzle and piled them on top of his body until only his head was peeking out from the bottom. "You're safe like this."

She looked around and saw the eyes of other fish on the other side of the grid. They had been watching her all the time.

She realized that her journey wasn't such a secret as she had thought. Perhaps they knew about her and whispered to each other as if she was an unwelcome intruder that had to be removed.

She realized how hostile the world around her was. She couldn't make the journey alone. She had to catch up with the others.

That night, she decided to travel further. The morning found her in a bad temper. She was exhausted. She had swum many hours to reduce the gap and catch up with the other eels ahead of her.

How long could it take for an eel caught in the grid to die? This horrible thought haunted her even as she lay down to sleep. She tossed and turned for several hours and couldn't fall asleep.

Even an eel recognizes the moment that is decisive for its future. The moment when it must adapt to something it doesn't know, something it has never encountered before.

The vast expanse of water stretching out before her was one of those new experiences she knew nothing about. The bottom sank into the depths, disappearing into semi-darkness.

The vast space made Ursula shiver with fear. She had no idea where to hide. Should she swim in the middle where she could sense an almost

imperceptible current – or should she rather move closer to the bank where she might find a hiding place?

She decided to swim deeper down. The quickest way out. Catch up with the other eels.

At night, fish eyes lit up around her again. They were piercing and hostile. Ursula rushed forward without looking round. Her body had become one elongated muscle. She picked a point and followed it. Everything else was irrelevant, unimportant.

Sometimes, when she felt really exhausted, the iron gate would creak open before her. Light streamed through the cracks and blinded her. Beyond lay paradise. She heard the clicking sound of menacing jaws and the door began to close. It slid along the smooth bottom, churning up black sludge.

She flew like an arrow. She ceased to perceive the boundaries of her body and turned into an infinite yarn. It felt as if she wasn't swimming but moving along a route someone before her had already outlined.

When she came back to her senses and realized it had all been just a dream she decided to stop and rest. To sink to the bottom and bury herself in the sand. She could feel the earth beneath her fins warm her up. She snuggled into to it, as if the earth was a mother radiating love and security.

The Maw I

In the morning, a familiar taste on her palate woke her up. A salty one. It invaded her from the inside of her body, perhaps from her memory. She knew the sea was still far away. She stretched her fins and continued on her journey. She had already travelled many eel lengths through that motionless space. On the third day after entering the dam, a scream disturbed her.

She was horrified at first, but then joy filled her body. She heard Spotty's voice.

"The Maw is silent! The Maw is silent! "

From all sides, she heard other voices repeat: "The Maw is silent! The Maw is silent! "

Without realizing it, she started to shout out the joyful news, too. She darted forward and saw Spotty.

They stopped and stared at each other for a moment. Spotty smiled.

"Here, the way is clear," he pointed to the square opening that gaped in the giant wall of a dam wall.

"This way, dear miss."

"Spotty, you have no idea how glad I am to see you," she fixed her gaze on him.

"I am also very happy to see you. You'd better not say anything and move on, before the Maw awakens. It has never done this before. Everything seems to be going well."

"And the others?" she asked. "Where are the others?"

"They swam through a moment ago. I'll have to go back now."

"I know," Ursula nodded.

"Good luck," he wished her.

"Thank you... One more thing – if you happen to meet Benedict, tell him I'm no longer cross with him. Tell him I'm waiting for him."

As she swam inside, she found herself in the middle of cold nothingness. The walls around her were smooth. The passageway was sloping downwards, and it ended in a large room with a giant machine. Ursula examined the massive blades of the water turbine not knowing what its purpose was. She had no idea that the bipeds used the turbines to generate energy to light their cities and power their machines. Nor could she have known that the owner of the power station had decided to switch the turbine off on that very night for several nights so that the eels could safely swim through without being chopped up by the rotating blades.

When she reached the other side, she almost fainted. The rapid change in pressure had stunned her. She looked around. She smelled a strong eel scent. The others were very close.

She caught up with them after two hours. She joined them without them noticing and slowly made her way forward. She was more and more surprised at how many of them there were. When she had been lying feverish in the Talking Cave, the eels from the upper stretches of the river – from the foothill bends and cooler pools – must have swum down as well.

She gradually made her way to the front.

She now was swimming first, the leader of the parade.

The deadly gob

Seven days later, after crossing several smaller weirs and entering another river, they stopped at a small warm sandbank. The water there gave off a strange smell and the banks of the river were overgrown with waving tufts of algae.

There was another weir looming ahead of them so they decided to have a rest and cross it in the evening when their bodies would be charged with energy.

In one of the banks there was some sort of drain emanating a greenish light and illuminating the algae that were growing there with shapes and colours never seen before.

Ursula ventured closer to the drain and peered inside. Crystals of rust glittered in the layers of sediments covering the bottom. The whole thing gave off an intoxicating smell.

“It isn’t advisable to look into the deadly gobs,” she heard a voice behind her say. When she turned around, she saw nothing. The drain caught her eye again.

“... deadly gobs,” slid out in an echo.

She hesitated.

She suddenly felt that there was oblivion and relief inside. That somewhere down there were her parents, and that their embrace was waiting for her.



“Not there!” she heard from behind her again, and felt something pull the tip of her tail. She fought back, thrashing about, but the grip didn’t let go and kept dragging her away from the drain. Rage filled her body. Who dares to stop me? Who is so rude as to prevent me from accomplishing my task?

When she came to her senses, she found herself entangled in the bodies of her comrades who were pulling her away.

“You almost committed the biggest mistake of your life,” one exceptionally long eel with a strange growth on his head said to her. Ursula raised her tail to strike him.

“Knock, knock” he said tapping his forehead, “I tried to save your life and this is how you repay me. Are you alright?”

Ursula paused and exhaled.

“Yeah, I’m okay now. Sorry.”

She had learned an important lesson that morning. The deadly gobs, which line the banks of rivers, attract the unwary fish by exhaling poisonous fumes.

No one knows what is at the end of them.

She gradually learned about other lures awaiting them. The eel with the growth that had saved her was the most talkative. They called him Toxie. He told her how he had once ventured into a small pond and when he had wanted to leave it, he had found the exit barred by a grate. So, he had had to spend his youth there.

Everything in the pond was rotting. The fish had festering blisters on their bodies which would burst after some time. Then the fish would die. The shallow water was swarming with leeches and similar vermin.

"I only survived by luck," he said, pointing to the many healed wounds on his body.

"But that wasn't the worst of it. Every now and then a stinking sludge would flow into the tank – as it was more of tank than a pond."

Others also joined in with their stories and slowly, before their eyes, the picture of a terrible life disfigured by poisonous fumes began to form. In such toxic waters, living creatures turned into phantoms.

"I've heard of a serpentfish that spits death."

"And I've heard about a mushroom-liana that wraps itself around you and strangles you."

"And have you heard of the quillmouth that sucks your brain out?"

"Enough!" Toxie cut in. "You mustn't believe everything you hear. We know too well the tales that some fish tell," he said and looked towards the surface where several curious rudds were playing with a floating stick.

"We must point to the cause of all these ills – the bipeds."

"Yes, the bipeds, they're the cause!" a cry followed.

"They're to blame for everything, they're responsible for the unfortunate state of our eel nations, not only ours, but also of our brothers from the northwest and southeast. And they," Toxie stretched his narrow head towards the unsuspecting fish near the surface, "can still play games and mock us eels. Let's teach them a lesson!"

Eels aren't naturally hot-tempered fish, and they tend to hold back. But there are times when passions flare up even in the most mellow of eels. An outburst of hatred was stopped by Ursula's voice.

"Enough!" Ursula shouted. "What are we here for? To accomplish our task or to take revenge on someone?"

The question took the eels by surprise. They were looking at each other and a silvery flush suffused their faces.

"At least we'd feel better," Toxie hissed at her.

"If you want to feel better, try to figure out how to get across this," she pointed towards the weir. "In the meantime, we could take a nap."

Before falling asleep, she noticed two ominously glowing points staring out at her from the dark. She knew where that gaze was coming from. Toxie was lying down somewhere there.

Toxie shows his true colours

The first argument happened that same evening. The shoal had divided into two groups to find the passage to the other side of the weir. After some time, the eels met again to talk about what they had found. Ursula suggested trying it *sidewise*, that is to use the side cascade which had probably been built for them. Toxie disagreed and tried to persuade the others to venture up and cross the weir *tumblewise* (that was what the technique was called when the eels swam across the top of the weir and slid down – often doing somersaults). Everybody started to quarrel.

"Ursula here," said Toxie pointing at her squeamishly, "showed bad judgment yesterday... I was the one to drag her out of that pipe when death was breathing in her face. Do you really want this lady to give you advice? To swim through something that, as she said, the bipeds have probably built to help us eels? Do you really believe in bipeds building something to help us? Do you really want to believe in that nonsense?"

Ursula shook her head helplessly. She couldn't understand but she suspected that Toxie was probably jealous. He was envious of her intelligence and determination.

"And besides, she's a female. That in itself isn't very trustworthy."

Ursula couldn't believe her ears. She had never heard anything like it before. It impressed the others, nevertheless, and they started turning away from her one by one.

"Don't be silly," she urged them. "This isn't only my opinion, look at, for example..." she looked around at her allies, but they were leaving her side and joining Toxie.

"Now what then?" some of them asked gesticulating with their flippers.

"If only Spotty was here, he would tell us what to do," many were saying.

"If Spotty had been through only a fraction of what I have," Toxie remarked, "he would certainly suggest the same."

"But you aren't Spotty! And never will be!" Ursula snapped at him.

Toxie gave her a threatening look. "You just wait... I'm not done with you, you crone," he whispered so that no one else could hear.

"So who's coming with me, ladies and gentlemen?" he exclaimed.

Ursula and a couple of others slipped through the cascade before knowing it. They hadn't experienced such an easy pass before. Not everything built by the bipeds must be bad, she thought.

Toxie's group fared worse, but Ursula didn't find out until later. When they met up again and some of the eels were missing, Toxie just brushed it off: "They're delayed. They'll catch up with us."

But when they hadn't returned by the morning, Ursula asked the others. She asked them at the side so that Toxie couldn't hear them, and then one eel told her: "They got stuck there for good. When we tried to cross the weir from above, we got trapped. The birds came and carried some of us away."

Ursula realized that she had to be careful of Toxie.

The Maw II

They soon reached an obstacle that seemed insurmountable. They already knew there would be trouble as they were approaching it. They found themselves in a smaller reservoir with a dam and a strange noise coming from the other end of it.

At first the noise resembled that of a moth buzzing on the water surface. Then the clicking of a water mill.

It grew louder and louder until it turned into the roar of a waterfall.

The vibrations of the deafening device shook each and every muscle of the eels.

They reached the square opening in the concrete wall of the dam and realized they were at the entrance of another Maw.

But this one wasn't shut. It was working at full power.

The eels started panicking. They began to shout over each other. They swam wildly backwards and forwards arguing.

"We're stuck here!" some shouted.

"It'll slice us up to bits!" others wailed.

"We're all going to die here!"

"Nah. Some will get through, but not many," Toxie concluded with his grim prediction.

The most important thing is to keep calm, went through Ursula's mind. She swam nervously from side to side trying to think.

Spotty, Spotty, where are you now that we need you? She remembered his technique – empty your mind and concentrate.

She looked at the tiny silver bubble floating in the water right in front of her eyes. She focused on it intensely. On whatever was reflecting on its surface. And then on what was inside it.

And that is when it struck her.

Approaching the Maw, she had noticed some rotten branches lying on the riverbed. She remembered the words she had once heard. Wood soaked in

water turns to stone. It becomes so hard that it can withstand the ravages of time itself.

“Come, I have an idea,” she called out to the other eels.

Their initial distrust was replaced by curiosity. “Why not listen to this crazy girl’s idea before we die?” the eels thought.

When she explained her plan to them, they didn’t believe her at first. They looked for Toxie to see what he had to say.

“That’s a great idea, Ursula,” he nodded and his eyes sparkled.

They were motionless for a moment at the unexpected remark, but immediately set to work.

“First we need to get rid of this,” she said pointing to a structure with a net stretched over it. The net protected the Maw from floating chunks of logs and waste.

They threw themselves at the net and began to chew it. The tangled strings resisted. The eels took turns. It was extremely exhausting. After a while, the net came loose on one side and the hole sucked it in. Slowly, they tore the net to pieces. All that was left were flapping tatters.

They then gathered around one of the smaller trunks with sharp branches. They crowded under it and tried to push it towards the opening. When they lifted it, a cloud of sediment was released from the bottom. The water there was cold and with very little oxygen. After a while, the eels had to come up to breathe. It wasn’t until the morning that they managed to move the log closer to the hole.

There was one more step to take – to lift up the log and rest its tip on the edge of the hole. It was very dangerous. The Maw was like a vortex. The eels held onto each other. They toiled away all day and night. It was always dark at the bottom anyway.

In the end, they succeeded in rolling the entire trunk into the Maw.

“I need a volunteer to join me,” Ursula proclaimed.

“Me,” she heard a voice say. It was Toxie.

“We’ll lift the trunk in the front and you at the back will then let go of it. Remember to hold onto the edge of the hole with your tail,” she turned to Toxie, “otherwise you might end up in there yourself.”

“You’d better watch yourself,” he muttered grimly under his breath. “I’ll take care of myself.”

Together again

The entire shoal of eels buried their tails into the riverbed to set the heavy trunk of the old tree into motion. In their eyes it was possible to see, besides the effort, something that could be called happiness. With a few jolts they tested the weight of their load and then tried to lift it.

In the meantime, Ursula and Toxie squeezed their way into the opening which the tip of the tree was already pointing towards. A strong current was dragging them down. They held onto the edge with the tips of their tails. They were to steer the process and make sure the branches at the front of the trunk didn’t become stuck on the edge. If they succeeded, they would crawl out of the hole and let the others drop the trunk in.

“Heave-ho, heave-ho...”

When they did it for the third time, they heard a snap – one of the branches, which had been stuck in the concrete, broke off, the trunk jerked, and the current started to suck it in violently. Toxie sprang up and pulled himself out of the hole. Ursula wanted to do the same, but Toxie pushed his tail under Ursula’s, inconspicuously, to make it look like an accident. Ursula’s tail slipped on the slimy surface and she went flying towards the Maw. Right at the last moment, she managed to tighten a loop around the tip of the trunk. The trunk jerked once more, floated in but was stopped by a metal handle on a concrete block that was inside the hole.

Ursula felt like crying out but her voice was stuck in her throat. She was clinging to the trunk for dear life staring wide-eyed in mute terror at the

others whose horrified expressions blended with the dark background of the dam.

She tried to call to them again, but only bubbles came out of her mouth. The current was slapping her face and swaying the trunk from side to side. It was only a matter of time before the tree would be ripped from its grip, and then it would disappear for good along with Ursula in the depth of the Maw.

She was slowly starting to feel faint. Everything around her was dancing frantically. It was spinning and changing colours.

Ursula clutched onto the trunk and didn't give up. She kept fighting.

She saw Toxie's face right in the middle of the hole. He looked triumphant. But suddenly, something pushed him aside and the shape of another eel appeared in front of Ursula.

It was becoming larger and larger.

It moved to the hole, wrapped its body around the trunk and started drifting towards Ursula. Bubbles swirled everywhere, blinding them. Ursula heard a voice. Then she felt a grip. The eel was trying to pull her out.

She gave into the pressure of his body, let go and just before the vortex pulled her in, she wrapped her tail around his. The eel first pulled her to him and then pushed her towards the trunk. She now understood his intent. They would slide slowly along the tree trunk to get out. The trunk jerked several times. Soon both eels grabbed hold of the edge of the opening. With the last of their strength, they pulled themselves out of the hole. They quickly slithered to the bottom and pressed themselves against the wall of the dam out of reach of the current.

Almost immediately they heard a snap – the log swung and disappeared inside. At first, they heard nothing.

Then the whole dam shook.

The blades of the turbine bit into the trunk and stopped. The cogwheel hummed idly.

The eels' exultation echoed all around. One by one, they disappeared down the hole. Toxie was one of the last. He was burning with rage.



"Benedict," exhaled Ursula with surprise, "what are you doing here?"

"I'm not respecting the intimacy zone. You're not angry with me, are you?"

Ursula almost fainted with joy. Everything she had been through so far was transformed into something pure, something she had never experienced before. She snuggled up to Benedict and hugged him with all her strength. He didn't resist.

"Come on, let's swim on, we mustn't be late."

"We have so much to tell each other," she let out as they swam away from the Maw exhausted but happy. "I thought you'd turned into another Mouldy."

"You see, Ursula, I'm sorry for everything," he said guiltily. "You were right. I finally understood our mission. But most of all, I missed you really badly."

"I missed you to. It's over now and I don't want to dwell on the past. We must look ahead."

The next day, all the eels discussed what had happened to them in the Maw. "It was a million-dollar idea, I'll give you that," they praised Ursula. They complained about Toxie's behaviour and accused him of being a coward for not saving Ursula as Benedict had done. Toxie was making light of the whole thing.

"I wanted to give the floor to this youngster here, you see," he patted Benedict on the back, "since there is such a love affair going on between them".

Ursula knew Toxie had released her fin on purpose. She was convinced, though, that if she told the others, they probably wouldn't believe her. And she hadn't forgotten that he had saved her from the deadly Gob.

The longer they travelled, the more the shoal became smaller. Some groups lagged behind while others, tempted by a pleasant river bend or the backwaters, decided to settle down for a while.

Winter was slowly creeping in, and ice shards were floating in the water. In some places, the river was completely frozen at the sides. Everything went quiet and the other fish were preparing for their winter sleep.

The eels had to be more and more wary of the cormorants. Not even large fish could escape their ravenous gullets. And when the cormorants couldn't swallow an eel, they wounded it with their beaks. During daytime the eels didn't go anywhere near the surface preferring to bury themselves in the sand or under rocks.

Their goal was to reach the river delta. The place where land meets sea. They would spend the winter there resting, and in the spring when nature was released from the grip of the northern winds, they would venture out. Across the ocean.

The eel gang

At this point of their journey, the eels had lost all their enthusiasm. Their appetite had disappeared and all their pleasures were reduced to the brief moment preceding sleep when they surrendered their exhausted bodies to a deep slumber.

Benedict and Ursula were inseparable. They lay down beside each other to rest. They overcame all hardships together. They gave each other strength. They advised and encouraged each other. Sometimes they had an argument, but then they longed all the more to reconcile.

They didn't notice the changes that had taken place in the meantime.

Their bodies had become more silvery and their minds more sombre. Gradually they stopped talking and only communicated with their eyes or with a touch. Or not even that.

They simply knew in advance what the other was thinking.

A group of conspiring eels kept disturbing the overall peace, taking advantage of the general feeling of tiredness. They pretended to fall asleep, rose from the bottom, found a weak victim and started to bully them.

"Get yourself out of here, you wretch," they would shout at one sleepy girl eel. "Get the hell out of here before we make a knot out of you," they threatened her.

Panic began to spread across the shoal and everyone was whispering about the eel gang rampaging among them.

It wasn't easy to distinguish who was part of the gang at first. Membership to the gang was secret, so the eels stopped trusting each other altogether, and everyone preferred to concentrate on themselves.

But that was exactly what suited the gang, and its power grew. It became gradually clear who the members were. These eels wanted to have first choice in everything.

Like the best resting places. Or that they never had to take risks when the shoal was exploring an obstacle.

The weakest eels had to serve them.

Sometimes they took their anger out on the other eels for no reason.

When this happened, nobody stood up for the victim. Everyone was scared. The more difficult the journey, the more inclined were some eels to hurt the others.

"This can't go on," Ursula once declared. "If we don't put a stop to the gang's rampage, we'll all pay for it."

"Shush," an eel called Pharaoh because of the golden gleam in his eyes admonished her. "If they hear you, you'll pay."

Ursula cast a dark glance towards those who had formed the core of the gang. Toxie was among them.

"We have to team up against them," she hissed. "We cannot achieve anything on our own."

Ursula had one certainty – she could count on Benedict.

The gang leaders feared Benedict who was strong and agile. They didn't dare approach him. And because they knew how close he was to Ursula, they left her alone as well. At least for the time being.

Toxie was busy making plans. He wasn't actually sure why he was doing it. He just was. It made him feel important. He, who had spent his entire teenage years rotting in a pond, had the right to indulge in the feeling of victory.

Oh, how lovely it would be to feast on that damned Ursula! And that pompous suitor of hers! Oh, to bring them down and enjoy the sight of their misery!

An opportunity must arise at some point.

Toxie had his ways of cornering others: "If you don't do as I say, you'll pay."

He was really good at threatening them. "If you don't do it, I'll tell everybody!" Or "If you don't do it, you'll get a good thrashing!" He knew how powerful fear could be. He considered the other eels weaklings.

If someone asked Toxie where he was actually going and what the aim of his journey was, he probably wouldn't have been able to answer. He was so full of himself.

He was gradually gaining more and more influence in the gang, and it wasn't long before he became the leader.

One day, the gang members summoned the other eels and told them that the days of equality were over. And that they were now taking over for security reasons.

"From now on, we'll protect you. You'll finally feel safe," Toxie announced patronizingly.

Murmurs and quiet cries of disapproval were heard amongst the eels. Toxie only had to look at them and no one objected anymore.

"Anyone else who disagrees?"

"We do!" Ursula and Benedict shouted out firmly.

The gang members twitched. Toxie did not. He expected them to object. Actually, he was counting on it.

"Banish them!" he ordered to his mates. His expression was full of hatred.

"There's no need to," Benedict stopped them. "Don't bother. We're leaving anyway."

As they were swimming away from the shoal, they noticed the guilty looks of the other eels. They couldn't blame their friends for their cowardice. They too were driven by the instinct of self-preservation. Their job was to reach their destination, not to fight for the rights of others.

Ursula and Benedict did not abandon their companions for good. They swam after them at a safe distance, waiting for the moment when the power of the eel gang would weaken.

From that moment on, their journey was sad. They watched the silhouettes of the eels swimming ahead of them. They could only guess what was going on in the shoal. Now and again, an eel would break away having been bullied by the gang so badly that it didn't have the strength to go on. Its pale body would disappear in the depths. But Ursula and Benedict would swim over to such eels and wish them well.

The cave II

One day they reached the place where the river split into narrow canals. Some of them lead to docks where boats were moored. Heavy metal gates connected the waterways, and water flowed from one to another. Sometimes, one canal would close so that another could open. Water flowed between them.

The eels didn't know how the gates worked. This scared them. They feared they might lose their way in the labyrinth of canals.

"We must try and find the right way," Ursula thought.

"How about asking someone?" Benedict suggested.

"But who?" they looked around. All they saw was a large sign that said *REISEBÜRO HAMBURG* (HAMBURG TRAVEL AGENCY).

They were helplessly swimming backwards and forwards for some time when a strange fish appeared in front of them. It was holding a bumpy shell in its pectoral fin and using it as a comb. The fish wouldn't stop grooming itself.

"Good morning. Do you know how to get to..." Ursula approached the fish. "Not yet!" the fish stopped her and struck a pose which markedly showed off her curly back.

"Now yes," she relaxed and fixed her anxious eyes on them.



"Ah, eels, this year you be late. You meet salmon?"

"Who?"

"Argh," the fish clicked her jaws in disappointment. "You be from some *Czechish* backwaters."

"You see, we're looking for..."

"Move it, move it, not block the way, here you not hang around. It leave in a moment and I checks many tourists," the fish scolded them. But when they looked around, they didn't see anyone at all. Not a single fin.

"I loves it. Everywhere work, everybody want to be first. You be first in queue."

"Erm," Ursula cleared her throat, but decided not to argue with the fish.

"Especially today the traffic be strong. Also bad weather, wind blow, maybe typhoon come also. Everybody swim in opposite direction and not follow the rules, phooey. Where to, huh?"

"Sorry?"

"If you not know, not take up place here. That alcove," the fish pointed to the right, "there be many, many offers."

The alcove looked like a partly demolished hall.

As they swam closer, Ursula saw a familiar scene. The hall was bordered from above by a rocky protrusion, and it was dark inside. It took the eels a while to become used to the darkness.

There were lines carved in the rock. They represented a painting the eels didn't understand at first. It was only after a while that the picture began to emerge in front of Ursula, and she finally started to recognize it.

"Do you know what that is?" Ursula said and facepalmed.

"No idea," Benedict admitted.

"That's a map. The map of the world. And we're inside one of the Talking Caves Spotty used to tell us about."

"I see," he looked around, "it doesn't look much like a cave."

"I guess it is a bit damaged," she run her gaze along the crumbling hall, "but with a little imagination, you can call it a cave."

"With all respect to your imagination, I want to get out of here quick," Benedict said. "That fish be still there and be really weird."

The gloss had long faded off the painting. The map carved into the slimy surface of the rock featured darker areas that represented the continents with the ocean currents spiralling in all directions. The drawing looked complicated, but it was possible to orient oneself after a while. Some places were covered with pictures of exotic landscapes, and Ursula guessed that the fish guarding the travel agency sign organized trips to such places. The dream destinations of fish tourists, willing to pay anything (Ursula had no idea what) to replace the boredom of fresh water for the clear blue of coral islands.

Ursula remembered Spotty's tales of travels to tropical landscapes – in the tanks of ships that carried hectolitres of water in their hulls to prevent them from tipping over in the open sea. In one port they would suck in the water and in another port, perhaps on the other side of the globe, release it again. Along with the cargo of fish tourists.

That silly fish has no idea that this is the Talking Cave," Ursula concluded.

As they were leaving the cave, the fish said, "The Caribbean be popular this year. For those who prefers the cold, we has the Laptev Sea. But nowadays, there be oil patches everywhere. Just the other day a tanker capsize..."

"Excuse me," interrupted Ursula. "Do you have by any chance a trip to Sargasso?"

"Sargasso?" the fish paused. "You means the Sargasso Sea?"

"Yes," the eels confirmed.

The fish looked at them in astonishment.

"The Sargasso Sea? You be serious?"

"Yes, it is the home of all eels. The living heart of the world," exclaimed Ursula.

"Hahahah," the fish laughed. "Disagree. There be only few such appalling places as Sargasso Sea, and I not even be there."

Her words embarrassed the eels.

"And you two has anything to pay with?"

The eels shook their heads.

"I sees you be in trouble," the fish said and looked around. "But that be good, because a German proverb say, *Large canals not lead to paradise.*"

"*And the road to hell is paved with good intentions,*" replied Ursula with the first thing that came to her mind.

"Great, great!" the fish praised her. "You be well educated. You not imagines what stupid fish I meets. Sturgeons? Total dunces. And they travels! Among you eels be an educated individual sometimes, I likes it."

"Yes," Ursula seized the opportunity. "We truly appreciate your extraordinary education, which few can equal."

The fish was all aglow.

"And you will have no problem telling us where to find the... ugly Sargasso Sea."

"Simple enough," the fish bragged. "Geography be my forte. And travel not be easy. Big responsibility! Imagine the hullabaloo if I makes a mistake and sends a tourist to a swamp!?!"

Then suddenly a roar came from above their heads. A huge propeller stirred the surface creating a vortex in which all the waste floating around disappeared.

"Goshy gosh," the fish remarked. "Tiny sail off."

"Tiny?" Benedict asked, puzzled.

"The biggest cargo ship in Hamburg port. Its capacity be five hundred tons and it go to New York. Tiny be the uncrowned king of all tankers."

"Does it happen to sail through the Sargasso Sea?" Ursula asked carefully.

"It happen, but too late," the eyes of the fish sparkled. "But you pays me, and I finds a spot for you in the tank."

"Hang on a second, my dear f-f-fish!" Benedict stammered. "We are eels and we are endangered. You'd better help us, right now!"

"What he say? He threaten me?" the fish said angrily.

"Oh no, never, dear fish, we would never dare," Ursula tried to calm the fish down.

"You belongs to that group of Czech eels?" the fish pointed its fin to a shoal of fish, which kept returning for the umpteenth time searching in vain for the exit from the maze.

"Oh no, dear highly respected fish. We don't know those boors at all. They are probably a less intelligent eel species," Ursula assured her.

"To this day I thinks all eels dumb but you changes my mind. As a reward I advises you. Out of the harbour, you follows that narrow canal, then turns left twice and once to the right."

"Thank you," Ursula answered.

"If you wants a shortcut," the fish leaned close and whispered, "you swims through that grate there. But you not tells anybody."

By now, a noisy and bad-tempered shoal had caught up with them. Benedict and Ursula remembered Pharaoh and their other friends.

"I think we should help them," Benedict said.

The battle

They cautiously sneaked up to them and listened. The eels were shouting and attacking each other. The gang members were losing their patience. They were worried that the others might rebel. Eventually, Toxie stepped in.

"We will swim together. If anyone leaves the shoal, they will be treated as a deserter. And desertion is punished with death."

After those words, silence settled. Then Pharaoh spoke.

"A leader who leads his tribe to destruction is a bad leader. I suggest we reinstate eel democracy. Let's decide the way forward together."

He turned to the others. There was agreement in their eyes, but the gang was against it. As if they had received an unspoken command, they rushed at Pharaoh and began to beat him with the ends of their tails. Chaos seized the shoal and all the eels scattered left and right.

Benedict didn't hesitate to rush to Pharaoh's aid. Ursula wriggled her way into the middle of the shoal and began to call everyone together. No one heard her, though.

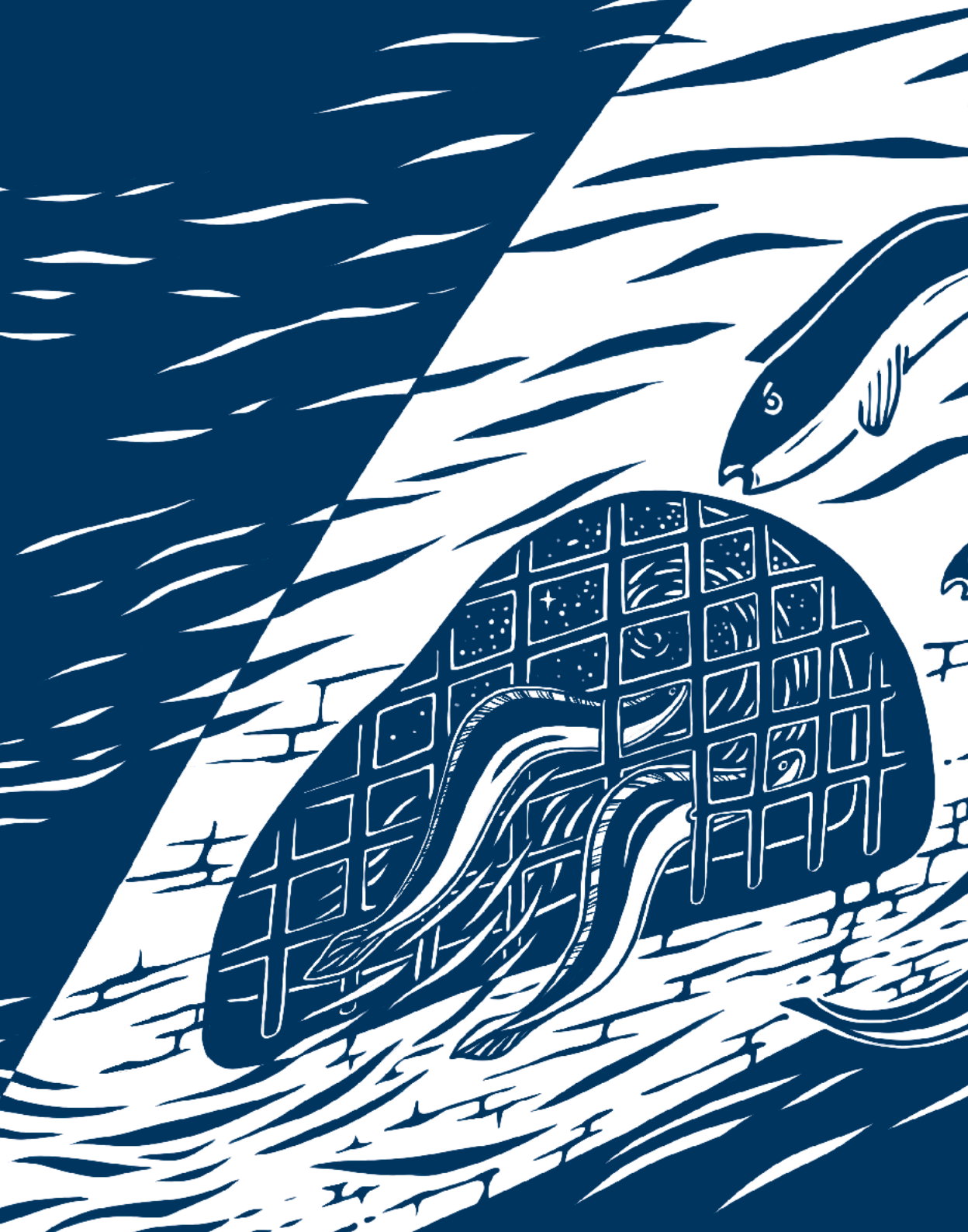
The bodies of the fighting eels became a ball. The gang members outnumbered the others, so Pharaoh and Benedict had to retreat. Ursula followed them. The gang members went after them. Toxie knew it was now or never. He finally had a chance to rid himself of Ursula for good.

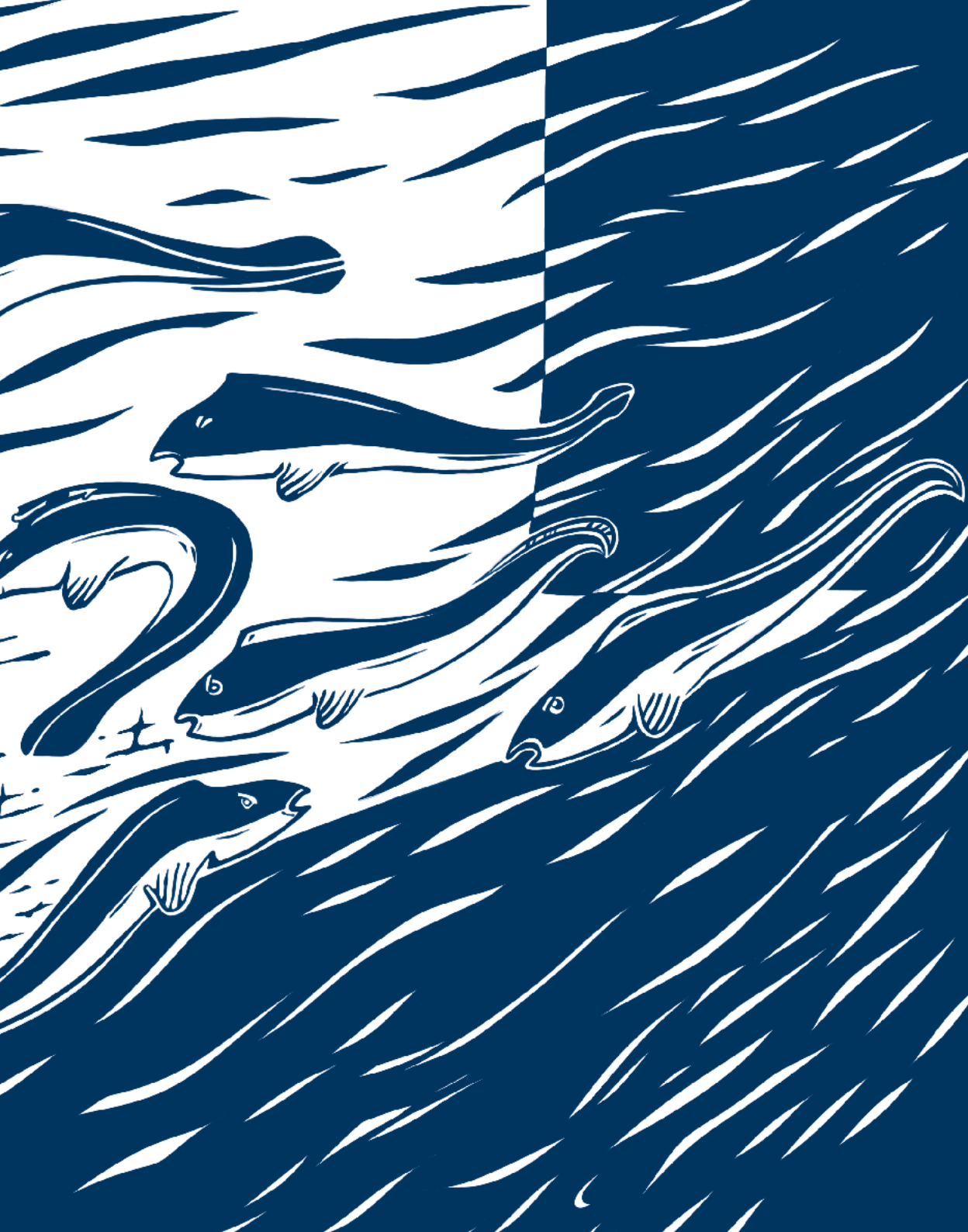
The chase didn't last long. Ursula was slashing the water with her tail, straining every muscle, but the gang members soon managed to surround the fleeing group. Toxie's eyes flashed with anger. Benedict and Pharaoh flanked Ursula on both sides.

They would defend her until the bitter end.

Suddenly they all heard a deafening sound. A siren. Something moved. The iron gates creaked and started to open. The eels were pulled by the current.

The pursued group didn't wait. Benedict grabbed Ursula and sprang up towards the grid that the fish had shown them. They clung to it and watched how Toxie and his cronies vainly resisted the current. The more the gate opened, the stronger the current. Eventually it sucked them in.





After some time, the current quieted again. Meanwhile the fugitives had disappeared behind the bars. It wasn't until then that they noticed that Pharaoh was missing. The gate must have swallowed him, too. They searched for him for a while, but then morose and full of sadness, they continued on their way.

Before they knew it, the labyrinth of canals was far behind them.

Night was descending on the world, and so Ursula headed to the surface.

When she poked her head out of the water, she was blinded by thousands of lights. The river was flanked by a city with a huge port. Hamburg.

The cawing of seagulls came from a distance. The air entering her nostrils was salty.

Gradually the water in the river was also turning salty. It poured forward like an avalanche. Unstoppably. It had done so for millions of years.

A strange feeling stirred in the eels. A mixture of awe and anticipation. After several hours, the river was so wide that it was impossible to take it all in. At the shore, it disappeared completely. It had lost its banks and become the sea.

A new beginning

"Are we still travelling?" Ursula asked one day.

They had completely lost track of time during those endless winter weeks, sleeping in the rocky bottom or dreaming under a thick layer of mud. Each one of them travelled on their own – in their own imagination.

Ursula was the first to come to her senses.

She looked out of her hiding place and saw the same old current rolling over her. It disappointed her a little at first. She probably hoped to see what she had been dreaming of – the Sargasso Sea.

The sun was flashing through a column of water. Never before had Ursula seen so much glow and sparkle. It felt fated. Spring in the river. Something she was never to see again.

Fish darted everywhere and boats floated on the surface. Some bubbles rose from the bottom. Ursula was watching them. They were so volatile... One moment they were there and the next they were gone.

What was she dreaming of?

In those dreary weeks, she would sometimes go off to look for the others. "Pharaoh, where are you?"

"And the rest of you – where are you all?"

No answers penetrated her fading consciousness. Only a grey, impermeable silence seemed to reverberate through everything.

Fortunately, Benedict was there. She wasn't even able to express what she felt towards him when she returned from her fruitless wanderings.

When they came back to life again, they headed for a calmer section of the river. They weren't alone.

All around them swirled the bodies of other eels. Their eyes blazed with concentration. They were slowly creeping out of their refuge and taking up position. A wall of silence hung over everything, as if something was to change when they entered the sea. Ursula didn't know what was going to happen. But she was nervous. Nobody had prepared them for this.

Is it better to swim in the middle or at the edge? Aim for the depths or slide closer to the surface?

They knew at least the answer to the second question. They would stay deep down during the daytime, until night came. Only then would they ascend and perhaps see the stars reflecting on the surface. But they weren't here for the stars.

Their star was in the depths, hundreds, perhaps thousands of metres deep down. But how do I know when I'm there? Ursula pondered.

She wanted to ask Benedict, but he was probably asking himself the same questions. And no other eel tried to speak out. Or perhaps they couldn't.

Ursula sensed that the shoal intended to travel at least partly together, but this might be a mistake. If they all travelled together, they could also perish together in a catastrophe. So before they left the river, the eels lined up in separate groups and set off in different directions. Later, in

the sea, each shoal swam along a slightly different route, expecting all the routes to join at some point, or maybe not.

Watching the other groups swim away, Ursula felt deep down that despite the distance, she was still connected to them.

A suspicious noise

When daytime came, they descended into the depth to avoid becoming prey to their predators.

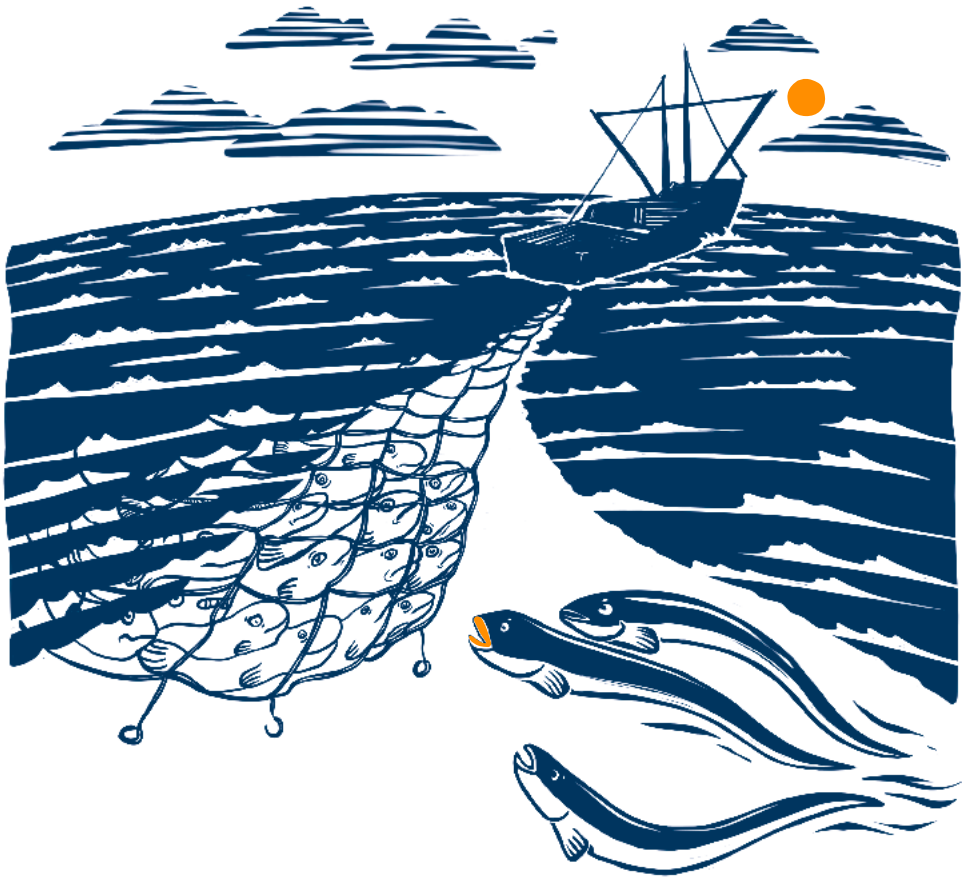
For Ursula, darkness had a certain shine about it. On its surface, darkness reflected everything else, perhaps even her life. An amazing array of tiny organisms was floating all around her. Now and again strange creatures full of quivering cilia and luminous bristles flashed past.

Who could have possibly invented all this?

The creatures with their open jaws were all translucent and as fragile as porcelain. Crystal bells fluttered on their heads and their brains resembled pulsating jelly-like balls which, through a peculiar process, gave birth to thought.

What frightened her most, though, was the ever-present sound of ship engines. The sea wasn't welcoming. The seabed was dug up and, except for those living miniatures and scary creatures, it had hardly any life in it. From time to time, shoals of small fish would appear, but even they looked scared, especially when nimble-bodied pike-like fish glittered through the depths, darting from one side to the other like scattered glass marbles.

One early morning, as they were descending, they heard the muffled drone of the boats drawing closer. Benedict and Ursula made their way to the greenish light in front of them. It was probably a giant swelling, one of the many ocean plateaus. Or maybe not? Everyone around them became very nervous. An undefinable fear spread through the water.



They suddenly found themselves in the middle of a huge shoal of sardines. The terrified fish passed them, their eyes filled with horror. From time to time, the shoal exploded into space flying off in all directions. The eels swam faster and with all their might plunged down towards the depths beneath them.

They were now right under a boat.

"When you hear a suspicious sound, swim," a voice came from behind them.

They turned and saw a blueish fish heading the opposite way.

"What sound?"

"This one."

The swish of coiling ropes.

A fishing trawl was rolling through the sea right behind them. A huge belly swallowing everything alive.

From its insides came terrible whines, screams and cries.

Before they knew it, the net slid past them. It brushed against them, but this time it missed them. The current tossed them aside.

They watched the swelling maw of the net pass them by. The bodies of the fish caught inside it were thrashing from side to side. Thousands of voices anticipating suffocation. In the wild uproar, thousands of flailing little bodies were trying to break free from the trap. They were thrashing around, inflicting painful blows on each other.

"That was close," the fish behind them remarked quietly. "Next time we won't be so lucky."

Whale songs

As Ursula was swimming away from those waters, she felt her throat contract. The sea around them was fading away. The sound of engines was slowly receding.

The vision of the fish trapped inside the net kept appearing in front of her eyes. She imagined herself inside it. Or Benedict.

She snuggled up to him and hugged him with her slippery body. Their hearts were racing. They were beating so hard that they drowned out the sound of the sea.

Then they heard a distant trumpeting. They heard it again. It was a prolonged sound of anguish coming from all directions. The eels weren't afraid of it. They felt that somehow those songs were about them.

The next day a strange looking fish told them that it was the whales singing. They had already heard of the whales. Hardly anyone knows the oceans as well as the whales do. Apparently they criss-cross the oceans and know best what happens where.

"And this is their favourite route," the fish continued. "Over the years, I've learned to understand their songs a little."

"And what do they say?"

"That they feel like singing less and less. That something bad is happening to the oceans."

"The same old story, the same as what's happening at home," Ursula sighed.

"What do you mean by *home*?" Benedict asked.

"I mean our river. But you're right, I guess – there probably isn't such thing as home for eels anymore," she said with disappointment.

"But we're returning home. You said so yourself not long ago."

"Not long ago... it feels like an eternity. No, Benedict. I was wrong. There is no 'home' for us. We swim to die. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Well put, Miss Eel," the fish joined in. "The important thing is to get as much as you can for yourself while you live. Nothing else matters. It's better to enjoy life than cry over spilt milk like the half-witted whales. But if you're already tired of life, all you need to do is tell me – there is a shark reef not far from here. They will rid you of your misery before you know it."

"Shush," Benedict warned the fish. "If we die, we'll die like true eels. We won't give up without putting up a fight. We'll swim as far as the gods allow us to. Not a fin less!" he exclaimed, repeating words he had once heard in the past.

The strange fish raised its eyebrows and disappeared in its hiding place.

Doubts

"Thanks, Benedict, but if you want, we can separate," Ursula said a moment later.

"What? What on earth are you talking about?!"

"I don't have the strength anymore. Sorry. All of it. I can't make it. And I don't think I want to, either."

"Rubbish, Ursula!" he fumed. "That's not like you!"

"But it is me. The old Ursula's dead. She died in me. All we come across is suffering. I don't want to live in such a world anymore."

"That's enough now," he tried to interrupt her.

"No, wait. I know what you want to say. But look at me. You don't really believe that we're going to make it to the finish line, do you?"

"I do."

They both stared at each other for a moment. Benedict knew he must not let her have her way. He felt a tremendous strength within him. He realized it was his duty to accompany this beautiful and sensitive lady eel as far as possible.

"Ursula! It's not important whether we get there – but that we try." He wasn't very sure about what he had just said.

"Erm," he added quickly, "that's a load of rubbish, isn't it?"

Ursula nodded.

They both burst out laughing.

"Now you just need to declare your love to me and I'll melt in bliss."

"Right then – will you marry me?" He bowed before her.

"When pigs fly," she giggled.

"Oh, Ursula! How on earth am I supposed to see flying pigs from this depth?"

A secret revealed

A few days later, they swam out of the stormy waters and found themselves in an emerald revelry of life. Jellyfish were swimming around them, and

now and again they came across endless shoals of tiny fish whose numbers bordered on the infinite.

After some time, they turned south. From time to time, they met groups of travelling eels. They stopped for a chat, or slept together on the seabed and then continued on their separate ways again. The important thing was to make sure they were headed in the right direction. And some eels were also very knowledgeable and willing give them advice. They shared their fears and warned each other of possible dangers. Almost every group had encountered trawlers and they all expected to come across more.

"They say that the greatest number of trawlers can be found in the Sargasso Sea. Some bipeds specialize in us. They have special nets with tiny holes and they use them for catching baby eels returning to the rivers."

"Rogues," someone uttered.

Ursula now remembered that she too had once been in a net.

"We all were," one of them started to explain. "Most nets mean death. There's a certain type of net that helps baby eels overcome all obstacles and get back to the river. But you cannot count on getting caught in one of those. Not even the eel elders can figure it out. I spoke to some of them about it. Some say it's in the interest of bipeds to send some of the eels back to the rivers so they can fish them there. They get them out of the sea and transport them inland and then release them into different rivers. For these bipeds it's not about eating us, but about restoring what they did to the rivers – building barriers on them which make it impossible for us to swim across. There are many opinions on this."

"You mean all bipeds aren't the same?" Benedict wondered.

"I doubt that" most eels objected.

And so the mystery of Ursula's journey to the river, where she had spent part of her adult life, had finally been solved. It was the bipeds who had helped her reach the river. Even if she had almost been caught on their hooks a few times. This new awareness lifted her spirits a little. It gave her hope that her daughters and sons – if she ever had any – would return to the places she knew so well and perhaps even find her hiding place in the tangle of sweet flag.

Annabelle

This also had to do with the changes that were taking place in Ursula. A maternal instinct was awakening in her. Before it had been dormant, but now it burst forth with all its force. Every now and then she was moved by something, then she was cranky again, her belly was weighing her down, and her attention was more and more focused on Benedict.

She began to have feelings for him that she didn't understand.

One moment she loved him and the next she hated him. She longed for him but was afraid to tell him, blamed it on him one moment, and the next on herself. She was jealous when she saw him in the company of the other girl eels they occasionally met and swam with for a while. She also started noticing other males and comparing them to Benedict.

He, too, acted strangely at times. He would get angry with her and make fun of her.

Or he would insult her.

"I'm really fed up with you!" he once exclaimed.

"I've been watching the two of you," said a female eel from the shoal they had been accompanying for the last couple of days, "and I think you might have cabin fever."

"Cabin what?" Ursula snapped.

"Cabin fever. When a *madame* or *monsieur* spend too much time together, they start getting on each other's nerves."

The female eel was called Annabelle and came from the French tribe of eels living in the waters of the Seine. "I used to live under a Parisian bridge where I learned the most exquisite manners."

Indeed, Annabelle was the most elegant eel they had ever seen. An ironic smile lit up her face, and a distinctive black spot above the left corner of her mouth drew everyone's attention.

"Go and see that Annabelle of yours," Ursula would snap at Benedict when she was angry with him. "She's all you think of, anyway."

"What's gotten into you this time?" he defended himself.

"Well, you keep eyeing her up and you can't take your eyes off that mouth of hers when she speaks."



"You're pathetic," he snarled. "Stop it now!"

One night Ursula put him to the test. She swam away and hid under an old coral. Benedict woke up and when he couldn't see her in her usual place, he started looking for her.

Ursula watched him maliciously from her hideout.

Now I'll get you, bighead, she thought.

"Where are you, Ursula?" Benedict shouted searching for her everywhere. But Ursula's hideout was too far away. He looked for her in all directions

and asked the others. No one knew where she was. Not even Annabelle who was calmly preparing for the journey.

Benedict became increasingly worried.

The other eels were already setting off.

"She might have swum ahead," someone suggested.

"But that makes no sense," said Benedict in despair.

Annabelle approached him and gently touched him with the tip of her lower jaw.

"You might find her. I know how you feel. I lost my suitor, too, back in the river... but I'd rather not talk about it."

Benedict sank into despair. He couldn't bear to think of losing Ursula. And in such a silly way, without a single clue.

"It happens sometimes. A crab sneaks in and grabs the prey in silence. The others don't even notice what's happening right beside them."

"No," Benedict retorted, "I'd never let that happen."

"It doesn't matter what you would or wouldn't do. Nature is far more powerful than you are. You have no right to decide what happens or doesn't. You're too small a master for that," an old and experienced eel said to him.

"That's why there's so many of us, so that we can replace each other," Annabelle continued.

"But that's terribly cruel!"

No one said anything after that.

Alone and without a chance

It took them a while to convince Benedict. Eventually, Annabelle gently pulled him off the bottom and smiled at him. Benedict succumbed. He probably wasn't even aware of what he was doing. He was so very upset about losing his loved one.

"There you are!" Ursula sputtered full of resentment when she realized that he had stopped looking for her and disappeared into the depths with the others.



"Stupid me, I thought he loved me. It didn't take him long to forget me, did it?" she flicked her fin angrily. "I hope he'll feel sorry for me for a very long time."

Her heart was burning. Above all she was jealous of Annabelle.

Dusk had fallen and it was dark in the depths. Ursula could only make out silhouettes.

Suddenly everything around her started to move. A whisper echoed through the water, growing louder.

"No, I'm not scared, I can handle this myself, I don't need anyone else," she muttered to herself.

"I had to keep pulling him out of some mess, anyway," she said aloud thinking of Benedict. "Without him, I could have been in the Sargasso Sea long ago... Just don't do anything stupid now, Ursula girl, gather your wits and listen to your instincts."

But fear was growing inside her. She detached herself from the seabed and cautiously set out. The last vestiges of courage began to fade. She panicked and started to flounder about in an attempt to disappear from that place as quickly as possible.

Just don't draw attention to yourself, she suddenly thought. Stay calm, don't thrash around, and don't resemble anything that might look like wounded prey. Every unnatural movement attracts predators. And the sea is swarming with them.

She didn't have to wait long for the first one to appear. Out of nothing, an elongated shape swam past her. Ursula headed for the surface where at night she felt safer. But after a moment, more elongated bodies appeared, and an eye emerged from the darkness. It was cold and emotionless.

In no time, a mouth full of teeth appeared. The fish weren't very big but they swam around Ursula in sinister circles.

They were closing up on her, slowly and steadily.

There were more and more of them. They were whirling around her like angry wasps.

Ursula picked up speed, but the fish were much faster. They caught up with her in one flap of their fins, but just before touching her, they swerved. For now they wouldn't dare bite her.

The distance grew smaller. The first fish brushed against her fin and scratched it. Ursula lashed out against the fish with her mouth but missed it.

She knew that the moment the first drop of her blood touched the water, the fish would come at her and tear her apart.

Don't they know that an eel's blood is poisonous?

She probably won't be able to explain it to them anyway. Perhaps the poison doesn't even affect them. Or maybe they just don't know.

Then she saw thousands of tiny tendrils above her. She almost crashed into them. She swerved and narrowly missed them. The fish remained below her. They were probably scared of the tendrils.

She weaved her way through the tendrils, swam out, and the fish began circling her again. She looked up and saw a path winding through the dangling threads. She headed towards them. Something told her, though, that she mustn't touch them. What were they hanging from?

Ursula learned soon enough that it was a fleet of jellyfish pulsating from one place to the next, and she only managed to avoid them with great effort. Once she failed and the translucent tassels hanging from the jellyfish stung her side. She twitched in pain. She now had a searing wound on her body.

Just below the surface there were fewer jellyfish. Thousands of luminous lanterns now fluttered beneath Ursula.

The pleasure this spectacle gave her was clouded by the notion that she might never get out of this place. When daytime came, she would not be able to hide in the depths because of the jellyfish, and then a bird would catch her. Or if the jellyfish wanted to see the surface, she would fry in their tentacles. None of this happened, fortunately. By morning, the jellyfish had dispersed, and Ursula could descend to the places where the light of dawn was merging with the darkness of the depths.

That is when it struck her.

"What have I done? Why did I let passion carry me away? Oh, Benedict, if only I knew where you were," she whispered desperately to herself.

Meanwhile, Benedict had continued with the group of eels. He barely noticed anything. He swam not knowing where he was going. He didn't care. He felt empty. Annabelle tried to cheer him up.

“Don’t be such a grump. My ex ended up in the blades of a turbine. But I’m over it now.”

Annabelle, Ursula... everything was mixed up in his head. He remembered Mouldy. He must be doing well, lounging on his bolster and not feeling lonely at all.

He then looked at his companions. They were skinny and exhausted, but there was something in their expressions that he couldn’t define. The unquenchable desire to live, a pure will, and perhaps even joy, happiness, for overcoming the hardships and for not flinching an inch. He saw Ursula’s face in theirs, and recalled her words, smiles, movements. She was in fact quite similar to Annabelle.

“Land on the horizon!” someone from the shoal shouted out.

The seabed was rising and the numbers of shore fish were growing. A moment later, they were carried away by the current brushing against the rocks that jutted out of the sea. A volcanic archipelago loomed high before them.

The Azores.

A place to rest for a few days.

Ursula arrived there a few hours later. The rugged coastline offered a plethora of shelters. Anemones were poking their tentacles out of the rocks. In one spot, the entire seabed was covered with colourful starfish.

Down below her, the reef was black. Everything appeared distant and absent. Life was following its own course, regardless of Ursula.

She felt lonely. She longed to meet Benedict, but feared it at the same time. What would she tell him? Would he still want to see her?

She realized how much she had hurt him. And if she had to pay with her life for it, so be it. She was to blame.

Whenever she saw something resembling an undulating eel, she stopped and hid. Dawn was approaching fast and she was still winding her way through the coastal waters. She had to hide somewhere soon enough.

She noticed an opening between two volcanic boulders. Just as she was about to slide into it, a huge open mouth appeared in front of her, and

a long serpentine body swam out. It bore a striking resemblance to an eel, but it was yellow and speckled with dark spots all over.

A moray eel.

It started to chase Ursula.

Ursula turned round and swam off. Fortunately, the moray eel was slow. Just as Ursula managed to hide in a cavity in a rock, she noticed a rod resembling a protruding antenna. The rod wiggled slightly, and what Ursula took to be a rock covered in algae began to stir. Swaying, it raised its claws at her. And then there was another. A whole army of crabs was now hungrily moving towards her.

She didn't wait a second longer and hightailed. Get out of here. As fast and as far away as possible.

She felt like crying. Alone in this world, she didn't stand a chance.

The cave III

Benedict was watching Annabelle probingly. The black spot above the left corner of her lip had caught his eye. Annabelle noticed his gaze and smiled at him. Benedict quickly averted his eyes.

He couldn't help thinking of her all day. And of Ursula, too. Oh no! They were driving him mad.

"There's bound to be a Talking Cave around here somewhere," an experienced eel and leader of the group said. "Let's have rest and then we'll try and find it."

As they lay hidden under a large boulder, Annabelle sneaked up to him.

"Don't think about her anymore," she whispered in his ear. "She's dead by now."

Benedict wanted to tell her off, but he stopped himself.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I just wanted to comfort you. It's sometimes better to think of your loved ones as dead. Your mind is then clear, and you aren't consumed with doubt."



“Don’t apologize. Ursula got what she deserved,” Benedict said firmly. “Don’t you want to snuggle up a bit more? I’m cold,” she begged him.

The following day, Ursula caught up with the eels. She saw Benedict and her heart leapt, but when she saw Annabelle by his side, everything around her turned sour.

She slowly started to come to terms with the fact that she was going to have to travel on her own. She would swim haphazardly and perhaps meet someone on the way who would accompany her to the Sargasso Sea.

But she couldn’t tear herself away from them and kept watching them from afar. Sometimes she noticed Benedict looking round him with a desperate air, poking about in every nook and cranny. She was sure he was looking for her.

Eventually, they found the Talking Cave. The opening was not large, but when they swam through it, the vastness of the space took their breath away. Something red shimmered in the middle illuminating the walls around them. A diamond eel heart.

“Spotty never told us about this,” Benedict said in astonishment.

“No one knows for sure what it is. Most likely it’s the heart of the sacred Ourobouros, our forefather,” the old eel explained.

They swam closer and bowed to the heart.

Thousands of polished facets sent out their coloured threads in all directions. And each thread illuminated a part of the painting of a giant eel rooted in the very heart of the world. The Unified Plan of the Universe.

“Absolutely everything is represented here,” the most experienced eel continued, “the entire eel story. Our history, the picture of the greatest elders, their words. We could spend months trying to decipher what each character and drawing mean, but there is no time. We’ll just let the splendour overwhelm us and draw strength from it.”

It was as if a load had fallen off Benedict’s chest. He felt relieved. His problems suddenly appeared insignificant. He was touched. He began to

think of Ursula again. How he wished she could also see it. After all, their story was also represented in those drawings.

He noticed a coloured female eel carved into the rock in the upper part of the cave. It must have been the queen, Ourobouros's mate. There was a sublime look in her eyes. Her immense grace appealed to all of Benedict's senses. He was completely dazzled.

"I guess it's quite pretty, but Paris has more class" he heard a voice beside him say.

He turned around and saw Annabelle curiously examining the cave.

"The riverbed was covered with diamonds like these."

Benedict clenched his jaw and gloomily turned away from Anabelle.

"Nowhere else are there so many lights reflecting off the river surface like in Paris. This is just a pathetic fairground in comparison," she continued.

"We'd better swim away," Benedict suggested.

In the days that followed, he tried to suppress his disappointment. Annabelle clung to him more and more. He didn't reject her, but he wasn't too fond of her either.

"What's going on, Benedict?" she asked him.

"Oh nothing, I'm not feeling very well, that's all" he was making excuses.

"Hm, I guess I'm not good enough for you. I don't have to waste my time with you. I can have any suitor I want, you see. Everybody wants the girl eel from Paris."

The voices of the ancestors

In the morning they lay down for a last rest. When it became dark, they would set off again. Ursula swam around. She looked towards where Benedict was lying and said goodbye to him in her heart.

"Farewell, I hope you reach your destination. I'm going back to my parents. I love you."

She then headed towards the cave. Inside, she lay down by the diamond heart and let its rays shine through her. They gave off heat.

Her body was slowly flagging.

The energy radiating from the diamond soothed her. There was nothing she wanted more than to stay there.

In the meantime, Benedict woke up. He had had a dream that something was about to happen. He remembered the tales of an old eel who had once felt tremors back in his homeland down in the south of Italy. The earth awoke and spewed lava from its belly. It flowed into the water and solidified.

It was only Benedict's body that was trembling now. Annabelle was quietly breathing by his side. Sleep was shining in her eyes.

He got up and looked around. The sea was empty. Fans of seaweed swayed in the rhythm of the waves. Then he noticed a slight movement. A small fish bobbing on the bottom. It glared at him its mouth open wide. It made him laugh.

He followed the little fish. The sound of the surf receded, and he heard a distant echo.

He listened to it.

It was a voice.

Then other voices joined in.

Until they were countless.

They intertwined like snakes. Their timbres differed. Some of them sounded familiar, as if he had heard them before.

They were the voices of the eel ancestors. They lingered in the ocean, like a trace from times long gone, traces that will never go away. Even if the last eel disappeared from the face of the earth, they would remain here as a reminder for all who came after them.

Some creatures are born out of mud. Some creatures will rise again from the depths and make the endless journey to the Sargasso Sea or any other sea, regardless of whether or not there are still any bipeds left here.

The voices were disappearing inside the cave. When Benedict was close to it, he was stunned by one of the voices. It sounded just like Ursula's.

And then he saw her. He swam up to her and touched her. She looked at him. She wanted to avert her gaze, but Benedict wouldn't let her.

"Come and swim with me."

"And what about Annabelle?"

"There's only you."

"I can't make it, I'm too weak."

"Oh yes, you can."

The eels were still sleeping when Benedict and Ursula left the rocks of the archipelago. One last time, Benedict cast a look at where Annabelle was resting. The sight made his heart ache.

It is hard to describe what followed. All the adversities that befell the travelling eels. All the dangers they faced. Someone up there must have been very demanding to place so many obstacles in their way.

Never complain – is one of the eels' principles. One of the most important ones.

Krakatah...

Something huge swam past them. Ursula thought it was a whale. She leaned towards Benedict and asked: "Do whales feed on eels?"

"I don't know," he answered.

But this creature had left them alone. Perhaps they were too small for it.

They very rarely met eels now. This could mean they were in front of them. Or that there were no eels left because no one had succeeded in making it this far.

After some time, they reached a place where huge bubbles protruded from holes in the seabed. As if the Earth's belly had burst open and its smelly contents had spilled out.

"Something smells awful here," Ursula complained.

"It wasn't me!" Benedict joked.

"No, this smells dangerous. Like rotten duck eggs."

Their eyes were stinging. Their bodies were tingling.

"We have to get away as fast as we can."



Strange creatures were swarming around the place where the bubbles were coming out. Tube-shaped worms sticking their little moving horns out of their chitinous shelters. They saw translucent tentacles flitting from place to place as if someone had let go of a popped balloon. Below them, massive crabs were crawling, raising their claws at the eels and shouting: "Krakatah krakatah krakatah..."

"Do you know what krakatah means in crab language?" Benedict asked.

"I have no idea. Nothing good is my guess."

The darkness here was inky black.

"Octopuses release ink. That's what the experienced eel we swam with told me," Benedict said. "They release a cloud in which they then hide."

"We can't do that, we can only hide in the dark," Ursula lamented.

"It's probably for the better that we can't see what's happening around us. Maybe we are surrounded by monsters. Lurking monsters," said Benedict with fear in his voice.

"Maybe," Ursula answered. "Maybe one is lying in ambush for another who in turn is on the lookout for a third one."

"I wish they would eat each other and leave us alone."

"Yes, I wish that as well."

Krakatah krakatah krakatah...

First they saw massive tentacles in the half-light, followed by a body several metres long and with a distorted snout quivering in the centre. Inside it they could see its jaws.

"Don't move," Benedict whispered to Ursula.

They stopped swimming and just floated in the depths.

It was a giant squid. Fortunately, it didn't notice them. All of a sudden, something resembling a cloud appeared above them. It flapped its huge fin and bit into one of the squid's tentacles.

The eels stared at it in amazement. Right in front of their eyes, a fight between a sperm whale and a giant squid was taking place. The giant squid lashed out with its tentacles and plunged its toothed hooks into the sperm whale's body. The whale yanked and ripped off one of the squid's tentacles

with its jaws. The tentacle kept wriggling and writhing in the water as if it were alive. Now the sperm whale bit into the squid's giant torso and a cloud of blood poured into the sea. The whale then used its strong fin to drag the squid away until it disappeared from the sight of the eels.

"Woah," Benedict exhaled.

That was the day they learned their first crab word – krakatah.

Resigned to her fate

Even here, far from land, they would find the grooves left by trawl nets in the seabed. There were many of them. And from time to time, they heard the familiar sound of boat engines above them.

The sea current was now helping them move forward. It slowly carried them to their destination. Ursula once hit a sprouting coconut. Another time, they had to dodge suspicious barrels. They also came across various glass and plastic bottles.

They knew that from the river. Especially from the times when the water spilled over the banks and stole some of the bipeds' belongings. Mostly, there was nothing to gain from them. They gave off suspicious smells and held many traps. At sea there were old torn nets aimlessly floating on the surface. They came in handy to the eels. They could crawl into them to rest during daytime.

They were about to approach a free-floating bundle of nets when they noticed a bulging creature entangled in tight strings of netting.

It was a sea turtle.

She had given up on trying to free herself from the nets. Resigned to her fate, she stuck her head above the surface to take a breath.

The deadly loop had trapped her left leg at first, but the more the turtle had tried to free herself, the more entangled she became. After some time, the net had trapped all her limbs and the turtle could barely hold her head above water.



The eels watched her with immeasurable sadness. Ursula thought of biting through the nets. "We've had so much experience with that," she said remembering their struggle with the Maw. But this net was much thicker and the eels' jaws weren't big enough for it.

"You aren't the first who've tried to help me."

The sea turtle didn't look disappointed.

"We turtles are resigned to our fate. We consider ourselves lucky when we see another morning."

"But that's not fair," Ursula objected. "There must be something we can do for you!"

"And what do you suggest, Miss Eel?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

"We turtles are very ancient. Patiently enduring all adversity has helped us survive many world disasters. We're also good at patiently laying our eggs, of course."

The turtle's face lit up.

"You have no idea how sweet turtles are when they're little. Such funny little propellers, just like wound-up toys."

They all fell silent. They seemed to be lost in their own thoughts remembering happier days.

"My name's Ursula, dear turtle, and I come from a hideout in a tangle of sweet flag in a distant river. It's beautiful there."

The turtle nodded.

Ursula wasn't sure why she was telling her that, but she felt that her story might delight the old turtle.

"The most beautiful are the twilights on the river. When the mist drifts over the water, or when a gentle drizzle falls."

Ursula was moved by her own memories. Even Benedict fell silent and gave in to daydreaming.

"Or when the river level rises and the water becomes cloudy. There is plenty of slimy mud everywhere, the kind you can cover yourself in nicely."

"The ocean is my home, the immeasurable distances," the turtle said in a daze. "But I won't be enjoying it for much longer."

"But you mustn't talk like that," Ursula reproved her.

The sea turtle had noticed something that they hadn't. It lightly brushed against her gaze from a distance and disappeared again. A shadow.

"I was heading for the islands with sandy beaches, like so many times before."

The shadow now flickered a little closer.

The turtle listened to the quiet splashing of the waves and closed her eyes. The sun which had risen above the horizon started to scorch.

"I've lived a happy life."

"And you will have many more happy moments," Ursula blurted out full of hope.

"No," the turtle said. "And now you must go. Swim."

Now even Benedict noticed the silhouette of the shark. The shark wasn't in a hurry. It was steadily circling the turtle from a distance waiting for the right moment.

"Come, Ursula. She's right. We have to get out of here."

"Please don't, dear turtle," Ursula begged her, "fight, do try! You still have strength, we can help you..."

"Ursula," Benedict urged her.

"Dear Ms Turtle, please don't give up."

"Ursula. Ursula," he shook her. "Come now. There is nothing left for us to do here. At least let her have a peaceful end."

This time the shark swung its tail impatiently and came closer.

"Oh no," Ursula wailed when she saw it. "Please try again. Don't give up."

"I don't want you to see him tear me apart," the turtle said calmly. "I wish you luck. It will be a relief for me. I bear no grudge against sharks. The sea needs them as much as it needs me and you."

After those words, she opened her eyes wide. They knew her gaze was no longer of this world.

Ursula and Benedict didn't turn round and headed for the depths as quickly as they could.

In the shoal again

As soon as they descended, a shoal of eels swept them along.

"Come swim with us, be quick, we've only just passed a trawl," a majestic eel swimming at the head of the group shouted at them.

They didn't hesitate a second and immediately joined the shoal. There were about fifty of them. They were very thin but determined. They were swimming so fast that Ursula and Benedict had trouble keeping up with them. Soon they got used to the speed and learned the trick the eels used to keep going. One of the eels swam in front and several others swam

close behind. After a while, the first broke away and made its way to the end. And so they all took their turns.

During a break, they overheard the leading eel called Scar talk about a group of eels that bullied the others. They picked on the weaker individuals and forced them to serve them. They would lurk on the edges of the river and refuse to travel further.

"Such eels are nothing but freeloaders and cowards who take their anger out on others."

Ursula became attentive.

"Doesn't it ring a bell?" she said turning to Benedict.

Their suspicions were justified. From what Scar told them afterwards, they learned that Toxie was the gang leader.

"We also had the pleasure," they said.

Scar then told them how Toxie started bullying some of his own gang members and how unpredictable his behaviour was. In the end, no one was sure of their lives. Toxie grew less and less popular and even his most loyal cronies started to be weary of him.

"Did they kill him?"

"No, but he probably sensed that he was in danger and he left. No one has seen him since. Most of the gang members then realized they had done wrong and joined the travelling groups. Right here is one corrected eel who used to belong to Toxie's gang," he explained pointing to an eel that guiltily bowed his head before them.

Benedict and Ursula recognized him. He was one of those who had chased them down the dock.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It was stupid of me."

"It's all right," they answered forgivingly. "Shame about Pharaoh, though."

"Pharaoh," the eel straightened up. "He's fine. Here," he pointed to a long scar under his eye, "he whipped me here with such force that it took me two days to recover. But it served me right. Pharaoh managed to escape. I think he's probably swimming in a group right behind us."

"Hurray!" Ursula and Benedict cheered so loudly that even Pharaoh could have heard them.

Manta ray dance

They had been travelling for many weeks in the shoal led by Scar but the Sargasso Sea was no way in sight. The eels' innate distrust bubbled to the surface. They started to blame each other and shout at one another.

"Maybe we messed up," some grumbled.

"I think we're going in the wrong direction," another one said.

"We are trapped, too weak to turn back," complained another.

And once again they reproached the eel elders and Ourobouros who had sent them on the journey, and cursed the unjust fate of eels.

But Ursula paid little attention to all of this. Like other female eels, she had grown a belly. Her small belly bump had turned into a purplish lobe that dragged her down towards the bottom. Swimming now required more effort.

Benedict was watching this with some concern but when he realized that a similar malady had taken hold of the bellies of the other females, he concluded that it was a natural consequence of the long journey.

After some time, a group of younger eels came up with a suggestion. There were shortcuts. They noticed that in some places the main current divided into two sometimes even three directions, and that it was a mistake to follow the direction suggested by Scar.

"That's not my direction," Scar objected, "I follow what we all do – my instincts."

"But how do we know that your instincts are right?" they argued. "Ours are telling us otherwise," they claimed.

The female eels lashed out.

"We should be glad we are still swimming. Why are you doubting? Do you realize what an important treasure we are carrying?"

At that, they looked down at their bellies.

"We won't let your bellies dictate our terms," one of the young ones, who liked to call himself Joffrey, retorted.

Silence followed his words.

"What did you say?" The female eels crowded together and stared at him in a such way that his fins shook with fear.



“Hey, look!” someone shouted and pointed towards the water surface. They saw a creature whizz past. “It’s a monster!”

They looked again but saw nothing. Then they noticed the outline of a body several metres long. It had wings.

“That’s no monster. It’s a bird, you fool,” Scar reproved.

But something about it didn’t seem right. This one seemed to be floating under the surface. Some birds can do this. Frigatebirds dive headlong down into the depths snapping their sharp beaks around.

This creature was much slower, though. And bigger.



In an instant thousands of other wings blocked their view. The silhouettes of majestic giants flapping their wings and wagging their tails like tame dogs.

"We're in trouble," the eels exclaimed.

"Manta rays," Scar uttered. "They're probably about to start courting. They usually do a dance. It's supposed to be beautiful. No need to worry about them."

But they should have been worried.

At the stroke of midnight, their behaviour changed. The mantas were seized with rage. Their dance was no longer neat and peaceful like before. They began to wriggle, hit out with their fins and knock into each other.

They were suddenly all over the place. The eels clung together and tried to swim through the mantas. But it was impossible. They shouted at each other, they gave each other advice, but soon they were all swimming in different directions.

Ursula and Benedict stuck together. They pushed forward. The manta rays paid no attention to them. There was madness in their eyes. As if they were running away from something. Benedict had once heard of manta rays from Annabelle. She admired their elegance. She said that when courting, manta rays would leap above the surface to get the attention of the females. Benedict remembered how Annabelle paused after saying that and stared at him.

I hope you don't think I'm going to leap above the surface for you, he had said to himself.

In those days he had thought it was funny.

But now it was a matter of life or death.

The most important thing was not to lose Ursula.

He looked around. She was nowhere to be seen.

"Ursula! Ursula!" he shouted. His voice echoed off the bodies. He plunged forward and tried to push through them. He got caught in the vortices created by the flapping fins. He came upon Scar who was muttering away.

"What are you doing? Can't you see that you are hurting us? Calm down!" He was scolding the manta rays, but they were paying no attention to him.

And then he saw her.

She was motionlessly sinking to the bottom. Her fins were twitching, but otherwise she seemed dead.

For a fraction of a second, everything went black. He darted towards her. He wrapped his body around hers and started falling with her.

It took forever.

The pressure was unbearable. And the cold. And the darkness.

Then Ursula woke up and asked: "Are we in the Sargasso Sea yet?"

"Almost. We're almost there."

At the destination

Then they travelled alone again. They had almost no strength left, and they were assailed by visions. The water before them swelled into strange and mysterious shapes. Prehistoric monsters rose from the depths and when the eels entered their mouths, they melted away.

At other times, they saw an ocean of shimmering lights below them. Fish looking like bladders swam in the lights. They would inflate and at one and the same moment deflate again. They gave out a terrible sound which resembled an orchestra out of tune. Tinkling and knocking came from every side, then dull thuds and finally silence, and the illuminated ocean below them went dark.

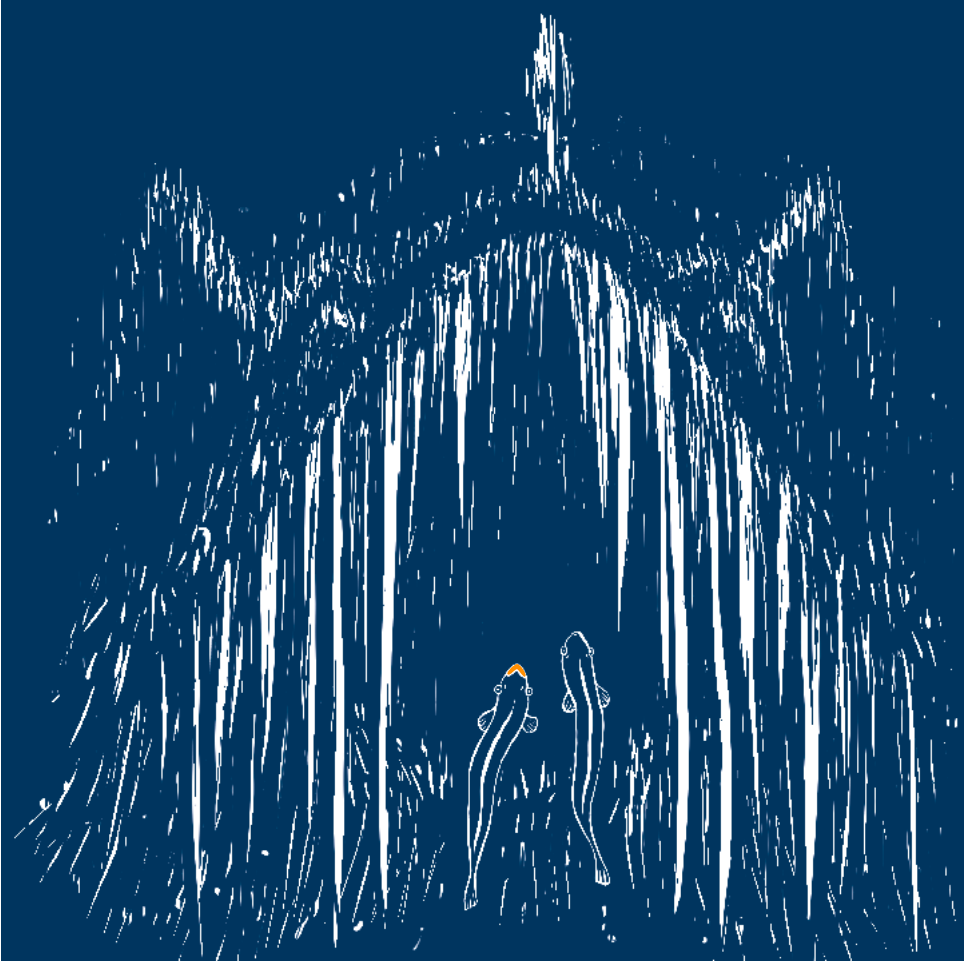
"Don't you think that sometimes the entire word resembles the Talking Cave?" Ursula asked Benedict.

"More like the Maw," he replied.

After some time, Ursula could go no further. Her belly was bigger, and she didn't have the strength to drag it under her anymore. She tried to persuade Benedict to continue without her, but he wouldn't hear of it. He poked her with the tip of his head, trying to encourage her.

"The Sargasso Sea could be round the first bend."

"There are no bends in the sea," she murmured.



They remembered the river and realized how they missed it.

"That can no longer be true," she uttered.

Benedict knew exactly what she meant. As far back as their memory went, it was filled with the sea. The ocean.

Everything that came before that had vanished into make-believe.

Just as Ursula was about to give up, she heard a voice inside her. It was coming somewhere from behind, from the depth within. It said: You are ours. You are ours.

"Whose?"

Why, ours! she heard again.

"No," Ursula shook her head. "Not only me," she replied and looked at Benedict. "There are two of us."

The moment she uttered those words the sea before them cleared a little, and there was complete and utter silence. Even Benedict froze. They both shivered. Then they saw them. Their eel companions.

There were thousands of them, maybe more.

There aren't only two of you, she heard humming in her head.

That voice again.

There are more of you. There are many more of you.

They joined them. Then everyone started to prepare for something. It was all happening by itself. They slowed down, creating one fluent body. Their blood was boiling. Ursula felt a strange thirst. There were voices everywhere. The voices of the ancestors. The voices of her parents.

Ursula was ceasing to be Ursula.

Benedict was no longer Benedict.

They were writhing, and they couldn't stop. They hugged and looked into each other's eyes. Relentlessly. Deeply.

Then her body opened, and from somewhere inside her, eel eggs started gushing out. They were leaving her and falling into the depths. They were venturing into uncertain existence.

It made her sad. She wanted so badly to help them. To tell them that it all made sense.



Swimming to the rivers and then returning here again. Completing the circle.

But Ursula couldn't think about that anymore. She was falling. Straight down towards a bronze haze created by billions of eggs. Further below, the current was carrying them away so that their journey to the shores of Europe could begin.

This is where Ursula's story ends. There is no need for it to continue.

Some creatures are born out of mud. Some creatures emerge from the depths to undertake an endless journey to the Sargasso Sea or another sea. And it doesn't matter if there are still any bipeds left.

Afterword

The European eel is an endangered species with an uncertain future. It can be found in our country only due to its artificial reintroduction. It sounds rather strange, but sometimes baby eels arrive here on a plane. They are placed in oxygenated boxes by fishermen who in turn bought the eels from their colleagues in coastal states, such as France, Portugal and Great Britain.

The Czech Republic is an unconquerable fortress for eels. The scientists have counted about 6,600 obstacles which are higher than one metre on Czech rivers. Eels can do all sorts of tricks, but this is too much even for them. There is no other way than to ship the eels to us by truck or air. Do they get dizzy on the flight, you ask? I have no idea. In any case, it costs a lot of money and it is not good for their survival.

It is better than nothing, though.

There is also the option of breeding eels artificially in specialized hatcheries. It is possible with most fish species. But with eels, everything is more complicated. So far, artificially bred eels have only lived for about a month. Compared to the past, it is an improvement, yet their story still ends in a premature death. We need to keep them alive until adulthood. Scientists have already accomplished this with the Japanese eel, but it is going to take some more time with our European eel.

The very best option, though, would be to enable eels to move naturally again. To remove the obstacles from the rivers. Or to build fish passes. And to crack down on smugglers who catch small eels to sell them to someone with a strange urge to eat them.

All this is being done, but it isn't enough. We must try harder.



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URSULA'S

Journey Home

MIROSLAV
BOČEK

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Ursula the Eel was living peacefully in the river until one day she woke up to a scent that made her want to go on a journey. But her journey was full of pitfalls and the final destination out of sight.

Ursula's Journey Home tells the story of the mysterious journey of eels to the distant Sargasso Sea. Ursula must navigate weirs, avoid turbine blades and learn the rules of eel love. Can she overcome these obstacles and challenges, and complete her task?

This environmentally-themed story with an adventure plot and a touch of mysticism is not only about the mysterious eels and fishways in general, but also a lot about us humans.

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