

„Come on, just paddle over here!“

Bernard sighed. What had he gotten himself into? Why hadn't he simply stayed on the boat? And why did these people seem completely incapable of understanding that he did not 'just paddle over here', as they were so intent on putting it, but that said paddling, to him, was an act of extreme concentration, psychological tension, physical exertion and pain. He had been 'paddling over here' for hours now, or so it felt, and his arms were leaden and tired, his ribs ached where they had to carry his weight on the board, and his lips were chafed from the sea water and light. Also, he had a headache, and quite possibly a severe sunburn. on about 80% of his body. Dede's Yacht was probably just a few hundred yards away, but it seemed miles, so small did the hull appear from his vantage, and so enormous the span of unfriendly water stretching between it and him.

But his friend had called, and he knew where to catch the best fun waves – which, to Bernard, were the frightening ones that seemed ten yards high, although he realized that they were probably only a third of that, since everything seemed a lot taller when your head was almost level with the surface – so Bernard went down on his raw stomach and his aching ribs again. He tried his best not to lose his balance in the process, and indeed succeeded in not rolling his board, although he had to correct his posture three times before he was finally in a position to start the horrible process of lifting his aching arms above the water and generating some traction by dragging them through, all the time doing his best not to think about the miles and miles of black abyss beneath him, from which horrible things might come up, surely for the sole purpose of dragging him down to his wet grave.

Bernard had once read about sperm whales diving into the lightless depths of the ocean to catch their prey and reemerging with dinner-plate-sized wounds from their struggles against giant kraken, and for the life of him, he could not figure out what might drive an intelligent sentient feeling being like a whale to do such a thing and risk attacks in the absolute darkness of the deep from a horrible monster such as a giant kraken.

But he tried to banish those ideas from his mind, as well as the countless aches and bruises which were his body's way of warning his useless brain what a bottomless stupidity he was engaging in, and paddled towards Dede.

When he arrived, and had painstakingly found a position in which he could sit on his board more or less upright, Dede pointed at something behind him, laughed and shouted:

“There! That's a good one! Paddle, paddle! I think you can catch it!”

But Bernard just gave him his best 'You have got to be fucking kidding me'-look, because he was not sure he would be able to move a finger without falling from his board into the water and limply sinking down into – whoa, stop right there, wrong train of thought.

“Can't!” he croaked. “Need ... a rest.”

Dede shrugged and laughed.

“Sure, take your time!”

Bernard liked surfing. He really did. He practiced at least one week, twice a year, and he had been to the beaches of Indonesia, Australia, South Africa and California. It was just that he had never tried it on the open ocean, and never so long at once. He usually went out after about an hour to recharge his batteries, take on some water and food and relax in the shade of a palm tree. He loved it. He loved the exercise, the mood, the image, and the wonderful feeling of being bone tired in the evening and going to sleep without even having a chance of starting to ponder the problems in his life and the responsibilities awaiting him back home. He loved surfing.

And then he had allowed himself to be talked into Dede's harebrained scheme of taking him out here on his yacht, and catching some '*really* great' waves. Well, Dede was a professional competition surfer, so this was all fun and games to him, but Bernard was not, so it felt like anything but.

"You know," he wheezed, "Come to think of it, I might just call it a day. Do you think Leyla would be so kind as to drive over here, or shall I ... just paddle over to her?"

Dede laughed again, and if it wasn't so contagious and endearing a laugh, Bernard just might have started hating it that day.

"Just paddle over quick," he said, "I'll be after you in a minute, just a few more waves, okay?"

"Fine by me," Bernard lied, and allowed himself a few heartbeats of postponing the dreaded moment when he had to lower his scratched and wounded body onto the loathed board again – which was way too small for someone of his ability, of course – and start paddling before he finally did, as he knew he must.

And paddle he did, for a long time. It seemed like an eternity to him, and the pain of his smarting arms and his bruised ribs and his burning eyes and the abominable scorching sun formed such a barrier around his senses that he hardly heard Dede's warning cries, and Leyla's worried calls, and when he finally lifted his head and turned around, it was too late. Not that he would have known what to do anyway, but the wave left him no more than half a second before grabbing him, ripping his board away – Dede had told him he didn't believe in leashes – rotating him until he lost any sense of up and down, and pulling him under into the blue depth.

For a moment, Bernard had the acute impression that, from the dark abyss below him, something was shimmering and flashing, but before he could even finish the thought, he lost consciousness.