



# DAY OF THE WHALE

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### Chapter 1

#### Big Blue

A single note soared over the island – a high-pitched yawn that cut through the thick, sticky heat. Cam stopped scrubbing and waited, hoping another would follow. Hoping with all his might. . . Seconds later it came: a long, mournful bleat. A summoning call.

“Big Blue’s coming!”

Cam dropped his brush and ran out of the barn and into the open yard where he fell, sprawling on piles of seaweed. The workers around him laughed and pretended to prod him with their rakes, but he picked himself up and kept going, dashing through the tight alleys of the kelp district, his green tunic flapping like sea lettuce in a storm.

When he hit the main streets, crowds of people were oozing through them already, slow and thick like lava. He bounced on his toes, watching as the throng thickened. If he was swallowed up in that sluggish tide, he’d be stuck at the back, lucky to see anything at all.

And he had to see. He had to.

Crowds were now building up behind him; he was running out of time. Cam looked for an escape. To his left was a breeze tunnel – a gut-pinch alley between two houses, barely wide enough for a possum. He sucked in his tummy and slipped into it sideways, edging through it like thread through a needle to the other side, where he found himself in the network of small alleys that criss-crossed the districts. The backstreets were cool and empty, and Cam sprinted through them, zigzagging towards Eden Place as fast as he could.

Eden Place was at the heart of Cetacea: a square so big, it could hold everyone on the island. It was half full by the time Cam got there, and hot – the stone baking like an oven under the vicious southern sun. People scurried to pockets of shade and squabbled over the auditorium seats on the east and west sides.

That’s where Cam and his dad had always chosen to sit. Not for the light breezes, like most, but for the clear view of the screen that towered over the north side of the square. It was almost as big as Eden Place itself, and from up there, at the top, when Big Blue came,

they could see all of him, tip to tail. Cam recalled his dad's excitement, how his fidgeting hand would tap Cam's knee and he'd say, "Take a good look him, Cam. See what he is."

What he was, was a blue whale. And when Big Blue appeared, magnified and magnificent on the giant screen, it always took Cam's breath away.

*Take a good look him, Cam. See what he is.*

His dad had always urged him to look harder. And over the years, Cam had done just that. He'd memorised the whale's markings, colours, scars and barnacles; he knew the contours of the creature better than he knew his own face. He thought he knew everything there was to know, but it turns out he didn't know anything at all. Not about Big Blue. And not about his dad.

Because he never thought his dad would leave.

"If I don't come back, follow Big Blue and find the truth, Cam. Understand?" His father had gripped his arm and nodded as if to nail the words into Cam's forehead. Then stepped through the door and was gone. He didn't return that day or the day after, and, as the weeks turned into months, Cam took those last words and distilled them into an oath.

*Follow Big Blue. Find the truth.*

There was something else he needed to know about Big Blue – some truth – and when he found out what it was, then he'd find out where his dad had gone.

It seemed simple enough at first. But four Big Blue sermons had passed since then. Four times, Cam had rushed to the top row of seats and stared so hard at the Eden Screen his eyes dried up – inspecting the whale from mouth to tail fluke, from dorsal to belly – and each time he learned nothing new. Now, he suddenly realised how pointless it was. Pointless doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different outcome. If he hadn't seen the 'truth' in the last four sermons, why would it be different this time?

He was going to try something else.

Instead of scrabbling up the scaffolding, he headed into the standing area, where people were surging like shoals of fish towards the slim shadows. Some fell due to the heat, or from sheer exhaustion after starting dawn work shifts. Others pushed and shoved. The pit was always like a tureen of boiling carrots.

Cam twisted his body through the tiny gaps that opened up between elbows and shoulders, pushing his way forward bit by bit until he found himself in the one area of Eden Place that everyone else avoided.

The very north side of the square was in full sun and right under the screen. The view was terrible and the noise unbearable. But that's what he had come for: the sound. If he couldn't see the truth, perhaps he could hear it. *Feel* it. Anything was worth a try.

He shook out his green tunic, scraped back his damp brown hair and climbed onto the wooden stage beneath the screen, positioning himself cross-legged in front of a noise box. When sound came, it would be unbearable; the vibrations would play his bones like a xylophone. But he hoped Big Blue's voice would sing right through him and leave a message under his skin.

As he waited for it all to begin, he recited the *Birth of Cetacea* laws, hoping Big Blue would somehow notice his devotion.

*We do not speak of the dirty past – the past destroys the future.*

*We will work hard – we must sustain ourselves and clean the world.*

*We do not consume more than we need – greed is our downfall.*

*We do not eat animals – all creatures are equal.*

*We stay away from the sea – we will trespass no more.*

*We work together. We eat together. We live together.*

*We obey the whales. Long live the whales.*

The crowd suddenly *aaaaah*-ed. Cam leant back a little and saw above him the Eden Screen had blinked on. It was filled with blue. Fish now flickered this way, then that. Sun pierced the water in shimmering spears. Like magic, it had become a porthole into the Cetacea Sea.

Applause rippled through the square and Cam knew that somewhere in the ocean blue, a dark shape was emerging. They clapped harder and cheered. He was coming.

Big Blue, the Master Whale.

Cam couldn't see clearly from his position, but he knew it by heart – how the giant appeared from the deep, swimming closer and closer until the grooves along his throat were as big as the plough lines in the fields. So close, it looked as if he might break through the glass and swim right into the crowds. And then stopped and hung there, suspended, gazing out at them with a patient eye.

Cam gritted his teeth. "This time, Dad, I'm going to find the truth. I promise."

The sound box buzzed to life and vibrations spread through his skin like a shower of pins. Then a voice flowed out of it, rich and slow like syrup.

*“Good morning, Cetacea.”*

On a platform to the left of the screen, fifty metres above the stage, a curtain was pulled back to reveal Byron Vos, the greatest whale expert the world had ever known. The founder of Cetacea. The only person on the planet who could talk to whales.

Next to the giant master whale his body looked tiny, but his presence was huge; he always drew everyone’s attention.

Byron raised his arms to the sky and the crowd began to chant.

*“Byron! Byron! Byron!”*

His voice soothed. “Everyone, please be still.”

The applause evaporated. Eden Place fell silent. The whale-talker focused, and Cam braced himself.

A groan burst through the noise box and slammed into his body. The sound boomed; it twisted, yawned and throbbed like earache. Cam squeezed his eyes shut against the pain and tried to imagine the whale call wrapping itself around his heart.

“What truth? Tell me!” he yelled, but Big Blue fell silent and Byron’s voice took over.

“Big Blue says welcome, citizens of Cetacea . . . Because of your dedication, the seas surrounding your island are abundant with life. Fish have begun to fill the reefs. The waters are awash with nutrients . . . The sea gardens will soon be restored to glory.”

*“Yeah!”*

Cam turned his head to see who had spoken. Behind him, a boy was standing in the pit, his arms resting on the stage. About the same age, with light brown skin and blond hair, wearing the yellow tunic of the sand workers. The boy was smiling right at him. Cam wondered why, but he couldn’t be distracted, not now. He couldn’t miss a thing. He turned back to face the noise box.

Big Blue continued his sermon with wide, hollow bleats that strummed Cam’s throat and shook his bones. But as the call faded and Byron began his translation, Cam was left with nothing but a churning stomach.

“You are making progress, but you are yet to rid the oceans . . . of waste created by thousands of years . . . of human neglect. Look after the Earth and the Earth will look after you.”

*Look after the Earth and the Earth will look after you.* Those were always the final words. So, just like that, it was over. The shortest sermon in years.

A sob escaped Cam's chest as he looked up and saw the blurred image of Big Blue drifting like a giant monolith into the steely distance. The Cetacea Sea faded too, along with Cam's hope that this time would be different. He wanted to slink away and scream with frustration, but the session hadn't finished – not until Byron said so.

The whale-talker's upper half now filled the screen. His linen top and long sandy hair fluttered in the thin breeze and his hands were positioned in front of his chest, wrists pressed together and palms apart.

"Adopt the whale tail," he prompted.

Everyone placed their hands in the whale-tail position for their silent promise to reject the dirty past and live for a clean future under the guidance and laws of the whales. Cam usually loved this part. But today he was agitated. His body was still shaking from the noise, and his mind was maddened. The truth – whatever the truth was – had evaded him again. He felt his father slipping further away.

"Thank you, all." Byron Vos's bright green eyes seemed to look at each and every one of them in the square. "Let us remind ourselves. Who caused the floods?"

*"We caused the floods!"*

"What must we do?"

*"Clean up the Earth!"*

"Who saved our souls?"

*"The whales saved our souls."*

"The whales are our masters. Long live the whale!"

*"Long live the whale. Long live the whale."*