

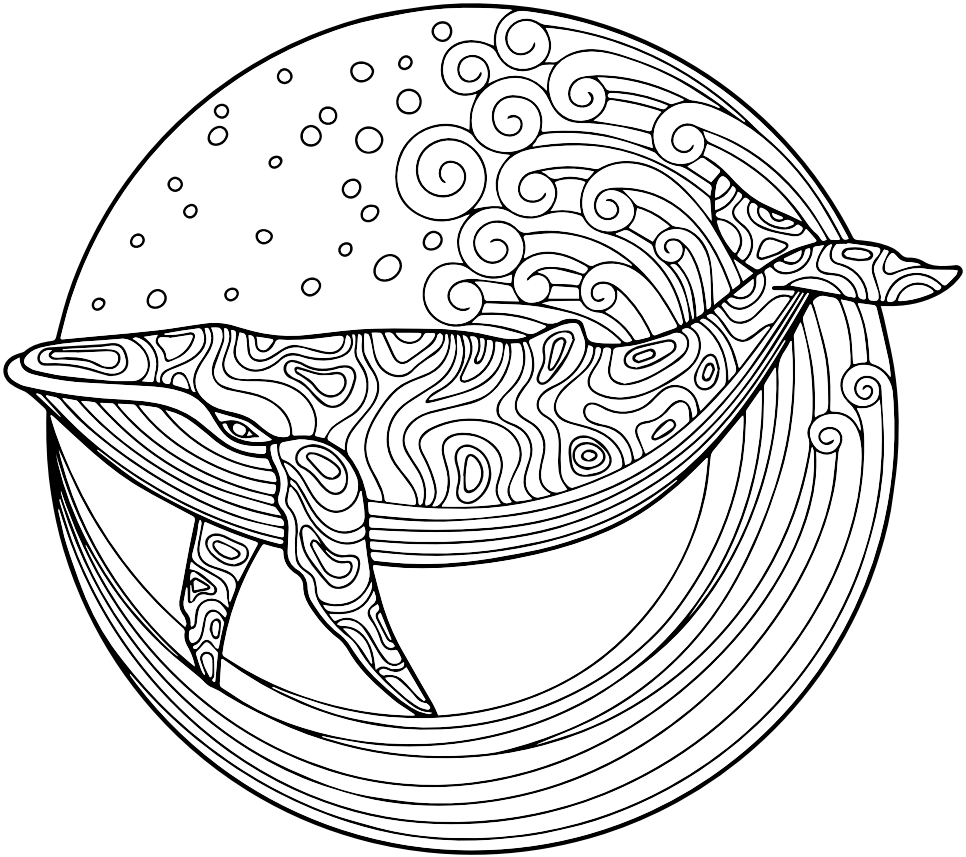
# UNDER THE SEA, GOING WITH THE FLOW



**MY NAME IS :**

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# UNDER THE SEA, GOING WITH THE FLOW

Written by Emma Ibrahim

Translated by Basma Omar and Esther Jacoud

Full page illustrations by Khadija Casanova

Spot illustrations by Thibault Gauthier,  
Mahault Georges, Alaa Kadah and Lama Jisri

Layout by Abdel Rahman Ibrahim

April 2023



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On the shores of the Red Sea lives Maya, a curious little girl, who never stops asking herself questions; she lives with her family and her little brother Farid. Before leaving for school, she never fails to run to admire the sea – she has always been attracted by this gigantic stretch of water, perhaps due to her name<sup>1</sup>. So, with Farid, every day at sunrise, she goes to the beach to search for the most beautiful seashells; the sea generously delivers them to the shore, but Maya doesn't take them, she observes them, then shows them to her brother and puts them back on the hot sand. Why? Because they serve as homes to the small marine animals, every uninhabited seashell is a future home.

Maya is passionate about marine life. What types of animals live in the depths of this fascinating space? She would always like to know more. She was taught the names of the species that live in the Red Sea, but there are so many that she has never seen with her own eyes. Multicolored fish, turtles, dugongs, and sharks remain a mystery to her. Her dearest dream is to discover these species as much as possible, but her parents forbid her from getting too far from the shore. She knows perfectly how to swim, like Farid, but the flippers and the snorkel that her uncle had offered her are in the closet: "You will go in the deeper zones when you are older!" they say.

This Friday, however, the sea is calling her stronger than usual. In secret, she leaves her house and, accompanied by her brother, goes to an abandoned beach.

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1. Maya means water in Egyptian dialect.



Only the light breeze disturbs the morning silence of the place. "There will be more fish", she says to herself; she knows that the vibrations emitted by the boat engines displease them. Farid meets a friend on the beach and prefers to play with him, rather than spontaneously becoming a diver so early in the morning. Therefore, in agreement with Maya, he leaves to play a game of soccer, while his sister prepares her flippers and her snorkel, which she finally took out of the closet for the getaway.

As soon as she's ready, she slips into the lukewarm and clear water; no waste came to dirty the sea water in this area, to her great relief. A thought suddenly came to her mind... "Why not being helpful?" She is determined to memorize everything perfectly, so that her expedition isn't purely free. She knows that researchers need everybody's help in their observations. It's what we call citizen science.

The currents seem unstable and perhaps dangerous, Maya remains cautious. The water carries her gently for the moment and she lets herself go, still, without going too far, when she sees a dark mass at the bottom of the water. Her mask is well adjusted, and she makes out better and better the outlines of the animal that's rising to the surface: green and covered with scales, it's a turtle. But she is swimming strangely, her two front fins seem tangled in a fragment of a net. However, she is going up, somehow, to catch her breath. Maya understands that this is unusual. In class, she learned that turtles get too often caught in garbage or in fishing nets. Normally, no one is allowed to get so close to turtles, let alone touch them, but Samir, her uncle, taught her life-saving gestures. So, she approaches cautiously, without scaring the animal and undoes the net that was wrapped around its fins. The turtle, motionless, observes Maya with its large dark eyes. With no hurt, Maya was able to free it.



She moves backwards a little bit and observes the turtle, now free, while it regains full use of its fin. That's when something completely unexpected happens: "Good morning" says a rocky voice. Maya is alone, so it was the turtle who spoke. Its eyes were fixed on Maya: understanding the confusion she caused, she resumes: "yes, it is me that you hear; the gift of communicating with humans was granted to me by the god of the abyss, at the very beginning of my existence. But I use it very rarely, overwhelmed by the damage that humans cause to us. They don't seem trustworthy. But for you Maya, it's different. You freed me from this net, and you saved me from a certain death." Maya, still in shock, attempts to speak, but almost goes under. That's right, how to speak under water? But no sooner had Maya thought about it than the turtle declares: "I can read in your mind what you are trying to tell me; think Maya and I will hear you." Surprised, she asks the turtle in her mind to introduce herself. "My name is Cleo, I'm 80 years old, I am part of the family of green turtles! In the Red Sea we are five families of turtles. Follow me! From now on, you can breathe underwater; you have earned this privilege.



You will discover wonders, but also witness disasters. "Did you know that millions of tons of plastic are thrown in the oceans every year!"

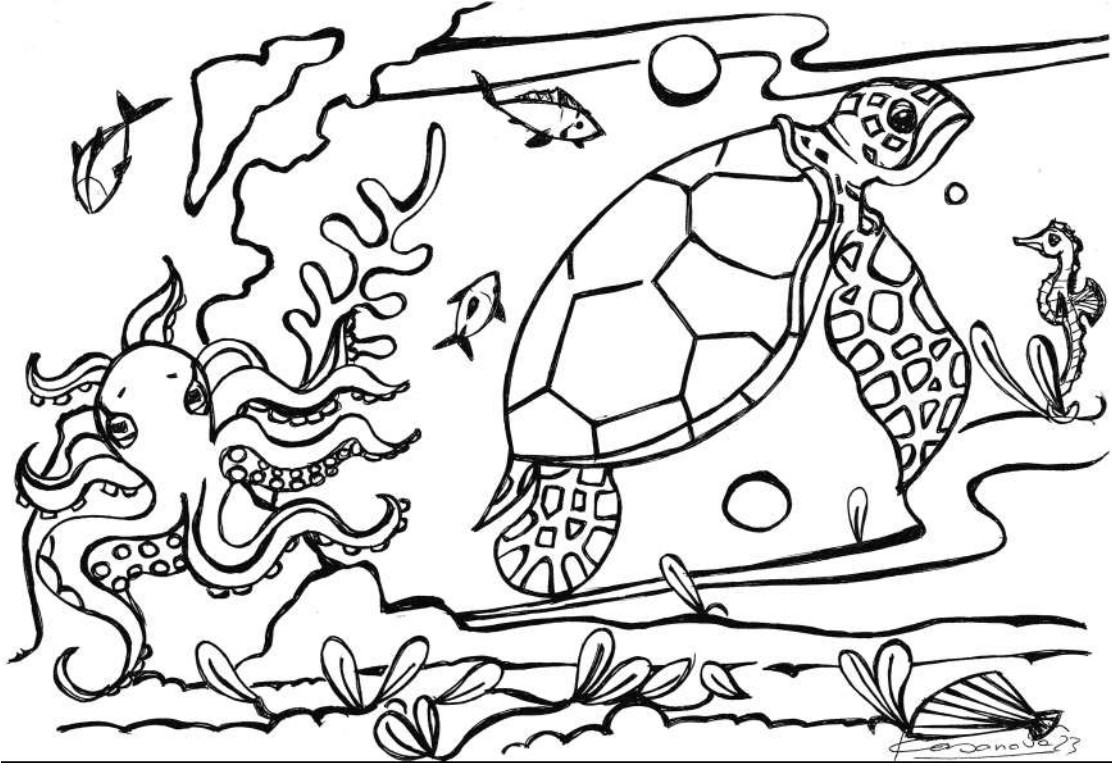




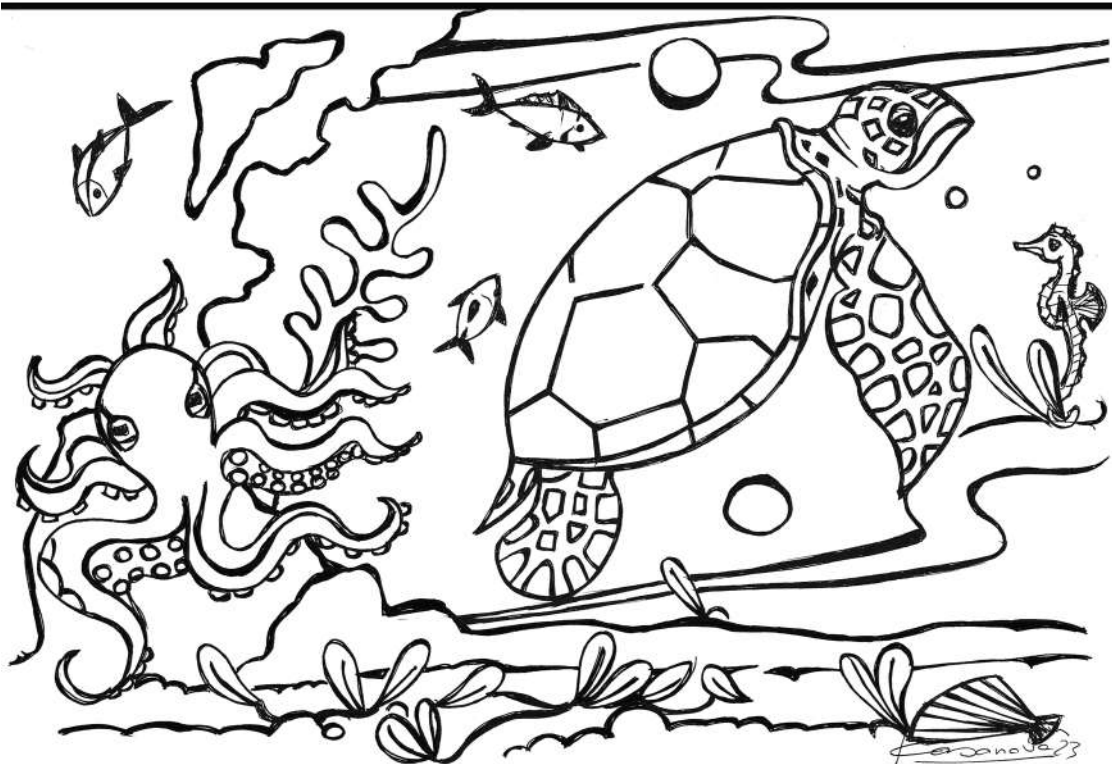
Downhearted, Maya thinks however: "But how do you manage to live so long? What do you eat?", Cleo answers "I feed on seagrass and some seaweed; it's in my nature to live so long, even as much time as you, humans, actually!" In a dash, she pulls Maya along with her. "Look, this is my favorite place: the herbs are varied and still well supplied." It seems to Maya that she's swimming more comfortably and that she can even hold her breath much longer than usual, to dive deeper; she is quite surprised and enthusiastic. Who wouldn't dream of doing the same?



But what is her surprise when, approaching the bottom of the water, she catches sight of grass choked by debris and hears a faint voice calling out to her: "Maya, free me!". With a delicate gesture, Maya pushes aside the plastic bag, which she keeps with her to throw later in a dumpster. "Thank you, I can finally breathe, and thanks to you, I can resume my role in the ocean." "What are you talking about?" Maya wonders. "Oh yes, we may seem negligible, but our function is essential in the cycle of the ecosystem: the much larger ones, like Cleo, could not survive without us and our roots stabilize the seabed. It's also thanks to these same roots that we, who are so small, capture at least 10% of the carbon stored in the bottom of the oceans." "I never would have imagined such a thing" answers Maya, impressed. With the back of her hand, she caresses the grass gently. But Cleo moves away; Maya wants to follow her.



CAN YOU SPOT THE 7 DIFFERENCES?



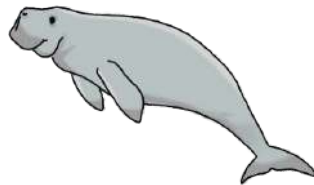


Both rise to the surface for a moment; Maya takes the opportunity to take deep breaths. She then takes pleasure in following Cleo on her peaceful and soothing descent towards the sandbanks. Now she almost touches the bottom, and she can observe the seagrass more easily. All of a sudden, she distinguishes small creatures that intrigue her. Cleo comes closer and explains to her: "Often they camouflage, and we can't see them! They're seahorses, very strange fish that don't swim very well, but that stand upright like you." So much delicacy impresses her. But Cleo continues: "You probably know that turtles go back to the beaches where they were born to lay their eggs." Maya carries on: "Yes, I also know that baby turtles, when they are born, find the ocean thanks to the reflections of the moon on the surface of the water." You will learn something even more incredible, resumes Cleo: "With seahorses, it's the father who carries the eggs and gives birth to them. But although they are very numerous, they too are threatened." Maya is saddened, Cleo explains to her: "the humans fish nowadays with huge nets that scrape the bottom of the seas; they collect much more than they need and the seahorses, along with many other species, are caught unnecessarily and more often than not they die!" Maya distinguishes a tiny voice. It's that of the seahorse: "everyone has their place in the cycle of life: if we ask too much, everything is unbalanced, and nothing goes right anymore."





Following in Cleo's trail, Maya continues her way, thinking, when a cloud of sand catches her attention. Cleo distances herself and warns her: "Beware of Mobo! If he sees me, he'll chase me again and I won't be able to outweigh him." It is a young mischievous dugong, which camouflaged itself, because a group of swimmers started to bother it. But they have moved away, and Maya doesn't want to bother Mobo at all: she stays far enough away from him, so that he can savor the seagrass that he is fond of. Now, a female dugong approaches. The dugong mothers stay with their young, until they are ready to reproduce. Mobo is confident now and Maya hears him complaining to his mother, as he comes to the surface to breathe, surrounded by small yellow fish that seem to play with his large lips: "I can't find as much grass, it's all gray today." Maya unfortunately understands; she knows that a construction site has been set up on the shore, not long ago. Another trendy residential building that will affect the shoreline and damage the sea grass beds where Mobo and many others graze. Humans are intruding on vital territories to the point that turtles and dugongs are now threatened with extinction.



But Cleo has moved far away. Maya quickly catches her breath and speeds up to join her. Fortunately, the Red Sea is very salty and carries her warmly and comfortably, as the current accompanies her in her efforts. Cleo is once again within reach; she gently sinks back down.

The sea is so pretty seen from below! A few meters in front of her, there is now a coral reef. She was taught at school that reefs are composed of hundreds of thousands of corals gathered at shallow depths, which are home to a variety of fish species and other colorful creatures.

But at first glance, the reef seems quite different. It looks like a gigantic city, like a bubble under the sea, where thousands of small and big fish, with the most shimmering colors, swim around. Life flourishes in all directions and the sun pierces the surface of the water to illuminate the place, as well as Maya's eyes, amazed by this new spectacle.

Just at the bottom of the reef, on the sand, she sees new seagrass. She then let herself sink gradually to the bottom of the water to come closer to the plants. They are firmly rooted to the ground, protected from the currents by the reef which shelters them. In exchange, they contribute to the fixing of the sediments and guarantee a better transparency, essential to the good development of the corals. "To everyone his place in this precious balance!", comments Cleo who is grazing. Maya takes the opportunity to observe more closely and quickly notices that many small animals, various shells come to take refuge in these seagrasses. "There's a lot going on here," she thinks, thrilled by her discoveries.

You are probably wondering, young readers, what are the noises that prevail at the bottom of the sea, what sounds are produced by all this agitation? Does it sound like our cities? You see, around Maya there is a pleasant silence, a few hushed sounds, against the backdrop of the steady, gentle roll of the sea on that day. Fish, large and small, come and go around her, barely noticing her presence; some shy and almost fierce, others casual and fleeting, some bold and carefree, even brushing against her mask.

But as Maya approaches the corals, she perceives faint noises.





Casanova



Indeed, if, like Maya, you listen carefully, you will hear slight “cric, crac, croc”. Is it the reef talking? Maya will soon learn that the louder and more diverse the noises, the healthier the coral. However, she doesn’t get too close to the reef, fearing that she might touch the corals and break them; she might suffer herself, because corals, like jellyfish, have stinging cells that would make her skin itch. As she looks more closely, Maya notices that some are losing their colour or structure. Intrigued, she stares at one of the many fish around her to question it.

It is a large, silvery specimen, streaked with black and yellow.



Maya calls out to it mentally: “Sir!” she shouts thoughtlessly... The fish at first ignores her; she approaches it more until it notices her, not without visible annoyance. “Well, young lady, you allow yourself to interrupt the spiritual walk of a wise person like me! Ah, young people...” he huffs, letting out a few little bubbles - “my apologies, I didn’t mean to bother you,” Maya says sheepishly, moving away a little. But our friend, Monotaxis Grandoculis, stands in front of her and stares at her with his big black eye.

In a firm, resigned voice, he adds: “Um, now that you’ve disturbed me, it’s too late; tell me what’s bothering you.” Caught off guard, she asks him why the corals are pale and damaged in some places, even though there are no visible signs of human activity nearby.

Monotaxis replies vigorously: “Your industrial areas are warming the oceans, which are becoming acidic too quickly. So, our coral habitats, which are as fragile as they are precious, are not able to adapt to these changes. Did you know that I have moved at least three times already? The reefs are deteriorating one by one, they are dying and many of us are dying with them! Moved, Maya doesn’t know what to say. She has never been so determined to do something to protect this environment.

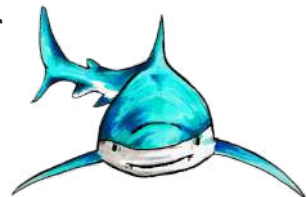
Monotaxis slips away and Cleo suddenly brushes past her as she rises to the



Her escapade has been going on for over two hours. Maya doesn't want to linger too long; her parents would worry. But she goes around another part of the reef, before moving away towards a hollow rock shape, her final exploration.

She then freezes, stunned. There, barely fifty meters from her, moves the gigantic silhouette of a whale shark. Maya is as if paralyzed, she stands upright and does not know what to do. Then she notices Cleo coming towards her. "Don't be afraid," she says, "Candida is so much bigger than us, but she is harmless. She sometimes passes through the area and we are always really lucky to see her. She only feeds on plankton." Maya regains some of her confidence and timidly approaches the majestic animal, which undulates as if rocked by the waves. Candida gives her a sad look: "Sharks do not always mean bloodthirsty carnage; it is us that humans slaughter, not the other way round. To keep these corals healthy, we also need large predatory fish and Galeo, the hammerhead shark, who passes by from time to time, plays a fundamental role in this balance." Maya, sorry but reassured, is now swimming along with Candida. The encounter is magical and unexpected, indeed. Cleo, always very peaceful, and Candida, even more placid, form a calm escort at her side: she has never been so happy. The sun rays make the corals glisten a little further away. A deep sense of well-being overcomes her. It is as if she has finally found her true place in this enchanting, natural expanse. An increasingly strong determination grows inside her: she must put all her energy, all her intelligence, all her willpower at the service of this space threatened by human practices as blind as they are criminal.

The warmth of the rays on her back reminds her that it is more than time to reach the shore. Candida, in a whisper, heads for the open sea to continue her long journey, but Cleo accompanies her a little longer.



When she gets close to the beach, she waves goodbye to Cleo and promises to fight until her last breath for the survival of the oceans. The waves gently bring her back to the shore: she almost touches the ground, and it is like a game to let the roll push her. She pulls her head out of the water almost reluctantly, but she



can see Farid and his friend. They both look worried. Maya gets back in contact with the ground; it is not without a twinge of pain, however, that she puts her two feet on the sand.

Farid runs to meet her, relieved: "Why did you stay so long? I thought something bad had happened to you!" Maya, thoughtful, smiles and replies: "If you only knew! The sea is not so hostile; as always in nature, you must find your place discreetly and then you discover wonders. Farid, we have a difficult and necessary mission to accomplish," she adds in a rush. "Follow me home, I'll tell you all about it; it was magical but also terribly alarming."

Farid struggles to keep up with Maya, who takes giant steps, driven by an almost miraculous energy. Intrigued, interested, motivated, he takes one last look at the sea and joins his sister, accompanied by his friend.







