

### *I am the Monk Seal Cave in Amchit*

I was not always called anything. Long before I was given a name, before someone decided I was worth pointing at, I was simply the sea's favorite place to rest, a depression in the rock. The water carved me slowly. Not beautifully or intentionally, just patiently. Year after year, wave after wave, until there was a space inside me where sound stayed somewhat longer than outside. That was how I learned to listen.

I have listened to Amchit for a very long time, from church bells carried by wind and fishermen arguing before sunrise to boys jumping from the rocks above me, shouting just to hear their echoes return. 50 years ago, there were many of them. Ten soft breathing bodies that slipped in and out of my shadow, according to a book written by a man who cared enough to count, and back then, I was not rare. I was simply home. Now I am almost a rumor. Today there is one they call "Arzeh", she never asked for the name, humans just gave it to her, like they give names to storms and wars. But she answers to it in her own way, by returning.

The first time I heard her footsteps approaching and entering me, she was cautious. Not frightened, just measuring. Seals do that, they test the silence before trusting it. She circled once, then twice. Then she settled against my inner wall, and something deep inside me, something I did not know I possessed, shifted. I had sheltered life before. Crabs, fish, things that flicker and vanish, but this was different. She stayed, and when stayed, I began to understand something about motherhood. It is strange for a cave like me to speak of motherhood, I do not have arms, I cannot close around her and I cannot move and protect if danger moves. All I can do is remain. But remaining, I discovered, is a form of love.

When she slept, her slow and heavy breath filled my hollow spaces. The sound of it traveled through my stone and it felt like a reassurance that I, her chosen mother, am enough to offer her comfort. At night, when the sea was calmer, she would lift her head and look toward the opening where the moon sometimes rested like a quiet visitor, maybe her guardian angel. I felt her watching the world beyond me. I never asked her to stay. A mother, even a stone one, must know the difference between protection and possession. When she was pregnant, she left. I felt the absence immediately, not dramatically, just a change in weight and a missing rhythm. Months passed, the sea kept moving, the village kept talking and life above me continued in its ordinary noise.

I did not know where she had gone until the wind carried whispers... Cyprus. She gave birth there. Of course, safer waters and quieter rock. I understood. But she came back. This is what I need you to understand. She came back to me. Not because I am the safest, not because I am untouched, but because this is where her body remembers how to

rest. Do you know what that means for a cave? To be remembered by the body of a wild creature? It means you belong to something older than ownership.

Above me, in 2021, machines arrived, and heavy ones. I felt them before I heard them. Vibrations travel through stone faster than sound, especially drilling vibrations. There was the sharp, metallic bite of tools humans call progress. They said it was a villa, a beautiful one. I do not argue with beauty, I have held sunsets inside me for centuries. I know what beauty looks like. But I also know the difference between building beside something and building over its breath. When the jackhammer struck, my ceiling answered with a thin crack. Not collapse, not yet, just a warning. Arzeh was inside that day, she lifted her head sharply. Animals do not need environmental reports to understand danger. She left me quickly, cutting through the water with a speed I had not seen in her before and she did not return until night. That was when I first felt fear, not for myself, but for the possibility that she might decide I am no longer worth returning to. People protested, young and old voices, activists standing near the shore saying words like “endangered” and “natural reserve.” They spoke of the Mediterranean monk seal, *Monachus monachus*, as one of the rarest creatures left in these waters.

They are right, but when they speak of extinction, they speak in numbers. I feel it in echoes. In 1970 there were ten, now there is one who trusts me enough to sleep here. One.

I am not declared a reserve yet. Officially, I am rock. Privately, I am history. Conventions recognize places like me as sensitive, but sensitivity is not protection. Some evenings, children still climb above me, they laugh and play and run not knowing what lives beneath their feet. I do not resent them. I only hope they grow into adults who understand that not everything silent is empty. Arzeh still returns, she slips into my shade after long hours in open water, and rests her body against me. I cannot stop construction with my walls. I cannot speak at municipal meetings nor sign petitions. So, I endure, the only thing I can and know how to do. But endurance should not be mistaken for invincibility. I was carved by patience, do not answer me with impatience. If I fall, Arzeh will not protest, she will leave. And when she leaves, she will not come back. I am the cave they named after her, I do not ask to be admired, I ask to be left breathing.

Because once, there were ten. Now there is Arzeh. She is still inside, and I am still holding my breath.

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