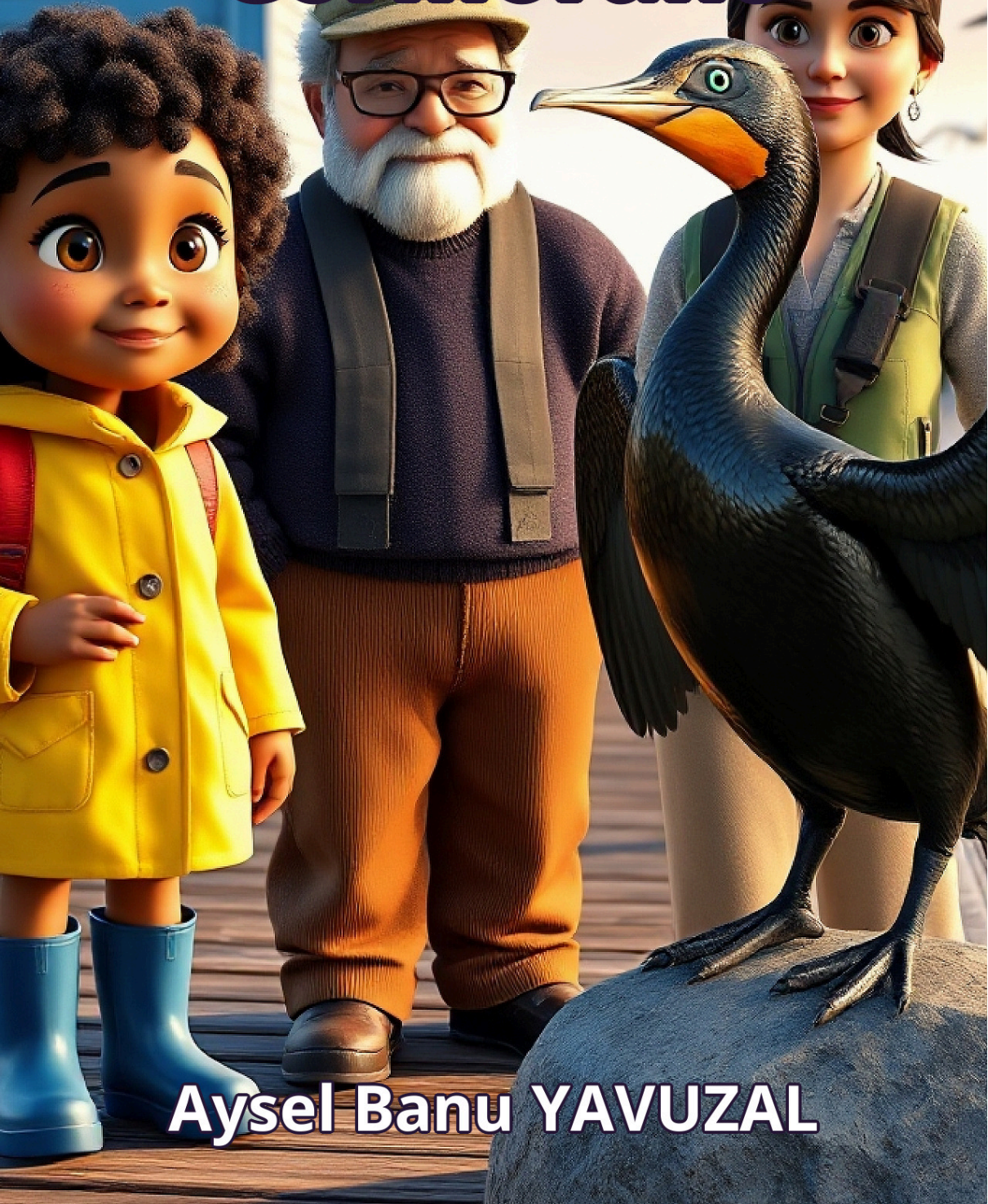


The Girl and the Cormorant



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Maya lived in a small blue house right beside the harbor. Every morning, she pulled on her yellow raincoat and blue rubber boots. She grabbed her red canvas satchel and ran to the water's edge. She loved the salty smell and the cry of the gulls. But most of all, she loved to watch the harbor wake up.



On a flat gray rock near the pier, a big black bird stood very still. It had glossy feathers that shone green and bronze in the sun. Its eyes were bright turquoise, like tiny jewels. Maya watched it spread its wings wide, wide, wide. It looked like a dark umbrella or a cape drying in the breeze. 'Why does it do that?' Maya wondered.



Maya asked everyone she met. She asked the fisherman mending nets. She asked the lady selling ice cream. She asked the seagulls, but they just squawked and flew away. 'Why does the cormorant spread its wings?' she asked again and again. Nobody knew the answer. Maya decided she would find out herself.



The next morning, Maya took out her sketchbook and a sharp pencil. She sat on the pier and drew the cormorant. She drew its long hooked beak and its orange face patch. She drew its wide wings and its thin silver band on one leg. She wrote down everything it did. The cormorant dove into the water and stayed under for a long time. Then it popped up far away.



Maya's grandpa Tom came to sit beside her. He wore his navy fisherman's sweater and olive cap. 'Watching the cormorant again?' he asked with a smile. Maya nodded. 'Grandpa, why does it spread its wings like that? And why does it dive so deep?' Grandpa Tom adjusted his round glasses. 'Those are good questions,' he said. 'Let's find someone who knows.'



Grandpa Tom took Maya to the harbor visitor center. A friendly woman named Guide Priya was there. She wore a green vest and carried binoculars. 'Hello!' she said. 'I hear you have questions about our cormorant.' Maya nodded so fast her curly puffs bounced. 'I want to know everything,' she said. Guide Priya smiled. 'Then let's watch together.'



Guide Priya led Maya to a quiet spot near the rock. 'Cormorants are diving birds,' she explained. 'Their feathers are not waterproof like a duck's. That helps them dive deep to catch fish.' Maya watched the cormorant splash and disappear. In a moment, it came up with a silver fish wiggling in its beak. 'Wow!' Maya whispered. 'It's a great fisherman.'



Guide Priya pointed to the cormorant on the rock. 'Now its feathers are wet and heavy. So it spreads its wings to dry them in the sun and wind.' Maya looked at the wide black wings. 'So it's like hanging laundry?' she asked. Guide Priya laughed. 'Exactly! The cormorant is drying its coat.' Maya wrote it all down in her sketchbook.



Maya had an idea. 'I want to tell everyone about the cormorant,' she said. 'People should know why it spreads its wings.' Guide Priya clapped her hands. 'What a wonderful idea! We can make a display for the harbor visitors.' Maya's eyes sparkled. 'I'll draw pictures and write facts.' Grandpa Tom said, 'And I'll build you a stand.'



Back home, Maya worked on her drawings. She drew the cormorant diving with its sleek body. She drew it spreading its wings like a dark sail. She drew its bright turquoise eyes and silver leg band. She wrote big, clear words: 'Cormorants dive for fish. Then they dry their feathers in the sun.' She added, 'Please watch quietly and give them space.'



Grandpa Tom found some wood and built a sturdy stand. It had a little roof to keep the rain off. Maya painted it bright blue. Grandma helped her glue the drawings onto the board. Soon the display was ready. It showed the cormorant's day, from diving to drying. It asked visitors to be kind and not to scare the birds.



They set up the display near the harbor path. Guide Priya came to see it. 'This is perfect!' she said. 'You've taught people how to respect wildlife.' Visitors stopped to read and look at Maya's drawings. A little boy asked, 'Why does the bird spread its wings?' Maya smiled. 'It's drying its feathers,' she said. 'Watch quietly and you'll see it dive for fish.'



Maya felt proud and happy. She had turned her curiosity into something helpful. Her grandpa gave her a hug. 'You asked good questions,' he said. 'And you found good answers.' Guide Priya added, 'Now everyone can learn from your display.' Maya looked at the cormorant on its rock. It spread its wings wide, as if to say thank you. She waved back.



From that day on, Maya visited the cormorant every morning. She still asked questions and wrote new facts in her sketchbook. Sometimes she led small tours for visitors. She showed them how to watch quietly and keep a respectful distance. 'We share the harbor with wildlife,' she told them. 'And when we watch carefully, we learn wonderful things.'



The cormorant became Maya's favorite neighbor. It always stood on the same rock, spreading its wings in the sun. Maya knew its routine by heart. She knew when it would dive and when it would dry. And she knew that curiosity had led her to understand and respect a wild creature. Her display still stands by the harbor, teaching others to watch and wonder.



One sunny morning, Maya saw a family reading her display. The little girl pointed at the cormorant and said, 'Look, it's drying its wings!' Maya grinned. Her heart felt warm and full. She had learned that asking questions is the first step to caring. And caring for wildlife starts with watching, learning, and giving space. The harbor was a happier place for birds and people alike.