

Blue Planets: Book I of the SOFAR Trilogy - Prologue and Chapter One

PROLOGUE

September 15, 2010

The third planet from the star glowed blue and white when viewed on the long-range visual scanners. The bizarre array of frequencies became more pronounced, luring the two travelers. At this distance, the ship's sensors revealed a planet with a sustainable atmosphere and vast bodies of water.

As the scanners separated the wave-forms, strange and wondrous voices began to fill the inside of the crippled vessel. It was as if a thousand beings were all speaking at once. The cryptic transmissions generated from the oceans on the strange world.

The travelers set a course for the water planet.

September 21, 2010 - The Seri village of Punta Chueca, on the northeastern shore of the Gulf of California, Sonora, Mexico

The triangular metal shard lay on the rough wooden table between them, the light from the kerosene lantern reflecting the strange inscriptions on its surface. Enrique Morales stood facing away from his young wife, Maria, and their five-year old son Jorgé.

Maria suddenly felt as if she and her family were being pulled into the center of the table by the cursed object like some ocean whirlpool yanking them into its vortex.

"You have frightened Jorgé," said Maria angrily, shifting her focus back to her husband. She placed her arm around the young boy. "Instead of filling his head with useless tales of Sky People and fallen ships from the stars, you should be teaching him how to prepare to live among the whites and the *mexicanos*."

Enrique turned sharply, snatched up the shard and held the three-sided metal object in front of her. The light from the lantern exaggerated the deep creases in his weathered face.

"This should be proof enough to you, Maria. My father gave it to me, and he got it from his father, who gave it to him before that. The Sky People were here. This was part of their great flying ship."

"My grandfather told me the same stories," spoke Maria. "They were fine when I was a little girl. But that is all they are - stories. Ramblings of old men to frighten small children. Those fables do not put more fish on our table, nor blankets on our bed, nor clothes on the children's backs."

"You dishonor your grandfather's memory," said her husband disparagingly.

"I loved my grandfather, Enrique. I watched him waste his life looking toward the stars like all of the other elders. He waited for these Sky People to return. On his deathbed, he still believed they would come. They have not come. And do you know why? It is because they never existed."

Jorgé, deep brown eyes wide, looked to his father, then to his mother. His gaze returned to the metal piece. The circular symbols and lines appeared to dance off the burnt-orange surface. The piece appeared to grow before his eyes.

"What then of this piece of metal?" said Enrique, exasperation in his voice. "You cannot burn it, shape it with fire or scratch it. Even Martín's acetylene torch could not

cut through it. It is not of earth.”

“It could have washed up on the beach or been brought by the Spaniards,” said his wife. “There are hundreds of explanations. But I will not allow more tales of visitors from the stars in this house.”

“You cannot disregard the teachings of the elders, Maria. The Sky People will return. They will return at the end of time.”

Maria shook her head in disgust. She stood and lifted the boy from the wooden bench. “Come, *mi hijo*, it is time for bed. Say goodnight to your father.” She carried the boy around to the other side of the table. Enrique kissed his son’s forehead.

“Tonight, you will dream of dolphins, my son.”

Jorgé nodded. “Papa, will you tell me of the Sky People sometime?”

“Yes. Some other time. When you are older.”

“*Buenas noches*, Papa.”

“*Duerme con los angelitos, mi hijo.*”

The woman and the boy disappeared into the dimly lit house. Enrique cradled the strange metal shard in his palm, gazing at the series of lines and circles etched across its surface. He wondered again, as he had so many times throughout his life, what secrets these ancient hieroglyphics held. He placed the object in a small leather pouch that he wore on his belt, reached into his shirt pocket and produced a worn pipe. Lighting it, he stared skyward, contemplating the countless pinpoints of light. At that moment, a meteor’s bright flare arced across the indigo sky and disappeared over the mountains of Tiburón Island.

CHAPTER ONE

September 24, 2010, Gulf of California, 29° 20' W latitude, 112° 40' N longitude

It was late in the afternoon when a lone kayaker rounded the point and faced into an expansive bay. The westerlies were whipping up a three-foot chop, leaving the ocean’s surface a soupy mess. The sea kayak plowed through the waves without difficulty, the sharply defined bow piercing the breaking crests. Foamy water ran over the deck, splashing against Cooper Ridley’s spray skirt and into his face.

Ridley squinted against the sinking sun. Even at this time of year, the late afternoon brightness off the water made his eyes red and weary. He didn’t usually paddle at this time of day. In the northern Gulf of California, it was a pretty safe bet the winds would kick up in the afternoon, making paddling more arduous. Normally, he preferred to hole up under a tarp on shore during the time of the winds. A restless urge caused him to bypass the afternoon take-out point and put more miles of coastline behind him.

Through the glare and the salt caked on his sunglasses, Ridley saw a small boat taking the swells head on. The boat then reversed its position into a following sea, the backwash splashing over the transom. He recognized the craft as a Boston whaler. The captain was maneuvering the boat erratically, the bow pitching wildly in the white-capped swells. Something else caught Ridley’s attention about thirty yards off the whaler’s portside; a gigantic plume of spray erupted skyward from one of the waves. He glimpsed another smaller spout closer to the boat. It took him only a second to discern the geysers as being exhalations from large whales.

“Hey!” Ridley yelled above the wind and engine noise. “Don’t get between the mother and her calf!”

There was no way the two occupants of the whaler could hear him. Ridley dug the paddle in and the kayak shot forward. He grew more furious with each paddle stroke. Drawing closer, he saw that the two occupants in the Boston whaler were women. Their frenzied gestures to each other indicated something was very wrong.

“Get that boat away from the baby!” Ridley yelled. “You’re pissing off the mom!”

This time, the two women looked up to see where the voice was coming from. The woman at the helm angrily waved Ridley off. “Stay back!” she said. “You’ll panic the whales!”

The other woman at the bow leaned down and lifted something out of the water and attempted to cut at it with a knife. Ridley realized the baby whale was trapped in a section of gill net.

He cautiously approached the boat. Timing the wave sequence, he paddled nearer, checking over his shoulder to keep an eye on the adult whale’s position. She continued to circle the Boston whaler and her trapped calf.

“Get the hell away from the boat!” said the captain of the whaler, shifting her gaze constantly between the two whales and the kayak. She threw the throttle into reverse to avoid ramming the baby whale.

“Can you use some help?” said Ridley.

“Just stay back. I’ve got enough to worry about here,” the captain said.

“I’m coming in,” Ridley said. “I think I can help.”

“You don’t listen too well, do you asshole?” she said. “We have a baby whale that’s about to drown and you’re in the way. I’m not going to shut the engines down just to let you board.”

The trapped whale thrashed in the water, churning it white. “It’s getting more tangled!” said the Mexican woman, her voice frantic.

“Look,” Ridley said. “I’ve worked with dolphins before. Something needs to be done soon. I think the winds are picking up.”

The captain looked to the whale, then to the other woman. She nodded grimly. “Come up on the starboard side. Wait until I put the engine in neutral. Better tie up fast.”

Ridley secured the kayak to the starboard cleats. He dragged his cramped body into the Boston whaler.

“What have you got?” Ridley asked the captain.

“Fin whale calf. Maybe six months old. We’ve been with it nearly two hours. The net is still wrapped around the flukes. We cut a big section away from the head. But the water’s too rough now. Every time we get close, it just gets more tangled. It’s getting weaker.”

Ridley limped to the bow of the boat and peered into the deep green water. The young finback whale was as long as the boat. The slate-gray back tapered to a seven-foot wide set of flukes held in a downward position. Ridley saw why the boat was maneuvering so close to the infant. The women had rigged up two lines that were attached from the bow to four plastic fenders used in docking. The boat was part of a makeshift sling designed to buoy the whale’s body up. The calf was nearing exhaustion

as wave after wave crashed over its blowhole.

Ridley looked at the Mexican woman. "What's the mom been doing?"

"She charged the boat once. Mostly, she's been circling, calling to her calf."

"Have you been in the water with it?"

"We tried. Darcy cut away some net near its head. Then the baby started to panic. It just got more tangled. It's worse around the flukes."

"How long has it been like this?" said Ridley. The young fin whale opened its twin blowholes, expelling atomized droplets of water. The breath smelled fishy.

"Hours. Maybe all day." Tears of anger and frustration began to well in the Latina's eyes. "The damn gill nets are going to drown it!"

By the time the Mexican woman had turned around, Ridley was already at the stern, shirt peeled off and pulling on an old pair of jet fins retrieved from the kayak.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" said the American woman.

"Keep the engine at the lowest idle you can, Captain," said Ridley, as he placed the mask and snorkel over his face. Lowering himself over the starboard side, he said, "I'm going to try to cut away the rest of the net."

"Be careful. There's fragments of gill net all over the place. The current is wicked strong," said the American. "I don't want to have to come down there and cut you loose, too. I almost got snagged in it a while ago."

Ridley nodded. He released his grip from the gunwale and immediately felt the strong pull of the current. He swam against it until he reached the bow of the boat. He guessed the visibility in the water was less than twenty feet.

A large shape loomed in front of him. As he finned closer, the shape of the baby finback whale materialized out of the frothy green. A length of netting was bound tightly around the whale's flukes. The other end had broken free from its floats and was ensnared somewhere below. Scattered throughout the net were the lifeless forms of fish and a large animal that could only be the corpse of a sea lion.

A deep rumbling sound enveloped him and penetrated down to his viscera. His entire body began to resonate with the pulsation. The adult finback was nearby, communicating with its infant.

It's okay, momma, I'm not going to hurt her, Ridley thought. He swam slowly along the infant whale's left side toward its head, keeping his arms folded close to his body and his movements as small as possible.

The finback infant still possessed strength enough to crush him under five or six tons of weight. Nearing the head, Ridley saw thin linear lacerations encircling the mouth and over the left eye, obvious cuts from the monofilament gill net. The young whale's large eye regarded Ridley with a mixture of fear and curiosity. Moving his hand out slowly, Ridley tentatively stroked the underside of the finback's jaw. The whale's rubbery skin recoiled from his touch. The second time he attempted, the whale closed its eye in acceptance.

Ridley's lungs were burning. He knew he was going to have to grab a breath soon. He was aware of something immense moving beneath him. Looking down, his heart pounded as seventy feet of finback whale glided just below his fins. Three large, black remoras moved back and forth across the behemoth's back as if it was an underwater soccer field. The great whale rolled onto its side as it passed underneath, regarding the small intruder. The finback swam seemingly without moving a muscle, a

silent freight train gliding through liquid space.

Ridley was going to have to attempt to cut away the netting after he surfaced for a breath. He stroked the baby finback whale under the chin one more time and shot for the surface. He broke through near the bow of the boat and saw the Latina peering down at him, worry etched on her face.

“What were you doing down there?” said the Mexican woman. “I can’t believe that whale let you touch it.”

“Triage,” said Ridley. “I needed to let it know that I wasn’t going to harm it. I’m going down now to try and cut it loose.”

“How’s it doing?” she asked anxiously.

”It’s getting tired.” Trying to avoid inhaling a mouthful of seawater, he took three quick breaths.

“Good luck,” said the Latina. “Be careful.”

Ridley performed a surface dive. He swam dolphin-style to avoid thrashing his legs. The current was fierce. Ridley felt himself being pulled toward a tangle of netting just past where the young whale’s tail was being pulled downward. Reaching for his knife, he swam below the whale and began slicing through the monofilament gill netting. Although the netting was incredibly strong for withstanding linear stresses, the razor sharp survival knife separated the strands easily. Ridley hoped the blade’s edge would hold until the whale was released.

Reddish lacerations were evident where the netting was imbedded in the whale’s flukes. Ridley continued slicing at the tangled netting. The skin flinched and shuddered as he moved the knife’s serrations through the strands.

The right portion of the fluke was much more tangled than the left side, the net bunched up in thick balls around it. One strand was imbedded in the whale’s flesh several inches. Ridley cut and pulled. The young whale bucked suddenly, knocking Ridley backward, the force sending the air from his lungs. He gasped, inhaling a mouthful of seawater. Panicked, Ridley kicked and pulled his way to the light.

Ridley broke the surface, gagging and choking. He vomited up seawater and nearly inhaled more before drawing a breath. With difficulty, he managed to get his snorkel back into his mouth. The two women in the boat were yelling at him, trying to tell him something. Ridley felt as if his head was caught in a wind tunnel.

Ridley struggled to catch his breath. Removing the snorkel from his mouth again, he called out, “Net binding to fluke... Won’t pull loose...”

“I don’t think it’s got a lot left in it,” said the American woman through cupped hands. “It’s breathing faster now. Whatever you do, do it soon.”

“Get ready to release those fenders,” said Ridley, breathlessly. “Once it’s free, things will happen fast.” He placed the snorkel back in his mouth, hyperventilated three more times and dove down.

By now, the wave sets were cresting over the back of the fin whale. He swam directly toward the tail this time. Ridley swam below the level of the tail and ripped at the monofilament strands. It took more effort to slice through the netting; the knife blade was beginning to dull. The young whale’s movements were less now, its tail barely flinching as Ridley cut the netting near the lacerated skin. Feverishly, he continued to tear through the strands.

Ridley was aware of a great life force very near. Turning his head, he was face to

face with the female finback, just out of arm's reach. His entire body began to resonate with a deep bass humming. The female's huge eye regarded Ridley curiously. The parasites that clustered around the eye were as big as his thumbnail. He forced himself to turn his back on the enormous creature and continued cutting. *Hang on momma. We're almost there.*

Ridley sawed through a large section of net. He kicked continually with his legs to avoid being swept into the tangle of drifting gill net. Finally, the last strand of netting fell away from Ridley's knife. He touched the tail gently, urging the baby whale to move forward. At first, the finback did not respond. Ridley worried that it was too exhausted to swim. He reached down once more and attempted to move the fluke for the whale.

Suddenly, with renewed energy, the young finback moved its fluke in a wide arc, again knocking Ridley backward in its wash. He saw the fender lines go slack. The infant whale slipped over them. He sculled out of the way rapidly, fascinated, as the baby broke the surface and swam directly toward the mother. The female nuzzled her youngster and rolled slightly onto her side, allowing the baby to be supported by her great bulk.

Time's up. Ridley's oxygen-starved lungs screamed for air. He made for the surface, all the while facing the retreating female and her calf.

Surfacing, he spit the snorkel out of his mouth and yelled, "It's free!"

In the boat, the two women hugged each other and yelled something that Ridley could not hear. Then, the women stopped celebrating and pointed at the water beyond Ridley.

"Turn around! Look behind you!"

Spinning in the water, he saw the whales returning.

Placing the snorkel in his mouth, Ridley dropped his head below the surface in time to see the female and the calf pass within ten feet of him. The whales stopped momentarily, suspended in the roiling water. Ridley felt electrified, his body attenuated to the energy field present between him and the cetaceans. For an instant, the gap was bridged between two alien species as each one regarded the other. Then, with powerful downward motions of their flukes, the huge female and her calf faded into the shimmering blue-green curtain.

Ridley swam back toward the boat. He wasn't sure if the salt that stung his eyes was from the seawater or from his own tears.

Draining the last of the Pacifico from the bottle, Ridley set it down between his feet and sat back. "As Doc Ricketts used to say - nothin' like that first sip of beer."

"Oh, so you read Steinbeck, too," said the American woman. "I think we may have one or two more cold ones in the ice chest, Mister . . ."

"Ridley. Cooper Ridley." He smiled a lopsided grin, made more comical by the layer of salt crusted around his eyebrows and several days beard growth.

Ridley guessed the American woman to be in her late twenties to early thirties. She was slender with light brown hair tied in a single long ponytail. He noticed how the reflected rays of light from the sunset shone on her, casting her in a golden glow. Even after being battered about in a strong sea for most of the afternoon, he noticed she had a beautiful calmness about her.

"Thank you very much, but that one will do me just fine," Ridley said.

“Somehow, I don’t think you’re running a concession stand for stray kayakers out here. I know how researchers have to live close to the bone when they’re out in the field.”

“How did you know we’re researchers?” said the American woman. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Darcy Billings and this is my colleague, Teresa Gamez.” The Mexican woman smiled shyly, brushing her jet black, shoulder length hair out of her face. She was roughly the same age as the American woman, her features more gently rounded, but equally as beautiful.

“Nice to meet you both,” he said. He wondered if the women were as attractive as he saw them at this moment, or if he’d been alone at sea too long. He indicated the large wooden plates and coiled black netting leaning against the stern.

“That otter trawl looks like it's seen some use.”

“Yeah, it has,” said Darcy. “How did you know it's an otter trawl? Are you a biologist?”

“No. Just crewed on a few research vessels from time to time. What are you studying out here?”

“We’re conducting a census of the cetacean populations in the mid- to northern gulf,” said Darcy.

“In the past two years, there have been inordinately high numbers of marine mammal die-offs and strandings,” said Teresa. “Lots of bottlenose and common dolphins, sea lions, even the larger whales like the finbacks.”

“We’re trying to determine the cause of all the deaths and strandings,” said Darcy. “In addition to performing necropsies, we’ve also been taking fish samples and water samples, and dredging the surface sediments.”

We’re working with IDO, the Institute for Deserts and Oceans. We’re also funded by the *Instituto de Biología* in Mexico City,” Teresa said. She spoke clearly and slowly with only a hint of an accent. “A support team in Mexico City is helping us with the substrate analysis.”

“So how are the whales doing?”

“Not so good,” said Darcy. “Our examinations of tissues from stranded animals show excessively high levels of PCBs in their blubber. Most of the deaths seem to be the result of severe respiratory failure, like pneumonia.”

“It’s not unlike the AIDS virus,” said Teresa.

“How are they getting sick?” asked Ridley.

“The oceans of the world have reached critical mass,” Darcy said. “It’s biomagnification, or the concentration of toxins as you move up the food chain. The animals at the top of the pyramid carry the toxins from all of the creatures below them.”

“Any idea where the pollution is coming from in the gulf?”

“We have some pretty good clues,” said Teresa. “But nothing definitive at this time.”

“Fishing stocks are down, too,” said Darcy, “so the fishermen are increasing their fishing intensity. They're struggling to feed their families. That’s why you see more and more gill nets stretched out for miles. It’s amazing anything slips around those damn things.”

“We were lucky to find that baby when we did,” said Teresa. “We were lucky you happened along when you did.”

Ridley held up his hands. “All I did was finish what you both started. That buoy

system you rigged up was brilliant.”

“Just what kind of work do you do, Mr. Ridley?” Teresa asked. “That is, when you’re not rescuing stranded whales?”

“Just Ridley. Right now, I’m in between jobs. I guess you could say I do a bit of everything. Some salvage diving here and there. Did a stint with the *Sea Shepherd* for a year. I taught SCUBA diving and kayaking in some of the resorts in the Caribbean and Canada. Crewed on a few research expeditions into the Silver Banks. I make enough to bankroll me through the lean times until another job comes along.”

“Sounds like an exciting lifestyle,” Teresa said.

“Or the wanderings of a lost soul,” Darcy added, smiling.

“Ouch! The lady biologist hits a nerve. For what it’s worth, it has its moments. But for right now, wandering along this coastline is just what the doctor ordered.”

“You mentioned you worked with dolphins before,” Darcy said. “In what capacity?”

“I used to train dolphins for special projects in the navy.”

“Oh. Did these special projects include death and mayhem?”

A shadow passed across Ridley’s face. “Originally, no. In the last gulf war, the Navy brought back the program utilizing marine mammals for covert activities. They were to be used to help us patrol the harbors at night. Kind of an early warning system. Unfortunately, my former commanding officer had other ideas.”

Several moments of uncomfortable silence ensued. Darcy broke the tension first. “Where are you headed from here?”

“Well, I guess I’m going to try to make Cabo San Lucas by New Year’s Day.” Ridley said. Darcy noticed his grin was boyish, with just enough mischief to make her wary.

Teresa whistled. “In that? Man, I think you are one crazy *gringo*.”

“All the comforts of home.”

“If you live in a sardine tin,” the American biologist said. “That’s a long way to travel by yourself. Do you have a support team along the way to re-supply you?”

“I was counting on my fishing prowess and the kindness of marine biologists for food and beer.”

“How are your fishing skills?” Teresa said.

“Marginal, at best.”

“*Buena suerte*,” said Teresa. “I think you will need it.”

The sun dipped below the horizon, leaving the peaks on the Baja peninsula bathed in a vermilion hue. The winds had finally died down and the sea calmed into a silvery sheen. Ridley lowered himself into the cockpit of the kayak and cinched the spray skirt around his chest.

“Thanks again, Ridley,” said Darcy as she handed him the bowline. “This day had the potential to wind up very badly. I think we scored a minor victory today.” Suddenly, her tanned face took on a slight crimson color. “About that exchange earlier - I apologize about the . . . the asshole thing. Heat of the moment, you know.”

Ridley laughed. “No worries. Trust me, if that’s the worst thing I get called on this trip, then I’m not doing half bad,” he said. “Good luck with your research. I think what you two are doing here is important.”

“We certainly believe so,” said Darcy

“Could we ask one more favor of you?” said Teresa after she untied the stern line.

“Name it.”

“Could you write down the location of any strandings or dead animals you may encounter on your trip? Maybe include what species of animal if it’s not too badly decomposed? You will be covering areas that we won’t be able to get to.” Teresa quickly produced a scrap of paper and jotted some information on it. “This is where Darcy and I can be reached in Kino Bay.”

Ridley took the note and stashed it in the brim of his long-billed cap. “I’ll be on the lookout,” he said as he back paddled away from the whaler. Tipping his hat, he said, “Well, it’s been fun. See ya around.”

“Good luck and safe journey,” said Darcy.

“*Vaya con Dios*,” Teresa said. They both watched the kayak move westward until it was lost in the shadows of the point.

“Interesting man,” said Darcy, straining to catch a last glimpse of the crimson kayak. “Do you think he’ll make it?”

“He seems resourceful enough,” said Teresa, as she pulled the cookware out to prepare the evening meal. “The Gulf of California is a strange place though. A lot can happen between here and Cabo San Lucas.”