

# The Adventures of Sharkface

by

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# Chapter One

## The Last of the Elephant Seals



The old schooner floated on a flat, hazy sea, its sails hanging uselessly in the slow breeze. Three men sat around the stern, smoking and talking.

“My brother says they are as long as the wharf and as tall as our house, and the bulls are as fierce as grizzly bears with hides of iron. How are we going to kill them?”

“Your brother is good at making up stories, but this one is not true” the captain said calmly, trying to quell the fears of his young cook. “There is not much danger. You can come with us if there are seals to hunt.”

The captain could see that the boy’s fears had diminished and that he was beginning to be eager for the adventure.

“I think we will be very lucky to see any on this trip. I think

they have all been killed. Last year a boat from San Diego went south and they did not see even one; the islands were deserted. They returned with empty barrels. I don't know why we are going down here, but the boss said he knew there were seals left to kill. We will fill our barrels with their oil if we can. If there are any on the beach, you can come with us. Maybe you can taste the heart blood of the last of the *elefantes marinos*. Now, why don't you go below and make a pot of coffee."

The voyage to Isla Guadalupe usually takes three days, but on day four, they were still far from the island. There was no wind; the sky was overcast and the horizon hazy. Gregorio had been sailing with Eduardo for most of his adult life. Sometimes he would be captain but on this voyage, Eduardo was in charge.

"There has been little spirit in the wind or the sea on this trip," Gregorio said as the smoke from his cigarette lingered around his head. "I wonder if we shall ever make it to the island. I think your talk with Carlito got his blood up. I think he is ready for the hunt. I hope he is not disappointed, but I fear he will be."

"I believe you're right, my friend," Eduardo replied. "I think we have seen the last of them. But if not, we will do our duty as hunters. Maybe we will have the honor of taking the last of their kind. God only knows."

The *Ernestina* was barely making headway with only a little

breeze and a flat sea, but on the fifth day, the wind began to fill the two large, patched sails. Just as the sun set, Carlito saw a black smudge on the horizon.

“Is that Guadalupe?” he asked excitedly.

Eduardo replied that indeed it was the island and they celebrated with a smoke and a cup of wine.

“If the wind and seas are still calm tomorrow, perhaps we can land at Playa Elefante. If there are any seals left, that is where they will be. In all my trips to the island, I never could land there. The waves were horrible. Even if you got on the beach, it would be hard to fight your way back through the surf, but if the waves are calm, we will give it a try. Gregorio, you have the watch tonight. Keep her on course and call me if the wind changes. Good night.”

The wind continued gently from the north and the *Ernestina* made steady progress towards Guadalupe Island; in the morning, they could clearly see the tall volcanic cliffs of the north end. The seas were still like glass and Eduardo turned the boat to the west. After a magnificent sunrise, a hearty breakfast and a smoke they dropped anchor off Northwest Beach. The day was one in a thousand with only the tiniest of surf lapping the coarse black sand.

As the small rowboat crunched to a halt, Eduardo and Grego-

rio pulled in the oars and heaved the boat high up on the shore. It was morning and the beach appeared deserted but they could not see all the way to the south end, which was in deep shadow. They grabbed their harpoons and started marching awkwardly on the sloping sand; as they walked, the sun rose and the beach lightened. When they were about half way down they could barely make out a small group of animals on the far end of the beach. The excitement of finding seals and the anticipation of the hunt made their hearts beat faster.

A big bull lay at the edge of a group of about twenty cows; amongst them were a few black pups nursing their mothers in the early morning calm. The seals were up against an angle in the cliff and the bull was lying as if to protect his harem from intruders. As Eduardo cautiously crept closer, the bull rose to his full height, towering over the small captain; Gregorio was standing off to one side. Both had their harpoons at the ready and both were eager for blood. Just as Eduardo was about to thrust his weapon at the bull's chest, the seal spoke.

“Why do you still come here to kill us? Why can't you just leave us in peace?”

The two hunters stepped back abruptly, as if they had been punched in the chest. They dropped their harpoons as they stumbled in the sand. “Madre Dios,” they both said simultaneously. Then the seal spoke again.

“We have never done you any harm. We just want to live our lives and raise our babies. We are more like you than you know.”

Eduardo and Gregorio were speechless. They could not believe a sea elephant was actually talking to them. “Maybe this is the voice of God,” Eduardo thought to himself, “telling us to stop killing the seals.” They both stood there with their eyes wide, their mouths open and their arms dangling by their sides.

“Go back to your homes. Tell your people we are all gone. Tell them we are all dead and there is no reason for any of them to come down here ever again. Now go!”

Neither of the men spoke as they walked back to the small boat. They launched it in silence and sailed away from Guadalupe Island without uttering a word, save for an occasional, “Madre Dios.” When Carlito asked what had happened, they answered simply, “All gone. All dead. All the seals are dead and gone.”

After two days, the sailors regained their composure and began to talk once again with Carlito.

“There were no seals on the beach at all. No sign they had been there for a long time. All the elefantos marinos are dead. They are all gone. This entire trip has been a waste of time.”

By the tone of their voices, Carlito knew enough not to ask

any questions. He was still curious as to why they left two perfectly good harpoons on the beach, but he did not ask. They sailed together mostly in silence. Upon their return, the word spread quickly that the *Ernestina's* trip had been a failure. The boss was disappointed, but not surprised. When they were asked about their trip, all Eduardo and Gregorio would say was, "All the seals are gone. They are all dead. There is no reason for anyone to make that long trip to Guadalupe ever again. They are no sea elephants left to hunt."

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