

# Chapter 10

## Sharkface and the Angry Walrus



**A**fter Sharkface left Saint Paul Island, the weather was still cloudy, but one night as the sky cleared, he got a good look at the stars and determined that he was indeed heading north. After two days, he began to once again get a faint smell of seals and as he traveled, just as the old fur seal had told him, the unmistakable odor got stronger. He relaxed and kept diving.

The seas were calmer and his dives were becoming more regular when one day, as he was nearing the surface, he hit his head on what felt like a rock and there was a sharp pain in his snorter. He tried to take a breath but got nothing but seawater. With a stroke or two of his hind flippers, his head popped into the air between two large white slabs in a vast floating field of ice.

Cuvier had told him about ice, but this was the first time he had ever seen any, and now there were patches of it in every direction. The scene was quite beautiful with the blue sky, the gleaming

ice and the deep green water between the slabs; some of the water was pink with his blood. The cut on his snorter was minor but, as he was not interested in running his head into the ice again, he decided from now on to stop before reaching the surface and look up and see if there was anything above his head.

In the ice fields, the water was much colder than it had been at Saint Paul but Sharkface had spent so much time eating at Amukta Pass, that he had put on quite a bit of fat and his blubber layer was keeping him warm in the chilly waters. He was now setting his course by the walrus smell alone and continued to follow it northward, carefully navigating his way through the broken ice. As the odor was getting stronger and stronger, he thought he was almost there, but he was still several days away. "These walruses must really stink," he thought to himself.

After a week of dodging the ice, Sharkface finally got to the source of the smell. This time the island appeared deserted with a gently sloping sandy beach on which to lay down. Except for his brief stay at Saint Paul, he had been traveling since he left the Aleutians. It had been his most difficult journey so far with huge storms and seas covered with ice, and now he was ready for a real rest, and maybe something to eat. He quickly went to sleep on the small beach.

"You want I should poke you in your silly-looking nose with one of my sharp tusks?" Sharkface awoke with a start at the growling voice. Next to him on the beach was a wrinkled seal, standing on stiff legs with his funny-looking head pointed up in the air.

“Who do you think you are coming here to my private beach?” the voice yelled in his ear.

Sharkface had heard of walruses before but he had never seen one. He now knew what he had been smelling for the last week. This was the Island of the Walruses the fur seal had told him about and this angry one seemed to be its only inhabitant.

“My name is Sharkface and I am an elephant seal. I come from an island far to the south called Guadalupe and I have just stopped here for a short rest, and no, I do not want you should poke me in my snorter with your sharp tusk.” Sharkface replied to the walrus in a calm voice, hoping he would relax.

“Well, Sharkface, I am Bennie and I am the top walrus on this island and you are on my private beach. I see you are a pretty pitiful excuse for a walrus with those puny little teeth. Look at my tusks and you will see what a real walrus looks like. You want I should poke out your good eye with one of them?”

Sharkface remained lying on the beach, taking the insults the walrus heaped on him. Bennie was big for a walrus, but he was only about half the size of Sharkface. He had a head shaped like a concrete block. In its center was his tiny excuse for a nose and at the bottom, a silly-looking fringe of whiskers. His two beady eyes were almost lost behind his square snout. About the only part of Bennie’s face which had any kind of dignity at all were his two gleaming tusks. They were quite long and sharp, and very white. Sharkface noticed there was not a scratch on either of them, almost as if they had never been used.

“You see these two tusks? They are my two ivory sabers and they are deadly weapons. I have been in more fights than I can count and I have never lost. I am the king of all the walruses around here! I am even the king of all the polar bears! I am Bennie, the king of all the polar bears and all the walruses! In fact, I am the biggest and most powerful of all the creatures of the north. I am the greatest seal of any kind that has ever lived. I have swum in all the seas of the world and have traveled to the ends of all the oceans. I have even been to the other side of the great frozen sea. There is no seal of any kind or any kind of bear I cannot defeat. You want me to give you a poke in your fat belly with one of my deadly tusks?” By this time Bennie had turned red with anger. He had never had to threaten another creature with three pokes before, but this Sharkface, or whatever his name was, would just not run away.

This latest threat was about all Sharkface was going to take from this Bennie, the king of the walruses, and he rose up to his full height, with his front flippers off the ground and his scarred chest fully exposed. He towered over the now quickly deflating walrus as he tossed his massive snorter in the air and gave out a most powerful utterance “hooooooooonk, hooooooooonk, hooooooooonk,” and showed Bennie his “puny little teeth.”

Bennie was now in a bit of a jam. He was looking up at this towering mass of seal, but he could not very well back down after all the bragging he had done. He stuck out his two tusks, ready to attack, but Sharkface was too fast and gave him a body slam that

forced his square face into the beach cobbles. Sharkface shoved Bennie along the beach scratching his beautiful white tusks and breaking the tip off one of them. He was dazed when Sharkface finally let him up. Just for good measure he gave him a whack with his snorter, sending him careening into some rocks at the end of the beach, then laid down and pretended to go back to sleep.

After a few minutes a submissive Bennie crawled back to where Sharkface was sleeping. “What kind of seal did you say you were, and where did you say you came from?” Bennie cautiously asked him.

“My name is Sharkface and I am an elephant seal. I am not the biggest elephant seal nor am I the toughest. There are many bigger and tougher than me on Guadalupe Island, where I come from.” Bennie’s two beady eyes were about as big as they could get when he finally gave Sharkface a good look and saw all the scars on his body. Sharkface’s ravaged hide was in stark contrast to Bennie’s wrinkled but otherwise pristine skin.

Sharkface now spoke to Bennie in a very calm but superior tone of voice. “You said you had been beyond the frozen sea. I am going in that direction. I am going to visit my cousins in the Southern Ocean. I hear the elephant seals down there are even bigger than the ones where I come from. I hear they could easily crush any puny walrus in the world, even the very king of all the walruses.” Bennie had no doubt now that Sharkface was telling the truth. He looked down at the rounded stones on the beach and hid his battered tusks under his chin in submission.

When Bennie finally raised his head again, he spoke in a very subdued tone. “I did swim in the frozen sea, but I never made it to the other side. It was such a tough trip, I turned back about half way there. The ice was so thick, I could not even swim. I had to crawl out on an ice floe. There was nothing for me to eat. I nearly starved.”

“How did you get back here?” Sharkface asked. Bennie was now beginning to recover from his humiliation and started to look at Sharkface when he talked to him.

“I had almost given up hope when I saw a big red ship breaking its way through the ice. I followed it, and finally made it back. I was never so scared in my life. I haven’t gone far from home since then.”

Sharkface decided he had humbled Bennie enough and changed the subject. “What do you have to eat around here?” he asked.

Bennie eagerly replied, trying now to please his new master. “We have the best clams in all the world, just off the north end of the island. I can take you there and we can both eat our fill.”

Sharkface had never had a clam before and he was eager to try this new food. He followed Bennie and they both swam together to the clam beds.

Bennie immediately dove to the muddy bottom and started flailing with his front flipper. He seemed to be lost in a cloud of mud. When Sharkface looked closely, he could see Bennie’s square snout buried in the silt. He occasionally got a glimpse of his white

tusks as he rooted on the bottom. When he swam back up to the surface, Bennie had a satisfied look on his face and the clam bed was littered with empty shells. “Now you try it,” he said, indicating Sharkface should stick his snout in the mud as well.

“I don’t think so,” Sharkface said sternly and Bennie didn’t argue. He simply went back down and rooted around in the mud once again. When he came back, he pointed to a pile of clams neatly placed on a rock near where he was digging, and Sharkface swam down and sucked the clams into his mouth.

“These are the best clams I have ever eaten,” Sharkface lied to Bennie. In fact, they were the first clams he had ever eaten and he thought they were wretched. He despised their jelly-like texture and found their taste revolting. He thought they were about the most horribly-tasting food in the world, but he did not want to disrespect his newly-reformed host who had gone to such an effort to prepare them for him.

Bennie spent the next several hours burrowing in the mud, sucking the soft bodies of the clams from their shells and depositing them on the rock. Sharkface dutifully ate them and praised their delicate consistency and their subtle taste while all the time he was nearly nauseated by their sliminess and vile flavor.

After their clam feast, Bennie and his newfound friend lay on the beach, side-by-side and rested. After one more day as the guest of the once king of all the walruses, Sharkface decided he had had enough of this smelly island, the once arrogant but now submissive walrus king and the ghastly clams. After telling

a couple of stories, he said good-bye and headed off to the east, towards the frozen sea. After what Bennie had told him, he was worried about his trip, but he was not about to turn around now. As he looked back he could see him standing alone on the beach stiff-legged, proudly displaying his now scratched and broken tusks. After Sharkface left, Bennie was once again king of all the walruses.

