

Chapter 18

Sharkface Saves a Sperm Whale



The tropical waters near the Azores were much more like his home on Guadalupe Island than the frigid seas of Iceland, Newfoundland or Baffin Bay and Sharkface dove lazily as he headed south. He was enjoying the warm waters and his renewed state of health. He was very skinny when he emerged from the frozen sea and then it was nearly a month until he had something to eat. The trip stretched him to his limits and there were times when he didn't think he would make it, but now he was finally fat and healthy and enjoying his leisurely journey.

It had been a month since he left the Gully and his memories of the Children of the Oodon and his nearly fatal encounter with the giant squid were slowly fading. There was nothing on his mind as he dove with a relaxed rhythm. He was now sleeping on

each dive, but without dreaming. He still needed the rest.

Near the bottom of one of his dives he heard a sound he recognized. It was the same sequence of loud clicks that had scared off the killer whales which he had insulted with his Shamu story, only now the clicks were very faint and far away. Then he heard another sound much closer, which he did not recognize. It was a kind of mournful whimpering. It reminded him of the sounds that whales make when they are in shallow water, only now he was deep in the ocean. He followed the sound to its source.

Usually it is completely black this far below the surface but in the distance Sharkface saw an eerie green light. Millions of tiny luminous creatures, disturbed by something flailing about, were emitting a cold glow at the bottom of a small canyon. As he got closer he could see the outline of a sperm whale by their dim light; a thick cable wrapped tightly around his body. The young whale was thrashing to and fro, trying to free himself.

“Calm down a minute, would you please and I think I can help you out,” Sharkface said in his most confident underwater voice. “Just lie still.” It took several minutes before he could convince the whale to stop struggling. “Just lie there and don’t move. I’ll figure out a way to get you loose.” The young sperm whale replied with a faint and quavering, “OK.”

In the dim luminescence Sharkface looked carefully at the cables encircling the whale’s body. They were very tight in some places but looser in others. He tried to pull them away with his flipper but as he loosened them in one place, they tightened in

another. He tried to bite through the hard cable but he could only dent it. He was getting nowhere and time was running out. If he could not free the whale in a few minutes he would have to get back to the surface to breathe and the whale would surely drown. Then he had an idea. If he could get his snout under the cables maybe he could loosen them enough so the whale could wiggle free. He had to give it a try.

Sharkface started to flatten his snout and work it in between the whale's body and the cables. He used every muscle in his dexterous nose to squeeze it into the tight space and, when he finally had it in just the right position, he slowly expanded it and gradually the coils began to loosen. "When you feel the cable get loose, wiggle out and head for the surface," he commanded the now shivering sperm whale. With Sharkface's snout expanded to its fullest, the tight wrappings of the cable began to release. "Go, go, go," he yelled and the young whale wiggled free and shot upward. Sharkface contracted his snout as quickly as he could and followed him to the surface.

Once they emerged into the air it took them both a long time to get their breaths. They had been underwater for over an hour and with all their exertions, they were both spent. After what seemed like a very long time, they were finally able to talk.

"That was quite a close call you had there. How did you get all twisted up in that rope?" Sharkface asked. His snout was still pretty well out of shape and so his speech was a bit odd. "I don't know. One minute I was chasing a school of squid through the

canyon and the next I was upside down and caught.” The sperm whale’s voice had not returned to normal either and he shivered as he stuttered his reply. “I bbbbegan to ststststruggle, pretty soon I was ttttrapped. Thanks for saving me! By the way, hhhhhhow did you gggget me loose? I ththththought I was a ggggoner.”

“I used my nose to loosen the cables.” Sharkface said tersely. He really didn’t like to talk about his snorter much because other creatures always made fun of his huge proboscis. “Are you all alone?” he asked, changing the subject.

“My mom’s around here somewhere.” The sperm whale had begun to calm down and his speech was steadier. Before long the whale’s mother came charging down on them like a freight train. “What happened?” she bellowed. “I heard your cries. Are you all right?” “I’m OK, mom. I got tangled up in some ropes at the bottom of the canyon and this big seal – or whatever he is – got me free with his nose.” His mom bellowed again, “I don’t care about a big seal, I’m just glad you’re all right.” She turned to Sharkface and asked, “What did you say your name was?”

My name is Sharkface and I come from Guadalupe Island on the other side of the world in the Pacific Ocean.” “Well, you’re pretty much of a mess,” the sperm whale said, relaxing her voice a bit. “What with all your scars. How did you get all those sucker marks?” She was referring to the round pink wounds that covered his backside. “A giant squid nearly had me for his lunch in Newfoundland. I see you have also had a dance with these beasts,” Sharkface replied seeing the scars on the sperm whale’s head.

“They’re such pests,” she replied, “but they are very good to eat. By the way, thanks for saving my boy.”

“I’m glad I was able to help him. He was in a bit of a bind down there.” Sharkface and the mom chuckled at his pun. “While I was in the canyon I heard some distant clicks. Were you making them?” Sharkface asked. “I heard them too. I think they were made by a big bull sperm whale far away. Maybe he was trying to help my boy?” Sharkface said he had heard clicks like that before, but they were different. “They were closer together and there were more clicks in the ending.” Sharkface did his best to make the sound and told the story of how the loud clicks had chased the angry killer whales away.

“That’s odd. It sounds like a bull from around here, but with a bit of an accent. You said you heard these clicks in the other ocean?” By this time Sharkface was beginning to put it together. It was a bull sperm whale that had saved him from the Orcas and that he saw diving down into the darkness. “I wonder if it was Alexander that saved your hide?” the mother sperm whale said and proceeded to tell him the legend of the wandering whale.

“There was a family of sperm whales that used to swim between the Azores and the Grand Banks. One day they were attacked by men in boats and they were all killed except for a young bull. His name was Alexander and he wandered around the ocean looking for his family but he never could find them. He tried to join other sperm whale families but he was always rejected. As he continued his lonely wanderings he began to feel that even the

ocean was cursed. He swam far to the south looking for a family that would take him in, but wherever he went he was turned away. Eventually he swam around the bottom of the land and into the other ocean.”

“The whales in the other ocean – where you came from – were wary of this stranger at first. He spoke a different kind of language, but eventually their curiosity overcame their fear and they accepted him. In the end Alexander was well respected by all the sperm whales in the Pacific and he had many children. He became known as Alexander the Wanderer. He always spoke in his native sperm whale tongue but he picked up an accent from his Pacific cousins. His clicks were just as you described them and I’m sure he was the whale that you heard. Eventually Alexander’s story filtered back into this ocean. I heard it from my mother.”

“There is also a tale about how Alexander chased off a pack of killer whales, but I don’t remember anything about a seal. He may have been the whale that saved your life.”

Sharkface was fascinated by Alexander’s legend. He had only heard of a very few creatures that had traveled from one ocean to the other. “Wouldn’t it be great to follow in Alexander’s track around the bottom of the land?” he thought to himself.

“How can I thank you for saving my baby?” the mom asked. “Well, I am a bit hungry and I could use a snack before I get on my way.” Sharkface replied. “Have you ever tried jellyfish? They have a delicate taste and there’s a large school of them just to the south.” Sharkface had never heard of any creature eating jellyfish

before. They had always just been something floating around in the water, but he decided to give them a try. After the mom had given Sharkface directions she told him that she would tell everyone the story of how he had saved her trapped son. “What kind of seal did you say you were?”

Sharkface said his good-byes to the sperm whale mother and her son and headed off south in search of his jellyfish feast. He found them just where she said they would be and they were so dense that he could only see a few feet ahead. He was able to easily fill his stomach several times over. They tasted kind of like the sacred shrimp of the Oodon, only much more delicate. The only problem was that they were not very filling and shortly after he had satisfied his hunger his stomach felt empty again. After a few days he left the Azores and continued his journey. He was anxious to meet his relatives in the Southern Ocean and to get a more filling meal.

