

Chapter 8

The Mighty Jubata



Many of Sharkface's pals from Guadalupe travel to Alaska every year. They especially like a place in the Aleutian Islands called Amukta Pass, a narrow gap between two islands, where the water is shallow and many kinds of sea creatures move back and forth from the Pacific Ocean into the Bering Sea. Elephant seals from all over converge there to wait for their swimming feast to arrive. The great banquet was also a chance to meet old friends, make some new ones and share some gossip. When Sharkface finally showed up, several seals from his home beach were already there and the food was plentiful. For two days, he ate nothing but a tasty kind of fish called hake; then someone told him about a school of squid just to the north in the Bering Sea and he swam off in pursuit. He was having a wonderful time in Alaska, feasting with his friends.

After failing to find the squid, Sharkface decided to see if there was anything good to eat to the east. He swam past island after island, all of which looked like snow-covered pyramids. They were the volcanoes of the Aleutian chain. He was swimming along the rocky shore of one of these islands when he heard a voice he recognized, that of a sea lion named George, whom he had met several years before.

“Hello my friend,” George called out when he saw Sharkface swimming among the rocks. “I’m glad you are up here again. I see you have had a dance with one of our black and white brothers.” He was of course referring to the fresh pink scars that wound their way around Sharkface’s body.

“Yes indeed, it was a nasty business in Queen Charlotte Sound. It seems that I told the wrong story to some very sensitive brutes.”

“Your face doesn’t look too good either. I’ll bet you have a story or two to tell me,” George replied with a hearty laugh.

Sharkface proceeded to tell George the tale of the great white shark and of his narrow escape from the killer whales. This made it necessary to tell him about Topsy and Shamūs, and he threw in a few shorter stories for good measure. After an hour or so he asked George what was going on in his world.

“Well, as you can see, the volcano is spitting out smoke and fire just like it has been for weeks. This isn’t unusual; it happens all the time. It’s a very pretty sight at night.”

George was not much of a traveler and he didn't have many adventurous tales to tell. His kind of sea lions were called the Jubata, and they were pretty much stay at home types who didn't often leave the waters around the Aleutian Islands. Occasionally they would go and visit their relatives to the west, but mostly they hung out on the rocks and in the small coves that made up their homes.

The Jubata were relatives of another kind of sea lions, called the Californias, that lived near Sharkface's home. The Jubata did not think much of the Californias because of their rudeness and their incessant barking. They also tended to hang around humans and were the stars of the circus shows, prancing around the stage with rubber balls balanced on their noses. They would gather where the humans kept their fancy boats, lying around on the docks and making a mess of things, while the Jubata stayed as far away from these strange two-legged creatures as possible. They considered themselves to be a noble race of sea lions and were very conscious of how they looked as they posed on the jagged rocks of their rugged homeland. They didn't care to mingle with lowly creatures such as humans, or Californias for that matter, but enjoyed the company of elephant seals, especially ones with stories to tell.

Even though the Californias considered the Jubata to be conceited, Sharkface had easily made friends with George many years ago and whenever he traveled to Alaska he would look him up. George always wanted to hear his stories and then the two of

them would swim around the islands looking for something good to eat. George had introduced him to a wonderful flat fish called halibut and to the delicious Alaska red fish and Sharkface had shown him where to find the tastiest squid.

“Have you ever eaten octopus?” George asked one day when there was a break in the storytelling.

“No I haven’t. Are they good?”

“They are very tasty, one of my favorites, but they are hard to catch. Let’s go for a swim and I will teach you,” and with that, George and Sharkface were off.

They had not swum far when George led him into a small inlet in the shadow of the volcano. The sky was filled with smoke and ash and there were red streaks running down the sides of the mountain, but despite this, the rocky cove was peaceful.

“I am going down to look for an octopus hidden in the cracks. Follow me.” George and Sharkface went from rock to rock looking for the elusive creatures. When he located a big one, George motioned for them to surface.

“Watch closely what I do to get him to come out of his hole. When he is all the way out, I will grab him and eat him; then you can give it a try.”

They dived back down and George put his head right in front of the octopus’s hole, stuck his big pink tongue out and wagged it back and forth. The octopus was not very happy to see George’s tongue wiggling in front of his face and he quickly became angry. Octopuses do not take kindly to disrespect and

this one was getting madder and madder. He turned many different colors as George continued to tease him. He cursed George's tongue louder and louder in his octopus language, which neither George nor Sharkface could understand. Finally, when he had enough of George's taunting, he came out of his hole to attack his tormentor, and George ate him.

"Well, that was pretty easy," said Sharkface. "I'll give it a try."

They looked for another octopus and found a large one far back in his cave. Sharkface swam right up to the opening and began to wag his pink tongue back and forth. After a few minutes, he came over to where George was just finishing the last of his dinner. "I'm having trouble. My snorter keeps getting in the way and when I pull it back, I can't see the hole."

George replied that he did not need to see the octopus. "You will know when he comes out; he will try to bite your tongue with his beak."

Sharkface went back in front of the octopus's hole and proceeded once again to waggle his pink tongue back and forth. It was much larger than George's and not quite so mobile, so it took a long time to get the octopus so angry he would come out. At first he would stick out a tentacle and Sharkface would grab it and try to pull him out, but George told him to be patient and wait until the he comes out on his own. It took nearly an hour but eventually the octopus was so angry he jetted out of his hole, right into Sharkface's mouth. As he bit down, he was engulfed in a cloud of black octopus ink.

Although Sharkface's tongue was very tired and sore – the octopus had even taken a bite out of it with his beak – his meal was tasty and he and George swam farther into the rocky cove to look for more. They went from cove to cove under the shadow of the volcano and hunted octopuses for the rest of the day.

“How did you like that?” George asked.

Sharkface replied that the octopus was so delicious, it was worth the work, and his sore tongue, but for all their day's hunting, they had only eaten four of the tasty creatures.

As the sun was going down, George climbed up to the top of his favorite rock and Sharkface crawled up on the cobble beach below.

“I really had fun today. I hope we can do it again sometime.”

George acknowledged Sharkface's comment with a grunt, tipped his head back so his nose was pointing straight up, closed his eyes and was lost to the world. Sharkface threw a few of the rounded beach rocks onto his back and closed his eyes as well. The next day he said farewell to George and swam back to Amukta Pass.

There were still many elephant seals around when Sharkface returned. They were diving and feeding and chatting in small groups, but after a few days, they began to leave, one by one. They were returning south to their beaches on Guadalupe Island or San Miguel or Año Nuevo, while Sharkface was going north into the unknown waters of the cold Bering Sea. It always seemed to Sharkface that he was going one way when all the other seals were going the other, but after all, that was who he was.

