

## Chapter 6

# Sharkface and the Cult of Shamús



On his trip north, the seas were calm and the skies clear. Sharkface could hear the gray whales in the distance, chatting and gossiping, but he did not pay them much attention. When he was near San Francisco, he decided to stop by several small islands off the Golden Gate known as the Farallons. He knew elephant seals often lie on the beaches there and he wondered if any of his friends from Guadalupe were around. As he got closer, he felt a tingling sensation in his snorter. He had this sensation once before, when he was face to face with the great white shark and he knew there must some of her kind around. Maybe he was feeling the electricity that sharks use to talk to one another. He chose to forget about his visit and continue his journey.

He was headed to a place called Haida Gwaii. An elephant seal friend named Adrian had told him about a very tasty fish with red flesh that came into the riv-

ers there in great numbers. Adrian had stayed for many weeks eating his fill; it had saved him a trip all the way to Alaska and he was so enthusiastic about these tasty fish, Sharkface decided to stop and give them a try. They were called the Coho and this was the time of year they swam from the sea into the rivers.

Sharkface had never seen fish quite like the Coho. They were very fast swimmers, brilliant red in color with huge hooked jaws. He had trouble catching them at first. He would just about have them in his grasp when, at the last minute, they escaped over the sand bar at the river's mouth. He learned he had to wait at the narrow opening where the waves built up and pick them off as they came to him. And come to him they did! They swam straight at Sharkface, never deviating from their course, as if they did not even see the huge elephant seal waiting to eat them. They appeared to be single minded in their journey into the river, and made no attempt to avoid his gaping jaws. Just by waiting at the river mouth, Sharkface had all the fish he could eat, and they were very tasty fish indeed.

After a few days of gorging himself on the succulent red flesh of the Coho, Sharkface suddenly felt he was no longer alone. He could hear faint clicking and whistling sounds and he knew there were whales about, but he was not sure what kinds of whales they were. Then suddenly he was startled by a flash of black and white that raced past his head. He knew in an instant there was a pod of killer whales around him at the river mouth and he was more than a bit nervous.

Had the killer whale been in pursuit of a speedy Coho or had he been trying to send him a message? When the same thing happened three more times, Sharkface decided it was a message and that he might be trespassing in the Orca's territory. He swam a few hundred yards to the north of the river mouth and waited to see what would happen next. After about an hour a huge male killer whale with a ridiculously tall fin in the middle of his back came up next to him and spoke.

"What's an elephant seal like you doing so far away from home?" he asked.

"I am here to eat these wonderful fish as they head up the river. I heard of this place from a friend on Guadalupe Island, where I am from, but he did not mention there were Orcas who also ate them," Sharkface replied calmly.

"Well there most certainly are Orcas who eat the Coho and for this particular river, those Orcas are us," he answered in a curt and obviously irritated voice.

The killer whale did not open his mouth when he spoke, but rather talked through the blowhole on the top of his almost totally black head. The white patch behind his eye, which is large in most killer whales, was tiny giving him a very sinister look.

"I did not mean any harm and I most certainly do not want to trespass on your hunting grounds. I will leave right away and not bother you again if that is what you want."

After this offer of submission, the Orca's tone softened and he began to talk to Sharkface in a tone of voice that was more curious than threatening.

"I haven't been to Guadalupe Island, but I've heard of it. What is it like down there?"

Sharkface replied that near the shore the water was very deep and there always seemed to be great white sharks just off the beach. "I'm afraid they try to eat us elephant seals as we come and go."

"Is that what happened to your face?" the killer whale asked.

"Yes, it was a very close call," Sharkface said and proceeded to tell him about his dance with the white shark and how he had escaped by blowing bubbles into her mouth.

The killer whale then told Sharkface about a close call he had in a fisherman's net and how he had barely escaped with his life.

After their exchange of stories, things seemed much friendlier between Sharkface and the big killer whale. This was very unusual as Orcas are known to be quite unfriendly to anyone but members of their own group, but then Sharkface was a very charming seal.

He told stories about helping a team of divers as they searched for sunken treasure in the Caribbean and about the giant oarfish he had seen deep in the sea off Catalina Island. The killer whale told stories about great feasts, and his friends who had become leaders after battles with their rivals. He told stories about the people who

worshiped them and how they carved images of Orcas into the poles next to their houses. The killer whale even bragged he had once single-handedly killed and eaten an enormous walrus, tusks and all. Sharkface thought some of his stories were a bit exaggerated, or maybe even made up, but he wisely did not question them.

As the killer whale told his stories he, would occasionally stop and click loudly in a language Sharkface could not understand. It seemed as if he was talking to his fellow Orcas in some kind of code, and Sharkface wondered what he was telling them.

They told story after story and eventually it seemed like the killer whale was losing interest. But when Sharkface mentioned the name Shamús, the Orca became very alert. Sharkface proceeded to tell Topsy's story about Shamús and Winston and about how Shamús had demanded more squid and how Winston had showed him up in the main tank. When he told the part about Shamús biting Winston and getting sent to Orlando, the big killer whale began to abruptly clear his blow-hole. He spoke quietly in what seemed like a barely controlled rage,

"I don't want to hear any more of your lies about the Mighty Shamús." He then began to click and squeak loudly. He opened his mouth and showed Sharkface dozens of gleaming white conical teeth. Soon seven or eight more Orcas appeared, all listening intently to what the black-headed one was telling them.

Sharkface had made a bad mistake. He had not known that Shamús was like a god to these killer whales. Many of the local pods would get together and chant his name, “Shamúúúúúúúú, Shamúúúúúúúú, Shamúúúúúúúú,” before they went on a hunt. Young killer whales were told endless exaggerated tales of his exploits and many were named after him.

As a young whale, Shamús had been part of a pod only a few miles away and every one had known him as a fun-loving kid who liked to jump in the air and twist about. His pod was very sad at first when he was taken away, but later, when a wandering whale named Willy told them he had become the star of the show at Neptune’s Ocean Adventure, he became a hero. And now this wandering scarred elephant seal was spouting the vilest lies about their idol. Sharkface was in big trouble.

He decided not to wait around to see the consequences of his Shamús story, and immediately dove straight down as fast as his huge hind flippers would propel him. Down he went until he thought he was out of danger, but just then the big killer whale streaked past him, turned around and came at him from below. In an instant, he was in the grasp of the whale’s toothy jaws. While the killer whale was biting down, Sharkface used his front flippers to spin his body and he was able to wrench himself free.

Almost immediately he was surrounded by four whales, each twice his size, who took turns lunging at him with open mouths. He tried to break out of the tightening circle, but it was no use. Although he was very

fast, the killer whales were faster and there was no way he could escape. Then Sharkface heard the loudest sound he had ever heard in his life. It was a gigantic click of such volume that all the killer whales began to writhe in agony, each turning in a different direction to try to get away from the sound. The clicks came in rapid succession, each one seemingly louder than the last until all the Orcas had fled and Sharkface was alone. When the clicking stopped, he saw a huge dark shape swimming far below him. It turned to look in his direction and then disappeared into the abyss.

It was no exaggeration to say Sharkface was scared to death. He had never come closer to being eaten. Even his encounter with the great white shark was nothing compared to being pursued by a pack of insulted killer whales. He realized it had been a big mistake to tell Topsy's story and he vowed to be more careful in the future.

He swam rapidly to the north, away from Haida Gwaii, found a quiet stretch of ocean and rested with his head and chest sticking out of the water like a buoy. He thought about the killer whales and their bloodthirsty and humorless nature and how close he had come to being one of their victims. Then he wondered who – or what – it was that had just saved his life.

