

A New Homeland

I stare at the gray slabs of ice floating in a stained ocean. Murky oil has occupied the previously crystal blue water. Both of my flippers ache with exhaustion from swimming for so long, and the goal of finding a new homeland for my colony is slipping further away each day. I yearn for the comfort of home, but I've swam too far to return. Six months ago, some lanky creatures called "humans" wrecked their floating device on my colony's shores. The dark gray oil, which leaked out onto our home, has polluted our food supply ever since, making the fish and krill inedible. We have quickly gone from joyful Adélie penguins playing on the icy shorelines to starving scavengers, thin as a bone. Pathetic. In deep frustration, I yell out at the abyss.

"Hello!? Is there any new land out there for us to live on?"

"Who are you yelling at, penguin?" To my shock, I hear a grumpy voice answer in return. "...M-my name is Aqua, who are you?" I ask, my voice quivering on its edge.

"The name's Snow," a gruff looking albatross replies, descending from the sky. His pitch-black wings look immensely worn from flying, his feathers mangled and ruffled by the wind.

"Your land is also covered by oil, is it not? It's getting really hard to find clean rest stops, you know."

"Mr. Snow, I-I'm searching for a new home. Did you see any islands on your journey over here?"

"It's your lucky day, kid. I happened to pass by a roomy white ice floe about two

days of flight toward the north. Never remember seeing that place before..."

"An ice floe?" My eyes grow wide with anticipation. An expanse of frozen land just like my home! "I can't fly, but can I swim there!"

"You can't fly," Snow guffaws. "What kind of bird are you?"

I bristle, but he continues.

"Just a tiny problem—the area's infested with killer whales. Oh, and you do know about the plastic there, don't you?"

"Plastic? Is it something like oil?"

"Plastic is just as dangerous. It's shiny and stiff and comes in many forms. If you see a tube of it, that's called a straw. If you see it in a square shape, that's a box, and the round one with a short neck is a bottle. It floats around and looks like food, but it'll definitely kill you if you eat it. The humans make these. Selfish and ignorant creatures, they are." "Hu... humans again?" Selfish and ignorant indeed.

"I need to keep moving, Aqua," Snow grumbles irritably, preparing himself to fly away. "Sorry to hear about your home. It'll take a brave soul to reach that ice floe, you know." Stillness surrounds me after Snow takes his leave. I am certainly not brave: the thought of even a baby leopard seal sends me into shivers. Now, killer whales and that ominous "plastic" in the waters ahead seem impossible to face. But I have to do this. My colony had been skeptical about my mission of finding a new home, yet this was their last hope. With our numbers dwindling, I am the only one young and healthy enough to go. They loaded me with what little food they had and watched me leave for the journey. How I miss them... I continue to swim north alone in the endless ocean for what seems like days. The cloudy water slowly reverts back into the stunning cobalt it is supposed to be. So far, there are no signs of killer whales; I breathe a heavy sigh of

relief. Whenever my legs feel fatigued, I simply let myself drift along. There are things that drift along with me. Stiff, round, and shiny, they float in groups. Plastic bottles. They look perfectly harmless until I see bodies floating around them. Sea turtles choked to death on these things. I frantically try to help a seagull choking on a straw, but he was too far gone. A helpless, empty feeling starts to consume me, no matter how much I try to keep a positive attitude. Was Snow confused? How could there be a new ice floe? What about the folks back home? What about me? I have no energy left to make the journey back...

Finally, just as my doubt starts to overtake me, I see it. On the yellow-orange horizon, there sits the white ice floe that Snow had promised. It is magnificent—a few miles in width and plain white, just as my home used to be.

“It’s real! It’s real!”

Even though my legs ache with pain and my lungs are exhausted, I surge forward, letting out a loud whoop of joy. My folks will have a new home! Jubilant, I jump onto the edge of the island, extend my wings, and let them embrace the solid ice. Instantly, though, I feel a chunk fall through my arms.

...What?

The piece of “ice” resurfaces right in front of me and I yelp. It is not compact and cold like ice should be at all, instead bobbing right back up to the surface. I look down at one of the mysterious blocks, brushing off a thin layer of snow that disguises something else underneath. The block is light and formed in a square shape, shiny and glittering in the reflected sunlight of the ocean. It is a texture that can only be described as...

...Plastic.

Plastic boxes! I cry out and look up, and there, to my horror, the giant ice floe is nothing

but thousands of white plastic blocks. I lose the little calm I had and plunge into despair.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I spot dark forms heading toward me. Someone else has sensed my fear. Watching the ominous figures move, I realize that my worst nightmares have sprung to life. Killer whales. Two of them. I cover my beak, stifling a scream, and immediately attempt to submerge myself. My body is exhausted and I overestimate my speed. This catches the whales' attention, and they surround me. Their gargantuan teeth sharpen their hungry expressions. I have no energy left to flee, but then, out of sheer desperation, I'm struck with a perilous idea: I'll swim *toward* them. I gather my courage and dash out between the two predators. They shriek in surprise, making way, and I'm filled with a fleeting moment of joy: *I did it!* But the whales whip back around in no time; they're skilled hunters, and they'll do anything to kill. This sends a shock of fear through my veins. Twisting around, I attempt the same strategy, surging back toward them. All at once, a sharp pain yanks me back. Distraught, I look down; there, my foot has been caught in a stringed, latticed object resembling a web... a fish net! Another human product! The dark shadows rush closer, but I can't wrench myself free from the net.

Spotting my struggle, one whale lunges at me. This is the end, isn't it? I will be eaten. I will fail my colony... but I can't! Letting out all the air in my lungs, I make a daring submerge, barely dodging a hit from the attacker. It releases a terrifying bellow, and I see that it has charged into the fish net itself—the trapped assassin has started a gruesome struggle to get free. I become dragged in as well, wailing and thrashing around, my foot getting further tangled in the net. My

vision is blurring. I have failed... Regret slowly floods me, eclipsing all other rage or hope... I find myself sinking, sinking, and sinking into a silent abyss.

Everything is dark.

A loud ringing in my ears breaks the silence. I snap out of my unconsciousness, shocked to find myself lying in a shallow, warm pond. Where am I? I see an abundance of food and a few bright lights. A group of figures waddle toward me: penguins! Not my species, but penguins nonetheless!

“Are you alright?” one of the penguins inquires gently. I am amazed to find that she knows my language, even through a thick accent.

I nod slowly.

“Am I... dead?”

“No—you’re in a wildlife center. You’re safe,” she replies, her eyes kind. “I am Arctic.” “B-but what happened?” I whisper. “Why am I here? I should have been d-dead.” “Ah,” she explains, “the humans saved you from the abandoned fishing net.”

“Humans? Aren’t they the ones who’ve created all these problems?” I am bewildered.

“Some of them help us,” she answers simply. “The humans saved me, too.” “Oh, Arctic, please tell me they can save the penguins from my colony!”

“I heard something about the humans tracking your habitat. You should ask the group of all-gray penguins who just arrived at the wildlife center.”

All-gray penguins?

“What? There aren’t any all-gray penguins, just like how there isn’t a new homeland!”

As I shake my head, Arctic points to a large group of, yes, *all-gray* penguins entering the pond. I stare at them in awkward silence. In a flash, my eyes widen, and my beak drops. The gray is just oil. Underneath it lie the Adélie penguins from the colony! The humans found them! I dash forward, hugging them until we start to cry. I realize now just how

grateful I am to these humans. They saved me from the net and my folks from the polluted ice floe. Why did Snow have such a low opinion on humans? These smart creatures could care about us, too! Who were the clumsy ones that created all of these problems, anyway?