

Three-P

The adventures of a fairy penguin

By Nick Creech

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Set in Times New Roman

*To remember the dolphins
I once saw on the
way to their
Dance*

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THE AUTHOR

Nick Creech is a former newspaper journalist. He has two sons, both now successful and more-or-less responsible adults who still deign to talk to him from time to time in tones of kindly condescension. He has a wife who does the same, mostly.

Since leaving journalism, he has written extensively for children, young adults and people of all ages who just enjoy a story.

Chapter 1

The word flew around Mickleburrow like a school of pilchards exploding before a hungry bluefin tuna. Three-P – that is to say, Pengelly Perceval Puddle – had really done it this time.

Oberon heard it from his valet. He had just finished consulting his diary and was choosing a bow tie suitable to the day's events. He was reaching forward, about to select a symphony in royal blue silk with particularly regal gold stripes, one of his favourites, when his valet began to whisper deferentially in his ear. Oberon froze. It was too much, altogether too much. Angrily, petulantly, he rejected the blue tie and chose instead a fierce scarlet. It exactly matched his complexion.

Titania heard it from her maid and like Oberon, first she was flabbergasted and then furious. She banged her crown on her head any old how, winced and marched forth, the pearls at her throat swinging aggressively.

Mr and Mrs Puddle heard it from a neighbour, Mrs Stickybeak, who was just bursting with the news, and with barely suppressed glee. They looked at each other resignedly.

"I'm going fishing," Mr Puddle said in a low voice and hurried off, ignoring Mrs Puddle's squawk of protest. Not knowing whether she was more upset by her son's latest escapade or by her husband's cowardice in the face of it, she retreated into her burrow to make a nice shell-full of raw fish broth.

Genevieve Longbottom was mincing down Main Street attracting admiring glances when she was stopped by a girlfriend.

"You'll never guess!" she said, and began to chatter furiously. Genevieve drew in a long, delicious breath the better to savour the situation.

The youngsters in school heard it from a late-comer and the whispering spread until the teacher, Miss Featherbrain, was forced to speak very sharply. Her name, not as you might think, was actually a mark of respect. Miss Featherbrain, amongst other things, was a noted expert on the predatory habits of fur seals, something with which all young penguins needed to become acquainted almost as soon as they could swim. However, even Miss Featherbrain describing the lightning lunge of one of the most feared killers in the sea could not begin to compete with such a juicy scandal.

And finally, Cassidy Hopalong heard it from her mother, who was sympathetic and concerned, but secretly relieved. Perhaps now her daughter might see sense and abandon her infatuation with that particular rascal. But all Cassie could think was, poor Three-P. What will happen to him?

However, this is all getting far ahead of the story...

Way down south there is a small island, a secret island. Once it was a jagged mountaintop spearing sharp out of the ocean but now is so worn down that it is low and softly mounded, so low that one might think the huge waves driven by the winter storms of the southern ocean would drown it completely. But instead, the surf, no matter how monstrous, must break on the long, gradually rising shelves of rock, the bones of the old mountain. Over thousands and thousands of years they have been pounded and ground down till they have disappeared below the water, but they still extend far out beneath the surface, where they ring the island and provide a barrier capable of defying even the worst of tempests. And better yet, these undersea reefs and ledges shelter a mass of waving sea plants that teem with fish of different varieties so that if you were a seal, or suchlike, you might think you had found a marine smorgasbord.

And as the ancient mountain top was gradually ground away it acquired a deep layer of sandy loam, which in turn had trapped seeds brought by passing birds. The gentle undulations of the island were now layered thick with tufted grass and matted scrub, tough enough and resilient enough to anchor the soil against the worst the storms could do. The final perfect touch was that the island had finally come to acquire the shape of an hourglass. At the southern end there was a low bluff and at the northern end there was a tumble of rocks of all sizes, ancient scree now worn smooth and round by the endless waves. In the middle there were two narrow inlets, one on either side, almost cutting the island in half, inlets that meant whatever the wind, there was always a safe landing place of conveniently stepped, rock ledges protected from the waves. For a fairy penguin then, the place was paradise: breakfast, lunch and dinner a hop skip and a jump from your front door, and your front door itself and the deep burrow behind it secure from the worst nature could do.

Not surprisingly, the island had acquired a major colony and Mickleburrow, where generation after generation of penguins had excavated their homes, and raised their families, had grown and grown until it was now a regular metropolis full of bustling life.

Keeping a careful eye out for lurking fur seals, Three-P shot across the shallows, turned sharp left into West Bay and grounded himself on the sloping rocks of the shore, being careful not to bruise the fine, plump mackerel still wriggling in his beak. It was a fish he had gone to great trouble to select and catch, and for which he had most serious plans. Three-P was in love, at least he thought he was, at least he was almost certain he was, at least he was fairly sure... and he had come to a momentous decision. It was time to act, to declare himself.

He huffed his feathers, squared his shoulders and was about to march off to confront his fate when a voice stopped him.

"Now that's what I call a mackerel." Three-P swung sharply about to find himself under the beady gaze of a large seagull.

"Gully Jimson, young sir," the bird said in a calculating sort of voice. "At your service."

Being a well brought up young penguin, Three-P nodded politely, unable to speak with the fish still in his beak.

"Allow me to add," the bird continued, "straight from the horse's mouth as it were: Gully as in gull, gull as in gulling, gulling as in silver, silver as in fish. A very fine fish," he added. "But the question, young sir, the question that must and will be answered is: are you gullible?"

Being quite unaware of what gullible might mean and still gagged by the fish in his beak, Three-P nodded again.

"Well young sir, in that case I can confidently predict that what I have here will fascinate and intrigue you." And Gully Jimson gestured to the rock in front of him where three shells were sitting in a row. Slowly he lifted each shell in turn. Under the middle one was a small pebble.

"Now watch very carefully," he said, and as he spoke he began to shuffle the shells rapidly about the rock.

"So, young sir," he said finally, looking up. "Where is the pebble now? Tricky question, but one I am sure is well within your gifts."

Three-P scratched his head and decided to put down the fish. This needed concentration. At last he pointed, and with a theatrical flourish Gully Jimson lifted the chosen shell. And there indeed was the pebble. Three-P allowed himself a satisfied smirk.

"And was there ever any doubt?" Gully Jimson demanded. "Of course not, not with a smart young fella like you. But... but I would make a small wager that you couldn't do it a second time."

"A wager?" Three-P said hesitantly. Gully Jimson reached behind him and brought forth a strand of kelp. It was beautiful if you liked that sort of thing, a clear transparent green that shifted and shimmered as it moved against the light.

"Now, young sir, I will wager my magnificent example of finest kelp that this time the swiftness of the shells will defeat your eye."

"And what do I have to bet?" Three-P asked, suddenly careful.

"Why, nothing young sir," the gull said blandly. "If you should win, then it is my misfortune. Should I win, then I shall have the satisfaction of knowing I have defeated two of the sharpest eyes in Mickleburrow." Three-P scratched his head, searching for the catch.

"All right," he said at last.

Again Gully Jimson slipped the pebble beneath one of the shells and began to shuffle them rapidly around the rock. Three-P felt his eyes crossing as he tried to stay fixed on the prize. At last, Gully Jimson stopped and invited Three-P to choose. He thought long and hard, hesitated, and finally picked the shell to his left. Not daring to breathe, he watched intently as Gully Jimson lifted the shell. There indeed was the pebble and

Three-P felt a triumphant thrill. Mournfully, the gull passed across his prized piece of kelp.

"Too good, young sir," he said. "Too good by half. But you must give me one last chance at revenge."

"All right," Three-P said confidently.

"And just to make it interesting, this time it's your turn to put up the wager."

"All right," Three-P said again, but this time rather more slowly. "What?"

"Why, that fish you have there, young sir," Gully Jimson said casually. "What else?"

Three-P gulped. He had worked hard, all morning and well into the afternoon, selecting and rejecting to capture that particular mackerel, but on the other flipper he had already proved that he couldn't lose, could he? And it was only fair to give the seagull a chance to get even. Three-P nodded reluctantly and pushed the mackerel forward.

Gully Jimson, with an odd little quirk of his head and knowing glint in his eye, began shuffling the shells again. Three-P stared and stared, clenching his feet and curling his flippers in concentration. When the movement finally stopped he stood there for a long time, thinking carefully. He was sure he knew which shell hid the pebble but he was determined not to be too hasty, to make certain. At last he pointed and Gully Jimson lifted the shell.

"Oh bad luck, young sir! So close and yet so far." And without more ado, Gully Jimson seized the mackerel and flew away, chuckling to himself.

Three-P was shocked. He stood there clutching his head, hearing a distant echo of his father.

"You pay to learn, son. You pay to learn..."

Stupid, he said to himself angrily. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Pathetic! Absolutely pathetic! And what do I do now? The afternoon was drawing on and Three-P doubted his chances of finding another mackerel, let alone a splendid mackerel, before nightfall. He could, of course, abandon his plan but having once nerved himself to the sticking point he thought it unlikely he would ever manage to do it again if he faltered now. His eye fell on the abandoned piece of kelp. It really was very fine, the green as transparent as an emerald and as softly radiant. One might search for a month to find another piece to match it. Perhaps, Three-P thought, just perhaps it might make an even more impressive gift. He came to a sudden decision, picked up the kelp and marched off.

Genevieve Longbottom was most aptly named. For generations her family had been famous for the length of their tail feathers, and Genevieve herself was particularly well endowed even by Longbottom standards. Of all the eligible young debutantes in Mickleburrow that year, she was undoubtedly the most beautiful, quite stunning, and along with all the other young blades, Three-P was totally infatuated. Together with all the others, he had spent months jostling and striving for her attention and had come to think that possibly, just possibly, he was not now looked upon with total disfavour. If

ever there was going to be a right time to press his suit, then he had convinced himself it must be now. He had intended the fish to open the way for his proposal... but when you thought about it, the fish was a very ordinary sort of gift, not really a gift at all, nothing that Genevieve Longbottom couldn't catch for herself. A most singular piece of kelp, on the other flipper, a rare piece of kelp, indeed valuable, might be just the thing to elevate him above the ruck and make him irresistible.

And by the time he'd worked his way to that point, Three-P had managed to convince himself that the encounter with Gully Jimson might have been all for the best. Now was indeed the moment and it was up to him to seize it.

As was her custom Genevieve Longbottom was holding court amongst her admirers, down at the end of By-the-Sea Boulevard where a pleasant little dell offered a fine view out over the azure waters. She was surrounded by eager suitors and behind her there was a cluster of three or four girlfriends hoping for a leftover or two. One of them was Cassidy Hopalong, whose real name, her family name, was actually Catchalot, but because Cassie when very small had lost a leg to a seal, almost her life, she had inevitably acquired the nickname. Otherwise she was an unremarkable little penguin, almost plain until one noticed her eyes, which were full of kindness and gentle mirth. She wasn't there for just any old leftover, however. She had set her heart on one particular penguin.

Three-P hesitated a moment then pushed his way penguinfully through the crowd vying for attention.

"Why Pengelly," Genevieve said when at last she deigned to notice him. "How nice. And what do you have there?"

Now Genevieve, it has to be said, was properly conscious of her derriere and indeed, mightily impressed by it. It was not unusual to see her standing stock still and admiring her reflection in a pool. To us, tail feathers a smidgen longer than anybody else's might seem a matter of absolutely no importance, but consider how much store we set in a nose fractionally shorter than ours, and sweetly curved. It's still only a nose but oh, how we wish it belonged to us.

And because Genevieve was so pleased with herself it also has to be said that her character was less than admirable. To put it bluntly, she was a stuck-up snob, only interested in herself. She never had a thought or feeling that didn't begin or end with the word "I".

Three-P, conscious of the weight of the occasion, gravely laid his offering before her. He cleared his throat nervously, terribly aware of the hostile eyes of his rivals staring daggers at him.

"I have come to ask you a question," he said, a slight catch in his voice. He paused, expecting Genevieve to offer some sort of encouragement. Instead, she was gazing with affront at the piece of kelp laid tenderly before her. She wrinkled her beak.

"And what," she demanded in a petulant voice, "is that?" Three-P gulped, but there was nothing for it but to plough on.

"I hope..." he said hesitantly. "At least I had hoped that you would accept it as a token of my esteem, my very great esteem. I had hoped to ask for your flipper in..." Three-P ground to a halt. There was a titter from the back of the crowd.

"You what?!" Genevieve exclaimed. Her voice began to rise progressively until it reached all the way to a shriek. "You come here with a dirty old piece of seaweed anyone could have picked up on the shore and you have the nerve, the unmitigated gall, to ask me to marry you. In front of everyone. I've never been so humiliated in all my life. A dirty old piece of seaweed! Who do you think you're talking to? Just who do you think you're talking to? Are you trying to make me a laughing stock? Well let me tell you something, Pengelly Perceval Puddle. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last penguin in Mickleburrow..."

Genevieve was wrong about one thing, however. She wasn't the laughing stock, Three-P was. The original titter expanded into giggles and then swelled until the whole crowd was roaring, slapping each other on the back and even rolling about on the ground, gasping and spluttering.

Three-P stood there shocked, then slowly he began to turn crimson with shame and embarrassment. It was the worst moment of his life, absolutely, positively, the worst. He wanted only one thing, for the rocks to cleave open and swallow him whole like some giant seal, or maybe an orca if an orca could ever be bothered to swallow such a pitiful little mouthful.

Only two other penguins weren't laughing. Genevieve Longbottom's face was frozen in an expression of loathing and contempt. Slowly she raised her flipper and with vast disdain motioned Three-P from her sight, forever. Cassie, too, watched him go unsmiling, her heart aching, breaking. If only Three-P had proposed to her, but how could he when he didn't even know she existed? A tear slipped down her cheek. Three-P, the chance to see him, possibly even one day to talk to him, was the only reason that Cassie had ever hung around Genevieve's crowd in the first place. Following a sudden impulse, she eased her way out of the group. Skirting round the edge she set off in pursuit, but in the meantime, Three-P had managed to disappear completely.

Genevieve, however, watched Cassie go with great disfavour. Traitor, she thought. There will have to be punishment.

Cassie finally found Three-P right at the southern end of the island, as far from Mickleburrow as it was possible to get. Here there was a low bluff which dropped sheer to the sea below. Three-P was standing, miserably hunched, right at the edge.

"Don't jump," Cassie said. "Please don't jump."

Three-P looked at her dully. "I wasn't going to," he said. "I was just wishing I could fly, fly away..."

"Where to?"

"I don't know," he said in a voice so low that she could barely hear. "Anywhere. Anywhere away from here. Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does," Cassie said.

"Why?" Three-P said without interest. "Who cares?"

"I do." Three-P looked at her for the first time, with a total lack of recognition.

"Cassie," she said with a sigh. "Cassidy Hopalong."

"Oh yes," he said, dropping his beak back on his chest. Three-P had, of course, long been aware of Cassie. With her strange gait she did rather stand out from the crowd, but beyond the odd, rather nasty smile Three-P had never paid her any attention.

"I can never go back," he mumbled eventually.

"Of course you can," she said firmly.

"Never," he muttered. "Never... never..."

"But what about your parents?"

Three-P said nothing, then he shrugged. It was on the tip of Cassie's tongue to say: And what about me? But she just managed to stop herself. She lingered for a long time but eventually, when Three-P had failed to give any indication that he might ever move again, she sadly took herself off. And all the way home, all she heard was penguin after penguin busily repeating and embroidering the story of Three-P's abject humiliation.

Penguins are so cruel, she thought to herself, so cruel.

Three-P was quite sure his heart was broken, never to be mended. He replayed the whole ghastly scene over and over again. He was certain that never before had a penguin been so shamed before such a gathering and he was equally certain that never again would he be able to face the community.

The sun finally decided it had had enough nonsense for one day and slipped below the horizon, leaving the sky to flare as red raw as Three-P's emotions.

"Feeling sorry for ourselves then, are we, young sir?" The voice was all too familiar. Three-P did his best to ignore it but felt a sudden, sharp peck on his shoulder.

"I asked you a question," Gully Jimson said remorselessly.

"Kindly keep your beak to yourself," Three-P said, feeling the first stirrings of anger.

"Think you're the first penguin ever to get the brush off, do you?"

"You swindled me," Three-P said, straightening up a bit. "This is all your fault."

"My fault! And did I make you do anything you didn't want to do?"

There was a long silence as Three-P thought about it. In the end, he had to admit what the gull said was true. He could have said no, at any time.

"And let me ask you this, young sir," Gully Jimson went on, implacably. "The kelp was beautiful, wasn't it?"

Three-P could only agree.

"Which must mean that the young lady penguin in question is only interested in our material goods, the fish we can provide, the burrows we can dig?"

Three-P thought about that, and in the end, again, could only agree.

"So," Gully Jimson continued. "We now must ask, are we the sort of penguin who would choose to spend our life with someone only interested in how much fish we can catch?"

Reluctantly, Three-P shook his head.

"Which leaves us where, young sir? Upset because what we thought the worthy object of our affections chose to make a fool of us? A narrow escape, I call that. A very lucky escape."

For the first time, Three-P turned to look at the seagull.

"And one last question, young sir. Do we really care what that bunch of no-hopers thinks about anything?"

On her way home, Cassie stopped at the Puddle's burrow and honked. Mrs Puddle came hurrying to the entrance, looking anxious. She had obviously heard about Three-P's latest calamity.

"Oh... Cassie," she said, disappointed.

"It's all right, Mrs Puddle," she said. "He's all right. He's up at the bluff."

"Oh, thank you. Thank you, Cassie... Were you there? Was it really awful?"

"Pretty bad," Cassie said. "You know what that Genevieve is like..."

"Oh dear," Mrs Puddle said. "Oh dear, oh dear. I kept telling him she was all wrong for him, but would he listen? Would he listen? No he would not. So stubborn. Oh Cassie, if only you... Do you think there's any chance...?"

"I don't think so, Mrs Puddle," Cassie said uncomfortably. "I don't think he even knows I exist."

"But couldn't you...? No... I don't suppose you could..."

It was well after dark and Mickleburrow was fast asleep – something for which he was profoundly grateful – by the time Three-P found his way home. It was all very well for that seagull, Gully Jimson, to talk tough but bruised as he was, Three-P had no wish to meet anyone. He found his way to his own familiar chamber in his parent's familiar burrow and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Chapter 2

In the morning Three-P woke as he usually did to pleased expectation of the day ahead. It didn't last long. The events of the past 24 hours came flooding back in a rush. He was just about to bury his head again when his mother, who had been waiting for him to stir, came bustling in with a shell full of raw fish broth.

"It's a lovely day," she said brightly. "And your father's gone fishing already. Up with the lark, so to speak."

Three-P looked at her sharply. They both knew that given a choice, his father preferred to sleep late. There could only be one reason he had disappeared early and without any of the usual fuss: fear of ridicule. Glumly, Three-P took the proffered broth and sipped at it unenthusiastically. Then, unable to think of an excuse for putting off the evil moment, he took the empty shell to the kitchen, suffered his mother to peck him goodbye on the cheek and headed for the door.

Outside, he paused and breathed deeply. He had no idea what to expect but was pretty sure that life would be unpleasant, certainly for the next few days. Oh well, he thought, let's get on with it. He squared his shoulders and was about to march off when a shy, little voice stopped him.

"Hullo..." Three-P turned. It was Cassie, who had obviously been waiting for him.

"Oh, hullo," Three-P replied uncertainly.

"I thought perhaps..."

"What?" Three-P said after a moment.

Cassie took her courage in both flippers.

"I thought you might like some company."

"Oh," Three-P said and then, "All right. If you like..."

Together they walked down Lamprey Lane, turned into Cockle Street and then into Main Street, which would take them on to the water. That is to say, Three-P walked and Cassie hopped along beside him trying unsuccessfully to make conversation. At the bottom of Main Street, a group of young, loutish penguins were standing around doing nothing in particular. When they saw Cassie and Three-P they suddenly sorted themselves into two lines so that anyone wanting to get to the water would have to pass between them. Cassie faltered.

"What?" Three-P said.

"Oh, nothing," Cassie said in a low voice.

"What do they want? What are they doing?"

"Just ignore them," Cassie said. "They only shout at me. It doesn't matter. I'm used to it. They haven't done it for a while..."

"Done what, exactly?" Three-P demanded, coming to a halt.

"They just like to give me a hard time," Cassie said. "They think I'm funny, because I've only got one foot, so they... Just ignore them. Please. Or it'll be worse."

Three-P looked at her hard. "They bully you? Just because you...?"

"I'm used to it," Cassidy said again. She shrugged.

"Well I'm not," Three-P said, beginning to get angry. Just then, one of the young toughs chose to shout at them:

"Come on, Hopsy... Hop-along there, Gympie. Don't keep us waiting... And come on, lover boy, you too. Come and take your medicine... "

Three-P glared at them, and off in the not-so-distance he saw someone else. Genevieve Longbottom was watching intently. Three-P came to a sudden decision. Just there, the path dropped down a rise before reaching the rocks where the gauntlet of young thugs was waiting for them. Before Cassie could say anything more or move to stop him, Three-P launched himself.

He tore down the track and was at full speed when he reached the waiting gang. Lifting both his flippers to shoulder height and with unstoppable momentum, he raced between them, his flippers slapping each head as he passed... bam, pow, smack, smack, crash, wham...

Penguins went flying right and left, bowled over like ninepins. It was a rout, a massacre, total victory.

Three-P came to a halt, turned and surveyed his victims, struggling to their feet.

"And if any of you bother Cassie ever again, just watch out, that's all," he roared at them. "You just watch out."

Cassie came hopping down the path towards him, her eyes shining, but Three-P was already moving away.

"See you later," he called, and waved a flipper. Without more ado, he dived into the water and was gone, leaving Cassie standing on the rocks, alone and suddenly forlorn. She was still standing there when Genevieve came up behind.

"You can't have him!" she said.

"What?!" Cassie said, spinning round.

"I said, you can't have him."

"But you've dumped him. You said you wouldn't marry him if he was the last penguin in Mickleburrow..."

"That was just to teach him manners, and you can't have him. He's mine."

"But that's awful," Cassie said. "You can't treat him like that..."

"Mind your own business," Genevieve snapped, and stalked off. It occurred to Cassie that Genevieve's abrupt change of heart could only have been brought about by Three-P's rout of the louts. He was suddenly extremely desirable. And then Cassie began to wonder whether it had been Genevieve who had put the gang up to ambushing her in the first place, and the more she thought about it the more certain she became.

Three-P went cruising off with no particular destination in mind, happily reliving the recent battle. He was about to smack the first of the gang square on the beak all over again when he, himself, felt a sharp blow on the back of his head and something rebounded into the water beside him a second later. It was a pebble. Oh no, Three-P thought. Not again. He rolled over on to his back and there, hovering above him, was Gully Jimson.

"Who are you bombing?" Three-P demanded crossly.

"You."

"What do you want now?"

"For you to behave like a decent penguin," the seagull snapped back.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"What have I done...?" Three-P found that yet again Gully Jimson had put him squarely on the defensive in the shortest possible time.

"All very well protecting a lady for five minutes, but then you abandon her. Who's to say they won't start bullying her all over again?"

"They wouldn't dare," Three-P said.

"Why not?" Gully Jimson said. "You're not there. What could you do about it?"

Three-P stopped swimming and lay there floating on his back.

"Oh, all right," he said with extremely bad grace. He turned about and headed back to the landing place. Cassie was still standing near the water, staring thoughtfully at the ground. Three-P could see some of the gang still hanging around in the background.

"Hey," he honked. "You'd better come with me for a while, in case they come back."

Cassie looked up and suddenly smiled.

"Really?" she said.

"Hurry up. I'm hungry and the fish won't wait forever."

Cassie hopped awkwardly down to the edge and then a magical transformation took place. She dived into an oncoming wave with perfect timing and slid elegantly through the water to where Three-P was waiting. He was surprised.

"I didn't know you could swim like that," Three-P said admiringly. Of course, all fairy penguins are more than competent in their natural element, but as with all things, some are better than others and Cassie was truly talented, perhaps to make up for her missing foot. No longer was she funny little Cassidy Hopalong, but Cassidy Catchalot, demon of the deep.

That day there was a south-easterly blowing and the swell was curling around the bottom of the island and running along the western shore in long, breaking combers, the sort of surf perfect for a wave-rider. The two little creatures swung wide past the break, darted across the reefs and plunged down the flanks of the undersea mountain to one of the deeper plateaux. A school of baby trevally swam into view and with one accord the

two penguins flashed into action. Cassie scored easily but Three-P, much to his embarrassment, missed completely.

Back on the surface, the little fish still wriggling in her beak, Cassie looked at Three-P rather nervously. She was sure that like any male he would be angry and put out, but he just laughed.

"Serves me right," he said.

"Why?" Cassie said with her beak full.

"For thinking that boys are automatically better than girls," Three-P said. He dived down again and a while later he too surfaced with a fish.

As they frolicked away the morning, Three-P was surprised to realise that he was enjoying himself. His humiliation of the previous day now seemed of small consequence and this little Cassidy Hopalong was turning out to be lots of fun. Furthermore, she really was excellent in the water, to the point where Three-P was hard-pressed to match her. Once they leave the land, penguins don't so much swim as fly and everything a bird can do in the air a penguin can do underwater. As time went by, Three-P even began to suspect that Cassie might be holding back a fraction, so as not to embarrass him. Twice he put it to the test and twice Cassie pulled out of a manoeuvre that would have left him looking very foolish had she continued.

"Don't do that," Three-P said at last, coming to the surface.

"What?" Cassie said innocently.

"Pretend I'm better than you. I'm not..." Cassie regarded him, her eyes very wide.

"Not even a little bit? A tiny little bit?" Three-P laughed and made to duck her again, but this time he was quite unable to catch her and he was so engrossed in the game it was only when he suddenly found himself nose to nose with a dolphin that he realised they were no longer alone.

Now to us, dolphins are fascinating, indeed lovable, animals. Fairy penguins, however, have a very different point of view. They treat dolphins with distrust verging on loathing. You see, in the first place, dolphins are a different colour – a dull, unattractive grey compared with the penguins' delicate, slate blue with white underpinning. And in the second place, they're a frivolous lot, fin-loose and fancy free, gambolling away their lives with no thought to the future, never mind making a decent burrow and raising their children to be upright, responsible citizens. And worst of all, fairy penguins are well aware that dolphins regard them as thoroughly boring little creatures quite beneath their notice, unless to be tormented for some passing, light entertainment.

Uh oh, Three-P thought. Here's trouble. And an instant later, the trouble had doubled and doubled again. Three-P now found himself surrounded by four dolphins swimming in a lazy circle. For the second time that day he began to worry about Cassie. She, however, even though enjoying their game, had stayed rather more alert. She had heard the dolphins coming and had managed to slide away without being spotted.

"So a hey-nonny-nonny the nonce," the lead dolphin began. "What do we have here? A penguin, I declare. A fairy penguin. But is it a gay fairy penguin? This must be discovered. All must be discovered." Three-P's heart sank. A gang of penguin bullies was one thing, a pod of large, bottlenose dolphins, each about 400 times his weight, was quite another.

"Swim for it, Cassie!" he honked desperately. "Swim for it! Go home!" He heard her begin to protest.

"Do it!" he honked as loudly and as urgently as he could. "Don't argue! Do it!"

"Such a noisy little thing," one of the other dolphins remarked.

"Needs to learn some manners..."

"Penguin football, I think," the lead dolphin said judiciously. "Yes. Definitely penguin football."

"You mean fin ball..."

"Nose ball..."

"Smack-it-with-your-tail ball..."

Uh oh, Three-P thought again. He didn't like the sound of smack-it-with-your-tail ball the least little bit but he had no more time to worry about it. A dolphin nose slid beneath him and an instant later he found himself flying high in the sky, which for a penguin is quite unthinkable.

Three-P should have been terrified. Instead, astonished, he found the experience intoxicating. He rose and rose and the higher he went the more time seemed to slow. There was Cassie, well away now and watching with a shocked expression on her face. He waved gaily and honked with glee. Now his climb was losing speed, stopping. Now he was hanging weightless for what seemed like hours. And now he was plunging back down in a way that was totally exhilarating. He even had time to discover that by moving his wings as he would in the water he could control his dive. Instead of smacking down in a dreadful bellyflop, he cleaved cleanly through the surface and came up whooping.

"Do it again!" he honked at the dolphins. "Do it again. Do it again."

Nothing loath, one of the dolphins flipped him up and again Three-P found himself spearing high into the sky. This time he could see Cassie swimming fast for Mickleburrow, which was a pity he thought. She would have enjoyed this if only they had known, but then maybe not. She was just a girl after all. And then he forgot all about her in the pleasure of the moment, managing a somersault with full twist as he descended. The dolphins were regarding him with astonishment when he surfaced and one even applauded with his flippers.

"My, my, a very gay fairy penguin," the leader said. "A very gay fairy penguin indeed. Allow me to introduce myself. I am d'Artagnan." He gestured towards the others. "And this is Athos... Porthos... and Aramis. We are the Four Musketeers." The other dolphins bowed in turn.

"Pengelly Perceval Puddle at your service," Three-P said. "Better known as Three-P... But as musketeers, shouldn't you be swordfish?" he demanded.

"Oh, very sharp," Porthos chortled.

"Sharp as a rapier..."

"So sharp he'll cut himself..."

"Blood in the water..."

"You know whats..."

"Hungry you know whats..."

"Poor little penguin..."

"All gone..."

"So tragic..."

The dolphins were swimming in that lazy circle again and Three-P was going dizzy trying to follow the conversation as it flowed about him.

"Talking of hungry..." d'Artagnan said.

"Very hungry..." Porthos said.

"Always hungry..." Athos and Aramis finished together.

"Bubble netting," d'Artagnan said. "Time to go bubble netting."

"What's that?" Three-P said. "What's bubble netting...?"

"He doesn't know about bubble netting..."

"Such ignorance..."

"Such innocence..."

"So deprived..."

"He must be educated..."

"Elevated..."

"Elucidated..."

"Elongated..."

"Oh, I do hope not," Three-P said. "That sounds painful."

"Onward," d'Artagnan said. "Before we starve to death."

The group turned as one for the open ocean, the dolphins swimming slowly enough for Three-P to keep up, and deployed in line abreast to cover as much ground as possible. Three-P was as happy as he'd ever been and he was delighted when he happened to be the first to spot a fine school of albacore tuna setting the surface of the sea a boil. He then watched in amazement as the Four Musketeers set about catching their lunch.

The tuna were themselves hunting a school of pilchards and had no idea they were about to become the hunted. The dolphins slid into the depths and soon a series of air bubbles began to pop up to the surface. They started out wide and began to curve inwards in a spiral, the curl growing tighter and tighter, herding the tuna into a smaller and smaller space until they were all corralled, seemingly with no chance of escape.

Confused by the streams of bubbles surrounding them, the fish milled about until suddenly, the dolphins exploded into their midst wreaking havoc.

At last, the dolphins had dined sufficient. What remained of the tuna were allowed to disappear and the Four Musketeers regathered about Three-P. Athos was still grasping a large fish.

"We brought this for you," d'Artagnan said.

"Um..." Three-P said, nonplussed. The fish was bigger than he was. "Thank you. Thanks awfully..."

"Ah, I see," Aramis said. Without more ado, he also seized the tuna and together, he and Athos wrestled it apart until they had pulled it into small enough pieces for Three-P to manage. He had never had tuna before. It was delicious, absolutely delicious.

"We learned bubble netting from a whale," d'Artagnan said. "A humpback."

"A fine fella..."

"Excellent chap..."

"Master fisherman..."

"Hear hear..." Three-P said enthusiastically, his beak full. At last, replete, he rolled over and lay there, floating on his back, rocking gently with the waves.

"Isn't life just wonderful?" he asked the world at large.

Later, after a long afternoon siesta, the dolphins decided they should escort Three-P home to Mickleburrow. The island had just heaved over the horizon when a bird came plummeting out of the sky and splashed down in front of them. It was Gully Jimson.

"Why Gully," Three-P said benevolently. "What brings you here?"

"You do," Gully snapped. "You are in so much trouble..."

"Why? What have I done?"

"Our little penguin..." d'Artagnan began.

"Our innocent young friend..."

"Our mascot..."

"Our comrade..."

"And you lot can stop with the nonsense right now," Gully told the dolphins crossly. "It's all your fault..."

"He says it's our fault..."

"Can he be serious..."

"Surely not..."

"Say it ain't so..."

"We are blameless as the day is long..."

"You were using him as a football, weren't you?" Gully demanded.

"Perhaps..."

"Possibly..."

"Almost certainly..."

"Depending on your point of view..."

"And Cassie thought they were going to kill you," Gully told Three-P. "So she went to get help. From Mickleburrow. And now they're all hunting for you. Determined to save you."

"But I don't need saving," Three-P said, bewildered. "As you see, I'm perfectly all right. In fact, never better."

"And if you tell them that," Gully said. "Then they'll kill you themselves. The whole town has spent hours searching for you."

"But..." Three-P began.

"So you lot have to disappear," Gully ordered the dolphins. "And as for you," he added to Three-P. "Tell them you got lost or something. Tell them you were kidnapped. That's it, tell them you were kidnapped and only managed to escape just now..."

"But that's not true," Three-P said.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Gully said. "This is an emergency."

"But I haven't done anything wrong," Three-P insisted. "And even if I had, I wouldn't lie. This is just a misunderstanding."

"Fear not," d'Artagnan began. "We shall accompany you..."

"We shall explain..."

"We shall convince..."

"We shall make them see the error of their ways..."

"Oh no," Gully Jimson said. "That's the worst possible thing. You know how penguins feel about dolphins."

"And that's just silly, plain stupid," Three-P said angrily.

"Hear hear..."

"Quite..."

"Absolutely..."

"Bravo..."

Chapter 3

The closer they got to Mickleburrow, the noisier things became. Penguins were everywhere, honking Three-P's name. It was clear the whole town had rallied to the cause. There were hundreds of penguins thrashing about, thousands, or so it seemed. At last, one of them got a beak full of water and stopped honking long enough to realise that the object of all this searching was there, right in front of him.

"He's here! He's here!" the penguin shouted triumphantly. The cry was instantly taken up by those about and spread rapidly, far and wide. In an instant, Three-P found himself at the centre of an anxious gathering.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he kept saying. "Nothing happened. Everything's all right. I'm fine. I'm fine..." But there was so much noise, nobody could hear him and even if they could, they weren't about to believe him. If the whole town had been called out, then it stood to reason that he couldn't possibly be all right. The situation was much too serious for nothing to have happened.

At last the tumult began to subside and then a way opened through the struggling mass and Oberon and Titania swam regally into the centre of the circle. Titania had left her crown back at the Palace Burrow but nevertheless was still wearing her pearls, naturally. For the purposes of this search and rescue mission, Oberon had chosen a bow tie with a striking grey, blue and white camouflage pattern. He felt it lent him an air of a command most appropriate to the occasion, which was very nearly a military operation after all. Oberon waited for silence and then spoke in his most sonorous tones.

"A triumph," he declared. "A triumph for Mickleburrow. We have saved Pengelly Perceval Puddle from a terrible fate."

"A triumph indeed," Titania echoed.

"What do you have to say, young Pengelly?" Oberon continued, somewhat put out at his wife's attempt to share the glory.

"Me?" Three-P said, bewildered.

"Come on, boy," Oberon said. "Don't be bashful. Speak up now."

"But... but..."

Oberon turned to the crowd about and raised his voice even more.

"He's overcome, overwhelmed, unable to speak. If he could, he would offer his undying gratitude for our courage in saving him from those dastardly dolphins. A near-run thing... a most narrow squeak..." Whereupon he was interrupted by a very wide squeak, the broadest of squeaks. The Four Musketeers had chosen that moment to erupt from the depths and, grinning hugely, were squeaking for all they were worth. Oh no, Three-P thought. Not now! Cassie, who had pushed her way through to the front row, hid her eyes in horror.

Oberon recoiled in shock and then, recollecting his august position, began to flail at the dolphins with his flippers, shouting:

"Thieves! Robbers! Murderers! Assassins!"

In an instant, the four dolphins, swimming in their lazy circle, had him isolated and totally at their mercy.

"Do you think he's talking about us?" D'Artagnan began.

"Surely not..." Athos said.

"Us?" Porthos said.

"Assassins...?" Aramis said.

"So cruel..."

"So unjust..."

"So wrong..."

"We are blameless..."

"Playful, perhaps..."

"High-spirited..."

"Even mischievous..."

"But assassins...?"

"Libel..."

"Slander..."

"Defamation..."

"Downright character assassination..."

"Retribution is required..."

"Punishment..."

"Penance..."

"His portliness must pay..." Oberon, who had been listening open-beaked in astonishment, began to splutter. Undeniably he was a fine figure of a penguin, but portly? He had never been so insulted in all his life. It was outrageous, simply outrageous.

"Now look here," he began in his sternest voice, but got no further.

"Biggest splash wins," d'Artagnan said.

"Oh goody..."

"You first..."

"Bombs away..."

And before anyone could intervene and like Three-P before him, Oberon suddenly found himself hurtling up in the air, but unlike Three-P, Oberon quite failed to rise to the occasion, so to speak. Instead of revelling in this new experience, he panicked, flailing and flapping quite out of control until he hit the water again flat on his tummy and with a most dreadful wallop. Three-P rushed forward and pushed his way into the circle of dolphins.

"Stop it!" he shouted. "Stop it! Stop it! You must stop it. You can't do this to Oberon."

"Why ever not?" d'Artagnan said in surprise. "It didn't bother you."

"But I'm not the king."

"King?" Aramis said.

"He's a king?"

"King of what?"

"King of Mickleburrow," Three-P said, desperately. "He's king of the penguins and you mustn't treat him like this."

"Why is he the king?" Aramis wanted to know.

"He's the fattest..."

"The slackest..."

"The all-round wackiest..."

Oberon turned pink with emotion, then bright red. He suddenly stopped gasping and spluttering.

"How dare you?" he shouted in fury. "How dare you?"

"How dare we?" Athos began but before the dolphins could begin another round of their circular conversation, Three-P cut in.

"Please," he said urgently. "Please, please, please, don't tease the king. As a favour to me, please..."

"A favour," d'Artagnan said. "He wants a favour..."

"He is our friend..."

"Our comrade in arms..."

"Our comrade in flippers..."

"A favour he shall have..."

"Oh thank you," Three-P said gratefully.

"See you soon," d'Artagnan said and in an instant the dolphins had dived deeper than any penguin could hope to reach and had disappeared. Three-P was left anxiously eyeing a wrathful Oberon.

"Did they say friend? Did they say comrade?" Oberon demanded.

"Err..." Three-P began nervously. He was beginning to realise that he was in trouble deep enough to drown him.

"Only in a manner of speaking," a new voice said, a coarse, raucous voice. It was Gully Jimson, apparently appearing out of nowhere but who had been hovering overhead the whole time. He bowed gravely to Oberon, and again to Titania.

"Your highness and your majesty, forgive the intrusion but with your permission I feel I must explain." Oberon, somewhat mollified by the ceremonial, nodded regally.

"As a witness to the whole episode, I can tell you that had it not been for Three-P, those dastardly dolphins would have caused infinitely more distress and damage. You

must understand that at great risk to himself and instead of fleeing when first attacked, as any penguin less courageous would surely have done, Three-P set out to lure the dolphins away from Mickleburrow, from all of you, by pretending friendship..."

"But I wasn't pretending..." Three-P tried to protest, only to swallow a beak-full of water as Cassie pushed him firmly beneath the surface and kept him there. He emerged choking, spluttering and quite unable to speak to hear Oberon saying very doubtfully:

"Well, in that case, I suppose this young penguin should be considered something of a hero. It seems improbable, most improbable, knowing the penguin as I do, but in the circumstances I am prepared to say no more about it." And without another word and before Three-P could regain his voice, Oberon and Titania swam off, followed by their retinue and all the rest of the penguins.

Three-P was left with Cassie, his parents and Gully Jimson.

"Ahh, see you back at the burrow then," his father said awkwardly, and he too swam away. His mother gave Three-P a look that spoke a whole library shelf of volumes and joined his father.

Three-P was about to burst out angrily but Cassie forestalled him.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "It's all my fault. If I hadn't rushed off and brought them all to the rescue, this never would have happened."

"Oh well," Three-P said after a moment, trying to be gracious. "You thought you were acting for the best and no real harm done. They all think I'm an idiot anyway, after making such a fool of myself with Genevieve... ouch!" he exclaimed. Gully Jimson had just pecked him sharply on the shoulder and he realised that Cassie was looking suddenly crestfallen and miserable.

"But I'm glad I did, make a fool of myself," Three-P went on. "Otherwise, I would never have got to know you." And as he spoke, Three-P realised that what he was saying was absolutely true.

That night, Three-P could not begin to sleep. His day with the dolphins had not only been tremendous fun but had opened his eyes to a way of living he never could have imagined. He lay there, tossing and turning, reliving everything that had happened, then his mind turned to even earlier events, to the fun he had been having with Cassidy Hopalong before ever the dolphins had appeared. And it was something more than just fun. He sighed and in desperation began to count mackerel, but the more he counted the more awake he felt. At last he rolled out of bed and crept out of the burrow, careful not to disturb his parents. Perhaps some fresh air and a stroll would calm him down.

The night was delightful, balmy with a full moon glistening on the water. Three-P meandered down towards the southern tip of the island. The tide had changed again but the surf, generated by a storm who knew where, was still swinging round the point and running up the western shore in lovely, curling combers. Suddenly Three-P stiffened. There was something out there, or rather things. Then clear in the moonlight, he saw it

was the dolphins, taking it in turns to catch a wave and surf along the shore before racing back for the next.

The pull was so strong that even had he wanted to, Three-P would have been quite unable to stop himself. He rushed down to the water, launched himself in a racing dive and swam frantically out to the break.

"Well, well," d'Artagnan was saying a moment later. "Look who it is."

"Just in time," Athos said.

"Dude, it's pumping..." Aramis said.

"Come on, you're next," Porthos finished.

Nothing loath, Three-P gave it everything he had but could not manage to swim quite fast enough, quite long enough to catch a wave. He tried and he tried, but the more he tried, the more tired he became and the worse his failures. At last he gave up, disheartened and depressed.

"Hmmm," d'Artagnan said, consideringly.

"Ummm..."

"Ahhh..."

"Err..."

"What about...?" d'Artagnan went on.

"You're not thinking...?"

"Genius...!"

"Let's do it!"

"Do what?" Three-P said mystified.

It took some practice, but quite soon anybody watching would have seen a most astonishing sight. A dolphin surfing is not so unusual, but a penguin riding a dolphin riding a wave, the same way a human rides a surfboard, now that's simply unique. Three-P had never experienced anything remotely as exhilarating. The speed, the power, the sensation of controlling the power, of bending it to his own will was unlike anything he could have imagined even in his wildest dreams. His first successful ride, he felt sure, would always remain the pinnacle of his life, his finest memory. When at last d'Artagnan cut back off the crest and Three-P allowed himself to collapse into the water he was hysterical, whooping and hollering so much that he all but choked and drowned. The dolphins were almost as excited and demanded to be allowed to take it in turns, catching wave after wave with Three-P, no two waves ever the same, always different.

Dawn was long past and the sun well up by the time they finally began to tire of the sport. It was then that Gully Jimson came hurtling down out of a clear blue sky.

"Idiots!" he squawked. "Fools! Morons, all of you. Turn my back for a minute to get some breakfast and what happens?"

"Why, Gully? What has happened?" Three-P said benevolently.

For answer, Gully turned and gestured at the shore. It was black with penguins, all staring at them.

Uh oh, Three-P thought. They didn't look at all friendly and he seemed to feel waves of disapproval washing towards him. At that moment, somebody dived in and came swimming towards them. It was PC Flatfoot, the Mickleburrow policeman, large, intimidating and pregnant with all the authority of his office. He stopped and surveyed Three-P with an awful eye.

"Pengelly Perceval Puddle..." he began. His voice was deep and threatening. "I hereby place you under arrest on summons to attend the Mickleburrow Assizes forthwith." Three-P opened and shut his beak several times, but he was so stunned no sound emerged. He was saved by Gully Jimson.

"On what charge?" Gully demanded.

"And whoever you might be," PC Flatfoot snapped. "This is none of your business. Be on your way."

"On the contrary," Gully stated. "I am Mr Puddle's attorney and if you're not very careful I'll have you up before the Beak for harassment of an officer of the court in the execution of his duty."

"Oh bravo!" d'Artagnan applauded.

"And you can shut up," PC Flatfoot said. "This is none of your business either and you have no call to interfere with an officer of the court. On about your business or there'll be trouble."

"I think he's threatening us," Athos said.

"Can he threaten us?" Porthos said.

"Are we going to let him threaten us?" Aramis wanted to know. Three-P felt the situation was rapidly getting out of control.

"I think we should threaten him," d'Artagnan said.

"I'll come quietly," Three-P said. Everyone looked at him in surprise.

"You don't have to, you know," d'Artagnan said. "He can't make you, not with us about."

"That's what worries me," Three-P said. "I'll go. I'll go now. I don't want any more trouble."

"How disappointing," Porthos said.

"How sad..."

"What a waste..."

The great mass of penguins silently parted and PC Flatfoot led the prisoner down the path they made towards the meeting dell, where Oberon and Titania were waiting, their palace retinue drawn up behind. Three-P shivered. He had no real idea of what was happening.

PC Flatfoot marched him up to the official party.

"Prisoner at the bar, 'tenshun," he bellowed. Three-P found himself automatically coming to attention and then, suddenly rebelling, decided he wouldn't. Gully Jimson shook his head disapprovingly.

"Let me do the talking," he whispered. "And try to behave." He stepped forward and speaking in a loud voice, demanded:

"What is the meaning of this? Why are you treating my client like a convicted felon?"

"And who the deuce are you?" Oberon shot back, testily. His complexion was again as crimson as his tie and a little ditty was running round his head: Pengelly Puddle, always in trouble. First it was upsetting that nice Genevieve Longbottom and more importantly, her father, holding her family up to ridicule. Then he has the whole of Mickleburrow turn out to search for him quite pointlessly. And Oberon still couldn't bear to think about the aftermath, the... ambush he had found himself sucked into. It came to him all of a sudden that the humiliation inflicted on him by the dolphins, not to mention the pain and suffering, had obviously been planned all along. Absolutely. He began to swell with fresh fury.

"I..." Gully Jimson was saying, meanwhile, with lofty dignity "... am Mr Puddle's attorney-at-law. I demand to know the charges."

"You, sir, are an interloper," Oberon spat. "This is a penguin court and you have no business here." And then speaking to PC Flatfoot, Oberon commanded: "Remove that bird."

"Bird...!" Gully Jimson began to protest, but got no further as PC Flatfoot delivered him a sharp peck. He reared back, shrieking and flapping his wings the way gulls do, only to find himself bowled over by PC Flatfoot thrusting forward inexorably like a miniature bulldozer. There was a hiss of indrawn breath from the crowd, none of whom could remember ever having witnessed so much entertainment crammed into so short a space of time. Three-P moved to help his friend but was too late. Dazed, Gully picked himself up and when PC Flatfoot threatened another charge, he gave Three-P an apologetic look and flew off, squawking.

Suddenly Three-P was all alone in that huge crowd and still with no real idea of what was happening.

Oberon gestured and another large penguin stepped forward, the clerk of the court. He began to intone in a most severe voice:

"Pengelly Perceval Puddle, in that you were witnessed by the assembled multitude consorting and disporting with sundry dolphins, a species highly inimical to all right-thinking penguins, you are hereby accused of treason, species impurity and heinous crimes against morality, the mandatory punishment for which is expulsion and exile in perpetuity. How do you plead?"

"You must be joking," Three-P said in astonishment.

"Joking!" Oberon roared. "Penguins and dolphins do not mix. They're oil and water, chalk and cheese, whatever cheese might be. And you choose of your own free will to

associate with that gang of hooligans, to go sporting with them, the worst gang in the neighbourhood. Why, it's unimaginable, unconscionable, intolerable..." He was almost frothing at the beak by the time he had finished and had quite run out of breath.

"How do you plead?" the clerk of the court repeated.

However, Three-P didn't get a second chance.

"Guilty," someone shouted from the crowd and then a chant began, growing louder and louder until it was impossible to think: "Guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty..." To Three-P, it felt as though a mountain was falling on him, crushing him, destroying him, a mountain of unreasoning hate.

"Silence!" the clerk bellowed. "Silence..." Gradually, the assembly came to order.

"Guilty he is," Oberon said. "Clearly guilty."

"Unquestionably," Titania seconded him. Oberon scowled at her for butting in. The crowd roared again.

"Prisoner, do you have anything to say before I pass sentence?" Oberon intoned at last when he could be heard. Three-P stared at him. Somewhere deep inside him a spark began to glow.

"I like the dolphins," he began.

"Shame!" somebody shouted.

"The dolphins are my friends," he continued in a louder voice.

"Shame! Shame!" The cries were growing.

"I haven't done anything wrong..." he was shouting now. "And I agree with the dolphins. Penguins are ridiculous. You're all stupid, especially you..." Three-P pointed at Oberon.

The noise from the crowd was now so raucous it was impossible to make out anything anyone was saying. Oberon was staring at him in fury. Slowly he raised his flipper over his head as though about to strike Three-P, then lowered it to the horizontal, rigid as an iron bar and pointing to the sea.

"Go!" he hissed. "And never come back."

The crowd began to push at each other until they had cleared an avenue down to the water, an avenue of exile. A small part of Three-P wanted to throw himself on the ground and beg for mercy, but the rest of him drew himself up, straight as the bill on a swordfish. Slowly he looked about him, a last look. There was his mother, sobbing quietly, his father ineffectually patting her shoulder. And there was Cassie, staring at him with horror, her eyes huge. Three-P realised with a shock that apart from his parents and little Cassidy Hopalong he didn't care if he never saw any of the others ever again. What was being forced upon him was not punishment, but freedom. He smiled at his parents, winked at Cassie and began to march towards the sea, towards a new life.

The Four Musketeers were waiting for him. Gully Jimson on being evicted from the trial had sought them out and warned them what was happening.

"So..." d'Artagnan began, not quite sure what to say.

"Well..." Athos said.

"Um..." Porthos said.

"Ah..." Aramis said.

"Don't worry," Three-P said.

"But it was our fault..."

"Sort of..."

"A little bit..."

"Just a smidgen..."

"Not at all," Three-P said. "Being with you is the best fun I've ever had and they're all just jealous. And they're stupid. They think dolphins are despicable just because you're different. They have no idea what you're really like and they're too full of prejudice to find out. I'm glad they threw me out. Now I'll never have to bow and scrape to that fat old Oberon ever again. I'm glad you used him for a football. Serves him right. The only thing is, I don't really know what to do now."

"That's easy..."

"Peasy..."

"Japanesy..."

"You come with us," d'Artagnan said.

"We're going to make you an honorary musketeer..."

"The fifth musketeer..."

"But..."

"Do you think..."

"That he's really..."

"A whole musketeer...?"

"Being so small and all...?"

"The four and one eighth musketeer...?"

"That's it..."

"Brilliant..."

"Magic..."

"Outstanding..." And then they all spoke at once.

"Welcome to the Musketeers." Three-P sighed with pleasure and gratitude. Suddenly life was not only filled with freedom but infinite possibility.

Chapter 4

There was only one word for it, Three-P thought to himself. Hoot... Life with the dolphins was an absolute hoot. Or did he mean honk? Either way, hooting or honking, it was all just too much fun.

The four and one eighth Musketeers had quickly discovered that if Three-P lay on someone's back just so, with his flipper hooked over the dorsal fin, then he was nicely streamlined and they could all move just as fast as they pleased. The only thing was, whoever was doing the honours that day had to remember not to stay down too long as Three-P could not hold his breath as long as the dolphins. In the excitement of the chase, it was not unusual for the steed of the moment to forget and Three-P would have to give his back a sharp bang to remind him that he was in imminent danger of drowning.

It was another perfect day. There was a hint of a storm in the offing but for the moment the sun was shining benevolently, the breeze was amusing itself by scaring up whitecaps and the Musketeers were larking along, having just enjoyed a splendid luncheon of calamari à la mode.

"Squid-licious," Three-P was thinking to himself, when suddenly d'Artagnan, whose turn it was to carry him, stopped.

"Did you hear that?" he asked Three-P.

"What?" Three-P said absently, still savouring the memory of the squid.

"Someone's in trouble. Listen."

The other dolphins stopped and then circled back.

"What's up?" Aramis said.

"Listen," d'Artagnan said again, and then: "There. Did you hear that?" The sharp sound of a creature in distress vibrated faintly through the water about them.

"A whale," Athos said.

"Wailing..." Porthos said.

"A young whale," d'Artagnan said.

"Come on!" Aramis said, and without more ado the Musketeers swung sharply to the east and increased speed to very near the maximum. It was the fastest Three-P had ever gone in his life and was so exhilarating that he hoped it would never end. The speed of their passage through the water rushed and tore at him. He flattened himself against d'Artagnan's back to minimise resistance and held on for dear life, gulping air desperately every time they rose to the surface. At last, just when he was beginning to think that however much fun it was he would be unable to cling on any longer, and as they yet again leaped clear of the surface, he spotted a dark, grey hump off in the distance. It looked rather like an isolated rock sticking up out of the ocean, waves breaking over the top of it. As they drew nearer, they could begin to make out that it

was in fact a humpback whale, wallowing on the surface. And finally, it became clear that the whale really was in deadly trouble. He was entangled in a great mess of abandoned fishing gear that had broken free from a trawler and which was now washing about him with the action of the waves.

"Well," d'Artagnan said, coming to a halt in front of the whale. "This is a pretty pickle..."

"A fickle pickle..."

"A prickly pickle..."

"A very tricky pickle indeed..."

The whale sighed mournfully.

"You poor thing," Three-P said. "How long have you been like this?"

"Days," the whale said so faintly they could barely hear. "Days and days and days. I've tried and I've tried but I just can't get free. And I can't swim. I can't do anything. I'm starving... I think I'm going to die..."

"No..." Three-P began.

"Absolutely not..." d'Artagnan echoed.

"Never..." Porthos said.

"Not while we're here..." Athos said.

"We'll think of something," Aramis finished.

But what, Three-P wondered? The dolphins circled about a little way off, careful not to get tangled up themselves, studying the situation. It looked hopeless, quite impossible.

I've got to get closer, Three-P thought. He slipped off d'Artagnan's back and edged in.

"Oh, do be careful," d'Artagnan said anxiously and he was right to be worried. The great mess of nets and ropes and buoys was swirling about treacherously in the building seaway, a deadly trap just waiting to snare anyone the slightest bit careless.

Three-P decided he needed to get still closer, and then dived right underneath the whale, studying the situation. Gradually he began to make some sort of sense of the constantly heaving mass. It was difficult to see, but he decided it all came down to one thick rope which had somehow wrapped twice around the narrowest part of the whale's tail. Cut that and maybe, just maybe, the whole horrible mess might sink away. Three-P popped up out of the water and swam back to the dolphins.

"Well," d'Artagnan said. "What do you think?"

"There's this rope," Three-P said. "One rope. If we can cut it..."

"Cut it?" Athos said, the dolphins all looked at each other helplessly.

"How ever could we possibly cut it?" d'Artagnan said.

"I don't know," Three-P said. "But that's what we have to do." There was a long, long silence. They could hear the whale breathing raggedly and they knew he couldn't

survive much longer, not with tons of wreckage dragging him down. At last, Three-P spoke.

"Could you chew through it?" he asked.

For answer, d'Artagnan opened his mouth. He had lots of teeth, nearly 50 counting top and bottom, but they were all conical, designed for grasping and holding, not cutting. They sank back into gloomy silence, and then the same inspiration seemed to strike them all simultaneously.

"It's human rubbish..." Porthos began.

"So we need..." Aramis said.

"A human way..." Athos said.

"To cut it..." d'Artagnan said.

"We need a knife," Three-P finished triumphantly. Which was all very well to say, but getting a knife out there in the ocean was quite another matter. There was another long silence, finally broken by d'Artagnan.

"I have a plan," he said. "Three-P comes with me and the rest of you stay here. Try to help him stay afloat, and keep a sharp eye out for you know what... We'll be as quick as we can."

Every so often, d'Artagnan would leap a bit higher out of the water and Three-P, whose eyesight was much better than the dolphins', would strain to see the coast. Finally, there it was, a thin, hazy blue line.

"I can see it," he honked. He was wildly excited despite the seriousness of the occasion. He had never ever seen the mainland, nor did he know anybody who had. It was a fantastic, mysterious place. Nobody at Mickleburrow had ever been there in living memory but one of the oldest penguins had once had an uncle who had once had a cousin who had spoken to a friend who had heard of a penguin from another colony who might have seen it in the distance, but couldn't be sure. And now, not only had Three-P seen the mainland for himself but he was actually going there.

Once in view, the coast came rapidly nearer and very soon Three-P could make out a forbidding line of rearing cliffs. Closer still, a gap opened up and d'Artagnan changed course slightly until he was heading straight for it.

"This is the place," d'Artagnan said when he was sure of his bearings. "There's a town tucked into the bay and a jetty."

"What are we going to do?" Three-P asked.

"You," d'Artagnan said. "It's what you're going to do. I can't go on land so it has to be you. There's a jetty where humans fish. They're always there. It will be dark soon and you can creep up and take a knife."

"You mean, steal a knife?"

"I do," d'Artagnan said. Three-P suddenly fell silent. All his life he had been scrupulously honest and the thought of stealing something was deeply troubling. D'Artagnan sensed his discomfort.

"It's their rotten rubbish killing the whale," he said angrily. "It's only fair for them to help us free him."

The sun waved a last scarlet banner at the world and departed for the night, leaving dusk to creep across the water. D'Artagnan and Three-P slid silently down the bay with barely a ripple, rounded the point, and there suddenly before them was the town, lights beginning to sparkle. A dark mass jutted towards them. It was the jetty. They could hear people chatting as they fished and from time to time there was a glow from a torch as somebody baited a hook.

D'Artagnan dived and swam underwater until they could surface beneath the jetty, between the piles and quite invisible. With a whispered "good luck" from the dolphin, Three-P slipped off his back and eased into the shoreline where ripples were lapping at the beach. He lay there listening for a second or two then crept up the sand and finally out from under the jetty where he found steps leading up to the roadway. He stopped, shivering with fright and suddenly overcome by the enormity of what he was about to do. He knew that the humans would cut him up for fish bait without a second thought if ever they should catch him. At last he took a deep breath and made to move, but found himself rooted to the spot. His body was flatly refusing to do what it was told.

"Move!" he ordered himself. Still nothing happened. Then he thought of the poor whale, struggling to stay alive, hopeless but nevertheless refusing to give up. His foot stirred, and again, and suddenly he found himself creeping along the decking, trying to make himself even smaller than he already was.

Half a dozen people were fishing from the end of the pier. They had rods and handlines, tackle boxes, coolers and other bits and pieces scattered about, the way fishermen do. A couple had brought stools. The others were sitting with their legs dangling over the edge.

Three-P crept nearer and nearer, then stopped and stiffened. He was suddenly aware of two things. Behind one of the seated figures was a bait bucket and lying beside it on the planking, Three-P could see a fish knife. But at the other end of the row there was something else, a shapeless hump, a hump that rose and fell slightly as it breathed. It was a dog.

This time Three-P was absolutely paralysed with fear. A dog would tear him to pieces. He wouldn't just be cut up for fish bait, he would be ripped to shreds while still alive. Again he thought of the poor helpless whale, but he was petrified, literally turned to stone. A vagrant thought flashed through his mind. If he were to fall over the edge now, he would sink straight to the bottom, a stone indeed, and drown. His beak twitched with the beginnings of a smile, and suddenly it was possible to move again. He was

sorely tempted to turn tail but on the point of doing just that, he was struck by the realisation that it was probably not much more dangerous to go forwards than back.

Inch by painful inch, centimetre by painful centimetre, fraction by painful fraction, he edged towards the knife. And at last, finally, he could reach forward and grasp it with his beak.

He must have made a noise.

One of the fishermen swung round and gasped with astonishment. He and Three-P stared at each other. And the fishermen began to shout:

"Hey! That penguin is stealing my knife! Butch, you dozy dog! Wake up! Geddit! Go on! Geddit! Kill!"

The dog sprang instantly to life, growled and then lunged for Three-P, who reeled back in total panic, scrabbling madly to get away. Somehow he evaded the dog's first rush and still back-peddalling furiously, found himself teetering on the edge of the jetty. The dog, claws smoking on the planking, heeled around and came at him again. Three-P had a fleeting impression of yawning jaws, jagged teeth and flying spittle, and then he was falling.

He hit the water flat on his back and with a force that jarred all the breath from his body. However, he somehow kept enough presence of mind not only to hang on to the knife but to swim for the shelter of a pile before he came to the surface, gasping desperately for air. D'Artagnan arrived from the shadows and supported him with his snout while he recovered. Above them on the jetty there was pandemonium. The dog, balked of his prey, was barking hysterically. The owner of the knife was shouting:

"It was a penguin, I tell you! A penguin stole my knife... it must be under the jetty still. Go on, Butch! Go on... get in there, go get him!" There was a yelp as the dog was thrown over the edge, and a large splash.

Three-P and d'Artagnan glanced at each other, then Three-P slid back until he could clasp d'Artagnan's fin comfortably in his armpit, and the two noiselessly submerged. By the time they came up for air were well away, invisible in the dark. They could hear the dog thrashing about in the distance, his master still shouting angrily. Three-P shuddered. It had been a very near thing, a very near thing indeed, but he had the knife and that was all that mattered.

Even though it was a black night, cloudy and moonless with the weather thickening rapidly, they found the others without difficulty thanks to d'Artagnan's sonar and his infallible sense of direction. The whale was still alive, but only just, and the other musketeers greeted their return with anxious eagerness.

"Did you get it?" Athos demanded.

"We did..." Three-P began but was interrupted by d'Artagnan.

"Three-P did," he said. "Wait till you hear what happened..."

"No time," Aramis said. "He's very weak, we have to hurry..."

"Start cutting," Porthos said. Three-P slipped off d'Artagnan's back but the dolphin stopped him before he could go further.

"It's too dangerous," d'Artagnan said. "In the dark, in this rough water, it's too dangerous. You'll get tangled up for sure. And we won't be able to save you and you won't be able to save the whale. You'll both drown and what's the good of that?"

Three-P paused. D'Artagnan was right. The chances of getting trapped himself were very high. But on the other hand, the whale was now so weak he could no longer speak and his breathing was getting fainter and fainter. Three-P was certain the whale could not last till dawn, that he would die before their eyes and if he had not even tried, Three-P knew he would be unable to live with himself. Better then for him, if it came to it, to die in the attempt.

He suddenly made up his mind and, without a word, took a breath and dived. The four dolphins looked at each other with deep concern. They had become very attached to the tiny penguin and what he was doing, deliberately diving into a swirling, deadly tangle, quite invisible in the dark, was the bravest thing any of them had ever seen anyone do.

Twice, Three-P felt clutching tendrils grasp at him like some monster from the deep but each time he managed to wriggle free. And then he was inside the worst of the mess, right up against the whale's tail. He found the crucial rope he needed to cut and followed it up to the surface so that he could breathe while he worked. Then, clutching the knife in his beak as firmly as he could manage, he began to saw at the thick, synthetic hawser.

It seemed an impossible task. The small bait knife, never very sharp to begin with, quickly became so blunt and Three-P, who weighed only a little more than a kilogram, could apply so little pressure that it was having no noticeable effect. At last, close to despair, he stopped to rest. It was then he noticed that the back of the knife was serrated for scaling fish.

I wonder, Three-P thought. I wonder...

He started sawing with the back of the knife and immediately could feel something was finally happening. Rope fibres were catching and fraying till they parted. Three-P redoubled his efforts but it was a long, long, weary business, frustrating, endless. However, never once was Three-P tempted to give up. Dogged is perhaps the wrong word to use, but that's what he was, dogged to the point of obsession.

His friends, the dolphins, swam round and round in a slow circle anxiously chirruping. Every so often one of them would demand he stop and reassure them that he was still all right or, heaving mass of wreckage or not, they would come in and pluck him out. Three-P of course knew that if they came any nearer it would be disastrous. He was so small that he had some chance of slipping through the gaps, but any of the dolphins would be snared in an instant and doomed to a horrible death. So Three-P every so often would have to break off and try to honk, his beak muffled by the handle

of the knife, loud enough for his friends to hear him over the increasing tumult of the wind and the waves.

Three-P began to doubt that he would ever manage to saw through the hawser but still he refused even to think of giving up. Finally, the sky began to lighten with a hint of the approaching dawn. It meant that he had already been at work for hours and hours, and he knew that if he didn't manage to free the whale soon, it would all be for nothing. He was now so tired that he had to concentrate fiercely on keeping his grip on the knife. One mistake and it would disappear into the depths, never to be found again.

It was full daylight now but there was no sun to be seen. The sky was raddled with dark, tattered banners and it was hard to tell where cloud ended and sea began. Still the dolphins circled, keeping vigil. Still Three-P sawed away, exhausted, mind numb, struggling to hold position against the breaking waves, fighting to avoid being washed into the wreckage himself, knowing only that he must keep at it come what may, that he must not drop the knife though the serrated teeth were now as blunt as the blade, worn away to the point where they were all but useless. On and on he worked at the stubborn hawser and then suddenly, before his disbelieving eyes, another filament parted and the rope actually began to stretch. At last it was near to breaking.

Three-P drew one last determined breath and attacked the rope again with his final shreds of energy. Then, one second it was there and the next not. The rope parted soundlessly, whipped around the whale's body and the whole seething mass of deadly debris slid below the surface and out of sight. Three-P spat the knife away from him, watching as that too disappeared, glinting dully for a minute, and finally he rolled on his back, gasping. An instant later d'Artagnan reached him.

"You've done it," he said disbelievingly. "You've done it."

A ray of sunlight suddenly lanced through the lowering sky and settled on the whale like a spotlight.

"Is he still alive?" Three-P asked. "That's all that matters."

"Just, I think," d'Artagnan said.

"He needs food."

"Don't worry. The others are off rounding up some squid now. Whales like squid. They'll be back soon."

And how fortunate, Three-P thought, that another whale had once taken the trouble to teach the dolphins the art of bubble netting.

Humphrey, for that turned out to be the whale's name – Humpy for short – recovered quickly. Athos, Porthos and Aramis happily found an about-to-be unhappy school of squid nearby and more or less herded them, all unsuspecting, straight into Humphrey's open mouth. Relieved of the terrible weight dragging him down, the still exhausted whale was able to sleep then, guarded by the dolphins who were concerned that blood from his skin, scored and chafed red raw by the action of the wreckage dragging at him in the waves, would attract you know what.

Humphrey woke late that afternoon to find the four dolphins gazing into his face with interested expressions. Most curiously, one of the dolphins had a tiny fairy penguin reclining negligently on his back, leaning against his dorsal fin.

"Well," d'Artagnan said. "I must say you look rather better than you did this morning."

"And I feel it, sir," Humphrey said. "But I don't really remember very much about what happened. I remember a storm, days and days ago it must have been. And I remember getting trapped in that horrible wreckage and calling to my family for help. But up near the surface there was so much noise from the crashing of the waves that they couldn't hear me. You have to be deep, you know, for sound to carry, to be able to hear anything. And then all I could do was try to stay afloat, for days and days and days... How ever did you manage to save me? I can't even believe it was possible. How on ocean did you do it?"

So the four dolphins told him the whole story while Three-P listened contentedly, saying nothing. At last Humphrey sort of bowed to him.

"I can see," he said, "that I owe you my life, sir, that without you I would now be dead. Please accept my deepest gratitude. You are a most remarkable little penguin and I would be proud to be your friend."

"Think nothing of it," Three-P said. "Glad to be able to help. And I would be equally proud to be your friend..."

"And us," the dolphins chorused simultaneously.

"Now," d'Artagnan said a moment later. "There's one thing left to do..."

"We've been talking..." Athos said.

"And we've decided..." Aramis said.

"That as Three-P has proved himself an absolute hero, first-class with flippers on..." Aramis said.

"You should be promoted to full musketeer," d'Artagnan said. "Three cheers for Three-P, the fifth Musketeer..."

Which was when Gully Jimson came plummeting out of the sky.

Chapter 5

Cassie watched Oberon point to the sea with his rigid flipper, numbed by a sense of doom descending. The crowd of spiteful, spitting penguins separated and drew apart, forming a corridor of calamity down which Three-P marched into exile, head held high and back defiant.

Three-P was right, she thought. Penguins were ridiculous and to banish someone for being friendly with a pod of dolphins was stupid beyond belief. But that did nothing to change what had happened or to ease the pain in her heart. At last she had managed to make Three-P notice her, even begin to like her, and now he had been driven away by the worst sort of mob prejudice and unreasoning hate. Cassie was close to despair.

The gathering continued long after Three-P had dived into the shore break and disappeared. Nobody could ever remember events so momentous and the crowd stood around for what seemed like hours, discussing, recounting and chewing over everything that had happened. It made Cassie feel sick. They were all taking such pleasure in Three-P's disgrace and it was unseemly, indecent, downright disgusting. Worse, she was held prisoner by the crush, forced to listen to the gleeful gossip. In the end, she began to push and shove, careless of whom she might trample, just desperate to escape. She felt that if she had to listen to one more sentence that began: "I always knew that young penguin would come to no good..." then she would die on the spot.

She had just about made good her escape when she was blocked by another penguin who refused to let her pass. It was Genevieve Longbottom.

"And I hope you're satisfied," she said venomously. "This is all your fault. I could have made something of Pengelly, but you had to go and interfere and ruin everything. How dare you...?"

"What...?" Cassie started to say.

"This is all your fault," Genevieve repeated, shouting now. Other penguins were turning to look, their faces stern. "You turned out the town to go searching for him. And then you dared him into surfing with the dolphins. I heard you."

It was such an outrageous accusation, such a total lie, that Cassie could only gape opened-beaked in astonishment. There was a moment, a fraction of a second, when she might have been able to reject Genevieve's charge and then it was too late. Other penguins were crowding in close now and taking up the running.

"What, what did she say...?"

"She says it's all Hopalong's fault..."

"That she called the dolphins..."

"She dared Three-P..."

"... And he went surfing..."

"Disgraceful..."

"... That any young penguin could do such a thing..."

"If she were my daughter, I'd give her such a pecking..."

And if Cassie had been close to despair moments before, now she was more miserable than she'd ever been in her life. It was all so unfair, so unjust, and worst of all, she had lost Three-P just when she had begun to hope, oh so secretly, that they might have a future together.

At last she managed to force her way clear of the jabbering mob and fled for her burrow.

She stayed there for days, too miserable to move, too disgusted ever to want to have anything to do with anybody in Mickleburrow ever again. Her mother, of course, was frantic with worry and tried everything she could think of to coax Cassie to come out, but in the end even she had to give up. If Cassie was determined to starve herself to death then there wasn't very much anybody could do about it.

In the end what saved her was the thought that Three-P would despise her if he could see her now. The realisation came on her slowly, sneaking up, insinuating itself into her mind, gradually becoming more and more powerful until at last it filled her head and drove her to emerge. It was almost as dark outside the burrow as it was inside but thanks to her excellent penguin night vision and the faint light of dawn, Cassie had no difficulty picking her way down to the shore. She hesitated for a moment and then with a lingering look over her shoulder, plunged into the water. She had the feeling that she would never return to Mickleburrow again and was not sorry there was no one to see her go. Well, almost no one. A seagull roosting on a rock had pulled his head out from under his wing as she passed.

The thrust of the water pulsing through her feathers as she swam slowly away from the shore brought her back to life and she realised she was hungry, starving hungry. However, it was one of those strange occasions when the sea seemed to be devoid of fish, absolutely barren. She could sense a storm coming and apparently everything in the ocean had decided to lie low. Now that she had finally admitted to herself that she was indeed famished, Cassie was desperate to find food. She swam on and on, mile after mile, intent on finding something to eat. It was full light now but grey and gloomy, the sun hidden behind a sky darkening with purple clouds. Already the rising wind had slashed the sea with long lines of white. The island quickly disappeared below the horizon without Cassie noticing.

Still she hunted on but the building storm really had swept the ocean clean and without realising it, Cassie, too, was being swept faster and faster away from safety. At last, diving down to her limit, she chanced on a school of squid and was able to satisfy her hunger a little before she lost them in the tumbling murk.

Now, slightly less ravenous, she started to think again and realised all of a sudden that she was in bad trouble. Intent only on food, she had allowed herself to be carried far to leeward of Mickleburrow and the chances of being able to swim back against the gale and the current were extremely small. Nevertheless, she turned about and grimly began to trudge into the wind and the waves. It was hopeless. Cassie didn't know it but

this was the same storm that had made Three-P's rescue of the whale so difficult and dangerous, and she was caught in the absolute worst of it.

Giving up any attempt to fight against it, Cassie turned downwind and concentrated on keeping herself afloat. Even that was exhausting. The waves had built up quickly but had not yet had time to lengthen out, which meant they were steep and breaking haphazardly. Time and again, Cassie was picked up by a foaming crest and dumped mercilessly into the trough beyond. Even though the sea was her element, it took every ounce of her strength to survive. A human would have drowned long before. On and on it went, Cassie concentrating grimly on fighting her way through one battering wall of water, and then the next, and the one after that. It seemed as though the storm would never end and many times Cassie thought she could not possibly endure. But somehow she did. At least the storm, unlike the prejudice of the penguins of Mickleburrow, was something physical to fight against.

All that day she battled on, moment by moment, minute by minute, and on into the night. Finally, the wind began to moderate and the waves to lengthen out so that no longer were they a tumbling cauldron. Cassie could begin to relax a little, even to sleep for a minute or two before being caught by another dollop of spray smacking her full in the face.

By morning, the wind had lost its viciousness. It was still strong but no longer goading the waves to unreasoning madness. Cassie, however, was now far gone. She had been weak to start with after her self-imposed fast and the few squid she had managed to catch had done little to restore her strength, now again exhausted by the storm. Once more, she turned into the wind to try to head for safety but in her weakened state could make absolutely no progress. And she no longer had any idea where safety, in fact, might lie.

Another wave caught her full in the face and she was now so tired that she swallowed involuntarily and began to choke. She knew she could not last much longer but she was determined to keep on resisting until the absolute last second. She coughed and spluttered and somehow fought her way back to the surface. It was then she saw something floating on the water some distance away. Numbly she began to swim towards it. At least it was something positive to do.

Again, she choked and began to sink. One last time she battled her way back to the surface and then bashed her head on the object she'd been making for. It was the top of an old wooden packing crate that must have been dumped overboard from a ship. It was awash but still had enough buoyancy to make one very small penguin a life raft. Somehow, Cassie managed to wriggle her way on top and collapse. For the moment she was safe again.

"It's all your fault," Gully Jimson squawked at them in outrage. "No good bunch of loafing layabouts. Look at you, idling away your lives when she's lost and all alone and very probably dying!"

"Oh no!" Three-P exclaimed, automatically feeling instantly guilty. "What have I done this time?"

"It's Cassie, Cassidy Hopalong," Gully stormed at them, still squawking at the top of his voice. "And it's all your fault, you and your surfer dude buddies."

"Cassie? What's happened to Cassie?" Three-P said with a pang.

"She's lost at sea, that's what," Gully said. "Lost at sea and starving to death and it's all your fault."

And little by little, with the other four musketeers helping and feeling a tad guilty themselves, Three-P managed to extract the story.

When, finally, it was clear what had happened they all looked at each other helplessly. How on ocean could they possibly go about finding one tiny penguin lost somewhere on the heaving depths? It seemed absolutely hopeless and no one had any idea of how even to begin.

Humphrey watched their increasing distress and finally decided to speak. He was an extremely polite and well brought-up young whale who was very much in awe of his rescuers. He had by now heard something of their free and easy life gallivanting about the ocean and it seemed to him that if not musketeers, they were certainly buccaneers. His own family was very proper and the notion of freebooting one's way through life with a bunch of ne'er-do-well friends would have struck them as being totally beyond comprehension. One spent summer in southern waters, working hard to lay down blubber to fuel the long journey north to the breeding grounds in the tropics, where one spent the winter working hard to teach young whales a proper appreciation of their place in the scheme of things, a scheme of things that held no place whatsoever for fun and frivolity.

Whales were solid citizens of the sea, respectable, restrained, and young whales certainly never spoke to their elders and betters without first being spoken to.

"Excuse me," Humphrey said hesitantly. "But do I understand correctly? One of your friends is lost somewhere out in the deep ocean...?"

"And we have no idea how to find her," Three-P said disconsolately. He felt he was about to burst into tears. The excitement of his life since leaving Mickleburrow had disguised his pain at having to leave Cassie, but now it was assailing him with horrible force.

"Ah... if you will allow me," Humphrey said diffidently. "Perhaps I can help." They all turned to him.

"Help...?" one of the dolphins began.

"How...?"

"What can you do...?"

"How can you help...?"

"Quiet!" Three-P shouted. "Let him speak. What can you do?" he added.

"Ah..." Humphrey said modestly. "I can put out an APB on the www."

"What...?"

"What's he talking about...?"

"What sort of nonsense is that...?"

"Don't understand a word of it..."

"Or a letter of it..."

"Quiet!" Three-P roared. "Let him speak. Please let him speak..."

"Hear hear," Gully Jimson chimed in, feeling it was time he inserted himself back into the conversation.

"Please! Please! Just everyone shut up!" Three-P shouted desperately.

"I can put out an all penguins bulletin on the world wide whale web..."

"Don't start," Three-P said warningly. "Just don't start..." The four dolphins hurriedly closed their mouths and Gully Jimson glared at them forbiddingly.

"The world wide whale web is how we communicate," Humphrey said. "Ignorant creatures call it whale song, but it's not. We talk to each other. I was just about to ewhale my parents to tell them how you saved me. But now, I'll put everyone on the lookout for your friend. Don't worry, we'll find her..."

And without more ado, Humphrey inhaled mightily and sank beneath the surface. Sound, by the way, travels four times faster in water than it does in air and much much further, so conversation over a distance is quite possible. Humphrey was gone for what seemed like hours and Three-P had convinced himself that he must have drowned when the whale finally surfaced again.

"Well?" he asked worriedly.

Humphrey took a long time to recover his breath, spouting and inhaling, but at last he spoke.

"Nothing immediately, I'm afraid, sir," Humphrey said respectfully. "But every whale in the whole Southern Pacific is now on the lookout for her. I told them all we have to find her, that it's a debt of honour."

"Thank you," Three-P said after a moment, trying not to show his disappointment. He had been telling himself that Humphrey would have news straight away.

"Did you get in touch with your family?" d'Artagnan asked.

"Oh yes, sir," Humphrey said. "They were very worried about me. I told them how Three-P saved me so bravely and now they're all hunting for your friend."

Humphrey waited for another 10 minutes and then dived back down to the depths. Again when he surfaced he had nothing to report, and so it went through the long, long day. Three-P was beside himself with worry. It was only now that he was beginning to realise how dear Cassie had become to him.

And all through the dreary waiting, Gully Jimson glared at him until at last, Three-P could bear it no longer.

"It's not my fault," he said plaintively. "I didn't banish me from Mickleburrow..."

"Surfer dude..." Gully hissed.

"Just a little harmless fun," d'Artagnan began.

"Harmless!" Gully squawked, but before he could launch himself into a thorough-going tirade Humphrey once more surfaced beside them. He was quivering with excitement.

"They've found her, sir! They've found her!" he said to Three-P.

"Where? Where?" they all demanded at once.

"From here, at least two days swim."

Cassie sank into a stupor of exhaustion. Her breathing was undetectable and anyone happening upon her would automatically have taken her for dead. She slept she knew not how long and when she did eventually wake, she thought she was dreaming. A deep voice, gentle but insistent, seemed to be murmuring in her brain.

"Wake up, Miss," the voice was saying over and over again. "Time to wake up now. Wake up, Miss."

Cassie opened an eye and hurriedly shut it again. Another eye, a huge eye, was staring at her.

"It's all right, Miss," the voice said. "Really it's all right. Your friends have sent me to help you."

Cassie opened her eyes again and this time kept them open. She was floating in what seemed to be a vast, blue bowl. Sea and sky were exactly the same colour and she couldn't tell where one began and the other ended. She was lying on something hard and she remembered now, scrambling on to the wooden raft which had appeared just in time to save her. She moved her head slightly and there was the eye again. It regarded her unblinkingly. Cassie started with fright and reared back.

"It's all right, Miss. Really it's all right," the voice said soothingly. It seemed to be associated with the eye and slowly Cassie began to realise that the eye itself was embedded in what seemed to be a mountain of grey flesh.

It came to Cassie at last that what she was staring at was a whale, and apparently a whale who meant her no harm.

"So," the whale said. "No offence, but you do rather look like you could do with a nice cold bath and something to eat. And if you were to slip over the side of that thing you're riding on, whatever it is, you'll find some very fine squid just aching to be eaten right underneath you, which means you'd be able to kill two birds with one stone... oops. Very untactful of me but you know what I mean."

Cassie realised as the whale was speaking that the hollow pain in her middle was hunger, that she was starving, and gratefully she did as she was told. She ate and ate and ate until she thought she would burst. She ate so much, in fact, that she had great difficulty worming her way back on to the raft. The whale had been watching approvingly a little way off and when she had finished, came back to speak with her.

"Feeling better, I hope," he said.

"Oh much better, thank you," Cassie said gratefully. "I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"Nothing to repay, nothing at all, don't worry about that," the whale said. "After what your friends did for our Humpy, this was absolutely the least I could do."

"Really?" Cassie said. "Why, what happened?"

"That little penguin – Three-P, is that his name? – why he risked his life for hours in a storm to cut Humphrey free from some dreadful human wreckage, nets and stuff. Humphrey would have drowned, no question. It was heroic what that little penguin did, absolutely heroic. And we hear that he had to fight a dog and all sorts of things..."

Cassie was thrilled. She had always believed Three-P to be a superior young penguin and now here was the proof. She wanted to interrogate her new friend to get every last detail but the whale was now impatient to leave.

"Well then," he said. "Now that you're feeling better I really must get on. Still a long way to go to the summer feeding grounds, you know. You'll be fine now. Just stay with your raft and they'll find you quite soon. They'll be here some time tomorrow, I should think. And if you get hungry again you can always pop over the side for a bit of fishing."

"Oh..." Cassie said, feeling suddenly bereft. Then she rallied. "Of course you must go on. I've taken far too much of your time already and I'll always be terribly terribly grateful. Will you tell me your name so that I can tell everyone how kind you've been?"

"No, no," the whale said. "It's been a privilege and any one of us would have done the same. Nothing's too much after what your friend did." And without more ado, the whale puffed a cloud of vapour into the air, inhaled hugely and sank beneath the surface, disappearing rapidly into the depths.

Cassie couldn't help feeling thoroughly forlorn. Once the whale had left it was hard to believe that she hadn't dreamed the whole thing, that it had all been a figment of her fevered imagination. How could the whale know all about Three-P? How could he know that Three-P was on the way to rescue her? It was impossible. It made no sense at all. Here she was, lost in an immensity of sea and sky, utterly alone, and to think that anyone could find her was just ridiculous. The despair hovering around the edges of Cassie's mind began to thicken and crowd in on her.

But you're not hungry any more, she told herself. The squid must have been real. Or, she wondered, am I now so hungry I just don't feel it any more?

Night fell and mercifully, Cassie, still exhausted from her battle with the storm, slipped into a deep sleep. She woke with the dawn and much to her relief was feeling hungry again. It meant that her huge meal the day before must have been real, as were the whale, and what he had said, that rescue was on the way. She slipped over the side of her raft and into the cool embrace of the water, hoping for some breakfast. She was in luck. Some of the leftover squid from yesterday were still hanging around, confused

and disoriented. Cassie helped herself and climbed back on board, stretching out in the sunshine. Time passed oh so slowly and despite the fact that she had determined she must keep a vigilant lookout, she dozed off.

It was a sense of looming menace that brought her awake. A haze had crept over the sky while she slept and the sea was now a molten grey, oily, threatening. There was no wind and the life raft rose and fell with a barely perceptible motion on the lingering swell. Cassie stood up awkwardly and studied the water around her. She could see nothing but still the sense of menace twanged at her nerve ends. She was sure that something dreadful was about to happen and she began to shiver. It was, she suddenly realised, just the weather when wise creatures were most on the lookout for you know what.

Even sharks fear sharks, for they know best of all that they are nothing more or less than highly mobile eating machines and that anything that comes within range is likely to be munched, particularly in the midst of a feeding frenzy. And the most feared shark of all is the great white, a huge animal, all muscle and teeth and ravenous appetite; a shark that ranges across the oceans of the world and which is so large that it can take a large, bull seal in one bite. To see one hunting in full flight, and flight is exactly the right word as these animals are so strong they can leap well clear of the water despite their huge size... to see one hunting in full flight is a sight so awesome, so terrifying, that it is absolutely unforgettable.

The longer Cassie stood there anxiously swivelling about and starting at every slight ripple, the more certain she became that there was a great white somewhere nearby, a great white who would not hesitate an instant to crunch her raft to matchwood and use the splinters to pick her feathers from his teeth. And then, paralysed with fear, she saw it, a faint vee of ripples heading straight for her. She knew the wake came from the tip of a dorsal fin just creasing the surface of the sea. She knew there could be no escape. She knew she was doomed and all she could think was that she wished she had told Three-P exactly how she felt about him.

Even for dolphins, even for a whale, it had been a long, hard haul. They had been swimming at near full speed for well over 24 hours and there was no denying that they were coming to the end of their strength. Even so, Three-P wouldn't hear of them stopping for a rest.

"Faster," he kept urging them. "Faster. We must go faster."

At last, when the dolphins were on the point of open rebellion, of dumping Three-P and telling him to do it himself if he was so all-fired eager, Humphrey stopped.

"Listen," he said, cutting off Three-P's protest. "Just listen..."

"What is it...?" d'Artagnan began to say, but then he too fell silent.

"Uh oh," Porthos said finally.

"What?" Three-P demanded.

"No time," d'Artagnan said. "A rescue! A rescue! All for one and one for all... Onward!"

Just when she thought the vee would cut her in half, Cassie saw it turn aside and then circle round her raft, suspiciously. The faint wake looked absolutely innocent but Cassie could now make out a monstrous, indistinct shape hovering beneath it, all the more frightful for being just a shadow. Again it carved right round her, and again, until it seemed to Cassie that it must cut a hole in the sea through which she would fall to the bottom. Then it stopped completely. The ripples vanished, leaving just a faint mass which might or might not have been there.

Still the shark hung motionless, apparently trying to decide whether such a tiny morsel as a fairy penguin was worth the trouble of eating.

Then there was a slight swirl in the water and Cassie knew the shark had just twitched his fin, that he was about to come for her, that the last thing she would see would be his vast, open jaws. It was the end. The end of everything. In another second she would be torn to shreds and deep in the creature's maw...

All but frozen with terror as she was, she managed to hop backwards to the edge of the raft furthest away from the shark, determined to make it as difficult as possible. It was then that there was a great uprush of water behind her. The raft danced and swayed in the wash and she fell heavily.

"In here!" a voice behind her shouted, a voice she knew. "Quick! In here!" And without the least idea of what was happening or how this magical refuge had suddenly materialised, Cassie found herself rolling into what seemed to be a large cave.

Even to someone like Cassie, who also lived on fish, the smell was appalling. The cave snapped shut behind her and Three-P had hold of her and was helping her up.

"Shsh," he said, putting a flipper to her beak. Outside, they could hear a deep, booming voice.

"It ain't worth the trouble," the voice said. "But it's da principle. Dat penguin is mine and I want it. Hand it over. I ain't usually bothered with whales but for you I kin break da rules..."

Cassie and Three-P clung to each other as their cave suddenly swayed violently from side to side as though gripped by an earthquake. It was Humphrey shaking his head.

"Whasdamatter?" the shark demanded a moment later. "Catfish got ya tongue? Speak up or I'll rip it out meself."

But of course Humphrey couldn't speak for fear of crunching his two guests. It came to Cassie in a rush that she couldn't stay in this refuge, not at the whale's expense, not if the shark was going to tear him to pieces too.

"Let me out," she shouted. "Let me go. It's the only way. Save yourself." Again there was that violent motion as Humphrey shook his head, though this time it was directed at the tiny creature shouting inside him. Three-P looked at Cassie with amazement. He had never dreamed that a girl could be so brave, so honourable.

"It's all right," he said. "We'll be all right..."

Cassie began to argue but was interrupted by another voice outside, distant, muffled. It was d'Artagnan.

"Oi! Fish-face...!"

Cassie realised it must be one of Three-P's dolphin friends and she had visions of him and the others being torn to pieces by the angry monster. The situation was getting worse and worse. How many lives would be lost trying to save hers? She couldn't bear the thought, but just then Humphrey opened his mouth and she and Three-P were suddenly able to see.

The shark was now in the centre of a wide circle formed by Humphrey and the four dolphins and he appeared strangely uneasy.

"Dis ain't nuffink to do with you lot," the shark said, and Cassie was astonished to realise that there was almost a note of wheedling in his voice. What she didn't know was that while any shark might be more than happy to try conclusions with one dolphin and enjoy wolfing the result, so to speak, facing a pod of them was a very different kettle of fish.

"Now you listen carefully, guts for brains," d'Artagnan went on. "That's our whale and our penguins and I'll give you exactly three seconds to disappear..."

"Or what?" the shark said, but there was a distinct note of anxiety beneath the truculence.

"Or war... one, two, three, charge!" d'Artagnan roared.

And with one accord, the four dolphins revved themselves up to ramming speed and smashed into the shark with their snouts, which are properly called rostrums. The four simultaneous collisions came to the penguins as one mighty wham that somehow echoed and rolled for what seemed like ages. Even humongous as he was, the shark was lifted half out of the water by the impact and came down gnashing and flailing. A dolphin weighing more than half a tonne and flying through the water at a speed of around 30 knots makes a very damaging battering ram and the shark, huge as he was, was hurt and dismayed.

Cassie shrieked and Three-P gasped. He was desperately afraid that his four friends must be slaughtered by the writhing monster but somehow they managed to win clear without damage and on d'Artagnan's signal they again roared into the attack. Again, the sound of the collision rolled across the water and again the shark reared up at the impact. And this time he had had enough. As he crashed back into the water he gave a mighty slash with his tail, dived deep and kept on going.

Chapter 6

Their joy was unbounded. Not unnaturally, the dolphins and Humphrey were rather pleased with themselves. There is no more formidable opponent than a great white shark and it had taken great courage for them to face it down and drive it away, and of course Cassie and Three-P were both ecstatic to have survived, never mind that they were together again.

Whales might be solid, respectable citizens but humpbacks, particularly, do like to breach, what you might call a breach of the peace, and Humphrey hurtled out of the water again and again, to crashing down to throw out great sheets of spray. The four dolphins, not to be outdone, did some strenuous formation leaping of their own. It was a wild celebration, a victory frolic, and Cassie and Three-P were lost in admiration.

At last, Three-P turned to Cassie.

"I really missed you," he said quietly. "Really really really..." Cassie blushed. Her natural shyness was about to overcome her yet again but then she suddenly thought: If I can face the you-know-what, I can do anything.

"And I was so miserable when they banished you, I thought I was going to die," she said. They stared at each other hungrily, looking deep into one another's eyes. They were interrupted at last by another voice.

"So that's all right," d'Artagnan said. Unnoticed, the wild gyrations of the others had come to a natural end and they were now all watching the two little penguins with benevolent interest. This time, they both blushed.

"So I suppose we should take you home to Mickleburrow," Three-P said at last, to cover his confusion.

"Oh no," Cassie protested, aghast. "I don't want to go back. I never want to go back. Not to Mickleburrow. Not to all those awful penguins."

"But it's your home," Three-P said. "What will your mother say?"

"The same as your mother," Cassie retorted. She was much too alarmed at the prospect of being taken home to remember that she was supposed to be a meek and mild little creature who wouldn't say boo to a brim.

"Oh..." Three-P managed, now at a total loss.

"Don't worry..." d'Artagnan began.

"She's welcome..."

"... to stay with us..."

"... as long as she likes..." the others chimed in.

"And what about me, sirs, Miss?" Humphrey suddenly demanded. Everyone looked at him, surprised. They had all thought he would want to return to his family as soon as

possible but Humphrey was finding the pull of the buccaneering life most powerful, what with rescues and battles and the prospect of who knew what further adventures.

"My goodness," d'Artagnan said, after a moment. "So now we are seven..."

"The seagoing seven..."

"The serendipitous seven..."

"The sensational seven..."

"I know," Aramis suddenly said. "Let's take them to the Dolphins' Dance..."

"Brilliant..." Porthos said.

"Super..." Athos said.

"Oh, what fun..." d'Artagnan said.

Three-P and Cassie looked at each other. Neither of them had ever heard of the Dolphins' Dance, which is not surprising as it is a very great secret, but every year in every ocean of the world on the night of the summer solstice, dolphins gather in great numbers in the most secluded reaches of the seven seas to celebrate the ending of one annual cycle and the beginning of the next. Sometimes mariners come across great schools of dolphins, thousands strong, obviously on some sort of purposeful journey. It is an awesome sight as such a school even swimming on a very wide front can take hours to pass. And a seafarer privileged to witness such an event can't help but wonder where these thousands and thousands of dolphins might be going in such a hurry all at the same time. Well, the answer is simple if deeply mysterious. They are all on their way to the dance.

But when the four musketeers had finished explaining, Three-P and Cassie looked at each other doubtfully.

"Won't we be intruding?" Cassie asked hesitantly.

"Not at all," d'Artagnan said.

"You will be our honoured guests," Porthos said.

"And Humphrey," Aramis said.

"And it will be the first time a whale has ever been invited," Athos said. "Never mind a pair of penguins."

Humphrey looked embarrassed but secretly was beside himself with excitement. Being a whale he was naturally aware of the dance but had never dreamed he might ever be able to go. It was generally understood that dolphins took a dim view of gate-crashers and, as he had seen with the you-know-what, were quite able to enforce their wishes. However, a formal invitation was quite a different matter.

It was a long, long journey but for Cassie and Three-P absolutely delightful – day after day of brilliant weather, good food, good company and best of all, time to really get to know each other. The four dolphins would take it in turns to be sea chariot and the two little penguins riding at ease had all the time in the world to tell each other everything. Cassie had hoped all along that Three-P would be her soul mate, but to

Three-P himself their extended courtship was a revelation. Never once was he bored. Never once did he wish that Cassie would just shut up. Never once did he feel the need, as he had so often done in the past, to go off by himself. And there was no denying that life was infinitely more fun when shared with someone for whom he cared deeply.

As the little company made its way further and further out into the vast, empty reaches of the South Pacific, the secret places, they began to encounter groups of other dolphins all heading for the annual rendezvous. D'Artagnan and the others seemed to know everyone and there were so many introductions that Humphrey and the penguins gave up all hope of remembering anyone's name. However, it didn't matter in the least. Dolphins are generally the happiest of creatures and they were only too pleased to welcome the three outsiders once it had been established that they were being properly sponsored.

The small groups of dolphins all heading in the same direction began to coalesce into streams and then rivers, until finally it seemed that the whole surface of the sea was one, solid carpet of heaving backs. It was the most astonishing sight and it appeared to Cassie and Three-P that the dolphins were so thick about them that they would be able to get off Aramis, their chariot for the day, and walk.

As the balmy afternoon drew on and twilight began to fall the infectious excitement of the massed crowds boiled and bubbled until it was so thick in the air you could almost taste it. At last, d'Artagnan turned to the two penguins.

"Time for you to join Humphrey," he said. "It won't be safe for you to stay with Aramis..." Without more ado, Cassie and Three-P slipped into the water, swam to the whale and began to work their way up his back until they were ensconced on his broad forehead. They both thought the same thing. Grandstand seats had never come grander.

The sun disappeared below the horizon and then set about turning the great columns of cumulus in the sky into massive towers of scarlet and gold and a thousand hues in between, a setting so magnificent that it was hard to remember to breathe. There was a moment of stillness and then at some signal undetectable to the three spectators, the massed dolphins, all the thousands and thousands of them, every last one, rose up on their tails until they seemed to be standing on the water and then they began to dance, all in unison, all bowing in turn to their neighbours, dipping and circling each other with grave courtesy, offering congratulations for the year just passed and hopes for the year about to begin.

Then, at another undetectable signal, parties of dolphins here and there would disappear beneath the surface to erupt suddenly into the flaming sky – soaring, tumbling, somersaulting, fountains of living fireworks, their glistening skins reflecting the fiery colours from above so that they too were rainbow-hued and totally magical.

Cassie and Three-P stood motionless, awestruck, holding each other's flipper and gripped by a spectacle quite beyond their wildest imagining. It was as though the whole extraordinary performance, stretching as far as the eye could see, had been mounted for their exclusive wonder.

At last the sunset darkened to be supplanted by the silver iridescence of a huge, full moon creeping above the horizon and picking out each individual of that extraordinary gathering like a spotlight on a stage. On and on the dolphins danced, never ceasing, never wearying, in the most joyous of celebrations, their homage to the miracle of life.

The dawn came quietly, apologetically, with just a faint rim of colour as though reluctant to intrude. It need not have worried. As the moon had declined and finally slipped below the horizon, so the dolphins individually and in groups had slipped below the surface of the sea and disappeared until finally only the four musketeers remained gathered about Humphrey and the penguins. Nobody spoke, nobody even thought of speaking, not until it was full daylight and the enchantment of the night before was truly only a memory. Even then, there was nothing to say. Words would only sully the magic and Three-P and Cassie, in particular, needed nothing more to know they were now indissolubly bound together for life.

Everyone was in a quiet, contemplative mood and they ambled along for days in no hurry to get anywhere, content just to enjoy each other's company with a bit of fishing here and a bit of rollicking there just to keep their flippers in. And of course, dolphins being dolphins and penguins being penguins and Humphrey being Humphrey, slowly the rollicking gained tempo until everything was quite back to normal. Until, that is, Humphrey surfaced from one of his deep dives, berating himself for not paying proper attention to the www and its warning system. He was now looking as pale as a certain, famous white whale.

"What's up with you?" Aramis demanded.

"Seen a ghost, then?" Porthos asked.

"Or are you thinking of changing your name?" Athos said.

"Should we be calling you Moby-Dick?" d'Artagnan finished.

"Do shut up..." Three-P hollered.

"Something's wrong..." Cassie said. "What is it, Humphrey?"

"Oh Miss..." Humphrey started, then words failed him.

"What?" the four dolphins demanded simultaneously, suddenly realising there was trouble afoot.

"Oh sirs..." Humphrey tried again, but his voice trailed into silence at the horror of the situation.

"What?" the dolphins repeated, now seriously alarmed.

"Whalers," Humphrey managed to say. "The whalers are coming. They're nearly here..."

Three-P and Cassie looked at each other, mystified, but the dolphins knew all too well what Humphrey was talking about.

"They're humans," d'Artagnan explained.

"And humans are the most dangerous..."

"... the cruellest..."

"... the most vicious of all animals..."

"Why, humans kill creatures like us just for fun, when they're not even hungry..."

"And whalers are some of the worst of all..."

"They shoot harpoon things into whales like Humphrey..."

"Which explode and kill them slowly..."

"In agony..."

"We've even seen them towing harpooned whales backwards to drown them when the bomb thing was taking too long..."

"Humans are worse than you-know-what..."

"Far worse..."

"Humans are horrible..."

"Humans are hateful..."

"Humans are hideous..."

"Humans are horrific..."

"So what are we going to do to help Humphrey?" Three-P interrupted. He was afraid that once the four dolphins got properly started there would never be an end to their tirade.

"Escape...!"

"Flee...!"

"Swim for it...!"

But it was too late. Because they were all so low to the water, none of the seven companions could see any great distance above the surface. While they had been talking, the whale-catching fleet had steamed up over their very limited horizon and was now very close. The seven friends looked up to find a line of ships bearing rapidly down on them. In the centre there was the large factory ship and ranged on either flank were the catchers, small, fast, hunter-killers, each with a wicked harpoon gun mounted on the foc'sle. There was only one word for them. They were evil, absolutely evil.

And as they watched, stunned, aghast, the nearest catcher broke away from the fleet and turned sharply in their direction. Obviously, someone had spotted Humphrey.

Yamasaki san anxiously prowled the bridge of the factory ship, the Nisshin-maru. So far it had been poor hunting that season – for some reason, the whales seemed magically to have disappeared – and as captain of the fleet he would be held responsible. So when a lookout reported a spout far to the east, he turned his whole command in pursuit to make sure the quarry had no chance of escape. This was one whale he was determined to kill and butcher. When he was sure the whale was trapped, he dispatched his most reliable catcher, the one with the best harpoonist, to take the shot. Meanwhile, he

deployed the other catchers in a wide circle in case the whale managed to dive deep and make a run for it.

They were frozen with horror, all seven of them. The doom dashing towards them was ineluctable, inexorable, inevitable. Humphrey was going to die. He was going to die horribly. There was no possible escape. They were surrounded and however deep Humphrey dived, however far he managed to flee underwater, the whalers would track him and slaughter him when he was finally forced up for air and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, his friends could do to prevent it.

Three-P stared fixedly at the assassin ship racing towards them. It was very close now, nearly in range, and his friend – a friend for whom he had risked his own life at least twice – would be shot and tortured to death. In an instant, the ice around Three-P's heart shattered and he was filled instead with cold rage.

"D'Artagnan," he commanded. "With me. Porthos, take Cassie..."

Three-P knew it was hopeless, that at best it could be a gesture only, but nevertheless he was determined to make it. Honour, never mind friendship, demanded it.

Fat Yoshi, skipper and harpoonist of catcher No. 3, ducked out of the wheelhouse and hurried forward. He slipped in behind the gun and settled himself comfortably, his hands automatically dropping into position on the controls, worn to a polish by hundreds of executions. Fat Yoshi loved his gun. He had even modified it to his own design, fitting it with a telescopic sight. It was quite unnecessary of course, but Yoshi, like all his family, like everyone in his village, was deeply superstitious. Among many other very strange things, he had come to believe with all his heart that the sight was the secret of his continuing success as the number one harpoonist in all Nippon.

He flipped off the cover and adjusted the focus but then, instead of curling his finger lovingly around the trigger as he had done so many times before, he reeled back in shock. What confronted him in the eyepiece was not the broad back of a juicy whale but the staring image of an enraged little penguin, enlarged to fearsome proportions and gesticulating at him dementedly. And if that wasn't sufficiently terrifying, the penguin appeared to be riding a dolphin, standing up like a surfer, and charging straight for him. Worse, there was a second penguin on a dolphin following close behind, and two more dolphins after that, all storming towards him.

Fat Yoshi paled and broke into a sweat. His skin prickled where it was chafed by the band of his cap and an oily drop slid down between his eyes and on to his nose.

Demons! It was the only explanation. Demons of the deep! His family had warned him time and again. Everyone in his village had warned him. But because for so many years he had been spared, he had grown complacent, careless. He had almost stopped believing and that was the worst thing of all. Sensing his incipient betrayal the demons were now assaulting him, in broad daylight what's more, determined to wreak vengeance upon him.

He shrieked. He couldn't help it. A man, a whaler, could face anything, anything natural, but not demons. Nowhere in his contract did it mention anything about demons. He shrieked again. Closer. They were racing closer. Almost close enough to board, and then who knew what would happen. The rest of the crew, equally superstitious, caught his panic and without anyone giving an order, the helmsman put the wheel hard a'starboard and catcher No.3 frantically fled the scene, careering wildly all over the ocean, still pursued by the demons.

The rest of the whaling fleet watched in astonishment and listened anxiously to the garbled hysteria streaming from the radio. Instinctively, and again without any orders being given, they all began to edge away. Fat Yoshi was a good man, the best harpoonist anyone had ever seen, and if he said there were demons chasing him, determined to destroy him, how could they not but believe him? Everyone knew there were demons out here in the deep ocean. Everyone knew demons could assume the shape of any animal they chose in order to attack you. And everyone knew what demons would do to you if they caught you... And here they were pursuing catcher No.3 like the demented beings they were, clearly determined to wreak upon it a terrible fate. The sidling away of the rest of the fleet quickly became outright flight, and then a rout.

Yamasaki san was furious. He had never heard such absolute nonsense in all his life. Whatever was going on over there, it was not demons. But he also knew that he would never convince his men that there must be some perfectly natural explanation for one of his catcher ships being hunted all over the ocean just like... just like a whale. Reluctantly he was forced to cut his losses and join the retreat, muttering darkly the while about ignorant peasants who never should have left their rice paddies and esteemed themselves to be seamen. It was all so galling it was beyond belief.

"What?" Three-P said. Suddenly, the others were all staring at him, staring with awe, with amazement, with profound affection.

"Sir, how can I ever thank you," Humphrey said. "Again, you..."

"Oh rubbish," Three-P interrupted rudely. "We're friends. Friends help each other. That's what friends do."

"Look," Cassie said, adroitly changing the subject. "They've gone completely." Her heart was bursting with pride for Three-P but she understood that nothing made him more uncomfortable than praise.

"But why have they gone?" d'Artagnan asked. "It makes no sense."

"Who cares?" Porthos said.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," Athos said.

"And humans are the worst rubbish of all," Aramis finished.

Chapter 7

A crowd baying for blood is a terrible thing. It is beyond thought, beyond reason. It has no shame. Three-P had been expelled from Mickleburrow by just such a crowd, a lynch mob, and for days the town remained in a ferment. It was the most exciting event that anyone could ever remember. However, slowly, eventually, here and there, the more sensible penguins began to think again. And the more they thought, the more unjust Three-P's banishment began to seem. After all, just what exactly had he been guilty of? Surfing with some dolphins? Well, pretty much everyone had the same opinion about dolphins – mad, bad and dangerous to know – but even so, Three-P's escapade had been entirely harmless. Sensible penguins began to realise that if Oberon's prickly dignity had not been so offended by being used as a football, then Three-P never would have received such a severe punishment.

Surfing with the dolphins was not something any other penguin in Mickleburrow would ever have thought of, never mind contemplated for a moment, but the fact that Three-P had chosen to do so was not of itself necessarily sinful. When you came right down to it, much worse things happened at sea. So in the final analysis, all Three-P could really be accused of was being different, and if being different was suddenly a drowning offence, so to speak, then who knew who else might be dragged before the court and kicked out of Mickleburrow at Oberon's whim. And when you thought really hard about that, you began to realise that if Oberon wasn't already a terrible tyrant, he could easily become one. And so, the muttering began.

Titania became aware of it first, a ground-swell of opinion which she dismissed out of flipper. Peasants. Peons. Little people. Whispering behind her back. Who cared what they thought? A smart slap across the beak and they'd do what they'd always done, bow and scrape. But it turned out to be not so simple. She actually did slap quite a few but it just meant that instead of muttering, they began to openly criticise, even shout.

Finally she went to Oberon, deeply alarmed. It was getting quite out of control, she told him. He would have to act, and act now. A short, sharp lesson was urgently required before their authority was seriously undermined.

At first Oberon tried to ignore the Queen's concerns, just another one of her vapours he told himself. Fish had been delightfully plentiful recently and he was feeling particularly well-fed and relaxed. Indeed, his valet was finding it increasingly difficult to fasten his cummerbund about his royal person – all the adjustment having been quite used up – but rather than fat, perish the thought, Oberon preferred to think of himself as having a magisterial figure entirely appropriate to his position.

He looked up from his elevenses, a fine dish of mullet, as Titania came sweeping in to his private chamber. He was distinctly put out at this most inopportune interruption and buried his beak deep in his fish, hoping she would get bored and go away. But Titania just stood there, tapping her foot more and more impatiently.

"What now?" Oberon was at last forced to demand. Ordinarily Titania would have flown straight back at him, so to speak, sparking yet another row pleasurable to both of them – theirs was a fighting marriage – but now the situation was far too serious.

"Riot! Rebellion! Revolution!" she snapped. "That's what!"

"Why, my dear, whatever can you mean?" Oberon said. His voice was suddenly oily as he tried to change tack. "Whatever it is, I'm sure it can wait till tomorrow, very possibly next week..."

"Wait!" Titania shrieked. "There's far too much weighting around here as it is," and she pointed rudely at Oberon's royal girth. He sighed and looked sadly at his mullet. However, when he had finally absorbed and understood what Titania had to tell him, he was equally alarmed.

"Outrageous," he said, forgetting all about his elevenses in his agitation. "How dare they?"

"I know," Titania said. "Despicable. But the question is, what are we going to do about it?"

Well, thinking was never Oberon's strong suit. Apart from anything else, thinking tends to be very hard work and if there was one thing Oberon detested above all else it was work, any sort of work, never mind hard work. However, after hours and hours of frantic cogitation which made his temper even worse, if that were possible, he finally came up with a plan.

When Mrs Puddle answered the peremptory honk at the door of the family burrow she was astonished to find not only the king but PC Flatfoot and at least a dozen other tough-looking birds, who enjoyed acting as Oberon's muscle whenever he felt the need. They all looked particularly grim, not to say threatening. She stepped back in alarm, all a-flutter and a-fluster.

"Get Puddle out here immediately," Oberon demanded without so much as a "good afternoon" or "I trust I find you well".

"Err... err... he's..."

"Now. Or we'll come in and get him."

"...Not here," Mrs Puddle finally managed to get out. "He's off fishing. Where else would he be on a fine sunny afternoon?"

Mr Puddle propelled himself out of the water to make a nice three-point landing (that's tail and both feet) on the usual rock ledge, the way penguins do, shook the water out of his eyes and stopped in amazement. Evening was falling but there was still quite enough light to reveal that he was surrounded by an ominous semicircle of the biggest, toughest penguins in Mickleburrow, standing shoulder to shoulder. Behind them was a crowd of curious onlookers and his wife, he saw, was among them, hopping up and down and trying to peer through the gaps. Oberon stepped forward.

"Ah Puddle," he said confidentially. "I want to have a word with you." He motioned to the ring of guards and they began to shuffle backwards, herding the crowd, until Oberon could speak without being overheard – except, that is, by a stray seagull hovering unnoticed overhead.

"So, how was the fishing?" Oberon asked jovially. "Catch your dinner then?"

Mr Puddle shifted awkwardly. Never before had he ever had occasion to speak with the King and he was overwhelmed into silence.

"The thing is, Puddle," Oberon went on. "I need to ask a favour of you, a very small favour, but important nonetheless."

"A favour?" Mr Puddle managed to say.

"Well, more a case of doing the right thing. Standing up for principle, don't you see?"

"No," Mr Puddle said, becoming more and more confused. "I don't see at all..."

"It's a matter of common decency... Of course, if you don't agree then it will be incumbent on me as your king to consider what further action I should take." And Oberon gestured subtly towards the encircling ring of thugs. Mr Puddle flapped his flippers involuntarily. Though the most mild-mannered of penguins, mild-mannered to a fault, even he was becoming exasperated at Oberon's evasions.

"But what is it exactly that you want me to do?"

"So I have your agreement, then?" Oberon said with a crafty look in his eye, but even Mr Puddle was never going to fall for that.

"How can I agree to anything until I know what it is that you want?" His voice was beginning to rise and Oberon tapped him sharply on the chest to remind him to whom he was speaking.

"This business with your son," Oberon said. "I might say this disgraceful business with your son and the dolphins... Unheard-of, unprecedented, outrageous... It has come to my attention that some misguided penguins, most misguided, are whispering that Pengelly has been treated unjustly... No, don't interrupt... Accordingly, I require you to issue a statement to the effect that you fully support the lawful decision of the court and that further, had the court not acted as it did, you would have been forced to impose a similarly severe punishment yourself as his father. I trust I make myself clear."

Mr Puddle was flabbergasted.

"W-What?" he eventually managed to stammer.

"Come, come. It's a very simple request and will take you only a moment."

There was a long, long silence broken only by the lap of the water on the rocks. At last, Mr Puddle drew himself up to his full, not very significant height, straightened his back and thrust out his chest. Meek he might be, inconsequential he certainly was, but that didn't make him a coward, nor did it mean he couldn't tell right from wrong nor even that he was prepared to be bullied.

"Your Highness," he began formally. "Why don't you go take a running jump? And I hope you fall flat on your beak. It could only improve it."

Now as it happened, Oberon was particularly proud of his royal features, particularly his beak, so to add this sort of insult to the injury of refusal was galling in the extreme. Nevertheless, out of need he managed to contain his temper. For the moment.

"Puddle," he said breathing heavily. "You would be well advised to consider carefully before refusing." Mr Puddle, however, said nothing. He simply turned on his heel and made to leave, but before he could take a step Oberon gestured angrily and the thugs closed in on him.

"Take him to the prison burrow," Oberon shouted. "And Puddle, you needn't think I'll let you out until you agree. Let's see if a taste of starvation will change your mind."

Gully Jimson came screaming down out of a clear blue sky, shrieking like a banshee. How he had managed to find them was a saga in itself but just quickly, a passing seal had suggested he speak to a whale or two, whales, as even a seagull ought to know, being the greatest gossips in the ocean, and because of Humphrey's now instantly famous escape from the whalers, one thing had led to another.

To say the seven companions were surprised at Gully's sudden appearance was putting it all together too mildly. And to say they were horrified at the story he had to tell was hopelessly inadequate. Three-P seemed to swell to at least twice his size. In all honesty he couldn't claim to be particularly close to his father but nevertheless, for him to be imprisoned and sentenced to starvation for refusing to condemn his son was simply outrageous.

And the more he thought about it, the more Three-P came to realise that he had never properly appreciated that beneath his meek and mild exterior, his father actually had a core of steel, a core that was entirely admirable and praiseworthy. Along with the pulsing anger, Three-P found that he was now also feeling the double beat of pulsing pride.

Only Cassie was anything but totally furious. She could foresee great trouble ahead and was deeply fearful of what might happen to Three-P.

"You can't go back," she said anxiously to Three-P. "You mustn't go back to Mickleburrow. Who knows what dreadful things they'll do to you?"

"I have no choice," Three-P said. "And I'm surprised at you trying to stop me." It was the first time there had been even a hint of disagreement between them.

"But it will be so dangerous," Cassie said desperately. "You can't go back. You've been banished." She knew Mr Puddle of course and wished him no harm, but all her concern, all her fears were for Three-P. She couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to him now that they were finally together.

Three-P, however, outraged and itching for a fight, could think only of his father. Unconsciously he drew away from Cassie, leaving her miserable as well as frightened.

The dolphins and Humphrey looked at each other unhappily. Their idyll had been so rudely shattered, seemingly in an instant, that they all felt confused and bereft.

As it happened, they were at that moment not as far as they might have been from Mickleburrow. They had been ambling along, content to follow one of the great eddies in the ocean current which had circled them back in towards the coastline. They were now perhaps only three days' hard swim from the island. It was just possible they might get there before it was too late.

Even dolphins can't go on indefinitely. Much against Three-P's wishes they had stopped for a short rest. Humphrey had taken the chance to dive deep and check the www just in case there were more whalers around – he was determined never to be caught so unawares ever again – and Gully Jimson had flown ahead on yet another reconnaissance mission. They could see him a dot in the distance on his way back when suddenly there was a great swirl in the water nearby and Humphrey emerged, sputtering and spouting.

"Terrible news!" he said as soon as he could speak.

"Not more whalers...?" d'Artagnan began.

"No, no," Humphrey said. "Much worse than that. There's been an earthquake off the coast of Chile..."

"Chile, where's Chile...?" Aramis began.

"No idea..." Porthos said.

"But I bet it's freezing cold, with a name like that..." Athos said.

"Be quiet! Let him speak!" Three-P roared.

"Chile is on the other side of our ocean," Humphrey said. "Thousands of kilometres away..."

"So what does an earthquake all the way over there matter?" Three-P interrupted despite having yelled at the others.

"It's set off a tsunami," Humphrey said.

The others all looked at each other, mystified. None of them had any idea what a tsunami might be, and there was no particular reason they should. By and large, a tsunami has no effect on the creatures of the deep oceans. When an undersea earthquake shifts the earth's crust there can sometimes be a huge release of energy which is transmitted through the sea in the form of a wave, travelling at hundreds of kilometres an hour. Out to sea, if it is noticeable at all, it reveals itself only as a passing ripple but when the ocean floor starts to shelve as it nears land then the tsunami begins to be constricted and to build, until it becomes towering, raging walls of water, unimaginably powerful and able to sweep all before them. When they hit land, tsunamis are one of the most fearful things nature has ever created and can cause terrible devastation and destruction.

Think of the worst storm you can imagine and the huge, pounding surf that builds up. Terrible as such waves are, they are moving at only about 60km an hour. A tsunami will race along more than 10 times faster, at well over 600km an hour, which gives some idea of the huge forces it contains. And if it moves so fast, you might wonder how it was that Humphrey could possibly have received any warning that one was coming. Well, as it happens, sound travels through water even faster than a tsunami – about seven times faster.

Humphrey, being a well-educated young whale, knew all about tsunamis relative to the speed of sound through water but it took quite some time and a lot of explanation before everyone else understood. Gully Jimson arrived in the middle of it all, and poor Humphrey had to start his explanation all over again. But at last the situation was clear to everyone, and it was also clear that Mickleburrow was in the gravest danger. Even a small tsunami would sweep right over the island and inundate the underground penguin city, destroying everything and, more importantly, anyone caught there; someone like Mr Puddle, buried deep in the prison burrow. Even if he hadn't already starved to death, Mr Puddle would have no chance of surviving the tsunami.

The only spark of hope in the gloom was that Gully Jimson was able to report that Mickleburrow was now only a couple of hours away.

"Well, it looks just the same," Three-P said to Cassie, surveying the island now clearly in sight. He could feel that she was unhappy with him without any real idea why and was trying to be conciliatory. Cassie just sighed, but Three-P was right. Mickleburrow looked exactly the same as it always had. They had all paused and were rocking gently to the motion of the waves, looking at the distant land.

"So what's the plan?" d'Artagnan asked Three-P. After their various adventures together everyone automatically deferred to the little penguin in moments of crisis. He was their acknowledged leader though Three-P himself was always reluctant to tell anyone what to do. He had remained a humble hero and everyone loved him all the more for it.

"I don't know," Three-P said honestly. "I have to make them all leave the island before the tsunami gets here and I have to free my father, but I don't know how. They all hate me. They won't listen. I know they won't listen..."

Gully Jimson interrupted with a squawk.

"Don't be too sure about that, young sir," he said. "A lot of them are starting to think you never should have been banished. What we need is something to get their attention..."

"It's too dangerous," Cassie said softly. "What if the tsunami hits while you're there? How long have we got?"

"Not long," Humphrey said. "An hour, maybe two, not more."

"It's too dangerous," Cassie said again, insistently, but nobody heard her.

"I've got an idea," Three-P said almost simultaneously and everyone turned to him expectantly. Three-P's ideas were well worth listening to. He began to talk and the others began to grin, all except Cassie.

The news rocketed around Mickleburrow, extraordinary news, and first a trickle, then a great avalanche of penguins raced for the shore side. No one wanted to miss this even if they didn't believe it could possibly be happening. It was obviously totally incredible. Somebody was dreaming, or hallucinating, or both. It was simply impossible. It could never happen. Never. Never. Never.

But it was, it was happening and as more and more excited, chattering penguins hurried up to the bluff, they too fell silent until there was a vast crowd of them, unnaturally silent, scarcely daring to breathe, lost in contemplation of the spectacle before them.

Chapter 8

The tide was in, that was the first thing, which meant there was deep water right up to the low cliff at the southern end of the island. And that meant the great whale swimming majestically towards them could come all the way in to the shore. That was the second thing. And that meant that in due course the penguin standing on the whale's brow and riding him like chariot, when the time came could just hop across on to the island to stand before them like an all-conquering hero. Riding a dolphin was one sort of exploit, and quite enough to be going on with, but riding a great whale...

That was the third thing and it was astounding. It was astonishing. It was amazing. It was incredible, inconceivable. It was unimaginable, unthinkable, unheard-of. It was stunning. It was stupefying. It was stupendous. And most of all, it was absolutely magnificent.

The awestruck silence lasted for what seemed like hours and then suddenly, spontaneously, simultaneously the crowd burst into a great roaring cheer that went on and on. And as they honked and hooted, clapped their flippers and slapped their feet, the word passed among them. "It's Puddle... Pengelly... Pengelly Perceval Puddle... Three-P..."

Like everyone else, Oberon and Titania had been drawn to the cliff top. Oberon had watched the unfolding scene with mounting envy. It should have been him riding the monstrous whale and stepping ashore so nonchalantly to the plaudits of his adoring subjects. But it wasn't, it was that horrible little Puddle penguin, the one he had banished so deservedly for bringing mockery down on his king, the one whose father even now was continuing to defy him, preferring to starve to death rather than do the right and proper thing. A variation on that nasty little refrain began to drum in Oberon's brain: if there's trouble, it's must be a Puddle. Envy and aggravation combined to form a poisonous, corrosive acid deep in his stomach. This rotten little bird simply could not be tolerated any longer, and he was just the king to deal with such a situation.

He stepped forward, his flipper raised accusingly on high and pointing at Three-P with unwavering viciousness. Gradually, the crowd behind him fell silent, silent and expectant. Whatever was going to happen could only be the most thrilling event in any of their lifetimes and nobody wanted to miss a syllable.

At last, when he was certain that he had everyone's undivided attention, Oberon spoke, sorrowfully, disdainfully:

"Throw that object over the cliff," he said in a clear, carrying voice. "It is sullyng our beautiful island."

However, nobody, not even Oberon's palace guard, moved. And even though it seemed impossible that it could, the hush deepened as everyone simultaneously held their breath, waiting to see how Three-P would respond. He didn't disappoint them.

"Be quiet!" he said reasonably. "Or I'll feed you to my whale."

The crowd gasped and Oberon found his beak opening and shutting wordlessly as he groped for some sort of reply that wasn't totally ridiculous.

"Now all of you," Three-P went on. "Listen very carefully. In a little while, minutes, an hour, a catastrophe will hit this island. We must evacuate. Swim to deep water. We'll be safe there. But we must do it now."

There was a moment of astonished silence and then the multitude broke into a cacophony of speculation, everybody speaking at once:

"What did he say...? A catastrophe...? What's he talking about...? What can he mean...?" And on and on.

Three-P waited patiently and at last the racket of hundreds and hundreds of penguins all shouting at each other in an effort to try to make themselves heard gradually began to subside. Unnoticed, Cassie hopped up to stand beside Three-P. Aramis had brought her into the usual landing place and she had made her way along the well-remembered paths of the island to the cliff top.

The last person to fall silent was Titania, who self-consciously stopped in mid-shriek when she suddenly realised she was the only one still speaking, or more accurately, yelling. She had been shouting at Oberon, demanding he do something, anything, to get rid of Three-P. For his part, Oberon was still standing there, beak opening and shutting foolishly, soundlessly. He had no idea at all how to handle this situation. Events were quite out of his control.

When at last the crowd was quiet enough to hear a feather rustle and every eye was fixed upon him, Three-P raised both his flippers and began to speak.

"I have to ask you to trust me," he said in a carrying voice. "There is no time to explain. Disaster is coming. We must leave now. Trust me! Go! Go now! If nothing happens you get a bit of extra fishing time, that's all, but believe me. Disaster is coming and if we don't leave now we'll all die. Go! Go now! Flee!"

Three-P dropped his flippers down by his side and waited expectantly, but nothing happened. The huge crowd of penguins just stood and stared at him, transfixed.

Cassie, who was stationed on Three-P's left, gazing at him with a strange mixture of pride and fear for his safety, started and suddenly focused on the sea far out beyond him to the east. A thin, dark line had appeared on the horizon and was moving rapidly towards them.

"Look!" she shrieked, pointing. "It's coming! It's coming!" The crowd obediently swung to gaze out to sea.

"Run!" Three-P bellowed. "Run! And swim for your lives!"

A few penguins closest to the approaching tsunami turned and began to push against the crowd behind them and seemingly in an instant the whole great throng of them were stampeding towards the opposite shore.

"My bow ties!" Oberon exclaimed and instead of fleeing to the shoreline began to race towards the palace burrow.

"My pearls!" Titania exclaimed and ran to follow.

"My father!" Three-P said. And he too began to run.

"Wait for me," Cassie called, hopping frantically after him. Three-P stopped. She would be too slow, he realised, far too slow. They would never make it.

"Stay here," he ordered. "I'll be back."

"Here?" Cassie questioned, amazed. But Three-P had already gone. Surely not here, Cassie thought. He can't mean here. She hesitated, unsure of what to do. The wave was racing towards her, already it seemed much closer. In another minute, two at the most, she would have no chance of escape. But Three-P had said to wait. So she did.

The prison burrow was located in the worst part of the island from a penguin point of view, at the bottom of a little hollow which meant that it was always very damp and mouldy and in heavy rain storms might even flood. When Three-P arrived he was expecting to find at least one guard who would have to be dealt with, but the place was deserted. Whoever had been on watch had fled with the rest. Presumably the guard would also have freed Mr Puddle – it would have been simply unconscionable to leave him to drown like a rat in a trap – but Three-P realised he would have to check. He thrust his way down the complex of twisting tunnels, honking desperately. He was about to give up when he heard a faint, muffled answering call. It was his father. Three-P raced on and suddenly came to a screeching halt. He was facing a dead end.

He honked again and again his father replied. It was coming from beyond the earth in front of him. They had walled his father in. The villains had all but buried Mr Puddle alive.

"Dig, Dad!" Three-P shouted. "There's not much time. Dig!" And Three-P began to scabble desperately at the wall in front of him, hoping his father would be doing the same on the other side.

As it turned out, the blockage was not very substantial – the guards, as usual when out from under Oberon's direct supervision, had been lazy – and it took less than a minute for Mr Puddle's beak to poke through.

"Why, Three-P!" he said, puzzled. "What in ocean are you doing here?"

"No time, Dad," Three-P interrupted. "There's a giant wave coming. Run! Run..." And suiting his actions to his words, Three-P turned and raced for the surface. He had done what he could for his father and now he had to think of Cassie.

Mr Puddle lingered a moment, trying to absorb Three-P's meaning, then the urgency of his son's words penetrated and he, too, began to run. They burst into the sunlight one after another and Three-P set off as hard as he could to the cliff where Cassie was waiting.

"Run, Dad, run!" he shouted over his shoulder. Where was the tsunami, he worried? It must be very close now, surely. Would there be time? There had to be time...

Cassie was waiting where he had left her, alternately staring down the path and anxiously out to sea.

"Hurry!" she screamed when at last she saw Three-P racing towards her. "Oh hurry..."

"Over the cliff," Three-P shouted. "Into the water. "He was praying desperately that Humphrey was still there, and that he had waited despite the terrible force bearing down upon them.

Puffing in the rear Mr Puddle watched with astonishment as the youngsters disappeared over the edge of the cliff, hesitated, and then he, too, launched himself, all the time wondering what exactly was happening.

Humphrey had been eyeing the approaching tsunami with mounting fear. Common sense said that he should flee for his life while there was still time, if there was time, but he couldn't bring himself to desert Three-P and Cassie, Three-P who had twice saved his life and Cassie who was his hero's beloved. And then, even had he wanted to bolt, it was too late. The wave had hit the outlying reefs of the island and was building to monstrous size, roaring like a host of demented fiends from hell as it thundered towards him.

They were lost, Humphrey thought, Three-P and Cassie were lost. They would die, he was certain when suddenly there were two small splashes right beside him, followed a moment later by a third. Humphrey opened his cavernous mouth.

"Inside," he said. "Quick." And as once before, Three-P and Cassie sought refuge within the whale, with Mr Puddle bringing up the rear. Poor Mr Puddle. As one amazing happening followed hard on the last, he was now quite beyond surprise or indeed thought.

When he felt the little birds safe inside, Humphrey carefully closed his mouth and turned to swim directly at the wave, now close upon them, hoping that somehow he might be able to thrust his way through to the other side. But even he had no chance. With a howl from the wind generated by its passage, the wave sucked out all the water before it, leaving Humphrey momentarily high and dry, reared to its final great height, taller than many buildings, and with a final, thundering roar crashed down upon him.

Even for someone as massive as Humphrey, the force thrusting down on him seemed impossible to withstand. It gripped him like some monstrous anaconda, roiling, coiling, determined to squeeze him flat, crush him utterly and then obliterate him. It went on and on. The pressure was immense, intolerable, unbearable, but somehow bear it Humphrey did. At last, as though thwarted, the wave picked him up, all 30 tonnes of him, and hurled him forward.

As Three-P had feared, the massive, cresting comber completely swallowed Mickleburrow, engulfing the whole island in a pounding torrent that seemed to last an eternity. Oberon, emerging from the palace burrow clutching an armful of bowties and his best cummerbund, had no chance. His portly figure was smashed flat and the life crushed out of him. Titania, caught still inside, just drowned. The water roared through

the tunnels like a fire hose, swept her down to the deepest point and then held her pinned. Such was the force that she couldn't even struggle.

All the rest of the penguins, however, thanks to Three-P's warning, reached deep water safely and in time to be able to turn and watch. What they saw would stay with them for the rest of their lives. One second the island was there as it had always been, the next it had vanished into a seething white cauldron, a witch's cauldron, huge, evil, unimaginable. And as the great wave thundered down, they glimpsed a dark, tumbling shape, a shape which should have been massive but which was so dwarfed by the horrendous wall of water that now it seemed tiny.

Poor Humphrey. He hung there for a moment, suspended above the island and then crashed down to be lost from view. Three more crests followed the first, each smaller, diminishing, and finally after what seemed like hours the island began to re-emerge as the water drained away. It had been swept clean. Every last shrub, every last stunted bush, every last twig had gone. All that was left was Humphrey, stranded on the cliff top.

One or two of the boldest penguins began to swim for the island, followed by more, and more until the whole crowd was on the move. The sea was curiously flat now, as though the tsunami had never happened. They poured ashore at the landing spots and marched towards the cliff top. Gully Jimson, who had watched the whole astonishing spectacle from overhead flew down to join them. He had seen Three-P, Cassie and Mr Puddle dive off the cliff just before the wave had hit and feared the worst. He couldn't begin to imagine how they could possibly have survived. Even Humphrey, for all his size and strength, appeared to be dead from the battering he had received. The wave had dropped him on the edge of the cliff so that his tail was hanging down towards the water and his head was pointing inland.

The returning penguins gathered before Humphrey in a silent, respectful semicircle. Nobody knew what to say. Nobody knew what to do. It seemed that the great whale was indeed dead and of Three-P, who had brought the warning that had saved all their lives in the nick of time, there was no sign. Oberon, too, had disappeared, and Titania. Mickleburrow, their home, had been totally destroyed and worse, they were leaderless.

A whisper of conversation began to spread through the crowd as penguins began to recover from the shock of all that had happened. Suddenly, Gully Jimson stiffened. He gazed at Humphrey a moment longer. The whale appeared misshapen, somehow. His body was drooping, sagging without the water to support him. Then Gully Jimson shrieked as only a gull can. With a great struggle, the whale was opening his mouth. The crowd gasped collectively and held their breath in suspense. They were not disappointed. Slowly, Three-P emerged, blinking in the sudden, bright sunlight. He was followed by Cassie and then his father. They were battered and bruised and clearly much the worse for wear but they were alive. The crowd roared with relief. They were leaderless no longer.

Three-P turned to speak to Humphrey and stood there, his beak open, taking in the full horror of the situation. Already Humphrey's skin looked dry in the sun and he was clearly most distressed. He could not survive for long. How to save him? Three-P wondered frantically, for save him they must, even though it looked totally impossible. How could tiny little penguins possibly shift a huge humpback whale who weighed every bit of 30 tonnes?

Three-P walked all the way around Humphrey from one edge of the cliff to the other and then back again. There had to be a way. There just had to be. Slowly it came to Three-P that the cliff top was now very different to when he had stepped ashore what now seemed like hours ago. Then it had been covered in tussocky grass. Now there was just wet, sandy soil. All the vegetation had been torn up by the roots and swept out to sea. Three-P began to get the inkling of an idea. He went back to the edge of the cliff and peered down. He could see from the striations in the sheer face that the soil overlaid on the foundation of rock was quite deep. But would it be deep enough? Three-P stood considering and decided it might be possible. It just might be possible.

Cassie and his father were looking at him anxiously but he ignored them and turned to the crowd. He spoke quietly but somehow the force of his words took them to every last penguin there.

"My friend Humphrey, my comrade, has saved you all from the tsunami. And he protected Cassie and my father and me when the wave hit at great risk to himself. We all owe him our lives. Without Humphrey we would all be dead. Now it's our turn to save him. It looks impossible but I think I can see a way if you'll help..."

Three-P gazed from one to another in the crowd but there was no reaction. They stood wooden and unresponding. Three-P stared at them a moment longer then shrugged. He went to the edge of the cliff where Humphrey's tail hung down towards the water not far below, and he began to dig. After a moment, Cassie came to join him and then his father. They worked frantically, digging the soil out from under Humphrey's body, and as the other penguins understood what they were trying to do, one by one they came to help, until they were ranged along Humphrey on both sides, scrabbling away.

Now that he had them started, Three-P stopped digging and went to speak to Humphrey.

"Here's the plan," he said. "If you stay very still, as still as you can or someone will get hurt, we'll dig away as much soil as possible sloping back to the edge. Then if you squirm and wriggle I hope you'll be able to force away what's left and slide back into the water. I'm sorry I don't have a better idea but this is a chance at least. Just stay still..."

Fairy penguins are doughty diggers and with hundreds of them working all at once coordinated by Three-P on one side and his father on the other they soon had two deep trenches running down Humphrey's flanks. Then they began to undercut beneath

Humphrey's body, digging away absolutely as much of the soil as they dared and excavating right round underneath his tail until he was teetering on his balance point. At last Three-P decided that if they tried to take out any more they risked Humphrey crashing down and killing who knew how many of them.

"Out," he called. "Everybody out. Stand clear. Stand well clear." Then he went round the front to stand close by Humphrey's head.

"All right," he said. "It's now or never. It's up to you, old friend. You can do it. I know you can do it. On three. One... Two... Three..."

And at Three-P's command, Humphrey began to lash his tail from side to side. Three-P and as many of the other penguins who could find room heaved and pushed at his head.

"Harder," Three-P gasped and everyone increased their efforts, most of all Humphrey. The remaining earth beneath him began to crumble away and all of a sudden he started to move, slowly at first then faster and faster, sliding backwards until he hit the water with a thunder clap, sending up a mighty fountain of water that drenched them all as they rushed to the edge of the cliff to watch.

Humphrey was floating there peacefully beneath them and already beginning to look like his old self. Three-P heaved a great sigh of relief and from sheer lightness of heart dived off the edge himself, to float there with his friend.

Epilogue

It would be nice to be able to tell you that from that moment on Three-P and Cassie lived happily ever after, but it wouldn't be quite true. First there was a splendid row involving every last penguin on Mickleburrow.

Having tasted the freedom and the delights of the deep ocean, Three-P was all for returning to his buccaneering life with the Musketeers as soon as possible. He helped his parents clean out and repair their burrow and then went with Cassie to help her parents. And when everything was shipshape again he announced he would be leaving to re-join the dolphins in the morning, automatically assuming that Cassie would be going with him. But her beak fell. She had been dreaming of a comfortable little burrow of her own, and children, definitely children. She had managed to convince herself that after experiencing the roving life and having had so many adventures Three-P would now be happy to settle down. To find, suddenly, that he had no intention of staying put was deeply dismaying. She couldn't hide her disappointment and sought comfort from her mother. Well after that, it wasn't long before everybody knew...

In the morning, Three-P dutifully pecked his own mother farewell, slapped flippers with his father and resolutely marched out into the sunlight. His plan was to collect Cassie and leave immediately, if not sooner. Well, so much for that.

As he emerged from the burrow, he discovered it was surrounded by a great mass of penguins, indeed every last inhabitant of Mickleburrow. His way was completely blocked and struggle as he might, he would be quite unable to force a passage. He stopped and stared. Cassie was standing in the first row, looking frightened.

"It's not my fault," she said anxiously. "I didn't ask them to come..."

"But..." Three-P said in his most forbidding voice.

"They won't let you go," Cassie said, her voice faltering.

"No! No! No!" the crowd roared in unison. Such was their vehemence that Three-P found himself taking a defensive step backwards. He looked to Cassie for an explanation.

"Oberon is dead," Cassie said helplessly. "And Titania. There is no one to..."

"What?" Three-P demanded.

"To... To be king," Cassie mumbled.

"Oh no," Three-P said, taken aback. "Not me. No! No! No!"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" the crowd roared.

Well, to cut short a long and very painful argument, Three-P finally arrived at a position where he would be leader of the flock, not king, never king, on condition that he be allowed to escape every summer to go with Humphrey and the Musketeers, and Cassie of course, to the Dolphins' Dance. And so it was agreed.

Next summer, at the appointed time, the dolphins and Humphrey were waiting beyond the reefs as Three-P and Cassie swam towards them.

"So," d'Artagnan said mockingly as they approached. "Cometh the hour, cometh the penguin..."

Three-P sighed happily. He was home.

The end

P.S. Genevieve Longbottom never managed to marry anybody. All the young penguins who had once found her so attractive took the view that if Three-P, the famous, the renowned, the legendary Three-P, had not been good enough for her then how could anyone else possibly hope to succeed where he had failed. And as time went by and Genevieve grew shriller and shriller and more and more bad-tempered, many an erstwhile gay young blade had cause to be thankful they had decided to pursue happiness elsewhere.



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