

The Reflection of Captain Charles Moore Kelley Hernandez

He watched the sun sink below the horizon of what appeared to be a mound of diamonds reflecting off of the sun's dying rays. His eye closed and he imagined the ocean sunset he grew up seeing in his grandfather's *Facebook* archive, a horizon of sparkling sand that disappeared into crystal blue water. He thought how wonderful it must have been to run barefoot on the sand without the fear of cutting yourself on the sharp plastic that would eventually wash away when the tide came in. To him, this familiar plastic was the diamonds sparkling in the horizon, not the golden sand his grandfather knew. It was a different era, the *Facebook* Land of Oz no longer existed.

"Guard 0206 reporting for duty." He was the island guard on the night shift of Island 500. Charles Moore III was proud to be an island guard especially on 500. It got its name for being the 500th island erected in the Pacific Ocean made entirely of plastic waste. It was actually the most beautiful of all the plastic islands, given its artistic sculptures, buildings, and roads made entirely of plastic garbage. The population of 500 was one thousand people consisting entirely of young, female adults and a hundred facility leaders. In January 2100, the President Elect of West Coast, USA passed a law whereby the government would ship young women between the ages of 18-30 to the "plastic islands" in order to prevent the region's rapidly increasing population. The women would remain on the island until the sterilization process was complete. Advances in biotechnology allowed doctors to sterilize the female population so that they could only spawn one child after the age of 30. Now, only 6 months into the new law, there were already 500 plastic islands and over 50,000 young women not reproducing. It was quite an accomplishment for the new regime of West Coast, USA.

Charles strode across the deck of his boat. It was the same boat his grandfather Charles Moore I was on when he discovered the Great Pacific Garbage Patch in 1997. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch was considered the forefather of the plastic islands. Each afternoon Charles sailed from San Diego, the capital of West Coast and home to the military headquarters for the regime's naval guard branch. The ocean was different from the one Moore I sailed. It was black. When Charles reached 500, he docked his boat and prepared to secure the island for the evening. Charles kept watch all night assuring that no one would try to escape. The air was dead silent. He sat and waited for any movement in the ocean.

About four hours into his shift, Charles was drawn to a somewhat recognizable bird in the distance. A memory was sparked by its huge wings and its amazing ability to glide for what seemed like forever. Charles had seen it in the *YouTube* videos he used to watch of Moore I's expeditions. *It must be an albatross*, he thought to himself. *It couldn't be*, was his next thought, *those have been extinct since 2020*. In the blink of his eye, the giant bird was soon soaring over Charles' boat. It had the body and the wings of an albatross, it had the wings of an albatross, but as it circled lower Charles saw something that shocked him.

Its body was white with grey wings that spanned 11 feet just like the albatrosses he had seen in the videos as a child. But this albatross that was flying above Charles did not have a beak; it had an elongated snout! It was as if an anteater had collided with an albatross. "What is this creature?" Charles shouted to his audience of plastic bottles. "Its beak has transformed into an eight inch snout made of hardened flesh," still addressing a lifeless audience. He wondered why this happened, was it some sort of sick experiment, he could not understand why someone would perform such a perverted prank. Charles spent the rest of the night peering through his

bionic eye, waiting for the bird to return to 500 so he could attempt to shoot it down. No one would believe what he had seen.

On any other day Charles would have left 500 before the sun appeared. Today, he was determined to stay until Guard 0327 checked in so he could ask him about the grotesque creature he saw the night before.

“Oh good, you’re here.” Guard 0327 was beginning to make his rounds to account for the 1,000 residents.

“Ya, what’s up?”

“Last night I saw a huge bird. I think it had a snout instead of a beak. Have you seen it around?”

“Uh, ya. I saw it the other night when I picked up the night shift on Island 16. It’s the ugliest bird I have ever seen. The thing lands on the island and starts snorting up bugs and crap. What kind of damn bird does that? It didn’t even make a sound when I shot at it, it just lifted its snout and flew off. I wouldn’t have believed it if I didn’t see it with my own eyes.”

Charles did not answer. 0327 was not the brightest of the crew and he had no intention of dragging out the interaction. On his way back to San Diego, Charles could not stop thinking about the new species he had seen. He wondered if others knew of its existence and even gave it a name, Albaeater. “Huh, Albaeater, you idiot Charles, that sounds stupid,” he said to himself. It did not take long before his mockery turned into serious thought, and he felt a tear roll down his cheek. He realized what he had seen and somehow felt responsible. His social stature, his respected job, and his self-worth suddenly came into question. “What have we done? What are we doing?” He felt ashamed. He knew his grandfather would be devastated at the sight of the transformation of the once majestic albatross. And this was only the beginning. “What would he think of me? I revel at the beauty of the glistening plastic, and hold my job in such high regards. I am a monster, and I am a contributing participant in transforming beauty into unsightliness. What have I done?” Images of the Albaeater replayed over and over in his mind as he sailed to his home on the mainland. He looked up at the sky, absent of any seabirds, and felt unwilling to adapt anymore. He stared into the black ocean and saw who he really was, “I am just as much an Albaeater as the bird I saw last night.”