

The body turned to saltwater on the cave floor. Spiritual energy dissipated into the air and the stones, a waste old Yeklenka would have berated me for. The creature's words still swam in my head. What the hell had the old hag been up to out here?

Thankfully Sorishdrenye seemed unhurt, other than his dignity. My stone blade made short work of the seaweed binding him to the wall.

He regained consciousness on his own before I could dig out my medicinal herbs. "God damn," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Tilnin? Man, am I glad to see you. What happened to the giant fish?"

"You're not supposed to be able to see spirits."

My sometime friend let out a shaky laugh. "Tell that to the fucking monster who swallowed my boat." Laughter turned to anxiety, like a rainstorm blowing in at sea. "It's gone, isn't it? The boat?"

"Don't worry," I said. "Your rusty queen is in as good a shape as it'll ever be. How would I be here if my body had gone down with the ship?"

"Who knows?" He looked away, glancing at the paintings on the cave walls. "You guys don't make a habit of telling us how you do...what you do."

For good reason. So many things I shouldn't have seen and done, all those nights in old Yeklenka's back room, the blood I'd shed on isolated cliffs, the screams and tears in lonely coves only known to sea birds and shamans. I'd drowned, and come back. Sorishdrenye pissing around with his little tub and spending his days decapitating fish seemed paltry next to that. Paltry and wonderful.

"I found out what happened to your friends," I said, keeping my voice level.

Sorishdrenye turned to face me again. He knew; I saw it in his eyes.

"Yeah," I said, softer. "Sorry."

His fingers hesitated next to the bowl on the altar. Deep crimson still stained the insides. A glance from me told him not to touch.

"I guess it's over, at least?" he said eventually. "Since we're still breathing and all."

A sigh escaped my lips. "No, we've got a real mess on our hands." I gave him the short version of my encounter with the self-styled Mother of Scales. When I got to the end he couldn't help a glance at the puddle on the floor, strewn with scales, a gray archipelago.

"So you think she's still out there," Sorishdrenye said.

"Yep. What I did is like someone stabbing your shirt. It's gonna take a lot more to bring down this monstrosity."

“We’d better get started, then.” He put his arms around himself. “Besides, probably not a great idea to stay in here.”

Sullen skies greeted us outside. Patches of orange clung on at the bottom of the horizon, but we’d soon need a flashlight to see.

“The Mother’s holed up in that old factory,” I said as we made our way down towards the shore. “I need to find a way inside, then give it my best shot.”

“Let’s take the boat around the back,” Sorishdrenye said. “I’m going with you.” His tone of voice made it a challenge, but I didn’t meet it.

Our soles crunched against pebbles. After a while, he spoke up again. “Some of the other guys had wives and kids back home. Parents. Why couldn’t this fucking thing have taken me instead? If there’s anything I can do to tip the fight, even just as a distraction, it’s more than worth it.”

“I get that,” I said. “And hey, a good distraction can be the edge you need.”

We boarded Sorishdrenye’s boat again, wrapped in silence and the gathering night. Part of me wanted to wait until daylight, but that was just a misplaced primate instinct. Wouldn’t make any difference to the spirit. It’d left us a simple choice: strike back now, before it recovered from the loss of its physical body, or let it pick a fight on its own terms.

Lanterns came to life on the bow, carving up the twilight. The growl of the engine and the smell of biodiesel fumes took me right back to my teens, to all the hours I’d spent on this deck, up to my elbows in fish guts.

Didn’t take us long to sail around the cliff to the factory. I joined Sorishdrenye at the wheel, then showed him the goddess figurine.

“Got any idea what your dad wanted with a professional-grade religious artifact?” I asked.

My friend looked at me and shrugged, and for a moment I saw the helpless little kid I’d known in those eyes. “He wasn’t the talkative type. You should know.”

“The guy never seemed devout in the least to me,” I said. “Other than making a few token offerings from the catch, for appearances’ sake, I guess.”

“No, I think he genuinely believed,” Sorishdrenye said. “Or believed in the traditions, anyway. Especially towards the end, after you started spending all your time with old Yeklenka.”

The boat made a slow turn towards the factory entrance, yawning like the mouth of a corpse.

“And then, when he got stuck on shore for a while after breaking his arm, he started reading all these old books,” Sorishdrenye went on. “Learned what I’d known all along, how

the Askulaya fisheries were a pale shadow of their old selves, how they'd screwed up everything with industrial trawlers to send the profits down south."

"Figures," I said. "A story as old as time. So he thought he'd turn to Tsur'yadom to bring back the cod?"

He wouldn't be the first. The Tsur'yadom cult in Askulaya had the institutional clout of a kindergarten class, but it did exist, and it'd seen a very modest increase in supplicants over the years. Going by what the lone priest of Tsur'yadom in town—moonlighting as a cafeteria cook at the People's Party building downtown—claimed after a few beers, anyway.

Another shrug. "Like I said, it's not like he told me stuff. Who knows what went on in his mind?"

Doing his magic with the instruments and levers, he brought us to a halt in front of the rust-bitten gate.

"We're not clearing that one," he said.

"No problem. I'd rather go on foot from here, anyway."

After some quick persuasion and a handful of cloudberry thrown into the sea, I leapt over the side and landed on the water with a soft thud. Water spirits could never get enough of cloudberry, not that I knew why.

"It's perfectly safe," I told Sorishdrenye. "At least the stretch where these particular spirits live. Should be enough to get inside."

With a doubtful look, he followed, and we made the short walk across the water.

Heat and moisture hit me, like someone trying to suffocate me with a soggy pillow. Translucent fish swam the air, their skeletons showing through their incorporeal scales. They came in all shapes and sizes, from tiny slips of silver to the fat, regal cod of last century to true beasts of the deep, extinct for millennia.

The scent of blood and industrial oil invaded my nostrils. And far inside some mechanical heart beat a steady rhythm, old machines brought back to life for some purpose I couldn't even guess at.

We clambered onto a catwalk threatening to rip itself loose from the wall. The rickety metal swayed and groaned under our weight.

Step by cautious step we made it further into the factory. I held my stone blade ready, but the floating fish didn't care about our passing.

A pool of water filled the cavernous main hall, surface dark with flecks of rust and blood, a revolting soup of fish entrails, bits of bone and debris from countless shipwrecks. The giant,

bloated fish spirit floated inside, its body still strewn with horrifying fish heads staring dead-eyed into space.

*“You have come.”*

The voice echoed through the hall, more human than I liked. And more lucid, now that the spirit didn’t have to work around a physical body.

“What the fuck did you do to my—“

Before he could finish, Sorishdrenye’s words turned to mud in my ears as I jumped off the walkway and plunged into the water, head and dagger first.

Clouds of fish surged towards me, but I was quicker. With a burst of supernatural speed, I ducked under them, then slashed at the monstrous spirit. Four awful heads left the body and drifted off. Guess my work for Sorishdrenye’s dad came in handy after all. Blood stained the water an even murkier shade, and the voice howled in my head.

My dagger sunk deep into flesh. I stabbed like a madman, tearing off scales and gouging deep gashes. Then I felt myself rising. The water itself seemed to push me up and out, and with a gasp I landed back on the walkway.

*“I serve the Tarveginyaio,”* the spirit said. *“I am the daughter of Yeklenka and Kastramki, created here from their blood and their fluids.”*

Sorishdrenye looked from me to the spirit and back again, eyes overflowing with florid panic. “What the hell?”

I had no idea what to say. Only the gods and goddesses could create spirits out of whole cloth. To do this, the old hag would have had to capture and sacrifice one of the highest echelon of spirits, a personal servant of a deity. Not only had old Yeklenka and Sorishdrenye’s dad committed blasphemy of the highest order, they’d also violated every rule of Tarveginyaiyo shamanism and then some.

A tentacle of water shot out of the pool and grabbed poor Sorishdrenye, dragging him into the depths. Didn’t take a genius to figure I’d be next.

I hated having to resort to this, but we’d run out of options. My hands met the goddess figure in my pocket. I raised it, brandished it against the horrible spirit.

“Tsurynom, Great Lady of the Depths,” I said, voice shaking. “I beg of you, deliver us from this horror. Destroy this abomination, this mockery of Your works.”

My heart picked up speed. Maybe dying would have been better. Maybe, but I had a duty to the people I’d sworn to protect.

Brilliant, white light blossomed from the figurine. I tried not to think about the rituals old Yeklenka would have used to imbue it, the bleeding and the screams.

Once again I dived into the water. My dagger took on the same otherworldly glow, and the swarms of fish parted easily when I slashed at them.

*“Yeklenka was right to turn her back on the false goddess,” the spirit said in the same detached voice. “She had to take matters into her own hands. Tsuryadom has abandoned you. My children feed yours, as Yeklenka intended. Without me, no one in your little world will ever bring in another catch.”*

“That’s a chance we’ll have to take,” I said.

This time my dagger struck true. The spirit disintegrated in front of me, leaving a cloud of floating scales.

Something crimson and shiny caught my eye, down at the bottom of the pool. I had a fair idea who’d directed my gaze there. The help we’d received would come at a steep cost, as it always did.

After checking to see if Sorishdrenye had made it out of the water, I dived down to grab the band of roe lying at the bottom, pulsing with life energy.

A month later, Sorishdrenye and I walked down to the shore as the sun set over Askulaya, accompanied by the priest I knew. In a few years’ time, there’d be two of them. Funny how a few minutes’ worth of aid from the old Lady demanded a lifetime of dedication in return. Sorishdrenye didn’t seem to see it like that, though. He’d come around to the idea of priesthood right away. Maybe that life suited him more than the hardscrabble work of a fisherman.

“The Lady of the Depths never abandoned us,” the priest said. “She turned her back on us as a rebuke for our stupidity. And frankly, who can blame her?”

I sure couldn’t. At least old Yeklenka’s death started to make sense now, if she’d been enough of an idiot to piss off a goddess.

We knelt down among the dark, wave-beaten rocks and watched the water lap over them. Then the priest got out the incense, and he and Sorishdrenye performed the ceremony. For once the weather cooperated, with a clear evening sky above us. I watched in silence, saying my own quiet prayers, fumbling towards an apology for my fucked-up mentor.

When they’d finished chanting, Sorishdrenye sat down again. He opened the jar of roe left behind by the Mother, still glowing in the twilight.

“Thank you, Tsuryadom, for your gifts,” he said as the water took the eggs and brought them back out to sea. “We trust that you’ll send the cod back to us when you deem us ready. Until that day, we’ll keep you in your hearts and trust in your guidance.”

Personally I had my doubts the cod would be back on anything like a human timescale, but seeing the cult of Tsurryadom emerge from its slumber made my heart rise in spite of myself.

All three of us bowed our heads and prayed as the sun slipped below the horizon, into the sea.