



As soon as he had the sleek, toothy slayer cornered, Chachel knew the shark was going to use magic. He was not worried. The heavy spear of pure white bone that he held had been shaped and carved by Fasalik Boneworker himself from the massive, scavenged lower jaw of a dead rorqual. You could slam it against rock and the shaft would not shatter. Furthermore, he had surprised the shark from below while it was busy patrolling the mirrorsky. Now it was trapped between the waterless void above and reef wall behind.

Cradling the spear under one arm and aiming it with the other, Chachel adjusted the strap that held the woven patch over the socket where his left eye had once resided and swam forward. The webbing on his left foot and the fin growing from the back of his calf fluttered in perfect synchrony with the artificial counterparts that occupied the space where his right leg was missing below the knee.

Above and in front of him, the blacktip's eyes darted nervously from side to side as it searched for an escape route. If the shark made a dash for it, Chachel was ready with the spear. If it began to spout time-honored shark sortilege, the hunter's well-honed vocabulary contained a clutch of stock counterwords. The gills of trapped shark and merson alike pulsed furiously, flushing water and extracting oxygen as they strained in expectation of the coming confrontation.

A powerful, yard-long tentacle slithered over Chachel's taut left shoulder.

"Watch for a combination of teeth and talk. It may try to attack and invoke at the same time."

Chachel nodded tersely. He knew that Glint was only trying to help. But it would have been better if the cuttlefish, who was as big as Chachel himself though not nearly as heavy, had stayed back out of the way. The last thing a hunter needed at killing time was to feel crowded.

Then the blacktip charged.

To anyone who has never seen a shark strike, it can be said that the great fish does not actually appear to move. One moment it is swimming lazily, and the next it is somewhere else, as if no water in-between has been transited. Some mersons called it wish-swimming: wish you are another place, and without a single kick or flick of a tail you find yourself therewith transported. After all, to catch something as fast as a fish, the shark must be faster still. Couple this intrinsic speed and ferocity with traditional shark magic, and surely an intended target has no chance to escape at all.

But Chachel was ready for the charge. Ready physically, because over the years he had pushed and worked his body to compensate for the loss of his left eye and right leg. Ready mentally, because he had laboriously learned the appropriate counterspells and protections. And ready emotionally, because he liked killing. He especially liked killing sharks because it was sharks who had taken his eye and the lower half of his right leg. It was sharks who had killed his father and mother in the same unanticipated pitched battle.

It was always sharks.

That this solitary blacktip had not been part of the murderous frenzy that had destroyed his family and crippled and half-blinded him did not in any way temper his fury. Exploding straight at him, it opened its mouth and conjured. Jaws suddenly gaped wide enough to swallow a grouper. Teeth expanded instantly to the size of the knives the villagers used to pry gastropods from their protective shells. On the surrounding, multihued reef, startled fish scattered for the nearest bolt-holes in the coral.

"*Uraxis!*" Chachel snarled as he kicked hard, driving himself toward the sandy bottom below.

Using his spear to shove off a huge nearby brain coral helped to drive his body downward. At the same time, his terse recitation countered the shark magic. The water between hunter and hunted blurred. Powerful jaws and formidable dentition returned once more to their actual size. The blacktip's teeth were still big and sharp enough to shred a merson's flesh, but with the countering of the shark magic, they no longer appeared so fearsomely intimidating.

Forcefully expelling a burst of water through his siphon, Glint blasted clear. His body color and pattern changed instantly from bright red stripes on white to a shifting, mottled blue-green that matched the surrounding water perfectly and made him almost impossible to see. A cloud of dark brown spurted from his ink sac. Writing in the open water like a pen on clear plastic, it formed several of the special words known to manyarms that were designed specifically to confuse an attacker. Most predatory fish would be sufficiently confused by the swirling sepia alone, but not a shark. The pores lining their snouts enabled them to detect prey by other means. Shot through with embedded sparks, the cuttlefish's inky conjuration was intended to blind the toothmaster's other sense as well as confuse its mind.

Unable to see, unable to locate its attacker by other means, the blacktip slowed as it passed through the far side of the ink cloud. As it reappeared, Chachel kicked hard with both his real leg and his artificial one. Gripping the spear tightly in both hands, he thrust it straight up and into the shark just behind the lower jaw. Then he let go, allowing the plaited line fastened to a hole in the blunt back end of the spear to run free.

The blacktip spasmed violently as it attempted to dislodge the length of polished bone that had pierced its skull straight through from bottom to top. A target with a more complex brain would have expired sooner, but the shark's simple nervous system kept it thrashing for long moments after it had been speared.

Knowing it was already as good as dead, Chachel busied himself scattering a masking spell. From the pouch secured at his waist he withdrew a stoppered bone container. Whipping it back and forth in the water, he muttered the appropriate complementary words as it dispersed a green, metal-based powder. Both powder and spell would adhere to the shark's spirit as well as to its body and act to

mask the smell of blood. Without the talismanic cover-up, he and Glint would find themselves fighting off sniffing scavengers and curious sharks all the way home. Drifting next to the reef, he waited as the blacktip's violent side-to-side spasms lessened and finally ceased altogether.

Transparent lateral fins rippling hypnotically and normal color and stripes restored, Glint approached the blacktip's body and clasped it in six of his ten short tentacles. With his two longer, sucker-lined hunting arms, the cuttlefish leveled the corpse in the water. Pulling it close, he took a tentative bite. One S-shaped pupil swiveled toward Chachel.

"The kill has a good flavor, my friend. Tastes nothing of disease, and I cannot see or feel any parasites. Good for the larder."

"Good that it's dead," Chachel muttered upon concluding the cloaking spell. Swimming upward, he rejoined his friend. With Glint holding tight to the sleek carcass and using his siphon to maintain his position in the water, the merson hunter yanked and tugged in the other direction until the spear pulled free of the now lifeless body. "I can tow it," he added.

"No, let me." Pointing his tail to the east, the cuttlefish used all ten tentacles to secure his grip on the dead shark. Drawing in water and squirting it through his siphon, he accelerated backward, taking care to moderate his speed so that the much slower merson could keep pace.

Behind them, the finger of reef once again came to life with hydrodynamic splotches of color as wary fish and cautious crustaceans began to emerge from their hiding places. His dark fin cutting the boundary between void and mirrorsky, a solitary gray shark cruised lazily over the top of the reef. Thanks to Chachel's oft-employed and reasonably effective cloaking spell, she did not detect the recent kill—or the killers.

Fully occupied with the task of manipulating the dead body, Glint did not ask his companion if he intended, as was customary, to share the meat with the other manyarms and mersons who lived in Sandrift. He knew Chachel too well for that. Expecting nothing from anyone else (and usually receiving it), his "special" merson friend was not inclined to contribute so much as a sliver of his hard-won prey to the town's communal pantry.

Chachel's status as an outcast was self-imposed, he made no effort to alter it, and he was content with his existence on the fringe of the community. It did not bother him that one of his two faithful companions was a ten-tentacled, color-changing, ink-spewing manyarm given to the occasional display of rude body-patterns, and the other an enduring melancholy.

As befitted hunting partners, they took turns towing the kill. Once, a quartet of blue sharks swam within sight, but with the corpse cloaked to mask the smell of blood, they paid the travelers no heed. A cluster of caucusing prawns spewed the usual spralaker invective that crustaceans reserved for mersons. Busy hauling the blacktip, Chachel ignored them. When Glint diverted in their direction, they promptly vanished into a labyrinth of available holes in the reef. The cuttlefish could have winkled them out—manyarms loved the taste of hardshells just as much as hardshells loved the taste of manyarms—but Glint was concerned the prawn taunting might have been a diversion, an attempt to separate him from his friend and their catch. So he contented himself with mumbling a short, simple, transitory enchantment and squirting a shot of the resultant stink ink into the nearest coral cavity. The polyps would filter it out without suffering any harm, and his effort was rewarded with the sound of chitinous choking from the prawns hiding within the stony maroon warren.

Spralakers hated manyarms, and the feeling was mutual. Their relationship meant tentacle versus claw, and so it had been since before the time of Remembering. The fact that the manyarms had forged friendships diverse and frequent with the equally soft-bodied mersons had made the relationship that much worse. And while the spralakers had their own methodology of magic, its parameters tended to be flimsy, suitable only for fooling fish. Though there were known to be exceptions.

Exceptions that sometimes proved unexpectedly dangerous.

None of the hardshelled conjurers or warriors appeared on the reef to contest their passage, however. When they cut upcanyon through the coral into Yellecheg Lagoon, Glint allowed himself to relax a little. Despite the lagoon's considerable extent, few large predators came inside, preferring to patrol the outer reefs where they could not be challenged or cornered. It allowed him and Chachel to let down their guard.