

“Turtles”

By Melody Yossami

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Andre was a fisherman. In the waters around his village, he caught sprats, soles, turbot, halibut, and flounder, and he sold his yield at the morning markets by the bay. He caught the most fish in the village, and he lived happily, comfortably, and proudly.

But some years ago, a supermarket was built in the village. This supermarket had everything (tuna, salmon, cod, prawns, crabs) and in every variety (live, frozen, canned, smoked, salted), but the way it got its fish was terrible.

Andre heard stories about crews of fishermen, far out at sea for months, who weathered brutal storms that would often claim their lives. He heard other stories of collapsing coral reefs and entire species getting eradicated. And he heard stories about towns in distant countries that had been decimated by aquaculture; farms bought up all the towns' fish for low prices, not to feed people, but to feed other, more marketable fish.

Here in Andre's village, demand for his own fish dwindled, and the morning markets thinned, and many of his compatriots, skilled fishermen, gave up the trade or moved away to work for big companies. People knew about the injustice and the pain and the waste that came with the supermarket's fish, but they didn't care. It was convenient and cheap, and people simply preferred the taste of tuna and salmon over turbot and flounder.

For these reasons, Andre hated the supermarket. Over the course of his own life, he had caught and killed thousands of fish and profited from their lifeless bodies. But he, he reasoned, was different because he felt a respect and love for the ocean that industrial fisheries lacked. His family taught him this respect. They taught him the prayers to the sea god that his village was named after: Louloulou. He thanked Louloulou after each day of work, and now, he begged her for the tide of life to turn back in his favor. But year after year, nothing changed.

One afternoon, he was in his boat, and the sun was setting, and the water was calm. He dreaded going back to shore because there, he'd have to face reality: he had to sell his home. It was the place where he grew up and, other than his boat, it was the last talisman of his parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. He wished he could keep it, but he had no more money. How could it have all gone so wrong? He felt powerless, like there was nothing he could do to fix it all. But there *was* something he could do, something he had never dared to carry out. His aunt taught him the incantation; she said it should only be used in the most extreme emergencies. The spell would summon Louloulou, the sea god, who would make the earth and water swallow any threat of the spell-caster's choosing. The spell was dangerous. His aunt explained that even the slightest mispronunciation of a syllable could cause him to explode with the force of 8,000 tons of TNT.

It was also time consuming and expensive to prepare, and he wasn't sure if he remembered all the steps. It was time to try it though, he told himself. He had to. He wanted to get rid of the supermarket in one godly gulp, and if the spell worked, it would finally prove that Louloulou existed. After years of silence from her, doubt bubbled up within him. The myths, the spells, and prayers his family taught him all seemed silly in retrospect. Even her name, Louloulou, when he thought about it long enough and said it in his head over and over, sounded made-up. He had to make sure his family hadn't lied to him. He turned the boat around and went back to shore. He wouldn't be selling his house any time soon.

Three-fourths of the spell were etched into the base of a lamp, which he kept in the study. Another part was inscribed on a sea shell. And the last part was engraved along the side of an old telescope, which was tucked in the attic. He gathered the objects together, lined them up, translated them, and hoped he wasn't forgetting another, secret part of the spell. Had his aunt hidden a section of the incantation in his toy box? In the sole of her shoe? He checked every knick knack and piece of furniture in his house, and found nothing. Yes. His memory seemed correct. This was all.

He went to the tackle shop to get the first ingredient: 84 pounds of live bait worms. He then went to the other store. That's what it was called: the other store. Frida ran it. She sold all sorts of spices and candles and specialty items and secondhand clothes and old DVDs. Andre picked up milkweed, epazote, fish mint, and wood-ear mushrooms. When he brought everything to the counter to pay, he asked Frida if she had a burlap sack. She blinked. Yes, she had a burlap sack, but together with all these other items, she realized there was only one purpose he had for it: the spell to summon Louloulou. It was arguably the most important part of the spell. The wood-ear mushrooms could be substituted for shallots. The worms, snails. But the burlap sack was a critical component that could not be replaced or left out.

She told him she didn't have one. He peered into the storage closet behind her, and saw a whole bunch, which were full potatoes. He pointed them out to her, and she laughed. "Those aren't for sale," she said. With a huff, he paid and left the store. Frida chewed her fingernails, and a plan formed in her brain. She closed her shop early, and went around town buying up all the burlap sacks she could find. She even visited Andre's close friends and neighbors, and offered to buy their burlap sacks off of them.

Meanwhile, Andre figured he could find a burlap sack later; there were more pressing things he needed to get. At the SCUBA center, he tried to arrange a dive near the old shipwreck, but the divers refused. They weren't allowed to go there; it was too dangerous for them. Without their help, he had to resort to his family's antique, bronze scaphander. He retrofitted a garden hose onto it to fashion a make-shift breathing tube.

He took his boat out at night, in secret, and he navigated through the jagged rocks that deterred

the folks at the SCUBA center. When he reached the spot, he inspected the scaphander and his garden-hose-breathing-tube one last time. It'd have to do. He put it on, then tied a rope around his waist and fastened it to the deck.

The helmet weighed down on his shoulders and bit into his collar bone. His breath sounded hollow to his ears; he could barely see through the glass. When he went to pick up a flare, he could hardly grasp it, the suit's gloves were so thick. *You're dumber than hell*, he thought to himself, but still, he climbed overboard, lowering himself down into the water. It was warm. Too warm. Like a lukewarm bath. Now submerged up to his chest, he struck the flare, and the bluish-blackish night exploded in a flickering red glow. He let go of the hull, and allowed himself to get pulled down.

And down.

And down.

Unbeknownst to Andre, Frida had followed him. She guided her boat alongside his, and found it empty. *Of course*, she thought. *That's why I brought my own SCUBA gear.* She put it on as fast as possible, clicked on her diving headlamp, and clutching a rescue tank and mouthpiece, she jumped into the water.

The deeper Andre went, the warmer it got. Sweat on his brow, he thought about what the ancient poem said: *This was the realm of Louloulou, and in the realm of Louloulou, things were very weird.* With the pressure at this depth, he sucked in air, his throat raw, but his lungs felt like they barely inflated. Around him, cast in the light of the flare, he saw the ship. The jagged mast. The shattered deck. People said it sank in the sixteenth century, but Andre searched for something even older. He drifted down through the crew's quarters; he saw barrels, a crate, and a chair, still intact. Damsel fish fluttered past his eyes. Silently, he dropped even further, until he was below the wreckage, which was propped up by huge rock formations. An icy current nipped at his feet. He swam up along the current, until he found its source. Like a jet in a jacuzzi, the cold water blasted from a crevice in the rock. He dug into a pouch sewn into the side of the scaphander, and took out a small plastic vial that had a lid. He placed it up to the crevice, did his best to fill it up with the cold, sacred water, then flipped the lid closed with his thumb. He had to do this all with one hand, since the other was still holding the flare, but then, like a balloon popping, the flare exploded.

Exploded isn't the right word. One moment it was in his hand, and the next, it was gone, as if it evaporated. In the blinding darkness, Andre flexed his hand. His fingers stung, but he still had all five of them. He put his vial back in his pocket. Then, he started to swim back the way he came, following his rope.

At that moment, Frida dolphin kicked down through the ship wreck.

With a heavy thud, the top of Andre's helmet made contact with wood, the bottom of the ship. He felt with his hands and moved forward. As he rounded a jagged hole in the broken planks, making his way back up through the wreckage, a bright light hurtled toward him, and he got slammed by what seemed like a colossal shadow. It was Frida, swimming to his rescue. They went spinning and bumping in a tangle of arms and legs. In his panic, he thought he had been attacked by a lieutenant of Louloulou, but that was the least of his worries. His garden-hose-breathing-tube detached from his suit. Water rushed into his helmet, and then he started to drown.

He thrashed and kicked and pulled Frida as if he was trying to climb over her, but he just dragged them both deeper into the darkness. She had to get his helmet off somehow. She clambered around behind him, and twisted the helmet as hard as she could. It screeched free, and floated off his head. She jammed the spare mouthpiece between his lips, and she hoped he recognized what it was.

He did. He took it. And breathed. Calmer now, he recognized Frida in the light of her headlamp.

When they resurfaced, they climbed back onto her boat. He sputtered water, and before he could say anything, she thrust a glass jar of strange herbs under his nose. He passed out.

When he awoke, he found himself tied down to a bed by rope. He did not recognize the room. Outside it still seemed like night time, but perhaps he had been unconscious for an entire day. In the corner, Frida sat on a chair and watched over him.

"No," she said.

"What?" he said.

"Just no."

"Can you please explain to me what I'm doing here?"

"If you perform that spell, it'll kill you."

"It won't, because I'll do it carefully."

"Even if you did, you don't know the secret part."

"Then teach me."

She took out his vial of sacred water he collected, and she poured the contents on the floor. He gasped in shock. "What use is teaching you the secret part of the spell," she said, "when you didn't even realize that the sacred water could be substituted with any kind of water."

Andre gaped at her, confused.

She explained: "Because all water is sacred."

"If you know so much, why haven't you done anything about it?" He asked.

"The reason why this spell is so dangerous is because she doesn't like to be woken up early. When she's ready, she'll arrive on her own."

"But when will she be ready?"

"That's unknowable."

"Her oceans are dying as we speak. We can't sit around waiting."

They heard a doorbell. She sighed. What now? She lived above her store, so as she went downstairs, she saw who it was through the display windows. A neighbor stood outside with a whole bunch of burlap sacks; she had heard about Frida's offers to buy them around town. Frida thanked her, paid her, and took the sacks. However, the neighbor liked to gossip, and couldn't stop talking.

Upstairs, Andre set about trying to free himself. Although Frida's knowledge of ocean magic far outstripped his, Andre's knowledge of knots exceeded hers. He wiggled, tugged, and fiddled with the rope. He loosened it gradually until it came undone.

He got up, and across the hall, he saw her room. Within, there sat a pile of burlap sacks (the ones Frida had collected earlier that day). He grabbed a sack, opened a window, and slipped out. He climbed down a drain pipe, then dropped down the last few feet.

He raced back home, cutting through backyards. Everything in his body was sore from the dive. Luckily, it was a small town, so he only lived a couple blocks away.

At this point, Frida shooed the neighbor away and went back upstairs, only to see that Andre had escaped. Since she didn't own a car, she'd have to bike after him. She ran outside, unlocked her bicycle, and hopped on. She pedaled as hard as she could, heading for Andre's house.

Andre got their first. Barely. Frida saw him stumble through his front door. He filled a bottle with water, collected all the other ingredients for the spell, and tossed them into his car. Maybe he couldn't pull off the spell correctly, but if that meant exploding with a force of 8,000 tons of TNT, he could take out the supermarket with him.

Outside, Frida waited on her bicycle for Andre to come back out. Then, the garage began to open, and the car roared out of the driveway. She rode after him as fast as she could. But again, it was a small town; after a few turns, she knew where he was going.

He pulled up at the supermarket's huge parking lot. Late at night, no one else was there. He laid the burlap sack on the ground, dumped the worms on top of it, sprinkled them with the herbs, mushrooms, and water.

He took out the lamp, sea shell, and telescope, and began to read the incantation aloud. It sounded like this:

“Lee-lee-loo-loo-lah-lah-bloo-bloo-glug-glug-leb-leb...”

Half way through the spell, Frida arrived. She knew if she'd stop him now, in the middle of the incantation, then he'd surely die. There was only one way to save him from exploding with the force of 8,000 tons of TNT: helping him complete the spell. She sat on the ground, crisscross applesauce, and began to pray.

“Lah-lah-bleh-bleh-blob-blob...”

You see, the secret part of the spell was her very own voice. Her voice had magic within it because her great-great-grandmother was a lieutenant of Louloulou. In the old days, her kind was hunted and trapped, forced to use their voices for spells like these.

Then, as suddenly as a balloon pops, the supermarket disappeared. Actually, it shrank very rapidly, and got transformed into a tiny baby sea turtle. Andre picked it up. He had expected a huge chasm to open up around the supermarket, but this would do. He took the turtle to the sea, and let it swim free.

Andre had done it. With Frida's help, he got rid of the supermarket. He celebrated at home. He played records and ate ice cream. But Frida didn't celebrate. She worried that the spell might've worked too well.

And it did.

Over the course of the next day, strange things happened around the world. Everything associated with commercial fishing got turned into sea turtles, giant and small. Fish markets, fish nets, grocery stores, restaurants, fish farms, processing plants, certain office buildings, and even fishing trawlers.

No one understood what caused this except Andre and Frida. He demanded an explanation from her. She shrugged. Why would Louloulou, a god, only do exactly what a human asked her to do?

That afternoon, Louloulou's attention returned again to her home village. Andre saw it coming through the bay like a wave. All the fishing boats turned into sea turtles, including Andre's. Even though he performed the prayers and thanked Louloulou for each day's yield of fish, she didn't care; he had still killed thousands of her beloved creatures. Remember, he even prided himself in

killing the most out of everyone in the village. *Oh, no*, he dimly thought as he felt a pinching sensation at his feet. Like the other fishermen and fishmongers, Andre transformed into a sea turtle.

Frida watched it happen. In his tiny turtle form, Andre now waddled off the dock and plopped into the water. The next day, Louloulou swept away the rigs that spilt oil into her oceans. The day after that, she addressed the problem of the great pacific garbage patch. And the day after that, well, that's outside the scope of this story.

Frida hoped that in time, we'd adapt our ways of life for the better, but at the moment, as people panicked and hunger set in, she could only hope. As for what Andre thought about all of this, no one but Louloulou could know what went on inside his turtle brain.