

Bring Them Home, Deathblood Daughter

Faren

Faren had been blind for much too long, too long to still be upset about it. But today, she cursed the gods for her poor eyes. She wailed and howled and shook her fist at the sky for taking away her vision and making this task so damn difficult. Why must she be old on that day that the world must end and she, Faren, was the only one who seemed to see it coming?

Well, *smell* it coming.

There was a stinking briny death in the air today, the exact scent her mother had warned her of so many years ago. Faren was not from the city of the Earth Mother. No, *she* was from a place where they remembered their myths and counted their blessings. Unlike the people of this sea-forsaken city, the people from the isles of her birth could never have mistaken that scent for anything else.

Faren harnessed Luella, receiving only a few scratches from the cat for the insult, and banged out the door into the city. Luella the cat was also old but her eyes were in excellent condition. Furthermore, she had perfected the art of yowling and yanking at her leash when faced with even the slightest obstacle. It still took a while for the pair to reach the amphitheater.

“Fastest route” was a command Faren had tried and failed to teach the cat.

There was a yowl as Luella smashed into a food vender making their way up the amphitheater steps.

“Pardon the cat, she’s an old fool,” Faren said. The vendor grumbled and grunted, pushing past with the smell of fried galfish hot on his heels. Faren inhaled deeply. She hadn’t had time to eat anything and her stomach was as empty as a worship house on festival night. But

underneath the delicious, oily odor was a faint whiff of that briny death scent. She sniffed the air, letting her nose and instincts do what her eyes could not. It was coming from below her, somewhere beneath the stands. Down, her instincts said. And so Faren went down.

With each step the briny death grew more intense and Faren muttered the myth under her breath. Sounding out her mother's words was an important reminder of why she must keep plodding through this muck of people and stench. Horrible, horrible myth. It had always scared her as a child. It scared her now, even with the warm sun on her skin and the bustle of people all around.

Ora

Mother found her on the shore, amidst a tangle of rocky spires, letting out keening cries into the slosh of storm. At that time she was a child, fully formed, but her mouth was incapable of words. Instead she gaped fish-like and churned out endless wails.

"What ho, little one?" Mother had said, a smile on her lips and a fishing net in her hand. "You must be cold. Come." Ora only let out another cry and stretched out her terribly pale hands towards the woman—pale like the underbelly of a fish.

Ora grew into a girl who was neither slimy nor pale. Her skin was fresh and smooth, olive toned, as Adona, her old nursemaid, wrapped her in the ceremonial cloths. Adona glanced at her face.

"You are having the nightmares again."

"No," Ora said, too quickly. Adona pressed a thumb beneath the girl's eye.

"Your eyes betray you. Bruised with the fingerprints of a poor night."

“They are worse than before,” she admitted. The feeling of thrashing, churning, burrowing. And that feeling, that all consuming feeling of—

Adona smoothed a hand over Ora’s hair, avoiding the whorls of silver slipped amongst the strands and saying nothing. When the bandages were done she hooked her arm through Ora’s and gently led her through the doors, out into the city of the Earth Mother.

All around, vast swirling structures of earth and living wood rose, fixed in place with the roots of Thalu. Her piny offspring lined the streets, rattling in the wind. Ora had never seen the streets this empty. There were many stalls that had simply been abandoned with their produce. As they passed a stinking barrel of gralfish, Ora locked eyes with the fish on the top. It twitched, its mouth puckering in a silent ‘o’ as it lay on the pile of its dead brethren.

You. I know you.

The voice came as a whisper of a thought in the back of her mind, but when she looked again the fish was still, no hint of life. The nerves were getting to her.

In contrast to the city, the amphitheater was crowded and noisy. Food venders strolled up and down the isles, selling everything skewered imaginable; pickled eel, fried giant crab, powdered tulberries in sweet syrup. Ora stood in a shaded alcove beneath the stands, twiddling her bandages. This was where she would stay until it was time for her entrance.

The noise of the crowd was mostly consistent until there were a couple ragged shouts and what sounded like a nearby scuffle.

An old woman stumbled into the hidden alcove. Clutched in her hand was a leash, at the end of which a gray furball of a cat yowled and hissed. The woman’s nostrils flared and her milky eyes swept across the space, though Ora was sure those eyes could see nothing. She sniffed the air like a bloodhound, then lurched forward and into Ora.

“You,” the woman hissed. Her nails gripped at Ora’s wrists, nearly slicing the bandages. “My mother warned me about you.” Suddenly the woman lifted Ora’s wrist to her face and sniffed deeply. “The salt of the sea lingers on your skin. You carry a hundred thousand deaths within your body. I can smell them,” the old woman shuddered and licked her lips, “I can *taste* them.”

A guard barreled into the alcove and grabbed the woman, securing her arms behind her. “Apologies, old Faren’s blind as a hagfish and crazy to boot.” He saluted Ora as he dragged the woman away. The woman hissed and spat on his boot while her cat howled. It was a strangely mournful sound.

It took a few minutes for Ora to stop shaking and by the time she did, the crowd was quiet. The gentle pluck of a lyre rang out, soon joined by beating drums. That was her cue.

Ora stepped out of the alcove and into the eyes of the crowd.

Faren

“Get off of me you stinking *lachyuba*!” Faren struggled against the guard’s grip. In her native tongue, *lachyuba* meant “land lover.” It was the worst of insults. Eventually she was allowed to sit on one of the long benches. She tried several times to stand, but each time she was shoved back down by rough hands. Some sort of meat on a stick was pushed into her hands, as if that might pacify her, but it did nothing but turn her stomach. She gave it to Luella.

Faren could not see as the music started and drumbeats rattled the ground, but she knew what was happening nonetheless. She had seen many a ceremony before she lost her sight.

In the center of the open space was a stone dais with lit torches on either side. There would be a crowd of flickering faces in the stands, rapt and waiting. On the dais would be the implements: Knife, needle, thread, and a piece of twig fallen from Thalu Herself.

The young girl would approach the dais and the Headwoman would ask her if she dedicated herself to Thalu, Earth Mother, Mother of Us All and Protector of the City. The girl would answer yes, and then it would begin. She would slice open her own young flesh, push in the bit of wood, and sew it up with the needle while the crowd chanted in honor of the Goddess.

The chanting began, and Faren felt hot tears run down her cheeks.

Ora

Ora's vision swam as she pushed the twig into the flesh of her arm. It was all she could do not to pass out. With one shaky hand, she gripped the needle and began the laborious process of sewing the skin. It was only three stitches, but it felt like an eternity.

When she had finished, she dropped the needle and raised her arm to the sky, then crouched and planted her palm firmly on the earth. The chanting stopped and a cheer rose up from the crowd. In spite of the pain, Ora grinned.

No, something was wrong. The piece of wood was searing her flesh. It was as if she had sewn a burning coal into her arm, and it was only growing hotter by the second. She fell to the ground, writhing, as her blood boiled with heat.

Through streams of tears Ora looked at her arm. She watched in horror as one by one the stitches tore open. Beneath the skin, the fluid that rushed out was not blood. From the wound in her arm came water. Salty, stinking water. For a moment it only trickled, creating a muddy patch on the ground. Then it poured. Then it rushed. Then it consumed.

Torrents of water streamed out of every orifice and Ora could do nothing but open her mouth and let it come. There were screams, but Ora did not hear them. There were children dying but Ora did not see them. And high in the stands, sat on her bench, Faren held Luella close and quietly begged the sea for mercy. But Ora did not hear her, and neither did the sea.

When all was said and done, there was nothing left of the city but a seamless stretch of open blue. The ocean didn't have a mouth, but it must have been smiling.

“The Myth of the Sea Daughter” or “The War Unseen.”

In the words of Faren's mother and all the mothers before.

The ocean was the great living thing they never knew about. How could they? The living things they knew had skin and blood and flesh. They never knew to look for anything else. But when the first things crawled up out of the sea they didn't know they were taking pieces of the ocean with it. They fled like a trickling stream of lifeblood, up up out of the water and to the land. The ocean could not feel pain, but it felt the loss all the same. An ache of something gone forever.

Oh how the water hated the land. It swallowed as much of it as it could. But its flesh and blood, those living things that fled first, loved the land and did not love it. Like children that grew up and left the home, they left the womb where they were first created. Then the trees grew nearly as high as the ocean was deep and their roots held the land together against the endless waves. And so the ocean created a new child. The child of death. The child of rot and darkness. The child to bring them back home.

Daughter of the sea, born of the sea, died of the sea. A creature born from vengeance and a desire to create once more. The product of so many years of death that had settled to the ocean floor. Layers upon layers of death. Rotted seaweed, curled seahorse-spines, great whale bones like ghostly fallen trees stuck in the endless muck and slime. There can only be so much death before there is life.

She was that life, although she didn't know it. She grew slowly in a womb of death. And when it was time she unfurled herself and broke free and floated up up and out. The ocean felt the loss but this time it was not so bad. Where she went the sea would follow, and she would return. It knew she would bring them all back home.