

Curses, Hearts, and Other Broken Things You Find In Ponds

*There is a story about a pond in these woods. It's not very big, but it is very beautiful.
And very deep.*

Some people might be distressed at waking up in a pile of feathers every morning. Mara was getting used to it. So used to it in fact, that for the last few days she had stopped bothering to clean out the sheets. They would just be there again in the morning, and at least they helped her stay warm at night.

The more immediate problem was what she was supposed to do with the feathery appendage that was now starting to grow out of her back. What had started as a case of very dry skin had suddenly turned into sharp little points coming out of her flesh. She reached behind to try and once again unsuccessfully scratch the itchy pinfeathers, many still tight in their spike-like casings. Most other people would have gone to the doctor, but the hospitals were filled to the brim with sick and dying patients. The doctors were busy enough fighting a pandemic without having to deal with a girl who was sprouting feathers. She could just imagine people panicking at the sight, thinking she was some sort of sign that this was the end.

Perhaps she could have shown it to a close friend... but that was another problem. She didn't really have anybody she'd consider "close." It was hard enough to make friends as an adult, and nearly impossible to do in the middle of a global health crisis.

She sighed. She was lucky to have her own secluded cottage in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. No neighbors for miles, but a tiny store within driving distance, convenient for basic groceries. She hadn't been very hungry recently. Not since...

A memory of black water and a full moon grew in her mind. Her hand rose to the bandages covering one side of her face. She was convinced it was mostly a dream, even if the damage to her face told her otherwise.

Her dreams had been so strange and so vivid lately. Visions of flying above the forest, rising through clouds into sunlight with the other birds. Sometimes when she woke up, she could swear it was because she had felt herself land in her bed. Occasionally when she was walking, she felt as though she could spread her arms and step up into the sky.

Outside. The open sky called to her like a siren.

Opening the front door of her cottage, she found part of a dead fish on her doorstep. Every morning she'd begun to find odd things waiting for her: a pile of nuts, beetle shells, a dead mouse. She thought that perhaps a stray cat was trying to make a case for moving in with her. She wouldn't have minded; it wouldn't have been her first time taking care of wayward creatures. She had even once nursed an injured crow back to health. However, she still hadn't been able to catch sight of whatever was leaving the items behind. She delicately picked up the fish carcass by a fin, throwing it into the blackberry brambles that she knew she needed to cut back away from the house.

She had no idea how her eyes glinted black in the sunlight as she turned towards the woods.

There is something that lives in the pond. The stories differ about how it got there... But most are pretty sure it came from the ocean. I heard a seagull say it was just a skull some poor man found on the beach. But when he travelled inland, the skull convinced him to dig a hole.

She sometimes forgot to eat as the days passed, so light were her thoughts. Black spikes continued to sprout from her back, the casings cracking open to reveal dark luscious feathers. They grew in such plumage that she was now forced to sleep on her stomach. The surrounding skin dried and cracked painfully. She had a recurring dream of the feathers catching fire, blistering her back. When she awoke she would find that she had itched what skin she could reach raw. She barely noticed her clothes beginning to hang off her already-skinny frame. Every day she walked into the woods, unaware of the creatures who watched.

During one of her more vivid dreams, she was awakened by the oddest sensation. She had been trying to reach the clouds, but had been stopped. Opening her eyes, she found one foot was on the roof of her cottage, and the other was hovering above the nothingness of the ground far below. She should have been falling.

Her wing attempted to stretch out, as though it could carry her into the night sky. But it was pressed into her back by someone holding her tightly. Warm breath rustled her hair, and Mara felt herself gently pulled back from the edge of a long drop.

The most surprising thing about the man who helped her down from the roof was not the fact that he was on the roof in the first place, or had feathers growing out of his arms. The most surprising thing about him was the immediate sense that Mara knew him. She could have convinced herself it was a dream, because much like a dream, she had difficulty forcing words from her throat to ask how she had gotten there. But she did manage one word.

“How?”

The man tried to say something, but instead began to cough. Coughing harder and harder, he cupped his hands in front of his mouth, and with a final retch expelled a single, white, round object.

A pearl.

The man kept digging for days, and a deep pit was created. Even when the heavy rain came, he continued his task. It was only when he inhaled water that he stopped.

They say he's still down there with his shovel, at the bottom with that... thing.

Mara woke up in her own bed, unsure of how she had gotten there. The ever-present feathers were no longer just in her bed, but now covered the floor of her cottage as well. Ignoring the shoes that had been carefully placed by her bed, she walked to the front door.

Sky and water, water and sky. Outside was where she needed to be. If she had looked down, she would have seen the pile of blackberries waiting outside her doorstep, amongst which nestled a single white pearl.

Blink.

She was walking through the trees, listening to the whisper of pines and the promises of cool water in the distance.

Blink.

The shadows grew closer, darker. Something pulled her forward, towards something that soothed the hurt aching inside of her.

Blink.

She stopped short, her path blocked by someone. Tan arms with dark feathers gently held her shoulders. Dark eyes searched hers from beneath a curtain of black hair. A tentative touch to the barely-wrapped bandages on her face made her wince, the pain bringing an awareness she hadn't felt in days.

What was she doing barefoot in the woods?

A stranger... That she somehow knew, but didn't. She felt a warm hand in hers, and a gentle tug back towards the way she had come. She did not fight, but a part of her yearned to pull away and continue her journey into the dark.

She knew that she would be back.

Over the next few days he silently watched over her. Bringing her piles of nuts and berries, he quietly watched as she nibbled at his offerings. He would walk alongside her as she went for her walks, but they never travelled to the darkest part.

The shadows still called to her. But she knew that if she tried to go towards them, he would lead her away.

At night he would often sit out on the front porch, giving her privacy. But the ever-present itch of the feathers drove her mad; they had started sprouting down her arms and legs. She could barely stand to sleep, much less be inside the house.

One night as she restlessly paced the cottage, she felt the cool breeze of the front door open, letting in the night air. Her unravelled mind barely noticed as he led her onto the porch, gently pulling her into his lap. She watched the moon as he delicately pushed the hair out of her face, examining the healing scratches.

"I'm... sorry."

Mara wondered what it was he would have to be sorry for, but found the way he'd started rubbing her back unbelievably comforting. He rubbed small gentle circles around the dry skin, soothing the itch without irritating the raw flesh.

Her eyelids drooped as she leaned against him, and noted that he appeared to have lost some of the plumage on his arms. She might have asked him about it, except she was having a

difficult time speaking; she knew that instead of words, she only would have been able to make strange noises that sounded more bird-like than human.

Had she been able to keep her eyes open, she might have noticed the way he watched the woods, drawing one arm protectively over her.

He didn't trust the scent of the oncoming rain.

The animals knew better than to drink from the water. Not even the frogs would go in. The birds passed the story down through the generations, warning each other and others not to go near. It's true, they feared being pulled in.

But I think they were more afraid of the thing inside gaining the strength to come out.

Mara dreamed of a baby crow in a cardboard box.

Oberon. His solemn black eyes had reminded her of the dark fairy king from Shakespeare's tale. She'd spent months taking care of him, until he was strong enough to fly away.

But in this dream, his box was filling with water, his frightened chirps making her heart pound. She reached to pluck the baby bird from the box, but Oberon was now suddenly a full-grown crow.

He burst from the box, claws stretched out towards her face, screeching in panic. The water spilled over the edges of the box, turning into a pond that called to her...

The pond.

This was not just a dream, but a memory mixed with a dream. Details of suppressed recollections wriggled through her mind; the sound of feathers while her tears slowly fell into the water. The way the air had suddenly become charged with something unknown, seductively menacing as the pond rippled with the salt of her sorrow. She was so lonely, and something in the water wanted to give her comfort...

Come inside, let me help you...

An animal screeching as she stepped into the water, the sudden pain in her face making her stumble backwards.

The static in the air turning hot and angry at her retreat.

Don't leave me... I need you...

The bird continued to dive at her face, forcing her back. She turned to run, but some instinct told her it wasn't the bird she needed to fear.

No... STAY.

She had been thrown to the ground by some unknown force, the sound of the crow's shrieking warping into screaming.

She awoke, the screaming coming from her own throat.

But nobody came.

Opening the front door, she saw nothing in the morning light. No one sat on the front porch, waiting to be invited inside. No piles of berries, no one to keep her from walking too close to places she shouldn't be. It had rained overnight, so the blood that spilled over the grass was recent. It turned pink in the morning dew, the grass bent where something... someone... had been dragged into the woods.

He was gone.

She turned towards the forest.

Blink.

She was walking through the trees, the rising sun suffocated by the shadows of the ever-thickening greenery.

Blink.

She saw feathers and blood on the broken reeds before her.

Blink.

She stood before the pond, the dawn cracking shards of light through the otherwise smooth mirror of the water.

A single black feather floated on the surface.

The thing in the pond was starving. She had been awakened after such a long time, only to have her prey stolen. She was weak, but she was prideful thing.

The creatures of the sky had forgotten to properly fear her kind.

She would remind them with a curse, and the crunch of their bones between her teeth.

Mara dove into the black water, whatever was left of her human self remembering how to kick through the darkness. She knew she had to go towards the deepest part of the pond, even if she couldn't see where she was going.

She felt a push of current beat towards her, a thrashing of sorts. She barely had time to turn towards it before she felt a cold hand press against her throat, and push her down into the water. Down, down, down...

The surface rushed away from her, the sun's brightness disintegrating.

Cry for me, little one... give me your tears.

Mara felt the back of her head hit the squishy silt bottom of the pond. In the darkness she could make out luminous eyes staring into her own.

Sing for me, little one. I want to hear how your voice mixes with water.

She felt something sharp against her hand. It was slick with muck, but not so slick that she couldn't grab it.

I will release you from the pain of this world, and suck the sweet marrow from your bones. Sweet, sad child, I love you so...

Mara rammed the side of the broken shovel into the creature's face.

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Mara always found the sound of rain comforting, even if it meant the nights would be getting colder.

Moonlight streamed over the bed she lay in, and she shivered at the memory of luminous eyes looking into her own. When she had awoken at the bottom of the nearly empty pond, the rain had been falling up towards the sky. The crows were busy picking up what appeared to be a shattered skull not far from where she lay. But the pieces were odd-looking; she'd caught sight of a bleached jawbone with curiously pointy teeth, and another seemed to have long-dead barnacles attached.

She now glanced at the broken shovel that she had cleaned and hung above her doorway, shivering again.

A warm hand found hers, and gently squeezed.

She'd found him barely alive at the other end of the empty pond. She couldn't believe it; she thought he might disappear along with the pond and all of its strangeness. She had dragged them both back to the cottage, where they slowly recovered.

It had been weeks now, and neither one of them had any feathers.

Mara gently squeezed his hand back, and tucked the blanket more tightly around them.

*She was returned to her homeplace, her bones dropped back into the sea. The old ones smelled their daughter's defeat, and laughed at her failed attempt. But others could not help but marvel at the scent of the place she had been...
and wondered what it would be like to try again.*