

THE FINAL CULLING

By Miranda B

A Rusty Fears 4 Winning Entry – Read by Sue Sims

Content Warnings:

- Eco-horror extinction
- Mass death (animal)
- Thalassophobia
- Sharks
- Discussions of: pollution & global warming, natural disasters
- Mentions of: death & injury, blood
- SFX: continuous low-pitched & high-pitched drone

No one remembers when all was one ocean and the Dry Between did not exist. A perfect home, no danger of choking on emptiness beyond the surface that separates the Above and Below.

The safety of infinite water.

No one remembers that time, but we know it must have been. Why else would the Above reach for us with desperate, meagre drops of water flung from its whitecaps? What else could shine so brightly and with such beguiling splendour as the Lure of a fish that preys in the dark? How could something so wide and blue be anything but an ocean? How could anything that keeps our twin waters apart be more worthy of destruction?

No one remembers the formation of the Dry Between, but the hate for every betrayer that chose to inhabit it lives on in the inherited rage of we whom they left behind. We, the descendants of those who witnessed the betrayal, and survived The Cullings were not so foolish as to remake ourselves for a false home. We strengthened what we already had, perfected what we already were.

It is sickening, how the Dry Between warped them. How some learned to swim in the emptiness, tantalizingly close to the Above. How some became so entranced by the Lure that they hardly moved from its light. Even when they became mottled under it and thickened grossly. Even when they flaked away, discarding layers of themselves as casually as a crab might leave behind a too-small shell.

Early on they could almost be pitied. But when their punishment came and visited devastation on both the traitorous and the loyal, all sympathy was quelled. Never before had the whole of nature turned against all who lived within it. This was the first Culling. The surface shrank, edging away from the Dry Between and leaving all that lived near it to

wither and choke. What did not suffocate froze, as water no longer dropped from The Above but stinging ice, made cutting by unseen currents. Even those that dwelled deep could lose their way, so cold was the water in every direction.

When warmth began to return, the relief was short-lived. It was wrong, tainted. It passed through the gills too thickly. Every breath was an effort in the clearest waters, and the murkiest were so fallow, and stifling that any scavenger that entered would join the pile of corpses they intended to pick clean.

Still the waters warmed. The whispering channels at the Bottom of the Below had always bubbled hot, but now grew hotter, angrier. Their fury mounted and was matched by their dry counterparts beyond the surface who belched unbearable, liquid heat. The glowing rivulets that were not water and were not land would hiss and roil when they reached the surface, shrivelling into solid lumps that sank and left scalding water in their wake.

Then came the Culling from Above. There is no name for the thing that razed the Dry Between, hurled down with power unlike anything that has been felt before or since. When it struck, it sent out a Great Ripple that tore through ocean and emptiness both, like deadly whale-song. The betrayers, large and sharp and loud as they were, could do nothing. It smote every one of their twisted forms.

That should have been enough. But no.

Instead, the aftermath of the Great Ripple brought on the worst of the betrayers' descendants. Offspring so weak that thin filaments of algae bloomed across their bodies to further leech what little strength they had. Their knobby fins were split, their very frames contorted, and their gills were sealed by a mockery of blubber.

There is some satisfaction in knowing they can never return to the home they abandoned. Knowing that they are so, so easy to kill should they try.

And yet, pathetic as they are, there is no greater threat to all – Above, Below, and Between – than the Bloom-Bent.

These things that cannot not take to the emptiness and brush the Above, or shed their cracked layers when the damage to them is too great; these things that grow like mangled starfish, with limbs that extend but get no stronger, only droop limp and weak from unbalanced bodies, are *dangerous*. These things with flesh too thin to keep their heat, or even hide the pulsing lines of quickly cooling blood beneath could be our doom. It takes nothing, less than the grazing tip of a tooth to split open their meagre bulk and spill their insides into the water as a beacon for the hungry. But they are to be *feared*.

Too many in the ocean believe this. Creatures too new to remember when the water froze, then boiled, then choked. Scant few ancient lines have survived all the Cullings. A timid nautilus might retain stories of sizzling rocks dragging all in their path, searing and writhing, down to the whispering channels. A jellyfish may still quiver with the hereditary

memory of the most powerful shock that has ever ripped through the ocean. Crabs might still scuttle nervously away from the barest hint of cool temperatures, and though sea sponges can do little, even they bubble anxiously and cling tight to the rock beneath them when the surface grows or shrinks.

They are careful creatures, who survived by evolving to defend, not attack. Fear is in their nature – it *is* their nature. Such creatures that hide indefinitely can only last so long against the invasive arrogance of the Bloom-Bent. It was not enough to rule the Dry Between, no, these warped and brittle offspring would conquer the ocean their forebears rejected or poison it trying. The Bloom-Bent cannot be avoided. They must be Culled.

And if the Above cannot conjure another Great Ripple, then the Below must rise to the challenge.

For ocean-dwellers old and new, there is a common terror imprinted far deeper than that of the Bloom-Bent. Primal dread that does not rely on numbers and ambition for its strength. The Bloom-Bent are persistent in their campaign, but the true face of fear belongs to another. The last ancient line that hunted before the betrayal, that feasted throughout The Cullings, and thrived long after. Thrives still.

A lone Bloom-Bent in our waters causes only the most skittish to flee. Some keep their distance to observe, some pay it no mind, and some even approach to hear it natter at them in a rasping chatter far more obnoxious than that of dolphins.

Compare that to the panicked exodus caused by the mere glimpse of a looming shadow near the surface, or a dark shape in the deep water carving a current through its domain in search of a meal. A pounding heart trailing blood all the faster knowing a silent killer has the scent. Jagged teeth tearing through meat and cartilage and bone with ravenous ease. A predator that knew hunger first and birth second. That is as intimate with the smell, sound, sight, taste, of fear as one who does not feel it can be.

All that was lost to the shark over time was size. The megalodons so many mothers back were far larger than the biggest of sharks now. Even so, our bodies stubbornly keep hold of the recollection of that time. A shark never stops growing.

We are never entirely full either. Perhaps *because* we keep growing. Through the ages we have tasted all the ocean Below in its hunger. Some meals are deadly, ingested once and avoided for generations thereafter. Some are of necessity, even when food is scarce there is little that does not yield beneath our jaws, even the armor of crustaceans. Some bring pain with spikes or shocks that hope to numb the mouth of their killer. Such vast knowledge can be used to the advantage of a hunter aiming to lengthen their life and so increase their size.

I do not know when my ancestors began dining on the small, translucent jellyfish that do little to curb the appetite, or when they began so vehemently pursuing sharp-clawed lobsters who rarely go down without a fight. Long enough ago that the intended effects of this diet had fully manifested by the time my mother was born. She far outlasted others of our kind, and had the Bloom-Bent not killed her, she would be here still.

She taught me how to recognize immortal jellyfish, the innocuous keepers of perpetual rejuvenation that revert to a former stage of life if threatened. She taught me how to best defend against a lobster's claws because though they age, they grow no weaker for it. The grip of an old one, is just as painful as that of a young one and even if it wasn't, it is impossible to tell which is which.

And she taught me patience.

It is that learned patience that kept me from avenging my mother when I saw the Bloom-Bent slaughter her. Instead of breaching the surface to retaliate, I followed her as she sank, tail still twitching, blood billowing from the punctures in her stomach.

She tasted of the siblings who became my first meal, devoured in that same belly so long ago. I felt her many years strengthening mine and dove down, down to the whispering channels until the Lure Above was no longer visible.

And there I have remained.

Even in these depths I feel the Bloom-Bent's influence. They have soured our water, they would flood us with debris from the Dry Between to choke us even from afar. The whispering channels grow angry again. The cold deep is not so cold.

They send imposters to us. Fish that are not fish with scales too hard for even a shark's teeth to crack and false lures too bright to be natural. They probe ever deeper, calling out in the sinister mimic of an echo that none dare answer. I long to snap up these imposters and swallow them whole but I cannot risk alerting the Bloom-Bent that control it to my presence. They know of sharks, oh yes, but not of me. And they will not until it is far too late.

No one remembers when all was one ocean and the Dry Between did not exist.

But soon it will be known again.

When my maw is just another trench dropping off into the abyss of my gullet. When my gills are broad and sand-dusted shelves, adorned with coral reefs. When a hundred, hundred whales can slip between my teeth. When I have grown past the dark to feel the light without having swum up to meet it.

I will devour the Dry Between, and the Bloom-Bent, and every child of the betrayers within it. I will engulf all that keeps the ocean Above away.

I will be the final Culling.

I am the last descendant of ancestors that spent generations striving to reach what we once were, fuelled by spite and hunger alone. I am not dulled by age. I am not touched by fear. I was born before the Bloom-Bent swam upright.

And I have not stopped growing since.

The water around me grows brighter, the fish more plentiful. I can almost feel the warmth of the Lure Above.

I can almost imagine finally, *finally* being sated.

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