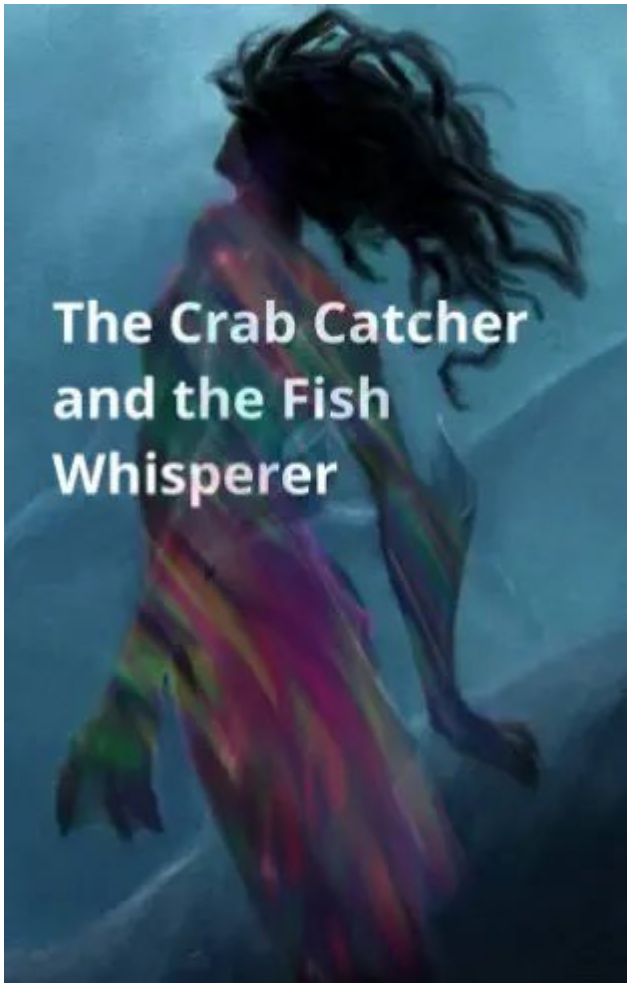
The Crab Catcher and the Fish Whisperer



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Once upon a time in a far away land there sat the village of Shulderstronge. This village, instead of sitting by the sea like most other villages, had only a stream for its boundary on one side and mountains on the other side. The unhappiest people were the fish trappers for, in the utter absence of tides, they could harvest only steelhead trout, the single species of fish in the stream, and in two directions only - downstream at sunrise and upstream at the hours of the long shadows.

There was not one fish trapper who didn't rue the day the founding fathers had erected their shacks on the bank of the stream, no matter how mighty a stream it was. What they truly detested each morning as they went about the business of relieving traps of their squirming burden was the downwards journey on the strong back of water, for they knew how arduous it would be rowing upstream, all the way back to the village, canoes laden with glistening mounds of trout.

Life was somewhat easier for the crab catchers, as they never had to go very far to catch their daily quota of fresh water farahs – the local crustaceans. And it was in this village of Shulderstronge that there lived a maiden, a crab catcher herself, by the name of Sarai.

Like that of every other woman in the clan, Sarai's skin was adorned with the inked drawing of a carapace intricately interlaced with as many legs as years had passed since her fifth birthday. Thus the tattoo of an eleven-legged crab already spread from nape to shoulder blades. The following year, the last thin crab leg drawing would be added to the overall design – the official signifier of her womanhood reached.

There would have been nothing unusual about Sarai if it had not been for the fact that she had never danced at the time of the Moon Night, the time in the cycle of nights when the moon was as big with yolk as a trout's belly, and maidens declared a momentary interest in a boy of their choosing. She

did not ever go, not as far as anyone knew, to the place behind the knoll where exploring maidens went to play with the manhood of any consenting young males. And so, by day, Sarai went crab catching with other women. By night, as wicks flickered over her cheeks and cast sooty shadows over the earth-dyed threads that glided beneath her fingers, she would weave more rows on the loom.

One day, The Clan Mother would cut the wrap to free the cloth. One day, she would shape the cloth into a cape, Sarai's cape, and with it on her back, Sarai would finally leave the village. She would simply ride the stream downwards and stay there forever. This was her secret.

One day, the Thrower of Bones spoke of changes. She spoke of hunger settling on the village. She spoke of fish made only of bones. The very next day a fish trapper died. Her fellow oarsmen said that a steelhead trap had appeared empty. Like the greedy one who wakes to find her coffers empty, the trapper had leaned too far overboard to grope and tug at the mesh until it simply pulled her in.

"She didn't thrash about," said the oarswoman. "She just vanished in the water. She melted into it like ice into broth."

No more fisherwomen died that year, but increasingly more traps were found to be empty and the fish trappers no longer needed all the power of their shoulders to row back upstream.

"This is so terrible," Sarai said to her mother. "What is there that can be done?"

"Daughter, when a stream is as bare as the fields in winter, there is nothing one can do."

The next day, Sarai was once again by the stream, conscious of each of her movements, as she shook loose the dozen of farahs that had crept into her trap. She was quick to spot the ones that had molted only recently and she shooed these back into the water. They would be no good to anyone with their body-meat loose and floppy in their new carapace. She flipped open the

females' aprons to check the density of their egg sponge - the bigger the better to barter with, as the subtle saltiness of the egg clusters was much prized by all traders who stopped by the village.

Mindful of the great claws, she reached for the mature crustaceans, the ones with algae growing on the shell. As she had been taught to do by her mother, Sarai gripped them firmly between the index and thumb of one hand then pressed the thumb of the other firmly on the abdomen plates to check for fullness.

The sorting done, using her big toe to secure each knot, she went through the task of tying them, string under and around, pulling the ends as tight as possible, ensuring the claws were hard up against the shells. With her catch secure in a hessian bag tossed over a shoulder, she began winding her way back to the village.

Though still young, the morning sun was already aggressively hot on her skin and she had to wipe the sweat off her brow with the back of a hand. It was then that she felt it. One egg. A miniscule orange crab egg between the back of her hand and her forehead. She plucked it, tiny as it was, and stared at it on her fingertip. And that is when Sarai did what no other from her village had ever done before.

All senses suddenly on alert, Sarai furtively scanned the village just beyond the field of wild reeds.

"The females," she said to the breeze. "The females with eggs should not be taken. They should not be taken any more."

Squatting on the bank, she quickly lined up all the female crabs that were ready to spawn. She severed their ties and quickly jumped out of their path. Thick sword arm raised defiantly above their heads, the crustaceans scurried sideways into the stream.

Mind in a turmoil, she watched them blend with the water and disappear. She would declare her actions and the Clan Mother would find a fitting punishment - a compensation for the loss of six mature, egg-bearing crustaceans. As surely as the stream ran down through the fields, the Clan Mother's punishment would be both swift and nasty.

"From the village midden of cracked shells," spoke the Clan Mother, "you will reconstitute thirty crab skeletons. Each chitin will have its original two claws, its own six legs and the two back paddles given to it by Mother Nature. Each skeleton will be complete to the last bit of their stomach plates. Thirty crabs, Sarai, complete to the last beady-black eyeball!" The Clan Mother did not shout. She never had to. Her pronouncements, everyone knew, were final.

For the rest of what turned out to be a very long day, the longest Sarai had ever endured, she rummaged through the huge village heap of broken crab shells. Picking and flicking away bits that did not match, picking and keeping some, all the while pricking and cutting her fingertips, she had reconstituted six shells and three claws, though she had not managed one single matching crab leg or back paddle before the hours of the long shadows arrived.

She slept exhausted at the foot of the midden and again the next day and the days that followed. Sarai could not go back to her village until she had completed the task set by the Clan Mother. If she did, she would suffer a further punishment - invisibility to all, even to her own mother. And so, fingertips cut to shreds by the sharp edges of the many shards she had already picked up and flicked away because they did not match, she let her tears flow until they pooled around her in an ever-expanding watery circle.

"Sarai."

Sarai heard her name, but she was too tired to be startled. Too tired to answer. Besides, who would be calling her name while she was invisible to all?

"Sarai."

Sarai sat up, her face turned to the stream.

“Sarai. Look into the dark water.”

Sarai peered into the stream. All she saw was the elongated shimmer of the moon.

“Come into the heart of the stream, Sarai.”

Sarai had set but one foot into the dark waters when she was pulled right under. It was as if the stream itself had curled up around her to bring her down. Bubbles gurgled in her throat.

“Sarai,” the water whispered through her hair. “Your good deed shall be rewarded.”

Sarai opened her eyes. Darkness surrounded her. It was icy and it was still. Then it rippled and shimmered around her like black silk in the breeze. She shut her eyes tight, already fearing the creature that lurked on the other side of the darkness.

The water whispered again. “Open your eyes, Sarai. Those who do great deeds must never fear.”

Sarai opened her eyes.

“What dee-”

Wrapped from wrist-to-shoulder in a pod of inked steelheads, wild hair dancing to the breath of the stream, there, right there in front of Sarai was the most beautiful sea creature she could have imagined. Something stirred deep inside Saira – something hot but diffused. Something shimmery, coiled and electric. Something she had never, ever felt before.

Eyes drawn to the handsome fish woman’s ripe and round breasts even before they were drawn to the bejeweled fishtail that sheathed the woman’s lower body, she asked, “Who are - ”

With a finger gently against Sarai’s lips, the fish woman shushed her. Where she had placed her finger, she placed a kiss. Sarai’s first kiss.

Whatever sensation it was that had made her heart beat madly, Sarai wanted more of it and, instinctively, her hands fluttered to her mons. They only lingered there for the time it takes an eye to blink, but she was able to hold on to the unfamiliar but delicious searing a moment longer.

“You have returned the female crabs to the stream, Sarai. You have remembered the Law.”

“Who … are you?” Sarai asked, still faint from the brush of the fish woman’s lips.

“I am the Fish Whisperer, Sarai,” the finned woman answered, as if that was to mean something to Sarai. “I am one with the Fish and all the creatures of the stream.” With these words the fish woman flicked the fluke of her tail and brought it softly around Sarai.

So strong and so yielding, Sarai thought as she dared touch the tail fluke, albeit hesitantly. As fine as golden filigree was the striated network of blood vessels. Warm and wonderfully soft was the large muscle that stemmed upward from the fluke to release from its scaly sheath the torso of a gorgeous woman with coral-green eyes.

“You make the fish stay away from our traps?” Sarai asked. “My people need fish for barter. They will -”

“There will be no more bartering of my kin until each and everyone in the village remembers the Law as it was passed on to them by their forbearers.” The creature’s mighty tail twitched threateningly. Sarai felt the motion like a field of energy rippling invisibly, displacing water somewhere below her feet. “The fish belong to the stream, not to the villagers. The stream gave freely, long ago, when the villagers respected the law of leaving the mother fish and the young. But, unlike the fields, the stream will not be fat for harvest come the next cycle. The stream is done giving. But you, Sarai, must make two wishes. The one you wish for the hardest will be yours.”

Never had a task been so painfully difficult for Sarai, not even that set by the Clan Mother. Her mind pulled one way but her heart pulled equally hard the opposite way.

Sarai wished very hard for the crab midden to sort itself out, as if by magic, just so she could become visible again and resume her life in the village. But just as her wish was about to take shape, her heart pulled her

hard in another direction. To her surprise, she wished that the fish whisperer would kiss her one more time.

The Fish Whisperer watched Sarai, very much aware of the conflict that divided her. So she waited for the seesaw to stop. She waited for the one wish to become much stronger than the other, so that Sarai would not regret her wish when it were granted. She closed her eyes, drew in her breath and released her wish.

When Sarai opened her eyes, the looming pile of cracked crab bits stood in front of her. Lined up near her feet she saw thirty crustaceans' skeletons. Clearly once broken and clearly empty of meat, they had nonetheless been carefully reassembled, piece by piece, from the shards yielded by the village heap.

When the Clan Mother greeted Sarai, the girl knew her punishment was over. She was very happy to be back to her everyday life in her mother's house, but the more she tried to call sleep unto her that night, the more she tossed and turned and tossed some more until her fingers curled around the foreign object lodged under her pillow.

In the palm of her hand shone the most beautiful fish scale she had ever seen. Much bigger than a thumbnail, it was blue and it was green and yet had the transparence of water. It shone with the color of gold and yet it had the silver sheen of the moon when high in the sky. Sarai understood that this fish scale was a secret present from the Fish Whisperer. She pressed it hard against her breast, closed her eyes, and the Fish Whisperer came to Sarai. She came to her as a lover and together they glided to the bottom of the stream amidst a flurry of iridescent bubbles.

With its flying buttresses of polished rock and its spires of red coral, gigantic stone guards on all sides, the crypt had the majesty of a watery cathedral vault. Just like one, it concealed the lovers from all. Through the swaying light-splattered curtain of emerald kelp only fish glided past, deep in

thought, graceful and silent; rainbow fish, gold fish, silver fish, polka-dotted fish, striped fish, and masked fish; as many varieties of fish as there were wild flowers in the fields above.

Sarai who had never seen any other fish but steelheads would have been entranced by the silent parade if she had been alone. But she was not alone at all. Reclining on an elbow, hair as wild about her as a spray of golden seaweed, the Fish Whisperer was caressing her with the long and furry plume of an anemone.

"So lovely, Sarai. So young. So strong. So responsive."

Sarai ached to touch the fish woman and draw out of her the same dizzying craving that had gripped her, but she could not bring herself to even attempt movement. And so she lay spread-eagled, wrists and ankles loosely shackled by braided cuffs of kelp while the fish woman continued a dreamy exploration of her body.

From the tip of her chin, to the points of her erect nipples, to the flatness of her belly that cradled her belly button, to the smallest of her toes, eyes closed, gasping softly, Sarai pulsed with a desire she knew not how to control.

"What on earth are you doing! Dirty, dirty girl!"

Sarai's breath caught in her throat. Her eyes snapped open.

Leaning on her walking stick and towering above her was Sarai's mother.

"Go wash *that* hand, daughter! Immediately!" Sarai cowered under the coverlet pulled up to her chin. "Don't just lie here, gasping like a fish out of water." Sarai's mother yanked the coverlet loose from her daughter's fingers. "Up!" Just as she was about to turn on her heels, her eye caught something she should never have seen. "*My* daughter?" She blanched, cane pointed at Sarai's breast. *"You?"*

Sarai looked down at the spot where her mother had poked her as if she had been a diseased steelhead, and she blinked and gasped again.

Inked a couple of fingers' breadth above her nipple was the image of a fish scale. It was as blue as it was green. As transparent as wild water. It shone with the color of gold and yet it had the silver sheen of the moon when high in the sky. Sarai's mother was horrified. "The mark of the Fish is on you!" she cried.

Long, long ago, Sarai's mother had urged her to look at the moon. "Look at Her, way over there, little darling!" Sarai had looked. She had even scrunched up her nose to better see the fish shape her mother said was there, all curled up inside the diaphanous moon-disk that lay fat and low above the village. Only very young she was then, but already she knew all about the Great Fish Spirit who, the villagers were convinced, guided the steelheads into their traps.

In thanks and honor of the Fish Spirit, on the night of every full moon, at the time when it is the fattest, the villagers would gather by the stream to sacrifice the largest female fish caught that day.

Many, many times, Sarai had watched on as the clan Mother sliced the plumpest of all fish from lip to tail to offer its heart in exchange for stream waters that sparkled, and its roe-worm in exchange for the fertility of the fish. Consequently, the folks of Shulderstronge held the belief that, should the Fish Spirit ever become dissatisfied with the villagers' offering, She would choose Her own sacrificial being in the form of a village maiden. On her, they had learnt to believe, She would leave the mark of one of Her scales.

Too confused to be dismayed, Sarai remembered the fish scale she had retrieved the night before from under her pillow. She checked inside the palm of her hand for she remembered having fallen asleep with it clutched against her breast, but she was no longer holding it. She looked under the pillow. She inspected every crease of her sleeping mat. She shook the coverlet carefully, but nowhere was there the beautiful scale she had clutched during the night. Sarai sat up, a quickened pulse erratic at her throat.

“The scale of the Fish Spirit on the tender bosom of a maiden,” sing-songed the clan Mother, as she would an old nursery rhyme. “No longer hers is the commandment to bear children. Destined to a life with Moon, a moon-dweller she becomes. The Bringer of Fish she becomes. Destined to live with Moon, she is.” The old woman looked deeply into Sarai’s eyes. “How could I have been so blind to not expect it!”

Sarai frowned. “Expect what?”

“Child, what with only fish bones as offerings moon after moon, the Coming of the Sign has been duly heralded! The Spirit of the Moon expects more, much more from us. And rightly so.”

Sarai echoed dully, “The coming of the sign?”

“Daughter of the Crab Catcher clan, *you,* Sarai, daughter of Genubra, are the Chosen!” The clan Mother beamed. “Rejoice, young Sarai, for you are the one who will return the steelheads to our traps.”

The clan Mother was very busy during the days that ensued, because preparations for the imminent full moon ritual were as numerous as they were sacred.

The flowers and leaves of the hawsonia inermis shrub had to be prepared into a dark brown unctuous cream and left to ferment to ensure a lasting dye. Sarai had to be bathed in the waters of the mighty stream, and her lithe body oiled with the finest ointments that the clan Mother had garnered from the bartering tables and secreted away for special occasions. The tattoo on Sarai’s breast had to be painted over with red clay so as to keep the spirit of the Fish linked to the earth that held the village.

From the time the Coming of the Sign had been recognized for the solemnly auspicious moment that it was, Sarai had been kept in a state not unlike that of suspended animation. Twice a day, the clan Mother cradled Sarai’s head on her lap while reverently, one hand under Sarai’s silk-pale throat to better prop up her head, she guided drops of treated cactus juice to

fall between Sarai's lips, as carefully as if it were the distilled essence of the moon she held in the minute crystal bowl.

On the second afternoon, that of the ceremony, elder women of the clan were brought in to apply intricate designs of dark dye to the soles of Sarai's feet - filigree-fine fish tails intertwined with traditional patterns of exquisitely crafted crab shapes, framed by loose-stemmed algae formed a dense but delicate web that spread upwards to her shins.

Finally, dressed in a flowing white robe, the bride of the Moon, the Fish Spirit was readied just as the last branches and stumps were added to the ever-growing pile of wood erected on the bank, very close to the spot where Sarai's ritual bath had been administered.

By the time the moon rose above the village roofs, the pile of wood would be neatly arranged into a flat-topped pyre.

The sturdy drumbeats that had resonated dully but steadily for the past two days, stubbornly holding back at the edge of the village, suddenly broke forth. Reverberating against walls and glancing off the stream's back, the drums' cadence called in the Spirit World. Each striker brought such depth out of the drums that their fullness filled the villagers' ears and rattled their ribcage.

And then all sound stopped abruptly. A flame peaked from the base of the pyre, timid at first. In the stillness of the moon rising, the villagers watched, spellbound, slack-jawed, as the flame grew denser and brighter. They watched it birth one then two, then ten, then hundreds of little flames that also grew dense and bright and hot. The flames gained in unity and, noisily, they combined heat and strength to rush to the top - hungry for Sarai's young flesh.

As the strongest of the fire-tongues licked the edge of Sarai's robe, the villagers intoned, "She is not leaving us. She is just changing shape. She is not leaving us. She is just chang -"

Suddenly the stream rumbled mightily. The villagers turned as one to face it. Pillars of stone, they watched round-eyed as the stream spread its ever-widening back over the bank. Unable to run, they watched until they no longer could, a massive wave rise and rise. They watched it tower above the pyre. They watched it till it shattered, releasing enough water to flood the village in such a way that infants would have been swept away if they had not been strapped to the backs of their mothers. Dogs and cats were not so lucky. When the clan Mother was finally able to scramble over what remained of the pyre, Sarai's body could not be found amid the calcined wooden remains.

Meanwhile, far below the surface of the stream, tail coiled protectively around Sarai's body, the Fish Whisperer held her tightly, head pillowed against her breasts.

"Only fools would turn to the moon whilst their salvation lies within the stream to which they are tied more tightly than a cartwheel to its rim."

She bent her head towards Sarai and blew over her three times. Once over the crown of her head. Once over her forehead and once over her heart.

"Only fools would ever believe that the sacrifice of virgin flesh could ever atone for their greed and selfishness."

When Sarai's eyes opened drowsily, the radiant smile of the Fish Whisperer was their first point of focus. Sarai smiled back before her features rearranged themselves in a perplexed frown.

"Am I dead?"

"Sarai. You are where you belong, Sarai," is all the fish woman replied cryptically.

Sarai opened her lips to speak again, but words were too slow forming. And what she tasted between her lips was the salty tip of the Fish Whisperer's tongue – the gentlest of all caresses.

Warm and soft and utterly penetrating, the touch electrified Sarai. Body ignited by a desire she had learnt to recognize, she clung fiercely to the finned creature, as fiercely as one drowning clings to a passing log. The fish woman

smiled, as she scooped up Sarai to lie her gently on a bed of coral-green sea-grass.

The Fish Whisperer undid each of the many tiny buttons that were aligned lengthwise on Sarai's billowing white robe. One pearl button at a time, from high against her throat to below her mons, she freed Sarai's body from its shroud. She caressed her young breasts and let her hand run freely along the length of Sarai's thighs.

Wedged snugly against her, Sarai sighed the sigh of the traveller who has found a haven. Body taut and hungry, she reached for the fish woman. She reached to feel her body solid under *her* hands, but the sea creature refused the touch. Instead, effortlessly, she rose a few hand spans above Sarai.

Arms open wide to the power of the universe, golden hair wild about her, scaly sheath riding low on her hips, the Fish Whisperer remained still, face uplifted to the moon above. Time suspended. And then, as if once aware of Sarai, the fish woman allowed the wide trailing edge of her tail to sweep slowly above Sarai's prone body. A watery shiver rippled over Sarai, igniting her skin, her thoughts, her tongue, her loins, her mons. She gasped, hands hard on her lower belly, knees opening to better guide the fish woman.

Overcome by the need to hold and touch, she called out, perhaps brashly, "Come to me, Spirit of the Stream."

The fish woman dipped and came to rest head to tail alongside Sarai who was quick to link her arms around the bejewelled hips. But the fish woman's tail would not be restrained and it flicked up before settling in a hovering pulse low, almost but not quite touching Sarai's face. The sensation was dense and palpable as if there had been touch. Sarai arched her hips again. The Fish Whisperer slid a hand under her buttocks to better bring Sarai's mons to her lips.

"Sarai," she whispered, "Sarai, you are where you belong."