

Blood in the Water, Blood on the Hill. A modern retelling of the Redhill folklore.

The waters were calm once.

Before humans came, the sea was our cradle. The currents sang lullabies, and the moon carved paths of silver light for us to follow. My name is Sura, a swordfish born in the coral beds off Temasek. I remember chasing minnows with my siblings, slicing through the currents with our bills. The sea moved as our mother — we could not be harmed while we were within her.

Our bills, glistening spears, weren't just for hunting. They were our pride. We were blades of the sea — fast, gleaming, and subservient to none.

But even the swiftest cannot outswim fate.

The humans came in their wooden boats with nets and spears. The sound of their motors filled the air, like the incessant cawing of seagulls. At first, we tried our best to ignore them. We dove deeper, thinking that they would leave.

We were wrong.

They multiplied. Every day, more boats came, turning the surface of our reef into a bustling market. They were waiting for something.

And then, one morning, the sea bled.

It began like any other, apart from the boats still floating on the surface of the water. The younger ones were playing near the shallows. I remember watching little Kiru, the youngest swordfish, barely longer than a coconut, his bill still soft at the edges, swimming around the shallows. He was too bold, too curious.

That morning, he saw something shiny glinting in the water, drifting just below the surface. We thought it was a game.

We were wrong.

As he swam up to the surface to see what it was, a crack split the water — something sharp.

Steel.

Kiru did not cry out. He didn't have the chance to. One moment, he was streaking through

the water. The next, he was still, his body limp, a red cloud blooming around him, and the tip of a spear jutting from his belly, skewering him. The next moment, a net yanked him out of the water.

The sea went silent. It had been pierced. One of her children had been taken, and she could not shield him.

I felt something inside me crack as I saw his blood dissolve — a thread of red, unwinding into blue until even that was gone.

If the humans would not leave, we would make them.

The boats were anchored above, bobbing like lazy predators waiting for a feast.

We shot upwards, bill first, and splintered the underside of a small wooden boat. A man aboard screamed as he fell into the water, kicking wildly. He never touched the reef. We made sure of that.

We tore through the fragile nets and aimed for their spears and motors. The larger swordfish rammed the hulls of boats.

The sea churned with chaos. Screams echoed. Blood — not ours — dyed the waves. But humans are not so easily defeated.

They returned in fleets, with bigger boats, stronger hulls, faster engines.

And something new.

I remember the morning clearly. From the deep, I rose to watch. A boy stood at the bow of one of the boats, young and sharp-eyed. He didn't shout like the other fishermen. He was speaking to the captain, pointing at a piece of paper — a blueprint.

The captain grunted, sceptical at first. But the boy insisted, gesturing to the crude sketch again. The boy then pointed toward the water, and the captain gave the order.

A metal net uncoiled like a serpent from the boat, made of cruel wire. It sparkled with curved barbs.

We surged forward — a school of fury. But the net was ready for us.

As soon as one of us hit it, the hooks turned inward. They caught not our bodies, but our bills. Our pride. One by one, they became caught in the net. Some struggled and snapped their bills in panic, while others thrashed until blood clouded their sight.

As my bill drove into the net, I felt the sharp kiss of steel twist around it, a sudden jerk as the hooks cinched tight.

We were caught now, nothing more than swords on display.

The humans placed us into half-submerged pens built from iron, each swordfish penned in, alive but barely able to move.

They did not kill us at sea.

They saved that for land.

They kept us fresh.

We were tied down against rough wooden carts and wheeled through streets that stank of dried fish and sweat, toward a hill.

At the top of the hill stood a slaughterhouse.

I remember the smell first — thick and iron-sweet. Blood and brine. The ground was already slick and dark with old blood stains. Wooden planks had been laid out as makeshift tables, stained crimson, with butchers standing blades in hand.

They began with Kalea.

She thrashed when they brought her up. Even with her bill tied, she fought. I saw the spark in her eyes—until they drove a spike through her head to keep her still. Then the blade came down.

Once.

Twice.

Blood sprayed everywhere. Onto the wood, into the dirt, into the grooves of the hill, staining the ground red.

I couldn't scream. The ropes cut into my skin when I tried. I gagged on my grief, choked as

if their deaths were being carved into my gills.

Next came Taru.

He was my brother. As he lay on the block, he tried to hum the sea lullaby Mama taught us. His mouth moved as they tied him down. No sound came out. Only when the blade hit did I hear him — not a song, but a sob.

After that was Maila.

She was my best friend. Just a few days prior, she had been racing me through coral mazes. Now her tail lay limp, blood trailing from the stump of her neck.

Then Ricu.

The rest of my siblings. My friends.

Each one was lifted onto the block.

Each one was decapitated.

All this while, the ground drank greedily.

I lay in my cart, bound, forced to watch it all. Their heads were hacked off. Flesh carved in strips for sale. Bills were tossed into a pile to be sold to collectors later.

The hill ran red.

It flowed with **us**.

The blood trickled down in slow rivulets at first, then in streams. Over rock and root. Down into the village below, painting the earth the colour of murder.

And still, they continued.

One after another, till the stench of death hung heavy in the air, and the cart creaked as they dragged me closer to the block.

The blood of my kin soaked the earth, but still, the hill demanded more. My gills flared, my bill throbbed, my fins ached. Yet despite the pain, I saw them — the boy and the captain.

They stood apart from the butchers, near a stack of crates. The boy's face was pale, his hands clenched. He was pointing and arguing.

“This was my idea,” the boy said, “I showed you the design.”

The captain, a thick-armed man with a crooked grin, scowled. “You’re a child. I’m the one who brought the catch in. Just because people think highly of you doesn’t mean—”

“I just want credit”, the boy snapped.

“You little fool,” he hissed.

I saw something flash through the air.

A small fishing knife.

The boy staggered back, hands clutching the red on his chest. He collapsed behind some crates, his blood mingling with ours as it seeped into the soil.

The captain looked around, then calmly wiped his blade on a cloth and tucked it away.

Just like that, the boy who had spared us no mercy had found none for himself.

“Next!”

Rough hands dragged me from the cart. My body had little fight left. I was weak, bloodied, bones aching with every movement. But my eyes—my eyes still burned.

Burned with the image of Kiru’s skewered body.

Burned with the sight of Kalea’s decapitated head.

Burned with the boy’s lifeless form, slumped behind crates as his blood soaked the hill.

I was the last.

They laid me out on the block, bill bound tight, eyes staring at the sky.

The butcher raised his blade.

I did not flinch.

I thought of the reef.

I thought of the sea.

I thought of the children who would ask why the sea was quiet now, no longer teeming with life.

Then the blade came down.

And the hill drank.

The villagers whispered of a curse and called it Bukit Merah — Redhill.

Now, few remember why. Fewer still remember the boy. None remember the swordfish.

People call it fishing. Harvest. Industry.

But this is slaughter.

No longer do humans come in wooden boats. They build new machines, cast wider nets, use sharper hooks, to pull more from a sea that is already grieving.

And still, humans do not stop.

Perhaps they never will.