

Fracture by Fracture

By Cassandra Francis

Adra stood among reeds of wavering gold, marveling at the endless horizon of shallow water. Beneath her, the sand molded around her feet in an earth-made sock and the fen shivered with her every breath. Grass fluttered. Water rippled. She was the moon to its still tide.

At her heel, a flower sprouted. Its stem curled around her ankle, up her calf, and stopped at her thigh. She fantasized about stepping forward, out of its embrace and into the water's serene body, but ultimately, she knew it was not for her. The petals tickled the inside of her leg as the flower unfurled. A kiss. A memory surged at the contact, and Adra was forced to bear witness to a string of thoughts not her own.

*A speeding fist collided with a jaw. 'Marcus didn't deserve such a pitiful father,' the owner of the fist yelled, voice echoing in the void. The image widened, revealing a gray sleeve framing an assortment of red knuckles. 'He was a good boy, and you ruined him!'*

*'I did no such thing,' the jaw's owner responded. His voice vibrated beneath the scene, down to Adra's bones, it danced around her chest and bounced between her ribs. 'I will not take such slander. Not while the casket is still open.'*

*The fist reared back again. This time it broke two teeth in the father's mouth. He spat them onto the tear-stained floor. 'Your negligence killed him,' the attacker growled. "You sent him off to die."*

*The accusation punctured the father's heart, and in turn, Adra's. With bloody gums and bile forming in his belly, he surged forward. The stoic face he had built out of necessity, imploded, sending shards of false courage straight into his flesh. 'Lies!' he roared before tackling his assailant. A hail of age-weakened nails rained down upon the funeral-goer. He*

*continued to hit, blinded by the desperate need to protect his son's legacy. He drew blood, tearing the flesh like a rabid animal and when he got to the bone, he did not stop.*

The memory expired, and Adra fought the urge to wake, begging to be returned to the fen, but it was useless. The familiar ceiling of her mother's wagon stared down at her as she opened her eyes. As she scooted to the edge of the cart, her woolen blanket scratched her thighs. Dangling her legs off the splintered wood, Adra watched as her mother and their customer finalized the transaction. In a pail behind her, leeches stirred, their viscous black bodies wrestled over one another, shimmering like a vat of oil.

Her mother, a wiry woman with hair like twine, known as Marina, thanked the old man as she pocketed a pouch of coins. A purple bruise marred the man's jaw, and his uneven steps carried a lopsided rhythm as he departed. Adra made a point not to catch his eye.

Their cart, perched at the edge of the dirt path, gave Adra a view of the river snaking between the sun-bleached hills. A man stood in the water. He was still as a statue, light-skinned with long black hair and a narrow face. The waves lapped at his waist. He looked up to their cart, and Adra shivered. Goosebumps decorated her skin, filled in the flesh that was not scarred, and she looked away, ready to tell her mother about his presence when a coin landed in her lap. Its silver edge peeked out from beneath the folds of her gown. When her gaze returned to the river, the man was gone. Curiously, Adra searched the banks but only found late-bloomed wildflowers.

The wagon shook as Marina began closing the shop. Adra jumped out of the cabin, still examining the river below.

"There was a fire," Marina said, looping a rope from her palm to her elbow, "to the north." When her daughter failed to respond, she asked, "Was it as terrible as he proposed?"

“No. I’ve taken worse,” Adra responded, voice hoarse from disuse.

Back on the offensive, Marina returned to her rope. Over the palm, down to her elbow.

“Good. Fires scar. Rarely kill. We should have plenty to take. You’ll be ready?”

“I’ll rest on the road.” Adra was well-aware that Marina’s worry was more for the business than for her well-being, but the thought, the minor outreach in her direction, gave her comfort. Adra hungered for any reminder of herself, and a mother’s empathy, no matter the authenticity, gave her proof of her existence. She was her child first and foremost; she could build her character from there.

The village in the north was pressed firmly against the ocean, and it welcomed the weather with full furnaces and imported wools, as the occupants were not only prepared for the colder months, they celebrated them. Garland, comprised of orange and red leaves, dashed between houses, bundles of dried lavender hung above every door, and plump bows adorned each lamp post.

Wooden houses with straw roofs bordered the streets, and the center of the town, a circular pathway with a decorative patch of squash in the middle, was home to an assortment of businesses. They parked their wagon next to the bakery.

As Marina left to fetch a stable-hand and a key to an inn, Adra was left in the bowels of the town. Leaning against the cart, she scanned the area. Those that passed her appeared to be in good spirits, not once did she see someone flush with burns and the buildings surrounding her were unscathed, clean of ash and decay.

“Addie?” The nickname followed a hesitant gasp, and Adra turned to see a woman she had thought long gone.

Padma, Adra’s elder by a decade, stood decorated in an auburn robe and a scarf of ivy. The sisters examined one another. Adra counted wrinkles, proof of age, evidence that Padma was not an illusion. “It’s really you,” Padma whispered, astonishment edging on horror.

“You live here,” Adra noted. Padma clutched a basket of apples.

“I’ve been here since I left the company.” Suddenly, as if she were pinched, Padma noticed the wagon. “Momma is here as well?”

“She’s buying a night at the inn.”

“Just a night?”

As it stood now, their presence appeared to be unneeded. “Was there a fire recently?” Adra asked.

A breeze ruffled Padma’s hair. Her golden waves hung near her breast, much longer than Adra had ever seen on her. She laughed, and Adra marveled at how free she sounded. “I see her strategy has not changed.”

“How many people died?” Adra pressed.

“Three.” Padma grabbed Adra’s hand. She glanced beneath her sister’s sleeve. “You look awful,” she whispered.

“I had to take all of them after you left,” Adra said. Marina liked to organize. Perfume bottles arranged by shape. Closets arranged by color. Children arranged by emotion.

“I did this,” Padma whispered, ready to cry.

“You didn’t do this. No one did.” The scars, nearly covering Adra entirely, came from hundreds of strangers. She never thought herself a victim. It was a job.

“Aren’t you ever worried about how much you can take?” Padma asked. She had always had too much empathy, and only after she left did Adra realize why. Marina gave Padma the clients prone to guilt-induced anxiety.

“What do you mean?” Adra asked.

“I just don’t want you to end up like little baby Rue.” Padma glanced away, content with the line she cast.

Rue, their middle sister, had died the year before Padma left. Marina had always told Adra that Rue had contracted an illness and that there was nothing the herbalists could do. Adra and Rue had been identical, same high cheeks and cleft chin, and despite their difference in age, the two were extremely close. Adra took grief. Rue took sorrow. A pair of sisters fit to take on war itself. “What are you talking about?” Adra asked. The mere mention of her late sister’s name sent her heart hammering. Rue was often lost among the grief she took from strangers. It was rare to feel her so loudly, so close.

Marina hit them from the side, where neither woman was looking, approaching in a gust of anger and loathing. “Get away from her,” Marina spat. Adra jolted at the sound of her mother’s voice. With a lunging step back, she parted from Padma. “What are you doing here?” Marina asked, cheeks red with the chill of night.

Marina's mania rolled over Padma with ease. The eldest daughter simply readjusted her grip on her produce basket. "I live here, Momma."

"Then we are leaving," Marina responded.

A hand encircled Adra's wrist, she could feel her mother's bones through her sleeve. The ground shifted beneath her as Marina tugged her away. "Wait," Adra said. "Padma was just telling me about the fire. Three people died."

Marina loved nothing more than to present herself as charitable. She had gained the title as the 'Healing Wisp' from being overly giving. The helpfulness was a guise, a way to feed her self-righteousness, a way to feed a hunger for misery, and a way to keep her pockets fat. "Like you said, fires scar," Adra said. "We could use the coin."

Marina's knees locked, and she looked to Adra as if the girl were about to drown, as if Adra was too stupid to see the danger before them. "Adra, we can't," she said.

"Why not? You bought a room," Adra said, frustrated by her mother's condescending tone. Marina's free hand curled into a fist, but the key was too long, and the observation was already voiced. Adra sank back on her heels. "Let us stay."

"You come at a fortunate time," Padma said. "I'm being crowned tomorrow."

"Crowned?" Adra asked, invigorated by her minor victory over her mother.

"I'm being indoctrinated as a mentor in the village. Since you are here, it would be nice of you to come." She then spoke to Adra and Adra only, "We have much to talk about."

Suddenly, as if she had forgotten its weight, Padma lifted her basket. "Are you two hungry?"

They were hungry. Starved in fact, and despite Marina's distress, she could not decline a warm dinner for her and her only remaining daughter.

When Padma left after they lost Rue, she departed in a storm of hatred, with a sail she had crafted herself, open and ready to draw a course. She left with a flare of individuality. Marina had not known where it came from, as Padma was always the perfect subservient child. The abandonment blind-sided her, turned her into a reluctant mother with an eye always on Adra, waiting to see her turn away and leave. So when Adra finally claimed her voice for her own, nearly demanding they stay in the village, Marina was scared to push against her. Best to not test a flighty horse.

Padma's house was home to many people. Five children and a proclaimed husband. He was handsome, Adra admitted, with small eyes and a bun full of curly brown hair, but throughout the evening, she had learned and forgotten his name multiple times. Each child looked different. Some wide-jawed, others thin and mousy. None of them looked like Padma.

"These are your children?" Adra asked as Padma flitted between the dining room and the kitchen, arms full of dirty dishes. No one had spoken during the meal, out of awkwardness, coldness, or custom, Adra was not sure, but their limited conversation consisted of asinine comments about the food.

"They are." Padma stacked the plates on the island. "Loves of my life." She pushed her hair out of her eyes. "Victor and I tried and tried, but I can't conceive. So, we decided to adopt. Most of them are orphans. Henri, the one with the blonde curls, he lost his family in the fire."

"I could help him," Adra said suddenly. The offer was a reflex, a way back to what she knew.

Padma shook her head with a near ferocity. “No. No, I can’t let you do that. Not when I see how close you are.”

“Close?”

“I was thinking about it. Watching you with her. Every time you reached for a slice of bread, your sleeve climbed higher up your wrist.” Padma bowed her head, a sudden influx of emotion took hold of her, drowned out the motherly warmth she had worn throughout dinner. “What do you think of the house?” Padma sent her hook into the stream. “I was thinking, well I mean, I just saw—”

“Adra, it’s time to go.” Marina hovered near the door, poked her nose past the frame, and glared at her oldest daughter. “Wait outside.”

Despite the evening spent across the table, Adra had yet to bring up Rue. It didn’t seem appropriate to drag the carcass of Padma’s past life onto the table in front of her work-in-progress family, and now, with her mother ordering her away, Adra failed to find that spark that burned her tongue and had kept her there in the first place.

Still, even as she stepped out onto the porch, she felt the twinge of guilt for abandoning the subject.

“I saw the way you were looking at her. If you love her, *don’t* tell her.” Marina said from the doorway. Her tone was clipped, ice-cold, and taut.

“I’ve learned a lot living on my own. A lot about caring. A lot about how love should work.” Padma swallowed her distress, voice already wavering. Marina's presence had that effect, even after all this time. “I’m a mother now.”

The floor groaned as Marina pushed off the doorframe. She barked out an ugly laugh, and Padma's stomach clenched. "You are *not* a mother," Marina said. Padma bristled; a carnal rage sent a wave of energy up her spine. Marina continued, "Do not call yourself that. You play hen to a gaggle of orphans. You didn't suffer through the trial of pregnancy, the burden of carrying. You're not allowed to talk of motherhood and *loving*. How can you claim to know how love works when you don't even know what suffering is?"

"All I knew was suffering!" Padma seethed, teeth grinding against one another.

"Don't be so dramatic. I gave you everything I could and more."

Padma placed her hands flat on the island, willed her fingers to stop shaking. "My first memory was from a fisherman who accidentally tipped the boat. His wife sank like a stone. I still can't differentiate between what is mine, what is *really* mine, and what I was forced to take."

"I gave you the opportunity to experience hundreds of lives. Hundreds of instances that would otherwise be kept locked away to stew," Marina said.

"Maybe it should have been locked up, kept by its owner. Look at what it did to us." Padma's fingers curled, nails scratching against the wooden table like a tree branch against a window after a particularly strong gust. "Look what it did to Rue, Momma."

Marina stooped over the opposite end of the table, leaned so close to Padma, her breath ruffled her daughter's eyelashes. "At least she was loyal."

Padma closed her eyes in a tight grimace, and when she opened them, she was alone, left in a pool of venom and spit.

In the morning, while the tide was low, Marina took Adra out to the shore. After following a string of directions from the innkeeper and a gust of gossip from those at the bakery, they identified the victims of the fire: Henri's parents, Oli and Ange, and a teenage girl named Ima, who was simply trying to save them.

Ima's parents waited up the hill, next to Marina's cart. Their stifled sniffles and occasional sobs fluttered down the grassy mound.

"They are paying extra for two at once," Marina said. "Remember to relax. It can be discombobulating." She retrieved a smelling salt from her poncho pocket and shoved it beneath Adra's nose. Adra reluctantly inhaled. She hated this part.

With eyes stinging, and mind awoke, Adra watched the waves rolling forth. White froth soaked the brown sand. "What about Henri?" she asked.

"I'm not even going to try. Your sister is against our practice. And now, with her calling him her son, there is no way we can treat him." Marina pressed the salt beneath her nose and inhaled sharply. "I packed your stuff."

"We aren't staying for Padma's crowning?"

"I'm sure it's a falsified event. Probably a fall banquet put on by the masses that Padma has selfishly misconstrued to fit her fantasy. She truly believes those children are her own." Marina's lips stretched, sharpening the valleys of her wrinkles. She could bury bodies in the depth of her frown.

Marina removed the leech from Ima's sleeping father and placed it on Ima's mother, then finally, she gave it to Adra to choose where it went. Adra looked down at her bare body. They

were running out of space. Adra chose the largest patch of unscathed skin and let the leech latch to her. Marina stuck the smelling salt beneath Adra's nose.

The fen welcomed Adra as it always had, a personal realm of promised safety. The memory of Ima sent ripples through the stagnant water, and by the time they lapped at Adra's ankles, the sense of security vanished, and she was thrust into darkness.

*A blistering pain followed by a baby girl. Spindly legs sprouting as time rushed ahead. Giggles deepen into laughter and then eventually cries. Ima's tears over problems she could not prevent. Overly empathetic. A problem both mother and father could not curb. A half-dead bird in a box. Coming home to a house full of herbs and an adolescent girl crouched over a corpse, baiting it back to life. Dozens of instances of manic scrambling to save what is already lost. The father, embarrassed. The mother, agitated. 'She's too old to cry.' Then the stifling smell of ash. A hand-made coffin. Blame. Blame. Blame. Disgust. Sorrow.*

*Grief.*

The parents woke with smiles and tears they could not comprehend, and Adra was not surprised to find her cheeks wet as well. She sat up and dangled her legs off the edge of the cart, eyes immediately drawn to the ocean below. Her head throbbed, and the new scar, placed between her ribcage like a low-hanging heart, blistered as it finalized.

Amidst the spray and foam, a man stood. The same man from the previous day. The only change she noticed was his pose. He had one hand stretched out before him, finger pointed up toward their caravan, not beckoning, simply acknowledging.

A vibrant unease blossomed in the pit of Adra's stomach. She felt as if she was supposed to understand him, but she was missing half the sentence, the subjects and the verbs escaped her.

Adra jolted as Ima's mother blew her nose, her white handkerchief fluttered like a butterfly taking flight. The stranger in the ocean was gone, Adra felt the absence of his presence before she verified it. His presence was heavy, just like her mother's.

By mid-day, they were finalizing their plans for the following week. Marina got her hands on a paper from the next town over, cut out the obituary listing, and pinned it to the inside of their cart. It was a battle to convince Marina to stop for lunch. Adra didn't tell her about the man in the ocean. She wouldn't know what to say.

When they returned to their cart, fresh rolls in hand, their front right wheel had been smashed. Fragments of wood, pieces of the rims, and several spokes, littered the grass. After a string of sharp-tongued cusses, Marina took off to find a wheelwright, leaving Adra before the bakery.

"Adra!" someone called, and Adra pivoted to find Padma leaning in the doorway of the tailor's shop. Adra did not think twice about joining her.

"You work here?" Adra asked as she admired the garments hanging from the hooks on the wall. A wax candle burned on the table, filling the room with the crisp scent of apples.

"Oh, I work everywhere. A full-time volunteer as the elders like to call me." Padma threaded a needle through a sleeve she was working on. "I see your cart broke."

"The spokes are shattered." Adra picked up a hat from the shelf near the window, fiddled with the felt, and watched for Marina's return. "I took Ima's death today." She folded the brim up and let it roll over her thumb. "Did you know her?"

“Of course, a tragedy really. But,” Padma looked up as her needle dove into the fabric in her grasp, “I knew I should have tried to stop Momma. I’m sorry, Adra. You shouldn’t have to put up with it. You’re the same age I was when I left—” Padma straightened with a gasp, a convincing display of hope. “How would you like to stay here? With me?”

“I can’t.” It was what Adra believed. “I have a job to do, you know that.”

“Aren’t you tired of the leeches?” Padma asked.

“Even if I was, I can’t just leave,” Adra said.

“Yes, you can. I did it. You can too.” Padma grabbed Adra by the forearm. “You know it is not a job of necessity. Those you help, they will be fine without your interference.”

Adra knew that she wasn’t needed by their clients. The service they provided was a luxury for the wealthy or the weak, but it was familiar, and she wasn’t sure who she would be without it. She was covered in layers upon layers of stolen memories. A champion of sadness and misfortune. She took the worst of the human experience, every association of suffering, loss, guilt, and grief. She wondered if there was anything left beneath the layers of misery, and if there were distinguishing characteristics, were they tainted by the years spent beneath all the woe?

“Momma needs me,” Adra said, eyes flickering between the window and Padma’s pleading eyes. The grip on her arm tightened, Padma’s nails dug into her scars.

“Momma doesn’t need you,” Padma said.

“Yes, she does. This business is all she has. I’m all she has.” It was difficult to fill a hole initially dug for three. Adra lowered her voice, “Especially since you left.”

Padma took offense to the comment, immediately squared up, and dropped her hand. “And do you know why I left?” Her breath, rank with the scent of cider, dusted Adra’s cheeks. “Because I wasn’t weak. Because I couldn’t even *dream* of continuing after Rue—” Her voice cracked, releasing the name in a hideous croak. “After Rue killed herself.”

A bolt of pain struck Adra’s stomach, and she grimaced. “What?” Adra said.

“Oh, Adra! Don’t you remember?” Padma said. It was an accusation. Exasperation and disappointment evident on her round features, Padma brought her hand to her face and dabbed a finger beneath her eyes, preparing for the tears.

Adra’s heart was in her head, and she ransacked her mind, flipped through her memories, fought to find the handful that was her own. Parting the veil, all she could recall were different shades of joy, but she played those memories over and over, and she felt the heavy flow of tears racing down her cheeks. Rue’s face, pudgy and always so sickly, and then suddenly she saw it, beneath the long-sleeved shirts, the picking at the skin, the insults hurled toward Marina, then Padma, and eventually Adra herself. The hairline fracture racing between each of Rue’s scars, like rivers dividing a valley. The promise of shattering with the mere question, “Are you okay?”

Adra withered. Her shoulders melting forward as she captured a sob between her teeth. With tears clouding her eyes, she looked to Padma and waited for her to exclaim that it never happened. But all her older sister did was furiously crunch her chin into chest and punch globs of tears into her sweater. She cried harder than Adra did.

“No,” Adra whispered.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” Padma responded. She reached for Adra.

Adra dodged the embrace, body heaving as she struggled to breathe. In an explosive movement, Adra turned to the window. Marina stood next to their cart, motioning to the wheel. A wheelwright crouched beside her. Adra's head throbbed, and her heart skipped, anguish filled the spots between arrhythmic beats, and before nausea took over her body, she rushed outside, toes twisting against the sandy ground.

"Momma," Adra cried.

Marina started and slowly turned to Adra. "Darling, what is it? What is on your face?"

"Padma told me. About Rue." Adra shuddered. The bile burned holes into her stomach.

Marina shooed the wheelwright away with a flick of her wrist and a scowl. "And what exactly did she tell you? You know she's prone to exage—"

"The truth. She told me the truth. That she," Adra flubbed, "that Rue..." She couldn't verbalize it, merely thinking about the words was enough to send her into another fit of sobs. She placed her hand on her abdomen and tried to use herself as an anchor. The recollection turned her exasperation into malice, and she seethed. "What else have you kept from me? What other lies have you convinced me of?" She thought back to one of Marina's most infamous stories. "What about Papa? Is that a lie too?"

"No, Adra." Marina surged forth, ready to reassure where she could. "You were a gift from God himself. Put in my belly on Saturday, birthed by Monday. A gift. All of you were."

"Then why did you let her die?"

“I gave her a life to remember. She tried her hardest, but she couldn’t handle it.” Marina's nose twitched, eyes passive and cold. “I gave you girls an experience many would long for. Rue wouldn’t have survived long on her own.”

“Padma left, and she seems to be doing fine.” Adra waited for her mother’s rebuttal, but her patience wore thin. If Marina did not defend herself, Adra had no choice. Her upset was vicious and foreign. Not often did she feel the all-encompassing mania, which often followed loss and heartache. Not often did she feel grief as raw as she did now. She thought herself numb to such extremities. The stagnation in conversation felt inappropriate, and her reeling mind could not stand her mother’s passiveness. “I can’t be here. I can’t be with you, I mean. I’m staying here. I’m leaving the company.” The more she said it, the more she believed it. She inflated with hope, and Marina faltered. “I’m leaving you.”

Marina tore her gaze from her daughter, watched the blades of grass poking out from the sand, dancing ever so slightly beneath the touch of wind. “She has convinced you that I’m the enemy, hasn’t she? You’ll regret it,” she said softly, painfully.

“Is that a threat?” Adra asked.

“It’s a warning. If you suddenly stop taking memories, you’ll miss it.”

“Again, Padma seems to be doing fine.”

Marina shook her head and released a low chuckle. “I’ll give you this evening, grieve for Rue, blame me, whatever you need to do, do it tonight. I’m leaving tomorrow morning with you in hand.” It was a cool order, one that Adra’s heart was too hot to respect.

As Adra hiked back to Padma's house, the pathway opened to reveal the ocean. She paused at the top of the bank, frustrated to find the familiar figure in the water. Exhausted from the day's revelations, Adra had no patience for the man and his mysterious intentions. She tore down the sandy hill, heels slipping out from beneath her.

"You," she started, toes meeting the water. The chill of the ocean roused her senses, and she ignored the numbness forming in her heels. The man stood knee-deep in the water, and she strode forward, dragging the length of her soaked dress behind her like a corpse after a hunt. "You started showing up when my life began to fall apart. Who are you?"

He was slender, borderline emaciated, with washboard ribs and narrow hips. Dark tresses bled from a pale scalp, cascaded past his knife-sharp collar bones, and swayed with the occasional salted breeze. Eyes, pale and faded, like an opal unfit for sale, sat below a pair of thick eyebrows. The body remained void of any emotion, no twitch, no furrow, no shift of the heel. A mere vessel for his words. "This isn't my doing," he said with a voice like smoke.

"The coincidence is irrefutable."

His head tilted to the side. "You want someone to blame."

Padma wanted her to blame Marina. Marina wanted her to blame Padma. Adra just wanted the truth to be fiction. "Who are you?" she asked, anger diffused into a muffled confusion. "What do you want from me?"

"I want what is mine," he said monotonously.

"And what's that, exactly?" Adra asked.

"You hold a lot of memories, a lot of terror. I need it."

The sand beneath her began to melt, and pieces of seaweed wrapped around her ankles. Her lips quivered as anger bled through her agony. “And what could you *possibly* want with all of this rot?”

“It was mine to begin with.” He tilted his head. “You hold so much, and I am old enough to see that you cannot take more.”

He sounded like Padma, and the sudden association made Adra recoil. “I’m stronger than people like to think.”

The man took her animosity with an open face. “Count them,” he said vacantly, “the cracks along your spine. Keep living fracture by fracture, funeral by funeral, see how tall you can grow.”

Adra stepped away, tore herself from the grip of the seaweed and encroaching sand. “Stay away from me,” she said.

“I will be here,” he said, voice trailing after her as she rode the waves back to shore.

“You can take this room, Henri and Iris can bunk together for now.” Padma nudged the cot to the back wall. She had been buzzing ever since Adra showed up at her house. Her hospitality had been vicious, quickly stripping Adra out of her wet clothes and into a loose linen dress, and now the rearrangement of her children’s beds. Her energy felt like a chaotic drum against Adra’s numbed mind.

“Oh, Adra,” Padma said, pulling her into a hug. “I’m so glad you’ve decided to stay.” Chewing at her bottom lip, Adra failed to respond. Padma’s misplaced joy was grating, but Adra

didn't have the energy to be cynical at a time like this. Padma parted and ran her hand up Adra's arm, twirling Adra's elbow-length locks. "There are a few cultural rules you'll have to learn. Nothing too severe. But your hair will need to be cut."

Adra returned to her body and stepped away from her sister. "Why?"

"Women who are not taken must keep their hair cut above their shoulders." Padma smiled girlishly. "How else will the men know you're free?"

*Free.* "Right." Adra wasn't particularly stubborn about her hair, so the custom bore no weight she was not willing to take. A small price for a new life. "Can you cut it now?"

The blade of the scissors skimmed the nape of Adra's neck. The contact created goosebumps along her flesh. "Have you ever seen a man in the ocean?" Adra whispered.

The scissors paused. "What?" came Padma's response.

Adra shook her head. The blade punctured the back of her neck, drawing blood. "Nothing. Never mind." She sounded out of her mind, and maybe she was. She had just got Padma back, best not to lose her due to delusional ramblings. The blood at her neck slowly dripped down her spine, making a river between the circular scars at her back.

After her haircut, Padma gave Adra a bandage and dashed away, claiming it was time for her to get ready for the ceremony. "I'll meet you in the hall. You can choose a dress in the wardrobe. They might be a bit big on you, but no one will notice," she said before retiring to her room at the end of the house. Her door clattered shut.

Much like Adra, Padma's attire consisted of long-sleeved, high-necked garments, and just as Padma said, they were too large for her. Eventually, she chose a gray dress with a navy sash racing across the body. Adra looked in the mirror. She examined her face, her slender eyes, and sharp nose, and tried to recall what she looked like before she had arrived in the village. She couldn't recall the last time she looked in a mirror; her sense of self and physical identity had gradually disappeared over the years.

She fingered her freshly cut hair and forced herself to smile at her reflection. This was what she wanted. This was what she needed. Her untrained lips could only muster a grimace.

The dining hall was a triangular building, resting so close to the ocean that the windows were stained from getting hit with the high tide. A long table filled the room, log-carved benches rested beneath it. Placemats made of braided twine with large oblong plates marked the seats, and Adra arrived with the masses, finding a seat halfway down the table. She could see out the sea-tinged window. The moon winked at her from behind the clouds, as if it were an old friend sharing secrets. It started to rain.

The head of the table was four steps higher than the remainder of the room, and a throne made of jagged driftwood made for an impactful crown. As the occupancy of the town squished together, Marina entered the room. Dressed in a dark blue gown, Marina sat at the foot of the table. Teetering on her stool, Marina scanned the audience, meeting Adra's resentful eyes with minor trepidation.

Suddenly the room quieted. Two elderly women walked into the hall, the first one held a crown of white sage. Padma followed them, dressed in a deep crimson cloak. Her blonde hair

was pulled back into a low braided bun, and her shoulders anchored a train made of autumn leaves. Two elderly men held the end of the train and escorted her to her throne. The five figures gracefully ascended the stairs, stopping at the head of the table. Padma beamed at the villagers as she took her seat.

Her face fell as she saw Marina at the other end of the room. Adra stared out the window, searching the deep blue sea.

“This feast is in honor of our Fluer Queen,” the empty-handed woman said. “After our previous queen perished in the tragedy, it was time to elect a new one, and no other woman is more fit to bear the crown than Padma. In our darkest times, she has soothed our heartache with her generous gestures and empathetic nature. She is more than qualified to take this crown and watch over us for the years to come. As God has sent you, may you nurture and love us through the pain of growth and be our harbor in the upcoming storms.”

The woman holding the crown stepped behind Padma’s chair and raised the headpiece. “We crown you Fluer Queen,” she said before lowering the wreath down onto Padma’s head.

Padma grinned, surrounded by shades of reds and greens and the occasional streak of blonde. The villagers clapped, returning her joy with ease. Padma’s smile turned smug as she met Marina’s eye. “Bring out the feast!” she said, and the doors adjacent to the table flew open.

Cooks carried the platters, and servants carried the mugs, and in a blink of the eye, the table was full of food and drink. Two men carried out an elk and laid it across the table. The entirety of its side was carved open, skin peeled back to reveal its charred organs. Vegetables were placed between the ribs and grains in the concaves of flesh. They had removed its eyes; the organs were in a bowl at the head of the table.

Those around Adra merrily dug around the animal's guts, picking and choosing what they would like to eat. The chorus of cups clattering against one another filled the air as the village toasted to their new queen. Adra watched as her mother and sister continued to stare each other down. Adra picked up a cup someone had filled for her and drank.

As the ale went down, the hair on her arms stood on end. The feeling of unease was familiar, and she looked to the window. Lightning cracked, illuminating the sea for a brief second. The strange man was there waiting for her. He stood there, seeing her, knowing.

After the feast, once the carcass was picked clean and the drunken villagers departed, it was only Adra, Marina, and Padma. "Leave it," Padma said, noticing how Adra was awkwardly stacking the dishes. "They'll get it in the morning."

"We need to talk," Marina said. "All of us."

"Whatever you need to say, you can say it here," Padma said.

"I refuse to talk to you while you're sitting on a throne. Come down here," Marina said.

"Momma, I'm staying," Adra said, loud and fueled by alcohol.

"Is that what you think?" Marina asked.

"I've already cut my hair," Adra said.

"Ah, yes, your hair. I didn't know that's what it took for you to show you're serious. Cutting your hair." Marina's tone was sharp and strained, and Padma giggled from the other end of the table.

“She wants to stay. I’m not sure what else there is to discuss,” Padma said.

“Give up the act, darling,” Marina said, exasperated. “This play has gone on long enough. Both of you. What a disgrace. All this talk about Rue and not once did you consider your actions disrespectful? The girl died working hard, working selflessly, and now both of you have quit. What would she think of you?”

Padma stood, leaf mantle ruffling with her momentum. “Still talking about her, aren’t you? Never could get over it.” The hostility caught Adra off-guard. “Rue was weak, Momma. And after her death, I realized I was strong, so I left. I left because I realized I could do things by myself, great things.” She raised her hands and presented the hall. “And I did.” As if she just remembered Adra’s presence, Padma motioned to her younger sister. “I’m going to allow Adra to find her own path, with my guidance she could do anything. I’ll give her that freedom, that individuality, that you tried so hard to keep us from.”

Marina tented her fingers upon the table and pushed herself up. “I gave you the gift of a million lives,” she bellowed, voice bouncing from wall to wall.

“You gave us the worse of it!” A tendril of blonde hair escaped Padma’s bun. It fluttered around her cheek like a streamer cut from the rafters. “The deaths, the losses, heartache. All of the *pain*. What do you think that does to someone? To a child?” A raw vulnerability, one unlike she had often worn, rippled off of Padma, and Adra realized this was the first time she had truly seen her. Padma fell back into her seat. “It rots us from the inside out,” she croaked.

Marina stalked the length of the table. The sound of rain filled the hollow room, heavy dollops of water splashed against the window. The hem of Adra’s dress rustled as Marina passed.

Padma didn't flinch when Marina climbed the stairs and leaned over the table. She tiredly met her mother's gaze. "You don't get to complain," Marina hissed. She placed one hand on the back of the driftwood throne and one at the dirtied silverware. "I gave up everything for you. My life, sacrificed for you girls."

"What about our lives, Momma?" Padma whispered.

"They were mine to begin with, and mine they will stay." Marina turned, rapidly descended the stairs, and grabbed Adra by the wrist. She continued to the door, and Adra, not expecting the sudden momentum, fell after her.

"No." Adra yanked her hand away, but her mother's boney fingers wound tighter, constricting her, binding her to this selected fate. "I'm staying," Adra whined.

Marina tightened her grasp. "I've had enough of this, Adra."

"Let her go," Padma cried, flying down the stairs in a hurricane of leaves. She pushed Marina away. And Adra, still locked beneath her mother's cage of fingers, jolted after her, like branch after a falling bird. "She isn't yours to take."

"Of course she is," Marina snapped, turning back to Padma, white mane framing her face like a blizzard. "She can't just stop. None of us could. It will destroy her."

Padma was tired of her mother's incessant worrying, a selfish gesture masked as maternal protectiveness. It was a condescending smother, and Padma desperately longed for breath. She retrieved a knife from the table.

"Leave us alone!" Padma screamed. It came out as a cry, and Adra finally broke away from Marina's grip. She stepped away just as Padma lunged forward, knife in hand.

Adra helplessly watched as Padma stuck the blade into Marina's chest.

Stammering a few steps back, Marina placed her hand on the hilt of the dinner knife, a splintered piece of wood lodged beneath her sternum. The table clattered as she backed up into it. Marina's mouth sagged as she looked to her eldest with resentment. Blood languidly dribbled down the front of her dress. "You're wretched," she hissed, lungs straining for the two words.

Padma, who had been nearly regretting her actions, trapped her tears and swallowed her sob. Slowly, making sure Marina anticipated the extent of her motion, Padma closed the distance between them. She pushed the knife in deeper, and Adra couldn't help but notice how she relished in the way their mother wilted, melting into the table and eventually falling to the floor. Padma stared at Marina's weakening form, impervious to Adra's presence.

Adra's chest burned, and she needed to scream, but all that came out of her was a low whine, like a dog left in the chill of night. The image before her was incomprehensible: Marina, her mother, long thought to be indestructible, crumbling beneath the hand of a stranger.

That's what Padma was, Adra realized. She was a stranger, a husk of who she once was, a *lie*. Marina struggled on the floor, fought for each shallow breath. Adra's mind flipped, folded in on itself. She thought of all the toxic memories that were not her own, but even that suffering wasn't loud enough to drown out her current sorrow.

Padma pivoted and caught Adra's chin between her fingers. She lifted Adra's face to meet her eye. She mouthed 'Don't look,' and Adra, who longed for some sense of direction, did as she was told.

The skin of the cot created hatch marks along Adra's cheek. She woke to the gray of the morning streaming through the window, and the heavy scent of breakfast entered her room from the crack beneath the door. She rolled over, dragging the scratchy blanket with her.

They wouldn't bury her. "We don't put our dead in the ground," Victor, Padma's husband, had said. After they returned to Padma's home, Padma locked herself in her room. That night, Adra listened carefully, hoping to hear the sound of tears, the sound of remorse.

All she heard was the sound of the storm raging at her window.

Padma let herself in, carrying a tray of bread and eggs. "Thought you could eat," she said.

When Adra looked to Padma, her chest erupted into flames, she saw Marina, heavier in weight and younger in years. "It was out of defense," Padma had said on their way home. "She would have hurt you, taken you away."

Adra's bottom lip curled as she fell apart. "What's wrong?" Padma asked.

Adra flinched as Padma moved to console her. "It hurts," Adra whimpered, clutching her chest.

"Shh," Padma said, stroking Adra's shoulder. "It doesn't."

Clarity hit, and Adra frowned. "Yes, *it does*." She had spent most of her life taking pain from others. It was the only emotion she was sure she could identify and experiencing it firsthand was like stepping into an inferno. The memories she had taken from her clients surged forth with a new color. Was every ounce of loss as painful as this? Adra's anger faded, and she wilted back into the quilt. "Why are you okay?" the question was childish, begging for the fairness in it

all. Padma had been the one to kill, and yet she stood straight, ready for breakfast. “Where is your guilt?”

“My guilt?” Padma leaned back, and Adra watched as her friendliness sharpened into cynicism. “You want to know how I survived Rue? Marina? The scars? All of that guilt she stuffed into my mouth? *I swallowed it.* And I suggest you do the same. It will corrupt you, either way, might as well grow from it.”

Adra muffled her upset. She chewed on her lip like a schoolkid. Padma subscribed to an illogical ideology. Nothing good could grow from roots soaked in death, and Adra realized that despite Padma’s confidence as a ‘survivor,’ she was still unhealthy. This projection of strength was Padma’s only way of coping, and Adra felt foolish that she ever believed her sister was cured. The burden remained, suffocated her in a different way, and Adra finally saw the hopelessness of their situation. She had left Marina with the promise of freedom, but Padma showed her that freedom works differently for them.

Thunder shook the house, and Adra stiffened.

“Eat. I just spent all morning making it,” Padma said, voice lifting to a lighter tone. She scooted the food toward Adra. “I’m off to arrange the burning—” Adra pushed herself off of the cot, and Padma frowned. “Stay. You look ill. I’ll fetch you when the service is about to start.” Padma left Adra with the food.

Adra eyed the plate and attempted to find the hunger in her body. The eggs wiggled as the air trembled with another roll of thunder.

Adra snuck out of the house, weary of Victor and the children. She tore through the town, hysteria building with each stride. The landslide built, and she was hit with a rush of life.

Padma's house lost its hold on her, and the chill of fall returned her to her body.

A sprinkle of rain hit her scalp, and she sped down the bank, cold sand piercing her bare feet like glass. She ran into the ocean. Outlined by the storm's final breath, she saw him. Caressed by wind and scent of sea, he spoke, sending his voice far beneath the roaring waves, far away from her realm of comprehension. Blood surged to Adra's head, and she couldn't make out his words between her pulse and the hum of the ocean.

Her scars buzzed beneath her soaked dress. A wave pushed a blanket of gray sand over her feet. The coarse grains melted between her toes, molded around her knuckles in an earth-made sock.

The pale man lifted his arm, presented it like a suitor would a rose, and waited. The base of his palm protruded above his wrist like a thick thorn, slick with sea and obvious with want, and despite Adra's confidence, she faltered before such an imposing proposition. "You'll take it, all of my misery?" she asked. He nodded. Memories beat beneath her sternum, filled the silence between each heartbeat. Was she ready to let them go? "What will be left of me?"

He cocked his head to the side, his black tresses pulled taut with the movement, his slick skin acting as an adhesive. "Life."

Adra stepped forward and took his hand. He wasn't cold nor warm. He made the tips of her fingers go numb, and with the buzzing of her scars and the ocean singing in her ear, she was too overstimulated to note his lack of pulse.

At her heel, a piece of seaweed sprouted from the sand. Its slick body curled around her ankle, up her calf, and stopped at her thigh. The edge of its blade tickled the inside of her leg. A kiss. Gently, she was tugged deeper into the water. The man pushed her beneath the surface, and she found herself unafraid of the stranger above her. He was her last hope at tranquility in a time drenched in loss. Unable to bear the salt of the sea, she closed her eyes.

The stone surrounding her heart fractured. It tore her flesh to shreds, and when she woke, bobbing to the surface with water-laden lungs, she was born anew. Alone in the ocean, she found her legs and planted them on the ground. She peeled her sleeve up from her skin. The scars were gone. As was everything else.

A hollow nothing sat between her ribs. She had retained her memories, her knowledge of where she was and what she was doing, but the *feeling* was off, tainted by the impression the man had left within her. Behind her, a column of smoke stretched toward the sky, escaping the village in languid spirals. She watched it with passive eyes. Her heart did not clinch, nor did her mind fray. She was cold.

Her breath quickened as she grew unnerved with the lack of response. Where was her warmth? Her vitriol and drive? Had he taken all of her? Had he left her to die?

Adra cringed as something thrashed within her. She placed a hand at her stomach, fingers trembling over the engorged flesh. Movement rippled beneath her skin, and she muffled a sob. The soaked dress stretched over her round belly, the sudden onset of weight threw her off balance and as another wave crashed into her back she tripped forward. She turned to the great body of the ocean, begged the waves for a proper answer, but was only met with an endless horizon of deep water and the presence of a horrible void of colorless nothing.