

Excerpt—A Crack in the World, Deborah L. Rhodes

1. BIRTH AND BURIAL

*Wrapping it in a burlap cloth, they buried the newborn infant alive. Edise acted alone when even his most induced followers were abandoned by their motivating fear. He took her deep into the northern woods, near the edge of the mountain foothill, where a burial site had already been prepared. As he placed her on the ground next to the shallow grave, the child, without sound or movement, looked directly at her captor and pierced him straight through the center of his soul. Stunned by the intensity of her power, Edise, with his limbs momentarily paralyzed, began shaking violently. When he regained the ability to move, he quickly mummified the infant in the shroud and allowed the wet earth to slowly swallow her whole.*

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The Saba had been late that day. The day following the darkest of nights when the Ocan people gathered to deliberate, decide what must be done. Sleep had held her under for more time than she intended, until bodiless words with no source or origin forced her to awaken. They repeated continuously in her mind even now as she pulled her four years old grandson by the hand, making her way through the crowd seated on the floor throughout the large atrium-like building that was full beyond its capacity.

The words filled her head so completely that she could not decipher the meaning of the heated argument between the two men who stood facing one another in the middle of the overly crowded room. She tried shaking her head to clear her mind, but the words still came, *Wrapping it in a burlap cloth, they buried—*

The people shifted to make room for Saba, and she waved away their attempts to point her to a seat of honor, managing to squeeze onto a bench in a small alcove near the door, with Tajaur on her lap. Looking around the room, both Saba and her grandson appeared to be searching. The boy's bounty was apparently more fruitful than his grandmother's, as he wiggled out of her arms and moved toward the one other child present within the gathering.

Through the blur of words in her mind, present reality nudged the Saba's thoughts and captured her attention as she looked up,

surprised to realize that her own brother, Kalal, was one of the two debate contenders. Her ears finally became tuned to the tenor of their discussion, just as Edise proclaimed in a loud clear voice, “The Obeah confirm the obvious. This birth has led to a fracture in the reality of our world. That child cannot remain among us.”

Above the room’s sudden drone of murmured acquiescence, Kalal shouted, “Edise, you cannot interpret the Obeah’s words just to suit your purpose. These fractures exist at all times, in all places. We cannot make this child responsible for the Earth’s own natural occurrences.”

Edise turned his back on the older man and continued to address the gathering, his hands in open palm supplication on either side of his body, “They looked into her mind, into her soul. They saw disaster connected with this child’s future, the destruction of our way of life.”

The two men stood in contrast to one another, as they both paced in the open circle around which the people sat, each propelled by the current of their thoughts and emotions. One man was large, burly, and sweaty with a full beard, wild bushy hair, exposed glistening forearms and an angry, bewildered, almost frightened expression on his face.

The other—tall, rail thin, and fully covered in a gray muslin robe—was pale, clean shaven and wore a look of bored, haughty disdain. Edise wove back and forth through the crowd, as he extended his range, gliding through the larger gaps and spaces between those seated nearby, while Kalal, conscious of his bulky frame, confined his territory to the middle circle alone.

A violent cacophony of wind, thunder and rain arose outside and drowned out all sound for a moment. It then subsided into a steady battering of rain before lashing forth again, crashing against the building as if to tear it from its foundation. The effect of intermittent lightning mixed with rain spilled through the fractal glass ceiling of the Maja, casting an eerie preternatural spectrum of light and shadows that danced on the walls and people in the candlelit room. Competing to be heard against the force of the external elements, the voices of the two opponents bounced off the acoustically enhanced walls, echoing up into the higher strata of the open room.

The Maja sits in the middle of the village marketplace and was strategically built in a place where the land’s underground rock formations contain highly concentrated fields of energy. The five

story high hexagon shaped adobe and stone building was crowned by a modified glass geodesic dome and surrounded by stalls and booths of a marketplace that was now empty of its normal bustling activity.

Most of the adults in the main Ocan village were there, as well as many of those from the second largest Ocan community near the Haman River and even some from the other outlying villages. Saba and her grandson, Tajaur, had entered the Maja in time only to hear the triumvirate Obeah utter their final words before watching them silently depart. In addition to the loose circle of people seated on the ground floor, most of those present were overflowing on the four balcony levels of the Ocan community meeting house, either sitting, standing, leaning over, or crowding into the metal railings.

They looked like spectators in a sporting coliseum, except they made no sound, cheering neither champion nor rival. Saba recognized some familiar Haman villagers who, no doubt, would rather be bartering in the closed marketplace on this solstice Exchange Day or at least making their way along the distant route back toward the river. Saba searched the room, in vain, to see if any members from the Ocan faction community—the Aka—were present. Even the knowledge of how unlikely this would be, never dimmed the healer-woman's false sense of hope.

Saba watched her only sibling with a mixture of worry and pride. He was older than she by almost ten years and watching him reminded her of the much too swift passing of time. This was not the same man that she had known even two years ago. Daily it seemed that energy and vitality were draining visibly from this once master of all Ocan builders.

Reaching beyond his weariness, Kalal seemed to find himself, mustering his strength as he now towered above his adversary, his words thundering, "The Obeah said that this child was brought here by the will of the powers of the universe. Who are we to question the intent of life's greater forces?"

As he spoke and then waited for a response, Kalal nervously fingered the strap of a hemp pouch that lay draped diagonally across one of his broad shoulders, reaching down over his rounded midsection. Despite being the Master Builder of the Ocan, Kalal never donned the longer robes of the Masters' Guild that would have distinguished him as the chief architect of the Maja and all important edifices constructed in the last half-century. Instead, he was most

comfortable in the same clothing as the masons and workmen of his trade, a brown sleeveless cotton like tunic, belted at the waist and hanging to mid-thigh, partially covering loose fitting, light weight pants.

The room was momentarily silent and Kalal seized the opportunity to continue, “The Obeah spoke of renewal, not destruction-- of beginnings born of inevitable endings.”

Saba looked across the room at the two men and three women who comprised the Council of Elders. They were sitting on a low bench against the back wall, overlooking those seated in front of them on the floor. Although she tried, she could not penetrate the empty benign gazes of that small select group of cultural and legal overseers.

Brief uncontrollable feelings of frustration and disappointment swelled in her heart and mind as she struggled to pull her attention back to the discussion. There was a time, when by sentiale awareness alone, she could have discerned, felt, touched all that she needed to know *a priori*. But now she could only listen closely and observe these present actors and actions for clues, reaching for an understanding that once would have flowed into her being of its own accord.

Unlike most Ocan council meetings, no other person in the Maja even tried to voice an opinion in the debate that ensued between Edise and Kalal. The people seemed to be wrapped in a tight silent bond of hopeless anxiety. The Saba fought to hold her tongue. She knew that any support that she offered would be viewed as tainted by the biases of her connections.

Despite her attempt to think otherwise, the Saba was well aware that Mala’s offense of bringing forth a hybrid child—a potential contaminant—was viewed as more than just an unlawful wrong, but as a mortal threat to the Ocan people’s insulated collective. But Saba also knew that Ocan laws—while rooted deeply in her people’s fears, and their way of life—were never meant to take precedence over powerful human bonds created outside and beyond their fragile temporal realities.

For Saba and others like her, a loved one’s pain will always assuage any actual or perceived iniquity. She accepted the shame of Mala’s transgression as a mere isolated moment of human suffering, in need of nothing more than compassion and regret.