

Title: *Red Sun*

Summary: Wren Adeyemi's quiet village is situated in the centerfold of three warring tribes. To the southeast are the Igbos, to the west are the Yorubas, and to the North are the Hausas—the appointed majority leaders of a newly independent Nigeria. It is 1966 and Wren is freshly eighteen.

As she navigates her relationship with an untrustworthy sister and the mother who abandons her, Wren grows closer to the new brothers who move into town.

But her new friendship is not without its mysteries. The boys' arrival is accompanied by a string of murders—brutalizations by some undetermined animal. With the promise of war raging around them, a budding romance on the horizon, and the question of death more poignant than ever, Wren must come out on the other side unscarred.

“A divided nation is the playground for revolutionaries.”

Wren

Wren wrapped her arms around herself. Against the cold wind, the loose sleeves of her *ankara* flapped aimlessly. She inhaled deeply—evening her breath to the chorus of the rustling weaves, the creaking windowpane, the moaning cicadas. The night was black except for the pinhole of moonlight along the stream. Wren narrowed her eyes. She pressed against the bark of a mangrove tree. By the grace of the shallow light, Ada’s slender frame was slightly discernible.

Wren craned her neck further in an attempt to look at the face of the man, woman, *creature* standing besides her older sister. But her attempt was fruitless: whoever Ada had snuck out to see was cloaked in shadows, so thoroughly obscured she thought the individual might fade into the very night.

“Did anyone follow you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“You’re not sure?”

“No one followed me. I took the long way around town to get here. I made sure to take the bus route. I left my car at home. As far as anyone knows, I’m in bed asleep.” Wren chewed her lip as she listened to her sister’s hushed promise.

So she’d been right: Ada was keeping a secret. Something so terrible she’d needed the privacy of this backwoods stretch of land.

“Okay. Okay,” the figure repeated. Though the sound was hushed, Wren could hear the bass in the voice, confirming her suspicions. She let out a breath of relief. Ada was sneaking out to see a *boy*. A secret lover was far better than the possibilities her mind had begun to conjure.

But why did she have to lie? What relationship was so unspeakable that Ada would risk leaving Wren all alone in the cabin? Sure, the two sisters fought like storm and fire—just last week they’d argued

to the point of tears, Wren storming off in a dramatic fit and Ada swearing to never speak to her ever again. But they'd made up since then--and in those long stretches of time when Papa was away, the girls grew closer. The nights were the hardest, and on the worst nights, Wren sought her sister's warmth for comfort, curling up next to her so that they lay smushed together like two peas in a pod.

Hadn't it only been yesterday, the sun buried deep beneath them, that Ada rustled Wren awake from her nightmare and rubbed circles along her spine? Now that moment of intimacy seemed as if it had appeared in a different time to different girls. Ada felt more distant and foreign than ever before. Wren felt a knot forming in her throat, but she ignored it. She would save her hurt, her betrayal for later. Now was the time to listen—to see what was so special about this strange man that Ada would sacrifice her trust.

“I brought herbs, salt, and red silk. Tie the silk around your wrist, my love,” Ada was saying.

“You know I don't subscribe to paganism. And neither should you. This isn't the town for it.”

“Since when have I followed what others subscribe to? Give me your hand,” her sister said and pulled the man towards her. The movement brought him closer to the gap of moonlight, and now his profile was in partial view. Wren drank him in, committing his few distinguishable features to memory. The strong jaw, the shallow indent in his lip, the bold nose. He was tall, but not overly so: he only had a couple inches on Ada who was tall herself.

“Ada, I love you, but I will not sacrifice my faith for you.”

Her older sister whined her hand around the hem of the man's shirt. She slipped her palm beneath the fabric, pressed close into his chest. When she brushed her lips against his mouth, the kiss was gentle. At first, her lover responded slowly, but soon the kiss grew in intensity and the lovers breathed into each other--as if synced by right of the dark earth beneath them and the christening moonlight above.

“Haven't you already?” the words were so soft, Wren barely made them out against the wind.

“I still believe in wrong and right,” he asserted.

“Who decides what is wrong and what is right? According to the people in this village, our very connection is sinful, irreverent, disgusting. But it doesn’t feel that way, does it? When I’m near you, all I know is that nothing has ever felt more right.”

“All the lies, all the secrets, all the betrayal...”

“... are worth the risk,” Ada murmured.

“You are blind. You are insightful and brilliant, but I blind you and you blind me.” the man stepped back, returning to the cranny of darkness. As he retreated, lengthening the distance between himself and Ada, his voice seemed to grow firmer in resolve. “That’s the thing about sin. It never feels wrong when you are committing the evil—only once you’ve paid the price. I have already laid down my book. I am prepared to pay whatever price God intends for me, but I don’t want the same for you.”

“And you expect me to be okay with that? You expect me to sit back and let you suffer alone?”

“You must understand--”

“I understand nothing,” Ada returned sharply. “I won’t allow you to pretend that what we have is wrong or dirty. I won’t allow you to pretend that this is your burden and yours alone.” Wren had never heard her sister speak with such vitriol, though she doubted she was even looking upon her sister. The difference between the Ada that Wren knew and the wild thing that stood before her clashed savagely. Wren wanted to press her knuckles to her sister’s forehead and discover what fever had taken her—what sickness had made Ada dizzy, reckless, impassioned with infatuation.

The man took another backwards step. “We can’t.”

Ada countered forward. “We can.”

“We will be found out.”

“Let them find us,” she challenged softly, pressing her lips to that of the strange man. Wren felt her cheeks heat. She wanted to look away, but when she moved her head, her hair caught in the bark of the mangrove, entangling her. She resisted and ended up scratching the delicate skin of her left cheek against the rough wood, slicing a deep gash down her profile.

Blood gurgled from her face. She gasped as she put a hand to her cheek. The liquid was hot and sticky.

“What was that?” the strange man demanded, breaking the kiss.

“It was nothing, Tobias.”

The ichor was now dribbling down Wren’s lips: she hated the smell. *It made her gag.* Wren imagined the ruby color of the blood on her skin and suddenly felt glad for the darkness. The only thing worse than the smell of blood, was the sight of it. The glistening rivers, embalmed in gem tones. The rusted brown color it took on when it dried, the way it turned black when enough of the stuff pooled together.

“This was a bad idea. I think someone is watching us.”

“Everyone in this village is fast asleep, Tobias.”

Tobias. There was the name again. This small revelation, this little jewel of a secret, was enough to distract Wren from the gash in her cheek. She’d have to explain the wound to her sister later, but if Ada could tell lies then so could she. *I was skipping rocks with Fela,* she would say. *We got carried away and one cut my face.*

“I can’t let you risk yourself out here in the dead of night. It isn’t safe,” the man—Tobias as Ada had called him—was saying.

“Please,” her sister huffed. “You are risking much more than me.”

“That’s not true.”

“Of course it is. The tariff I pay for our few interactions is worth the feeling I get when I am with you.”

That tariff, Wren realized bitterly, was their sisterly bond. All the new holes in their relationship—the strange tensions now spiraling between the two girls—seemed the result of this unspeakable affair. Wren’s hands crumpled into fists. She’d never known her sister to be disloyal. Impatient, stubborn, cold like iron when she wanted to be: of course. But never dishonest.

Wren clenched her fists even tighter. Ada still raged about their mother's disappearance, even though the woman had walked out on the girls ages ago. She called her a coward for not bothering "to be a deadbeat in the light of day."

And yet here she was, trading secrets to meet a man in the dead of night.

What was it about love that made the women in her family so foolish? Wren wondered if she too possessed the gene that seemed to eliminate all morality and reasoning when it came to matters of romance. Her mother had left behind two daughters and a devoted husband for a secret lover. And now she suspected her sister was capable of the same.

She stared over at Ada's lovesick expression and felt bile rise in her throat.

"Liar."

Tobias whipped his head around. "Did you hear that?"

Wren clapped a hand over her mouth. She meant to only think the word, not utter it out loud. *Right?* To be honest, she wasn't so sure. All she knew was that she hated the hiding. She yearned to walk into the night, grab her sister's hand and drag her back to the cabin's safety. But her desire to be exposed was outweighed by cloying fear. Fear that if Ada discovered her, she would not stick around for an explanation.

Wren had observed enough in her eighteen years to know that when people ran away, they usually didn't return.

"There is no one," Ada soothed. "You spend our limited time worrying after phantom noises."

Tobias let out a breath of air and nodded slowly. "I'm sorry. You're right."

"We were careful."

"Careful," Tobias repeated. He laughed humorlessly. "It almost makes you wonder how much energy we expend on caution rather than defense. You deserve to be loved out loud, Ada. You deserve to walk down the street with your hand in my own and have the whole world know that you are mine and I am yours." Tobias edged a breath. "I am selfish, so selfish for allowing you to sacrifice so much to be

with me. I think the worst part of me takes comfort in the fact that I cannot have you. Or rather that I should not.”

“But you can,” she protested. “You can have all of me.”

Wren frowned at her sister’s promise. The words felt wrong. Like Ada was agreeing to give up her soul or something more.

“Do you swear it?”

“You know I do.”

“I need to hear you say it.”

At that, the night seemed to grow quiet, the symphony of crickets decrescendoing, the air standing on its toes.

“I swear myself to you.”

And all together, the natural orchestra resumed, the cricket song returning with more fervor and tempo than ever before. When the lovers finally kissed, their embrace was urgent. The wind sang to them, released its breath over the pair in warm waves.

In the pit of Wren’s stomach, she felt something turn ablaze. If this was only a fraction of the fire roiling through Ada, she understood why she was so willing to burn.

But the display was too much. And though she was left with more questions than answers, Wren had had her fill.

She swallowed and turned away from her sister. She looked upwards to where the bright star signified north and headed in its direction, her footsteps soft against the forest floor. This time, Wren did not check for prints made in the earth. The night was at its blackest; she could barely make out her own two feet. The incision still stung on her cheek, except now the cut was dried with blood.

She smacked away a mosquito that buzzed near the open wound. The forest was alight with them. They hissed in her ears as she trekked towards an opening in the mass of trees. Wren tried to ignore the discomfort of their metallic bodies rubbing up against her, but she could not ignore the

feeling that their green eyes were watching her. A branch cracked and leaves brushed together somewhere in her proximity, heightening her wariness. A sound of that magnitude could not have been caused by a simple mosquito.

It was the wind, she convinced herself. Or maybe some forest creature. Are there mountain lions in Asaba?

She considered the possibility that her earlier sensation of being watched was not caused by the beady eyes of the insects, but by a larger, keener pair of viewers. It then occurred to her that spying on Ada without being caught had not proven very difficult, and that the same technique might be applied successfully on her. She conjured up images of a different creature, an unfamiliar one, observing her and upon the queasy feeling in her throat, decided the strange rustling of leaves was indeed the fault of a lion. Wren closed her eyes and imagined the cat's ragged claws and feral gait as it stalked the forest. Somehow, the familiar fear brought her comfort. *Better the devil she knew.*

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In the house, Wren busied herself with the planters. She watered the green vines and dusted the blue ceramic pots. She brushed back the blinds, allowing the filtered moonlight to spray across the kitchenette. Then, she walked downstairs to the basement where the air was humid. She turned on the light and hurried to the metal cookie pan where she kept her supplies. Pulling out her paint, brushes, and scavenging for canvas behind one of the hidden closets, she prepared herself to paint the memories in her head.

It had been so long since her mother left. Exactly eight years this coming July.

Ada would have hated the idea. Still, Wren couldn't help drawing the few remaining memories she possessed of their mother whenever inspiration spurred. A vision would come along, fleeting and delicate, and Wren would rush down to the basement to capture the image before it flurried away. Sometimes, there was only a feeling and the girl moved her brush in strange, colorful strokes to mimic the sensation.

Oftentimes, that feeling was sadness and Wren used up all the blue paint in her stock.

But for other emotions, she called upon the entire rainbow: green for the calm she felt in her mother's embrace, yellow for the panic in her chest when she heard the door slam shut that night from her bedroom, and red—red for everything.

The color seemed to thread its way into all of her paintings; there was always a place for it no matter the emotion.

Red for the flush of her cheeks when her father smacked her that night. Red for the blood on the seat when her moon cycle came and she had no one to tell but Ada. Red for the sun as it set over the riverbanks, for the reflection married between the water and the sky, for the soil as it ran bloody with the sacrificed animals from the worship house a couple miles east.

And red for love: which found a way into each of her pieces, the only constant among the heartbreak, confusion, and anger. Love as a testimony to life.

That night, Ada's betrayal still heavy on her chest, Wren painted with her fingers—mixing yellows and whites to simulate the pale golden color of the lanterns she'd lit one October with her mother. The image came to her slowly: the girl and her mother with their trousers pulled up to their ankles; the sound of the canoe balancing on the water; the flicker of firelight as she struck the match inside the fabric. The women were silent in their canoe as they lifted the lantern and watched it float west. Wren remembered peeking over at her mother. Her face was beautiful, but sad. Her eyes were deep with a wistfulness that threaded all the way down to the curve of her mouth.

Wren should have known then—by the look of longing; the overwhelming need to be elsewhere—that Isioma didn't plan on sticking around. But she had been young—too young to look for the signs; too young to imagine that her mother could be anything less than her mother.

In a glimpse, the image was gone. The opticon behind her eyes went blank.

She cleaned her brush, wiping the gold paint against the pan. She watched as the color faded in time with her dissolving memory.

Slowly, the events of the night came into view. Ada rubbing circles on her back to shoo away the bad dreams; Ada sneaking out of the large bed and slipping their father's hat over her head; Ada trudging through mud and grass to reach the dark forest where the man of shadows met her.

All those secrets lingering, thickening between them like a shroud.

Wren reached for the deepest shade of black. Black for all the darkness. She could still feel it, soft against her like felt, as she watched Ada from behind the tree.

And that other darkness, a sharper kind, which had followed her all the way home.

She could still feel those eyes watching her.

It was irrational. The forest was long behind and she had taken extra care to walk near the water where the moonlight bounced and exposed the hidden nooks left covered by night.

But the fear still simmered and as the hours passed, it grew, bleeding into her like oil spilling from a rig. Ada had not returned, still then as the night curved into dawn. The emptiness was a veil. She became aware of the coolness of the terracotta floor beneath her bottom and the mist filming against the old window like warm breath. There was that silence again—that utter drop of sound in which the air stretched as if it were okra soup. All the heat shuttered out of the room, replacing it a cold so thin it reached inside the crevices of her teeth.

Wren heard a rap on the window and her head turned quickly towards the sound.

No figure appeared behind the murky glass. She wiped her hands against her *ankara* and let the paint tools clatter back into the cookie pan. There was no time to convince herself that the weight she felt—the presence—was a configuration of her own imagination. She felt the danger surrounding her, caging her like walls erecting around an arena. Never before had the need to live, to breathe, felt so strong. It clung to her chest, dripped down the corners of her mouth like the saliva of a rabid hound. Her mind raged.

Ga. Ga. Ga.

She tumbled up the stairs, shutting the door to the basement behind her.

Sweat leaked from her temples, even as the adrenaline dissolved in her chest. The humidity—the wet heat—of outside hit her like a blow and Wren sank back against the basement door, feeling the curve of her spine moving forward and away from the wooden surface behind her. A laugh frothed out of her, shrill and keen. She was going mad. The same kind of madness that they said took her mother all those years ago.

Papa was never forthcoming with snippets of information about the woman. But her aunt Catherine, Isioma's eldest sister, would often drop little wayward anecdotes, and Wren would savor them like crystalline drops of sugar melting on her tongue.

“Isioma always had this look in her eye; a look of being far outside the world of the living; a look which one might have assumed if wandering through a dream.”

She could visualize it now, magnified in the eyes of Ada right before she kissed the stranger.

She wondered if that expression preceded trouble, and scrambled across the foyer for the mirror sitting on the back wall. Her reflection wore dark and excitable. There was the gleam of fear in her bright eyes and a new redness surfacing beneath her cheeks, but none of that dreaminess that seemed to possess the other women in her family.

Nothing that suggested any immediate risk.

Wren calmed herself. She pinched the skin around her wrists. There was no madness. There were no monsters. She only needed to repeat the sentiment a few times for the dread in her chest to slow itself, all the fear pulsating through her skin seeming to come to an abrupt halt.

And then the air cracked. Split itself right down the middle.

There was the wounded howl of an animal piercing through all other sound. The cry rang through Wren's ears and that sense of survival, that intuition which told her to run, to flee, escaped with every panting howl of whatever beast had injured itself. She followed the cries outside, shutting the patio door firmly behind her.

The blood, as Wren found it, preceded the beast.

She stared at it, red and slick and leading in a strange, wayward path towards the wild roses in the garden. The liquid made shapes and distortions of the dying grass beneath it so that it gave the appearance of something catching flame. Her stomach turned in preparation for the sight that was sure to follow, and she steadied herself against the shifting night, against the withstanding moonlight, the curve of dawn in the easternmost part of the sky.

And there the thing lay, half-dead and whimpering: the neighbor's old houndstooth with his droopy, forlorn eyes stunned wide and his brown coat inked in crimson. There were two holes in his neck, sharp and precise, much unlike the jagged maim of flesh running down his ribcage where it seemed some predator, in its haste, had ripped him open. The wound ran uneven, and Wren was consumed with the possibility that the hound must have been breathing, living, pleading as that greater predator plundered his innocent flesh.

Wren dropped to her knees. The earth wore hard on her soft skin, but she could not feel the gravel, the dense dirt pressing into her shins. She could not feel the thick heat folding under her arms, behind her neck, nor the nearing flies buzzing in her ears. All that remained was the tang of blood in her nostrils, the conjured image of teeth against flesh, and that heavy sensation of eyes watching her even as she stayed there dull and unmoving.

The paralysis managed itself a little while longer.

And then some spirit inside of her moved her attentions east, towards the river delta where the water becked with its white current and ruffled surface. It was this visual, that long wide river stretching itself out in front of her, that seemed to stir the girl from her stupor, directing her back inside the house where she picked up a large, clear vase and marched it to the stream. She nursed the delta water inside the carafe, making sure none of the elixir sloshed out as she returned to the dying creature.

By the time she returned to the beast, the flies had come in full swing. The blood was drying, but the smell of the warm, dying flesh was very much alive and coruscating through the air. She bit her cheek to keep from gagging and poured the delta water over the animal, pinpricks of moisture burning against

her eyeballs. There was a nagging inside of her. The compulsion to speak. She should say something. The neighbor—had he been here—would have wanted her to say something.

But words were failing and she couldn't remember any prayers.

"I'm sorry," she decided.

And then she kneeled over and began to dig.