

# Eleven: 1

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.

-- Genesis 11:1

## Agunwi Village, Sudan, Africa

Alexander's head ached from the sorghum grain alcohol. It was the native drink of the Agunwi tribe, a home brew made from their only harvested crop. To refuse it would have been an insult to his native hosts, so he downed it with a smile and a shrug.

Last time he had drunk this much he was a grad student at the University of Illinois. To think of it, the alcohol wasn't that much better then, either. Except instead of native drums he would have been listening to John Hiatt.

The U of I and John Hiatt were worlds away from this remote village in the heart of southern Sudan, Africa's largest country. Southern Sudan was a vast savanna with little but meadow grass and trees; the Blue Nile that bordered the village was dirty and not much more than a creek. There was little civilization—no Internet, no electricity, no phone lines. Even the roads were trails carved out by villagers walking from one village to the next or the utility vehicles driven by the relief workers.

Alexander was willing to put up with the discomfort for the sake of his studies. In the span of three days he had learned more about the Agunwi than he could have garnered from any textbook that he had read in graduate school. Alexander ran a hand through his tousled black hair. His skin was the palest among these natives, and his blue eyes were a source of curiosity to the villagers. Most of them had never seen a white man before. Even under the layers of African dirt, Alexander's handsome features were apparent. His chiseled good looks would probably seem more at home at a country club than here.

To look at him now, it was hard to imagine him as a sickly kid holed up in his room with his nose in a book. As a child he dreamed of adventures like this. The world came alive through the words of Kipling, Stevenson, and his favorite book, *Swiss Family Robinson*. Alexander's father gave him that book when he was eight. His father was a career soldier and hardly ever home, but when he was, every minute was an adventure. They built their own awesome tree house and fought pirates as fierce as those the Robinsons defeated.

He and his father would sit around the campfire and tell stories all night long. Now Alexander's father was in Washington, DC, and he couldn't remember the last time he had seen him. He longed for those innocent days when they would sit around the campfire until the sun appeared.

This campfire's glow was the only refuge from the complete darkness of the bush. The stories and drums would continue throughout the night, but Alexander wouldn't last much longer. He was exhausted after spending the day walking

from village to village, sometimes miles under the heat of the unforgiving sun.

“Catch ya later,” he told his new frat brothers as he stood up, stretching his legs. The common phrase from home had become a joke to the locals, as they didn’t have any hard *K* sounds in their language. As much as Alexander tried, he couldn’t get them to pronounce this consonant correctly.

He went off to the solace of his tent, taking care to check the area and his sleeping bag for unwanted critters. Even though the night was humid, he left his layers on for protection. Sudan’s dry season was like the worst August day in Chicago. A line from a John Hiatt song played through his head: “It was so humid the moon began to sweat.” It was probably around 100 degrees with equal humidity and no chance of escaping to a swimming pool or an air-conditioned room.

Sleeping required ten percent determination and ninety percent grain alcohol. Although Alexander had bathed before going to bed in water that had been boiled, his khakis and Fighting Illini t-shirt clung to him, and he was covered with the gritty dust that caked over everything.

Bathing here was a chore, but his guide Amat insisted on wiping off the dust and germs from the eternal friendliness of the villagers. Each time Alexander stepped out of his tent, the villagers crowded around him. They all wanted to shake his hand. Alexander obliged them but was careful to wash frequently.

To bathe, Alexander had the village women boil water. He then mixed the boiled purified water with cooler purified water,

so as not to burn his skin. There was no shower; he literally just poured water over his head. He never felt completely clean. Tonight was no exception.

He longed for sleep. Throughout his days here, he had found sleep a long time in coming, but tonight he knew that it would not be a problem; it was his last night in this particular village. His going-away party would be an all-nighter for the Agunwi.

The drums faded as he closed his eyes. The buzz of mosquitoes around the netting that surrounded him comforted him in its familiarity. Little comforted him in this dark, brooding place.

## Glasgow, Scotland

Clutching her briefcase, Rebekah strode down the tree-lined streets of the University of Glasgow. In the four years she had lived in Scotland, she had grown to love the university and the surrounding countryside. It was rich in history and in beauty. She had attained a slight Scottish brogue, but her Yankee tenacity revealed her country of origin. Though reluctant at first, the Scots had welcomed her as one of their own as she won them over with her beauty and wit and her willingness to embrace local customs.

Looking up as she walked, she saw the tall spires of the old Main Building rising up over the hills. It dated back 550 years to when the English ruled Scotland. She wasn't quite that old, but sometimes she felt as if she had lived that long. She stopped and stared at the cool gray stone exterior of the tower and marveled at how far she had traveled to get where she was. Not just in miles, but in life. The tragedy of the past had put her at a crossroads. She had been nine on the day that changed her life forever.

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It was a fall day and the Michigan Wolverines had just won their homecoming game. Mr. and Mrs. Simmonds never missed a Wolverines game. Tony was a professor of history at the U of M in Ann Arbor, and Margaret was a professor of philosophy. The two had met at a football game while graduate students. A year later, Rebekah, or Becky as her parents called her, was born.

They showered her with love and attention and food. She was raised in the era when the four main food groups were starches, red meat, whole milk, and Twinkies. Her mom would say, "It's baby fat. You'll lose it when you become a teenager." Maybe she did lose the external fat, but she would never lose the fat girl inside her. She had built a wall around herself to keep people out.

She never quite fit in at school, so she spent most of her time on the U of M campus and felt more comfortable talking with grad students about Descartes than she did with nine-year-old girls. Being a girl and fat in the fourth grade was a ticket to Loserville. Becky opted for a different train ride. She went the way of books and solitude. She didn't care about makeup, boys, or clothes. In her heart she hoped that someday genetics would kick in and she would become the beautiful woman that her mother was.

Her parents never said no to her so when she whined about stopping for ice cream on the way home from the homecoming game, they stopped at the Baskin Robbins a block away from

their house. While her parents ordered, Becky went to use the washroom. She dawdled in the washroom looking at herself in the mirror. She sucked in her stomach so her developing boobs would stick out further. The only benefit to being fat was that your boobs looked bigger than most nine year olds.

When she first heard the sound of explosions echoing, she had thought it was fireworks, possibly a late homecoming celebration. But when she heard the screams and thuds and breaking glass, she knew it was something much worse. Rebekah's knees buckled and she slumped to the floor, hovering against the wall between the toilet and the window. Her teeth chattered. She couldn't move. She heard footsteps along the hallway. Someone paused outside the door to the bathroom and jiggled the knob. Rebekah wrapped her arms tighter around herself. She felt a warmth trickling down her legs to the floor.

She hid there frozen for what seemed longer than the ten minutes it actually took the police to arrive. She heard the sirens sounding their shrill scream into the still fall night and then the approaching squawks of the police's two-way radios. At the sound of the siren, whoever had been fiddling with the door took off. With all the excitement, Rebekah had forgotten the reason she had come into the bathroom in the first place. Now it was too late. She was embarrassed and didn't want the police to see that she had wet herself.

She heard the rush of loud, official-sounding voices. She listened for her parents' voices in the commotion but could not make them out. The bathroom door burst open. On the other

side was a cop brandishing a gun. When he saw her, he put his gun down and called to someone behind him.

A young officer had come and led her out. Perez was his name. Rebekah remembered reading his silver badge. He had tried to shield her from the devastation, but not in time. She saw the splatters of blood, a red pool mixing with a runny chocolate one. She recognized the ring on the finger of the hand that had been holding the cone. She stopped and stared. She didn't recognize anything other than the ring and the blue and white scarf her mother always wore on game day. Lying next to her was her dad—a great big athlete of a man—lifeless, brought down by a single bullet. The fat girl died that day.

“Daddy,” she murmured as the tears welled and her throat closed up. Perez led her out to a squad car. The robber had stolen eighty-six dollars in cash and Rebekah's childhood that night.

From then on it had been an endless series of foster homes and “what ifs.” What if the game hadn't gone into overtime? What if they'd had a flat tire? What if she hadn't insisted on stopping for an ice cream cone? What if her parents had said no? What if? What if? What if? It was a never-ending refrain in her head.

When she found religion couldn't provide the answers to her questions, she turned to books. She would escape from a foster home and scour the rows of books in the local library. That's how, years later, she stumbled across Professor Angus McLean's book, *Principles of Chaotic Math*. In this one volume she found the key to understanding “what ifs.” Chaotic math became her talisman against the violent randomness that

happens. It's not God. It's not the devil. It's not nature. It's not nurture. It just is. Randomness just is. She learned what ifs could sometimes be explained. She was seventeen years old.

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Here she was now, twenty-six years old and about to preach the gospel of chaotic math to a lecture room full of freshmen. Her mom would be proud to see that genetics had kicked in with a vengeance. She had turned into a beautiful young woman who was late for her first day of lectures. She made the hall in time to hear Professor Anne Knuth introduce her. She stepped up to the podium and saw a roomful of kids no more than four years her junior. She froze and took a sip of water. Then she began.

She took a quarter from her pocket and threw it to a handsome young man in the front row. He looked surprised but caught it.

“Without opening your hand, tell me: is it heads or tails?” Rebekah asked.

The boy thought for a moment and said, “Heads.”

“What is the chance that you are right?”

“Well, fifty-fifty. It could be heads or tails.”

“So if you flip a coin ten times, it will come up heads five times and tails five times?” Rebekah asked.

“Well, I don’t know.” The boy studied the quarter in his palm. “There’s only two sides. So if one side has to face up, wouldn’t that mean I have a one out of two chances of being right?”

“Open your hand,” Rebekah said.

He did and glanced down at the coin. “It’s tails,” the boy replied.

“This is a common fallacy about randomness. It’s called the Monte Carlo theory. Just because you flip a coin ten times and heads appears five times does not hedge your bet that the sixth time will be tails. Each flip is a new and unique event. It is not predetermined by the previous events, or is it? I ask you now to ask yourself the first question in chaotic math: what if?”

## Agunwi village, Sudan, Africa

The buzzing grew louder in Alexander's ear. It was too loud for a mosquito, he thought. His head ached, and his face felt numb. With a hand shaky from too much alcohol, he reached up to his forehead. Something moved under his fingers. He jumped out of bed, tangled in the mosquito netting, still grasping the thrashing beetle. His first impulse was to throw it to the ground and smash it. But he stopped when he saw the brilliant colors of the bug. His intellectual curiosity kicked in. It was like nothing he had seen before in a textbook or in the field. He grabbed an empty Mason jar that he kept by the air mattress for midnight emergencies. He put the bug in the jar and closed the lid. Grabbing his pocketknife, he poked holes in the top.

Carrying the jar, Alexander walked the few feet to Amat's tent. A patient and proud African, Amat, had been his tour guide for this trip. He was a fellow professor at the University of Nairobi.

"Amat," Alexander called into his tent.

"Over here," Amat called, walking up behind Alexander. He was carrying a fish that he had caught in the Nile, which

was only a short walk away. Amat thought the best fishing was in the predawn hours.

“Is this poisonous?” Alexander held up the Mason jar, showing him the still thrashing beetle.

“I’ve never seen that before,” Amat said, peering into the jar. “Where did you find it?”

“It found my face while I was sleeping.”

“Have you talked to Methu yet?”

Methu was the village medicine man who lived in the mud hut on the edge of the village. At ninety-eight years old Methu had far outlived the average span of the Agunwi. He looked like a walking beef jerky. He held the knowledge of all the generations of Agunwi. Not having any written language, he was the keeper of their stories.

Alexander had an audience with Methu when he had first arrived in the village but couldn’t get much information. As friendly as these people were, they were very wary of strangers. Alexander followed Amat toward Methu’s hut. A crowd of local children quickly followed behind, chattering loudly.

Hearing their voices, Methu came out of his mud hut wearing the Chicago Bulls t-shirt that Alexander had given him during his ceremonial visit with the elder. Alexander hadn’t seen him since that initial visit.

Methu sank onto an antelope skin, crossing his long legs. He motioned for Alexander and Amat to sit on the skin across from him. After what seemed like hours of pleasantries,

Alexander was finally able to get to the point of his visit. At this point, it was already late afternoon. He pulled the jar out of his backpack.

Methu motioned for Alexander to pass the jar to him. He studied it, smiling a toothless grin and rubbing his head. "I haven't seen this since I was a young boy," Methu said in stilted English.

Alexander got excited. "You've seen it? What do you call it? Is it poisonous?" He rattled off questions.

Amat held out his hand to the excited American. "Slow down; one question at a time, my friend."

The medicine man's English was limited, so Amat translated as the old man spoke quickly. "It's a kula." At Alexander's confused expression, Amat explained for the medicine man. "A rain beetle. They live very deep within the ground and only come out when there is much rain."

"Huh? There's no rain now," Alexander said. "What did you call it?"

"A kula."

Alexander's brow wrinkled in confusion. Amat looked confused as well. "I thought you had no 'k' sound," Alexander said.

"We didn't name it. My grandfather told me what it was." Amat translated the old man's words.

"Where'd your grandfather hear about it?" Amat asked for Alexander.

“The Valley of the Voices.”

“Do you know where that is?” Alexander asked Amat.

“I think he is referring to a valley through the pass of the foothills of the Gunga Mountains,” Amat said. “Only the medicine men are allowed to go there. They believe it is a very powerful place. It’s also dangerous. My people are very superstitious. The Christians have tried for years to convert us but our beliefs are strong. This is one of the oldest tribes in all of Sudan and none will venture into the mountains.”

“Can we go there?” Alexander asked, trying to hide his excitement. Over the past month, he had learned that the tribe did not respond to enthusiasm because they were worn down from the continuous civil war that had been waged for the past fifty years. They seldom ventured from the village after years of relief organizations dropping food and supplies from the sky. They had no ambition to look further than their own village. The relief workers tried to teach them irrigation and crop rotation, and often their reply would be, “Why work when food falls from the sky?”

Amat translated. He then translated the medicine man’s reply for Alexander. “You can go there, but you might not come back.”

“What does he mean?” Alexander asked, noticing that the medicine man was still talking. Amat motioned for Alexander to be quiet. “He’s talking about the kula. He says only the oldest of my people have seen it. Not good to eat, doesn’t bother crops, so we don’t think about it. Thought they were gone. Extinct.” The medicine man shook his head.

“Do you know where the word is from?”

The medicine man shook his head again.

“Is it poisonous?” Alexander asked.

“Harmless.”

Alexander thanked him, took the jar back, and followed Amat back to his tent.

“I’ve never heard of it,” Amat said. “In all my studies.”

“I don’t understand. I’ve categorized almost every word, and no one’s ever mentioned this kula,” Alexander said.

“Our medicine man has seen many things. He just didn’t know how to tell you before because he needed to see the bug,” Amat said.

“Maybe I haven’t been asking the right questions. We need to talk to more villagers, and we’ll have to take this beetle back to some of the other villages.” Alexander’s fingers tapped the Mason jar.

“We’re a day from the next village and it’s too late for us to start today. Then we must meet with the plane that is scheduled to pick us up,” Amat said.

“Can we change the plane?”

“No, my friend, unless you have a satellite phone. We have no way to get in touch with the pilot. The nearest transmitter is at least a day’s walk from here. The plane would arrive before the pilot got the message.”

Alexander threw his hands up in frustration. His semester-long grant did not cover the cost of a satellite phone for this excursion. Sudan was a difficult place, especially with its lack of modern conveniences like phones or plumbing. It was like stepping back in time a hundred years, and it was hard for an American to accept. "I guess we'll just head out to the next village in the morning and then to the valley."

"All right, my friend. Until then." Amat went into his tent. Alexander walked over to his tent to record his findings in his journal. He brought a lawn chair outside the tent to write about the day's events. He watched the lizards soaking up the late afternoon sun.

The next morning, Alexander followed Amat's path through the tall elephant grass. Amat was carrying a primitive machete to scare away the snakes. Luckily it was the dry season, and most of the snakes were away in search of cool, wet places. They passed the work site where the local relief agency was building a health center. Once completed, the center would have to service 100,000 villagers. It would be the only one in southern Sudan, a vast territory.

They exchanged greetings with a few of the workers. Amat pointed out a few more beetles as they passed the deep trenches of the construction site. They passed nurses from Doctors Without Borders tending to a local who was suffering from a snakebite. The local's arm was swollen and turning black. Alexander turned away.

"If people ask where we are going, don't mention the Valley of the Voices," Amat said as they walked. "They would warn us away."

“I understand. But you can’t tell me that no one has ever mapped it or explored it,” Alexander said.

“I’ve heard of a couple geologists from oil companies going there a few years ago, but they never came back, or that’s what I heard,” Amat said.

It was hard for Alexander to conceive that there was a spot on earth where few people had ever trod. This vast wasteland called Africa was an enigma to him. As they walked through the tall grass, the sun beat down upon them. It was nine in the morning and it was already at least ninety degrees. Alexander took off his Chicago Cubs baseball hat and wiped the sweat from his brow. “Let’s stop here for a minute,” Amat said.

Alexander opened his pack, drank from his water bottle, and then pulled out two protein bars. He handed one to Amat and sat down in the grass, looking for snakes first. Instead, he saw a black combat boot and jumped back. He looked up and saw two South Sudan militia wearing green camo, holding AK-47s that were pointing at his head.

Both Alexander and Amat raised their hands. “I am from the University of Nairobi,” Amat said slowly. “We are here on a research mission.”

“Papers?” one soldier said in English. “We must see your papers.”

Alexander reached slowly into his pack and pulled out his yellow travel pass, which had been issued in Nairobi. The older soldier walked over to Amat, walked around him staring, and then smiled slowly. Amat nodded in recognition.

The soldier put down his gun as his smile grew larger, displaying large, yellowed teeth. “Captain, it’s been so long. I did not recognize you. Forgive me.”

“Samir, it’s good to see you, my old friend.” Amat stood up and shook his hand.

Alexander watched as the two exchanged greetings, not sure what to make of it. “Samir, this is my good friend and colleague, Mr. Alexander.”

Samir smiled and shook Alexander’s hand. He turned to his fellow soldier. “Put your weapon down. These are friends.”

“Tell me, Samir, what are you doing so far out here?” Amat asked.

Samir shook his head. “It is very bad. Young girls were taken from a village not too far from here last night. We’re looking for the girls. They’re only thirteen.”

“This is bad news,” Amat said. “Do you know who took them?”

“We think the LRAs got them and are headed to Khartoum. We need to track them before they get there, otherwise the girls are lost,” Samir said. “I knew you had retired and were teaching. Why are you in this nowhere?”

“I am a guide for my colleague, Mr. Alexander. I am showing him the history of our peoples. We’re headed to the next village to talk to the elders. Mr. Alexander is from university in America and is interested in our languages.”

“Very good.” Samir nodded, pausing for a minute. “We can take you. Our vehicle is over the hill.”

The four men climbed up the hill and got in the army green Jeep. They bounced along on the uneven road. Alexander felt the jolting settle through his uneasy stomach. He held back the acid rising up his throat.

Alexander had waited to ask Amat as he did not want to interrupt the soldiers. “Amat, what is the LRA?”

“It’s the Lord’s Resistance Army. They are very bad. They claim to be Christians, but they come and steal our children, forcing them to be soldiers or selling them into slavery,” Amat said. “The warlord has been indicted for war crimes. There was a very brutal war against the Ugandan government. It went on for many years, and then they fled into the jungles of my country.”

Alexander shuddered. It was hard for him to grasp the savagery of this primitive country.

“It’s very dangerous for us on both sides of the Nile,” Amat said. “We must be careful whom we speak with and what we say. These men are friends. We will be safe with them.”

The rising sound of excited children’s voices reached Alexander, signaling that they were closer to the village. Each time it started the same way: he would first hear the shouting and then the rustling of the brush as the barefoot children came out running, circling around them.

The vehicle stopped in the center of the village, which was surrounded by a circle of mud huts with thatched roofs. “We

will let you out here,” Samir said as the car came to a screeching stop.

Alexander and Amat got out of the car. “*D’jaret*,” Amat said. “Good luck finding the girls.”

They watched the Jeep drive off at a fast pace, bouncing along the makeshift dirt trail that served as a road. Amat shook his head sadly. “This is getting worse. So many young girls are taken either for the slave trade or killed by the northern Sudanese. Most of them because they are Christians.”

Alexander felt the gold cross that hung on the chain around his neck underneath his t-shirt. His mother had given him the family heirloom when he took his first communion. Other than the fact it had belonged her, it bore no significance to him. He didn’t believe in the magic that it symbolized. Now it brought him comfort in this forsaken place, reminding him of her gentle touch.

## 1400 S. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago

Chicago's famed Field Museum is one of the world's greatest natural history museums. It had been conceived during the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 and moved to its present lakefront home in 1921. From the Dead Sea Scrolls to a complete reconstructed T-Rex named Sue, there was no finer warehouse of historical artifacts. After starting at the museum as a volunteer while in high school, John Lloyd had worked his way up to chief curator by the time he was thirty-five. He didn't look the part with his long salt-and-pepper hair tied in a ponytail.

Tall, pale, and doughy, it was evident that he spent most of his days sitting at a computer, guzzling coffee and Krispy Kreme donuts. He loved all things dead. His brilliant imagination allowed him to experience ancient civilizations as though he were sitting in H.G. Wells's time machine, watching time elapse in front of him—except Wells's machine went into the future and Lloyd's machine went into the past.

Lloyd wiped the glazed sugar from his lips and took one last gulp of his coffee. It was cold by now, but he needed the

caffeine. He put on his white cotton gloves and picked up the leather-bound journal of Howard Carter, discoverer of King Tut's tomb.

He gently ran his finger over the drawings of hieroglyphics within the journal, stone rubbings that Carter had done after opening the tomb. The fluorescent lights in his crowded, dinghy office flickered. His computer flashed off. Lloyd reached behind the twenty-seven-inch iMac to restart it. The screen flickered, and a frowning Mac face appeared.

"Shit, it was just working," Lloyd said. He tried doing a hard recovery only to get the same result. "This thing is fried. First time this has happened to me with a Mac." Lloyd had no problem talking to himself. He spent so much time alone that he had started answering himself back.

Lloyd gently closed Carter's journal and placed it back in its glass case for safekeeping. Grabbing his ID badge from the cluttered desk, he walked out into the narrow hallway. He was surrounded by silence; it was nighttime and the museum had been closed for hours. There weren't many people around at this time of night. In fact, there was only the security guard. He walked outside to enjoy a cigarette in the cool spring air. The museum bordered Lake Michigan. Lloyd stood on the limestone steps, feeling the wind rising off the lake. He zipped his Columbia jacket to shield himself from the wind rising off the lake. That's when he heard the sirens in the distance.

## Sudan

The children called out to Amat, who always had a smile and kind words for them. They gathered around Amat like he was the Pied Piper.

Then they turned to stare at Alexander with curious eyes, crowding around him. The Africans had no sense of personal space, something that made Alexander uncomfortable. The children held out their hands in greeting. Alexander would shake them per the local custom, yet he was unable to hold back a shudder at the grime. Disease was a very real factor here due to unsanitary conditions and the lack of clean water.

That didn't bother Amat. He laughed off Alexander's concerns with the same shrug he gave when Alexander pulled out his never-ending supply of waterless antibiotic soap. "The dirt gets under your skin, my friend. You will not feel completely clean again until you return to Nairobi," Amat would joke. Alexander didn't even know if he would feel clean in Nairobi, which seemed dusty and overcrowded to him.

He watched Amat shift his heaving duffle bag. He had declined to tell Alexander what was in it. Amat guarded it like it was a bag of gold. It was as heavy as gold, and he would lug it around, never showing any sign of aching muscles.

As Amat chatted with one bright-eyed boy, Alexander swatted at the flies that were everywhere. He didn't understand how the people let the flies perch on their faces, their ragged clothes, their bodies. He couldn't ignore the buzzing and crawling on his skin and was constantly waving them off.

With a few quick words and a wave of his hand, Amat sent the children running toward a large *tukol*. He turned to Alexander. "We will stop at the school, my friend," Amat said, leading the way in the children's direction.

A young man who was slightly cleaner and wearing freshly washed clothes came out of the building. The school had been built on the outskirts of Odella proper;

it was in the suburbs of the larger village. He smiled and waved at Amat, who walked over to him.

Alexander listened as the two Africans exchanged words. He couldn't understand all of their conversation. Each village had their own unique dialect, sometimes a completely different language. Even a student of languages as brilliant as Alexander had a hard time grasping the three hundred different lexicons of the southern Sudanese.

Amat finally switched to English. "Alexander, my friend, meet Peter. He is the teacher here," Amat said.

"*D'jaret*," Alexander said. It meant hello, goodbye, and friendship. He held out his hand to shake hands with the young teacher.

"Peter has been working with the children. He has asked us to stop and give a lesson," Amat said, following Peter into the classroom. Alexander followed the two tall Africans to the front of the classroom. The children were crowded on the dirt floor. It was dark in the school and Alexander strained to make out shapes other than the whites of the children's eyes.

"I'm going to introduce you to the children. First in English and then in Ogoni," Amat said. "Children." He pointed at Alexander. "This is Alexander. He is from America." He turned back to Alexander. "Please say something to the children. I will translate."

"Children, I am here visiting your country to study your people. I will take your story back to my country." As Alexander spoke, Amat translated. He finished and took a step back.

Peter stepped forward and clapped his hands. "Class, let's show our welcome to our guest." One child beat a drum. And then all the children sang. It took a few moments before Alexander realized they were singing "welcome to our school" in halting, stilted English. Tears welled in his eyes as he looked around the room and saw the bright, hopeful faces. These children had no desks, no books, no pencils, no chalkboards. The list could go on and on. He thought of his own students back in Chicago and the complaints he would hear about the lack of Wi-Fi in the classroom or the horrible food in the cafeteria. They were the lucky ones; many of these children in Africa would not even have food tonight. His time in Africa had made him realize the meaning of the word "privileged."

The children finished their song. Wiping his face, Alexander smiled and said, "Thank you." Bending his head, he walked toward the open doorway. "Excuse me."

He stepped out into the bright sunlight to collect himself. He came back inside just as Amat was opening up his duffle bag.

“Now children, I have brought you gifts from the church in Nairobi.” Amat pulled out exercise books. “These books will help you learn, and I have one for each child in the village. We also have writing instruments for you.”

Alexander watched as Peter and Amat passed out the books and pencils. The children clasped the books carefully. A girl turned the pages, running her fingers along the words. One boy clutched the book to his chest. Alexander looked away in embarrassment, thinking how much paper was wasted each week on the celebrity tabloids and his own boxed-up collection of books in the basement of his Chicago home.

Amat conducted a brief reading lesson in both English and the native tribal language. Alexander watched as Amat had the children read from their primary readers. Following the class, Alexander walked outside with the teacher and Amat. “We will go into the village, my friend, and bring your curious bug to the chief,” Amat said.

“Wait. This is my star pupil,” Peter said, bringing a boy about ten years old over to Alexander and Amat.

“Hello, Mesabo,” Amat said to the boy. Alexander recognized him as the boy Amat had talked to when they first arrived in the village.

“Hello,” the boy replied, looking down at the ground. His feet were bare and dusty. Dirt clung to any skin not covered by a pair of castoff shorts and a San Francisco Giants t-shirt, donations from a relief organization.

“Mesabo would like to talk to you, Mr. Alexander,” Peter said, putting his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Do you have a few minutes?”

“Certainly. Please follow me.” Alexander led the way underneath a shaded rain tree. He and the boy sat down across from each other. A group of children gathered around and watched curiously.

“I am very interested in your country,” the boy said in halting English.

“How do you speak such good English?” Alexander asked, swatting away a fly.

“Mr. Peter has been teaching me after school. My dream is to be well-learned like you and Mr. Amat.”

“That’s very good. How can I help you?”

“You can go to your America and tell them about us. About how we cannot learn because we have no books, no teachers, and no tools. We need tools. We want to learn.” The boy’s eyes burned with a passion that had been missing from Alexander’s own classroom for years.

“I will do that,” Alexander promised. “I will go back and tell my people about you and your school.”

“This is good. The more people that know or that come see us, the more people will know about our troubles. I want to follow Mr. Amat and go to school to teach so I can come back here like Mr. Peter.”

“That’s great.” Alexander was impressed by the boy’s earnestness and promised to help him with his dream.

“I want to go see your America and learn there so I can come back here and teach.”

“Come see me when you are ready to come to America. I will help you,” Alexander said.

“How far do I walk?” The boy asked.

Alexander smiled. “It’s many miles across great water.”

“Oh, the river,” the boy said in broken English.

“It’s further than that. First you have to cross the Nile then pass another great body of water.”

The boy pondered. He couldn’t conceive of any land that was too far to walk to. The vastness of the world was a mystery to him. Explaining it was impossible without the help of a book or globe to demonstrate.

Alexander reached around his neck and removed a gold chain. Attached to the chain was a silver compass. “When I was your age, a great man gave this to me to remind me I am never too far from home,” Alexander said, holding the compass in his hand, balancing it in his fingers. He handed it to Mesabo.

Mesabo held the shiny compass in his palm. He stared at it.

“This will help you find me when you are ready to come to America. When you are ready, follow the ‘w’ pointing west.” Standing up, Alexander demonstrated on the compass. The boy stood up, staring over Alexander’s shoulder. “When you reach

America, I'll be there for you. When you need my help, you will find me at the end of this 'w.'”

“W,” Mesabo repeated. “Thank you.” Mesabo put the compass around his neck. In return, he took off his necklace of native beads and handed it to Alexander.

“Thank you.” Alexander took the necklace, studied it and then placed it around his neck. Each tribe had its own colors; this one was brown and red. He had found the southern Sudanese a very generous people, continuously offering him gifts from their meager possessions. To not accept the gift would be an insult. He felt bad accepting these treasures from people who had nothing, but their pride meant more than the possessions.

Alexander stood up and looked for Amat, who was sitting nearby on an antelope skin circled by a group of men. He turned to walk over to them. Mesabo stood where Alexander left him, staring at the compass. He ran his finger along the “w.”

“My friend, we must go to the village. The medicine man is waiting.” Amat stood up and waved as Alexander came up to him. “It is not far.”

Alexander followed Amat along the worn path. Many children and villagers followed them. The women and young girls balanced heavy baskets filled with water on their heads. By the time they reached Odella, the village, it was late afternoon. Alexander's feet ached in his heavy hiking boots, his clothes clung to him dampened with sweat, and his water bottle was nearly empty. His shoulder was sore from carrying his heavy backpack. He tossed back a couple of salt tablets and marveled at Amat's cool exterior. The heat did not seem to affect Amat at all. They were greeted by children and tribespeople who were proudly wearing wool clothes that had been donated by church ladies in North America. Alexander would have gone naked before donning the itchy wool.

Amat sent one of the village children to notify the elder that the visitor had arrived. The elder came out of his *tukol* followed by his council. They passed around a ceremonial pipe. Alexander held himself back during this ceremonial meeting. He wished they would get to the point, but these people made a ceremony out of his visit. In every village it had been the same. There was no way past the rituals. After an hour and a half of smoking and drinking, Alexander was finally able to remove the jar from his backpack. Upon seeing it, all the elders mumbled among themselves. Alexander couldn't understand any words except for the occasional “kula.” He handed it to the medicine man, who studied it. The medicine man laughed and said something to Amat.

“He says you’ve captured a rain beetle. He wants to know where you got it,” Amat translated.

“In the Agunwi village,” Alexander said.

The medicine man nodded and said something to Amat, who looked at Alexander and translated. “The trenches are bringing them up.”

“Kuot, come here.” The medicine man waved his arm and called out to a boy who looked around eight years old. He was wearing a pair of tattered shorts and a Nike t-shirt. The boy looked at the bug and laughed with his grandfather. He said something.

“The boy says the bug looks like the picture in the cave,” Amat said.

“Cave? What cave?” Alexander asked, rolling up to his knees in his enthusiasm.

Amat shared his enthusiasm, filled with the same curiosity.

“Slow down.” Amat motioned for Alexander to sit again. He translated something. The boy and his grandfather exchanged a few words. The medicine man then turned and said something to Amat. “He says his grandson will lead us there. He has traveled there before with the medicine man.” Amat continued, “Because the boy has the blood of medicine men, he alone can travel to the Valley of the Voices with us.”

It was two miles from Odella to the mountain pass. The sides of the path were surrounded by cliffs and overhangs a thousand feet high, with little vegetation. The pass was a mile-long walk and an easy trek during the dry season, except for the need to avoid the occasional puff adder. The boy walked at a fast pace with no apparent fear of snakes. Alexander walked carefully with each step; the thought of the slithery creatures was making him uneasy. During his travels throughout sub-Saharan Africa, he had seen puff adders, vipers, cobras, and green tree snakes. He had watched a relief doctor care for a villager who had been bitten while she was sleeping. Her arm swelled from the toxins and paralysis quickly set in. By morning, she was dead. There were so many types of snakes. They were in the ground, in the trees, in the water. Alexander’s skin crawled.

He glanced down at his dust-covered boots. The dark rich soil resembled powdered chocolate pudding. His eyes darted back and forth along the ground, waiting for a flash of movement. Alexander understood why no one wanted to make this journey in the rainy season, as that was when the most snake bites occurred. A couple of days of rain and it would be a sea of mud.

At the end of the pass, there was a clearing of dry, brown grass. The valley was surrounded on all sides by mountains, the tallest of which was three thousand feet.

Amat pointed. "That's where we're going. The east ridge."

As Alexander watched Amat enter the valley, he thought back to the first time he had met him.

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Alexander had landed in Nairobi three months ago. Although he was a seasoned traveler who grew up in a military family, it still hadn't prepared him for the wild African landscape and customs, some of which dated back thousands of years. He had left London in the evening and slept fitfully most of the way, crammed into economy class. They had arrived in Nairobi in the morning. Planes couldn't land at night due to the altitude.

He followed his fellow passengers out of the plane and to the customs area. His backpack, which he had filled with PowerBars, Gatorade, and freeze-dried food, felt heavy on his shoulders. He set it down to fill out the one-page transit form and to ease his aching shoulders. When it was finally his turn, he walked up to the clerk, passport in hand. The attendant scanned his passport and stared him in the face.

"Reason for travel?" he asked with a stern expression.

"Transit," came Alexander's reply. Amat, his correspondent at the University of Nairobi, had instructed him on what to say. "I will only be here three days until I travel to Sudan."

"Thirty dollars," the man replied, stamping his passport and pocketing the money.

He scribbled out a receipt, which Alexander shoved in his pocket. He followed the path to baggage claim, where he waited by the carousel. As he waited, he looked around for Amat. The two had been corresponding via email after meeting in an academic chat room. As their plans had developed, they had switched to Skype, so Alexander felt confident he would recognize Amat. While Alexander's interests lay in cataloguing the many tribal languages of Sudan, Amat's were in studying the rich history of his people. After having grown up in the Sudan, Amat, with the help of Christian missionaries, had been educated in Nairobi and was now a professor of

history at the University of Nairobi. He would also be serving as Alexander's guide on this trip.

Alexander grabbed his duffle bag off the carousel just as he spotted what he thought was a familiar face. A tall, lean African man wearing a well-fitting black suit and black-framed glasses walked toward him, his hand extended. "Alexander, my friend," he said in accented English. Alexander felt that he would have recognized him anywhere.

"Amat," Alexander replied, shaking his hand. "It's good to meet you in person."

Alexander felt dirty in his travel-worn jeans and t-shirt standing next to the neatly clad Amat. He had been in the air for more than twenty-four hours with no time between flights to freshen up.

"Are these your bags?" Amat asked, pointing at the two duffle bags, laptop case, and backpack at Alexander's feet.

Alexander nodded.

"Let's go then. I have a car outside." Amat picked up both duffle bags and headed toward the sliding glass doors.

Alexander grabbed his laptop and backpack and followed him out. Immediately he was hit with the humid air. It clung to his skin, making sweat beads appear on his brow. He followed Amat to a white Renault and listened to the babble of voices that surrounded him outside the crowded airport. Mixed with English were phrases of what Alexander assumed to be Swahili and French, among others.

He settled into the passenger seat of the car. Amat started the engine and took off down the highway, avoiding the bumps and potholes in the street with the skill of a racecar driver. Alexander watched the scene out the window, disbelieving his eyes. The images resembled those he had only seen on the Travel Channel or in *National Geographic*. People displayed their wares in shabbily constructed corner stalls crafted from leftover pieces of corrugated aluminum and twigs. Women were walking to and from the city balancing baskets on their heads. Scantly clad shoeless children were leading skinny cattle to the marketplace. Dust was everywhere—on the car, on the people, filling the air.

They hit a bump and Alexander's head hit the roof. "I'm sorry, my friend," Amat said. "The Nairobi government is so corrupt, they cannot determine whose responsibility it is to fix the roads. Instead they do nothing."

When they reached the center of Nairobi, they experienced a traffic jam like nothing Alexander had seen in Chicago. Cars were parked everywhere, even in the middle of the streets. Amat swerved his way around them, following the path of crowded minibuses and other drivers ahead of him. People walked across the street with no regard for traffic even as cars sped by. Amat explained that this was simply the way people drove.

They entered a neighborhood that appeared to be middle class. The homes were surrounded by wooden gates and each had a large wooden barricade leading up to its drive. Amat pulled into one of these drives and honked. A young girl appeared on the other side, sliding the gate open. Amat pulled the car in and up a steep driveway. The girl hurriedly closed the gate and locked it.

“Here we are, my friend. I thought you might want to freshen up before we go meet with the Sudanese authorities in Nairobi,” Amat said, leading the way into the house.

Alexander looked around. The house was built along European lines, with a large hallway carved out in mahogany and wood parquet flooring. One side of the hallway opened into a formal living room with a fireplace, and the other opened into a formal dining room. Alexander followed Amat down the hall. The African opened a door to a small bedroom decorated in dark wood.

“This is where you will stay until we leave for Sudan. I hope it is satisfactory,” Amat said. He placed the duffle bags on a bench at the foot of the bed.

“It will be perfect. Thank you for letting me stay in your home,” Alexander replied. He put his laptop bag onto the bed.

“Why don’t you freshen yourself and rest? I’ll have Magda call you when dinner is ready,” Amat said.

“Thank you. That sounds great,” Alexander replied.

“The restroom is right next door. Call if you need anything.” Amat walked out, closing the door behind him.

Alexander was exhausted from his two long plane rides; he sat on the edge of the bed looking around the room. He had a strange sensation of *déjà vu*. He strained to keep his eyes open but couldn’t fight off the fatigue. He lay down on the bed and slept well except for a disturbing dream about a cave.

“Mr. Alexander, Mr. Alexander,” Magda called through the door, lightly tapping. Her soft rhythmic voice woke Alexander. He felt rested and refreshed. And

hungry. Somehow airline food was never enough, and this would be his last good meal before he had to start on his stash of granola, PowerBars, and almonds.

When he walked into the dining room, Amat was sitting at the head of a large teak table. "My friend, please join me." Amat stood as Alexander took a seat to his right.

They exchanged pleasantries and collegial stories over the meal of rice, sausage, cassava, and fried bananas. After dinner, they adjourned to Amat's study for cigars. The walls of the study were Koa wood and decorated with tribal masks and native fertility dolls. Alexander looked at a picture on the mantle. It showed a beautiful young woman with three boys and a girl. "You have a beautiful family," Alexander said, picking it up to look closer at it.

Amat placed the picture neatly back on the mantle and ran a loving finger over it. He smiled. "Thank you. There have been many terrible losses in the war."

"I'm sorry." Alexander stared at the floor.

"This is a tribal mask of the Agunwi tribe," Amat said, pointing to one of the masks on the wall. "It signifies the tribe's motto of peace under courage. See the bird." Amat talked about the mask and its symbols. "As you know, my friend, northern Sudan has been waging its war over southern Sudan for the past fifty years. They've been holding my people hostage. They've bombed the schools, the hospitals, and the villages. My people go without much. Northern Sudan won't let food reach my people. They are starving. Babies are dying because they don't have access to the simplest of vaccines. All in the name of religion. We go tomorrow to the rebel army headquarters here to ask their permission for us to travel in southern Sudan. We need a pass from them to get into the country. But that is tomorrow."

Amat walked over to the folding card table in the corner of the room. "Here, look, my friend, this is our route." Alexander followed him to the table. Covering the table was a map of Sudan. The northern boundary was split from the southern by the curving Nile.

"Here is where we will enter Sudan." Amat drew a line on the map with his finger. "We will go to these villages. Finally we will end up here. The government has permitted a relief organization to come in to work with the people. We will end up at their camp because there is a landing strip there. That's where our pilot will drop us off and pick us up. The conditions can be very treacherous. Are you ready, my friend?" Amat looked at Alexander.

“As ready as I can be. I’ve read everything I can find about your people, but I couldn’t find as much as I had hoped.” Alexander sat down into a red leather armchair.

“That’s because our language is spoken, not written. There are so many different tribes and so many different variations in our languages. Travel is difficult. There are no roads, only brush. It can take days to get to the next village. These are a remote people.” Amat poured two glasses of brandy from a carafe, handed one to Alexander, and sat down across from him.

“I want to look for the origin of the language,” Alexander took a sip.

“You shall, my friend, you shall.”

“Is it safe? What about snakes?” Alexander asked.

Amat laughed. “Don’t worry about snakes. It is the dry season. They are away in dark, damp places.”

This reminded Alexander of his dream about the cave.