

What Desta's Readers are saying. . .

“What a passion for details, simplicity and readability! . . . Ambau did all these without any exaggeration or distortion of the customs or the cultural facts. . .

“The key to knowledge is curiosity. I greatly admired Ambau's choice of the mountain, the sun and clouds as his objects of curiosity in the novel. How original can one be! This is not just another book on Ethiopia. I truly enjoyed reading it. Thank you, Ato Getty Ambau for writing this book!”

—Dr. Alula Wasse, social historian

“I read DESTA in manuscript form a year ago, and this amazing, lovely book is still in my mind. Getty is a fabulous storyteller, and Desta and his family are wonderful, vivid, flawed, and ultimately uplifting characters. I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Like Harry Potter or The Book Thief, it is a book for both adults and younger readers. READ THIS BOOK! You will be glad you did. It is a true literary and cultural treasure!”

—Lori Schryer, author

“A very unique, creative and exciting plot . . . extremely impressive usage of language. All the pieces to the story are brought to life cleverly and beautifully! There is a hidden, effortless, unintentional spiritual quality to the writing. . . And there is a truly magical world within which the imagination and the spirit can soar. I loved it.”

—P. Sanders, writer

“A marvelous work. . . . I enjoyed it immensely. What fascinated me the most was how the author was able to weave in the book our cultural nuances, blending it well without deviating from the storyline. . . . I am certain there are many Destas who went through similar life experiences who could cherish this work.”

—Getachew Admassu, writer

“The language is graceful, the story and writing nourishing to the spirit. . . It would be great for students!”

—Monika Rose, author, educator

“A beautiful novel with full of hope and emotion. . . .The characters are well crafted and believable. The sense of family and belonging are portrayed wonderfully. . . . What is also amazing is its visual aspect. The author has a unique gift in painting vivid pictures with words. . . .This novel would make an incredible movie!”

—S. Metcalf, writer

“Amazingly sensorial!—you can see, smell, and hear everything so clearly. It’s a great, inspiring novel—I loved it!”

—Joy Roberts, manager, literary press

From miscellaneous readers:

“Engrossing! Stunning and imaginative!”—“A great blend of storytelling and fiction writing with an entrancing magical setting.”—“Mature and original.”—“Brilliant and wonderful . . . Moving, funny and mysterious.”—“Like a good book, it gets better as it goes on.”—“Unusual, poetic and magical.”—“Masterful! Plausible, foreign, exotic with an ancient-like setting.”—“Skillfully portrayed with vivid characters that imprint on the mind.”—“Absorbing and relaxing.”—“Authentic and Powerful.”

“I was a Peace Corps teacher in Bahar Dar, Ethiopia from 1967 to 1969. DESTA is an accurate and beautifully written description of the land, the people and the culture of that part of Ethiopia where I lived. Reading this book gave me many wonderful memories of my experience in that very unique country. This book allows you to feel the emotions of the characters, and almost “see” the world in which they live. By all means, read this book and learn about a very different and beautiful people.”

—Robert Hill

*Dest*a

and King Solomon’s Coin of Magic and Fortune
is the winner of Moonbeam’s Young Adult Book award and
Independent Publishers’ Children Book award.

Destra

AND KING SOLOMON'S
COIN OF MAGIC



Getty Ambau

Book one of the epic adventure series of an Ethiopian shepherd boy
in search of his ancestral family's twin sister coin of magic and fortune

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1. The setting—an actual place.
2. Wedding scenes—Fiction.
3. The coin and watch—Fiction.
4. The children's game and the robbery—Fiction.
5. Genealogy—Fiction.
6. The market events—Fiction.
7. The murder and funeral—Fiction.
8. Land ownership disputes—Fiction.
9. Child miscarriages—Fiction.
10. The boy's trip to the mountaintop—Fiction.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. The author's use of the names of actual persons, places and characters are incidental to the plot and are not intended to change the entire fictional nature of the work.

The cover illustration is solely a product of the artist's imagination. The reader may have a completely different perception of the boy after reading the story.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Second Edition

Dedicated to:

the Desta-like boys and girls of the world.

Preface

A complete character list and cultural terms and their definitions are provided at the end of the book for your convenience. Please refer to these pages whenever the need arises, so you can understand and fully enjoy the story.

Although Ethiopia is located north of the equator, the seasons are the exact reverse of those found in most western countries. Hence, you may need to adjust your perceptions when you read passages that describe thunder clouds or lush green fields in July or a carpet of wild flowers adorning the mountainsides in September.

The Ethiopian calendar takes some getting used to as well. Firstly, there are twelve 30-day months and one mini-month of five or six days (depending on whether or not it's a leap year). Secondly, the Ethiopian New Year comes on September 11 in normal years and on the 12th of the month during a leap year. The calendar lags from Gregorian (western) calendar by eight years—from September to December and seven years—from January to September. This difference stems from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church not agreeing on the date of Jesus' annunciation.

Being near the equator, most of Ethiopia receives nearly equal hours of sunlight and darkness. However, this fact may not always hold true for folks who live in isolated, mountainous valleys, such as where Desta's story takes place. In such locations, the sun often rises and sets half an hour later or early, respectively.

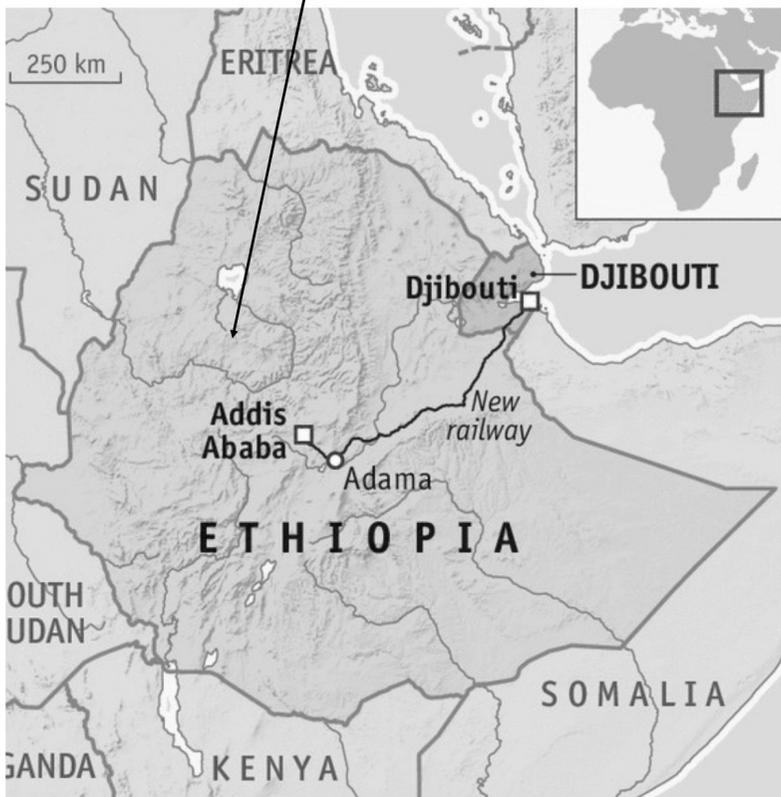
Although the story is fiction, the setting, natural features and events, and the culture and customs presented in this book are true to life.

This tale is probably unlike any you have read before. I hope you have a fun ride to Desta's far-off world!

GTA



Gojjam, the setting for Desta, Vol. 1



The mountains are used only as a reference to the setting.

ONE

January 1956

Abraham sits on a cowhide spread on the lawn in front of his home, situated at the foot of a tall mountain. Its shadow, presently just below his property, chases what remains of the daylight in this isolated and remote Ethiopian countryside.

Inside his folded and crossed legs, his fingers caress the soft brown hair of the hide as he dreamily watches the bright golden light move across the river and up the flanks of the eastern mountains. The evening is cool but comfortable. The valley hums with the lowing of home-bound cattle, the chirp of birds, the guttural call of colobus monkeys in the nearby forest, and the chant of crickets in the bushes.

Ordinarily, Abraham would simply enjoy the cacophony of sound and activity surrounding him. This evening is different. His mind is taken by the rite of passage he will hold for his son, Desta, who turns seven in a couple of days. He will be inaugurated as a shepherd and assume all the responsibilities of a man.

The very thought of this ancient practice, however, ushers in memories of Abraham's own ceremony that never happened, and the dark circumstances that disallowed its occurrence. For a moment, he is unable to see, feel, or hear anything. His fingers halt their play, his breathing slows, and his mind journeys to a place and time in childhood. He feels as though he is digging through forty years of his life—youthful years, marriages, parenthood, and war—to find only the shattered images and incomplete stories of his childhood.

THE EVENTS THAT SHAPED Abraham's life began on January 5, 1916, four days before his seventh birthday, in Kuakura, a place fifty miles north of here. On that evening, Abraham stood in the front courtyard waiting for his father, Beshaw Mekonnen, to return from Dangila, where he reportedly had gone to buy his son a birthday gift.

It was then that he noticed the sky above the western horizon awash in blood—poured, it appeared to him, from the setting sun. Where the sky met the earth, Abraham observed a larger-than-life man lying down on his back, mouth agape, knees bent, and hands raised as if shielding his horror-stricken face. On either side of this

giant figure stood two grotesque men of similar size. Frightened, they watched the sun descend into the man's cavernous mouth. Lingered on the sight, Abraham ultimately determined that the blood that bathed the sky had flowed from the man who had swallowed the sun.

The celestial orb soon vanished, leaving behind a crescent amber afterglow on the horizon. Two vultures rose from their perch on the bow of the lone sycamore tree below his home and flew west. Abraham wondered if they intended to feast on the dead man's body, the sun a palate cleanser capping the meal.

Past the sycamore tree and a row of thornbushes, the Kilty River flowed silently beneath a horse-mane of verdant grass that grew along its banks. Beyond the river, cattle and sheep herders drove their animals homeward across the vast fields, as the locals scurried along footpaths before darkness fell. All were oblivious to the crime committed moments before beneath the western horizon.

To Abraham, the scene was like a dream. After the evening haze had cleared, and just before the filmy light faded from the mountaintop, he realized that his eyes had deceived him. The vanquished man on the horizon had been the profile of the mountain peaks. The hands and bent knees were just trees on the ridges, the two standing men but hanging dark clouds. Nonetheless, the imagery left an indelible mark on Abraham's consciousness. As he turned to go inside, he was mystified: Why hadn't his father returned with his gift?

Having given up waiting for the father's return, the family of five sat down for their dinner. It was at that moment, the too-familiar but unexpected call of an owl from the sycamore sent shivers down the mother's spine. "She died, so she got buried," the bird hooted repeatedly in its plaintive, human-like tone.

But there is nobody sick in the family the mother thought, knowing that the doomsayer usually makes that awful call when someone is about to die. To the children, the owl's call was amusing. They mimicked the bird and giggled right up until they fell asleep. The mother went out twice and threw stones at it, and Kooli, their dog, barked insistently, but the bird was unrelenting. Feeling powerless as an infant, the mother contracted a sickening sensation in her stomach.

The father didn't come home on the second or the third day, which was the family's Coptic Christmas. In those two days, the mother was too preoccupied with her husband's absence to do anything. Her hands moved mechanically, touching objects without feeling them. She ate her meals without tasting the flavor or smelling the aroma of the food. She walked through the house and outside into the grounds without feeling floor or ground beneath her feet. Her eyes saw things yet didn't register them.

Her mind took her to places she had never been. *Had her husband been tricked by a harlot and kept in her sway?*

She reprimanded herself for her thoughts. Her husband was a God-fearing, Bible-reading man who wouldn't allow himself to fall into debauchery. The perverted idea came after she had ruled out more conventional possibilities: sickness, robbers, delays to help relatives in town. And then there was that damnable premonition of the bird chanting ceaselessly in her ears. She spent much of Christmas day sitting misty-eyed on a bench in the courtyard, her three girls huddled around her. Abraham repeatedly ran to the gate to look for any sign of his father walking the twisted path to their home. The family's world had cracked but they couldn't know who or what had broken it.

By the fourth day, news had spread through word of mouth about the missing father and people came out in great numbers. Some were sent to search in Dangila; others combed the woods, fields, rivers, and creeks nearby, but their searches turned up nothing.

On the morning of the fifth day, which was Abraham's seventh birthday, his mother was determined not to allow the misfortune that had befallen her family to interfere with her son's celebration and rite of passage. On this important day, she also wanted to bestow upon Abraham the family's ancient coin of magic and fortune, as his father had intended.

She prepared food and drinks for the family of five. Then she retrieved the ancient sandalwood box that housed the coin. When she opened the box, she discovered the coin that had been handed down through several hundred generations, the family's symbol of pride and identity, their emblem of fortune and prosperity—was gone! Her hands shook and terror gripped her brown face and eyes. She gasped, trying to cry out with stricken voice, but no sound came. Abraham and the three girls watched their mother in stark horror. Her hands still clutching the ancient box, she staggered and came crashing down on her husband's bench in the living room. One hand anchoring her on the edge of the bench, the other now cradling the box on her lap, she gazed at the fireplace and shook her head slowly, trying to fathom the mystery dealt to her family.

Several minutes later she recovered. Together with the children, they ransacked the house, but the coin was nowhere to be found.

The family now felt as if their world were shattering in a million pieces. The mother knew that her husband had always kept the precious relic in its box. It became clear to her that their missing coin was a poignant clue to her missing husband. Whoever had stolen it might have harmed the father. And it was not difficult to guess the culprits: her neighbors—those two, good-for-nothing, green-eyed brothers who had known that the family's wealth was linked to the coin.

The mother couldn't go forward with her son's birthday ceremonies. There was no gift, and now there was no coin. The shock of the lost treasure blotted out their appetites. To Abraham, the missing coin and uncelebrated birthday were the apex of the long and painful wait and his mounting anxiety over the father who hadn't returned with a gift. He felt abandoned, unloved, and robbed of the excitement that he had looked forward to.

Noticing her son's distraught face, the mother was compelled to say something to ease his grief. "Only God knows what became of your father and the coin, son," she said, holding Abraham by the hand. "For now, all we can do is pray for his safe return. As soon as he comes home, we'll celebrate your birthday and hold your coming-of-age ceremony."

Abraham was too disappointed to adequately register his mother's consoling words. He broke free from her hold and went outside, wishing to deal with his problems on his own.

In the following days and weeks, relatives and friends searched for the father but found nothing, not a murder weapon, body, skeleton, or witness. A theory took form: the father had been given medicine by the evil brothers that caused him to go mad and abandon his family. That was a consolation to the grieving family, because it meant that he could still be alive.

For Abraham, time had stopped. No longer did he stroll the springy, green Abo Guendri fields with his father on sunny afternoons, his dog Kooli trailing behind them. He no longer sat next to his father and listened as he read the Bible, or watched him paint trees, animals, and people. No longer could he look forward to his father's homecoming with stories of the people he had met and the places he had visited. He would no more have someone to call Baba.

Abraham would never accompany his mother, as he had been promised after he turned seven, to watch his father compete in the horse races at the yearly Bat'ha Mariam Church festival. There were so many ways he would miss his father. Abraham felt a deep void in his heart. To fill it, he vowed to avenge his missing father and coin once he got old enough to afford a gun.

The mother, afraid more misfortune could befall them if they stayed, decided to abandon her estate and move to the valley where her beloved cousins, Adamu and Kindé, lived near her younger brother and an uncle. She thought that the mountains would wall off her past, and that she and her children would be with relatives who would protect them.

To this end, they walked the fifty miles, driving their animals and carrying their

possessions on their backs and heads. And it was during this journey, when they rested under the seamless shadow of the gottem tree that the mother gathered the children around her and said, “You promise me that as long as I am alive, you will never share with strangers we meet in the new place what has happened to your father.” She looked into the eyes of each child and waited until each answered with a verbal oath of “Yes, Mama.” Only Abraham had to be cajoled and begged before he complied with his mother’s request.

They settled in the hills of Avinevra, east of the Davola River, on a property owned by their relatives and in a valley the locals simply referred to as *Gedel*—The Hole. This was 250 miles northwest of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia.

FOR ALL OF HIS LIFE, Abraham had been haunted by memories of his father and the ancient, precious family coin. These incidents molded Abraham as a man, husband, parent, and even a warrior.

After this mental journey to his childhood, Abraham looked up to discover that the sunlight had vanished, and the valley was now draped in charcoal-gray dusk.

TWO

On the eve of Desta's birthday, Abraham rose early. The brilliant red and golden rays of the sun that greeted him reminded him of that childhood day so many years ago when nothing was more important than what his birthday gift would be. He perched on his bench and for a brief moment he allowed himself a smile, as he reached for the bowl of water his daughter, Hibist, had left him. He felt its cold, rough rim and was uneasy about dipping his fingers into its contents. He clenched his teeth, splashed water on his face, and dab-dried it with edge of his *gabi*—cotton shawl.

He gazed into the mirror of leftover liquid, and his father's eyes looked back at him. The joys of a short-lived childhood dripped down his face and fell into the folds of his *gabi*. The hard fact that Abraham had lost his father before he was seven gripped his heart yet again. The possibilities of his life were forever to be unknown. He would not pass along to his own children the love and possessions he had never received from his father. Abraham buried his face in the soft white fabric of his *gabi*, making sure there was no trace of what unmasked the burden of his soul.

He uncovered his face and thought. Just as his mother died without knowing what had happened to her beloved husband, so Abraham feared that he, too, might pass away without discovering what had become of his father and the precious family heirloom. For Abraham, this was a greater shame than the gossip mill his mother had dreaded—*that their father had taken the coin and abandoned them! His own wife and children!*

As an older Abraham grappled with these childhood memories, a tantalizing notion rushed into his mind. If he had had the good fortune to receive the coin, as his mother had promised, he would have passed it on to Desta, his four-foot five-inches tall son who had been treated as an outcast by his family, because of the circumstances of his birth. Abraham felt closer to Desta than his other children, because of experiences that linked them. Giving Desta the precious coin for his birthday would have made Desta feel wonderful, and Abraham would have been happy to give it to him.

Abraham even was tempted to give Desta the empty coin box, which he had placed next to him. In recent years, he'd used it to store a gold pocket watch he had collected from an Italian soldier he had killed in the war. Ironically, the watch, too, had been

missing for two years. The box had been a symbol of his own fatherless childhood, and he had grown to treasure it. He picked it up and studied the many mystic carvings on its exterior of birds, plants, serpents, and people, cryptic writings, and the magical cross on its lid.

As a boy, Abraham had developed an interest in the language of birds from this box. He had hoped that someday one of the birds would open its beak and tell him—either in dream or wakefulness—the story of the coin.

Abraham soon abandoned the idea of giving the empty box to Desta. Surely it would have no value, and would only evoke interminable questions from his son and the rest of the family. None of them had any knowledge of their grandfather's fate, or of the ancient coin.

All these musings were only fancies of his mind. What the family had lost so long ago would hardly turn up suddenly at their door or fall from heaven in response to Abraham's longings. Abraham brought his thoughts back to reality. He had to prepare Desta for the things he must do in the months and years ahead and engage him with Deb'tera Tayé—the Sorcerer—to solve the family's present problem. They must find out why Saba, Abraham's daughter from his first marriage, had suffered a string of miscarriages.

IN THE EVENING, Abraham sat on the brown cowhide that his wife, Ayénat, had brought and placed outside their home and waited for Desta to return from the creek, where his sister, Hibist, had taken him to bathe. He planned to hold a rite of passage for his son that evening.

This evening, too, the tall, expansive mountain had eclipsed the setting sun and draped the foothills with its shadow. The finches, weavers, and sparrows called excitedly in the nearby bushes, welcoming dusk.

Fingers interlocked around his bent knees and his eyes on the mountain's shadow beneath his home, Abraham leaned back and thought about the things he would tell his son when he came to sit with him. In the front of his mind, though, were his daughter's childbirth problems, which Abraham hoped Desta would help solve.

For nearly two years, Abraham and Saba's husband, Yihoon, had taken Saba to several venerated churches to drink blessed water, dab her belly with it, and pass the church's crosses and Bible over her. She had applied the recommended herbs and roots to her belly and had taken them internally. The family had pledged money to angels and saints of various sanctuaries if they would help solve Saba's problems. Finally, they had taken her on a two-day journey to a missionary clinic in Dangila. Unfortu-

nately, the nurses there didn't have an answer to her problems, and shortly after they returned home, she lost another baby. After each failure, it was another heartache and more misery for Saba and her family, as well as profound disappointment for Abraham.

Abraham shuddered at these thoughts. He unlocked his hands, folded and crossed his legs and let his arms and hands gather in the space between his legs. He looked out again to the shadow of the mountain that now had passed the lower fence of his property.

After all the known methods of cure for such problems had failed, Abraham and Yihoon were poised to try something new: consulting with the spirits of the valley. Deb'tera Tayé, the sorcerer, had convinced them that the spirits might be the causes of Saba's problems, and for their dying animals and poor crops.

Abraham knew that he would be turning his back on God and putting his own reputation on the line by engaging in witchcraft. Ayénat had vehemently opposed the idea, fearing Desta could end up possessed by the spirits.

He had to give this last proposition a try. For Abraham, what his daughter and family were going through was akin to the mystery of his long-lost father and the missing coin. He was determined to do anything to try to unravel it.

A conversation from the side of the hill to his right took Abraham's eyes from the shadow and thoughts from his daughter's troubles.

He turned and looked.

Desta and Hibist emerged, trailed by Kooli the dog. Desta wore his brand-new gabi, which Ayénat had bought him for this important ceremony.

"There's Baba," Hibist said, pointing the moment she saw their father.

Desta looked up.

"You should go and sit with him," Hibist said. "There are important things he wants to share with you."

Desta's mind raced. This was the first time Baba had invited Desta to sit with him in such a formal setting—a privilege usually reserved for guests and older family members. Kooli, as if he were an extra appendage, limped behind Desta.

"Good, you are finally here, Desta," Abraham said the moment Desta arrived.

Desta exuded the spring-fresh scent of *Lux* soap.

"You must feel wonderful after your bath. Sit here," Abraham added, pointing to the portion of the cowhide to his right.

Desta hesitated, then sat down. The soft, silky hair of the hide felt good on the soles of his feet. Kooli sat near Desta on the grass just outside the skin. Desta studied the rich brown of the hide. He thought if he went by its color, he would

be hard-pressed not to think that the long-dead cow was a blood relative of Kooli, whose pelt resembled it.

“The reason I invited you here this evening, son,” Abraham said, looking at Desta, “is because you will turn seven tomorrow, and I want to share with you the things that will be expected of you. This meeting is your rite of passage to adulthood.”

“What things am I expected to do, Baba?” Desta asked, looking up to his father.

“As a Christian boy, you should start to fast on Wednesday and Friday and before major holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Soon after your birthday, you will be trained as a sheep and cow herder to replace your brother, Damtew, who will graduate into farm work in May,” Abraham said.

The idea of tending animals excited Desta. This meant he would learn how to crack a whip to herd and drive the animals. This opportunity would also allow him to meet and play field hockey with the shepherds he had seen across the Davola River. But Desta didn’t like the fasting idea. Not only was it hard for him to go past midmorning without food, but also he did not want to feel guilty every time he didn’t fast until noon. He had seen the remorse on Hibist’s face every time she ate before the prescribed time.

“In addition,” Abraham said, “You will be expected to bring firewood, take lunch to the farm workers, and protect the grain fields against baboons, vervet monkeys, and birds.”

Among these tasks, only working with vervet monkeys pleased Desta. Besides Kooli, the vervets were his only other animal friends. When he thought about all the other things he would need to do, Desta’s brow tightened and his stomach lurched. He began to caress the cowhide as if its soft and lustrous hair might ease his nerves.

When he noticed the frown on Desta’s face, Abraham continued, in a low, consoling voice. “Furthermore, Desta, during harvest time, you will help with the cutting of grain stalks and the gathering and transporting of bundled sheaves to the threshing floor.”

“How do you expect me to do all these things if I am going to be herding the animals?” Desta asked, disturbed by the list of things he must do once he left his childhood.

“We won’t expect you to do all these things at the same time,” Abraham said. “The extra things you will do only when we need additional hands.”

Still, Desta couldn’t believe his ears. The work his father itemized was overwhelming enough, but this was hardly what he had wanted, or what his mother had promised he would do after reaching his seventh birthday. He gazed into the shadow of the mountain, which had crossed the Davola River and was pushing the evening light up the flanks of the eastern hills, slowly measuring time and distance.

“This was not what mother said I would do after I turned seven,” Desta muttered without turning.

“What did your mother say you would do?” Abraham asked, lifting his thoughtful gaze from Kooli to Desta.

“You know I have always wanted to climb to the top of these mountains so that I can see the sky up close and touch it and feel the clouds with my hands,” Desta replied.

“I know you have, son. It’s admirable that you’re still determined to go to the place of your dreams. But you need to wait until you are a little stronger before you go up there.”

Desta had wanted to make the trip to the mountaintop since he was two. He remembered a summer evening when his mother, Ayénat, had held him in her arms and leaned against the fence while they watched the gargantuan moon rise over the eastern mountains. He had stretched out his little arms and waved his dainty fingers, warbling furiously, wanting to be taken to the mountaintop to touch the moon. As he had grown, it was not merely the moon he wanted to touch, but the sky and the clouds.

“And there is one critical task we’ll need your help with, Desta,” Abraham said. “But this would not be a part of your daily work.”

“What would that be?” Desta asked, fixing his eyes on his father’s big brown orbs.

“You know your sister, Saba, has lost her babies. I understand that you might help us solve this mystery.”

Desta knew Saba and Yihoon’s problems and all the failed attempts to solve them. Now, the idea that he could somehow find a solution sounded ridiculous to him.

“This is getting strange, Baba—are you that desperate?”

“We believe that Saba and her family’s problems may be caused by spirits who are angry with them for living on their roaming grounds,” Abraham said. “We need to contact these spirits to find out why they are unhappy and if they will give us a remedy. These creatures reveal themselves only to young people with the help of the conjurer Deb’tera Tayé. We need you and your niece Astair to contact these creatures and find out why. . . . We plan to hold a session with them next Saturday.”

That spirits would solve human problems was a curious notion to Desta. He had thought spirits caused problems for humans by possessing them and causing them to do all kinds of crazy things. A year ago, he had seen a visiting woman engage in a wild act of eating fire while she coiled and uncoiled on the floor. Hibist told him that the woman was possessed by spirits. That he could be talking to the spirits directly both excited and frightened him.

“That was the day I had hoped you or ma could take me to the mountaintop.”

“It cannot be on that day and I don’t know when we could, either,” Abraham said, caressing his goatee. After looking away for a few seconds, Abraham turned to Desta and said, “May I share with you a secret?”

Desta nodded.

“I also hope to travel to a distant place, but I cannot go just yet. We can make our separate journeys—you and I—when the time is right.” Abraham still dreamed of finding his father, and hoped by sharing his own yearnings, however veiled, he could lessen Desta’s.

When he looked up, Desta caught his father gazing at the dog once again. To Desta, Kooli always seemed more important to his father than he was. As usual, he felt like an outsider.

As Desta was about to ask Abraham where he planned to go, he saw his mother and Hibist coming toward them, wearing their long beautiful white gowns which they kept off the ground with multiple rounds of colorful cotton girdles, their tufts cascading down the front of the dress.

Ayénat cradled a covered basket in one arm and swung the other as if it were a device that she needed to move her body through space. She appeared pleased about something. Desta thought if there was still sunlight on their side of the valley, he would have seen the glint in his mother’s patches of white hair to match her beneficent smile.

Hibist walked behind her mother carrying a horn goblet in each hand and keeping an eye on one of them, as if worrying its contents might spill.

“I had a premonition last night as I prepared to make you something special for this meeting,” Ayénat said, as she lowered the basket and placed it before Abraham and Desta.

Hibist gingerly placed the goblets in the grass near the edge of the cowhide and secured them with rocks.

“What do you have in here?” Abraham asked, pointing to the basket, as if he needed a verbal acknowledgement of what his nose already knew.

Ayénat lifted the lid off the basket, revealing a steaming, redolent, circular loaf roughly seven inches in diameter.

Both Abraham and Desta peered into the basket.

Hibist sat down next to Desta and also looked in. She was as much trying to see her father’s reaction to the loaf as to study the intricate relief on its surface.

Ayénat sat next to her husband and gazed at the faces of the onlookers, like a magician who had put them under a spell.

“This is an interesting *dabo*—loaf—you have made. Thanks for bringing it,”

Abraham said, turning to his wife. “Why is its top such an artwork? You had never made one like this before.”

Destá’s mouth watered, and his stomach growled as the rich aroma of the freshly baked rye bread filled his head.

“I know it looks interesting, but does the bread remind you of anything?” Ayénat asked, studying her husband’s face.

“No. Like I said, it’s an interesting creation and I am glad you brought it to us because I was getting hungry.”

Destá and Hibist’s eyes shuttled from the loaf to their parents’ faces.

“I know you have never seen the object this loaf represents, but I thought some of the details you see on it could remind you of it. . . . This bread is a recreation of your family’s coin of magic and fortune!”

“*Era*—how. . . . who showed you how to make this?” Abraham asked, after it finally dawned on him. His heart leaped as if he were looking at the actual coin itself.

“It all started with this strange premonition last night, but I must say it was from divine instruction how I actually created the design this afternoon. I don’t know anything about the coin other than the pieces of information I remember from your mother’s account. I started with the few details I recollected. With the rest of the work, a pair of invisible hands took over,” Ayénat bragged.

Abraham looked at her in awe.

“Don’t look surprised. The Good Lord, who knows about your wishes and listened to my prayers, made all this possible,” Ayénat said, glowing. “This is what I have been trying to tell you with this thing you’re fixed to do on behalf of Saba. We need to pray to God, not consult with the spirits,” Ayénat said. “It disturbs me that you involve my boy. I fear for him.”

There she goes, thought Abraham. When Ayénat was on the subject of *her* God, nothing of what he said mattered and he rarely challenged her. He needed to change the subject quickly.

“What do you have in those two cups?” he asked, as if he wanted to hear in words what his nose had already detected—*tej*—the sweet and pleasant-smelling honey wine.

“Those cups of *tej*, too, came by divine suggestion,” Ayénat said. “Otherwise I would have brought the usual *tella*—homebrewed beer.”

Abraham shook his head.

“Tell me, are we supposed to eat and drink these things?” Abraham asked, turning to the mother. The aroma of the loaf and the *tej* had triggered his hunger and thirst.

“Yes, of course,” Ayénat replied. “Here, I have already cut the dabo, too.” She pulled a slice out and gave it to him.

“Thank you! I had never dreamed that our long-lost coin would appear in the form of a loaf,” Abraham said with a smile.

“Maybe this loaf will cure you of your hankering for the real thing, and for your father,” Ayénat said with a smile. “You know, forty years is a long time to be thinking about lost things and people.”

She looked at Abraham, like a parent reprimanding a child.

“It’s not a small matter to our family. It’s something very old and precious. I cannot die without finding what exactly happened to my father and the coin. Thank you for this bread. It’s sweet of you. Its symbolism alone is great! I hope your premonition and whoever guided you to create it could help us solve the mystery of the lost treasure and my father.”

“I am glad I could do it on such an important day. I know you have said you’d have liked Desta to be the inheritor of the coin. Speaking of symbolism, why don’t you hand one of these slices to him first, as you had intended with the coin?”

Ayénat picked up the basket and held it before Abraham. He put his own piece to the side, took another slice from the basket, and gave it to Desta. He handed a second slice to Hibist. He picked another slice and gave it to Ayénat saying, “Thank you for making this meeting more meaningful.”

Abraham’s hand dove into the basket again and re-emerged with another slice. “This piece is for Kooli, the last but not the least member of our family,” he said, placing the loaf near the dog. Kooli, who had been watching Abraham’s hand, happily grabbed his share and began to eat.

Abraham then picked up his own piece and began to eat. The family ate quietly and thoughtfully. In the intervening moments, Abraham thought about the problems of his daughter and the impending meeting with the spirits.

The evening was getting on. Shadows had reached the crest of the eastern ridges. The birds chirped and rustled in the bushes less and less, and the cicadas and crickets grew louder. The home-bound cattle from the field below had begun to moo.

“Don’t forget the drinks,” Ayénat said, handing Abraham the full goblet.

He thanked her and took the wine. Abraham swallowed his last bite of the coin-bread and cleared his throat. He then raised the goblet and said “Desta, may you become a reliable and responsible shepherd, and a good and obedient young man who brings no hardship or strife to your parents’ hearts. And may you have the industry of

the bee, the wisdom and foresight of your ancestors, and the courage and fortitude of all those in our family line who defended and protected our coin of magic and fortune.

“We have two cups containing honey wine. One full, the other half full. The full cup is what we all hope to achieve in life. The half represents what life really is. The important thing is to remember that we strive to make it full. Our world was full when we had our coin of magic and fortune, but now it is half full.” Abraham stopped and held his chest. He coughed, cleared his throat, and continued.

“Always look at life as half full, *not* half empty, no matter how difficult it may be. It’s this belief that sustained my mother, sisters, and me after we settled in this hole of a place. And that is why I am still hopeful that we can someday—in my lifetime—find that coin and discover what really happened to my father.” Abraham’s voice cracked.

Ayénat came to his rescue. “We need to go. The animals will start arriving soon.”

Desta listened to his father attentively, but his eyes were on the half-filled goblet before him. He noticed that this cup was almost the exact shape as the gap in the mountain high up in the eastern ridges—the same pass through which the sun rises in the morning.

His father’s association of the half cup to life and personal effort made Desta wonder about the sun, which he watched each morning as it rose through the cup-like gap in the eastern peaks.

“Does this mean the sun’s life is half full, too?” Desta asked, turning to his father.

“What do you mean?” Abraham inquired.

“In December the sun comes out near the bottom of that gap in the mountain,” Desta said, pointing toward the peaks. “It rises at different places along the slope as the months advance. In June it comes out at the halfway point in the rising slope and then it reverses its course from June to December. It’s almost as if it could not go to the full height of the cup.”

“I don’t know, Desta. I didn’t know it was even trying,” Abraham said.

“Yes, I watched her for the whole year and was disappointed that she didn’t make it to the top,” Desta said. Suddenly his eyes filled with tears. He feared the same could happen to him when he finally went up there.

“I am sure someday it will clear the top if it keeps trying,” Abraham said, smiling.

Ayénat tapped Abraham’s arm. “We need to go.”

“Let’s share this wine first,” Abraham said, taking a sip. Then he passed it to Ayénat. She took a sip and passed to Hibist, who in turn took a sip and passed it to Desta. The strong, suffocating aroma was too much for Desta. After just a whiff of it, he passed it back to Abraham to finish the rest of the wine.

“The half cup of wine?” Desta asked.

“This wine, we will take and pour in the river tomorrow morning,” Abraham replied.

That evening Abraham walked home happy and lightheaded from both the honey wine and the vision of the coin on Ayénat’s loaf. In some ways he felt he received his birthday gift forty years late. Abraham’s birthday was on Monday, two days after his Orthodox Christmas and Desta’s birthday. But the last thing he thought as he crossed the doorsill of his home was the problem that had plagued his daughter and family, the one that he hoped Desta and the spirits would soon solve.

Ayénat didn’t think about anything. She floated home, buoyed by her closeness to God when she created the image of the family’s treasure on her dabo.

Hibist was thinking about all the cows she and Damtew had to milk and all the animals they had to gather before the evening was over.

The birds retreated to their nests while the cicadas and crickets came in full force to reclaim the night.

As he walked home, Desta once more let his eyes climb the mountain. Now, only a thin ghost of light sputtered at the summit. He stood watching it, transfixed. As the last traces of light vanished, bidding him and his world farewell, Desta realized that he, too, had bidden farewell to his childhood.

THREE

It was this nameless valley that Desta's paternal grandmother had come to forty years earlier to hide from her shame and assuage her fears. Here, where the air was thin and clear like a pane of glass, where the wind streamed out from the eye of a needle lodged between two boulders near the sky, where the sun rose late and set early and never got hot, where life came in colors of the rainbow, where people possessed so little materially, yet were contented as if they had everything in the world, where God reigned supreme and his believers pretended devotion but still did ungodly things—such as making promises to children they never meant to fulfill.

It was here in the pitch-black of the night the stars above gleamed like diamonds that would at any moment tumble down and blanket the mountainsides and valley floor, where life hummed and exuded scents that one could suck up in a single breath during the day to stow inside and be nourished while asleep. It was in this place that innocence was pure and abundant like the highland breeze, and all one could ask for to complement all this beauty and bounty was a little more love and kindness. This was Desta's world. With the mountains for walls and the sky for a roof, it was his universe.

East was separated from west by the Davola River. Slicing the valley floor as it snaked south to north, it was fed by rivulets that came down the sides of the mountains. The west was wild, and at first, Desta's family was its only homestead. The rugged terrain was enveloped by a dense forest that ran for twenty-five miles along the mountain face. In the north and in parts of the east, low-lying plateaus and rolling hills pegged against the mountains dominated the view. A cluster of villages and a quilt of farmland adorned the flatter terrain, and the flanks of mountains. Trees and bushes lined the meandering creeks and property boundaries. Two churches, one to the north, another south, were swaddled by their groves of *tsed*—juniper trees—that rose from the sides of the mountains like bumps on a tree trunk.

DESTA LIVED WITH HIS PARENTS, a brother and sister—the fourth and sixth youngest of his six siblings—along with three horses, three *mookit* goats, a dozen chickens, a dog and a cat, all in a single circular structure made of wood and earth and topped by a conical roof of bamboo and grass.

As one entered the home, the horses' stall was on the right, followed by the goats' cubicle and a larder that was used to store food and pots and pans, house three granaries, and serve as a brewery. Past these, a closet contained two large wooden boxes and two round-bellied baskets that held the family's clothes and jewelry. Next came a built-in bedding area approximately seven by twelve feet, and three feet high, divided by a four-foot wall. Each half could comfortably sleep three adults or four children. The last was the mill room, with two sets of grinding stones abutting opposite walls.

The center of the house was divided by a two- by four-foot parapet on either side of a round, roof-bearing center post. The living room was on one side, the kitchen on the other. There was a fireplace in each, with three tapering stones roughly six inches tall to support cookware.

Above the animal stalls were two lofts. One was used to store firewood and as a chicken roost, the other where Desta's brother Damtew slept.

The only furniture in the house was a two- by four-foot bench and a round, concave stool. The bench, made from a solid piece of wood, was Abraham's. The stool, often found in the kitchen, was used by Ayénat or any woman who was cooking. Outside, in a separate shed, was the apiary where the family gets its supply of honey.

It was what he saw, heard, and experienced in this home that molded Desta into the boy and the adult he was to become.

LOOKING BACK, it was exactly seven years earlier, on a frosty Friday morning, with the first guttural calls of the colobus monkeys from the forest, before the first fleeting rays of the sun struck the peak above their home, that Desta pushed from his mother's belly. It was as if he had timed his exit for the sunlight that would soon filter through the cracks in the walls, below his parents' high earthen bed. At this time of the year, the sun rose near the lowest point of the cup-shaped gap in the eastern mountains, on the right slope.

Ayénat, in labor since midnight, had expected the worst. So did Abraham and the rest of the family. The new baby's arrival had not been expected for another two months. Preparing for the worst but hoping for the best, Abraham had gone when dawn barely broke and returned with a root of a secret plant to promote the baby's fast delivery. The plant's potency was by association rather than by direct contact with the patient. So, Abraham had placed it in the opening through which the horses' manure was removed from their stalls, to the right of the entrance. Abraham now sat next to his wife, not far from the fireplace in the center of their living quarters. Some of the family

sat by the fire, heads down, as if sad that their Christmas would be marred. Others hovered around the mother, encouraging her to push.

As fortune would have it, not long after their father placed the medicinal plant, there arrived a fist-sized squirming baby, much to the glee of the family.

The baby *wished* someone would quickly free him from the slippery cord that bound him to his mother. He had long waited for this moment, to be delivered from his mother and her problems. It had been a rough life inside the womb, and a tough journey out. To everyone's surprise and fear, the boy didn't cry, as if saving his tears for future times. He didn't open his eyes, as if afraid to see his brother, Damtew, who sat by their mother, quiet and gloomy, gazing at him.

Although it's said that the odds favored survival for a seven-month premature birth to a six- or even an eight-month term, why the baby came so early without any attributable causes was a mystery to those who were now congregated around the mother and gazing down on the skinny baby who appeared shriveled by the morning chill. But there were causes. They just didn't know, except perhaps Ayénat.

IT WAS IN EARLY JUNE, at the time of the year when the sun rose nearly as high as it could go on the right slope of the gap in the eastern mountains, when Ayénat and Abraham had conceived Desta. That was the beginning of the rainy season and a frantic time for farm workers. For Ayénat, besides the exertion of grinding grains, preparing food, fetching water from the creek, washing clothes, the other part of the day—when she had respite from her domestic chores—she helped on the farm for an hour or two. When her mind was so preoccupied with work, she often forgot to feed herself and the baby inside her. When she did remember to eat, she nibbled on *injera*—flat, spongy bread—made from *teff*—a grain a quarter the size of a rice berry—with pea sauce, the staple food of the family for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The other grains, barley and rye, were used to make dabo or tella. These foods, together with teff, were the only foods consumed daily in some form. There were no vegetables to speak of, except for potatoes and *gomen*—collard green—that appeared on the family's plate during the rainy season. In those wet months, they had plenty of collard green that was chopped, cooked, and served after being mixed with a spiced butter and sometimes ground flax seeds.

This provided the only color in their meals. If one or two spoonfuls of cheese made an appearance next to the pale green and muted brown injera and pea sauce, it was more for variety than its substantive benefit to the body.

Fruit didn't grow in The Hole. Nobody had ever heard of lemons, oranges, and

bananas and people wouldn't have known what to do with them if they were given any. Berries and figs grew plentifully in the forest, but only during the dry season and even then, were only used as snacks for children.

Although there were sufficient eggs and milk in the home, they were never part of the family's diet. "Milk is for babies," they'd say, "because babies don't have teeth yet to tear and chew the spongy injera." Eggs were to make chicks, which if they were spared from hawks by day and foxes by night, grew to become chickens that had one purpose—to produce more chicks and repeat the cycle. The family rarely killed a chicken to consume its meat as an everyday meal. They only did so when a very important guest came to visit, or sometimes as supplemental meat during the holidays. In the rainy season, no guests came, so Ayénat would forego killing a chicken for a meal. Lamb, goat, and beef were consumed only during the holidays—Christmas, Easter, the New Year, or at weddings and other major events.

Ayénat didn't eat until two or three in the afternoon on Wednesday and Friday—the two fast days of the week. For *Filseta*—the first two weeks of August—she fasted until four or five every day. Although a pregnant woman had the option not to, Ayénat would indeed fast. She would rather risk the life of the baby that was inside her than offend her God.

And then, too, the baby became the recipient of every emotional and physical stress Ayénat experienced through the lifeline that linked the two. He *heard, felt, saw, tasted, and experienced* what his mother did.

Two of her assistants—a young man and a girl—vanished without a trace at the end of September. Abraham had brought them from a faraway land when they were just teenagers to help his wife before he went off to fight in the Italian war. They disappeared, possibly running off together, leaving Ayénat with all of the domestic work.

Asse'ged, the second oldest son, was old enough to handle the farming. Teferra, the oldest son, worked for Abraham's mother across the Davola River, up on the plateau of Avinevera. Tamirat, the third boy, studied at church school miles away. Damtew, the fourth male child, herded the animals.

Abraham was always gone on business trips, leaving the farmwork to the family. As days became weeks and weeks months, miraculously, the baby continued to grow, like an extra appendage Ayénat didn't need or want. She hated Abraham for impregnating her, especially since she had already given him six children, and the two had so little love for one another. When Abraham wasn't gone, he showed little affection for Ayénat.

Unloved and unwanted by mother and father, and malnourished, by the end of the

harvest season, it seemed the baby could no longer endure his hardships. He no longer wished to stay in the dark, famished, and troubled place in his mother's womb. He decided to exit two months early that morning on January 7, 1949 and chance a better life in the outside world.

LEAVING MOTHER and baby to rest, the family congregated around the fireplace. Enat, the baby's fifth sibling, had sprinkled the floors with *kettema*—long, pulpy grass—and had placed goat and antelope skins over them. These were sitting mats for the Christmas guests. That day Abraham killed a lamb in honor of the Christ child. The meat was made into a stew and served to the guests.

Throughout the day, the new family member lay peacefully with just the company of his mother's breathing. He was cherishing much-needed rest. The family got busy with preparations for the celebration of the birth of Christ. Nobody came to check on the baby; Ayénat's hands and eyes hovered over him to see that he was still breathing. Even with his family present, the baby *felt* unwelcomed and abandoned.

AFTER DINNER, the family discussed the name they should give the new baby. Ayénat spoke up. "Let's call him Amanuel, for day of the Christ child." Others proposed different names: Habtamu, Adissu, and Mullat. Abraham sat quietly while the others were rattling off their choices. "Desta—happiness—is a fitting name," he said with finality.

When Ayénat bridled at this, he said, "I think it would be appropriate because—" he began, pulling up a finger for each reason—"One, this is a very happy time for our country. The Italians are long gone, and your father has won medals for warfront deeds against the invaders, and our *Negus*—king—God bless him, is ruling the country peacefully."

He continued. "Two, here at home everything is good with us. Our crops are growing abundantly, our animals are thriving, and we have all this land to prosper and flourish."

Abraham then pointed to the infant and added, "This boy is the firstborn in this place. You know, after I returned from the Italian war, I had an epiphany. I saw that some of you boys had grown to be strapping men since the last visit from the warfront. Then I studied the vast forested flanks of the western mountains. Knowing that I would soon need more land for my growing family, I crossed the Davola River and claimed seven hundred acres of virgin land separated by deep running creeks.

“That is a wonderful story and those are wonderful reasons to call our son Desta, but I’m not so sure I like that name,” the mother said.

“Ahh, but there is more.” He held up a third finger. “The boy arrived on Christmas day, the day when we all are here happily gathered in celebration.

“What is more, we had feared a miscarriage last night when Ayénat went into labor. Instead, we have a healthy-looking baby. So, we all should be happy. Desta will be his name!”

Nobody would challenge Abraham once he spoke in that tone of voice. Ayénat whimpered in protest, but it was to no avail.

THE NEXT SEVEN YEARS of Desta’s life were not an improvement over life in his mother’s womb, especially when it came to nourishment. But in his new world, which still felt like a womb, he had freedom. He no longer bore his mother’s daily trials and tribulations, and he could move freely in open space.

In Ayénat’s mind, the unanswered question was why Desta turned out a boy instead of a girl.

After four boys born in a row, all Ayénat wanted was more girls. She already had two and hoped for two more if Providence was good to her.

DESTA WOKE ON HIS SEVENTH BIRTHDAY, Saturday, January seventh, more confused and frustrated than when he had gone to bed the night before. In his dream, he stood in the middle of the cattle field below his home at high noon. His own shadow circled his feet, mirroring the celestial orb above his head. Just then, a strange old man with cotton-white hands appeared and gave him a yellow metallic disk, one tenth the size of his own shadow. The man said that the disk was his birthday present. Desta was thrilled that somebody had thought him not a mistake, but someone to be loved, who deserved a gift like no other.

He kept turning the yellow disk over and over, causing it to flash with each flip, as if the sun were taking a chunk away with each flicker. Desta curled his fingers over the item and held it tightly in his small fist. Then, the man said, “Keep it in a safe place. Guard it with your life,” and vanished. When Desta woke and opened his fist, the object was gone, taking with it the excitement from his heart. He kept running his hands again and again over his mat and folds of his gabi, hoping the disk was not a dream but real, and that it had simply slipped from his grasp.

Sad and baffled, Desta sat up and surveyed his family’s home. He noticed there was more sunlight in the house than he could ever remember, causing him to wonder

whether there were that many cracks in all the walls. Desta had awakened later than his usual time, which was half an hour before the morning light had come down from the mountaintop. His father was putting on his work clothes, just outside the closet to the left of Desta's room. Damtew was sitting by the fire, wolfing his breakfast before going off to tend the animals.

Desta waited until his brother had left. He didn't want to hear another snicker or mocking remark regarding Desta's planned trip to the mountaintop to touch the sky after his birthday.

Abraham brought out a pair of iron knives, each nearly the size of his hefty arm. He whipped the sharp edges against one another, causing him to cringe with terror and place his fingers over his ears. For Desta knew what those knives were about to do that day. His father picked up a round-bellied bamboo basket, dropped the knives into it, and left. He was going across the Davola River to kill a cow and bring a share of its meat for the Christmas dinner.

Ayénat was in the kitchen, baking injera for the holiday dinner. Hibist shuffled in and out of the house with rolled up goatskins and antelope skins, taking them outside and beating them with a stick, and hanging them on the fence to air.

Damtew also left soon after their father, giving Desta much needed relief of his own from natural forces that threatened to come at any moment. After wrapping himself with his gabi, he grabbed his penis and squeezed it tight, hoping to reach the bushes behind his home. He was doomed. Before he got to the door, he streaked his legs and wet his gabi and the floor as he dashed with his hand buried in his groin. His sister Hibist giggled heartily with her hand over mouth.

After Desta returned and cleaned up after himself, he stood in the living room and tried to remember what was special about this Christmas day. Having been distracted by the beautiful object in his dream, he had not thought about the significance of today. The round basket near the parapet Ayénat used to serve the dabo for his ceremony the day before brought his memory back into focus.

This Christmas was Desta's seventh birthday—the day when he officially joined the adult world! The one that would allow him to travel to the place of his dreams—atop one of the mountains that circled his valley so he could see and touch the sky and run his fingers through the clouds.

Then he remembered something else. His father said that Desta couldn't go to the mountain anytime soon because of his important new family duties. Desta's stomach knotted, his spirit flagged. The day he hoped would begin his adventure to the limits

of his realm was not to be. He needed to go out and think through the disheartening bombshell from his father.

The fallow land behind his parents' home was Desta's refuge. The vervet and colobus monkeys and the rich verdure on either side of the creek at the bottom of the hill had always brought him happiness.

He liked to be with his sister Hibist whenever he felt down, but Hibist was busy helping her mother. He slipped out without his dog and dashed through the shade bushes and across the sloping earth. When he came to a clearing, he stopped and studied the view. The midmorning sun had made everything bright and pleasant to behold. He could see no monkeys in the trees near the property. The place was hushed as if all the animals of the forest were observing the holiday. Across the southern creek, up on the grade, Desta could see the rickety shed his father had built years ago in the middle of the forest, staking his claim to the land.

This broad and descending land—down to the valley floor—had been earmarked for Asse'ged and Damtew, Desta's older brothers. A fortnight ago he had heard his brothers discuss how they would divide it up. Desta could see now why Damtew wanted it split lengthwise; that way each would get fifty percent of both the flat and steep terrain. Asse'ged had insisted on splitting the land crosswise and drawing a lottery to see who would take which piece.

As Desta stared at the lush foliage, though, he wondered how much of the forest would remain once his brothers cut the trees down and converted the land into farms like his father had done on this side of the creek. While standing there contemplating his brothers' dreams, which he knew would become a reality, he thought of his own unfulfilled dreams—dreams he had thought would be within his grasp after his seventh birthday, now receding from him like a mirage.

Desta sighed. The years he had waited and the excitement he felt the last few days anticipating the arrival of this special day had all been for nothing. Then he remembered his fantasies. Desta used to imagine himself traveling up the mountains on a sunny day, walking along the ridges and letting the wind from the eye of the needle flutter his gabi around his legs, filling his nose and lungs with fresh scents of the plants that grew on the peaks.

He would bring his face and hands close to the sky and study its texture, feel it with his fingers. And he envisioned himself sitting with his back against the sky and looking toward his home to see if it was visible from where he sat. Now that he wouldn't be able to do these things any time soon, his eyes fluttered and he had a lump in his throat.

He snapped a twig from the nearby bush, stripped its leaves off and sat on his heels.

He had seen his brother Damtew scratch a hole in the ground with a tip of a stick whenever something bothered him. Desta wanted to think about his own fate and what the future might hold.

He parted the grass, removed a flat rock, and poked the dirt with his stick.

Besides his unfulfilled dreams, what saddened Desta the most was that only Hibist and his mother cared to listen or offered to take him up on the mountains. To the others, going on such a trip was silly. Desta's eyes brimmed. His throat constricted and he felt sick in his heart.

And then there were those damning things his mother and Damtew used to say about him when he was little. Although Desta couldn't hear or talk for the first year of his life, he could hear and speak like a grown-up after his second birthday. People flocked from far and wide to see and hear him talk.

"Oh, he is just possessed by *Saytan*—Satan," Ayénat would say, dismissing Desta's unusual nature.

"He is just a mistake—that's all," Damtew would sing, echoing his mother.

"No, he is just an unusual boy who has a remarkable gift for words. Who knows what else!" Abraham would say, smiling at Desta.

"What else could cause a baby to talk like this. . . ? Oh my. . . oh my," the women would say in unison, tapping their chests.

The men just gazed and shook their heads.

But after they all left, Desta remembered feeling empty and strange. The more he felt that way, the more withdrawn he became, until finally his father put a stop to the visitors.

A few years later Desta thought the reason Damtew enjoyed ridiculing him was probably because he didn't have Desta's verbal gifts. Damtew must have felt inferior to his little brother. The only way he could preserve his own self-worth was by belittling him. The revelation consoled Desta.

The hole he was digging had gotten deeper and longer, like a small trench. He now began to stab and knock the soil from its walls.

He refocused his thoughts. Over time, he felt less important than his siblings. Damtew would remind Desta that he was not his equal because he didn't stay the nine months in womb, as if saying that Desta were not a full human being.

Desta remembered asking his mother if she could put him back in her womb so he could stay there two more months. When she told him she couldn't, he felt miserable. Later, his big brother even told Desta his desire to go the mountain proved that he was not normal.

When Desta thought about all these things, his isolation and now his unfulfilled

dream, his tears began to overflow. He tipped his head and they fell directly into the trench he was digging, soaking the soil.

He heard a noise, like someone walking across dry leaves or snapping a twig. He lifted his tear-streaked face to look. A white silhouette of a person flashed before him and vanished. Desta didn't know what to think. He was not even sure he had seen anything, but the transformation within him was remarkable. He felt cleansed, relieved of his burden and his mind felt clear. He wiped off his tears, sat back, folded and crossed his legs and looked around. Nothing about him was out of the ordinary.

He gazed toward the eastern mountains for a long time. His clear and happy state of mind allowed him to think of the good times he spent in his childhood.

IN THIS WORLD where beauty came in so many colors, shapes, features, and sizes of people and animals; of birds, insects, and plants; of low land and mountains, of clouds and of sky, of day and night, Desta, alone in thought—but in the company of his dog—unbothered by anyone, had lived mostly a life of dreams. So much of what he saw, imagined, and heard made him who he became as a boy then, and now as a man-to-be.

As a little boy, during the rainy season of June to August, Desta loved to watch the clouds gather above the eastern peaks. He perched on the threshold of his home and observed the unfolding events with piqued interest. Their changing movement, mood, and configuration fascinated him.

During those times above the eastern horizon he saw—or imagined—a multitude of creatures form and come alive. Braying donkeys charged at top speeds, teeth gleaming, eyes bulging, ears and hair brushed back by the ferocious wind. Trees became cows, horses took on ponderous human forms, wading birds grew into tall devouring monsters. One cloud stretched its arms and touched the ridge as if gripping the mountain or picking up a boulder, enthraling Desta. Another cloud rested its feet on the shoulder of the mountain and pushed itself forward into space how a snake might erect its head seeking prey. Desta thought this was incredible.

Not too long afterward, the clouds crossed the Davola River, driven by a powerful wind. They floated above his home, black and ominous, swallowing first the sun and then the entire sky—turning day to night. As the rain fell in sheets, he dashed inside to the warm comforts of home.

Desta closed his eyes and shuddered, wondering what it would be like to be in the open field when such a storm occurred. That's exactly where he would be when put in charge of herding the animals, with just a skimpy *gessa*—a hooded cape made of pulpy

grass—or a tree for cover when rain fell like that or when the day turned into night.

After he recovered from his imagined horror, Desta opened his eyes and thought of the spring season. September to November brought wildflowers. During this time, Desta and Hibist would go to the hillsides gathering flowers. They made garlands, festooning the blossoms under the fillets of vine skins that wove around a circlet of bunched grass, and placed them on their heads. So adorned, they went chasing the butterflies, giggling, and whenever one eluded their grasp, they tripped and fell.

It was during one of these escapades when Desta learned what it meant to be Christian and consequently became the inheritor of Hibist's treasured beads. She'd noticed he didn't have a single cord around his neck, which she declared was a symbol of *Islam*. "A Christian person," she had said, "should have something around his neck, even a simple cord." She explained that if the cord was broken or lost, they needed to quickly pick a long and flexible straw and place it around their neck until they could replace it with something more substantial. She pulled a supple long green straw, put it around his neck and tied it. When they got home that day, she retrieved her old beads and put them around Desta's neck, tying them tightly so they wouldn't come undone. She had wanted to save him from becoming Islamic again. Desta never understood what Islam meant, except that when he had nothing on his neck, he was Islamic and when he had a cord around his neck, he was Christian.

Desta grinned and gazed down at his feet. He was sorry he would no longer share such experiences with Hibist once he became a sheep and cow herder.

Then he thought of his love affair with the sun. Every morning, he woke half an hour before the sunlight reached his home. He'd go outside and sit on the fence to wait for it to come down from the mountaintop. His dog Kooli curled beneath his dangling feet. Once the sunlight reached him and began to warm the air, Desta would stretch his arms and smile, but once the heat began to cloy, he would hop from his perch and go inside with Kooli in tow.

During the day Desta sometimes lay on his back with his hands over his face and stared at the sun through his fingers, defying his mother's warnings that it might burn his eyes. At other times, he sat under a tree and thought about the sky and the mountains, and everything on them, places he hoped to travel to, other children he hoped to meet and befriend—all within his world, of course.

Desta grinned once more over the fun he used to have when he had all the free time in the world. Now all this would no longer be, because he was going to be very busy with his daily chores.

He looked up and saw the sun was near the midpoint in the sky. He felt exhausted, happy, and hungry. He held his digging stick between his hands, fashioning them into a steeple. He brought the tips of his fingers to his nose, closed his eyes and thought

of everything good and bad that happened to him once again. When done, he opened his eyes and hands and laid the stick in the trench he created. The stick represented everything that happened to him in his childhood. Shortly after, he pushed back the soil with the flat rock, covering and burying the stick completely. Then Desta rose and happily walked home.

FROM THE TIME Abraham had left home that morning, Hibist and Ayénat had worked feverishly, cleaning the house and preparing food. Hibist had swept the living room floor and sprinkled it with freshly cut kettema that Damtew had brought the day before from the banks of the river. She covered the long, pulpy grass with a selection of goatskins and a cowhide, and then she washed the drinking horn and clay cups and arranged them on a woven straw tray.

In the early afternoon, Abraham arrived with a basket of meat covered with dark green false banana leaves. He cut the meat into chunks with his knife and chopped the bones with an ax. He gave Ayénat enough for the dinner party and cut the rest into cubes that would be hung and dried to make beef jerky.

FOR THE CHRISTMAS DINNER, all Desta's brothers and sisters came, except for Saba, her husband, Yihoon, and their daughters Astair and Zen. Although they lived just across the northern creek from Desta's home, they were skipping the festivities that year. Desta had heard that Saba, who had lost her fourth baby a month earlier, was depressed and didn't want to attend a dinner celebrating the birth of baby Jesus. They said she was bitter and angry with God for not listening to her prayers to stop her miscarriages.

Desta remembered when his sister had lost her last baby. It was a weekday, and he had gone to see a new calf born to a milk cow given to Saba and Yihoon by Saba's mother, Azal. This cow was a replacement for the one they had lost six months earlier and was intended to provide supplemental milk for the new baby.

When Desta had arrived on that sad day, Saba was lying by the fire under a pile of clothes, her face turned toward the fire, tears trailing across the bridge of her long nose, and nestling into the folds of the fabric. Her mother was sitting next to her, head bent, hands resting on her daughter's covered body, comforting her. Tears came from her too, in slow periodic trickles that fell onto Saba's coverings. Yihoon didn't cry, but his soft, brown features were shadowed with sadness. Astair and Zena huddled near their grandmother until she instructed Yihoon to take the children outside. He went back into the house and came out again, carrying Saba's lost baby swathed in a cloth. He wrapped the bundled baby with two curled pieces of bark, tied the little casket with string, and took it to the cemetery by the Avinevra church.

Not wishing to see his nieces' sad faces anymore, Desta went home that day. The fun he had thought he would have playing with the newborn calf had turned to sorrow. He felt sorry for Saba and her lost baby.

So now at the Christmas dinner, Desta wouldn't be seeing Saba and Yihoon and Astair and Zena. His only young dinner companion would be his eleven-year-old sister, Hibist.

That night, Desta remembered his own birthday only in the context of Jesus' birthday. As in the past, no one had made even a passing reference to it—even his important coming of age. He was not envious of Jesus or the boy whose family killed a cow in honor of his birthday, nor did he feel sorry for himself.

But he was happy with the time he spent in the morning remembering many of the good times of his childhood. He might be a "mistake" in Damtew's eyes, or "the possessed one" in his mother's view, or "the unusual one" from his father's perspective, but Desta was happy with exactly who he was.

At night, as he clambered into bed, he felt sad for Saba and, once again, thought about the trip he hoped to make to the mountaintop someday. In the past, it was the years that were a barrier to the place of his dreams. Now it was his family. If they failed him again, he would be strong enough to journey on his own one day. Thinking this made him feel wonderful and free. As he closed his eyes, Desta now saw himself romping along the mountain peaks, running his hand over the deep blue surface, and letting the wind that streamed out of the eye of the needle whip his gabi around him.

FOR ABRAHAM, as he crawled into bed that night, it was not the usual Christmas festivities, the killing of the cow, the drinks, the food, and the happy dinner gathering with his children that he thought about; rather, it was his unresolved past.

Ever since the previous morning, as he prepared for Desta's coming-of-age session, and his tender childhood memories came galloping back, Abraham had been ruminating over the events that had snatched his father and the family's coin of magic and fortune from his young life. So much he had been deprived of—the same events that forced his mother to desert her seven hundred acres of flat, loamy land and come to settle in this godforsaken hole—events that shaped Abraham's destiny, identity as a man, a husband, and a father. Incidents that altered the course of not only his life and his sisters' lives, but also the lives of all their progeny. But the last thing that crossed Abraham's mind before he fell asleep was Saba's problems, which he hoped Desta and the spirits would solve.

FOUR

Desta should have been in a funk at best, or angry and mad at worst on this Saturday—the day he had long wanted to travel to the mountaintop. Once again, any such plans had to be postponed. Instead, here he was standing near his father, who, on the sunlit floor by the entrance of their home, was completely absorbed by what was before him. His face grave and thoughtful, he sat on his heels on the floor and arranged black horn and clay drinking cups, pint-size jars of honey, milk, and freshly brewed coffee, and seven stacked miniature coffee cups. A basket of sliced dabo and injera, roasted coffee beans, and a wooden tray also lay on the floor before him. He also had put out two rolled goatskins, one inside the other.

From the conversation he overheard between his parents the night before, Desta figured these things were probably to be used in the spirit work to be done later that morning.

Desta brimmed with questions but thought better of interrupting his father. Instead, he studied his face, and wondered why a woman had recently referred to it as biblical. His chin cut square angles at either side before joining with gently curving high cheek bones that united with a broad and arching structure at the summit. Beneath his brow, on opposite sides of his long, slightly curving nose nestled a pair of piercing brown eyes whose pupils were deep and spiritual, capable of a volley of fire when at war, but kindness and grace at peacetime. Abraham's sensitive, full lips were bound by a bushy mustache that curled around them like cat's whiskers. These markings were bordered with a pair of perfectly spiraled ears and a pile of wooly hair. Desta still couldn't figure out why his father's face was likened to a book. He wondered if he would look like him when he grew up.

It was while both father and son were absorbed in thought that Yihoon and Astair materialized out of thin air. Yihoon, a slight framed man of about five-foot-nine inches, his light brown complexion made darker by worries, barely acknowledged his father-in-law's greeting. Astair, nearly the same age as Desta, was a tomboyish girl with a fair complexion and attractive but not-so-dainty features. "Are you excited to meet the spirits?" she asked the moment she saw Desta.

"I am not sure. Are you?" asked Desta.

“Not particularly. But I would even meet with the Saytan if he had the answer to Mother’s problems.”

“I know what you mean,” Desta said, remembering how his sister had cried when she lost her last baby.

Yihoon stared down at Abraham’s collection, puzzled.

“Deb’tera Tayé ordered us to bring these things for the spirits,” Abraham said, noticing his son-in-law’s quizzical face.

“Hmmm. . . interesting,” mumbled Yihoon, too preoccupied with the impending meeting to say anything else.

Deb’tera Tayé arrived next. Deb’tera was his title and Tayé was his first name. He was a short, stocky man with a dark face, stubby goatee, and inquisitive brown eyes. Abraham and Yihoon greeted the guest with a handshake. The Deb’tera waved a hand at Desta and Astair, who were standing together a few feet away. They waved back hesitantly.

“Is everything ready?” he asked, looking down at Abraham’s neatly arrayed things.

“I think we have everything you wanted us to bring,” replied the host, scanning the items as if to assure himself of what he had.

They gathered the provisions and set off on a path that followed the outside of a wattle fence down to the big cattle field. Deep in thought, Abraham and Yihoon walked with their heads down. The Deb’tera strode with his head up, but he seemed not to want to talk either. Desta and Astair, anxious, didn’t dare speak lest they disturb their solemn fathers.

Desta saw his brother Damtew rise from his perch under the shade of an acacia tree, where he was tending the animals grazing in the field and nibbling in the bushes. Damtew started toward them, but Abraham waved him off.

At the end of the field, the group crossed the creek that bordered Yihoon’s property. They passed a patch of farmland and entered the wooded section of the Davola River. They crossed the river and arrived at a large, spreading warka tree.

About forty feet from the river, Yihoon and Abraham laid the goatskins next to each other and set out the food and drink.

“These things were brought as a reward for the spirits’ goodwill,” whispered the Deb’tera to the children, when he noticed their curious expressions.

Deb’tera Tayé slipped two books off of the hangers suspended from his arms, and placed them on one of the goatskins. From the pockets of his hunter-green jacket he produced a gleaming silver cross, a scroll, a five-inch square clear glass panel and a

white handkerchief, all of which he placed on the goatskin. He then took a seat in the middle of one of the goatskins, leaving the other for his assistants.

The Deb'tera ordered Abraham and Yihoon to stay out of sight and earshot until he was done. Thoughtful and anxious, the two men departed, leaving in their wake the sound of crushing leaves.

For fifteen minutes, Deb'tera Tayé described to Desta and Astair the two types of spirits they might see. The Saytans, he told them, were dark, naked beings with strawberry eyes and grotesque features. The Zars were tall and spindly creatures clad in gauze-like fabric, with frizzy golden hair and humanlike features. Both beings were known to be capricious, and worse, they could make one go mad and behave violently. In talking with these spirits, the children needed to be polite and keep eye contact with them at all times. They should bow when the spirits arrived and when they departed. With this introduction, the sorcerer ordered Astair to be seated and told Desta to go away until he was called.

Desta sat under a canopying tree thirty feet away where he had a clear view of the Deb'tera and Astair from behind. Although he wouldn't hear them, he wanted to see what they would do and watch the spirits as they arrived. The idea that this place could soon be full of strange beings frightened him. As the session got going, he occasionally peered around, checking for lurking spirits.

After nearly twenty minutes of reading, chanting, turning, and talking, Astair's session was over. She was visibly confused and disappointed when she came to fetch Desta.

"What happened?" Desta asked.

"I didn't see anything," Astair said, nearly in tears. "I think these creatures just didn't want to be revealed to me. I was so looking forward to asking them about my ma's problems."

Desta didn't know what to say. He gazed at his niece, wondering if he would not see any spirits either.

She urged him to go with a slight push on his shoulder. "Maybe you will be lucky," she said, watching him shuffle across the dead leaves.

The Deb'tera also appeared disappointed as Desta took Astair's place on the goatskin. Desta noticed that the Bible and the silver cross were placed between the Deb'tera and himself. The scroll was partially unfurled and laid out to the right of the sorcerer. In his lap the sorcerer had propped open the second book.

The Deb'tera handed Desta the glass panel to hold up on its edges in the white handkerchief. He rested his hand on his knee and gazed into the glass. He was eager and nervous.

With everything set, Deb'tera Tayé hunched his back and began to read from the book. Desta felt increasingly uneasy as he stared into the glass. He began to fidget. When he thought of the creatures the Deb'tera had described and what they could do to people, his fingers grew sweaty and his heart raced.

“Relax, Desta. Nothing will happen to you. We are protected,” Deb'tera said with a toss of his chin to the Bible and the silver cross.

Desta glanced at them to reassure himself.

By degree, the scent of decaying leaves, the forest, and the fig-like fruit of the warka soothed Desta's senses. The sibilant sound of the river, the Deb'tera's hushed, monotone reading, and the turning of pages helped ease him also.

He thought about the trip to the mountaintop he hoped to make soon. He also considered his career as a shepherd and all the things his father had told him he must do as a young adult.

“Any movements?” the Deb'tera asked, glancing at Desta after he read for a few more minutes.

Desta shook his head, keeping his eyes fixed on the glass. The longer he saw nothing, the more unlikely it seemed that any creatures would actually reveal themselves. He began to wonder if they even existed.

After about twenty minutes, the Deb'tera finished reading the book. He turned to Desta once again and asked, “Anything at all?” He sounded exasperated and a little desperate.

“Nothing,” Desta said. As much as he feared seeing the spirits, now he was disillusioned.

The Deb'tera closed the book and put it aside. He presently chanted from the scroll.

Desta gazed into the glass now almost absentmindedly. But right after the Deb'tera started to chant, he noticed the air begin to stir. It jerked him back to alertness.

After a while, the whirling air produced a gray mist. This was followed by a thicker, white cloud, which gradually took on the appearance of a man. Desta's heart raced and his hand that held the glass shook.

“Something happening?” Deb'tera asked excitedly.

“Yes, I see a strange. . . . cloud-like man before me. But he is not anything like the kind of spirits you described,” Desta whispered. He leaned toward the Deb'tera while he kept an eye on the creature in the glass.

“Cloud-like?!” the sorcerer asked, screwing up his face and dropping the scroll.

“Yes. . . . with a yellow light around him. Also, many brown dots all over his body,” Desta said.

“We have never seen anything like this before, child! . . . No matter, let's just hope

that he can answer our question.” Deb’tera Tayé fumbled for his scroll and brought his face close to Desta’s ear. “What is he doing now?”

“He’s staring at me but not in a bad way. . . . He just sat down and turned into a mass of cotton with just his head poking out,” Desta said, transfixed.

“Keep your eyes on him. He may speak,” the Deb’tera said nervously.

“He just moved his head as if to say something,” Desta said in a low voice.

“Good!” said the Deb’tera, pleased. “Ask him why Saba continues to lose her babies and why her animals have been dying.”

Desta repeated the question.

“Well, young one,” the apparition said, raising his neck a little like a hen. “The family and their animals inhabit a place where bad things happened to someone a long time ago. They need to move. Things will be normal again for them then; a healthy boy will be born within two years.” The man gazed at Desta with cone-shaped, spotted eyes.

After a string of further questions, Desta and Deb’tera Tayé learned that Saba and Yihoon’s problems were caused by a loss of family heirloom. To Desta’s surprise, they were told that the same item was also responsible for Desta’s many problems, including his premature birth and early trouble hearing and speaking—and had caused trouble for Abraham, too.

Soon after these revelations, the cloud man vanished. Desta dropped the glass on his lap, bit his lip and looked away, baffled and afraid.

Deb’tera Tayé held the unfurled scroll in one hand while he stroked his bushy goatee with the other, mystified. “What problems do you have?” the sorcerer said finally, turning to Desta.

“I don’t know what they all are,” Desta said. “I can tell you those I know sometime, if you will help me meet this man again. I’ve a lot of questions to ask him.”

“You’ll have to tell your father what the problems are first, and then perhaps we can arrange another meeting,” the Deb’tera said, still caressing his goatee.

“But my father won’t listen to me,” Desta said.

“Please go get your father, Astair, and Yihoon now,” urged the sorcerer. “I’ll see what we can do with your problems.”

After the three arrived and sat down, Deb’tera Tayé told them what the man had said.

Yihoon knotted his brow and listened intently as the Deb’tera related the cloud man’s revelations. That Saba could carry a baby to full term was great news, but he frowned at the idea that they had to move. He nervously twirled the fringe of his gabi. “What if we decide not to have a child?” Yihoon said, turning to the Deb’tera.

“He said you have to move, no matter what. The situation could get worse if you don’t. He has given you many warning signs.”

“Yes,” Desta added. “The reason your animals have died, and your crops have failed is because he doesn’t want you there.”

“Did he say anything else?” Abraham asked, craning his long neck toward Tayé. “The session seemed rather short.”

“Well, the answer was very short and simple,” Deb’tera Tayé said.

“Actually, he did say something else,” Desta volunteered nervously.

“What else did he say?” his father asked.

“He said he knows all about you and me and our problems,” Desta said. “He also said that all the problems have something to do with a missing item.”

“Missing item?” asked Abraham, puckering his brow.

“Yes!” Deb’tera Tayé said, glancing at Abraham. “It appears you have more problems on your hands than you thought. If you wish to find out the answers, we should arrange another meeting with the cloud man.”

“No. Let’s just focus on Yihoon and Saba’s problems for now,” Abraham replied. “How much do I owe you for your service?”

Abraham buried a hand underneath his gabi and dug around in his chest pocket for a few seconds. The hand re-emerged with a short, cylindrical object rolled in a piece of old cotton cloth. He carefully unwound the cloth with one hand while holding the object in the palm of the other.

“You don’t have to pay me now,” the Deb’tera said. “But if you insist, my fee is five shillings, as we discussed.”

Yihoon’s face crinkled. Desta, whose knowledge of money was extremely limited, thought five shillings was a lot, too.

To everyone’s surprise, Abraham instead counted out seven silver shillings and handed them to the Deb’tera.

Deb’tera Tayé’s brow pulled and tightened, and his big eyes grew puzzled. A bemused smile spread across his face. The sorcerer hesitated, and then accepted the money.

“I think you misheard the Deb’tera,” Yihoon said, glancing at his father-in-law.

“I heard him,” Abraham said. “If this is going to work, we’ll have to do it this way.”

“Thank you for your generosity,” Deb’tera Tayé said, smiling. He quickly put the windfall in his pocket, as if he thought the father might change his mind.

Desta’s jaw hung open. His father wouldn’t give him two shillings to buy a shirt! Here he had just given away the same amount.

Yihoon shook his head.

“It’s getting dark,” Abraham said. “Let’s go home and break the news.”

Everyone set off for home, leaving the food and drink behind for the spirits. Desta placed the rolled-up goatskin over his shoulder and walked behind the three men with Astair. His niece tried to hear what the men were discussing, but Desta only half-listened. His mind was busy mulling over the spirit, the things he had heard in the ceremony, and the curious generosity of his father.

Why had his father given the Deb’tera seven coins? His mother always did things in threes because of her three confusing gods. Did his Baba have seven gods? He never prayed to them the way his mother did to hers.

Desta had often seen his father do things in sevens, particularly when he counted his shillings and silver dollars. He would count to seven, stop, and stack them on his bench. His father seemed so enamored with that number that it made Desta just a bit jealous for his attention.

FIVE

When Abraham rose the morning following the spirit work, he found himself thinking about the missing item the cloud man had linked to his daughter's problems. He had been surprised by this revelation and was curious what the item might be.

He could think of two possibilities. There was the ancient family coin that had vanished without a trace more than forty years before. The empty coin box left behind had been the only reminder of the missing treasure.

And then there was a gold Italian pocket watch that had been missing for two years. Since the cloud man had not been specific, either item could be the culprit—assuming Abraham accepted this strange claim. Complicating matters, the sorcerer had indicated that Saba and Yihoon could solve their problems by moving away. Abraham shook his head, baffled. He needed private time to think through the riddle.

He washed his hands and face with water from a bowl Hibist brought to him. He put on his khaki breeches, a long cream-colored shirt and a gray wool jacket, over which he draped his white cotton gabi. He collected his walking stick from the side of the mill room and prepared to leave for church.

He set out on the path that went around the wattled fence of the potato and collard green garden and down the north side of the cattle field. The sun was barely clear of the mountain peak. The air was cool, the sky cloudless.

With his aquiline nose down and his big brown eyes on the path, Abraham kept his mind busy with Desta's claims from the day before. To make sense of them, he needed to examine the history of the two items.

The ancient family heirloom was lost when Abraham was seven; Abraham had collected the gold pocket watch in 1937 from the first Italian soldier he had shot. It happened at a battle just twenty miles from home, near Mount Wendegez. The recoil of the gun chipped his right canine tooth, but the moment he saw the shiny old timepiece, he forgot about that. It reminded him of his family's lost coin, and he fell in love with it. Like the coin, the watch had inscriptions on both sides. Abraham believed it too must be an heirloom with special powers.

For nearly fifteen years, the watch helped with his anger, resentment, and yearning

for the coin, but it too was missing. Abraham had been troubled by its loss when Saba and Yihoon had their second miscarriage and their animals began dying in great numbers. For the following year, he had been busy searching for a solution to their problems, and had not looked for the missing watch. But now the cloud man's hint of a missing item had brought back the memory and meaning of the watch to him.

He had left the trail that came down from his property and was walking on the main caravan route, going north along the Davola River. The birds chirped in the trees. The ebbing water gurgled around stones and down granite slabs and was a comfort to him. The sun had cleared the mountains but was still a long way from reaching the bottom of the valley.

Because it was Sunday, the caravan route was quiet. And being early in the day, there were no cows, sheep, or goats grazing in the fields. Abraham felt he had the world to himself. It was perfect for contemplation.

After lengthy thought, he concluded that the cause of Saba and Yihoon's problems, if he could believe the cloud man's claim, had to be the gold watch. The family coin couldn't be the answer; it was lost so long ago and far away from where they now lived, and in the forty years it was missing, his family had never had any problems like this.

Although he was at a loss to why Saba and Yihoon's move would solve their problems, he believed the cloud man himself could be the ghost of the dead Italian soldier, who caused problems for his beloved daughter to torment him. *The timing couldn't be a coincidence*, he thought, recalling the severity of Saba and Yihoon's misfortunes after the watch's disappearance.

Then there was the other issue. Where would he move the family?

Ten years ago, Abraham had brought his family to the west side of the valley and claimed three strips of property, totaling about seven hundred acres, separated by deep running creeks, hoping his growing family would have a comfortable place to live. He built his home on the middle property and earmarked the ones to the north and south for his four male children, two sons for each; his daughter's needs would be met by her in-laws.

But five years after they moved, Abraham's mother died, leaving all her land on the valley's east side to her oldest grandson, Teferra, who had farmed her land and lived with her. As a result, Abraham gave the land he'd intended for his sons Teferra and Tamirat—who'd decided to join the priesthood—to Saba and her family, who lived fifty miles away. The land to the north was put aside for Asse'ged and Damtew, his second and fourth sons, respectively.

Now to realize the cloud man's solution for his daughter's problems, he could only

move Saba's family to the property intended for Asse'ged and Damtew. Asse'ged, older than Damtew and married, could, by seniority, share the property with Saba and her family, but Damtew would then have no place to settle.

Then there were other issues. Much of the northern property was covered with a dense forest full of birds and wild animals. The forest had been a good source of firewood and building material, as well as game. Also, the governor had been encouraging the farmers in Abraham's district to conserve forested land.

Still, his daughter's needs were urgent, not least because they had only five months before the rainy season in June. If they didn't move soon, they would have to wait a full year, because of the time needed to farm and harvest before they could clear new land and build a home.

These reflections, instead of calming him, sent his brain on an endless loop, his thoughts ricocheting from the missing items to the cloud man and his confusing message, to relocating Saba's family, and back to the lost items. In the end, he gave up trying to find a clear answer. The man's suggestion that his daughter's problems would be solved once her family moved was good enough. Abraham would have to find them a new place to live and hope that the promise of better times would be fulfilled.

A side trail took him north toward the Avinevra church. After passing a cluster of houses, crossing a deep-running creek, and climbing a hilly terrain, he arrived at the wooded church.

At the stone-walled gatehouse of the church, he crossed himself three times and repeated the act with his lips and forehead on the doorjamb. He retreated to a tree on the other side of the path, leaned against it, and prayed for God to put him on a course that would one day unravel the mysteries that had long plagued his family.

SIX

The morning after the session with Deb'tera Tayé, Desta awoke with thoughts of the cloud man. He wondered why the man was not made of flesh and bone and why he didn't resemble the Saytans or Zars the Deb'tera had described. Why this spirit was revealed only to Desta and not to Astair was another mystery.

And why did this cloud of a man come by himself? Deb'tera Tayé had said that other spirits came in groups. The man Desta saw had not come with a wife or other relatives. Did that mean he had no family? Even Deb'tera Tayé had said he was surprised by these things. Desta regretted not asking the being these questions. More importantly, why hadn't he asked him to help him find a way to the mountaintop? Just then Desta realized he had not yet asked Ayénat if she would keep her promise to take him to the place of his dreams.

He peeled off the heavier layer of his gabi and climbed down the platform bed.

"Mama, can you take me to the mountaintop after you've returned from church?" Desta asked.

His mother was scurrying around in the back room, preparing *mekleft*—the bread churchgoers used to break their fast after the service. "No, son. I will be too tired to go climb a mountain after church. Some other time maybe," she said without looking up.

Desta was disappointed. After years promising she would take him when he turned seven, now she wouldn't even give him a definite answer. *Some other time* felt hollow and uncaring.

"But you told me you'd take me once I turned seven," he protested, knotting his brow.

"Yes, but these mountains are merciless," Ayénat said, fixing him with her small, stern eyes. "If you became exhausted halfway there, I would not be strong enough to carry you back. We need to wait until you get a little bigger."

Her tone told Desta anything more he said would be pointless. He walked away feeling as miserable as a wet chicken. Now he had nothing definite to look forward to. In the past, all he had dreamed about was turning seven and going to the mountaintop.

Ayénat left for church. Desta's older brother, Damtew, had gone to the field with the animals. Hibist had returned from milking the cows.

"Hibist, do you think you and I can go to the top of the mountain so I can touch the sky?" Desta asked, standing by the fire pit in the living room.

"First of all, Mother is not here, and I have many things to do," Hibist said. "Secondly, I think Mother said that you should wait for another year or two before you make the trip because it's hard to climb these mountains. She hopes after you become a full-fledged shepherd in another three months or so, you'll forget about your crazy idea to touch the sky because. . . ." Hibist trailed off.

"Because. . . why?" Desta demanded, crinkling his brow.

"Because your trip to the mountaintop will be a lot more rewarding for you when you are better prepared to make it," his sister said. "Even if you made it up there right now, you'd be so exhausted that you wouldn't really enjoy your time." Hibist caressed Desta's woolly hair with both hands as she spoke.

"Then why did Mama promise to take me when I turned seven?" Desta asked, pursing his lips.

"I think it was probably her way of buying time," Hibist said as she massaged Desta's head. "So, you wouldn't pester her every day with the same question! I think she also felt you might have outgrown your dream by now. Since you have not let up, I am sure she will take you when she has the time and feels you can manage the trek. What I want to know is why you are so obsessed with touching the sky?"

Desta felt good being caressed, spoken to, and loved by his sister. His parents never even listened properly to anything he said or asked.

"The sky just seems so much bigger than the earth. I want to know what it's like to be near it," Desta said, twirling the fringes of Hibist's girdle. "I long to know how that soft deep blue color feels."

He sighed. "I also want to see the holes that the rain and clouds come from. It would be wonderful to see God's land through them. But most of all, I wish to know what it is like to be in the most remote place on earth. As you know, I have never even been across the Davola River."

"Hmmm, you must have been thinking about this for a long time to have such a clear set of reasons," Hibist said, grinning.

"Of course I have. This is all I've dreamed of every day," Desta said, his eyes fixed on his sister's face. "And you know this would have been the greatest birthday gift I could have received from Ma. But nobody even mentioned my birthday. It was all

about Christmas. I guess it was my bad luck to have been born on that day!” Desta said, choking up a little.

“I know. . . . I just wish I had the power to take you up there myself,” Hibist said as she continued to stroke his head. “To Ma, going on such a long trip is a waste of time. And she would worry about our safety.”

Desta turned his face away, focusing on the pool of sunlight by the entrance of their home. His thoughts of birthday gifts brought back a faded dream he had had the night of his seventh birthday. He struggled to reconstruct the details.

Hibist glanced at Desta’s dreamy face. “What are you thinking?” she asked.

“You know what?” he said suddenly, pulling away from his sister.

Hibist screwed up her face, surprised by the abrupt change in Desta’s mood.

“All this talk is making me depressed,” Desta said, turning toward the door. “I need to go out.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I want to be with the monkeys for a while.”

“They are your water, eh?” Hibist joked, smiling.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Father always goes by the creek or the river and sits there listening to the water whenever he feels out of sorts. You like to be with the monkeys.”

“After Kooli, they are my most soothing companions,” Desta said, attempting to tease her.

“I don’t count?” Hibist said, flaring her big eyes and faking a frown.

“You are neither a dog nor a monkey—you are my sister and I love you,” Desta said, showing his evenly set white teeth.

“You always have a clever way of mending things, don’t you?” Hibist said, smiling. “I was just teasing. But don’t you want to eat something before you go?”

“I don’t feel like eating. I’ll see you in a little while,” Desta called out as he left her. On his way to the door, he filled his cloth pouch with grain from the mill room.

Hibist followed him out and stood on the threshold. Kooli, who had been napping in his usual spot under the fence a few yards away, raised his sleepy head when Desta came over and sat on his habitual perch on the fence. Kooli came and stood next to Desta.

“You didn’t have a birthday gift either, did you?” Desta said, bending over to pet him.

Kooli was staring back at Hibist, who usually fed him breakfast.

“Talk to me, Kooli,” Desta pleaded. He brushed off the bits of straw from Kooli’s back.

“You know we were born nearly the same time,” Desta continued. “Baba brought

you into my life to be my companion, Kooli. Now would you like to accompany me to the top of the mountain so we can touch the sky together?"

"Desta, you can be very strange sometimes," Hibist chuckled. "Do you think Kooli even understands what you are saying to him?"

"You don't understand," Desta said, looking up at his sister, who was still standing on the doorstep. "This is just my parting talk with Kooli. I know he would like to come with me, but I can't take him to visit the monkeys. They are not comfortable with him. Can you take him inside and give him some food, Hibist? I am sure he is hungry," Desta said as he stood up.

"If you don't return soon, I'll give your food to him too," Hibist said, winking at Desta.

"I don't mind. Kooli deserves to eat all he can get. He never breaks his promises. He is loyal and loves me," Desta said, fighting off tears.

"You better go then. . . . If you stay here any longer, you're going to cry your eyes out," Hibist said with a light push on Desta's back.

She grabbed Kooli by the scruff of his neck and pulled him toward the door. The dog struggled to free himself, keeping an eye on Desta as Hibist dragged him inside.

Desta waved at Kooli and his sister and left. He crossed the sloping, fallow land behind his home and stood at the edge of the forest. He looked for the vervet monkeys. On the trees along the creeks, he saw the luxuriant white, motionless tails of the colobus monkeys. *This is a good sign*, thought Desta. When the colobus were around, their feisty neighbors, the vervets, were usually lurking nearby.

"Tottas! Tottas! Tottas!" he shouted, trying to make his presence known to them. It had taken Desta an entire year of diligent courting to become friends with the vervets. Now all he needed to do was call them and they came hopping from tree to tree.

Desta knew that the aloof colobus rarely came down to the ground in his presence, no matter how much he tempted them with a fistful of grain. He also knew that both monkey species had long been persecuted by humans; the vervet for raiding crop fields, the colobus for being beautiful. The plush black-and-white pelts of the colobus were prized and hunters shot this monkey in staggering numbers. Their greatest threat was actually Desta's oldest brother, Teferra.

As Desta shouted and scanned the trees along the forest, he noticed some green foliage stir in the distant woods. He focused his attention in the direction of those trees until he saw the silver-gray tails of the vervets.

They must've heard me, Desta thought cheerfully. The vervets slowly made their way toward him as he called. Once they reached him, they perched on the nearby branches and surveyed their surroundings.

Desta took pinches of grain and tossed them in the air.

“Come and get it!” he shouted in their direction. He saw them flicker their eyes and tilt their heads as they watched the grain fall to the ground. One or two yawned, then closed their mouths with loud snaps.

Desta knew it was only a matter of time. He settled himself on the nearest rock and intermittently tossed more grain. Eventually, some of the vervets descended from their branches. These were the bigger, fatter alpha males. When they had collected their share and were eating peacefully, the females and their babies took their cue and scurried to the remains. The females with babies eyed Desta warily while they picked up the scattered kernels. Once they had finished eating, some sat where the grain had fallen, apparently waiting for more. Others paced the field, hunting for any missed kernels. This was a familiar routine.

Desta knew he was now in control. The monkeys were not as skittish as they sometimes could be.

“I know it’s been over a month since all the grain was harvested from the field. You probably have not had any barley or wheat or rye for at least that long,” Desta said to them as he scooped out some and scattered it around him.

All the monkeys—he counted twelve—came rushing over. The bright blue hair between the males’ hind legs reminded him of the sky.

“Hey, have you ever gone to the mountaintops to touch the sky?” Desta asked one of the large males near him. The monkey was busy eating. He didn’t even turn his head.

Once again, the monkeys sat and watched Desta after they had finished eating the second course. He gladly scooped out more grain and scattered it near him. Desta was enjoying himself as he watched the excited monkeys. He even held out his fist to encourage them to come pry it open and get the grain it held. He smiled and laughed outright as he watched some baby monkeys fight over a single kernel. The male monkeys rolled over rocks to get to the grains that fell in the cracks. Desta was completely at peace here with friends.

He dispensed the last batches of grain from his pouch. Watching the vervets eat so greedily had made him hungry.

“Now you go back to your trees,” he commanded the monkeys. The animals still eyed him, silently pleading for food.

“I have no more,” Desta laughed, gently shaking the pouch upside down in front of him to show his friends he wasn’t lying.

Desta walked home happy. The monkeys always had this affect on him.

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, Desta was at home reposing on the grass, thinking about the cloud man when he saw Astair and Zena running toward him.

“We have been meaning to come and talk to you, Desta, since that Saturday with the Deb’tera, but our parents wouldn’t allow us to come across the creek,” panted Astair, trying to catch her breath. “They think you might be a bad influence on us.”

“If they think I’m a bad influence, how did you manage to come today?”

“They’ve gone to visit friends across the river. Our grandmother, who is with us now, permitted us to go play. We ran straight over to ask you about that man you claimed to see in the glass.”

“I wanted to talk about what happened with you and the Deb’tera too,” Desta said in a low voice.

“First of all, did you really see anyone?” Astair asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Yes, I did.”

“What did he look like?” Astair’s eyes now were mere slits.

“He was cloud-like, with brown dots all over his body and he had a golden glow around him. He was very tall.”

“You are lying!” cried Astair, stabbing the air with her index finger.

“No, I am not!” Desta said.

“My mother thinks you are lying because the Saytan caused her to not carry her babies to term, not the type of creature you described. The Saytan has long, sharp teeth and a pair of horns on its head,” Astair said, staring intensely at Desta.

At a loss for words, Desta looked away at the grazing cattle.

Astair continued. “You also said that this Saytan—man, or whatever, came out of nowhere. Father and Grandpa chose that spot under the warka tree because it was close to where the river has carved a pool into the embankment. The Saytan lives in such waters. Right there is more proof that you made him up. And you said that man warned us to move from the place where we have lived for almost four years. You’re cruel, do you know that?”

“Astair, the man I talked to didn’t come out of the water. He came from the air, and I certainly didn’t make up him or what he said about moving,” Desta said calmly.

“I have an even stronger reason to believe you are lying,” insisted his niece, shaking her head.

“And what is that?”

“My father said the reason we were chosen was because the Saytan is revealed to boys and girls who are virgins—and you are not one!” shouted the girl triumphantly.

Desta looked confused.

“What on earth are you talking about, Astair?” he cried, rising to face both girls squarely.

“Remember a year ago, when we were playing grown-ups by the woods near our home? We built houses, held weddings, made babies, then raised them. And as a mother of Zena, I married her off to you. You and she went away to your house and made babies.”

“That’s true,” confirmed Zena, her cool eyes on him.

“But we really didn’t do anything like. . . .” Desta began to say, trailing off as a memory of his parents came to him. He closed his eyes and saw in his mind’s eye an old image of one of Abraham and Ayénat’s intimate bedtime scenes. He used to sleep next to them and had heard everything.

Returning to the present, Desta opened his eyes and yelled, “It was not like that!”

“What was not like that?” demanded Astair.

With his left hand, Desta made a circle with his thumb and index finger. Then he inserted his right index finger into the circle and slowly moved it in and out. “It was not like this.”

Bringing his two index fingers together, Desta continued. “It was only like this. That was exactly what happened between your sister and me when you married us last year.”

“It doesn’t matter, it’s all the same!” Astair shrieked.

Zena tightened her lips and moved her head up and down, concurring with her big sister’s assertions.

“Let’s go. Grandma will wonder where we have gone,” Zena said, pulling on Astair’s sleeve.

“Look,” Astair said coolly, needling Desta’s bare chest with her index finger. “You and I both know that you saw no one in that glass, man or spirit. You imagined this man and made up what he told you just to make life even harder for me, my sister, and our parents, as you have done to your parents, brothers, and sisters. I hope somebody takes you away from this place so we can all live in peace.” She finished her tirade with a shove of such force that Desta fell violently and gashed his bare thigh. The two girls took off, turning around now and then to see if Desta would chase after them.

But Desta didn’t rise. He was in excruciating pain. Lying where he fell, he thought about what his nieces had said. Instead of being thanked for helping solve Saba’s problem, he was being blamed for making things worse.

What worried him even more was that his nieces’ accusations would now spread quickly among the rest of his family and he would be further disliked by everyone. The last thing he wanted was to be even more alienated from his family.

Blood curdled and covered his gash and his pain lessened gradually. Finally, he staggered to his feet and walked home. He needed to sleep and forget about his problems.

SEVEN

One February evening, Desta was sitting by the fire across from his mother when his father returned from a long meeting at church. Ayénat had told Desta that whenever his father arrived late on a Sunday afternoon, it usually meant he was settling disputes or problems for the parishioners.

Abraham went to the bedroom, removed his long white shirt, khaki breeches, and a matching coat, and re-emerged in his gabi. He came and sat next to Desta on his long wooden bench. Abraham pulled one corner of the gabi between his legs, over his front, and tucked it at the groin to serve as an undergarment. Hibist brought a tumbler of tella and handed it to him as soon as he sat down.

Ayéat, sat on a round wooden stool baking injera on a circular clay pan, roughly eighteen inches across. The pan was supported by three small, stout stones that rose from the ashes like ancient monuments. Hibist was preparing dinner sauces in the main kitchen across the parapet from where Ayénat sat.

Shortly after, Yihoon announced his arrival. Both Abraham and Ayénat greeted him and invited him to sit down. Hibist brought him a goatskin to sit on and a tumbler of tella.

Yihoon drew two sips from his tella, set it aside, and wrapped his hands around his knees. “Saba and I have seriously discussed moving, but we don’t really have a place to go. I came to see if you had a suggestion,” he said, turning to his father-in-law.

Abraham dropped his chin and glanced at Yihoon. “I have been thinking about it too. Unfortunately, we don’t have any other land for you. My mother’s death made it possible for you to settle on your current property. As you know, our other lands have long been earmarked for Asse’ged and Damtew.” Abraham stroked his goatee thoughtfully and stared into the fire.

“I know,” Yihoon said. “But going back to our former property in Goota is not an option. My brothers settled their own families there after we moved away. We truly are in trouble now. We can’t continue to live where we are, not after what that spirit said to Desta.”

“I understand. It may, indeed, be a good idea to move. But where would you

go?” Abraham continued to stroke his goatee. “It’s a shame you have to leave, but then you have faced problems ever since you arrived.”

“We were hoping you would give us permission to move across the other creek,” Yihoon said quietly.

Abraham looked at him, surprised. “But that land has been promised to Asse’ged and Damtew. And we cannot continue to destroy the forest, or we’ll run out of the wood we need to live.”

Yihoon stirred in his seat and pressed his lips as if searching for the right answer.

Before either of them spoke again, Desta’s brother Damtew walked in behind three male goats. These were Abraham’s mookits. Their testicles had been pounded into a pulp to stop them from wasting their energy chasing females. Damtew drove the goats to their stall in the back room and went out.

“Tell us, Desta,” Abraham said. “Did you really see that man when you were with the Deb’tera?”

“Yes, I did,” Desta said in a meek voice.

Yihoon watched Desta keenly.

“He said Astair’s mother and father and all the animals need to move. If they don’t, the animals will keep dying, and Saba will keep losing her babies,” Desta said, at a hurried pace as if he had memorized the words.

Abraham’s eyes shuttled from Desta to Yihoon, then back to Desta.

His mother peered at him circumspectly. “Who did he say he was?” she asked.

“He didn’t tell me. But he was cloud-like with brown dots and a golden glow all over him,” Desta replied.

“He must be a Saytan, but the Saytan is not cloud-like, nor does he have brown spots,” Ayénat said with a perplexed look.

Desta shrugged.

“It does not matter who he was,” Abraham said. He turned to Desta. “Before it gets too dark, why don’t you go and bring the horses in?”

Desta had been watching his mother, hoping she would give him a piece of the freshly baked injera. He had not eaten all day except two wedges of bread and a tumbler of milk he’d had for breakfast.

“Go get the horses first. We’ll have dinner as soon as all the animals are in,” she said.

“Well, anyway,” Abraham said, turning to Yihoon. “Regardless of who that man was or what he said, it would, indeed, be better to do something than nothing.”

“My wife and the children have been very unhappy about the idea of moving,

but we have come to the conclusion that the alternative will be worse,” Yihoon said in a sad, halting voice.

After a long silence, Abraham said, “If we were to consider settling your family across this other creek, you could only cut just enough trees to build your home and raise your animals. You would need to do your farming elsewhere.”

“At the moment, what we need is a place to live. I can always lease farmland,” said Yihoon, relieved.

“We can talk about the details later. I still am not sure how all this would work out. At the same time, I certainly don’t want to sacrifice my grandchildren or you and your wife and the animals to save the forest.”

“You have been gracious to let us come live here. Many thanks for considering our needs and for giving us another chance to stay here.”

Yihoon drew his last swig of tella and prepared to leave. Ayénat invited him to stay for dinner, but he declined. His family was waiting for him and he was anxious to share the good news. The two men shook hands. Yihoon bowed to Ayénat and turned to go.

“Wait, Yihoon. Let me get you a torch. You may need it this moonless night,” Ayénat said as she rose to get him the bunched twigs.

“Desta! Are you not going to go and get the horses?” Abraham turned to his son, glaring.

Desta, charged with resentment for having to wait for dinner, left grumbling.

The night was nearly black. Desta found the horses a few yards away from the entrance, waiting for someone to come bring them inside. He herded them back to the house.

When Yihoon saw the animals at the door, he waited for them to pass. But to Desta’s surprise, the lead horse stopped at the threshold with her ears upright and her eyes fixed on the stall. She snorted. The others too stood unmoved. Desta tapped their backs with his stick, but instead of going in, the animals reared, eyes still fixed on their stall.

“Go in. Go in. What is going on with you?” he said to them, tapping their backs again. The animals didn’t budge.

Ayénat came to the door to see what was going on. “Maybe they are afraid of you, Yihoon. Please come back,” she said, pulling him toward the living room.

The torch Yihoon held low to the floor was burning slowly.

The horses still stubbornly resisted, even after Yihoon retreated.

Despite Desta's pleading, the lead horse turned around and trotted away. The others followed.

He came close to the door and looked into the stall. "Oh my God," he cried, covering his mouth.

"What's wrong?" Ayénat said, coming to the door.

"I can't believe it. I saw that cloud man," Desta answered, terrified.

"What man?" Ayénat asked.

"The man we met by the river. He was just here and now he's gone."

"The Saytan you have been talking about?"

"Yes."

"God almighty," she shouted. "Please don't tell me you have brought the Saytan into my house!"

"I didn't bring him; besides, he is not a Saytan, Ma," Desta said, trying to calm her. "Who else causes havoc in people's lives?" she replied as she grabbed her son and pulled him in.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Desta said, pushing his mother's hand away. "I just saw him again. He said the new home they talked about will be all right."

Ayénat began to recite, *Besmam*, besmam, besmam, calling after the trinity and pushing the air with her hands as if the specter were approaching her.

Yihoon heard what Desta said and walked to the door speechless.

Desta's father joined them too. "What do we have here? What happened?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

"I just saw the cloud man again," Desta said timidly, afraid his father might scold him.

"Did you really see something or is it one of your vivid imaginings taking hold of you again?" Abraham asked, lowering his gaze over the group.

"I saw him. I didn't imagine anything. The horses must have seen him too," Desta said excitedly.

"Calm down, calm down," Abraham said. "Tell me what happened exactly."

Desta repeated what he had seen. In the end he kept repeating, "The horses saw it too. The horses saw it, not only me," he insisted, concerned he'd be accused of lying.

"This is very strange but. . . . Yihoon, that place is yours," Abraham said, tapping the son-in-law's shoulder.

"Thank you, sir, but I don't know what to think right now. It's too strange and worrisome. We've never experienced anything like this in our lives." Yihoon shook his head.

"I think I will go now, but thank you. My wife and daughters will be happy to hear

what you said. . . . and. . . . and,” he stuttered, losing his train of thought.

“You mean. . . . and. . . . what the man said?” piped in Desta.

“I don’t know if they want to hear that, Desta. They have been fearful of that man ever since they heard what he said,” Yihoon said.

“This was exactly what I had feared—that Deb’tera would bring the Saytan into our lives,” Ayénat said, turning to Abraham.

“Ma, it seems the cloud man had been around here before Deb’tera Tayé brought him into your life. You just didn’t know he existed,” Desta replied.

This remark stunned his mother but impressed his father.

“Our little wise boy!” Ayénat snapped, fixing Desta with her small eyes.

“Thank you. . . . Thank you very much for giving us another chance in a new place,” Yihoon said, bowing his head to his in-laws as he moved to the door.

“Let’s hope this will be the end of your problems,” Abraham said. “Good night.”

Desta gathered the horses once again, brought them back and attempted to put them in their stall. Ayénat and Abraham waited by the entrance to see what would happen. To their surprise, the horses went in without any hesitancy.

“I think Desta, too, may be possessed by the Saytan, don’t you?” Ayénat said, her eyes darting about nervously.

“Nahh,” Abraham said, dismissing the idea with a wave of his hand.

“I am going to the priest. . . . I need to consult with the priest,” Ayénat said.

“I don’t think it’s necessary, but do what you please,” Abraham said as he turned to go sit.

Desta, who was standing behind them, shouted, “I am fine. I am fine!” He strained as he swung the crooked wooden door to shut it. The massive door creaked as its two pointed ends pivoted in the conical holes of the threshold and header. After it came to rest in the portal frame, he lifted a long pole and wedged it between two posts on either side of the door.

EIGHT

In late February, deep into the dry season, Desta began training as a shepherd with his brother Damtew, who in a few months would leave shepherding to become a full-time farmer. Until then, Desta had much to learn from his older brother: tending cows, goats, and sheep; the plants and vines in the woods from which he would make ropes and whips.

They sat under a big sholla tree where fire-red, succulent figs hung above them. To Desta, Damtew appeared distant and thoughtful; the hacked mole on the side of his nose looked angrier than when he last saw his brother. Desta was thinking about that blemish and its resurgence when Damtew interrupted.

“I saw Saba and Yihoon last night,” Damtew said, his small eyes narrowing.

“What did she tell you?” Desta asked casually, avoiding his brother’s gaze.

“I am shocked!”

“What happened, Damtew? Tell me.”

Hibist had once told Desta that Damtew couldn’t express his feelings and thoughts easily—and it was worse when he was upset. Desta needed to be patient with him.

“Wait till I tell our brothers,” Damtew muttered, his eyes blazing.

Desta sighed. Eyes deep in their sockets, he gazed at his brother.

“Saba said Father has given them the land across the creek to live on. All this because of your ridiculous story. Years ago, Father earmarked for us brothers that piece of land, plus the one they presently live on, and now we are not going to have either of them!”

Desta grappled with how to appease Damtew.

“Do you realize that making up stories and telling lies is a dangerous thing? Do you know what a great problem this is, not only for Saba, but also for the rest of the family?”

No convincing words came to Desta. He stared at the eastern mountains where the deep blue sky seemed welded to the ridge. He wished he were there, caressing the smooth surface with his bare hands, away from his barking brother.

“Talk to me!” Damtew demanded, pushing Desta’s shoulders with a force that startled him.

“I had no intention of doing this. I just told the Deb’tera what the man told me,” protested Desta.

“What man? The man your mind gave a face and form, to amuse yourself and fool the Deb’tera? This is not funny, Desta! You’ve created an awful mess in our family and God knows where it will end!”

Desta breathed deeply and looked away. His brother’s words frightened him.

“I didn’t make up the man!” he insisted, tears in his eyes. “The horses saw him the night Yihoon came to see Baba. Go talk to him. He saw everything.”

His brother’s size and simmering rage were as imposing to Desta as if he were actually being smothered by him.

“Don’t insult me!” Damtew cried. “I know all about it. You’re trying to trick people by bringing dumb animals into the fray. Everybody knows that what you said is a horrible lie!”

Overwhelmed by his brother’s fury, Desta shrank further into himself.

“Talk to me.” Damtew pushed him again, until Desta nearly collapsed on the ground.

“I have told you all I can! I didn’t lie and I didn’t make the horses see what was not there!” blurted Desta, confident of the truth.

“You had better go tell father and Yihoon that you deceived them. You didn’t see any man. He was just a figment of your imagination. And tell Father that Saba and Yihoon should not move.”

“You can do whatever you want to me, but I am not going to lie,” Desta said evenly, straightening up and preparing to run home.

“Do you know that once they settle on that property, you too will lose your share, with no place for you and your future family? Do you know that?” Damtew grasped Desta’s arm and bore down on him.

“I don’t care! Let me go! I will not lie!” Desta said, tugging to free himself from his brother’s hold.

“You don’t care because you don’t understand what you have done. You will not go until you promise to tell father and Yihoon that you made up that man,” threatened Damtew.

“Will you let go?” Desta continued to pull as hard as he could.

“Do you promise to recant your story?”

“If that is what you wish to hear, I promise,” Desta said, gazing into his brother’s small red-rimmed eyes. Desta knew he could not change his brother’s mind.

“Just remember, things could get worse and you have the power to stop them—if you cooperate,” Damtew snarled as he let go of Desta’s arm with a hard push.

Staggering, Desta turned away from his brother and sprinted home at top speed. When he arrived sweaty and breathless, he found his mother bending over a large round wooden vat. She appeared to be mixing something.

“Desta, what happened? Why are you all sweaty?”

“Nothing, I ran home because I was thirsty,” he gasped, not wanting to tell her what happened, lest she bring the priest to exorcise the Saytan from him.

“Can I drink from this?” He pointed to the jar of water next to her.

“No, it’s not clean. Go inside and get some,” she said, resuming her task.

“What are you doing?” Desta asked, as he came back with a clay tumbler of water.

“I am soaking barley for wedding beer,” she replied.

“Who is getting married?”

“Your brothers Tamirat and Damtew and sister Hibist will be married in May.”

Desta stared at his mother, trying to make sense of this bombshell.

Ayénat elaborated. “What it means, darling, is that our Hibist will go to live with her husband, and in her place will arrive two beautiful girls who will be your sisters.” With that she went inside the house, leaving the wet barley in the vat and a speechless Desta.

Not only would he soon lose his sister, but he would also have to live with two complete strangers. Desta was choked with emotion by the time his mother re-emerged from the house carrying five bamboo baskets.

“Why do you look so sad, Desta?” She stared at him with the baskets cradled in her arm.

“I was thinking about the wedding,” he said, quickly looking away.

“My dear, weddings are something to be happy about, not sad.”

“Not for me,” sniffled Desta, shaking his head.

“Why not? Aren’t you happy for your brothers and sister?” she asked, dropping the stacked baskets next to the vat.

“How can I be happy when my only friend is going away? And I’ll be living with girls I don’t even know,” Desta said, biting his lip.

“With the arrival of your brothers’ wives, everything will be better not worse, darling. It means you will have two sisters instead of one. You will be loved twice as much,” Ayénat said, as she separated the baskets and lined them around the vat. She covered their interior walls and bottoms with false banana leaves and filled them three-quarters full with the wet barley, pushing and cresting the barley around the basket to leave a shallow depression.

“We will get to see Hibist often,” Ayénat continued. “She will be married to a

young man whose family attends the same church as we do. When you get bigger you can come with us on Sundays and visit her.”

“Not seeing her is not what’s sad, it’s living here without my sister, the only trusted friend I ever had,” Desta said, his voice breaking.

“Oh darling, no other person here cares for you? You are hurting my feelings,” his mother said, knotting her forehead.

Desta sucked the air and compressed his lips, deciding not to pursue this any further.

Ayénat flipped the false banana leaves and covered the top of the barley. She took additional shreds of the same leaves, wrapped the top and tucked them in. Desta noticed that although his mother’s forehead had relaxed, the wrinkles remained.

As he watched her shuttle in and out of the house, Desta’s thoughts drifted back to what his brother had said. He couldn’t believe that his account of the spirit man’s words had set all these events in motion—events that were starting to terrify him. With his sister soon to be married and gone, he would have nobody to talk to anymore. His heart ached. He was also troubled by his brother’s threats, which played again and again in his head.

What could he do to undo the damage? Should he lie and tell his father and Yihoon that he made a mistake? What would that cloud man think? How could Desta deny that the cloud man talked to him when the cloud man truly had?

For the moment, Desta resolved not to say anything. He would take things as they came. *Maybe that man will notice these problems and come protect him. And tell him what to do about his troubles with Damtew*, Desta thought, rallying his mood.

His mother came back and crouched beside him. “I noticed you were shaking your head, twisting your lips and frowning. You must have been thinking about our conversation. I didn’t want to disturb you. Can I say something?”

“Sure,” Desta shrugged.

“There are many benefits to you from these new girls. With their help, you will no longer have to run errands for me, take food to your brothers out farming, hold the calves when the cows are milked, or bring firewood. If you get sick, they might even look after the animals for you,” counseled Ayénat.

“It’s not those things. It’s everything else that is the problem,” Desta protested, wiping away a tear that had dropped down his cheek.

“I promise you: Everything will be fine. Come inside. I will give you something to eat,” she cajoled.

For Desta, there was nothing more to say. He could not make her understand his predicament. Eyes downcast, he followed his mother into the house.

NINE

The morning Damtew came to take Desta to the field for his first shepherding lesson, Hibist was troubled by the fear she saw in her little brother's eyes. Desta sat near the fireplace eating the breakfast his sister had given him.

"Are you ready?" Damtew asked, towering over his little brother.

Desta lowered his eyes to the tray on his lap and said nothing.

"Did you hear?" Damtew demanded.

"Something must be bothering him," Hibist said, glancing at Damtew. "Why don't you go by yourself? I'll send him after he finishes eating."

"He can't be slacking off from the start. I've a lot to teach him. He should come as soon as he has eaten," Damtew said, and left.

"Is something the matter, Desta?" Hibist asked, crouching near her brother.

"A dream—a horrible dream."

"What happened in your dream?"

"Let's go outside and I'll tell you."

Desta and Hibist went in back of the house and sat in a clearing overlooking the creek and Saba's future family home.

"So, tell me: What exactly happened last night?" Hibist asked, resting her big brown eyes on her brother's troubled face.

"I have never had a dream like it before. It was so scary that I could have died. . . . It involved Damtew and Asse'ged," Desta said.

"What did they do?"

"It seemed that Saba and her family had moved to their new place over a year ago. She was with baby again and was ready to deliver. It was late in the evening and she was lying by the fire. People were sitting around; Damtew and Asse'ged dragged me there and held me by my arms. The three of us were behind one or two people. Saba's mother was by her side, holding her arm with one hand, and resting the other on her belly. There were other women hovering, but I'd never seen them before.

"So, what happened to Saba and the baby?" Hibist asked.

"While she was in labor, the baby got stuck. Most of us who were close by the fire

could see the baby's head, with tussled dark hair, peeping out. The women gathered around her and kept saying, "Push, push, push." Saba pushed, but the baby still didn't come. She shouted, "Kill me! Kill me! Kill me!" Still nothing happened.

"Damtew kept his eyes on me while Asse'ged tightened his grip on my arm, causing me severe pain. Once in a while, Damtew would bring his face close to me and say, 'Is this the normal baby that the man told you Saba would deliver, eh?'"

"I said nothing. I looked down at the floor and prayed.

"Saba's shouting continued. Some people brought roots and pounded them into a paste with mortar and pestle. They gave the paste to the mother to massage into Saba's belly. Others made her smell herbs they brought. But it was all to no avail. The baby still wouldn't come.

"Yihoon paced the room, eyeing me from time to time as if I should know what to do. Astair and Zena were also there, staring at me with hatred. The longer Saba's agony continued, the more I shrank and the tighter was our brothers' grip on my arms.

"I prayed, 'God please don't kill this baby. God, please make it easy on Saba.' Then I was back to my own plight. 'Please don't let my brothers kill me. . . .' I sobbed silently and continued to pray at the same time."

Desta breathed a deep sigh.

"Take a break," Hibist said, putting her arm around him. "I am sorry to hear all this. . . . it sounds horrific. Father is good at interpreting dreams. Tell him what happened, and he'll say what it means."

Desta gazed into the distance for a bit, but he was also gazing inward. By degrees, tears gathered in his eyes. "You know what saddened me most the whole time?"

"What?"

"That I would die without touching the sky," Desta said. The tears now gushed down his cheeks, as though waiting for this moment. Then Desta sighed again, feeling the warm air rush out through his nostrils. He felt deep relief in sharing his fear with his sister.

"My God, Desta! I know you have talked about this for a long time" his sister said, wiping her own tears and pulling him closer to her. "Look, maybe you and I can arrange a time when the adults are not around, on a Saturday, to climb up the mountain together. . . ." Hibist patted his shoulder and said, "Everything will be okay. . . . So, how did it end?"

"When none of my prayers seemed answered, I started to say what father says whenever there is violent storm—you know?"

She nodded.

"I kept saying, 'God of Israel, please help my sister have a healthy baby. God of

Israel, please don't kill my sister. God of Israel, please don't let my brothers kill me.' And I kept my eyes closed the whole time.

"And then. . . you won't believe what happened," Desta said, glancing at his sister. The words got stuck in his throat, but there was serenity on his face and a sparkle in his eyes.

"Tell me," Hibist said.

"When I opened my eyes, I saw that man."

"What man?"

"The man I saw by the river, the one the horses saw."

Hibist tightened her lips and knotted her forehead. "So, what happened?" she asked.

Desta closed his eyes. "It was really strange. He came floating on air with the same features: tall, brown, with faded golden light around him, cloud-like, but in human form. He hovered over Saba, and finally stood beside her, directly opposite her mother. The moment he landed, the whole place grew hushed.

"I gasped. I wanted to say something but thought nobody would believe me. Instead, I said to myself, 'Now what? Are we going to see the baby? Will she be helped?'

"My brothers still had a tight hold on me, but I felt a great sense of peace come over me. The man looked toward me just for a second, sort of winked, and averted his eyes.

"When I couldn't hear or see Saba, I was blanketed with enormous fear again. I thought maybe Saba had died, and nobody would forgive me—or worse, Yihoon or my brothers would kill me. Right there and then! As I was going through all of this, I felt dread well up from my depths. It choked me. I began to groan out loud.

"I woke up in a cold sweat. . . ." Desta deeply sighed once more and opened his eyes. He didn't like what he saw on his sister's face.

For a moment, Hibist said nothing. Then she got up and said, "Let's go home." Desta hesitated, surprised by his sister's seeming indifference. He stared at the forest across the creek. Hibist started for home.

Desta regretted what he'd told his sister.

"So, all this is pretty weird stuff, huh?" Desta said, breaking the silence.

"I don't know, Desta. It's strange, indeed! To tell the truth, Mother may be right. You might be possessed by the Saytan. Or the Deb'tera has done something to you to make you see this man again and again. I am afraid for you."

Desta was quiet, disappointed. His sister sounded like everybody else. The two walked in silence for several minutes.

Desta was choking. He had to let out what was welling up inside.

“I hate you, Hibist! I hate you and everybody else! Nobody believes in me!” Desta shouted.

Hibist wheeled on her heels and gazed at her little brother. “It’s not that I don’t believe you,” Hibist said. “I just don’t understand! I have never seen anything like this. Nobody in our family has. Then again, it’s only a dream. . . . I’m sure everything will be all right. . . . But for now, you should go for your training with Damtew.”

Hibist accompanied Desta to the edge of the field where his big brother was tending the animals, gave him a warm hug, and returned home.

“WHAT’S THE PROBLEM? What took you so long?” Damtew asked the moment he saw his little brother.

“I had to finish my breakfast and was not feeling well. But I am better now,” Desta said.

“Good. There are a lot of things we’ll be doing today and tomorrow,” Damtew said bossily. “The first thing I want to teach you is the names of the key bulls and cows. Knowing their names will help you manage them better. From these animals we’ll move on to the goats, sheep, and horses.”

As Desta trotted behind his brother, he was struck by Damtew’s tall and broad physique, his perfectly shaped calves, his high arches, and the way he walked. Damtew moved as if he had a set of springs beneath his heels: bouncy, rhythmic, and graceful—just like their father. Also like their father, his heels clicked, as if the bones were broken.

But there was something different about Damtew. Unlike his father or other brothers, he hardly talked, laughed, or joked at home. He spoke in one-word sentences, and then only when spoken to, or if he needed something.

In the evening while everybody chattered away, Damtew quietly sat, wrapped in his gabi, a portion slung between his legs, arms intertwined and resting on bent knees. Desta thought Damtew always looked like a roosting hen—puffed up and guarded—a complete mystery. But here in the field he talked a lot and was relaxed and open. He seemed like a different person.

“Remember that goats are the hardest to herd. They seem to have a brain completely different from the other animals and from each other. They climb rocks and sometimes get into tight places where it’s hard to drive them out. They are the most independent and the toughest to manage.”

Desta was mystified that the friendly goats that he often fed grain and salt to could be so difficult, but he didn’t challenge his brother.

“The sheep have their own problem,” continued Damtew. “Easy to manage, yes,

but they are hard to keep in one area. They always bunch together and move in one direction so long as there is open space ahead of them. The horses are easy. They pretty much stay around the bigger animals, and they don't roam and raid like bulls or cows."

Desta knew that the horses were, indeed, easy to work with, except when they saw a stranger like that cloud of a man in their stall.

"In all this, the most important thing," Damtew said, "is to make sure that the cattle stay in this field. If you have to take them across the Davola River to the fallow land on the opposite side, you must keep an eye on the bulls and some of the lead cows. They can easily sneak away and destroy the crops alongside the field."

What his brother was telling Desta seemed like a lot of work. He had never done anything like this.

"I will show you the animals that are hard to manage in a moment," Damtew said as he headed to where a knot of cows grazed on the south side of the field. "The next important thing—the most, as far as I am concerned—is to ensure that the goats don't go deep in the forest or stay too long in the woods. I have two goats with kids, and I don't want to lose either of them to a wild animal. You have to be around them and sound the whip from time to time, or whistle, or talk to them. That way, predators won't dare attack the kids. The same thing with the sheep and their lambs—just keep them out of the forest."

Damtew's coiled whip hung down his back while the shiny wooden rod that attached to it dangled from his broad chest. As they walked, he absent-mindedly twirled the tip of the rod while he spoke to Desta. His deep-set eyes did not veer. He didn't crack a smile. He was all business.

Once they reached the cows, Damtew introduced Desta to each animal and emphasized their individual traits: Lomee the bull, the nastiest of all the animals, who could travel miles to raid crop fields; Salle-Ayiset the cow, the most notorious crop raider, who often got their family into trouble with other farmers; and Begiziew, the young bull who was the rising star at destroying crops. Desta must keep an eye on the three of them at all times during the growing season.

But Desta felt like an ant compared to these beasts. He couldn't believe that these moving mountains responded to commands, let alone his.

Next, Damtew and Desta walked off to the north end of the field where the goats were feeding in a copse of acacia bushes. They strode gingerly through the thorns and dried twigs. Occasionally Damtew held the branches so Desta could pass unharmed.

"This is how you will find these goats most of the time," Damtew said, pointing to the scattered animals in the grove of thornbushes. "What always worries me

when I find them like this is that they could lose their kids or a weak member to an *anir*—leopard, an *affin*—a predator, or a *kebero*—fox. So, you need to chase them out of the bushes. Stand here and make noises or crack the whip until they come out on their own.”

“What are *anir*, *affin* and *kebero*?” Desta asked, watching the goats feed.”

“They are lazy beasts that prey on lambs, kids, and sick adult sheep and goats instead of hunting for antelopes and rabbits. Now, let’s go to the sheep,” Damtew said.

They crossed the field to the big sholla tree where the sheep were gathered and busily nibbling on the wind-fallen figs. In the tree, the fire-red fruit hung in bunches.

“The sheep are a pain to handle and keep in one place,” Damtew said. “They move as if their bodies were sewn together. If there are no rivers to cross or steep mountains to climb, they’ll just keep walking. Home is whichever way they are pointing—where the lead sheep takes them.”

Desta was only half listening.

“I see that you keep eyeing the figs. Are you hungry?” Damtew asked.

“A little,” Desta said.

“Let’s stop for now. I am getting thirsty and a little hungry myself. Why don’t you go home and bring us water and bread? It’s almost noon. I can get us some sholla figs.”

Desta loped home, relieved from his brother’s lectures for now.

When he returned with the food and water, Desta found Damtew dozing under the tree. And his brother had not picked any figs.

They sat on the grass in the shadow of the sholla tree and began to eat.

“Do you think you can handle everything I told you?” Damtew asked, eyeing his little brother’s slight frame.

“I guess so. This is what I must do before I become a farmer, right?” Desta asked.

Damtew nodded.

“As you said, I will have to get used to it then,” Desta said. *Just like I’ve gotten used to being an outcast in my family*, he added under his breath.

“Just remember that right now, it is easy,” Damtew warned. “It’s harder when the rainy season comes and the farmlands are filled with wheat, teff, and barley.”

Desta’s spirits flagged.

“As I said, the lead animals, the bulls and that cow I pointed out, are the worst. Just keep close watch over them. You also need to keep all the goats and sheep in one area, particularly when it rains. Speaking of rain, we should get you a *gessa* and a nice sheepskin with thick fur that fit you well.

“The rain and cold can be brutal at times, and no tree will keep you dry or warm.

You will be out here in the open with the animals, particularly when they are scattered about the field and in the bushes. The moment I see rain clouds gather, I immediately collect the herds and drive them to a tree—away from the forest and bushes. You need to do the same until the rain stops.”

Desta gulped his water nervously with his eyes fixed on his brother. He was seized with fear. He knew how severe the rain could get. He wondered how he could survive the kind of horrific storms he had watched with his father from the threshold of their home. He remembered the alarm in his father’s face at such times when he closed his eyes and solicited God’s intervention. *God of Israel, please abate this rainstorm, thunder, and violent wind from our valley. God of Israel, please protect our cows, goats, and sheep from this storm and wind, and our farmland from flood.*

He remembered when the rain came in sheets—sometimes like a billion zapping arrows. He had watched the earth beyond the eaves punctured in a million places. *And Damtew thinks I can protect myself against such a storm with a double-ply papyrus pulled over my head?*

“What’s wrong?” Damtew asked.

“Nothing.”

“By the way, Desta,” Damtew said, trying to take his brother’s mind away from his worries.

“Did you tell Yihoon and Father what we talked about last time?”

Desta thought for a moment. He gazed to the distant mountains.

“You mean about Saba’s family moving?”

“Yes,” Damtew said in a guarded voice.

“I gave you my promise, didn’t I?” shot back Desta without hesitating.

“Good! I suspected you had, since there has been no news about it. As I told you before, it just can’t happen. We’d have no place to go when each of us gets married. Although Father set aside these three plots of land for all of us, it seems our future is expendable when it comes to *his* daughter. Maybe it is our brothers’ curse that has caused problems with her babies.”

Desta kept mum, afraid Damtew would ask how he recanted his story about the cloud man to Yihoon and his father.

“You have told me a lot about my job,” Desta said, changing the subject. “I am not certain if I will remember it all. What should I be sure to do every day?”

“The two most important things are that the animals don’t steal away and destroy crops, and that they are kept safe from predators. If you do these things, everything

should be fine. If you don't, all hell will break loose with father, the farmers, and with me, particularly if something happens to one of my animals.

"I have been safekeeping three male goats and two kids, hoping that someday father can help me geld them to make mookits out of them. After they grow fat and big, I plan to sell them for a lot of money, which should come in handy for my wife and me when we move into our own house," Damtew said excitedly.

"To come back to what I was saying," continued Damtew, "You know who else was very upset?" Damtew asked.

Desta shook his head.

"Asse'ged, Teferra, and Tamirat. But frankly, I have the most to lose. Both Asse'ged and Teferra have their own homes. Tamirat will be a priest and won't need much land to farm. I want my family to have a nice place to settle once I marry and have children. I have dreamed that father would pass that land to me as soon as I got married. And of course, I will give you some when you get married, too."

Desta didn't have any desire for the land his brother coveted, though the thought of living with two strange girls bothered him, particularly with his sister's leaving.

"Will you be happy living with a strange girl?" asked Desta.

"Yes, I'll be happy. I look forward to having my own house, children, and farm. As I told you before, I expect to move to that property across the creek after a couple of years. Asse'ged also told me that he would like to take a portion of it. We are both happy Saba and Yihoon will not be moving there anymore. I am glad we stopped everything at the outset."

Desta squirmed, knowing that he had not done what Damtew asked him to.

"What's wrong?" Damtew asked. "I told you that I can share some of it with you when you get married. It could still happen. My feeling is Asse'ged probably won't move. I'll talk to father about giving that property just to you and me."

Desta had his eyes on the shadow slowly forming at the base of the mountain across the river. He knew that it would get taller and taller, climbing up the mountain as the sun set behind the peak above their home.

"The sun will set soon," Damtew said. "Why don't you take the food home? I will bring the animals myself."

As Desta walked home, his mind drifted back to Damtew's consuming obsession with his dreams of the future: the wife he would marry, the children they would have together, the farm he would own, and the home he would build on the property that Saba and Yihoon were poised to take. This fact gave Desta the chills. He wondered what Damtew would do to him once he realized the truth.

THAT EVENING, DESTA REMEMBERED his own dream from the night before and was anxious to ask his father its meaning.

“Baba, Hibist said you are good at interpreting dreams. May I tell you one I had and ask you its meaning?” Desta sat next to his father by the fire, across from his mother.

“What happened in your dream?” Abraham asked, settled on his bench, a cup of tella in his hand.

Calmly but with intensity, Desta told his father the dream.

The father listened to Desta, pulling on his salt-and-pepper goatee, twirling the ends at times. Occasionally he drank from his cup.

“Well, let’s see. . . .” Abraham said. “Firstly, I must say that I didn’t like the way your brothers treated you. But sometimes a dream like this—a nightmare—is the re-enactment of things we have thought or heard about. In this dream, you must have been worrying about your sister’s not delivering her baby or her dying while giving birth. And the dream manifested in your thoughts and worries. Am I wrong?” He turned to Desta.

“It’s true. But I don’t understand why my brothers treated me like they did,” Desta said in a sad voice.

“I am not sure either. Are you afraid of your brothers?”

“Not Asse’ged; but Damtew, yes—because he is so much bigger, and he is often rough with me.”

“Well, there you go. Your mind acted upon your fear of Damtew, just like the fear you have about your sister’s pregnancy. Asse’ged was merely Damtew’s accomplice in the dream.”

“Why was the cloud man there? Why didn’t my sister deliver?” Desta asked, confused.

“Those are very interesting parts of the dream,” Abraham said, smiling.

“I think it’s terrible that poor Saba didn’t deliver. And I certainly don’t like that Saytan pops up in my son’s life everywhere,” Ayénat said, indignantly.

“He is not a Saytan, Ma. He is a nice man. But I was disappointed that he didn’t help Saba deliver her baby,” Desta said, annoyed by his mother’s comments.

“I’ve a rather positive feeling about that man too, particularly since he has been a reliable presence in Desta’s life and dreams,” Abraham said.

“I am not afraid of him. He seems gentle and harmless, not like what mother thinks,” Desta said.

“I don’t like him to appear in all these places—in real life, as well as in your dreams. Although he doesn’t look like the Saytan, he could be the Saytan in sheep’s clothing, as they say, or just a bad spirit. That worries me.”

“What disturbs me is not that he appeared again, but that he didn’t help Saba have her baby,” Desta said. “I woke up not knowing if she had the baby, or if she lived or died. Maybe you can explain the reason for this.”

“It’s that aspect of him that I have been intrigued with since you told the story. He showed up, hovered around, winked at you, and then disappeared. What do you think he was trying to do?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Desta said, gazing at his father.

“If he really were a helping spirit, he would have brought you the joy of seeing your sister deliver her baby. I really think he is playing the Saytan’s advocate, torturing you. You said you woke up in a cold sweat. Do you call that fun?” barked the mother.

“I think you are right. This whole time I thought that if these dreams had meaning, I should have known if my sister gave birth. After all, it was the cloud man who told them what they should do. I didn’t want him to let me down, because ever since I met him, and then told you what he said, everybody has been blaming me for their proposed move,” Desta said, nearly choking.

“My feeling is if you had not made him up from the start, if you truly met and talked to him that time by the river, he probably wouldn’t let you down,” Abraham said. “I think what he did was test your faith in him. It was his sudden disappearance from the room that I find fascinating.”

“In the dream, you woke as soon as he left. Nothing happened to your sister, and the baby was still not born. Now it’s up to you to believe if he will fulfill his promise,” Abraham said, glancing once again at Desta.

“I hope you are right,” Desta said, relieved.

Later, after he crawled into bed, Desta prayed to God, asking him to give Saba and Yihoon a healthy baby, to restrain his brothers from harming him, to and help him fulfill his dreams of going to the mountain top.

TEN

Damtew and Ayénat restrained Desta by his arms as they prepared to bring him before a lean, tall priest named Aba Yacob. Hibist stood behind Ayénat and Damtew to ensure Desta cooperated.

“We’re going to free you from the Saytan that possesses you, son. Be calm,” his mother said as they tried to subdue him.

Desta was not interested in seeing a priest. He was touchy whenever someone grabbed him by his arms; this brought back the horrific dreams he’d had recently.

“I feared from the beginning that something like this would happen to him,” Ayénat said to Damtew as they pushed Desta to the door. “I told your father. Deb’tera Tayé has dragged that spirit man into Desta’s life and terrorized his dreams.”

“I think it’s a good idea to solve this problem before it gets worse,” Damtew said as they passed the threshold.

“That is why I invited Aba Yacob to exorcise him,” replied Ayénat.

Aba Yacob sat on a bench, his head bent over an old cloth-clad book that he balanced on folded knees. He had a silver cross by his side, its handle wrapped in a faded, multicolored handkerchief.

Aba Yacob raised his head and planted his sharp eyes on Desta. “Is this the boy possessed by the Saytan?” he asked Ayénat.

“This is he,” replied the mother.

Desta turned and stared at his mother with scorn. He’d had enough of her hectoring that Saytan was the cause of all his problems.

“Give me time to finish these two pages,” the hunched figure said, returning his attention to the book.

Near Aba Yacob was a round-bellied clay jar filled with several gallons of water. A similar pitcher stood to one side, while a silky rope made from the fibrous *kusha* plant lay coiled in many loops on the other. Desta had noticed these things under the eaves when he and Hibist had gone earlier to milk the cows. Then, the pitcher had covered the open jar.

“The jar contains water that mother brought from the creek before dawn, before

any bird or animal touched it,” Hibist had said, when Desta asked about these things. “It’s for *medhaneet*—medicinal—purpose. The water has to be *nitsuh*—pure—and *dingle*—virgin. Before it can be used as *medhaneet*, the jar with the water has to be blessed by a priest.” She didn’t go into further detail.

It dawned on Desta from the proximity of the jar that the priest expected the passages he read to flow into the water, transforming the liquid into something holy and curative.

The hold his mother and brother had on his arms grew painful. He wished he could break free.

After Aba Yacob was done with his reading, he ordered the two adults to remove the *gabi* from Desta and fetter his legs with the rope that lay near the jar. His legs secured, arms still restrained, Desta was ready for the priest to exorcise the *Saytan* from him. Desta slouched and closed his eyes.

Hibist poured water from the jar into the pitcher and handed it to the priest, who held it above Desta’s head and began to pour slowly as he recited, “*Besmam wold woamen fis kidus*—in the name of Jesus Christ, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—we ask you creatures of the unknown—the *Saytan* or other spirits—to immediately depart from this boy’s body.”

The moment the water hit Desta’s head, he twitched, wriggled, and stiffened his shoulders. But Damtew and his mother pressed him down. Ayénat kept whispering, “Close your eyes, stay put. . . . Be strong. . . .” Desta turned his face one way, and then the other, trying to shield his eyes as the water flowed over him.

The priest repeated his mantra and poured another batch of water over Desta. “*Besmam wold woamen fis kidus*. . . . we entreat you, creatures of the underworld, to leave this boy so that he can lead a happy and normal life—free from nightmares. . . .”

With the third batch, he said, “It was not in the boy’s power to ask for your help to solve the problems of his sister’s family; he was engaged by *Deb’tera Tayé*. We ask your pardon for the needless provocation in bringing you into this boy’s life. . . . We equally entreat all alien spirits that might have dwelt in this boy’s body from earlier years.”

The priest handed the empty pitcher to Hibist, picked up his silver cross from the bench, and passed it over Desta’s face and body.

“*Besmam wold woamen fis kidus*. . . . We also ask you to free his mind from the many tiresome questions he poses to others, and the wasteful imaginings he engages in daily.”

The priest then recited something in *Ge’ez*—the ancient church language. When Desta looked up, he saw a cupped hand filled with water suspended in midair, as if

waiting for the priest to finish. Then he told Desta to close his eyes, and he splashed the cold liquid onto his forehead.

Desta shook violently, again terrified. He gasped for air.

“The Saytan or alien spirits—are you leaving this boy?” demanded the priest, towering over Desta.

The man repeated the anointment. Desta shuddered and tried to wriggle out of his constraints. With each splash, Desta’s heart raced and pounded in his ribcage. He felt like crying but wouldn’t give his captors the satisfaction. He bit his lip, closed his eyes tight, and took the onslaught of water like a warrior.

The deluge went on for several more minutes. With each dousing, the priest commanded the Saytan and bad spirits to leave immediately and to signal their departure.

When Desta realized the man was not letting up, he answered for the spirits himself. “We’ll. . . we’ll. . . we’ll. . .” he said in terrified voice.

“Now?” The priest hit Desta’s forehead with another wash of water from his cupped hand.

“We’ll depart immediately,” Desta said.

The priest doused Desta’s face again.

“Never to return to inhabit this boy’s body?” demanded the priest.

“Never. . . we’ll never come back. . . we will never, never, never come back,” Desta said, dripping wet.

“Good!” said the tall figure, pleased with his efforts. He ordered Damtew and his mother to untie Desta, dry him, and give him fresh clothes.

While Hibist ran to get Desta’s clothing, his mother turned to the exorcist and asked, “All those answers—was it Desta talking or the Saytan and alien spirits?”

“Those are the Saytan and alien spirits talking through Desta,” the priest said, fixing his eyes on her.

In the meantime, the patient had crouched on the grass, whimpering, clutching his knees, resting his chin on them, eyes boring holes in the ground. His teeth chattered.

Hibist brought a large gabi and rubbed him dry while the priest and mother watched.

“Hopefully now you can sleep in peace, free from bad dreams,” Hibist said tenderly, putting her arm around him.

Desta, in turn, glared at her with a blazing rage.

She was confused and asked, “You don’t believe me?”

Grim and mute, Desta just looked away.

Ayénat invited the priest to come to the house.

“Let him get dry and warmed by the sun, but keep him company,” Aba Yacob said to Hibist, before following his host inside.

“Bring him injera with sauce from last night’s dinner,” Ayénat said. “He had no breakfast before his treatment.”

Hibist brought Desta a cup of warm milk and injera with a mound of thick, warmed-over pea sauce. She put the tray of food next to him and handed him the milk.

Desta placed the tumbler in the grass beside him and looked away.

“Look, I know you are mad, but this is to free you from the bad spirits in you, causing you problems all these years. When I told mother about that horrific dream, she was certain you had become a nest for Saytans and alien spirits. She was afraid that they would take you over, torture you, and toy with your soul, the way a cat does before killing a mouse. We wanted to get rid of them before that happened to you.

“This problem is not new, Desta. These spirits have been with you since you were two years old; they made you talk like an adult and ask endless questions. Mother and I thought the Saytan or Zars would leave you as you got older, but the reverse appears to be happening.”

Desta listened to Hibist with his eyes still on the distant mountains.

“So, you mean that you are now in league with the rest who give me hell? I thought you were my friend,” he said.

“I am. . . more than that, you’re my best brother.”

“You didn’t act like it today. Do you realize how terrified I became every time that horrible man drenched me? How could you betray me like this, Hibist? I shared my dreams with you because I trusted you. I knew if I told mother, she would take me to some church to get baptized with holy water. That was why I wanted us to talk far away from her.”

Contrition registered on Hibist’s face. She had her hand on her mouth.

Desta suppressed his satisfaction and continued his indictment. “Do you know how hard it has been for me all these years? I cannot talk to anybody because they think I will ask questions they can’t answer. You have been the only person I could really talk to—my confidant. I can no longer trust you, either. Do you realize how lonely I’ve been, and how much more I will be if I can’t share my thoughts and feelings with you? Do you care?”

“I do. . . very much. Don’t stop confiding in me.”

The more he thought about his ordeals and his sister’s betrayal, the more embittered Desta became. He had long wanted to vent his frustration at someone. Hibist, at that moment, represented everyone—Damtew, Ayénat, the priest, and all the others—who had shunned him.

He lifted the tumbler of milk, pretending to drink from it. In a flash, he hurled it at Hibist's forehead, and watched its contents spill over her, just as the priest had done to him. She swayed a little and fell backward on the ground. The skin broke. Blood oozed out.

He watched as Hibist, drenched with milk, moaned for help.

Her caterwauling reverberated through the house. The mother and the priest came running.

Ayénat was stunned to see Hibist gashed and bleeding. She crouched and planted her palm on her daughter's forehead to stanch the blood. She lifted her daughter to her chest. She looked up at Aba Yacob, baffled by Desta's vicious attack.

"Father, I don't think this boy is free from the Saytan," she said in a broken voice.

"Well. . . . uhhh. . . . ummm. . . ." the priest said, face crinkled, eyes narrowed as he searched for an explanation. "Well, these things take time, and I. . . . I am sure he will be all right shortly."

Ayénat and the priest carried Hibist inside and put her to bed.

Desta sat expressionless.

He didn't eat the food Hibist had brought him or move an inch. He stared into the distance and watched the shadows of clouds race over the slopes and trees and fields as if they were flying saucers. He fixed his eyes along the eastern horizon and tried to remember the time of year when the sun rose on each section of the cupped pass on the ridge. His mind was not clear. He wished he could run away from his problems.

But where can I go?

ELEVEN

The morning sun was still in the mountains above Desta's home, caressing the earth with its band of cool, golden light and chasing the shadows of the eastern mountains downhill.

Shortly after Desta and Damtew left for the field with the animals, Yihoon and three unfamiliar men arrived with axes over their shoulders. Hibist was outside spreading hops on a large cowhide to dry all day in the sun. The hops would be used to brew tella for the upcoming wedding.

"We are here to see my father-in-law," Yihoon said to Hibist. "Is he home?"

"I'll look," she said, dashing toward the door.

Abraham emerged from the house. He greeted Yihoon and those who had come to help cut trees.

"Wait here," Abraham said, and he went back inside. After a short time, he re-emerged wearing shorts and an old jacket beneath his gabi.

The four men followed Abraham on the gravel footpath that ran along the acclivity behind the house. They crossed the northern creek and strode diagonally along the flank of the forested hill on the other side, finally reaching the clearing where Abraham had built a small shed, staking the land as his own when he first moved his family here ten years ago. The long, broad land, bounded by two sleepy, deep-running streams on either side, stretched from the Davola River below to the cultivated plateau above, spanning approximately 250 acres of thick forest.

Abraham led Yihoon and his men around the roughly 30-acre perimeter, about which he earlier had marked one hundred five tree trunks with an ax, delineating a semicircle whose diameter lay along the creek at the bottom of the canyon.

As the men hiked through the forest, antelope, dik-diks, quail, and wrens fled into the distant woods. The vervet and colobus monkeys sent guttural alarms and sped away, leaving behind a wave of buffeted, whooshing trees. Birds chattered wildly in the branches, and on the ground, other creatures slithered and scuttled away as if they, too, sensed the approaching destruction of their home. All this commotion disturbed Abraham.

After their walk around the area to be cut, he directed them to spare a number of large, fruit-bearing sholla trees. The rest were to be cut carefully, methodically, and

low to the ground, staying within the marked boundary. With these instructions, he wished Yihoon and his assistants well and departed.

As he walked home, his heart was heavy, and his mind was crammed with agonizing thoughts. Years ago, in the perfect world he had imagined for his family, Abraham had apportioned all of his land to his male children. He foresaw himself surrounded by sons and grandchildren. At that time, much of the western mountains were shrouded with what appeared to be inexhaustible forest.

Now ten years later, much of this wooded land had been cleared by many who had crossed the river and had staked their own claims.

At first, his farmlands had yielded great quantities of crops, but they rapidly declined as floods washed their rich topsoil into the creeks and the river. He had no fertilizer to revive the earth, and so had to carve new farmland from the forest—robbing its animals of shelter, and depleting its resources: game animals, firewood, and building materials.

Now he was concerned that what had happened elsewhere in the valley would happen here as well. He feared that soon they would leave this land barren, too, and his descendants would eke out a meager existence. He had not fully considered these things when he offered Yihoon a portion of this land; his daughter's predicament had overridden these concerns. He needed to provide a comfortable and untroubled homestead for his daughter and son-in-law and, hopefully one day, his first grandson.

Worse still for Abraham, who strongly favored conservation, the district governor had chosen him to educate other farmers about the importance of protecting the forest and its animals.

How hypocritical it would be to carry out this charge while I've allowed my own son-in-law to do exactly the opposite. He had a life-and-death situation with his daughter, but so did every other farmer who needed productive land.

Abraham reached home. He didn't remember any of his journey, saying goodbye to Yihoon, or what trees they were cutting first. He wondered if he was losing his mind over his problems.

Giving Saba and Yihoon the new property had implications besides scrutiny or criticism by the governor, or his neighbors. Abraham feared most the problems he was causing in his own family.

TWELVE

Desta couldn't believe his eyes. He was standing on the side of the hill behind his home in the predawn hour, gazing at the gutted trees across the creek. He had come here as much to distance himself from his angry brother, Damtew, as to find out what Yihoon and his men had done to the forest, the home for the monkeys and countless other animals.

The night before, Damtew had been very upset after he learned from Asse'ged what had become of the property their father had promised them. Desta sat next to Damtew by the fire, pensive and fearful. "I heard about what's going on with our land. It's all because of your stupid story," barked the big brother, glaring. "Don't think we'll forget this."

Now standing here and staring at the felled trees, it hit him that it was not just Damtew and Asse'ged who would be affected by this. He, too, stood to lose something dear to his heart: the animals that were his hard-won friends.

Desta wondered if the cloud man had considered what would happen to the monkeys when he sanctioned Saba's move to this place—particularly since the move would cause such problems for everybody else. He wondered if his mother might be right that the man could be a Saytan who had used him to wreak havoc on everyone. Desta now was even more worried about what it all could mean.

Aside from Kooli, the monkeys were the only animals Desta truly called friends. It had been only a year since he had first won their trust through a series of tricks, cajoling, and bribery. He remembered how happy he had been the first time he had touched their bristly, silver hair. And how much happier he had been ever since.

Now, with the trees gone and Saba and her family moving to the cleared land, that friendship would be a memory. Desta was saddened and confused. Why was he in the middle of this mess? Damtew's threat and prediction now rang true for him. *A mess you started, God knows where it will end.*

Although Desta couldn't see the monkeys, he could imagine their horror as they watched their world savagely destroyed. As he stood scanning the forest for signs of his friends, Desta was seized with a new fear. *What if after all this destruction and loss, his*

sister still had miscarriages, and Yihoon's cattle still sickened and died? The implications terrified him. He would be blamed; he would be hated by his whole family.

He sat down. Arms clutching his knees, eyes fixed to a fist-sized rock inches from his feet, Desta concentrated on Saba and her problems. If his sister didn't have a healthy baby after all this, he would rather die than live with the constant torture of his brothers.

But death was another matter for Desta.

He closed his eyes and thought about its meaning. Once we die and are buried, we will never come back, Desta remembered Asse'ged once telling him. Since then, every time he thought of death, he would close his eyes and think of its meaning.

If I die today, he thought, I will not come back tomorrow, not next week, not next month, not next year, not in five years, not ten. . . . and. . . . and not. . . . He opened his eyes and shivered. He touched his body to assure himself he was still alive.

Never again to see the sun, the mountains, the monkeys and birds, seemed very sad and very wrong. The ultimate regret for him, however, would be to die without touching the sky. He didn't want to think about death and dying anymore.

He lifted his head and gazed at the tangled mess of fallen trees. Large branches stuck up from the pile, their leaves wilted by the strong March sun.

Those trees are now dead, Desta thought. I can sit here and wait, and wait . . . for a long time, and they will never stand up and live again.

This thought scared and depressed him. He needed to go home.

When Desta returned, he found his mother crouched by the side of a large cow-hide, crushing the dried, smoked barley for wedding tella with a round stone. As she pounded, it crumbled, and a grayish-green cloud rose from it. Next to this mat was another large old hide containing fresh-picked leaves and finely chopped twigs of the hops plant.

"Where did you disappear to, Desta?" Ayénat asked.

"I wanted to see what Yihoon and his men did to the trees in the forest," Desta said, trying to sound casual.

She looked at him sharply. "It's not just the trees that are affected by the problem you started," Ayénat said. "It will affect all our lives, too."

Desta was frightened, as much by this problem as knowing that Hibist wouldn't be around to help him deal with it. He teared up as he crossed the doorway.

THIRTEEN

It was a brilliant morning in mid-March. Desta sat under a circular, flat-topped acacia tree waving flies away with a horsetail whisker and stared at a large clay jar of the whey he would be drinking all day. The gray liquid was meant to be a purgative for a horrific disease the family feared he could contract.

A week earlier, Desta had been bitten by his dog. Unprovoked, Kooli snapped and sank his teeth into Desta's shin as he entered the house, causing him to bleed profusely. Alarmed, Abraham had irrigated the bite with plenty of water, dabbed it dry, and bandaged it with a clean, white cloth. Then he promptly quarantined the dog. Having seen Kooli sad and listless for a few days, the family was not sure what ailed him.

Kooli continued to be downcast and languid, and he began to drool and eat less. He only showed aggression toward Desta. Every time Desta passed by, he barked and snapped. These symptoms had made Abraham suspect the worst and decide to put the dog down.

Kooli was killed with a bullet.

With his friend and companion gone, Desta, in turn, became sad and enervated. The adults explained to him the severe consequences if the dog had infected humans with rabies. It was better, they said, to put him down than to expose people to the disease, but no words were sufficient to soothe Desta.

Two weeks later, uncertain if Desta had been spared from Kooli's ailment, Abraham and Ayénat decided to treat Desta with home remedies for the disease. This involved finding cheese aged for at least seven years—twelve- or thirteen-year-old cheeses were considered the best. Ayénat scoured the valley for anybody who had such cheese. To her relief, she found a woman in Avegira who claimed to have cheese that was thirteen years old—dried and covered with mold in a clay pot. The woman had scraped the pot and produced half a cup of the dried, bluish-green cheese and gave it to Ayénat at church.

A contact of Abraham's gave him the dried leaves of a secret plant to be pounded with the horrid-smelling cheese. This powdery mixture was added to water and

stirred. Desta, holding his nose to avoid smelling the ghastly compound, downed it in one steady swig.

The nauseating aftertaste nearly made Desta vomit. Ayénat gave him a tumbler of water to drink and told him to walk around until the medicine settled in his stomach. “The dog disease causes miniature dogs and other animals to hatch in the stomach,” Ayénat said. “This medicine should kill them.”

While Ayénat helped Desta with the drink, Abraham and Hibist found a secluded shade tree. Desta was to spend the day there alone, drinking whey and purging the disease. After Abraham and Hibist returned, Ayénat led Desta to the prearranged location, sat him down on the skin and informed him of his task for the day. They had brought five gallons of the gray liquid in a clay pot and a black horn cup and placed both at the side of a goatskin, securing the pot with three fist-sized rocks. Desta was to sit there, pour the whey into the cup at regular intervals, and drink and expel it all day.

Every time he purged his system, Ayénat told him, he was to examine his excrement with a stick for any signs of living or dead things shaped like tiny dogs, insects, worms, or other animals.

What he had drunk was already turning in his stomach, threatening to fly out with the mention of such things coming out of him. His chest heaved and he gagged. Ayénat poured a half cup of the whey and urged him to drink and walk around some more.

After pacing the ground for a few minutes, Desta sat on the skin and gazed at the horizon above the eastern mountains. He looked despondent and miserable.

“You will do exactly as we told you, won’t you, son?” Ayénat said, her hand on Desta’s shoulder.

Desta said nothing, with his eyes still fixed on the horizon.

“It’s a very bad disease that is incurable once you become sick. You don’t want to die, do you?” pleaded Ayénat, shaking him a little.

Desta shook his head slightly.

Wretched as he felt, gazing at the blue sky above the eastern mountains soothed him a little. For Desta’s dying without touching that azure surface would be the ultimate disappointment. He thought he must do everything he was told in order to live. “Can you answer me in words—that you will do everything as told to you?”

“Yes,” Desta said firmly.

Desta’s first bowel movement was of the everyday variety, containing nothing of the animals his mother had described. Desta was revolted by the idea of poking it with a stick. He returned to his perch without touching it.

For the first hour or so, Desta was nauseated and retched several times, but nothing

came out when he staggered and sat at the edge of the goatskin. Intermittently, he thought of Kooli's behavior and death at Damtew's hands. He remembered all the good times he had spent with the dog, as well as the attack.

When Kooli was a puppy and Desta not even two months old, a cow had stepped on the dog's leg, fracturing it. Abraham had mended it by wrapping small bamboo strips around it with a clean cloth, but the dog was never again able to stand straight or walk normally. As a result, he limped along with Desta, playing and keeping him company, wherever he went. His eyes grew moist and his heart sank to think that he would never see Kooli again.

It was while in this state that Ayénat appeared. Desta straightened up quickly.

"Have you moved your bowels yet?" she asked, gazing down on him.

"Yes—just once," he said grimly.

"Did you do what I told you to do?" she asked in a stern voice.

"No, Ma, no."

"Why not? We need to know if the medicine is working. If we see something like I described, we need to increase the dose or use a stronger medicine."

Desta's spirits sagged.

"Where is it?" demanded the mother.

"No, Ma, No!" Desta said again, covering his face. The prospect of leading his mother to his excrement embarrassed him.

"I need to see it."

She paced around the perimeter of the acacia tree.

"Please stop, Ma, nothing happened. Nothing you described is in it."

"I need to look anyway. I will *not* go home until I see it, so get up and show it to me," she demanded.

Desta pulled himself up grudgingly. He took his mother to a cluster of bushes thirty feet up the hill and showed her his mound, which now was surrounded by flies. Ayénat snapped a twig from a nearby bush, stripped its leaves, shielded her nose and mouth with her sleeve, and bent over to study the pile. Desta covered his face, leaving just enough room through his fingers to see what his fanatical mother was doing.

With the stick, she sliced the pile from the top into two halves, provoking the flies to swarm over the mess.

"Uggghhh," Desta said.

She pushed and spread the first slice, her small eyes glued to her actions as if she were looking for some precious stone.

Desta kept looking through his fingers, grimacing and shaking his head.

The first half of the pile produced nothing. Combating the flies, she pushed aside and turned over the second half for anything that looked suspicious or might harbor the tiny animals. She found nothing there, either.

Ayénat sighed, dropped the stick, and uncovered her mouth and nose. “I didn’t see anything so far. Keep drinking the whey. I will come and inspect the next batches.”

Desta still felt nauseated, but also tired and starved now. “How long will I be here?” he asked.

“Till sunset.”

“Without food?”

“You can’t have food till evening, or the medicine won’t work,” his mother said, her face cast with worries.

To Desta, evening felt like eternity. He closed his eyes and thought, *if I want to touch the sky, I must be alive. To be alive, I must be cured of this disease.* He gritted his teeth, screwed up his face, and marched back to his place of isolation.

“I’ll see you in a while,” his mother said and left.

The more he drank the thin, grayish liquid, the more repulsive it became. Hunger had burrowed deep in his stomach, as overpowering as the monotony of swallowing this concoction all day. Everything in his bowels seemed to have been washed out of him. He tipped the jar and poured himself another cup, brought it to his lips, and downed the sickening liquid in one long, breathless chug.

The sun had turned west, striking Desta directly. Slowly, he rose and placed the animal skin where the shadows now lay. He left the jar where it stood.

From here, Desta had a direct view of Saba and Yihoon’s new property. He noticed that nearly all the trees had been cut down, their remains left in piles to be burned. There was a new footpath from the creek to the flatter center of the property, where Yihoon would build his new family house. In the vicinity, the earth was pockmarked where stumps had been dug out. Here and there, he saw piles of bamboo and split wood, which appeared to be building materials for the new home.

All of this brought a flood of memories: Saba’s problems, Damtew and Asse’ged’s threats, the cloud man and Deb’tera Tayé, and the way Desta had been vilified for interceding in his sister’s problems.

He’d had enough of these thoughts. In his present condition, he thought a nap would help. As he was about to lie down, he saw two figures shuffling on the path to Yihoon and Saba’s cleared property. Desta couldn’t make out the faces. The strong sun and his awful cure had made him drowsy and blurry-eyed. Squinting to get a better look, he saw that they were his sister Saba and her daughter, Astair. Desta sat up

straight and watched them walk to the creek. *They must be going to their new property*, he thought. Suddenly Astair blurted, “There is Desta! Ma!”

Saba followed her daughter’s gaze. A discernable grin crossed Saba’s face when she saw him. They left the trail and walked uphill toward him.

“How are you Desta?” Saba asked, halting several yards from him.

“I am not good, but I think I will make it. . . . I am surprised to see you. What brings you this way?” Desta said.

“We heard you weren’t well. Astair and I thought we would come see you,” said Saba, not moving.

“Kooli bit my leg,” Desta said in a weak, cheerless voice. “Baba and Mama think he might have had the disease that makes dogs and people go mad. Kooli didn’t go mad, but they killed him anyway. They were afraid I would get sick unless I got treated, so they gave me this nasty medicine.”

“That is what Hibist told us,” Saba said with empathy. “I am sorry to hear what happened to your friend. But it’s a bad disease and you shouldn’t take chances.”

“Can you come closer?”

“No, we don’t want to cast a shadow on you. Then the medicine will not work. . . . We can come only a little closer,” Saba said, as she took a few steps toward Desta. Astair did the same.

“Yes, that is what mother said to me this morning.”

“I know I have not seen you for months, but we came here in part to thank you for, hopefully, helping to solve our problems,” Saba said, speaking as much with her beautiful brown eyes as her melodic voice.

“I have not done anything. I only repeated what the man told me. Hopefully all this will work.”

“We know that. The man you talked about never revealed himself to anybody but you. This means you are a special boy in our family,” Saba said.

“I wish everybody else felt the same. More importantly, I hope that cloud man will not let us down. There are many people who think that I made him up. I didn’t. I have seen and *felt* him in my dreams, in person, and even just felt him. Baba had said that I only needed to believe in him, and he would do what he said,” Desta said, in a rush of words.

“We know. For us, even a change in the soil will probably do us some good. Things have gotten worse where we live.”

“Things have gotten worse for me, too. You know, Damtew and Asse’ged—” Desta hesitated when he saw his mother rambling across the shoulder of the hill. “Don’t go

to the creek to fetch water by yourself. Send Astair to get water until you move to your new place. I fear the worst for you,” he said hurriedly.

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know for sure, but just do what I told you.”

Desta’s mother greeted her stepdaughter indifferently.

“Be well. Hope to see you soon,” Astair said as she and Saba departed.

Ayénat grumbled about the visit. Desta explained that they had come on their own.

“Where have you been depositing your stool?” his mother said abruptly.

“I have not had any, Ma. It’s just the whey that is coming out and it’s gone underground,” Desta said, avoiding eye contact.

“Where did you eliminate—the same place?” queried Ayénat again, tossing her head in the direction he had taken her the first time.

“No, Ma, why do you have to do this again? I am telling you: Nothing came out of me but water—no dogs, cows, goats, sheep, birds, insects, nothing!” Desta said, exasperated.

“I need to see for myself. Or I am not leaving,” his mother said as she paced around the tree, looking for the evidence.

Shaky and weak, Desta rose and staggered up the hill to the left. Ayénat followed him with a stick.

“There,” he said pointing to the two patches of wet ground. Traces of undigested food remained where the liquid had seeped through the dirt.

Ayénat poked and scraped the wet earth looking for traces of animals—dead or alive—from her son’s body. She found none. She was pleased with her discovery. “In another hour or so, I will send Hibist to collect your things and you will come home,” she said.

Desta tottered back to his spot. The sun was approaching the horizon above their home. Only slanted shafts came through the bushes. The shadow from the acacia tree was long and spear-like. Desta closed his eyes and waited for Hibist to come collect him.

When he woke, he found that Hibist had decanted the remaining whey and inserted the cup into the mouth of the jar.

“Good, you are awake,” Hibist said in her chirpy voice.

“I’m happy you are here. Finally, I get to go home and eat something,” Desta said, groggy and sleepy.

“We have prepared fresh food, and you can eat to your heart’s content.” Desta salivated with the thought. He couldn’t wait to get home.

“Mama said you either didn’t have the disease or are cured. She found nothing in your elimination,” Hibist said, gazing at her brother.

“Mama will be proud of you,” Desta said.

“What?”

“With your choice of words.”

“Of course,” Hibist said, confused.

“You always used that other word when we found hyena droppings,” Desta said, grinning.

“Oh that.” It suddenly dawned on her what he meant. “Well, that was a hyena. My brother deserves a little more dignity,” she said, smiling broadly.

“Thank you. You are sweet.”

Hibist lifted the jar with the rope and slung it on her back. Although weak and emaciated, Desta still managed to carry the rolled-up skin on his shoulders. He teetered behind his sister. He was happy his ordeal was finally over, and he didn’t have the disease—at least, he hoped not.

FOURTEEN

A groggy Desta raised his head from his goatskin sleeping mat and listened to the faint discussion from the living room. From what he could hear, it had something to do with his dog bite. A familiar voice recommended additional treatment. Desta cocked his ears and listened some more. The voice was that of his maternal grandfather—Grandpa Farris, one of Desta’s favorite relatives.

Desta spilled out of bed and landed on the floor. He wrapped himself in his gabi and went to greet his grandfather. He kissed the old man’s knees. His grandfather gently took his chin and kissed him three times on the cheeks, grazing Desta’s soft skin with his bristly beard—the only thing Desta didn’t like about him. Desta sat next to him.

Zegeye Farris was five-foot-seven with a round face; dark, rough skin; and fine features. His small eyes twinkled under heavy brows. He had a full head of hair that he kept short. He often came dressed in his long, cream-colored breeches and light shirt, under a gabi and black wool cape.

Grandpa Farris caressed Desta’s woolly hair, making him wish that the man lived with them. While his parents looked on, Desta explained to his grandfather how he had been bitten by Kooli, how his brother killed the dog, and his horrid cure.

Grandpa Farris explained in his rough but gentle voice that Desta’s parents had done what they did because the disease could kill. To ensure a complete cure, grandpa said that Desta now must also take communion.

“What’s communion?” Desta asked.

“It’s the blood and flesh of Christ,” answered his grandfather.

Desta contorted his face and declared he was in no mood to eat someone’s flesh and drink his blood. “Who is Christ anyway?”

“Christ is the son of God, who came to free us from our sins.”

“What is sin?”

“A sin is like stealing, lying, killing, and other bad things,” Grandpa said.

Desta was quiet, trying to remember if he had done any of them.

“Although we often do sinful things,” continued Grandpa, “Christ can forgive our sins if we do good.”

“Is getting bit by a dog a sin, too?” Desta was asking when his mother interrupted.

“Abayé, as you know, this boy could keep you all night with his questions. Let’s stop for now. Dinner is served. Hibist, please bring water for their hands.”

“It’s good that he asks questions. That is how he learns,” the grandfather said, turning to his daughter. “He will grow up to be an honest, God-fearing man.”

“Yes, but he never stops with the questions. Let’s have dinner,” Ayénat said.

FIFTEEN

“Why are these women standing out here?” Desta stopped in his tracks and stared at the veiled women among the trees.

“They may be unclean,” his mother said. “They may have recently given birth, they may be on their periods, or they may have spent the night with their husbands.”

“Being with their husbands makes women unclean?” Desta said a little louder than he intended to.

“Ssshhh. Do you have to know everything? Stop asking questions. Let’s keep walking,” the mother said, scowling.

A few yards later, Desta saw men with their backs to the trees, walking sticks on the ground, hoisting their arms. Their gabis edged their nostrils, leaving just enough space for air. A question danced on Desta’s tongue, but fearing his mother would scold him, he swallowed it. He thought that these men must be the husbands of the women they had passed earlier.

Since his grandfather suggested he receive communion, Desta had wondered what a church looked like inside, and what it was like to cross the Davola River.

From a distance, Desta knew every part of the land beyond the Davola: the corrugated face of the mountains and their wave-like peaks that rose to the clouds and circled his world; the knolls and humps of earth that projected from the mountainsides and lowlands like bumps from tree trunks; the deep, dark green canyons where he imagined creeks running crooked and rocky courses; the legendary plateau in the south, beyond which it was said lay a sheer cliff where enemies settled old scores by tossing their bound victims down the precipice; the immense, glistening rock that reflected the sun like glass when wet; the hamlet of thatched houses that rose from hillocks, lowlands, and mountainsides like mushrooms on dead wood; and the two churches, on the either side of the valley, enveloped by verdure.

To Desta, all these places were as familiar as the sun, moon, and stars, but he had never had the chance to explore them.

He also knew of the various localities. There was the village of Avegira on the

northern slopes of the Lehwani mountains, Avinevra to the northeast, Dega Avesken due east, and Tuff Gumbra south of his home.

Desta remembered the crack of shepherds' whips, the lowing of cattle on the hills, the shouting of farmers driving plow-harnessed oxen, the cackle of hyenas at night, the predawn deep guttural calls of the colobus monkeys, the medley of colors—blue, red, violet, green, and gold—that came and went with the seasons, and the soothing fragrance of the air.

All these things he saw, heard, and felt from where he lived. This trip would give him the opportunity to experience all of it at close range, to walk the grounds and to meet the people who lived across the river.

On the appointed Sunday, Desta's mother woke him for church. He washed his face and put on a new gabi and white shirt. He would not be permitted to eat or drink until after he had received Christ's flesh and blood at church. The thought revolted Desta, but Ayénat had explained that it was only symbolic. He would actually eat bread and drink water—holy bread and water, she had emphasized. As he prepared for the trip, Desta hung on to this notion.

They took the dusty footpath around the wattled fence from home, down to the open cattle field below. The trail sliced the north side of the field and snaked through a thicket before linking up with the main north-south caravan route that ran along the Davola River. After two miles on the main road, Ayénat and Desta turned onto a side path. This path followed a gentle slope that came to a narrow, flat land of farms, a cluster of homes, and a cattle field. A half-dozen girls stood near their houses, and several shepherds stood in the fields to watch Ayénat and Desta shuffle past. A dog too sick or too tired to get up gazed at them listlessly, moving its mouth as if trying to bark.

Desta lagged behind his mother and studied his surroundings, the people, and the animals. He wondered what disease had silenced the dog. Since he would be a full-fledged shepherd in a few months, he wished he could talk to the boys to find out what it was like to spend all day watching animals. He had never met any boys from this side of the Davola. They were not like the shepherds near home who made amazing sounds with their whips, and whom he hoped to emulate.

I bet these kids are capable, too, Desta thought as he trotted to catch up with his mother. As he ran, he caught a glimpse of a long, narrow stretch of tree-veiled land that disappeared into a hazy horizon.

"Mama, mama, mama!" Desta shouted as he ran breathlessly.

His mother stopped and waited for him.

"Is that all part of earth?" he asked, pointing.

“Yes, a little way from here is Danka. Then there is Fagita, and way at the end, where the haze is dark and thick, is Kuakura—your father’s birthplace,” his mother said, her small eyes dreamily probing the landscape.

“Wow. Is that how big the earth is?” Desta gazed at the distant land in wonder. “I didn’t think there was anything beyond here.”

“There is a lot more to the earth than we have around here,” Ayénat said. “Let’s keep walking; we can’t be late.”

Desta followed her quietly, thinking about his discovery.

The path wound along a slope and dipped into a wooded, gurgling brook, beyond which the terrain rose sharply. At the creek, another major trail came downhill from the right and joined theirs.

Once they crossed the stream, Desta limped ahead of his mother up the hill, dodging sharp rocks and rain-washed pits. Although his wound from the dog bite still bothered him, particularly as he climbed, the excitement of church had masked much of the pain. He couldn’t wait to get there. Ayénat walked as if she had stones attached to her feet. Desta had to stop and wait for her a few times. She breathed heavily, and a dew of sweat dampened her forehead.

There were other people walking on the same path. Some greeted his mother silently with a slight bow of the head while others said good morning as they passed. Some of the people glanced sideways at Desta and continued. Others complimented his lightness of foot as he hopped up the hill.

It occurred to Desta that he was the only person his age—boy or girl—going to church. Undoubtedly, he was the only person from the valley bitten by a dog who needed to eat Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood to be healed.

After the steep climb, the land leveled out and the path passed through what looked like a public plaza. Here there were rows of stones; carved benches; and large, flat logs on either side of the trail. The ground was compacted from heavy use, but tufts of viridescent grass grew under the benches and around the rock seats. Ayénat explained that this was where large festivities, such as church holidays, were held. She pointed to the north corner of the plaza, with a separate row of benches and stones. She said this was where his father held court on Sundays. Desta wished he could be here to see him.

Farther north, the land ascended gently for a short distance and then shot up to the sky to meet the clouds and high-flying birds.

“That, up there, is Lehwani,” Ayénat said, pointing.

Desta tilted his head and looked through the tall oak trees in front of him. He

glimpsed the mammoth mountain peak. He had seen Lehwani's face from afar for as long as he could remember, but never this close.

"Let's keep going," Ayénat said, turning around.

Desta trotted behind her.

Past the plaza, the path entered a wooded ground that was more like the familiar forest around his home. But Desta noted there were many things different about this place. Unlike the forest near home, this one teemed with leafy undergrowth and towering trees with large, brown, fuzzy trunks.

"Those are *tsed zafs*—juniper trees. People make church walls and doors with them. These trees also smell very nice," his mother said when she saw him craning his neck.

The air here was chilled and smelled sweet and earthy. The ground, damp and strewn with leaves—green, brown and yellow—was cool and soothing under Desta's bare feet. Shafts of morning sun seeped through the trees and dappled the floor, making their walk colorful and pleasant.

After a while, Desta halted again. It was as if invisible strings pulled at his neck. This time he inspected the long, thin leaves of a plant.

"Those are *kirkaha*—bamboo," his mother said. "We use them to make baskets, roofs, and wall supports. Let's move on. We can't be late!"

As they walked along the variegated path, Desta was struck by the hushed tranquility that he'd never felt while hiking in the woods at home. But the uncommon quiet was not to last. Reedy, trailing, and melodic song pierced the serenity. Desta at first was not certain if it came from deep within the earth or from the recesses of the forest. He stopped to listen. The voices trailed off and stopped as suddenly as they began. He walked for a bit and halted again when he heard the singing resume. The voices sounded pure and enchanting. The stillness of the place amplified them, allowing the timbre of each voice to penetrate the air, crisp and lucid. They resonated deep within his senses. He was enthralled. He didn't want to move. He turned slightly and bent to the ground. Cocking his ears, he tried to pick up the blurred lyrics that floated toward him.

"What are you looking at now?" Ayénat asked, retracing her steps, exasperated. She, too, gazed down to see the object of his curiosity.

"I am listening. Aren't they beautiful? Who's singing?" Desta asked.

"My lord, I thought you discovered some exotic ants," Ayénat said, chuckling.

"Those are the priests. You will hear better when we go inside the church. Move on!"

As thick and lush as the forest was, Desta noted no birds chirping or monkeys chattering. It seemed these animals were also mesmerized by the liquid voices of the priests.

Desta chased his mother, keeping his ears cocked to the singing. When they neared

the church entrance, something else struck him: the rich fragrance of the air gave way to a pleasant, singular aroma—incense—which Ayénat said was burned by the priests.

They had seen so much along their walk that Ayénat had admonished him many times for lingering and staring at things and people. Desta wanted to remember all of it.

The path ended at a rectangular thatched house framed on either side by lofty woodcarvings that abutted the beginnings of mossy, crumbling stone walls. A line of people stood at the entrance. Desta and his mother had to wait.

Over the stone wall loomed the conical roof of a house larger and more rugged than any Desta had ever seen. At its pinnacle was a miniature, parasol-like roof whose eaves were skirted by tiny metal chimes that quivered in the wind and shimmered in the sun. Inserted on the ferrule of this small roof was an egg many times larger than a hen's. Desta fixed his sights at the ovoid object; he had to know if it was real. Then he turned his gaze toward his mother and stared at her. Ayénat finally broke her silence.

"That is an ostrich egg," she said.

"What's an ostrich? Is it like a hen?"

"No, it's a big bird!"

"What is it doing up there?"

"It's to remind us that we should be as diligent and devoted to our religion as the ostrich is to her eggs. It's symbolic, like many things in our church," Ayénat said.

Desta tried to visualize the bird that could lay that egg. *She must be as big as a cow*, he thought. He wondered where a bird like that lived. He wanted to ask his mother more about the bird, but he knew what her reaction would be and squelched his questions.

Once again, Ayénat scolded Desta for ogling everything he saw and hurried him toward the entrance. Before she set foot on the threshold of the gatehouse, Desta watched his mother touch the doorjamb with her forehead and lips three times. He had seen several men and women do the same thing before her. He kissed the doorjamb once before entering the gatehouse. The threshold was high and massive, and his mother hoisted him by the armpit so he could cross it. The two reddish-brown wooden doors were also huge, as was the arching structure above.

The gatehouse was a large rectangular room with benches around it. A dozen nuns in tight-fitting cotton skull caps and long girdled gowns sat on benches, counting their rosaries. Some had russet glass beads; others had small tawny wooden ones. The slacked loops rested on their laps. Other women of different ages sat among the nuns with their heads veiled, bent in prayer.

Beyond the gatehouse, the church stood bound by a circular green courtyard.

Ayénat stopped at the center of the small house. Turning her face toward the

church, she crossed herself three times, bowing after each act, and prostrated on the matted floor after the third bow. She knelt and planted her forehead on the ground for a long time. She spoke in hushed tones. Desta caught a few stray words. They concerned his dog bite and asking God to heal him.

After she rose, Ayénat and Desta sat on an empty bench near the interior door where they had a better view of the church courtyard. They waited there for Tamirat to take Desta inside the church to receive Jesus' flesh and blood.

Tamirat soon appeared dressed in a cloak of red, green, and gold with tongue-like strips cascading down his chest. On the cloak were metallic dots that glittered in the sun. Desta longed to touch the fabric and study its colorful patterns, but Tamirat presently ushered him across the grassy courtyard and into the circular church.

As they hurried across the yard, Desta observed a great number of men standing around the stone wall, some reading books, others leaning on walking sticks and appearing humble and repentant. At the far corners, tussocks of grass grew wild. Nearby, rose bushes with blood-red blooms embowered the walls above in vivid contrast to the verdure beyond and the mossy gray stones below.

Woven bamboo skirted the exterior of the church from its eaves to the ground. They went through an open door and stepped down twenty feet deep from the first interior wall. Soft animal skins and smooth palm leaf mats covered the grass-strewn floor. The aroma of incense was overpowering and the ambience serene and comforting.

Here too, there were mostly men with a few older women standing along the bamboo wall, some murmuring, others reading books or reciting by heart. Still others knelt with their faces on the floor. Desta's eyes lingered on these men and women.

"Come, come," Tamirat urged. He stood before an immense set of closed wooden doors, framed with decorative arched headers and jambs that rested on a massive threshold.

High on the wall to the left of the door stood a man in colorful brocade, looking down on Desta amiably. The man had wings that were partially unfurled. His head rested on a circular orange disk, and he held a sword in one hand.

Desta gazed at the man wondering who he was and why he had wings like a bird and stood on the wall with a sword. On the right wall was a pretty, big-eyed woman with a baby who appeared about six months old. She too had a disk around her head. There were also two people above her shoulders, about to whisper in her ears. She looked reticent and virtuous, and stared into the distance. Only the baby seemed to look at Desta. Both the man on the far wall and the woman with child looked unlike anybody Desta knew—their skin very fair, their hands soft and delicate, and their disposition unworldly. A string of queries brimmed in Desta, but it was not the time to ask.

Tamirat had pushed open one door and stood on the inner ledge of the doorsill. Desta hesitated to walk on the beautiful mats with his dusty feet. When his brother waved for him to come quickly, he joined him. It was pitch black inside and Desta stood by the door, staring.

“Where are you taking me?” Desta whispered, pensive and fearful.

“This is the church,” Tamirat whispered back.

“Why so dark?”

Tamirat had no time to explain. He motioned his little brother to come in.

Desta heard muffled laughter from behind. He turned. A swarm of eyes were on him.

From the chuckling under their piled shawls, it was obvious to Desta that the onlookers found his skittishness funny. Tamirat glanced at them and smiled. He grabbed Desta by the hand and tugged him in. Desta closed his eyes and groped for the step and the floor with his feet.

“Why are you closing your eyes? Open them, open them,” insisted his brother.

“What good will it do? I can’t see anything. I don’t want to see where you are taking me.”

“This is just another part of the church.”

Tamirat closed the door and made Desta stand against the wall by the entrance. “Stay here until you receive communion. I’ll come and fetch you after the services are over.”

Alone now, with his back pressed to the wall, Desta opened and closed his eyes, trying as hard as he could to see. The chanting and singing appeared to come from deep within something before him.

He heard a rustling to his left, followed by a guttural throat clearing. He turned to see. The more he concentrated in the direction of the noise, the more the darkness lifted. A dull light seemed to have seeped in; somehow, the darkness had transmuted into a pale glow of its own accord. Desta saw the dull white of someone’s *shemma*—female shawl. Or was it a *gabi*? He couldn’t tell. He kept looking and looking. The figure became clearer and clearer, now more than a silhouette. It was a woman—an old woman, standing only a few feet from him, leaning on a cane. Her *shemma* now was a few notches lighter. She wore a gray skullcap. She eyed him from time to time as she said her prayers.

Satisfied that she was human and not some monster, Desta turned and looked straight ahead. He could now see a curving, rugged wall with closed double doors behind an arched entry. The doorsill was similar in width and design to the ones he had already passed. Another man was high up on the left wall. He could just make out the image. He was on a cloud-white horse, holding a long spear that plunged into the

mouth of a beast the likes of which Desta had never before seen. The beast had a tail, a fat torso, and a gaping mouth. Its teeth gleamed in the pale light, and frothy, shadowed blood oozed out of the corners of its mouth. With his hair flowing, the man appeared as if he had just passed through a strong wind. This man, like the others Desta had seen by the first entrance, was fairer than anybody he knew and had a golden disk behind his head.

The man's eyes were anxious and intense as he gazed at the vanquished creature. It all looked gruesome to Desta. Who was he? Why had he killed the beast? Desta looked for a lamb or kid it might have killed that made the man attack it, but there was no other animal. In the muted light, Desta tried to make out the details of the dark gray beast. The more he looked, the clearer it became. It had a coiled tail and a sharp ridge that ran from its head to its tail. The feet beneath its metal belly were stubby and clawed.

When Desta viewed the entire animal, he determined it was nothing but a lizard. He saw these creatures every day when he walked the grounds of his home. But why so big? And what did it do to cause that vicious attack? The lizards Desta knew were harmless. No one ever warned him against them. The snakes, yes. "Always carry a stick when you walk in the field or the forest," Ayénat had cautioned. The stick would protect against a snake that reared and spat its venom. This man and beast were just as mysterious.

His thoughts drifted back to the singing voices. He now knew where they came from: behind the massive and lofty circular wall before him, the innermost chamber of the church.

Once his eyes adapted, Desta could see more, although still dull and faded. More people—men and older women—in their white apparel loomed around him.

Desta was getting hungry. He wondered how much longer he would have to wait before the services were finished and he could go home and eat. "When you go to receive Jesus' flesh and blood, no food should have passed your gullet," Ayénat had said to him the night before. Now hunger had begun to nibble at him.

The song stopped and suddenly everything went quiet. Desta could hear only the occasional rustle and throat-clearing of his neighbor. He was getting bored standing alone in this shadowy place. He slouched a little as if to sit down.

"Mass is about to start. Stand up straight," commanded the woman.

Whatever that meant. Desta stood erect.

Mass started. Someone behind the thick wall before him began reading something, fast and loud, as if intended for everyone outside to hear. Desta wondered if the women who had spent the night with their husbands, whom he and Ayénat first saw at the outer

precinct of the church, could hear the man. He read and read and read, and then, almost seamlessly, broke into song, in a trailing, smooth cadence. Shortly after the man was done, a younger and intensely more beautiful voice took over. The progression of the voice was hypnotic, and it thrilled Desta. He wished he could sing like that.

As mass continued, a man in a long, flowing gown with colorful brocade opened the door before him and came out swinging an incense burner that hung from three metal chains festooned with chiming trinkets. The man was escorted by a younger man dressed in red, gold, and green, tinkling a bell. They walked around the circular hallway, the man rattling the incense burner and leaving all around him a swirling cloud with a sweet aroma. As they circled the hall, they opened the doors to the outer hallway, trading the aroma for light.

The mass was very long. How long, Desta didn't know. It involved singing, reading, reciting, and chanting. Occasionally, one or two priests came out to sweeten the air with incense. Every word they read or sang was in ancient Ge'ez, and Desta didn't understand any of it.

One of the priests was Aba Yacob, the bearded man who had come to baptize Desta against the Saytan. A young man with him held a silver pitcher and bowl. The two stood straddling the threshold of the inner chamber where the bearded man washed his hands with the water the young man poured from the pitcher. He shook his wet hands and dabbed them dry with a white cloth from the young man's shoulder.

During the service, Desta noticed there were certain rules he must follow. Not knowing them, he simply mimicked the old woman next to him. When he saw her prostrate on the floor, he did the same, sneaking occasionally to see if she was still in supplication. When she got up, he followed suit. When he heard her whisper prayers, he closed his eyes and prayed, asking God to give Kooli a happy place in heaven. He repeated this over and over and over. He wished Tamirat or Ayénat had taught him a few prayers.

Near the end of the services, a sharp drumbeat jolted Desta to attention. A bell tolled, and the bearded priest appeared, accompanied by Tamirat and another young man. The priest held something beneath a pale green cloth, while the second man carried water in a silver vase. Tamirat held an umbrella and a silver bell that he tolled continuously. Desta thought it odd to carry an umbrella inside a house. A beeswax candle placed on a holder by the entrance had brightened the room.

When Desta saw these men emerge from the room, he threw himself on the floor and covered his face, pretending to pray. To his embarrassment, when he looked to his left, he noticed that the old woman was still standing, saying her prayers.

A man picked up Desta and brought him before the familiar priest. Aba Yacob ordered him to open his mouth, then dropped into it a bead-sized, sweet tasting, warm bread that had the aroma of incense. The man who held water in the silver chalice tipped the chalice for Desta to draw from, and then wiped the chalice rim with white cloth.

The bearded man told Desta to cover his mouth before he walked to his place. Once back in his corner, Desta chewed and chewed and chewed on the flesh of Christ, trying to savor every bit of it. Jesus' blood had barely wetted his lips, but Desta kept smacking his tongue trying to taste it.

He had thought he would retch from taking Jesus' flesh and blood, but he actually enjoyed the bread and wished for more. He watched as more people, including mothers with babies, lined up to receive God's offering.

At the conclusion of the service, Tamirat came, and they walked out into bright daylight. Desta was happy to be in the cool open air. Milling people filled the courtyard. The two siblings joined their mother and walked to the chapel where, as Tamirat had said, they would break their fast. At the chapel, the bearded priest who had given him Jesus' flesh and blood sliced with a sharp knife the piled bread, two or three layers at once, into eight wedges, and passed them out to the congregation.

Desta was still hungry. He couldn't wait to get home to eat a big meal.

SIXTEEN

First the vervets. Then Kooli. Now Hibist is about to leave me. What have I done to deserve all this? Desta lay on his back, staring at the smoke-stained ceiling where flames from the fireplace nodded and danced. Lately, he had been preoccupied by Hibist's wedding. His nights had been sleepless, his days seized with fear of abandonment. *After Hibist is gone, to whom can I talk about my problems?*

The answer scared Desta. Nobody! There were no boys his age or close siblings he could confide in. He was an outcast to many in the family. Hibist had been his support, his defender, his companion.

With his father often gone and his mother too busy to give him the attention he needed, Hibist had assumed the role of both. After the wedding, Hibist would be gone, and he would live with his brothers' wives—two strangers, one whom he disliked. As the wedding preparations gathered steam, Desta grew more depressed and listless, face dour with somber eyes.

Two nights before the wedding, he woke. A hushed conversation by the fire drew his attention. Two women sat huddled, tossing something like a potato between them. He got up and tiptoed toward them. Hibist, with her back to him, was startled when she turned to see Desta's shadowed form. He apologized.

They sucked the air sharply as they held the object between tosses. Next to them was a wide-mouthed metal pot holding more of them.

"What are you doing? What is that?" Desta asked.

"It's *insocila*," Hibist said. She tossed it from one hand to the other before passing it to their cousin, Genet.

"What is *insocila*?"

"It's a root that colors your hands magenta," his sister said, bringing her hand to the fire to show the stain.

"We have a long way to go, but it will eventually change color," Genet said.

Desta squatted next to the girls. "Why does she blow air on it?"

"It's hot," Genet said. "It was cooked to strengthen the color."

Hibist gave Desta a look. He stopped asking.

"It looks dangerous, but . . ." Desta began.

“But what? Go back to bed,” Hibist snapped.

“Nothing, just, I hope you change your mind about going to live with a strange guy and his parents,” he said, looking away.

“Desta, first of all, it’s not my choice; our father and mother have arranged it. Second, I will come to visit you often. Mother said I am not going very far.”

“I wanted to tell you what has bothered me since mother told me your news.”

“Everything will be alright, Desta. Just think of it. You will have two for the price of one,” said Hibist, smiling.

“What I said was not a joke!”

Offended, Desta trundled back to bed. He lay on his back and watched the flames flicker on the bamboo, thinking about his sister’s indifference to his heartfelt concerns.

When he finally drifted to sleep, Desta found himself under the sholla tree below his home, alone, watching the animals. Then there appeared the man in his usual cloud-like form. Desta was unhappy to see him again and wondered why he kept bothering him.

“You are too worried about your sister’s leaving. Why??” the cloud man asked, scolding.

Desta thought about the question. Then he said, “I don’t know why you keep appearing in my life. I have been going through hell from what you started. Could you please leave me alone?”

“That’s not what I asked. Answer my question.”

“Do you want me to dance and laugh when the person closest to me is about to be taken away?” Desta was surprised by his response. He didn’t mean to be confrontational.

“That is just it. You see, you have befriended monkeys, a dog, and your sister these many years. You have to learn how to live with strangers—the new ladies who are coming. There will be a time when you will live only with strangers. You have an opportunity now to adapt to change and learn to live with loss. Incidentally, don’t expect your sister to be like Kooli—this will become clear later. She is only human and has not the profound feelings and loyalty that dogs have.

“I know you resent my return, but I am here to tell you that everything that has happened and will yet happen to you is for good reason. The reasons will be revealed to you in due time. For now, be strong and accept things as they unfold in your life.”

Desta stared at the cloud man, perplexed.

“Do you follow what I said?” the figure said.

“I did, but what do I do with all that?”

“Just remember what I said, and everything will be all right—in the end,” the man said. Then he slipped out of sight.

SEVENTEEN

Desta rose the next morning to what he had long dreaded. It was the day Hibist, Damtew, and Tamirat were to be married. His home was swimming with people— aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends from around the valley and far away. Some he knew, while others he saw for the first time. Among the guests were a dozen children, a few his age. Desta was amazed by the chaotic preparations.

At the two indoor fireplaces, two women were busy baking injera and piling it in baskets. Outside, another pair tended large saucepots.

The goat and horse stalls had been adorned for the event. Walls were draped with white cloths, the floors padded with dry grass over which were spread elegant cowhides and goatskins. White and black colobus monkey skins created contrast on the walls and floors. *The goats and horses will never recognize their rooms*, thought Desta of the transformation. He was equally struck by the number of antelope skins spread on the floors throughout the house.

The big thatched tent was also decorated beautifully with large cowhides on the floor and white cloths that hung from its beams. Ayénat told Desta that the skins had been stowed for occasions like this. Teferra had brought the antelope and monkey skins from home.

At mid-morning, half a dozen men stood a slouching gray cow before Abraham and two elderly men for the priest Yacob to bless before slaughter for the wedding feast.

Enat, Desta's fifth sibling, and Genet, the cousin, took Hibist to the back of the house for a warm bath in a makeshift curtained room. Desta followed until Enat chased him away. More than this small snub, what disturbed Desta was how happy Hibist looked as she was led to her last bath at home.

He couldn't understand his sister's happiness leaving him and their family to live with people she did not know. He had thought her love was unconditional, forever. Was her affection capricious? She seemed utterly oblivious that he was cheerless about her leaving.

Desta's fears turned to anger. But just as quickly he remembered what that man told him in his dream: "You have to learn how to live with strangers. Everything that has

happened and will yet happen to you is for good reason. Be strong. . . . accept things as they unfold.” The words comforted him.

I don't care if I ever see you again, he said to himself as he returned to the house with his head hung low.

In the afternoon, Desta was to guard the curtains to the grooms' room while his brothers changed into their wedding clothes. This took his mind off Hibist.

Damtew wore full-length, sky-blue breeches with seams at the bottom so he could slide his high-arched feet through them. Over the pants, he wore a knee-length white shirt that opened on its sides. A matching blue jacket went over the shirt. This dashing outfit was topped by a new gabi with thin green borders.

Tamirat wore the same costume except his was all white, including the priest's *tintem*—turban—that wreathed his head.

They swathed their bodies with gabis, and folded and piled them tidily on their shoulders, leaving enough room for their arms and hands.

Desta admired his brothers; strangely, with their new clothes, both appeared taller. No sooner had they emerged from their quarters when half a dozen smiling women gathered around. The women praised their looks and smoothed the wrinkles from their shirts.

The grooms stepped outside to meet their best men, four or five extra grooms-men, and the horse and mule team that would take them to their brides. The best man from each group held a black cape and two khaki-clad topees to be worn by the groom and bride.

The grooms waited for the customary send-off ceremony. Surrounded by onlookers, Abraham and Ayénat stood on the grass before the house with three elderly men, one of whom was Aba Yacob, the head priest.

The grooms stood like celestial figures before their parents and the old men while as they were blessed by each. Aba Farris, Ayénat's father, went first. Then went Aba Yisakh, Abraham's cotton-haired uncle, who, along with his good wishes, sprayed the grooms and those nearby with spit from his missing front tooth. Desta felt as if he were showered with soap bubbles. He shielded his face, squinted, and wiped off the spit while the others stood by, unmoved. The next speakers were Abraham and Ayénat. Abraham's speech was long and detailed, while Ayénat's was short and simple.

Aba Yacob said his prayers and blessings, wishing the grooms happy and safe trips over and back. He passed the cross over them and touched their foreheads and lips with it. The grooms each bowed and kissed their family members' knees: their

father's, their mother's, and lastly, those of grandfather and uncle. The crowd clapped, and the women let out a shrill "Lililililililililil!"

Once the ceremony ended, the grooms and their entourages left for their brides' homes to fetch them.

Enat explained to Desta that the horses were for the grooms, and each mule for a bride and the best man riding with her, to ensure her safety en route. Damtew and his group went north, toward the Davola River. Tamirat and his entourage headed west to the mountains above their home.

After they left, Desta's thoughts returned to Hibist, and he ran back to the house, nearly tripping, to look for her. She was nowhere to be seen. Most of the women were still outside seeing to the departing entourages.

Desta asked the first woman he saw about Hibist. The woman told him to ask his mother or Enat. He looked around for Enat. Remembering that she and Genet were giving Hibist a bath, he went to the back of the house. There was no sign of Hibist or Genet. The curtain was down, exposing the four poles and soggy earth and the fragrance of Lux soap. As he ran back toward the entrance looking for his mother, he saw Enat in the tent, her back toward him, talking to her husband, Tenaw, and two other men.

Winded, he ran toward Enat. The men watched him weave his way around the crowd toward them. Tenaw, who saw the men looking behind Enat, followed their gaze and saw Desta's panic-stricken face. Tenaw knotted his forehead and narrowed his eyes. Enat turned to see the object of his interest. Desta, breathless, stopped before them. He hesitated, then blurted, "Where is Hibist? Where is Hibist?"

"You ran here just to ask us that? What's wrong with you?" scowled Enat.

"I want to see her before she leaves," Desta said meekly, stepping back, a little embarrassed. Others stared at him.

Enat excused herself and broke away from the men with Desta.

"Wait for me in the house. I'll be there shortly. I need to get Hibist's *she'etto*—perfume—from Tenaw. Then you and I will go to Hibist," she said, hushed, her eyes warmly planted on Desta.

The crowd watched Desta as he snaked his way back to the house. Some thought he appeared happy; others wondered why he seemed distraught.

Desta stood by the entrance and waited for Enat. People were all around, but he was oblivious to them. Enat came swinging a fist. "This will make Hibist smell nice," she said, opening her hand and revealing a small glass vial of green liquid.

Inside, Desta followed Enat to the corner back room, now draped with cotton sheets, the entrance cordoned with a colored curtain that reached the floor. The room

was scented with fresh aromatic grass and herbs and the floor topped with the softest-looking goatskins Desta had ever seen.

Hibist sat on a small bench with folded knees, her white, embroidered gown spread around her on the goatskin. On her long, elegant neck hung tselome—silver jewelry of various shapes and sizes, on bunched, multicolored threads.

Above the tselome, a large silver cross on a black silk cord lay on her plump, olive chest. The elaborate needlework in red, blue, green, and gold around the neck of her white cotton dress ran down her bosom and was lost in the folds of the voluminous outfit. A band of silver bracelets hugged her slender wrists, and circlets of blue and green glass beads adorned her ankles.

Dark blue *kohl*—antimony powder—framed her eyes and made them shine brighter than the burning candle on the wall. Her tapering, exquisite fingers drooped lazily from a hand anchored to the bench, while the other was hidden in the folds of her dress. A pair of small cone-shaped silver earrings glinted in the candlelight and enhanced the adornments on her neck. Her soft, thick hair was trimmed evenly to a rounded mass and accented by a white sash that ran across her forehead. Her fine nose and plump, rosy cheeks glistened in the light.

Her finery and quiet dignity made Hibist seem very beautiful, virtuous, and regal, just like the woman Desta had seen on the church wall with a baby in her arms.

Desta and Enat waited for Genet, Hibist's cousin, to finish massaging her feet and manicuring her toenails. Desta was so taken by his sister's transformation that he almost forgot she was leaving. He stood by, happy not to be shooed away. After the cousin was done, Enat handed Hibist the precious vial from Tenaw.

The bride unscrewed it and brought it close to her nose. "Smells beautiful," she said, pushing the vial toward her cousin for a whiff.

"I smell it from here. It's wonderful," Genet said as she inspected the unlabeled bottle.

Hibist tipped the vial to her finger as Ayénat came and announced, "They are here, they are here. Are you ready?"

"Almost," Genet said.

Hibist gave the vial to her mother to smell the she'etto.

"Konjo she'etto. Who gave it to you?" Ayénat asked.

Hibist pointed to Enat. "And Tenaw," she added.

"Excellent choice!"

Curious to see the men who would take his sister away, Desta ran out to find the groom and his company. In front of the house, three of the groom's party were talking

to Tenaw, who had been appointed their host by Abraham. Several yards above the home, the other men stood around the groom with a lean, gray mule.

When Enat came out to join her husband, Desta stopped her to ask who these men were. She explained they were the three best men. Her husband Tenaw would see to their needs during their stay, providing food and drink.

He would also act as go-between for the men and Hibist's parents, and coordinate Hibist's handover to them at the end.

Desta was crestfallen that Hibist would be given to complete strangers.

Enat put her arm around him. "You should be happy for her, not sad. This is the best day of her life!"

"How can I be happy when they come to take away the only person who. . . ."

Desta hesitated, remembering his mother's admonishments.

Enat pulled him toward her, touched by the intensity of his bond with Hibist. She wished she had been there for him too, but Desta was just a toddler when she married at age eleven, and neither could recall time spent together. For Desta, Enat was little more than a holiday visitor.

Tenaw instructed the best men to bring the groom to the house, and then went ahead to prepare the living room for them.

The groom and groomsmen met with Tenaw at the front door. Once the muleteer tied his animal to a fencepost and joined the rest, Tenaw ushered them in and directed them to the sitting area.

Desta was dying to see Hibist's husband-to-be. As the men walked past, he and Enat watched their feet. Desta pointed to a pair that were humped unusually high, their edges dry, scaly, and chapped. "I think that's him," he said. "Let me run and tell Hibist."

Enat's hand grabbed Desta's delicate arm like a vice. "Don't you dare!" She scowled at him. "I don't want to see you near Hibist before she leaves with the groomsmen. If you wish to save your skin, don't make me tell Baba and Mama what you just tried to do!" She turned and went into the house.

Desta bit his lip and walked off.

After the groom and his men were given food and drink, the best men rose and asked Tenaw if he would permit them to ask the parents for the bride. Tenaw swiftly relayed the request, Abraham and Ayénat came and sat side by side on a high stool and received the three men. Before three witnesses, they pledged to safeguard Hibist until she was transferred to the groom's parents, and in turn, obtain assurances that the in-laws would receive the daughter unharmed.

With these vows made, Ayénat and Genet brought Hibist from the bridal room and

delivered her to the three best men. Outside, the first best man threw a black cape over her shoulders. He lifted her and set her on the mule, put the topee on her head, then hopped on the mule himself and held her securely. All the guests clapped. The women began to dance and sing:

*The bride—the beautiful flower; the bride—the beautiful flower
Be not afraid and let not your heart stir
Your future will only be brighter and more beautiful than the one you
are leaving behind.*

They repeated this refrain as they clapped and danced, adding more verses as they went.

The bride and groom, along with his best men and animals, left shortly after.

Enat found Desta leaning on the fencepost, crying. She held him tightly and gently admonished him.

When the dancers and singers went inside, Enat brought Desta to the bridal room. She held and comforted him there and brought him food and water. Desta drank but barely ate. Afterwards, he sat leaning on the wall and thought of Hibist. He was exhausted. Many days of troubled sleep had taken a heavy toll on his body and mind.

Someone began a drumbeat in the living room. The crowd gathered there, clapping and dancing and singing. Despite the din and commotion, Desta dozed off.

EIGHTEEN

When he woke in the bright morning, Desta found himself surrounded by a great number of people strewn on the floor like wind-tossed bundles of wheat, draped from head to toe in white gabis and shemmas. Some lay on their backs and snored, gulping breath by the gallon. Others assumed the fetal curl, heads resting on arms. They drew air through collapsed nostrils, as though sucking on straws, then emptied bucketfuls of air through flaring noses. Silvery liquid spread from some leaky mouths onto arms and the white goatskins beneath them. A few others lay groggy, eyes half closed. One or two ground their teeth and chewed their cud.

Now wide awake, Desta studied these mostly male houseguests, wondering where they had come from. Everything seemed like a dream. Where was he? The last place he had been, if memory served, was in Hibist's bridal room. Where did she go? He remembered. She had been taken away on a mule by those men. She was married to that guy with the fat feet. Once they disappeared into the nimbus of dusk, he had hidden behind the fence, shedding pearly tears for his lost sister, until Enat came for him.

He ran his fingers on the plush, white bridal skin beneath him, wondering where Hibist was now and whether she was happy. Did she miss him and her family?

He could see the beautiful, smiling face that awakened him every morning before they milked the cows. He remembered the gentle tap of her hand on his shoulders, her soft voice, the sweet things she crooned in his ears, the special foods she prepared for him, and their dinnertime talk. He also remembered the fun times they had in spring chasing butterflies, picking flowers, gathering berries, and collecting figs from the sholla trees. The carefree laughter they shared on their escapades. Now he had no one to do these things with.

Then he thought of his other lost friends: Kooli the dog and the vervet monkeys of the vanished forest.

Desta tried vainly to stem the surge of emotion. He placed his head between his knees and wept. The tears came like a river spilling its banks, flooding lands beyond. Finally, he stopped. He told himself to be strong, to move on with his life. He knew he

would inure to Hibist's absence. The cloud man's advice came to him once again: "Be strong. . . . accept things as they unfold."

Then he remembered something else. His brother's new wives were coming, as Ayénat had said, "In Hibist's place." He wondered if they had arrived already. Slowly he rose and straightened. He hopped over the sleepers and went to the living room. Some slept here, too. His mother pattered in the kitchen. Without a word, he went outside to answer his morning urges before searching for his brothers' brides.

Outdoors, Desta noticed that the guests who had slept in the tent were up, walking the grounds, leaning on the fence, or sitting on grass, swathed to their noses in their gabis. The sun was high in the mountains. The morning was nippy and dewy.

After returning from the backwoods, Desta sat on the fence. There was a band of golden light high up on the mountain. He wanted to watch it descend as he did when he was little, but presently, a gray nimbus veiled the sun and the light on the mountain. It seemed to embody his severance from someone he loved. He smiled; was this image in the sky an irony, or mockery?

Presently, he went inside to see about breakfast. Having had no dinner the night before, he was hungry. He found Ayénat and Enat busy preparing food in the kitchen. From the hearth, a great fire lit up and tessellated the wall of the adjacent room where Hibist had last stayed.

After he ate, Desta asked if Damtew and Tamirat had returned with their brides.

"They are in there," said Enat, pointing to the big room by the entrance.

Desta looked toward the curtained entrance. Nobody came or went.

"Once they wake, you can see them—we'll all go," she said.

Thoughtful and forlorn, Desta gazed at the entrance.

"Don't you want to see your new sisters?" Enat asked, peering at him.

"I would rather see Hibist. These are not my sisters. . . . but I will have to learn to live with strangers," he said finally.

"Hibist now has a husband and a new home. You'll get to see her on holidays and other occasions. But it's good to hear you will give the new girls a chance," said Enat as she hurried back to tend to the saucepot.

In the meantime, most of the guests had risen, and there were a great number of them in and out of the house. A line of girls and boys had formed by the entrance of the newlyweds' room, including Desta's nieces, Astair and Zena. Desta stood several feet away and watched the children as they went in and came back out one by one. Some who returned went to those still in line and whispered in their ears, giggling. Others seemed disappointed.

Curious, Desta approached a dejected boy and asked him what was going on.

“A man said I had to give a button, pin, or money to see the brides,” the boy said.

“You have to give something *just* to see them?” Desta said, wide eyed.

“Yes. I didn’t have anything, and the man wouldn’t let me see ‘em,” the boy said, pouting.

“Are you going?” a second boy asked Desta.

“He shook his head. I have nothing to give, and I am not interested.”

“You have that safety pin,” a girl said, pointing to his neck.

“I need it to remove thorns from my feet when I am a shepherd,” Desta said.

“You won’t get to see them then,” the first boy said.

“No, I won’t, since I have nothing else to give—unless somebody. . .”

“Somebody gave you something?”

“Yeah.”

“I will be right back,” the boy said, and ran.

Desta watched the children in line giggle and laugh, and his curiosity was piqued.

The boy soon returned and handed something to Desta. “I found this a week ago in our backyard. My father kept it for me. I was tempted to use it to see the brides, but I will give it to you since they are your sisters-in-law.”

Desta looked at the beautiful horn button the boy had given him. He would have liked to keep it for himself, but he wouldn’t offend the boy. Besides, he had no shirt to put it on. He might as well use it to see the women.

Yet, he was hesitant.

“Go, go, go,” said the boy, pushing him.

At the curtained entrance was a tall, smiling man who allowed only one child in at a time. “Do you have your gift?” he asked Desta.

“Yes, here,” Desta said, showing him a closed fist.

“Go talk to that man,” the gatekeeper said, pointing to a second person sitting between the two veiled brides.

Desta was surprised that there were so many men in the room. He walked haltingly as he looked around. Most of the men were busy talking and didn’t pay attention to him.

Tamirat greeted him with a smile as he approached. Damtew was talking to two of his best men. He glanced at Desta but said nothing.

“What do you have for a gift?” asked the second man, grinning. He said his name was Dawit.

Desta opened his fist and showed him his gift.

“Just one button?”

Desta nodded.

“Then you will see one bride.”

Desta was puzzled. The boy had not told him he would need to pay twice.

“If you want to see the second, you will have to give that safety pin,” the man said, pointing to Desta’s neck.

“No. I need it for myself.”

“Which one of the brides would you like to see?”

“I would like to see her,” Desta said, pointing to the veiled girl on the right. She was the smaller of the two, and Desta was curious about her.

Tamirat leaned over to the man and whispered.

“Okay, I will let you see both,” the man said, smiling. “You will pay for this girl but not for Tamirat’s. He will pay for you.”

Desta smiled, too, as he crouched to see the mysterious bride completely covered by her shemma.

Dawit slowly lifted it. Desta kept his eyes on its edge to catch each small reveal of the girl. First came the feet—very fair and adorned with beaded silver anklets, nails trimmed, but dry, cracked, and chipped. The feet, hennaed pure magenta, were flat. *Not as pretty as Hibist’s*, thought Desta. As the cloth lifted, in turn came small, hennaed hands clasping folded knees; arms and chest, where rose two small breasts like succulent pears; and farther up, multi-colored, bunched threads festooned with chimes that dangled from silver trinkets. Closer to her neckline hung a large silver cross on a black cord.

As the man continued to peel the shemma, there came the neck; the chin with a tattooed cross; delicate, sensitive lips; rosy, plump cheeks; large, brilliant eyes; and a fine, beak-like nose. She resembled the image of a doll and not a girl. Her face was fair, showing little expression. Her hair was black, thick, and round.

The man smiled at Desta and said, “She is Damtew’s bride. Her name is Melkam.” Desta was surprised how small she was next to her brawny husband. Dawit prompted Desta to introduce himself. “Hello, my name is Desta. I am your husband’s brother,” he whispered, his eyes planted on hers.

The girl gazed at him as if he were some curious object, pursed her lips, blinked and looked away.

Desta waited to see if she would turn to him and speak.

“She is too sleepy to talk,” Dawit said apologetically. “We will arrange for you to see her again tomorrow.”

As Desta was about to go, the man said, “Don’t you want to see the other bride? Tamirat will let you see her free of charge.”

“Then I’d like to,” Desta said in a low voice.

Tamirat’s bride leaned against the wall, her head slightly drooping. Dawit tapped her shoulder and whispered, “We have a visitor who would like to meet you.”

The girl straightened her head, lifted the veil from her face and stared at Desta.

Taken aback by the lack of suspense, he stared at her, wondering if she would ignore him as the other bride had, or introduce herself.

“What did you say your name was?” said Dawit smiling, pretending ignorance.

“My name is Desta. I am your husband’s brother,” he said awkwardly.

The girl tossed her head down in a greeting, puckered her lips and smiled at him.

“My name is Amsale,” she said, holding his eye.

Amsale’s face was soft, her eyes big and intense. She had a narrow, aquiline nose; short, jet-black hair; low cheekbones; and a curving chin. There was a glaring gap on the right side of her smile, but her teeth otherwise were even and white.

Like Damtew’s bride, Amsale was not disposed to talk with Desta. Dawit said that she, too, was tired and that he should come another time.

Desta bowed and parted.

He was confused by the two girls: One was totally mum while the other was a little friendlier—yet still unconversant. *How could they possibly replace Hibist?* He remembered what Ayénat had said. He would be getting two for the price of one, and twice as much love. *What a joke!!* Desta said to himself. How he missed Hibist! And how he hated his parents for sending away the only person who loved him back.

The man’s voice came to him again: *You have to learn to live with strangers.*

NINETEEN

For Desta, the second day of the wedding was much like the first. People ate, drank, and talked both in pairs and in groups indoors, on the grass outside, or in the tent. Some walked the property leisurely. Children laughed, giggled, and romped about. At night, after dinner, the guests clapped, sang, and danced to the beat of a drum until the wee hours of the morning.

By day, Desta sat and watched them, dreamy and melancholic. Nobody cared to ask what bothered him or why he did not play like the other children. Occasionally, he overheard relatives or friends who knew Saba talk about him.

“How could they take a little boy’s story as if it were God’s word and uproot the entire family?” said one.

“They say that the man he talked to was not even the Saytan,” remarked a second man, “but rather some strange creature in human form. This proves that this idle boy dreamed him up and then described him to the Deb’tera.”

Some of them laughed hilariously between swigs of tella.

“In fact,” said the first man, “it’s known among the family that the boy has a bizarre imagination. He sees animals and humans in the mountains, rocks, and clouds.”

“It’s a shame that this poor family must endure his crazy ideas, let alone abandon their home and farm,” said the second man.

Some approached Desta and asked directly for his account. To those who asked nicely, he told them precisely what he had seen and heard from the man by the river. Talking about the cloud man gave him a much-needed respite from thoughts of Hibist. Recalling the man’s parting advice lifted his spirits.

But when drunk and rowdy guests mocked him, Desta walked away. He heard women suck their lips audibly. “He must be possessed by the Saytan to create such havoc in his poor family. Look at him; he seems so gloomy.”

“Have they not tried to exorcise it out of him?” asked one woman. “You know baptism by a good priest and taking communion could help. He just doesn’t look like a normal boy. Did you notice his sunken eyes—as if he has not slept or eaten for days?”

“I understand he was baptized. He has even taken communion. But from the looks

of him, it seems neither has helped. Unless the family does something, I am afraid he will go mad. Or worse,” said the second.

“Worse?” said the third woman, knotting her brows. “What could be worse?”

DEPRESSED BY WHAT PEOPLE said about him, Desta kept to himself until the guests had gone. During the day, he went to his old playing grounds by the edge of the ruined forest where he had once heard birds chirping and now mourned Kooli and the vervets in this place where they shared so many fun times.

Desta understood that the monkeys were gone because Yihoon had destroyed their habitat. They could no longer trust humans. But he could not fathom Kooli’s demise. Why had a healthy, friendly dog suddenly turned against him?

For weeks he had racked his brain to unravel the mystery. *Why had Kooli bitten him? Why had he been sad and listless in the days before? Did he really have the “horrible” disease his parents were so worried about?*

Desta lay on his back in the shade of the wanza—a small to medium size ever green tree—propping his head with interlocked fingers. With little sleep for two days, it felt good to rest and think.

He looked at Saba’s new place, the land nearly cleared. Here and there were fallen trees yet to be gathered and piled like so many that dotted the land in tiny hillocks. Hibist said that Yihoon planned to burn the piles. Desta hated Yihoon for that: for making the vervet monkeys flee. Desta also blamed the cloud man for all these problems, for sanctioning Saba’s move without concern for helpless animals and birds. But Desta wouldn’t say anything bad about the cloud man, fearing he would exact punishment on Desta.

Desta’s thoughts drifted, and he soon fell asleep. His head dropped, rolled, and lay to one side. His arms and legs went limp. He began to snore.

He was transported to another world, one with cinnabar green hills covered with flowers that filled his senses with the most redolent, invigorating, and intoxicating scents. The sun gently caressed his back and neck as he galloped the hills, feet light as feathers. As he ran, he heard soft whispers carried on the wind, saying, “Kooli didn’t die of sickness. He died for you.”

Desta stopped to listen. The voices repeated, “Kooli didn’t die of sickness. He died for you.”

“Why did he die for me?” Desta asked.

“Your family wouldn’t let you go beyond the Davola River unless something

drastic happened. You wouldn't have discovered other worlds if you had not left your birthplace," said the voices.

"He was not really sick when he seemed so listless with glazed eyes?"

"He was, and he wasn't," came the reply.

The wind was blowing hard around Desta, fluttering his gabi about his body. He was astonished and transfixed by the revelation.

"He was sick knowing how much you suffered from all the things happening with your family. He was not sick with disease," said the voices gently.

"Kooli sacrificed himself for me so that I could discover the world beyond the river? Oh God!!"

Desta wanted to weep but tears refused to come. He thought of all the wonderful things Kooli had meant to him, the absolute devotion he had shown him. The best he could do was cry. *I need to cry, I need to show him how much I loved him, how much I will always love him. He squeezed his eyes shut again and again. Still no tears came. What kind of creature am I? What is wrong with me? Why can't I cry?*

He sat on a rock overlooking the green valley, closed his eyes, and tried to imagine what it was like to be cornered and shot by Damtew. He wanted to know what Kooli felt in his last moments, what the blast of the gun and the shattering impact on his body felt like. But still he felt no emotion in his depths. *What kind of cold brute am I?! Why am I incapable of simple tears for one who showed me ultimate love?* The more he thought about it, the more desperate he became. He imagined Kooli looking down from the heavens, seeing his metal-cold heart.

I am trying, Kooli, I am trying. I am not as unfeeling as you see, Desta said in desperation.

He searched for something to make him weep, but he couldn't think of anything worse than being shot by Damtew.

Just know that your friendship always meant a lot to me, he thought, searching the sky for Kooli. . . . *I have been heartbroken since you left. I don't know how my life will be without you and Hibist."*

The voices in the wind spoke again. "Don't torture yourself. Kooli doesn't need your tears. His death was in the scheme of things so that you would travel, discover new places and things, be happy, and begin to think of your freedom. Don't forget the kindness, love, devotion, and sacrifice he showed you. He has set the example for you to be good and kind to others."

When Desta woke, he found his feet and legs swarmed by ants—big and black, whose sickle-like antlers pierced his flesh and made him ooze small beads of blood. He

jumped and tried to brush them off, but some were embedded in his skin, and he had to pull them off one by one. Some remained driven into his skin; others came off with bits of skin locked in their antlers. Meanwhile, more scurried up his body, climbing the ridges and valleys of his gabi, searching for his flesh. He removed the gabi and shook it.

The bites looked as if someone repeatedly had poked him with a needle, yet curiously, he didn't feel the stings.

It occurred to him that while he was asleep, he had gone to a different world. He looked at the crop stubble in the valley and the seared grass beneath him. This was not where he had been a few minutes before. The beautiful green hills and mountains were the product of dreams, as was what happened there. Images loomed and faded in his head, became diffused, and came clear again, like a misty landscape slowly coming into view.

He was amazed that he had slept through the ant attack, yet when he remembered the events and intense feelings of his dream, he realized that his bodily senses had been overwhelmed by its power. As he walked home, he recalled in detail all his futile efforts to cry for Kooli. In the end, he had shed blood instead of tears for his best friend.

TWENTY

“This is the day of the Wedding Return,” said Enat when Desta asked where his brothers and their brides were going. Enat explained that on the third day of the wedding, grooms and brides, along with their best men, return to the girls’ families for a few days. “They will then come home, and our brothers’ wives become part of our family.”

“Does this mean Hibist will come back, too?” Desta asked anxiously.

“Yes, she should be here before dusk.”

Desta jumped to his feet.

“I am glad to see you happy for a change,” Enat said with a wide grin.

“Seeing Hibist always makes me happy!” Desta said merrily.

“Just Hibist?”

“No, but this is her first time away from me. I want to learn how she likes her husband and new home.”

“No matter. I am glad to see that handsome face awash with a beautiful smile. You know, if you were not my brother, I would have killed to have you for one,” said Enat, looking sideways at Desta’s glowing face.

“Thank you. I am happy you are my sister, too. I just wish I could see you more. I don’t even remember when you lived with us. I must have been very little,” Desta said.

“I think you were three when I got married. Although I remember you well, you probably don’t remember me at all,” said Enat, looking far away.

“I am close to Hibist because she raised me. Mother and father were always busy and hardly paid attention to me. Hibist did, though,” Desta said, his face gloomy.

“Oh, I am sorry you feel this way about our parents. Yes, they had so many things to do to raise all of us,” Enat said.

Desta and Enat stood in the tent, watching the best men prepare the mules that the brides would ride. Enat had told Desta that Damtew and Tamirat would walk with their brides on the return trip rather than ride their father’s beautiful horses. Abraham wouldn’t burden his sons-in-law with their safekeeping.

Without ceremony, Tamirat, his bride, and their best men went west, and Damtew’s

party headed north. The few remaining close relatives stood and watched them go. The elderly blessed them and wished them a good journey.

Shortly after the entourages departed, Yihoon came with three men to help chop, collect, and burn the felled trees.

Desta cringed whenever he saw Yihoon, fearing more snide remarks about the cloud man. Now Desta ran inside.

“Desta doesn’t like these new girls, does he?” Ayénat said to Enat. “After they left, he was grinning ear to ear.”

“I think he smiled for Hibist’s return today.”

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Ayénat said. “How thrilled he must be at the prospect of seeing her.”

“I think we should let him spend all the time with her he wants,” Enat said. “The more he learns about her new situation, the better he will adapt to the changes.”

“Yes,” Ayénat said. “He has nothing to occupy himself with until he takes over shepherding next month.”

That afternoon, Ayénat and Enat decided to serve lunch in the tent in order to prepare the house for Hibist’s company. Enat sprinkled fresh grass and spread the choicest goat and antelope skins in the living room. Abraham had a goat killed especially for the newlyweds’ return.

For Desta, time stretched out; the closer it got to early evening, the more slowly it passed. Every so often, Desta looked at the sun descending the mountain. The shadows moved ever so slowly.

“Stop running in and out,” Enat said, “and time will pass much faster.”

“I am afraid I might die before I see Hibist,” Desta said, trying to be serious, but smiling.

“Silly boy, if you stop thinking about it, the time will fly. Here, go pour this tella in each guest’s cup and come back for a refill.” She handed him a heavy tin kettle, speckled with dried rivulets.

Desta staggered with the heavy vessel. Humping slightly, he wobbled to the tent, tella spitting from the spout, spraying his feet and the ground. The guests had eaten, and Grandpa Farris was giving his blessings to Desta’s parents, the absent newlyweds, the children, and the livestock. He even offered good wishes for happiness and prosperity for Saba and Yihoon on their new land. Desta wished he hadn’t. A few in the group looked his way at the mention of them. It made him feel like a criminal.

Shortly before dusk, two men arrived, chanting:

“Your son-in-law, the virile and the strong, he has broken the silver bracelet.”

They exclaimed this repeatedly, one twirling a white handkerchief over his head. They were dancing in a circle when they got to the entrance.

Desta ran for Enat to come see. He didn't know who they were.

"Those are the best men for Hibist's husband," explained Enat. "Our sister, the groom, and the escorts should be nearby, waiting for the men to return for them."

"What do their words mean?" Desta asked. "Why is that man carrying a handkerchief with red marks?"

"You are too young to understand," Enat said casually.

"What do you mean?"

"It has to do with Hibist and her husband's wedding bed; they expect a gift from Baba and Mama. That red stuff is probably animal blood."

Desta didn't understand his sister's cryptic explanation but didn't press her.

Someone from the dinner crowd directed the two men to the tent where Abraham and the guests waited. Desta and Enat watched them as they danced, sang, and twirled the handkerchief. The spectacle captivated Desta, and for a moment, he forgot all else.

The guests clapped as the men entered. Desta and Enat followed, watching with avid interest.

Shortly after, Abraham went to the house and returned with something in his hand. "It looks like Baba is going to give them money," Enat said, turning to her brother. The father handed what he had in his fist to one of the men. Coins fell with a clatter into his hand. Soon after, the grandfather reached into his breast pocket and gave something, too. The rest of the guests offered what they could. Nearly all gave money. The cotton-haired uncle pledged a heifer.

Desta saw Enat's eyes double in size at the uncle's pledge.

"Hibist was his favorite. He never gave us such a munificent gift," she muttered.

After Enat collected the gifts, the men went to fetch the groom and bride, along with the third best man. Desta was not sure what to say or do when he first saw his sister. He thought at least he would match her energy and enthusiasm.

The four men and Hibist arrived. She was still on the mule with the caretaker best man. The groom was on foot along with the others. The man hopped down from the mule and helped Hibist dismount.

To Desta, Hibist seemed tired and limp, as if she had not slept for three days. Enat embraced and kissed her first, then Ayénat and Abraham. Tired as she was, Hibist acknowledged everyone who greeted her. At Desta's turn, she planted three hard kisses on his cheeks.

She must have missed me just as I have missed her, he thought with pleasure.

Content for now, he stepped way, although still curious whose swollen feet he had seen when the groom and his best men first came for his sister.

It was immediately clear they belonged to the groom. His humped feet were ugly, dry, and cracked, with puffed, stumpy toes.

Desta couldn't imagine his beautiful sister sleeping with this man. *Could Hibist get his disease?* he wondered. He dashed across the doorstep to Enat and pointed to the groom's feet as he walked in. "I was right about his humpy feet," he said.

"Ssshhh," said Enat, grimacing at the sight.

Ayénat had heard Desta and saw Enat's reaction. She pursed her lips as she came and stood near them. Her eyes dimmed ruefully. "He is very handsome otherwise," she said.

"Well, diseased feet can get worse," said Enat. "It may be inherited. Would you want a grandson or daughter with elephantiasis?"

"I don't know, daughter," said Ayénat, looking away. "I just don't know." Her eyes grew wet.

"Tella, Tella," cried Tenaw as he came after seating the guests. Enat rushed to bring tella to the men.

Ayénat stood still, as if struck by lightning. "This is what can happen when you only talk to the parents," she said, shaking her head. "We never met the son or confirmed his well-being."

Desta watched his mother and worried for Hibist.

The following day, Desta rose early. He had expected Hibist might tap him on the shoulder to go milk the cows, but she had not. In fact, she didn't wake until much later, leaving Desta to pace about the house in frustration.

When Hibist finally came to the living room, she explained that it had been her first decent night's sleep. At her husband's place, the celebrations had gone all night.

After lunch, Desta asked Hibist to go for a walk. She agreed happily as this was her first day of freedom since leaving home. They strolled to the forest limits behind the house and back, stopping on the way to rest under the gottem tree's protective shadows. The sun had already passed its zenith.

Desta described his brothers' brides: Damtew's wife was small, pretty, and aloof; Tamirat's was unreserved, yet unfriendly. He told her of the boy who provided the but-
ton to see the girls, and about the all-night dances and prolonged feasting.

Hibist, in turn, talked of her own experiences. She described how dark and small the room was where she, the groom, and the best men had stayed. She had rested on an old balding cowhide without much padding beneath it and could neither sit nor sleep comfortably. It had been an ordeal for her. She hardly met the parents of her husband

and had no idea if they were friendly. But the first best man had been very nice to her and tried to make everything as pleasant and easy as he could.

“What has happened with you?” Hibist asked.

Desta shrugged, not ready to talk about himself. He was waiting for the right moment to ask about her husband, and maybe his feet. Hibist studied his face as if she were privy to the thoughts churning in her brother’s head.

“I had a very interesting dream the other night,” Desta said, brightening. “Well, actually it was during the day.” He had anticipated sharing his dream with Hibist and hearing her thoughts.

Hibist, looking exhausted, sighed and shook her head. “How about tomorrow? I am really too tired to be a good listener,” she said. “Okay?”

Desta nodded, too disappointed to speak. *Why did she ask about me if she didn't really care to know?*

TWENTY-ONE

“He has been distraught since you left,” said Ayénat to Hibist on the second day of her return. “Enat and I promised he could spend as much time as possible when you returned.”

“We had a brief visit yesterday. We can take a walk this afternoon,” said Hibist, shrugging.

At lunch, Ayénat sat Desta and Hibist together. After they finished, she whispered to Desta, “Invite her to go walk with you. She leaves tomorrow.”

This time, Desta and Hibist walked to the field below the house and onto the Davola River, reminiscing and laughing about the things they once did together. As they returned, Desta tried again to describe his dream. Sensing his urgency, Hibist gave him her full attention.

Desta began.

“I took a nap above the barley field and dreamed of Kooli. I have missed him very much. I had been mystified by his behavior in his last days and why he attacked me. I was worried about the disease he might have contracted. But you see, Kooli really was not sick at all. He sensed my troubles and had become depressed. He was aching for me. He sacrificed himself for me so that I could discover new things and places far from here.

“I didn’t realize there were more villages and land beyond our valley. I discovered them when Mama and I went to church that Sunday. Kooli was part of a larger plan, although I don’t really know what that means. It all came to me in my dream.”

“Who was it who told you these things?” Hibist asked, puzzled.

“I heard it from the wind,” Desta said.

Hibist stared at him. “The wind?”

“Yes! In my dream.”

“I never did understand the things you come up with,” she said, shaking her head.

“Do you know what happened to Kooli’s body?” Desta asked.

Hibist thought a moment, and then said, “I think I remember where Damtew disposed of him, but I am sure the hyenas have consumed him by now.”

“Can you show me where?”

“What are you going to do with him? He is dead with hardly anything left of him.”

“I want to thank him for being my friend and sacrificing himself so that I may advance in life. For being more compassionate to me than anyone else in my family—other than you,” Desta said.

Hibist hesitated and then got up.

They went along the north side of the house, down a steep grade where the earth formed a narrow cavity, about fifty yards above the northern creek.

They paced the ground in all directions. There was no sign of the dog’s remains. Hibist paused, wondering if this indeed was the spot where Damtew had dumped Kooli’s body. They went farther down toward the creek. There, near a clump of bushes, was the skeleton of what appeared to be a dog. The legs were gone, and a few of the ribs were either crushed or missing, but the skull and vertebrae were intact. Desta and Hibist looked down at the remains silently. Desta held back his emotion.

“I wonder if an animal dragged him here, or if this was where Damtew left him,” Desta said, finally breaking the silence.

“I am almost certain he was left here by Damtew. I remember saying to him that he either bury Kooli or place him near a bush. He said he wanted the vultures to spot him right away and eat him clean to leave no odor,” Hibist said, struggling with her own feelings.

“If the vultures did eat him, we should see strewn bones,” Desta said. He remembered watching vultures swoop down on dead animals and strip their bones in no time.

Hibist agreed. “As you might remember, Damtew wanted to club Kooli,” Hibist said. “But father objected, so Damtew shot Kooli at close range,” she said, choking.

Desta stood speechless, frozen in place, fighting the tears that gathered. He imagined Damtew raising the pistol and shattering Kooli’s heart, a soul who had given nothing but love. He had taken in Desta’s pain, become listless and sad, and then in anger, bitten him to make Desta see that he must act against those who try to hurt him.

“His action was misunderstood,” Desta said. “It cost him his life—and cost me his friendship.” He finally let his tears flow. Hibist held him close and cried with him.

“He was always with me wherever I went,” sobbed Desta. “He even slept next to me despite Ma’s complaints. He was the only good brother I had. Would any of my brothers or sisters sacrifice their lives for me? But Kooli did. I will remember him forever!”

“I understand how you feel,” Hibist said, wiping away her tears. “I also disparaged you for sleeping with Kooli. What you did wasn’t customary, but then again, you have always been different.”

“I cannot tell you why I am as I am, just as I can’t explain how a dog could grieve with me.” Desta cried harder. He felt Kooli’s loss, and how lonely he would be with his sister soon gone.

Hibist held him close once more, his tears soaking her new dress. “Let’s go. If we think longer about these sad things, we will cry our eyes out,” she said.

Desta sighed, letting his sister wipe his tears with her sleeve. “We shouldn’t leave Kooli’s bones here,” he said, looking around. “I would like to bury them.”

Hibist remembered a foxhole at the edge of their property, by the kaga tree on the south side. She suggested they take Kooli there. Desta spread his gabi on the ground, gathered on it every bit of bone he could find, folded them in, and followed Hibist to the foxhole.

Once they found it, Desta held the opposing ends of his gabi and then poured its contents down the hole, letting go of one end.

Hibist suggested they cover the hole with branches for now and come back the next day to fill it with dirt, but Desta wanted to finish the burial.

He thought it better to fit wood in the foxhole and then cover that with rocks. They found three small logs and lined the opening, stepping on them to bury the ends in earth. Then they filled the gaps with rocks and wood.

Once this was done, Desta sat by Kooli’s new grave and thanked him for being his loving friend and sacrificing his life on his behalf. He wished him well until they met again in heaven. Hibist looked on, touched by Desta’s words and the feelings he expressed.

The ceremony done, Desta and Hibist walked north and then cut west to the footpath that crossed to the back of the hill facing Saba’s new property. Hibist chose this roundabout route so as not to dirty her new dress on the tilled soil. They walked in tandem, Desta behind his sister.

“I really admire Baba’s humane decision to have Kooli shot instead of letting Damtew club him,” said Desta.

“Well, for him it was more than just humane,” Hibist said.

“How do you mean?”

“Apparently, the name *Kooli* has been entwined in his own life, connecting him with his lost father,” she said as they turned the corner of the fence.

“Tell me.”

“When Damtew asked why he would waste a bullet on a crazy dog—when he made others use their own bullets with his rifle, he said, ‘Letting you club Kooli would be like committing the same act on my father.’”

Hibist motioned Desta to sit on some flat rocks next to the *Abo*—leafy evergreen plant—bushes beside the path, one of their favorite spots for sharing secrets. “Let’s sit here for a bit so that I can tell you the rest of the story. I know you will find it very interesting.

“Baba had been drinking that night, and he was in a talking mood. He said when he was born, his family lived in an isolated part of Kuakura, where they owned a huge amount of land. His father, who travelled a lot, brought home a dog he named Kooli to look after the family. Over time, Kooli and Baba became best friends. They romped together through the countryside, and the dog kept intruding animals and humans at bay by night. Kooli was with him when they scoured the land after his father disappeared. He nearly wept when he recalled this.

“Until Kooli died some five years later, he was the only connection to his father. After that, he named another dog Kooli. And whatever dogs they got had to have similar color and traits as the original Kooli. Interestingly, the way your Kooli came into our lives had an uncanny similarity to the first one. . . .”

“How so?” Desta asked.

“Well, Baba got the dog right after you were born. He thought the dog would grow with you and keep you company in this isolated valley, as well as guard the family. This Kooli was important to Baba because the dog connected you and him the way his first Kooli had with his own father.”

“You know, it all makes sense now,” Desta said. “When I was little and played with Kooli outdoors, father would sit and watch, often smiling or telling me to be gentle with him. Sometimes Baba even played with us. And he always saved the entrails of a cow, goat, or sheep for Kooli. Mother was horrified when Kooli slept with me, but father thought it was fine.”

“Well, now you know. Let’s head back home,” said the newlywed as she rose.

Desta rose, too, and held his sister close. He kissed her cheeks and thanked her for being there with him.

As the last rays of sun on the eastern mountains brought closure to the day, Desta felt a measure of closure, too.

TWENTY-TWO

The wedding that had caused Desta so much consternation had come and gone. Hibist and her husband, along with their escorts, had left. Damtew, Tamirat, and their wives were back from three days with their in-laws.

Now there were more people in Desta's home than ever. Tamirat had yet to complete school, but as a future priest, he needed first to consecrate his marriage by taking communion with his new wife. For reasons not obvious to anyone, she hadn't yet agreed.

Desta was happy to have Tamirat at home. Desta's third brother was the only one who hadn't taken sides over Saba's move. If the situation with Damtew and Asse'ged worsened, Tamirat would be there to help. Tamirat had begun church school before Desta was born, visiting only on holidays, so now he could get to know his brother better.

Despite the many people around him, Desta had never felt lonelier. There was a big void in his heart and his world. It had begun with the departure of the vervet monkeys and grew wider and deeper with Kooli's loss. With Hibist gone, it had become an echoing chasm that no one could fill.

He could bear his woes when Hibist was there, but now there was no one to turn to, not even his mother. She was always too busy to listen to him. "Tell me later," or, "I am too busy, go talk to Hibist," Ayénat would say. So, Desta had stopped sharing his feelings with her.

Since the wedding, Desta had been in survival mode. He took his meals, tended the animals, and slept. He talked little and smiled at no one.

Hibist and Ayénat had said the new girls would keep him company and care for him, but his brothers' wives appeared too scared and disconcerted to be friendly. Melkam, Damtew's wife, seemed terrified of the mountains. When she went outside, she studied the ranges to the east, the north, and above her new home for a long while. "I feel completely walled in," she complained. "Goota, where I come from, is flat as a baking pan. You can look in any direction without seeing an anthill."

"I don't feel walled in," Amsale would say, looking at the massive ridges above the

house. "But they are hell to climb when I visit my family. I nearly broke down the first time we went through them. You're lucky you don't have to."

"How I miss my family and land!" said Melkam. "Have you noticed that the sun rises late and sets early here?"

"Yes. I don't know how my parents found these people. I certainly won't stay here the rest of my life," Amsale said, tossing her head with a frown.

Foreheads knotted, eyes downcast, the new wives did not disguise their distaste for their new home. They did the work Ayénat gave them, Melkam more diligently than Amsale, but talked very little to anyone.

Their shared circumstance bonded them. They ate together, and when Ayénat sat Desta with them, they spoke quietly, ignoring him. He often ate quickly and went out or went to bed while the girls sat and chattered.

You will be loved twice as much with two new sisters-in-law. How hollow his mother's promise seemed now. Of the two wives, he favored Melkam; she was nearly his size, innocent and shy, and he could imagine being her friend. He didn't like Amsale at all. She was tall, pretty, and slender, with severe eyes and haughty bearing as if the world revolved around her, and he avoided her.

Desta wondered if Hibist was happy. Did she like her husband? Was she getting used to his feet, or was she scared she might get elephantiasis, too?

His mother had kept her promise that Desta would no longer have to milk the cows. That job belonged to the new girls. Desta slept a little longer. When he rose, he ate his breakfast of injera with leftover sauce, or if there was none, just plain. With Hibist gone, he no longer got milk with his bread. Desta missed Hibist even more as he ate dry bread, sometimes asking Melkam for water.

It was Monday morning, May 14, 1956, when Desta became a full-fledged shepherd. Damtew was now a married man and a bona fide farmer, both of which he took very seriously. Since his brother had married, his walk and attitude had changed. He swaggered with self-importance, never more so than the day he became a farmer.

Impressed by his brother's long preparation with their father's help, Desta had risen early that morning to watch Damtew's first day as a farmer.

He remembered standing at the door watching his brother ready his equipment. Damtew had been up before dawn, gathering his tools: some old ones, and others his father had made to complete a set, including the eight-foot stout wooden beam that connected the hoe to the yoke. The beam's end was shaved flat into four even sides and trimmed to square corners. Two holes were bored into the flat surfaces. A straight sturdy wooden rod, its tip attached to a gleaming metal plow-end; two wooden,

perforated half wedges carved from a log; a short wooden dowel; and a metal ring hooked on one end were part lay before him.

Damtew inserted the dowel into the side holes of the long, stout beam and mounted the two wedges on the dowel on either side. He passed the hoe through the beam's second hole, pulled the tips of the wedges and hoe together, and held them with one hand while he secured them with the hooked ring. Finally, he harnessed the hook to the beam with rounds of rope to make a solid unit. He hoisted the whole assembly with ease and balanced it on his burly shoulder. He threw his whip over the other shoulder and drove the yoked pair of oxen to the lot behind their home. Wheeling around to Desta, he said, "Make sure the animals are well looked after."

As he watched Damtew shamble away with his tools on his oxen, Desta felt no desire to be a farmer. He was glad that he and Damtew finally had different work, and that Damtew's wife, and Asse'ged's, would assume Desta's job delivering lunch to his brothers.

Around the house, Damtew became bossy and demanding. Upon his return from work, his little wife had to bring him his food promptly. After dinner she would perch on a small wooden stool by the fire, facing her husband, and place a large wooden bowl and a dry cloth near his feet. Without a word, Damtew would lift a foot and put it in the bowl for his wife to wash. With bare hands, she scrubbed his tough, calloused soles and the dust and mud between his toes, then wiped away the excess water. That done, Damtew would remove his foot from the basin once she'd kissed the arch of his foot or the big toe. Then he'd place his foot on the dry cloth.

AS TIME WENT BY, Desta became more withdrawn from his surroundings. Both Abraham and Ayénat were greatly disturbed by Desta's despondency. One evening, they watched him disappear into the shadows of the back room right after he ate. "Desta has been in the dumps since Hibist left," said Ayénat, looking at her husband sitting across the fire. "I'm afraid things will get worse unless we do something." It was late Sunday, and Abraham had just returned from church and was relaxing by the fire, nursing his tella.

"What should we do?" he asked.

"We cannot bring back Hibist. But we should at least replace the dog. He needs a companion when he is tending animals, and it could help him adjust to the changes," said Ayénat, eyes on her husband.

"I have been looking for one ever since Kooli died," said Abraham. "I cannot live

without one myself. You know the dog is a link to my father, and I can't give him a proper burial until I'm sure he is no longer alive."

"I used to wonder why you named all of your dogs Kooli. I once thought maybe you had just run out of ideas," Ayénat said with a wisp of smile.

"Yes. Well, now you know. As for a new dog, I have a dilemma right now. None of the parishioners has puppies. They say to wait until spring."

"We can't wait that long," Ayénat said. "Desta needs a dog in the fields." She paused, her eyes fixed on the fire. "But Desta was shaken by Kooli's death. I am not sure he wants one."

THE NEXT DAY, later in the evening, after he secured the animals—the cattle in their pen, the sheep in their shelter, the horses and goats in the house stalls—Desta came and sat by his father's side.

His mother brought him half a fresh-baked injera, which Desta devoured greedily. He had eaten only his morning meal and was famished.

Abraham told Melkam to bring him more. Ayénat said he should wait for dinner, not fill himself with bread. Abraham overruled her.

Desta munched more slowly on his second portion. His eyes were on the fire, watching the nodding column of flames.

"What do you say we get another dog—another Kooli, Desta?" Abraham asked, glancing at his son.

"What for?"

"To replace the old dog."

"I am not interested in another dog. I know one Kooli, and he is gone. Another dog won't make me forget the Kooli I had," Desta said firmly.

"Your mother and I thought that with Hibist gone, another dog could keep you company," the father said.

"The Kooli I had is my company. He is always in my thoughts. I cannot trade him for another."

Ayénat, who had been listening to the conversation, came from the back room and stood across from them. "Don't you think it will help wean yourself off of all these thoughts of Hibist and your dog?"

"Why should I give up what I still love?" Desta said, angered by his mother's pressure. "I know you hoped the new girls would replace Hibist. They didn't and won't. I am happy with my memories of Hibist and Kooli."

Abraham and Ayénat looked at each other. She signaled with a headshake that her husband should leave Desta alone. He nodded.

“Can I get another Kooli for myself, then?” he asked, smiling.

“By all means, but may I ask why?” Desta said, expecting to hear what he’d learned from Hibist.

“I got your Kooli for me as much as you. When you were born, my old Kooli had been dead two months. I had planned to get a new dog and picked up the puppy when you were born. This Kooli was uncannily similar to the one my father gave me at birth. So, I was as much attached to him as you were. That is why I couldn’t bring myself to shoot him when we thought him ill. It was a mistake, a rushed judgment, and he was killed,” the father said, nearly overtaken by emotion.

Desta listened quietly. His eyes filled with tears.

“Hibist and I found his bones and buried him in a foxhole at the other end of the property,” Desta said, wiping his eyes.

“Good boy. I’m proud of you,” Abraham said, patting his shoulder. “I didn’t know of that. It was in my thoughts to do, but lately I have not had time for a proper meal. Thank you for doing it for both of us.”

“You are welcome!” said Desta. “I couldn’t sleep at night knowing that his bones were left in the sun.”

Abraham proudly gazed at Desta.

Ayénat listened quietly. She was pleased to see this sensitive part of her rugged, inscrutable husband. *He has such a sweet side as well*, she thought. She felt as if she had met her husband anew.

While the parents and Desta were talking, Damtew came huffing and puffing.

“What is wrong?” Ayénat asked, looking toward him.

“Asse’ged and I ran into Yihoon. He wants us to help him with their move next Saturday.”

“Well, what did you say?” Abraham said.

“Asse’ged said maybe. I said nothing.”

“Mum is the answer to your sister who solicits your help?” the father said, staring at his son.

“If I had said ‘yes,’ I would be lying about my feelings. If I had said ‘no’ without good reason, he would be offended. I took the safest route and said nothing,” blurted Damtew.

“You mean to say, after all these months, you’re still hankering for that property? Where is your compassion and support for your sister, your nieces, and their father? A good neighbor would say, ‘Yes, I’ll come.’ You should know this, Damtew. Your pouting, reeling, and sizzling anger are fruitless; holding grudges changes nothing. They

will not suffer, but you will. When you are in need, nobody will help you. You'll reap what you sow. I am afraid for you," Abraham said as he rose to leave.

"Aren't you going to eat dinner?" Ayénat asked.

"Our son has killed my appetite. I'd better just go to bed," he said, shuffling to their sleeping quarters.

Damtew sat next to Ayénat in silence. Desta watched his brother's reaction. His breathing quieted. He was pensive, but not contrite. He narrowed his eyes and stared at the fire.

"You should listen to your father," Ayénat said. "What's done is done. If you don't help them move, Yihoon, Saba, their children, and surely your father will judge you harshly. You don't want a bad reputation in the family."

Damtew watched the fire. His face relaxed and his eyes softened. "I guess you are right. I'll have to grit my teeth and do this. But it won't change how I feel about that place," he said finally.

TWENTY-THREE

When Yihoon came to the house Saturday morning to ask for help moving, the sun was struggling to break free from the charcoal gray clouds that hung over the eastern mountains. The air was damp from the night's rain, the ground soggy.

Abraham was about to go inside when he saw Yihoon a few yards away. "Good morning, Yihoon. What brings you here so early on this chilly morning?"

"We move to our new house today. I came to enlist Damtew and Asse'ged, and whoever else can help."

"Oh, yes, Damtew mentioned you would be coming. Is the new house finished?"

"Most of it. All we have left is to partition the rooms, seal the outside walls, plus the raised platform beds, and a few other things."

"Good. You can take your time; they are not so critical. You wish to beat the rain, don't you?"

"Exactly, Baba. In fact, I am already behind with my farming. The house has occupied all my waking hours."

"Come in. Let's see if Damtew is still here."

"He is. At least he was a little while ago," piped up Desta, who had overheard them. He had returned to the house after releasing the cattle from their pens.

"Desta, good morning! Here we are, ready to move, as you recommended!" Yihoon said, grinning.

Abraham looked keenly at Desta.

"I didn't recommend it. The cloud man did," Desta said in a low voice.

Seeing the fear in his son's face, Abraham interceded. "No matter who, this was the only option. Let's see how your family fares."

"I know. I had to tease him a little bit," Yihoon said, his grin widening. "As much as we were anxious at first, now Saba and the children are very excited. I suspect the animals are happy, too. For no reason, I saw our goats leaping, the sheep running in circles, and the donkeys braying merrily."

Desta burst out laughing as he imagined this. Abraham smiled at his son's mirth.

Desta wanted to hear about the cows, too, but his brother-in-law hurried off to find Asse'ged.

"I'll tell Damtew to wait for you," Abraham said, heading inside with Desta.

Being a full-fledged farmer, Damtew didn't often rise early on weekends; when he did, he sat leisurely by the fire and watched his little brother run around preparing the animals for the fields. When he felt generous, particularly when their father was around, he would help Desta with the morning chores.

When Abraham and Desta returned, Damtew was sitting by the fireplace with his arms crossed on his folded knees, staring into space.

"Yihoon was looking for you to help with the move," Abraham said, looking down on his son. "He's gone to collect Asse'ged. He should be here in a few minutes. Be ready to go with him."

Damtew grunted.

"So. . . what's your story?" glared Abraham.

"He is not now waiting for me, is he? I'll go when he comes back," mumbled Damtew, looking away.

"Get dressed and wait for him outside," the father ordered.

Abraham went to the closet and took his knee breeches, cream-colored long shirt, and khaki coat from an old wooden box. While he put on his clothes, he watched Damtew, still staring into space, by turns pursing, curling, and biting his lips.

When he noticed his father's eye still on him, he rose begrudgingly and went to his loft. He returned in work shorts and a worn, sleeveless jacket and shuffled out to the fence. When Yihoon and Asse'ged arrived chatting, carrying three leather sacks, he grew darker. He coughed out a curt, "Good morning," in reply to Yihoon's greeting.

Handing his supply of leather sacks to Asse'ged, Yihoon went inside the house and re-emerged with more. Then all three departed for Yihoon's home. Damtew followed several feet behind his brothers, head down, as if he were angry at the earth.

When they crossed the creek, Asse'ged and Yihoon remarked on how much rain had fallen the previous night, evident from the debris littering the flooded embankment.

When they arrived at Yihoon's home, the brothers were relieved to find two other men to help, as well as a few draft animals. One of the men had gathered all the farming equipment—the hoe, yoke, *wegel*—a metal ring with a six-inch hook—and had piled them on the grass. In the cow's pen were two pack mules and three donkeys eating hay through the fence.

When Yihoon and the two brothers entered the house, they found Saba and the two

children crying out loud, squatting by a broken, black object. After the bright morning sun, it took a moment for the men to see her broken pan.

“That was the only baking pan we had,” Saba said, gazing at the men.

Damtew wanted to say, *Maybe something is telling you to stay put*. But he didn’t have the nerve.

Yihoon looked away, shaking his head. “We will be happy to leave this place behind.”

“The irony is that last Saturday I was going to buy a new one,” Saba said. “I thought we should bake our first injera at our new place with a new pan, but I couldn’t find what I needed. And now we don’t have any pan at all! What does it mean that it happened on our moving day? Does this portend something bad?” Her eyes ran from her husband to her brothers as she grew more distressed. “Without a pan, we can’t bake. Without injera, life would be near impossible.”

“It means nothing. It’s just broken clay,” Yihoon said, annoyed. “We have to get going.”

“You can look at it positively, too,” Asse’ged said with a faint grin. “It could mean that you are breaking from the life you have lived here the last four years.”

In the larder, Yihoon instructed Damtew and Asse’ged to fill the sacks with grain, tie them with cord, and stack them neatly outside.

Asse’ged and Damtew wiggled the circular, interlocking walls of the barrel-like granaries, removed the top two rings, and took them outside. Damtew, basket in hand, scooped the grain and poured it into the sacks that Asse’ged held open. A few minutes later, Yihoon brought his two men to do the same in the other granaries.

From three different granaries of barley, rye and teff, they filled and tied fourteen sacks. Then they took them outside and arranged them in three rows.

In the meantime, Saba had moved the broken pan aside. She and her girls filled large and small bamboo baskets with pots and pans, clothes, and other household items, and arranged them tidily outside.

In the bedroom, Astair and Zena argued about who should roll the animal skins. Zena didn’t have the strength but insisted she should do it. The fight was quickly squelched by their father, who ordered the older, stronger girl to do the job. Zena left pouting. Yihoon took her outside and sat her near the piled household goods with a stick to chase off any goats that got too close.

Steam was rising where the morning sun had warmed the wet ground and the dung in the cows’ pen. The air reeked, and flies tortured every living thing nearby. Soon enough, the men became accustomed to the stink.

Saba was still preoccupied with her baking pan. The strange way it had broken made her wonder if some evil force had caused it, perhaps the Saytan that had told Desta

they must leave this place. She was too confused and worried to accomplish much and drifted through her house, gathering things randomly and taking them outdoors.

Then, in the thick gottem tree above the spot where Yihoon had stationed Zena, finches began to twitter, and a group of wrens joyfully sang. Zena was enchanted, and soon stopped her pouting.

Saba, too, was pleased by the birds' beautiful trills, and they calmed her. Her father, an accomplished birdsong reader, would think these pleasant notes a positive sign, she thought. Heartened, she concluded that whatever that spirit was—bad or good—it didn't want her to bring her old pan to her new home. *It broke so cleanly that there must be meaning and purpose in it*, she said to herself.

By early afternoon, the sacks of grain were piled high like flood barriers. Yihoon and the four men sat next to them, and Saba brought them lunch: injera piled on a *mosseb*—a circular top basket with bell bottom used to serve food—with a generous amount of —sauce made from ground peas—in the middle. Astair staggered behind her mother with an aluminum kettle of tella. Zena followed with a stack of four horn cups and two clay cups, which she passed out to the men. One cup she set aside for her mother.

Damtew and Asse'ged downed their drinks in one swig as if they had not had a drop for days. The other men drank their tella in one straight chug but stopped half way.

"That is the tella I prepared for your wedding, Damtew. Did you like it?" Saba said, surprised he had gulped it. She ordered her daughter to bring more.

"It's not too bad," Damtew said, looking away.

"Well, thank you for the compliment," Saba said, simulating a smile.

"No, it's very good, Saba. It has aged a little, which makes it even more enjoyable," Asse'ged said earnestly.

"Thank you. We don't have much left, and I am not sure when I will brew more. Another big event, I guess," Saba said. In the meantime, Astair had brought another kettle of the brown drink and poured a second round. This time, the men drank and ate leisurely.

The sun had descended halfway to the top of the mountain above them. Yihoon studied the eastern mountains. There were many lots already tilled; some still had last season's stubbles. The rest of the land was mantled in a thin veil of new grass or the vegetation that lined the deep creeks.

Yihoon wished he had begun farming as early as the others, whose soil would be ready for planting in a few weeks when the rainy season arrived. He still had much to do with the house before he could till the land. He sighed deeply. Saba, who sat next to him, tapped his knee and said, "What's wrong? We should be finished moving by Tuesday, so don't worry."

“I was thinking of the farming I have yet to do. I am already behind.”

“We have enough grain for at least six months. If we grow half of what we harvested last year, we should be okay.”

“Thanks. That eases my mind,” he said, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“How are you feeling, guys?” Yihoon asked, turning to his helpers.

“We are fine. We should load the animals soon, as the day is passing rapidly,” Asse’ged replied as he placed his empty cup next to the mosseb.

They loaded the donkeys with one sack of grain each, and they loaded the mules with two sacks placed crosswise. Asse’ged and Damtew each carried one granary ring on their shoulders and drove a donkey. The other men carried the smaller sacks on their backs and drove the mules. Yihoon shouldered one remaining adobe ring. He looked awkward as he teetered along behind the men and animals. Saba carried some pots and pans. The children were left behind to watch their remaining possessions.

At the new house, they quickly unloaded and brought the sacks inside, then left to fetch more. In two hours, the sun would slip behind the mountain.

With the second trip, they had moved the rest of the grain.

On their third trip, Damtew and Asse’ged took the last of the granaries. The other men and Yihoon carried furniture and skin mats, leaving behind only their bedding and the pots they would need for that night’s meal.

By the time the sun finally set, they were done. Yihoon and Saba thanked Damtew and Asse’ged, and invited them to the big housewarming party they planned for the following weekend.

TWENTY-FOUR

Before they could move into their new house, Saba and Yihoon needed it blessed by the head priest of their church. In the morning, they gathered the last of their belongings and left for their new place. Deb'tera Yacob, the priest from Avinevra, was coming early to consecrate the house with holy water.

When they arrived, the priest had not yet come, but Saba was happy to see her father and stepmother strolling toward the home carrying the new baking pan Ayénat had promised her. Shortly after, Teferra, Asse'ged, and Tamirat arrived with their wives. Enat and Hibist lived too far to come. Damtew claimed a severe headache and didn't attend.

Aba Yacob arrived last. He apologized, explaining that he had been reading the Bible and praying to sanctify the small green bottle of water. Saba was grateful, and Ayénat thought it wonderful of him. She hoped to dab a few drops on her face and body, and maybe even have a sip of it.

The priest stood by the entrance of the new home. He took his Bible from its leather case and began reading. The family stood around him, attentive, not understanding a word of the ancient Ge'ez.

After the reading, the priest crossed the threshold, tipped the bottle into his cupped hand, and sprinkled water around the entrance, uttering unknown words. Then he went inside, followed by all of the family. He continued sprinkling water around the house as he recited his blessings.

Lastly, he poured a bit into the cupped hands of the four family members, telling them to rub themselves with it, and drink it if they wished. Then he handed the bottle to Ayénat, who accepted it graciously.

Before they sat, Abraham whispered to Tamirat and signaled to Asse'ged and his wife. They left the room and returned minutes later, Asse'ged with a jar of tella, Mulu with a mosseb of freshly baked bread. Amsale brought knives, and Tamirat came trailing behind him with a beautiful lamb.

Saba gasped. "Baba, what a surprise!" Her big eyes conveyed her words. "It's not much. We want you to have a happy start in your new house," Abraham said.

Everyone, including the priest, turned and looked at him with admiration.

“Where had you hidden these? When did they come?” asked Yihoon excitedly of his father and mother-in-law.

“Ask Asse’ged and Tamirat. The job was theirs,” the father said with a smile.

“We brought them early this morning,” Asse’ged said. “We hid them behind the house.”

“That is beyond our wildest expectations. . . . thank you both,” Saba said, glancing at her father and stepmother.

With these niceties, Tamirat brought the sheep to the entrance. The men and priest followed. They stood by the sheep while the priest prayed and passed his silver cross over it. Then Tamirat grabbed the animal’s legs and flipped it onto its back. Asse’ged grasped its muzzle, held tight, and pulled it back to expose the neck. Amsale passed the big knife to Yihoon. Yihoon crouched, said his own prayer, then rose and placed the sharp edge of the knife over the lamb’s neck. A torrent of blood sprayed everywhere, making the men jump. Once the sheep was still, they went back to their seats.

Saba, thrilled by the gifts, quickly made a fire. To cure her new baking pan, she laid it on the three stones, covered it with two fistfuls of *gomenzer*—collard green seeds—placed the lid, and let the oil-rich brown seeds, and the poppy-red pan itself, turn black. With the new baking pan, she made her first flawless injera. She couldn’t be happier. She placed the steaming pancake bread on a straw tray and brought it to the priest for blessing. The bearded man cut it with a knife into small wedges and passed them out to everyone.

That night, with tella given by Ayénat, Mulu, and Saba—all from the weddings—and injera, the whole family feasted.

Desta was the only one who couldn’t attend, as he was tending the animals. But Saba sent Astair with a basket of food for him to say that their good fortune was thanks to him, and that she hoped to return the favor in a grand way when she had her first baby.

Late that night, Abraham walked home behind Ayénat, secretly praying that Saba would soon bear his first grandson.

TWENTY-FIVE

“Here, put on your sheepskin,” Ayénat said.

“I don’t want it,” Desta said.

“You need it for the cold, and to protect your gabi from the rain. Take it.”

“The gessa is enough.”

“Every shepherd wears a sheepskin. What is the problem with you?”

“I am not every shepherd, and I am not a sheep.”

“Here, put it on, before I put it on your face.”

Desta grabbed the sheepskin and threw it on the stubby fire log. “There! That’s where it belongs!” he cried, and dashed out of the house and into a cloud of flies. It was May, the fly season.

Ayénat watched him go, stunned by his unexpected outburst.

AFTER DESTA BECAME a shepherd, he began spending his days—from dawn to sunset—with cows, sheep, and goats. Every day, Desta rose at daybreak and released the goats, sheep, and horses from their stalls to graze nearby until the cows were milked and Desta had had his breakfast.

Then Desta collected his gessa, whip, and stick, and threw his sheepskin over his gabi like a cape. Mindful of Damtew’s instructions, he gathered the animals and drove them to the large pasture below home. He kept close watch on the kids and lambs and cattle while they were in the fields.

May began the rainy season. April’s sporadic showers became steadier and more regular as the months advanced. Desta watched the mountains, canyons, and flatlands become greener by the day, from a thin, mossy film in early May, to rich, thick emerald grass and foliage in June. After a three-month hiatus, the farmers and their oxen were back working the fields, readying them to sow in June and July.

Within a few weeks, the white stubble patches would transform into a quilt of burnt sienna in a sea of green. The hushed valley of the preceding months, echoing with wedding and funeral drums, the lowing of driven cattle, and the odd cries of hawks and other birds would come alive with new energy and activity.

Since becoming a shepherd, Desta noticed that there were a great number of cattle, sheep, and goats grazing all over the valley with more shepherds tending them. He had watched from afar as they cracked their whips, played hockey, and ran in the fields, laughing and shouting. He longed to run and laugh and shout alongside them, but he knew there was little chance of that. They were distant, and different. He hadn't met them and was unsure if they'd welcome him.

While Desta studied the changes all around him, changes also came within him.

His fear of retribution by his brothers over their land dispute had been assuaged. It seemed Damtew and Asse'ged had finally accepted the loss of the coveted property. Being busy with work, they seemed less hostile toward him.

To his surprise, Desta had also come to accept his own losses: his sister, dog, and monkey friends, whom he kept close in thought and memory.

He was glad to be free of the paralyzing fear and melancholy of the previous months. Still, in the back of his mind, he feared for Saba's next baby.

Desta's predominant emotion now was loathing. He hated his job. It had not even been thirty days since he began shepherding. It felt like a year, long enough for him to realize how hard it was and how difficult animals were to manage.

It was late afternoon in the first week of June when Desta, donning his small papyrus gessa, took shelter under the spreading sholla tree. Sitting on a long, flat, gray rock, he watched the slanting rain fall in sheets and pummel the ground as it covered the field before him in a white haze. Leaves chattered, and branches squeaked and lashed in violent gusts. Black clouds above the eastern mountains cracked into lightning, and the wind howled and moaned as it raced through the deep, curving Davola gorge high in the ridges.

This was the first time Desta was caught in a rainstorm, and he was terrified. His feet and hands were cold. The blood withdrew from his toes and fingertips; his skin sagged and dimpled. The small gabi and sheepskin kept his body warm, and the gessa and the tree above shielded him from the rain.

The animals, too, had taken shelter. The sheep huddled on the other side of the gotem tree, the goats several yards from him, and some of the cows clustered in the field unfazed while others grazed.

This was a moment when Desta, undisturbed, could escape into his imaginings. Yet, he reeled with anger—for the animals he tended, and the adults who ruled him.

The goats were the most unruly and disobedient. That morning, after he drove all the animals down, the goats had entered a forbidden part of his parents' property where the bushes were thick with thorns and the ground littered with long needles. Desta would need stiff cowhide armor to go after them.

Standing beyond the bushes for nearly an hour, Desta shouted, begged, and cracked his whip at the goats. He might as well have been a rock or tree. They simply went on nibbling the fresh leaves as if they were delicacies. Damtew's words came to him: "What always worries me when I find these goats like this is that they could lose their kids or a weak member to an Anir, an affin or a kebero. So, you need to chase them out of these bushes." Having given up on them, Desta kept shouting, hoping at least to scare predators lurking nearby. In the end, after cleaning out all the fresh buds, the sheep came out of their own accord.

The bulls and some of the cows didn't obey him either. No matter how much he shouted at them when they went astray, they never turned to look at him. When Damtew shouted from afar, they would turn his way, but Desta had to crack his whip in their sights for them to notice him. He figured he didn't intimidate them because he was smaller than Damtew.

The sheep had their own quirks. They went in packs, following a leader. They also moved whichever way they were looking. Once in motion, they had no sense of home. They simply kept walking. Desta had to constantly watch them and turn them around.

By the time the rain stopped, the sun had swung over the western mountains and was sliding down in a silver glow amidst patches of charcoal-gray glowing, gauzy clouds. At times like this before his shepherding days, Desta would retreat into reverie. But he had no such refuge now.

Desta parted his gessa and stood it up to dry. Stiff, cold, and depressed, he watched as the goats and sheep shook off the rain and left their respective shelters. All around the valley, farmers, shepherds, and animals had come out. Desta heard them shout as they resumed their activities.

Out in the open, Desta sat on a large granite outcropping that jutted from the earth like a disc. He tried to shake off the dampness with the help of the dull, waning sun. He remained preoccupied about his fate—this job his parents had foisted on him, and he had willingly accepted, thinking of happy days with the animals.

Desta's mind returned to the good old days when he entertained his family after dinner with dance.

The dance, called "Skista," entailed moving his upper body, particularly his shoulders. With the adults clapping their hands, Desta would stand akimbo and shudder and see-saw his shoulders from right to left or shake his whole body in frenzied vibration. As the clapping grew louder, or someone beat a metal pot, Desta would enter further into the dance.

It would end when he was spent and someone engulfed him in their arms. How Desta missed those happy days of childhood.

TWENTY-SIX

Desta sat under the eaves of his home, shrouded in the darkness of early evening, cold, worried, and shivering. His sheep were lost without a trace, and Desta blamed himself. Afraid he would be punished, he sat, straining to hear his father fuming inside as rain pelted the roof.

Desta had never heard him so angry.

“How could you sit on your fat ass all day? My sheep! Gourmet meals for the hyenas! Oh my, oh my, how could this happen? The whole pack, decimated by those beasts. . . . oh my, oh my. . . . my cursed children. . . .” Abraham’s voice went up with every word he uttered. Desta peered through the crack in the wall and saw his father pacing the living room, around the fire, past his stool. Every so often he stopped, held his head with one hand, and stared into the fire. And then he paced around it again, saying, “Oh my, oh my, oh my. . . .”

Desta could not see his mother. Melkam and Amsale were huddled together behind the parapet; he saw only the tops of their heads.

Abraham leaned over the parapet and said, “Has anybody gone looking for them?”

“He and Asse’ged,” said Melkam meekly. Desta knew the “he” was her husband, Damtew. Melkam, like her mother-in-law, never used her husband’s first name.

“What about that lazy, tailed one?”

“We have not seen him since the sheep’s disappearance,” Amsale said.

Abraham grunted and walked off.

Desta knew he was the “tailed one.” He did not dare go near.

Desta couldn’t see his father anymore. The fire had gone out, leaving only smoldering wood. The smoke twirled and swayed as it dissolved into darkness.

Desta thought his mother probably had gone into the larder. Hibist once told him that a woman could escape a beating by her husband by running into the larder. “No pants-wearing man would dare drag her out of there. It’s a woman’s sanctuary,” she had told him. Desta had never seen his father beat his mother. He rarely even saw them in conversation. Their exchanges typically involved a “yes” or “no” answers to

questions asked, or short phrases. The few times he had seen his father angry at his mother, he had done all the talking.

Desta heard a popping noise. Someone was walking on the muddy path that came around the cattle pen. He turned to see Damtew, wrapped in his gabi, his face a blur in the night.

Desta swallowed and held his breath as his brother headed straight for the door.

“Any good news?” asked an angry Abraham. His voice came from the back room. Desta thought he must be in bed.

“Asse’ged and I scoured the field, and across the creeks and canyons. We saw no sign of the sheep.”

Desta’s heart sank and his stomach tightened. He heard the howling of a hyena somewhere. He cocked his ear and listened. It came from high above their home. Desta was relieved. Shortly after, he heard another howl from somewhere across the Davola River. This hyena was closer, but the sheep had disappeared on the near side of the river, so this hyena was probably too far away. He didn’t know if hyenas could swim; the creeks and Davola were roaring after heavy rains.

Desta brought his face again to the hole in the wall and watched. Melkam went to the father-in-law and asked him to come for dinner. He said he had no appetite and told her to serve the others.

It seemed Damtew was the only one hungry. Melkam slipped into the kitchen, returned with a basket of food, and set it before Damtew. He tore off the injera, rolled the wat with it and placed it in his mouth, tossing his head like a chicken sucking up water.

Desta’s stomach growled. Melkam came again with a folded injera in her hand. Amsale was right behind her. The two girls shared a stool together and joined Damtew. Desta’s mouth watered as he watched them eat.

But something was strange here. Where was his mother? And why hadn’t Damtew asked about her?

Desta guessed she had taken refuge in the larder. He walked along the perimeter wall and sat near a small aperture at the larder. He pressed his face to the hole.

By the light from the kitchen, he saw the silhouette of his mother in a posture he had only seen her assume when they’d gone to church together.

Her knees were planted on the ground, her back bowed, face near her knees. She held her head with both hands and spoke in a hushed voice. He could only hear a smattering of words.

“Good Lord. . . . guard those sheep from the hyenas. . . . return them safely—Lord, please do. Please Lord, send your angels to guard those sheep.

“Please Lord, keep Desta safe. . . . return him home. . . . Desta safe. . . . from the wrath of his father. . . . us too. . . . Please Lord.”

Melkam appeared in the larder with the empty basket from Damtew’s meal, nearly tripping on her mother-in-law’s skirt, spread on the floor. Ayénat gathered and tucked it while her head still rested on the bare earth. Once Melkam returned to the living room, Ayénat raised her head, sat up, and said a few last words, crossed herself, got up, and walked toward the living room.

Desta darted to the front entrance, where he could see through the gap between the doorjamb and post. Melkam said she would close the door and came to the entrance.

Her mother-in-law looked at her incredulously. “Close the door?”

“Yes, the hyenas are howling and I am afraid,” Melkam said.

“What about Desta?” said the mother in disbelief.

“Ahh, I, I. . . .”

“I know. You forgot he was out there. . . . He probably is hiding. Don’t close it yet.”

“I think you should leave him out, Mama. It will be a lesson to him,” Damtew said.

“I hope you are kidding,” Ayénat said, glancing at Damtew’s shadowed face.

“No, I am not,” Damtew replied, looking away.

Ayénat kept her eyes on Damtew, waiting for him to face her.

The figures standing by the fire were silhouettes.

“I knew it, Ma; I knew something like this would happen,” Damtew said, finally turning to his mother. “Desta never took his training seriously. He had no interest in what I taught him. He’s too dizzy dreaming about all kinds of wild things. The best way to teach him a lesson that he will remember is to leave him out in the cold. The hyenas will shake him up. . . .” Damtew didn’t have to wait for Ayénat’s response. Her face spoke volumes. He shuffled off to his loft.

“I never thought you were that heartless, Damtew,” Ayénat said, and turned to her daughters-in-law, who sat by the fire in the kitchen. “Don’t lock the door,” she said. “Close it, but don’t throw the pole across.”

Desta decided to make a discreet entry into the house.

“Good, you came as I suspected you would,” Ayénat said in a whisper, when she saw Desta.

“Let’s go straight to the fire in the kitchen. Your hands are terribly cold, you need to warm them.”

She hid him with her skirt as they walked past the dying fire in the living room.

“I will take care of him. You go to bed,” said Ayénat to Melkam and Amsale, who stood by the parapet, surprised to see Desta.

As he waited for his mother to bring him something to eat, Desta's teeth chattered, and his body shook. The fire seemed to have made his chills worse.

"I will not ask you tonight to explain how the sheep got lost," Ayénat said when she returned with his food. "I don't want to wake your father. Here, have your dinner while you are getting warm."

"Your father, as you must know, is very mad. I am not sure you want to be near him when he wakes tomorrow. I will give you a goatskin and my old gown and you can sleep in the larder. Get up before dawn and go hide in the woods. I will have the girls drive the cattle to the field for you. They will bring your breakfast there."

The fire had gone out. The ash-crowned charcoal glowed with a fresh draft from the door and dimmed when it subsided.

Desta wolfed his food, eyes on the fire, half listening to his mother. He was afraid to think what would happen if the sheep had been killed.

He pushed the basket aside, chilled. "Can I sleep by the fire instead?" he asked.

"I wouldn't take that chance if I were you," Ayénat said. "I will give you enough gabi; it is better that your father not see you."

Ayénat prepared Desta's bed where she had prayed. She spread straw from the horses' stalls and threw a goatskin over it, then covered him with his gabi and her heavy, old gown.

"Remember, you need to rise early and go hide in the woods. Bring the gown with you to keep warm," she said as she tucked the clothes around him.

Soon after his mother left, Desta arranged himself into a ball and thought about the sheep. Nothing like this had happened to him before, and he had no idea what to expect. From his mother's grave words, he could only conclude that the consequences for both of them would be severe.

IN THE MORNING, Desta followed his mother's advice, but instead of hiding in the bushes, he went searching for signs of the sheep: bones, a trail of blood on the grass, shreds of skin, severed heads. He walked the whole perimeter of the field until his bare feet and hands ached from the morning chill and his mind went numb with worry.

From where he had last seen the sheep, Desta went deep into the woods searching in crevices, under big trees, and any other place they may have sheltered from the rain. He imagined them huddled under a tree, sleeping on the ground with their feet folded under their bellies, or standing, chewing their cuds, in a dream-like state.

Nowhere did he find them.

Exhausted and scared, Desta sat on a rock near the gottem tree in the south of the

field, waiting for the sun to come down from the mountain and warm him. His feet and hands were the coldest. To warm them, he squatted on the rock, tucked the edges of his gabi under his feet, and buried his hands in the folds of cloth.

He rocked back and forth, attending to the tumult of his thoughts, when he heard voices from behind. He turned to see Asse'ged and Yihoon emerge from the woods at different points along the south end of the field. They were walking toward each other, searching around them.

Desta wanted to run and hide, but running would make him more noticeable, so he slipped over to the tree and stood by its trunk.

Asse'ged and Yihoon scanned every corner of the field, then slowly approached the gottem tree.

Desta froze. He clung to the trunk, hoping it might save him.

Asse'ged spotted him first. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. The whites of his eyes were red, as if he had not slept. But then, he wouldn't have. Three of the lost sheep were his.

"I woke up early to search for the sheep," Desta said timidly.

"What do you think happened to them?"

Desta shrugged and looked away.

"Where were they when you saw them last?" Yihoon asked.

"They were exactly over there," Desta said, pointing to the north side of the field. "And when you woke from your long sleep, they were gone, right?" Asse'ged said, looking at Desta disdainfully.

"I didn't sleep."

"How could they just disappear into thin air if you were keeping watch over them?"

"I went to gather some goats that had strayed into the woods. By the time I came out, the sheep were gone."

"They were on that side of the field?" Yihoon said, pointing to the location Desta indicated.

"Yes, over there. They were facing the river."

"Let's just hope that at least some of ours were spared from the hyenas' jaws," said Asse'ged, glancing toward the brother-in-law.

Shortly after Asse'ged and Yihoon left, Melkam arrived with the cattle and goats. On one arm, she had Desta's breakfast in a small basket. He took it and found a folded half-moon injera with a spoonful of leftover shiro wat. She watched as he devoured the cold meal.

“Both Baba and he looked everywhere in the foothills and returned without any sheep—dead or alive,” Melkam said as Desta was swallowing his last piece of injera.

“But if Ma’s prayer works, maybe they will come home alive. She has been on her knees since daybreak.”

“Do you think so?” Desta asked. “I heard so many hyenas howling last night. I hate to think it but. . . .”

Melkam looked at Desta severely. “When Baba and he returned empty-handed, Am-sale and I thought the hyenas must have killed the sheep and dragged them into their holes in the forest. How else can you explain their disappearance without a trace?”

“I don’t know,” Desta said as he wiped his tears away.

“You should pray,” Melkam said as she gathered the basket and rose.

Desta blew his nose with the tip of his gabi. “I don’t know how. And what good will it do now if the sheep have already been eaten?”

“Just say, ‘God, please bring the sheep home alive, God, bring the sheep home alive.’ Repeat those words until you get tired,” Melkam said.

The rest of the morning and into the afternoon, Desta kept repeating Melkam’s words. But how could God bring back sheep from the bellies of hyenas? He was not expecting a miracle.

Late in the morning, Asse’ged and Yihoon returned without any sheep. Desta scurried into the bushes and hid nearby. He didn’t want to talk to them.

“No trace?” Yihoon asked Asse’ged when they met at the common footpath.

“No sheep, dead or alive,” Asse’ged said with a deep sigh. “And, obviously you didn’t find any, either.”

“No, but I asked the villagers to let us know if they find any lost sheep,” Yihoon said in a grim voice.

“You must believe in miracles,” Asse’ged said sarcastically. “How can you expect to find them alive by now?” He stared around the eastern sky. “I hope you are right, but I still feel like we’ve wasted good hours of farming before the rain.”

Desta slowly emerged and looked up at the winter sky, with its spreading sheets of ominous clouds.

THANK YOU, LORD! Thank you, Lord! Thank you, God Almighty!” Ayénat said when Desta woke early on the third day of the sheep’s disappearance.

He shook his head, trying to come out of his deep sleep. He cocked his ears and listened to her words.

“From way over there? It’s amazing!”

“We were amazed ourselves. . . .,” said an older voice.

“Who found them?”

Desta couldn’t believe his ears. “The sheep are alive!” He bolted out of bed and ran to the door, where his father and mother were speaking with an old man and a boy. The sheep were gathered behind them.

“My son here found them in a cave on top of that mountain,” the man said.

“This is nothing short of a miracle,” Abraham said. “First, how in the world were they spared from the hyenas for two nights? And how did they get to the top of the mountain across the rough waters of the Davola?”

“We are at a loss ourselves,” the old man said.

“When you pray for the help of St. Mary and her son, anything is possible,” Ayénat said. “I’ve been praying for their safe return since they disappeared, and look what happened. This is truly the intercession of God Almighty!” she said triumphantly.

“They went all the way up there,” Abraham said, pointing to the distant mountaintop.

Desta followed his father’s finger, shaking his head.

“Yes, all the way up there!” the old man said. “My son came to tell us about some fat antelopes. He wanted me to shoot them. When I went with my gun, I saw sheep. Having heard about your lost sheep from Yihoon, we thought they must be yours, so we brought them home last night and boarded them with ours.”

“I am sorry you had to travel so early in the cold morning,” Abraham said.

“We wanted you to know your sheep were safe and give you peace of mind,” the man said, looking at Ayénat, then Abraham.

“Would you come in and have something to eat before you go?” Ayénat asked.

“No, no, we have work to do. Thank you for the kind offer,” the man said as he rested his hand on his son’s shoulders, urging him to go.

“I pledged two shillings to St. Mary’s church if the sheep returned. I’ll give them in your name,” Ayénat said as she watched the father and son shuffle down the path.

“That is kind; you really don’t have to. All we did was bring them back.”

“For boarding them and the trouble you have taken to bring them to us in these cold hours.”

“If it pleases you, Weizero Ayénat. . . . May God bless you and protect your sheep.”

After the man and boy had gone, they counted the sheep and discovered that two baby lambs were missing, perhaps eaten or drowned, thought Abraham. But he was grateful the rest were alive. He thought about what Asse’ged had often told him. “We are not a sheepherding family, so why don’t we get rid of them?”

That day, Abraham decided to give the sheep to others who knew how to raise them.

After the rest went inside, Desta remained, staring at the massive, granite rock that capped the mountain facing his home. The boy found the sheep under this rock, the same granite rock that had first drawn Desta's interest in touching the sky. On a wet and sunny day, its face flashed like glass, illuminating the valley. Desta was grateful to the mountain for sheltering the sheep, and dreamed once more that one day he would climb to the top and let the clouds flow through his fingers.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Abraham walked in before dinner, a tired brown dog trailing behind him on a leash. Ayénat, anticipating his arrival, had cleaned the house and prepared the meal. Desta sat at his usual place at the foot of his father's stool. Melkam and Amsale had milked the cows and were helping Ayénat in the back room. Damtew sat quietly next to Ayénat's seat, wrapped to his nose in his gabi like a crowned spirit.

"This dog replaces the one we lost. It will keep you company in the field," said Abraham as he handed Desta the leash. "Maybe you will be a better shepherd in its company than you have been until now."

Ayénat had stopped her activities and come to look at the dog. Melkam and Amsale also watched. Damtew simply stared at the dog and Desta.

"But I don't want a dog, Baba," Desta said, dropping the leash.

"It's a gift from my sister, Welella. She got him as a puppy a year ago because it reminded her of my first dog. When she heard we lost our Kooli, she decided to give it to us." Abraham looked at the dog as he talked.

Ayénat said, "That is very nice of Welella. Desta, I know how distraught you have been since Kooli died. This animal can be good company and help you forget your old dog."

"But I don't want to forget Kooli," blurted Desta, staring at his mother.

"Welella calls him Tizitaw, but I've renamed him Kooli," Abraham said, appealing to his son.

"There you go!" Ayénat said brightly. "With the same name, it's like you never lost your old dog. You will remember him every time you call this one."

"Baba, I know the name Kooli keeps your father's memory alive. But to remember my Kooli, I want his name to remain his alone," Desta said firmly.

"Desta has a point. How long will you keep naming your dogs Kooli?" Damtew asked, pulling the pile of gabi down from his mouth.

Desta was surprised that Damtew took his part.

"Until my father returns, or until we find out what happened to him," Abraham

said, tossing his head a little and looking at Damtew. He, too, seemed surprised with Damtew.

“Do you think your father might still be alive?” Ayénat asked, glancing at Abraham.

“Miracles do happen, don’t you think?” Abraham said, thinking of their sheep’s miraculous return. But the father also thought of the dog and Desta. His reaction had surprised and disappointed him.

For a long time, no one spoke.

“I think you are right about a miracle,” Ayénat said finally. “It’s good that you still have hope. How old would he be now?”

“I don’t know exactly, probably 68 or 70. He could be living like a monk in some church. I wish we had followed the three leads we had of a sighting in Lalibela years ago,” he said, his voice trailing off. “But enough of this. It’s dinnertime, and I’m hungry.”

While Ayénat and the girls got dinner, Abraham leaned over to Desta and said, “You don’t have to spend time with this dog if you don’t want to. He can guard the house.”

“That’s okay, Baba,” touched by his father’s concern. “This Kooli will not come between my own dog and me. I’ll keep his memory in my heart,” whispered Desta.

THE NEW KOOLI became a good guard dog and a comfort to Abraham. Kooli yelped at visitors and barked furiously at night, protecting their penned animals from hyenas.

It seemed to Abraham that more and more hyenas were invading his property. Only recently, a pack had killed and devoured a stray old cow.

Abraham was sitting with Desta at his feet, across from Damtew when Desta heard Kooli barking frantically, and the sound of racing hyenas nearby. He thought at first that the dog, was chasing them, but it was soon clear that the hyenas were after him. Abraham threw on his trousers and a heavier gabi, grabbed his rifle, and headed for the door.

Ayénat protested, but he didn’t listen to her. Desta and Damtew did, too, fearing he would be attacked, but he merely told them to shut the door behind him. Kooli was happy to have help. He whimpered, then barked with gusto as he ran to Abraham.

“Come take the dog inside,” Abraham told Damtew. He grabbed Kooli by the scruff of his neck and gave him to his son.

The half moon was hardly visible, buried by heavy winter clouds. All of the family stood by the door staring into the darkness and worried for their patriarch, who was now completely swallowed by the night.

“Nothing will happen to him,” Damtew said, sensing his mother’s worry.

“It’s crazy to go after hyenas in the dark,” Ayénat said, gazing sideways at Damtew. She had her fingers on her mouth.

“He has a gun,” Damtew said. “What can happen to him?”

Desta’s eyes went from mother to Damtew, and then Kooli, who now was quiet.

“Sshh, listen,” Damtew said, cocking his ear.

They heard many cackling hyenas charging down the hill as if they were chased by a furious beast. In an instant came a deafening blast that silenced them, as if it had wiped them out. The family listened and peeked into the void, but all was silent, and then the dog began to bark again.

“Did Baba kill all the hyenas?” Desta asked, looking to his mother. “Nothing is moving.”

“I don’t know. We’ll find out when he comes,” she said.

When Abraham returned, his wooly hair was curled and matted by the damp winter air and his gabi hung cockeyed. He held his rifle with one hand, barely off the ground. “Did you kill them all, Baba?” Desta asked anxiously.

“I probably killed one and scared off the others,” Abraham said, his sweet grin with one chipped tooth.

Desta couldn’t wait to see the dead beast. All his life he had heard the marauding hyenas’ terrifying calls in the night but had never seen one. Hibist had told him that hyenas were ridden by Budas to gravesites to unearth buried people and share the flesh with them, or carry the dead to the Budas’ homes to eat them. Budas, she had said, were people possessed by evil spirits, who preyed on children and adults alike.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE on the doorstep so early?” Abraham asked when he saw Desta sitting on the threshold, his gabi wrapped like a cocoon from neck to toes.

“Waiting for you to rise so we can go look at the dead hyena,” Desta said.

“I am anxious to do that myself because I’m not sure I killed one,” Abraham said with a faint grin.

After his father returned from his morning ritual in the bushes, the two searched for the dead hyena. For a long time, they looked everywhere—under the trees, in the bushes that lined the southern creek, all the ravines—but found nothing, not a drop of blood or a spent bullet. As they continued to search, Desta noticed that the question mark on his father’s forehead became more and more pronounced.

“I was almost certain that the bullet hit flesh,” Abraham said as they walked home. The question on his face had become puzzlement.

LATE IN THE DAY, Melkam came running out of breath to the field where Desta tended the animals.

“Go, go, go, run, run. . . . to where they are farming behind the house,” Melkam said, grabbing Desta by the arm and pushing him.

“What is going on?” Desta asked, pulling out of her grip.

“Baba wants you to come quick. They found the hyena. He’s not dead yet, Baba wants you to see it before he finishes it off. Go, run. . . . It’s crippled. . . . It has been trying to drag itself away. I’ll keep an eye on the animals until you get back. Run now and come back soon.”

Excited by the prospect, Desta flew. When he arrived at the farm, he was panting and breathless. He coughed and held his chest, trying to calm himself.

“Here is the hyena we looked for. See, I told you I had hit him,” Abraham said with a smile.

Desta was gasping too hard to respond.

“Why did you run?” Tamirat said. “He wasn’t going anywhere, silly.”

“I didn’t know what to think. Melkam said to rush.”

Desta stared at the wounded animal. “It looks like a dog! I thought it was much bigger, at least from how it howls at night.”

Damtew had pinned down the hyena. Its eyes, pained and watery, glinted at Desta. The earth around its feet was scraped from the animal’s struggle to free itself before resigning itself to its fate. One hind leg was broken and hanging, the other under a rock slab.

“Hyenas are not big, but they have strong jaws,” Abraham said, staring down at the vanquished brute.

The hyena had a round, spotted belly and legs, and its brown hair was frizzy, showing a scaly skin below. Flies were busy at its nose and gaping mouth and the blood-crusted wound on its hind leg. Its tail was streaked with blood and mud and flies, too.

“It’s very ugly,” Desta said. He couldn’t quite imagine how Budas could ride it to graves or load it with corpses.

“Hyenas aren’t handsome, but they are powerful,” Abraham said. He was twirling a crooked stick with one hand. “This is where the bullet entered,” he said, pointing to the wound with the stick.

Desta squatted to study the bullet hole.

“It shattered the thigh bone, came out and grazed the skin of the belly,” Abraham said.

“I am amazed that you could shoot in the dark and bring it down,” Tamirat said.

“I had a lot of practice during the Italian war. Do you think I got my medals for nothing?” Abraham said with a glimmer of pride.

“I am proud of you, Baba. People can’t hit a target in broad daylight, let alone in the dark,” Damtew said, thinking of his own experience with a gun.

“You know that well, don’t you Damtew?” Tamirat said, chuckling.

“I must admit it was very dark. And some luck played a part,” Abraham said.

“You deserve another medal for this one,” Tamirat said.

“I have enough. I pass the baton to you two. . . . three,” he said, looking at Desta. “We should all go back to work. Desta, now that you’ve seen a hyena, could you go get my pistol?”

“What for?” Damtew asked.

“We need to finish him off.”

“This is not Kooli. I can do it in a flash by my own sheer power,” bragged Damtew. He slid the pole to the hyena’s neck and pressed down hard. The beast kicked with its unharmed hind leg and swirled its front limbs briefly. Then a clear liquid oozed out of its gaping jaws, and its tongue hung limp.

Desta looked at his brother and shuddered.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Desta was in the field tending his cattle when he found himself under the breath of a fuming bald man who claimed that the cattle had destroyed half of his crop. “Your cows and bulls decimated three months of toil and sweat,” said the man, pointing to a dozen cattle he had brought to Desta. He demanded to know where his father was working that day.

Shaken, Desta looked toward the animals the man had brought. Sure enough, they were Lomee the bull, a few young males, and cows that had crossed the river.

“My Baba has gone to court and won’t be back for two days,” Desta said.

“I will come another day. . . Haven’t you been told that this is a critical time for shepherds to keep close watch on their animals?” The man admonished as Desta looked at his feet.

“Can you answer the question?” the man asked, tapping Desta’s head with his work-worn hand.

“Yes, my brother told me, but I am also tending sheep and goats. They have already gotten me in trouble, so I was watching them. I’ve had no problem with the cattle all this time,” Desta said in low voice, his eyes flickering between the man and the animals.

“If you are tending cattle, you must take the utmost care with them as well. Now your father will have to pay for my losses,” the man said, and shuffled off.

Desta watched him go, angry at himself for failing again.

TWO DAYS LATER, Desta and Damtew drove the animals across the Davola to their parents’ old property. A big field there had been left fallow and was thick with new grass. They needed the animals to trim it. Part of the land was also being farmed.

Desta and Damtew had just had the lunch that Damtew’s wife, Melkam, had brought, when their father arrived. Desta was about to rejoin his animals when Abraham signaled him to come; he had an important question for him.

Desta walked over to his father. Abraham grabbed him by the arm with the power and swiftness of a predator. “Tell me,” he said glaring at Desta. “What were you doing when the cattle crossed the river and destroyed Gizaw’s crop?”

Desta was mortified, more by his father's intense eyes than his grip or harsh voice. Desta tried vainly to pry off the hand locked on him. His father demanded an answer.

Desta stammered to speak, but no clear words came out.

"You frittered your time away staring at mountains and sky, huh?" demanded Abraham. "It's time to teach you a lesson, Desta," Abraham said as he shook his son's arms and pushed him down onto the tilled soil. Before Desta could rise and run, the father took his horsewhip from under his gabi, uncoiled it, and began lashing Desta's bare buttocks and legs. When Desta tried to flee, his father pushed him with his feet and continued to thrash him.

"Because of your irresponsible, lazy habits, I will lose my hard-earned money," he kept saying as he struck him.

Farmworkers and neighbors who heard Desta's wails came running. Each time one tried to grab the father's swinging arm, he threatened to lash them, too. Fearing for themselves, they stood back and watched, hands on mouths, faces gripped in horror.

Desta buried his face in the tilled earth, inhaling its aroma as if it might deaden his senses. Desta had given up the idea of escaping. He waited for his father to kill him.

Once Abraham was satisfied with the seven lashes he delivered, he coiled the whip, tucked it under his gabi, and sauntered off. When he turned and saw a bystander lifting up Desta, he rushed back and said, "Don't do anything for him. He must be taught a lesson."

"But he is only a child, Abraham," stammered a familiar voice.

"It's when they are small that they should be taught responsibility," Abraham said, looking at Desta severely. "Last month, we nearly lost our sheep herd. Last week, the goats destroyed my new crop. And two days ago, I learned my cattle destroyed Gizaw's crops. I must pay for his losses or he will take me to court. All of this, because of my lazy, dawdling, useless offspring!" His anger surged.

Desta lay in the dirt, his tender skin burning, the fear of his father rekindled. When the beating stopped, he had dared to think he might live. Now Abraham's renewed fury made him cover his face in terror. He wished everyone would leave so his father would go.

"None of you is to help him. He needs to lie here and reflect on his punishment until sunset," Abraham said, looking at the women.

They stood, silently watching, for what seemed like a long time. Desta could hear Damtew's whip crack as he drove the plow oxen. He slowly lifted his head to see if anybody was still there.

He saw three women. One was Melkam. The second was Mawa, an off-putting

neighbor who would shower him with kisses during her visits in a show meant for his parents. The third woman was tall and good-looking with tattoos lining her long neck. She had tried to intercede when his father beat him.

Desta put his head down and lay on his belly, face in his hands. Now that all was quiet, he felt the sting of the lashings. “Would you please cover my legs and thighs with cool earth to soothe the burning?” Desta asked in a muffled voice.

He heard the women softly speaking.

“I can,” said Mawa. “Abraham has gone behind the hill.”

She lifted Desta’s legs and pushed away as much soil as she could manage. Then she dropped his legs in the small trench she had created and pushed the fresh dirt over his legs. Desta sighed deeply when he felt the cool earth on his bare legs.

“Not too much, not too much—don’t crush them,” the third woman said.

“I am fine, I am fine,” Desta said.

Damtew came and told the women to get back to their work.

“Whose idea was this?” Desta heard Damtew say.

“His own,” Mawa said.

“Why? Now he wants to be buried alive? He should get up and do his job,” the older brother said.

“His legs and thighs are hurt. This will soothe them,” the tattooed woman said.

“He deserves it! He needs to learn his lesson. If not, I’ll have my own way with his little body,” bosted Damtew. “Tell him to get to work.”

Desta cringed at the thought of what Damtew might do.

Eventually everyone left and Desta fell asleep, comforted by the blanket of earth. When he woke, he lifted his head and looked around. The tattooed woman squatted next to him.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yes. Can you help unbury me?” Desta asked. “I think my legs have gone to sleep.”

“It’s as if you have been eating the dirt, my little one. It’s all over your face. Let me clean you up,” the woman said. She used the ends of Desta’s gabi to brush him off.

Desta dragged his legs slowly and sat up.

Damtew and his wife had left the farm. Desta rose to see if he could walk. But his legs wouldn’t take him a few yards, let alone the long stretch home. The tall woman, who said she was Degay, offered for him to stay at her house until he felt better. Having little choice, Desta limped alongside Degay the short way to her home. He felt closer to this stranger than to his own relatives.

Once inside, she laid him on a furry sheepskin by the fireplace and made a roaring fire to warm him. The tickling sensation of the fire on his half-naked body relaxed him.

She gave him a warm tumbler of milk with injera that helped kill his hunger and quickly put him to sleep.

When he woke the next morning, Mawa was by his side. “Are you feeling better?” she asked, tapping Desta on his leg.

“I am still sore,” Desta said, still partly buried in the extra clothes Degay had laid on him.

“I will take you home. Your mother must be worried that you didn’t return last night,” Mawa said.

“I just saw him struggle to the bathroom,” Degay said. “I am not sure he can go the full distance yet.”

“We have the monthly association gathering at my brother’s house today. Ayénat and Abraham will be there,” Mawa said.

“In that case, Desta, Mawa will take you to your mother this afternoon at the gathering. Till then, rest here,” Degay said, her soft eyes resting on him.

WHEN MAWA TOOK DESTA to the meeting, they found the house teeming with people. He remembered many from a meeting his parents had hosted. The adults would discuss community affairs, and then share dinner.

Ayénat, dressed in her flowing, embroidered gown, sat at one end of the room, talking with two women. Desta recognized neither of them. Higher up in the living room sat a half-dozen men, his father at the center, in heated discussion about a court case he had won.

Desta didn’t want to cross the room to his mother, afraid his father would see him. Mawa thought it better for Ayénat to meet him outside. Not wanting to draw attention, she took Desta behind her brother’s house and sat him on a peeling log and went to fetch Ayénat.

“Oh, my Lord, my Lord!” cried Ayénat. “This is not what Damtew told me had happened.” Desta stood and held up his gabi as his mother ran her fingers over his legs, thighs, and buttocks.

“What did he tell you?” Mawa asked, knotting her forehead.

“He said their father spanked Desta, and he had refused to come home because of it. I figured he would return eventually,” Ayénat said, after a quick glance at Mawa. Her eyes and hands still surveyed Desta’s body.

“As you can see, this is no spanking,” Mawa said. “This is a beating that turned the boy’s skin inside out.”

“It seems to me that Abraham vented his repressed anger again. He did this once to Damtew,” Ayénat said. Her eyes filled with tears. Mawa shed a few of her own. Desta just wanted someone to hold and comfort him. Neither of the women did.

“What is he angry about?” Mawa asked, surprised.

“It has something to do with his father and a lost item. Don’t ask, as I know very little else,” Ayénat said, looking away.

“Ma,” Desta said turning around with a severe face.

“Yes, dear?” replied Ayénat.

“I want to see Hibist.”

“We’ll invite them after the new year—in two or three weeks.”

“I want to go see her tomorrow. Take me with you when you go to church,” demanded Desta.

Ayénat looked at Mawa and then at Desta.

“He must be missing his sister. I think you should grant his wish,” Mawa said after a long pause.

“But he can’t even walk in this condition,” Ayénat said.

“Yes, I can! It will be worth the pain to see my sister again,” Desta said emphatically.

Baffled, Ayénat looked at Mawa as if soliciting her input. “But . . . but we don’t have anyone to tend the animals. Damtew and his wife will be at church in Avinevra.”

“I’ll loan you my son,” Mawa said. “He is Desta’s age, and a good shepherd, too.”

“Will you? Desta has asked to see his sister all winter, but I couldn’t spare him,” Ayénat said.

“I know Koomay will be happy to do it,” Mawa said.

“In that case, you have my word, Desta. I will take you to see your sister tomorrow. Let’s be thankful to Mawa and Koomay for making this trip possible,” Ayénat said, glancing warmly at Mawa.

Desta smiled at Mawa.

“I am happy to see him smile, finally. I need to go,” Mawa said as she rose. “I will see you two later before you leave. I may bring Koomay so that he can come with you this evening.” Desta hobbled ahead of Ayénat as she led him back inside.

DESTA ROSE EARLY, put on his shirt, and wrapped himself in his gabi. The trip to Hibist’s had him turning and tossing most of the night. Though he felt much better than the night after his flogging, it still hurt to walk. Somehow, he needed to steel himself against the pain.

His mother was dressed and ready. It had rained, and there were pools of dirty

water in the hoof marks in front of the house. Much of the sky was veiled with piles of gray clouds with pale silver edges.

Ayénat and Desta took the footpath north along the Davola. As they hiked, Desta noticed that, like the many streams that fed the river, several footpaths fed into the main caravan route that went alongside the waterway, which is something he hadn't noticed when they had gone to church for his communion. They passed many people walking in the opposite direction as well as others who joined them from side paths. Desta kept track of the details as they walked. He spoke little but noticed everything.

When they reached Hibist's neighborhood, a shepherd boy called Tilahun helped them identify the house. The moment she saw the visitors, Hibist came running.

"This is like a dream! I am so happy to see you," Hibist said, her face radiant. "Never thought you would come see me. All through these dismal months of rain, I kept wishing the days would go by and the work be done so that we could come see you."

"Our plan was to invite you in September after the holidays and farmwork were done and the days brightened a bit, but we had to. . . ." Ayénat said, glancing toward Desta.

Hibist followed her mother's eyes to Desta, her face crinkled into a question mark. "Come in. My in-laws have gone to church and my husband is out helping his brother with something." Desta noticed that Hibist, too, didn't use her husband's first name.

They walked along a broad and knobby log laid over a muddy island just outside the threshold. Desta thought this was better than hopping from stone to stone, like at home. Hibist brought out a brown goat hide for her mother and brother to sit on. Desta surveyed his surroundings. The house was smaller than theirs, and he saw no animal stalls. He wondered if Hibist's in-laws had no animals or kept them elsewhere as they did at home with most of their livestock.

Hibist brought food that her mother-in-law had prepared for church. She gave Desta a loaf with a tumbler of milk. It seemed like old times again to Desta, and he realized how much he missed his sister for these special treats.

Sitting by her mother's side, Hibist complained about how hard she worked every day—milking the cows, working the fields, grinding grain, fetching water, cooking, laundry, and washing her in-laws' feet at night.

Desta wondered if she washed her husband's feet like the girls at home, but she didn't say.

It was past midday when Hibist's in-laws returned. The couple was pleased to find Hibist's mother and brother at home.

"This boy has been despondent for many weeks," Ayénat said. "Recently he demanded to see his sister, and I agreed, hoping to cure his melancholy and temper tantrums."

“We are happy you came,” the mother said, who introduced herself as Marta. “Separations from siblings can be hard. We’d have liked my son and your daughter to visit you, but we’ve had so much to do, we’d even have farmed on Saturday and Sunday if we didn’t fear God.” Marta was a diminutive woman with a pretty smile and big soft eyes. Her husband, Nega, was her opposite. Tall and big framed, he said little and rarely smiled.

“Hibist, why don’t you go outside and visit with your brother for a while?” the mother-in-law asked.

Desta was thrilled. He liked his sister’s new mother immediately. Hibist didn’t hide her excitement either and quickly agreed. “Let me show you my neighborhood,” she said as she rose and took Desta by the hand. They hadn’t even reached the door when she put her arm around his shoulders, like always. It felt wonderful to be held by her again.

They walked past a smelly cow pen and a farm field thick with corn that was a foot taller than Desta. Farther out were several fields of barley, rye, and teff, some of which, as Hibist pointed out to Desta, were theirs. “That is where I sweated all winter,” she said, resentment in her voice. Scattered over a wide area were houses bordered by green corn or luxuriant potato fields.

Once they cleared much of the bordering crop fields, Hibist led Desta to a dark granite rock that stood on the side of an incline amidst lush, green grass. They sat side by side overlooking a wide panorama.

“That over there, in the juniper thicket, is our Church, Ginda-temem Mariam,” Hibist said, pointing to the west.

Desta studied the wooded grove at the foot of a rocky mountain. He wondered if this church looked like the one in Avinevra.

“Over there in the north, on top of the plateau, live my father-in-law’s brothers with their families.” As Desta followed his sister’s hand, he caught sight of some boys driving cattle to the open fields. He wished he could meet them. . . . and ask if they liked being shepherds.

Hibist continued. “Over there is Danka, bordered by the tail end of the mountain Lehwani, same as back home, above the Avinevra church. Farther out there in the haze is Fagita. Way beyond it is Kuakura, Baba’s birthplace.” These are the same lands Desta first saw when he went to the Avinevra church to be treated for the dog disease.

Seeing that Desta was only half listening, Hibist changed the subject. “So how do you like your new sisters?”

Desta stared away for a bit, deciding what to talk about first—his father’s beatings or how much he hated his sisters-in-law. “I don’t like them,” he blurted.

“Why is that? What did they do to you?”

“They didn’t do anything, but they are not friendly. They are always with each other. They don’t give me any food when I come home from tending the animals.”

“Have you tried to be friendly?” Hibist asked. “Have you spent time with them?”

“I am not unfriendly. I’ve no time to spend with them. I get up, spend all day shepherding, come home, eat my dinner, go to bed and get up in the morning to do it all over again, seven days a week,” Desta said.

“And your Kooli is no longer there. I can imagine how lonely you must feel,” Hibist said.

“And you are not there to talk to when I have problems.”

“I know. I liked being there when you needed me,” Hibist said. “I will have Mama tell Father to get another dog.”

“As matter of fact, he did. But I’ll have nothing to do with the new Kooli. The only Kooli I had and will ever have is gone,” Desta said. “But I asked mother to bring me here today to talk to you about something else, something that happened to me recently.”

“What happened to you?”

“Look!” Desta said as he stood and pulled up his gabi and shirt.

Hibist covered her mouth. Desta’s lash marks were still crusted with blood, the ends of some beginning to peel. “How did this happen?”

“Father beat me for letting his cattle destroy someone’s crops.”

Hibist stared at the numerous trailing marks, some crossed, others at odd angles.

Desta watched his sister’s face as she examined him. In no time, tears pooled in her eyes. Pearly drops rolled down her cheeks and landed on the neckline of her dress.

Hibist wiped them away with the back of her hand. “I never thought father had it in him to do this,” she said finally.

“I didn’t think so, either. I am always afraid of Damtew and Asse’ged—but not Father,” Desta said.

“I’ve been worried for you about Damtew. I’ve watched his behavior and attitude change after Saba and her family were given the new property,” Hibist said, looking at Desta. Her face was still somber. Tears smeared her long eyelashes.

“I thought I would die when he was beating me. He chased away people who came to help. But after he left, a tall, tattooed woman came and took me to her house. She fed and comforted me and kept me overnight. Her name is Degay, and she lives in a nice house on our old property. I had never seen her before. Do you know who she is?”

“I think I do,” Hibist said. “She is father’s distant relative. Mother and us girls don’t like her, but I am glad she cared for you.”

“I don’t know why you dislike her. She was so nice to me,” Desta said. “Anyway, you know what my greatest fear was when father was beating me?”

Hibist shook her head.

“That I would die before I touched the sky,” Desta said his eyes filling with tears.

His sister tightened her lips, crinkled her forehead, and looked away. Tears welled in her eyes, too. She looked as if she were gripped by something horrible.

“I didn’t mean to upset you with my tale,” he said.

“Oh no, I am just sorry all these things happened to you.”

“I made mother bring me here because I want you to hug me and tell me that it will be all right. I am so afraid of Father,” Desta said, coming closer to his sister.

Hibist held him tightly. “Yes, it will be all right. I am sure Father didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“In a way, I wouldn’t mind dying,” Desta said. “Because then I would get to join Kooli. Mother once told me that when we die, we are with our loved ones.”

“We don’t want to die until God calls us,” Hibist said.

“I just don’t want to die before I go to the mountaintop and let the clouds flow through my fingers,” Desta said, brightened by the prospect.

“I’ll see if I can take you when I come visit,” Hibist said, smiling.

“Would you? It would be sooo great!”

A young man was shuffling toward them. “Mother wondered where you two had disappeared to,” said Zeru, Hibist’s husband.

“We didn’t disappear. We were here reminiscing,” Hibist said, as she rose. She helped Desta dismount from the rock where they were perched.

Zeru bent his bulky frame and kissed Desta on both cheeks, three times. He then put his arm around Hibist, who in turn put hers around Desta, and they walked home.

TWENTY-NINE

It was as if the stars had crept down from the sky to the hills and villages. It seemed that way to Desta every year on this day. Everywhere there were lights—small twinkling ones and large, bright, flaring orbs. Some darted about, others moved in arcs, and still more stayed still. “Everybody is out with their *cheebos*-twig torches,” Abraham said, rushing inside.

In the darkness, from a distance, Desta could only see the lights and not their bearers, as if the lights had a life of their own.

The thirteenth, shortest month of the year was over. The New Year had arrived. By the Ethiopian calendar, this was September first.

A commotion in the wee hours of the morning had awakened Desta. He rose, wrapping himself in his *gabi*, and ran outside to watch the spectacle. It was several hours before dawn and an hour or so before the rooster crowed. Desta ran back inside to watch what his brothers were doing.

“This year we are beaten. I planned to do this before bed, but I was tired and forgot,” Damtew told Tamirat. Both were in the flour-milling room, making their *cheebos* from dried twigs that Damtew had stowed near the chicken coop months ago for this occasion. He had brought them down the night before and left them here to build his long torches.

“I know, you are a farmer now. You have more on your mind.” Tamirat said.

“These things seem less important to me than they once did, I guess,” Damtew said.

“It’s more thrilling for boys like Desta here,” Tamirat said, glancing toward his little brother, “but still, I don’t think I’ll ever outgrow celebrating the New Year.”

After he finished his *cheebo*, Tamirat put together a dozen twigs, tied them in several places, and handed a spindly bunch to Desta.

Ayénat came in and urged the two brothers to finish quickly, as Teferra and his wife would soon arrive with their burning *cheebos*. She had seen two lights coming down the hill across the Davola and wanted Damtew and Tamirat to be ready. “I am surprised Asse’ged is not here yet,” she said. “He should be shortly.”

“As I always say, hold your *cheebos* low to the floor until you clear the eaves,”

Abraham said, when he found the brothers still bustling in the milling room. They both did as instructed. Tamirat lit Desta's cheebo outside with his own.

Abraham held up his torch and watched Damtew and Tamirat walk in circles, up and down the hill, saying "Eyoha Abebaye Meskerm Tebaye—Hurray the New Year has arrived." Abraham, too, paced and moved his torch up and down, singing "*Eyoha Abebaye Meskerm Tebaye*." Desta followed suit but stayed close to his father.

The two wives came out to watch their husbands' jubilant march and were soon swept up in the excitement.

"*Abeba Ayehi wey*, Have you seen the spring flowers?" crooned Amsale, remembering the timeless New Year's melody.

"*Lemlem*," chimed in Melkam.

"*Balenjerochè koomoo betera*, My dear friends stand with me," continued Amsale.

"*Lemlem*," harmonized Melkam, as she clapped.

Amsale began to clap, too, in tempo with Melkam.

"*Inchet se 'biray, bet iskiserà*, Until I gather wood and build my home," intoned Amsale.

"*Lemlem*," replied Melkam.

"*Inquan bet ena, yelegne Attir*, I have no wood for a fence, let alone for a house," said Amsale, still clapping.

"*Lemlem*," replied Melkam.

"*Iwichi adralehu kokeb sikoter*, But instead I spend the night outside counting the stars," said Amsale.

"*Lemlem*," hummed Melkam.

"*Iwichi aderay sigeba bête, Tikottachigen injera enate*, When I come home at dawn, my stepmother scolds me for staying out in the cold."

"*Lem. . . lem*," replied Melkam, absentmindedly. Her eyes and mind had wandered off to the earth-bound stars near the villages across the river.

"Look at all those lights," Amsale said, interrupting the song and throwing Melkam off cue.

They stopped clapping and stood next to each other, enchanted by the lights in the valley. Their eyes darted from one village to another, from south to north.

Desta wished Amsale and Melkam would sing the beautiful refrain once more. He remembered Hibist's singing it again and again, adding more lines as she went, Desta standing beside her chanting "*Lemlem*."

"We don't have anything like this where I come from," Melkam said.

“We do, but you don’t see these many lights, for the trees and hills cover us,” Amsale said.

“Where we are, the land is flat, and the houses are buried in the trees, so you don’t see much,” Melkam concurred.

Not long after the family began celebrating, Teferra and Asse’ged arrived with their wives, each carrying a roaring torch. They were followed by Yihoon, who came by himself. The men gathered together and danced.

For the most part, Ayénat stayed at home preparing the New Year’s *goozgoozo*. This was a double injera that she made by laying a baked injera over one just spread on the baking pan and letting the two bake together until the lower layer was cooked. When they were done, she placed them on a basket to cool while she made more batches. With her fingers, she smeared these injera with a ground pepper paste. Then she spread a thin layer of homemade cheese and garnished it with liquefied spiced butter and basil pesto.

Desta salivated the night before when he thought of goozgoozo. In the morning, after the torch dances, he came inside and found goozgoozo piled on a basket. “If you don’t give me a piece right now, I am going to die,” Desta said, half grinning.

“My Lord, you act as if you have not eaten for days. What is the matter?”

“I don’t eat goozgoozo every day, and it’s my favorite food.”

“Here, take this slice to keep you from dying,” Ayénat said, throwing a side glance and a smile at her son.

Desta wolfed down the small wedge his mother gave him.

After their cheebos were nearly gone, Abraham and the brothers put them out in the wet grass and came inside—wet, sweaty, and weary. The women, too, came in, following their husbands. Yihoon went home with his chebo still burning.

Abraham cut the layers of goozgoozo into wedge-shaped pieces and handed them out. He started with his oldest, Teferra, and his wife; then Asse’ged and his wife; followed by Tamirat and Damtew and their wives; and finally, Desta. Abraham and Ayénat were last.

DUTIFULLY, DESTA RELEASED the goats and horses and let them graze the grass near the house. Damtew had helped release the cattle and had driven them to graze above the house where they were safe from wild animals, and there were no crop fields that needed guarding.

When the sheep were released, one lamb was kept back from the rest. Damtew grabbed it by the scruff of its neck and dragged it into the house. It bleated and struggled,

forcing him to carry it in his arms. As he tied the unruly animal to the corner post by the horse stall, its bleating grew stronger and mournful. “Bahahaha, bahahaha, Bahahaha.”

The men and some of the women sat in the living room around the fireplace. Ayénat ordered Melkam to roast coffee. Using a wrought iron pan, she washed three handfuls of coffee beans by scooping them in her hands and rubbing them together in water to remove the skin. She rinsed them three times, then placed the pan with the beans on the three stones in the fireplace. With a wooden spoon, she stirred them, releasing blue-gray smoke and the rich aroma of roasting coffee. When these beans became dark brown, Melkam removed the pan from the fire and transferred the beans to a straw tray to cool. After they cooled, she poured them into a wooden mortar and pounded them with a pestle.

Desta, sitting by his father’s side, kept an eye on the bleating lamb. At times it chewed its cud, staring at the door. Then it would stop and look away, as if in thought, shake its head, bleat, and chew again. In time, the lamb’s eyes took on a somber hue. It saddened Desta, and he began to feel sick.

Abraham told Desta to feed the lamb. He pushed a small basket of barley seeds in front of it. The animal nibbled indifferently, then raised its head and began to bleat again. Desta saw a clear liquid fill one of the lamb’s eyes and land on the freshly cut kettema beneath its feet. Desta wished he could express how he felt. He wished Hibist were here.

After the first serving of coffee, Abraham announced it was time to kill the sheep. Damtew and Tamirat rose. Damtew removed the leash, pushed the lamb toward the entrance, and stood with it a few feet from the threshold. Abraham took two large knives from a basket Melkam brought and sharpened them against each other, something he only did when about to cut meat or kill an animal.

In one swift motion, Damtew grabbed the animal by its feet, hoisted it, and flipped it onto its back. The lamb struggled to escape. It freed one hind leg, and Damtew grappled it. Tamirat came to his rescue. Abraham said a prayer, signed a cross over the sheep’s neck, and then pulled back its mouth to expose the throat. He rested the sharp edge of the knife on the lamb’s pale neck and went to work. A torrent of blood gushed in two directions. Tamirat dodged it, but Damtew and Abraham received a bloodbath. The frothy liquid hit the father’s face and arms. Damtew’s chest and new blue shorts got soaked. Desta had to contain a giggle. Melkam came rushing with a pitcher of water and a cloth.

All eyes were on the lamb that lay on its side, still struggling to live. It had kicked violently right after the neck was slit; then, it seemed to sleepwalk with its front legs. They moved briskly at first, then slower and slower, until finally the sheep was dead.

“Baba, you have a long life to live,” said Asse’ged who had kept track of the time it took before the lamb finally was still. “An animal that doesn’t die quickly after its throat is cut signifies long life for the person who killed it,” Hibist had said once to Desta. The animal’s glazed eyes stared blankly at the bamboo ceiling.

Desta hated his father for killing the beautiful lamb. He went outside, hid in the apiary, and cried. Later, as he returned to the house, he wondered where the life that left the lamb’s body had gone.

After all the blood had been drained from the lamb, Abraham handed the knives to the brothers and told them to skin it. Damtew undertook the task with pleasure. He stuck the tip of the sharp metal deep beneath the skin near the cut by the throat and worked his way down to the lamb’s bottom, splitting it in half. Then he cut a circle near the ankles of one front leg, tipped the knife into the skin, and sliced down to the chest to join with the vertical cut he had already made. He did this with each leg.

Tamirat tied the hind legs with a rope and hooked them to a noose that hung from a crossbar above them. Blood continued to drip from the neck. Once the skin was removed, Damtew cut open the belly, releasing a translucent, convoluted mass. The metallic, smooth flesh containing stomach and intestines hung down, dragging the rest of the body with it. Damtew cut it out and handed it to Desta, telling him to take it outside, disgorge the contents, wash them in the creek, and bring them back.

Afterwards, Damtew reached deep into the cavity of the animal, incised and pulled out two pieces of flesh, one reddish-brown and trembling, the other pink and foamy. He dropped them in the basket, covered in false banana leaves.

Desta returned with the cleaned tripe and intestines and gave the tripe to his mother.

Ayénat cut the tripe and liver into tiny pieces and sautéed them with chopped green onions, green peppers, salt, and garlic. This was the family’s first meal from the sacrifice to commemorate the New Year.

The intestines were thrown to Kooli. Mandefroshi the cat, also known as Mandy, came to snatch some, but Kooli growled at her, and she ran and hid in the mill room. Tamirat called her back and gave her a slice of the spleen, which she grabbed and dragged away to her hideout.

“Give a good amount of *dulet*—the liver and tripe mixture—to Desta,” Abraham said as Ayénat dished it out on their mosseb. “This is all he will get today. The rest of us have two more sheep to kill and will have more than our share to eat.”

After eating the minced liver and tripe with spiced butter, salt, and pepper, Desta watched the family leave for the next round of activities with the family of Saba, the next

oldest child, at their house, and later, at Asse'ged's. Although he would miss the festivities, Desta was actually pleased not to go. At some point, somebody would bring up Saba's future baby, and soon everyone's eyes would be on him. He would rather stay away.

Thanks to his father, Desta ate well and was content when he left to tend the animals.

The day was glorious. There were puffy clouds here and there, and a lot of blue in between. The valley was hushed. It was always like that on holidays. Desta liked the quiet. He could better attend to his duties that way. But his mind kept returning to today's celebration, the first time Desta would spend New Year's dinner without Hibist—and probably the first without special treats.

He wondered how much meat he would have for dinner. On previous holidays, he had received bones with little on them, or just a few cubes of meat. Often, he got a piece of vertebra; the few morsels on them were hard to dig out. He often bloodied his lips or poked his tongue with the sharp-edged ribs. If he were lucky enough to get a bone with marrow in it, he would be in heaven. If he didn't, then Desta, somewhat ashamed, would accept bones discarded by family members. Desta would readily accept a bone from his father, Ayénat, or Teferra, and crack it open between two rocks to slurp out the marrow. He wouldn't take one from Damtew, sometimes not even Asse'ged. And Tamirat was very stingy with his.

In past years, Hibist always saved a hunk of meat and gave it to him privately. This year, nobody would do that for him.

When Desta returned at day's end, he found his mother, Melkam, and Amsale busy preparing dinner. Ayénat handed him half a freshly baked injera. "This will tide you over until dinner when the rest of the family arrives," she said. He had looked forward to meat, not plain injera, so he set it aside. He didn't want to fill himself up with every-day food. That night, all he wanted to eat was meat.

After the rest of the family returned from their rounds killing lamb, eating its dulet, and drinking coffee, tella, or honey wine, dinner was served. The adults ate together from two separate mossebs. Desta, Astair, and Zena sat around one large old platter loaded with injera and sauce.

After the adults finished eating their injera, Ayénat brought the meat she had siphoned and kept in a bowl. She poured it into the middle of their mosseb for Abraham to pass out as he saw fit.

Inclined over the mosseb, Abraham gathered all the meat with bones and placed them in a pile. In the meantime, Ayénat gathered all the cubed meat and made a separate mound.

Abraham then sat back, surveying the people at the two mossebs. Then he went

to work, judiciously apportioning the boned meats for each. Desta remembered that priority went by age, his father's esteem, and whether they were friends or family.

After all the boned meats were passed to the men and their wives, Abraham moved to the mound of cubed meats. He quickly picked three or four cubes and passed them to Desta's group. Before they received their portions, Desta and the other children rose, stood erect, put palms together, and bowed.

Desta received two large cubes. That was all the meat he would eat until the next holiday, probably Christmas or Easter. He might get some morsels in the next meal or two, but most would be consumed at this New Year's dinner.

For Desta, his meal only added insult to injury. He did not get a bone with marrow, nor did he get a good amount of the cubed meats. A glance at Zena's portion confirmed that his was the least of all at the dinner party.

Later, as he lay in bed, the chorus of marrow-slurping men and women haunted him. He wished he had protested the injustice. None of the children had received meat on bones, and the portions they did get were small.

He wished he were an adult. He wished his parents would kill another lamb and feed it to the children for days. More to the point, he wished Hibist were there. She would have saved meat and bone and marrow for him. Instead, he thought he might be waiting for such a treat until he grew up.

THIRTY

It was now September, and Desta was at the door about to tend his animals when Tamirat walked in. He didn't appear to be himself; he didn't smile or greet anyone. He had not been home for a few days and everybody, including his wife, had wondered where he had gone.

"Where have you been, stranger?" Ayénat said, standing by the mill room.

"I went to talk to my *mergeta*—head teacher—on the matter we discussed a few days ago," Tamirat said, glancing briefly at his mother. "While I was there, he had me help with a new classroom they're building. I also had to tidy up the lesson I began before the wedding until my studies next year—after, hopefully, this communion business is done with."

"Regarding communion," Ayénat said, "I think you should consult your father first; after all, it's a family matter. But the *mergeta* could also help in your situation."

For nearly four months, Tamirat had grappled with a problem that threatened his career, his dreams, and might break his father's heart. His wife, Amsale, had refused to take communion with him, a sacramental rite key to becoming a priest of the Orthodox Church. A married priest had to consummate his marriage to remain a clergyman; if divorced, he had to be celibate to remain in his profession.

Tamirat did not want celibacy. But the alternative—leaving the priesthood and remarrying—would be hard on his father.

For a twenty-year-old man who had barely discovered the mysteries and joys of his body, to suddenly abandon them in lifelong devotion to God seemed the ultimate punishment. Then, of course, there was procreation, progeny, and living on through the seeds he would sow, impossible for a celibate with a failed marriage.

For the past five Sundays, Amsale had concocted every conceivable excuse for not going to church with her husband to receive communion. Knowing that they could not eat or drink before receiving communion, she used this as an excuse the first three Sundays. On the fourth, she blamed her period, which barred her from the inner sanctuaries where communion was given. Tamirat had not seen a drop of blood anywhere,

but he did not challenge her. On the fifth Sunday, she was struck down by a severe headache and couldn't make it to the door, let alone walk the long distance to church.

Tamirat's patience had finally run out. When Amsale insisted that she was afraid of taking the flesh and blood of Christ without her immediate family, he consulted his teacher. But the mergeta had no advice for his wife's problem, except perhaps that she was too young and afraid to deal with God. He recommended patience.

Ayénat thought the girl might be possessed by the Saytan, and suggested Tamirat take her to a famous priest at a major church to have the sacred liquid poured over her, but Amsale vehemently opposed this idea. Ayénat also thought he might go to her village to take communion there.

Although Tamirat knew his father had no power to change Amsale's mind, he still wanted his advice.

Soon Abraham walked in, followed by Amsale with a jug of water on her back. Tamirat sought his wife's gaze, but she went past with her head down.

"Can I talk to you outside, Baba?" Tamirat said in a whisper.

They stood leaning against the wattled fence outside. Abraham was disturbed by Tamirat's cheerless, desperate face.

"Everything all right?" Abraham asked in low voice.

"I have a problem with Amsale," Tamirat said, in a somber tone. "She won't come to church and take communion with me."

His son looked as if he had not slept for days. His fair skin was dry and blotchy, and his small eyes dulled with sadness.

"I'm aware of that," Abraham said. "I thought in time she would change her mind."

"I have tried five times, Baba, but she keeps making excuses. Now she says she wants to go home and take it in the presence of her family. Should I do this?" Tamirat looked into his father's deep brown eyes as if the answer might be found there.

"Let me ask you man to man," Abraham said. "Is everything okay? I mean, you know. . . ."

Tamirat kept his eyes on his father, suppressing a laugh.

"Yes, of course," he said finally.

"I had to ask. . . . a man's impotence can be a real problem for young women," said Abraham thoughtfully.

"You don't think men have the same problem with women?" Tamirat said nervously.

"Well, men in your situation—I mean, priests put up with it because divorce makes nothing better. Companionship is just as important as a sexual relationship."

"I am glad you brought this up," Tamirat said. "I am terrified. My marriage with

Amsale might not work. She seems to have a heart of stone and a closed mind that no amount of talking and pleading will crack open. To be honest. . . .” Tamirat’s thought would break his father’s heart. He let it die on his tongue.

“If there is no problem as I thought, the rest is fixable,” Abraham said. “We can get her parents involved, worst comes to worst. If she prefers to do it with her family looking on, that is understandable. Make a plan with them first and go.”

“I am scared, Baba. I’m afraid we might divorce, and I’d be forced to give up the priesthood. The idea of becoming a celibate to avoid that. . . .”

“Tamirat, do as she requested. Stay for a week or two and come back once you have received communion. Everything else—divorce, celibacy—is rubbish. The girl has hesitated, and now you have gotten all worked up that your world is at an end. She is only eleven, for Christ’s sake! What does she really know about life and communion?

“Go to her parents. You have plenty of time to finish school. Don’t rush her. Make an ally of her parents—they can be the key to her heart.”

Tamirat looked away for a long time. Deep down he thought he could never pry open Amsale’s heart. As young as she was, she manipulated him like a much older woman.

“Do you hear me?” Abraham asked, watching his son’s mournful face.

“I heard you. I will do my best.”

“Don’t be pessimistic. You are dealing with feelings that can change at any time. Once she is in the company of family and friends, her resistance might melt away.”

“Like I said, I’ll give it my best.”

“In that case, you will go at the end of the month, after celebrating Meskel with us,” Abraham said. He tapped his son’s shoulder and said, “Come. Let’s see if your mother has some breakfast.”

THIRTY-ONE

Desta sat in the open meadow keeping an eye on the animals and enjoying the morning sun's caress as he thought about all the events since he became a shepherd—since his quiet, carefree life had changed.

He thought of the long, mind-numbing days spent watching the animals graze in the field or nibble on leaves in the bushes; the cold, wet months that sent him scurrying for shelter from the rain; the chill mornings that caused his bare feet to sting and numb his fingers; and the threats of punishment from Damtew and his father, some already meted out and others still hanging over him like dark winter clouds.

Then he thought of the weddings of his siblings and the loss of his best sister; the ordeal to cure himself of his supposed dog disease; the loss of his best friends, Kooli and the vervet monkeys; the lost sheep and their miraculous return; his father's beating that left deep scars on his body and mind; and New Year's, its lights, blood, festivities, and the meager portion he got at the big dinner. When he thought of all these things, Desta felt very old.

What Desta saw around him brought back tender memories of happier times. The spring season had awakened every weed, grass, and shrub with dazzling color. Everywhere were whites, yellows, golds and blues. In the backyards, fallow lands, virgin hills, and valleys, under bushes and in meadows, spring had dug up colors stowed away through the rainy season.

This was the time of year when he and Hibist had had the most fun. As far back as he could remember, they had roamed the countryside, chasing butterflies and gathering flowers for the bouquets they would hang around the center pole of their home. It was the time when Desta's desire to reach the mountains took firm hold of him, when he longed for someone to take him to the highest peak to spend all day in the perfect azure sky. But with Hibist gone, there was no one who cared enough to take him there.

Sitting here, looking at the panoply of flowers and the deep blue heaven above, Desta felt he could not bear the pain.

HE WAS DEEP IN these thoughts when Damtew walked up, cradling a kid from one of the goats. The kid's mother, a wedding gift from Ayénat, was right behind him, bleating incessantly and nudging him. The beautiful male kid was Damtew's pride and joy.

"I am going to the river to introduce my kid to the swimmers," he said, towering over Desta with the kid in his arms. "Do you want to come along?"

Desta said "no" with a grunt and shake of his head.

"I want you to bring him back with the mother after I introduce him to the boys. I plan to stay there for a swim," commanded the brother.

Desta explained that he needed to mind the animals, but Damtew persisted; he argued that they could drive the goats to the riverbank and keep an eye on them there. Since they would be close to the crossing of the Davola, the cattle had little chance of straying.

Desta drove the goats to the river as instructed and followed Damtew to a group gathered on the embankment.

As they walked, Damtew crooned steadily to the skinny gray kid. The mother, still following, sounded more desperate with every step but still managed to snip grass along the way.

Desta was amazed by his brother's devotion to the goat. *Where did this love come from in a man like Damtew?* Desta wondered how Damtew would treat his own child since he was so devoted to a scrawny baby goat.

There were about a dozen men and boys where the river had carved a half moon against the embankment, creating a large pool. Several boys had spread their gabis on the grass and were lying naked on their bellies, feet stretched out, water glistening on their backs. Others were dry and basking in the sun. A few sat up, wrapped in their gabis, watching the boys in the water.

"What do you have there?" said one man as Damtew and Desta strolled toward them.

"This is my new baby—baby goat. His name is Habté. Isn't he handsome?"

Damtew said as he slowly lowered the animal to the ground. The boys on their bellies rolled over and sat up. They crossed their legs, shielded their laps, and studied the animal. The men also turned to gaze at the curious creature.

"He looks alright. How old is he?" one asked.

The mother goat had begun nuzzling her son as soon as Damtew dropped him. The kid staggered quickly toward her dugs and began to suckle contentedly.

"Born four days ago. He is not strong yet, but I think he will be a beautiful goat,"

Damtew said, trying as much to assure himself as to fend off the man's lukewarm reaction.

"All baby goats are skinny and rickety when born," the second man said. "He has long legs and a long body and neck, and I think he could become a handsome goat."

Damtew glowed. “I think you are right. What I see is not what he is now but what he will be when he grows up. I have always wanted a big mookit like my father’s. This one definitely has the makings,” Damtew said, looking at the approving man.

A couple of the boys patted the animal as he nursed on his mother’s teat. Others looked on indifferently. Desta kept stealing glances at the boys in the water. They seemed to glide easily and freely, making swimming seem fun.

“Does Desta know how to swim?” asked the man who had first greeted them. He was Mogus, a distant relative from across the river.

“Not really. I tried to bring him here before, but he refused,” Damtew said.

Desta had wanted to spend as little time as possible with Damtew.

As he continued to watch the swimmers, two more boys dropped their gabis, ran to the embankment, and jumped into the deepest part of the pool. They disappeared momentarily, then resurfaced, and began swimming naturally. Desta stared. “He seems interested. Why don’t you show him how?” Mogus said.

“Does anybody have a rope?” Damtew asked, looking around.

“Here, I have one,” said a brown-skinned boy about Desta’s age. “I am still learning myself. . . . I am getting better, but I bring this rope just in case.” He handed the rope to Damtew.

“What do you think?” Damtew asked, turning to Desta.

“It looks fun.”

“Yeah, it’s fun,” said the boy who gave Damtew the rope. “At the beginning it’s hard, but as you do it over and over, it gets easier—that’s when it becomes really fun.”

It seemed easy enough to Desta.

“Someone had better go with him to get started. You can’t just tie him with the rope and throw him in,” Mogus said.

Damtew hesitated. Desta thought, if he was going in the water, it wouldn’t be with his brother.

“I will teach him how to float and kick,” Mogus said, smiling. “It will be my pleasure.”

“Great! I’ll steer him with the rope from here,” Damtew said, grinning at Desta.

Desta dropped his gabi and was ready.

Mogus led Desta to a spot where a few rocks jutted from the wall of the embankment. Mogus went first, holding Desta by the hand as they rappelled down, one step at a time. Once they were in shallow water, Damtew threw one end of the rope to Mogus. Mogus tied it around Desta’s waist, slung the loose end between his legs, and tied it to the main section, making Desta feel as if he were a bucket to be dropped and lifted in the water by hand.

While Damtew held the rope securely from high on the embankment, Mogus held Desta by the waist and moved him around the shallow portion of the pool, telling him to kick his feet and push the water away in front of him with his hands and arms.

For Desta, kicking his feet in a rhythmic and coordinated manner like the other boys seemed daunting, but he was determined to give it his best.

“Good, you are getting better,” said Mogus as Desta grew less afraid and began to float on his own.

Sitting on the ledge, feet dangling, Damtew monitored Desta’s progress. Each time he felt his kid brother could handle it on his own, he tried to tug the rope from Mogus’ hands. “Not yet,” Mogus would shout, and Damtew would stop.

The longer Desta stayed in the water, the more comfortable he became. Mogus sensed his confidence and finally loosened his hold.

Desta struggled to keep afloat. When Mogus noticed he was swallowing too much water or seemed about to go under, he grabbed him. “Let him go! Let him go! I am holding him,” Damtew shouted. Mogus let Desta go.

The instant Mogus let go of Desta, his brother dragged him to the deepest part of the pool and relaxed the cord. After a struggle, Desta went down. Damtew kept him under for a few seconds, then pulled him up. For Desta, powerless to save himself, it was terrifying. The more he fought to stay afloat, the harder it got. When he opened his eyes, he saw himself sinking in a smoky gray liquid. Then he felt the tug of the rope, and he was above water again. He took a huge gulp of air and furiously fought to keep afloat.

Amidst his struggles and the swish of water in his ears, he heard roaring laughter from high above him. Then he felt the rope slacken again, and he slowly sank. He couldn’t breathe. The water was choking him. This time there was no tug on the rope. He was going to drown. He thought of the sky he would never touch. He frantically tried to catapult out of the water, but with nothing to push against, he sank farther and farther. Out of desperation, he grabbed the cord that held his beads around his neck.

Then, another tug, and another peal of laughter. From the edge of his vision, he saw Mogus swimming toward him.

To his horror, before Mogus reached him, he felt Damtew drag him away and slacken the rope again. He gulped a great quantity of air and held his breath. This time instead of sinking, he found himself being dragged along underwater. When he came up for the fifth time, he saw he now was at the other end of the pool.

Mogus was rushing toward him, shouting at Damtew, but he and the other boys were laughing. Desta saw a rock and grabbed it, but Damtew jerked the rope with such force that he plunged back into the water.

Finally, when Desta came up for the sixth time, it was because Mogus held the belt of the rope and was swimming ashore with him to the other side of the river.

When the man pulled him out, Desta wrapped his hands around his neck and wouldn't let go. Mogus repeatedly assured him that he would not let him fall into the water again. He quickly untied the rope and threw it away. They were alone on the grassy beach. Mogus laid Desta on the ground.

Shaking uncontrollably, Desta gasped and heaved until everything inside of him gushed out. Mogus tapped him on the back and tried to calm him with kind words. After several minutes, Desta recovered, calmed by the warmth of the sun and the sibilance of the river. Mogus and Desta rose and crossed the river to collect their gabis and join the group.

They arrived amidst a fiery argument between the two older men and Damtew.

"How else is he going to learn? He needs to be pushed. The harder he tries to keep above water, the sooner he learns," Damtew said.

"You don't teach a small boy by terrifying him," said one of the men, glaring at him. "You should be punished by your parents."

"My intention was to challenge him to learn faster," Damtew said. "Besides, we have not had such a laugh for a long while. Isn't that true, guys?" He turned to his friends, who responded with another burst of laughter.

"You should tell your parents what he did to you," Mogus said, as Desta wrapped himself in his gabi. "I will tell them too when I see them."

Mogus escorted him past Damtew, and Desta walked briskly away.

"Where are you going? What about the animals?" Damtew ran after him and dragged him back.

"You have terrified the boy, you scoundrel. Is that how to treat someone who cares for your baby goat?" Mogus said angrily.

"I wish he could do it again," giggled one of the boys.

Mogus gave him a look that made him shut his mouth.

"This is just one part of the payback for all the havoc he caused our family," Damtew said with an evil grin.

"Go tell your parents," said one of the men.

"What will they do to me?" bragged Damtew. "One of them is my ally. The other is careless. I run the show."

The men looked at each other and then Damtew. The boys continued to giggle under their gabis, as they looked at each other and then Desta.

Desta wanted to run home and tell his mother what Damtew had done, but after

hearing what his brother said, his heart sank, and he slowed to a walk. Without Hibist, there was no one he could go to.

“WHAT BRINGS YOU HOME SO EARLY? Where are the animals?” Ayénat asked, frowning.

“Damtew almost killed me. . . . I was afraid he might actually do it if I didn’t come home,” Desta said, tears filling his eyes.

“What?”

“He took me to the part of the river where people swim. He wanted me to learn how. He attached a rope to me and kept yanking me in and out of the water. Every time he dropped me, I struggled to keep afloat, but I just sank even more. It was like a nightmare.” Desta fought his tears.

Ayéat listened keenly. “He probably thought it was funny. For him everything has to be entertaining. I will talk to him when he comes back,” she said casually.

Her hollow words hurt Desta even more. “Damtew said you don’t care what happens to me. Please tell him not to kill me, at least, not before I touch the sky.” His tears overflowed.

“That is rubbish. I don’t love any one child less than the other. Stop that foolish talk. I don’t want to hear it again,” barked Ayénat.

That evening, when Damtew came in after putting the animals in their stalls, Desta heard Ayénat stop him in the living room. She said, “Desta told me what you did. If you ever do it again, I will never let you in this house and your father will handle you however he chooses.”

Her words were harsh, but not harsh enough for Desta. He wanted her to beat Damtew, to whip him until he bled. But she couldn’t; Damtew was too big for her to handle. *He was too big for anyone to handle*, Desta thought.

THIRTY-TWO

“I hope you will be that affectionate with your own children,” said Ayénat when she saw Damtew doting on his baby goat outside.

“I love him like a son. Do you see how beautiful he has gotten in just a couple of weeks?” boasted Damtew as he ran his fingers over the goat’s dove-gray hair.

“This is nothing short of obsession. Your life revolves around him. I think it’s a good sign. . . . I commend you,” said Ayénat before she crossed the doorsill.

Desta couldn’t believe that someone so brutal could show such tenderness. It was as if the kid had transformed Damtew from a beast to a kind soul.

Every evening, Damtew petted his goat and brought him a basket of grain. He shared his mother’s roasted barley snack with him. Worried the goat might get hungry at night, Damtew left him hay to graze on. He even made a bed of hay for him while all the other goats slept on the bare floor and got no extra food.

One night, Abraham scolded Damtew for feeding salt to the kid, saying it was bad at such a young age and only to be done after the goat was gelded and became a mookit.

Damtew explained that he wanted the goat to grow big and become a mookit as soon as possible. He planned to sell him for a lot of money to use for a new household for himself and Melkam.

“That is all very well, but you can’t hurry nature. Feed him as you wish, but don’t give him salt yet,” Abraham said.

Secretly, Damtew fed the goat salt anyway.

Within two months, the scrawny kid had grown into a handsome, rugged beast.

“Just like his grandfather, the billy goat that sired the mother,” commented Abraham. “Although you wouldn’t know it by looking at her: She’s so skinny.” He eyed her kindly. “The grandfather of Habté was the most beautiful goat I ever had. I wish I had not made him a mookit. He would have produced many a handsome goat like yours. Sometimes when the need for money looms, we can be shortsighted. Don’t repeat my mistake.”

“Is she the only one he fathered?” Damtew asked, studying the pathetic animal.

“She had a twin, but we sold her. I wish we hadn’t. She would have given us more offspring of the same pedigree.”

“How can such a beautiful creature come from a sickly goat like her?”

“That’s what I mean,” Abraham said. “I repeat: Put off the idea of a mookit. He could sire many future mookits if you breed him.”

“I’ll see. Maybe we can get two baby goats out of him before I make him a mookit,” Damtew said to satisfy his father. Because it took at least three years for a mookit to mature, he had wanted to begin with Habté as soon as possible.

“I mean that,” the father said, sensing Damtew’s insouciance.

“Okay, okay. We’ll decide when the time comes—you and I,” Damtew said, grinning. Abraham threw his hand in the air and walked into the house.

EVERYONE who came to visit not only had to meet the goat but also feel his translucent coat. “What do you feed him that makes his skin is so soft and beautiful? Can you give me the recipe?” people would ask.

“Nothing special, only lots of love and affection,” Damtew quipped. And invariably he added, “You know, I’ve discovered goats are like people. The more you love them, the more beautiful they become.”

Desta nearly puked when he heard this. “Whom have you loved that you have such ideas?” he asked under his breath. “Not your little wife. Your love for the animal is for the money you will make gelding and selling it. You’re greedy. That’s why you hold a grudge against me for Saba’s land.”

But Desta wondered if love indeed could make animals beautiful. Undeniably, this goat had become so. Unlike others that were feisty and testy—even when fed—the kid hung around and nuzzled people. The love he got seemed to have rubbed off on his master.

“Take good care of Habté,” Damtew invariably ordered Desta after he finished with his kid. He would contentedly watch the little goat strut away with his mother.

Damtew’s devotion to his animal had made Desta doubly conscious to protect him from predators. When he did his head counts twice a day, he began with Habté. Once they were counted, his mind was at ease.

THIRTY-THREE

This must be the rain everybody talked about—no, terribly worried about! thought Desta, as he watched the November sky over the eastern mountains grow progressively somber. “If the rains come in early November, we’ll be finished,” his father had said a week ago. The unwelcome downpours that sometimes came during this month could strip the grains from their husks in the uncut fields, rendering them bird feed. The fields already cut and left to dry would mildew and rot—making the grains useless.

Desta jumped at a huge crack followed by a flash of light. Soon the whole mountain was swallowed by vast, boiling clouds, below which the rain poured abundantly. Not long after, the same clouds drove across the Davola—black, ominous, and water-clogged—turning day into night.

Desta saw the farmers on the mountains scurry to shelter in their homes or under trees. He did the same. As the rain pelted the earth around his feet, he ran to the sholla tree for cover. Under the largest bough he stood and watched the rain come in sheets, then a squall of *berredo*—hail—that shredded the leaves and pocked holes in the earth. Lulled by many sunny days, Desta had forgotten his gessa. He wrapped himself tightly in his gabi and stood shivering, back pressed to the trunk.

He had never seen *berredo* like this, even in the rainy season. Once, a few years ago, he had watched from home a similar hailstorm assault the bare earth. When it was over, it left piles of white, watery pebbles all over the field. He remembered that they stung his fingers when he scooped them up. This time he just wanted to survive the bombardment. Some cows had come to the tree for shelter, too. They shivered and ground their teeth.

They reminded him of the goats. He had not checked on them for a while. Captivated by the gathering storm, he had forgotten them. He prayed that they were safe and that the sheep were still where he’d left them.

When the storm was over, a rushing, rusty flood blanketed the fields. Brown water pooled in low areas, small gullies trundled down the beaten footpaths, and a river of rainwater coursed along flood channels around the field. On the higher grounds and around trees, the white stones piled up in patches.

The sky cleared, and white light draped the valley. Dusk was just around the corner. The cattle came out of their shelters and shook themselves violently of the rain. Desta scampered to the woods, relieved to find the goats gathered around a sholla tree, their rears butting the trunk, facing out, eyes bright and alert. Desta walked around the tree and cracked his whip to drive them to the field. They filed along the footpath to the open field. Desta hissed in relief. He drove them toward the cattle to take them home. As he walked toward the tree where he had sheltered to get his stick and whip, he remembered he had not counted the goats. He collected his stick and returned to them. He raised his index finger, poking the air as he counted.

He counted twice, and each time he came up short one goat. Halfway on the third attempt, it dawned on him. “No . . . no . . . no . . .,” he said as he continued counting. “No . . . no . . . no . . .,” he repeated as if it would answer the terror gripping him. “Please God, not Habté. Please God, don’t do this to me . . .” He ran back to where he had found the goats. He circled the tree, looking in all directions. Thinking the goat might have drowned, he walked the bank, scanning the creek. There was no sign of Habté.

He scurried back to the goats, praying he had miscounted or would find Habté hiding behind his mother. He counted again, and he looked under the belly of every goat. No sign of the animal. Desta had a new thought: Maybe Habté had become separated when the pack ran for shelter. Maybe he was under an acacia tree, wet and shaking. He felt a moment’s relief until he pictured the little goat huddled alone, pummeled by berredo. How could he survive that? He couldn’t. Desta remembered how those white rocks had torn up the earth. A delicate kid . . . no way, he said to himself.

He had to keep looking. He walked the length of the acacia thicket, bending low to see if the baby goat might be hugging the tree or lying on the ground.

And then Desta found him. Where the acacia bushes ended, near where the southern creek joined the Davola, in the thick undergrowth beneath the tall trees, there he lay: motionless, neck twisted, belly torn open, skin hanging in tatters from his small ribcage. His eyes were glazed and lifeless; his long neck and torso, his beautiful face, the whole repository of many handsome goats to come, had been ambushed by an animal.

Desta crouched near the goat, dazed, not daring to think what Damtew or his father would do to him. He concentrated on the beautiful kid and the irredeemable fact of his death. He sat for a long time looking at the goat’s soft, gray coat that was slicked by rain and pocked by hail. His skin glistened. Part of his bottom leg and tail were buried under the piled hail.

From the wounds, Desta thought the attacker had grabbed him from behind. Once it had brought him down, it moved to the neck and strangled him. Damtew had once explained how most predators kill goats and sheep. Desta couldn't understand why the animal had not torn away the legs or any other part of the body. He thought maybe the sudden rain and hail had made the predator grab the gut, an easy target. With the rain over, it would probably return to finish off the rest.

The evening rapidly advanced. Desta had to act quickly. In its current condition, the skin would have no value as a mat or for sale in the market. Maybe to Damtew, it could serve as a memento of sorts. But did Desta want Damtew to have this reminder to blame him and hate him more? No.

He needed to move the body, hide it someplace. He made a lasso of his whip, slid it on Habté's neck, and brushed off the hail. Then he pulled him out to the field, struggling over rocks and branches. Once at the clearing, he sought a place to hide the body. First, though, he needed somewhere to spend the night himself. Going home would be foolhardy. Damtew and his father would be furious. One would beat him, and the other finish him off.

He thought it would be safe to tie himself to a branch in the sholla tree. He dragged the goat behind the bushes where he could keep an eye on him from his perch, and shout at any animal that might come near. He hid the carcass behind a row of abalo bushes and covered it with their branches.

The evening was getting on quickly. Desta gathered the rest of the animals and drove them home. He put the cows in their pen, and he put the goats in their stalls in the shed. The mookits he brought inside and drove to their quarters behind the horses' stall. Then, he demanded food from his mother, saying he was starved to death. Ayénat looked at him quizzically, but when she saw his wild eyes, she hastily brought a half injera. "This should save you from dying until dinnertime," she said, handing him the bread.

Desta wolfed it down in a few large chunks. Realizing he would need more food to last him for a day or two, he waited for an opportune moment.

He watched Melkam go milk the cows with his cousin, Genet, who was visiting. Ayénat was busy grinding in the mill room. Desta grabbed the bar of salt and dashed to the goats' stall, as if to feed the mookits. On his way, he detoured to the larder where he folded pieces of injera, stuffed them in his pouch, and returned the salt bar to its place. From the bedding area, he gathered his father's old gabi, folded it three times, and threw it over his own. Then he yanked one of the ropes that hung from a beam above the entrance and slipped out of the house.

Trying to avoid Damtew or their father, Desta leaped over the garden fence, dashed across the fallow potato field, crossed a grove of bushes, and emerged near the sholla tree. Its leaves were rustling in the evening breeze.

He slung his bag over his shoulder and scampered up the thick branches as he had done many times collecting figs. He went as high as he could and found a strong bough. He straddled the V of the bough, secured his body with the rope, and tied himself to the branch.

He waited.

He thought through how the Habté's absence might come to light. Damtew, soon after he came home, would go to pet his little animal, as he always did. Not finding him, he would look in all possible places, his face darkening as he searched. He would go out and call for Desta after learning Ayénat had seen his little brother recently. Damtew would keep searching for his goat in the cows' pen and in the bushes behind the house as he called for Desta. Dazed and confused, he would walk down to Asse'ged's house to share the news with him.

IN THE MOONLIGHT—thank God for a full moon—Desta saw something moving along the south end of the property. Holding his breath, he saw Damtew's hulking form come into view. He was with Asse'ged. They were heading for the acacia thicket where the goats often grazed. They were talking, but Desta couldn't make it out. After covering the length of the thicket, they hiked across the field toward the sholla tree.

Desta's hands began to sweat and shake like the wet leaves around him as he watched the pair approach his hiding place. His heart pounded and his mind raced, but he kept his eyes on his brothers. *They found the track I made when I dragged Habté's body, and they're following it to me*, he thought.

"Where are you going?" Asse'ged asked when he saw Damtew head for the tree.

"That big tree is where Desta shelters from the rain. I am just . . . uhhh . . ."

Damtew sounded confused and lost.

"Do you think he would be here now?" Asse'ged asked. "There is really nothing you can do tonight. Tomorrow, in broad daylight, we can do a better search. Let's go home."

Damtew walked to the tree anyway. He circled it slowly, looking up as if he sensed something. Desta stopped breathing. His heart skipped several beats. He clung to the branch tightly, closed his eyes, and prayed. He heard a faint voice, neither Damtew's nor Asse'ged's. He couldn't make out the words, but somehow the voice calmed and reassured him.

"It would be comforting to think my kid got mixed in with the neighbor's goats,

like in the old days. But I am sure nothing like that happened here, as our goats almost never cross the river,” Damtew said, nearly choking with emotion.

“Don’t torture yourself. Let’s go home,” begged Asse’ged.

As they walked, Damtew fumed. “I’ve been telling you that son of a bitch was born to mayhem, and to bring misery to me. If my goat is dead, I swear I will kill him. Baba can shoot me afterwards. I don’t care.”

“I know how you feel, but don’t jump to conclusions. Don’t be a martyr for a goat,” Asse’ged said.

“It’s no small matter. You have no idea what he means to me. I have so many grand plans for me and my family.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s go home. I am cold.”

Desta lost them to the woods below Asse’ged’s home. He began to breathe again.

His buttocks and legs ached, his feet numb and heavy. His clothes were drenched from the water-clogged leaves and his own sweat. Even his glass necklace felt cold and weighty. To comfort himself, he loosened the rope and stood up. He folded his gabi several times and wedged it into the cleft of the branches for a seat. For a cover, he swathed his father’s old gabi around him. “Now, I can hopefully sleep better,” he said as he secured himself once more with the rope.

It was not long afterward that he heard the howl. It came from the south end of the valley near the church. His heart jumped. He had not thought of the hyenas till now. But what could they do to him? Hyenas can’t climb trees.

Another hyena howled back across the Davola near the foothills, and Desta trembled. He cocked his ears for more. He parted a handful of leaves and peered through the branches. The moon cleared the clouds, and everything around him was bathed in comforting, cool light. At least he could see if an animal came near.

A third hyena responded to the others. This one, to Desta’s surprise, came from exactly where Desta had found Habté’s body. Oh my God, he must have smelled the blood and is now looking for the body, he thought, terror running through his head. His heart raced as if he were chased by a hyena himself. A fourth howl came from directly below Saba’s new home. The one at the other end of the field howled again. Desta wondered if he was relaying that he had found some remains and that they should join him.

The chorus of calls continued. Desta kept his eyes and ears on the hyena that howled at the other end of the field. Not long after, he saw him sniff the trail and come toward the tree. After each howl, the hyena whimpered and growled as he chased the blood trail.

Desta saw that the hyena was with two more. He kept his eyes on them. When they got to the tree, they circled it three times, stopping to look up and sniff. Desta wondered if it was true that hyenas couldn't climb trees. He thought they must have smelled him.

Desta prayed and petitioned the help of all the angels—Michael and Gabriel, followed by the saints, Mary and George. While he prayed, a story his father once told came to him:

A long, long time ago, our country was ruled by a python. Every year, a child was paid to him as tribute. It needed to be the firstborn, and a lottery determined who it would be each year.

The last year the lottery was cast, the name of a beautiful girl called Saba was drawn. Her father was a poor farmer. Her feet were her only unattractive parts, ugly and curved outward. She was an outcast with no friends. All her relatives shunned her. When she was taken to the python, the father grieved, but the rest of her family were happy to be rid of the shame of her. The father, full of tears, left Saba early in the morning under a giant oak tree, the place the python came for his meal on the appointed day and time every year. Afraid, she climbed the tree and waited. While there, she prayed and prayed, tears washing her cheeks.

The python finally came, crushing everything in his way. He slithered his giant body around the tree, disturbed that his food was not there. When he looked up, he saw the weeping girl. He was pleased. He lifted his giant head, struggling through the heavy branches. When his mouth came close to Saba's feet, he tried to grab them and bring her down. At this instant, St. George came flying on his white horse and lodged his gleaming spear into the gullet of the python. The beast struggled mightily to expel the spear from his mouth, but the more he fought, the deeper the spear went into his belly. He finally died, blood frothing from his mouth.

Saba climbed down from the tree, smiling. As she landed on the ground, she stepped on the python's blood. To her surprise, soon after, her old feet dropped off like the skin of a snake, replaced with beautiful new ones. She became our country's first ruler.

Now, sitting on the sholla tree, Desta prayed to St. George. *Save me, St. George. Please come on your white horse the moment a hyena climbs the tree and kill him with your spear.* Then another thought came. *Did he want the hyena killed, or Damtew?*

He thought for a moment. Hyenas didn't climb trees, so he probably was safe from them, but he would never be safe from Damtew. He had promised Asse'ged to kill Desta anyway, so why not get him first?

The thought of St. George's ramming his spear down Damtew's throat horrified him.

He had seen the same image at church when he went for communion, the same man on the horse vanquishing the beast, blood gushing, tongue twisted, eyes glazed in agony. He quickly dispatched the image of Damtew skewered. "If you wish bad things to someone, bad things will happen to you," Ayénat had once said.

The wind began to blow and shake the leaves around him, and a velvety soft voice came to him. "Don't despair. Everything will be all right," it said. Desta thought he must be hallucinating. He held his breath, cocked his ears, and listened again. The wind rustled, agitating the leaves around him. Droplets landed on his face and his father's gabi. He heard no voice again. He thought his mind was playing tricks, but then he remembered the cloud man's saying things at unexpected moments when he was in trouble. Still, it had been months since he'd heard from him. Desta thought that the cloud man was done with that.

When he looked down, Desta saw no hyena, but there were cackles coming from where he had hidden Habté's body. He wondered if the hyenas were fighting over the body. He parted the leaves to look.

He was right.

One hyena dragged the body into the open, trying to appropriate it. The other two chased him. After a few minutes of the chase and dance around the flailing carcass, the first hyena dropped it and all three began snatching, chewing, and crushing the bones. Horrified, Desta wished he were strong enough to bring the goat up in the tree with him or could shoot the howling beasts. Shortly, more hyenas arrived, but the first three had already devoured Habté. The others paced around, sniffing the blood and scavenging for morsels. Eventually the first pack vanished. Even more trotted to the scene of the feast, sniffed around and, finding nothing, disappeared.

Desta could not sleep. He was terribly uncomfortable and afraid that if he didn't keep awake, he might fall and be eaten by the hyenas. He checked that the rope was still tightly knotted. As his fear subsided, he became aware of the dampness of the big gabi. There was nothing he could do about it. He pulled his coverings closer to keep out the biting cold. He had to bear it until dawn, which seemed a long time away. His heart dropped and his stomach lurched at the thought.

Throughout the night, he nodded, waking when his head banged his perch. Each time, he reminded himself, I can't afford to fall asleep, I can't afford to fall asleep . . . He shook his head to drive sleep from his brain.

Once alert, he parted the leaves before him and found no animals or monsters trudging through the field, only yellow moonlight draping the valley. Distant trees and

bushes were shadows, and the grain lots up on the mountains resembled huge gray sheets spread to dry in the moonlight.

The quiet of the night was broken occasionally by hyenas, the whisper of leaves, and the brisk wind, which seemed to wrestle the falls of the Davola in the mountains. The sound came in waves at different pitches; Desta thought the wind broke the cascade. The sound comforted him.

While Desta listened to the pulsing sound, he thought of his goal to touch the sky. He must not die. The more he thought about it, the more alert he became.

He parted the leaves again and peered out to the yellow world, straining for a good view of the mountains. He saw snatches of sky near the top, but couldn't clearly see the horizon. It didn't matter. He knew what he must do.

He thought of his trip to the mountaintop. He knew he had to go when the day was gorgeous and sky a deep blue.

What would he bring? Several things: a stick to touch the sky where he couldn't reach it with his hand, a bucket of blood, a tied bunch of straw to paint the blood with, something sharp to widen the holes rain falls through, a sack to collect clouds, a canteen of water, and a loaf of bread in his pouch. He would travel with Hibist. That was obvious.

While Desta planned his journey, a rooster tore the silence with his call to the coming day. Desta knew it would be a while before night faded into day, but he was glad to know most of the dark hours had passed. It would not be long before the sun made its way to his valley, and he should prepare to leave his perch before dawn to find a safer place to hide.

He had to fight off the urge to sleep. He began to nod again, woke each time he heard the rooster crow, and then just as quickly, his head swayed again. He went back and forth until the silence was torn by the racing, guttural calls of the colobus monkeys. Dawn was imminent.

Desta untied himself from the bough, leaving the rope attached to the top branch. He rose slowly, stiff and achy all over. He attached one end of the rope to the sack that held his food and slowly lowered it. He threw down his father's gabi and wrapped himself with his own. He scanned all around him, then gingerly climbed down the trunk of the great tree. Grateful for the shelter it had provided, he kissed it three times.

As he stood at the foot of the tree, he noted that it was still dark. The ravines and the canyons on the eastern mountain appeared smudged with charcoal. Those on the western massifs were not as black. The thought that there could still be hyenas lurking gave Desta chills. I have to be brave, he told himself. Now, where to go?

He remembered that the shed in Saba's old place was still packed with hay. He thought it a safe, warm place to sleep. But he had to see first if there were any remains of Habté.

The entire goat had been devoured. The only things left were the crushed jaw—teeth intact—and fragments of skull. Desta shook his head as he inspected the ground for any more, a token, a memento. Tears came as he thought how the beautiful goat had become a meal for the hyenas.

He didn't have time to mourn. He had to leave before Damtew came looking for his goat. He gathered up his sack of injera, his father's big gabi, and the rope, and scampered across the field under cover of a pencil-gray dawning. Through the woods and across the creek he went. As he walked, the things Damtew and his father said about Habté came to him: his pedigree, the sire of handsome goats, the money Damtew would get for him, and the things Damtew and Melkam would buy when they moved into their own home.

Desta worried how the loss would affect Damtew. Although Damtew had received a heifer and young bull for his marriage, and Melkam had brought her own pair, his happiness revolved around Habté.

Through that goat, Desta had seen a human side of Damtew. He was capable of love. He remembered, too, how Damtew had talked and smiled with the goat in his arms. It was as if with Habté, Damtew had found a way to feel and express happiness. But now . . . ?

Desta couldn't imagine what "now" might mean. He didn't want to imagine what would happen to Damtew. Would he kill himself? Would he become a worse beast than he already was?

Desta was afraid of the answers.

At the shed, Desta discreetly pulled out a few bales of hay and made room to rest.

He looked across the creek toward home. He saw a figure in white exit the house and disappear. Desta thought it must be his father or mother relieving themselves.

He couldn't afford to be seen. He snuggled into the pocket he had created, using his father's gabi for a pillow. With him in it, the pocket quickly became warm. Desta thanked Yihoon for not taking the hay and demolishing the shed. As he tried to sleep, he wondered what he would do the next day.

Desta knew what Damtew would do if something happened to his goat. There was only one answer: He had to run away. He had to disappear completely.

THIRTY-FOUR

The sun was already setting when Desta awoke in the late afternoon, groggy and confused. Distant, indistinct sounds drifted to him. At first, he thought he had slept through a day and a night. Once fully awake, he realized it was still the same day. Now he wanted to find the source of the strange noises.

He tilted his head and listened. The sounds grew louder, as if they came from home. He wondered if Damtew was having a breakdown, and the family had gathered to console him. Or, God forbid, he had gone berserk and killed someone. No matter what, Desta resolved not to move from his hideout.

He was terribly hungry and thirsty. He nibbled on a bit of injera, but this only made him thirstier.

When darkness finally fell, he crawled from his berth and scurried to the creek for water. He cupped his hands and drank. The water soothed his parched throat. He ate part of his injera and drank more water.

Feeling better, he went back to the shed. As he walked, he thought about what to do next, whether to stay here or find a nearby tree to spend the night in.

He would not go home. Tomorrow, before daybreak, he planned to go to Hibist. She would keep him safe, feed him, and shelter him. For tonight, despite his worry for hyenas, he thought he could sleep better in the hay shed. He closed the opening as best he could, allowing only for needed air, and slept.

When he woke the following morning, it was still dark. He needed to get going before anyone saw him leave his hideout. He transferred the remaining injera to his gabi, then stowed his father's gabi and his pouch in a pocket in the hay.

After filling his stomach with dry injera and creek water, he walked the tree-lined banks of the creek. Birds chattered their predawn songs. Two dik-diks bolted from the bushes along the river and dove into tall weeds on Saba's old property. Startled, Desta nearly fell on a pile of dried agam thorns that stood on their stems like porcupine quills. He needed to walk carefully on this unbeaten path.

He was happy when he finally connected with the caravan route where the creek met the Davola River. The day had not fully broken, but it was clear enough to travel

without tripping. As he walked the rocky road, he noticed hyena tracks in the dust. He wondered if they had returned to his field the second night, looking for another goat.

As he walked farther down, he saw farmers driving oxen and carrying tools on their shoulders. Blue smoke rose from the thatched houses that stood in clusters on the foothills and mountainsides. He saw boys like him driving animals to the fields, cracking whips. That would have been me if I were still at home, Desta thought.

He couldn't wait to see Hibist. He was sure she would be surprised to see him come alone all the way from home! And he couldn't wait to eat his fill and drink a big tumbler of cold milk.

As morning advanced, Desta saw more boys along his route. He worried that they might beat him up. He had heard stories about groups of boys doing all kinds of things to other boys traveling alone.

Some stopped him and asked where he was going. He said he was going to see his sister, not far away, but not why he was traveling alone. Some thought him a runaway and invited him to stay with them. Desta firmly declined, and they let him go.

He traveled all morning, passing many men and women—some dressed in nice white clothes, as if going to church or a wedding. Others were in work clothes. Some of the men asked him where he was headed. He said he carried a message from his mother to his sister who lived nearby.

Desta was thrilled when he saw the tall, packed juniper trees at the foot of the rotund mountain west of the Davola. He remembered that was his parents' church. Hibist's house was near.

Excited, Desta picked up speed. He left the main route and took a small street in the direction of the church. He soon saw a group of boys playing a bead game he had never seen before, one Hibist had told him about when she gave him her bead necklace.

He stood and watched. They stopped and stared at him. Desta counted: There were five boys, two of them big and menacing. The others appeared to be his size and age but were unthreatening.

"Stop! Where are you going?" asked one of the big boys, walking to Desta. He had a cleft lower lip and mean-looking, deep-set eyes.

Desta kept walking, eyes on the road.

"Didn't you hear? He told you to stop," said the other big boy. He had a huge shaved head and ugly, crooked teeth.

Desta froze. The boys surrounded him.

“Do you want to play a game of diba—glass beads—with us?” asked the boy with the cleft lip. Desta noticed his eyes were on Desta’s necklace.

“I don’t know how.”

“We’ll teach you. It’s fun,” said the big-headed boy. Desta saw him looking at his beads, too.

“No, I need to go. My sister is waiting for me.”

“C’mon, just for a bit,” said the boy with cleft lip, tugging Desta’s gabi.

The other boys watched, their eyes running from the cleft-lipped boy to Desta.

Desta yielded, partly from curiosity, and partly fear.

He noticed that on a sloping ground they had shaved the grass, smoothed the surface, and drilled a hole the size of a shilling. One of the kids stood some distance away with beads in his hand. He moved his hand back and forth several times, eyes fixed on the hole. Then he threw the beads. A few fell into the hole, and others scattered around it. He scooped up the ones in the hole and held them in his hand.

Another boy collected the scattered beads, stood at the same spot as the last player, aimed, and threw.

Three beads fell in. He claimed them, leaving the others. A third boy rose and miraculously threw all the remaining beads into the little cavity. The big boys, the ones who had been eyeing Desta’s beads, stared in shock.

“Would you like to play?” asked the big-headed boy. He seemed less menacing.

“No, I don’t know how, and I have no. . .” Desta began, as he pushed his gabi farther up his neck.

“We can teach you. It’s very easy. . . and you have plenty around your neck,” said the cleft-lipped boy in sweet tones.

“No, my mother would kill me if I play with these.”

“No, she will be happy because you will win a bunch more,” said the big-headed boy.

“I can help you untie them,” said the cleft-lipped boy.

“No, I can’t, I don’t want to. . .”

“Look, the rule is, any boy who passes here either plays with us and goes home with dignity or gets a bloody nose and his beads ripped from his neck,” said the cleft-lipped boy.

Desta looked at their feet and considered his choices. “So, what do you say?” asked the boy with the big head.

“I guess, okay. Just two games,” said Desta meekly.

“Everybody needs beads to play. I will help you untie your necklace to get yours,” said the boy with the cleft lip.

“O . . . O . . . Okay,” said Desta. He remembered Hibist tightly tying the cord that held the beads for safekeeping. These were the beads she had worn as a girl, her gift to him, his first necklace. She’d said it was un-Christian to be without one. But the memory of her mattered more than appearing Christian.

The boy with the split lip quickly undid the knot and looped the cord over the cleft of his thumb and index fingers, holding the ends to contain the beads. Considering how fast he untied it, Desta thought he must have cut it with a blade.

“You need at least three beads to start the game,” said the boy as he stripped a bunch off the strand and handed the rest to Desta. Desta watched in horror. The others covered their mouths to keep from laughing.

“Now take out three, and let’s play,” said the boy.

“This is how it’s done. Let me show you,” said the big-headed boy, as he snatched Desta’s beads and stripped another bunch from the other end of the cord. “Look.” He brought his fingers together, fashioning them into a cone. The stacked beads rested from the tip of his fingers to the middle of his palm. He laid his thumb over the stacked beads as he moved the hand back and forth, aiming for the hole.

“Do you understand?” asked the boy, looking at Desta.

Desta shook his head. He looked at the hand that held his beads, wondering if the boy would give them back.

“Good! Now take three off your necklace and let’s play,” said the big-headed boy.

The three small boys could no longer contain their laughter. The split-lipped boy glared at them, and they stopped.

Upset and afraid, Desta pulled three beads from his necklace and held them tightly. He tied the cord and slid it up his arm and under his gabi. More than half of his beads were gone.

The split-lipped boy collected one bead from each player and gave the first shot to Desta. For the others, he drew a lottery for who would next throw the beads. Desta’s shot scattered around the hole. Only one bead fell in. He retrieved it and stood aside. He bit his lip and watched the split-lipped boy gather the scattered beads and walk to the throwing line.

His throw netted him three of the remaining five.

One of the smaller boys had his turn. He got one in.

The fourth player tried one but failed.

The fifth hit the bull’s eye. Nobody even saw the bead disappear into the hole. The others looked at him in awe. Desta was impressed.

On the second round, Desta lost the bead that he had gotten in on his first try.

He took the necklace off his arm, untied the knot, and put the other two beads back. “You’re not leaving, are you?” said the big-headed boy.

Desta nodded.

“The rule is every kid must play at least three games before he leaves,” said the cleft-lipped boy. His eyes were hard and menacing.

Desta yielded.

On the third round he played again and lost.

“I need to go. I have already played and lost three times,” Desta said politely.

“Well, since you are not good at this game, you deserve to lose what you have left. If you stay, you will lose anyway. Save yourself time and give us all those beads,” said the cleft-lipped boy. He stepped up to Desta and stared down at him.

“No, I can’t . . . I won’t,” said Desta. He tried to run, but the big-headed boy tripped him. He fell, hitting his head on a rock. He began to bleed.

“See, you could have avoided all of this if you had given up those beads,” said the boy with the cleft lip. He reached for Desta’s arm, and slipped off the necklace.

Desta began to cry.

“Here boys, take your shares,” said the boy, as he passed out Desta’s beads. “Each of you gets three. The rest are for me and my buddy.” He tossed his head toward the big-headed boy. “Now run, or we’ll beat you up,” he told Desta.

Desta got up and scampered, half walking, half running, occasionally looking back to see if they were following him. He kept dabbing his head with his gabi to stop the bleeding.

Once he was far enough away, he slowed to a walk, his excitement to see his sister dampened. He had lost her necklace, and with it, his Christian identity; he was now “Islam,” she would say. Worse, the link with his sister was broken. Whenever he missed her, he would reach for the beads that had once graced her long, beautiful neck and feel comforted. Now they are gone. What would she say when she finds out? How upset would she be to know that her beads were divided up by the local kids? He would have to keep his neck covered.

Another thought came: Maybe Hibist’s husband could recover the beads. He might know the boys’ families. This gave him a glimmer of hope. Now, though, he must hasten to Hibist. He would tell her about the beads when the time was right.

As he walked, two horsemen raced past. He looked to see if there were more, wondering what had happened to merit their coming.

Instead, Desta saw a distant figure walking briskly toward him.

“Oh my God! Asse’ged!” said Desta, halting in his tracks.

He had to either quickly run and hide or stay put. The impulse to run overcame him. But where could he hide? Everywhere was harvested farmland, the ground reduced to stubble. Left of the road, a few yards away, a big rock jutted from the flat earth. Desta scuttled toward it, finding scant dried grass behind it. He could see a lush Abo bush behind a fence that bordered a farm and, beyond the bush, a house that looked fairly new.

Desta lay flat on the ground behind the rock and closed his eyes, listening for Asse'ged. The thought that his brother had seen him made his heart race. With every rustle in the bushes or buzz of an insect, he held his breath and cocked his ear. It seemed he lay there a very long time waiting for Asse'ged to pass. Suddenly, Asse'ged appeared behind him.

"You thought I didn't see you, did you?" he said, as he grabbed Desta by his foot.

He might as well have been a hyena or a leopard. Desta was terrified and speechless. He hadn't heard the slightest sound to alert him.

"Come out. Let's go home," said Asse'ged, as he tugged on Desta's foot.

"Let go of me," said Desta, as he tried to break his brother's hold.

Asse'ged stared at him.

"I am not going home, even if you threaten to kill me," said Desta sharply.

"Look, nobody will hurt you," pleaded Asse'ged. "Right now, everyone is worried that you might have drowned. Mother is beside herself. Many blame Damtew, saying that you fear him for his lost goat . . . Everybody will be so happy to see you."

Desta didn't move.

"You look weak and thin," Asse'ged continued, letting go of Desta's foot. "Your forehead is bloody and swollen . . . I bet you have not eaten for days. Let's get some food for you at the house over there."

Desta stared at a line of ants ringing the rock.

"Let's not worry about home. . . get up," said Asse'ged, grabbing his brother by the hand.

"I can wait until I get to Hibist's," said Desta sullenly.

"She is not there. She and her husband have left for his aunt's funeral. Mother sent me yesterday evening, thinking you might have gone to her. I slept at their house last night because I was tired, and it was too late to walk back home."

Desta's gut tightened into a ball. "You are lying!" he snapped.

"Why should I? I can go home, and you can find out for yourself that you have no place to go . . . the dogs are ferocious at Hibist's."

Desta's eyes filled with tears. "I won't go home," he cried. "I want to kill myself!"

Surprised by his brother's reaction, Asse'ged looked away. "I have a suggestion," he began, turning to Desta. "You want to kill yourself; that is fine. I will teach you a quick way to do it. But before I do, you need to eat, for the rest of your dead life. You know there is no food like here in heaven. Whatever we eat just before we die will be what we'll have the rest of our dead lives."

Desta had never heard such talk. He certainly didn't want dry injera for eternity. He stared into the distant haze to the place Hibist said was their father's birthplace, the place where his grandfather and the ancient family coin had vanished. He weighed his options. Was he really ready to abandon his dream to go to the mountain?

"What do you want?" asked Asse'ged in a resigned tone. "To come with me to see if someone at that house will give you food?"

Desta couldn't sacrifice his life just yet. Despite his struggles and pain, he had to keep living until he touched the sky.

He staggered to his feet and hobbled behind his brother. Asse'ged climbed the wattled fence first, then reached over and helped Desta. They crossed a stubbled field of teff. When they reached the house, Asse'ged called out.

A woman in a long, old gown came. She was slender, in her thirties, with dark olive complexion and pretty, almond eyes. Her hair, soft and curly, was piled in large loops like Saba's. It would bounce as she walked and glint in the light had she washed and combed it out and touched it up with butter, like Saba, thought Desta.

"My little brother here is very hungry," said Asse'ged, resting his hands on Desta's shoulders. "He has not eaten for days. Could you be so kind as to give him something? A glass of water and piece of injera will do."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that. Please stay for a moment. I don't have anything freshly baked, but I'll see what I've got," said the woman as she disappeared into the house.

To Desta's delight, the woman came back with a tumbler of milk and two large injeras with thick, yellow split-pea sauce. She set the platter on a chopped log and soon returned with two wooden stools for them to sit on while Desta ate.

Then she vanished again, returning this time with a tumbler of tella for Asse'ged. Desta downed the milk in two long swigs and tore into the injera, scooping the split peas with it. The injera tasted old and dry—but better than the one he had eaten for the last two days. This injera is heavenly in comparison, he thought.

Asse'ged watched his brother eat. The cut on Desta's forehead had crusted with blood and was swollen like a bump on a log.

"I brought the food for both of you. Please help yourself also, sir," said the woman as she brought a kettle of tella to refill Asse'ged's tumbler.

“I just wanted Desta to have his fill. Thank you,” said Asse’ged.

“Why had he not eaten for so long?” asked the hostess, looking down on Desta with empathy. Her long, dark eyelashes glinted in the sun.

“One of the animals he tended was killed by a beast, and he ran away, afraid someone might spank him, I guess,” said Asse’ged, glancing toward Desta.

The woman sucked her lips in sympathy. “Does he get spanked so badly that he would abandon his home for days without food?” she asked, her eyes still on Desta.

“No, not really . . . He is just a sensitive and adventurous boy . . .,” said Asse’ged.

“Ahhh . . .,” she said, as if she doubted Asse’ged.

Desta fixed his eyes on his brother, wondering what other lies he would tell.

“Just to show you how adventurous he is,” Asse’ged continued, “we live in a place called Jomer. Have you heard of it?”

“No, I haven’t,” said the woman.

“You have not missed much. It’s the kind of place you would run from as soon as you arrived,” said Asse’ged with a grin.

The woman looked at him quizzically.

“It’s a bit far from here. All you see around you is a wall of mountains. We have a sister here, and Desta came all the way . . . alone. Don’t you call that adventurous for a boy who is only eight years old?!”

“He came by himself, and he is only eight?”

“Yes. He is very close to his sister and wanted to come see her for a long time. With work up to our necks, we didn’t have time to bring him. So, he decided to brave it on his own. Unfortunately, he didn’t get the chance, as she has gone to a funeral.

“When he didn’t come home, our mother suspected he might come to his sister and sent me to find him. I ran into him just now as he was heading to her house.”

“That is too bad,” said the woman. “Sibling separation can be very hard on young ones like him. You should invite her or bring him to her often. After the harvest, it should be easier for both of you.”

“We think so, too,” said Asse’ged, motioning for Desta to get up. “Thank you for your kind help. He should make it home now with renewed energy.”

Desta did not take his eyes off Asse’ged. He was disgusted by how he had distorted the truth.

“Let’s go,” said Asse’ged, resting his hand on his shoulder.

Desta jerked his shoulder free.

“Thank you again. May God bless you and your family,” said Asse’ged, turning to the woman.

“May your trip home be safe and free of obstacles! Take care of the boy,” she said.

“Will do,” said Asse’ged without looking back.

As he walked behind his brother, Desta sizzled with anger. But what could he do? His world was run by adults who cared only to make him a shepherd. He would rather not face Dantew, but he knew he must if he ever wanted to travel to the place of his dreams. He couldn’t let his fears sabotage that. Strengthened by these thoughts, Desta walked home with less apprehension and worry.

THIRTY-FIVE

When Desta and Asse'ged returned home, there were a dozen people huddled around Ayénat on the grass outside the house. They appeared to console her. Some were friends from across the Davola, including Mawa; Mogus and his wife; Yisehak and his wife; Maray; and a few others. Yihoon, Melkam and Mulu were also there. Damtew sat several feet away from the group, his chin buried in the turns of his gabi, his eyes boring into the dirt near his feet, which he poked with a stick.

"There is Desta with Asse'ged!" blurted Melkam when she saw the pair. All turned to the two brothers who had just come around the fence. Damtew gave Desta a hard, cold stare.

"Just like I thought," said Ayénat with a half-smile. She rose to meet them. Others did as well. Mawa dashed before Ayénat and showered Desta with exaggerated affection. Desta cringed; Mawa always did this when his parents were watching, and he hated it. He accepted the assault stoically.

"You found him at Hibist's?" Ayénat asked Asse'ged.

"No, he was on his way there," he replied.

"Where did he spend the last two nights?" asked Ayénat, wide-eyed.

"That you will have to ask him."

The other women gazed at Desta with wide eyes, too.

"As you can see, he is emaciated and tired," said Asse'ged. "I think he can use some food and sleep before you ask him too many questions."

"Melkam," said Ayénat, glancing at her daughter-in-law. "Could you please prepare Desta a good lunch and give him milk? He looks like he has not eaten since he left home."

Desta followed Melkam into the house. Coming in from the bright sun, the sitting area of the house was barely visible. He groped with his feet for his father's bench and sat. In time his eyes adjusted to the light.

While he ate, Desta heard Ayénat thanking God for bringing him home safely and thanking Asse'ged for going to look for him. Shortly after, the people wished her well and left. Asse'ged and Mulu left, too.

As Desta finished his meal, Damtew and Ayénat walked in and stood before him, the brother morose and gloomy like a winter cloud.

Desta shrank and looked away.

“Can you tell me what exactly happened to Habté?” asked Damtew, his voice laced with anger.

“Right after the hailstorm, I found him dead by the creek, near the Davola,” said Desta, looking down at the fireplace.

“You mean to tell me the storm killed him?” growled his brother.

“I don’t know. But his stomach was open, like some animal got to him. I am not sure whether before or during the storm,” said Desta, looking at his mother, wishing she would make Damtew leave him alone.

“The storm didn’t kill any other goat. An animal killed him because you didn’t keep our herd out of the bushes as I repeatedly told you to do,” continued Damtew.

“Nothing can be done now. Stop asking him questions. Go attend to your things,” commanded Ayénat.

“I want to know what happened to my goat,” muttered Damtew.

“Nothing you say or hear from Desta will bring him back,” consoled Ayénat.

“Please go outside now.”

Desta shrank farther into himself as he listened to his mother and brother. He wished he hadn’t come home. He couldn’t imagine living with Damtew after this. His brother would forever bring up the lost goat in anger. Desta would rather run away than live with him. But where could he run to? And how could he, before achieving his life’s dream?

“I need to take a nap now, Ma,” said Desta as he rose. “I’ve not slept much.”

“You think I’ll forget this?” said Damtew, watching Desta head to his bed.

As Desta crawled into bed, he watched Damtew and Ayénat go out. She spoke to him, but Desta couldn’t hear the words. He covered his face and closed his eyes, wishing sleep would take him away from this place he called home.

THIRTY-SIX

It was early morning, January 21, 1957, the day of Timket, Epiphany. Desta was outside the house about to drive the animals to the field when Yihoon appeared, smiling broadly. Desta's father squatted in front, feeding his two mookits a mixture of salt and grain.

"I came to share good news," said Yihoon. "We think Saba is pregnant."

"Congratulations! What great news!" said Abraham, looking up at Yihoon.

"Saba has missed her period for two months. She feels certain she is pregnant," said the son-in-law, beaming.

Both men glanced at Desta, who quickly left for the animals, avoiding eye contact.

"I'll see you at church," Yihoon said, hurrying to catch Desta. "Let's hope your man's scheme works. I hear you're in contact with him; your prayer could help."

"No, I have not even seen him in my dreams for some time," said Desta dismissively.

"We moved and made enemies of your brothers because of him," said Yihoon.

"What do you want of me? I don't want to hear it," snapped Desta, recalling with fear what Damtew and Asse'ged had done to him in his dream.

"You might ask for that man's help to send us a baby boy."

"Pray for yourselves. Don't drag me into this again," retorted Desta, running away.

When he looked back, he saw his brother-in-law walking slowly, head down.

The news dampened Desta's spirits. He foresaw seven months of worry that Saba's pregnancy would fail. For now, he wouldn't dwell on it. He drove the animals to the field and sat on his usual perch by the sholla tree.

In the dry season, the dormant valley and thin wisps of clouds above didn't hold his interest. The days warmed as soon as the sun cleared the mountains and the heat rose steadily, dulling his senses. *It's all for the better*, he told himself. As much as these sights had fired his imagination, he didn't need distractions that might cause further harm to his flock.

Damtew and everybody else knew that Habté had perished because of Desta's inattention.

"I can't believe you are still here while my beautiful Habté is gone," Damtew had

told Desta privately. "My dreams made a meal for some wild beast, thanks to you! It's only because I gave my word to Ma that you are still walking. . . someday it will happen," he fumed.

Desta's hairs stood on end. As usual he said nothing, looked down, and walked away. He now certainly was more attentive to the animals than ever. But his days were mind-numbing; even the beautiful blue slate above ceased to captivate him.

BUT TIMKET was an exciting time for Desta. A few weeks in advance, the family washed their holiday clothes. The women stashed fragrant grass and herbs in the folds of their dresses and stowed them in wooden boxes. A few days ahead, the men placed their folded trousers and jackets between layers of kosso leaves and put slabs of stone over them so that they would be soft and neatly pressed to wear.

Desta remembered Hibist's glee on Timket last year. She wore a long white dress with blue, green, and red embroidery at the neck and a large strip of the same handiwork running down the front, ending in an intricate cross. An equally decorative shemma lay over her shoulders. She was only ten, but to Desta seemed transformed into a beautiful young woman. Mother often said Hibist was mature way beyond her age; Desta knew that. It was this quality that made him respect and love her more than any other sibling.

"I wish you were old enough to come with me to mass," she had said on Timket morning.

"I am so anxious to go," he had replied.

When she returned, she told him what happened. He closed his eyes and remembered.

"When we arrived, the priests were already celebrating mass by the river. A great crowd camped on the riverbank, singing and praying and chanting all night.

"The priests wore long brocaded vestments of gold, blue, green, and red, and other colors such as amethyst, purple, and lavender. One priest carried on his head *the Tabot* wrapped in these rich colors. Several priests and deacons flanked the Tabot, holding colorful umbrellas that shimmered in the sun.

"Around the pool by the river stood our group, dressed all in white, waiting for the head priest to bless us. Aba Yacob had a large white timtem around his head. He stepped forward and dipped his large silver cross three times in the water, blessing it. Then he cupped one hand, scooped the water, and sprinkled the congregation with it. Then other priests did the same, and everybody else, particularly those younger in the crowd, scooped the water with their hands and anointed one another. You should have seen it. It was quite a riot.

"After this ceremony, the priests split into two groups and lined up in opposing

rows before the priest with the Tabot and the others carrying umbrellas. They began the Dance of David. One priest beat a kettle drum in a slow, ponderous rhythm. The priests in each facing row swayed, tinkling rattles and moving prayer sticks in tempo with the drumbeat. As the drummer picked up speed, the priests did also, and adding to their swaying, they advanced and receded, still keeping time with their rattles and the prayer sticks.

“After the first dance, the priests, still moving to the beat, led the crowd to the church. Once the priests and the Tabot reached the church grounds, the crowd dispersed.”

Desta couldn't wait to be old enough to go to Timket with Hibist. Bu this year, she was gone, and he must tend the animals. And he had no white clothes.

On this Timket, Desta sat at the far corner of the field, watching his family march down the road to the ceremony, but he had no wish to join them. He was thankful to be left to his thoughts and daydreams undisturbed. For all he cared, they could leave forever.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Saint Mary's Celebration was the one time of year when relatives came in great numbers from near and far. It happened on January 28, and Desta awaited the day with great excitement. He would see uncles and aunts, cousins and family friends. During that time, the house teemed with people. They went to church dressed in white or their best clothes and brought food and drink to serve the celebrants at church. At home, people ate, drank, and danced.

Desta's cousin Awoke, who lived across the Davola River with his parents, had come to the festival with them. Awoke was five years older than Desta and treated him like a kid brother. He was bigger, too. His family had many cattle, and he had grown up drinking much milk—a precious commodity in Desta's house that Ayénat mainly used to make cheese and butter.

Awoke had brought with him a small square pamphlet tied in the middle with a thin thread. The morning after the holiday, Desta found his cousin sitting between two boys by the fence reading to them from the pamphlet. Intrigued, Desta watched. With a thin amber straw, Awoke pointed to letters in the pamphlet and called them out. The boys, heads nearly touching Awoke's, followed the straw and repeated what he said. Desta was transfixed.

Once Awoke finished reciting all the letters, he asked Desta if he would like to learn the alphabet. Desta immediately agreed and sat beside him. The two boys left.

Awoke took Desta through the entire alphabet, and then a second time. Desta was thrilled at Awoke's miraculous knowledge.

"I can read too. I just showed you the alphabet so that you can actually read pages like this," offered Awoke as he flipped to the third page. He began to read, "Abugeeda . . ."

To Desta, nothing he read sounded like Amharic, their language.

"What did you just say?" Desta asked.

"This page contains letters arranged to make you learn to read faster. They don't mean anything," Awoke said.

"But how did you learn to read?" Desta asked.

"Oh, on my own," Awoke quickly replied.

“On your own? How?”

“A relative who is a Deb’tera taught me the alphabet. From then on, I taught myself to read and write.”

Desta couldn’t quite conceive how it was possible to remember all those letters to read a page like that.

“Look, I can write my name, too,” said Awoke, taking out a stubby, gold piece of wood with a thin gray rod in it.

“This is *Irsas*—pencil—,” said Awoke, dangling the golden rod before Desta. He flipped to the back of the booklet and carefully and slowly wrote his name.

“This is my name written out,” Awoke said, with a touch of pride.

Desta looked at Awoke like he was a supernatural being.

“You can learn to do it, too. It’s easy!” said Awoke, seeing Desta’s surprise.

“How can I? I have nobody to teach me, and I have no book,” Desta said, looking far away—doubting that he could remember all those characters, read the third page in the pamphlet, and write his name.

“I will teach you. You can use my Fidel—this book is called Fidel,” said Awoke.

“I want to . . . I’d like to . . . I would love to . . . but . . .”

“But what?”

“But you will not be here to teach me,” Desta said. What he really thought was, *How much room do I need in my head to remember all that? I need someone to show me over and over again until I can remember it all.*

Desta didn’t have a vague notion of what the alphabet and writing his name could mean to him. He probably would never get to read and write like his cousin. His cousin was much more advanced, and it would take him a long time to be like him . . . He wondered if it was worth the effort.

Awoke promised to teach him.

Soon his mother, Maray, came and took Awoke away.

The next day, Desta tended the animals by the fence at the end of his parents’ property.

“I want to write my name . . . I can write my name . . .” Desta kept saying as he hopped on the fence railing and jumped down. He hopped up again, repeated his mantra, and jumped down.

He did this repeatedly. Unbeknownst to Desta, Awoke had been watching him.

“Yes, you can. I will show you how . . . It’s easy.”

Desta stopped, enthralled by Awoke’s appearance.

Awoke and Desta sat with their backs against the fence. The cousin opened his little book and began reciting the alphabet again. Desta repeated.

U U· ʒ ʒ̣ ʒ̥ ʒ̧
 Hä Hoo Hē Hä Hã Hĩ Hō
 ʌ ʌ· ʌ̣ ʌ̥ ʌ̧ ʌ̨
 Lä loo Lē Lä Lã Lĩ Lō
 ɸ ɸ· ɸ̣ ɸ̥ ɸ̧ ɸ̨
 Hä Hoo Hē Hä Hã Hĩ Hō
 ɹ ɹ· ɹ̣ ɹ̥ ɹ̧ ɹ̨
 Mä Moo Mē Mä Mã Mĩ Mō

As Awoke went down the first page and up the next, Desta started to see and hear the pattern.

“Once you know the first letters, the rest are easy. They are merely a variation of the first,” said Awoke.

“I see and hear that,” Desta said, excited. All of a sudden, what had been a great task seemed doable.

“Just remember, all you need to memorize is the thirty-six letters here on the first column,” said Awoke, running his finger.

“Yes, I see.”

After four recitations, Desta could remember about a quarter of the alphabet.

Telling Awoke to fold the booklet, Desta closed his eyes and recited them.

“You see, I told you it is easy. I must admit, you are also a fast learner,” said Awoke, a ghost of a smile on his big face.

“Thank you. This is great!”

“At this rate, you should finish the whole alphabet by this afternoon. Then I will give you the book so that you can repeat it on your own and memorize it,” Awoke said.

“I would love it!”

By the end of the day, to Awoke’s delight and Desta’s surprise, he had memorized nearly all the letters of the alphabet. As promised, Awoke loaned him his book and left with his mother.

Desta couldn’t resist the question that had coursed his mind since he began. Desta ran after his teacher.

“Can I ask you something?” Desta said. “What good will it do me to learn the alphabet and write my name?”

“I will give you the same answer that the Deb’tera gave me. First, you won’t have

to sign your name with your thumb. And, if you want to write or receive a letter, you don't need a priest to read or write it for you. You can do it yourself."

Neither answer satisfied Desta. He might never need to sign his name and read or write a letter. For something he would barely ever use, the time to learn seemed a waste.

"You are not convinced, huh?"

Desta nodded.

"In that case, give me back my Fidel."

"No, no, I want to learn it. I just wondered what to tell people if they ask."

"Tell them you plan to become a priest someday."

"That is easy. I can do that. Thanks. See you next time."

Desta ran home.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Desta couldn't thank Awoke enough. He had sparked Desta's new passion: learning the alphabet. Desta took his cousin's Fidel wherever he went, opening the booklet and reciting the letters whenever he could. Even in bed, he visualized letters as he drifted off to sleep.

Desta had memorized the whole alphabet by week's end; he could recite most of it backwards, too. Next, he taught himself the shapes of each letter in the first column and all the special attributes of its derivatives. He saw that they all followed the same pattern: If he remembered each character in the first column and memorized the shape and extensions of a few rows, the rest followed suit. Then he could combine different characters to write words and names.

After a few hours studying the shapes, he put his learning to the test. He closed his book, and with a dry strand of straw, wrote his name on his thigh: **᠘(de) ᠨ(sä)ᠰ(ta)**. The letters were halting and squiggly, but the shapes and patterns were legible. When he compared them to his book, the first and last letters were correct, but he'd misdrawn *Si* like *sä*. Nonetheless, he was thrilled.

The scratched white letters made a striking contrast with his dark skin. His thighs made wonderful writing slates. He erased the middle letter with spit, let it dry, and wrote the correct mark. "That is my name," he said, shaking his head and biting his lip. It was a miracle. For a long time, he stared at the three letters as if to keep them from evaporating into thin air.

Desta then tried the names of his brothers and sisters. He wrote Hibist's right below his. He got all but one letter right. He rubbed it out and corrected it. To his surprise, all of Hibist's letters were from the sixth column of the alphabet. Below Hibist's name, he perfectly wrote *Enat*. Over the next two days, he inscribed the whole family's names on both thighs and legs, with Damtew's at the very bottom. His body became an exotic work of art.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" said Ayénat, seeing the strange lines on Desta's skin.

“Oh nothing—just scratch marks, from my nails and the dry grass in the field,” said Desta.

“Does your body itch? Let me see,” said Ayénat, grabbing his arm and inspecting it.

“Not a lot.”

“You don’t have those horrible marks here,” she said, twisting his arm.

“It’s the grass, Ma . . . where I lay on it, uncovered. Let me go,” said Desta, pulling away.

“Be careful. Spread your gabi so you are protected.”

The last thing Desta wanted was such scrutiny. He had not shared his pastime with anybody. He instinctively knew that few would approve.

To avoid attention, he needed a different surface to write on.

He had seen Tamirat take dictation from his father for court cases with ink from a small blue bottle. He wrote with a sharpened split-tipped reed on large white paper with many faded green lines, and double red ones at the top. All he had to do was find these three things, and he would be set.

He knew that his father kept paper folded in a straw box with his court documents. Desta could steal one or two sheets if he could find that box.

He knew he would be breaking one of God’s cardinal rules. But he thought that stealing paper to learn to write would be like stealing food out of hunger. He would ask God’s forgiveness later or make up for his sin with good deeds to please Him. He remembered his father had once said, “If you pray for God to help you violate His rules—say, against stealing—he might help you do so, but punish you in the end.”

So long as God helped him find the box and steal the paper, he would find some way to make it even with Him. Besides, it could be a long time before Desta died. Maybe God would forget by then.

What else could he do? His father wouldn’t give him what he needed; he’d always treated his papers like gold. Desta had no other choice but to steal.

The reed would be easy. He could make one from the thin bamboo plants that grew plentifully along the Davola. But the ink was a different matter. He didn’t know where his brother kept the bottle; he’d always been shooed away when their father gave Tamirat dictation. He couldn’t think how to get that bottle.

The next day, a light went off. He and Hibist used to paint their own faces with charcoal; he could grind some, mix it in water, and use it as ink.

Desta went to work. He gathered all the cold charcoal he could find in the hearths, and finely ground it with two small stone slabs. Then he mixed the powder with water in a small horn cup, which became his inkwell.

Now he needed the oval-shaped straw box with his father’s paper. Damtew had

made the beautiful little box while tending the grain fields. No one said so to his face; he was ashamed of it—because, as Hibist said, “it was women’s work.” Desta had seen his brother glare and leave the room when their father took out the box.

“Don’t you need something bigger to store your paper in?” Damtew once said to Abraham.

“Why? It’s special because you made it,” said Abraham. “My folded papers fit just fine.”

Desta wished he could show the box to their guests and announce who made it. He would have loved to see Damtew’s skin crawl as he seethed in anger.

But now, he needed to remember which granary held their father’s box. There were three in a row, dividing the living room from the larder just behind the bamboo partition.

He recalled that Abraham had put it in the middle one. When the grain was low and Abraham couldn’t reach the box, he would lift Desta into the granary to retrieve it.

When no one was around, Desta climbed onto a stool from the corner of the larder, slid off the granary lid, and groped inside with his hand. The granaries were nearly full from the recent harvest. He felt around, and then he found it.

Desta took the box to the bright entrance, untied its cords, and opened it, flipping quickly through papers until he found a thick packet of squarely folded blank sheets. He carefully peeled off two, then refolded the remaining six. Hastily, he closed the box, tied the cords, and dropped it back in the granary. He slid the lid back and put the stool away. *The perfect crime*, he thought with a smile.

He folded the bright blank pages, tucked them under his arm, and ran out. He was ecstatic. Now he could write on real paper!

He wrote family names, putting his own at the very top, then Hibist’s, Enat’s, and Saba’s, followed by Tamirat’s, Teferra’s, Asse’ged’s, and finally, Damtew’s. He wrote his parents’ names in a separate column, his father followed by his mother. He made a separate column for the in-laws.

Then he copied words from Awoke’s Fidel. He didn’t understand the writing, but he faithfully transcribed each letter from the booklet onto his writing paper, leaving spaces between the words. He remembered the characters for most of the letters, but he couldn’t combine and read them the way Awoke did. But for now, he was content with his effort.

Desta was writing furiously, deep in concentration, when Asse’ged appeared from nowhere.

“What are you doing?” he asked, glaring at his little brother.

“Nothing,” said Desta, startled. He quickly hid the page beneath him.

Asse'ged saw the book, the cup, and the pen. "Let me see . . . how . . . where did you get all this?"

Desta scrambled for an answer.

"Let me see what you hid!"

Desta shook his head.

"Either you give it peacefully, or I will take it."

Desta slowly pulled the paper out and handed it to his brother. Asse'ged looked at it, silently reading—or pretending to.

Desta's father had once said that Asse'ged had mastered the alphabet in a few days in church school and learned to read and write twice as fast as the other students.

Desta had wondered if Asse'ged could still read. This was the test.

"What have you written here?" said the big brother, dropping the hand that held the paper. His eyes bore down on Desta.

"Some are names. Others are just words I copied from this book," Desta said, pointing to the little booklet.

"Whose names have you got here?"

"Everybody in our family."

"Am I here?"

"Yes." Desta got up and pointed out Asse'ged's name.

"Way at the bottom here—how come?" he said with a little smile.

"No reason."

"Let me see the book."

Asse'ged leafed through the pages, finally returning to the alphabet at the beginning.

"You know, I once knew all the letters. Some I still remember: *Ha, Le, Ma...*"

"You skipped the second *Ha*," corrected Desta proudly.

"Oh, yeah." He recited again. As he got farther down the page, he faltered. Desta kept correcting him.

"See, I have forgotten," he said, as he handed back the book. He narrowed his eyes and looked away. "What I want to know is, how in the world did you learn to write? Did Tamirat get you started? . . . Where did you get all this stuff?"

"Awoke Yisehak taught me the alphabet. The rest I did on my own."

Asse'ged's eyes grew bigger. "Does Awoke know how to read?"

"Yes. Some Deb'tera taught him how. But he said he learned a lot of it on his own. He told me I could as well. All this stuff he loaned to me."

Asse'ged's eyes grew wider still. He thought for a long time. "I hate to tell you this," he said, looking at Desta. "It's a complete waste of your time. As a shepherd and

future farmer, you will never use what you learn. Like me, you will soon forget it all, and the time you spent learning it will be wasted.”

“I hope to become a priest.”

Asse’ged snickered.

“Like Tamirat?!” Asse’ged shook his head. “Listen, Desta. Baba and Mama could afford to send Tamirat to school because I would become a farmer, and Damtew, a shepherd. Now we have no one else but you to tend the animals. Stop fantasizing! Give all this back to Awoke, and just keep your animals out of trouble.”

Desta pressed his lips and looked away. Should he believe what his brother said?

“I need to go,” said Asse’ged. “Don’t let others see this, or you’ll be in big trouble.”

As he watched Asse’ged shamle away, Desta thought about his brother’s advice. Asse’ged was probably right. No matter how much he desired to learn, Desta had no say. He had to do whatever the adults chose for him.

He put his face down on his gabi and wept until his eyes stung and his cheeks were flushed red. When he stopped crying, he dried his eyes and vowed to keep reading and writing. He wouldn’t let anyone stop him from learning.

But I must make sure nothing like this happens again.

For the next six months, whenever he felt safe, Desta practiced his alphabet. He copied all the pages in the booklet at least fifty times. Awoke brought him more paper and blue ink and taught him the Amharic numbers, which Desta also practiced.

Right before the New Year, at the end of the thirteenth month, Awoke lent Desta a prayer book that he had read several times. Desta couldn’t yet read. When he tried, he did so slowly. But he had mastered enough of the alphabet to write well.

The new book had black and red writing. Awoke told him that the red were the words of God. Skipping the black ones, Desta read all the red, despite not knowing its meaning.

All this kept his eyes and mind from wandering about the valley, which formed a backdrop to his busy thoughts. The dramatic clouds, rainstorms, floods, and the roaring river no longer captivated him. It was the Fidel and prayer book that had a hold on Desta.

THIRTY-NINE

Spring had arrived. Flowers invaded the fields, mountainsides, and backyards. Sprouted grain—some short, others knee high—veiled farms. It was a time when Desta might have feasted his eyes on the surfeit of color, reminiscing on times when he roamed the hills and valleys with Hibist.

But he was a student now, and his passion was in his Fidel, writing, and reading. His animals drew less of his attention. Feeling sure the goats were safe and the cows were in their grazing grounds, Desta retreated to the shade of the sholla tree to practice his handwriting. Writing cleanly and neatly was as important to him as reading. He had heard his father remark on the fine penmanship of the priests who took dictation for his court cases. Desta hoped that someday his father might ask him to do the same.

From his small pouch, he spread out his supplies: the blue inkwell, his bamboo pen, a writing sheet, his Fidel, and a new book of Bible verses loaned by Awoke.

He had just finished copying a line and was about to dip his pen into the inkwell, when he noticed Damtew from the corner of his eye. He was driving cattle toward Desta: the three cows and bull, which were the biggest crop raiders. Desta froze, his hand suspended above the inkwell, eyes fixed on Damtew and the animals. For a moment, he lost his senses, then knew exactly what had happened. The animals had eaten someone's crops. The shouting he'd heard earlier hadn't been the shepherds across the creek. It must have been the farmer whose fields were plundered by the animals Damtew now brought back.

Desta panicked. Eyes on Damtew, he fumbled for his things. His brother walked toward him like a wild beast after prey.

Desta managed to stow his things in the pouch and scramble to his feet before Damtew got to him.

"Desta, I found these animals across the river. I wanted to be sure you didn't lose sight of them," said the big brother benignly.

Desta knew better. Despite Damtew's friendly tone, he sensed danger as a dik-dik would a stalking leopard. He slipped the pouch over his arm, spun around, and ran.

He sprinted up the field toward home, then cut to the right into the bushes. When he looked back, he saw Damtew charging towards him.

He slipped beneath the blackberry bush and saw what looked like an animal path. The thorny bush tore at his skin as he dove through the narrow opening, ripping bloody gashes up and down his arms and legs. Ignoring the pain, he fought his way through the space, and struggled out of the path.

Realizing the portal was too small and thorny for his frame, Damtew ran around the bushes to the spot where Desta would likely emerge.

But Desta was already flying down the path. He skirted their property and headed, unthinking, toward Saba's new home.

He glanced back and saw that Damtew was following. He also heard Asse'ged's voice. High on the hill that he was weeding, Asse'ged shouted Desta's path to Damtew. When Desta looked back again, Damtew was rapidly gaining on him.

Desta crossed the creek that bordered Saba's home and was halfway to her house when Damtew caught up. At the same time, Saba had come outside and was shouting at Damtew to stop. She tried to run toward them but tripped and fell. She rose and tried to run again, but her big belly slowed her. She moved like a mountain, calling out to saints Mary and Michael for help. Desta wished for Saint George, the swift, spear-wielding horseman, to fly on his white horse and stab Damtew in the gullet. Across the creek on higher ground, Asse'ged urged Damtew on.

Desta was still moving—sweaty, out of breath, and terrified—when Damtew kicked him with all his force, and he fell flat on his face. He rolled down the slope, hitting rocks, logs, and stumps. When he came to a stop, he scrambled to his feet and tried to run, but he was too weak to get far. Damtew caught up and kicked him again.

Desta could still hear Asse'ged's encouragement beneath Damtew's kicking, shouting, and swearing. While he cowered, gasping in pain, his brother snapped a long slender branch from a nearby Abo bush, stripped its leaves, and began to whip him. Desta covered his face and eyes in resignation. Damtew was going to kill him as he had threatened.

As Damtew lashed him, he lost bodily sensation. His mind was alert, but he no longer felt the searing pain tearing at his skin. This was what it *felt* like to die. He would never go to the mountaintop.

He could still hear Saba's pleading. The horse-riding saint never came, but Damtew finally stopped whipping him. He heard rustling, and slowly lifted his head. He saw Damtew open Desta's pouch and take out his papers. He slipped the strap of the pouch onto one hand and held the pages open with both hands, staring at Desta's writing. Desta knew Damtew had never seen the alphabet, let alone learned to read, but his

brother kept looking at the page, as if admiring it. Completely absorbed, he became quiet and calm.

The longer his brother stared, the more curious and worried Desta became. Maybe Baba had sent Damtew to church school once, and he did know how to read. Then, when he saw his name at the very bottom of the page, he would renew his attack on Desta.

He raised his head slightly to see if Damtew held the page right-side up. He saw the blotch of ink at the bottom of the page; it was at the top when Desta spilled it. Damtew held the page the wrong way. He couldn't read. Desta was relieved but confused. Why was Damtew so engrossed in his writing if he didn't know what it said?

Desta watched his brother, trying to gauge his emotions. He was still, jaw tensed. Desta watched and waited, barely breathing.

Then it happened. Like a crack of thunder on a sunny day, Damtew exploded. Shouting and swearing, he furiously tore at the pages, shredding them to bits, which he threw at Desta's prostrate body. Then he pulled out Awoke's book of verses and Fidel and shredded them, too, ripping out pages and showering Desta with their confetti. A scrap with God's word fell right before Desta's eye. He wished he understood it, but it was written in Ge'ez, the language only priests understand.

Damtew used the ink bottle for his grand finale. He held it high over Desta and proceeded with the show. "This is what you deserve, our priest-to-be. I heard all about it. This is what it costs when you fritter your time instead of shepherding like you're supposed to." He slowly poured the blue liquid over Desta. Then he hurled the empty bottle away like a stone and crushed the writing reed under his feet.

Desta tuned out the rest of Damtew's tirade. He didn't care. He just wanted to die. He didn't even care about the top of the mountain.

With a final kick to Desta's ribs, Damtew left. All was quiet. Unable to move, Desta remained curled in the dirt, waiting for death.

Dazed and disoriented, he waited, but death didn't come. Slowly, he felt the effects of the beatings. His legs and arms stung as if steaming water had been poured over them. His temples pounded. His heart raced. He heard footsteps and felt a large presence over him. Was death, at last, arriving on foot?

"Thank God, you are alive!" said Saba. She squatted and put a hand on his shoulder. "Desta, are you okay? Talk to me."

Desta didn't answer. He couldn't answer. He felt as if his vocal cords had collapsed.

"I'll send Yihoon to help. I am too weak to do anything. I am sorry. If it were other times, I would have run like a gazelle to protect you, but there are two of us, and I couldn't endanger the baby. I'll be back."

Desta's pulse slowed. He waited, afraid to move, for Saba's return. He tried not to think about what had happened to him, what Damtew had done to his books and papers, about what might come next.

Finally, Saba returned with Yihoon. They sat on their heels next to him. They talked in hushed voices as if afraid to wake him.

"Desta, this is Yihoon. Are you okay? Can you speak?" he asked, shaking Desta lightly.

"I feel pain all over. Can you please take me home?"

"We came to bring you to our home."

"No, I prefer to go home. Can you help me walk?"

"I will carry you if I have to."

"Check for broken bones before you pick him up," Saba said.

"Let's see, can you move this?" Yihoon asked, touching Desta's top leg.

"Clean the ink off first," Saba said.

The brother-in-law snipped leaves from the Abo bush behind them and wiped off the rivulet of ink from Desta's thighs and upper body.

Desta slowly stretched his leg and lifted it with Yihoon's help. "And the other?"

Desta rolled on his back and did the same.

Yihoon was satisfied. "How about your arms?"

They were okay too, though bloody and blistered along the lash marks.

"Your back okay?"

With Saba's help, Desta slowly sat up. He nodded.

Yihoon turned to Saba. "Go home. We don't want any more drama with you here. Lie down. I will return soon."

"I would have loved for you to stay here, but in my condition, I would not be much help. I will come see you tomorrow, God willing," Saba said, kissing Desta on the forehead.

Yihoon, half carrying him, half walking with him, brought Desta home.

When Ayénat saw them, she dropped what she had in her hand and ran to the door. "What in the world happened?"

"Damtew had a field day with this small body," said Yihoon. He helped Desta cross the doorstep and sat him by the fire.

"Oh my, oh my, oh my," Ayénat said as she ran her fingers over Desta's body.

"It's a shame, really a shame: a grown boy like him abusing a fragile body like this," Yihoon said.

“He is such a Saytan. I don’t know why he won’t stop harassing him,” Ayénat said, wiping tears and sniffles with the back of her hand.

“If you don’t put a stop to this, he will kill the boy one day,” Yihoon warned.

“It’s not as if we have not told him. Many, many times. Damtew is unrelenting.”

“I have to go,” Yihoon said abruptly. “As you know, Saba is near term. You can imagine we have been on pins and needles.”

“I understand. Go. That she has carried the baby this far is encouraging,” Ayénat said.

“That is how we feel, too. Desta had a lot to do with it, and we are grateful,” he said.

Desta hated having his name linked with Saba’s pregnancy, but didn’t concern himself with it.

“Let us know as soon as anything happens,” Ayénat said. “Her father knows good medicine for fast delivery, you know.”

Yihoon nodded. “He has helped hundreds of women deliver babies. . . . I’ll send one of the girls the moment there is any change.” He turned to Desta and patted his head. “You are a strong boy. I am proud of you. You handled it like a man.”

DESTA HOPED his parents would punish Damtew, making him bleed and cry and suffer the way he had done to him.

He stayed up as long as he could, waiting, but Damtew didn’t come home. When he woke the next morning, his brother still was not there.

Although Desta never counted on his father to do anything, he wanted him to see what Damtew had done to him. He limped to the bedroom to see if his father had slept in as he sometimes did on Saturdays or after a trip, but he wasn’t there. He asked his mother where his Baba was. She said she had expected him to be home the day before, but he hadn’t come. She thought he would come later that day because he had an important appointment at church the next morning.

Desta didn’t attend to the cows. He didn’t know who took care of them and he didn’t care. All day he waited for his father. He waited for Damtew, too, and the whipping his father would surely give him.

Damtew never came.

Abraham did come, however, late in the evening. The moment he arrived, Desta hobbled to him and kissed his knee.

“Bless you,” said Abraham in a low voice, lingering a little until Desta let go. He appeared haggard and heavy-eyed. He had his usual post-trip, not-disposed-to-talk look.

Desta sat by the fire, waiting for the right moment to show his wounds, but the fire was low and the room too dark to see well what his brother had done to him.

Noticing Desta's restlessness, Ayénat said softly, "Better wait until tomorrow morning." Desta reluctantly agreed, but only because Damtew was not there to be punished.

WHEN DESTA ROSE THE FOLLOWING MORNING, he found his father dressed and ready for church. He was leaving when he saw Yihoon at the door, asking Melkam for his father-in-law.

Abraham hurried to greet Yihoon. "Anything wrong?" he asked urgently.

"Saba's in labor. I came to see if you could bring your medicine," said Yihoon with apprehension.

"Era—you're not kidding?"

"No, she just started. Knowing her, she will probably go on for a while. We thought the sooner you bring the medicine, the better."

Abraham looked disheveled. "You caught me just in time, I was just about to . . . tell me, is it the time?"

"Our counts tell us it shouldn't have come for another week or so," said Yihoon. "Something happened yesterday that may have accelerated things." He looked away, worried.

Desta was all ears. *Better if the news comes from somebody else*, he thought.

"What happened?"

"Desta was severely attacked by Damtew. Saba heard his cries and saw it. She ran to help, but she slipped on a rock and fell. Even so, she still managed to reach him and got me to bring him home."

"That's right," whimpered Desta, pulling down his gabi to show the wounds on his shoulders and arms. "He'd have killed me if it were not for Saba. I am sure of it. You can see for yourself."

"What did you do to deserve this?" said Abraham, looking down at Desta with awe.

"Era, era, era, who can believe this . . . who can believe this?" he kept saying, as he ran his fingers over Desta's hands, arms, and legs.

"No one deserves this, no matter the crime," said Yihoon.

"I am sad to see this. Don't worry, Desta, he will have a piece of my mind and hand, but I have to go now," said Abraham, as he patted his son on the head.

Desta wished his father would stay home, all day if necessary, and beat Damtew when he came back.

"Yihoon, I didn't finish what I was going to tell you. I was just leaving for church to seek the Lord's help resolving a property dispute. I was planning to hold court with the parties after the services, but those plans have now changed. I'll dispatch Asse'ged

to inform them. Let me swap my clothes, and I'll be right back," said Abraham as he disappeared in the backroom.

"Desta, I don't know if you heard, but Saba is in labor," said Yihoon, after his father-in-law was gone. "Can you contact that man again and pray for his help? We are all worried, especially since we think it's come early."

"I've not seen him for a long, long time—since the priest's treatment—and I don't even know who he is—an angel or a spirit or something else," said Desta. "I can pray to God, yes, but him—I don't even know what to call him."

"Okay, just pray to God," said Yihoon, seeing his father-in-law return in his regular clothes.

"Let's walk by Asse'ged's house," said Abraham.

After the two men left, Desta went to bed. He curled up, closed his eyes, and thought of his beating and Saba's news. His mind flooded with questions about the coincidences.

Why did Saba go into labor early? Why did he cause it? Why did he run toward her house when Damtew came for him? Was there someone, a Saytan, that made him go that way? He tried to piece together the events after Damtew began to chase him. His first impulse had been to duck in the woods, but Damtew was faster than he. He was on Desta's trail and saw exactly where he was going. When Desta slipped into the blackberry bushes, Damtew could have caught him if he had dared follow, but chose a safer route instead, allowing Desta to buy time and cover more ground. When he finally emerged near the potato field behind his house, it was easier to run around the fence by the short grass, than to wade through the potato patch. From there, it was an uphill run home, so he had simply kept running along the foothills to get as far away as he could. He had chosen his path instinctively, not thinking of Saba or her house. She just happened to be there at the right time and place.

Was it a coincidence that Saba fell as she ran to rescue him? Or was it part of a greater design? Would Saba miscarry again—despite having moved because of him in hopes of a healthy baby—and would he be blamed for it? Was that man really a Saytan, as his mother suspected?

Or was Desta in a fantasyland as everybody had said when he first saw the man by the river? Was that man a fantasy? He shivered at his thoughts.

He could hear what Damtew and Asse'ged would say if Saba miscarried. "See, we told you so. He made up that man! We have lost our land, all because of his lies."

Desta had not seen the man or dreamt of him for over a year, ever since the night in the tree after Damtew's kid was killed. Desta was unsure it was even him. He heard a familiar voice, but it was thin, and masked by the rustling leaves; he couldn't be sure.

If it was him, why would he support someone as mean and dangerous as Damtew? Was he more aligned with Damtew than with Desta? If so, maybe he really was a Saytan.

The more Desta analyzed things, the more convinced he became that there was something terribly twisted that he couldn't explain.

But he found comfort in another thought. If Saba lost her baby, he could blame Damtew. *Saba would not have fallen if she hadn't tried to rescue me, he would argue. And if she hadn't fallen, she would have had a normal baby.* That was it! He would waver on this point.

With that, he grew calm and waited. His entire body ached, and his open wounds stung terribly, but he was even more battered emotionally. He sought sleep, but none came.

Melkam was the only person home. She brought him food and water, but these amenities didn't comfort him. In the early afternoon, Ayénat returned. Desta searched her expression for a clue to Saba's status. He covered his face and watched his mother through small apertures in his fingers.

He removed his hand from his face. "Everything all right with Saba?" he asked softly. "Not really."

His stomach tightened. "What is happening?"

"She has been in labor all day, but the baby hasn't come. Some of us had to leave because we couldn't do anything more for her."

Desta relaxed a little. No miscarriage yet.

LATER IN THE EVENING, Abraham came home, ragged and exhausted. "I tried every treatment I knew, but nothing worked. Saba has been pushing all day, yet there is no sign of the baby."

"She is in the Lord's hands. We must be patient," said Ayénat.

"I need to nap and then go back," said Abraham as he clambered to bed. "If I'm not up by midnight, please wake me."

Desta's spirits flagged again, more so now that his able, medicine-man father couldn't help his own daughter.

"The moment I placed the root by the manure portal of the house, the baby flew out," he had often said.

Desta wondered if Saba's baby had no wings.

After Abraham went to bed, Melkam brought Desta his dinner of injera and shiro wat. He was hungry, but his mouth was sore, and his jaw felt dislocated. When he fell after Damtew kicked him, he had bitten his cheek, and it pained him every time he moved his mouth.

He carefully ate a few bites and drank his cup of water. Then he pushed the basket away and lay back on his pillow. Next door, Abraham snored. Desta wished Melkam would shake his father to make him stop, so he could sleep himself. He was exhausted. Somehow, his ears went deaf, and he fell asleep.

At midnight, he was awakened by Abraham as he prepared to go back to Saba's house. "Lock the door," he heard him say to Melkam as he left.

Drowsy and half conscious, Desta rested, begging sleep to return. He drifted off but was awakened again about an hour later. This time, it was Ayénat who had come home. Asse'ged was with her but didn't come in; Desta heard him say good night at the door.

IN THE MORNING, DESTA was awakened by commotion. Ayénat prepared to go to Saba's house with food and drink and some clothes that Desta couldn't identify as he settled back to sleep.

He woke several hours later when Melkam came with his breakfast. He forced himself to eat despite the severe pain in his mouth. His jaw had worsened overnight. With a little food in his stomach, Desta slept well until mid-afternoon. When he woke, a face he had not seen for months peered down at him. It was Astair, his niece.

"My father wants to know if you could come pray to that man who sent us packing to this new place," said Astair, her voice somber, her forehead lined with worry.

Desta didn't like what he heard. He was sure the words were hers; Yihoon would not load such a request with a veiled incrimination.

"I am sorry, I cannot come. Tell him that it has been very difficult for me to go to the bathroom, let alone travel. But I will pray where I am," said Desta, studying his niece.

"Is that the best you can do for us, after . . . after making us believe in that man you concocted and making us move?" scowled Astair.

Too tired to argue, Desta said nothing. Astair's eyes bore down on him.

"Sit down. I want to show you something," said Desta, finally. Astair crouched.

Grimacing, Desta sat up, leaned on one elbow, and peeled his gabi from his legs and lower thighs.

Astair cringed. She covered her mouth and stared, eyes fluttering as though to keep from crying.

"I am sorry, I . . . I . . ." Astair turned away. When she turned back, her face was streaked with tears. "I didn't mean to accuse you . . . but another miscarriage would be too much to take. We thought it would work out this time because, well, in part we

believed you. Sort of. And as Grandpa said, we had nothing to lose by moving. But we are afraid it might not happen this time too . . .” She broke down again, sobbing out loud.

“I understand,” said Desta. “I am not upset. I am sorry I can’t come pray with all of you.”

“You know,” said Astair after a long pause, “you know they had wanted a boy after us girls. That was why they kept trying all these years, even when nothing worked. I am frightened for my parents. Their spirits will be broken forever. I am afraid Mother might kill herself.” She struggled to continue through a new surge of tears. “And we won’t be safe from their sadness—my sister and I. Our hearts will ache. Our spirits will sink every time we think of what our mother has gone through.”

Desta wished he could comfort his niece, listening and letting her purge her dammed-up heart. That was how Hibist had always let him deal with his sorrow. He thought it would help Astair, too.

After a while, she wiped away her tears and said softly, “I’m sorry I said those things. I’m not mad at you.”

“I know,” said Desta. “I am very sorry for your mother, but as far as this baby is concerned, you don’t know yet.”

“But she has been in labor now for a day and half. Everybody around her says, ‘push, push . . . keep pushing,’ but nothing happens.”

Pulling his leg slowly, Desta sat up and leaned against the hard leather pillow.

Astair helped him with his legs. “What I also want to say, regarding what happened to you . . . My parents feel that Mother’s labor was caused by her fall and her distress seeing you. She was very upset afterwards. She cried and cried till her eyes were red.

“She said she was crying for what she saw, and also for dragging you into her problems. We know what has been going on. Damtew, and I think Asse’ged, too, resent you because we took the property promised to them. We heard from Asse’ged’s wife what Damtew has been saying and doing to you.”

Desta nodded, scooted down to get comfortable, and waited for her to continue.

“One of the reasons we have stayed away from this side of the creek was to not worsen this problem by reminding you of it,” said Astair. “We thought the less Damtew and Asse’ged saw of us, the sooner they would forget their loss. We were heartbroken when Damtew’s goat was lost, and you ran away. Oh my God, Mother was so worried for you. We also heard what happened when Damtew took you to swim. Asse’ged’s wife said Damtew bragged about how he terrified you.”

“I am sorry not to see you for a long time,” said Desta. “I thought it was my doing, missing your visits while tending our herds.

“No, it was better to stay away.”

“My greatest fear, no matter what happens to me, is to die without touching the sky. I worry that Damtew will kill me before I realize my dream.” Desta lay on his back and stared at the ceiling.

“We know how important that is for you. My mother says she wishes she could help, but because of the bad way things are in the family, she can’t.”

“So long as I am safe from Damtew, I will eventually get there. I am sure of it.”

“I think so, too,” nodded Astair.

“Tell me,” said Desta, turning his head. “Who else is at your house?”

“My grandma, Azal, Asse’ged and his wife, your parents, and Damtew.”

“Damtew?!”

“Yes, believe it or not . . . Mama and Baba were surprised too. He wouldn’t miss mother’s miscarriage, I guess. He came with Asse’ged. He was sitting at the far end of the house, wrapped to his nose in his gabi. If we could have kicked him out, we would have.”

Desta thought for a moment. “You know, he has not come home since he beat me. He must have stayed with Asse’ged these last two nights.”

Astair rose to go. “I better get back.”

“I will pray for your mother. Whether I speak to God or that man, I will do my best. Tell your parents what I showed you. Tell your father so everyone can hear: The reason I can’t be there is because of what Damtew did to me. He is the one to blame for your mother’s premature labor.”

“I am not sure I can say all that with Damtew listening, but I will tell them what I saw, and that you will be praying. I need to run now. They are waiting for my return with you.”

Astair hugged and kissed Desta, then hurried off.

FORTY

Desta woke at midnight to the touch of his father's hand. He heard Ayénat talking to Melkam excitedly. She thanked God, Saint Mary, and other saints and angels, and told Melkam what happened with Saba. Desta slowly adjusted to the light by the fireplace and shook off sleep.

“You will be happy to know that Saba finally delivered—a baby boy! She has named him Desta.”

At first Desta thought he was hallucinating. “What? She gave birth to a live baby?” He turned to his father.

“A beautiful baby,” said Abraham, beaming. “A little small, but considering he is two weeks early, he is healthy and lively as they come.”

“I am so happy for Saba and . . .,” said Desta.

Abraham smiled. “I know. We are all happy this run of misfortune has ended. You helped end it, Desta. You should be happy, too. Your credibility was questioned for so long.”

“I hope I will be left in peace now.”

“I know you have been teased and bullied, and I was not always there to protect you. I will make sure the harassment stops—you should be held in high esteem for communing with the underworld to help solve this problem. And to think I resisted it because I didn't believe in such things. I am humbled.

“Now I don't doubt that spirits can help us if reached by the right person. I grasp the true meaning of your name today. I called you Desta—happiness—because your birth was the gladdest of times. Today, I feel greater joy that you helped solve the problem that plagued us for so long. I think it no coincidence, as others are apt to say, that Saba had a normal baby after they moved. And you are the reason we are all happy tonight.”

Desta was overwhelmed by his father's praise. He rolled onto his side. He saw Abraham staring at the fire, thoughts swimming.

His father turned and said, “Until now, our attention has been with your sister. But I have not forgotten what Damtew did. I'd whip him if that would please you, but I can punish him in worse ways. Justice will be served, I assure you!”

“My wish is that Dantew leave me alone. I can’t wait till he moves out, like Asse’ged.”

“You have my word,” said Abraham. He rested a hand on Desta’s shoulder and pressed his lips against the boy’s forehead. “I am proud of you, son. Good night.”

Desta couldn’t believe his father’s show of affection. *I hope from here on, he gives me a meatier part of the chicken*, he thought with a smile.

He was very happy for Saba, Yihoon, Astair, and Zena. And for himself. He hoped the dark cloud that had hung over him for so long would now lift. He hoped now the rest of the family would let him be—and even be nice to him.

Desta now saw new opportunities. He would read and write without worry. More importantly, maybe someone would take him to the top of the mountain. And if not, he would find someone to tend the animals and go by himself.

FORTY-ONE

The December sun rose over the eastern mountains like a crowned spirit. A thin, gauzy cloud veiled its path, making it glow like a lantern through mountain shadows to become one indistinguishable blur. Desta studied the camouflaged sun with great interest.

It was early Saturday. Abraham found Damtew standing at the entrance to the house. Desta ate breakfast by the fireplace, watching.

“I need you to tend the cattle today, as I need Desta at the nursery,” said Abraham.

Damtew looked at his father as if he had lost his mind. “Since when I am demoted to shepherd?”

“This is no demotion. Since you have no farming to do and we have no one else to do it, the responsibility is yours.”

Damtew mumbled a few words, but Desta couldn’t make them out. His brother’s face spoke volumes about his displeasure.

Desta too was stunned by his father’s decision. He had never spent time with his father. The prospect of a day with him both excited and puzzled him. *What would he do at the nursery? What would they talk about? Would they spend the whole day together?* The thought was a little frightening. His father had always been an aloof presence in the house, someone who went away on business or court matters for days at a time, came home briefly, and left again.

Desta noticed that his father was smiling a lot since his grandson was born. He flashed his chipped tooth at everyone, but particularly at Desta.

After breakfast, Abraham put on his old khaki shorts and gabi, and they left for the nursery on irrigated land by the banks of the Davola.

Known as the onion and garlic field, it was the only irrigated land in the valley. Abraham had devised a method to divert the river for two cash crops that grew year round. Large harvests went to market, thanks to the hard work of Abraham and his helpers.

Abraham and Desta walked to the farm on the footpath for the Avinevra church. Desta noticed new details about his father: the high arches in his feet; his long, shapely legs; his straight back; his broad shoulders; and his towering height. And Desta also noticed his distinctive walk: steps measured and deliberate, gait smooth and graceful.

There was a language to his walk that made Desta happy. He hoped to be like him when he grew older.

To his surprise, Desta felt very comfortable with his father. His fears rapidly faded.

“Desta,” said his father, without looking back.

“Yes,” said Desta, trotting closer, glad to hear his father’s great voice.

“I want you to know I am very proud of what you did for your sister.”

“I didn’t do anything for her.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. You’re the reason Saba had her son—my grandson. I am sure of it. We tried everything, and nothing else worked.”

“I am happy it worked out. I was not sure of it myself. Because everyone said I had imagined that man by the river, I started to believe it.”

“I know. We all had our doubts. What happened to you was not a common occurrence.”

They walked along the trail to the caravan route that ran along the flatland by the river. As they walked the main road, they passed market goers, their donkeys loaded with sacks of grain, stacks of animal skins, and fired pottery. Many bowed to Abraham, kissed him on the cheeks, and chatted before continuing on. One woman kissed his knee and thanked him profusely for solving a property dispute. Some patted Desta’s shoulder or head and imparted endearing words as his father looked on.

Desta realized how important his father was to these people, making him even more proud of his father.

They reached the onion and garlic field after they crossed the Davola and walked north a few hundred yards. The field was huge—how big, Desta didn’t know—divided in half, for garlic and for red onions. A third, much smaller patch to the west was covered with straw. In one part of this patch, young plants of varying heights bunched together.

Desta trailed behind his father as he inspected the larger field. The onion stalks were partially dried and fallen. The garlic plants were already dry, their bone-white skins gleaming in the morning sun. Several canals ran the full length of the field. Along these canals at discrete points were large holes, which Abraham said were watering depots. It was from these that workers watered the crops with wooden bowls. They paced the perimeter of the field. “Sometimes passers-by help themselves to a few heads of onion and garlic,” said Abraham. “So far so good this year.”

After the inspection, they stopped at the straw-covered beds in the small field. There were seven in all, each three feet by seven. Abraham bent over one of them. He lifted the straw and peered at the green sprouts.

“These are new beds of bahar zaf—eucalyptus,” he said, fingering the plants. The soil was damp and there were weeds along their borders.

“What kind of tree is bahar zaf?” asked Desta.

“It’s a type that grows fast and tall and has a pleasant aroma. Those there I planted a few months ago. They are already tall enough to be transplanted, but I can’t do that until the wet season. These here are a different variety, and they should be ready to move to our property by June, along with the rest. They will be the only trees still standing when I am gone. ‘Those are Abraham Beshaw’s bahar zaf,’ people will say when they see them from far away.”

Desta walked to the leafy, fragrant, brownish-green plants. They were unlike any other he had encountered. “Can I come with you when you plant them?”

“Yes, just remind me. It will have to be on a weekend, so Damtew can tend the animals.”

It pleased Desta to imagine Damtew a shepherd again.

“We need to open the canal and bring water for them,” said Abraham as he rose. Then he added, “Let’s first close off the section for the rest of the field.” He lifted a wooden board alongside the water course and inserted it in two vertical grooves in the canal, blocking the waterway. Then he walked toward the river with Desta in tow.

He lifted a large, rectangular board wedged near the gate of the canal. Desta watched the released water rush through.

“I will wait here,” said Abraham. “You go watch the water depots fill and let me know when they are done.”

Desta loped along the canal gleefully, chasing the headwater as it surged, carrying straws, leaves, and loose dirt with it. When the water reached the nursery, it flowed along its channels and flooded the watering holes.

Desta shouted to his father once the holes were full. Abraham closed the gate and walked briskly toward Desta. He straddled the water hole, and scooped and threw water over the sleeping, sprouted bahar zaf with an old wooden bowl that he held with both hands.

Desta asked why there were seven beds, not six or eight. He knew his father was superstitious about the number seven—just as his mother was about the number three—but he wanted to hear it firsthand.

Abraham stopped to answer. Desta couldn’t tell if water or sweat hung from his father’s forehead.

“Seven is a lucky number—my lucky number,” said Abraham, after catching his breath. “It also has religious significance. It’s a number revered in our family, passed down for generations. Who started it and when, I can’t tell you. We did everything in sevens. Seven also has personal meaning to me—bad and good. I was seven when my father disappeared. You’re my seventh child.

“I am almost certain that the reason that man was revealed to you and not Astair was because you’re the seventh child,” said Abraham, still holding the wooden bowl.

“Are all seven beds filled with bahar zaf?” asked Desta.

“Yes and no. The germinating seeds are in all the beds. But they’re thinly sown to allow for seven beds—and not all the seeds may germinate.”

Abraham finished watering and stowed the bowl in a grove of bushes near the nursery. He invited Desta to sit with him under the oak tree near the river.

They sat on a rock facing the river. The shade and cool breeze from the river soothed them. The sound of the river added tranquility. The late morning sun, filtered by the branches, threw speckled yellow light under the tree, reminding Desta of butterflies he once chased with Hibist in spring meadows. He was transported, eyes fixed on the butterflies, ears tuned to the sound of the river.

Abraham, too, reflected. He mulled his thoughts, saving some, discarding others. “Desta,” he said, glancing toward his son. “One reason I invited you here was to share my thoughts about your vision of that man. Now that his prophecy has come true, I need to tell you something that happened to me.”

Abraham stopped when he saw a massive membrane of frog eggs floating in the water. Desta followed his eyes and saw two fat, white-bellied frogs leap and dive in the shallows. Immediately, they began their guttural rattle, awakening others, and a chorus soon formed.

“They must have sensed an audience for their vocal skills,” said Abraham, grinning at Desta.

“I didn’t know so many frogs lived in a river,” said Desta, taken with the sound.

“Only in the dry season. This is where their eggs hatch,” said Abraham. “To go back to what I started to say, I want to share some things with you while they are fresh in my mind.

“The man who visited you by the river reminds me of an experience I had years ago right after I got married. I have never shared this with anyone besides my mother; it was so odd, I thought nobody would believe me.”

Desta looked at his father.

“I loaded two horses with many young tsede—juniper—trees and took them to the church of Ba’tha Mariam in Kuakura, my birthplace. I wanted to plant them there in memory of my father and got permission from the head priest. I was alone, feverishly planting. Three times, I felt a hand touch my right shoulder and a voice whispered, ‘Good job, good job, I am proud of you.’

“When I turned around, I saw a phantom of an old man with a long white beard.

The moment I focused on him, he vanished. At first, I was so spooked that I wanted to leave immediately. But as I thought about it, I realized the voice was kind and only praised me. It was a long journey from home, the trees were precious, and I had only one day to plant them. I worked from dawn to sunset without a break.

“By the time I finished and walked out of the woods, I had this great sensation of joy—from accomplishing my mission for my father. I was also happy that someone here on earth saw the value of my efforts and said so.”

“Who do you think he was?”

“Mother said it could be a *Goossa*—an old monk in spirit form who roams the forest. But she thought he also might be a family guardian angel. For all I know, it could have been either.” He paused and smiled at his son.

“Coming to your own experience, Desta, I think the man you saw could be our guardian angel, not an alien spirit. You were the channel he chose to solve our problem. You should feel blessed that he chose you.”

Desta smiled. He felt blessed indeed. The fact that his father had a similar experience made him feel that much more special. He felt giddy.

“Baba, you always do things in memory of your father. Why have you not gone looking for him? If he is still alive, it would be great to meet him.”

“I have thought about that lately; it would be nice for him to meet all his progeny, particularly an ‘oddball’ like you,” said Abraham, winking at Desta.

“I would love to come with you if you go to look for him.”

“You are not ready for such a long and tiring journey. But if I find him, I’ll bring him home, even if I have to sell my shirt for transportation. In the meantime, we should pray to God and our guardian angels to help us find him,” said Abraham, looking thoughtful.

“If I ever see that man again, I’ll definitely ask for his help.”

“Good . . . We need to go home now. The sun is stronger. We cannot do more watering,” said Abraham as he rose.

Abraham’s sudden shift in focus had caught Desta off guard. He had more questions to ask about his grandfather, but his father usually clammed up on this subject. Desta wouldn’t press him further.

Abraham went to the nursery after telling Desta to wait in the shade. He looked to see that everything by the onion and garlic field was in order—the canal tightly closed, the wooden bowl stowed, and the nurseries covered. He brushed the mud from his feet on the grass by the river and joined Desta on the caravan road.

As they walked, Abraham again told Desta how proud of him he was and how glad

he was that they had spent time together. Being chosen, he told his son, is an honor and privilege that comes with responsibility and accountability. He should feel humble about these advantages, and not speak of them to strangers or even family, lest they become jealous. If he were teased for it, he should simply walk away.

Desta noted his father's advice, but his concern for him was overwhelming. His throat was lumpy, and his eyes gathered tears of happiness and anger. He was happy to have an ally in his father, but angry that he had not defended and protected him all along. As his father continued, the dam broke, and Desta openly wept.

Abraham was startled. "I am sorry, son. I didn't mean to make you cry," he said, and held him close. "I hope these are tears of joy. I feel blessed to have the child of my dreams. You are destined to do great things."

That day, Desta realized how capricious the adult world was, and how precious love was in his family. It was not freely given; it had to be earned. He couldn't imagine what might have happened if Saba had miscarried again.

FORTY-TWO

By January 1958, it had been nearly nineteen months since Tamirat had left home to take communion with his wife on her home turf. Updates Desta got from Amsale's cousin, Tenaw, the husband of Desta's sister, Enat, suggested things had gotten worse. Amsale still resisted her husband's wishes, and, after mounting pressure from her relatives, she had gathered her things and run away.

Tenaw told them that Tamirat had taken refuge with his cousin, Kiwin, and her husband, Brihan. He prayed day and night for God to return the girl and save his marriage. *If you really want me to serve You to the end of my days, please save my marriage*, Tamirat had pleaded, which Tenaw related to Ayénat. Desta's mother kept the news secret, afraid to upset Abraham, who had long wanted a priest for a son.

Tenaw reported that Tamirat had told him that he could not bury his desires and be celibate forever; he wanted progeny to carry on his line. His brother-in-law had resorted to desperate measures.

He fasted and took to standing on one leg while praying every morning from first light to dawn. He read the Bible twice a day. He went to church every Sunday and prayed in the woods—away from the distraction of young women—where he hoped purer thoughts would bring him closer to God.

When nothing changed, Tamirat felt that no other course remained but to divorce the girl, remarry, and lead a lay life.

SO TAMIRAT RETURNED home with his young wife, Bogay, whom, unlike Amsale, he had made sure to meet before marrying.

Bogay captivated him: her sunny personality, voluptuous figure, fair skin, and brilliant eyes like polished silver seemed like God's consolation for all of Tamirat's suffering. He could easily imagine the beautiful children they would have.

He was anxious to introduce her to his parents. Uncertain how his father would react to abandoning the priesthood, he waited for the extended family to gather for their annual church holiday, hoping the occasion would soften the impact on his father.

Tamirat and his new wife arrived late in the afternoon to a full house. Desta, playing outside, came running to greet them.

Tamirat and Bogay next met Ayénat, who was outside directing helpers to set up for dinner. She immediately broke off, delighted to see Tamirat and meet his new bride, and they all kissed. She asked why he had not come for so long, and then other relatives, led by Enat and Genet, came running.

Ayénat thought her son looked much better than when he had left home. His fair skin glowed, and he appeared at ease. The more she studied his wife, the better she liked her. Not only was Bogay pretty, but she was also polite, with a reticent disposition. Ayénat wondered why Providence had not led them to her when they searched for Tamirat's first wife. She seemed a perfect priest's wife for a son who now could never be a priest. She could only pray that her husband, who knew nothing of his son's remarriage, would feel similarly disposed.

TAMIRAT CAUGHT sight of his father as Abraham appeared with a group of men from the back of the house. He left the people around him to greet his father.

Abraham's eyes lit as if Tamirat were a vision, then dimmed as he thought of his son's divorce. "Era, where did they find you?" he asked in a tone tinged with irony. He clasped his son's chin and kissed him on the cheeks. The men with Abraham also kissed Tamirat and asked about his well-being, his married life, and school.

Abraham listened coolly as Tamirat responded with a vague answer about married life. The news of his son's divorce was still fresh. He was eager to learn what Tamirat had decided about his future as a priest, but such a question would have to wait until the right moment. For now, general inquiries would have to suffice. As they strolled back to the house, the two chatted, and Tamirat conveyed Kiwin's good wishes and regrets for the festival.

As they approached home, Tamirat glanced around nervously, looking for his new wife. It appeared that his mother and sisters had vanished with her to defer introductions with his father.

At dinner, Bogay sat with Enat and Genet in the back room while Tamirat ate with his two uncles and their wives in the living room. After dinner, Ayénat arranged for Tamirat and his wife to sleep at Asse'ged's house.

It was mid-morning. The sun shone over the eastern mountains. A few puffy clouds hung above the pass south of Lehwani. The guests in their white gabis sat on the grass like a flock of pelicans, enjoying the day. Tamirat stood by the fence, impatiently waiting for his father to break free from conversation.

Noticing Tamirat's restlessness, Abraham strode toward his son. He was eager to talk about all that had happened since he left home so long ago.

Abraham smiled a little, barely showing his chipped tooth. Tamirat returned the smile nervously.

"I am keen to hear your account of what happened with Amsale," said the father.

"Not what you want to hear, I am afraid," said Tamirat, looking away, his face knotted.

"I have heard fragments, so it's not entirely news. Let's go to the backwoods to talk without distraction."

They sat in a clearing with a good view of the Davola and the mountains beyond.

"What happened at her parents'?" asked Abraham, eyeing his son anxiously.

"She continued her excuses about communion. When her father finally threatened to punish her, she disappeared in the dead of night. Nobody knows where she went." Tamirat shook his head in frustration.

"She prevaricated for several weeks. I prayed daily for God's intervention, but to no avail. After she vanished, I waited for two weeks, but she never returned.

"Feeling hopeless, I left and stayed with Kiwin and her husband for seven months. For the first five, I prayed, rising early, petitioning God to save my marriage so that I could be of service to Him. It seemed that He didn't care because my wife didn't return.

"After I gave up waiting, I prayed the same way for two months more, asking God to purge my desires of the flesh, to give me the strength to lead a celibate life and serve Him. But the more I beseeched Him, the farther away He seemed; my desire for a partner became even more consuming.

"When I finally told Kiwin and Brihan what was going on, they said it was not meant to be, and to stop torturing myself. They suggested I . . . I . . ." Tamirat struggled to compose himself.

Abraham waited for his son to finish. "They suggested what?" he asked finally.

Tamirat studied his father's face. "I know you won't like what I have to tell you, because this is not what you wished for me. I gave it my best effort, but as Kiwin and Brihan said, it was not meant to be." He looked at his feet.

"You mean you won't be a priest?" said Abraham, his face nearly bloodless.

"I am afraid so, Baba . . . I am sorry . . . I couldn't spend the rest of my life celibate . . . I am now remarried—her name is Bogay."

Abraham thought for a long moment. "You know, if your twelve years of education were going to end like this, you could have saved yourself the trouble." He planted an elbow on a knee and played with his goatee. "You might have prepared yourself for the farming life."

“I am very sorry . . . It was not my intention. Bad luck brought Amsale into my life—derailing my career and bringing us sorrow—you and me, Baba. I knew this would sadden you. That was why I prayed all those months and kept the wedding to my new wife secret from you.”

Abraham was silent for a long time. His face looked darker, his eyes—somber and metallic—were fixed on the distant mountains; his lips and tongue lost their mobility. “I am sad to see your career and my dreams for you end like this, all because of this young girl,” he said at last, fumbling for words. “What is your new wife’s background?”

“She is the daughter of Belay Zeru and Alem Nega. Her parents are Kiwin’s neighbors.”

“At least she comes from a good family. I know the mother,” said Abraham.

“I wish you had fixed me up with Bogay the first time around.”

“It was all your mother’s handiwork,” said Abraham bitterly. Flooded with emotion, he rose to head home. “Let’s go back now. There may be people to see me.” He was businesslike, anxious to end their conversation.

Tamirat followed his father, thoughtful and cheerless.

When they returned, a crowd of festival well-wishers greeted Abraham. Tamirat dropped back and cut to the north of his parents’ house. He didn’t want to answer any more probing questions and disappoint anyone else over his lost career.

IT WAS LATE MORNING when Abraham excused himself from his guests and walked to the southern creek. Tamirat’s bombshell bothered him a great deal. He needed time and space to think things through. The sun was intense, but the Davola’s cool breezes tempered the air. Across the creek, he saw Saba’s old property. Only the old hay shed was still standing. Where Saba’s house used to be, tall grass with a profusion of flowers had grown in the rainy season; now the same growth was matted and dry. Abraham stopped for a moment and studied the vacant land, pondering its future fate. Nobody had entered since the family left. The tableau distracted him only briefly from Tamirat’s news.

“The sons of fire are ashes,” Abraham kept saying under his breath as he walked, his eyes on the path, his mind far away. He couldn’t fathom how none of his four grown, healthy sons had inherited his drive and ambition. He reviewed the many things he had accomplished: his medal from winning feats in the Ethio-Italian war, his enterprising business skills, the oratorical gifts he brought to his mediation and courtroom work, and the honesty and mental acumen with which he won cases before the most corrupt judges. He thought of his many efforts to afford his family better opportunities, his dogged determination to see things through, and his cauldron of a

mind that unceasingly spun out ideas . . . Yet, sadly, none of his grown sons showed any of these attributes.

As he strolled along the path to the creek, hawks circled overhead, beaks pointing downward, eyes scanning the earth. Several yards away, on a scraggy bow of an oak tree, he noticed three vultures. *They must have fed on the remains of a cow killed for the festival*, he thought.

He wished his children had the vigilance of a vulture and the eye of a hawk to pursue their goals and distinguish themselves above the common folk of the valley. It was not as if he hadn't pushed them—*perhaps too hard at times*, he thought, remembering the beating he gave Desta for the cattle's crop raid. But his intentions had always been good. From the time they were little, he had tried to steer his sons in ways to bring honor to the family and respect for themselves. Two of his grown boys he had hoped would become skilled horsemen, *like your grandfather*, he remembered saying. For the other two he wished the priesthood, the only respected profession in the valley.

But none of them had a desire for horsemanship, and of the two he sent to church school, one had quickly dropped out, and now the other had abandoned the church after twelve years of study. He had counted on Tamirat to make him proud: to fulfill, in a way, the aspirations he had for all his children. Now, that dream was over.

This was a big blow: to his pride, wishes, and hopes, and to his fulfillment as a parent. He had wanted his sons to have opportunities he did not, to create a solid foundation for them and their children. He felt now as if he had failed twice—once in his own life, and now again, through his children.

It was past midday, and the heat was intense. He moved to the canopy of the acacia tree a few yards from the path and stopped. He sat on the dried, pale grass. His eyes caught blackberry vines drooping from a kaga tree at the edge of the woods. There were berries at different stages: green and pink on the lower branches; lush, dark blue higher up; and seared, dried ones near the top. He salivated and swallowed, recalling that he had not eaten that day. Studying a swarm of bees attending to the sky-blue flowers, Abraham prayed to God for the wisdom and steadfastness to endure his personal travails.

When he took his eyes away from the bees, his disappointment with his children had abated. He instead dwelled on their attributes, instead of those he had wished for them.

He knew that Teferra, the oldest, had inherited his abilities as a marksman; but what good was a sharpshooter in peacetime? The Italians were long gone, and there was no war in the offing. Admittedly, Teferra had become a great hunter. He had enough antelope and colobus monkey skins to furnish every home in the valley, and the walls of his home were decked with antlers and antelope heads. *But hunting trophies were*

nothing but fodder for his own vainglory, thought Abraham. Those deeds would not bring recognition, honor, and respect to him or his family.

Asse'ged's redeeming qualities were his verbal and interpersonal skills. Someday he could adeptly defend the family's many properties against encroachers. He could also be an arbiter for quarreling families in the community, as Abraham himself did. Yes, there was hope yet for Asse'ged.

Tamirat, with his ability to read and write, could assist Abraham with court documents. He could hire himself out to people, using his education in service to others.

Damtew was a natural farmer. In just one year, he had significantly increased grain production. Book knowledge didn't suit him. He was a poor speaker and lacked intellectual curiosity.

Then he came to Desta, almost as an afterthought—a scrawny boy who probably wouldn't amount to anything. He couldn't see Desta as a horseman; he was too small and not especially athletic. He was not good for the priesthood, either; that required great self-reliance. He'd have to ask neighbors for food after his daily lessons, and Desta was too sensitive for the hardships of church school.

Abraham had never believed that Desta's daydreams and endless questions were a curse to the family, but when he thought about Desta's physical limitations, he could only conclude that he would never be in a league with his other sons. If he couldn't count on his four strapping older boys to make him proud, how much could he expect from his skinny, quirky eight-year-old?

Abraham returned to Tamirat: He had to admit, Tamirat was as good as dead to him now. With a rush of resignation, he felt a heavy despair descend on him.

No longer would his heart leap and his head inflate like a balloon on Sundays when Tamirat sang hymns in the church sanctuary. During mass, his beautiful voice reverberated through the walls and filled the air for the hushed parishioners to enjoy.

"That is your son, isn't he?" someone would ask. Abraham would acknowledge with humility, but inside, be bursting with pride. On other occasions, parishioners wondered aloud whose liquid voice graced them that morning. "That's our son," he would say.

No longer could he anticipate his son at the head of the family table at festivals blessing food and reciting prayers. Now, an outsider would perform these sacred duties. Perhaps worst of all, at his own funeral one day, not his son, but a stranger, would lead the procession.

His powerlessness to change things pained him. But he could not undo what was done. He couldn't change priestly law on Tamirat's behalf.

He had to accept that such things were another vanished vision. He hung his head, hurt and disillusioned.

He wished he could talk about his feelings with someone who truly understood what it meant to lose hope in his son. A friend would not do, nor would just any relative. It would have to be someone who could share the burden and disappointment: his father.

Abraham would have shared his feelings and thoughts openly with his father. Had he been around, he would have helped make Abraham a better father and encouraged his grandchildren to follow in his footsteps. Abraham wished his father were here now with him under the cool shade of the tree, discussing these painful, personal matters. But that was not to be!

He needed to rest his head near gurgling water to ease his mind. Abraham rose and continued on the path. He entered the wooded creek and walked upstream along the embankment until he found a place to sit near a waterfall that flowed through the gray rocks. He sat on a moss-fringed slab and laid his head on a massive boulder.

He closed his eyes and listened to the water for a long time, letting the soft sound soothe his thoughts.

He finally opened his eyes from a deep, dreamless sleep. He cupped his hands and drank a cool draught. Refreshed, he rose and headed for home, feeling as if he had washed away his lost visions for his sons in the flowing creek.

FORTY-THREE

By April, the long, flesh-melting days of fasting were over. People could eat as they deemed fit anytime except Wednesday and Friday, the two regular fast days. This Easter, three lambs fed three households for a whole week. The whole family ate at different homes for three nights over five days, excepting Teferra and his wife, Laqechi, who lived too far from the others, and came only for the first meal at their parents' home.

Desta got lots of attention and praise, especially from Saba's family, but only cynical remarks from Damtew and a few nods from Asse'ged and Teferra.

Typically, the third and last dinner was served at Asse'ged and Mulu's house, but this Easter, Abraham and Ayénat gave a fourth dinner; Abraham had an important announcement for the family. For three days, the family speculated what it would be. Damtew and Asse'ged thought that their father had acquired new land to divide between them. Saba and Yihoon expected their father would give a celebration for his first grandson. Some of the women imagined he would honor Desta with land, a cow, or a mookit for helping solve Saba's problems. Only Abraham and Ayénat knew what the announcement was, and they weren't talking.

AT THE FOURTH DINNER, everyone was on pins and needles. After the meal, Abraham gave a long blessing of the food eaten, to each child, the animals, future harvests, and for their healthy and happy passage through the winter into the New Year in September. The last blessing was showered on the new baby, his mother, father, and sisters. "May he be happy and healthy, may God bless and care for him, may he grow to be a good, obedient son . . ."

After his long-winded blessings, Abraham took a long pull from his tella and cleared his throat. "We invited you here tonight to share with you my decision to take a journey," Abraham began.

"Journey? Journey? Journey?" exclaimed a few, obviously disappointed.

"This journey was long deferred. I wish I had done it long ago when I first came of age."

"Ahh, I know," grunted Damtew, looking at Asse'ged.

His older brother nodded. Only Saba and Teferra seemed in the dark.

“As the only boy of my father, having fled from jealous neighbors, I couldn’t leave my mother alone to travel to strange lands on a flimsy lead.” He paused, gazing at the group. “Some of you look confused. I refer to my father. Your grandfather. As most of you know, when I was only seven, he disappeared without a trace. Along with him vanished our ancient family coin. The story goes that invidious neighbors gave him a mind-altering herb that made him go mad and leave his family. Then, finding my mother left alone with four small children, the perpetrators thought they could steal our land and cattle.

“My mother, bless her soul, was wise enough to flee. She wouldn’t watch others seize her property or see harm come to her children. We gathered our possessions and settled in Avinevra, near her relatives.

“Over the years, we talked to those who claimed they had seen my father in Lal-ibela. They said he told them his name and asked about those who came from Kuakura and the family he left behind. We heard these rumors from three different people, but the accounts varied. Two said the man was from Agew Mider, and their descriptions of him differed.

“With only this to go on, I couldn’t leave my mother for a two-week journey. And she wouldn’t have let me. Be that as it may, it has bothered me all these years that I did not learn my father’s fate. Now, I will do what I should have done long ago—try to find my father.

“I guess you might say that my mortality is becoming more real as the years go by. It’s a shame my father never knew what became of his children or met his grandchildren. Saba’s new baby has brought me so much joy. . . It’s this joy that my father never experienced.”

Abraham went silent, his eyes glistening with tears. The women silently cried and sniffled. The men tipped their heads. The room became mournful. Nobody dared speak.

Finally, Abraham cleared his throat and continued. His voice was ragged, his eyelashes wet.

“Only Ayénat knows my father’s story. As we grew up, we couldn’t talk about it; it was considered shameful for a father to abandon his family. But we knew he had not intended to leave. I remember how he carried me on his shoulders, me grabbing his thick hair as we wandered the fields. My sisters had similar stories. We have no doubt how much he loved us. We are sure he was not murdered. We scoured the land where we lived but found no body or trace; to this day, no remains have been found.

“Mother had said there were neighbors with sore eyes for the wealth and life we had. They wanted us gone, you see. . . . And what’s more,” Abraham continued after a pause. “For lack of proof, we couldn’t sue them. . . . And I was denied the hope of

going after the criminals and reclaiming the coin. By the time I was ready to do so, the perpetrators had died.”

Abraham went silent once more.

“And they did take your parents’ land after you moved to Avinevra, didn’t they?” asked Teferra, trying to get Abraham to continue.

“Sadly, yes. And it wasn’t a small amount,” replied the father.

Abraham sighed. “How we all would have loved to have him in our lives, to benefit from his experiences and advice. . . Anyway, my plan is to investigate once and for all if your grandfather is still in Lalibela—alive or dead.”

“When will you leave?” asked Yihoon.

“Next Saturday, assuming your mother will prepare enough dabo kolo for me to eat for a couple of weeks.”

“Can one of us come with you?” asked Asse’ged.

“I must do this by myself. This is a personal mission I have held so long in my heart. My Dama is strong enough to carry me there and back.”

“How long will it take to get to Lalibela? Do you know the way?” asked Teferra.

“They say a good two weeks on foot, perhaps half that on horseback. I know the direction but not the exact route,” said Abraham.

“They say Lalibela is beautiful,” said Ayénat. “The pillars are made of iron and the walls stone. Every year people travel long distances there to pay homage to God and receive his blessings. I wish I could come.”

Abraham shook his head.

“How old would your father be now?” asked Yihoon.

“I would think about sixty-eight or seventy.”

“That is not so old,” said Saba. “There are many monks here much older.”

“If you find him and he comes home with you, you will need the help of at least two strong men and a horse,” said Yihoon.

“First things first. I need to complete this mission. God willing, if he is still alive, then we can arrange to bring him home.

“If all of you have nothing planned next Saturday, do come and send me off. Also, in the meantime, if all the women would contribute dabo kolo for my trip, I would be grateful. It’s a tedious job for one person.”

“We would be very happy to,” chirped the women in unison.

“The night is getting old, and you all had better get home. The baby should go to his crib,” said Abraham, pointing to his new grandson. For the first time that evening, he smiled.

FORTY-FOUR

The appointed Saturday for Abraham's trip to Lalibela arrived gloriously. The sun beamed brightly over the valley and brightened the house, filtering through its walls and entrance.

"What a day! And a good omen," said the traveler as he crossed the threshold.

Inside, all were busy making dabo kolo for his trip. They put a bit oil in the palm of one hand as the other pinched the viscous wheat dough that was seasoned with spices, red pepper, and salt, and they rolled the mixture between their palms. Then they dropped each ball on the hot baking pan. Five women gathered around two fireplaces, working feverishly to get Abraham on his way before the heat of the day.

They had been baking since early morning and produced only a hundred apricot-size rolls. Desta found them irresistible. The bakers had tasted the fruits of their own labors, consuming a sizable number.

Abraham ate a late brunch of injera with lamb sauce. Saba and Mulu added their own dabo kolo to a large basketful, which appeared more like harvested apricots than bread.

Ayénat transferred the rolls to two cloth sacks of similar weight. *To balance well on the horse*, she thought.

"Not too much," said Abraham. "It can be cumbersome for me and the horse. Just a few to munch when I am really hungry. Knowing how these trips go, I expect to be fed by strangers I meet."

Abraham put on his brown breeches and donned his khaki coat over an older, sweat-stained shirt. "I will bring a new shirt for my arrival in Lalibela," he assured Ayénat when she balked at the shirt he wore.

On top of the coat, he donned his new gabi. He neatly folded the extra breeches and white shirt and placed them under the saddle seat cover.

The horse was fixed up nicely. Sacks of dabo kolo hung from the pommel across its shoulders.

Then came the troubling part for Abraham. Almost everyone wanted to send gifts for the grandfather. Saba had prepared three ceremonial bread discs to share with a cup of water in the name of the Holy Trinity when they first meet. Teferra brought a

new gabi, Asse'ged a thick cotton skull cap, Ayénat prayer beads of beautifully carved wood. Desta was not to be left out; he added his safety pin.

“What good will that do him?” snapped Damtew. “He probably doesn't walk on thorns.”

“Actually, that may be the most useful gift for an old man,” said the father, glaring at his older son.

Most gifts were practical and light enough for Abraham to carry. Only Teferra's gabi was too bulky to take. He suggested Teferra think of something easier to carry.

Ayénat had bought a pair of scissors to give her own father and suggested Teferra send that instead. Everybody thought it a good choice, and Teferra agreed. Saba's breads were put in the dabo kolo sacks. The rest of the items were carefully folded or rolled in cloth for Abraham to carry in his coat pocket.

They gathered outside, some by the horse, others around the father. One by one, he kissed them. Saba wept openly. The in-laws pretended to cry. Ayenat's forehead was knotted with worry. Asse'ged grumbled, wishing he could join Abraham, along with Teferra, who said he wished his father had given them advance notice. Desta held the horse's lead and watched his father be kissed and hugged. “Need to leave, need to leave,” said Abraham, heading toward the footpath that would take him to the caravan route.

Desta went ahead, leading the horse. The others followed. When they reached the middle of the field below the house, they said their final goodbyes. Abraham bent over and pressed his lips to Desta's cheeks. “Be good. We can talk more when I get back,” he said, holding Desta's head and shaking it a little. “Got to go.”

He took the lead from Desta and mounted the horse. He put on his hard topee hat, uncoiled his leather whip, and started his horse on the journey, waving as he galloped away.

The family stood until Abraham disappeared in the woods at the north end of the field. Then Ayénat invited them in for coffee and dabo kolo. They all strolled in silence, heads low, lost in thought.

After everyone left, Desta cried—not for his father's absence, but for the intimate moment they had shared on parting.

NOT LONG AFTER ABRAHAM LEFT, a horseman emerged from the same woods Abraham had entered. Desta was the first to see him. He kept his eyes on the figure as it came nearer, then realized with a surprise that it was his father. “I wonder what he's forgotten,” he said, as he ran toward him.

The horse wasn't galloping as before. Dama walked solemnly, as if feeling his master's emotions.

“What happened?” said Desta.

“The birds, son. The birds.”

“What about them?”

“I need to go home now. I will tell you later,” said the father in a monotone. “It’s complicated, and I can’t explain here.”

Desta didn’t push him.

When Abraham reached home, everyone came out, looking puzzled. “What did you forget?” asked Asse’ged breathlessly.

“Are you feeling alright?” asked Teferra, seeing his father’s somber face.

“I am fine,” said Abraham, as he dismounted.

But he was not fine.

Damtew took the horse’s lead and stood by. The others watched anxiously.

“Are you afraid, or not well?” asked Ayénat studying her husband’s face.

“Damtew, remove the harness and bags from the horse and let him free. I will make another attempt tomorrow. Let’s all go inside, and I’ll tell you.”

Abraham sat on his stool and the family gathered around him, anxious to hear.

“I hadn’t gotten past the edge of our property before they began chattering doom-day at me,” Abraham began.

“Who . . . what?” said Teferra, baffled. Everyone exchanged glances as if their father had lost his mind.

“The birds. I’ve lived in the forest and studied bird language long enough to know their presentiments. During the Italian invasion, when we fought from the forests, my comrades routinely asked me what the birds were saying. I could tell, you see, whether the day would be good or bad, just from listening to them as we traveled. The last time I heard the birds ranting as they did today was when my friend Gdaff was shot to death before me. I had just told him, ‘Watch out, watch out, someone is near,’ when it happened. He was only a few feet away. I heard the birds and sensed the danger just moments before. Today I had nearly the same experience. I knew it would be foolish to proceed.”

“Maybe today was not meant to be. We should be thankful that you know when to get out of harm’s way,” said Asse’ged.

“After you left, we were sitting here, talking about your trip,” said Yihoon. “After so many years, to go so far now, we thought it dangerous. . . .”

“Frankly, I’ve been uneasy about the whole thing since you announced it last week,” said Teferra. “I certainly agree there is a guardian angel that protects us. He must have spoken to you through the birds about something dangerous that lay ahead.”

“I don’t know what it was, but I didn’t want to take chances when I know better.”

“As the saying goes, we don’t want to lose what we have, trying to find what we have not had,” said Asse’ged.

Abraham could see his family’s expressions shift from somber to calm. They realized that a higher power protected him.

“You know, something just occurred to me,” said Abraham, looking away, his eyes narrowed.

Everyone was hushed.

“I’d meant to bring my gun and forgot. I wonder if the birds tried to remind me of it. It’s the only formidable weapon I have against dangerous animals or a *shifita*—an outlaw.”

“That may well be it,” said Asse’ged. “Your guardian angel warned you not to take such a difficult trip without protection.”

“Even a *shifita* would think twice if he saw your gun,” said Teferra.

Satisfied, the two older sons got up to leave with their wives, agreeing to return the next day to send off their father once more. Abraham discouraged them, saying he would leave at dawn to cover more ground before the day’s heat. Damtew left without saying where he was going. The women busied with work.

Abraham took his pistol from its wooden chest with his clothes and the coin box. He polished and oiled it and loaded six rounds. He counted another seven bullets and placed them in the bandolier to be strapped around his waist, along with the holstered gun. He kept thinking of the birds. More and more, he became convinced that his family angel protected him, and he was grateful.

FORTY-FIVE

The following morning, Abraham rose before dawn on his quest for his long-lost father. Ayénat rose, too, and prepared shiro wat with injera for breakfast. Damtew harnessed Dama, hung the bag of dabo kolo from the pommel, and had the horse at the ready.

After a quick meal, Abraham strapped on his holster and slung the bandolier over his shoulder. He kissed his family goodbye, mounted his horse, and left. The horizon cast a metallic glow over the eastern peaks. The valley bottom still lay dark.

The birds twittered and chirped—a full chorus, welcoming the new day. Abraham kept his ears cocked for the doomsayers as he proceeded, but there was too much chatter to pick out any bad omens. He nevertheless was relieved once he cleared the woods and left the birds behind.

By the time he reached Timbil, the dense forest at the south edge of the valley, the sun had risen, washing the treetops and mountain flanks with thin golden light. The air was cool and invigorating.

Abraham was glad for the forest's good visibility. Here, too, were a great number of birds calling. As he rode and the sun rose higher, their numbers thinned, but he could hear more portents. Hidden in dense trees and bushes, these black and gray birds tweeted and cheeped sad, disturbing notes.

“No matter what you say, I will not turn around this time!” he said to them.

The journey was not without surprises. Dama's hoofbeats and snorts sent a wild boar charging away from their path, making the horse rear, nearly throwing Abraham. Farther along, a pair of grazing antelopes flew off when they saw them, again startling the horse. Occasionally, Abraham heard other animals run through the dry leaves. Each time, the horse would jerk to a halt, ears pointed, stiff like horns. Meanwhile, birds kept up a portentous heckling.

If only those damn birds would stop, thought Abraham, increasingly annoyed. “I have my gun and I will defend myself till death, so stop bothering me,” he shouted at them.

As the birds' calls multiplied, he began to wonder if the sounds were in his head, or if there really were so many birds determined to torment him. The one that rankled the

most was a white-tailed, gray-feathered pest that flew back and forth across his path, relentlessly, as if trying to block his passage.

Eventually, he lost patience. *I need to be rid of you once and for all*, he decided. He stopped his horse and dismounted, tethering it to a young koma tree, and went looking for it.

He had last seen the bird on the bough of a broad-leaved tree a few yards off the path. When he returned to it, the bird flew to a gottem tree across a gaping ravine, burying itself in the tree's thick olive leaves. Though mostly hidden, the bird kept up its calls. Abraham thought it mocked him. He walked on, looking for a way to cross the ravine. A few feet farther, an uprooted tree had fallen across the chasm. He gingerly crept along the trunk to the other side, then whipped out his gun and trod quietly toward the gottem tree.

With its head in the leaves and its tail flashing, the bird continued its chattering. Abraham inched his way closer, stepping softly on dried leaves blanketing the forest floor. Once in range, he aimed at the bird's tail and pulled the trigger. A branch splintered in half, and leaves rained down. Abraham scuttled to the foot of the tree, hoping to find his enemy, but he found no bird, dead or injured.

Cursing his failed shot and wasted bullet, he made his way back over the ravine and stomped to the tethered horse. Clearly frightened, Dama reared and pulled at the lead, forcing Abraham to be calm. He patted and crooned kind words to the horse until it relaxed and stood still as Abraham climbed in the saddle.

For a while, all was tranquil, and Abraham heard no birds. Hoping his blast scared them away, he relaxed, and settled into his ride.

The peace didn't last. Shortly, the same bird reappeared, resuming its chatter. Soon several others joined in and before long, every tree and bush seemed to harbor bad portents.

As if to compound his distress, a pair of crows suddenly appeared to his left. *These are messengers of death, aren't they?* he said to himself.

"This is it!" he shouted. He dismounted Dama and led him away from the chattering birds and crows, back to where they had come from. He hitched him to a tree, and returned to the path, bringing his gun and bandolier.

The crows hopped around, snatching meat from a small carcass by a cluster of abalo bushes. With his finger on the trigger, Abraham walked stealthily toward them. He took cover behind a big oak, aimed, and shot, hitting and killing one crow.

With a mix of satisfaction and anger, he hunted the forest for his tormenters,

shooting at every bird he spotted. He ran from tree to tree, bush to bush, shooting again and again, not hitting a single bird. Then he reloaded.

The birds flew ahead of him, mocking with their incessant chatter until finally, exhausted, sweaty, and angry at himself, Abraham conceded defeat.

He staggered back to his horse and crumpled onto a fallen tree trunk. In this state of mind, he knew he couldn't go on. He hadn't the stamina to continue battling the birds, at least not today. Abraham rose wobbly to his feet and headed to his horse. To his shock, Dama was gone, spooked perhaps by his master's bizarre behavior. A piece of broken lead was attached to the tree where Abraham had tethered him. Abraham sat on a stone under the tree. The thought of walking home defeated overpowered him. He couldn't go forward and wouldn't go back. He sighed deeply and buried his head in his hands. It seemed something or somebody kept meddling in his plans for his father. He wished he knew what that was.

He could walk the hour back home once he had recovered.

He'd admired the large warka tree he'd stood beneath on his rampage against the birds. Even in his madness, he remembered how church-like the tree was. Its giant trunk; its long and stout limbs; its thick and drooping leaves; and its cool, enveloping serenity drew him in.

Abraham retreated to the great warka tree to think through what had happened. He needed to rest, calm himself, and think things through, but his aching head and chaotic emotions left him only an overwhelming sense of failure. Completing this trip seemed beyond his grasp. Strange thoughts played in his head. *What does this journey matter? Why do I matter?* he asked. Increasingly, he believed there was no good answer. All the resentment of his early years toward the old neighbors suddenly swamped him.

A decaying tree lay on the path nearby. Its wood was crumbled, its bare branches covered with moss. Abraham pictured his own body as lifeless as this tree. But unlike the tree, he wouldn't survive one night before hyenas and leopards made a feast of him.

He spread his gabi under the warka tree and sat. He set aside his gun belt and bandolier, pulled out the gun, and opened the cylinder to see how many rounds were left.

It was empty.

He removed the last bullet from the bandolier and inserted it in the chamber. He held the gun in his right hand. It felt cold, heavy, and powerful.

He raised the muzzle of the gun to his lips. He smelled metal tinged with sweat.

He opened his mouth and inserted the tip. He closed his eyes and counted to three: one . . . two . . . three . . . He pulled the trigger.

To his dismay, nothing happened. He pulled the curved metal handle again. And again. Nothing.

He opened his eyes. Unlocking the cylinder, he took the bullet out and shook it. It had powder; the trigger seemed fine. Baffled, he put the bullet back in the chamber, closed it, and locked it.

He heard a noise and looked up. His tormenter was perched above him in the warka tree. The bird twittered and flashed its tail. "I cannot believe this," said Abraham. Without thinking, he rose, lifted his gun, aimed, and fired. The blast was deafening. Shocking. He saw a cloud of feathers, then spattered blood on dried brown leaves, and fragments of the dead bird.

He was stunned. "How did this happen? My last bullet, the one meant for me, takes the life of my enemy? Who can explain this?"

He returned to his berth and sat. His senses returned. He felt alive, triumphant. Maybe he could pursue his mission another time; his horse was no doubt already safely at home. He would go home, too, but first he needed rest. He closed his eyes. The birds sang sweetly. The leaves rustled in the wind. He was at peace.

DESTA COULDN'T BELIEVE HIS EYES. When he checked on the animals, he found Dama still fitted with his saddle, reins, and dabo kolo sacks, grazing with the other horses and cattle. Abraham was nowhere to be seen.

Desta slowly approached the steed, keeping his eyes on this vision. But he was not hallucinating. His father's horse was here without its master.

He ran for home to see if his father was there. But if he had come back, why leave Dama saddled? It didn't make sense.

"Is Baba here?" he called, when he saw Ayénat outside.

"Do you think he would have flown over and back from Lalibela in one day? Horses are not airplanes, you know," said Ayénat, puzzled by Desta's anxious look.

"Well, Dama is here—with everything on him still. I found him with the other animals."

Ayénat jerked her chin toward her chest in surprise. "What?"

"Yeah, Dama is here . . . with all Baba's supplies."

Ayenat's hand flew to her chest. "I wonder if he fell somewhere and needs help. Go tell Asse'ged. I will send Melkam to Yihoon."

Desta took off at a sprint toward Asse'ged's house.

"Where did you say Dama is?" shouted Ayénat.

"In the field with the animals," Desta yelled back, still running.

Ayénat stood with the horse when Desta, Asse'ged, Damtew, Yihoon, and Melkam arrived.

Kooli was with them. They looked at the horse and each other, mystified. Asse'ged grabbed Dama by the reins and hastily looked through Abraham's supplies. The extra clothes, the gifts, and the dabo kolo were all intact.

"He must have been thrown and hurt himself," said Yihoon.

Asse'ged pulled the horse. "Dama is the most docile horse you could ride. I don't think he threw him, although I suppose Baba may have fallen accidentally." He checked for scrapes on the animal's body.

"What else could have happened? He had no enemies lying in wait. Everybody loves him here," reasoned Yihoon.

"Regardless, we must find out," said Ayénat, turning to Damtew. "He can't be far."

"Let's go," said Asse'ged.

"Stay at home in case he comes," said Ayénat, turning to Melkam.

Everyone else went except Desta. He had to watch the animals. Kooli trotted behind the group.

As if searching for a stolen cow, they kept their eyes on the horse's tracks. Occasionally, one of them left the trail to check around bushes or big trees. As luck would have it, there were no other horse tracks heading north, although quite a few in the other direction.

The longer they went with no trace of Abraham, the more somber they became.

"Really, I had misgivings about Baba making this trip alone," said Yihoon. "The birds warned him yesterday. It seems he didn't even leave the valley before something happened to him."

"This is not his first trip, for chrissake!" blurted Asse'ged. "What could happen?"

"It's not that," said Ayénat. "I think there's something strange about your grandfather and that coin. He vanished without a trace. The coin was stolen by those horrible neighbors. Now a search for him meets trouble from the start."

"We really don't know. We shouldn't jump to conclusions," said Asse'ged calmly.

"No matter. It's trouble!" she cried. "The horse came home, and your father didn't!"

Partway through the Timbil forest, the horse tracks left the road and disappeared in the leafy floor of the forest. Try as they might, they couldn't pick up the trail. The forest floor masked any hoofprints.

"What do you think happened here?" said Yihoon, at a loss.

"It seems the horse turned around here, because there are tracks going back," said Asse'ged.

“What happened to your father, then?” asked Ayénat.

“That is the question,” said Asse’ged loudly.

“Do you think there was foul play?” asked Ayénat, turning to Damtew.

“I doubt it, Ma. . . . but we can’t be sure,” said Damtew.

“If the horse returned from here, let’s see how he got back to the road,” said Asse’ged, heading away. He followed faded tracks into the woods.

The hoof marks led to a tree where Asse’ged thought the horse was tethered, judging from the trampled undergrowth. When he closely inspected, he found tracks returning to the road. It seemed that the horse was led outside the path for some way before it returned to the road farther down.

Asse’ged motioned for the others to join him. Once again, they followed the tracks.

WHEN ABRAHAM WOKE, he found Kooli breathing on him, licking his cheeks.

“Get away, get away,” he said, pushing the dog aside. Kooli’s whimpered and wagged his tail, waiting for the search team.

“Kooli sounds like he’s found something,” said Asse’ged. He looked toward the whimpering.

“God help us,” said Ayénat, right behind her son.

Asse’ged rushed to his father’s side. “What are you doing here, Baba? Are you alright?”

“I am still alive, if that is what you mean.”

“What happened?”

Ayénat, Damtew, and Yihoon pushed past Asse’ged, encircling the father.

“How are you?” Ayénat asked, her voice shaking.

“I battled the birds and lost,” said Abraham, eyes fixed on the ground.

“How did you get in a fight with the birds? This is sheer insanity!” said Ayénat, as she sat by him.

“They kept pestering me, torturing me with their dark prophecies. I had to silence them.” He nodded at his gun, lying by his side. “I used nearly all my bullets, and only got a damn crow.”

“Mama is right, this is crazy. What is wrong, Baba?” said Asse’ged, kneeling, eyes boring into his father’s.

“How can a person of your stature fight the air—that is all they are!” said Yihoon.

“I can’t tell you why, but I did it,” said Abraham gravely, placing the gun in its holster.

“Let’s go home. We are glad nothing bad happened to you,” said Ayénat as she helped him with his gabi.

“The real insanity was to leave home in hope of tracking down a man lost to me for

forty years. The birds tried to warn me of what lay ahead, what I may not find. But you are right, it was insane. What's worse, I nearly shot myself in desperation. I guess God wants me here awhile longer, because that bullet didn't fire.

"What! Babaaa!!" cried Asse'ged.

Ayénat covered her mouth and stared at him. The others gaped.

"You went to that extreme?!" asked Yihoon.

Abraham nodded. "I pointed the muzzle in my mouth and pulled the trigger—not once, not twice, but three times. Nothing happened. Zilch. I took out the bullet and reloaded it. Tell me if this is not divine intervention—the bird that tormented me, the cause of my madness, perched right there on this branch above us. I aimed, pulled the trigger, and *bam*: I pulverized the demon with the same bullet I had intended for myself.

"Did you feel better afterwards?" said Asse'ged.

"Mighty better. I calmed down and napped." He shrugged and stroked his speckled goatee. "I suppose part of my madness was my pride. I won medals in the war, but now I couldn't bring down one bird with twelve shots.

"This is not you!" cried Yihoon. "You are the one who counsels people, who steers them away from impulsive acts."

"I think I felt cursed. I denied my father—first as a boy, now as an adult. What have I done to deserve this?"

"Only the Almighty knows," said Ayénat. "We're only glad you are well. Let's go now." She picked up the bandolier and gun and handed them to Damtew. Asse'ged and Yihoon helped Abraham up.

The warrior, stiff and tentative at first, stood erect and walked at his normal gait once they got to the main road.

FORTY-SIX

After his aborted trip, Abraham slept every day until noon and avoided outsiders—even family. He ate and talked little. Occasionally, he thought to reattempt the journey, although his depression made the very idea exhausting. If he did, he would tell no one, fearing he might fail again.

Ayénat was deeply distressed by her husband's condition. She prayed every night and talked to priests to treat his woes. Other family members also prayed and gave Ayénat food that they thought might help him.

Desta was perhaps saddest of all. When his father first departed, he daydreamed about his grandfather. From what little his father had shared, he created the whole person: long, flowing beard; big eyes; perfect figure; tall and handsome—an older image of his father. He imagined him living in a hut by the church, waiting for his family to find him.

From the day his father left, Desta had counted the days until he would meet his grandfather. Now the dream was shattered. He would live and die without ever seeing him. He felt as he had when Hibist was to be married, after Kooli was shot and after the vervet monkeys left. But those feelings paled beside this grief. He had memories of the others for life, but he would never know his grandfather.

It was a mid-May afternoon. Showers had veiled the radiant valley in a film of green. A gentle sun flooded the valley, and soft breezes rustled the sholla leaves. He was hungry and wished for figs from the sholla tree, but they were long gone, shared mostly between Desta and the birds. He had a few more hours of herding before going home and having dinner. But he dreaded seeing his father in the same sad state since the day in the forest. He closed his eyes and wished for something to help his father.

It was at this very instant that he heard a voice.

“Maybe you can!” He opened his eyes and looked around.

There was the cloud man, as visible as when he first saw him with the Deb'tera Tayé—brown with a golden tint to his clouded, human form. Desta stood up, terrified. He made a move to run.

“Do not fear. I will not harm you,” said the man. “I am here to solve your family's

problem. You are the medium chosen to report what you will now learn. This should end the agony for all of you.” He spoke softly, like soothing and beautiful music.

The man’s presence and voice tranquilized Desta. He waited on his words.

“Come, follow me,” said the cloud man, motioning with a hand without flesh or bone, only stippled and tinged with gold.

Desta hesitated.

“Come, come . . . Have I ever failed you?”

Desta thought. It was true the man had not failed him with Saba.

With halting steps, he followed. All the while, he looked around for anyone who might see where the man led him. They crossed the field and stopped at the spot where he had found the body of Habté.

“This is strange,” Desta thought, his mind flooded by the memory of the goat and his suffering over its death. When the man continued, he remained behind.

“What’s the matter? Are you not coming?” asked the man, glancing back.

“I don’t know where you are taking me,” mumbled Desta.

“I know why you are scared. You realize that goat was not killed by an animal. He was sacrificed. But it was all for good.”

Desta stood his ground. He didn’t understand and didn’t want to.

“Do follow me. What I will share with you will lift your father’s sorrow and explain why Saba moved. Only you can hear this; it’s important you come with me. I assure you your animals will be safe in your absence.” The man gazed at Desta with the gentlest countenance.

Desta stared back, unable to move. Was he really the Saytan as his mother said? Did he kindly lure people into his hole to kill them? But he had heard that Saytans only possessed people and drove them mad. Would that happen to him? Desta’s knees trembled.

The man smiled sweetly, giving Desta every reason to trust him. “I will be blunt, Desta. I am here to introduce you to your grandfather.”

This sent a shockwave through Desta. The hair on his neck prickled like porcupine quills, and his spine tingled. He grew hot and sweaty, and his heart pounded like a hammer. Did this man mean he could make Desta’s grandfather—supposedly living in Lalibela—appear here, in their own backyard? The notion made him doubly suspicious. Was he using his yearning for his grandfather to seduce him?

Desta stared at the ground, but felt the man’s eyes on him, waiting.

“This is very, very important, Desta. I command you to come.”

If his grandfather indeed was here, he needed to know—at any cost. He needed to

find him and bring the good news home promptly. His father would be so happy, the family thrilled, and Desta, of course, would be in ninth heaven.

As these thoughts played out, his fears dissipated. He obeyed the man's orders and moved forward.

"Why have you kept him from us all this time?"

"I didn't keep him," the man said. "Circumstance did."

They walked along an animal track and crossed the southern creek to the bottom of Saba's old property, verdant and dotted with acacia trees. Desta remembered it well. They'd kept their cattle here. Back then, the grass had been grazed low, but now, untouched, it was almost knee high. He remembered roaming the area with Astair, getting thorns in their feet. Desta picked his way carefully now through the dry, tall grass, avoiding the thorns while being without the safety pin he'd given Abraham to take to his grandfather.

"Don't be afraid. I will lead you where there are no thorns," the man said, looking back.

Desta was amazed. How in the world did he know that?

As they strode, Desta grew anxious. Everything was happening so quickly. He didn't know what he would say when he met his grandfather or how to tell if it was really him. He wished his father were here.

He was sure that his grandfather would rather see his own son than Desta.

It felt like a long walk just to cross the field. The place was peaceful. Shadows from the acacia tress stretched eastward, sharply silhouetted against the seared gold grass.

Ahead, the man moved like a cloud. The brown dots were as if glued to an invisible body. He still glowed pale gold. He glided more than walked, feet barely touching the earth.

It felt like a dream. But Desta was not asleep. And the scene wasn't about to change.

At first, he thought they would cross the entire field, but once they got to the center near a beautiful, canopying acacia tree, the man turned due east and walked toward the place where the creek met another stream from the southern side of the property.

He stopped and turned to Desta, saying, "We are here. Your grandfather is behind the tall grass and cattail bushes down in the ravine. You cannot meet him just yet."

Desta looked where the man had indicated, baffled. Why would his grandfather be hiding here all these years? The rain, the sun, the cold, food, water . . . how did he manage? Or did he recently come from Lalibela?

"I want you to fix in your mind the location of this spot: this very spot! Here on my right is a dead gottem tree. On my left are these kaga bushes. This place is directly op-

posite the center of the field by that acacia tree. Here in the east, directly across from where we stand, is the big warka tree on the bank of the Davola where we first met.

Desta remembered the tree.

“You’ll not forget it when you come back with your family, will you?” the man asked kindly.

Desta looked around at the landmarks and said that he wouldn’t.

“If you do, we can give you some assistance, but we want you to handle things in your own way. I know you want to meet your grandfather, but it’s better if you meet him with your whole family.”

Desta tried hard not to show his disappointment. How would he convince the whole family to come here to meet their grandfather, who according to the cloud man, was hiding in the bushes? It was a crazy notion. Everyone knew that the old man had vanished forty years ago from a place fifty miles from here and was supposed to be in Lalibela. Why would they believe he had turned up in their backyard?!

The man stood at the rim of the ravine watching Desta, giving him time to think. At length he said, “Now let’s go back to the tree.”

Desta followed.

“This time I want to show you a safer route for the group. We will go along the perimeter of the property and cross the creek. This will be less complicated and thorn-free,” he said as they walked.

Desta was still uncertain about the whole idea. How could he persuade his family to come here without any tangible proof?

By the time they reached the sholla tree, the sun had declined in the west and the shadow of the mountain had formed at the bottom of the grazing fields. To Desta’s amazement, the animals were exactly where he had left them.

At the cloud man’s suggestion, Desta perched on his stone slab under the tree. The man sat on the ground next to him like a piled cloud, head poking from the center, just the way he first saw him by the river. The man’s feet and hands vanished in the amorphous mass. “I will tell you the full story about your grandfather and other important things shortly,” he began. “Now listen carefully and share this exact information, as much as you can. You’ll give a shorter version when your family gathers at the site I just took you to.”

As the man spoke, Desta could only see his faint form and face. His mouth moved, his eyelashes flapped, and his brows slid up and down with the twitch of his forehead when he talked. He had small, black dots for eyes, projecting like cones from his face.

Desta looked at the man intensely, heart racing. His whole being concentrated on what he was about to hear.

“First, I must caution you,” the man said, glancing at Desta. “I will tell you some things you won’t like. You need to know the whole story, and the rest of your family does, too. Though you are young, you have the mind and maturity to handle this.”

Desta pulled his feet together and hugged his knees, anxiously looking at the man. The wait was killing him.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, I am,” Desta said after a deep sigh.

“Bad people did bad things to your grandfather. He is no longer alive.”

Desta gasped and covered his mouth.

“They were his wife’s relatives—her cousins. They stole something very important from him that had come down through hundreds of generations of the family line. A thing with the power to bring great fortune to the one who possesses it and help him become a better person. As your father will remember from stories he has heard, this item is one of two things that prove the remains you will find are indeed your grandfather’s.” Desta looked away, dazed and saddened.

“Is it the gold coin?” Desta asked, sharply turning and uncovering his mouth.

“Yes. Did your father tell you?”

“Yes. . . . he still has the coin box.”

“So, it happened that when your grandfather prepared to pass the coin to the next generation—to your father on his seventh birthday—he discovered that the family treasure was missing from its box. Then your father’s oldest sister, Zere, having heard an excited account of a coin from the daughter of their mother’s cousin, told him who might have it. The girl had no idea where it had come from but told Zere it was beautiful and unique, and how carefully her father guarded it.

“Your grandparents had known this man, Adamu, to be jealous and greedy. He had always struggled to gain wealth, but none came to him. He saw how easily good fortune came to your grandparents, and he was envious of them. He had heard that the gold coin was the reason for their success. So, he came to your grandparents’ home under the pretext of working for them. While there, he managed to find the box and abscond with the coin.

Desta kept his gaze on the man, hanging onto every word.

“When your grandfather learned where the coin was,” he continued, “he bribed the thief’s daughter to help him retrieve it. To keep his mission secret, he didn’t tell his wife that he was going after it. Five days before your father’s birthday, your

grandfather told everyone he was going to Dangila for a birthday gift but instead journeyed from Kuakura to Avinevra.

“As soon as your grandfather arrived at Adamu’s home, he gave the daughter a silver necklace for the precious family item. As luck would have it, Adamu walked in on them. Surprised to see the uninvited guest, Adamu became uneasy, as did your grandfather. After a brief visit with Adamu and his wife, your grandfather could not be persuaded to spend the night and left. Adamu became suspicious and went to check on the coin. Finding it missing, he immediately left with his younger brother, Kindé, in hot pursuit of your grandfather.

Desta held his breath so as not to miss a single word.

“When your grandfather realized he was being pursued, he ran, as did Adamu and Kindé. The best your grandfather could do was to elude them. Instead of the main thoroughfare, he took a small path, a cattle track. Unfortunately, his pursuers saw him and followed. He crossed the Davola and kept running south along the river. When he saw them right behind him, he turned into the woods. They caught up with him there. With no chance to keep the coin, he swallowed it in desperation, nearly choking. The men watched in horror. Your grandfather mounted a big defense. He punched, kicked, and bloodied his enemies, but he was finally overwhelmed and died. Now his killers had a problem: how to retrieve the coin. It was dark, and the task would be messy. So, they threw him in the ravine and left him there until they could return at daybreak with a knife.

Desta exhaled. Thoughtful and crestfallen, eyes on the man, he shook his head slowly. He couldn’t believe the men could act so cruelly. That he now would never meet his father’s dad was heart-wrenching. He held back his emotions.

“I know,” said the cloud man, seeing Desta forlorn. He went on. “Although your grandfather’s body died, his spirit still lived; he then had to wait for his body to be buried and also wait for the coin’s safe return to the family.

“The next day, the killers came with their knives. They searched for the body, but it had disappeared without a trace. There were no telltale marks of the terrible act they had committed: no trampled grass, damaged foliage, or blood. You see, the spirit had masked all of the evidence.

“Later, when Adamu and Kindé learned that his family was distraught, they went to Kuakura and joined the search for him. Your family had no way to know they were implicated in his death.”

Desta felt as if his head would collapse under the weight of the sad story. He

brought his folded legs together, propped his chin on his knees, and continued listening attentively to the cloud man's revelations.

"The irony was," the man continued, "that your grandmother fled Kuakura to escape the people she believed responsible for her husband's disappearance. But the harm was actually done by her cousins—here, in this valley—where she and her children came to live.

The cloud man stopped on seeing Desta's cheerless face. "I am sorry you were chosen to receive such sad news," he said, his eyes holding Desta.

"I am sorry for Baba. Now he will never see his father, and I will never meet him."

"It is destiny, son. Destiny . . . Both of you must have strength to accept things as they unfold.

"Let me continue. As for your grandfather's spirit, he remained in the valley, protecting the remains and the gold coin. He waited for the birth of the right descendent before revealing himself and returning the treasure to their hands."

Desta stared at the cloud man, mystified.

"That is right. The spirit felt that the older children didn't possess the character, persistence, and tenacity to survive the challenges that lie ahead for the chosen one. There is a predetermined mission involving the coin. It had to be placed in the right hands.

"The coin will be revealed when the family is gathered. It is 2,800 years old, one of two identical coins, the only two of their kind in the world.

"The sister coin is far away, in a completely different part of the earth. For the first time since their creation, the two will meet in the lifetime of their possessors. When they finally come together, it will be thrilling for these two people who will witness an event unique in the lives of humans. Did you follow all that?"

"Yes, most of it."

"I know there is much to remember, but it will come to you as you share all of this with your family," said the cloud man kindly. "Now, do you have any questions for me?"

Desta didn't think he'd have a chance to ask. "I know you told me when we first met that you knew my problems; one was to find someone to take me to the mountain to touch the sky. Can you help me?"

"Be a little more patient. In time, it will happen."

"Do you think I will meet my grandfather's spirit?" Desta asked in a low voice, looking at the man squarely.

"Well, well, I think we can arrange that," said the man, grinning. His teeth and lips were mere outlines, as was the rest of him. He paused and looked around, grinning at

Desta again. “You might have not heard me clearly earlier, but to speak plainly, I am happy to finally meet my grandson in person!”

Desta was confused at first. Then he blurted out, “You are my grandfather!”

“Yes. I feel honored and privileged to meet my grandson.”

“Wow, I am so happy to meet you, too! I can’t wait to tell Baba. Can you come home with me so that the rest of the family can meet you too?”

“No, I am not in the human dimension anymore. My body is long lost. I revealed myself to the person chosen as my messenger. I simply want my remains gathered and buried, and I want the coin returned to the family’s possession once again. Then, I can go home to heaven.”

“Baba has waited so long to see you. He has suffered so much. He kept your memory by naming his dog Kooli. What an incredible gift it would be for him to see you, even just for a moment,” Desta said.

“No, son, he will just have to remember me. I can only be revealed to the chosen one. As for your father, he will be happy once my remains are buried, I can guarantee you.”

“You know that he nearly killed himself trying to find you but was foiled by the birds?” Desta asked.

“I know. That was foolish, I must say. I was there, watching. The birds were my messengers. I jammed the gun when he turned it on himself, and later placed the bird before him for his small victory. Like I said, everything will be right once he has closure.”

Desta was disappointed. At the same time, he felt an urge to run home and tell his father what happened.

“Are we done? I just can’t wait to tell Baba I met his father,” Desta said, his face glowing.

“Yes, he and the family need to know everything I shared with you. We shouldn’t burden their hearts any longer.

“One more thing. You must meet me back here seven days from tomorrow—Sunday—at the same time. Bring the coin box—the one with illustrations on it and fourteen-inch-square hard paper, ink, a pen, and a narrow and straight horn cup. I have something very important to share with you. The paper must be hard and durable. Regular paper won’t do. Take it as a challenge; you’ll figure it out. You need not disclose this or anything we discuss in our next meeting. It’ll complicate matters. This part of the story is just for you.”

Desta touched a finger to his lips, eyes planted on the ground. This request puzzled him, and he didn’t know where he would get paper harder than his father’s. The ink

and the writing pen he could borrow from Awoke or make them himself. But hard paper? Even regular paper was a luxury.

“Are you okay with this?” asked the man, studying Desta’s face.

“I guess . . .”

“As I said, you’ll figure it out,” said the man. “Unless you have more questions, with this, I bid you farewell.”

“No more questions. I am just so happy to meet my grandpa!” Desta said, trying not to worry about the challenge he faced.

“I am pleased as well, Desta. I look forward to our next meeting.”

FORTY-SEVEN

Desta didn't remember walking home after his long session with the cloud man—his grandfather! It was late in the day and the sun was already just inches from the mountain.

Desta's father, looking disconsolate, lay on the grass a few yards from the house, his great brown eyes downcast and listless. He was still far from well.

"Baba! Baba! I met your father!" blurted Desta, giddy with excitement.

Abraham gazed at his son, incredulous.

"Yes, yes, I did, I did . . . there is proof, too," said Desta, desperately.

"Calm down. . . What did you just say?"

"I said I just met your father," said Desta with restraint.

"Tell me," said Abraham, sitting up. "Did he fly from Lalibela, or descend from heaven?"

Ayénat, gathering dried barley nearby, caught Desta's bizarre report and frenzied antics. She dropped what she was doing and walked over.

"How in heaven did you meet my father?" said Abraham, gazing at his son in disbelief.

"He came to where I was sitting under the sholla tree and took me to his remains. Then he told me a lot of crazy stuff. Wait till you hear it!"

Ayénat drew closer like metal to a magnet. She stood behind Desta and listened.

"How can you say you met my father, and you know where his remains are?" said Abraham, shaking his head.

"Are you possessed by the Saytan again?" asked Ayénat, coming to look at his face.

"Oh Ma, not again," said Desta, nearly whining. His excitement fled. Now he felt like he was climbing a mountain. How could he tell his story with her accusing him again?

"Ma, can you go on with your business? I am talking to Baba."

"I want to know what you are talking about," she said.

"Go on, Desta. Tell me again what you saw," said Abraham.

"I will not unless Mama leaves us alone."

"Could you please go?" said the father, motioning Ayénat away with his hand. "I'll tell you the details later."

Ayénat left.

“Do you remember the man I met by the river?” said Desta.

“Yes, what about him?”

“He is your father.”

Abraham stared at him, shaking his head. “Now I, too, worry about you.”

“No, please, believe me . . . trust me . . . there is convincing proof. You will find out for yourself.”

Abraham still looked skeptical. “So, the man who appeared to you is the spirit of my father, and his body is elsewhere?”

“Exactly! That was your father’s spirit we met!”

“How did he come all the way from Kuakura, or wherever else he lived? Or are you saying he was here when he died?” Abraham’s tongue tangled as his emotions swirled through him. The slim chance of meeting his father seemed to slip away with his son’s fantastic tale.

“I’ll tell you all about that later. It’s a long story. Here is what he said to tell you. You need to gather the family so I can take all of you to his remains.”

“You have brought me news so incredible that I don’t know what to make of it. Can you and I go alone first to see what’s what before involving the rest of the family? After my failed journey, I would rather spare them another letdown.”

“Believe me. There will be no more letdowns. You and I cannot go alone; the whole family must see everything at one time. He promised definite proof that your father has been here this whole time.”

Abraham could not overcome Desta’s passionate appeal with logic. He was completely confounded.

“Let me ask you this,” Desta said.

“Yes?”

“Do you think Saba’s new baby was an accident, or was the man involved?”

“I have no reason to say it was an accident or say the man was not involved, especially with the outcome as he said it would be.”

“Then trust him. When I had that frightful dream where Saba was in labor all day and night, didn’t you say to have faith in him? You said he was testing my faith.”

Abraham smiled. “You make your points well, son. I’ll give you the benefit of my doubts. When can we make the trip?”

“As soon as everybody can come together.”

“We’ll let everyone know. Let’s plan for next Saturday.”

“I want Hibist and Enat included,” Desta said.

“We’ll do our best,” Abraham said, stroking his beard. “Let me ask you something else.”

Desta nodded, preoccupied with his father’s evasion about Hibist.

“Did that man—I mean my father’s spirit—say he will meet with you again?”

“Yes, next Sunday afternoon, but only he and I.”

“I have been waiting very long to meet my father. Can you arrange for me to meet him, too?”

“I asked him that, but he said no. He said he was revealed only to me for an important reason,” Desta said.

“Maybe you can plead for me when you see him again,” Abraham said.

“I’ll do my best. I would love for you two to meet.”

FORTY-EIGHT

Abraham was anxious and excited; his depression had lifted, and he was nearly his former self again. Meeting his father—in some form—now seemed within his grasp. He smiled for the first time in a week.

He had instructed Asse'ged and Damtew to summon Hibist and Enat for an urgent family visit having to do with their grandfather's remains and exhumation.

For four days, Desta had sorted all the details he could recollect for his talk. As his grandfather's spirit had said, it should be brief, but cover the essentials. He arranged the main points, then reorganized them again. He needed to be confident and forceful so that nobody would question their authenticity.

THE APPOINTED SATURDAY ARRIVED. The immediate family gathered; Hibist and Enat each arrived with their husbands after the sun cleared the eastern mountains. The only sibling missing was Tamirat; no one knew if he had received his invitation. Desta was happy to see Hibist and Enat but wished for Tamirat, too. With his priestly training, he could have blessed the proceedings.

It was early May, a month before the rainy season. Sporadic showers had already turned the valley moss green, and the trees had sprouted new leaves. The world seemed revived.

Slowly the crowd swelled outside: Saba with her baby, husband, and daughters; Teferra, Asse'ged, and Damtew with their wives; Enat and Hibist and their husbands; and Abraham, Ayénat, and Desta. These seventeen anxiously assembled to seek their grandfather's remains.

Hoping, like Desta, to meet their grandfather's spirit, they dressed appropriately to signal their grief. The sons and wives wore good clothes, but not white holiday apparel. Abraham wore brown breeches, a charcoal safari jacket, and his church gabi. Ayénat, too, wore Sunday clothes, a flowing gown with a plain neck, and an older girdle and shemma.

Desta wore his long cream shirt with side slits, speckled with dirt, under his gabi. He held his shepherd's staff.

Desta became rattled as a man with a white turban approached. It was Aba Yacob, the exorcist. “Who invited him?” Desta asked. It was not hard to guess. Probably Ayénat, but why? He wished someone would tie the man to a post and leave him behind. This mission was strictly for family.

As he neared, Ayénat explained that he would bless the site of the remains before their removal to drive off bad spirits nearby.

Some nodded their approval; others shook their heads. Desta relented; he would be vindicated when this priest learned the identity of the cloud man he tried to exorcise. Today, he thought, the priest’s ignorance would be revealed.

Abraham stepped forward.

“We are all here today because of an important development involving your grandfather—my father, lost to me some forty years ago. It’s a strange twist of fate, what we are about to explore. Given what we knew of his disappearance, it will be a shock to you, as it was for me, to learn that your grandfather has been here in our backwoods all this time. Assuming, I reiterate, that what we find is unequivocally linked to him.

“It was for all of these reasons I finally decided to make the journey to that holy land—to see if he had ever lived there. Even if I didn’t find him, at least I could finally settle the question and be at peace.

“As you know, I tried twice to go to Lalibela, each time batted down by birds—my self-appointed counselors. Although I fought them, even with my gun, they still won out. Their victory seemed evidence of an unbreakable curse and sent me over the edge. In my madness, I tried to kill myself with my own gun.”

Enat and Hibist’s hands flew to their chests. They gasped and gazed at their father. Their husbands shook their heads and stared in disbelief.

“Thanks to Providence, I walked away unscathed, but my spirit was broken. Now it appears that those birds aborted my journey for good reason—proving their wisdom beyond human ability.

“However, here I come to this inexplicable turn of events. You know that Saba was helped by Deb’tera Tayé, Desta, and this being we have called ‘the man’—or, as Desta prefers, ‘the cloud man.’ I won’t repeat what you know. It seems that this very man was your grandfather—or his spirit, apparently residing in this valley with us. His body—or rather, his remains—rest at the bottom of Saba’s old property. My Baba’s spirit revealed this to Desta last Saturday.”

Abraham paused, seeing the surprised faces. Some stared at Desta, hands over mouths. Others kept eyes on their father, grappling with what they had just heard. All chatter ceased when Abraham resumed his talk.

“Just like you, I first found the notion of Desta’s cloud man farfetched; I dismissed it. But Saba’s healthy, beautiful boy is here before us—a miracle, considering her past troubles, which Desta helped solve. And so here we are with Desta, poised to unravel another mystery. In light of Desta’s achievements, I agreed that all of us make this trip.”

Desta felt uneasy with all eyes now on him. He looked away to the mountains.

“Baba’s spirit requested that we all go together to his remains. Please ask no questions; I know only the bare facts from Desta, who is our chosen guide.

“If what we have heard is the truth, it’s akin to the biblical stories our priests share at church. How I would love for my sisters to be here, and more importantly my mother, who suffered the most. My sisters will learn of it in time, but Mama will never know what happened to her beloved husband.

“Thank you for coming. Now let’s follow Desta.”

Upon Abraham’s order, Desta turned and walked south along the fence. When he looked back, he noticed everyone, muted and thoughtful, shuffling behind in single file. When they reached the open field, the crowd spread into twos and threes. The men debated the likelihood of their grandfather’s coming all the way from Kuakura to die here when he was thought to be in Lalibela. The women whispered similarly among themselves.

Abraham, erect, dignified, and thoughtful, walked silently occasionally twirling his goatee, eyes fixed ahead. Ayénat, accompanied by Hibist and Enat, followed behind apprehensively. The priest Aba Yacob walked behind Ayénat.

Saba carried her baby on her back with a fire-red leather sling. Damtew stayed behind Melkam and Mulu. He walked meditatively with his dark, glum face downturned. Melkam whispered to Mulu from time to time. Asse’ged and Teferra walked side by side with their wives. The mood was solemn and tense.

As they strode down the field outside the grove of acacia trees, Desta felt strange having so many adults follow him, but he also felt a new sense of importance. For the first time, he was someone to be heard and respected. Some even seemed to fear him. That he could commune with the spirit world meant he was no longer the little Desta they had known.

At the bottom of the field, Desta paused to remember the way across the creek. He recognized a gray rock at its bank, the rock he had grabbed as he climbed with the

cloud man. With this reference point, he quickly found the animal track across the creek. Everyone followed.

After passing the stream and a thicket of trees, they emerged on the northernmost border of Saba's old property. Desta instructed everyone to walk single file to avoid the danger of thorns. He led the crowd along the eastern edge of the field bordering a row of tall trees and blackberry and kaga bushes. Once they reached the dead acacia tree, he stopped.

"This is it!" he said, turning around.

Everybody looked around, trying to see what "it" was. Most were still in a long line. They saw nothing.

Desta pointed out the ravine below to his father. Abraham had the advantage of height to see clear down past the grass, cattails, and dried weeds before them. He closed his eyes, then opened them to confirm what he saw.

Desta could see quite a bit. When he came here with the spirit, the area was covered with grass, but now, looking closely, he could see bones.

Desta didn't know what to think. His dreams of meeting his grandfather and telling him about touching the sky, were dashed. He saw what seemed like merely a pile of pointless, sun-bleached wood.

His father motioned the family forward. Some were already at the edge. The women gasped. Some teared up, shaking their heads. Hibist and Enat openly cried. The men looked on, showing no emotion.

"How do we know these are not wild boar bones?" Damtew asked Asse'ged, loud enough for most to hear. "There used to be lots of them around here."

"Boar bones don't look like human remains," said Teferra, staring into the ravine. "That looks like a human skeleton to me."

Abraham called Aba Yacob to bless the site before anyone descended.

The priest came forward and said his prayers, cutting the air before him four ways with his silver cross. Turning to Abraham, he said, "What proof do you have of whose skeleton it is?"

"There is proof," said Abraham. "Desta, come. Tell us."

The crowd formed a crescent with Desta, Abraham, and Aba Yacob at the center.

Summoning all his courage, Desta said:

"Last Sunday afternoon, I saw the cloud man again. It was hot; I was sitting in the shade of the sholla tree, watching the animals and thinking of Baba's sadness for his failed trip. I had been sad myself, not only for my loss, but also to see Baba that way. I prayed to God to help Baba find a way to get to Lalibela to bring Grandpa home.

“Then, out of thin air, that man appeared right in front of me, and I stood up in fear. He reassured me and asked if I would like to meet my grandfather. I said yes, but I couldn’t go to Lalibela by myself. I asked if he would take Baba instead.

“He said that Grandpa was not in Lalibela, that he was near here, and he would take me to him. At first, I thought he spoke nonsense, because we all knew that Grandpa must be far away. But knowing the power of the man, I thought maybe he had brought Grandpa from Lalibela and hidden him in the woods to surprise all of us. So, I said, ‘Yes, I’d like to meet him.’

“He brought me to this exact spot and said that my grandfather is here behind the bushes and wanted all the children to come and meet him at the same time. He said to tell Baba to arrange it. Afterwards, we went back to the sholla tree where we sat together. He told me about Grandpa, and that his bones that were here. He described why he came here from Kuakura and how, why, and by whom he was killed. It’s a long story to repeat now. But to summarize it, Grandpa made the long journey here to retrieve our family coin stolen by a man named Adamu, Grandma Hirute’s cousin. He retrieved the coin after bribing Adamu’s daughter, who knew where it was hidden.

“Unfortunately, Adamu arrived before Grandpa left. When he departed, Adamu found the coin missing, and he and his brother Kindé went after Grandpa. Grandpa ran, but they caught up to him.”

Desta proceeded to tell them how his grandpa swallowed the coin and how they killed him and disposed of his body. He told them how his grandfather’s spirit had hidden the remains from the attackers, and that the spirit had protected them for forty-two years.

Desta then explained that the person he had first met with Deb’tera Tayé was the same spirit, and that the coin and one other thing were proof the remains were his.

All eyes were on him, and much talk ensued when he finished. The older children and parents found it hard to believe that Adamu and Kindé, whom they knew well, committed such a heinous act. Both were long dead. Abraham reminded them that they were not there to discuss the killers, but rather to confirm the identity of the bones in the ravine.

The priest urged Abraham to search the ravine for the clues Desta mentioned.

With a heavy stick, Asse’ged and Dامتew beat the shrubs and vines from the ledge so that Abraham could descend safely. He climbed down carefully, followed by Asse’ged, who brought a pick.

The bones were covered with debris washed down from higher ground. The skull

reposed against a dirt-specked stone by a tuft of tall grass. The eye sockets, packed with dust and sand, stared blankly at the sky. The ribcage was partly obscured, and the extremities were loosely strewn.

Abraham began collecting the bones one by one and handing them to Asse'ged, who put them in a pile. During this gruesome and laborious process, Abraham found a bone that piqued his interest. The image floated like a dream. It was his father's hand with a hole in the palm. As a boy, when he sat with his father, he'd put his fingers or small objects through the opening.

"This must be one of the clues," he said, raising it to the crowd that now formed a wall at the rim of the ravine. "I remember this hole in my father's hand like it was yesterday," he said as he turned it one way and the other, inspecting it.

He tentatively dug around the ribcage with the pick and dislodged it from the mass of material that held it in place. He shook the dirt off and handed it to Asse'ged, who gingerly laid it alongside the piled bones.

Slowly the pile grew to a small mound that looked more like kindling than the remnants of a human being. Although Abraham was satisfied that he had identified the bones, he still sought the second clue.

For a long time, he carefully knocked off dirt with the pick and broke it up with a stone, but nothing turned up. Asse'ged sifted through the matter as his father handed it over, brushing off grit in a futile search for anything meaningful.

Then, suddenly, Desta cried out from the edge of the ravine, pointing. "There's something shiny! Look! Do you see it?"

Abraham sifted the dirt but found nothing. Desta threw a string of pebbles until one landed near the object. Abraham cradled it and removed the dirt. He rubbed it with the hem of his gabi, then spat on it and rubbed some more. "Oh, my Lord," he exclaimed, "It's our coin of magic and fortune!" He studied one side and then the other, hands shaking. "This is our coin of fortune! My God . . . This is the most precious thing in our family! Here it is!"

All stared at the small object from which specks of light flew as Abraham turned it over and over, inspecting it.

"This is as true as the hole in my father's hand. I have no doubt that these remains are my father's." He stared at the coin, shaking his head. Tears flowed down his cheeks as memories engulfed him. He remembered his mother's words so long ago. He wiped the tears with the back of his hand, placed the coin in his pocket, and said, "I'll tell you more about this, but let me finish gathering the bones."

As he dug and cleared debris, he found the bones of his father's feet. "Look at the

arches. They are exactly like mine; they are my father's, just as I remember them." Mixed in the dirt were also bits of shredded, mud-caked cotton cloth that crumbled into dust at Abraham's touch.

He gathered every bit of bone he could find and passed them all carefully to Asse'ged before climbing out of the gulch with Teferra and Asse'ged's help.

He stood at the ledge and studied the chasm that had held his father for forty-two years. "Let's go home. We will bury the bones tomorrow," he said.

They formed a single line and went the way they had come with Abraham, Desta, and Hibist at the rear. Hibist held her father's hand and Desta's.

The mood was solemn. Abraham thought of the killers and imagined the struggle by the pit. He still couldn't quite believe they were capable of such an act. He had called them Uncle. They were the relatives whom his family had come to live near. He had such fond memories of them. How could he hate them? What proof did he have of their crime? Only the account of his father's spirit that was told to Desta. A court would call it hearsay.

As they returned home, the men who knew the killers defended them. Others believed they were capable of murder if it involved a great fortune. Most of the women were quiet.

They gathered outside the home and discussed funeral arrangements and what to say to the valley folk when the funeral was broadcast from the mountain.

Since most in the valley thought Abraham's father to be long dead, the family agreed it best to avoid confusion and simply say, "We have had a death in Abraham's family and would like the community to attend the funeral."

Asse'ged and Yihoon would go up the western and eastern mountains, respectively, and alternately blow a horn three times, signaling the news in full voice.

The funeral would take place in a week and a half, on Wednesday, May 21st. In the meantime, the family would notify friends and relatives, particularly Abraham's sisters, and make preparations. In their stunned state, it seemed an overwhelming task.

FORTY-NINE

On the appointed Sunday, Desta sat on his rock under the sholla tree, awaiting his grandfather's spirit. Chin resting on folded knees, eyes fixed on the dead grass, he thought about their reunion, and the writing tools and the coin box he had been told to bring.

Because Damtew had destroyed his supplies, Desta borrowed ink and pen from his cousin, Awoke. The horn cup, wooden board, and hard paper—hopefully the right kind—he had found at home.

Of all the things the cloud man asked him to bring, the paper had been the most challenging. Deb'tera Tayé's scroll was a shaved, smoothed goatskin, so he'd settled on that. Desta had also seen Tamirat make a scroll from goatskin, which was hard and durable. As luck would have it, there was a forgotten goatskin from Hibist's wedding in the house, rolled and stored between the granary and the living room bamboo partition, gathering dust.

Desta cut fourteen inches by seven from the skin and brought it with him, along with the contents of his leather pouch. He was unable to shave the skin and hoped that, for the spirit's purpose, it would suffice.

Desta anxiously scanned the landscape. The cattle and horses were scattered and grazing, and the goats foraged by the acacia trees in the south field along the creek bordering Saba's old farm.

It was midday when his grandfather's tall spirit materialized before him. Startled, Desta jumped up, but managed to restrain himself.

"You are still not comfortable with me?" the cloud man asked with a smile in a soft voice that seemed to come from far behind him. His mouth moved almost mechanically.

"I expected to see you from afar. I am not used to your appearing right in front of me."

"I'm sorry. One can arrive in many different ways in my dimension," the cloud man said with a grin.

Desta stared, not knowing how to reply.

"Did you bring everything I asked?"

"Yes. They are all here," Desta said, pointing to his collection.

“Good! I know the family has retrieved my remains and found the coin. Did you see it?”

“Just briefly. It still had dirt on it. Father said I’ll see more of it after the funeral.”

“You’ve seen it before. Perhaps you don’t remember.”

Desta was puzzled. He was about to ask where and how when the man continued. “Before we begin, shall we take a walk?”

Desta stared at the man, unsure if he should ask him where. “Will it be far?” he asked.

“No, just a leisurely walk in the field. I have always wanted to do this with my grandchildren.”

Desta was touched. “Sure, I will go with you,” he said, happily.

From the sholla tree, they turned south and walked side by side. To Desta’s surprise, his grandfather’s spirit strode like his father, his gait rhythmic, graceful, and calculated. His father never simply walked; his body—erect, stately, and relaxed—made a statement in space.

Although the spirit could cover great distances, he took one stride to Desta’s two or three. His face was thoughtful, as if weighing what to share with Desta.

Beneath their feet, the seared, golden grass was momentarily aglow with sun that seeped through a thin, fluffy layer of clouds. The valley lay serenely, punctuated by the sporadic crack of shepherds’ whips in the distant hills and a game the wind played with a waterfall high in the Davola River. Intermittently, the breeze restrained the water’s free fall, and then released it.

“May I rest my hand on your shoulder?” the spirit asked.

Desta tightened his lips and gave a sideways glance at his companion. The cloud man had a warm, enveloping presence, not the sort one should fear. “I don’t mind,” Desta said, finally.

When the cloud man extended his hand, Desta didn’t feel its touch so much as the comforting weight of its presence.

“I want to share a story with you,” he began, “about a man and a woman—our ancestors—and how the coin connects to them. I didn’t know it when my soul was one with my flesh. It was revealed to me in the past forty-two years while roaming this valley.

“The woman was called Tashere and the man was King Solomon. He was from a place called Israel, and she from Egypt. Very beautiful, Tashere was the daughter of King Shoshenq. Solomon, son of David, was wealthy and wise. He wrote of many things and built the first Temple, a church for God and a place where an important document called the Ark of the Covenant was kept.

“Tashere and Solomon met, fell in love, and married. They had two girls, Basemath and Taphath.”

Desta, who had been watching the animals, stopped. “The cows seem agitated. They keep looking at us. I wonder if they are afraid of you,” Desta said.

“I wonder why,” said the man, smiling.

They kept walking. Some small animals fled. The bulls stayed put but fixed their eyes on the man, watching his every movement.

“These animals really are afraid of you, just like the horses at our house two years ago. How come?” Desta asked.

“That is for my protection. If they were not, I would have long since been eaten by a hyena or leopard, considering how long I’ve lived in the forest,” the man said.

“Yeah, right,” Desta laughed, trying to imagine a hyena or leopard eating a cloud.

“I know what you are thinking. . . .” said the man. “Joking aside, animals perceive differently from humans. That is why they see me, but people don’t.”

The cloud man fell silent when they reached the acacia grove where the goats were busy feeding. A few came toward them, which surprised Desta. This never happened when he was alone. He was intrigued.

“It seems that they don’t fear you,” Desta said with a smile.

“But they should,” the cloud man said with a chuckle. “They are my victims.”

Desta narrowed his eyes, mystified.

“Let’s walk south a little more,” the cloud man continued. “I’d like to see one last time the place where my remains rested for so long.”

As they headed down the field toward the familiar row of bushes and rocks, Desta saw something that astonished him. “Who planted that eucalyptus tree?” he asked. It was the only one of its kind, supported by two stout sticks. The top of its slender trunk swayed, and its dusty white leaves rustled in the wind. Desta gazed at the young tree intensely. “Why here and why just one? Father never mentioned it! He planted these trees mostly around our house.”

The cloud man looked toward the resting place of his remains. He waited for his grandson to finish his thoughts. “That was planted by Damtew in memory of Habté,” he said at last. “This is where his beloved goat was killed—sacrificed.”

“Damtew? Really?” Desta was incredulous.

“You see, he views life as a cycle. When one is finished, another must take its place and perpetuate it, although the form may be different.”

“Wow! I never knew Damtew was that thoughtful . . . or smart!”

“He is thoughtful and intelligent—but lacks the ability to express himself . . . and he has a dark side.”

“So, unlike Father, who perpetuated your memory through his dogs, Dantew planted something more permanent.” Desta gazed at the tree.

“I am surprised this is the first you’ve seen it. It has been here since the last rainy season.”

“I have bad memories of this place. I have avoided coming here.”

“I understand. Now let’s get back to your favorite spot, and the project I have in mind.”

“Okay,” Desta said hesitantly. They walked quietly, giving him time to think about King Solomon and connect the story to his own feelings. It fascinated him. He wondered where that place, Israel, was. What he had known before about God and Israel made him think it was in the sky. When his father prayed during heavy storms, he often gazed upward, beseeching the God of Israel, whom Desta assumed must live somewhere beyond the blue dome above.

Desta was very happy being with his grandfather’s spirit. The man seemed to transmit so much love without words: his presence, the sound of his voice, his storytelling, and the way his hand lay softly on Desta’s shoulder. He wished his grandfather had always been in his life. He wished he could wrap his arms around him as he had never done with his own parents, who were always too busy or distant. Now he grasped why he, like his father, had longed for his grandfather all these years and why he, too, had grieved after his father’s failed trip to Lalibela. He longed to be with someone who loved him.

Desta thought that his grandfather also must have wanted love all these years. For the first time, he felt the full meaning of the word, the way Hibist once described it to him. “Love is when someone really, really adores you,” she said.

Once they sat under the sholla tree, the cloud man continued. “To come back to my story,” the man said, “one day Tashere asked her wise husband to do something special for their two daughters, Basemath and Taphath, who were eight and ten years old, respectively.

When he asked her what she wanted, she said, ‘something more lasting’—something of his that could be passed down to their descendants. Solomon scratched his head and said, ‘They have me in them already. They are my children, and yours. What can I give them that is more lasting than what they already have?’

“Tashere, of course, was not surprised by this clever answer, nor was she satisfied. ‘I mean your wisdom, your ability to acquire wealth, to create things, to write,

to communicate with animals, and your gift with magic—all the things that make you who you are.’

“Ahh, well, to bequeath such things we must devise a means by which I can transfer not only what I know—or as you say, makes me who I am—but also precise instructions to lead a good, productive, balanced, and happy life,’ Solomon replied.

“Tashere wanted to record these things on tablets of clay, the only material used like paper at that time. She and Solomon selected 21 things—three sets of seven—to be practiced or recited each day of the week, and two sets of seven words to be represented by the channels on opposing sides of the same object. The additional seven words would be written in the spaces between the channels on one side, while the interspaces on the other side would contain a greeting for their descendants, all in ancient Hebrew.”

The cloud man paused when he noticed Desta had looked away. “Is all this too much for you?”

“No. I just wondered what ancient Hebrew writing looks like,” Desta said.

“You will get to see it on the coin, but let me continue. The couple had a seven-sided clay disk made with seven tracks or channels etched on each side, representing useful concepts for their descendants. The messages would be accompanied by a separate document, a small rectangular clay tablet that explained what each channel meant and how to apply it.

“Solomon prayed for three weeks, one week for each set of seven, asking God to bless the disks and the messages they carried. Along with his prayers, he encoded his own wishes in each message attached to the channels. Those who properly use the channels and recited the attributes would gain greater rewards from the disk and the messages it contained.

“Tashere gave these objects to her children on their thirteenth birthdays. But when Tashere’s father, Shoshenq, learned about the clay disks and tablets, he had them sent to Egypt to be transferred onto something more durable. He ordered the man who made the pharaoh’s gold bracelets to make two gold disks and two rectangular gold tablets and transfer all the lines and words from the clay objects onto the gold pieces. Shoshenq, with permission from Tashere and King Solomon, altered the shape of the disks from straight edges to uniformly circular boundaries, giving them movement like his chariot wheels and mimicking the sun. The pharaoh also had two elaborately illustrated sandalwood boxes made to house the coins. The pharaoh then had the gleaming disks and tablets shipped back to their owners.

“When they came of age, Basemath married a young man named Ahimaaz,

and Haptaph married a gentleman called Abinadab. Both men worked as Solomon's governors. Haptaph and Abinadab named their first son Joshua. When the boy turned thirteen, Tashere asked the couple if they would send Joshua, her first grandson, to her father's home in Egypt. She hoped her father would make him pharaoh—or leader—of that country.

“When Joshua came to live with his great-grandfather in Egypt, waiting for the destiny his grandmother planned for him, he met a beautiful Ethiopian girl named Bisrat. Her father, a master craftsman and architect, designed buildings and statues for the pharaoh. When Joshua came of age, he married the Ethiopian girl.”

“Later, Tashere had one more request for Taphath and Abinadab to fulfill: to pass the gold disk and tablet to Joshua. She had hoped the messages, wisdom, and magic her husband had imbued in the metal disk and stone tablet would be useful to her grandson, who was now far away from home. The couple did as requested. The same request was also made of Basemath.

“The coin found with my remains is the same coin that came down through hundreds of generations in accordance with Solomon's and Tashere's wishes. Unfortunately, the tablet along with a very important stone plaque that predicts the future benefits of the two coins after they unite and become one, was lost along the way. There is a fascinating story behind this coin box, too, which I'll tell you next time.”

The cloud man paused again, seeing that his companion seemed overwhelmed. Desta, for his part, was thoroughly confused, but for now, being with his grandfather's spirit was enough.

“Don't worry, in time all this will make sense,” the spirit said. “I wanted to leave you with this valuable information that no one has known for a long, long time.”

When they reached the sholla tree, they found the writing implements Desta had brought. Desta was tired, and the spirit thought it best to end the visit. The afternoon sun was descending on the blue roof above them. Desta, hungry and thirsty, welcomed the idea.

“Let's meet tomorrow at the same time. I have important details to share. Bring your writing tools once more,” said the man as he dissolved into thin air.

That evening when Desta got home, the family's funeral preparations were a blur. His mind reeled from the spirit's baffling story. And he couldn't get over the tree Damtew had planted in memory of Habté, or the love he still had for the dead animal.

FIFTY

The following day, a little before noon, Desta patiently awaited his grandfather on the granite slab under the sholla tree. He didn't watch for him; he'd come to expect his sudden appearances. The things he was told to bring were by his side.

Grandfather's spirit arrived in his usual way. After a bow, a smile, and a cheerful greeting, the spirit, in a business-like manner, instructed Desta to take out the ancient wooden box and his writing things. Desta quickly obeyed and knelt next to the slab, eager for what his companion had in store for him. The cloud man sat next to him and had him place the board on the slab and the goatskin, hair side down, on top of it.

"First," said the spirit, "We will draw concentric circles using the horn cup." With his guidance, Desta placed the top of the cup on the upper part of the skin and traced a circle with his bamboo pen. He then turned the cup right side up and traced another, smaller circle inside the first, then drew an identical set of concentric circles below them.

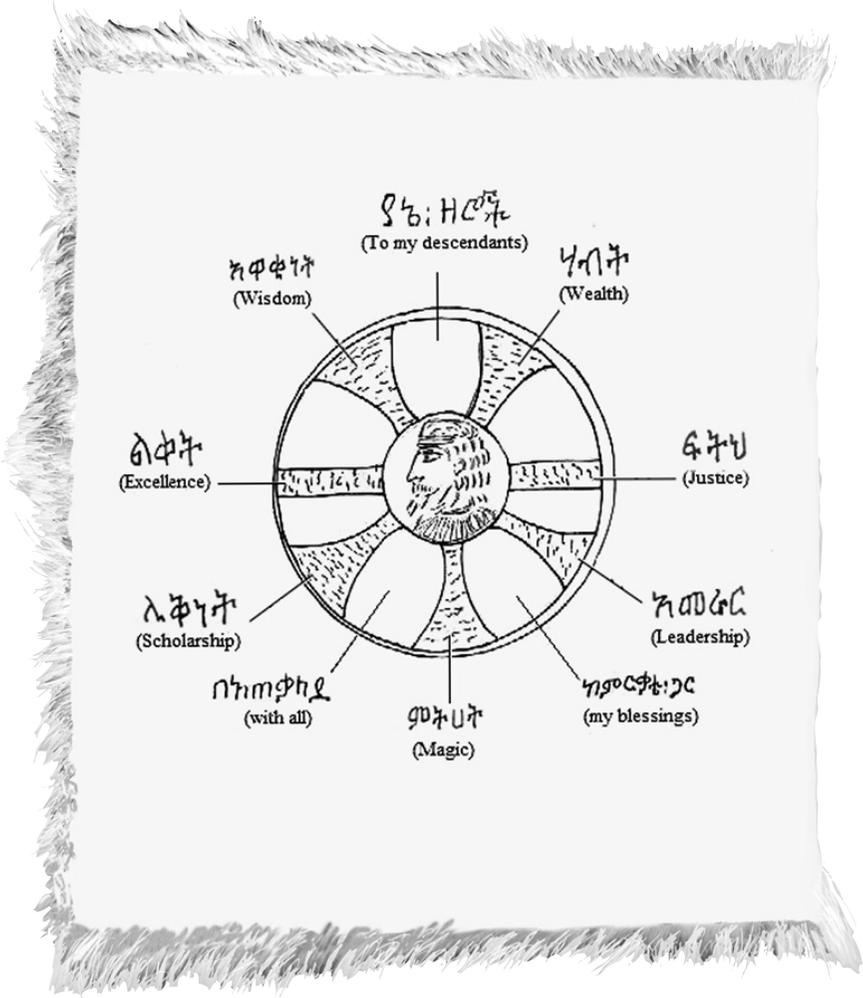
Carefully, Desta sketched channels in each set of circles, beginning from the far edge of the inner circles to the border of the bigger ones, the channels expanding in volume as they ran to the outer ring. Two straight channels that aligned with each other were also drawn in.

Desta's marks were rough and crooked, but to his amazement the spirit, with a touch of his index finger, smoothed the lines and curves. Next, the cloud man had him draw two images in the inner circles: the first, a man's face, and the second, a horse configured in a fetal curl, its power and exuberance constrained. Desta didn't know how to draw these and said so.

To Desta's relief, the man took the pen and drew the objects with great speed and accuracy. From family accounts, Desta knew that his grandpa was not only educated, but also an accomplished artist and horseman. He watched with avid interest.

Subsequently, with a beautiful hand his grandfather inscribed around the outer circle the attributes of each channel. "These assignments originally were on a separate document, lost a long time ago," he explained. "For many generations, those who possessed the coin didn't know what these channels signified. They were revealed to me these past forty-two years: one every seven years, except for the two along the straight

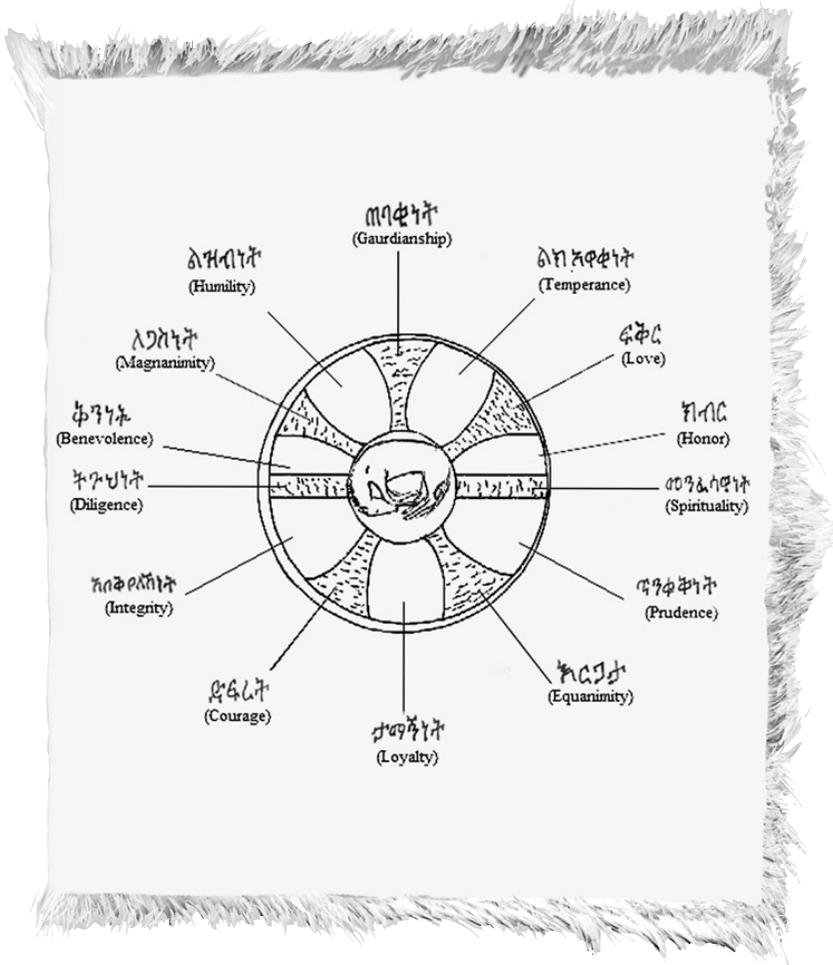
channels, which I learned of only recently. The fanning of these conduits meant that more will come to the coin’s recipient in due time.”



Finally, he inscribed the legend in the interspaces of the channels on the coin face, and more words in the same spaces on its reverse. “These you’ll see in the coin itself, although some may be worn and faded. There, they are written in ancient Hebrew, but I have translated them here into Amharic for you.”

As the cloud man worked, he intermittently glanced at his grandson. Desta was dazzled by the cloud man’s dexterity and knowledge. Having learned not to ask many questions, Desta watched and listened in silence. This task done, the man studied his work from different angles, modifying details here and there.

“When the original clay version was designed, Solomon wanted an image of his temple in the center of the coins, but Tashere objected. For the children and their descendents, she thought that his image would be more meaningful, and he complied. Nobody, of course, knew if this was an accurate portrait of Solomon or just the artist’s creation.”



The man studied the coin face again, made minor changes, and seemed satisfied. He then stared at the drawing on its other side. “The horse was special to Solomon,” he said. “He had 12,000 of them, against his religion’s dictates. He wanted its image on the coin because the horse symbolized intelligence, courage, speed, power, virility, generosity, and grace. In doing so, he hoped his descendants would appreciate all that this animal

represented.” The cloud man gazed at the image of the horse for a long time. “I wonder if this was why I loved horses and became a fierce equestrian,” he said thoughtfully.

“Can you guess why Solomon had the horse drawn in a curl?” he asked Desta.

Desta shook his head.

“So that his descendants would realize that every child born to them has the power to achieve all those things inscribed and encoded on the coin.”

Desta studied the image.

Finally, the man lifted the goatskin and held it farther from Desta, first one side, then the other. “Do you like it?” he asked.

“Yes, very much. It’s strange; the images look familiar. I swear I have seen them before, but I don’t know where,” Desta said as he studied them. “And I didn’t get a good look at the excavated coin.”

“You’re right, son. You received this coin as a birthday gift in your dream the night you turned seven. You also saw it on the dabo your mother baked for your rite of passage.”

Desta studied the drawings some more. “Yes, that’s it. Now I remember the dream and special dabo my mother made. Who arranged these things?”

“I did,” the cloud man said. “Because your family had no plans to celebrate your birthday, I arranged that you be given the coin in your dream.” He smiled faintly. “So was the dabo—to mark your event and to give your father a symbolic present. I recall he was particularly wistful for the coin and me that day.”

“In my dream, the coin was beautiful, but it was gone when I woke. I was so disappointed,” Desta recounted.

“In due time you’ll receive the real thing, but I want you to remember that the words here on the outside are not on the coin itself,” said the man, pointing to the outer drawings. “You need to keep this skin with the coin at all times. It will serve as a reference.”

To Desta, the fact that this skin—from a goat killed for Hibist’s Milash—wedding return—would now accompany the coin in his permanent possession was a happy coincidence. This hide would be an enduring reminder of his beloved sister.

“The recipients of the coin are meant to apply these messages in their daily lives and share them with their family,” explained the cloud man. “To manifest the coin’s blessings, you must run your fingers over the channels. Do this just before bed and concentrate all your thoughts and energy on what you wish to be manifested. After a while, the mere act of imagining what you seriously desire will actualize it—as long as you work hard at what you wish for.

“Of all the channels, the one about magic is most versatile and, if used properly,

the most potent for the recipient. Many uncommon things can happen, and wishes fulfilled, with this channel. A person can connect to desired objects and outcomes through the air, communicate with animals, read people's minds, and perceive their actions from afar . . . and many more powers," said the man.

With his elbow planted on the slab and his head propped on his hand, Desta watched the cloud man attentively. He wished he'd had the coin a long time ago to communicate with his animal friends and see into the heads and hearts of his family, particularly Damtew.

"Let's take a break now," said the cloud man, placing the pen next to the goat-skin. "I've some important information to share when we return." He turned and spread his amorphous body, only his neck and head showing. His hands disappeared into the puffy, pale mass. Desta turned and stared toward the eastern mountains, as did his companion.

"It looks as if it will rain later," said the cloud man, gesturing toward the dark gray clouds above the mountains.

"Baba will be happy. He wants Damtew and Asse'ged to till the potato field. The rain will make it easier," said Desta.

"You know what, Desta?" the cloud man asked, turning to him.

Desta turned and looked at the cloud man.

"There are things in life that you cannot do over again. One of them is life itself."

Desta's eyes narrowed, puzzled.

"I noticed you were hurt by Damtew's devotion to his goat. I saw your forlorn face as you studied the eucalyptus tree that he planted in memory of Habté. Did you wonder why he so loved his goat, but not you?"

Desta nodded, pursing his lips.

"I don't think your brother withheld love from you; he didn't have it in him to give. You see, he was shown little love growing up. Your father had a poor example, as I was taken from him as a child. He was saddled with anger for that—and still struggles with it today. This has affected all your brothers, and you, for that matter. I believe that is why they are unaffectionate toward you.

"The kind of love Damtew showed his goat was instinctive, from deep in his heart. With Habté, he felt unconditional love for the first time. And so, he was devastated when it was killed. Afterward, he perpetuated that love in the tree he planted. I hope knowing this helps you feel better about your brother and the rest of your family."

Desta listened attentively.

"Did you follow what I said?" asked the man, staring at Desta.

“I did, but it will not change how I feel about my brother.”

“I hope it will, in time, now that you understand him better. But let’s get back to our goatskin. I have more things to share before we part.” The cloud man turned to the slab and picked up the pen. “I planned to explain in detail the words attached to each channel, but that takes a long time. In the years to come, you should not only recite the words and finger their attributed channels, but also study them. Start with love and the channel it’s connected to. I will add a few more words of my own to help you.” He began jotting down words on the lower margin while calling out their meaning.

“Obedience—Happily obey your parents or anyone in authority without compromising your own integrity or dignity.

“Kindness—Be helpful and well-meaning to your family and others.

“Gratitude—Be thankful, and show appreciation for kindness extended to you.

“Impartiality—Always be fair and honest in all your dealings.

“Responsibility—Be accountable for your actions.

“Trustworthiness—Always be reliable and honest, sound bases for all relationships.

“Patience—Have it in you to withstand delay, hardship, and pain. Don’t show anger or disappointment. Anger is for animals that can’t express how they feel. We humans have language to describe our feelings without heated emotion.” The man picked up the goatskin and studied its words and illustrations.

Desta studied them as well, a dreamy look on his face. “May I ask a question?”

“Please do.”

“Why are there seven channels?”

“The number seven had special significance for Solomon,” the cloud man began. “For one, it took seven years to build his temple. There are seven days to the week. God created the earth, mankind, and the animals in six days and rested on the seventh. There are seven heavens and seven angels.

There are seven visible colors in the rainbow. It’s for these reasons, son, why seven is the symbol of perfection. Even the brown earth combines the pigments of the seven natural colors. I confirmed this in my days as an artist.

“There have been seven times one hundred twenty-three attempts to plunder the family treasure. Each time, the theft was either foiled or the treasure was retrieved. This is because the coins are vested with powers that will always ensure their return to the family.”

“In our family, seven or its multiples has often signified a lucky outcome, as we are connected to the seven channels in the coin. You were born just after seven months in the womb. You’re the seventh child in the family. By one form of calendar, you were

born on January 7, 1949. Forty-nine is seven added seven times. This figure is the highest number to which seven could ever duplicate itself—the ultimate perfect state. By our calendar, you were born December 29th in 1941. However, while the other calendar stays the same (1949) through the year, our calendar becomes 1942 after our new year in September. Forty-two is seven added six times.

I think these combinations of events make you an unusual child with an unusual future—all favorable, of course.

“In fact, if we look closely, everything that has happened to me, your father, and you—the whole family for that matter—is connected to the number seven.

“Your inability to hear and speak ended on your first birthday. This was on Saturday—the seventh day of the week, on the seventh day of the month in January 1950, by the other calendar. Your seventh birthday in 1956 fell on the seventh day of the week. It was early in the morning on this day you received the coin—in your dream. I was revealed to you on the fourteenth, exactly a week later. When your birthday coincides with the seventh day of the week, expect great outcomes. Watch for these events!

“To give you more background, Solomon had the clay disks created 2,800 years ago. This number is seven added four hundred times. Your father was seven when I was killed at age twenty-eight—seven added four times. I waited thirty-three years until you were born and waited seven more until you could receive the coin, albeit in a dream.

“My forty years in the wilderness before I was revealed to my family is in itself significant. I waited two more years while you prepared—were tested—through hardship and challenges, bringing my stay here to forty-two years, a multiple of seven. During this time, seven lives were sacrificed in the name of the coin—my own life and the lives of six goats, including Habté’s, one every seven years since my murder. My remains will be buried, and I will leave here on May 21, another multiple of seven,” the cloud man said when he noticed Desta’s wide eyes.

“You mean to say that Habté was not killed by an animal?”

“No, I had him sacrificed exactly two months before the anniversary of my murder,” said the spirit.

“Why? Didn’t you know how I would suffer as a result?” Desta was upset. How could his beloved grandfather let that happen to him?

“Yes, I did. I have this feeling that everything that has happened to us—three generations of men—was set in motion from the moment the coin was stolen from me by Adamu. The events that unfolded may have been an encoded message in the coin from the very beginning. These occurrences unfolded too perfectly to be mere coincidence.

“How else can we explain that I was murdered by my wife’s cousins and that she forsook her home and started anew here—near the same relatives—in the very place where I was killed? What followed was equally remarkable.

“After your father grew up and married, he moved across the Davola River, settling near the place where my bones were strewn. Later still, Saba and her family abandoned their former home in Goota for land very close to my remains. They had not been uncomfortable where they lived before they came to be near the family, but for the story to unravel, they became one more link in the chain.

“Although the mistreatment you received may not be uncommon, yours was compounded because you were an inquisitive, gifted child, and your family was unable to deal with the challenges you posed. You are the critical link that brings the family saga to conclusion, frees me from my responsibility for the coin, and finally extricates me from this foreboding place. It seems that all these things were directed by a force beyond our understanding, by something in the coin, perhaps.”

Desta shook his head, unable to fully comprehend what the cloud man was saying. “That tree Damtew planted in memory of Habté—I still can’t get over it. He had so much love in him, but none for me.”

“Yes, by planting a tree for Habté, he immortalized his love for the goat, the same love he denied you. Unfortunately, the love you had for him—for most of your family—was marked by your physical and emotional scars. I am afraid these may affect you later in life, but just as you have risen above previous difficulties, you have it in you to overcome future hardships.

“You asked me earlier why I had Damtew’s goat sacrificed, knowing what Damtew would do to you. Not only did I know what would occur then, but I have also known all the things that happened to you since you were born—as you may have surmised by now. You see, just as one observes a lion stalk an antelope, I watched, knowing that it is in the nature of things that, for one to survive, another must be sacrificed. Looking at it in reverse, for you to survive the hardships and challenges ahead, you had to endure adversity with your family as a boy. These tests will be the bedrock of your future strength. With all that has happened to you here, if and when you leave this place, you will have little desire to return, no matter the struggles you face, in pursuit of the coin and your own destiny.”

Desta was perplexed. He still didn’t understand why the cloud man had Habté sacrificed. He didn’t understand all these other things, either: his future struggles, the challenges and hardships, and going out in the world. He was doubly baffled. Desta

wanted him to explain, but Desta's mind was already bursting at the seams. He looked away and tried to make sense of what he'd heard.

"Let me clarify," the cloud man continued. "You were robbed of your childhood by a family that never understood you, that saw you as an aberration. Fearing you were possessed by a Saytan, your mother subjected you to a horrid water treatment to drive bad spirits from your body. Your father beat you to make you more dutiful. Your brothers sought revenge for their lost land. I believe all these things happened to you for a reason. It is the nature of things. You must accept what comes with serenity and move on.

"Magnanimity is one attribute of the coin. It means having nobility of spirit, being able to forgive those who have wronged you. This is good for you to work with—after love. In order to move forward with your life, you must purge your bad memories. That will free your mind for the new things that will fill it. You must forgive the people who have hurt you—for your own good, not theirs—but never forget what happened, as it is a lesson for the future. If forgotten, these things are bound to be repeated."

Desta nodded firmly, as if to concur.

Momentarily, the man regarded his grandson with a smile and said, "You may want to share this advice with your father. He needs to learn to forgive, too."

To Desta, forgiving Damtew and all the others who had mistreated him seemed like the worst thing he could do. How could he?

He stared at his grandfather's spirit, thinking he would never forgive himself if he pardoned his brother.

"Think about it. You don't have to decide now," said the cloud man to a pensive Desta. Then he turned and looked at the shadow of the mountain draping the eastern foothills.

"I am sorry to see the day getting on so quickly. There is this important coin box I have not yet told you about. There is an even more fascinating story about you behind it—more so than the coin.

"Let's meet tomorrow one more time," said the spirit man.

Desta was surprised by the sudden announcement. "Okay," he said. "Should I bring my writing things?"

"No, just the goatskin," said the man.

Desta watched the man's fluid body rise. Within seconds, he dissolved into the air.

FIFTY-ONE

With his goatskin spread before him next to the coin box, Desta waited for the cloud man. It was high noon, and just as he was trying to be calm, the cloud man suddenly revealed himself, startling Desta once again. The man grinned.

From his bosom, the cloud man produced a leathery bark with a gooey, amber resin on it, and placed it next to the goatskin. Then came two bundles of three and four agam thorns, respectively, each bound with string, that he also placed on the rock slab. “Do you have any questions before I share the story of the coin box?” the cloud man asked.

Desta hesitated, distracted by the man’s things, then blurted, “I still have not gone to the mountaintop to touch the sky. Can you help me?”

“You have to be patient, son. You’re destined to make the trip when the time comes. If it were my choice, I wouldn’t have you go,” said the cloud man, looking away.

Desta was surprised by the man’s cheerless answer. “Why not?”

“Your trip to the mountaintop will begin the coin’s parting from our family forever.”

“Forever—why?” asked Desta, eyes wide.

“Because the wisdom on this coin and its twin is all humanity needs. It was predestined since ancient times that *you* and the other bearer of the coin will be the *last* from your family lines.

Seeing Desta crestfallen, the cloud man added, “I was surprised and saddened myself, son, when I first learned of this. Not only has it been in our line for nearly three thousand years, but also many sacrificed their lives to protect and keep it in the family. The reason I spent so many years near the coin was to ensure its safe return to our fold. It seems I was just one cog in the great wheel of a prophecy, set in motion when the coins were first struck. But it’s for the greater good. It’s this recognition that helped me overcome my initial shock. Don’t preoccupy yourself with it.”

Desta shook his head, eyes fixed on the goatskin to the left of the coin chest. “I was just thinking about my father, too. He won’t get to keep the coin. He has yearned for you, and for it, for so long.”

“It’s neither his fault nor my doing he won’t realize his wishes. It’s beyond our power—like the chain of events involving us—or understanding, like this coin box, or our meeting. Nobody would believe that someone like me, in this state, would linger this long on earth, let alone reveal myself and speak with my grandson.”

“I know, even Father needed convincing about you.”

“No doubt,” said the cloud man. “Before we part, I need to share a few more important things. Some may not make sense to you. Don’t worry. I will place these things in your head to serve as a future reference for you.”

Desta sat back, folded and crossed his legs, and did the same with his hands on his chest. He wanted to give his undivided attention to what he was about to receive.

The cloud man picked up the coin box, placed it on one palm and said, “Shosh-enq had two chests made—one for each granddaughter—to house the gold copies of Solomon’s clay disks and tablets. He intended that the boxes keep the coins and tablets together and protect them.” The cloud man’s eyes flickered from the box to Desta as he talked.

The box in the man’s insubstantial hand appeared to Desta to be suspended in air.

“Afterward,” continued the cloud man, “Shoshenq presumably sent the chests to their owners along with their contents.

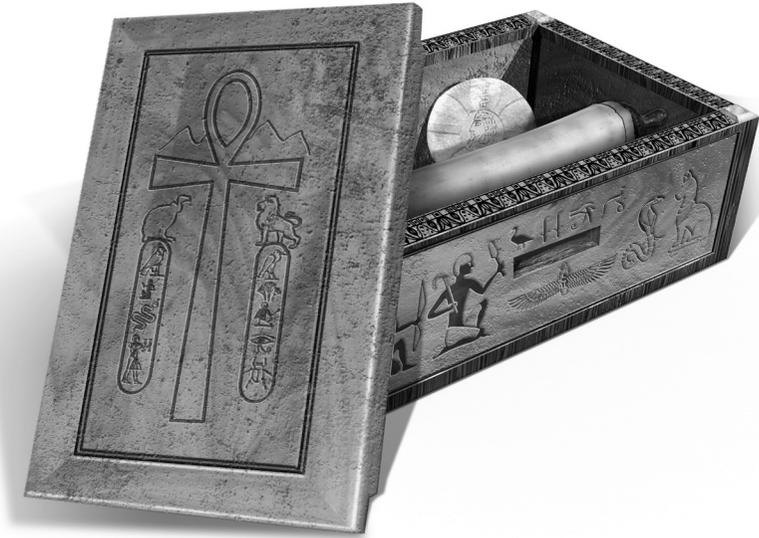
“Although Taphath received her three items, Basemath never got hers—only the disk and tablet. This mystery, along with Shoshenq’s decision to bequeath some things to Taphath and her children—but give nothing to Basemath—created animosity and bad kismet between the two sisters. They said this upset Basemath so much that she had a dour face and sour taste in her mouth until she died. Unfortunately, this original sin persists, and you are destined to feel its effects.”

Desta crinkled his brow and narrowed his eyes, baffled.

The man held Desta’s eyes and continued. “Although the box was made to protect its contents, it seems that it was also designed to describe one of the pharaoh’s descendants—You!” Desta jerked his head as if awakened from slumber.

“Me?” he retorted.

“Yes, you! Here is what I mean,” the cloud man said, dropping his eyes and pointing. “There are threes, fours, fives, sevens, nines, twelves, forty-two, and forty-nine in this box.”



The Ancient Sandalwood Coin Box

Desta brought his face close and looked into the box. He saw nothing. He gazed at the man the way a child regards a magician: in awe and wonder.

The cloud man shifted his puffy form toward Desta and said, “What I mean, son, is that the box is four digits, or fingers, wide, five digits long, and three digits high. The various combinations of these numbers relate to your birth date and year. The period from your conception to birth, as well as your birth order, are also here. Some of these numbers even define you and the things that interest you.”

Desta shook his head, confounded, his eyes fixed on the mysterious box.

“Let me explain,” said the cloud man, holding Desta’s eyes again. “Four plus three is seven, and you know what that stands for, right?”

Desta nodded. “My birthday, my rank in my family, and the number of months I was inside my mother.”

“Also the symbol of perfection, harmony, and light,” added the cloud man.

“Furthermore, if we add each of two measures—the box’s opening and its height—with the bottom perimeter and height, we get forty-two digits. Add this to seven digits, the vertical and horizontal length of the cross on the lid, and we get forty-nine digits. You know what these two big numbers stand for, right?”

“Yes. They are my birth years in different calendars.”

“Very good. Let’s go on. The sum of the length, width, and height of the box is twelve. This number, you’ll find it interesting to note,” said the man smiling, “is how many months in the year it takes for the sun to travel from the bottom of the gap up to the side of the eastern mountains and back again. You’re the only one in this valley who discovered this after tracking the sun’s movements for a year.”

Desta placed his fingers on his mouth, tightened his lips, amazed by his relationship to all these things.

“Let me tell you something else that further connects you to the box,” said the cloud man with a quizzical grin, registering Desta’s reaction.

“Do you see this carving?” said the man, pointing to a relief of a cross with a circle above the horizontal bar.

Desta nodded.

“In the old times, in our ancestral country, Egypt, this cross represented life and eternity. It also had another purpose. It represented the rising sun and the path it travels by day.”

“What do you mean?” Desta asked, dropping his hand.

“The circle above the horizontal line represents the sun. The horizontal line of the cross itself symbolizes the horizon. The vertical portion, below the circle, denotes the path the sun travels,” said the cloud man, with a knowing smile.

“Is this why I’ve always loved to see the sun rise, and watch it cross the sky?” asked Desta.

“I believe so. In fact, your interest in the sun is an ancient one. The sun played a prominent role in our ancestors’ lives. You are the first in many generations with an avid interest in it.”

Desta shook his head again, stunned.

“To illustrate my point,” said the cloud man, holding the lid before Desta, “let’s look at the place where the sun rises.” He turned his head like a top without moving his body.

When they studied the position of the circle, the wavy lines on the crossbar, and the dip in the middle, they determined that what they observed on the cross exactly represented the mountains and the sun’s relative position, the same mountains Desta had gazed at for years.

Desta now felt as if his life were not his own; he now felt that he was living to fulfill some grand design. He never imagined that his interest in the sun had to do with a coin and a strange cross on the mystical box. He sighed, frightened. “What else will happen to me?” he asked under his breath.

“There are many strange things here, son. That’s why I liken our part in the coin

as cogs in a wheel of prophecy from millennia past,” the cloud man said, as if reading Desta’s mind. “What else is in here—only the coin and this box know.”

Desta shook his head slowly with his eyes on the wooden chese. The late afternoon sun filtered through the sholla tree, dappling the grass where they sat, and adding butterflies of light to the many animal images on the box. He wished the cloud man would say more about the illustrations on the outside of the box. He was eager to know what all of them meant.

“I could spend the whole day describing the meaning and purpose of each object on the box,” the cloud man said, picking up Desta’s thoughts. “In the interest of time, I’ll give brief details about them.”

“Many of the animals here have protective power, as our ancestors believed,” the mand said, glancing at his grandson. “The others were thought to enhance women’s childbearing. Others still were thought to perpetuate certain natural events.”

“For example, the lion is the protector of the sun as it rises and sets. The coin represents the sun, and therefore the lion is here. So are the vulture and the falcon. Incidentally,” the cloud man said, changing his thoughts. “Your father may remember this. The evening I left to get him a birthday gift, he saw a ‘man’ murdered at the horizon. He didn’t know at that time, but it was an omen of my own murder. The sun that the man consumed represented the coin I actually swallowed. Similarly, the two vultures that flew west were symbols of protection, for my body and the coin; they did not mean to eat them.”

“But father never talked about a man who ate the sun,” said Desta shaking his head. He stared at the box, amazed by all these strange things.

“There is much more hidden in this chest that relates to you. In time, you will discover it yourself. Before we part, however, I want to leave you with a few reminders, advice, and clues I have learned of where you may find the other coin,” said the cloud man, serious and meditative.

Desta bit his nail and gazed at his companion.

The cloud man studied Desta’s face for a few seconds and said, “Someday you will go past these mountains and the sky to pursue your dream, the dream cut short by your brother, Damtew. Just as Kooli served as the impetus to discover worlds beyond here, climbing this mountain will be the springboard to your future life. You are destined to travel far, but the path to your dreams will be strewn with obstacles, hardships, and even suffering. The key is, no matter how difficult the process, never give up.”

Desta’s imagination churned at the idea of traveling beyond the sky and mountains. *What would that world look like?* he wondered.

“And as the last bearer of the coin and this box,” the cloud man went on, “your life goal is to protect them, to find the companion coin, and ultimately to reunite the two. In the meantime, the chest and coin will be your secret companions, open doors to the supernatural, and be your navigators, with the sun your compass. Just as Kooli and Hibist were trusted friends in this world of yours, so these two items will assume that role in the next world.”

Desta unclenched his nails from his teeth and dropped his hands onto his lap. “Just like Kooli and Hibist?” he asked, happily. Yet he couldn’t imagine how a metal disk and a wooden box could replace his two beloved companions.

“Yes, son. In some ways, even more than them. And don’t forget the number seven,” reminded the cloud man. “Your destiny is intertwined with this number. There will be seven levels of goals and challenges you must meet. The only way to know you have succeeded is when you realize the dream you have set for each.”

The cloud man pushed the box aside with his fuzzy, pale hand and stared at the coin drawings on the goatskin. “Use the seven channels to keep track of your seven challenges,” he said. He pointed his index finger to the horizontal channel on the left of the bottom illustration and said, “Not counting what you went through before birth, once you get to the mountaintop, you’ll have met your first goal. Let’s say that this channel is for your first challenge. You will have six more to go . . . After you achieve your next goal, go right on the circular panel, and you will have reached the second channel. With the accomplishment of your third goal, you will have reached the third channel and so on, until you’ve reached this last one,” said the cloud man, planting his finger on it.

Desta stared at the man. He had questions, but he didn’t know where to begin. All he could do was listen.

“In the end,” said the cloud man, turning to his Desta, “Just as seven added to itself seven times reaches forty-nine, beyond which it cannot go, you, with the coin and box, will have traveled as far as you can to a place beyond which you cannot go. It’s there where you will find the bearer of the other coin—your cousin, the ancestral grandchild of Basemath, who has come just as far, and also realized they could go no more.”

“Where is this place?” asked Desta, surprised by the cryptic information.

“I’ll give you some clues,” said the cloud man after a pause. “The place is a valley like this, with mountains not as tall, the basin not as rugged, nor the space as narrow and confining. It doesn’t have many creeks that course the mountainsides, and there is no river slicing its floor like here. Some of the hills, valleys, and canyons are mantled

with verdure, but there are no vervets or colobus monkeys or many birds in the trees.” The cloud man stopped and looked away.

Desta tried to visualize this place when the cloud man turned and said, “When you reach this land, you will know your journey has ended because it will remind you of home: the red-brown soil, the gentle sun, the terrain, and the clear blue skies. The evening there will mimic the morning here because the sun appears to set in the sky where you are accustomed to seeing it rise.

“No cattle, horses, goats, or sheep roam the land, nor are there any farms.

“You know you have come to the end of your journey when you find that the sky, the object of your dreams, no longer touches the mountaintop or distant lands but has tumbled down into a restless, vast blue sea, its clouds ruffled, wet, and smudged. Don’t be disappointed if the sky continues to elude you; instead be thankful for the chance it gave you to go the distance in life, just as Kooli did for you.”

Desta’s face and eyes brightened at the mention of his dog.

“You’ll know your odyssey is over when no reclining man or distant, hazy earth swallows the sun, but instead, the same restless, deep blue sea.

“The last rays of sun will still flicker on the cusp of the eastern mountains like here, making you wonder if you had come home after traveling a full circle . . . one more manifestation of the ancient coins: the cyclicity of things.”

“Cyclicity of things?” asked Desta, narrowing his eyes.

“Here is what I mean:

“Of life: birth-death-rebirth, or renewal.

“Of time: morning-evening-morning.

“Of seasons: spring-summer-autumn-winter-spring.

“Of the coins: creation-journey-reunion-recreation, or rebirth.

“Of you: departure-adventure-homecoming.” The cloud man paused and glanced at his companion.

Desta steepled his hands and rested them against his lips.

“It’s in this valley that you should concentrate your search for the second coin. Look in the streets, churches, parks, workplaces, in the markets—in short, wherever people gather—for someone whose name means sweet and sour. This person shares your birthday, has also come very far to settle in this valley, and knows they have come to the end of their journey.

“Shares my birthday? Why is this person called sweet and sour?” asked Desta, removing his hands from his lips.

“Yes, this person was born on the exact same day—January 7. Sweet and sour is not their name, but its meaning—like Desta—is happiness.”

The cloud man continued. “Just as forty-nine is the end of seven’s trip and, at the same time, the beginning of life, your birth year, our coin will end its journey there. There will be a reunion party for innumerable guests, but without food or drink. There will be much music, unlike any you have heard. It will be the happiest time for all who come. At this event, the coins will unite—and become one. The joined coin will be blessed to benefit not just Tashere and King Solomon’s descendants, but all of humanity.

“After the all-night party is over and the guests have left, go outside before dawn and wait for sunrise. Once the golden orb has cleared the cleft in the eastern mountains, bow in its direction and give it gratitude for guiding you to your ultimate destination. Then stand straight, close your eyes, and give thanks to Solomon for his wisdom and for the messages he encoded in his clay disk; to Tashere, for inspiring Solomon to create the channels and encode his knowledge into something lasting and transferable; and to Shoshenq, for his acumen in transferring these onto metal, rounding the disk’s edges to give it life and motion. Then remember everyone who played a role in your journey’s success—Kooli topping the list.

“This should be the day when you realize that all the suffering and struggle, your losses, your trials and tribulations, and all you endured were worthwhile. You may not have achieved the goal you set for your own life, but you will have achieved things more profound and far-reaching, and you will have experienced great adventure and revelations with the coin and the box.

“You’ll have paid back your father for all his disappointments and heartaches with his other children. For me, your achievement will make meaningful all the years I spent in this pit until you received the coin.

“A big responsibility awaits you, but it is because of your strength of spirit that you were chosen for this task,” said the cloud man as he placed the lid on the box.

Desta was overwhelmed by what he had heard. Both stared silently at each other. Desta then set his lips tight and gazed away.

“Don’t worry. You will get to know all this in time as more is revealed to you,” said the cloud man.

Desta put his head down and stared thoughtfully. Much of what the cloud man said made no sense at all, but the idea of going to another world brought threads of happy thoughts.

"I'll do something with you and give you one more piece of advice, though, before we part," said the cloud man.

Desta looked up at his companion.

"I will put a talisman on you . . . something that will protect you from harm," the cloud man said, picking up the three-thorn bundle.

"What would that be?" Desta asked, staring at the needle-like thorns, puzzled. A talisman, he knew, was something written on parchment in red ink, folded small enough to bind in a leather pouch and hang on a cord around the neck.

"I am going to tattoo the coin on you, emphasizing its magic. The coin itself may not always be accessible to you, but this image will."

Desta felt his hair stand on end, his skin tighten, and his nerves tingle. *I am constantly guarding against thorns in the field, and now he wants to poke me with those horrible barbs?* He was contemplating his refusal when he heard himself ask, "Where?"

"On the left side of your chest, above your heart," said the cloud man. "And you won't feel a thing . . . I'll make sure it's so."

Those words gave Desta courage. And he believed the man.

"Lean against the rock, and pull down your gabi," commanded the spirit.

Hesitant and nervous, Desta did as was told.

"Close your eyes and keep them shut until I am done."

Before he complied, Desta saw his companion dip the three-thorn bundle into viscous resin. Eyes closed, lips locked, nerves tense, Desta waited for the painful piercing of his skin. But he soon felt drowsy and fell asleep. Half an hour later, he woke with a slight soreness on his chest. He looked down, and to his surprise, above his nipple he saw the exact replica of the coin that he had drawn on the goatskin. The channel above the horizontal line, the one dedicated to magic, was heavily colored. The rest was only an outline.

"That image is your protector: for yourself, for those around you, and for your possessions," said the cloud man. "Touch it at any moment you feel in danger."

Desta liked having the tattooed coin on his chest and was pleased that it hadn't hurt.

"Will it be there always?" Desta asked, remembering how quickly the charcoal that he and Hibist had painted their faces with had faded.

"It will be for you to see, but not for others," the cloud man said. "The colors will soon fade, but the image will remain. You'll see it whenever you focus your gaze on it."

Desta was nonplussed and disappointed. He would have liked to have shown it to Hibist and anybody else who cared to see it.

“The color will fade to hide the coin’s identity and to protect you from curious minds.”

“Why did you need so many long thorns? They terrified me.”

“I have to comply with the power of seven, son—our family’s magic number,” said the cloud man with a grin. “I used the bundle of three thorns to tattoo the channels, and those with four to concentrate the ink at the channel dedicated to magic.”

Desta was excited and anxious to try out this last channel.

“Remember, though, that there are other great benefits to that channel. You’ll discover many of its attributes in due time,” the cloud man said, seeing Desta’s smiling face.

Desta was happy to hear this, especially if this meant that it could enable him to read people’s minds and communicate with animals, which he wished he could have done with Kooli.

“One more thing,” the spirit man said. His fingers touched his lips.

Desta looked up at the man.

“Have you ever seen your face in a *mestawit*—mirror?”

Desta thought about this for a bit and said, “No, not for a long time. Why?”

“You will find the answer when you see yourself in a *mestawit* again.”

Mystified by the man’s response, Desta kept his eyes on him, hoping he would say exactly what he saw on Desta’s face.

“I need to go, but let me share with you some advice before I leave,” said the cloud man. “Don’t always trust your eyes or your ears, but always follow your instincts. This is one universal wisdom all creatures share, small and large. Instinct was what connected you and Kooli and the vervet monkeys. And most importantly, don’t ever question the messages you receive through the coin, its image on your chest, or this box!” said the spirit man, glancing at the wooden holder.

Then he rose and said, “I hope to see you one more time,” and vanished.

SOON AFTER THE CLOUD man left, Desta ran toward the Davola River to find some pooled water in which he could see his face. He remembered the river was dammed where the locals came to swim.

Winded and breathless, he arrived at the riverbank. He felt a sudden queasiness in his stomach as he looked at the pooled water. This was the very place where Damtew had tried to drown him. Desta shuddered.

He shook his head to chase the memory away and took a deep sigh. He doubled over and searched for his face in the water below. He saw only a distorted and blurred reflection of himself in it. The water was calm, but he was too far from the surface to see details. To get closer, he had to cross the river and approach it from the opposite shore.

He walked around the curving bank and entered the river where its course was accessible. The water chilled Desta when he first stepped into it, but the exposed, sun-baked rocks he hopped across sent waves of pleasant sensations to his feet.

Desta stood near the water and stared in it, struggling to hold back the emotion that surged through him. Thankfully, the sound of the waterfall upstream drowned out his thoughts and calmed his nerves. Near his feet, he could see white pebbles and his silhouette underwater. Realizing he needed to be in deeper to see his face clearly, Desta waded farther as gray circles rippled away and startled water bugs skid across the table-like surface.

He stopped at a place where the water was knee high. He bent over and peered into the liquid, pleased to see staring back at him a face he had not seen for a long time.

The mid-afternoon sunlight on his face made his countenance bright, revealing its details. He studied his tapering nose, his big brown eyes and ashen skin, the chapped lips and unkempt hair. He saw nothing that warranted consulting a mirror. He nonetheless kept gazing at his reflection, wondering if he had missed some subtle detail.

He was about to get out of the water when he noticed tiny hairs trace a line from the left corner of his right brow, down to the base of his nose, up the other side, and then reconnect to the right corner of his other brow.

Then suddenly a dot of light appeared and rose along the interior wall of a cup-like image, getting brighter as it went. Desta's eyes flickered. Knowing that the Saytan lived in pooled waters like this, Desta wondered if it was He playing tricks on him. His spine prickled and his heart raced. Baffled, Desta quickly rose, crossed the river, and ran back to his animals, turning to be sure he was not followed. He sat in the field and inspected his surroundings. Everything was normal, but what he saw on his face in the water was still a mystery.

THAT EVENING, shortly after Desta fell asleep, he saw the cloud man again. Desta sat on the grass in the open field, enjoying the gentle sun while tending the animals.

"I came to explain the cup-shaped image you saw on your face in the river today," he said, shortly after arriving. Desta had not expected him, and yet was not startled or surprised by his appearance.

"That image is no ordinary matter. It represents the half-full cup you saw at your coming-of-age ceremony and is like the chalice from which you once drank Christ's blood when you received communion for the dog disease. The same object is also the gap in the eastern mountains in miniature. The rising light in it corresponds to the sun that rises through the mountain gap every day." The man stopped and gazed at Desta.

“I cannot make sense of what you are telling me, or why,” Desta said, bewildered.

“You will come to realize the purpose of all this, but let me share a few more things. The figure I refer to is a very important and powerful ancient symbol called Ankh, which incidentally is also on your face. This will become apparent as you grow older. “The cup-shaped form is like the first letter of our alphabet, which is identical to the 21st letter of a language called English. Interestingly, the various combinations of the numbers corresponding to these letters generate numbers that are the same as those found on the coin box—the most important being your birth year—in the two different calendars. Someday you will discover information that represents you in these two letters and their corresponding numbers.

“As you must remember, twenty-one refers to the number of messages encoded on the coin.

“Just as the chain of events prior to the discovery of the coin and my remains are no mere coincidence, everything has to do with the cup-shaped objects; and the letters, numbers, and symbols they correspond with are not happenstance. I think your birth here and all that has happened to you was predetermined not only by the coin and coin box but also by the gap in those peaks at the time of their formation. The ancients who created their alphabets—ours and the English—may have thought of you when they organized their alphabets.” Desta looked at the man quizzically.

“Who knows? How else to explain that the cup-like letter called “U” in the English language is the 21st letter of their alphabet?

“Lastly, when a cup-shaped hair grows between your brows, don’t shave it, as people are apt to tell you to do . . . Any questions?”

“When are you coming again?” Desta asked abruptly, unable to say anything else.

“We will probably see each other briefly after the burial of my remains. In your dreams, you may see me. And much later, if you have not forgotten me by then and care to invite me to the coin’s reunion party,” said the cloud man with a smile.

Desta shook his head, frowning. “I am sorry this is our last meeting. I have a lot more questions.”

“I am sorry, too, but I need to go,” said the cloud man, as he rose and straightened his flowing body.

Desta rose too and gazed at his companion pensively.

“Before we part,” said the cloud man, eyes holding Desta’s, “I want to say that although you and I only first met in our encounter by the river after I waited forty-two years, I am very pleased with the moments we have spent together. I am proud of our relationship and how you have managed all you have gone through. You are only a

boy, but you handled your troubles like a man. It was worth the wait for me to convey to you our precious family heirloom and its significance. I feel blessed that you are my grandson. I hope my love for you will heal your mind and soothe your soul.

“From here on, I trust that the coin and the box will be your family, friend, counsel, protector, and guide as you navigate life. Remember to keep the inscribed skin with you always. Practice until you’re properly able to read, live, and breathe the virtues and ideals in the coin. Recite the words and visualize the outcome you desire. Study and understand all the powers and benefits of the illustrations on the box. And finally, learn to forgive. That way, you will grow to be a happy, healthy, successful man. May God bless you!”

The cloud man extended his arms as if to hug Desta, and Desta did the same. He felt his presence, but not his touch. His own arms hung in the air, anticipating the embrace. He felt the spirit’s enveloping love, warmth, and kindness.

“This is the last of our private meetings. I’ll see you at the funeral,” the spirit man said and dissembled into thin air.

FIFTY-TWO

The skeletal remains of the grandfather were placed in a simple wooden casket made from a bored-out tree. The family considered funeral arrangements: Should they involve only close family members and friends or also distant relatives and parishioners?

The discussion quickly grew heated. Asse'ged and Teferra faced off on opposing sides. The others were split, largely by gender. Those who followed Teferra—Tamirat, Damtew, Yihoon and Ayénat—wanted a small gathering of immediate family. They argued that not only would they need to find messengers to contact those far away, but that it was also unfair to oblige them to attend a funeral for someone so long dead, whom many either didn't know or had long forgotten.

Asse'ged's faction included Saba, Enat, and Hibist. They wanted a big funeral, including their three aunts and their children and any others who wanted to come. They argued that the service was not just for their grandfather, but also to comfort their father and his sisters who had grieved so long. They maintained that sharing sorrow and memories in a grand way could bring them closure.

The priest argued to include parishioners to express appreciation to Abraham for his many years of service to the community.

No one asked Desta's opinion, but he would go along with whatever his father wanted.

Abraham listened closely to the debate. Sharing his grief with many was not important to him. But acknowledging his father in a big way would be consolation for his sacrifices on Abraham's behalf. His father would not have lost his life if he had not sought the coin for Abraham.

Although they had not made their wishes known, Abraham was sure his sisters would want to come. *It would bring closure for them as well*, he thought. In the end, he sided with Asse'ged, and it was decided to invite relatives and friends from both near and far, and all parishioners who could make it.

The date was set for Wednesday, May 21, 1958—seventeen days after they retrieved the grandfather's remains. The time of year permitted many farmers to attend.

They moved quickly with the logistics. Asse'ged was to go to Kuakura, where his

eldest paternal aunt, Zere, and her four children lived. Zere was old and her vision poor; if the day-long journey was too much, her children might attend.

Tamirat was sent to Talia, where Bosena, Abraham's immediate older sister, lived. Bosena lived with one son and had long battled lip cancer; she too might not make it, but her son and daughter could. Desta remembered how terrified he had been of his aunt at her visit six months ago, her lips disfigured, enormous, and crusted with wounds. She used a straw for food and drink, always covering her mouth with her shemma, and she could hardly talk. He thought she wouldn't come, as she'd stayed in and avoided people.

Damtew would go see Welella. The youngest aunt, Welella lived in Lij Ambera with her tall, strapping husband, De'goo. She was healthy, wealthy, and beautiful.

Ayenat's relatives would be invited as well. All her half-brothers and father lived in a place called Gumbra, close to Enat and Tenaw. Tenaw would extend their invitation. Word was also sent through market-goers to any others they could think of.

Many parishioners were informed by word of mouth. The day before the funeral, Yihoon and Tenaw were to go in the mountains to announce the funeral with their horns.

The priests, having been told the full, forty-two-year saga of the deceased, and that he was the father of their loyal parishioner and community arbiter, suggested an all-night prayer and Bible service.

The congregation was to prepare food and drink for the funeral and bring them to Abraham's home to support the grieving family.

For their part, the priests brought their canvas tent, and set it up outside the home. Abraham's household supplied animal skins for their comfort.

For the kindness and compassion extended to him and his family, Abraham killed a bull and fed all those who took part in the services. It was the least he could do, he thought, to honor a man who had sacrificed so much. He also thought this a fitting way to mark all the years of his sorrow and finish with the past as he prepared to usher in a new chapter in his life.

Teferra was assigned the task of killing the bull with help from a few able-bodied men and then provide the meat to the women to prepare the meal.

Two days before the funeral, the aunts and many of their children began arriving. Aunt Bosena covered her lip, which protruded beneath her shemma as if she held something grotesque in her mouth. Aunt Zere, weak and nearly blind, also came, but had to rest before joining the family for the evening meal. Aunt Welella came with her husband and five children. She looked as beautiful and youthful as ever.

Monday and Tuesday, people came in great numbers from far and near. Some

had heard the story of Beshaw Mekonen's death and discovery and were curious to hear more. Others came to support the grieving family. The home and grounds were packed. Local women brought large jars of tella, drinking cups, and baskets of injera. Ayénat was touched by their support and generosity.

On Tuesday afternoon, a dozen priests arrived with kettle drums, bibles, prayer staffs, and centrums, and they took residence in the tent. They stood on the goatskins and plush cowhides and prayed and chanted after dinner—around 8 P.M.—until midnight. After sleeping briefly, they rose at four and continued praying and chanting to their mournful drums. Beshaw Mekonen's casket was left outside the priests' tent.

The bull was killed Tuesday evening, and many guests were fed raw meat with hot sauce and injera. The women worked through the night cooking the meat and making injera and big pots of sauce to be served when the mourners and guests returned from the funeral the following day.

On Wednesday morning, the casket was carried by Desta's four oldest brothers, led by a mule fitted with an embroidered cloth, saddle, and reins, around which cascaded straps of leather decorated with red, green, and gold yarn.

Because Abraham's father had been an accomplished horseman, Dama was fixed up beautifully and walked alongside the mule, making her seem tiny against his massive bulk. The horse wore white cotton cloth, his reins adorned with colorful yarn. The grandfather's silk scarf and green gabardine jacket hung from the saddle.

The priests walked immediately behind the casket, dressed in brocades of emerald, blue, red, and gold, followed by Abraham and Ayénat, Enat, Hibist, and Desta, and the three aunts and their children. Desta noticed his father was somber and thoughtful. He walked meditatively, in tempo with the priests and pallbearers.

The casket was placed under the sholla tree at the north end of the cow field where Desta often sheltered from the rain and sun. The priests chanted, prayed, and sang to the somber thump of the kettle drum, the sound of brass rattles, and the swinging of prayer sticks.

The rest of the crowd, which had swelled through the morning, gathered in the open field. After the casket was placed under the tree and the mule and horse were tethered, the family joined the crowd. The assembly gathered around them as they walked in a circle, weeping and sniffing. Some took turns singing sad songs: some composed, others improvised. The crowd harmonized. The songs were deeply personal and touching, and the family, excepting Abraham, cried silently as they listened to the powerful words and melancholic voices.

After an hour of singing, they raised the casket and proceeded toward the church.

Along the way, more joined the procession. At the head priest's instruction, the pallbearers rested the casket under another big tree, a warka, and another display of mourning and singing ensued. For half an hour, the mourners circled, marking the cycle of life. They sang and softly wept before moving on.

When they finally arrived at the church grounds, the priests and close family went through the eastern entrance of the stone wall with the casket, circled the church three times, sang and mourned for another half hour, and then brought the casket through the western gate. A grave had been dug near Abraham's mother's tomb on the east side of the church near two lofty junipers, thirty feet from the stone wall. The crowd marched somberly to the benches where Abraham often held court.

Desta, who had been with Hibist the entire time, took her hand, and they walked to the periphery of the crowd to watch.

Desta and his sister watched the four brothers bring the casket to the burial ground. He could see that the grave ran from east to west. The priests chanted and read from the Bible. The head priest, Aba Yacob, blessed the grave, moving his crucifix in a criss-cross pattern. The brothers lowered the casket, head pointing west, feet to the east, and then threw dirt in. The women, who stood far from the grave, gasped a low cry as they started throwing dirt. Abraham looked on solemnly without tears.

Once the grave was completely filled, a remarkable event took place. The cloud man appeared and tapped Desta on the shoulder. He whispered, "Be good, my boy. God bless you. Good luck with your adventure. I will be on the lookout for you." Then he rose, gave Desta a wink and a smile, and floated gracefully toward the blue heavens. Desta capped his eyes and stared. Seeing him, others craned their necks, but saw nothing.

"What did you see? What happened?" asked Hibist, pulling Desta's arm.

"The man, the man . . . my grandpa just . . . flew off," said Desta, pointing to the sky.

"Sssshh, don't let others hear you," said Hibist, covering his mouth with her hand.

"He left, he left. I'll probably never see him again," he said tearfully.

After the funeral, the head priest spoke. "Now that the remains of your grandfather were laid to rest, you the children and grandchildren would carry on as his living representatives. Grieving brings no one back. Therefore, don't torture your spirit with endless thoughts of him. Move on with your lives, be happy to bear the torch, and pass it on to the generations that follow."

As the crowd dispersed, a seemingly endless number of people shared their feelings, thoughts, and condolences with the bereaved.

The immediate family, along with the priests and some deacons who gave the

service, went back to Abraham's home. All at the funeral were invited, and those who didn't have far to travel came to share the farewell dinner.

The food brought by the parishioners, prepared at home the night before, was kept warm by Melkam and Mulu.

People ate and drank abundantly into the early evening. Nearly a hundred attended, but with many hands to cook and serve, Ayénat and her helpers hardly noticed the work.

After dinner, Abraham stood before the group and spoke of his childhood. Aunt Zere, face half-covered from the light of the beeswax candles, talked tearfully about the days with her father—how he carried her on his shoulders and walked the countryside looking for flowers in the spring, and how proud he was to introduce her to all who came to visit.

At midnight, the priests, who would rise early for Sunday Mass along with their parishioners, left in moonlight.

On Sunday after brunch, the immediate family gathered in the tent to hear how grandfather's remains were discovered. Abraham told them all he knew, and Desta filled in the details.

Many likened the story to a miracle. "After forty-two years, for the ghost of my father to visit this boy and give such an account of his fate is unbelievable. The story behind that coin and box is a biblical miracle," said Zere.

Everybody nodded.

Abraham asked his oldest sister what she remembered about the coin.

"I was just about to tell," began Aunt Zere. "I'll share something incredible."

Everybody's eyes turned toward her.

"As the first-born, I was to receive that coin. My father had told me this on many occasions. He would bring the box from its hiding place, take out the coin, show and tell me the stories behind it—what each channel meant, for example. I can't tell you all that now—I was only seven or eight—but I think I remember those about happiness, love, being rich of mind and finance . . . and the ones on prosperity, happiness, and love . . . Am I repeating myself? Anyway, things like that."

"Do you remember how Adamu stole it?" asked Abraham.

"Yes. He was supposedly sick. He came to receive holy-water treatment at Ba'tha Mariam and stayed with us for a week. Once he felt better, he wanted to help father with a farm project—what, I don't remember. He told me he had heard about our family coin, how it was the cause of our wealth. He begged me to show it to him.

"I was so naïve. One day when father and mother were out, I fetched the coin from the box and showed it to him. He kept asking to touch it so that he could be rich, too.

I said no and ran to the bedroom to put it away. He was so anxious and excited about touching it, but I don't recall that he saw where I stowed it."

"How did you learn it was Adamu who stole the coin?" asked Welella.

"That is an interesting story in itself," said Zere, pulling her shemma down to protect her eyes from the morning glare.

"His daughter, Misrak, who was my age, had come for holy-water treatment herself for some illness. She also stayed with us. One afternoon shortly after her father left, we were in the field playing when she said, out of nowhere, 'Someday we'll be as rich as your parents!'

"When I asked her how, she told me about an old brass coin someone had given her father. It was supposed to make people rich. The coin she described in great detail sounded exactly like ours, which was supposed to be the only one in the whole country. I remember being disappointed that my father had told me something that was not true.

"I ran home—flew, really—anxious to tell him about the second coin. The girl thought I was suddenly possessed by the Saytan, and she kept calling after me. Luckily, I found Father outside carving furniture, and I told him what Misrak had said. He looked at me as if I were out of my mind. Then he stopped what he was doing and entered a trance. It seemed he was not looking at us, but through us. Misrak stood next to me. He told us to wait there and went inside. Shortly after, he returned with a face I had never seen, bloodless and pale, yet very controlled.

"He sat us down and rather casually asked Misrak about the coin. She told him everything she told me and more. She said her father sometimes rubbed the coin between his hands, and sometimes over his body, neck, and face, saying, 'Make me rich, bring me wealth like Beshaw Mekonen.'" As I said, I nearly laughed, imagining her father worshipping a coin like that. After she finished, Father just said, 'Thank you . . . that is interesting,' and resumed his woodwork. Afterward, though, he spent more time privately talking with Misrak. When she left, he gave her something that made her really happy. Neither of them would say what it was. And that is what I remember of the coin and its disappearance. The irony was, when I told mother this story right after she found it missing, she didn't believe me. I think later she also asked Adamu about it, but he completely denied having anything to do with our missing coin. At that time, mother suspected our old neighbors and didn't think he was the culprit. And he was so close to us."

The family listened attentively as Zere spoke. A few times, Bosena looked as if she wanted to add something to Zere's account. She moved her jaw and fat lips under her shemma, which reached the bridge of her nose, but no words came out. Her thoughts

started and died in her eyes. Welella pressed her lips together and mightily fought tears, seeing her sister struggle to speak. Others just looked away.

After a brief silence, Kifle, Zere's oldest son, asked, "Mama, did you think the coin would have been yours if Grandpa had brought it back?"

"Well, that was what he told me. As his first born, I was entitled to it. He didn't call me Zere, his seed, for no reason. I was supposed to propagate his descendants. But he conditioned his bequest on the husband I would marry—as if I'd have any say in the matter. Knowing how my marriage ended up, I wonder if he would have given it to me," said Zere, a ghost of a grin crossing her wizened, brown countenance.

"Baba was not a bad man," said Almaw, Zere's youngest son. "I bet he would have let you have it."

"It doesn't matter now. I am sorry he lost his life over it. It's a shame we grew up without him, and mother had to fend for us alone. All these years, I had not given up hope. Part of me didn't want to bury him without solid proof. I am glad Desta was chosen to find his remains and allow us to finally bury him in the ground and in our thoughts. This should bring an end to our long, silent suffering."

Everyone nodded.

"As for the coin," said Aunt Zere in a low voice to Abraham, as if in confidence, "if Father decided later to give it to Abraham, that was his decision. He left four days before Abraham's seventh birthday. He told us he was getting something special for him from the market. Now it's Abraham's decision whom to pass it to." She smiled at him. "You'll know who, in time. Our angels decide; we only act upon their suggestions."

"It's a big responsibility. I didn't want it to come to me this way," said Abraham, looking away. "But speaking of our angels, I won't have to make the hard choice, although in this case, it won't be difficult."

Everybody looked at Desta, Damtew with disdain.

"We need to get going," said Welella, as she rose. "Thank you for inviting us. It was a long wait, but it's good to have an end to it. Now, when we draw our last breaths, we won't wonder what really happened to father."

Her five children got up and began gathering their belongings. Bosena asked for water to fill her nickel canteen for the trip. Of the three sisters, she had the shortest to go. Zere and her children also collected their things and prepared to leave.

Abraham suggested that Ayénat bring the dabo kolo from his aborted trip and distribute it among the travelers. As Ayénat scooped out the dried rolled breads and transferred them to the travelers' gabis and netelas, Abraham told the story behind the dabo kolo and his failed trip to Lalibela.

“This dabo kolo was meant for one belly, but now will be in many,” said Welella.
“Thank you. It will be a handy snack.”

The others thanked him, too. Some tossed a kolo or two in their mouths and chewed, smiling. They all said how wonderful it tasted.

The guests hugged, kissed, and held hands before they parted.

Abraham stood outside the tent and watched thoughtfully as his sisters with their children strode in different directions.

FIFTY-THREE

Shortly after the guests left, Melkam and Ayénat emptied the tent. Abraham, with the help of Asse'ged and Damtew, took down and folded the canvas cover, which was to be returned to the Avinevra church. Then the two brothers left, and Abraham took a walk.

It was the first time in three weeks he had been alone without any pressing matters. And at last, he had his full senses back. Since Desta's bombshell, he had been too stirred up to think clearly.

He strolled toward the southern creek, his mind swimming with what had unfolded. *What can I do with all this now?* He thought of his father's murderers, his beloved cousins, long dead, now on trial in absentia before jury and judge—himself. Adamu and Kindé once had meant a lot to him, his mother, and his sisters.

But they were his father's killers and the reasons why his family left their home and grew up fatherless, Mother struggling to raise them on her own. And they had lost the benefits of the coin. *Should he rage at these men, hate them, despite all their happy memories?*

Reaching the creek, Abraham gazed at his reflection in the dammed stream where the family fetched drinking water. For a long time, he stared at his drawn face, as if the answers might be found there.

He crossed the creek and continued to Saba's old homestead. It was the first time he had ventured there since the family moved two years ago.

He shuddered when he thought of his youthful plans to avenge the loss of his father and reclaim the coin. Abraham had planned to confront their old neighbors in Kuakura with a gun.

He had vowed never to forget their misdeeds. Kooli had been the reminder of his missing father, the coin, and the wrongdoers.

But by the time he could own a gun, the two suspects had died, denying him revenge. His feelings for them had haunted him. He slept fitfully, walking or talking in his sleep. The animus he felt affected his wife and children, with whom he often lost his temper.

Now he understood how costly vengeance would have been. He would have gone

to prison and begun a cycle of violence between the families. What irony if his mother had known that her own cousins, and not the neighbors she had fled, had committed the crime.

Still deep in thought, Abraham reached Saba's old homestead, now covered with knee-high weeds. He let his eyes wander over the cursed land. It seemed to mock him now.

This land, once the harbinger of miscarriages, disease, and destruction, had also delivered the family coin and his father's remains, liberating his clan from their long, silent suffering. In a way, the whole place seemed freed now, more serene and comforting than he ever remembered.

He gazed toward the place of his father's remains. On the other end of the property, across the Davola, the top of the warka tree, where Deb'tera Taye had done his spirit work with Desta and Astair, spread like a mushroom. Abraham was happy to see it. It was there, under that enveloping tree, that his family's liberation had begun. He was grateful that Providence had led him to it.

Abraham yearned to surrender to emotion, to feel happy at the outcome of the saga, and to release his anger. He waited for the tears, but none came. Giving up, he slowly walked home.

That night, he tossed and turned, thoughts of his father and his killers churning. He had to bury them once and for all, or they would haunt him forever.

The next day, he rose before daybreak, put on work shorts and shirt, and wrapped himself in his gabi. He pulled a pick and a shovel from above the horses' stalls and went outside.

The air was cool and the ground damp from nighttime rain. He felt the chill on his feet and hands. Much of the eastern sky was veiled with soft gray clouds, the valley shadowy, hushed, and brooding. Abraham walked toward the field below his home. He left the trail and strolled across the southern border of the field, went halfway, and stopped. He dropped the shovel and pick where he stood. In the time left before dawn, Abraham decided to walk the open field before heading to his destination.

His six-foot-three frame was slightly stooped, as if weighted by thought. He walked from one end of the field to the other. He had completed three transits when the sun broke free, diffusing light throughout the valley. He threw his pick over his shoulder, grabbed the shovel, and followed the animal path toward the site of his father's remains. At the creek, he gathered seven white pebbles and put them in his pocket.

Once he got to the old gravesite, he beat down the tall grass near the ledge, dropped the pick and shovel, and sat. For a long time, he stared at the disturbed soil, the tussled

bushes, and the strewn rocks in the ravine, left from unearthing his father's remains. Images of forty years ago began to filter through his mind.

He saw two events unfold, one where he sat, the other fifty miles away at his childhood home in Kuakura. Abraham imagined the cousins' attacks on his father nearby, while far away, he saw himself as a boy, running in and out of the house, waiting for his father to arrive with his birthday present.

His eyes flickered as the frames rolled in his mind. He tossed his head to chase away sleep, or maybe stem his emotions.

Next he saw his father covered in flies and ants, mouth agape, eyes closed and sunken, face wilted from the sun. Back in Kuakura, his mother's face was careworn and sleepless. He and his sisters ran to the gate, peering down the long, twisted path that rounded a grove of trees. His eyes brimmed with tears.

Abraham imagined his father's reeking, decomposed body on the third day. Vultures avoided its overwhelming stench, and hyenas ran away. Only flies came, covering it like bees in a hive. Now, with his sights on his childhood home, he saw his mother on a bench with her arms around Zere and Bosena. They were all crying. Welella, his four-year-old sister, sat beside them, also crying. Abraham was there, still hopeful that his father would return with his birthday present.

Back in his old home, on the fourth day, friends and family arranged a search team. He was hoisted onto his uncle's shoulders and urged to call his father. If he were somewhere near, drugged by their jealous neighbors, the family thought he might be moved by his beloved son's voice.

Abraham's tears ran down his aquiline nose and dropped to his chest. He shook his head and brought his mind back to focus. The next montage saddened him deeply.

He saw white russet-tipped worms crawling out and away from the corpse as if they, too, were fleeing the foul body.

Abraham blinked. Remembered images streamed along with his tears.

Once he had seen all of it and purged the painful memories, he felt better. He thanked his father's spirit for protecting the coin, solving Saba's problems, and giving him his first grandson.

Then Abraham thought about his father's murderers—Adamu and Kindé. He couldn't press charges; they were long gone. There was so much he didn't understand, so much mystery in the coin. He would try to remember their good deeds. He needed to forgive them. He needed to forgive his grandfather's spirit, too, for not meeting him. Finally, he needed to forgive himself for blaming the old neighbors in Kuakura.

He rose. He threw the pick and shovel to the bottom of the ravine; he walked

around to a less steep part of the ledge and rappelled down, anchoring himself on a branch. He gathered the shovel and pick, went to the spot where his father's body had rested, and began to dig. He dug and shoveled until he had a trench three feet deep by seven feet long.

He stood alongside it, thought of his family's tragedies, and the anger that had festered in him all these years. He took the pebbles from his pocket and dropped them one by one at equal distances from one end of the trench to the other. They were for all the bad things that had happened, the pain suffered, and the ill will he held. Then he pushed the soil back into the hole, fast and furiously. Once it was completely filled, he said his prayers, threw his pick and shovel onto the embankment, and scrambled up the way he had come.

After his private rite, Abraham felt he'd buried the many years of pain connected to his father, just as his father's remains now rested in the church yard. Now he could go on with his life. He would follow Damtew's lead and plant eucalyptus trees—seven of them—around the ravine to hallow the site of his father's murder and immortalize his deeds in defense of the coin. He wanted future generations to know that here, Abraham had buried adversity on behalf of his father and the family heirloom.

As he walked home that morning, Abraham felt relief and contentment—closure, at long last. Only one unanswered question still nagged. The Italian soldier's gold watch. What had happened to it?

That night, great peace came to Abraham as he covered his face with his gabi and closed his eyes. "Now I can move on," he said with a long sigh.

"The moment he fell asleep, he snored in deep, long rattles," Ayénat said later. "I didn't dare disturb him. It seemed as though he needed rest as much as the air he struggled to breathe."

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Abraham woke with a smile. Desta saw seven flashes of his father's chipped tooth, not counting those he bestowed on the mookits he patted and bade good-bye for the day. Abraham didn't speak, nor was there obvious cause for joy at the house, but he kept beaming as though something funny were happening—or as though he felt blissful inside.

His father's chipped tooth always caught Desta's eye. It was not unattractive, more like a dimple or a mole. But because it interrupted the flow of his otherwise perfect white teeth, it stood out when he smiled.

His constant cheer was odd. It was the fourth day after he'd buried his father when he should have been mourning. Other family members noticed. Desta couldn't

understand why his father was so happy. He had yearned to see his father alive, but now, unlike everybody else, he seemed happy to have buried him.

“I hope nobody else sees you like this,” said Ayénat, when she saw her husband grinning from ear to ear.

“You don’t know what it’s like to feel free after all these years,” said Abraham. “It’s as if someone removed my shackles. I am not sure why . . . but it gives me great joy.”

“We buried your father, whom you have long grieved, and now you are happy? It looks bad,” said Ayénat.

“There are no outsiders here, and I am entitled to express my feelings, such as they are. I didn’t realize how much my feelings were bound to my father all these years. Wondering since I was seven when we would see him again, if he would meet his grandchildren.

“It doesn’t mean he is gone from my thoughts, but I will no longer wait and wonder. It still saddens me that our children and grandchildren won’t ever know my father. But now, all questions are settled: He has departed for eternity, and I feel free at last!”

“It also means you no longer need a dog named Kooli,” said Desta, with a half grin.

“Yes. This Kooli will be our last, the end of an era,” said his father, flashing his chipped tooth.

“It has been a long wait. It’s sad that it ended this way,” said Ayénat, looking away.

“Any end is better than none. I only wish it had come sooner. I wish Desta . . . uhhm . . . Desta,” stuttered Abraham. He was looking at Desta when his wife interrupted.

“It was not meant to be.”

Desta waited for his father to finish.

“I just wish Desta had been born earlier, so we could have solved the problem sooner.”

“We’ve no control over God’s will,” said Ayénat, smiling.

“If it had happened with one of our older children, we could have been free years ago.”

“They were not in the scheme of things, apparently,” said Ayénat.

“I need to bring this closure to the children as well,” said Abraham. “They are now free from their grandfather’s story, and so is the land—to be walked on, grazed, inhabited.”

“How true,” said Ayénat. “We have been terrified to set foot there since Saba left. Now, perhaps, our sons can split it. It’s time for Damtew and his wife to have their own home.”

Desta recalled his visit to Saba’s old land, the night Damtew’s goat was lost; nothing bad had befallen him during the night he’d spent in their old shed.

“I was thinking that, too,” said Abraham. “I know Damtew will soon press me to give him a share of that land. We need to think ahead and divide it among our deserving children.”

FIFTY-FOUR

It was now July, and grandpa's Teskar, the fortieth day since his burial. Ayénat had been busy for weeks. For several days, she brewed tella, prepared the spices for sauce, and made a great quantity of dough for injera as she had for her children's weddings. Only this time, there would be no guests.

To answer Desta's prying questions, Ayénat explained that what she prepared would go to church for the priests who led the prayer services for his grandfather, and for the poor and aged of the valley invited for the event. These good works were meant to ensure that God would have mercy on Grandpa's soul and usher it to heaven.

They'd had services for Grandpa on the third, seventh, twelfth, and thirtieth days after his funeral. For each, they prepared food and drink, less than at Teskar, with one jar of tella, and some forty injeras with ample sauce to feed the priests and family who came. "Why all this trouble?" Asse'ged asked seeing all the food. "Grandpa suffered enough in this valley. I am sure God has already admitted him to His Kingdom."

"We cannot know how God decides these matters. We do these things to be sure," Ayénat said as she brought the last basket of injera outside for the men to carry to church.

Everyone in the family—Yihoon and Saba, Teferra, Asse'ged, Tamirat and Damtew with their wives, and Abraham and Ayénat—went to church except for Desta, who stayed behind to tend the animals.

He watched the family leave along the path, men carrying bread baskets on their shoulders, women with jars of tella on their backs. Only Hibist's and Enat's families hadn't come for Grandpa's Teskar. When Desta asked why, his mother said the service was meant to support the priests and the needy so that God would look kindly on Grandpa.

ABRAHAM AND AYÉNAT made Teskar the occasion to apportion Saba's old property. Abraham also thought it a good time to announce who would bear the family's ancient coin, and further honor his father's part in guarding it for so many years.

It was late afternoon when everyone returned from church with their empty baskets and clay pots. Desta was driving the animals home when his father told him to make sure to secure them early so that he would be ready for dinner.

Three mossebs were set—two for the adults and one for the children. The parents sat at one mosseb with Yihoon and Saba, and Teferra and his wife. The other three grown brothers sat at another mosseb with their wives. Desta, Astair, and Zena sat in the living room near the central pole that supported the roof.

Before they lifted the lids of the mossebs, Melkam brought a pitcher of water and a wooden bowl for all to wash their hands. For each, she placed the bowl under their hands and poured water as they rubbed their hands together. Then the adults prayed quietly for the grandfather's soul. Desta and the other children put their heads down and listened to the adults' muffled words. The mossebs were uncovered, and everyone ate.

Two sauces, shiro wat and potato and dried beef wat, were poured over layers of injera. The adults ate their meals with tella, chatting about the service, how grateful the priests and the needy had been, and also of the services yet to come on the eightieth day and one-year anniversary of the burial.

After dinner, Melkam again brought out the pitcher and bowl for all to wash hands.

"We want to discuss some important family affairs," said Abraham.

Everyone wondered what surprises he had in mind this time.

"Now that Baba's spirit has departed, we need to restore Saba and Yihoon's old property. We have decided, in place of Asse'ged and Damtew's new property, that they should receive Saba's old land and share it. They can decide how."

Everyone's eyes turned to the two brothers. Asse'ged gave a toothy smile. Damtew grinned mouth shut against his perfect teeth, but the gloom that always shadowed him lifted, revealing a new side of him. Lips sealed, beautiful teeth hidden, his face spoke volumes.

Teferra and Tamirat shared a look, and then regarded their father, eager to learn what was in store for them.

Abraham drew a mouthful of tella from his tumbler, spat out a few grains, and resumed. "Teferra, since you live on my mother's old property, keep it for yourself. To make things even, we have purchased a sewing machine and paid for your lessons. If you give up farming, you can give the property back and continue your tailoring business.

"Tamirat, since we were unsure of your plans, we did not assign land for you, but you can have a portion of the new property we have cleared two creeks south. Yihoon and Saba, you have your new place; may you, your new child, and your animals prosper."

"Thank you, Baba. Everything is going well. We couldn't ask for more," said Yihoon.

The brothers and their wives smiled and chatted excitedly among themselves. Saba

stole glances at Desta. The brothers didn't seem to consider his existence or what he might receive.

Abraham let the chatter die down. When all were quiet, he continued.

"The last—but not least—part of our property will go to Desta," Abraham said. Everyone looked at each other in wonder. "Do you have land we don't know about, Baba?" asked Asse'ged.

"No, I mean the coin."

"Ohhh that . . . that metal thing. But you called it 'property,'" said Asse'ged, glancing at his father.

"It is property—valuable property, your grandpa said. I was not blessed to receive it as a boy as my father had intended, so I don't really know what it does. But I must pass it onto Desta; he was Baba's choice. Surely he had good reason to guard it for forty-two years."

"It seems like it's dangerous," said Teferra.

"There is great responsibility to owning it, and not everyone is capable of that," said Abraham.

"It sounds like a joke," said Asse'ged. "How can Desta protect it? You have to be big and strong to guard it from thieves."

"Firstly, Desta will grow to be big and strong. Secondly, it's not mere size that matters, but intelligence. Desta has that, and I am sure he will gain the former in due time."

"Grandpa chose Desta for his own reasons, and it's he who should have it," said Saba, frowning at her other brothers.

"I don't think Asse'ged meant Desta shouldn't have the coin," said Teferra, glancing at Saba. "Only for protection, it should be with someone who can handle the job."

"You mean like Damtew or Asse'ged?" asked Ayénat.

"Or Tamirat and me. Are you prepared to lose this ancient treasure again?" said Teferra, turning to his father.

"You all seem to want this curious disk," said Tamirat, turning to Teferra. "Leave me out of it. I'm not interested."

"Have you all spoken your minds?" said Abraham, looking gravely at his children.

"Then I will answer my own question. Desta, and *only* Desta, will have the coin. You can argue until dawn, but my decision is made."

Under the shadow of the earthen ledge that circled the roof pole, a few feet above the ground where a beeswax candle burnt brightly, Desta listened and watched as his brothers battled their father. They sickened him.

WHEN DESTA LAY in bed that night, he thought about the coin. His brothers might be right about its safekeeping. He did not feel physically able—now or ever—nor did he want such responsibility, but the idea of owning such a powerful piece excited him.

At the same time, when he thought about what his grandfather had said—how old the coin was, and how many had lost their lives protecting it—it terrified him. As much as he appreciated Grandpa's entrusting him with it, he wished he had passed the coin to one of his brothers, like Damtew. *Let him die over it.*

Desta tried to imagine spilling his blood for something or someone. He would have to truly love it. He could see himself dying for Hibist. Or if someone thwarted his desire to go to the mountaintop. And maybe even for the vervet monkeys—perhaps more for Kooli. But the coin? He had no visceral connection to it. He felt no passion when he touched it. He didn't even think it beautiful. *How can I give up my life to protect the coin as Grandpa did?*

Then he remembered something else grandpa said. There is a sister coin somewhere in the world. The two coins will unite within the lifetime of the bearers. When they do, an event that has never happened before nor will ever happen again will take place. *What did he mean?* He thought of the coin's images he and Grandpa had drawn, all those channels and attributes he needed to recite morning and evening, rubbing the coin in his palms to fulfill his wishes. It was all too complicated to comprehend.

Desta tried to piece together the details of the stories his grandfather told and illustrated on the goatskin. How would they all come together when he had the coin? How could he prepare himself?

He offered up a message to his grandfather:

Dear Grandpa, since I will now be the bearer of the coin, please give me the mental and physical strength to protect it. And please make me love it. Only then can I sacrifice my life for it. You didn't tell me where to look for its sister coin. I hope somehow in my dreams or in person you will advise me what to do with this coin. I am sorry for doubting your wisdom. I don't mean to dishonor this privilege. But I am afraid. I leave it in your hands. Good night, wherever you are!

FIFTY-FIVE

The next morning, Desta went to the back of the house with a knife. Under the eaves, he had buried a clay cup containing his father's gold Italian watch and two Maria Theresa silver dollars.

The idea had taken root one day four years ago when he was five years old. He had asked Hibist how one could change one object into another. "Only God can do that," Hibist told him. Knowing how much his father had pined for the family's gold coin, Desta decided, with God's help, that he would transmute the watch into a gold coin.

Desta removed two silver dollars from Abraham's collection in a jar, placed the watch between them, and put them in the cup. He sealed the cup with mud, dug a hole in the ground and buried it. He thought if he prayed to God often, the watch would be transformed. Then he would give it to his father as a gift. He had planned to leave it buried for seven years, knowing this was his family's magic number.

But the family coin had been found, and he was to receive it. It was time to check on the watch. He dug up the cup and opened it, but the watch was white with mold, the silver coins tarnished black.

He polished them with a cloth and brought them home.

"Baba!" said Desta, when he saw his father on his stool waiting for breakfast. Bright morning light streamed through the open entrance.

"Yes, Desta!" said his father cheerfully.

"You gave everyone something last night, but nobody gave you anything. I have a gift you might like," said Desta, smiling.

"What have you got for me, son?"

"Something in place of the coin you always wanted," said Desta.

"Hmmm," said Abraham. "I was not meant to have it, you were. I am happy for you. My grandson is gift enough from you." He looked at Desta, stroking his goatee.

"I only repeated what grandpa's spirit told me."

"No matter. You were still the agent of our success."

"Close your eyes and open your hand," instructed Desta.

Abraham did as he was told.

“Era!” said Abraham, gazing down at the familiar object. “Where did you find this?!” He suppressed the impulse to scold Desta for saying nothing when he’d looked for the watch two years ago.

“I buried it between two silver dollars, hoping it would become a gold coin I could give you one day,” said Desta, smiling.

“That is very nice of you, son,” said Abraham. “A watch won’t turn into a coin no matter how long it’s buried, but thanks for your thoughts.”

“You can still think of it like the family heirloom.”

“No. We must find a way to return it to the family of the dead soldier I took it from.”

“Why?” asked Desta, saddened.

“This watch may be *their* family heirloom,” said Abraham.

“Where would you find them?”

“We start with the sincere desire to return it. God will take care of the rest.”

Desta was confused and disappointed.

“I’ll do my best to track down the soldier’s family and return it,” said Abraham. “If I can’t do while I live, will you promise to do it for me?” Abraham asked.

“How can I find them?” Desta asked, puzzled.

“Don’t worry about that. Just set the intention to do it, and God will help. That is one of the cardinal rules of the coin we own.”

“Yes, I promise,” Desta said with a smile.

“Thank you,” Abraham said. He embraced Desta, tears in his eyes.

FIFTY-SIX

Desta paced the green grass between home and the open apiary, waiting for Saba. It was almost noon on a Saturday in September, and nearly everybody was out to market or visiting family and friends across the river. Some patches of clouds spread across the azure dome above while others hung over the mountains. Wildflowers blazed yellow, blue, red, pink, and violet in the bright sun.

As he paced, bees buzzed and floated about their bamboo hives. Some landed gracefully on the plentiful yellow daisies inside the fence of the potato and collard green garden, while others hummed and skittered on white potato blooms, avoiding the purple, cupped petals of the sweet pea vines that wrapped the fence posts. The show normally captivated Desta, but today, his mind was on his trip to the mountain.

Nearly three weeks earlier, when Saba came for New Year's, she promised Desta that shortly after the Maskel holiday, she would take him to the mountain. In the nights and days since then, Desta had thought of little else. He had prepared and packed everything he would need: a long, slender bamboo shoot, one end stuffed with a cotton ball, to write with, and use to reach the sky, if he wasn't tall enough; a leather sack to gather and stow all the clouds he could grasp; a small gourd of red dye to write his name and draw on the sky; and an old *ankasay* with a pointed metal tip to widen the rain holes in the sky, so that he could see God, Israel, and the God of Israel. Desta hid these in an empty barrel hive in the bee shed.

The night before, Saba had sent Astair to say she would come at midday. At her instruction, Desta drove the animals to the field for Yihoon's nephew to shepherd while he was away.

Desta kept watch on the spot in the serpentine path that emerged from the bushes, where he would first glimpse Saba.

She appeared as he retrieved his things from the hive. "Ready?" Saba asked, startling him.

"Very much so," Desta said, happy to see her.

"What is all this for?" Saba asked.

“These are what I need when we get to the top of the mountain.” Desta explained each item and how he would use them.

Saba’s eyes grew bigger and her lips tightened as she watched her brother’s excited show-and-tell.

“What’s wrong?” Desta asked, perturbed.

“Nothing . . . just that . . . I think this is too much to bring. This mountain is unforgiving and nearly impossible to climb, even with plenty of experience.”

“These are very important to me,” Desta said. “Without them, we might as well forget the trip.”

Saba looked away for a time. “Promise me something?” she said, turning to him.

Desta looked puzzled. “What?”

“Some parts of the mountain are hard to reach. Of course, we’ll do our best to get to the top, but if we don’t make it all the way, you won’t be too disappointed, will you?”

“No . . . no I won’t,” Desta said, not sure if it was the truth. “That is why I have this long pole,” he clarified.

“Even then,” Saba said, averting her eyes.

“I’m excited to get as close as I can,” Desta said, reassuring her.

“Good, then let’s go before it’s too hot.”

Desta gathered his things. He tightened the gourd and placed it in the leather sack. The thought that it might spill and stain the leather—and the cloud he would bring back—concerned him. He took it out, tightened the wooden lid again, and tilted the gourd to check before dropping it in the sack, which he closed.

Saba had her own concerns. She carried a nickel canteen of water and a large, warm dabo in a cloth sack on her back. Her dress stuck to her back with sweat. While Desta got ready, she removed the sack, reached over her shoulders, and shook her dress.

Desta was not strong enough to carry his leather sack, and Saba swapped her canteen for his load, slipping his sack onto her back. Desta tied the leather handle of the canteen to his pole and carried it over his shoulder.

With all in order, the pair started up the mountain, passing Teferra’s new, empty home. Saba saw wood they could use as walking sticks and took a stout, straight rod for herself and took a shorter one for Desta.

The high end of Teferra’s property bordered the forest that stretched midway to the mountain. Desta knew it, having watched the morning sun journey down the valley over the blanket of green, but he had never walked the trail. It went straight up, splitting Teferra’s property in half.

As they approached the forest, Desta saw three kaga bushes and a strawberry vine

that draped a gottem tree on either side. A flood of memories came, of how he and Hibist would raid the bushes and vines of their ripe berries. Desta wished Hibist were here now. He could hear his sister: "Someday we will go to the mountaintop and touch the sky." How much fun it would have been if she were with him today!

Saba was preoccupied as well. She thought it cruel for Desta to make such an arduous journey only to discover that the sky was beyond his reach.

Twice she thought to tell him the truth and abort the trip, but she then decided that it would be doubly cruel to tell him now after weeks preparing for his journey. Perhaps climbing the mountain would be its own reward.

"Do you want to hear a story?" she asked Desta as they entered the forest. He was springing up the path in front of her, his eyes scanning the forest floor and trees as if looking for something.

"Yeah," he said, turning to his sister.

Saba cleared her throat and began. "Once upon a time there was a fox in the forest that came across red-hot figs high in the branches. They looked succulent and beautiful, and he badly wanted to eat them. He jumped as high as he could, but he couldn't reach the figs. He tried again with a running start. He nearly made it but still couldn't grab them. He failed a third time. Finally, he retreated gracefully, and said to himself, *Who knows if these figs are sweet or sour? I will try again when I am better prepared.*

"That is too bad for the fox," Desta said.

"Do you know why I told you the story?"

Desta shook his head.

"So that if for some reason you can't reach the sky this time, you will be like the fox and walk away with poise and grace. . You shouldn't be disappointed; you can always try again."

Her words fell on deaf ears. He was determined to do it. He said nothing.

Birds chirped in the forest, rustled the leaves, and darted before them. The floor was mottled with yellow light, and the air felt cool and invigorating.

Desta looked for vervet and colobus monkeys but saw none. He asked Saba where they'd gone.

"They usually are by the creek," she said.

Desta and Saba walked along the edge of the rain-washed trail, avoiding the many rocks that dotted it. Off the path, the earth was strewn with dead leaves; twigs; and mossy, fallen trees. Weeds grew about the twigs and trunks. The path straightened when flat but twisted and turned when the terrain rose sharply.

Saba had said it wouldn't take long to clear the forest, but by the time they

emerged, it seemed a long time to Desta. Along the steep path, their conversation stopped, and they breathed deeply. Saba huffed and puffed to keep up with Desta; every time he turned around, she had fallen farther behind. When he stopped to let her catch up, Desta saw moisture on her face that trickled down to her chest. She wiped it with her sleeve.

“Do you want to rest, Saba?” Desta asked, smiling.

“Good idea. I need to drink some water.” Saba staggered to the grass, winded. “I’m out of shape. I haven’t done much walking since the baby was born. We have treated him like a precious object. Yihoon doesn’t want me to do anything but attend to his boy. Now look how rusty I am. I used to walk these mountains easily.”

Desta gave her the canteen, and she guzzled its contents.

“How about a snack?” she asked, pulling the dabo from her bag.

“Yeah, I am hungry more than thirsty,” Desta said. “I was too excited to eat much this morning.”

Saba broke off a wedge of bread for each of them.

As they ate, they looked down the valley. Their homes seemed tiny and flat.

The panorama was breathtaking: below, dense forest and patches of farmland mantled with ripening crops, fallow fields veiled with green pasture, and flaming wildflowers that adorned the hills and mountains. The cattle looked like ants, and the goats and sheep blurred into the bushes.

The sky above was sapphire blue, the way Desta always dreamed it would be when he came to feel it. Puffy clouds hung idly above the eastern mountains and spread gauze-like to the north of the valley. But there was no blemish above the mountain that Desta and Saba were climbing.

“Shall we continue?” asked Desta, rising.

Saba nodded and gathered her things.

As they climbed, Desta occasionally put down his things and waited for Saba.

“You are amazing, Desta—not a drop of sweat on you,” Saba said, drawing near.

“I’ve dreamed of this trip for so long. I’m so focused on reaching the top that I don’t feel tired.”

“Well, we are a little over halfway there,” Saba said.

“I don’t see any clouds. Do you think we will find any when we get there?” he asked.

“Maybe they will come when we arrive.”

“I really want a sackful for Hibist to prove that I finally realized my dream,” Desta said, beaming.

“You don’t need proof. Just tell her what you did, and she will believe you.”

“But I really want to see her face when she opens the sack, and the cloud shrouds her face and blankets the room. I’m going to give it to her inside the house.”

Saba suppressed a laugh. “Let’s keep going. The sun is dropping, and we need to return before dark.”

Desta quickly gathered his things and began walking. The path split in two, one to the right, while the other climbed up, winding and turning.

“Take the left,” Saba said preemptively. “It’s shorter to the top.”

With each step, he grew more anxious. His heart raced and the blood pulsed in his temples. He wondered what the sky would feel like: cold, warm, rough like a rock? Or smooth like his mother’s clay pan? Would it echo when struck like a clay pot, or be solid and make a dull thud?

When he wrote his name, would it be like paper, or so smooth that nothing stuck to its surface? How far could one see his name when he wrote it on the sky? How visible would his banner be? The more questions he asked, the more nervous he got.

“Have you ever touched the sky?” he said, turning to Saba.

She was far behind and didn’t hear him. When she caught up, he asked again.

“No, I never tried. But it sure would be fun,” she said, stopping to catch her breath.

“Why didn’t you?”

“Nobody took me to the mountaintop when I was a child. Then again, I never had the urge, like you. Later, I was too busy with work.”

“You can touch it today,” said Desta, turning to press on.

“I am looking forward to it.”

“You can use my stick where we can’t reach it with our bare hands. But I need it back to sign my name and paint the banner,” said Desta.

“I am at your service,” said Saba, smiling a little.

Happy with her answer, Desta trotted up the mountain, sometimes following the zigzag path, other times walking straight up, bypassing it.

As they got closer, Desta became more anxious, thoughts racing. All the while, he kept looking up to see if they were nearing the sky.

As they approached the mountaintop, the land became flatter, but the sky was still high, and they couldn’t see where it joined the earth. Heart pounding, Desta grew bewildered and terrified by what he saw. When they cleared the steep face of the mountain, he saw the earth curve with more land stretching beyond that. At the very top, they found a pea farm. The stalks crept on the ground, some bearing ribbons of blue blossoms.

The path ran around the pea farm. Desta perched on a boulder and waited for Saba.

He was baffled. Beyond the flat part of the mountain, another hill rose abruptly. He couldn't see past it. To the right, the land sloped gently, revealing more earth.

"What is going on?" he asked when Saba finally arrived. "I thought the sky joined the earth here, but it looks as high as it was from below."

"Well, that was what I said," said Saba, seeing Desta's bewilderment. His eyes were brimming. "At some places, it's like this. At others, it might be different. This route is new to me, as it is to you. Let's see if the sky is any closer at the next hill."

"But there is more land beyond these mountains. Can you see the top of those peaks?" Desta asked, squinting into the west.

"Yes, of course. There is always more land. You thought where we lived was all there was to the earth?"

"I thought there was nothing past our mountains," Desta said, fighting tears.

"Let's move on and see if the sky is reachable at this next one," Saba said, encouraging Desta with a light push.

Desta was lost in thought. He measured his steps, trying to make sense of it all.

"Saba," he said as they climbed the massive incline.

"Yes?"

"Is there anything you haven't told me about this sky and earth business? Where is it? I had hoped to see and touch it once we cleared the mountain. Now I am really confused."

"I can't answer those questions, Desta. I know you've dreamed of coming here to touch the blue above us. I am only your chaperone. I thought you knew there was land beyond the mountains; you've heard Baba talk about Kuakura, which is so far away. I have wondered about touching the sky for many years, too, and we are about to find out. Let's finish climbing and get ready to reach it with our hands or your stick," Saba said, earnestly.

Desta had to digest what Saba had shared. He said nothing and hurried to the final plateau to discover for himself. His heart beat like a hammer. It all seemed like a dream.

He looked around for clouds, all that remained of his dream. He scanned the eastern sky where the clouds always hung. Sure enough, a growing charcoal-gray mass was there. To his amazement, through the eastern passes, he could see waves of mountains shrouded in blue-gray haze. The sky was not joined to them either. His theory was crumbling before his eyes. He began to feel empty inside.

He trotted faster and faster to get to the top. Each new thought slowed him, and then his excitement impelled him onward again.

As he neared the top, Desta slowed to cautious, measured steps, as if stalking prey. When he finally reached the pinnacle, the sky was as far away as it had ever been at

home. Unfolding before him was more land—far and wide—some hilly and jagged, some flat as a tabletop. The sky and earth met in a mirage far away in the smoky mist. His tears finally flowed like water. Saba held him close and let him cry.

“Let’s make sense of this,” Saba said, when Desta’s cries became sniffles. She wiped his tears with her netela and brushed off the remains with her fingers. She held him by the hand and led him to the highest spot where they could see their homes in the valley and all the distant lands beyond.

They perched on a flat, moss-fringed rock and looked. All around, the rocky plateau was studded with scrubby grass and wind-beaten shrubs clinging fast to the soil.

“By your tears, I know you are very disappointed,” Saba said, caressing Desta’s wooly hair. “Perhaps we might have told you the sky isn’t close enough to touch, but I hoped there might be a mountain so tall one could lay a hand on the firmament.

“I hoped we could share the joy of that today. But it was not meant to be. We found what we found. Still, you must admit that all this land is exciting. And you had years of wonderful dreams about this day.”

“All of you led me on, making me believe something that didn’t exist,” Desta said sadly, eyes probing the deep haze below the sun.

“Of all the children in our home, and probably the entire valley, you are the only one who had this odd notion. Baba told everyone to leave you to your fertile imagination. It was better that you found out for yourself than for others to kill your dream. As I said, since I first heard of it, you made me wonder if it could be true. I am thrilled that I joined you in your quest.” Saba glowed with excitement.

“Had I known the truth, I wouldn’t have wracked my brain all these years,” Desta said, eyes still fixed on the hazy western sky.

“Had you known, you wouldn’t have thought of all the possibilities. And you wouldn’t have come here so young to discover all this land. Most children don’t leave the valley until they marry, go to market, or run messages to distant relatives.”

When Desta said nothing, Saba continued in a perky voice. “Speaking of discovery, let me tell you about these distant lands.” She pointed to an outlying valley. “There in the northeast beyond Lehwani is called Jemma. That is where that man lives who took Baba’s sheep to breed.”

“Melaku,” Desta said.

“Yes, him. The land in the east, where you see snatches of hills through the pass, is called Lij Ambera. Aunt Welella lives there. The road to Lij Ambera is very rocky—hard on the feet—and the terrain rugged. Here in the south, beyond Afer Masha, is Talia. Aunt Bosena and her son live there. It is hot in the dry season; they grow corn

and fruit. Over there to the southwest is Gumbra, where Grandpa Farris lives, and not far to the right, Enat and Tenaw live. Beyond them, on that plateau, is Yeedib, where we go to market every Saturday.”

“You mean you walk all the way there after climbing this mountain?” Desta asked gravely, squinting and trying to gauge the distance.

“Yes, but rarely do we come straight up the mountain. We take the road along its side, past our former farm to the main caravan route, which is easier and less steep.

“Let’s see, there in the north is the town of Fagita. This was where Teferra took tailoring lessons. Past Fagita, in the thick haze, is Kuakura. Aunt Zere lives there. As you know, Father was born there. Way beyond Kuakura, near the blurred horizon is . . .” She paused, as if she’d had a lapse of memory.

Desta turned to see what had happened. She stared into the remote, invisible land, eyes glazed.

“That place is Dangila, where I saw the woman with milk-white skin and yellow hair,” she continued, haltingly.

Grief came over Saba. Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked forlorn.

“She said she didn’t know the cure for my problem and gave me some useless round white things to take . . .” Tears streamed as she spoke. “All those years before her, with herbs and roots, the trips to places near and far, the holy water, and nothing worked.” Desta wrapped his arms around his sister and let her cry, as she had done for him.

“I was not expecting this,” Saba said, trying to laugh off her sudden tearfulness. “After all those years, my answer came from my little brother, Desta . . .” She began to cry again. This time she wrapped her arms around him.

Desta wriggled his hands from her grasp and wrapped them around her neck.

“A million thanks, Desta,” Saba said, resting her head on his little shoulder.

“A million thanks to you, too, for bringing me here to see all this land and helping me realize my dreams—no matter the outcome,” Desta said, forcing a smile.

“You know, with all this crying, I feel much better, as if a darkness lifted. I bottled it up for so long. It is a great relief to bid farewell to my difficult past. Father had his private catharsis after the funeral. Remember his happiness just days after we buried Grandpa?”

Desta nodded, smiling. “Yes, I counted seven flashes of his chipped tooth.”

“Well, I hadn’t been able to do that until now. This trip is good for me in more ways than one. Thank you for helping me find freedom.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

As the sun angled west, the clouds glowed white. There was less blue over their valley now as more clouds pushed over the eastern ridges and gathered above their

home. The western sky was partly clear with thin sheets floating high above them. As the sun descended through them, it brightened the haze and the varied landscape before them. They could see scattered clusters of homes, animals grazing on the open fields, and bushes that sheltered the creeks below.

A quarter mile from where they sat, a road ran north-south along the mountain ridge. Saba said this was the caravan route to the market. They could see people and animals, donkeys with cargo, mules carrying men, people hurrying home, all carrying loads on their backs or shoulders.

Plumes of smoke seeped from thatched roofs, reminding Saba of her own cooking, which she should start soon.

But Desta still had one more task: to stuff his bag with clouds. It had been a gamble with fewer clouds as the spring season advanced. To his luck, a cloud hung a few hundred yards from the mountainside where they sat, and it approached the plateau so low that he thought he could touch it.

He ran to the edge with his sack open, waiting as the cloud came in low and thick. Saba stayed on the rock, smiling at Desta's excitement. He called for her to come help stuff the cloud into the sack while he held it. She ran to him, laughing uncontrollably.

Although Saba clawed, pushed, and blew, they didn't get much into the sack. They could see the cloud in the sack after she blew on the cloud, but it slipped out of the sack immediately. Desta handed the sack to Saba and scrambled with his hands and gabi to contain the whiteness. To his disappointment, nothing stayed. He wanted to cry, but when he turned to watch the white mass float away, he was moved to the depths of his soul.

The sun had painted the western sky brilliant marigold. The clouds surrounding the orb glowed as if catching fire. Desta had never seen anything like it. He dropped the empty bag and took a few paces forward, transfixed by the spectacle.

Saba matched his steps and stood next to him. Desta trotted to the flat-topped rock and perched there to watch undisturbed. Saba came to tell him to gather his things to go home. The sun seemed to Desta the only thing left in the sky to believe in. He had to see the stirring conflagration to its end.

When the sun broke free from the clouds, it looked much bigger than usual, like a gigantic coin painted gold, tinged with blood. He was captivated by the restless palette of colors as the sun tumbled through a red sky.

Saba pulled on Desta's gabi and urged him to leave. Eyes fixed on the sun, Desta sat, unmoved.

"It's getting late. We'll lose our way back if we don't leave now," pleaded Saba.

“I don’t want to go home . . . I will not go home.”

“You will have to go home, darling.”

The fire-red embers around the sun grew fiercer and brighter like the ink he had hoped to paint the sky with. The sun was doing it for him on a much grander scale without his signature.

“Is this what happens every day when the sun goes home?” he asked Saba, tears in his eyes.

“Yes, every so often . . . We can come watch it again. Now we need to go home. Your brother-in-law was kind enough to let me come, but now he will wonder what happened to us. I need to prepare dinner.” She added, “Look, our valley is already in shadow, while there is plenty of sun here.”

Looking over the lower peak, Desta saw a gray shadow over much of the valley. The only light he could see was a pale band that stretched across the top of the eastern mountains.

He turned back to the setting sun. It looked about to touch land in the dazzling crimson haze far away, past the melange of hills and patches of flat, ink-gray earth. The sun seemed to slice the earth, leaving behind hues of orange, cadmium, and pink. As it descended farther, the colors began to fade, with a halo of red and softer shades around the sun. In the end, all the colors coalesced into a mute charcoal gray.

This wonder was Desta’s consolation prize. He had discovered something that would remain with him for life—a sun that goes home with a spectacular array of color. What a sight to behold!

“If we don’t leave right now, we will become meals for the hyenas,” snapped Saba.

Grudgingly, Desta hopped down from his perch and gathered his things. He wanted to throw the bamboo stick and the gourd away, but Saba advised that he might need the stick on their descent, and his mother could use the ink to color straw for her basket weaving.

They ran on the flatter ground and scurried downhill. As they began the steep descent, a full moon rose over the eastern mountains. It wouldn’t be as dark as Saba had feared. They could take their time on the arduous route and not risk injury. They spiraled down, avoiding rocks and other obstacles. *They could even have a conversation now*, Desta thought.

“Saba, do you think you could take me to the market sometime?” he asked.

“I would be happy to,” replied Saba. “You can come one Saturday. Yihoon’s nephew will help with the harvest a few more months, so I’m sure he can watch the cattle again.”

“Great! I would love to come with you the next time you go.”

“I’ll let you know, for sure. For you, I will do anything,” Saba said.

Once they reached the lower slopes, where the side road met the main trail, it occurred to Saba that the forest ahead would be nearly pitch black. The thought of blundering into the darkness terrified her. Desta, too, felt uneasy. Saba’s thought to take the main road up to the villages they saw from the mountaintop and seek shelter for the night.

While they debated what to do, someone came up the road with a flashlight. Both felt a surge of relief. It was Yihoon.

“What took you so long?” he asked.

“Desta and I were so caught up with everything unfolding before us, we returned later than we wanted to,” Saba said.

“What was it that made you forget to come home?”

“The sunset so captivated Desta. He couldn’t leave before it was gone.”

“Is that so, Desta?”

“Yes. It was incredible. I am sorry I have never before seen such a thing. I wish we lived up there so that I could see it every day.”

“Anything you see at first is exciting. I am sure it soon would bore you,” said Yihoon.

“I don’t think I would ever get tired of it. I thought the sun came out of a hole in the ground, but today I saw what really happens. It slides down the other side of the land. I wish I could follow the sun and find out where it goes.”

“It’s a mystery, Desta. Nobody really knows. God arranges everything for us, and we can’t question his work. Just accept it and be happy with what you have,” Yihoon said.

His reply disturbed Desta. If he heeded Yihoon—just accepted God’s mysterious handiwork—he might as well stop dreaming, thinking, and questioning.

“Let’s talk about your quest. Did you touch the sky?” Yihoon asked lightly.

“Not even close. I wish you all had told me the truth, so I wouldn’t have wasted years thinking about it.”

“Certain things are better unsaid. It was your father’s wish, and a wise one. It is good that you learned for yourself.”

“Desta, do you not consider our trip worthwhile?” Saba asked.

“No . . . I do. I saw so many wonderful things,” Desta said apologetically.

They didn’t talk much once they entered the forest, but instead concentrated on their footsteps, following the flashlight’s glow as it glided before them, shaky and halting as if afraid of the dark, rocky path.

They stumbled, staggered, fell, and tread on rocks until their feet bled, but they finally emerged from the forest.

“What happened?” “What happened?” Ayénat asked, when Desta arrived home.

“I discovered that the sky is not real . . . the clouds aren’t real . . . but the sun is. It painted the sky red, yellow, and gold. I also saw a world full of mountains, plateaus, and valleys.”

“I am happy you finally made your journey,” Ayénat said. “Now you can stop torturing yourself and concentrate on the animals.”

Desta didn’t want to talk further with his mother. He wanted to be alone and recall the mountaintop, the land he discovered, and the spectacular sunset, to think about the clouds he couldn’t gather and the sky he could not reach. What had happened on his trip moved him, excited him, and disappointed him—all at the same time.

He went to bed right after dinner. He covered himself with his gabi and summoned the sights and feelings he’d had at the mountaintop. He saw craggy, wave-like mountains rippling east, near where the sky met earth through the dark gray haze; the mist-shrouded lowlands in the south; the plateaus, the valleys, and the multihued crop fields of the west; and the olive-green expanse of earth in the north, veiled in a hoary miasma.

As Desta imagined these images, he felt elated and exuberant, and he had the same sense of freedom and wonder as when he was there.

He also thought about his deep disappointment at the truth about the sky and the clouds. But he realized that the larger world he had found and the spectacle he had witnessed were more rewarding and exhilarating than his thwarted dreams.

AS HE TOSSED AND TURNED with all of this, he also thought of strange and mysterious coincidences. Just as Abraham had not met his father after years of yearning, so too were Desta’s grand dreams dashed.

He thought of how clouds had helped solve family problems. The cloud-like spirit of his grandfather had cured Saba’s miscarriages, led Abraham to his father’s remains, brought him closure, and freed him from his past. The clouds that drew Desta to the mountaintop had made it possible to discover new places and wonders. And they had given him a taste of freedom from the mountains that had walled him in all his life.

It all moved Desta in heart and spirit in a way he had never felt before. He couldn’t wait to leave the valley again.

FIFTY-SEVEN

The day Saba had promised to take Desta to market finally arrived. He rose long before the sun, driving the animals to the field for Yihoon's nephew to tend to. After breakfast, Desta leaned against the fence, waiting for his sister.

"We need to climb the mountain before the sun gets strong," she had said when she informed him of their trip.

For Desta, he was eager to see not only the market but also all the land outside his valley. Since he returned from the mountain, he had spent sleepless nights thinking about distant lands, the names of places where his relatives lived, and the glorious sunset. Today, he planned to study the breadth of the earth and what the landscape really looked like. God willing, he would see another sunset.

The sun had barely reached the valley's bottom when Saba appeared, driving a stout gray donkey laden with a big sack of teff. The animal walked past Desta as if loaded with feathers. He sniffed and snorted, sending up a cloud of dust.

"Have you been waiting long?" Saba asked.

"Since before dawn. I have been dying to get out of this valley again. Since our trip to the mountain, I have enormous desire to travel," Desta said, grinning. He wore his gabi over a soiled white shirt and carried a hockey stick.

"You are too young to develop a taste for travel. But I am glad you liked what you saw on our first trip enough to see it again."

"I wish we lived on other side of these mountains."

"I know . . . Let's hurry," said Saba. "It's going to be hot. You lead the donkey."

Up the hill they went. They ran into Teferra, who was excitedly preparing for market with an assortment of clothes he had made. This was his first trip with his wares. He smiled and greeted Saba happily, but said nothing to Desta. When Saba told him where they were going, he glared at his brother. "What's he going to do there?" he demanded.

"He wants to see the marketplace, and I am fulfilling his wishes," said Saba, smiling. "A small token for the great favor he did for me."

"He won't be buying or selling, and I am sure he won't be of any use to you. It seems a waste of time for Desta to climb mountains and travel that far."

“There is no point in discussing this,” snapped Saba, motioning to Desta. “We are going. We’ll see you at the market.”

As they walked away, she turned back to Teferra. “You all call him a boy. The fact is, Desta is more mature and bright than many adults in this valley, including . . . guess who?”

Desta thought Teferra sounded more and more like Asse’ged and Damtew, who had thankfully left him alone since getting their land.

They cleared the forest above Teferra’s home in no time. Where the road split, Saba thought it easier to follow the contour of the mountain to the north. The route would take longer but was less arduous. At the top of the plateau, the road linked with the main caravan route where they turned south.

They joined market goers driving donkeys or riding horses and mules, clouds of dust in their wake. Saba’s donkey seemed pleased for the companions and needed no urging to keep up. Saba met acquaintances and chattered along the meandering ridge behind three women who marched hurriedly side by side. There were many people all around them, leading or riding laden animals and walking with loads on shoulders and backs.

Desta was happy, left to his own devices. His eyes and mind wandered.

He stared deep into the distant haze and wondered if that was where the earth ended and the sky began. Twice he wanted to ask Saba where the woman with the yellow hair and milk-white skin lived, but changed his mind, concerned she would cry again in front of the other women.

He brought his focus back to Saba’s bare heels, pounding the dusty earth, stirring the soil to life. He wondered if the sky existed at all, and if it did, where in this world it touched the earth. If somebody told him where, he thought he would go there, no matter how far or hard to reach. He hated to think that he might die without ever laying his hands on the blue thing that had looked down on him his whole life.

The western ridge sloped gently before it fell into a creek basin that ran along the foothills. After a point, the ridge itself descended slightly to a flat area, before rising sharply into a pommel-like mass. Their caravan route met up with another from the east, bringing more marketgoers.

“That is Wendegez,” said Saba, pointing to the ascending, knobby landmass before them. Scattered bushes covered the mountain face with scanty vegetation on top.

Desta looked up toward the mountain, remembering the Italian soldier and the gold pocket watch. He wanted to ask Saba where it happened, but she was talking with her friends. Then Desta saw many people and pack animals coming from the other caravan road, merging with theirs, drawing his attention to them.

People scurried in groups of four or five, driving animals along the stony route.

Soon after they left the saddle of land, the path curved to the west of Wendegez before dropping down the steep side of the mountain.

The travelers with laden donkeys stopped to secure their cargo again before the sharp descent. One woman helped Saba adjust the sack and fasten the strap on her donkey.

The road on the slope was rocky and twisted, its sides long washed out by floods, making it hard to follow. In some places, newer paths had been created. Some women complained about their knees' buckling as they descended. Occasionally they paused at the bottom of the hill to gauge the distance yet to cover. Saba steadily walked, keeping an eye on her donkey.

Desta enjoyed the view of the vast, treeless valley. "That is where we are headed," said Saba, pointing to a plateau thick with trees. "We have to travel this wide land first, but it's all flat and easy to walk," she assured Desta.

"How long before we get there?"

"Probably a little more than we've already gone, but be prepared for that hill," she said, pointing to the steep side of the plateau.

Desta didn't pay any mind. He was anxiously heading to market.

In the company of the people they had met and others who had joined later, the walk across the wide valley went quickly. They traversed small creeks and rivers, passing several villages and two churches. Desta wondered who lived in these places.

Saba was right. The climb to Yeedib was hard. Everyone sweated, huffed and puffed, and stopped frequently to rest. The animals grunted and faltered under their burdens.

As they came to the top of the hill, Desta sensed an aroma familiar from his trip with his father to the nursery by the river. The fragrance of eucalyptus was overpowering. As they drew nearer to the town, other smells overcame the eucalyptus trees: human waste, a bit of tella, animal dung, body odor, buttered hair, and oil-stained clothes.

Desta was impressed by the tall, dense grove of trees surrounding the outskirts of town. "Those are the trees Baba is growing," Saba said, seeing Desta crane his neck.

"If this is how tall they get, Baba's trees have a long way to go."

"They grow very fast."

They entered the deafening din of the market. Desta watched people scurry about, beating their animals through the maze of people. Everybody seemed to talk at once. The clamor reminded Desta of birds feasting on figs in a sholla tree. People moved every which way, seemingly without purpose. More people poured through the

entrance behind them, driving goats, sheep, and donkeys loaded with sacks. Some people had chickens on their shoulders that were hanging by their feet.

Saba directed Desta past the edge of the crowd to the aisle of the teff sellers. Desta lingered to look at the people, and she went ahead with the donkey, spurring him on with Desta's hockey stick, steering him through the crowd.

As Saba made her way, a woman stopped her. "Is that teff?" she asked, stabbing the air with a beak of a hand, pointing to the sack.

Saba acknowledged that it was.

"How much?"

Saba looked at her sack and then the woman. "I am not sure how the market is doing today."

"There is a glut of it. Harvest time," the woman said.

Saba's face crinkled. "We'll find out," she said, glancing at the woman indifferently.

The donkey sniffed the ground and snorted. Saba was about to spur on the animal when the woman said, "You must want to relieve your animal's burden. I can do that quickly if we come to terms." She smiled, her eyes holding Saba.

Desta studied the woman. She had clean, fair skin that glistened as if dabbed with oil. Her soft, dark hair caught the light. She had even teeth, big eyes, a pretty nose, and soft tapering fingers. She wore a pleated navy-blue dress that hugged her waist—clothing Desta had never seen, and so different from the women in his valley who wore long cotton gowns secured with wide, colorful cotton girdles. Around her shoulders, she had a white, spotless netela with a broad purple border. She wore shiny leather on her feet.

"I can't give you a price unless I know what others are getting," Saba said firmly.

Desta saw a strangely dressed, tall man glance toward the woman as he talked to two men nearby. He wore a fuzzy, thick, dark green shirt; long pants; and heavy leather shoes. He wore a puffy round hat tipped to one side, similar in color and texture to his clothes. There were silver stars on the hat and above his shirt pocket.

The man said something to the men, then broke off and came straight toward Desta, Saba and the woman. "How much does she want?" he asked the woman, who Desta figured was his wife.

"She wouldn't tell me."

Saba's face became tense and bloodless.

"Give her fifteen birr," the man said authoritatively.

Saba's face relaxed.

The woman produced two crinkled papers from a small leather pouch, one pale red and one faded orange, and extended them to Saba.

Saba didn't take them. "I can sell it for fifteen, but not those birrs," she said nervously.

"You people never get it, do you?" the man said angrily. "The old birr is banned. It's not our money. The *ferengies*—white people—brought it into our country. It doesn't have the portrait of our *Negus*—king. Do you understand?"

Saba said nothing, her face taut and pale.

"You take this money, or I will arrest you and put you in jail!" barked the man. He snatched one of the bills from the woman. He held both ends of the paper and shouted, "Look here! This is our *Negus*. He is called Haile Sellassie. This is our currency, from our *Negus*," he shouted, stabbing the image with his index finger.

"Give it to me," Saba said, nearly in tears. She took the bills, pulled open the neck of her dress, and stuffed them in.

"Come with me," the woman said to Saba. "We need to transfer the grain into my sack at home."

The man whispered something to the woman and disappeared into the crowd.

Saba followed the woman with the loaded donkey. Desta whacked the animal when he hesitated. They walked around the crowd and cut north when they came to a hard, grassless expanse. The woman led them along its border, then turned onto a straight, wide path bordered by tall eucalyptus trees and a row of tin- and grass-roofed houses on each side. Some were closed, others open, with people drinking tea or coffee. At one house, boisterous men sat on a bench drinking tella and honey wine from glass tumblers. As they pushed farther from the market, most houses were closed. Beyond fenced enclosures, women washed clothes or played with their babies.

Desta saw no boys his age. He wondered if youngsters even lived in towns.

The woman's house was at the end of an alley. She pushed open a rickety tin door, and Saba followed. Getting the loaded donkey to pass through was tricky; the two women shimmied the sack on the donkey's back. Inside, a girl brought a thick canvas bag. With the help of the girl, the two women transferred the teff.

Before Saba and Desta left, the woman offered drinks. She said she was sorry she had no injera for them. Saba thanked her just the same. They downed their drinks and left.

"If you bring any grain next time, bring it here first. I will pay top dollar. You don't have to wait around baking in the sun to sell it," the woman said, smiling.

"Thank you. We will," said Saba, mechanically.

As they returned to the market, Saba wondered what she could buy with the strange money she had received, or if she should accept it from anyone. She had seen it before but never used it. "It's paper, just paper!" she shouted.

To Desta, it seemed as if Saba had been robbed.

“I will see if . . .” The rest of the words never made it to her lips.

A long line of smartly dressed boys and girls appeared. At the head of the line, one boy hoisted a green, yellow, and red striped cloth above his head. They came from a side street, chanting and singing, and headed toward the market.

Desta and Saba waited for all of the boys and girls to file into the main street, then followed at a distance. Behind the singing children walked two men, one tall and dark, the other short, slender, and fair. The short man wore glasses on metal frames hooked to his ears. A uniformed man like the one who’d just confronted Saba walked in front and cleared the crowd. As the boys and girls marched through the market, the onlookers parted.

Desta trotted to his sister and asked who they were.

“They are *asqala temareewech*—modern school students. I have seen them before,” she told him. When he looked puzzled, she explained that they were students from modern school, different from the church school that Tamirat had attended.

After the last of the students passed, the crowd mingled, blocking Desta’s view. Saba wanted to find Teferra in the men’s clothing alley, then tour the market with Desta. He begged to follow the students, but she said it was a waste of their precious time.

Desta followed his sister and the donkey to their brother, then slipped away, weaving through the crowd in search of the students. He found them near the north end of the market. They were circling it, chanting and singing. As they passed, the crowd lined up to watch. Desta followed, snaking around the crowd. After they had made a complete circuit of the marketplace, they marched out the way they had come. Desta stood at the periphery and watched them disappear into the trees.

He was startled when the policeman who had threatened Saba wrapped his big hand around his arm. “Is this the boy?” he asked, turning to a crying woman. Terrified, Desta looked past the policeman to see whom he was talking to.

“That is him!” shouted Saba.

“Here, take him,” said the man as he pushed Desta toward his sister.

Saba scolded Desta, threatening never to take him anywhere ever again.

They returned to Teferra’s stand. “Don’t you dare move from here,” Saba said, wagging her finger at Desta, and walked off. Teferra dressed down Desta with his eyes.

Customers picked out trousers and jackets from his pile and studied them, picked up others, held them up to themselves to see how they might look.

Desta thought of the marching students and how clean their hair, clothes, and feet were, even those without shoes. What impressed him most was that all of them

wore shorts or long trousers. The beautiful multicolored cloth that danced high in the air . . . how Desta wanted to touch it and examine its colors, textures, and patterns. He remembered a drawing of a cat in the middle of the panel and wondered what it was doing there.

Saba returned. She apologized for her anger. She forgave him because she knew how curious he was, but she explained that it was safer for her to accompany him than to have him go off on his own. She seemed to forget that he had asked and that she had declined.

“Let’s go see things,” she said, grabbing Desta by the hand.

First, they walked down Teferra’s aisle. Men on either side stood or sat proudly behind piles of new clothes. Farther along were other kinds of goods. Under grass sheds, men and women displayed a medley of merchandise: soaps, perfumes, colored yarns, buttons, safety pins, needles, sugar cubes, coffee beans, and hundreds more objects. A pile of blue glass ring beads sat in a bowl like the ones the bullies stole from Desta.

Next, Saba took Desta to the teff row. As she talked to the dealers, Saba learned that a sack of white or brown teff was priced from six to seven silver birr. Saba had undersold her white teff by two birr. She explained to Desta that three paper bills the policeman had made her take traded for only one silver birr. The woman had given her the equivalent of five silver birr.

Continuing around the market, they saw barley, potatoes, spices, poppy-red pots and pans, black drinking cups, incense burners, and candle holders, but none held Desta’s interest. He merely followed his sister, listening to her chat with the merchants and farmers or prattle on about the things she showed him.

When they were done, Desta was thirsty and hungry, and he asked for water. Saba took him to a little hut at the fringe of the market where glasses were laid out on a long, rickety table surrounded by men. Saba went to the door and asked to buy bread and drink from a young woman. She invited them in and brought them tella, water, and a small round dabo. They finished quickly and left.

It was already mid-afternoon, and they had far to go. They loaded their empty sacks onto the donkey and the few things Saba had bought, and they made their way out.

Overwhelmed by the crowds, scents, and noise, Desta was glad to head home. Questions roiled his thoughts, and he was anxious to be alone with Saba.

Only a few people were departing when Saba and Desta got on the main road. With hardly any burden, the donkey trotted happily downhill behind Desta. Saba walked alongside. A few folks strode near them, scattered along the road from the outskirts of Yeedib to the river below the mountain.

“Can I ask you a question?” said Desta.

“Go ahead.”

“What is a police?”

“They are persons who put people in jail for doing bad things like stealing, hitting, or killing someone, getting into fights, or breaking the king’s law. A jail is a place where people who do those things are locked up. They are only allowed out for food, the bathroom, or exercise.”

Desta was impressed by this. “Why did that man say he would put you in jail if you didn’t take his wife’s money?”

“Because we are not supposed to use the silver dollar anymore. We have used it for so long that I thought we still did. But it’s not our money anymore, he said.”

“There are three parts of this trip that I dread,” she said, “climbing and descending this mountain, the one at the far end of the valley, and the one above our home.” She scanned the distance to the mountain.

“I have another question,” said Desta. “What is Negus?”

“The leader of our country, like Baba, in a way, is to our community.”

“Where does he live?”

“In Addis Ababa.”

“Is that far?”

“I think so. I have never been there, and I don’t think Baba has either, despite his travels.”

“I would like to go there someday,” said Desta.

Saba laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“One, it’s too far, and two, what good would it do you to go there?”

“I don’t know. It would be fun, particularly if the sun goes there every day after it leaves here.”

“That I don’t know. Is the sun your new fixation?”

“It seems more real to me than the clouds or the sky. It comes and goes without missing a day. The sky is very elusive.”

“I am sorry you’re still disappointed, but you shouldn’t be so quick to judge. I am sure there must be places where the sky is touchable. I just don’t know where.”

Desta noticed that the donkey tried to graze on the dry grass, but dust blew in his face each time he lowered his head. He finally gave up. Three men and a woman rushed by, spurring Saba to hurry. They needed to get home in daylight.

At the bottom of the mountain, the river ran silently. Water bugs skidded on the surface. The donkey bent and drank from it for a long time.

“Poor thing. He must have been very thirsty. If he could talk, he would have begged for water a long time ago,” said Saba.

Desta chuckled.

The land beyond the river was flat as his mother’s baking pan. The grass was shadowy green, the ground soft and springy, the cool air vitalizing. This part of their journey was a pleasant relief from dodging potholes, sharp rocks, and loose stones on the mountain.

Saba said the flat land was called Godir. The caravan road split it in half. On the northwest side of the road, near the foothills stood a church in juniper trees where people gathered for a breakneck horse race at the church’s annual celebration.

As he listened to Saba, Desta looked up to the eastern sky and noticed cloud formations, some of them appearing like giant horses. Desta thought he would like to bring a cloud horse and ride it in the races to make his father proud.

But it was only a cloud . . . as illusory as the sky.

Saba told him to release the donkey’s lead and let him eat the tufts of grass at the roadside. The donkey dove in.

“I hope I’m not tiring you, but I have more questions,” said Desta, glancing at Saba.

“Go ahead. if I can be of help to you, it’s no bother Desta. You know that.”

“Do you think Baba would let me go to asquala temareebet?”

“Frankly, I don’t know. But I can give you my own view. I hope you’ve gotten used to disappointment by now; I think it’s only fair that you know the facts.”

“Tell me.”

“First, I think our whole family is fortunate that, despite your youth, we can talk to you like an adult. You are mature beyond your age of, what, nine?”

Desta nodded.

“The good Lord has blessed you. God and grandfather’s spirit chose you, and you now bear our family treasure. They believe you can handle what comes with the coin. Just as Baba said, this is a big responsibility.”

Desta wished Saba would make her point.

“What I now say to you is something I’d not share with any other young adult, let alone a boy, but I know you can handle it: I think Baba is disappointed in his older children. Tamirat abandoned church school after twelve years’ training to be a priest. What a waste! Had Baba known, he would have put him to farm work at an early age.

“He had hoped Asse’ged would ride horses and make him proud at the church holiday races. But Asse’ged isn’t interested. As Baba says, he can’t even ride a donkey. He is a brilliant farmer and a devoted son, but he never achieved what Baba hoped for him.

“Teferra is now a tailor, thanks to Baba. He does very well since he is the only one in the valley. But still, he has not distinguished himself from the common folk.

“Good fate has not come to his married girls, either. One married a man with fat feet, another husband said to be high-bred was not. I blame our parents for the girls’ fates. They should have investigated these men before they married their daughters.

“Anyway, coming to your wish, with these disappointments for his older children, I am not sure Baba would gamble with you. He once said that he wished all his children could be schooled, but now that is next to impossible for any of them, including you.

“You are the last of the unmarried boys. Your mother and Baba will need someone to farm the land after Damtew and his wife move out.

“Baba is a great businessman, but not a farmer. He has always had help. In their old age, they will need someone to support them, farm for them. That lot will now fall to you.” She looked at Desta and smiled sadly. “That is what I think.”

Desta’s heart sank. He felt as if Saba had punched him in the stomach. What she said was true, and it hurt. He was stunted, locked in by circumstances not of his doing, the mountains that surrounded him his jail. He wanted to cry, but he had cried enough. This time he held his tears. He needed to break free.

Then and there, Desta vowed not to let his family or the mountains decide his life. He had endured so much already. He was stronger and wiser now, ready to make his own decisions about what was important to him.

Saba’s donkey chased after a female donkey that passed them. They ran to catch up, calling to its owners who grabbed Saba’s donkey by his lead and held him.

Talking very little after that, they crossed two low, humpy fields with thin brown grass. Saba hummed a tune. Desta thought of what she had said about his fate. All seemed dismal. He did not want to be a farmer like everyone else. He had to find some way to leave and attend school, even if he had to tunnel through the mountain to do it.

After passing the church of Gumbra on their right, they began climbing the steep mountain behind the shoulder of Wendegez. Tired and thirsty, they concentrated on their climb. Desta ran to the trickling creek on their right and gulped all the water he could, scooping it with cupped hands. Saba hesitated, then joined him. Afterward they finished climbing with renewed vigor.

As they marched comfortably on the easy terrain of the wave-like ridge, Desta thought of a new tack.

“I have an idea,” he said.

“Tell me,” said Saba, cocking her ears. The sweat on her brown forehead glistened in the setting sun.

“Do you think you could talk to Baba on my behalf?”

“Meee? Nooo way. I have no favor with him, and I really don’t have the gift of persuasion. You should ask him yourself.”

“You already said how he feels about his children. How can I reason with him? What can I say? ‘Send me to school. Find a new shepherd boy and farmer.’ Father won’t agree to it. My mother would be floored.”

“You know who might do? Teferra’s wife. Baba has a very high opinion of her. She has endeared herself to him. I think she should broach the idea.”

“Can you talk to her?”

Saba nodded.

“In fact, I will see her tomorrow. I will do my best. The rest is up to God and your good fortune.”

As they walked along the mountain’s crest, Desta kept his eyes on the sun. He watched the morphing of colors on the western sky as the lurid orb inched toward the portal to the other world. As the orange transitioned into red, just before the sun nestled into the fiery haze, they reached the junction of the main caravan route and the road to take them home.

“Not tonight,” said Saba when she saw Desta turn to the fireworks in the western sky. It was hard for Desta, but he reined in his impulse.

As they descended the mountain above home, white light shone on the mountains in the east as Desta had often observed this time of the day. One more natural phenomenon he didn’t understand. Why did a red sun cast white light? Why was the sun not red just before it dipped behind the mountain? Was the sun mocking him too, like the clouds and the sky? When would he see the red ember of the setting sun again, watch it undisturbed until the very end when the curtain of darkness fell?

“Thanks for everything,” said Desta as he arrived home.

“You are very welcome.”

“Don’t forget what we talked about.”

FIFTY-EIGHT

The trip to the market was eye-opening for Desta, another chance to discover worlds more vast than the walled valley where his family had long isolated themselves. He began imagining a different kind of life for himself. At the very least, other lands held the renewed possibility to touch the sky.

He imagined going away to school, seeing sunsets every day, traveling, and making friends far away. But how? As Saba had pointed out, it would be daunting to free himself from his family obligations.

He had to convince his father, the ultimate decision-maker. Desta thought it best to tackle the problem two ways: recruit allies to influence his father, and subtly plead his own case. His father needed his court papers read to him. Since Tamirat left, the priests at church had read most, and Awoke had handled the most personal documents.

He needed someone he could dictate his cases to. The priests were expensive and not readily available.

Abraham wanted a son to make him proud. His father had recently spoken glowingly of a beautiful umbrella and raincoat that a judge received from his son who taught in a distant town called Gonder. If his father sent him to modern school, Desta could do such things for him. He would do so well that his father's head would grow bigger than ever.

Abraham complained about the corrupt courts, how he wished for honest judges who ruled fairly and a relative at court to swiftly process his papers. With a proper education, that could be Desta.

Desta shared his ideas with Saba, who advised him to broach them when their father was relaxed and in a good mood. He thought Saturday, before his father went to town, and Sunday, when the priests read for him, would be the best times to approach him.

It was only a week later on Wednesday morning when Desta found an opportunity. In a sunlit spot by the entrance, Abraham crouched over Dامتew's fat straw box with his important papers.

His father had spread the contents on a cloth. The papers, folded in small squares, reflected the morning light and threw off reflections on the smoke-stained ceiling.

Abraham moved several papers around without opening them. He examined both sides and then laid each down.

Desta was intrigued. “Baba, how do you know which is which without opening them?”

“Some I know by how I folded them, and some I know by their age or the kind of paper,” said his father without looking up. He continued to sift the pile.

“Wouldn’t it be better to open them up and look?”

“That would confuse me. You know I can’t read.”

“Have you considered studying the alphabet and learning to read?”

“I am too old for that . . .”

“Awoke can teach you. He taught me.”

“You did tinker with reading, didn’t you?”

“That was nearly two years ago. My brothers thought it was a waste, and I stopped.”

A tear ran down his father’s long nose and hung, glittering in the light. Abraham brushed it off. Desta had seen his father tear up before, without clear cause.

He looked at Desta. “Can you read these?”

“I doubt I remember how, but I’ll try.”

Abraham unfolded one of the letters and passed it to Desta. “You’re halfway there, Baba. At least you know how to hold the pages,” said Desta, smiling.

“I am not blind,” said Abraham sternly. “I can see the *firma*—signature—my fingerprint, and where the dates and address are. I didn’t start working with documents yesterday, you know.”

Desta was surprised at his father’s sensitivity.

“Okay, that is pretty good. Let’s see what you’ve got,” Desta said as he scanned the letter. For the life of him, he could not make sense of it. He identified some of the letters, but couldn’t read the words. “Who wrote this?”

“Your brother, I think.”

“Is this how badly he writes?”

“Now, don’t criticize his writing. Others have told me he writes rather well. You can’t read it. Give it to me.”

Desta’s ego was bruised, and he handed back the paper. “I wish I had continued my studies,” he said.

“I think what I’m looking for is in one of these papers. I’ll have to take some with me to the courtyard for help,” Abraham said, gathering the papers into a pile.

“If it’s not among these, then what? Come home and look some more in the remaining papers?”

“If I have to, yes, but I am sure it’s here.”

“Why not take the whole box?”

“That would only confuse the reader. Besides, showing Damtew’s box in public would scandalize him.”

“It occurred to me,” Desta said, “that if you put me through school, I could save you these trips to read your papers. Would you consider that?”

Abraham looked at Desta through his eyelashes.

“I mean it.”

“I won’t be fooled a third time with that game. We all will be better off if you concentrate on shepherding and prepare to be a good farmer.”

The finality and tone of his words depressed Desta. His heart sank.

His father took the paper from Desta, folded it, gathered the others, and slid them in his breast pocket. He then put the rest back in the box, returned it to the middle granary, grabbed his walking stick, and left.

A FEW DAYS LATER, Desta ran into Saba. She told him she had talked to Teferra’s wife but was not sure if she had broached the idea with their father.

A WEEK LATER, Desta and Abraham sat alone by the fire.

“Baba—”

“Yes, Desta.”

“Don’t you want a son who finally makes you proud?”

“Who?”

“Me.”

“Ahh, what is it you have for me this evening?”

“I want you to put me through school—asqala temaree bet, not church school, Baba,” Desta said.

“You have not given up. It seems that you have agents working for you as well. Laqechi pleaded with me the other day, and Saba shared her opinion, too. It seems they all want to manage my life and yours, instead of their own,” Abraham replied.

“Really, I promise to be the best student I can. Someday, I can buy you things, like the beautiful umbrella and raincoat the judge’s son bought him. I can work in court so that you won’t have to bribe the judges and clerks. I can do many, many things for you. Grandpa’s spirit said I am capable of many great things, not only caring for the coin.”

Abraham quietly listened as Desta rattled off his great ambitions. “I think you are correct in your last point,” he said thoughtfully, caressing his goatee. “I wish we could afford to let you go, but you are our only help—for now and the future.”

“Teferra said that I would only be gone in the dry season. I can come help in rainy season.”

“Have you got dinner? I need to go to bed soon,” Abraham said to Ayénat, who had just come from the back room.

“Soon.”

“We’ll talk another time,” he said to Desta.

Desta’s heart leaped. He felt a sliver of hope.

TWO WEEKS LATER, Ayénat sent Desta to Teferra’s to retrieve a borrowed sieve. Teferra and Laqechi, Abraham, and Yihoon and Saba sat drinking coffee and chatting.

Saba and Laqechi were pleased to see Desta. They made him sit down. Desta sensed everyone’s attention.

Abraham asked, “Are you still interested in school?”

Desta held his breath. “Very much.”

“You and your agents have been pestering me.” He looked at Saba and Laqechi, grinning. “We will give you a chance. I won’t be surprised if you come running home after a week, but like everyone here has asked of me, I will give you the benefit of the doubt.”

Desta stared at his father, stunned.

“Thank you! Thank you very much, Baba!”

“Aren’t you going to kiss his knees?” Saba asked.

Desta lunged toward his father and kissed both knees.

“One would have been enough,” Abraham said, chuckling. “I am glad to see your enthusiasm. Try it; if you don’t like it, you can come home, no questions asked. The timing is convenient enough. The sheep are long gone; we have no baby goats. The cows can roam. We’ll find someone to herd them at night.”

Desta had not yet recovered from his shock. He pictured wide open lands; distant, hazy horizons; and brilliant sunsets. He would dress in smart clothes and march with boys and girls at the Saturday market as his family watched with pride.

“Aren’t you going to kiss the others?” Abraham asked. “They did the work. I only agreed to their wishes.”

As if awakened from a dream, Desta staggered toward Laqechi and kissed her twice on the cheeks. She kissed him back three times. He did the same to Teferra. Yihoon kissed him three times, as Desta did in kind. The last and the best Desta saved for Saba. He wrapped his arms around her neck and kissed her tightly on her cheeks, weeping. She didn’t get to kiss him back before starting to cry.

“Go ahead. We are not jealous. She did most of the work,” Laqechi said, chuckling. The others chuckled, too.

“I will make you a pair of shorts and a jacket,” Teferra said.

“We’ll take you next Wednesday morning,” Abraham said. “I have a business trip to make, and we’ll drop you off with your Uncle Mekuria. He offered such a favor. He will be thrilled to have you.”

Desta flew home, falling and bruising himself in the pitch black. He couldn’t wait to tell his mother the news.

“I am going to school! I am going to asqala temaree bet!” he cried the moment he arrived.

“Whose idea was that?”

“Mine, but it was Baba’s decision.”

“He put you in the Saytan’s school? If you’re going to waste your time, why not in our church school? It’s good enough for your Christian soul. *Yeferenge*—white people’s school—is the Saytan’s work.

Desta froze at her reaction. He stared as she ranted.

“No Mama, no . . . I want to go to asqala temaree bet, modern school.”

His mother went on, complaining about the house help, how irresponsible Abraham was to send him to modern school, how he could better serve others by learning from the mergeta at church to be a priest, and how her husband was wasting his child’s life.

Desta ignored her.

FIFTY-NINE

In March 1959, two days before Desta's trip to Yeedit for school, he went with Laqechi to Teferra for his tailoring. The next day, he excitedly tried on the jacket and shorts his brother had made. They were dark brown to mask dirt, as he would wear them every day. He kissed Teferra's knee, thanking him profusely.

The day of the trip, Desta got up early and found his father preparing a sack of honey and a bale of cotton to take to town. He washed his hands and transferred the honey from large clay pots into a brand-new leather sack that stank. He wondered why on earth people would buy this beautiful, sweet honey from such a foul-smelling bag. Its inside looked velvety clean, but the odor was sickening. When Desta asked his father, he said it was how the tanners processed the skin, and the odor would fade in time.

Teferra came for breakfast with their father. Desta had his own on a separate tray. He was so excited that he could hardly eat. He wolfed some down and pushed the rest aside.

"It's a strange thing to see a ten-year-old boy so excited to leave his family and live in a strange place," Ayénat said to Teferra.

"Everything is new to him," Teferra said. "Don't worry. He will come running home when he is hungry. They don't have abundant food in town like we have here."

I will prove them wrong, Desta said to himself. He was more determined than ever to prevail, no matter what.

"I can't wait to see that," Ayénat said. "If he still wants to learn, we can put him in our Christian school."

Abraham and Teferra loaded two horses with the cotton and honey and left.

THE TRIP TO TOWN was blurred in Desta's memory. After they arrived, they went to a large tin-roofed building filled with piles of sacks. In front, a short, stocky man in a greasy jacket and long, baggy pants stood by a large rectangular metal bed with metal columns and something that slid. Abraham placed the sack of honey on the bed. The man pushed a metal load along a bar this way and that, until the bar came to rest. He did the same for the bale of cotton. The man and Abraham haggled a bit about the price. The man counted shillings from a cloth sack and handed them to Abraham.

Abraham asked the man to leave their horses tied to a post in his compound. The man agreed and offered to feed them while they were gone. Abraham thanked him for his kindness, and they left.

They followed an alleyway through a thick, dark eucalyptus grove. At the end of the path was a grassless courtyard strewn with dead leaves. Beyond the courtyard stood a thatched-roof, circular house, not much different from their own. The door was open, and a man came out. He was short and brown-skinned with soft features and thick, bushy hair. He smiled and greeted them graciously. Desta vaguely remembered him and thought he must be his mother's half-brother, Uncle Mekuria.

The adults kissed. Mekuria put his arms around Desta and kissed him.

They went inside. Mekuria's young wife, Tru, greeted and kissed the guests haltingly. They all sat on the raised earthen crescent that lined the living room wall. Tru brought three glasses of tella and water for Desta, and they chatted awhile.

The three men took Desta to the school, a solitary, tin-roofed building of wood and mud that stood at the foot of a gently falling, windswept slope on the west side of town. It was mid-afternoon, and classes were in session.

Mekuria knocked on the tin and wood-framed door. A tall, dark, gray-haired man with a stubby beard and tired eyes opened it and asked their purpose. Mekuria explained. The man glanced at something shiny and metal on his wrist and told the visitors to wait a few minutes for the afternoon break.

While the three men stood and chatted, Desta let his eyes and thoughts wander freely over the land. A tall wooden pole stood a few yards from the school with the same multi-colored cloth on top that the students had carried at market. Desta craned his neck to watch the striking pennant dance in the wind. He noticed that the land beyond the school was rocky and dotted with thorny bushes, but farther on, the earth sloped into a flat green field bisected by a sleepy, curving river that swept from somewhere southwest of the green. To the north of the field, clusters of homes were bordered by eucalyptus groves and fenced brown lots. On this side, the land was a quilt of stubble and tilled farm lots. To the south and directly west from Desta's line of sight, there were no trees or farms, just cattle and sheep grazing peacefully on the green, rolling hills.

"That is Gish Abayi, the source of the Blue Nile," Teferra said, pointing to a copse of tall junipers at the end of the green field and rolling hills. Beyond them, the land rose to a dry and rocky heap, beyond which appeared a precipitous escarpment.

The name rang a bell to Desta, but not for a river. He was about to ask Teferra what else Gish Abayi was famous for—when he remembered. Gish Abayi was a sacred place where holy water gushed from the ground that cured lepers, the deaf, the blind, the

dumb, and all manner of ailments. There was supposed to be a church in that juniper grove. When Desta had his dog bite treatment, Ayénat wanted to take him there. He was pleased to live near such a holy place and to see open land that stretched for miles.

The school door burst open. A horde of children—mostly boys—spilled out. The boys in gabis also wore jackets and shorts beneath their stained white cotton clothes. The girls wore colorful dresses that stopped halfway up their legs and hugged their waists. Desta was shocked. *Mother would have a heart attack to see her daughters in such skimpy clothes.* His sisters wore dresses only a finger-width above their heels.

Moments after the students left, the same man stepped out and motioned the visitors to enter. He introduced himself as Brook.

With Desta trailing behind, the three men followed Brook to a back-corner room where a short, thin, fair-skinned man with glasses and intense eyes sat behind a rickety table. The man rose as the group entered and introduced himself as Yitbarek. Mekuria greeted him and introduced Abraham and Teferra.

“We came to register my nephew as a beginner. His name is Desta,” Mekuria said, glancing at the new student-to-be and then at Yitbarek.

“Good,” the man said as he sat. From beneath a pile of papers and books, he pulled out a dark blue tome bordered in crimson and opened it. He then took a long wooden pen with a brass tip, dipped it in a blue inkwell, and raised his hand above the page.

“What name did you say?” Yitbarek asked, looking up to Mekuria.

Abraham motioned Desta to step forward. “Desta Abraham,” he said, hands on Desta’s shoulders.

“Date of birth?”

“January 7, 1949—a Christmas baby,” Abraham said, smiling.

“That makes him ten,” the little man said.

“Slightly over,” corrected Abraham.

“I take it you’re not from this area, as you came with Ato Mekuria.”

“No. We are from a place called Jomer,” Abraham said.

“It’s about a half day’s journey,” Mekuria said. “A treacherous, mountainous place.”

“That is wonderful . . . I mean not that you live there, but that from such a place comes a farsighted man who brings his son to a modern school. We can’t get farmers next door to bring their children. Yet you, sir, have a thirst for knowledge for his son . . .”

“We have always tried to provide our children with opportunities in life. It doesn’t always work out, of course, but this boy pushed us to bring him here. We usually send our children to the local church school.”

The man looked at Desta over his gold-rimmed glasses. “Well, even better. It means we won’t have to push him to study so hard to do well in his lessons.”

“Let’s hope so,” Abraham said, glancing at Desta.

“You are the local contact then?” Yitbarek said, turning to Mekuria.

“Yes. He will live with us.”

The men shook hands with Yitbarek, bowed, and stepped out.

On their way out, Brook gave them a tour of the school. Desta took notice. The whole school was one rectangular building divided into four sections. In the first room, there were three rows of flat stone seats on the bare, dirt floor, and in the back, a crooked wooden bench that seated four or five. In the corner was a small open window. Its shutter of corrugated tin and wood sagged. To the left, on a bamboo partition, hung a blackboard and a large cream cloth with the Amharic alphabet in giant letters, along with numbers and other characters Desta didn’t remember from Awoke’s Fidel.

A long thin reed leaned against the wall to the right of the hanging cloth. Brook said this room was for beginners like Desta.

The visitors followed Brook to the next room across the partition. It had a two-foot-square window and one long wooden bench along the back wall. In the middle of the partition hung a black square board with a ledge containing two round white sticks. Brook said this room was for the first and second grades. The third room, which adjoined the registrar, was like the last but with an extra bench. The third and fourth grade students took their lessons together here.

Grand tour completed, they stepped into daylight where boisterous boys and girls were on their afternoon break. Some stood in clusters, talking and giggling. Others chased and kicked a round cloth ball.

“I will be right back,” Mekuria said. He sauntered over to one group and returned with two boys: Sayfu, tall and thin with a narrow face, and Fenta, short and stocky with a big round face. Both were fair-skinned with dark curly hair. Mekuria introduced them; they were his neighbor’s nephews. He told them that Desta was a new student and asked them to bring him home after school. With this, the three men left.

As soon as his relatives left, Desta found himself surrounded by a half-dozen boys. Remembering when he was robbed of his beads, he was suddenly gripped with fear. Instinctively, he reached for his neck, as if to guard his lost beads. But the boys didn’t threaten him, and after a moment, he relaxed. Some asked questions, but he didn’t have time to answer; the bell rang, and it was time to get back to their lessons.

After they all filed in, Brook led Desta to the back of the first room and sat him on the wooden bench. He told Desta to repeat the letters of the alphabet along with the

other children, following a boy who would lead them. About a dozen boys sat in front of Desta on their stones. Another four sat with him on the bench. A small boy got up, holding the long reed. He pointed to the Amharic alphabet on the large cloth and began to call out: “Hä Hoo He Hä Hã Hi Ho.” The class repeated after him. Desta quietly mouthed the letters, proud that he knew them all.

Brook came and whispered to Desta that he should shout out the letters like the other kids. He could learn them faster that way. Desta complied.

At the end of the Amharic alphabet was a single line of letters. The boy started reciting these: “A, B, C, D . . .” Desta followed, but he had no idea what they were or why they were learning them. After the strange characters came Amharic numbers that he knew, and another set of characters he’d never seen.

After the boy finished, another took a turn. He recited the Amharic letters and the strange characters at the bottom of the hanging cloth. Then a third boy began. The rote recitals went on until the end of the day.

At five o’clock, the students were released. The two boys, Sayfu and Fenta, came to fetch Desta. The boys walked on either side, asking a string of questions.

When he noticed other boys following them, Desta grew uneasy again. The eavesdroppers kept glancing at him, his new clothes, and his unwashed feet. Desta became anxious. *What was so different about him? Would they hound him every day?*

Sensing Desta’s unease, Sayfu and Fenta chased off the other boys. On the hill, right before town, Desta turned to see the setting sun. It had begun to color a little. The boys stopped too but saw nothing unusual.

“Let’s move on,” Sayfu said.

“Can we stay here a while? I like to watch the sun set.”

“Why? Have you not seen a sunset before?” Sayfu chortled.

“Not really.”

“What?!” Fenta said, with a side glance.

“Did you live in a cave or something?” Sayfu jeered.

The two boys laughed at the very idea.

“It was like a cave,” Desta said, gazing at the sinking sun. “Growing up, all I saw at sunrise and sunset were shadows—in the morning, in the evening—no sun. Shadows were our timepieces. That is how we knew if it was morning or afternoon. The longer and thinner the shadows, the later in the day it was.

“Where is this place?” Fenta asked.

“Far from here, where the mountains stand like walls.”

“Here you can watch all the sunsets in the world until you are so tired of it that you cover your mouth and retch.”

“Till then, can we stay until the sun goes home?”

“Our uncle will wonder where we are. You can find your way back. It’s easy. When you leave, go up this street . . . it comes to an open space . . . Gashé Mekuria’s house is in the bunch of eucalyptus trees on the left, in the middle,” Sayfu said.

“I remember,” Desta said, relieved to be left alone.

Alone and unhurried, he watched the unfolding drama in the pencil-gray haze. Lemon-orange colors transmuted to gold. Soon this dazzling hue turned to poppy red, then rose pink, magenta, red earth, and burnt sienna, to nutmeg, to dark brown, and finally to black. How the ordinary sun could assume so many faces and tease with its chameleon looks, Desta couldn’t fathom. *Where did it go after these dazzling fireworks?*

It was getting dark. He had just gotten up to head to his uncle’s when he saw Mekuria coming toward him.

“What kept you here? You don’t yet know the place . . . We were worried . . . Thank God Fenta told us where you were. Why are you so preoccupied with a sunset?”

“I’ve only seen it twice, never watching to the very end. I couldn’t resist.”

“You came here to learn, not stare at the sun. This is not a good start to your studies. Promise you won’t do this again?”

Desta nodded and followed his uncle home, happy to have seen the sun’s dazzling journey from beginning to the end until the last of the smoldering orb was engulfed by the brooding blackness.

SIXTY

Mekuria's wife, Tru, prepared a nice meal—injera with sweet-tasting pea sauce and beef-jerky sauce. After dinner, she spread a goatskin at one end of the high earthen seat and laid out a green and sky-blue checked wool blanket with a small cotton pillow.

After Mekuria and Tru disappeared into their doorless bedroom, Desta took off his precious new clothes and carefully folded them. Once he was in bed, Tru blew out the kerosene lamp in their bedroom, and darkness enveloped the house.

Desta lay on his back with knees bent, blanket raised like a tent. He rested his head on the pillow and stared into the brooding darkness, afraid. He'd never seen a night so black and quiet; at home there'd always been a lit fire and someone around when he fell asleep.

Everything felt like a dream. Just a day before, he had paced the fields at home in the scorching March sun, tending the animals. Now he was in a new home with people he barely knew. Yet, he wasn't afraid of the future or missing the family he'd left behind.

He was eager for school in the morning. He had no idea what it meant or what he would be once he finished. His brother Tamirat went to church school to be a priest. What did someone in modern school become? A court clerk? A teacher? What? For now, he wouldn't bother himself too much about the future. He was happy to be out of his confining valley and away from his brothers and animals. From here on, he would spend his days with boys and girls his age. He already knew Sayfu and Fenta.

He thought about the kids who surrounded him after school and his reaction to them. He had been nervous and fearful, unable to forget the boys who robbed him of his beads. He would need time to adjust to so many other kids. After all, the only friends he had so far were Hibist, Saba, Kooli, and the vervet monkeys.

Desta's feet hurt, and his legs were chilly. The room seemed colder. He stretched his legs, crossed them, and tucked the blanket underneath.

Before I can win new friends at school, I need to be worthy of them, Desta thought. He remembered the words of his grandfather's spirit: Before you can let new people into your heart and mind, you need to purge the bad ones you hold there.

Desta needed to let go of all that had caused him pain and suffering. *Like Grandpa*

said, I must start with a clean mind. This I must do before I sleep so that I will wake tomorrow free and happy.

Forgiveness, his grandpa had said, is the first step to healing. Although he had never thought he could forgive Damtew for all he had done to him, he knew he had to; one of the coin's cardinal rules was magnanimity, nobility of spirit toward people who hurt him.

To make it easy to begin, Desta thought of the animals. He forgave Lomee, the marauding bull, for his beatings by Father and Damtew. He forgave the goats that buried themselves in the thorn bushes for his anguish that their kids might be lost to wild animals. He absolved the sheep for disappearing for two nights, creating so much worry and distress for Desta and his family.

Then came the harder part. He forgave his father for beating him after the animals destroyed Gizaw's crops, and for not punishing Damtew for beating him. He forgave his mother for always siding with Damtew and for putting him through the water treatment for Saytanic possession. He forgave Asse'ged for being Damtew's accomplice in his dreams and for the last beating. He pardoned Teferra for being cold and unfriendly.

Desta was exhausted thinking about all who had done him wrong. At times he was filled with hate and struggled with his emotions.

He rolled over, face down on the pillow. It smelled smoky, musty, and greasy. He pulled up his gabi to cover it—to no effect. He lay on his back again.

Damtew was next. He closed his eyes and thought, then he opened them and deeply sighed.

"Damtew," he whispered, "for nearly three years, you put me through so much. I lived in fear of your constant threats. You demanded I recant my story of the cloud man and Saba's move. You bullied and browbeat me at every chance. You thought I would shrivel like a leaf at your power and menace, but it didn't work. You and Asse'ged terrorized me in my dreams. You made sport of my body on a rope in the river. Thank God Mogus stopped you. You chased, kicked, and whipped me at Yihoon and Saba's property. You shredded my papers and books to rob me of my dreams. You poured ink over me, crushed my pen, and hurled my inkwell.

After all, you never sapped my will or stole my dreams. Here I am, in a modern school, pursuing my education again. You saw only my helplessness, never my passion or determination. Now, I obey grandpa's wishes and comply with the family's blessed coin and forgive you for all you have done. May your family be happy on Saba's old property."

Tears. They came and came and came.

Finally, they stopped. He blew his nose and wiped his face.

He lifted his head and cocked his ears, listening to the battle outside. The wind, it seemed to Desta, waged war against the trees around the house, sounding as if they would crash onto the roof. They clashed as the wind whined and gusted. Now he knew why they called Yeedib the windy town.

He rose, pulled his tear-drenched gabi from beneath him, flipped the pillow, and lay down. His mind was fuzzy, but he felt calm. By degrees, his anger and resentment gave way to happiness, serenity, and a sense of freedom. He felt released from the confines of his birthplace and the emotional bondage of his family.

Desta closed his eyes once more and heeded his own joyful feelings and thoughts. As he relished the moment, he considered the meaning and consequences of his new freedom. He realized that he was alone in this new world where he'd come to live. A string of questions arose: Would the adults and students treat him like an outcast as his family had? Would there be boys here who robbed him? Whom could he talk to about his troubles?

Desta felt uneasy without answers. He struggled to suppress his qualms and calm himself. Just then, unsummoned, his right hand moved to his left breast and settled on the tattoo of the ancient coin. He felt a stirring, then a pulsating under his skin. Not long after, serenity descended.

The things the spirit had shared came back to him: The coin would be his protector and family in this new world. He had to be strong and learn to live with strangers. Among the many reasons for leaving home was fulfilling the ancient prophecy to find the sister coin, unite it with his own, and benefit all humanity.

Desta opened his eyes, moved his hand from his chest, and shook his head. How could a metal disk or tattoo replace Hibist or Saba? Why was he fated to be the coin-bearer? Where would he find the other coin, and how would their union benefit people? With no answers, Desta pushed his fears away. For now, he would focus on his gratitude, and happier thoughts.

He remembered what Ayénat had once said: When good things happen to you, be thankful to God. Desta wanted to thank not only God, but also the people and animals who meant so much to him here on earth.

He sighed and thought. "The vervets," he began, "I want to thank you for being my friends. I laughed more with you than with most of my siblings. You taught me social skills: how to win the hearts of strangers. The eight months I spent gaining your trust and learning how to relate to you will be useful with everyone I meet in this new world. For all this, I thank you."

"Kooli, you were one fine dog, my companion and playmate for years. You

sacrificed your life for me and started me on my journey. As through a window, I first discovered the outside world at church for my communion—the treatment for the disease they said you gave me—and for which, sadly, you were killed. I can never repay you for all that you did for me!

“Hibist, I don’t know what my life would have been without you. In our years together, you were my parent, companion, confidant, and protector. You taught me about life and the meaning of love. I am forever grateful to you. I am certain I will think of you whenever I reflect or pick up the goatskin from your wedding, which is now such an important companion to our coin.”

Next, Desta thanked his grandpa’s spirit for solving the family’s problems, for sacrificing his life, for guarding the coin for so long, and for their precious time together.

Desta thanked his father for letting him start modern school, and he thanked Laqechi for lobbying his father on his behalf. He was immensely grateful to Saba for supporting his dream to go to the mountaintop, for taking him to market, and for being the means to his freedom.

He was excited about his future once more. He looked forward to his first sunrise. He couldn’t wait to see if the sun painted the sky the same when it rose as when it set. He looked forward to spending all day learning and reciting the alphabet and making friends with his schoolmates.

Desta straightened in bed, placed his right hand over his chest again, and closed his eyes for the last time. The gentle pulse of the coin beneath his skin, like a cradle gently rocking, lulled him into another world, the beginning of a new journey.

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Lastly, I am grateful to the Creator who gave me healthy faculties so I could record what I saw, read, heard and experienced to use as material for this novel.

Desta's Characters

Humans

Abraham – Desta's father

Aba Yacob – The head priest at the local church

Abinadab – Husband to Haptaph

Adamu, Kindè – Abraham's mother's cousins

Ahimaaz – Husband to Basemath

Almaw – Aunt Zere's youngest son

Amsale – Tamirat's bride

Asse'ged – The second oldest son

Astair – Desta's niece, Yihoon and Saba's older daughter

Awoke – Desta's second-generation cousin, Yisehak and Maray's son

Ayènat – Desta's mother

Azal, Grandma – Saba's mother

Basemath – Daughter of Solomon

Beshaw, Abraham – Father

Birhan – Husband of Kiwin

Biserat – Wife to Joshua

Bogay – Tamirat's second wife

Bosena – Abraham's immediate older sister

Damtew – Desta's fourth oldest brother

Dawit – One of the best men at the wedding

Deb'tera Tayè – The sorcerer

Degay – Abraham's distant relative

Enat – Desta's older sibling (the fifth youngest)

Fenta – One of the two students Desta's uncle introduced to him

Genet – Cousin to Desta

Hibist – Desta's favorite sister

Joshua – Solomon's grandson

Kindè – Adamu's younger brother

Kiwin – Abraham's niece and wife of Birhan

- Koomay** – Mawa’s son
- Laqechi** – Teferra’s wife
- Maray** – Yisehak’s wife
- Marta** – Zeru’s mother
- Mawa** – Neighboring woman
- Mekuria** – Desta’s uncle, his mother’s half-brother
- Melaku** – Abraham’s sheep breeder
- Melkam** – Damtew’s bride
- Mekonen** – Abraham’s grandfather
- Menilek** – Sheba’s son by Solomon who became the first Emperor of Ethiopia
- Misrak** – Daughter of Adamu
- Mogus** – Distant relative
- Mulu** – Asse’ged’s wife
- Nega** – Hibist’s father-in-law
- Saba** – Abraham’s daughter from his first marriage
- Sayfu** – Second student Desta’s uncle introduced to him
- Sheba** – Menilek’s mother, the first queen of Ethiopia
- Solomon** – King of Israel, builder of the first temple
- Tamirat** – The third oldest brother who was studying to become a priest
- Tapath** – Daughter of Solomon
- Tashere** – The pharaoh princes, King Solomon’s first wife
- Taye, the Debtra** – The middle-aged witchdoctor who invoked the cloud man
- Teferra** – The oldest son
- Tenaw** – Husband to Enat
- Tilahun** – A shepherd boy
- Tru** – Mekuria’s wife
- Welella** – Abraham’s youngest sister
- Yihoon** – Saba’s spouse
- Yisehak** – Abraham’s uncle who lived across the river
- Yitbarek** – The head teacher and administrator at the elementary school where Destas registered
- Zegeye Farris** – Desta’s maternal grandfather
- Zena** – Desta’s niece, Yihoon and Saba’s daughter
- Zeru** – Hibist’s husband
- Zere** – Abraham’s oldest sister
- Zeru Belay** – Parent to Bogay

Animals

Begiziew – The young bull who was the rising crop destroyer

Dama – Abrahams beloved horse

Colobus Monkeys – The black and white haired, docile, aloof, tree-bound watchers

Goats, sheep, cows and horses – animals Desta is learning to look after

Habte – The kid goat, Damtew’s dream of wealth and comfort

Kooli – Desta’s beloved dog and best friend

Lomee – A dangerous crop-raiding bull

Mandefroshi (Mandy) – The family cat

Salle-Ayiset – The notorious crop destroyer cow

Tizitaw – Welella’s dog, renamed Kooli by Abraham

Vervet Monkeys – The silver-haired, notorious crop raiders, Desta’s friends

Spirits

The cloud man – the ghost-like creature invoked by Deb’tra Tayé and revealed to Desta

Saytan – Satan

Zars – are perceived to be spindly, fair-skinned creatures with frizzy golden hair

Cultural terms and their definitions

Aba – Father, a generic term of respect applied to most elderly men.

Abalo – A type of bush whose leaves are fuzzy and soft.

Abo – A luxuriant plant with large and shiny leaves that are often used to wrap dough and bake in a fire pit.

Abugeeda – A term assigned to a passage containing specially arranged Amharic letters, designed to facilitate the student’s ability to read.

Agam – A thorny bush whose needles are long and strong.

Affin – A creature nobody seems to have seen but which kills lambs and kids by cutting their air supply. This could apply to any of the predators.

Anir – Leopard

Ankasay – A rounded pointed metal tip (similar to the spear) with a long barrel for inserting into a wooden rod, used largely for hunting game animals.

Areqey – A double or single distilled home-made whiskey.

Asqala Temareebet – Modern school. “Asqala” is derived from the Italian or Spanish word with similar name “esquila”. Temareebet literally means house of learning.

Ato – The Amharic equivalent of Mister.

Bahar Zaf – Eucalyptus tree, first brought to Ethiopia from Australia in the late 1800s by Emperor Menilk. Widely grown in small and large groves around towns and cities as well as in the countryside.

Beredo – Hail

Besmam wold woaman fis kidus – A prayer- or blessing- opening phrase involving the Trinity.

Budas – In Ethiopian folklore, Budas are a class of people considered to have evil eyes. Budas haunt gravesites looking for newly buried bodies to dig out and bring home to eat. Budas supposedly use the hyenas as their draft animals to carry the corpse home.

Cantim – A cent.

Cheebo – Dried, bundled twigs used as a torch.

Dabo Kollo – In the countryside, this is an apricot-size dried bread travelers bring with them as a snack. In cities, dab kilo comes in different sizes and is served as a snack anytime.

Dabo – Loaf

Diba/Deba – Rings of blue glass beads.

Dik-dik – A type of diminutive antelope.

Dingle – Virgin

Dulet – Liver

Era – An expression of surprise, not really a word.

Eskista (Skista) – A form of Ethiopian dance involving the body above the waist, performed by see-sawing the shoulders or vibrating them into a frenzy.

Ferenge – A term used to refer to all white people, similar to the Mexican's Gaba-cho or Gringo.

Fidel – The Ethiopian alphabet.

Filseta – The first two weeks of August dedicated to long hours of fasting, generally up to 3 pm, by Orthodox Christians

Gabi – A double ply heavy cotton cloth, roughly 7 feet by 6 feet, worn for warmth over the shoulders like a blanket.

Gashé – A term of respect used to address an older male, usually as prefix to the first name. Example: Gashé John, Gashé George, Gahé Tom, etc.

Gessa – A rain protective covering made from dried kettema, woven into a mat, folded and sown together on one side while the other side is left open so one can slide the head in and let it hang down.

Gomen-zer – An oil rich gomen (Ethiopian collard green) seed often burned on a brand new clay baking pan to cure it.

Goosa – An old monk who lives in a forest who often is invisible to ordinary folks.

Goozgoozo – Two layers of injeras, topped with cheese and red pepper paste and garnished with spiced, liquefied butter.

Gottem – A round tree whose branches grow packed together with small dark green shiny leaves.

Injera – A spongy, flat bread made from fermented dough of teff, barely or wheat

Insocila – A root, the size and shape of a cassava or sweet potato that is often cooked and used to henna hands and feet. In some part of Ethiopia, insocila is used to color these same body parts of brides. In Northern provinces, one can often see even married women with hennaed hands and feet.

Irsas – Pencil

Kaga – A thorny bush that produces berries nearly the same in size, shape and color of cherry tomatoes. The skin of kaga berries is thicker but when ripe it becomes soft and delectable.

Kettema – A tall pulpy grass, often sprinkled on the living room floor during a holiday.

Kirkaha – Bamboo

Koma – A sparsely branched willowy tree which grows to 20 to 30 feet. Its pliable branches are often used for making walking-sticks or canes.

Konjo – Beautiful

Kosso – One of the rare trees in Ethiopia that can grow to a height of sixty to eighty feet and about twenty to thirty feet wide. Its bark is fuzzy and so are its wonderfully soft leaves. It is used largely for making furniture and home construction.

Kusha – A type of plant whose broad leaves and hollow stalk are covered with prickly fuzz and whose fibrous skin is peeled and used to make ropes.

Lemlem – A verdant, beautiful place. In Ethiopia, the New Year is the beginning of the spring season. At this time, much of the countryside is mantled with green grass and wild flowers. So the term lemlem may have to do with the land itself. Lemlem is also a feminine proper name. *Note: To my Ethiopian readers:* I have modified the English version of our classic song to make it sensible to an English-speaking person's ear. The apparent variation is not an error.

Maskel – The finding of the True Cross, celebrated in Ethiopia on the 27th of September.

Medhaneet or **Medhanet** – Medicine

Mergeta – Teacher

Mekleft – The bread (injera) the churchgoers break their fast with.

Mestawit – Mirror

Mookit – Applies generally to a male goat or bull whose testicles have been pounded to a pulp of tissue so that it won't waste its energy chasing she-goats or cows. This goat or bull becomes fat and big, fetching top price when taken to the market.

Mosseb – An often colorful basket with a round skirt-shape bottom and a lipped circular top used to serve food. It comes with a cone-shaped and colorful top.

Netela – A single-ply fabric, worn mostly by women as a shawl or to drape the shoulders with.

Negus – King

Nitsuh - Clean

Quagmé – The last or the 13th month of the year. (Ethiopia has 12—30-day months. The remaining 5 or 6 days are grouped together as a month, giving the Ethiopian Tourist Organization, its slogan of “The Land of Thirteen Months of Sunshine.”)

She'etto – Perfume

Shifta – An outlaw or a bandit

Shirowat – pea sauce

Sholla – Related to the warka tree but less rugged. It produces a great number of green figs which turn edible and fire red upon ripening.

Tabot – A square wooden plaque upon which the Ten Commandments are inscribed. It is kept in the inner sanctuary of the church, wrapped in a colorful cloth. On church holidays, the Tabot is carried by a selected priest and taken on a procession out of doors accompanied by dancing and harmonizing priests.

Teff – The smallest grain in the world which comes as either brown or white variety, and is the staple food of Ethiopians.

Tej – Honey Wine

Tella – A black or brown home-made beer made from hops and barley.

Timket – Epiphany celebration – where priests carry on mass by a lake or river and sprinkle the congregation with blessed river or lake water. Timket is a big holiday in Ethiopia. People wear their best clothes on this day.

Timtem – A white turban worn mostly by priests.

Tsed – A variety of juniper tree with an aromatic bark and wood

Tottas – Vervet Monkeys

Wanza – a small to medium size – 12 to 15 ft tall evergreen tree

Warka – A spreading, large-trunked tree with broad, thick, leathery leaves and long, hefty branches. Perhaps related to the sycamore tree.

Yeferenge – White people's

What Student Readers are saying. . .

Monika Rose's Advanced Placement English Classes Lodi, California

Brea Richmond

A heart-warming, intriguing and unique story that captivates the reader . . . I have never read a book like this and I really enjoyed it . . . very educational. It allowed insight into another culture and their ways of life . . . The story gives readers hope for their own dreams and aspirations.

Rochelle Lippert

I loved Desta's dreams of touching the sky . . . Desta gives people hope and ambition to reach for their dreams . . . makes you want to go for your desires and feel like anything is possible, even touching the sky . . . very inspiring. I think students my age would find this story enjoyable and educational because it has very creative imagery, and because it makes you think about and enjoy another world.

Kayla Hieb

A touching and extremely inspiring story. I had a real attachment to Desta's character and when sad things happened to him I felt bad. It's also very entertaining and educational. I learned a lot from this novel.

Justin Kah

An amazing novel! . . . Very different from anything I have read. There are a few books I can read continuously without getting tired of them. This book is one of them. I loved the characters and the setting . . . It taught me many valuable lessons as well as kept me entertained . . . reminded me about the importance of following one's dream no matter how hard it may be.

Guicela Marissa Sandoval

Desta really touched my heart! I thought the story was magical, hopeful, mysterious and adventurous . . . A real treat to read! I completely think that people my age will find this book to be very interesting. Desta's story is one of inspirations. Who wouldn't like it?

Marissa Nall

The setting of the novel was a very vivid and beautiful place. It was full of many opportunities for imagination and exploration. Desta's story was very interesting and detailed with unexpected twists and turns. The work seemed very well researched and provided a glimpse into an intricate and fascinating culture . . . There are magical, touching and gripping places throughout the book.

K. Carter.

Really enjoyed reading this book. Very different from all the books I have read. Every time I went to read it, I felt like I was temporarily entering a whole new world. Very touching . . . Sent a message to always go after your dreams, no matter how far they may seem or how challenging your circumstances maybe . . . Allowed me to look at life from different perspective. I think many students my age would love this book.

Harbir Dhillon

I loved the story and simply couldn't put it down . . . I loved the characters, especially Desta . . . I loved his determination and his motives and the love in his heart. A very inspiring, heart-warming and educational story.

About the Author



Getty Ambau was born in Ethiopia. He came to the United States for his education and studied molecular biophysics and biochemistry and economics at Yale University. After he graduated, he worked in research labs, earned an advanced degree in business, ran his own companies, but writing has always been his inner calling. He is the author of the award-winning Desta series and nutrition books which became international best sellers. Book Two of his novels was featured in both the digital and print versions of Kirkus Reviews magazine. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife, Rosario, and a precious terrier called Scruffy.

