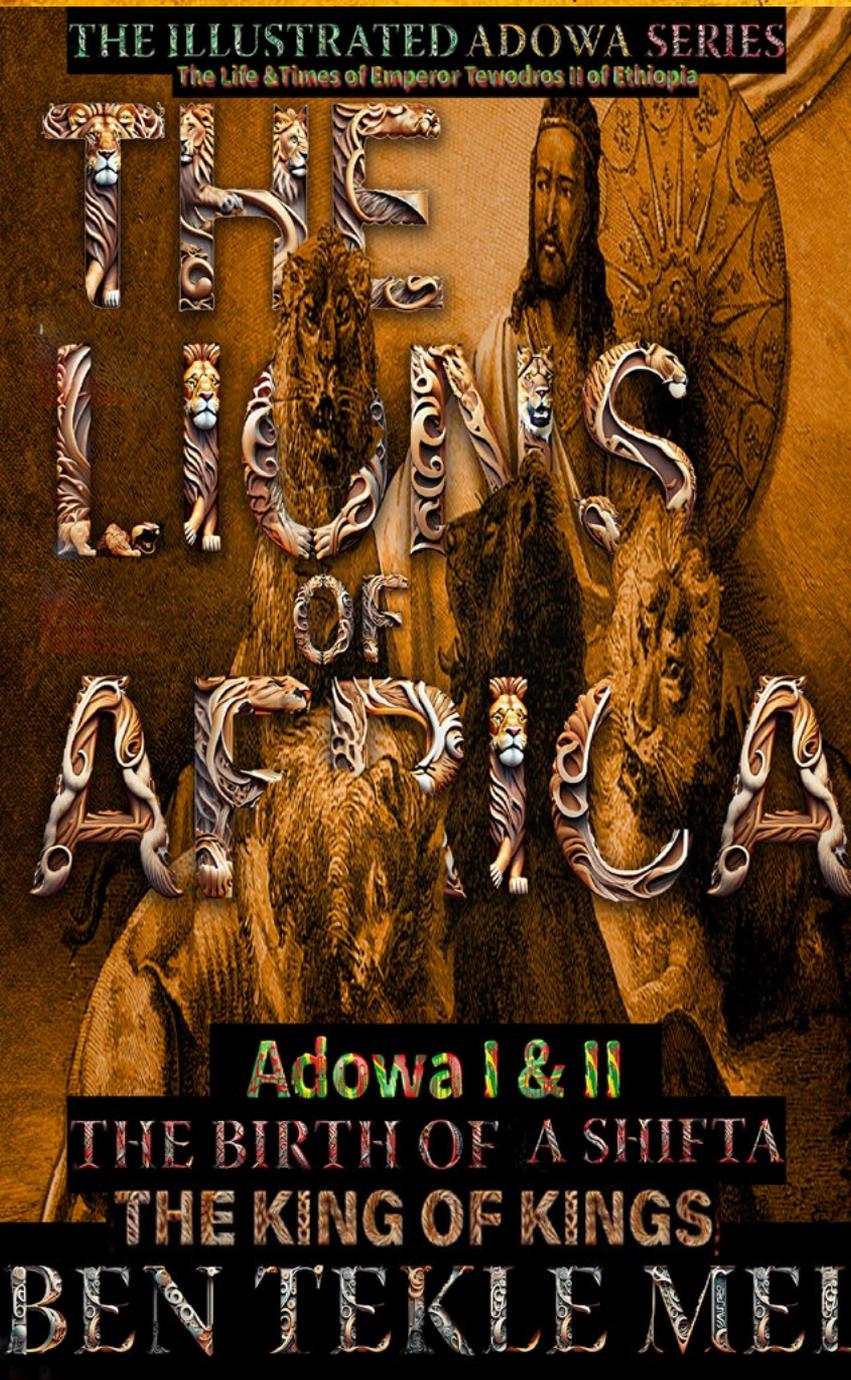


THE ILLUSTRATED ADOWA SERIES

The Life & Times of Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia



THE
LION
OF
AFRICA

Adowa I & II

THE BIRTH OF A SHIFTA

THE KING OF KINGS

BEN TEKLE MEL

ADOWA



THE LIONS OF AFRICA

THE ILLUSTRATED ADOWA SERIES

ADOWA ONE AND TWO

THE BIRTH OF A SHIFTA & THE KING OF KINGS

BY
BEN TEKLE MEL

BLM PRODUCTIONS

**The Lions of Africa:
Illustrated Adowa Series:
Adowa I&II: The Birth of a Shifta/The
King of Kings**

Ben Tekle Mel

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Dedicated to

My Nephews and Nieces

and

The coming generations of Africa.

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NOTE TO THE READER

On the first day of March, in the year 1896, the deafening echo of gunfire resounded through the mountains of Adowa as Emperor Menelik's troops, hundreds upon thousands of African warriors, charged forward in a final surge, determined to decimate the European invaders. After centuries of turmoil and resistance, this singular battle will decide whether a small nation at the horn of Africa, Ethiopia, maintains its independence or succumbs to colonial conquest. This pivotal clash will determine if the false ideologies of colonialism and fascism triumph on the African continent, or come crashing down in the subsequent century.

The Adowa story began long before the decisive battle, unfolding with the rise of three formidable Emperors in Ethiopia, each grappling to unite a fractured empire that once ruled the horn of Africa and beyond. The first of the three, Emperor Tewodros II, was an ambitious ruler seeking order over disorderly feudal lords, and had strengthened central authority and modernized his military to unite the divided regions under his rule. However, unrest brewed among those chafing under his iron fist, with the emperor succumbing under relentless rebellion, long before the invasion by the British empire that finally ended his rule.

Enter Kassa Mercha, the future Emperor Yohannes IV, a loyal subject to Emperor Tewodros II, who rose to leadership through cunning and battle prowess. As Tewodros' rivals multiplied, Kassa Mercha emerged as a peerless military strategist, systematically eliminating his rivals while contributing to the demise of Emperor Tewodros II with his support of the invading British empire. Although the British had left Ethiopia, new threats emerged from beyond its borders as Egyptian and other European nations eyed the land with covetous de-

signs, forcing Emperor Yohannes IV to confront all outsiders just like Emperor Tewodros before him.

With Emperor Yohannes IV falling defending the borders from a Sudanese invasion, the path seemed open for another to claim the throne — a prince from Shoa named Menelik, once held captive by Emperor Tewodros II will rise to emperorship. Menelik, guided by the lessons of his predecessors, outmaneuvered contenders through diplomacy and showmanship, inside and outside of his empire, until colonialism forced him into direct confrontation. On that fateful day in 1896, at Adowa, the vision of these three emperors for a unified, modern Ethiopia, resistant to colonial rule, faced the ultimate test with Emperor Menelik assembling over a hundred thousand united warriors from all regions of his empire against Italian colonial invasion.

“The Lions of Africa: The Illustrated Adowa series” explores the 19th century that shaped Ethiopia through these three rulers. The series is unabashedly a Pan-Africanist project intended to elevate African history and introduce African rulers and leaders to the upcoming generation by presenting them in a new light. However, Adowa doesn't seek to valorize African emperors or promote the pernicious ideology of exceptionalism of a single African nation in the Western sense. Instead, it delves into the triumphs and failures of past African regional politics through the Ethiopian nation and its celebrated rulers, in order to understand and examine the current fracture seen in the Ethiopian state and the African continent by extension.

The Adowa series aims to showcase the power of African unity, spanning ten illustrated books that lead to sagas culminating in a landmark moment of national unity. Illustrated with engravings, modified sketches, and fictional additions, the series features African characters in diverse societies, analyzing political, religious, and cultural structures rarely explored with such complexity in any previous work.

The Adowa series centers on the African experience before and after the continent's encounter with European colonizers.

Race relations form a major theme of the Adowa series, with authentic black history countering fictitious outsider perspectives on African history. Acknowledging these biases, the Adowa series strives to supplement past events with evidence from current-day discoveries and revisions by African writers, aiming to challenge ingrained racial and ethnic caste systems that dominate historical studies. Readers are encouraged to verify facts, as I have done by delving into historical records.

The beginning of the Adowa series, focused on Emperor Tewodros II and comprising three books, immerses readers in the narrative of Ethiopian unification under his rule. It explores the intricate dance of Emperor Tewodros II attempting to unify divided regions while engaging with the British Empire. Most importantly, a revision of his story gives us insight into the most powerful ideology invented by human kind — White supremacy and racism — and its operation on the African continent with European powers opening up the era of conquest with the scramble for the African land.

In a time when race-based populism and white supremacy sweep the globe, with African nations fueling regionalism, and the Western world grappling with a history of bigotry, the Adowa story which took on the divisive African regionalism and European fascist ideology, and obliterated them, aims to become a seismic cultural event to inspire the next generation of resistance fighters. The story of Adowa, capturing the unspoken zeitgeist movement of cultures resisting aggression, beckons the world to experience its greatness.

It's time for a new generation of Africans and the world that seeks to fight for equality and justice to learn about the epic tale of Adowa, one of the most important events in world history.



WORD GUIDE

IMPERIAL AND TRADITIONAL TERMS.

ROYAL TITLES

ASE: NEGUSA NEGEST: EMPEROR

NEGUS: KING

NEGESTE NEGESTATE: EMPRESS

ITEGE: EMPRESS (CONSORT)

ENDRESSE: REGENT/VICEROY

RAS: HEAD/DUKE

DEJAZMACH: GOVERNOR/GENERAL

FITAWRARI IMPERIAL: MINISTER OF DEFENSE.

AFE-NEGUS: MINISTER OF JUSTICE/MOUTH OF THE KING.

ORTHODOX/ISLAM RELIGIOUS TITLES

ABUNA: ALEXANDRIAN ELECTED PRIMATE OF THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH.

ETCHEGE: THE HEAD OF THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH, SECOND ONLY TO THE ABUNA IN POWER.

AQABE SA'AT: THE CLERGY HEAD ATTACHED TO THE ROYAL PALACE.

ABBA: PRIEST.

IMAM: MUSLIM LEADER

MESQID: MOSQUE

COMMON WORDS AND PHRASES

AWO: YES

ISHI: OKAY

EMMAYE: MOTHER

ABBAYE: FATHER

LIJE: MY SON/DAUGHTER

FERENJE: FOREIGNER

ANTE/AMTCHIE: YOU

TEWOBACHEH(SH): LEAVE IT, STOP KIDDING

ZEMBEL: SHUT YOUR MOUTH

CLOTH/GARMENT

GABI: THICK COTTON CLOTH

NETELA: A SCARF FOR WOMEN

SHIMMA: WARRIOR TOGA

KEMISE: DRESS/GOWN

SHASH: WOMEN HEAD WRAP

TIM-TIM: PRIEST/IMAM HEAD WRAP

FOOD/DRINKS

INJERA: FLAT BREAD

DORO WAT: SHICKEN PASTE.

ARAKE: SPIRIT ALCHOLIC

TEJ: HONEY WINE

TELLA: DARK BEER

KOSSO: MEDICINE PLANT

QWANTA: SUN-DRIED MEAT

BRILLA: GLASS

KOLO: ROASTED BARLEY

MISCELLANEOUS

MESOB: HIGH BASKET

AWAJ: PROCLAMATION

INDEE: EXPRESSION OF DISBELIEF

ALGA: BED/THRONE

MENMETTA: WHAT HAPPENED

DUNKWAN: A LARGE TENT

GIBIR: ROYAL FEAST

GURSHA: INTIMATE FOOD SHARING

FEATURED AUTHENTIC IMAGES



Young Kassa Hailu / Emperor Tewodros II



Ras Ali of Yeju and Egyptian Abuna Salama



**King Sahle Sellase of Shoa and Ras Wibe of
Semien/Tigray**

INTRODUCTION



They called him a visionary. A restorer of order and unity. A bloody tyrant. A nation builder and modernizer. A Mad-King. A Shifta. A tragic hero. Emperor Tewodros II has been many things to many people and the first three parts of the Adowa series examines his complex life from womb to tomb.

In a time of chaos and bloodshed, one man dared to unite a fractured kingdom and challenge the world's greatest powers. Deep in the rugged highlands of a mysterious land, locked away from the outside world, an indomitable figure was rising who would change the course of Ethiopian history forever.

Welcome to the era of Zemena Mesafent, a tumult that engulfed the Ethiopian kingdom in war, where brothers battle brothers and ruthless warlords carve the country into warring fiefdoms. For generations, Ethiopia has remained hidden from the world's eyes, its people preserving ancient traditions while anarchy tears the realm apart. In this upheaval, a Shifta warrior named Kassa Hailu emerged from the jungle with a vision that will make him one of the most formidable emperors in history.

Join us as we trace Kassa's incredible journey from childhood, boyhood, to adulthood. We will follow him into bloody battles and covert schemes, witnessing his transformation from fierce guerilla fighter to a ruler grasping for a crown as Kings of Kings of the empire. Along the way, we'll encounter unforgettable characters and glimpse a mysterious culture seldom seen by outsiders.

Kassa's rapid rise and radical ambitions will earn him powerful enemies—both within his kingdom and abroad. We will meet his contemporaries who had their own designs for the nation. To understand what drives this enigmatic leader, who was able to succeed despite all obstacles, we must venture into the heart of a man wrestling with destiny.

By the time you've finished this epic tale, you'll know Emperor Tewodros II as more than just a name in history books. You'll understand what compelled this charismatic and complicated king of Kings to risk everything for a unified Ethiopia. So sharpen your blade and prepare to enter a world of intrigue, adventure and empire-defining drama as we unveil the thrilling true story of one of Africa's most legendary figures whose legacy still echoes throughout the highlands.

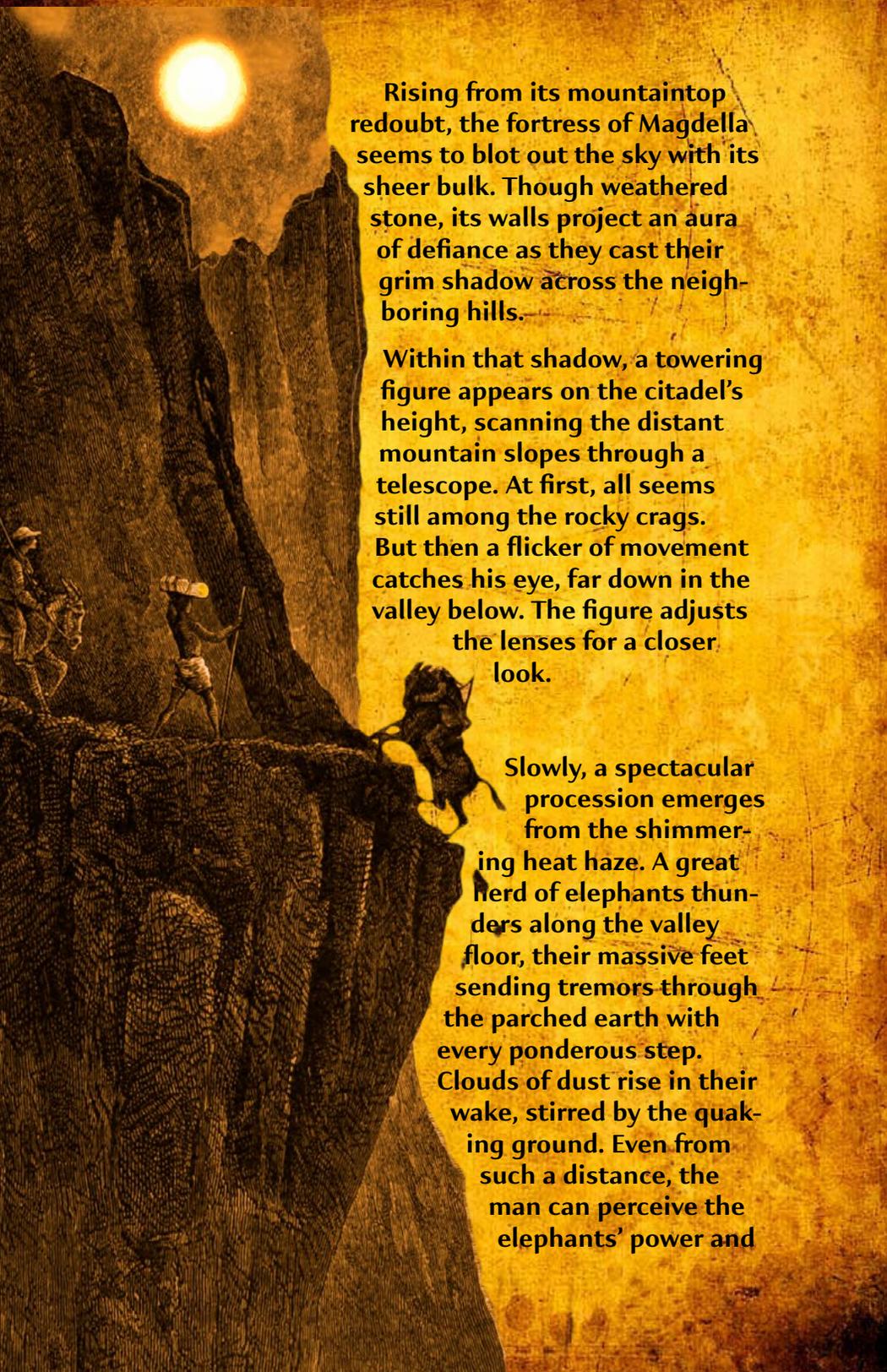
Get ready to discover the man behind the legend. Let the journey begin!

PROLOGUE

The Lion Roars

The Cleverness of the Ferenje, the peace of our land they inquire about.

The rising sun throws its golden light on the picturesque mountain ranges, casting a vibrant glow over the weird and fantastic shapes that dot the landscape. Sunlight slices through the everlasting ascents and descents of the Ethiopian highlands, illuminating misty hills, deep ravines, and precipices that seem to stretch on endlessly.



Rising from its mountaintop redoubt, the fortress of Magdella seems to blot out the sky with its sheer bulk. Though weathered stone, its walls project an aura of defiance as they cast their grim shadow across the neighboring hills.

Within that shadow, a towering figure appears on the citadel's height, scanning the distant mountain slopes through a telescope. At first, all seems still among the rocky crags. But then a flicker of movement catches his eye, far down in the valley below. The figure adjusts the lenses for a closer look.

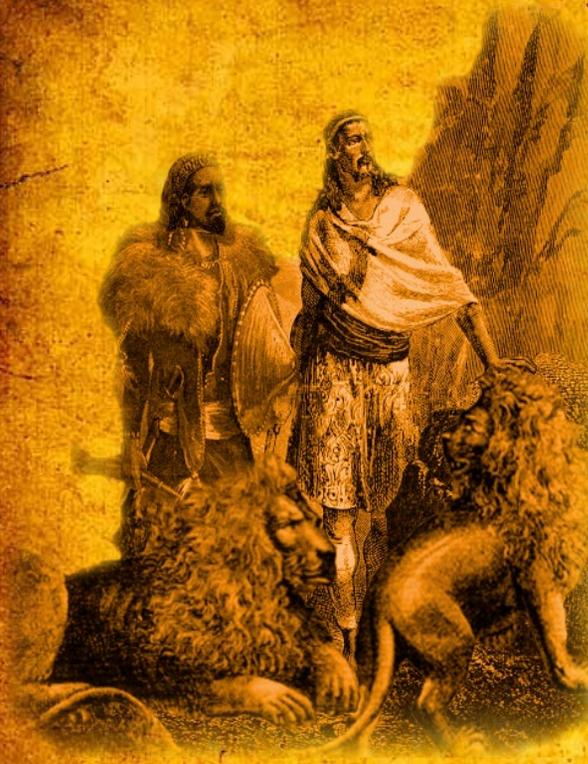
Slowly, a spectacular procession emerges from the shimmering heat haze. A great herd of elephants thunders along the valley floor, their massive feet sending tremors through the parched earth with every ponderous step. Clouds of dust rise in their wake, stirred by the quaking ground. Even from such a distance, the man can perceive the elephants' power and

majesty as they move as one massive, undulating beast.

He watches, fascinated, as the herd crosses from one mountainside to the other. Their passage shakes tiny pebbles loose from the crumbling valley ridges, sending them rattling down the slopes. Every footfall sends fresh shivers through the dusty soil.

As the elephants draw nearer, incredible details emerge. Their broad backs are laden with cannons and weapons, gleaming dully in the harsh sun. Behind comes a long line of camel trains, each beast straining under its cargo of infantry supplies. Their drivers—an international gathering of Africans and Arabs in Khaki uniform and head wraps—struggle to maintain order across the rough terrain.

But the largest contingent follows further back still. Even at this distance, the man can see it stretched to the horizon and beyond, snaking between the mountain passes. Row upon row of British soldiers march in precise formation, their



red uniforms blazing brightly against the drab landscape.

Intermingled are native troops from across the British Empire, along with cavalry units ranging further afield on horseback. The man rubs his eyes in disbelief. Never had he witnessed an army of this scale and complexity.

He swings his telescope. “You

must see this, Gabreye, such a force is surely meant for conquest, not diplomacy.” The figure hands the telescope to another man who takes the glasses silently, gazing out once more upon the sea of soldiers advancing ever closer.

An ancient roar that carries even over the din of armies on the move rises behind them. The figure turns to two lions, their roaring a declaration of defiance to quell the invading horde. The figure, his muscular body resolute, walks over to them, manhandles and rubs the manes of these majestic twin adult lions as if they are pets.

At fifty, this man, the Emperor of Ethiopia, cuts an imposing figure, powerfully built like a warrior with his face held high against the gale-force

winds, unfazed, he strides back to the cliff's edge, oblivious to the danger.

"What welcome will you offer these invaders at our gates Ase?" his companion remarks while handing back the telescope to the emperor who trains it on the advancing British forces in the far distance.

"If I were as powerful as I once was, I would certainly go down to the coast to meet them on landing," the emperor declares, lowering the telescope.

"Awo Ase, we would have picked them off, one by one," his companion's agreeable voice is carried off by the wind.

The emperor's gaze shifts to the flickering flames visible from the cliff edge. Bonfires burn around the fortress where his mortal enemies, the rebels of his kingdom, have gathered in the lower plains, smelling blood, poised to ambush his forces. The emperor raises his telescope and focuses on a tall woman in a regally decorated Kemise. . .

"The queen is here. . ." the emperor mutters referring to Queen Workquiteu of the Oromo clan. She appears to issue orders to her warriors, as if she can see him from far down below.

"So is the young one who now calls himself the prince of Shoa, Ase. . ." the companion adds to the surprise of the emperor ". . .there, on mount Falha" he points and the emperor trains his telescope on Negus Menelik, his escaped prisoner who has returned for revenge.

The emperor moves his telescope back on the advancing British forces and curses as he observes his own countrymen, led by Kassa Mercha of

Tigray, assisting the struggling army in navigating the treacherous mountains.

"If only I knew what I now know, I would have prepared them for our real enemy." The emperor sighs in regret. "A bite from a black snake has a cure, but a bite from a white one, you will search in vain until you die" the emperor laments.

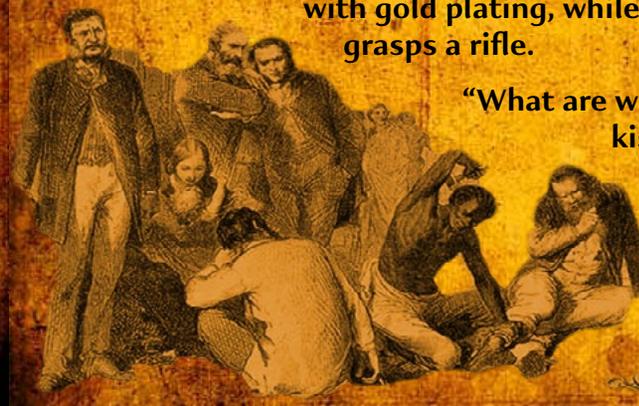
"A black snake can bite you just as bad as a white snake, Ase" his companion counters ". . .but brothers who are enemies to their brothers are not snakes but like those fire ants in the undergarments. . ." the companion steps closer to the emperor, ". . .do you remember Ase, in Qwara?" he asks with sadness in his voice.

The emperor turns to him, this bear of a man in full war attire, Gabreye Wolde Mariam—his childhood friend and army commander has served him faithfully his entire life.

The emperor scans the horizon, surveying the empire he has forcibly reunited. He points west, towards their birth land. "There," he says sorrowfully. Gabreye places a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Betraying men and upset stomach, I have never known you to bother Ase." Gabreye stands out with a unique lion's mane draped over his wide shoulders. In one hand, he holds a shield adorned with gold plating, while the other hand grasps a rifle.

"What are we to do with the kissing Judas whose mouth is honey, but their stomach holds bile?"



Gabreye asks, glancing back at a curious sight— a group of bedraggled and chained white prisoners under guard, shivering in the fierce wind in the distance.

The emperor grabs his pet lions' chains and yanks it as they pass the struggling guards and strides with them and arrives before the terrified prisoners. The hostages, European missionaries in tattered garments, fix their eyes to the ground. One, a stout bearded man, with heavy chains hanging on him, stares back defiantly.

The emperor steps to him, his lions grumbling as he hands the chain back to the guards.

"Gabreye, I thought all Ferenje were like our beloved John Bell, our Yohannes, who always told us the truth, who treated us with love and friendship. . ." The emperor glares at the defiant stout man peering at him ". . .who looked at us and our countrymen the way we looked at him, a true man of Christ who gave up his life for mine, but these —" he turns to Gabreye, lost for words to describe them.

". . .wolves in sheep clothing, Ase, all liars who think they are our masterful God's on earth that have come to make way for the invaders!" Gabreye responds.

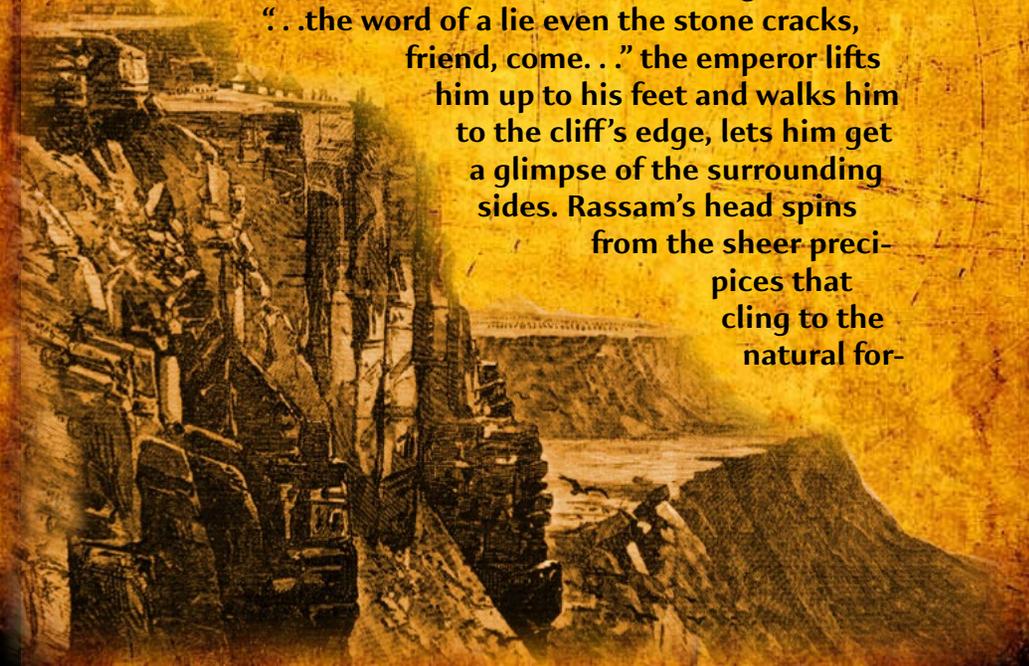
"Who insults a mother, huh?!" The emperor abruptly springs to life, and slugs the defiant man right on his mouth with a tremendous blow "Tell me, does not the Queen of England sell thread, needles, and tobacco to the world?" he shouts in fury "What of it if my poor mother sells Kosso?!" his guards chuckle watching the frightened man cower.

"They defame your grace with lies and rumors!" Gabreye grabs the chain on the defiant man, missionary Stern—a particularly hated prisoner who had insulted the emperor's mother with salacious writings—and yanks it hard, forcing him to bow down his head by force.

The emperor approaches a visibly anxious prisoner who stands separate from the others, watching Stern bleed. The prisoner quickly straightens up, making adjustments to his uniform, adorned with embroidery featuring golden oak leaves and a prominent red stripe that gleams across his chest.

"Even now, when my men beg me to hurl you all over the cliffs, have I not treated you as I would want you to treat me?" The emperor towers over the decorated, Hormuzd Rassam, the latest envoy diplomat, who falls down out of sheer terror.

"All I have received in return are more lies and insult. . ." The emperor, calming down, extends a hand and lifts the trembling Rassam, ". . .the word of a lie even the stone cracks, friend, come. . ." the emperor lifts him up to his feet and walks him to the cliff's edge, lets him get a glimpse of the surrounding sides. Rassam's head spins from the sheer precipices that cling to the natural for-



ness of Magdella that is perched thousands of feet high above the plain.



“I have lost all of my kingdom but this little rock. . .” The emperor quips, putting his arm around Rassam and stilling his nerves that are threatening to push him forward and cast him over the edge.

“Your Majesty, you can still negotiate, I can—”

“The die is cast friend, things must now take their course.” The emperor interrupts.

A sudden loud cheer erupts from the plains. The emperor trains his telescope on lower peaks, hundreds of warriors laboring to position an enormous mortar on a plateau have finally succeeded. The emperor’s eyes blaze with renewed vigor as he gazes through his telescope, proud and delighted to see the results. Tears form over his eyes as he reads the marking on the massive weapon that

dwarfs the other smaller cannons—a weapon he has toiled to build in his kingdom using these hostages, now bearing his royal seal as his last defence against invaders.

“God behind unknowing, the earth will not produce, God is great!” He whispers to himself then turns to Rassam “The lord knows what is in my heart, I built it to crush the wicked rebels in my kingdom and unite us because I knew what was to come for all of us,” his gaze returns to the British forces.

“I longed for the day I would see a disciplined, well-armed army in my kingdom. . .and here they have come!” The emperor casts aside his telescope and clutches Rassam’s shoulder, his eyes fixed on the advancing forces. He shoves Rassam back from the precipice and throws him down as fierce roaring rings out from his lions, a challenge to all who approach the fortress gates.

The emperor sweeps past the captive souls, mounts his majestic steed. Accompanied by Gabreye, who proudly carries the banner of the Or-



der of Solomon, and encircled by his loyal guards, they gallop amidst a formidable array of chieftains adorned with lion manes, shields, and gleaming swords. Along the path, thousands of the emperor's battle-forged warriors—the indomitable nucleus that has weathered the storms of triumph and adversity—prostrate themselves with reverence. Armed with spears and shields, the crack force pays homage to their sovereign as he rides forth in a spectacle of unparalleled grandeur.

The emperor swings astride his great stallion, eyes blazing as he surveys his legions.

“Are you ready to fight and die, or will you now abandon me like the others?” the emperor demands an answer. A vehement protest rises as fierce warriors stir, their chiefs responding as if orators on a grand stage insulted by the doubting emperor.

“We will never abandon you Ase!”

“We will rend the white ghosts to pieces!”

“Ase we will never leave your side!” they step forth, one after the other, vibrating with outrage.

Spurring to their fore, the emperor towers immense in his stirrups “God, who can do everything, and does it, has not allowed us to be shamed and lose our dignity like the others!” the emperor's voice rises.

“By God's power we will destroy them in battle and keep our dignity like we have for years before their arrival!” the emperor rallies.

“We know their deceit—the Turks, the Portuguese, the French—now these British missionaries

and their armies!” He spurs his horse. “Tell me! Do I look deceived like a Hindustani raja?”

A loud response of “No!” “Not our Ase!” “We are not fools!” erupts from his warriors.

“I know their game. When they want to conquer, first, the traders and the missionaries: then the ambassadors: then the cannon. It's better to go straight to the cannon!”

“Are you going to fight?!” A deafening response thunders as warriors leap and shout their response.

The emperor charges forth as guards release the lions. “Are you ready to fight these deceitful snakes and take back what we have lost?” The warriors erupt with blood-chilling cries.

“We will make our stand here on Magdella, Ase!” “We will fight and die!” “There is no cure for a bite from a white snake Ase!” they shout back reinvigorating their king.

The weary emperor suddenly looks twenty years younger—once again the brash, invincible warrior. The cheering rise to new heights. They have grasped victory from the jaws of ruin before and will again under their indomitable king.

“In Wollo, Tigray, Gojjam, and Shoa, you were victors!” the emperor declares “Thousands you have killed and thousands you have seen die and you have cast out your fears!”

“Men!” the emperor rides back to them and with a thundering voice “Give me your arms one last time, and I will give you the empire, I will give you Jerusalem!” His words hang in the air with an almost sacred weight as he made this solemn vow

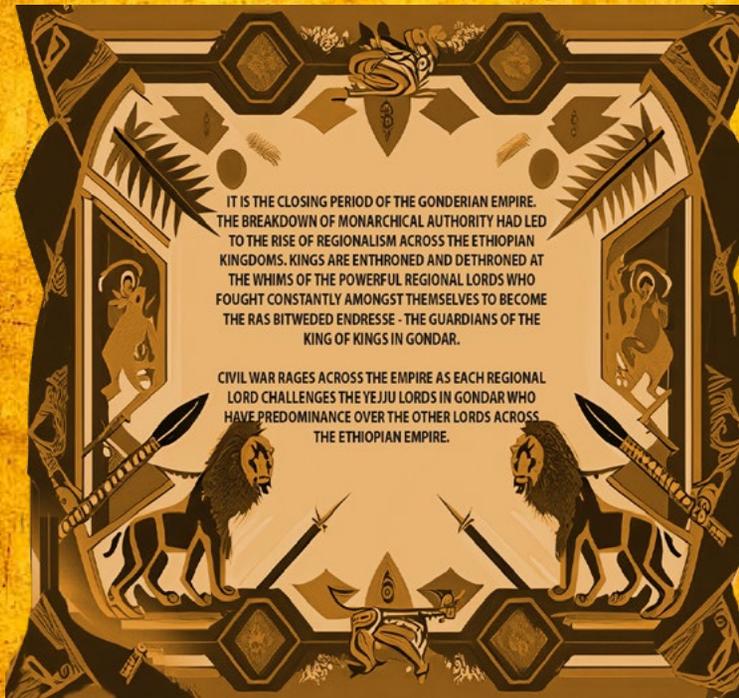
before, and in response, a fervor ignites within his warriors. A primal energy surges through the ranks, and they erupt into a war dance, ready to execute the commands.

“Ase! Tewodros!” they chant. “Ase! Tewodros!” sunlight filters from the heavens and shines on the King of Kings, the elect of God, the Lion of Judah, Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia.



The Birth

The character of the son, only the mother who gave him birth knows



The mist coils like mournful spirits around the peaks of Western Ethiopia, reluctant to reveal the breathtaking vista beyond. Yet it yields, parting to unveil majestic Lake Tana, the lifeblood of the Blue Nile. The verdant highlands, adorned in nature's emerald tapestry, stand proud in the distance.

A vast quilt of farmland unfolds towards the distant horizon. Winding dirt roads branch out across the land like spider legs, connecting scattered homesteads, huts, and farms. Warriors armed with spears and shields guard each fragile caravan, their watchful eyes scanning the fields where farmers toil, warding off the threat of marauding bandits.

The ghostly mist glides across the plain, descending upon a humble village at the foot of a towering mountain. Elegant tendrils of smoke curl skyward, rising out from the well-crafted huts of varied shapes and sizes.

Within the great hut, the abode of the esteemed Shum (governor), thick frankincense smoke weaves a heady spell, intermingling with the joyous laughter of conversing women from all corners.

The aroma of roasting coffee beans wafts intensely, as they dance on a long-handled pan over a flickering fire pit. Their surfaces darken and glisten with natural oils, and a chorus of crackling fill the air. A graceful hand seizes the pan's handle, rescuing the beans from the searing heat. With a swift motion, the young maid glides across the hut, oscillating the pan, releasing an aromatic zephyr that caresses the women's faces.

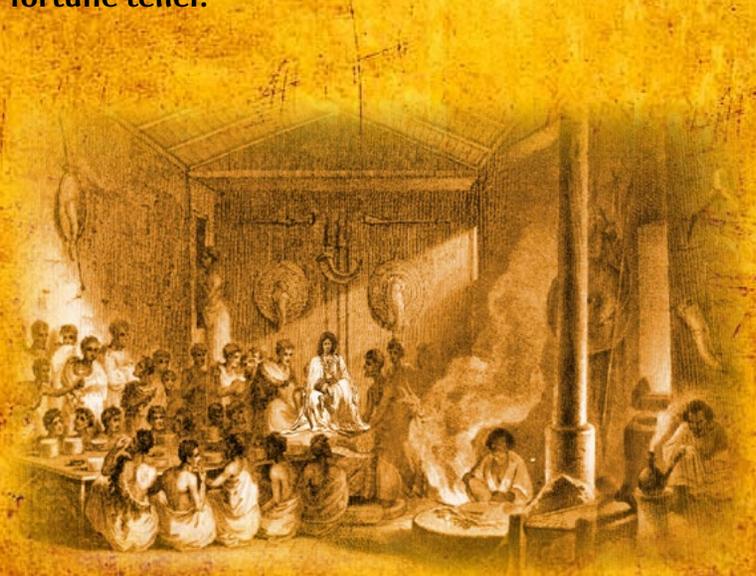
The women with distinctly stylish hairdos fashioned in the Gondarian manner, with loose braids split and twisted in all forms cascading down in buttered curls, appreciate the smell by waving the scent to their faces.

The young maid, draped in a Kemise and shash, the vibrant colors matching her youthful spirit returns to the fire pit, empties the beans into a pestle and mortar, grinds the fragrant powder before transferring the grounds to a boiling jebena. Amidst the rhythmic brewing, the lively conversations draw her attention. Her movements are graceful as she fills clay cups with the dark elixir.

Another maid, her youth blossoming, arranges two filled cups on a tray. She deftly navigates the smoky haze, traversing the space with reverence until she reaches two distinguished figures seated apart. The first, an elderly figure adorned in a black robe, in a stark contrast to the sea of white cotton-clad women surrounding them, exudes an aura of a stranger. Intricate henna tattoos grace her arms and long neck, marking her connection to ancient traditions, where she resides in the shadows—a fortune teller harboring secrets far richer than religion.

Opposite her sits a radiant pregnant woman, her glow enhanced by vibrant Kemise fabrics and glistening jewelry hinting at her high status.

The women raise the cups to their lips, establishing a sacred communion as the room falls silent, eager eyes upon them. They both take small but quick sips from their cups, and as soon as the pregnant woman is done, she hands the cup to the fortune teller.



The fortune teller studies the pregnant woman's grounds, clutching her wooden cross, then her amulet. Leaning closer, her hushed voice stirs: then erupts in a loud gurgling sound.

"Tewodros has risen!" she announces, her eyes widening, "Hail thee, mother of a king destined to reign over the empire you shall be!" Suddenly, she convulses and collapses to the floor, writhing and foaming in a macabre dance—part rehearsed theatrics, part otherworldly delirium.

As goosebumps rise on her arms during her trance, she screams "The resurrection of the King of Kings!" Prayers and blessings fill the room "Tewodros! Lion! Kassa! Kassa!" Fervent believers weep "Kassa! Kassa! Tewodros!, The king of Kings" she cries, trembling fingers grasping her cross tightly, calling out the name of the coming king.

The pregnant woman's radiance intensifies—she is Weyzero Atitgeb, the mother who is being honored as the vessel through which Emperor Tewodros II shall enter the world. Tears stream down her face as the fortune teller's ominous voice proclaims that the Western realms must prepare to witness the ascent of their prophesied ruler.



Outside the birthing hut, mist billows like ethereal smoke, enveloping the hut where new life stirs. Some months have passed since Weyzero Atitgeb's received the visionary prophecy.

Ghostly in their white shrouds, blessing women stand counting prayer beads, beseeching

the birth-saints, their devotion undisturbed despite Atitgeb's raw cries echoing from inside the hut as she labors to bring forth the new life.

Inside the hut, amid dancing flames of the fire, the sweat-soaked visage of Atitgeb twists in the throes of childbirth. She squats low, clutching the arms of her maids, gritting her teeth as contraction seizes her. The elder midwife, her wrinkled eyes speaking of a lifetime of safe deliveries, offers a serene presence. With practiced hands, she eases the baby from his mother and into the world, cleansing him as his cries persist until he finds solace in Atitgeb's arms.



The cries pick up again in the ancient stone walls of the village church, where candles line every alcove, casting the saintly icons and murals adorning the walls in a warm, flickering glow. An air of solemn ritual surrounds the newborn's christening.

At the center of the nave, upon a polished stone platform, lies the naked infant, his cries echoing high among the arched ceilings. Two

priests stand over him, reciting prayers in Ge'ez, the sacred tongue. Between verses, holy water is tipped from a gold vessel unto the baby's forehead by one priest, then swept across in the sign of the cross by the other. Monks in colorful cotton robes stand holding ceremonial umbrellas of crimson and azure silk overhead.

Gathered all around are the village faithful. Among the common worshippers are leaders dressed in finer fabrics and jewels befitting their status. All have their eyes fixed on the baptismal rites.

As the final blessings are spoken, a towering man emerges—none other than Shum Ato Hailu, father of the newborn. In his hand glints a sharp ceremonial blade. With grave care, he makes a shallow cut on the baby's groin, performing the ancient ritual of circumcision. Though the infant's cries pierce the church, the gathered crowd remains respectfully quiet in prayer.

Once the rites are complete, the priests lift the boy high for all to witness God's newest son. His wail rings out before he is placed once more into his mother's protective arms, now formally welcomed into the faith as his destiny under the watchful eyes of his people first begins to unfold.

In the night, in the cramped birth hut, steaming Nech Bahrzaf carries its suffocating vapors. Mother and son find solace in this sanctuary, their shadows dancing in flickering candlelight. Alone, Atitgeb, her body rocking back and forth, with her voice filling the small space sings a centuries-old lullaby that harkens back to legendary 15th century Emperor Tewodros I.

Shielded by diaphanous curtains warding off evil spirits, the baby shivers with fever. Atitgeb applies ointment, massages his body, he softly cries, pulling away from the burn. Atitgeb, a worried crease forming in her forehead, draws him closer to the pot's seething steam. Pressing her face to his, she whispers, stirring the fiery coals.

"My precious boy..." her gentle shushing calming him "... nothing shall befall you, my little Tewodros." The fierce crimson glow reflects upon their sacred bond.



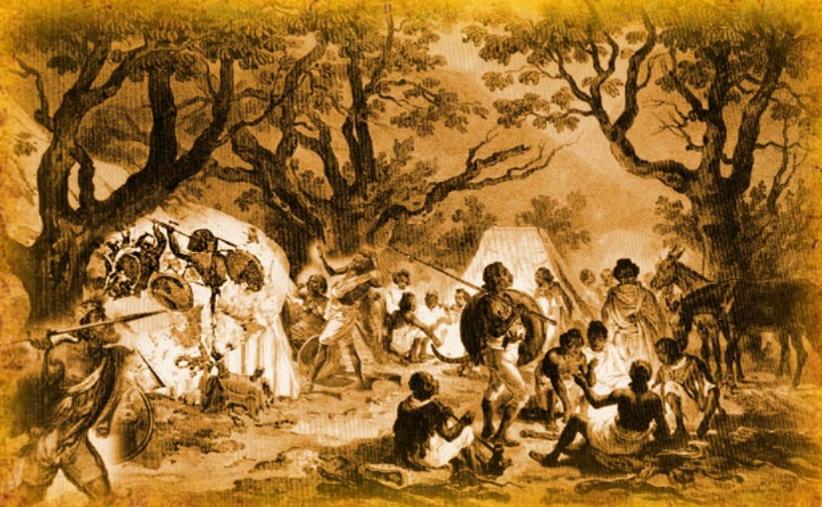
The flickering bonfire's mesmerizing hue ripples across the calm waters, as voices echo from somewhere nearby. An awe-inspiring yet foreboding sight unfolds—a sprawling encampment of hundreds of pitched tents housing Dejazmach Goshu's formidable Gojjam warriors dots the grounds like folded blossoms awaiting the sunrise. Some sleep wrapped in shimmas, weapons beside them. In the distance, smoke drifts from burning villages touched by the impending chaos.

Diligent watchmen tend to horses and mules, stacking and sharpening swords and spears, speaking in hushed, secretive tones. One approaches the cooks.

“In the early morning they plan to go out but fools for death going, God ahead of they do not go, may He protect them. . .” A cook smiles watching the watchman come. “Awo, God because He is, the sun rises, the sin of men wh—”

“Zembey! What do servants know of sin?” The watchman interrupts them. “God unleashed us as punishment upon them!” He points towards the trees. “Tomorrow, all these lands and treasures shall be ours.” He claims while turning back to taste some of the food. “You will see, tomorrow, with His guide, Gojjam will reclaim the —” A burst of blood from his neck! His boast is cut short as a spear slices through his throat.

Another one pierces him on his chest. The warrior claws at it as he drops on his knees.



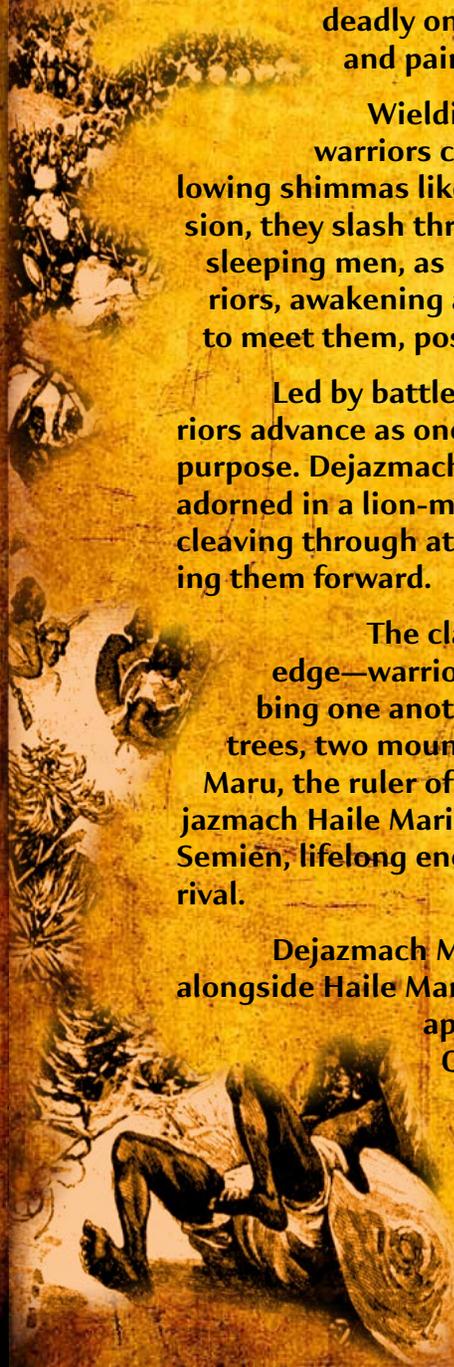
The horrified cooks erupt in a scream. Cries ring out as spears and arrows rain down, silencing the cooks in a flurry of violence. Oblivious, the other watchmen are caught off-guard, the deadly onslaught piercing the darkness and painting it with blood.

Wielding spears, swords, and shields, warriors charge from the trees, their billowing shimmas like specters. With ruthless precision, they slash throats and strike hearts of the sleeping men, as Dejzmach Goshu's Gojjam warriors, awakening and rising with weapons, rush to meet them, possessed with fury.

Led by battle-hardened chiefs, Gojjam warriors advance as one, footsteps resounding with purpose. Dejzmach Goshu, the ruler of Gojjam, adorned in a lion-mane collar, wields a broadsword, cleaving through attackers. He bellows orders, urging them forward.

The clash reverberates at the forest's edge—warriors stabbing, slashing, clubbing one another in a brutal display. From the trees, two mounted men emerge—Dejzmach Maru, the ruler of the Western realms and Dejzmach Haile Mariam of the northern realms of Semien, lifelong enemies now allied to crush their rival.

Dejzmach Maru, armed with a rifle, stands alongside Haile Mariam as their combined forces appear, bolstered by Dembeya and Qwara contingents.



“The kingdom has become a laughing stock of the uncircumcised and these serpents do the bidding of their Yejju puppets?!” Incredulous Dejazmach Maru turns to his Dembeya men “Where do they think they are?”

“Ye-Mar-u-Qemise!” His men respond indicating these are the lands from which the rulers of the West get their tribute.

“Where?!” He asks again, rallying his men “Ye-Mar-u-Qemise!” the response is resolute.

“You are defenders of the West and your faith! Silence these betrayers and enemies of Christ!” Chiefs beat war drums as more warriors move out.

Dejazmach Haile Mariam eyes Dejazmach Goshu slicing through warriors with tremendous power. “Cokebe bun iyeut, a sure morning star shining from the dark clouds,” he mocks “I want that bright light missing! Go! All of you!” He orders his Semien men, and the warriors charge into the fray.

“Son! Lij Kinfu!” calls out Dejazmach Maru and amidst the chaos of clashing swords and thundering hooves, a young warrior emerges behind him, his figure cloaked in a matching black lionmane in Dejazmach Maru’s signature style. However, the warrior’s distinct feature and his shimma flowing freely without the ceremonial adornments that distinguish Maru gives him an aura of a stranger.

Dejazmach Maru, a seasoned leader with battle scars etched into his story, affords the young warrior a moment to take in the fury unfolding before them. The clash of steel and the anguished cries of combatants echo in the air. Maru observes

young Kinfu’s gaze as it sweeps across the fierce battleground, a dance of life and death that both terrifies and exhilarates. Then, with a calculated shift of his horse, he pivots to confront a smaller faction trailing behind them.

Amongst the ranks of Maru’s Western reserves, faces now familiar from the recent baptism ceremony at the local church for the young baby come into focus. Ato Hailu Welde Giyorgis, the Shum of Qwara, his stern countenance etched with determination, stands at the helm. Maru slowly approaches him, as representative of Qwara’s leadership, the shum commands a position of authority.

Blood connections run deep on the battlefield, Ato Hailu is a relative to Maru. He was married to Maru’s sister before Maru forced him to break his matrimony.

A small force of approximately forty warriors, hailing from Qwara, stretches behind Ato Hailu. The Shum’s eyes, hard and unyielding, shift and fixate on young Kinfu, positioned steadfastly by Maru’s side. Kinfu’s struggle to avoid meeting Ato Hailu’s gaze speaks of tensions that extend beyond the immediate clash of arms.

Dejazmach Maru’s expression hardens, watching this exchange. His eyes shift momentarily from the brutal spectacle to the distant billows of smoke rising from villages set ablaze along the hillside. The sight fuels the fire within him.

“I cannot even depend on blood to guard our lands” Maru laments, turning his attention back to Ato Hailu’s faction, Maru’s glare meets the defiant stares of Ato Hailu.

“Go! Introduce yourselves to those that let them slip in the night!” With the weight of destinies intertwined, Dejazmach Maru addresses Ato Hailu’s men. The men turn to Ato Hailu, their Shum, but Dejazmach Maru, with the emblem of Order of the Seal of Solomon on his cape, a claim of being a descendant to the ruling house of emperors, directly addresses them “And prepare a feast, the battle will be over soon!”

Ato Hailu’s warriors, given free reign to pillage the surrounding villages do not look to Ato Hailu anymore as they melt back into the forest with eagerness. Ato Hailu, visibly shaken and frustrated, bows before Maru while keeping his eyes on Kinfu, who bears a considerable resemblance to him. He then quickly trails after his men. Dejazmach Maru turns to one of his mounted guards with a large scar running down his face, a relative from Dembeya, and signals him to go after them.

The blare of ram horns pierces through the symphony of chaos on the battlefield. For a brief moment, the clash of weapons falters as all eyes turn to the source of the sound. In the anticipatory hush, Maru hears the horns and spurs his horse into action. He gallops forward in fury, scanning the battleground poised ahead. The fighting stands caught at a precarious tipping point, suspended between calling a truce or continuing the engagement. A retreat seems the only option left before a massacre threatens the lives of the defeated.

“Retreat!” cries out Dejazmach Goshu, fighting his way toward his chiefs. “Retreat now, before it’s too late! One blow does not knock strong men down. Lead what remains of our forces to the shore!” Dejazmach Goshu turns and locks eyes with Dejazmach Maru, as if daring him to descend into

the thick of battle. But through the melee below, Goshu knows Maru won’t be able to reach him in time. The tide has turned, and a strategic retreat is the only choice to preserve lives of his men.

A furious Dejazmach Maru, dismounts and aims his rifle, points it right at the retreating Dejazmach Goshu. He fires but the blast hits another warrior. Frustrated Maru screams at his men to cutoff their retreat. Every Gojjam warrior flees with arrows and spears darting after them as Maru’s and Haile Mariam’s men pursue without letup.

The triumphant warriors burst forth with a cheer resounding through the expanse, ascending beyond the distant hills.

Torch smoke spews from a raided village as Ato Hailu and his men enter; the cheering from below filtering in behind them. Elder villagers in bloodied gabbies await with packed mules, a tradition to avoid pillaging by armies.

A gray-bearded elder clutches his cane, shaking in terror, knowing full well what is about to happen to his village all over again.

“They killed and burned so many! We fought with heart but failed with power. Mercy on us!”

A chief knocks down a farmer. Screams erupt. Ato Hailu orders his chiefs to silence them and prepare a feast.

“Come, sit with us, Abba.” He gestures to the elderly man. “What kind of man shuns his own family?” The horrified elder weeps helplessly as warriors cut down resisting farmers without mercy. “Mercy! The cattle, the fields—who will tend them?!”

Ignoring his pleas, Ato Hailu fumes over Maru hiding his son, Kinfu. "A man who ignores his own blood, all in the name of throne-treachery!"

"It is for the best, my lord. The end days of Gugsu's reign did not fill up yet a year, and Gonder is already riven to the core." A chief cautions. "The Yeju won't last for long. The war for Gonder has begun again, but what is the use of it, I ask my lord, if one ends up death-stabbed or poisoned on the steps to the throne?"



The elder continues begging as more huts are torched. . .

Screaming women and children are driven from burning homes, coughing and shaking. . .

Cattle are rounded up for slaughter. . .

Warriors fight over loot, ransacking huts. . .

Women are forced to work, preparing a feast.

Children are seized, terrified boys shaking as warriors approach with bloody swords. The tragedy and cruelty unfold deliberately, as if repeated often. The elder's heartbreaking sobs and the villagers' horrifying screams fail to stir the feasting men, deaf to anything but their own ambitions.



The Yeju

The leader's strength displays his roaring feeling.

The morning sun ascends over the Western highlands, casting its radiant glow upon the majestic stone castles of the powerful kingdom of Gonder. These ancient fortresses stand tall and imposing as symbols of authority, their enclosures teeming with warriors ready to defend their empire at all costs.



Within the formidable walls of the royal castle, the Elder Villager from the ransacked village, his face still stained with dried blood and tears, kneels solemnly in the opulent throne room. "Even the young olive trees, so full of potential, so green and growing, were ruthlessly cut down before their time," he laments, weeping in agony.

Sunlight streams through the towering arched windows, illuminating his despairing figure like a beacon in the dark. Behind him, a mournful line of men and women from across the kingdoms waits silently, their faces obscured by shadows, with their grievances written on them.

From behind luxurious curtains of shimmering silk, where beams of sunlight and torchlight merge, the Elder recounts the brutal aftermath of the raid on his village to the seated emperor. The emperor remains concealed, so his attention is seized by the imposing, barrel-chested man, standing confidently just outside the curtain with nobles, warriors and clergy surrounding him. The clergy is vastly outnumbered only by the traditional turbaned Muslim imams.



Nervously clutching his cross, the Elder speaks up, his voice quivering. "Our suffering knows no end. No more! No more! Our women, our girls—shamed and dishonored! The bodies littering our villages were not warriors, but good Christian farmers and innocent boys!" Tears flow steadily down his sleepless, sunken eyes.

"War consumes kingdoms, breeding only lawlessness, corruption, and murderous freedom!" bellows a Christian clergyman, visibly touched by the heart-wrenching testimony. "It is the curse of Allah upon the treacherous rebels of our realm!" adds a Muslim Imam, as the opposing sides compete to voice their opinions.

"Your Majesty, where shall we turn for mercy? We have lost everything. . ." Behind the curtain, the puppet emperor Gigar, a mere figurehead placed in power by the mighty Yeju dynasty, snores loudly upon his opulent throne. His glittering golden crown sits askew, teetering perilously on his head, while his drooping head rests upon his elaborately bejeweled royal garment.

Outside the curtain, the imposing warrior, rapt and attentive to the Elder's impassioned words, signals authoritatively for him to rise. All eyes turn apprehensively to the man, Ras Yimam, the formidable Endresse, and the true guardian of the throne and the real force behind the empire. With each deliberate step he takes, the cowering clergy and nobles disperse rapidly, their skittish movements like fragile leaves in a violent tempest.

"Only a lion can tame the chaos within the jungle" Ras Yimam's voice rumbling like thunder, drips with an ominous power, sending shivers down the spines of those who dare to listen.



Beyond the castle walls, a vast open field reverberates thunderously with the galloping of hundreds of Yeju horsemen. They charge forward as if on the attack, their sticks slicing menacingly through the air like deadly spears, engaging in intense drills and combat training for their formidable cavalry units.



Among the tense onlookers, a spirited young boy of seven years clings anxiously to his mother's hand, a wooden sword hanging boldly at his waist. Suddenly, the impetuous boy wrenches his small hand free from his mother's tight grasp and sprints recklessly towards the chaotic field, a defiant war cry erupting from his lungs.

A lone rider separates swiftly from the frenzied war games, hurtling at full speed towards the bold young boy. The rider dismounts in a single graceful bound, his billowing shimma swirling wildly around him as he lands firmly, his long polished Gobena stick pointed directly at the frozen child.

“Halt! Stand at attention noble nephew! What brings you here uninvited to my kingdom?” The imposing figure is Ras Marye, Ras Yimam’s audacious younger brother. Youthful and muscular, he embodies the quintessence of a skilled warrior. As the undisputed commander of the elite Yejju cavalry, he serves as the backbone of the empire’s formidable military might.

The brash young boy, Ras Alula Ali, the youngest scion of the all-powerful Gugsu Yejju lineage, thrusts his wooden sword in response to Ras Marye’s challenge, engaging him in a playful yet intense parry. “We come from Gojjam, with our noble mother. . .” The daring young boy charges forward, and the two exchange parries as if locked in a duel between two fearsome warriors, “. . . to deliver the most disloyal traitor of our kingdom to your esteemed brother,” declares the boy as Ras Marye ceases their spirited play. He turns sharply to the boy’s mother, a towering woman surrounded protectively by an entourage of even taller women, all adorned in vibrant red attire with distinct braided hairstyles, signifying their eminent noble status.

Menen Liben, a powerful matriarch and shrewd regent of Western Ethiopia, steps aside, dramatically revealing Dejazmach Gohsu of Gojjam, the disgraced captive, from the war in the West, now heavily shackled and guarded by her warriors. Menen and Ras Marye exchange a glance that

speaks volumes without uttering a word, a deep connection between two kindred spirits.

“You treacherous oldman, the echoes of your shame is louder than the drums of battle!” Ras Marye leaps and grabs Ras Goshu by his hair and yanks him up to his feet.



In a dimly-lit throne chamber, Dejazmach Goshu, as tall and muscular in stature as Ras Marye, stands proudly before Ras Yimam, only to bow down with deference with his approach. “Illustrious Endresse, I return from the blood-soaked battlefield, bearing the severed body parts of our mutilated enemies as proof of my allegiance. My loyalty lies only with you and no other,” he declares strongly.

Ras Yimam gazes piercingly at Menen, then turns to his incensed brother, furiously shoving the deceitful Goshu to the ground. “A man who does not stand for one thing, goes down with everything!” shouts Ras Marye “We should hang this

conniving traitor, standing upright, by what we gave him and he so carelessly lost, Maru reaps the benefits!" Dejazmach Goshu struggles to lift his head with great difficulty under his strong grip.

"My noble Endresse, when the almighty God humbles a strong man, first He breaks him, then He heals him," Menen laughs mockingly hearing these pleading words "I seek only to join your righteous cause and help put an end to the rebellious Maru and his traitorous ilk once and for all," Goshu begs in desperation.

Ras Yimam motions to his brother and Ras Marye lets go of Goshu in disgust, like releasing an unwanted goat from slaughter. An uneasy silence descends upon the tense chamber as Ras Yimam ponders the captive's uncertain fate.

"The Lord has decreed that we shall not wage war against our own Christian brethren, yet open rebellion engulfs every noble household in our kingdom," the Endresse takes a step closer to Goshu "From the defiant Sabadagis in the north to the scheming Maru and Haile conspiring in the west, and the deceitful Shoans in the south—all are humming a wicked tune of betrayal against us!"

"Esteemed Endresse, I—," Goshu interjects pleadingly but Ras Yimam explodes in unrestrained fury. "In front, one can make himself appear good, but when he returns to his own house?!" A violent fit of coughing overtakes him but he fights it off valiantly. "Mark my words! When we march forth in righteous vengeance, the damage done to our good names will not be forgotten!"

Ras Yimam succumbs to another prolonged fit of coughing, covering his mouth with his hand, he turns away from Goshu. Seizing the tense oppor-

tunity, Ras Marye knocks Dejazmach Goshu forcefully to his knees once more and lifts his head up slowly with a devious smile.

"Uncle, are you okay?" Little Ras Ali tugs on Ras Yimam's cape, worried about him while Menen and Ras Marye share another glance in a silent conversation that says he is not.

"There are treacherous things that I can sleep with that none of you could ever bear to lie down with!" Ras Yimam recovers his composure. He rubs Ras Ali's hair then turns to face Dejazmach Goshu "I will draw out my sharpened sword against each and every one of you before I watch my empire be left desolate, our noble kingdom laid waste!" He takes Ras Ali by the hand to his mother, letting him know all is well "Our future line will not be threatened by the likes of you." The Endresse eyes Menen, to let her know he's in control then turns back to Goshu.

Ras Yimam closes on the kneeling captive "I will punish all dissenters until they come begging on bended knees to join these unyielding Yejju hands." Ras Yimam extends his outstretched hand to Dejazmach Goshu. "Together we will unite for now, then against each other we will turn, as we always have in the past!"

Dejazmach Goshu reaches up slowly to clasp his hand, and with an unsteady shake they seal their newfound but tenuous alliance.

Thick fragrant incense smoke permeates the tense chamber, its pungent aroma mingling with the staggering weight of their shared ambitions to defeat the rebellious Dejazmach Maru of the West. The smoke drifting out of the chamber mixes with

ominous fog that swirls and dances eerily across the landscape.



CHAPTER THREE

The Fenja House

If it rains in the house, into the forest they flee.

Mist moves and dances across the western landscape. Thick fog hangs on trees and branches. Muted horse hooves clop, clop, clop through the fog as outlines of riders appear.

A much older Ato Hailu, the governor of Qwara, with two of his chiefs by his side, carefully navigate through the damp earth. Their faces are etched with worry, their eyes scanning the surroundings for any signs of danger.



An ominous stillness hangs over the forest, the mist muting even the calls of birds. Ato Hailu's heart quickens as a chill creeps down his spine. His chiefs sense it too, coming to an abrupt halt and exchanging uneasy glances. Shadowy forms seem to shift just outside of sight within the ghostly trees ahead.

In a split second, chaos erupts. Two arrows whip past Ato Hailu's head with alarming precision, piercing the throats of his chiefs behind him. The men drop down, gurgling in their own blood, their eyes wide with shock and fear.

"Your betrayal to Maru ends today!" a loud voice echos and a rider emerges from the fog—the scar-faced guard of Dejzmach Maru. His eyes gleam with malice as he approaches Ato Hailu, his horse stepping cautiously through the treacherous terrain.

Suddenly, the mist begins to dissipate, revealing a dozen menacing warriors who materialize from all sides, surrounding Ato Hailu and his remaining loyal companions.

The shum's mind races as he realizes the gravity of their predicament. They are trapped, out-

numbered, and fighting for their lives. With a voice filled with authority and defiance, Ato Hailu calls upon his remaining warriors to stand their ground. He draws his sword, his furious eyes gleaming in the reflecting blade.

The scar-faced guard, his scar now accentuated by the flickering light of dawn, smirks, "Your line is finished!" he sneers, relishing the impending victory. His warriors inch closer, their weapons ready to strike.

Ato Hailu's heart pounds, his mind races, they have come for his family and he must search for a way out, an escape from the encircling danger that threatens his wife and child. But fate has dealt him a cruel hand, sealing his destiny within this treacherous ambush.

"Attack!" he erupts, his fear transitioning into boiling rage. The clash begins, swords clanging against shields, arrows whizzing through the air. Ato Hailu fights with all his might, but the scar-faced guard and his warriors possess a relentless ferocity, their attacks unyielding and precise.

One by one, Ato Hailu's loyal companions fall, their valiant efforts in vain. Blood stains the earth, mingling with the fog. Ato Hailu, surrounded by fearsome attackers fights with everything he has but in the end his strength wanes. Every breath brings fresh agony as his broken body screams for relief. Through blurred vision, he sees the scarred guard lunge at him with a glint in his eye that can only be death's invitation.

The grotesque scar twists the guard's face into a nightmarish sneer, a gruesome emblem that will haunt Ato Hailu's last memories. Time slows as the final blow descends upon him. His life flashes



before his fading gaze —victories, failures, loves found and lost.

With what little strength remains, Ato Hailu pushes back against the inevitable end. But the scarred guard's sword pierces into his chest with merciless force.

Maru's warriors cheer as the scar-faced guard stands triumphant over the dying Ato Hailu. The mist swirls around them, bearing witness to the fateful encounter that forever alters the course of Qwara's history.

"My son, my son. . ." Ato Hailu chokes out the words, amidst blood-soaked breaths. His voice trembling with a torrent of sorrow and remorse, aching for his inability to protect the very heart of his family.

"Who marries a whore to birth him an illegitimate son?" the scar-faced guard laughs at the dying governor "What would one name such a child?"

"Kassa. . .kassa" Ato Hailu dies with Kassa's name etched in his throat.



"Kassa! Kassa!" Eight-year-old Kassa, his cherubic face glowing, lies hidden in tall grass alongside a giggling boy twice his size.



"Kassa!, Kassa!" Women's voices echo through the air, calling his name to the wind. "Your mother is asking for you, Kassa!" Suddenly, a cry of pain interrupts their playful moment, and Kassa turns to see fire-ants swarming over the larger boy's shimma.

"Shhhhh, quiet down, Gabreye," Kassa urges, his eyes widening as the fire ants begin crawling over him too. Remarkably, he doesn't flinch. Gabreye, however, jumps up, howling in pain, shaking and disrobing. The shadows of three women quickly close in on him.

Kassa remains on the ground, with intense concentration, he lies on the grass, his eyes closed, covered in fire-ants, grimacing as if he wants to test how much pain he can endure before surrendering. When he finally opens his eyes, a brilliant sunlight breaks through the clouds, shining directly on him. And with a smile, he seems to defy the pain, as if it cannot overpower him.

"Indee! Sweet Mary and Joseph, what on earth are you doing? Get up!" The bewildered maids, eyes wide with astonishment, swiftly lift him from the grass and usher him into the hut, brushing his fabric and shaking him vigorously to dislodge the ants.

Inside the hut, Kassa, itching his welts is greeted with chaos as maids run around every-

where. He tears through maids frantically packing and trails his mother, visibly shaken.

“Emmaye, what’s happening?” Confusion twists his gut as he searches her grief-stricken face. “Gather what you need, we must leave now!” his mother commands, her voice trembling with buried terror and sadness in her tear-stained face.

“Where is Abbaye?” Kassa looks around, noticing his father’s absence. “Will he be coming with us?” Dread and longing fill his voice. “No,” Atitgeb responds somberly without meeting his eyes.

“What happened?!” Kassa’s scream rips from his soul, gripping her kemise. Now frustration mixes with his fear and turmoil. “Go get what you need!” she exclaims, rage replacing her sadness. “We are never coming back here again!” her tears flow as she tries to pull away. But Kassa can’t let go of the last link to what’s being torn from him.

“He hates me!” Kassa suddenly blurts out. Atitgeb stops and turns to him, troubled by his accusation, she kneels by his side, tries to smile, cupping his face with shaking hands. “You two were never close enough for him to hate you, my son. You know this.” But Kassa can’t accept her comfort. “I am his son, his heir. Why do we have to leave home?!”

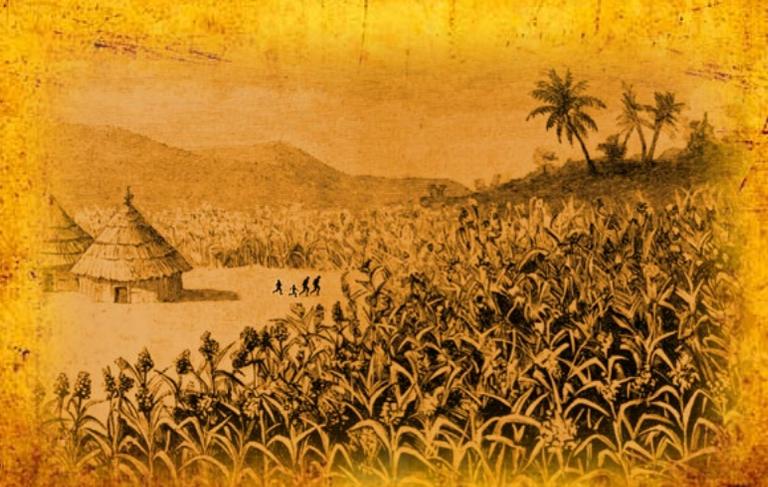
“Your father is gone” Atitgeb delivers the devastating truth. The shock hits Kassa like a thunderbolt “He is gone, Lije,” Atitgeb shatters what little hope remains. Gone. The word crushes Kassa under its weight. Sobbing wracks his body as he clings to his mother for salvation from this nightmare, and he loses himself sobbing in his mother’s embrace. “Enough now son! They are coming for

us.” Atitgeb, wiping away his tears, reminds him of the imminent danger.

“What do they want? I am not like the others, I am the family nothing, he told me! They have everything and I do not have anything!” He pours out his pain and frustration in boiling rage. “Hush now my love. To me, you have everything and much more.” Atitgeb attempts to comfort him.

Suddenly, a commotion outside interrupts their conversation. The maids freeze in place as Atitgeb rushes to defend her son, grabbing a sword from the wall. However, Kassa breaks away, running to a bed and diving underneath it. With determination, he drags out a heavy hide-skinned bag and begins rummaging through its contents, searching for something.

In the main room, another woman bursts in, accompanied by her child. The urgency in her voice is clear as she exclaims, “Men are coming!” Gabreye’s mother, as tall as her son, enters, fear etched on her face. Kassa rushes out and positions himself between the two mothers, his voice defiant as he declares, “So we give up everything, all that is ours without a fight?!”



Kassa's mother looks down at him, noticing the small emblem in his hand. She kneels down and firmly grasps his shoulders again, proud at her son conveying both strength and determination.

"Of course you will fight. You will have to son, they will not stop until you're killed!" Her eyes move to the gleaming emblem—an interlaced triangle forming the Star of David—the symbol of the Order of the Seal of Solomon, given only to members of the ruling houses in the kingdom. Kassa's mother closes his hand around the emblem and directs his gaze toward the forest.

"They know who you are, Lije," she says. Kassa's eyes fixate on the approaching riders, torchlights flickering in the night.



Firelight dances across the faces of Dejazmach Maru and Weizero Senait, their features illuminated in the dimly lit space. They are seated near a small, smoldering fire, draped in heavy gabbies, their bodies tended to by servants. Maru receives an aggressive rubbing on his exposed shoulders from a deaf and mute masseuse, while his wife indulges in a foot massage from a young maid.

In the far corner of the great hut, Maru's niece, Weleta Tekle, the former wife of Ato Hailu, attends to a deranged, half-naked brother, comforting him with soothing words and passages from the

Psalms of David. The air is filled with a sense of tension, as if something is about to disrupt the calm.

Suddenly, her son, Lij Kinfu, bursts into the great hut in a fury, disregarding everyone in his path to reach Dejazmach Maru. His face trembles with anger and betrayal.

"How could you?! My own father?!" he exclaims, his words laced with pain. Weleta Tekle spins around, her eyes widening in shock as she comprehends the news of the assassination of her former husband.

Dejazmach Maru, calmly rising from his seat, dismisses his masseuses and covers himself, focusing his attention on Kinfu. But Kinfu stands his ground, refusing to back down.

"I am his eldest! I should have been consulted! How could—"

"Now hear me Lije, you take what little memories you have of that traitor and mark them forgotten!" Maru shouts him down.



Kinfu aghast, turns to his mother, seeking support, but she stands helpless, bound by Maru's influence. Maru, who orchestrated her divorce from Ato Hailu and adopted Kinfu as his own, holds the power to shape the fate of their entire Fenja House.

"I am his master," Maru declares, his voice laced with authority. "And when a deceitful subject of mine goes on to father more of my opponents without my approval, he becomes my declared enemy!"

Kinfu takes a step back, the physical presence of Maru looming over him, pressing against him like an unyielding force.

"Our enemy!" Maru continues, his voice filled with a mix of determination and frustration. "Lije, what is meant for relatives and what is meant for a son are different. I have built a great inheritance for you that grows with each passing day. Our lineage holds the greatest power in the west."

"But how could? I should —" Kinfu attempts to interject, to reason with Maru, but his words go unheard, disregarded by the man who wields control over their lives.

"Soon," Maru proclaims, ignoring Kinfu's protest, "the battle for Gonder, our bloodline, shall enter and win!"

A faint snicker escapes from Weizero Senait, Maru's Yejju wife by alliance, mocking his last remark. An insulted Maru pulls Kinfu closer, his arm encircling him, and directs his attention to his wife, adjusting her hair styled with butter, mirroring the Yejju tradition. She smiles knowingly, understanding the significance of Maru's words, he aims to

challenge her relatives, a futile pursuit that many have attempted and failed.

"Every master knows a good thief is the best guardian," Maru retorts, his voice filled with a mix of pride and ambition. "Her father stole the throne and claimed it because he was strong. But his sons do not resemble their father. They are but wet little things when forced will burn."

Maru's gaze returns to Kinfu, their eyes locked in a battle of wills. "Lije, the Yejju are no more" Maru asserts with conviction. "Our house is the one the Lord has favored to restore the true Solomonic line of our Christian ancestors once and for all."

He pleads with Kinfu, a glimmer of hope in his eyes, as he reveals his grand plan.

"After me, the one I choose and favor will not only rule the West but the whole empire!"



The Monastery

A young tree must bend before it stands tall.

A small reed canoe glides silently through calm waters, with young Kassa and his mother awake in the early hours. Kassa peers through the mist, observing their surroundings, while she prays silently, worry etching her face.



Kassa spots an island floating in the middle of the lake like a mirage. Atitgeb, exhausted but filled with relief, gently awakens Gabreye and his

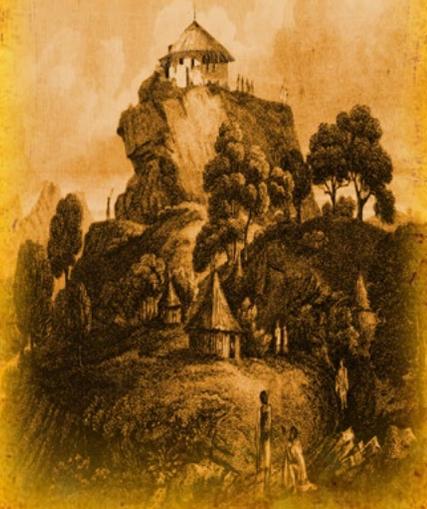
mother. As they begin collecting their belongings, Kassa keeps watch, wary of any threats.

Reaching the tranquil island's shores, tears of gratitude well in the eyes of their mothers. They bless Mary and the Lord as they embrace, finding momentary solace after their harrowing flight. But they do not spare a moment; they march straight into the dense forest for protection.

Kassa and Gabreye trail behind, following a twisting stone stairway that ascends the steep, forested hill.

"In the time of Zemena Mesafent, the elephant fights the ants," Gabreye's mother says, her words heavy with grief. "Man rises as high as a mountain, leaving mothers and their children in the dust to rot on the grounds. . ." she laments "One does not understand the deeds of God who gave power to warring men, tearing families apart. . ." she grieves.

"It's through repeated falling that our babies grew big," Atitgeb says, her voice filled with resilience. "No one can fathom the mind of the Lord, but His deeds are carried out slowly. . ."



She embraces the weeping mother before turning to the boys.

"My love, look how big and strong you have become," she says tenderly. But Kassa avoids her eyes, pain evident in his trembling voice. "Why can't I stay with you?"

"A mother and child together in a time of war are cripples Lije. We must survive on our own." She composes herself. "A mother's milk may dry, but her hands never do. I will protect your honor until you become strong and wise enough to fight alongside me! Now go, my son. I must seek fortune and will return to you by June."



Gabreye openly sobs, but Kassa, furious at his mother, hurriedly grabs his bags, and marches ahead to hide his tears. The boys ascend in silence, united in anguish, as their mothers who are not allowed to stay in an all male monastery weep before departing into unknown fates.

"Do not forget who you are, my little Te-wodros." His mother's mournful words echoes

through the forest, swirling around the towering stairs and trailing him along the path.

Suddenly, with a thunderous rush, Kassa descends the steps, his feet pounding against the stairs as if propelled by desperation. He crashes into his mother's waiting arms, tears cascading down his cheeks in a torrent. "Don't leave. . . What's going to happen? To you, to me. . . What will become of me, Emayye, please don't leave me, let me stay with—" His mother's embrace envelops him in warmth and security.

"Your path and mine are not the same," his mother murmurs, her words barely audible amidst his sobs. ". . . you will have to endure, you must, Lije, my little Tewodros, for he has chosen you for something greater. . ."

Kassa remains inconsolable, but his mother persists, whispering words of comfort and wisdom into his ears until gradually, his sobs subside, replaced by a newfound calm and understanding. "You must be strong, Lije," she implores, gently wiping away his tears. With one final embrace, Kassa turns and ascends the stairs, resolved to face the uncertain future that lies ahead.

The twisting stone stairway seems without end as it switchbacks up the steep, forested hill. Kassa's legs burn with each heavy step, his lungs grasping for thin mountain air, his body letting out his sorrow and fury with punishing exhaustion. In front of him, Gabreye's labored breaths and cries echo his own fatigue and loss.

As the boys ascend, a radiant light illuminates their path from somewhere in the far distance. Perched atop the hilly mountain, nestled amidst the thick forest, the monastery of Mahbere

Sellassie glows, as if touched by heavenly lights from above.

The boys walk along a stone path that winds through a small village of mud huts—a secluded sanctuary for the residing monks and priests, their eyes glued to the top of the village at the towering, magnificent century-old stone church. There is still more stairs to climb to get to it.

The boys keep ascending. How long have they climbed? Kassa has lost track as exhaustion fills his mind with cotton. Only the monks above keep him placing one foot doggedly after the other.



At last, the protective gate emerges through swirling gray spots in his vision. Frail, bearded monks await as promised, concerned eyes taking in the boys' weary states. Kassa staggers the final steps and collapses against the warm stones, chest heaving. Only Gabreye's hand on his shoulder prevents him from slipping into blissful unconsciousness.

Through the buzzing in his ears, Kassa hears monks murmuring as they help lift his limp form.

At last, the climb is over—for now they can rest in the towering church's sheltering shadow. But the true trials lie ahead, once strength and resolve return.



Within the hallowed walls of the monastery school, an elderly priest recites verses from the Book of Psalms in a gravelly voice. Kassa and his classmates sit cross-legged before him, their gazes locked onto the scripture in rapt attention. As one of the boys squirms restlessly, the priest's grasp on the long disciplinary stick tightens, any wandering thoughts are not accepted.

As Kassa listens, his inquisitive eyes wander to the religious art adorning the aged walls. Murals unfurl tales of biblical legends—Moses in pursuit, baby Jesus sheltered tenderly by Joseph and Mary.



Leaning toward Gebrye, Kassa's curiosity sparks. "What ever happened to Joseph, did he—"

Before he finishes, the long stick strikes Kassa's head, eliciting laughter from his mates. The venerable cantor's stern voice cuts through the mirth. "Disobedience to the devil belongs, the ways of sin lead to the gates of hell one guide along. . ."

In the afternoon, children gather beneath a canopy of trees to study, but Kassa remains distracted, gazing aloft as if seeking answers beyond the waters.

In a small hut, Kassa tends to an elderly priest, Debra Markos, his master and companion. The old man, shrouded in gabbies, mumbles about the end of the world, his words disjointed.

Inside and outside the hut, Kassa maintains cleanliness, sweeps, makes the bed, prepares the fire. He listens to Debra Markos's prayers while he flogs rugs made from animal skins, the lamentation of the old-priest, expressing his anguish and sorrow a constant background noise.

At night, within a rustic hut, Kassa tenderly bathes Debra Markos's feet. He listens reverently as the priest murmurs supplications. Kassa's hands pause, as he discovers a dangling toe, his expression a perplexed mixture of concern and wonder.

"I felt that, boy! Stick it back in," the priest grumbles, his voice a blend of discomfort and amusement.



As darkness descends, Kassa and Debra Markos sit vigils for all-night prayers. Their eyes, weary yet resolute, bathe in flickering candlelight.

Kassa's eyes grow heavy, but he forces himself to stay alert, gaze fixed on the dancing flames. His body aches to rest after another long day of study, labor and prayer, but his spirit remains resolute.

He watches Debra Markos murmur psalms, the older man's lips barely moving yet his devotion palpable. Kassa quietly joins the rhythmic incantations, letting the sacred words wash over and strengthen him.

When at last Debra Markos nods off to sleep, Kassa remains awake. Memories slip in unbidden of his family in happier times, overwhelming him with longing. With shaking fingers, he withdraws his sole link to the past—a worn emblem etched with familiar script.

As dawn light filters in, Kassa tucks the emblem safely away once more. He rouses Debra Markos with a gentle hand on his shoulder, then helps the frail priest through morning prayers and breakfast.

The days blend into an endless cycle of ritual. Yet each night, with Debra Markos' soft snores as his only company, Kassa allows himself this solitary moment of connection to all he has lost. Claspings the emblem renews his resolve to learn and serve faithfully, honoring both his mentor and the family whose memory keeps his spirit aflame.

On one momentous night, as Kassa examines and compares the details of the emblem with

the biblical text as usual, an abrupt darkness cloaks him.

Debra Markos wrests the emblem from his grip, jerking him to his feet, leaving a veil of mystery hanging heavily in the air.

“What do we have here. . . Who are you boy?” The old man's weathered fingers trace the lines of the emblem, his touch tender yet laden with disbelief. “Lord, say it is not so. . . What have you brought to me?” Suddenly, he erupts into uncontrollable laughter, the sound echoing through the room like a chorus of memories.

“As you go through life, young Kassa, you cannot help knowing, you can always get help, but only the way you are going. . .” Debra Markos, ambles with difficulty, and lifts the covering of his alga to reveal stacks upon stacks of books and parchments used to support the bed.

“I was a Debentra that served the royals, young Kassa, what would you like to learn?” his toothless smile expands.



Children gather in a hushed circle by the lake's edge, far from the village's prying eyes. Kassa and Gebrye stride together, the circle parting to unveil a towering, sinewy figure at its center. This behemoth of a boy looms twice Kassa's size, his

Adam's apple protruding from his youthful neck like a lurking titan. Gebrye's gaze fixes on the boy, sensing a formidable adversary.

"Noble lineage from Gojjam, the well-fed breed," Gebrye mutters to Kassa, "let me fight him."

"My wrath eclipses his size," Kassa retorts, his fury simmering just beneath the surface.

"Behold the peasant and cattle shepherd's offspring! His mother, my mother saw in the market, begging for scraps!" The lanky youth taunts, breaking into a crude shepherd's dance. Laughter and jests fill the air as Kassa and Gebrye enter the circle, the ring sealing shut behind them.

Enraged by the affront to his mother, Kassa takes two calculated steps, then erupts into action, landing a powerful punch squarely on the boy's throat. The stunned boy gasps for breath, collapsing to his knees amid the thunderous cheers and screams of the young spectators. Kassa doesn't relent; he leans down, his voice a forceful reprimand.

"Get up!" Kassa bellows with righteous anger, unleashing his pent-up frustration on the hapless boy. "We are all orphans here! No orphan slanders another orphan's mother with lies!" Kassa's voice resounds with fury.

With a swift leap, Kassa descends upon the fallen boy, unleashing an unrelenting flurry of punches. The cheers grow louder as blood splatters everywhere. Yet, as it becomes evident that Kassa's fury won't abate until he has extinguished the boy's life, the cheers abruptly hush.

Kassa, lost in the grip of his trauma and impotence cannot control himself, Gebrye leaps to get him off the boy but Kassa fights desperately

against Gebrye, venting his frustrations on his sole friend in an uncharacteristic frenzy.

A sudden uproar erupts from the opposite side of the lake.

The children scatter immediately, running along the lake's shore, their voices mixing with shouts and screams. A vanguard of an enormous force emerges, accompanied by a massive dust cloud kicked up by the travelers. Thousands upon thousands of armed warriors march, bearing their weapons, supplies, and joined by their women, children, and livestock.



All eyes turn to Dejazmach Maru, a towering figure perched upon his caparisoned horse, wielding a firearm. Drummers and performers chant his praises as the entourage advances. The children, familiar with the legendary Western lord, whisper Maru's name with equal parts reverence and fear. Just then, Kassa, his face splattered with blood and his fists dripping crimson, steps forward, locking

his gaze onto the man who took his father's life and banished him from his homeland.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Alliance

The stone of the fire, there are three.

The setting sun casts an ominous glow over the sprawling camp, its dying rays obscured by plumes of smoke rising from thousands of smoldering campfires. The stench of charred flesh and spilled blood hangs thick in the air. A tense meeting unfolds amidst the chaos and carnage, as new alliances are forged between the rival forces of Dejazmach Maru of the West and the Yejju rulers of the empire, brokered by the clergy from their respected churches.



Dejazmach Maru strides forward, Lij Kinfu shadowing his every move closely. Their hands rest near sword hilts as their eyes dart warily, fingers tapping restlessly against weapons as they near the Yejju warriors. Approaching Ras Yimam, they exchange a tense greeting. Maru's jaw clenches as Yimam's eyes scan for threats.

Horses and riders stand at attention in disciplined formation, but warriors eye each other suspiciously as old enemies, hands hovering near weapons ready. When the priest speaks of unity, some warriors from either side mutter grievances under their breath.

"A hydra doesn't change its spots" an elder grumbles in Ras Yimam's ear. Just then, heated shouts erupt from the back, sending tensions boiling over. Warriors draw steel and charge each other until Ras Marye angrily storms in with his cavalry, ushering the end of the unrest before it spreads further.

Once having taken control, Ras Marye gallops and leaps from his mount, and lands before Lij Kinfu. He measures him up then turns to Maru, pats him on the shoulder with a smile as if to say it's all taken care of, and walks to the leaders.

"Allies today can be enemies tomorrow so let us get on with it quick before we start the war right here and now!" Marye exudes an aura of a man who does not have time for pretensions.

A debtra priest, shaken by the possible eruption of violence quickly steps forth, clasping a leather-bound bible studded with a jewel-encrusted cross. His aged voice rings out with solemn authority:

"We are all followers of Christ here. Whether from the west, north, south or east, our Tewahedo faith binds us as one."

Ras Yimam and Dejazmach Maru face one another, wariness in eyes as old adversaries size each other up. Murmured prayers ripple through the crowd as the two leaders place their hands upon the holy text, sealing their oath of loyalty.

"If you wish for peace and prosperity in this life and the next, you must stand together as Christian brothers" the priest implores.

The formidable leaders with thinly-veiled distrust want to get it over with as soon as possible. Through gritted teeth, they swear fealty, "In the name of the father and his son Jesus Christ, we swear to love each other's friends and to hate each other's enemies. . . The people who each other respect live, the people who each other hate die!" They repeat these ominous words, binding themselves to defend each other and oppose shared enemies. Under the priest's watchful eye, they clasp forearms, feigning unity despite the undercurrent of tension. Both sides know the alliance is one of convenience, a temporary truce in the endless jockeying for power.

"Well then, let's hope this one turns out better than the last one" Ras Marye motions his cavalry, and the intimidating Yejju horsemen prepare to move out. Horns rings out, Dejazmach Maru and Ras Yimam reluctantly shake hands, "I will see you at the battle" the Endresse says to Maru but yet as their eyes lock, threat seems to carry more weight than sincerity in his words.



Far removed from the political machinations, the lone monastery sits untouched by the swelling chaos. Not a single monk stirs within its empty churches. Only wide-eyed novice boys scamper about the hills, gazing down at the sprawling military masses.

“... Doldale! Doldale! How long? After giving up everything in this world, everything my lord, in prayer in night and day, this life here has shown me nothing but the perversity of men!” Tears flow down from the closed eyes of Debre Markos.

“... perversion of your peaceful creation my lord, every hour of the day, terror, war and insanity. . .” Kassa sitting by his side watches the old man in sorrow “Only the suffering know you lord, only the suffering know God! How long must we wait for Tewodros to come?!”

Kassa sheds a tear hearing that name and remembering his mother. He places a comforting hand on his master, the bond has grown between them. They sit together, looking on the massive armies from the sanctuary of their cloistered enclave.

“What is happening now Lije” asks his frail master and Kassa details the scene, the blind old man interrupts with ominous mumbling. . .

“May the Lord save us from warring men who pursue only self-interest at the cost of others.” Lost in his own world, the toothless old man seems aware of the escalating danger and laments with overflowing tears. Arms outstretched, he cries out to the heavens: “You have warned us with lightning and thunder of the coming storm of your wrath!”

The distant sounds of drums and wild war cries drift upon the night air.

“He will judge the ungodly and bring an end to all this warmongering that kills children and women!” Kassa watches helplessly as his master dissolves into anguished weeping, overcome by despair. The weight of the brewing conflict bears down upon his young shoulders, his heart gripped by a tangled mix of hope and dread.

A sudden thunder cracks across the skies like the heavens are listening. . .



The pounding of war drums echoes relentlessly through the battlefield, each beat reverberating like a thunderclap. The very earth quivers beneath the advance of thousands of warriors, marching in disciplined, traditional battle formations.

Leading this imperial army is the imposing figure of the Endresse, Ras Yimam, his brother Ras Marye at the forefront of the Yejju cavalry. Beside them strides their newfound ally, Dejzmach Maru, his forces reinforced by loyalists from the West and neighboring provinces.

The priests, their voices carrying weighty prayers, bless the assembled warriors, anointing their faces with holy water. Rising from their bowed positions, chiefs brandish weapons that catch glimmers of the morning sunlight, their determination evident as they thirst for the impending battle.



Lij Kinfu, moving from the rear of the formation, joins Dejzmach Maru at the front. His gaze lingers on the Yejju cavalry, a sea of unmounted Muslim horsemen prostrated towards Mecca.

“I feared they might ask us to bow to the Kaaba and bend our knees,” quips the Western Christian with a wry smile.

“In times of adversity, one must bow low, my son,” Dejzmach Maru responds, his eyes conveying a deep wisdom of local politics. “Together, we shall weather this storm and support one another,”

his eyes fly to the Yejju rulers “let them assist in removing the weakest stones from beneath the cooking fire, one by one.”

Endresse Yimam’s commanding voice cuts through the clamor, ordering Ras Marye to deploy his Yejju cavalry. Ras Marye, his gaze fixed on Dejzmach Haile-Mariam, signals for his horsemen to mount and charges into the battlefield, signifying the full advance of their forces.

Across the open plain, the drums of the outnumbered Semien warriors beat defiantly. Dejzmach Haile-Mariam, leading the northern forces with allies from nearby provinces, wears a grim expression that mirrors the betrayal he senses.

“Abbaye, you cannot be oblivious to what the entire kingdom knows” a sharp voice of his son informs “Maru marches with the Yejju,” the young prince Lij Wibe solemnly watches his father, his face etched with fury.

Rage contorts Dejzmach Haile-Mariam’s face upon seeing his ally Maru aligning with the Yejju. Through gritted teeth, he seethes, “That two-faced jackal!” He turns to Lij Wibe “Remember son, trust not the one who smiles to your face but schemes behind your back!”

The furious Dejzmach turns his horse to address his warriors, his voice resounding with authority, “Men, we have been stripped of our titles and lands before this battle even begins! The Muslim Yejju have promised our domains to vultures, to the treacherous Maru!”

A chorus of fury erupts among the Semien warriors, their collective cry echoing through the battlefield. Dejzmach Haile-Mariam rides along

the lines of his enraged men, rallying them, "Shame on these betrayers! Shame that must stay outside here it comes!" Warriors ready their weapons "Are you prepared to defend your homes, your fields, your faith against these shameful vultures?!"

His battle-hardened warriors respond with chilling war cries, their resolve unshakable as they brace for the impending clash.

Lij Wibe readies for battle but his father charges up to him "Lije, stay behind, you must not allow them to encroach upon our domains!"

"Abbaye! I—"

"Protect our domain as you would your own heart, for it is the legacy of our ancestors and the birthright of our descendants." His father cuts him off with a commanding authority. Lij Wibe abides, and holds back with the reserve army as the Semien forces move out.

Insults and taunts fly between the two armies as they converge with a palpable hunger for bloodshed.

The charging Semiens, led by the fearless Dejazmach Haile-Mariam, pierce the mist with their war cries, their steeds thundering into the fray.

The relentless rumble of the Yeju forces draws closer, accompanied by the eerie specters of cavalrymen emerging from the mist.

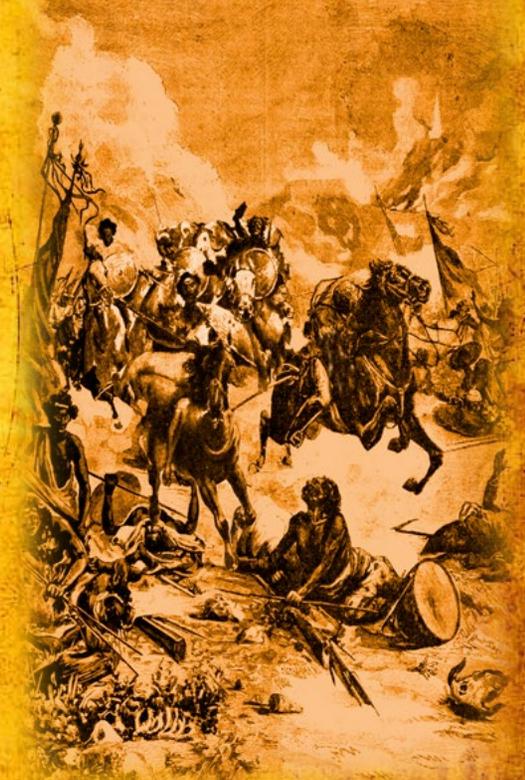
In a bone-jarring collision of steel on steel, the two armies clash, and the darkness swallows thousands into the maw of battle.

When the chaos finally dissipates, a gruesome tableau emerges: the severed head of Dejazmach Haile-Mariam, frozen in a grotesque expression of shock, clutched in the gore-slicked grip of Ras Marye. He gallops triumphantly across the battlefield, strewn with lifeless bodies, toward a high hill.

With contemptuous force, Ras Marye flings the trophy before Ras Yimam and his retinue, who remain mounted at a distance, surveying the carnage. Dismounting, Ras Marye kicks the Dejazmach's head like a macabre ball, intoxicated by the thrill of his victory.

"We can deal with Maru too!" the ferocious Marye, still consumed by battle frenzy, turns to his brother, demanding more blood. "And all of them, even the young offspring, Wibe and Kinfu!" He urges for the eradication of all Yeju foes.

Ras Yimam, his eyes locked on Dejazmach Maru and his men pursuing the remnants of the Semien forces, responds with calculated coldness, "Let Maru thrive



and prosper, growing fat on his fresh spoils," he murmurs, seemingly more to his advisors than his brother "We shall deal with him once he has doubled his lands and feasted upon the northerners." His gaze shifts to the decimated remnants of Semien resistance, whispered voices silenced forever, "As for their offspring, they are but ashes, incapable of igniting even dry grass, let alone a stone." Ras Yimam turns on his horse, his cape catching the breeze like raven wings to retire.

On the battlefield, the retreating Semiens are mercilessly cut down by Maru's forces. Young Lij Wibe, cornered by Maru's forces watches in stoic silence as his father's army is decimated before his eyes. With no other recourse, the survivors scatter, their retreat punctuated by a relentless barrage of spears and arrows.

Dejazmach Maru pivots on his steed, his gaze piercing the ranks of the retreating Yeju forces. "We could crush these Muslims here and now!" Lij Kinfu urges, sweeping a hand towards the formidable Western forces dotting the battlefield.

"In time, Lije," Maru replies, his voice calm but resolute. "Time shapes conquerors, and we will rise from its forge mightier than before."

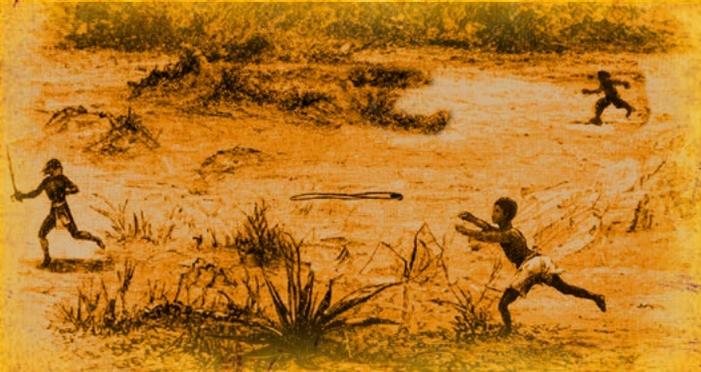
The alliance secures victory, yet beneath the veneer of triumph, seeds of distrust take root, and the hunger for power simmers, threatening to ignite once again into flames of conflict.



The North

Lightning and difficulties from the mouth go forth

The spear arcs through the air, landing with a thud at young Kassa's feet as he nimbly dodges and scoops it up in one smooth-motion. He sprints across the dusty-courtyard, spear aimed and ready, focused intently on his target ahead. With expert precision, he hurls the wooden spear, striking the boy squarely and eliciting a cry.



"You're out! Gojjam is out!" another boy declares, "Not fair, that is Maru's blade!" seizing the spear and initiating a new chase. A loud prayer suddenly rises as if every priest on the wholly Island is synchronized for worship hour. The boys, still panting from their competitive-game, rush to the holy-

church. Kassa and the others swiftly kiss the feet of their cantor before settling onto the ground.

Noticing the smears of dirt, blades of grass and leaves clinging to some of the boys' tunics, the cantor readies his long stick as he walks in and takes his seat. "Hail to the blessed Abba, whose faith shone brighter than the sun. Without adding or subtracting, he preached the Trinity as three-suns—three, yet one light." The cantor's gravelly voice fills the small church as he reads from an ancient, leather-bound bible.

A movement and he unleashes the stick on a distracted-boy's skull still brushing himself off without looking, then continues "...To become worthy of witnessing three magnificent suns, equal in brilliance, their splendor and radiance eternal."

Kassa fidgets restlessly, his mind drifting. "How can three or two beings be the same?" He asks and before he can stop himself, more words tumble out. "The son and the father, equal? But I am not my father!" The cantor's stick collides sharply with his head. No debate or doubt will be entertained regarding scripture. "Bless our ordained Abba, whose wisdom eclipses all. ." continues the cantor, ignoring Kassa.

"My father disappeared like smoke, deserted us like Joseph abandoned Mary and Jesus!" His outburst elicits shocked laughter from the other boys, but fury contorts the cantor's face. "Cast out this demon!" he erupts, launching himself at Kassa, seizing him by his ears, and he drags him outside, rage punctuating each word.



“Cast out this rebellious demon! Evil conduct only harms oneself! What one degenerate spews and infects, spreads its plague to others!”

A heavy pall settles over the remaining boys, their hushed whispers muted, then rising louder with a support for their mate. Kassa blinks back tears as his ears throb from the cantor’s vice-like grip.

“The moon cannot outshine the sun, this is the house of God! You hear?!” The afternoon sun beats down on the deserted courtyard, elongating the shadows creeping up the stone walls. His classmates watch through the windows, but Kassa’s eyes are on the gleaming cross on top of the ancient church, with its rays stabbing his vision.

Kassa’s pulse hammers as frustration wars with his yearning to break free of rigid tradition and unquestioning-obedience, without abandoning his devotion. As the cantor shouts and the church remains sealed to curiosity, he inhales deeply, steeling himself for the uncertain path ahead.



The shouts of children give way to the anguished wails of the bereaved, echoing through the valleys of the Semien mountains.

The somber funeral drums echo across the valleys like a death knell. An ominous stillness settles over the gathered mourners as they make

their way through the desolate mountains. Dark clouds gather on the horizon, mirroring the gloom in their hearts.

Inside the church, an air of foreboding hangs heavy. The priests’ voices tremble as they deliver the eulogy, seeming overwhelmed by a strange sense of doom. An elder shaman pays his respects, muttering of vivid dreams filled with spilled blood and carnage.

Lij Wibe stands a stoic vigil beside his father’s grave, brooding thoughts reflected in the flickering funeral flames that seem to respond to his inner turmoil. Crows circle ominously overhead, cawing loudly during moments of silence. The howls of the Semiens are deafening in the distance as the final prayers are uttered for their fallen leader.



As the gathering disperses after night fall, Wibe stands alone observing the strange lights transverse the skies. A howling wind sweeps through, carrying upon it whispered cries as from beyond. Those gathered to guard their new heir ex-

change worried glances, sensing a darkness looming on the horizon.

A high priest approaches Lij Wibe cautiously. "No one reigns on the throne forever," he says carefully. But his words hint at unrest simmering below the surface, not just referring to Wibe alone.

A weighty silence hangs between them, unspoken words suspended in the air. Lij Wibe breaks the stillness, voicing his thoughts. "They want me to submit?" A hint of rebellion colors his tone.

The high priest meets his piercing gaze, wisdom and concern mingling in his eyes. "All in the kingdom will have their chance, even you, my young lord. But we must bide our time until fortune favors us."

Lij Wibe gestures sharply at his father's grave "But when chance changes, it drenches all equally," he remarks, bitterness creeping into his voice.

Sensing the burden upon the heir's shoulders, the high priest hesitates, takes a deep breath "Your father-in-law dominates the north while Maru devours our lands and the Yejju advance. Without swift obedience, we are at the mercy of God's will," he cautions.

"I do not fear them!" Wibe declares boldly. "We can defend our mountains," his determination blazes strong within.



The high priest sees the fire igniting Lij Wibe's spirit.

"You are your father's son, who braved the cauldron's fury for the throne," he acknowledges "But, we cannot defeat the forces aligned against us, my young lord, not by ourselves"

"I will not crawl back north, tail between my legs, begging mercy," Wibe asserts. "Nor will I let Maru bite further into our realm," he vehemently shakes his head, seeing the only option as confrontation.

"Do you aim to seize Gonder from the Yejju, as your brave father attempted?" The high priest poses a challenging question.

"In time, I will! Chance and power find those who know what they desire." Lij Wibe's response brooks no doubt.



In the northern highlands, the ancient city of Axum proudly basks in the brilliance of the sun. The skyline is dominated by massive royal obelisks, gigantic monoliths that pierce the sky, ancient stelae remnants of the once-mighty Axumite empire, resembling colossal pillars that guard their domains.



In the royal castle at Adigrat, Shum Sebat Sabagadis, Lij Wibe's father-in-law, holds his court. The imposing Shum paces restlessly, surrounded by dignitaries from Egypt, who seem uncomfortable amid the opulence. Uneasy murmurs ripple through the assembly of nobles, chiefs and the clergy.

"Why did you send this disagreeable man back to me?" Shum Sabagadis snaps "Was it because you hated him in Egypt or you hated my country?"

The Egyptian dignitaries stumble over their response, while the Shum quickens his pace in the torch-lit great hall, which radiates grandeur, adorned with riches imported from afar. Persian carpets blanket the walls, and golden shields bearing the Lion of Judah embellish the great hall.

"Enough!" Sabagadis interrupts, with an alarmed expression as he notices a messenger approaching. He beckons the messenger, who urgently whispers unsettling news into Sabagadis' ear.

Having heard what he was awaiting, Sabagadis ceases his pacing and turns to address the Egyptians with scornful sarcasm, "Surely you must tell me about his conduct! What did he do to the Yejju heathens in Gonder to banish him?" He fixes his attention on one figure that stands out from the rest — Abuna Quirlos, a Coptic archbishop from Alexandria exiled from Gonder by the Yejju over doctrinal disputes.

"My lord, Ethiopians have received the true doctrines of his holiness since ancient times, as the dry earth receives rain from

the heavens," an Egyptian dignitary attempts to defend the archbishop, emphasizing his adherence to the doctrine of the ancient Axumites.

"Not all share your doctrine," Sabagadis interjects, "not the Muslim Yejju or the Sost-Ledet Shoans!" he retorts highlighting the kingdom's divisions.

"I desire a worthy bishop to unite the entire kingdom, not just a faction of it!" Sabagadis exclaims before dismissing the guests, his glare following them as they exit.

Once alone with his chiefs, the Shum sits on his throne and slams his fist on a side table, causing the imported riches to rattle.

"That treacherous son-in-law defies me at every turn!" the Shum erupts.

A jolted chief approaches "My lord, while kin cut each other down, we risk —"

"Silence!" Sabagadis' eyes flash dangerously. "That upstart threatens all I've built. I'll see him destroyed if it's the last thing I do!"

"My lord, with Maru siding with them, the Yejju pose a threat to all of us, not just your son-in-law," a chief voices concern about an impending war with the Yejju.

"Human blood is heavy, and one who has shed it cannot run away and hide! They went to war on their own! And now my defiant son-in-law?!" Livid, Sabagadis refuses to overlook Lij Wibe's transgression. "He must face the consequences!" Shock and unease ripple through the Tigrean chiefs and nobles.

“He considers himself a man now,” Shum Sabagadis seethes. “Let us see if the fire lit beneath him makes him dance alone.”

**“My Lord, Maru marches north with the Ye-
jju—” repeats another chief.**

“Leave it! Soon that Amhara will turn against them!” Sabagadis suddenly rises and grabs his matchlock. “The Yejju are nothing more than gala hordes who are no match for our firearms! They will never dare invade Tigray!” the voices of his warriors rise and resonate throughout the room.

“Let them come!” he bellows, brandishing his gun. “We are the one and only true Christ-fearing rulers of the empire!” the Tigrean warriors in the chamber stir.

“Our lost empire is ready for the retaking and restoration to its rightful place in the land of our founding fathers here in Axum!” Tigreans roar their blood-chilling battle cry.



The Advance

Power, like the setting sun, descend upon the son.

Imperial flags and pennants bearing the symbol of “The Lion of Judah” flutter triumphantly over the towering walls of the Gondarian palace. The air is charged with anticipation as Ras Yimam and Ras Marye, mounted atop their majestic steeds, lead their formidable cavalry, followed closely by the imposing ranks of their imperial forces. War looms on the horizon, and they stand ready to face it head-on.



The sun breaches the distant horizon, casting a golden glow over the vast expanse of the Semien mountains. The Yejju force, after weeks of arduous travel, ventures into the treacherous embrace of these formidable peaks. Ras Yimam and Marye, their men weary and worn, navigate the winding, wind-swept mountain passes of the Semien highlands on foot.

An oppressive stillness had settled over the land as word has reached the Semiens of the approaching Yejju forces. The mountains echo with a growing sense of dread as Wibe's forces race to bolster their defenses against the impending assault. Murmurs of fear ripple through the anxious ranks like a dark current, none knowing if their hastily arranged preparations will suffice to turn back the huge enemy force massing in the valley below.



Wibe scans the terrain from atop his restless steed, worry etched deep in his weathered face. How long until the moment of inevitable bloodshed

arrives at their door? His men work with feverish urgency yet shoot frequent glances skyward, dreading the first sign of the enemy's approach.

As the first outriders of the Yejju army materialize on the horizon, an ominous hush falls heavy as a burial shroud. Wibe searches his soldiers' stiffening faces and glimpses the first flickers of panic stirred by visions of the brutal chaos soon to engulf them. Will they follow him the way they did his father, will their raw courage alone withstand the fearsome realities of martial trial by fire? Dark clouds are gathering, and none know which way the gods might steer the winds of fate.

The Yejju war drums intensify like the pounding of death's arrival. Ras Marye stands ready to unleash the fury of his cavalry. Locking eyes with Wibe's forces across the mountains steeled themselves for the storm about to hit.

This rugged terrain makes a full assault impossible but yet, the sheer magnitude of the Yejju army signals that the imperial forces will not be deterred.

"Tell the men to stand down and send a messenger," Lij Wibe relents to his chiefs, aware that his forces are no match for the Yejju.



Nestled within the mighty Semien mountains, the Yejju have established their presence in an imperial camp that dwarfs the entirety of Wibe's town.

Lij Wibe, flanked by his steadfast warriors, approaches Ras Yimam outside the grand red tent, a symbol of imperial authority. A tight rope binds Wibe's neck, a stark emblem of remorse, and with a colossal boulder on his back, he humbly lowers it to the ground in a traditional gesture of submission.

A thunderous gunfire salute echoes through the mountains, sealing Lij Wibe's fate as a rival who has now submitted to Ras Yimam and the rule of the Yejju.



"You hold a hereditary right to the lands of Semien. Remove the rope from your neck—" Ras Yimam, grappling with a fit of coughing, commands. "If you—" He hastily covers his mouth with a cloth as the cough persists, and aides rush to his side, offering assistance. A chief drapes a thick cape over the Endresse to shield him from the mountain chill.

Observing his weakened brother, Ras Marye shakes his head sympathetically and steps forward, stating, "Just because your father-in-law wishes to hang by the rope, there's no need for your neck to itch for it!" Wibe discerns the underlying message and shifts his attention to Ras Marye.

"I hereby acknowledge you as the ruler of the Semien territories." Taking control of the proceedings, a recovering Ras Yimam declares. "If you so desire, you may govern the entire northern region of our kingdom once we address your father-in-law."

"Endresse, Maru has already seized half of my land. He ventures beyond the ranges to claim—" Wibe begins, but a furious Ras Yimam rises, "Maru, that Judas! The chosen line of Solomon and David? The true protector of the king of kings, like Sabagadis? Then what am I?" gripped by another bout of coughing, he spits out blood. Terrified, Wibe senses the tension as the Yejjus take the insult personally. "My Endresse, I only wish to—"

"A person determined to steal is the first to swear his alliance," Ras Yimam wipes his bloody mouth. "Mark my words, I am the vanquisher of those who turn against my empire and join its enemies!" Hit with another fit of coughing, he wills himself toward the kneeling Wibe, "I have not marched this far to force you to bow down before me but to see if you will join these Yejjus hands." Lij Wibe lifts his gaze, meeting Ras Yimam's outstretched hand.

The shifting tides of alliances reshape the kingdom once more, with their consequences yet to be unveiled.



In the other side of the kingdoms, in the Gojjam highlands, Dejazmach Goshu, once an ally to the Yejjus, kneels on the ground, his hands resting on the Holy Bible, finishing a heartfelt alliance with a rousing speech. The words flow passionately from his lips, filled with loyalty and dedication.

"Blood and poison together are not drunk," he declares as he rises, his voice resolute. "My arms and loyalty lie with you and no one else!" he concludes with his voice resolute.

Dejazmach Maru reclines on an opulent alga, surrounded by luxuriously carpeted red tent. He leisurely sips Tej, a sense of calmness radiating from him. This alliance is different from the previous ones, a sedated, diplomatic affair, with clergy members from both sides are present, adding an air of sanctity to the proceedings.

Dejazmach Maru rises from his seat, his gaze fixed on Dejazmach Goshu. "Iron sharpens iron," he states, his tone firm. "A Christian brother sharpens, but a Muslim enemy weakens." Dejazmach Goshu nods his head in agreement with his new ally.

"We have both suffered at the hands of the usurping Yejjus for far too long, brother!" Maru gestures to his chief. Tej is offered to Dejazmach Goshu, and he drinks it down like water, a symbolic gesture of unity.

The moon and bonfires cast a soft glow over the vast camp, spreading across the sprawling land-

scape under the starlit sky. The celebration of the alliance of Goshu and Maru begins as words spread from the brightly lit red tent.

A group of riders gallop through the city of makeshift tents, coming to a halt outside the red tent. A smooth-cheeked eunuch enters, announcing the arrival of Lij Kinfu and his scouts. They make their entrance into the tent. Lij Kinfu appears weathered, his face adorned with a rough beard. He stands tall before Dejazmach Maru, his lean body wrapped in a tight-fitted shimma. Time has etched its mark on him.

“They are advancing their army toward Goj-jam,” Lij Kinfu reports, his voice laced with concern.

Dejazmach Maru turns to him, a gleam of determination in his eyes. “How many?” he asks.

“Enough to match our own,” Lij Kinfu replies.

Dejazmach Maru turns to Dejazmach Goshu, his voice filled with conviction. “Only weak men hate war. Strong men love it,” he declares, taking another gulp of Tej.

“Together, we will thwart their hold on our Christian kingdom and break their back and restore the glory of our ancient empire!”

A rallying cheer rises up from the assembled chiefs and warriors.



The battlefield gleams under the brilliant sunshine. Powerful drum beats echo through the air as Dejazmach Maru, adorned with a lion-mane shoulder and headdress, stands atop his horse. His rifle rests on his back, and he clutches a jewel-studded, gilt-bound shield in his hand. He gazes over his 40,000-strong warriors, who stand ready for battle.

Warriors gather in groups across the field, forming circles around war-dancers and orators. The dancers perform impressive flips and jabs, while the orators whip up the warriors with tales of bravery and manhood. The atmosphere is charged with anticipation. Warriors leap into the air, some pounding their chests, others engaging in mock fights, displaying their skills and bravery.

Dejazmach Goshu, Lij Kinfu, and the chiefs, mounted on splendidly decorated horses and mules, direct the infantry warriors armed with swords, spears, and hide shields. Priests and monks from all corners of the West display processional bronze and golden crosses, adding a touch of sacredness to the scene. The Western army exudes eagerness, preparedness, and a readiness for battle. Warriors swing their swords and spears in the air, rehearsing their moves and showcasing their prowess to their leaders.

The anticipation mounts as they await the enemy's approach. Drums pound out a war beat to stir their blood. The warriors scream their battle cries, thirsting for glory in the trial by combat soon to come on this sun-drenched field.

On the other side of the battlefield, Ras Yimam's dominating Yejju forces stand alert, awaiting orders. The Endresse, adorned in a striking

golden and black brocade, rides on a horse with a scarlet saddle cloth. Retainers on mules hold decorated umbrellas over him, highlighting his regal presence. His 50,000-strong army stands ready, mirroring Dejazmach Maru's forces, down to the priests holding their crosses.

Ras Yimam shares a quiet moment with Ras Marye. Their conversation carries a sense of determination and strategizing.



"Ploughing it, the ox refused," Ras Yimam says, his voice rattling in fever. "Being slaughtered, will it refuse?"

"Let me give the stubborn a taste of our cavalry first, and cut them down like grass!" Ras Marye responds with fierce resolve.

Ras Yimam coughs, his nod indicating agreement. Ras Marye turns to the chiefs, who shout orders to their warriors.

Huge horses set off, building up speed. Fierce and proud, faces painted in blood-red, the Yejju cavalry roars their war cries. Their thundering hooves shake the ground as they charge forward.

Dejazmach Maru raises his gun high, signaling the order to charge. Masses of warriors set off at a steady pace, their resolve unshakable as they press onward.

On the other side, the Yejju forces respond with a terrifying roar, their shimmas billowing in the wind. They surge forward, screaming guttural war cries, their determination matching that of their adversaries.

Dejazmach Maru and Lij Kinfu stand side by side, observing Lij Wibe's force joining the Yejju cavalry. A sense of betrayal fills the air.

"Wibe! Traitor!" Lij Kinfu exclaims, his voice filled with anger. "You pleaded for his life after his capture, and this is how he repays you?!"

"A rat that betrays his own won't learn until a cat catches him," At a signal, a furious Dejazmach Maru directs his



archers to unleash a volley upon the approaching cavalry.

The Yejju cavalry erupts into a banshee scream, racing like a tidal wave toward the waiting armies. Arrows fly from Maru's archers but are lost in the choking smoke.

Lij Wibe, locking his eyes on Maru, spurs his horse, racing to catch up with the Yejju cavalry, vengeance flooding in his eyes.

The clangor of steel on steel rends the air, as swords become blurs in the frenzied melee. Spear tips shred flesh and pulverize bone, turning the soaked earth into a morass slippery with gore.

The lack of cavalry support puts Dejzmach Maru's forces in a vulnerable position, squeezed between two armies, facing impending slaughter. Without hesitation, Dejzmach Maru spurs his horse toward the Yejju and Semien forces, with Ras Goshu's Gojjam infantrymen racing behind him. Yet still the Yejju charge comes, trampling friend and foe alike under relentless hooves engorged with bloodlust.

Maru and Goshu coordinate their small cavalry with lethal precision, whirling through the madness to deliver precise slashes and thrusts. They carve gaps in the press, buying precious seconds for the infantry's to dig in. Spears lance out as an impenetrable hedge, grunting warriors bracing against the tide.

But still the Yejju come on in uncountable numbers. Maru's men fight with the ferocity of cornered beasts, dragging riders from saddles and employing any means to purchase each inch of

ground. Swords cleave skulls and parry blows with manic fury, as exhaustion and injury take their mounting toll. The overwhelming Yejju and Semien warriors threaten to turn the tide against Maru and Goshu's army.

At the Yejju battle command hill, Ras Yimam watches as Ras Marye emerges from the battlefield, his armor and horse covered in the blood of their enemies.

"People that have been cowards since birth do not value anyone but their masters!" Ras Marye screams in battle fury, then looks to the Endresse and pleads "Give me the order! Let me finish off both rats now!"

Ras Yimam fixes on his brother. "Bring their testicles back to me. Dead or Alive, it is no matter." Ras Yimam, assured that the battle is done, gives free reign to Ras Marye to do what he does best.

"And Wibe?" asks Ras Marye as they watch their northern ally decimate the Western forces.

"A witness to a rat is another rat. We need him in the north to keep an eye on his father-in-law for us. He lives, for now." decides Ras Yimam.

Ras Marye, ready for more blood, signals, and the guards and his reinforcements surge into bat-

tle for the infamous trophy collection of the feared Yejju warriors.

In the middle of the battlefield, a blood-drenched Dejzmach Maru fights back with a fountain of homicidal fury. His sword cuts through men left and right, his rage unyielding. But amidst the chaos, a spear flies through the air, finding its mark across Maru's chest, impaling him.

Dejzmach Maru screams in agony, and Lij Kinfu, his eyes wide with horror, turns to see Maru fall from his horse. With newfound vengeance, Kinfu fights his way through the Yejju warriors, cutting them down to reach Maru's side. He calls for aid, his voice echoing in the midst of the battle.

The chiefs rally around their fallen master, swinging their swords with deadly accuracy, clearing away the enemy from Maru's body. Kinfu kneels by Maru's side, his heart heavy with grief.

Meanwhile, their men are being slaughtered mercilessly. The feared Yejju cavalry spreads terror across the ranks of Maru's forces. In the midst of the chaos, Lij Wibe spots Kinfu holding onto Maru and bears down on them with his Semien warriors, ready to avenge the betrayal of his late father.

Dejzmach Maru, weakened by his wounds, hands off his rifle to Kinfu, his voice filled with urgency. "Remember, my son," he says, his words tinged with the weight of a kingdom. "One whose name has died is worse off than the one who died. Remember. . .the throne, our name, our —" Agony contorts on Maru's features as blood pours from the grievous wound.

Kinfu cries out, desperately trying to staunch the blood. But his efforts prove futile as

Maru's life slips away before his eyes. Rage and despair tear through his heart as Kinfu leaves Maru's lifeless body to the monks offering solace and absolution to the wounded and dying.

Gathering the chiefs around him, Kinfu turns to face Lij Wibe. Defiant and filled with rage, he sees Wibe charging towards him. He shouts an order to advance, and his chiefs and men fly to the Semiens to avenge their fallen master but just as the larger forces of Wibe is about to strike, Dejzmach Goshu intervenes, blocking the charge with his Gojjam warriors.

The denied Wibe turns his rage on the forces of Dejzmach Goshu. The clash between the Gojjam and Semien forces intensifies in the melee.

Kinfu watches in despair as Goshu's men are slaughtered, their numbers dwindling. Amidst the chaos, Dejzmach Goshu, the ultimate survivor, emerges from the skirmish unharmed.

"Revenge has no statute of limitations!" Ras Goshu shouts at Kinfu, warning him from advancing "Retreat!, Now!" Kinfu glares at Wibe, his eyes burning with a mixture of anger and frustration. He wants to charge with his men, but he knows it would be futile. The battle is lost. Finally, in defeat, Kinfu calls for a full retreat.

A resounding victory cheer rises from the Yejju warriors as what remains of the Western warriors peel off from the battle to retire from the battlefield.

Gun-Fire erupts from Ras Yimam's command hill. The victorious Endresse surveys the battlefield, the ground littered with the bodies of Maru's and Goshu's fallen warriors.

"Allahu Akbar," he whispers to himself, acknowledging the power and the price of victory. With a determined expression, he spurs his horse and gracefully withdraws from the battlefield, leaving behind a scene of devastation and loss.



CHAPTER EIGHT

The Realignment

A young bird, struggles to find its wings

The cloying scent of frankincense hangs thick in the air, clinging to the robes of the tightly packed worshipers like a suffocating blanket. Kassa chokes back nausea as the perfume mingles with the sweat of nervous bodies. Every exhale is a small relief; every inhale is a fresh assault on his senses.

"The time is near for the coming of his reign, the wrath of God can only be averted with his return. . ." Before him, the clergymen's chant rumbles like impending thunder, growing darker with each passage. Their voices seem to echo not just off stone walls but deep in Kassa's chest as well. His trembling hands grip the candle so tightly its wax threatens to spill down and burn his skin.

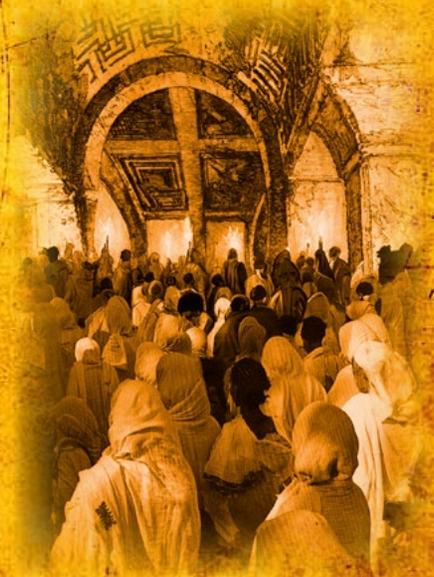
Images of warfare flash unbidden through his mind. Kassa sees gutted villages engulfed in flame, hears the screams of mothers as children are torn from dying arms—blood-slick stones where markets once stood; eyes of the dead staring unseeing at a sky gone black with smoke.

“... and mercy will be bestowed upon the remnant of the faithful,” the clergy continues, “Confusion, hatred, abuse, plunder, and murder would pass away. . .” he proclaims the hope for the end of the trials and tribulations.

Kassa watches his own hands, pale as corpses, embedded with cuts of another’s family, another’s future. His stomach roils, threatening to purge its contents onto the stone floor. Closing his eyes, Kassa prays for mercy, for an end to these visions, but finds only deeper shadows behind his lids.

“... and joy, contentment, and fear of the Lord would reign on earth with only the return of the blessed King Tewodros on the throne!” A hand squeezes his shoulder, a voice “... my little Tewodros. . .” comes like a whisper, shaking him from the brink of madness. His mother stands beside him, dark eyes gleaming with tears. But when he looks again, she is gone, and only shadow remains.

The clergyman’s words pour over the congregation like an oozing wound, vivid in the painting of destruction and chaos to come. Kassa notices faces twisting in agony and men clawing at their chests as if to tear out broken hearts. Darkness presses closer, the air evolving to a thickness that threatens to suffocate.



When, at last, the passage ends, Kassa rises on legs like straw, reeling under the weight of prophecy and memory. A tapping at the church’s sealed door sends fright lancing through the crowd. Kassa knows, with a certainty deeper than faith, that when it opens, only ruin will enter.

A deluge of mothers is granted entrance into the church, seeking refuge on the sacred island. Fear and terror are etched on their faces and in their hearts, each mother racing to reach her child.

Kassa, yearning for his mother’s comforting presence but not finding her in the crowd, redirects his gaze toward the clergy emerging from the tent, bearing the sacred Tabot. Memories of his mother affectionately calling him Tewodros inundate Kassa’s mind. With a tear glistening in his eye, he strides to Debra Markos, calling on him as if aware of his abandonment and loneliness, his features enveloped in the halo-like glow of candlelight.



The battling over Ye-Maru-Qemies, Maru’s vast lands, rages like the storm above across the West. Chiefs, nobles, and bandits turn on each other in bloody skirmishes, looking to claim a share.

Lij Kinfu leads a grim procession of the defeated warriors, every ragged step reopening his wounds. Rainswept chiefs bear the lifeless form of Maru, their leader’s eyes forever closed to the chaos around them.



Kinfu's dejected warriors stumble blindly through the dense forest, carrying their injured compatriots by the hundreds. Gunfire erupts from their homeland to welcome the returning men, but there would be no cleansing in this downpour, only the drowning of hopes and futures. Mud sucks at bare feet as insurmountable fatigue weighs limbs into the earth as the defeated force enters the town.

Inside the compound in the Fenja house, Kinfu stands numbly, feeling the fury gathering against him like storm clouds. Mutters sweep through the weeping masses, their accusing stares piercing him sharper than any blade.

His mother, Weleita Tekle, standing by his side, takes in her son's face that is weathered by grief. "Straighten up and look them in the eyes!" her voice rings "They will come for us like vultures, my son," she sighs, despair etched as deep as the lightning-scored sky. At the threat in her words, Kinfu's tattered defenses crumble further. He knows the factions would soon clamor for Maru's

vacant throne, demanding his head to sate their thirst for vengeance.

Within the church walls, priests' hollow comforts fall upon deaf ears. Kinfu hears only the ominous drums of warfare echoing from the forest edge, summoning what remains of their battered forces. Though his broken body cries out for respite, shredded honor demands he answer the call to combat once more.

As Weleita releases him to assume what leadership still clings to his name, Kinfu sees in her eyes the grim truth: this ravaged kingdom holds nothing but endless trials yet to come. Survival, not victory, will be his sole aim through the ceaseless battles arrayed against them.



The storm rages outside, filling the air with thunderous roars and the relentless patter of raindrops. In the main chamber of the grand palace, a pale-looking Ras Yimam sits by a massive fireplace, his body wracked with fits of coughing. Ras Marye paces anxiously, joined by their Yejju relatives, nobles, and a few solemn clergy members. Menen, a strong and silent presence, watches Ras Yimam with concern, her young son standing by her side, uneasy at Ras Yimam's constant blood spitting.



Amidst the crackling of the fire, a chief noble speaks, his voice filled with a sense of pride. "Weak persons from a strong blow do not recover, Endresse. Wibe has sworn his alliance, along with that harlot Goshu. From here to the West, every last one of—"

"The fall of the fathers is the son's rising!" Ras Marye interrupts. "We should have killed Wibe, Kinfu too, while we had the chance!" he accuses his brother, his voice seething with frustration and regret.

Ras Yimam, his fevered body trembling, rises from his seat, determined to overcome his ailment. He approaches his miffed brother, drawing nearer to him. "What burden a man carries is a choice he makes for himself, brother." They confer in hushed tones, their words carrying a weight of decision.

"The West is yours to rule," Ras Yimam declares, his voice resolute. "I want you to recruit from them, to strengthen our armies. The time has come to unify with the north!" Ras Marye, doubt-

ing the bold plan by his brother, cannot resist the thought of more conquest.

"Wibe will not join us against his own kith and kin." Ras Marye, skeptical of Wibe's loyalty, expresses his concern.

"What choice does he have?" Ras Yimam's eyes flash with determination, his resolve unyielding. "He must serve us, or we will strike a blow that eradicates both the northern threat once and for all!"

Turning to his family, Ras Yimam walks over to young Ali, affectionately rubbing the boy's head. He then nods to Menen, savoring the taste of his resounding victory before taking his seat.



In a fortnight, Ras Marye and his large imperial army advance on the western front, the fierce Yejju cavalry at the head, tasked to settle the civil war and take hold of the warring West. All villages, churches, and provinces they ride through are in ruins, destroyed by rebels to Kinfu's rule. Yet, Ras Marye and his imperial army are not greeted as liberators by the passing population but just another pillaging army.

A Yejju chief rides up to Ras Marye. "Qwara, Dembeya, AQulu, the whole western frontier are all rent with disturbances."



“What a shame!” Ras Marye proclaims. “I came here for a showdown, and these tattered Amharas are in ruins?”

“It is better to enter as a guest and stay the night without them knowing, my lord.” the cautious chief responds.

“Where is the fun in that?” Marye remarks. The confused chief turns to Ras Marye to see if he is kidding.

“Awo, these wretched sheep look ready to be devoured by hyenas. I need them rested before I show them the true strength of the strong Yeju hands!” Ras Marye smiles, not saddened to hear and witness the war ravaging the West. He triumphantly rides, and his army marches without facing any resistance from the locals.



In Gondar, Ras Yimam, weakened and shrouded in layers of blankets and gabbies, struggles with violent coughs, spitting out blood onto a small cloth. His brother, Dori, and numerous nobles surround him, their faces etched with concern.

The chamber is illuminated by a blazing fire to keep the Endresse warm, casting flickering shadows on the walls. “Ambitions beget nothing but trouble and rebellion!” Ras Yimam’s voice rasps with frustration.

“Dejazmach Welde Tekle and Maru’s relations are refusing to be ruled by your defiant brother. He has stirred them up once again.” A Chief noble speaks up, his voice filled with apprehension.

“If he continues like this, within a month, the West will descend into chaos with no one capable of governing it.” Dori adds, his worry evident in his voice.

“I sent him there to keep him away from the throne! A brother who rebels against his father and brother is not fit for Gonder!” Ras Yimam, weary and exasperated, erupts in a bloody cough.

Suddenly, Menen enters the chamber with her young son, Ras Ali. She witnesses Ras Yimam’s convulsive coughing fit. She rushes to him while urging the maids to attend to the ailing Endresse. “Rest in peace, Yimam. Remember your mother’s words—the fire that licks the cow’s birth, burns her; if it doesn’t, it dies.” With desperation in her voice, she pleads with him.

“He is not —” Ras Yimam coughs up more blood and erupts in a scream of frustration. “He is not of our blood! He is a traitor to the Yeju line!”

“Leave us!” Menen turns to the chiefs and nobles, her tone commanding, and one by one, they bow before Ras Yimam and exit. A turbaned noble attempts to take Ali’s hand, but Menen resists. Eventually, Ali insists and allows the noble to guide him away.

Outside the chamber, more Yejju noblemen, some wearing turbans like Imams, others adorned in ornate robes, gather anxiously, seeking information about the situation. After a long while, Menen emerges from the chamber, her eyes filled with contempt as she passes by the Muslim nobles and Imams without a word.

“May he recover to settle his differences with Marye. . . may Allah give him strength and protect

him because it will not be long now before his brother comes to snatch up the throne under him.” A Muslim chief expresses his hopes for Ras Yimam.

“A quarrel born in jealousy does not end quickly or peacefully.” Menen responds with a calm yet pointed retort.

She kneels before her son, adjusting

his shimma and ensuring his golden cross is prominently displayed.

“The army is already corrupted by him, looting and hanging innocents, and if he continues to transgress —” As the gathered Muslims observe her with fear, a bold Yejju noble voices his concerns for them.

“Maru’s niece has claimed Ye-Maru-Qemies for her son Kinfu. It would be wise to put those lands back in their hands.” Another noble advises.

“The one you hate and fear shall inherit the throne, have no doubt about that! What is left is for you to decide what is to be done in the West when he comes as Endresse.” Menen, her anger barely contained, confronts them with a fiery determination.

“Intestines in the same stomach, won’t kick and harm one another. The affairs of the West must be settled by the Amharas, not by the Yejju hands.” An elder Muslim noble interjects.

“By the Amharas, you say? The cattle that a bull does not possess, an ox will rule!” Menen shouts him down. “Tell me, my noble men, how are we to govern a nation that fears Christ if the Yejju are concealed behind veils and turbans?” Menen accuses the Muslims. The Imams are taken aback, shocked by Menen’s insult. She covers her head with a shawl adorned with a cross, a testament to her Christian faith, and walks away, leaving them in stunned silence.



In Western Ethiopia, in the palace chamber of Dembeya, Dejazmach Maru's widowed Yejju wife, adorned in a cross-stitched kemise and a head cloth similar to Menen's, sits alongside Ras Marye, who occupies Maru's throne. The chamber is thick with incense that only adds to the charged atmosphere. Armed men lining the walls have hands clenched white-knuckled on sword hilts, ready to draw blood at any sign of threat.

Kinfu kneels before Marye, seated arrogantly in Maru's throne, but eyes him fearlessly. Marye's own gaze is cold as a serpent's, daring dissent. A shaken Welete Tekle stands with the clergy and maids, mere observers in this clash of powers.

"People who someone wants to slight, their leader they first insult," Ras Marye's voice resounds through the chamber, breaking the uneasy silence. His gaze sweeps across the walls adorned with paintings depicting the Order of Solomon and the Lion of Judah. He rises from his seat, his presence commanding.



"Your people call me a traitor, a conniver with the Egyptians!" Ras Marye's words hang in the air as he turns his attention to the clergy. "They say I am a Muslim like my brother, but ashes and flour might look the same, yet I am not him!"

"My lord, I—"

"I came to end your line, traitor!" Marye hisses at Kinfu.

"The wolves are gathering at our doorstep, my lord. The Egyptians have seized Aqulu. Instead of preparing the kingdoms for war against the invaders, you come to fight us?!" a silent communication of the pressing matter at hand.

Ras Marye's anger simmers and ripples across his face. In two strides, he closes the distance, grasps Kinfu by the throat to harsh, scandalized whispers.

"I came to kill you so that I can drive them out myself!" Ras Marye shoves Kinfu away in disgust. His Yejju warriors draw their swords, the threat for the lives of Kinfu's men hangs by a thread as pride and vengeance war within Marye.

"I have been summoned back to Gonder, are you the man to defend the border or do I have to find one of your rebels to do so?" Ras Marye attempts to strike a conciliatory tone. He steps closer to a rising Kinfu, their faces mere inches apart.

"My people will unite to remove the wolves. They have done so for generations. You can count on me." Confident and resolute, Lij Kinfu responds.

"I will leave you two hundred of my best men," Ras Marye offers, leaning in to confer. "You have the hereditary rights to the territories of

The Showdown

A war without end is a land without peace.

Dembeya. It is your duty to protect all the lands that belonged to your line." Ras Marye strides out with the Yejju guards, leaving command of the West as much a punishment as an honor.

Lij Kinfu, now officially a Dejzmach, with every pair of eyes upon him, weighs his chances of survival. But the ancestral lands are his by blood, and he will see them watered with the blood of any who challenge his rule. From this day, a new power has risen in the West, and the wolves have a new hunter on their trail.



Lamentations rise from priests like waves crashing against rock, shuddering the castle walls. Their mournful voices gain momentum, swelling into an ominous tide that seems ready to sweep all before it.

Beneath the roiling storm clouds, a turbulent crowd churns like the restless sea.

"The Endresse!" Criers rip their clothes and tear their hair in agony. Christian and Muslim factions in Gonder shoot venomous looks, whispers slithering between them like serpents — "The Endresse is fallen!"

Within hidden chambers, Muslim Imams cleanse Ras Yimam's corpse with fragranced oils that soak darkly into old wounds. His ravaged flesh bears no dignity as attendants wrap the stained shroud around lifeless limbs.

When Ras Marye strides forward, Imams part with bowed heads and terror in their eyes. His piercing glare rakes over them, daring revolt to his takeover as their leader. Finding only plots amongst his own Yejju subjects, his fists clench Yimam's shroud in white-knuckled fury.

Outside, a crumbling kingdom tears itself to pieces. Divisions widen as dissent buzzes like wasps from a nest. Livestock and people panic under dust-choked skies as the Muslim population streams out in an exodus.

Meanwhile, Debre Berhan Selassie Church sits heavy as a tomb, thick incense choking worshippers into coughing fits. Monks sway on the brink of collapse as chaotic chanting takes on a fevered edge. Their cries bounce wildly off walls in the oppressive atmosphere. Ras Yimam's body, now covered in a white shroud and adorned with a black robe emblazoned with a cross, lies in an open coffin. Monks and priests encircle the coffin, their solemn chants creating a shroud of mist.

Priests, chiefs, nobles, and dignitaries from across the kingdom stand in attendance. At the forefront are the Yejju ruling family, Ras Marye and Dori, along with Menen, little Ras Ali, and others. A large group of mourners, clad in black with shawls covering their heads, exude an air of worry and uncertainty.

Ras Marye, the new Endresse, strides forward, his gaze fixed on the altar. The praying monks part before him, heads bowed in fear just like the Imams. Hovering over his brother's coffin, he scans the gathering, his eyes meeting Menen's. She

smiles at
him,



unwavering in her support. Ras Marye's piercing glare then falls upon the other assembled chiefs and nobles, their fear palpable.

Turning back to his brother's lifeless form, Ras Marye places a ceremonial cross by his side. The murmurs of the Muslim attendees grow tense, signaling the changing tides.

Mist wisps like ethereal veils across the highlands as a great exodus takes shape. Half the population of Gondar begins abandoning their home, taking to the road with Ras Marye and his Yejju legions towards their new seat of power. Vast dust plumes rise in their wake as thousands of people and livestock stir the land. Entire villages fold themselves up and flow endlessly over the lush valleys and hillsides. Wails of the bereaved and lowing of confused cattle drift on the miasmatic air.

At their van, Ras Marye rides ahead of his cavalry like a shade parting the fog. The Yejju warriors cling close as an honor guard, eyes sharp for any challenger who would waylay their charge. Over verdant fields and mist-cloaked forests they push ever onward, past the hot springs where locals swear spirits dance at dusk.



Until at last, ragged and weary, the mass exodus spills into the small town of Debre Tabor cradled in the foothills of Western Gondar. Here Ras Marye will make his intentions plain and plant his banner, beginning the next chapter in this dynasty's saga beneath the wary gaze of the gathering mists.

Debre Tabor, devoid of grand castles and great churches, welcomes the influx of residents from Gondar. Villagers gather to greet the new Endresse. Ras Marye, mounted on his caparisoned horse, approaches the chiefs and clergy of Debre Tabor, his entire army standing tall behind him.

Inside the new Endresse's modest palace, the chiefs, clergy, and nobles of Debre Tabor kneel before Ras Marye. Awkwardly seated on a throne, he dons formal regal attire, uncomfortable in his new role. The nobles and clergy, both Christian and Muslim, arrayed in their finery, are overshadowed by the formidable presence of the Yejju warriors.

Ras Marye's rises and his shadow looms over the court as he

walks past the clergy, breaking royal protocol. Ignoring their presence, he directs his attention to his chiefs and warriors, who await his words with trepidation.

Ras Marye paces before his assembled Yejju warriors, fury radiating from his stance. "From Gojjam, Begemdir to Semien," he proclaims, his voice resonating through the chamber, "treacherous enemies sharpen their knives to plunge them into our backs!"

The Endresse stops. The entire court, deathly afraid of him, is silent and attentive to his words for what is to come will determine the fate of the kingdoms.

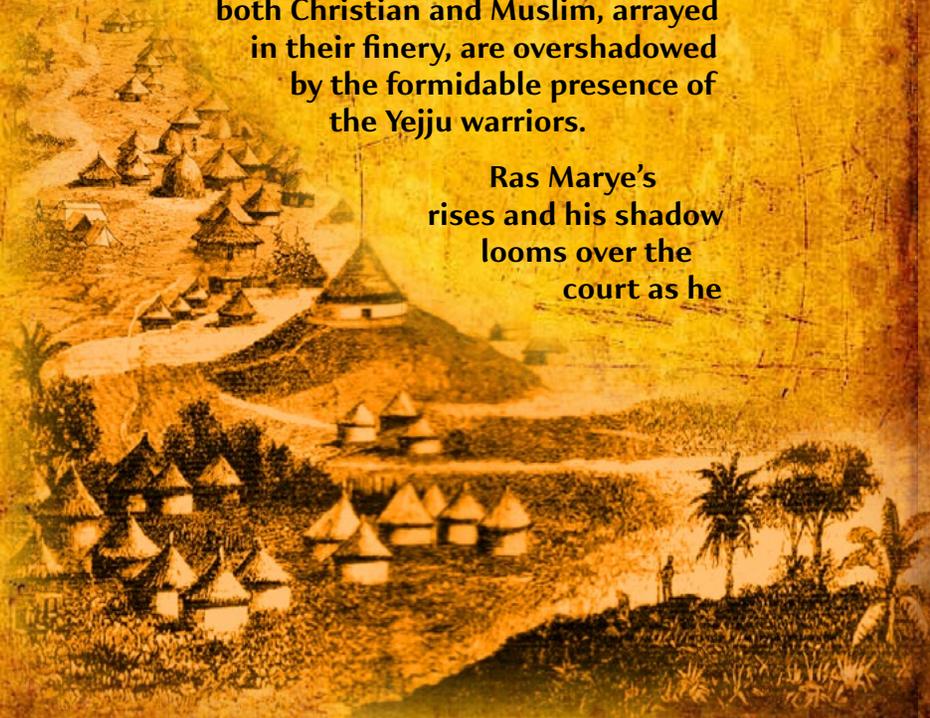
"Only the sword is the God to the Amhara and Tigrean disruptors!" he declares, marking the opening of a major war against all the Yejju rebels.

The sounds of the great Negarit war-drums across the empire begin their heart-pounding beat. Debre Tabor, the new capital, rumbles as messenger horsemen thunder out from a stable and gallop away. They speed down networks of caravan tracks to announce the start of the war.

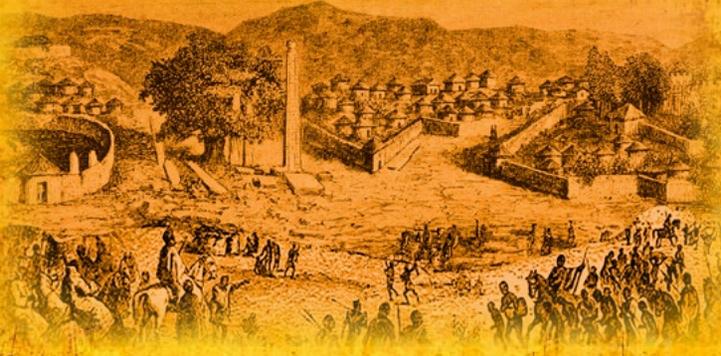
"An empire divided against itself cannot stand!" Ras Marye's voice echoes as the impending war shakes up the whole empire.

The response to the declaration of war is fierce across the kingdoms.

In the north, heralds make their way throughout Axum, to top mounds and hills overlooking the town markets. Criers throw their voices to the howling wind, declaring war upon the coming Yejju invaders.



Tigrean warriors begin to stream to the capital to answer the call of their Shum Sabagadis.



In the palace, imported firearms—muzzle loaders—are passed around to a group of Tigrean nobles and chiefs as Shum Sabagadis of Tigray gives a rousing speech.

“The gala, the marauding Yejju will only bow down to anyone with superior strength!” Tigrean Kitet warriors, dressed in their splendor of traditionally regal dresses, examine their stocks of firearms.

“Send word to the Amharas!” the dismayed Shum commands. “As a man stands up with his backbone, it’s necessary to reach out to our Christian neighbors to stop the Muslim invaders!” The Kitet war drum of the north beats from one province to the other as the Tigreans respond to the Yejju challenge.

The drum sounds echo in the northern highlands to the south of Tigray, in the Semien realms—Dejazmach Wibe’s domains in the northwest. Ranges of mountains soar in the distance as

a messenger powers along a track path on his way to Semien.

“We are at a crossroads, my lord,” an elder chief stands by Wibe’s side, “Choose the path with your heart,” he advises as a conflicted Wibe tries to once again decide which side to join.

“We should reach out to your father-in-law and—”

“A relative in need does not make a reliable ally,” Wibe interrupts, “We will defend our realms on our own!” he declares, resolute, and commands his chief to ready for battle. Semien warriors don their armors, tighten their straps, and gather their weapons. A sense of determination and resolve fills the air as they assemble in organized formations.

In Tigray, Shum Sabagadis emerges from his palace, a figure of authority and power. He adorns himself in a resplendent cape decorated with precious gold, carrying a shield studded with gems. His firearm gleams in the sunlight as he readies himself for battle. Thousands upon thousands of united Tigrean warriors, their traditional war attire accentuated by tightly braided cornrows, stand tall and vigilant, awaiting his command.

In Gojjam, Dejazmach Goshu, accompanied by his bastard son Birru Goshu, both dressed in matching gold-studded gowns, stands at the forefront of his 15,000-strong Gojjam warriors.

“Abbaye, is it wise to give aid to an enemy?” The son asks his father who holds his long spear by his side, exuding an air of authority and readiness. “He who does not take sides in a conflict has already taken one.” Dejazmach Goshu responds.

In Dembeya, Dejazmach Kinfu, draped in a jeweled cape, adorned with the golden medals of the Order of the Seal of Solomon, has assembled an impressive force of 20,000 warriors from the west. A chief approaches and hands him a shotgun that once belonged to his late guardian, Dejazmach Maru. Kinfu, a formidable warrior in his own right, kisses the weapon that serves as a reminder of the past and a symbol of the battles ahead.



The kingdoms are deserted of young men, who have answered the call with grave faces yet beating hearts. From the mountain top monasteries of Axum to Lalibela's underground churches, vast throngs of women and elders crowd with babes clutched tight. Their prayers and chants swell to a crescendo that shakes the lofty stones, a torrent of mingled hope, fear, and devotion echoing endlessly.

From every minaret, the heart-stirring call of "Allahu Akbar" peals forth on crystalline wings. Mosques and shrines overflow with weeping fami-

lies pouring out their souls. Thousands prostrate as one, humble supplications rising heavenward in a tide of unity and faith that binds them yet stronger.

In streets and alleys, trade grinds to a halt as merchants kneel in place, offering up swift entreaties. Within smoky huts and humble homes, the aged and young join in communion, souls turning as one toward the divine. This scene repeats without cease throughout every kingdom, where all might find solace however small within the walls of sacred spaces.



Prayer is now the sole unifying force to see their hearts through these divided, perilous times. For without, a monumental struggle is unfolding in this era of militarized strife of Zemena Mesafent. Kingdoms clash in a maelstrom of steel and banners, and upon the crimson field destiny will be shaped for all beneath the watching sky.



Ras Marye and his Yejju cavalry pound the earth, their thunderous charge instilling fear in the faces of the Gojjam army under the command of Dejazmach Goshu. Arrows fill the sky, unleashed towards the terrifying advance. However, Ras Marye's forces charge on with unrelenting fury, crashing into the Gojjam forces like a tidal wave of destruction.

In Semien, Dejazmach Wibe and his army prepare for the impending invasion by the Yejju. Warriors sharpen spears and swords, dig trenches, and fortify their positions. Dejazmach Wibe's authoritative voice echoes through the mountains as he directs his troops, their determination palpable amidst the backdrop of the majestic peaks.

The Yejju forces march confidently across a steep pass, with Ras Marye at the forefront. The defeated Gojjam army, now under the command of Dejazmach Goshu, reluctantly follows. Suddenly,

a great rumble shakes the mountains as huge boulders cascade down, crushing men and horses, sending them flying off the treacherous slopes.

A bloody war begins between Ras Marye and Dejazmach Wibe's forces across the highlands and mountain hillsides. Swords clash, shields shatter, and blood stains the earth as the fate of kingdoms hangs in the balance.

On a distant mountain, perched high above the battlefield, Shum Sabagadis and his Tigrean scouts observe the action unfolding through European-made telescopes. Their expressions reflect a mix of anticipation and concern as they witness the clash between the forces below.

Shum Sabagadis eyes the tide of battle turning against his son-in-law. With fury, he wheels his snorting mount, unwilling to witness the outcome. "Curse him!" he bellows, and his scouts melt away like shadows, abandoning Dejazmach Wibe and his beleaguered warriors.

Armored in blood, Dejazmach Wibe watches their departure with grinding teeth. Betrayal curdles his gut even as resignation steels his heart. His kin is leaving him and his forces to face their fate alone. A sense of despair washes over him.

The next morning, Ras Marye's victorious army covers a vast field of Debre Abbay, bathed in the morning sunshine. The Yejju force has quadrupled since they left Debre Tabor. To his right, the defeated Dejazmach Wibe, forced to join the invasion of the north, deploys the Semien warriors, while Dejazmach Goshu directs his Gojjam warriors on his left. Behind Ras Marye stands Dejazmach Kinfu and his forces, ready to join the fray when needed. The collective strength of 100,000 warriors, brought together by force or allegiance, stands as one to face the northern threat.

Shum Sabagadis and his formidable northern army of 60,000 men march out, spreading across the plains, prepared for the final showdown. The air is charged with tension and anticipation as the two mighty forces stand on the verge of collision.

Fallen

One wrong move can lose the game.

The sun hangs low on the horizon, casting a blood-red glow across the battlefield. Smoke's acrid tang permeates the air, a bitter reminder of the chaos engulfing the Adowa ridges.

The thunderous boom of gunfire erupts through the darkness, punctuating the frenzy consuming the battleground. It echoes across the fields of Tigray—a relentless omen foretelling death and defiance.

The piercing clang of steel swords colliding rings, a deafening din drowning out all other sounds. Warriors, their shimmas soaked in blood, engage in a brutal dance of life and death. Sword clashes



against sword, spear thrusts spear, hand grapples hand in a desperate struggle for survival. Gunfire tears through flesh and bone as cavalry charges, trampling men underfoot, leave behind a trail of devastation. War cries mingle with agonized screams and horses' unbearable shrieks—total war, a clash of kingdoms.

Smoke engulfs the skies, shrouding the battlefield in eerie haze. Gunpowder's acrid bite poisons the air, suffocating warriors in the bitter taste of the violence consuming the land. The earth quakes under the galloping thunder of the heavy cavalry, sending tremors of fear through men's hearts. Infantrymen, hack and slash wildly through the ranks of their foes, fighting like the annihilation-bound, weapons finding flesh with each swing.

The battle of Debre Abbay rages on, a pivotal moment that will determine the fate of kingdoms. Ras Marye's combined Yejju forces rally against Ras Sabagadis' Tigray forces in a clash of iron wills. The chaos knows no limits as each warrior fights with tenacious determination, seeking only the enemy's destruction.

The unstoppable mounted Yejju warriors, led by Ras Marye, ride down all standing in their path, spearing and slicing through scores of men. Their assault is terrifying, but the Tigreans battle back ferociously, their well-armed riflemen bristling.

Dejazmach Wibe's Semien forces, fighting on the side of the Yejju, push ever closer to the Tigrean riflemen, seeking revenge against their kin who abandoned them. Ras Goshu's Gojjam forces weave expertly through the chaos, survival instincts guiding them through the madness. Dejazmach Kinfu

leads the Western forces into the full fury of major kingdom battle for the first time.

The Yejju forces, following Ras Marye's command, gain the advantage over Sabagadis' Tigreans. Muskets crack overhead amid ringing steel, blood spraying as warriors and horses fall, but no matter how bravely the Tigreans fight, the Yejju's numbers overwhelm their resistance.



Spotting a gap in the Tigrean lines, Ras Marye leads his fearless Yejju cavalry in a thundering charge, unleashing spears upon the Tigreans, cutting down many. The Tigreans respond with thunderous volleys, staining the earth red with blood, yet the Yejju cavalry charges on, undaunted by the carnage. They ride down riflemen, their horses trampling hundreds underfoot. The Tigrean forces waver, discipline collapsing under the onslaught of chaos and terror.

Ras Marye, a force of nature, fights through the Tigrean ranks with relentless determination, his sword and gun dealing death with each swing

and shot. He fights ever closer to the defiant Shum Sabagadis, certain that victory is within reach.

In the midst of the battlefield, word of the eventual Yejjū victory spreads rapidly amongst the warriors. Overcome with relief and elation, Yejjū warriors celebrate in their own ways. Embraces are shared, prayers uttered in gratitude, and tears of sorrow and triumph flow freely. Yet amidst the revelry, some continue to ruthlessly slaughter the wounded and desecrate the fallen, drunk on the violence surrounding them.

At the front, Ras Marye and his chiefs unleash a relentless assault on the tight knot of men protecting Shum Sabagadis, seeking to finish them off. The air becomes a maelstrom of lead as both sides exchange fire at point blank range.

Ras Marye, consumed by vengeance, recklessly charges forward with a hand-picked group from his cavalry, blasting amid smoke and screams.

Shum Sabagadis spots the galloping Ras Marye, his eyes burning with rage and desperation. He orders his riflemen to focus their fire on the approaching threat. A thick pall of smoke engulfs the area as their guns erupt in thunderous volleys.

Dead silence descends upon the battlefield as the Yejjū cavalry halts, smoke slowly clearing.

Ras Marye, the Endresse, riddled with holes, looks down at his torn flesh, disbelief claiming him as he falls to the earth. Yejjū warriors watching their leader topple erupt in horrifying screams. Shock and horror ripple through the Yejjū riders around his fallen body as the enormity of their loss sinks in.

A cry for vengeance rises with the smoke, shattering the moment of victory. The sense of triumph evaporates in an instant, replaced by a ravenous thirst for retribution.

“The Endresse has fallen! The Endresse is shot! The Endresse is wounded! Call the healers, the priests!” Horrified chiefs shout as they drag their fallen leader through the milling survivors. Ras Marye’s bloodied body floats above the dazed warriors, a specter of doom. Screaming Yejjū chiefs from across the battlefield cut a path through the confused mass, desperately racing to reach their fallen commander. Ras Marye, locked in death’s embrace, drifts over the debris of battle and the carpet of the slain, his motionless form a haunting image of their futility.

“Brother! Brother!” A rider, flanked by his chiefs, gallops through the blood-soaked field, trampling the mangled corpses in haste. The rider, barefoot and spattered in gore, screams in anguish as he races to his kin.

Ahead, the Dejzaches and Rases of the major regions gathered by the Endresse’s mortal body, part silently before the onrushing rider, eyes filled with dread and grief.

The rider, Ras Dori, Ras Marye’s young sibling, throws himself before his brother’s body. Face twisted in agony, he gazes down in horror at his brother’s torn-open flesh, innards spilling out as light ebbs from wide eyes. With a sickening hitch, his last breath fades.

“Rest, brother!” Ras Dori clutches Ras Marye’s lifeless form, great heaves wracking his trembling frame. Yejjū warriors howl their anguish,

some tearing clothes and hair in raw-throated mourning for their fallen leader, stolen too soon.

The gathered Rases and Dejzasmaches look on in disbelief, sharing the shocked moment. Gazing at Marye's still chest, they sense new opportunities opening.

Ras Dori's agonized wails rise into an air-shaking chorus. Victory curdles to ashes as the truth strikes: Marye is lost to him forever.

Suddenly Dori's eyes flare, grief morphing into a feral thirst for vengeance. He springs up with a hoarse cry, scattering bloodied dirt. Behind him, the Rases trade worried looks—would this untested fury lead them to greater calamity or unite the fractured ranks?

Dori ignores all but the retreating Tigrians, the killers who had torn his world apart. He turns to the stunned Rases, each now bearing the impossible weight of leadership. With shaky hands, he removes the Endresse's insignia from his fallen brother and places it on his own robe. Rising, he becomes a living symbol of power and retribution.

"Only those without family, only the divided and weak cannot take revenge!" He leaps and clasps Dejzasmach Wibe of Semien, son-in-law of the rebel Shum Sabagadis, wanting to murder him. "No matter how loudly the old man wails, we will not spare the killer of our Endresse this night!" Eyes blazing with cold fire he screams "Go, find your kinsmen, and bring them to me alive!"

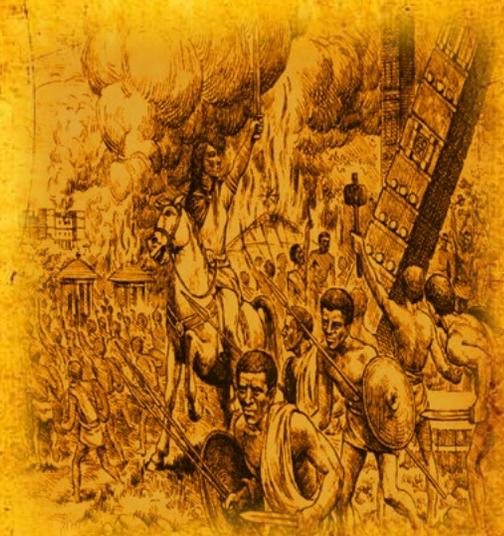
Ras Dori, eyes glaring at the rest of the fearful Rases as Dejzasmach Wibe's forces move out, mounts and seizes the reins of his horse, assuming full command as heir and new Endresse of

the realm. Spurs ring as he charges into the dusk, heart ablaze for retribution with a Yejju force that might consume them all. Behind him, the regional Dejzasmaches and Rases fall in, one by one, and the fate of the kingdoms hangs in the balance of this new flare of fury and resolve.



Thick plumes of smoke spiral into the heavens, blotting out the sun and casting an apocalyptic pall across the land. The north burns under the Yejju onslaught. Clouds of soot cloak the skies, while the ground blazes with fiery pinpricks, like a forest set alight.

Ras Dori strides among scattered corpses of Tigrean nobles and chiefs, bellowing orders between choked coughs. "Find him!" His rage-twisted face resembles a ghoulish mask in the smoke-shrouded dusk. His forces rampage through the streets, sprinting forth, the



screams of burning towns following their hooves like banshees.

Axum's skies bleed crimson as beams crash and flesh sizzles on the pyre. Civilians flee in terror, their desperate prayers drowned by the crackling roar. Villagers and farmers abandon belongings as they and their children stream from their huts and farms by the thousands. A brutal, punitive raid unfolds as the Yejju, drunk on vengeance, unleash genocidal violence across the settlements.

Thatched huts and great houses alike erupt into roaring blaze, fire devouring all before them. The pall of smoke swallows half the town, plunging it into ominous dusk. The clergy are driven out of their churches, their holy abodes ransacked and desecrated. Tigrean warriors begging for mercy find none from the Yejju; they are cut down wherever encountered.

The flames of Axum silhouette the weary survivors as Shum Sabagadis, grief gripping his heart, even as desperation seizes his mind, covers his face with his hands, and weeps. How long until the Yejju lust for vengeance consumes all? Hidden in the outskirts, he can see the palace, as Ras Dori and the Yejju pour into it hunting for him.

Shum Sabagadis turns on his horse and rides out under guard to the edge of the forest, pride and defiance warring on his face. He approaches the massive forces of Dejazmach Wibe and his chiefs awaiting him to surrender.

Dejazmach Wibe motions his warriors forward with a flick of his wrist. They emerge from the jungle's shadows to encircle the royal party on all sides. His men emerge, prodding the cowering family and guards into the open. Among them is the

Shum's weeping sister Tabotu, desperately pleading for her brother's life as she clutches her young son Belgada to her skirts.

Shum Sabagadis is moved by his sister's entreaties but livid at the treatment of his people by the Semiens. Sabagadis holds a prideful stare at Wibe, captured but not defeated, shaming him as Wibe trembles with barely leashed fury.

"One liver does not cut another! You are still my blood!" The Shum bows his head. "If my capture will end this slaughter, I surrender to you alone, not these savage gala hordes."

Dejazmach Wibe stares coldly at the Shum, fury brewing behind his calm facade. "Only the prideful beg when fire threatens," he smirks. "But revenge warms more than the sun!" He draws closer to the Shum with contempt. "Your words fall on deaf ears, old man," he scans the captured relatives. "Now, where are your sons?!"

Tabotu shoves through the guards, blazing with rage. "A person who does not precede, does not speak, or preach to his elder!" She spits in dis-



gust. "Have you no shame? Your mother would cry to hear such talk! You —"

"Silence her!" Dejazmach Wibe snaps at his guards, then turns back to the Shum. "He betrayed us!" Wibe's icy glare quiets everyone. "With a family cutting against one another, one is bound to fall into the mouth of the enemy."

"I am the ruler of the north! The protector of our traditions against these Muslim hordes!" the Shum bellows. "I sheltered your father, I put butter in both your mouths for years! What would Haile say to a son who puts a stone in return in my mouth?!" Sabagadis grasps at his fading bonds.

"You betrayed him too, as you betrayed me." Dejazmach Wibe scoffs, "We should have united!" he shouts eyes flaring with scorn.

"United?" The Shum shouts back in disbelief. "I sought alliance between Christian Tigray and Amhara against the heathen gala, as you have now allied with them!"

Wibe shakes his head bitterly. "If you had joined me to defend Semien, this war would not have come to you, but you wanted a crown while we burned!" Wibe retorts hotly. "The north will never kneel to invaders! Is that not our slogan?!"

"Listen to me, son! Kinship runs deeper than any crown. Do not repeat your father's mistake!" The Shum warns angrily.

Dejazmach Wibe turns his gaze skyward, where the bright moon shines over the smoke-choked plain. "Though the moon shines when it's night, a father-in-law inside you're but an outsider you remain." Fury burns in Wibe.

Silence descends upon the clearing.

"Take him!" Wibe finally commands. As cries arise from the Tigreans, Dejazmach Wibe wheels his horse away impassively. His chiefs close in and seize the helpless Shum Sabagadis as a prisoner.

That night, Dejazmach Wibe watches stone-faced as the Yeju warriors cruelly bludgeon the disgraced Shum Sabagadis, abusing him like a common criminal before his execution. Dejazmach Wibe and his Semien chiefs turn away as they enter the ruined palace at Axum, now under Yeju occupation.



Ras Dori sits atop the Shum's throne, bloodied knuckles proof of his own participation in the beatings. Surrounded by his chiefs, he resembles his late brother Ras Marye but cannot control the hacking cough that wracks his frame like his dead brother Ras Yimam.

"You gave me your kin's blood, so now my bones are yours, as yours are mine." The new Endresse rises from the throne. "Tigray is now yours to pacify," he confers, and Dejazmach Wibe rises.

With the northern confrontation over, Dejazmach Wibe can hear the echoes the realm's shifting sands. And when passions cool, all know instability remains like an unseen dagger, ready for

ambition's keen hand. Wibe bows to the Yejju, but his eyes promise this is far from finished.

Tigray's death knell had only begun to toll.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Aftermath

Unbridled cruelty is a monster unleashed.

Fire smoke billows out from the surrounding burning villages in the mainland, distant moans of the dying are carried by the winds to the monastery, along with the stench of blood in the air. The violence from the aftermath of the battle of Debre Abbay ripples across the kingdoms.

Inside the Mahbere Sellassie monastery, darkness envelops everything. Not a soul stirs. The frail Debre Markos stands frozen, his head sticking out of his gabie like a turtle's, peering into the night, straining his ears for any sound, but there is nothing. The surrounding forests have gone quiet and threatening. Tears stream down his wrinkled face as he glances up at the star-studded sky.



Suddenly, in the dark forests below the monastery, figures move stealthily from shadow to shadow. The priests have gathered all the boys in the monastery inside the church—Kassa and his mates look terror-stricken; the sinister night has etched its mark on their souls. Clergymen and monks huddle in small groups, clutching torchlights with voices hushed in secrecy.

“They are going to come in. . .they are coming in!!!” screams one priest in a deathly terror.

“Quiet! We are going to have to fight them off!” asserts another priest with authority. Overwhelmed, one priest drops to his knees, clasping his hands in prayer. “This is the house of God. The good Lord will protect us!”

“Get up! The Lord helps those who help themselves!” The cantor knocks him with his long stick, urging him to rise. “They will probably kill you first, then all of us men, and the devil knows what they’ll do to the little ones—”

A sound interrupts them, and they all fall silent. Something has stirred behind them. The priests flee inside and usher the boys out of the main church, rushing them across a darkened yard towards the safety of the backwoods, but. . .

Suddenly, a bloody figure stands in front of them: a young man, tall and skinny, holding a gory wound where his left hand used to be. Blood pours from the wound, and with an agonized groan, he collapses at their feet.

Kassa and his mates scream and recoil in horror, bodies turned to stone. Before the priests can move to aid the fallen, more forms emerge from the darkness, figures drenched in blood, carrying their young and severed limbs, a nightmarish vision of terror.

A mass of bloody shimmas and netelas painted crimson, hideously deformed men and women, blood streaking across their torn bodies and terrified faces, wail in the merciless dark. The horrified priests herd the children back inside the main church. Kassa and the others stand transfixed with horror upon the churchyard walls. Below, the gathering wounded sprawl in mangled heaps, moans rising hellishly into the night. Their eyes drift unwilling to the forested slopes beyond. There, shapes begin stirring, screams cut the velvet dark as gaunt forms claw their way up the treacherous hills, emerging from the shadows all smeared blood.

Wave after wave of villagers pour screaming from the woods as if pushed from some nightmarish sea. Hands outstretched in supplication and agony, they drag ruined flesh upward towards sanctuary’s glimmering promise. Kassa peers deep

into the forest, where flickers of firelight start to appear.

In the dark woods, torches illuminate the faces of about forty warriors—all armed with shields and swords in their blood-soaked hands. It's difficult to discern which region they represent; they could be an army or organized bandits. At the forefront is a chief, imposing and inscrutable, charging ahead as his warriors struggle to keep up with his relentless pace.

In the monastery yard, the newly arrived wounded villagers hear the approaching men, and they scream in terror. The priests shield the children, who can hear the horrific wail as armed warriors rush out from the dark trees like they have spotted their prey. The warriors swiftly stab them with spears, as if to end their suffering quickly. The wounded villagers cry out, more screams pierce the night, then silence as the warriors quite anyone in their sight.

Profound silence blankets the monastery as the warriors form a tight circle around the church. "Burn the village and kill every priest! We make camp here tonight," commands the chief warrior. A ripple of shock courses through some of the younger monks, yet the older priests, steadfast and accepting of their fate, are more preoccupied with the safety of the children.

The warriors disperse to carry out their grim orders. They ransack and plunder before igniting every dwelling in the monastery. Flames consume everything, sparing only the age-worn stone church. In its shadow, the cantor seizes the older boy—the lanky youth who had earlier fought with Kassa—now quivering with indescribable terror.

"Run as fast as you can, right down the hill, that way! Lead your brothers, hide by the bush by the river, then make your way to the mainland in the morning," sounds of atrocities stir paranoia in the boys. "Go! Go now, and may the Lord guide you!" The cantor says as he blesses each trembling child with a cross on their heads. But the lanky boy doesn't move. Terror in his eyes, he weeps.

Debra Markos gently caresses the tear-streaked faces of each frightened child before kneeling beside Kassa when he finally locates him. Grasping Kassa's arm, he places something in his hand. Kassa gazes down at the emblem of the Order of the Seal of Solomon, its shine accentuated by the flickering firelight. His eyes meet those of his mentor, a fiery resolve burning within him, as he embraces the aged master, sensing that this is their final farewell.

"Let's go!" Kassa declares, his determination radiating as he turns to his fearful comrades. Gabrey takes a step forward, and the others fall in line behind him.



Kassa scans the view across the monastery, seeing nothing but flames rising all around as the intruders ransack everything. "Stay close," Kassa orders, and just before stepping out of the church into the hell-storm—A warrior swoops in and lifts him off the ground, while others pour into the church, bare feet pounding, swords and spears dripping with blood.

Cries erupt as the boys are dragged, lined up and stripped naked by the warriors. Shaken to the bone, they clutch their privates, shivering in the cold night, too horrified to do anything but watch warriors load the loot from the monastery, bloodlust and greed driving them. Kassa, standing next to Gabreye, turns to the main church hearing the priests' solemn prayers falter at the sight of the warriors. What malignant force has loosed this unfathomable tide of butchery upon their people? He witnesses the priests being indiscriminately slaughtered. He turns away, their excruciating pleading echoing in his ears, a haunting refrain that leaves all the boys paralyzed with a mixture of shock and terror as the warriors approach them, taking swigs from their Areke, gleefully laughing, heavily drunk on spirits and violence.

One of the warriors shakes his head as he forcefully removes the clenched hands of the lanky boy, his short blade flashes, emasculating him without a second thought, turning him into a eunuch slave for life. The boy looks down, stunned and confused, blood flowing from his private area like a rivulet.

"Don't. . .do not look!" Kassa whispers to Gabreye as his knees buckle from terror. The other children are too scared to react, frozen stiff, some cry out for mercy. Kassa, eyes closed, hears his

mates scream one after the other as the crazed warrior slashes each boy's private parts. Kassa slowly switches places with a numb Gabreye just as the crazed warrior towers above him. His eyes are on the gore-slicked blade glinting in the firelight. Kassa sways on his feet, eyes locked onto the razor-sharp edge poised to end him and collapses.

The crazed warrior laughs at his fainting attempt, bends down to lift him, but Kassa springs up suddenly, grabbing the warrior's hand with the knife, fear turning into fury—He buries the knife right into the warrior's groin. The warrior screams in agony, hits the ground, clutching his groin. His fellows whirl at the commotion, rage kindling as they behold Kassa dragging the petrified Gabreye away across the churned yard, fleeing over fallen corpses towards the woods.

"Your mothers! After them! Seize them!" screams their sadistic compatriot.

Kassa and Gabreye flee blindly through the blood-slick bracken, animal instinct driving their flight. Stumbling over gnarled roots, they plunge into the thick gloom, the village's fiery death throes fading behind.

A crash of undergrowth makes them drop and crawl between prickling bushes. Anguished curses and the warriors' vengeful hunting calls worm into their brains. Kassa peers through bush, blood running cold at the sight of pursuers crashing nearer—their mutilated leader at the fore, spitting and snarling as he points their trail. Gabreye strangles a scream, about to cry out—but Kassa's hand claps iron-tight over his mouth just as thrashing shapes erupt into view. Kassa sees them rushing right at them, splintering wood, snapping

branches, bloody swords and spears at the ready, but suddenly a shadow moves, and warriors move toward it, discovering—Another villager, terrified, thrashing in the tangle of bushes. They stab at him, and he screams hopelessly.

More shouts from other wounded villagers who have seen the boys erupts, calling on the warriors and sacrificing themselves to save the young. Kassa and Gabreye creep low, barely daring to breathe, as they squeeze into the thin cover between thick shrubs. Their pounding hearts fill their ears as they roll down the sloping brush, coming up running.

Adrenaline surges through their veins like fire, fueling legs that fly over the rolling wet earth. Lungs burn for air as ragged gasps are swallowed by screams still ringing in their heads.

Each cry spurs them faster across the fading light. Branches tear at skin and clothing alike as they crash through the bush. Mud sucks at bare feet marking their path. Kassa grits his teeth and pushes on, Gabreye fast on his heels. They run until horror is drowned by splashing waves of water beneath flying feet.



Without pause, they fling themselves into the night-dark waters and strike out for the distant shore. Only the slapping of the lake guides their escape into the swallowing dark. Safe or not, anywhere is preferable to the fate left racing behind. Without hesitation, they dive into the dark lake and begin to swim across to the mainland miles away.



Beyond the island, the world is set ablaze. Kassa watches in horror as thick black smoke swallows the sky, burning away the sunset. His village crackles and roars, every hut consumed by raging flames—including his own home.

As the smoke grows suffocatingly hot, Kassa and Gabreye retreat further into the bushes. Through watering eyes, they see bandits riding the main road, terrorizing villagers and leaving a trail of rough intimidation all the way to the market.

In the aftermath, the once bustling market is reduced to a chaotic garbage dump. Pillaged debris and discarded items are strewn everywhere. Desperate villagers descend, their faces etched with misery, scavenging and haggling over whatever may sustain them.

Amidst the chaos, a loud argument breaks out. A barely recognizable woman haggles violently with a buyer, who manhandles her roughly before

his eyes dart back towards approaching bandits.

Kassa peers through the underbrush, barely able to stand on his feet, watching the hunched figure gathering pots and pouches in the ruins of the market. Only a tangled mane of unkempt hair and a grimy face remain of Weizero Atitgeb, his proud mother. Quickly stuffing her meager possessions into a

sack—traditional Kosso concoctions to cure tapeworm—she flees into the woods moments before the bandits' arrival. Kassa watches her go, his heart leaden in his chest. Sadness and shame well in his eyes at her diminished state, but hiding is the only choice to keep them both alive.

As she disappears into the trees, Kassa sinks further into the shadows, gripping handfuls of damp earth to still his trembling hands. Anger and turmoil roil within him like storm waves. Tears slip silently down grimy cheeks to join the mud staining his skin. Memories of her loving embrace only deepen his anguish in her absence.

Alone amongst the whispering trees, Kassa slowly uncurls his fists. The indentations left be-

hind mirror the chaos crumbling his world. With a shuddering breath, he turns his back on the smoke-shrouded ruins and wanders further into the gathering gloom of the woods.

"In a time of war, a mother and child together are cripples," her haunting words flood into his memory. "We have to survive on our own." Kassa wipes his tears and continues his aimless journey through the woods. Eventually, he stumbles upon a sobbing Gabreye, trying to find some rest high up on a tree branch. Kassa climbs up and joins him. He lies down beside him, and stares up at the smoky sky as the warm sun shines through it.

"Did you find yours?" his friend's tired voice asks, and Kassa answers, "No."

"I found mine," Gabreye sobs loud and Kassa, knowing what it means, wraps his arms around him, trying to comfort him.

In the morning, the lost boys, all alone, wander wearily through the forest. Whatever they find — rotten fruit or seeds—they devour instantly, driven by gnawing hunger.

At night, exhausted, they climb tall trees seeking brief respite from threats beneath whispering leaves. Merciless mosquitoes descend, piercing flesh throughout long, dark hours.

Come morning, a bubbling creek appears, murky waters reflecting emaciated forms. Kassa and Gabreye wash dirt-streaked skin and drink deep, finding momentary relief from suffering.

In the afternoon, suffocating heat bears down relentlessly. Suddenly, rustling breaks silence—a band of young bandits passes. Hidden and pounding with fear, the boys hope to remain un-

seen. Even in the jungle, lawlessness' sense grows palpable as marauders multiply without authority, breeding only anarchy.

Night after night, weakened by fever and hunger, vomiting and diarrhea wrack their bodies within this makeshift infirmary deep in the brooding woods.

Day follows endless day spent in gnawing hunger and thirst fueling mounting frustration. Fatigue and desperation take their toll, sparking a furious argument between Kassa and Gabreye.

"We should join them!" Gabreye shouts. "I will not die out here! They have food!"

"No! I will kill you myself before letting you become a pillager!" Kassa shouts back. Anger boils over, and in desperate circumstances, they inflict bloody wounds upon one another, driven to the brink.

Kassa, pushed to his limits, climbs a tree. Shaking like the leaves above him, he brushes aside buzzing bees and reaches into a beehive, driven by a desperate need for sustenance. The bees swarm, stinging him, causing him great pain. Ignoring the agony, he grabs whatever honeycomb he can before falling off the tree, running as fast as he can from the pursuing swarm.

A little later, Kassa and Gabreye, their bodies weak and emaciated to the bone, sit together, feasting on the honey Kassa acquired. The sweetness of the honey brings a momentary reprieve from their hardships, and they find solace in each other's company. They are friends again.

Their bodies deteriorating rapidly as exhaustion takes hold, Kassa and Gabreye wander aimless-

ly through the forest. With each passing day, their strength diminishes, their spirits fading. But then, a sudden deafening noise shakes the forest, jolting them from their dazed state.

Kassa freezes, his body tensing, as the forest grows unusually loud around him. He grabs Gabreye, and they both hide in the tall grass, their hearts pounding in their chests. Terrified, they look around, delirious, as the forest seems to rumble, threatening to consume them.

A piercing cry splits the air. Trembling with fear, they press deeper into grass as footsteps shake the earth, echoes multiplying from every direction. Too weak to flee, Kassa and Gabreye brace for whatever descends.

Spears and swords flash suddenly as screaming men rush forward. Frail bodies are no match for the onslaught; the boys are wrenched from hiding. All around unfolds a surreal spectacle—an army adorned in blood-soaked armor and broken shields, evidence of battles fought. This is no mere band of marauders but a formidable warhost moving like a storm through the haunted woods.

"Make way! Make way!" Someone approaches, and a thunderous sound accompanies the galloping of riders. The warriors part before them, creating a path.

Dejzmach Kinfu emerges, a gun jutting out from his back, with his chiefs riding behind him. Their blood-drenched lion manes and torn shields speak of the brutality they have witnessed at the battle of the kingdoms.



“Why have you stopped, you imbecile? Are you deaf?” booms Dejazmach Kinfu at the quivering chief. “We found children, my lord.”

Kinfu dismounts, his piercing gaze falling upon the boys. As the western lands’ proven leader, he carries himself with authority as he approaches.

“What are you doing here like little dead rats rotting in my path?” His eyes land upon Gabreye, speechless and terrified, he collapses. Summoning courage, Kassa responds for them.

“The monastery. . .burned. . .everyone killed. . . all dead!” Kassa rasps deliriously, the fresh horrors taking their toll. Dejazmach Kinfu notes the blisters covering Kassa’s arm—signs of the boys’ suffering in the wild. Their eyes meet and something passes between them, piquing Dejazmach Kinfu’s interest.

“And how do you know we won’t kill you like them?” he asks the terrified Kassa.

“Maru, Qwara. . .family, Hailu, my land”
Laughter rises but Kinfu, hearing the name of his

father, remains contemplative at this revelation. He steps closer, observing frailty of the boy, and catches Kassa by the hand before he collapses like his friend, and gently lays him down on the grass.

Kassa, holding on to Kinfu, opens his palm, revealing—the emblem of the Order of the Seal of Solomon, the same emblem Kinfu wears on his cape, reserved only for family members who have a claim to the western lands. Shock registers as truth hits—Kassa is his blood, his half-brother.

“I guess one doesn’t cut off and throw away the hand of oneself, even if it’s rotten. Clean them up, bring the healer to tend to this one,” Dejazmach Kinfu commands. He turns to a chief, “Sin produces sin. Take your best men to the monastery and bring me the heads of the defilers of our faith!” The chief and his warriors swiftly move to carry out his order.

By the time he turns back, Kassa has lost consciousness. Kinfu places the emblem on Kassa’s tattered shimma, fate now intertwining these divided souls within the blood-soaked wilderness.



Kassa writhes in feverish agony, sweat-slicked skin trembling. A hooded figure enters—a healer carrying a bag clinking with mysteries. She hums a familiar song, slowly approaching the central fire.

Settling, the healer retrieves plants, clays, and pots and begins to skillfully prepare a potion. Kassa lies delirious, gaze fixed upon the veil of steam rising around her glowing form.

“Mother. . .” A disoriented Kassa stretches his arm to her, “Mother. . .” he utters, and she steals a glimpse—recognition blooming in her eyes, she turns to face him. This is no mere healer but the fortune teller present at his birth, fate lingering in her tutelary care.

She begins dressing his blisters, the caustic touches eliciting pain. “A mother gives all for her son,” she muses “More than a mother, a father you have, my son — a father of fathers.” Kassa glimpses elaborate tattoos, carved crosses, bone charms, and shining amulets hanging on her neck.

His body writhes under burning boiled leaves as she covers his wounds.

“Young Kassa of Qwara, I remember you.” She looks deep into his eyes. “The favor of your ancestors you have! The one that cannot be named chose you,” she looks at him with pity. “Be brave, your fight has only begun,” she warns like a Seer who knows his destiny. She continues humming the ancient song of Tewodros I that his mother sung to him long ago.



Closing his eyes, Kassa absorbs the melody, feeling something shift within.

When he opens his eyes again, something in him has changed. The firelight in the room cuts through the steam and hallows his face. “More. . .” he demands, offering his festering hand. She complies, and the caustic leaves burn him, but he does not recoil or feel the pain anymore.

“More.” The light intensifies around him as Kassa drifts into a deep slumber, his fevered dreams and pain temporarily subsiding under the care of the healer.

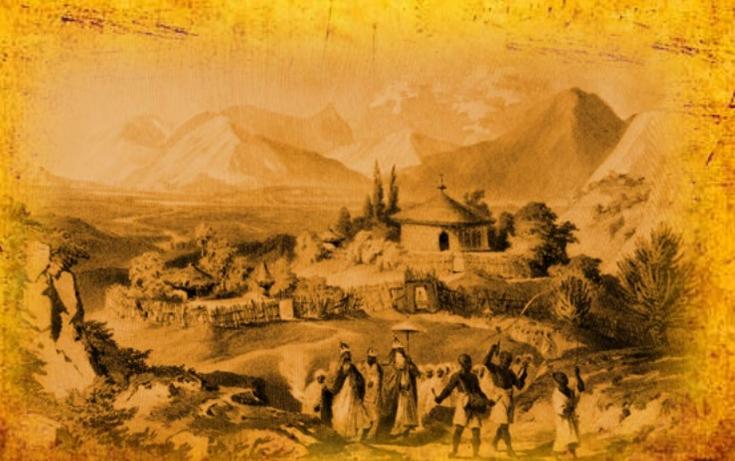
As the fire crackles and the night grows deeper, Dejazmach Kinfu stands outside the tent, gazing into the distance, contemplating the mysteries of his newfound kinship.



The Dangerous kin

Still waters run deep.

Brilliant sunshine bathes the majestic mountains of Western Gonder, casting long shadows that stretch across the vast landscape. Dejazmatch Kinfu's formidable army, weary from battle, marches through his Western realms with disciplined precision. At the forefront of the massive infantry, a small cavalry leads the way, their presence a stark contrast to the dangerous paths they traverse.



On a mule, Kassa rides alongside Gabreye, dozing off, his festering right arm wrapped in healing leaves, and secured tight with goat skin. Abruptly, the sound of gunfire echoes ahead, announcing the arrival of Kinfu in his homeland, the province of Dembeya. Unperturbed, farmers and cattle herders on the outskirts of the town continue their work, seemingly unaffected by the passing army.

As Kassa awakens from his stupor, he notices the villagers scurrying away from the roads, as if an invading force were marching into town. However, unlike the chaotic scenes witnessed in other villages and towns, this province maintains a semblance of law and order.

Kassa's eyes widen, stirred by curiosity, fleeting images of the population flash before his eyes—merchants, traders, and buyers engaging in orderly haggling at a well-stocked market. Warriors scattered among the crowd, ensuring the proceedings remain peaceful. In one corner, a Muslim enclave, he sees Sudanese merchants selling incense and exotic fruits.

At a bustling market center, a crowd gathers around a mounted warrior, his robust build accentuated by a thick beard and mustache. Dressed in a long shimma secured under a black cape, he exudes an aura of authority. Surrounding him are a dozen armed foot warriors. In the middle, men kneel, weeping and pleading. Their tattered shimma betrays their destitute state. A warrior, reveling in one of the men's despair, roughs him up until he places his hand on a bloody tree stump, serving as a macabre altar for executions.

"I beg of you!" the desperate figure cries out, his voice filled with anguish. "Mercy! Bad crops. . . my family. . . destitute, what more can I— The lord punished me already!" The man's words are drowned out by the laughter and mockery of the warriors.



The warrior on horseback, his voice loud and threatening, speaks in the name of the House of Kinfu, the protector of all the realms in the West. The condemned man is sentenced for his thieving ways, as dictated by the holy laws of the Fetha Negeistat.

"You are to lose the right hand that feeds your cursed habit," the warrior proclaims, finishing up his long diatribe with a nod to the warriors.

With a swift motion, a warrior raises his sword high and brings it down upon the man's

hand. Blood sprays, and the severed limb tumbles from the tree stump. Kassa remains stoic, unfazed by the gruesome sight, but Gabreye turns away in disgust. "A hand that stealing has learned even if they cut it off does not stop, we will hang any sinner who steals again!" The warrior's booming pronouncement silences onlookers, who scurry away in terror.

Kassa's gaze shifts from the terrified crowd to Dejazmach Kinfu, who watches the execution with a solemn expression. Something changes within Kassa as he observes Kinfu, seeing him in a new light, the draconian way of the town registering in his mind.

Dejazmach Kinfu and a select few from his contingent break away from the rest of the army and enter a heavily guarded compound—the House of Finja, the ancestral stronghold of the West and the center of the powerful ruling Fenja family.

Behind heavily protected gates, groups of warriors mill around, their presence a constant reminder of the compound's occupation. Inside the main palace, a host of monks and servants stand at attention, anticipating their ruler's arrival.

Weleta Tekle, at fifty, possesses sharp hawkish eyes and prominent features befitting her noble status as sister to the late Maru and mother of Dejazmach Kinfu. Wrapped in a royal kemise adorned with gold, her commanding presence stands out as matriarch amid younger women.

The sons of Dejazmach Kinfu wear spotless white robes, their attire standing in stark contrast to the filthy, torn shimmas of Kassa and Gabreye. Lij Yilma, aged fourteen, and his younger brother Lij Mekonnen, thirteen, stare openly from beneath

hair intricately braided in the western fashion. As Kinfu's caravan halts, the boys take notice of Kassa despite his sickly appearance. Though his hair is braided similarly to their own, a rough edge marks his overall presence. At the resemblance between himself and the noble sons, a curious Kassa gazes back. The boys exchange an amused snicker at the sight of the ragged stranger who mirrors their styling, if not in fortune.



Dismounting, Dejazmach Kinfu makes his way to his tearful mother. Their reunion is a whirlwind of emotion befitting a ghost's return—embraces, blessings, and kisses flow freely from Weleta in her possessed rapture. Servants assist Kassa's delirious, shivering form down from the mule. Fever still clutches his frail body as unfamiliar family closes around in this new home, however temporary its comforts may prove.

That night, Kassa, trapped in feverish dreams, writhing in pain, emits low moans in

restless torment. Opening his eyes, he finds the heirs' hovering above him, their giggles and laughter echoing in the chamber. They are digging into his bloody arm, their cruel prodding reopening wounds both seen and unseen.

Suddenly, Kassa springs up, the boys scurry out of the chamber like frightened rats. He checks his arm, blood streams from the peeled skin, Glancing around the fire-lit chamber, his gaze settles on the door where Kinfu's sons hide. Fury crosses his face.



In a fortnight, a furious Kassa slams one of the bigger sons, Yilma, squarely on his nose. Blood splatters, and Yilma falls to the ground, screaming and clutching his bleeding nose. Nearby warriors pause their drills, drawn by the commotion.



A shaken instructor rushes over, helping Yilma stand while issuing pointers to avoid such attacks—yet sparing no glance for Kassa seething nearby. From the veranda, Dejazmach Kinfu and his assembled chiefs and advisers watch the children below, engaged in their morning practice. Wielding wooden swords and padded armor, the youngsters huff and puff in the yard as padded thumps ring out. Beside Kinfu, Weleta Tekle keenly tracks her grandsons. Ever the matriarch, she issues orders between sips of morning coffee, served by maids who hover attentively.

A mixture of assessment and enjoyment lights Kinfu's gaze as he watches his son faceoff against Kassa.

"If you want to know the end, look at the beginning," Kinfu muses as his son pants under Kassa's strikes. "Dori deposed the emperor, just to show us the Yejju cannot be reached as in the time of his father." Below, Kassa presses his attack. The younger prince struggles, arm dropping, eliciting Kinfu's ire ". . . arms up" he quietly mutters.

"Keep your guard, boy!" Dejazmach Kinfu erupts in a scream, startling those around him.

The chiefs turn in concern at Kinfu's sudden rage. "In the country where brave men have deserted, the weak castrators boast of their bravery, my lord," a chief adviser soothes, sipping coffee. "The Yejju are feasting on one another. Aligaz in Lasta is rebelling, Dori has sent the Wollo Muslims, that treasonous Amade and Bashir against him."

"Still, Dori thinks he can dispose of us at will!" Kinfu watches intently as one-armed Kassa strikes his son with blinding speed, nearly overpowering the larger child.

Weleta notes his distraction. "I thought the Gala pride themselves on picking their stock well, like one selects a perfect bull, but Dori too is ailing like his brother before him." She rubs her son's hand to calm him. "My women tell me he won't last past the rainy season," she scoffs at the Endresse's falling health.

"The son who will come forth makes himself known under his father's watch! You hear! Keep your arm up and attack his weakness!" A frustrated Kinfu snatches his hand and rises before settling back down after rattling his young son. Young Yilma, shaking like a leaf with blood pumping from fear, glares at Kassa and charges at him full force, hitting him squarely on his injured arm and knocking him to the ground.

"False courage and pride, you see, make one fat. Later, they make one thin when the strong arrive," Dejazmach Kinfu satisfied by his son's performance turns to his mother. "May the good lord smite the usurpers with incurable sickness and finish them off one by one," he muses.

"And what of that snake in the north who has entered the hole and aims to take a bite of your land?" asks a chief adviser.

"For the sake of ruling a feuding kingdom in a mountainous desert, one does not swallow poison by betraying his own blood," responds the Dejazmach, his eyes fixated back on Kassa as he recovers and moves with ease against his son. "That treacherous Wibe, by desire alone cannot possess the fertile West. His father learned that the hard way, and the son shall too," Kinfu adds.

"He is but a big jar who on the small jar his neck will break soon enough. I wouldn't worry

too much. I doubt he will survive the chaos from Sabadagis's rivals and sons," quibs his mother in a prideful tone.

The Dejazmach observes Kassa rolling in the dirt, quickly springing back to his feet, while Yilma's eyes flicker between him and Kassa, indecisive.

"Goshu and his son Birru are a concern. They subdued the Mecha gala, chasing them as far as Abbay. They are amassing their army to challenge the Yejju for Gonder," claims one of the Qwara chiefs. "Gojjam is—"

"Goshu does not have the talent nor the size to match the ambition of that orphan son who pressures him." The dismissive Dejazmach Kinfu cuts him short.

"Ali, that little mouse they say, is capable of taking his place," a concerned Weleta says.

"A boy whose mother rules will not become a man to be respected. He is just another weakling from the cursed line. While the Yejju grow thin, your children grow strong, my lord," an adviser warms up to the Dejazmach.

Yilma charges at Kassa once again, but Kassa refuses to budge. He remains on his feet, regains his balance after each attack, frustrating the larger Yilma. Dejazmach Kinfu focuses all his attention on Kassa, noting that this boy refuses to give up, even if his son breaks all his bones.



Kassa begins his apprenticeship at the House of Fenja.

Each day, before dawn breaks, restless energy stir in Kassa from fitful dreams. While the camp still sleeps, he rises to begin his studies and disciplined regimented workouts learned at the monastery, long before carrying out his duties, driven by ambitions beyond instructions.

He treks through the warrior's waking camp, dawn chorus enveloping him—crackling fires, sizzling meats and raucous talk. The warriors eye the newcomer skeptically because he does not belong in their camp.

In the morning Kassa with Gabreye trudge through the muddy camp, carrying jugs of water, offering it to the warriors in need. By the afternoon the water transforms into Tela (beer) as noon approaches. Kinfu's warriors take sips of the refreshing drink between breaks.

Kassa moves through the camp from dawn until night, observing and studying the warriors. In the evening tela transitions to Tej/Arake (wine/spirits) as some of the drunken chiefs who found Kassa and Gabreye in the jungle are warming to him. They jokingly call him Kassa Maru, a name that begins to stick—a reference to the master of the West that Kassa deliriously called out in the throes of his fever.

In private lessons, Kassa and Kinfu's sons are taught writing and debate in Bible studies. Kassa trained under Debre Markos at the monastery engages an old monk in deep conversation about the nature of Christ, without any fear of reprimand, while the boys, bored, doze off.



Within the walls of Dejazmach Kinfu's private library, Kassa settles in for a session of quiet study and reflection. Shelves filled with neatly stacked parchment codices line the room, each volume lovingly woven and preserved, retelling the epic histories of Ethiopia's biblical kings.

Kassa selects a tome from the piles surrounding him, eager to immerse himself in tales of past rulers. Sitting alone, he opens the work and begins absorbing its contents. Ink drawings and Amharic text, with tales rendered in colored drawings, invite him into long ago worlds.

Yet, inner fires keep drawing him back to the soaked grounds, where warrior's camaraderie stirs distant longings. Day after day, Kassa, replicating the warrior movements with an eerie, zen-like focus, employs the strokes he learned at the camp against Kinfu's sons. Despite their physical superiority, he proves to be a far superior fighter, a fact not lost on the boys. However, aware of their fear of their father, Kassa assumes the role of an inept relative, committing deliberate errors to gain their confidence and trust.

When he is not practicing at the warriors camp, Kassa ventures into the market by himself, exploring every corner, including entering the Muslim quarters. Suspicious turbaned adults ignore and shun him, but Sudanese kids run up to him, excited to see a local brave enough to interact with them. Kassa spends the entire day attempting to communicate with the kids in Arabic.

At night, Kassa studies by the flickering light of a candle while Gabreye sleeps nearby. As Gabreye stirs, bothered by the light, he contemplates saying something but decides against disturbing him. A halo-like glow envelops Kassa as he traces Arabic alphabets, his focus unnerving.

At dawn, Kassa rises early and wakes up Gabreye to train with him. A groggy Gabreye, naturally skilled in his movements and capable of delivering powerful strikes, repeatedly knocks down Kassa's sword.

"Enough! Did you even sleep?" asks an incredulous Gabreye as Kassa flies at him with a fountain of energy. A tremendous blow to the mouth lands on Kassa from a frustrated Gabreye that knocks him down to the ground in a heap.

"Stay down! I'm tired of this!" he warns the bleeding Kassa as he heads back to his bed.

"How did the cow learn to graze?" says Kassa, spitting out the blood.

"What?" says Gabreye.

"By going to the ground again and again!" Kassa rises from the ground, wooden sword in hand, ready to face Gabreye once more.



Within a few years of his arrival, Kassa, filled with boundless energy and a sense of belonging, races through the camp with the agility of a seasoned warrior. Camp bounds grow as warriors, recognizing his potential, embrace him as one of their own. He moves among them, soaking in their knowledge and experience.

In his quest to master horse riding, Kassa endures the trials and error, the warriors cheering him on with each triumph. A diverse collective of seasoned horsemen, each an expert in handling different breeds of horses, guide him. With their patient instructions, Kassa gradually gains control over the powerful animals, building a bond of trust and understanding.

Kassa's physical prowess and indomitable spirit grow, his ambitions extend beyond the realm of riding. He immerses himself in the art of combat, embracing the weight of real swords, delving into the intricacies



of spear attacks and shield defense. His meteoric rise captures the attention of seasoned chiefs, who recognize his potential and lend their expertise to further refine his techniques. It is not only his skills that captivate those around him, but also the undeniable presence and resolute conviction that radiate from his core.

At the tender age of fifteen, Kassa, his sinewy form honed and sculpted, adorns his shoulder-length hair with a white band, a testament to the revered Qwara tradition as he rides with the cavalry in a war drill. The air thickens with anticipation as the riders execute intricate maneuvers, their collective movements a mesmerizing symphony of discipline and coordination. Fearlessly, Kassa embarks upon daring feats, showcasing a mastery of horsemanship that both astounds and humbles those who bear witness.

In yet another testament to his disciplined skills, Kassa engages in combat with a warrior twice his size. Undeterred by his opponent's imposing presence, he wields a real sword and shield with a grace that belies his age. Effortlessly, he overpowers his adversary, his every move a seamless blend of instinct and training. Chiefs, drawn like moths to a mesmerizing flame, converge around the spectacle, their gaze fixed upon Kassa's commanding presence and fluid motions. In silent acknowledgment, they bear testament to his exceptional talent, recognizing the birth of a true legend.

Kassa and Gabreye saunter mischievously through the palace grounds, teasing guards and maids as they pass by, joy animating their muddy frames. Kassa's magnetic personality attracts people of all ages and backgrounds, from servants

to chiefs and nobles. He effortlessly interacts with everyone, radiating warmth and charm.

Like a tempest unleashed, Kassa and Gabreye thunder into the grand chamber of the palace. Their bodies, shimmering with sweat and cloaked in a gritty layer from relentless days at the warriors' camp, surge into the room, a sudden and startling whirlwind that leaves everyone alert and attentive.

Dejazmach Kinfu, engrossed in imparting wisdom to his sons, feels them drawn to the boys' animated demeanor. His mother, seated by the flickering fire, tending to the needs of her grandsons, feels the flame of fury ignite with their intrusion.

"Our Solomonic lineage, stretching from the ancient Axumites to this very moment, is descended from the great Yekuno Amlak," Dejazmach Kinfu proclaims, undeterred by the disturbance that has disrupted the room. "Through the grace of God, he put an end to the blasphemous Zagwe Dynasty of the Agame and united the kingdoms," he carries on with his narrative, his words laden with the weight of history.

"Come here!" commands Weleta, her eyes flashing with fury, cutting the lesson. "I said come here boy!" she demands Kassa's attention. The room seems to hold its breath, the atmosphere tensing with anticipation. Kassa hesitates for a moment, then decides to face her steadily. He approaches and exchanges light-hearted banter with the boys in an attempt to alleviate the tension, but Weleta covers her nose in disgust with her netela, a disapproving expression etched on her face.

"Zembel, Afenya!" she erupts, her voice cutting through the charged environment. "The mad-

ness of your day, by the reeking smell coming home is known!" Rising to her feet, Weleta's fury intensifies, her eyes darting towards Dejazmach Kinfu, silently pleading for his support. Yet, Kinfu remains impassive, his gaze fixed on the lessons he imparts. Frustrated, unable to contain her rage any longer, Weleta springs forward, her hand connecting with Kassa's cheek in a resounding slap.

"You dare bring shame upon our noble house? You wretched drunkard! Who raised you?!" she seethes, her words laced with disdain and disappointment. Defiant and unyielding, Kassa locks eyes with Weleta, a silent challenge passing between them, before briefly glancing at Dejazmach Kinfu. Without uttering a word, he turns away, seeking solace in a secluded corner where he takes a seat, with Gabreye by his side.

The chamber is left in a state of unease, the servants trembling as they approach Kassa cautiously, offering him food as a timid gesture of comfort. Weleta exchanges worried glances with Dejazmach Kinfu, their shared concern hanging heavily in the air. Yet, the esteemed Dejazmach returns to his lessons, as if striving to maintain a semblance of normalcy amidst the turmoil that pervades the chamber.

"This one does not need to eat or sleep, Tela (beer) is now his food and blanket," Weleta shouts at the maids.

"Our Amhara kings once reigned in peace and prosperity, building an empire that united all peoples," Dejazmach Kinfu lost in nostalgia laments "But the Muslims, led by that heathen Gragun unleashed Jihad, burning, pillaging, allowing the gala to rise like a flood over our massacred Chris-

tians." The commotion in the room captures the attention of Kinfu's sons, diverting their focus to a slightly tipsy Kassa, who consumes his food voraciously.

"Mekonnen! Do not let your mind wander. Count the ancestors who have sacrificed themselves for you!" Kinfu commands.

The younger Mekonnen turns to his father, attempting to recall the genealogy of Christian kings. "Emperor Yekuno Amlak begat Amda Seyon, Amda-Seyon begat Sayfa-Ared, Sayfa-Ared begat Newaya Maryam, Newaya Maryam begat—" He pauses, realizing he needs assistance and starts counting on his fingers to jog his memory.

"Yilma! Help your brother!" Dejazmach Kinfu startles his older son.

"I don't know, Abbaye." Yilma admits.

"Ignorance is darkness, you hear! One is born with it, and unless one learns, he does not come out of it!" Kinfu chides.

"Tewodros. . .Newaya Maryam begat Tewodros." Kassa interrupts, drawing all eyes.

"But Abbaye, you said only fools dwell on the past. Why should we learn all the—"

"A child who that which has passed doesn't remember, that which is coming will not know!" their father draws closer to them, his voice filled with purpose.

"Lejoche, these are not just some names in ink trapped in parchments. You are your ancestors. They live through your actions and your deeds because they have given birth to themselves through you," he pleads for their attention.

“But Kassa says, if our ancestors keep making the same mistakes, then there is no point in learning from them.” Dejazmach Kinfu, intrigued, turns his full attention to Kassa.

“Did he now?” He approaches and towers above Kassa. “Enlighten us on how you came to be in the here and now,” the Dejazmach demands an explanation.

“Agot, I am who I am because of my father and my mother,” Kassa responds humbly “... to show disrespect to the great ancestors that came before them is to forsake the blood that runs through our family, through our veins,” he attempts to calm roused tensions.

Dejazmach Kinfu, satisfied with Kassa’s response, returns his attention to his sons. However, Weleta scoffs at Kassa’s claim to be a part of the family, her disdain evident, and this irks Kassa.

“The chiefs speak of Dori and Wibe uniting against our house, is that not true?” A defiant Kassa locks on Weleta.

Kinfu spins back, nodding acknowledgment.

“Before that, Maru and Wibe’s father were united against the Yejju. Even you, allied with them, did you not?” Kassa challenges Dejazmach Kinfu.

Unable to contain her anger, Weleta rises, “If you want something new to come in the warring kingdoms then it’s better not to form any alliances.” Weleta lunges at Kassa but meets a fiery determination blazing in his eyes as he rises to face whatever may come.

“Not all that have come before us have good intentions!” Kassa’s unyielding gaze remains locked with Weleta’s as the room holds its collective breath, tensions brought to a simmering boil around one who now stands embodying past strengths. His words have ignited a fire within him, a spirit that refuses to be silenced.



Outside Threat

Between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Khurshid Pasha stirs from fitful dreams, conquest crowding his restless mind. Before dawn could stain the sky, he rises, awakening his officers for an early morning war council to discuss strategy. As the dawn light breaches the horizon, he strides atop the plateau once more with his men. The Pasha, sent by Muhammad Ali to push into the Ethiopian highlands from the Western front, scans the vast expanse before him.

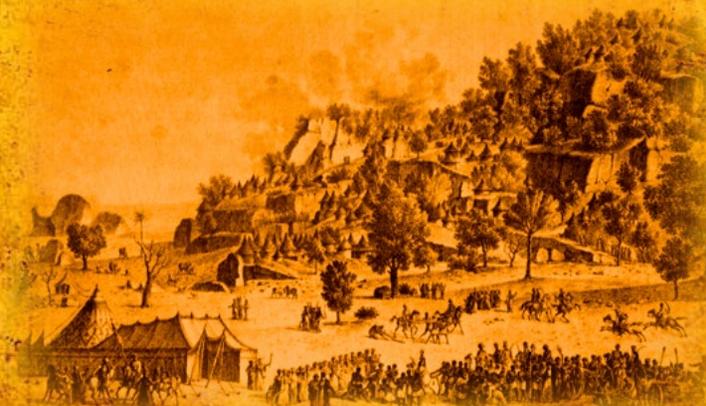


The landscape shimmers under oppressive heat, whispers carried on wavering winds. Yet Khurshid's gaze delves past superficial sights, dissecting maps showing coveted valleys.

"We have been raiding between the Niles here," the Pasha points to the officers, "Wokait is there to the north but here lies before us, the source, commanding this continent's heart."

The year is 1831. The Egyptian army has reached the borders of Ethiopia and Sudan, poised to unleash its might upon these ancient lands. The clash of cultures and thirst for conquest echo in the wind, as the looming invasion approaches over the horizon. The Pasha's heart swells with anticipation and apprehension. He is a Turkish veteran of countless battles, a skilled tactician hardened by the crucible of warfare. Yet the prospect of facing the enigmatic lands of Ethiopia holds an air of mystery that stirs his curiosity and caution.

"Spies tell of warriors by the thousands who fight like demons," an officer says, echoing his con-



cerns “. . . with the terrain, can our forces adopt to such foes?”

“Change is the only constant in war. We will unleash their own Sudanese upon these terrain and test their might,” the Pasha declares. “No victory comes without sacrifice—better them than us.” The whispers of desert winds carry tales of mighty emperors and fierce warriors, men and women who have defended their lands against invaders for centuries. Already Dejzmach Wibe has humbled them in battle protecting the north as they pushed in Massawa, and the valiant warriors of the Western kingdoms are said to be ready to staunchly defend their homelands.

“General, prepare our forces to march at dawn against these heathens!” Khurshid Pasha commands. The Pasha and his army, on the behest of the conquering masters, under the influence of the Europeans and Turkish powers for centuries, no longer see themselves as Africans but as part of the enslaving Arabs. They have feasted on Sudan for slaves for decades but have yet to penetrate the Ethiopian highlands.

“As you command, Pasha, but penetrating these highlands will not be so easy. They have captured our scouts, they know of our coming” the General replies cautiously but Khurshid Pasha is undaunted. His gaze shifts to the scroll clenched in his hand, a detailed map of the lands beyond the borders. Strategic pathways and hidden valleys etched on its ancient parchment promise glory and conquest. He can almost taste the victory awaiting his army.

“I do not underestimate our enemy’s strength. But the wealth of Ethiopia and control

of the Nile are too tempting for our overseers to ignore.” He gestures to mountains on the horizon. “Tell me General, what do you see ahead?” In the distance, the Nile flows steadily, its waters the lifeline to the fertile lands beyond. The Pasha’s mind races with visions of his soldiers triumphantly marching through lush fields, claiming dominion over these lands of plenty. The wealth of Ethiopia and Sudan’s strategic trade routes fuel his ambition, but it’s the control of the Nile that his masters have their grand plans for, and he yearns to etch his name into the annals of history by conquering it.

“I see opportunity,” the Pasha says, though doubt creeps into his voice. “Victory will come at a price in blood and harmony preserved. But glory, and my masters’ favor, await the man who claims the highlands for our empire. I will carry the weight of our actions. Are you with me?” Yet even as anticipation courses through his veins, respect for the lands he seeks to conquer settles upon him. He knows that beyond the borders lay civilizations with deep roots, vibrant cultures, and indomitable spirit.

As the sun rises above the mountainous horizon, casting elongated shadows across the mountains, Khurshid Pasha makes his decision. He will lead his army, for better or worse, into the heartlands of Ethiopia. With each step forward, he will carry the weight of history upon his shoulders, aware of the consequences his actions will bring.



The flickering bonfire casts shadows across huddled captives—Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers stained with blood, kneeling in somber prayer toward Mecca upon the sandy ground. Suspicious eyes watch from the sprawling warriors' camp, wary of any sign of dissent among the pious figures silhouetted in the fire's orange glow.

Weleta Tekle swiftly makes her way through the encampment, gray hair concealed beneath a tightly-wrapped shawl. Flanked by two guards, her presence commands respect and authority as warriors part before her with their heads bowed to the ground. Entering a crowded compound, she covers her nose to avoid the acrid scent of burning flesh that hangs heavy in the air. Inside, Dejazmach Kinfu's warriors inflict unspeakable torture upon two turbaned men, searing coals and scorching metals drawing agonized screams.

Dejazmach Kinfu, cloak stained crimson, presides over this gruesome spectacle, meticulously examining the scarlet embroidery of the Egyptian officers' uniforms adorned with crescents and stars. As Weleta approaches, firelight reveals weariness etched on her face.

"I knew I would find you here," she utters, voice tinged with concern.

Dejazmach Kinfu turns his gaze toward her, noting the fatigue in his mother's eyes.

"Tell me, what is it so urgent you summoned for me, Emmaye?" he responds, voice laden with curiosity and weariness.

"Dori is dead," Weleta solemnly declares. Shock briefly crosses Dejazmach Kinfu's face, fol-

lowed by unexpected relief. He steps closer to his mother, seeking solace in her presence.

"How did it happen?" he inquires.

"The fever claimed him," Weleta replies. Dejazmach Kinfu raises his eyes skyward, offering grateful prayer, voice resolute and zealous.

"Bless the Lord! The hand of God grinds the bones of the Muslims like a millstone!" he exclaims, attention returning to the torture. "Like these wretched Muslim scouts for the Egyptians! The curse God placed on the enemies of the kingdom, no one can ever take away. No one!" With closed eyes and fervent devotion, Dejazmach Kinfu bows his head in prayer. Sensing the weight of the moment, Weleta steps forward, firmly grasping her son's arm, leading him from the torment chamber into the compound's calm grounds.

"There is more news," she shares urgently. "Menen has taken charge of the court."

Dejazmach Kinfu's expression darkens, brows furrowing with concern. "If she intends to install that boy as Endresse, Amhade and his Wollo Muslim cohorts will not stand idly by," he responds with certainty.

"That devious woman is part-wolf, part-hyena, my son," Weleta warns with disdain. "Her insatiable hunger for power matches only her despotic ambition." Pausing, Weleta catches her son's gaze, "She will eliminate and dominate them," her eyes shining with deep concern, she gets closer "She will dominate all. She has always coveted your father's lands, and she will not rest until possessing them."

“Only a fool looking for war would reclaim the land given to mother and son for herself,” responds the Dejazmach.

“Ye-Maru-Qemise is the tasty meat she wants to devour before consuming the whole West,” Weleta counters.

Dejazmach Kinfu allows a grim but defiant smile, acknowledging the sudden shift in power within the kingdoms.

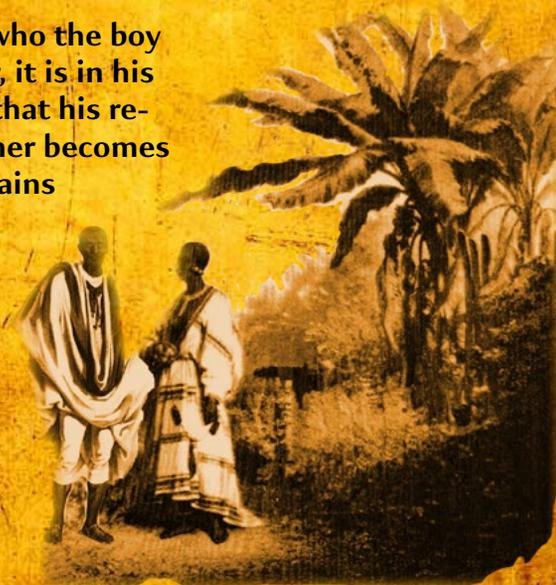
“She is not the only problem. son.” There is something heavy weighting on her mind as they stroll in silence through the camp until they are completely alone.

Weleta stops and presents him Kassa’s emblem of the Order of King Solomon. “Before we make our claim to the Yejju again, we must get our house in order,” she declares, turning to face the reluctant Kinfu who does not seem pleased to discuss this subject.

“More than who the boy claims as his father, it is in his words and actions that his resemblance to another becomes apparent,” she explains urgently.

Dejazmach Kinfu takes the emblem, studying its intricate details.

“The eagle a relative resembles but birds it eats,” Weleta continues



ominously. “In a few years, that boy will devour your sons and claim what is rightfully theirs.”

“Emmaye, the children resemble their father. They are strong!” Dejazmach Kinfu proclaims, a hint of doubt in his voice.

“The orphan is not of Maru’s blood but of that coward whose hasty marriage birthed an outsider to muddle your right to rule Ye-Maru-Quemise in peace!” Weleta abruptly erupts.

“What would you have me do?!” A frustrated Dejazmach Kinfu asks.

“I do not know, but if he stays here long, the orphan your children will resemble. The boys already like him, as does everyone in our camp. You know this!”

Dejazmach Kinfu gazes at the emblem, tightening his grip around it. “He does not flinch,” he murmurs admiringly yet contemplatively.

“What do you mean?” Weleta asks curiously.

“At the executions,” Dejazmach Kinfu replies, voice trailing off. “I would be proud if my own sons were as brave.” Kinfu turns to her “There is more of me in him than anyone I know Emmaye,” he confesses.

He fixes his eyes on his mother, concern on his face. “Even in appearance, the boy resembles his father. He is dangerous, but he is my half-brother, their uncle. He is one of us.”

Weleta stares back. “An orphan wears many masks, my son. He is but a trickster, a chameleon assuming whatever likeness it sees,” she grips her son tighter by his shoulders “Raise him as your own and he will lead you and our house into conflict.”

With finality she delivers her verdict. "Get rid of him!"

Dejasmach Kinfu rubs the emblem clean, its polished surface reflecting the dancing flames, momentarily illuminating the darkness surrounding them.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Menen

A woman's strength is her gentleness.

In the world of regal splendor and political intrigue, the emblem of the Order of King Solomon illuminates the royal robe of young Ras Ali, the newly anointed Endresse of the kingdoms. At a mere fourteen years of age, he takes over the mantle from his late cousin Ras Dori. Sitting tall above her son in a royal pavilion, Menen Liben, adorned in a resplendent royal Kemise, exudes an air of authority and power. Chiefs, nobles, and Yejju warriors, fearful of her presence, stand alert, their attention fixed on her as she addresses the court.



Young Ali stands before throngs, listening, observing all eyes tracking Menen's prowling form, knowing true power stirs beneath her gilded veil.

"The people of this kingdom," Menen proclaims, her gaze penetrating the men, her rasping voice like gathering dusk winds, "our fire towards themselves draw. We will smoke them out one by one until they learn that no one in front of the leader of the Yejju, no one in front of my son dares to go!" she echoes oaths of vengeance.

"Allah can go, but nobody else." A ripple of laughter ensues as Ras Ali, quick-witted and charismatic, adds his own touch of humor.

"I have sent my uncles, Ahmade and Bashir, to hunt down the traitors to our rule in the kingdoms!" Ras Ali declares excitedly.

A turbaned Muslim chief steps forward, his voice laced with skepticism and caution. "Our enemies are but like fleas that cannot be exterminated, Iteye. While on the ground, they fight among themselves, but when we send our men, they carry each other on their backs to suck out our blood," he laments.

"If you indulge them, they want to be masters; if skimped, they grumble and won't obey but make demands that not even the Lord in heaven can fulfill. What do you advise my son to do with such people?" the incredulous consort, her tone laden with determination, demands how to stem the turbulent storms brewing in the kingdoms.

The Christian clergy step up, basking in Menen's attention as she ignores the turbaned chief and the Muslim nobles, and focuses solely on the cross-bearing clergy.

"You priests who baptized me and my son," Menen implores, "help me and my son. We need your prayers now more than ever." All in the chamber know the true mastery of the rule is beneath her skills "As for the pampered rulers who come to us with sickness hiding to infect us, we shall pour down the medicine of the Yejju that cures all that ails them!" Her voice echoes like thunder through the chamber.



The sun shines on the picturesque village of Mahdere Maryam, nestled near mount Tabor in the realms of the Yejju power. A small caravan, led by Weleta Tekle of the West, arrives at an impressive dwelling, distinct from the others with its cleanliness and grandeur. Menen's tall Yejju maids escort Weleta, and they enter Menen's great hut.



Inside, noble women mingle in the large hut compound, its high roof supported by interlaced reeds. An open veranda offers breathtaking views of the surrounding natural beauty and mountains. Weleta walks through the fire-lit compound, filled with the fragrance of incense, taking in the sight of traditional artifacts and European glassware adorning the space.

Her attention is drawn to a caparisoned mule gracefully tethered in the middle of the hut for display. However, her gaze quickly shifts to Menen, seated on a low divan covered with a vibrant Turkish rug. Veiled behind a silk scarf, her eyes are fixed on her like a hawk as the other women discreetly leave the hut, granting them a private audience.

Beneath silks shrouding her form, anticipation coils taut within Menen as she prowls her domain with her eyes while taking sips of coffee with her guest.

“Our bones are intermingled like the bones of hyenas. As you know, my heart will always be in the West.” Menen looks outside to the sky as if reminiscing about her connection to the past “I was saved and baptized in Gojjam, I gave my birth to my son in Bure, all the bones of my ancestors are buried there.” she returns her gaze back on Weleta.

“Awe, Iteye, home is the place which under the land of those whose bones are buried.” Weleta agrees with prayer moans “After my great uncle married me to Hailu who gave me my precious sons before taking them away, the loss of his love and the death of my late brave Andwa had left me a lost wanderer. It’s Maru that gave me a backbone and taught me it’s in the West our place belongs.”

“Hmmm, Awe, but home like marriage is always temporary,” cuts in Menen feigning understanding. “Marrying my first husband I thought was the will of the divine but when the lord took him and I was forced to marry his brother, I knew it was a mistake, a blasphemy.” Menen spits and shakes her head in disgust “I was thrown into the blind Muslim custom of outsiders, and in the name of our lord and savior, I resisted it, but soon he too died in torment, punished by the lord in heaven for his sin.”

“How much one sinned and how long one has spent sitting in one place under the wrong man are not known.” Weleta says, her prayer moans getting louder.

“The deeds of the lord slowly come, I did not imagine that I and my precious son will be where we are today, it’s through the good lord’s kindness we were lifted up above all others.” Menen veils and unveils her mouth to sip her coffee, pride noticeable on her face “How is your brother? The feringe tells me he treated him” the conversation takes a lighter turn to their living respective families.

“The priests are treating him with nightly prayers and dousing of cold holy-water, and my women with herbs.” Weleta responds “All that feringe did was bleed him dry until he fainted and



whispered nonsense advice to him to behave like his illness was his mistake." Weleta sneers.

"May the lord show him the light of sense, I shall pray for him. And how are your sons?" she asks, her curiosity piqued about Weleta's house.

"You mean my son Iteye." corrects a surprised Weleta.

"I heard his half-brother has returned to the house." Weleta raises her eyebrows in shock, Menen must have spies in their house and is aware of the existence of Kassa.

Beneath the hut's woven walls, tensions simmer unspoken as Menen smiles with a private joy.

"I am confused, is Kinfu his brother or uncle?" adds Menen enjoying the shock on her guest's frozen face as Weleta burns in fury.



The reception of the Gojjam house guests continues the games of power swirling around the Yeju realms. Sahalu Webet, the wife of Dejazmach Goshu of Gojjam, enters the lavish hut accompanied by her sons, Birru Goshu and Tessema Goshu. Birru, a tall and muscular budding warrior, and Tessema, a lanky and pampered young man, trail behind their mother.

A few steps ahead, Menen, in a different elegant Kemise, sits with her impeccably made up daughter, Yiwubdar. Maids present offerings to Sahalu and her sons as the guests exchange the

usual pleasantries with the Iteye. They settle in for a chat, surrounded by an air of hospitality.

Yiwubdar rises from her seat and graciously serves Sahalu, effortlessly blending in with the maids. Birru and Tessema's gaze fixate on her, captivated by her presence. Yiwubdar catches the attention of Sahalu, who's charmed by her.

"How beautiful and mannered you're my dear. How delightful." she complements her.

"Thank you Enate. The beauty of the house is its foundation. My mother under sitting I learned everything." she bows and returns back to take her seat by Menen's side.

"First the mother they look at, then the daughter they marry. And for those who marry I say beauty is best, is she not pretty Tessema?" Shalhu turns to her younger son who stares at the carpet than look at Yiwubdar.

"She is my treasure, but the child the mother praises a lot is not fit for marriage." Menen not impressed by the boy switches her attention quickly from Tessema to Birru who stands in the shadows like he does not belong with the rest of them, his eyes still fixed squarely on her daughter.

Sahalu notices the sudden shift of Menen's gaze from her own son Tessema to Goshu's bastard son Biru.

"That is true Iteye, but some are born cold as snakes, offspring of vipers ready to betray their family at a moments notice," responds Sahalu with a sardonic comment.

Menen smiles, enjoying the discomfort by Sahalu.

"I hear one of you brave boys had been on a war campaign with your father." her eyes land back on Birru who stands silent and aloof from the rest "Speak up! My daughter does not need a playmate but a warrior that can fight and defend her honor." she confronts the young warrior.

Birru steps out of the shadows and comes closer. "I am the cold snake that stings men by the dozens in battle Iteye" he declares. A furious Sahalu glares at Birru. Her plumb flesh visibly shakes with fury as the sardonic laughter escapes through her trembling lower lip.

"A brave son only I bore Iteye, and the stomach of a brave man learns not only in throwing the spear but the knowledge of peace-making before doing so." She rubs the hand of Tessema "My son is trained by the high priests of Gojjam" The tension rises as Sahalu defends her son.

"Teyebakish, in times of war, knowledge from death with peace-talk one does not save and time alone will not change a boy that killing does not know." Menen's smile reveals her choice, and Yiwubdar smiles back at Birru, the warrior.



Menen, meticulously coiffed with her hair delicately curled with butter, dons a regal like robe adorned with intricate embroidery. A shawl resting upon her face, adds an air of mystique as she warmly welcomes another woman who enters, accompanied by her daughter and a retinue.

The woman of great importance hailing from the north, Abrihet Lamo, with her hair braided tightly to her skull in the Semien manner is the mother the formidable Dejazmach Wibe, and the young daughter is Hirut Wibe, who bears the bloodline of their lineage. Menen's eyes fixates upon the young girl, captivated by the innocence emanating from her large, enchanting eyes—a telltale sign of her tender age.

As customary, they exchange pleasantries before settling down for coffee, and Wibe's mother immediately begins airing out grievances and lamentations.

"Alas Iteye, my good Christian son tries to be friend of all but by the hand of his own kinsmen he suffers." she pauses for small prayers "These disgraced Tigreans weltering in their blood feud Iteye, while the people eat ears of corn which have grown in the blood, Iteye the friend of the Yejju is struggling by himself with demons." she moans in sorrow.

"I'm sorry to hear about your troubles, a great house from the wind shelters only, but from quarrels it does not, now does it?" Menen offers her sympathies.

"True Iteye, where a tree falls axes multiply. Tabotu, that harlot, accuses my son as a usurper." she wipes her dry eyes "As the sister of that traitor Sabadagis, she claims Tigray for her young son and has riled up all against my son and all the Semiens." she adds, expressing concern for her son's well-being amidst internal conflicts and rivalries.

"May her reputation go tumbling down like a donkey over a cliff, that woman has no dignity." Menen turns her attention to Hirut, invites her to

come to her, and the young girl shyly walks over to the divan.

Menen sits up, grabs hold of her, admires her smooth skin, runs her fingers over her hair, checks everything from her teeth to her finger-nails. "One finger, another finger is longer than. We have given Tigray to your son and if that finger breaks, we will come to support it." says Menen while continuing to examine Hirut.

"... it's not just the sons of Sabagadis but his many rivals Iteye, a pack of wolves biting each other that are sharpening their teeth for my son." she gasps "It's with the grace of our lord and savior who helps my brave son that he keeps them at bay and holds the north."

"As long as he stays close and is tied to the middle finger, your son can call on the Yejju." Menen smiles at the young girl, satisfied by her health and beauty "You're a very lovely young girl, would you like to meet my son?"



A teenage Ras Ali, his hair styled in strand twists, gracefully and effortlessly rides his horse as the Yejju cavalry, with their synchronized movements and thundering hooves, engage in rigorous war drills.

Ras Ali demonstrates his impressive equestrian skills as Menen, accompanied by her retinue, arrives to witness the training. A sense of anticipation permeates the crowd as they observe Ras Ali's

prowess. Menen, seated under the protection of a pastoral umbrella, gazes intently at her son's performance.



"Why isn't my son riding his caparisoned horse?" Menen questions the chief warrior.

"Iteye, he said he wanted to be just like the warriors, and his uncles and trainers have taught him to be like —"

"Uncle?! Trainers?!" her fury erupts at the discovery that the Muslim chiefs influenced his decision, "Only a fool who reputation does not know from ear to ear grins at me while saying such a stupid thing!" Menen turns and her furious gaze fly to a line of turbaned Muslims cheering on the young Endresse. "He is but a boy and you do as I say, not what those turbaned snakes tell you to do! Go get my boy!" She screams, jolting the chief who rides away in a hurry.

Menen turns and smiles at the startled Hirut. "Look at him go like a frightened zebra running alone." she teases as they watch the fright-

ened chief fly to confer with the Muslim chiefs before Ras Ali is pulled from the field, and Menen's authority is established over them.

Ras Ali, accompanied by his uncle Dejazmach Amade, makes his way to his mother. Menen, her expression betraying a hint of ambivalence about her son, turns to young Hirut.

"Men who do not value a woman's advise will stumble and wander aimlessly in the darkness." she advises as Ras Ali and Amade halt and face them. Ras Ali's eyes fixate on Hirut, captivated by her beauty.

"Are you too old to give your mother a kiss now?" Ras Ali stands tall, cues his horse with his voice, and slowly circles around his soon to be bride first. Satisfied, he parks his horse between Menen and her with a smile, and gives his mother a kiss on both cheeks.

"I see your talks have gone well Emmaye." his eyes drift back to Hirut.

"Her father sounding wounded has united the north and reached out for Abuna from Egypt to crown him." Menen informs her son of the grave danger in Tigray "We need to talk son" She reins and guides her horse away from everyone but Ras Ali does not follow her.

Menen stops and turns on her saddle. Ras Ali, no longer a child, smiles.

"Come uncle, we need to talk." The Endresse spurs his horse, his growing independence apparent as he chooses to engage with his uncle instead of following his mother's command.



Power of Faith

A snake that you can see does not bite.

A procession of colorful pastoral umbrellas moves gracefully through the streets of Gonder, led by the clergy of the powerful Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The air is electric with excitement as the crowd eagerly gathers, hoping to catch a glimpse of their revered spiritual leader. The Etchége, shrouded under a massive umbrella and surrounded by a retinue of clergy riders, raises his arms in a gesture of blessing and connection with the people.

Meanwhile, inside the grand chamber of the royal palace, anticipation swells as the pounding streets shake the palace walls. Christian chiefs and turbaned Muslim nobles gather in profound still-



ness awaiting his arrival. At the first sight of the billowing umbrellas, the clergy erupts in elation as the Etchége, the head of all the monks in Ethiopia, makes his entrance.



Menen prowling like a caged lioness awaiting her fateful summons keenly observes Etchége Gebre Mariam, a commanding figure in his forties, heavily bearded and adorned with the largest golden cross in the kingdom, blessing the Christian monks of Gonder, with tears streaming down the faces of some, moved by his presence.

On the opposite side of the chamber, Ras Ali, the young Endresse of great significance, freely moves about, receiving greetings from Christians, Muslims, and pagans alike. In a heartwarming moment, Ras Birru Alegaz of Yejju-Wollo, the uncle of Ras Ali, embraces him like a father welcoming his son.

Menen, silently observes her son's interactions with the Muslims wondering where and when he had abandoned his true faith. Her attention shifts to the approaching Etchége, she rises from her seat with unusual warmth, her courtesy concealing thorns.

"It brings me great joy, Iteye, to stand before you and the esteemed members of our kingdom. I offer you my greetings and gratitude for your friendship and spiritual closeness. May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ protect you and our kingdom." The Etchége bows before her. He turns now to the clergy awaiting his words like disciples awaiting wisdom from their teacher.

"In these uncertain times, unity is our greatest strength." The Etchége begins, his voice echoing in the chamber "Though divisive winds blow harsh, let our faith anchor us firm. We stand as shepherds to God's flock, called to guide with compassion, to defend our faith with courage, and heal divisions with understanding."

The clergy break into affirming applause, some calling out "Amen" or "Well spoken, Your Grace!" as smiles of resolution spreads "Brothers, the Lord bids us to lift our faith as He himself was lifted to the heavens in Hulet-Lidet Tewahido (two births). Where you find disagreement with those unfortunate believers of Debre Lebanos following Qebat or Tsegga Lej Sost-Lidet (three births) doctrine, find also room for nuanced thought and counsel freely given. And where you encounter fear or hatred, combat it with love alone." Murmurs of accord ripple through the congregation clinging to their version of Christianity in a deeply divided Christian kingdom.

"Today, I ask you to stand with Iteye and her son the Endresse, who are steadfast protectors of our faith, to be a one united body in purpose—to safeguard our faith, uphold justice, and spread hope to all the Lord gathers under His wings. With faith as our banner and each other as brothers, no darkness can overcome us." Menen acknowledges his blessing with a bow while Ras Ali remains with the Muslims "Now let us pray in peace as I bid you God's blessing to carry out your work." Heads bow reverently, an air of prayerful consecration descending as the Etchége leads with the Geez prayers, when they lift their faces once more, eyes shine with a shared purpose.

The Etchége bows again to Menen, meeting her eyes with a look of solemn assurance. Menen kisses the golden cross, bowing humbly before inviting him to sit on the throne chair beside her.

Whispers stir as Ras Ali still stands and consorts with the Muslims and not the clergy. The Etchége notes the concern on Menen's face as the Endresse prefers his Muslim uncles, rather than her.

"My son is a baptized Christian, as I am, but these snakes won't let him be. . ." Menen whispers to the Etchége "I ask for your wisdom, Abba. Help me guide him before he is lost to them and the kingdom." Menen glares at the Imams like they are enemies clawing at her son's fragile faith.

"The human soul carries knowledge of good and evil from the time it enters the womb, Iteye." the Etchége says with a dark omen "Your son, like our Lord and Savior, is surrounded by internal Judases and external Romans." He rubs his beard thoughtfully like invading demons lurk within the

chambers, and begins counting his beads, emphasizing his deep concern.

“For years, I have prayed and fasted for peace to settle in our Christian kingdom, only to witness divisions tearing us apart, as if Satan himself has invaded the souls of our countrymen.” He gestures to the nobles that are grasping for dominion “These people wish to surrender their power and authority to the beasts of Daniel.”

Menen laments quietly, overwhelmed by the challenges faced by the kingdom. “Furthermore, the Muslims are once again gathering at our borders, seeking to seize our lands and defile our faith, and burn our churches like that blasphemous Gagn.”

Menen, shaken by the news, offers silent prayers. The Etchége turns to face her, hopes hung by threads finer than a cross’s gleaming strands.

“I have waited for someone like you to come, Iteye.” utters the Etchége with his voice rising. Menen looks up, surprised, awaiting his words.

“Just as our blessed Virgin Mary, the redeemer of mankind, was elevated in our adoration equal to her son Jesus Christ, we look to you to guide your son and the kingdom he rules over.” He turns to the turbaned Imams standing beside her son. Menen, understanding the gravity of the situation, nods solemnly.

“Our faith rests in no one else but you, Iteye. You are the blessed mother who must guide the son.” Menen rises from her seat, walks over to the Imams, and forcefully takes her son by the arm. She glares at each Imam as she walks Ras Ali back to

the Etchége. Once there, she instructs him to kiss the giant gold cross held by the archbishop.

All breathe in anticipation, their tension suspended, as the cross’s golden glow illuminates Ras Ali, all wondering what storms may Ali’s redemption—or defiance—unleash upon these fractured lands now?



Radiant waves of light dance across Kassa’s face as he passionately kisses a cross crafted from bronze. The atmosphere becomes alive with murmurs and whispers, invoking his name. Kassa, with a towering and muscular presence, exudes a mature aura that defies his youthful years. An elderly bishop grins approvingly, contrasting sharply with the disquieting gaze of Weleta Tekle. Irritation smolders within her as Kassa effortlessly commands the attention of everyone in the chamber.

Yilma Kinfu stands proudly between Weleta and Dejazmach Kinfu, donning an intricately woven ceremonial vestment that signifies the completion of boyhood, receiving hollow praises while Kassa’s glowing presence overshadows him.

The dissent between Weleta and Kassa that first appeared in sidelong glances, tensions traded with sardonic barbs, is replaced with a cold stare that speaks volumes of their complete fracture.

Weleta does not take her cold eyes of him throughout the ceremony meant for her grandson.

Inside a dining hall, a great feast is underway. Dejzmach Kinfu, his trusted chiefs, and his sons are seated on an elevated platform, with warriors positioned below them in order of rank. Local chiefs and merchants approach Dejzmach Kinfu, offering gifts and praises for his older son. Maids and servants bustle around, refilling flasks with Tej and replenishing injera with stews and sauces for the distinguished guests.

However, there is a notable absence. Kassa is missing from the festivities.

In the servant quarters, a thick smoke billows out from a large cooking hut. Weleta Tekle, her face covered with a veil, instructs young maids to prepare a large plate. A maid quickly follows Weleta's guidance, pouring various sauces from bubbling pots in the chaotic kitchen. Weleta, prowling and hunting for opportunity, at the first chance of distraction, slips a potion from her Kemise and discreetly adds a small amount of the poisonous liquid to the plate, mixing it with her taloned hands, pretending to assist with the preparations.



“Hurry now, take this to the boys. They haven’t eaten all day.” she instructs.

The maid carefully takes the large plate, covering it, and begins her journey across a vast field. Other maids trail behind her, carrying small plates and jugs. Roaming camp dogs chase after them, eager to taste the enticing aroma.

Arriving at the warrior’s camp where Kassa and Gabreye engage with the local villagers, the maids place the plates on a small table in an outdoor shack near the training field. Young village boys, invited into the compound for the festivities, rush forward, hoping to partake in the delicious meal. The maids, however, shoo them away, along with the dogs that have caught the scent.

“Kassa!, Kassa! Kassa!” the maids scream out his name. The commoners are the first to arrive, their mouths watering at the sight of the plates filled with savory Doro wet and colorful stews.

Kassa and Gabreye approach last, and the maid uncovers their special plate made specifically

for Kassa by Weleta. Little maids holding jugs of water approach them to wash their hands.

“Where is my trusted Elefe?” asks Kassa, curiously examining the maid while he washes his hands, his instincts stirring within, looking for subtle warnings from her.

“She is with Iteye today” the maid, pouring water for them, hesitates for a moment before responding.

“Then who prepared the meal for me?” Kassa scrutinizes the plate suspiciously, sensing that something may be amiss.

“I did.” she answers excitedly.

“Taste it for me, as Elefe does.” he asks politely.

“Oh, here we go. . .” Gabreye grabs a chicken leg, “. . .with your paranoia again.” Kassa knocks the chicken leg from Gabreye’s hand, and the village boys scream and beg watching the delicious meat fall on the ground as one of the dogs laps it up before they have a chance to get to it.

“Silence!” Kassa shouts down the boys then turns to the maid. “Taste it” he commands, as fear anguishes the maid’s visage with his questioning gaze.

“In the name of the blessed Mary, how can you doubt your own blood?” the devout servant stands for her masters.

“My mother taught me that blood and poison should never be consumed together.” Kassa turns serious like he can see evils beyond her comprehension. “If you have faith in your masters, if you truly believe they mean me well, then prove



it by tasting the food you, they prepared for me.”

The young maid reaches out, confidently wraps a piece of injera around a sauce, and prepares to take a bite.

“Whoever has doubts and eats from this plate will be condemned. . .” Kassa says in an ominous tone, “. . . for such an act is not based on faith.”

Kassa observes the maid intently. Sweat beads on her flushed almond skin drip, her eyes widening as her hand trembles, slowly inching toward her mouth.

“For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin!” Reacting swiftly, Kassa rises and firmly grasps her hand, preventing her from consuming the poisonous food. She screams terrified but he directs her gaze to one of the dogs lying down, struggling to breathe after devouring the chicken leg.



The next morning, on the training field, a furious and determined Kassa effortlessly dominates both of Dejazmach Kinfu's sons, displaying superior skill and strength. With each crushing blow he delivers, Kassa locks eyes with Dejazmach Kinfu and Weleta Tekle, silently proclaiming, "I am still here, and I am stronger!"

"Now I understand why the ancients snuffed out the lives of all the little royal bloods on mount Wahni." Weleta shakes her head in disbelief. "The only remedy for a pretender who thinks he is the king of the jungle is to place him on a high cliff, where he becomes the prey."

"You worry too much Emmaye. He is but a strong boy who has put his hand in our house and does not know how to get it out." Dejazmach Kinfu responds while admiring Kassa's prowess. "I will not let a skilled warrior go to waste. I intend to employ his prowess in all the battles that lie ahead."

"The hand which a person himself puts in, he knows how to take it out, son." Weleta retorts.

"That which has fallen under my hand, I know how to handle. I understand his ways." responds a confident Dejazmach Kinfu.

"I have tried every scheme short of strangling him in his sleep with my own hands, and yet he still lives." Weleta says with incredulity. "That one has his own ways, and someday he will use them to ruin us. Mark my words."

Dejazmach Kinfu's gaze remains fixed on Kassa, then he scans the whole warrior camp, notices the chiefs and his warriors are cheering on Kassa and not his sons as he displays his superior skills.

"You are going to let him humiliate your sons, your heirs, our future? You have faith in an Orphan you found in the jungle?!" Weleta whispers in her son's ear as his face darkens with fury. Dejazmach Kinfu, unsure of where lies his true loyalties with his family, with his mother raging against his half-brother, quietly wonders if he's planting the seed of Kassa to challenge bloodlines' claims of his sons.



The Solution

*The thorn which is sharp in your foot
is sharp in your neighbor's foot.*

An army of hundreds of warriors silently maneuvers through a foggy forest. The tension hangs thick in the air as they move cautiously, ever watchful for an unseen threat. Kassa, adorned in full warrior attire, marches at the rear. He spies on Dejazmach Kinfu, who leads a large force with his sons sheltered amidst the well-armed warriors. Kassa turns to Gabreye, who bangs his sword and shields to rave up his nerves. He scans the common warriors around them who regard the two with confusion, as if they don't belong here, exposed to the elements and danger. As the forest swallows the marching army, disquiet gnaws within Kassa, instinct sense twisting undercurrents in Kinfu's intent gaze tracking his movements.



Surreptitiously glancing back, Dejzmach Kinfu observes Kassa from afar as he turns to address his heirs. "Remember, Lijoch, in a warring kingdom, to the spear, to a hero one goes," he tries to steel their nerves, "Only through bravery does a man become a leader," Dejzmach Kinfu warns.

His sons, filled with fear and confusion, survey the foreboding forest. It engulfs everything in silence, broken only by the distant calls of wild animals. A sudden shift in the atmosphere; creature sounds vanish. Dejzmach Kinfu shouts orders and the chiefs scatter among the warriors.

To the left and right of the Ethiopian forces, colorful shapes appear—warriors with cylindrical-shaped hats, blue garments, and loose-fitting pants—converge on the much larger force of Dejzmach Kinfu. Clothed in the same garments as the captured warriors that were being tortured by the Ethiopians, the Egyptian army, a mixture of infantry armed with muzzle-loading firearms, turbaned Sudanese men with sabers by the waist, and mounted Turkish officers sporting modern rifles, advance swiftly as if to take vengeance for their fallen warriors.

Blood-curdling cries are exchanged as the Ethiopian forces assuredly fan out and engage the encroaching enemy. Warriors push through dense foliage, their spears clashing with the sudden explosion of gunfire from the Egyptians.



As chaos erupts, raw panic engulfs the heirs in a swirling maelstrom. Yilma, trembling with terror, his guards falling around him, screams for his father. Gunfire pierces into his horse, and it collapses, covered in blood. Dejzmach Kinfu and his men swiftly drag him to safety behind a protective wall. Mekonnen, struggling to control his startled horse, dismounts and makes a desperate slide into the wall of protection to join his brother.



Kassa, left unprotected and exposed, surveys the chaos in terror. Trapped behind panicking warriors, he finds himself being suffocated as Egyptian attackers close in from all directions, blasting and slicing men as they advance. He grabs the horror-stricken Gabreye and drops to the bloodstained foliage. They navigate through stampeding men.

A shadow looms, and Kassa turns behind him. A huge attacker raises his gun high, about to strike him with a bayonet. Kassa springs into action, thrusting his sword into the attacker's stomach. The impaled assailant, eyes wide open and blood spurting out of his mouth, comes down hard,

collapsing on top of him. Kassa struggles, Gabreye rises and pulls him up.

“Are you hurt?” Blood is everywhere on Kassa, but it’s not his. A shaken Kassa and Gabreye stand back to back as the forest erupts into pandemonium. Gunfire, shouts, and the clash of blades echo through the smoke-filled fog everywhere.

A bullet grazes Gabreye’s shield, and they drop quickly to the ground again and maneuver through fallen bodies and legs of fighting men.

Up ahead, Dejazmach Kinfu, peers through the fighting men to locate Kassa, his cunning plans emerge in his watchful eyes and smiling face as Kassa disappears behind the enemy lines. The Egyptians are isolating the infantry, cutting them off from the main force. Kinfu orders his army to press forward rather than rescue the infantry. His warriors surge out of the forest, pushing the few Egyptians in front of them.

Shouts for retreat erupt as the ground rumbles. Kassa rises and catches sight of Dejazmach Kinfu and his forces moving away, abandoning them to their fate.

“No! No! NOOO!” Kassa exclaims in disbelief and terror, fury flooding in as he realizes Kinfu had designed this trap to get rid of him. Gabreye grabs him and turns him to face the Egyptians closing in, turning their full power on the abandoned infantry.

Kassa drops again and out of desperation, he grabs the fallen Egyptian and disrobes him. Gabreye, getting the message, hurriedly searches for another fallen soldier.

The Egyptian forces unleash all their firepower from all sides, finishing off the infantrymen.

Kassa and Gabreye scramble for life as blood rains on top of them, and men are shot down above them—falling by the dozens, threatening to suffocate them.

A Sudanese attacker spots Gabreye disrobing a fallen Egyptian, attempting to disguise himself. He charges forward to strike him down.

“Help me, brother!” a voice calls out in Arabic. The soldier spins, and a blood drenched Kassa extends his arm to him. The soldier hesitates, is he one of ours? And in that split moment, Kassa leaps up, bayonet in hand, and impales him with full force. Gabreye swiftly slices his throat to finish him off then quickly takes the fez hat and firearm from the soldier. Without hesitation, the boys, draped in Egyptian uniform, grab an arm and drag the fallen Sudanese soldier straight into the enemy lines.



The advancing Egyptians, encircling and suffocating the dying infantrymen, let the blood-covered boys and their fallen soldier squeeze through, thinking they are one of their own.

Shouts of alarm rise in Arabic as the boys drop the dead body and flee like deserters, senses alight with mounting terror. Dark woods dissolve into a blur as they run away from the deafening noise of the battle to the refuge of the deep forest, but gunfire and spear soon shatter the quiet. Egyptian soldiers crash through undergrowth in pursuit, the relentless staccato of rifles piercing the air all around. Branches whip and grasp as the boys push deeper into shadowed thickets. Their labored breaths billow in the foggy dark, but no trail could disguise their tracks. Merciless pursuers close from behind with each pounding footfall.

The boys run blindly, their chase for survival joined once more. Deeper still they plunge into the dense forest until ahead, through the shadows, Kassa spots a group of Egyptian warriors. He freezes, breath caught in his throat. Gabreye spins back, hearing the crushing pursuit. Ethiopian infantrymen, chasing after them, crash through undergrowth like stampeding beasts, almost upon them.

They barrel into them, toppling them over. The Ethiopians rise, realization dawning on their dire straits. As one, they turn to face the oncoming soldiers, finding themselves trapped from all sides within the knotted wood.

Hands grasp weapons, eyes straining through the dim for any escape. But only the vaguest glimpses of armor and rifles emerge between the towering trunks as Egyptians mock their efforts with terrifying cries and slurs in Arabic.

An Egyptian officer, adorned with insignias and badges on his striped uniform, leads a dozen men toward the frightened warriors, reveling in their vulnerability.

He stops, his gaze fixed on Kassa and Gabreye, clad in Egyptian garments that hang loosely on their frames. They could pass for a Sudanese soldier, but he gestures to their bare feet that expose their true identities.

“Nice try, boys,” the Egyptian officer mocks in Arabic as his soldiers join in, taunting the terror-stricken Ethiopians with derogatory insults.

Kassa turns to his countrymen who tremble in horror in the face of their annihilation.

“This is not our end,” he whispers to Gabreye. “No, this is not how we die,” a confidence so assured it resembles a divinity’s touch that stirs something in him beyond comprehension. He gazes up to the sky, seemingly touched by something otherworldly.

A bright light cuts through and illuminates Kassa. He fixes his gaze on the officer.

“Girls may laugh at men.” His voice rises in their tongue. “If you are warriors, you fight with swords like men and die with honor,” he proclaims in flawless Arabic as he steps and stands between his comrades and the Egyptians.

The officer, shock and admiration registering at this boy’s bravery, laughs, but Kassa steps up to him with a challenge in a resolute determination, as if he has been bestowed with a divine purpose.

The officer turns to his insulted men, and they all drop their firearms and draw their sabers instead, fury burning in them.

Kassa silently prays, removes the Egyptian jacket, discards the gun, and reveals his sword. Ga-

breye watches him in awe, recognizing that familiar trance-like state stirring in Kassa's eyes.

Kassa strides to his countrymen. He taps the shoulder of a kneeling infantryman who looks up from his deep prayer in tears, and whatever he sees in Kassa's eyes gives him the courage to stand and firmly grip his bloodied sword. The rest of the warriors do the same. Their apprentice has become their leader. Gripping swords once more, the others rise as one.

Kassa and Gabreye exchange a glance, hands fastening tighter upon weaponry as six warriors stand united, darkness closing from all sides, fully prepared to carve them up into pieces.

A heartbeat, and an Egyptian lunges forward with a scream. Steel rings out as Kassa, roaring like a lion, steps to meet the challenge, adrenaline surging through veins now coursing with the heat of combat.



The chiefs and warriors of Dejazmach Kinfu revel like victorious armies, celebrating with joyous fervor. Yilma and Mekonnen, without a scratch on them, sit proudly amongst the entourage of warriors, surrounded by the rhythmic beats of drums and the resonant chants of their praises.

A sudden eruption of gunfire shatters the air. Dejazmach Kinfu and his chiefs swiftly turn their attention to the commotion. The warriors, shouting and hollering, part in unison, making way for a group carrying wounded infantrymen, rushing them towards the heart of the camp.



And there, revealed in all their glory, stand Kassa and Gabreye, their bodies drenched in blood from head to toe. They appear like ethereal beings who have emerged unscathed from the depths of hell. Their presence ignites a deafening cheer that drowns out the singing and drumming of Kinfu's entourage.

Kassa's gaze pierces through the chaotic celebration, locking onto Dejazmach Kinfu. The great leader begrudgingly acknowledges Kassa's valor and raises his hand in salute, a mixture of respect and fear evident in his eyes.



The cheering continues, reverberating through the night as the warriors honor the indomitable spirit of Kassa. Calling him Kassa Maru! Kassa Kinfu! Kassa! Kassa of Qwara!

The next morning, Kassa and Gabreye, their bodies covered in sweat and numerous cuts, lie in the steamy water filwoha, exchanging silent glances, still in disbelief that they have survived. Natural hot springs gush from beneath the surface, creating bubbling pools of scalding water that generate a steaming mist all around them, enveloping the surroundings in a thick, smoky cloud.

“How did you manage to get out?” Dejazmach Kinfu's voice echoes through the mist. Kassa turns to the imposing shadow of Kinfu, draped in a white gabbie cutting through the fog.

“By the grace of God, the Egyptian soldiers did not see me, and I did not see them. . .that is how it turned out for me. . .How about you, Gabreye?” Kassa asks with a smile.

“Luck did not recognize me, brother. All their eyes were fixed on me!” Their laughter is tinged with defiance, but Kinfu remains unamused.

“Luck, unlike fortune or title from one person to another, does not pass,” Dejazmach Kinfu towers above them. “The men say you killed five, some talk of a miracle, a lion? What happened out there?”

“A Lion?!” Gabreye laughs hard, and soon his mirth turns to tears. “So it was not in my dreams?” He places his hand on Kassa's shoulder. “You are truly the Lion of Judah; as long as I stay close to you, brother, I know nothing and no one can threaten my life,” he says with gratitude in his voice, with awe and reverence.

“Leave us, Gabreye,” commands Dejazmach Kinfu. Gabreye rises from the lagoon, wiping his sweat and carefully wrapping his wounded body with his shimma. He gingerly walks past Dejazmach Kinfu and disappears behind the mist.

Dejazmach Kinfu paces above Kassa, his elongated shadow dancing in and out of the mist, turmoil rolling beneath feigned placidity.

“A warrior who knows himself tells others. You're a reckless fighter through and through. . .” He stops pacing “. . . just like our father, like me, like all the ancestors that came before you that wielded the sword of the West.” Kassa, tense but surprised to finally hear an admission of relation and a half-praise from his half-brother/guardian, turns to face

Dejazmach Kinfu. "You have greatness, but if you truly desire to become more, you must seek discipline and knowledge from the wise holy-men of Mahabrre Damot."

Kassa smiles, a tinge of disappointment in his expression as he understands the true meaning behind Dejazmach Kinfu's complementary words.

"My mother told me in the Fenja house, family members won't be outsiders, and outsiders won't be family members." He becomes serious, searching for his place in Kinfu's heart. "Which one am I to you?"

Dejazmach Kinfu locks eyes with him, studies Kassa's defiant visage, acknowledging the undeniable resemblance.

"You're my blood and my bone, but you're not my sons," he responds with the chasms returning in his voice. "A strong bone can be the backbone or the cause for pain and discomfort." He smiles sadly, reflecting on his own longing.

"They say distance makes relatives miss and love each other." his voice cracks "I never got to see my . . . our father, and I miss him so until this very day." Kinfu looks skyward, their complex bond hovering in the mist above them. "That is my wish for you, Kassa of Qwara, to disappear like him, without my hand causing you harm." Kassa nods, juggling the sorrow of losing both his father and now his half-brother.

"You have a greatness in you that cannot be extinguished. Go and find your destiny," Kinfu concludes, the weight of their complicated relationship hangs in the air as they share a moment of understanding amidst the ethereal mist.



Kassa gazes deeply at the vast expanse of the Western skyline, the land that is his birthright. He turns to Gabreye, who whispers to him with a glimmer of hope, "In time, someday, brother."

Their belongings are being securely fastened to mules, surrounded by a dozen warriors standing guard as they prepare to depart from the Fenja house. Yilma and Makonnen, alongside their father Dejazmach Kinfu, stand nearby, their expressions somber as Kassa approaches them.

Kassa respectfully salutes Dejazmach Kinfu and hugs the boys.

A radiant Weleta Tekle scurries around surrounded by her swirling entourage of maids, urgently directing provisions for the journey. Kassa warmly hugs and kisses the maids, exchanging a few words with the one he saved from poisoning, wiping away her tears in gratitude. He then nods at the assembled warriors and chiefs who show their respect by saluting him as if he is one of their own. His gaze finally falls upon Weleta Tekle, who conceals her excitement for his departure behind a facade of concern for him.

Kassa smiles and walks to the mules, beginning to lighten the load by discarding most of the added provisions.

"What are you doing? Food and well wishes one does not throw away!" Weleta Tekle exclaims.

Kassa faces Weleta, the guards tensing up as he stares defiantly at her.

“Only a fool feeds on the food of a poisoner.” Weleta gasps “I have strong hands, and I know how to feed my stomach,” Kassa retorts.

Weleta looks to Dejazmach Kinfu, then laughs away the accusation and walks away.

“But I will not leave until the valuable thing that feeds my soul is returned to me!” Kassa declares.

Weleta stops and turns to him, feigning innocence, snickering at him.

“By the grace of the lord, you shame our house with such slander!” she exclaims condescendingly. “What is it that we have taken from you now?”

“My emblem!” Kassa responds, his anger building. Weleta laughs at him.

“You see, children, every day life furnishes us with proof of the perverseness of ungrateful lots that come from vile backgrounds to latch on to others like parasites. . .” she mocks him “. . .to feed on the host for their nourishment.” With her tone dripping with condescension, she turns away.

“If you do not return it now, someday, I’ll turn everything in your house nine times over to find what belongs to me by right!” Kassa shouts, but Weleta’s taunts provoking flaring tempers.

“Teewbaakeh!” she scoffs, dismissing his threat, “Such arrogance from an abandoned little orphan! Don’t trouble yourself, young Kassa.” With a snide smile, she digs into her Kemise, takes out the emblem, and hands it to a guard.

Kassa snatches it out of his hand, his fury palpable, and walks away to mount his horse.

“The seed is one only, two has not!” Weleta Tekle taunts as she turns to face him. “You should be proud of your own low family line than pretend to be from a higher line.”



Kassa, ignoring her, mounts his horse gracefully, then turns to her, his smile enigmatic.

“I, like others, am not. I do not seek to claim your line, for I am of my mother, not of my father,” Kassa states, his voice filled with quiet confidence. “You do remember her, do you not? I am higher than any of you here. I have claims not just to the West but the whole empire!” With that, Kassa cues his horse, leaving Weleta Tekle and the Fenja house to struggle with the weight of his words.



The Abuna

A river cuts through rock, not because of its power

The majestic Adowa mountains of Tigray loom over the landscape. In the torch-lit splendor of the Axum palace, Dejazmach Wibe, adorning himself in a regal cape like an emperor, hosts a grand reception. The chamber glows with flickering torchlight, opulent carpets drape the walls and flags of the Tigrean Kitet army and paintings of the Lion of Judah add to the magnificence. The prominent presence of the Tigrean clergy stirs a hushed air of anticipation.

Abuna Selama, the Coptic Orthodox Church Metropolitan from Alexandria, commands attention as he makes an entrance. His crown-like mitre and vestments shine with religious symbols and elaborate embroidery of an outsider, distinct from the Ethiopian head of the church, the Etchége.

Gripping his pastoral staff, the Egyptian bishop—tall and pale, with black beard and hints of gray—looks far younger



than his thirty years as he glides through the faithful crowd. The clergy weep and reverently touch his garments. Some fervently kiss the cross in his hand. After twelve years without a metropolitan, the Ethiopian church rejoices in his return to the kingdom as the ancient tradition that extends back for centuries is restored.

Dejazmach Wibe, much older than the Abuna, rises respectfully. The Abuna extends the golden cross and Wibe kisses it, displaying his veneration and devotion. His decade long ambition to become an emperor is closer with elevation of the Abuna to this esteemed position by his persistent request and friendship with the Patriarch of Alexandria.

“God is great, when one way he closes, another he opens,” says Dejazmach Wibe, emotion filling his voice. “The Lord abandoned us to the infidels, the defilers of our faith who mock our traditions, but by his grace, He has sent you from our holy Alexandrian brothers to restore our faith.”

“God does not lose forever, my son,” soothes the Abuna. “In these troubled times, He has placed a protector of our shared faith in you, high and safe, as a leader of men should be.” The two men embrace warmly.

The grand tour of Tigray by the Abuna who has not been seen in this lands for decades begins.



The majestic obelisks of Axum tower like ancient citadels over the landscape. Surrounded by a crowd of devout Christians, the Abuna and Wibe approach the ancient church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Axum. Monks and clergy, in resplendent vestments await them, with some donning colorful robes with matching pastoral umbrellas.

Wibe leans in close to the Abuna, concern creasing his face. "We have had word that the Endresse's uncle has contacted your countrymen," he reveals.

"The arrogant Muslims see neither heaven nor earth," responds the Abuna, frustration tinging his voice. "Even in Alexandria, they fail to grasp that our Coptic Orthodox faith is our lifeblood."

"So the rumors are true, the Yejju under that usurping boy and mother have embraced Islam?" Wibe's voice drips with scorn.



"Submission eludes those who reject spiritual guidance of our blessed church," states the Abuna with conviction. "Because of this, we must protect her together," he pleads.

"I will deal with the Yejju, but I desire more than their demise" the ambitious Wibe says, eyes gleaming as he turns to the Abuna. "To unite our splintered empire demands persistence where divisions remain." Wibe contemplates "The radical Shoans have sown confusion across the southern realms. The one who calls himself Negus Sellase has even banned your teachings!" reveals Wibe. The Abuna nods, well aware such actions undermine all laid upon his holy office. "Yet Sellase's son maintains and clings to our faith. He extends a hand, seeking unity where discord now thrives."

Dejazmach Wibe spins in surprise at the young bishop's influence across far lands. He considers the many rivals and the obstacle he must overcome to realize his dream as he gazes upon the rugged grandeur of the Tigray mountains.

The Abuna and Wibe visit the ancient 6th century Abba Garima monastery near Adowa, walking amidst a jubilant crowd that have come out in great numbers to greet them. Their urgent conversations continue.

"The rulers of this kingdom will only yield when I crush them one by one on the battlefields," declares Wibe.

"If you can humble the defiant Yejju in a just war, there is no problem where there is no answer that God did not create," responds the Abuna with conviction. "With his wisdom, I can untangle any confusion."



“My army is ready to restore our faith” Wibe proclaims, rage building in him, but the Abuna suddenly stops him.

“Patience. Though you brought me here, I’ve been invited to Gonder by the Yejjus themselves,” the Abuna confesses.

Wibe grips his sword hilt. “I’ve shown patience for years waiting for your return. No more!” fury burns in his eyes.

“Patience,” the Abuna lays a calming hand on him. “I go to Gondar with neither hopes nor expectations of swaying them, but patience reveals weakness in opponents.”

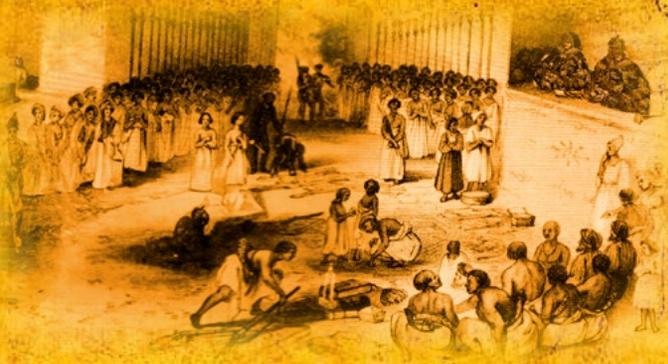
A calculating look crosses Wibe’s face. He gestures to his massed Kitet army. “If words fail, we have fifty thousand blades. What is your plan in Gonder?” The Abuna offers no answer, deep in thought. Their goal to reshape the empire is clear, but the path forward remains uncertain.



Gonder is transformed for the grand wedding and coronation celebrations. The streets bustle with revelry—music, dancing and laughter fill the air. Tela mead and Tej honey wine flow freely as the scent of roasting meat from slaughtered cattle wafts through the vibrant markets. Young and old alike carry food and drinks, embracing the infectious festivity.



Outside the palace, the resplendent Yejjus cavalry stand alert, spears and shields at the ready. Impressive entourages of major Dejazmaches and Rases from across the kingdoms march through, some bearing chests overflowing with silver and gold, men carrying luxurious carpets, others leading livestock and mules laden with gifts.



Within the palace, golden light from tall windows falls softly on the new Empress Menen Liban. Surrounded by noble Yejju women, she outshines them all in her brilliant royal silks. Delicate garlands and tall candelabras adorn the palace as she observes the gathering, her face obscured behind a golden chain mask.

Beside Menen sits her young new husband, Emperor Yohannes III—a mere figurehead granting her the title of Empress. Formidable in full war attire under his cape, Ras Ali echoes his late uncle Ras Marye's authority as he stands tall beside them. He proudly displays his high-ranking Endresse insignia, as the true power behind the throne, he still commands the highest authority in the empire. His Tigrian wife Hirut, Dejazmach Wibe's daughter, stands by him with a group of turbaned Muslim chiefs. On the opposite side, the Ethiopian bishop Etchége Gebre Mariam clutches his large cross, surrounded by Christian clergy.

Empress Menen smiles beneath her mask, putting on a show for the coronation, but tensions simmer within the palace walls. The notable absences lurk—Ras Wibe of Tigray and Ras Goshu of Gojjam with his sons are not present.

In the flickering torchlight of the royal chamber, Empress Menen and her chiefs face Ras Ali, his warriors and the Muslim chiefs—two opposing forces, with the ineffectual newly installed puppet Emperor between them.

“Excommunication! The viper springs from a snake,” declares the Empress angrily. “We should have eliminated that treacherous Wibe like his father long ago!”

“The gossip when it goes out they do not prevent, when returning with consequences they cannot block it,” a furious Etchége, now demoted under the Abuna, cries out, his voice firm, as murmurs ripple through the gathered clergy.

“That snake brought the Abuna here with deceit, to spread more lies and weaken our kingdom and our Orthodox faith!” continues the Etchége, resentment simmering in his tone.

“He claims the true Solomonic Emperor resides in his camp, in Tigray!” Empress Menen adds scornfully.

Endresse Ras Ali steps forward defiantly. “Slander alone cannot help that petty northern thief steal the throne,” he declares. “Let him stew in his delusion with the Abuna! When I march with my army, the north will learn the truth!” proclaims the Endresse with confidence.

The Empress looks to her aloof husband, seeking his participation, but he remains detached.

“What you do not have, you do not crow about, my son,” warns Empress Menen after a pause. “Wibe has acquired firearms through treacherous Catholic missionaries up there. Dislodging

his Tigrean forces will prove challenging. He is a dangerous sna—”

“Let the Endresse discuss warfare, Emmaye!” Ras Ali cuts her off, grasping his sword hilt tightly. Fury flashing in his eyes.

An uneasy silence falls. Empress Menen nearly scoffs but holds her tongue, wary of further provoking her volatile son.

“Our forces are superior, our cavalry stronger, there is no challenge on the battlefield the Yejju cannot overcome!” the Endresse declares.

“The hastily warrior, victory will not bring back my son.” The Empress’ voice turns somber.

Stunned silence envelops the chamber at her bold challenge to the Endresse. All eyes shift between mother and son, locked in an intense gaze.

“A brave man, they say . . .” Ras Ali slowly approaches his mother, “. . . springs from a wise woman.” The commanding Ras Ali draws all attention in the chamber “In Gonder, all know their place, utterance of faith to the Etchége is best, marriage arrangement and political alliances to you is best Emmaye, but in matters of warfare?!” The chamber falls deathly silent.

“None shall speak but me!” declares Ras Ali asserting and claiming authority. One by one, from warriors to Muslim chiefs to clergy, to the puppet emperor all bow their heads in submission.

“What kind of a man insults me and our sacred marriage by giving his own sister to another while married to my sister?!” Ras Ali seethes, anger and grief mixing in his voice. He goes over to his wife who trembles as she weeps openly. The Abuna

has annulled their marriage through excommunication and given her to Ras Goshu of Gojjam, already wed to Ras Ali’s sister.

“In marriage disgrace there is not, only your father honor has not, and I am the husband that punishes while weeping prohibits,” Ras Ali consoles her. Turning to face his mother, a steely resolve infuses his voice. “Emmaye, escort her promptly to Mahdere Maryam, where your guards will ensure her safety.”

Ras Ali steps forward, blade ringing free of sheath. “My uncle Marye taught me when Yejju are called to war, none stand against us remain unscathed. Let our enemies cackle like hyenas as they approach, we are the true lions of Judah!”

His voice rises above mounting cheers. “We will show them no mercy! By my will as Endresse, we shall answer their challenge with steel and send their carcasses to feast the waiting vultures!”

Bloodlust throbs through tightened ranks as Ras Ali’s decree inflames each Yejju heart to fury’s edge. Only Empress Menen stands mute amongst the revelry, concern clouding royal features while her proud son prepares for glory’s call. Her gaze alone remains detached, drawn ever to the son who now treads the blood-soaked path of empire’s defenders.

In the dim light of dawn, a troubled Empress Menen tosses around in the bed as her husband stirs beside her and rises. Silently cloaking himself in a shimma, the young emperor gathers his belongings, including his new crown. Slipping from their chamber, the emperor steals through the slumbering palace and hurries to his waiting guards and caparisoned horse.

Empress Menen abruptly awakes with a startle, sensing wrongness in the air. She finds herself alone, the emperor gone, escaping the coming violence. Her marriage alliances shattered as her son's surely as the breaking dawn.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The War

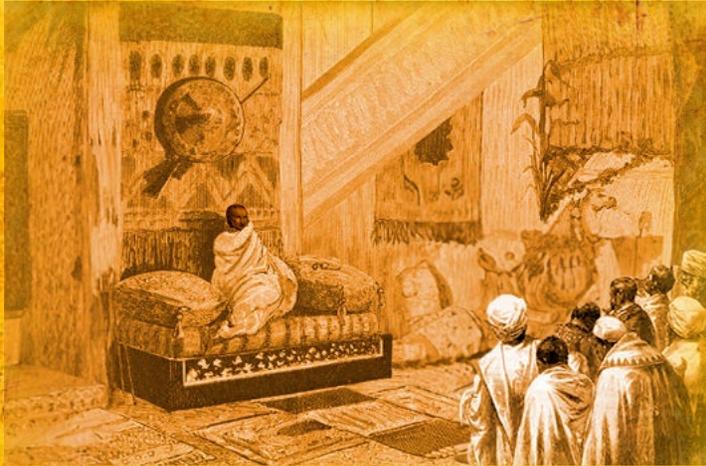
One who finds an empty throne should be wary of the ghosts in the palace.

The combined forces of Dejzmach Wibe of Tigray and Biru Goshu of Gojjam stride with confidence through the deserted imperial city of Gonder. Vigilant for any sign of Yejju resistance, they traverse the eerily quiet streets. Terrified farmers and residents scramble for cover, seeking refuge in the churches as the invading troops pass. The air is filled with the haunting echoes of wailing women and elders, who kneel in desperate prayer outside churches, gripped by the anguish of impending war.

Dejzmach Wibe's Tigray forces boast formidable infantry armed with deadly matchlock and flintlock rifles. In contrast, Ras Birru Goshu's massive Gojjam army, though lacking such firepower, compensates with sheer numbers. As the conquering army enters the imperial palace, Dejzmach Wibe surveys the scene with pride. Rows of clergy and elders bow before him, treating him with the deference befitting a new monarch.

In the throne room, Dejzmach Wibe is graciously received by the nobles and Christian clergy of Gonder, adhering to the honored tradition of Zemena Mesafent where rebels who capture Gonder are welcomed cordially with vows of civility.

However, tension permeates the chamber, with no resolution yet between Ras Ali and the Yejju lords.



Seated upon the throne, Dejazmach Wibe addresses the gathering as their new ruler.

“A thief lives under constant suspicion by the true owners,” he begins. “Where have the usurpers fled, and how many warriors march with them?” he demands an answer, his words tinged with derision.

The clergy shift uneasily as Wibe, rising from the throne, strides directly to the cross-bearing priests.

“The children of Israel transgressed against the Lord by serving false idols,” Wibe accuses as the clergy protests their innocence. “And the Lord’s fury burned hot against them, delivering the Israelites into the hands of enemies who crushed them!” He shouts and they quiet down, fearing punishment from the new ruler.

“We have come to restore our Christian faith,” Wibe softens his tone, “every great castle and sacred monastery seized by the desecrating Muslims, every inch of land abandoned by our enemies before our advance, will return to the rightful Christian heirs of our ancestors.” Wibe informs, skillfully playing on their shared faith and appealing to the clergy with promises of untold rewards.

An elder priest weeps, moved by this promise of redemption. “It’s true, my lord. The kingdom has wilted like a worthless autumn bloom that children carelessly pluck,” he declares. Murmurs and prayers of support ripple through the clergy, liberated from the Yejju Muslim nobles of the court.

“Thank the Lord, for he has not abandoned us. He has sent us the bringer of peace and had banished our enemies and sent them rushing to their homes at Debra Tabor,” another priest informs Wibe.

“The Endresse who is a Muslim at heart has sent your God-fearing daughter to Mahdere Maryam,” announces an elder to the dismay of Wibe.

“Just as God punished His wayward flock, He has sent me to punish the Yejju and restore the glory of our Christian kingdom, mending the divisions they sowed among us as your emperor!” Wibe asserts, his voice ringing with determination. “Now, where is Ras Ali?”

Ras Birru Goshu scoffs at Wibe’s bold declaration of emperorship before victory is secured. “A coward runs home to his mother. Where is that witch of a woman?” Birru interjects, cutting him off.

The clergy hesitate, fearing reprisal from Empress Menen, giving the ignored Imams that detest her a chance to speak up “Only God knows the whereabouts of that woman who consults the devil’s arts,” a lone Imam reveals. “She vanished like an apparition without a word.”

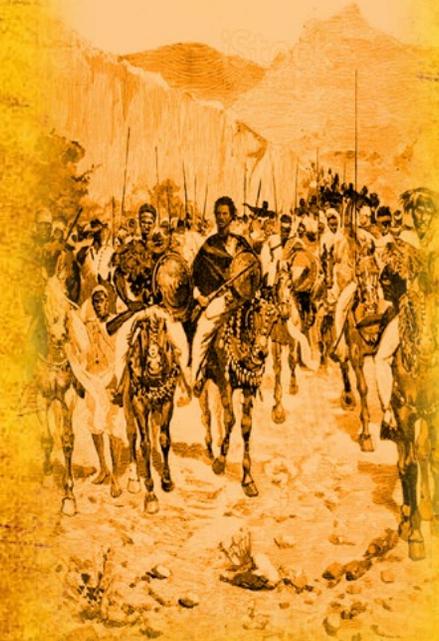
Wibe turns to Birru Goshu. “Only a virtuous hand may enter into holy matrimony. You have my blessing to seize that unholy sanctuary and sever my daughter’s ties to those wicked Muslims,” he declares.

Birru Goshu readies his chiefs for the hunt.

Wibe rises to prepare his army “A war a leader has, a marriage too a leader has, and the clergy too the right leader it shall have. Abuna Selama will soon arrive to take his rightful place amongst you,” Wibe informs the clergy declaring that the Etchége is no longer in power. “But first, I will flush out these usurpers from whatever southern hole they crawled out from and restore the Solomonic line of our ancestors!” Wibe asserts, his words resonating with conviction.



The battlefield resounds with the thunderous beats of war drums, emanating from the kitet and negarit, their ominous echoes shaking the very land beneath. This intense percussion sets the stage for a fateful clash, a convergence of two colossal forces gearing up for a final showdown. Ras Ali, his hands tightly gripping his spear, stands at the forefront, his eyes scanning the vast expanse



before him. In the open field, there is no refuge for warriors, and the impending confrontation looms large, a culmination of forces destined for a decisive encounter.

“My Endresse, should we wait for your uncle’s forces?” a concerned chief queries.

Fixated on Birru Goshu, Ras Ali seethes, “Fate for the hand of its master does not wait!” He turns on his saddle, fury flooding into him as he rides before the fearsome

Yejuu cavalry “Men, they believe some glittering metal gifted by the ferenje will challenge our cavalry’s speed.” With vengeance etched on his face, he growls, “The spear is deadlier than their smoking powder. Show them that! Bring me the severed heads and testicles of these would-be pretenders!”

The Yejuu cavalry beings to rumble.

Across the field, Dejazmach Wibe and his chiefs, observing the Yejuu lines through a telescope, call out for their matchlock infantry to get ready. Wibe’s gaze burns with loathing for the Yejuu and his half-brother Merso who has joined them.

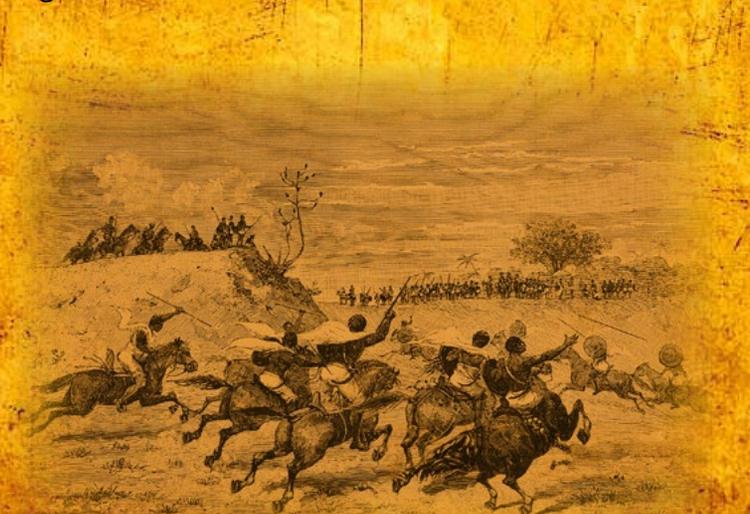
"It is their corruption that turned him against us," a chief attempts to console him.

Dejazmach Wibe's fingers tighten around his rifle "I grieve not, as long as he disowned his family, a brother who is lost, his name too shall be lost along with them this day," he vows.

Tigrean and Semien chiefs meticulously ready their army, demonstrating the loading and priming of flintlock muskets. Behind them, Ras Birru Goshu's vast army stirs, with singers and dancers whipping them into a frenzy. Some warriors sway to the rhythmic drums, while others leap wildly, all entranced by the impending clash.

Priests move through the ranks, blessing warriors and chanting prayers to steel them against the fear of impending death but their voices can not drown the war drums' thunderous reply.

The Yejju war drums intensify as the cavalry charge begins. Mounted riders thunder forward, their wild war cries piercing the air. Dejazmach Wibe's forces stand resolute, a chief steps forth, firing the first shot, but it finds no flesh.



The tension on the battlefield escalates, a sole chief firing, the Yejju riders building momentum towards the inevitable clash of these formidable forces.

Still, the Yejju riders advance, closer and closer, the ground quaking beneath them. . .

Dejazmach Wibe's men retreat unsteadily, fumbling to reload their muskets as the chief fires again, this time felling a horseman.

Heartened, the warriors brace themselves to fire on the order.

A tremendous blast erupts, engulfing all in smoke. Riders fall, but the charge continues unchecked. The Yejju cavalry unleash their spears with lethal accuracy, impaling numerous matchlock men.

Dejazmach Wibe gallops to the archers, "Arrows! All together! Loose! Loose!" He shouts, commanding them to loose arrows upon the thundering horsemen.

The archers let fly, ravaging the riders who plunge among the waiting spearmen to be finished off ruthlessly by sharpened spears and swords.

Ras Ali watches his cavalry's front line obliterated by Wibe's forces.



“Fear not! Creatures who bite lions only numb their own teeth! Send in all — I will deal with these powder-spraying vermin myself!” Chiefs ride out to their forces, and the Yejju infantry warriors surge forth.

Dejazmach Wibe observes the imperial Yejju army swarm over the fallen riders, spears and arrows flying. His gaze fixes on Ras Ali guiding the cavalry’s second line, a smile creeping across his face. “Defeat comes sudden! Advance, and leave me the gunners.”

“And your brother and kin?” a chief asks, sensing a quick triumph is near.

“My relatives to me were and are of no use to me till after death. Kill them all!” Dejazmach Wibe, ice running in his veins, commands elimination.

Ras Birru Goshu leads the frenzied infantry charge, warriors sprinting full tilt, shields and spears ready. Their shimmas blare wildly as they close like great flocks of birds upon their prey.

The Yejju forces roar to meet them, shimmas and weapons whistling like they are caught in a fierce wind as the two sides collide in a frenzy of slaughter, hewing and hacking for the throne.



Ras Ali maneuvers select horsemen through the chaos, sending them to ambush the matchlock men.

Ras Wibe draws his rifle, leading his men forward. They fire raggedly into the cavalry, their volley barely grazing some riders.

The deadly game of horsemen’s spears against flintlocked muskets unfolds in sharp exchanges.

Dejazmach Wibe’s men pick off Yejju riders.

Ras Ali’s cavalry explode with blistering speed, surprising the matchlock armed lines and cutting down many.

But with each passing moment, Dejazmach Wibe’s matchlock armed men overpower the Yejju cavalry, and Ras Ali realizing defeat, with the warnings of his mother ringing in his ears, grows more desperate. . .

The combined forces of Wibe and Goshu surge forward, with Ras Birru Goshu and his men shattering shields, slaying warriors, and reaping death all around. Even Emperor Yohannes III, Empress Menen’s escaped husband, joins the fray, butchering Yejju men in a furious onslaught as the tide begins to turn against the Yejju.

Amidst the chaos, Ras Ali rides swiftly to Ras Merso and his archers, who rain arrows down on his brother’s forces.

“Retreat!” the Endresse shouts to the winds, but in the madness of battle, no one heeds the call.

Both sides find themselves knee-deep in carnage, locked in a crazed frenzy. The Yejju forces teeter on the brink as the relentless onslaught from Tigray, Simien and Gojjam threatens to overwhelm them. Sensing the tide turning, Dejzmach Wibe dispatches more matchlocks to target the Yejju riders.

“Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!” Realizing that his cavalry faces imminent slaughter, Ras Ali orders a full retreat. Drums of retreat echo as he leads the chaotic withdrawal, with more Yejju warriors falling to the ground or being cut apart by the rampaging rebels in merciless pursuit. The battlefield becomes a maelstrom of violence and disorder.

On the blood-strewn field, Ras Ali battles his way through the artillery line. Every fallen matchlock man adds new fuel to his killing frenzy as he desperately attempts to free his Yejju cavalry.

Dejzmach Wibe rallies his gunners, their measured shots joining the volley. Horse and rider alike stumble, strewn across the bloody field.

Dejzmach Wibe rides behind the matchlock line as they unleash a withering volley. Taking aim at Ras Ali, he fires, missing by mere inches, grazing the Endresse’s neck.

A shot Ras Ali instinctively screams for his mother. . .

Within the church walls, Empress Menen falls to her knees as if sensing her son’s injury. She raises her hand in prayer. Her desperation lending wings to whispered appeals to whichever God might listen. She weeps and pleads, as if intuiting the end of Yejju dominion. . .

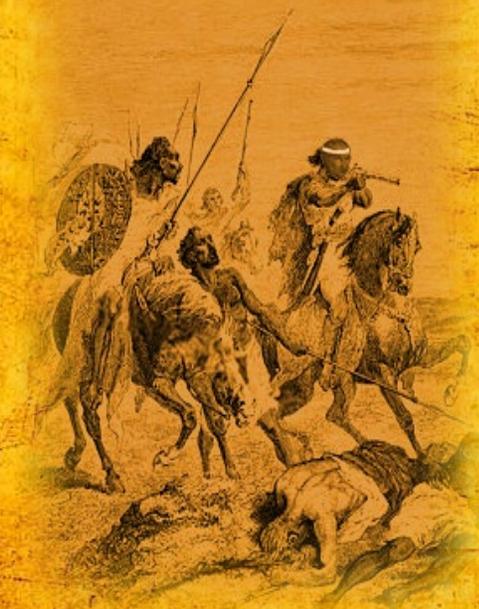
On the battle field, more Yejju riders plunge as Wibe’s men let loose another round. . .

But still, Ras Ali rides on, an undying wrath given flesh. He spurs his cavalry on, leaping over the fallen, as a black storm of spears and arrows rain down. . .

A deafening roar as mus-

kets rip into the horsemen, scything them down.

The battle rages on in bloody tides, as two visions of empire collide in primal violence. Dejzmach Wibe’s and Birru Goshu’s forces now in control, dominate the Yejju, teetering on the razor’s edge of victory. Sensing that the throne is already decided, Dejzmach Wibe initiates the celebration with a triumphant shot into the air.

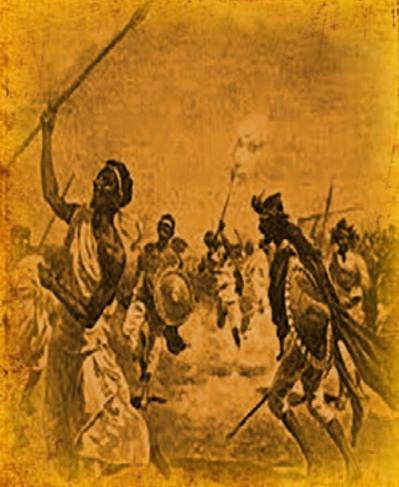


The Surprise

No one knows the road chance will take.

The evening echoes with the thunderous booms of musket fire, resonating through the surrounding slopes as the colossal tent city, housing 50,000 triumphant warriors led by Dejazmach Wibe and Ras Birru Goshu, erupts in jubilation. Bonfires blaze in all directions, casting columns of thick smoke into the sky as cattle, oxen, and sheep are ceremoniously slaughtered for the feast.

Within the sprawling camps, a hive of male and female cooks and carriers of tej and tela weave through entranced warriors. Horn jugs are filled, and substantial portions of meat are distributed with urgency. Drummers beat furiously on goatskin tympani, flautists and krarists perform triumphant tunes, while azmaris passionately sing praises of valor and narrate heroic tales to the distinguished chiefs and warriors.



Amidst this revelry, Dejazmach Wibe reclines on a silk-draped divan inside the main red tent of a royal, sipping tej from a horn birrila. His rifle rests beside him as a royal chronicler diligently records his words of victory. Dejazmach Birru Goshu stands with the chiefs, adorned in lion's mane cloaks and pristine shimmas.

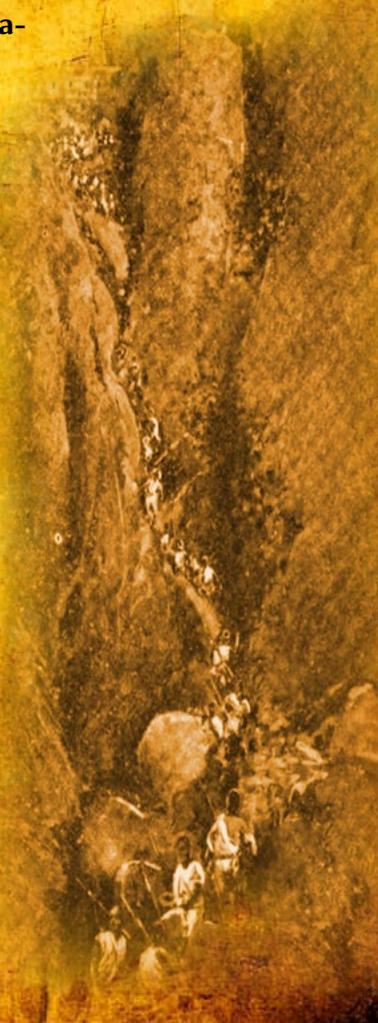
The tent flaps sweep open, and Abuna Salama enters in a golden-stitched robe, staff in hand, trailed by clergy members. Pleasantries and well-wishes are exchanged, sealing the alliance between church and state.

The encampment's celebrations rage through the night.

High on a plateau overlooking the celebration, Ras Biru Alegaz of Yejju-Wollo, uncle of the defeated Ras Ali, surveys the scene with his chiefs, having arrived late to the concluded battle. Scouts scramble up the steep slope toward Alegaz.

"My lord, they gather in the red tent, even the Abuna sits among them," a scout reports urgently.

"The wicked defeat themselves with their conduct. If we move against these drunkards, my lord, they will surely be scattered to the winds," remarks a Wollo-Yejju chief.



Alegaz grins knowingly. "Let the fools lose themselves. Let the madness of victory cloud their thoughts and the tej fill their bellies. Let them sing, dance, and dream, for these are dead men who will soon join the damned in Sodom and Gomorrah." He turns to his chiefs. "Night there is, sleep there is, but our hands will not rest until we snatch victory from their grasp."

Behind Alegaz, rows of men cloak themselves in long, thick gabbies over white shimmas, swords glinting in the moon light—a formidable otherworldly army.

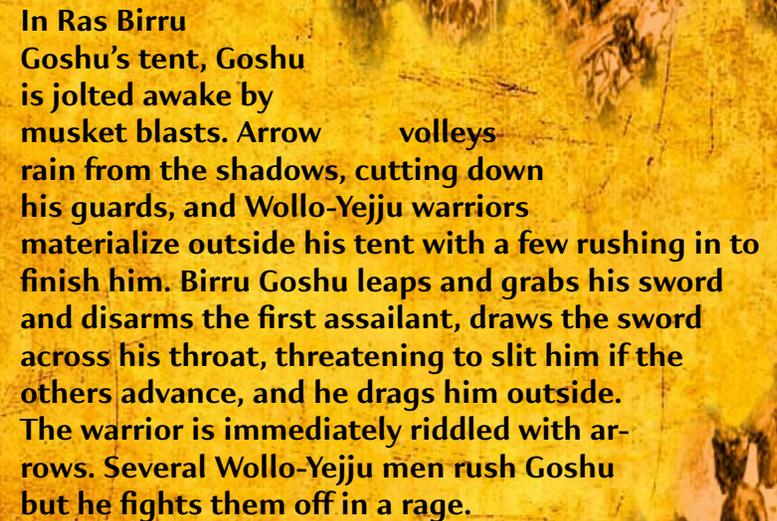
In the dead of night, a torrent of thousands of Wollo-Yejju warriors cascades down the slopes toward the sprawling city of tents below. The camp lies silent, save for the crackling of fires and the occasional snores or coughs of sleeping warriors.

Bleary-eyed guards stumble along the outskirts, some drunk, struggling to remain alert. Suddenly, spears and arrows whistle through the darkness, striking them down. The Yejju warriors fan out, slitting throats with short blades, stifling any cries of sleeping warriors.

The Wollo-Yejju warriors sweep into the unguarded camp, arrows and spears raining down in a brutal ambush.

Screams rend the air as Dejazmach Wibe's warriors stumble from tents firing muskets, shooting blindly into the night.

Ras Alegaz's warriors move with demons' speed, slaughtering all who rose to meet them. Ras Alegaz directs contingents of warriors to quickly close in and surround Dejazmach Wibe's red tent.



In Ras Birru Goshu's tent, Goshu is jolted awake by musket blasts. Arrow volleys rain from the shadows, cutting down his guards, and Wollo-Yejju warriors materialize outside his tent with a few rushing in to finish him. Birru Goshu leaps and grabs his sword and disarms the first assailant, draws the sword across his throat, threatening to slit him if the others advance, and he drags him outside. The warrior is immediately riddled with arrows. Several Wollo-Yejju men rush Goshu but he fights them off in a rage.

In Emperor Yohanees's tent, the emperor kneels, clutching his crown as Wollo-Yejju warriors train their swords and spears on him.

Across the camp, total confusion reigns as men and women run screaming and weeping. The Yejju methodically eliminate fighters, cutting off escape routes.

At Dejazmach Wibe's tent, the matchlock-armed warrior guards huddle, muskets raised and

swords flashing. They fire at the surrounding Wollo-Yejju mass, each shot claiming a life. But for each one shot-down, two more attack with spears and swords.

Panic sets in; musket fire explodes as they shoot back into the night, spotting shadows while losing men one by one.

Inside the red tent, Dejazmach Wibe and the Abuna bear witness to their men falling, one after another, until the last warrior succumbs and the relentless musket fire finally subsides. Shadowy figures appear, they stand motionless outside until the tent flap parts. Wollo-Yejju warriors pour in, filling the tent, vastly outnumbering those inside. Dejazmach Wibe's men form a defensive ring around their leader.

Ras Alegaz enters, eyes locking with his nemesis. He focuses on the Abuna and clergy, moving closer while the cries of dying men from the outside reach them.

Dejazmach Wibe glares defiantly. "Prepare to meet your maker!" Wibe seizes his rifle, rage twisting his features.

"By God's will, your rebellion ends tonight!" The victor Ras Aligaz shouts as weapons are raised all around him.

"Mercy for life, God will judge each of you according to your own ways. . ." declares the Abuna " . . . do not let sin and murder become your downfall." The Abuna and the clergy beg and plead with the warriors for God's mercy through the tension of flame, blood, and the massacre proceeding outside according to no heavenly or earthly laws.

"Only a leader who truly cares for his people prevents further bloodshed." Ras Aligaz eyes Dejazmach Wibe. "You are no such leader but a damned usurper!" Alegaz counters.

Dejazmach Wibe glares back unbroken. "Then do your God's work, butcher. My soul is prepared." His finger moves to the trigger and the Wollo-Yejju tighten their grip on swords and spears.

"In the name of the Lord of life, I implore you to calm this man's pride and cease this madness!" Alegaz addresses the Abuna giving Wibe a last chance before slaughter.

Silence settles in the tent but filtering sounds of anguished cries of the dying and the triumphant roars of the victors intertwine, with terrifying massacre echoing with the cacophony of clashing steel and musketfire.

Outside, fleeing warriors are cut down by fresh Wollo-Yejju reinforcements. Terror spreads as the Yeju attackers gain ground. Birru Goshu gathers his remaining Gojjam fighters, but they are vastly outmatched. Staying would mean certain death. Birru Goshu urgently prods his men toward the captured Yeju horses. But no matter what they do the Wollo-Yejju have them dead to rights.

A sudden cacophony of horns and drums suddenly rings out— a resounding proclamation of surrender. Reluctantly, the Wollo-Yejju warriors lower their arms as their foes lay down their weapons and drop to the grounds with hands in the air.

Everyone stops to move except for Birru Goshu who leads his Gojjam forces to the herdsmen, mounting up by the hundreds and thundering away in droves.

The Wollo-Yejju warriors, having accomplished their unbelievable coup as thousands of Dejazmach Wibe's men surrender, begin to celebrate and a different kind of victory sounds sweep the camp.

In the main red tent, Dejazmach Wibe lays down his weapon and reluctantly accepts chains at Ras Alegaz's order. He is shackled with his head hanging low in shame and utter disbelief as a guard hammers his chains in place—his trajectory from a prospective emperor to a prisoner unfolding in a mere matter of hours.

“Inform my nephew, the Endresse, that by Allah's divine will we have captured the enemy and will deliver them for judgment at Debre Tabor,” Ras Alegaz commands.



Ras Alegaz, having captured the most dangerous rebel in the realm, watches the dispatched messenger hurry out. Words are communicated and messengers fan out on swift horses, to deliver the astonishing news across the kingdoms.

As morning dawns, the entire camp of 60,000 warriors, prisoners, providers, horses, and cattle prepares to march under the banner of the conquering Ras Alegaz of the Wollo-Yejju.



The Yejju VS The Shifta

When the moon sets, the sun rises

A Yejju messenger rides across the heart of the highlands, navigating the unforgiving terrain, pushing the limits of his horse's endurance, determined to spread the news. Reaching the shores of Lake Tana, where the wounded Yejju army is encamped, he traverses through the deflated warriors, breathless and excited. With a voice that cuts through the heavy air, he screams the news of victory to the puzzled warriors. The messenger, rides directly to the red tent of the Endresse, bursts in, finding Ras Ali still adorned in his battered armor, surrounded by his turbaned chiefs who turn to him with the sudden commotion. Aflame with exhilaration, the messenger delivers the news of the momentous turn of events. Initially in disbelief, Ras Ali rises with newfound vigor, as the realization of the victorious shift permeates the atmosphere.

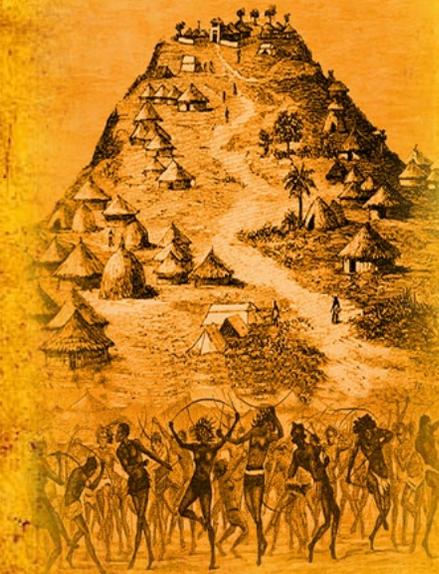
Across the Yejju territories, a seismic wave of jubilant bedlam erupts in towns and villages. Forces from all corners—Ras Alegaz's marching warriors, Ras Ali's battle-worn army, and Empress Menen's small yet determined force—all converge on the royal city of Debre Tabor. This surge of warriors sends ripples through the kingdoms, reshaping alliances in the wake of an unforeseen triumph.

Debre Tabor, the jewel of the Yejju capital, rises majestically in the highlands of central Ethiopia. The green plains surrounding the Yejju stronghold blaze in the early morning light, casting a fiery glow upon the city. Columns of hazy smoke rise from bonfires and campfires, creating an ethereal haze hovering above the city like an inferno.

The scene teems with frenzied movement—riders, dancers, and people scampering on foot. The air throbs with pulsating drums, resonating through the city gripped in wild revelry.

Within the main palace, mounted and unmounted warriors stir outside the grand walls. Many embrace, some weep, stunned spirits unable to grasp this unexpected reunion after their defeat on the battlefield. Inside the partially lit, crowded court, Ras Ali sits enthroned in lion's mane and war

attire. Ras Biru Alegaz, the savior of his rule, stands prominently at his side.



Suddenly, heavy chains click loudly, cutting through the celebratory atmosphere. Yejju chiefs surround approaching figures, led by the captive Abuna Salama, the Alexandrian bishop. His hands free of fetters, the Abuna



walks through the hostile crowd. Chained prisoners of war follow, including Dejzmach Wibe and allies, their faces hidden in darkness.

The Abuna bows before Ras Ali. "Honorable Endresse, the lord has decided on your triumph. After the victory, the lord teaches us to be kind, to forgive each other, to bear with each other, for we

are all sinners," he appeals for the prisoners. "If anyone has a grievance, make peace."

He turns to the court, "It is only through the lord that we reconcile to things, whether to things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross for all of us by his son, our lord and savior Jesus Christ. For without holiness, no one will see the gates of heaven, no one will see the house of the lord!" The Abuna urges for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Shifting on his throne, Ras Ali fixes his gaze on Wibe. "Your holiness, the Lord also tells us that when a brother sins against his brother and does not repent, to treat him as you would the devil!"

"If a brother sins, Endresse, you point out their faults, and if they do not listen to you, then

tell it to the Church and they will not refuse to repent," counters the Abuna.

"Let's hear it then!" demands the furious Endresse.

"My sin was protecting our Christian kingdom from enemies!" retorts the defiant Dejzmach Wibe, sparking Muslim ire. "I alone defended our lands from their incursions! Their agent told of your uncle's treachery, converted to our enemy's religion. I—"

"The baboon's way brings each person to ruin, do you hear me?!" the offended Endresse rises. "What is it I have to do to convince my countrymen that I am a true Christian who is guided by the spirit and the word of our lord and savior? Do I have to be baptized again Abuna?!" he demands an answer from the Abuna but there is none.

"Ambition deceives, then deceives others, spreading lies like disease to turn countrymen against each other" interjects Empress Menen, entering with her entourage. She walks straight to Dejzmach Wibe. "His own blood knows a brother's sins better than others." Her eyes move to Dejzmach Merso, Dejzmach Wibe's sibling, standing with the Yejju.



"A thief claims anything to go free!" Ras Ali stares down Dejazmach Wibe. He stands and salutes Merso, then approaches the prisoners. Scanning the chained allies of Wibe, Ras Ali's eyes miss a heavily garbed Emperor Yohannes III who turns away to avoid being found. The Endresse turns to the Abuna "There is no holiness here Abuna for all have sinned against their leader! Their empire!"

The Endresse turns to the Abuna and declares, "For whatever one sows, he also reaps."

The Abuna bows before the Endresse who signals the chiefs who lead the chained men out of the palace. At the last moment Ras Ali spots Emperor Yohannes III scurrying away along with the rest.

"Halt!" shouts the Endresse. The chained gang stops, everyone turns to look at the Endresse, everyone except for Emperor Yohannes III. Ras Ali turns to his mother aghast.

Empress Menen's gaze locks onto the camouflaged Emperor, her eyes widening in surprise and fury at the sight of her young husband among the enemy. "By the name of the lord and savior, by the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the lord is not mocked like this!"

In a state of disbelief, Empress Menen closes in on him, her command cutting through the charged air. "Seize him and bring him to my chamber!" the Empress erupts.

"Let me die! Let me die here and now!" shouts the Emperor as Yejju warriors swoop in, forcibly unshackling the chains from him. He fights back, struggling against their efforts as they hurriedly usher him behind Empress Menen, Ras Ali, and the Abuna, who enter a private chamber.

"What God has joined, none can put asunder," urges the shaken Abuna. "If a man wants to die, let him live."

"This marriage—an old gala woman I married, last night I died in battle is better!" shouts Emperor Yohannes III, sparking Yejju ire.

"Silence, you little boy! I wish I could tie a rope around your neck and end the shame you've brought to my name! By what miracle does light join darkness, you devil? I married you only for position!" snaps Empress Menen.

"Iteye, what God has joined together, let no one put asunder," repeats Abuna Selema, attempting to calm the Empress.

"How dare he! The treacherous men of this kingdom have no shame! Together they go, then against each other they go!" Empress Menen stops and grabs the Abuna's arm. "How can you have faith in anything when you cannot trust anyone, not even the man you share your bed with? How can you know what the lord has decided?"

"The lord has decided on the triumph of your son Iteye. I saw it with my own eyes as Wibe's men



fell like leaves from a wind-shaken tree," the Abuna turns to Ras Ali before meeting the Empress's gaze.

"Please, let me die!" begs a weeping Emperor Yohannes III.

"You will serve us, for we are the Yejju!" Empress Menen turns to her guards. "Take this dog away from my sight and chain him in my chambers!" she commands, her words hanging heavily in the tense atmosphere.

"Our enemies are many and those who each other mistrust and suspect for each other cannot watch out for their common enemy." Ras Ali, watching the Emperor being dragged away takes command of the chamber.

"The mouse that good sense has, with the family eats, but these scattering rats like the Goshu's, Wibe's, Kinfu's would rather fight for crumbs!" adds Empress Menen in support of her son.

She turns to Ras Ali, "The Yejju reign is supreme son!" she reclaims her calm and power. "No rebel will ever threaten Yejju rule again!" she proclaims grabbing her son's hand and walking with him back to the throne room.

Yejju chiefs, nobles, warriors, and the clergy bow in unison as mother and son stride into the grand hall together, commanding attention. With regal grace, they take their seats side by side, symbolically reclaiming the throne as the undeniable source of power across the kingdom.

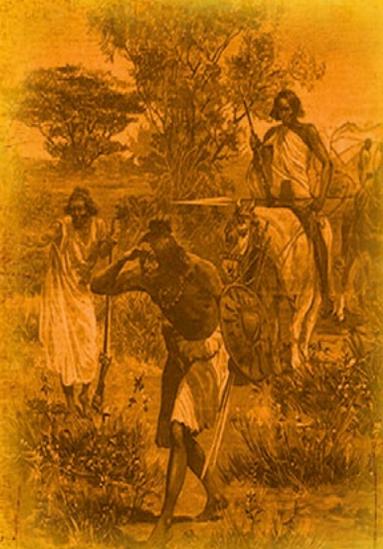
"We are the Yejju, and the might resides in our hands!" they declare, raising their intertwined hands in a triumphant gesture, met with thunderous cheers from the elated court.



A well-guarded caravan winds through a dense forest, the air is thick with tension as vigilant guards scan for danger.

Suddenly, chaos shatters the peace.

Guards are systematically picked off by unseen assailants attacking from all sides. The forest ambush is a blur of violence. The forest comes alive as warriors descend from trees, swiftly surrounding the caravan. Outnumbered guards stand resolute, determined to protect provisions at all costs.



An eerie silence hangs over the forest like a shroud, rent only by the sudden peal of galloping hooves. A hooded rider leaps from his mount with predatory grace and lands before the guards.

The lone warrior strides, shimma wrapped tight, steel flashes in his fist as he advances with lethal elegance. A guard lunges with his spear, but the blade severs hand from arm in a spray of gore.



His throat is open next before a shocked gasp can pass his lips.

Four others rush, only to be dispatched by a whirlwind dance of death that leaves them crumpled before their foes even knew danger. Crimson stains the forests floor.

“Kassa! Kassa! Kassa!” The name awakens terror in all who hear it. Guards drop shaking blades and fall to their knees at his approach, a towering shadow shifting under a blood-drenched sword.

“You’ve heard of me?” Kassa asks a young guard. “Y-Your name and exploits are known to all!”

“Have mercy, we are countrymen!” pleads an older guard.

“What do they call me?” Kassa asks.

“The Shifta, Shifta of Qwara!” replies the young guard.

Kassa smiles, a flash of splintered bone in the gloom with his charm returning “Rise, you’ve nothing to fear from me. We are brethren who seek good Western men like you, but draw steel in my lands, and may the lord show mercy, for I shall not!”

The forest rumbles as the Shifta warriors emerge from their hiding by the hundreds.

Kassa, helping some guards stand, adds, “You’re welcome to join us for men who resemble each other should stand with one another.”

“Rise, rise, rise friends, may our enemies perish in your stead! Which house do you hail from?” Gabreye leads Kassa’s men swarm the caravan, laughing and joking as they inspect provisions.

As Kassa approaches the wagons, piercing screams rend the air within. He slashes open the curtains to reveal noblewomen’s tear-stained faces huddled amongst crumpled silks—pitiful shells beside the tattered maids quaking at their feet.

No sooner do the first Shifta warriors pour in like ravenous wolves, than greedy hands seize elegant fabrics and tangle in flowing hair. Pleas for mercy mingle with light laughter as eager men unaccustomed to female company in far too long lay claim to stolen prizes.

“Such beauty, skin as if carved from almonds,” cries one,

“The sweet honey of Gonder clings to their skins and lips,” another howls.

“Beauty and one’s lot at birth are ordained, these are of a different stock than us!” a resigned one walks away.

Kassa stands frozen amid the chaos, when movement draws his eye—a maid turns with familiar features. Recognition strikes like flint. It is the Fenja house servant he once saved from poisoning's bite, long ago in a past now vanished.

"Kassa, why choose this pitiful one who herself beauty does not know when these astonishing beauties are gawking at you?" A warrior japes, earning a glare from Kassa.

"Silence, you fools, appearance is better than she is. This woman of gentle people reminds one of home," Gabreye smiles at her, defending her from his confused men.

The maid suddenly screams and bolts from the wagon in terror. Wild laughter and Kassa's shadow trails her flight until Kassa's sure hand seizes her against gnarled bark.

"The path of sin to the top of the one who knows it well it leads." Kassa says to the maid who struggles in terror. "Look at me!" he commands.

Trembling, she raises ochre eyes and gasps, "Please, do not hurt me. . ."

Kassa's gaze softens. "Why would I harm the one I once saved?" The maid stops fighting and looks up at Kassa.

"Remember me, sinner?" recognition dawning in her wide eyes, "Kassa?" she answers hesitantly, gasping for air, "Kassaye?" she gets closer, struck by the hardened warrior he has become. Kassa smiles, and walks away from her. The maid trails after him, shuddering. "Kassaye?" Hope and horror warring in her whisper. Kassa takes a small satchel and fills it with grain from one of the provisions.

Gabreye comes by to exchange a few words with the maid who remains in stunned horror by the violence around her.

"Whether they kick one, sell one, or exchange one for others, we all have to find a way to eat," Kassa hands her the satchel.

Gratitude fills the maid's eyes, realizing she was spared from marauders. Even the frightened women are captivated by Kassa's gentile manner, their eyes are on him, admiring his handsome, youthful appearance.

"What happened? I heard your master grew fat after the victory against the Egyptians," remarks Kassa.

"You do not know? Your uncle, your brother" the maid hesitates before revealing in soft broken voice, "He, he was taken from us."

Kassa's gaze fixes upwards, past the tree shades to the blue sky above. The unexpected news

of family's demise grips him in its talons.

Silence as Kassa stands motionless.

Without a word, Kassa, alone, walks the bloodied path deeper into the forest cathedral, silence heavy with the weight of all he's lost. Gabreye follows loyally, a quiet guardian as destiny presses close unseen.

Blood-stained sword at his side, contemplative, Kassa grapples with the void where faith once stood. Who is he now, a mere Shifta, this man become legend of the forest, hardened beyond recognition?

Kassa digs into his garment, gripping the Seal of Solomon, he looks up at the sky at the unhearing heavens.

"Mourning that cruel bastard?" Gabreye asks.

Kassa turns, flame-eyed. "We have to grow stronger," he declares, eyes sparkling with determination.

Gabreye understands—the time has come and the trials ahead will shape this son of fate into the blade that will change the kingdoms.

"Is it time?" Gabreye's voice rises with anticipation.

"Time reveals all." With lethal grace, Kassa hurls the emblem, embedding it in a distant tree.

"We are our ancestors," Kassa utters through clenched jaw, eyes glistening as memories of Kinfu, his mother, and Debre Markos flood his mind. The spirits of all those who came before and filled his soul with purpose seem to roar within him. "They are us, and we are them," he whispers, tears now streaking his cheeks. "Their dreams, their sacrifices—they live on in us." His voice cracks with rising fervor. Gripping his sword tighter, emotion swelling in his chest, he raises the blade skyward. "It is our time to answer their call!" With tears of reverence and rage, he screams as if addressing the endless line of ancestors who had fought and bled for this sacred duty he now embraced with his entire being.

"Qwara, Ye-Maru-Quemis, the West, everything that belongs to me by right will be ours!" Destiny's herald blazes before them, "Tell the men to get ready! We are going to take it all!" Kassa commands ready to change the fates of all.

Kassa walks to the tree with the embedded emblem, sunlight filters through the watchful forest and lands on him and shrouds him with a halo.

Suddenly, a roar and a regal lion emerges from the shadows—an awe-inspiring lion, its golden mane glistening in the dappled sunlight. Time seems to stand still as Kassa, unafraid and commanding, locks eyes with the king of the jungle, a silent acknowledgment passing between them.

In that terrifying moment, Kassa walks straight to the lion, in a profound connection to the untamed creature, and he stretches his arm for an encounter with controlled but adventurous soul. The majestic lion purrs like a cat under his touch before leaping away as the rustling leaves and distant calls of unseen warriors come, venturing away deeper into the lush greenery.

Kassa watches the lion disappear as he walks back to the tree, the forest floor rumbling with thousands of warriors stomping it as they hear the word from Gabreye. Kassa gazes at the emblem of destiny that calls on him, eyes blazing with fire, he pulls it out—the glimmering seal reflecting the weight of a kingdom's hopes shines bright.

With solemn reverence, he pressed it to his chest, closing his eyes as its power and responsibility sink deep into his flesh and soul. When he opens his eyes once more, fresh tears glisten on his cheeks. But now a steely resolve still upon his features. With slow, deliberate care, Kassa's hands fasten the seal — the symbol of his lineage's legacy.

Kassa cues his horse, a swift steed that seems to share his fiery spirit thunders forth, echoing the heartbeat of hundreds of hardened warriors surrounding him.

With effortless grace, Kassa vaults onto his horse, a singular figure at the forefront of this formidable assembly. The air crackles with anticipation, and the dappled sunlight that filters through the watchful forest now bathes them in a warm, golden glow.

The moment of reckoning is here, and the forest seems to echo the thunderous beat of a collective pulse. Kassa, the orphan, the Shifta of



Qwara, sits tall in the saddle, emblem shining on his chest, as thousands of warriors, unified in purpose, await his command.

Kassa throws back his head and lets out a ferocious roar that shakes the heavens.

“Men! For years we have lived hidden in the jungle in our own homeland. No more!” His words tear through the ranks with primal fury. Swords are drawn from sheathes with a keening rasp, and thousands of voices join the call in a battle cry to wake the ancestors.

“With me, my brothers! With me I will give you the West, I offer you the empire! We take back what is ours by the blood in our veins on earth and the favor of our lord and savior in the heavens!”

As one, the vast shifta army bellows their response, a sound to shatter the jungle and break mountains.

“Give me your arms and I will give you Jerusalem and beyond!” With fire in his eyes, Kassa whirls his charger and plunges into the golden sea of upraised steel. From the heart of the jungle rises

a wave to drown all foes in the kingdoms, to shake the empire, and write a new chapter across the stars.

A new beginning is dawning, carried on a storm that Kassa and his warriors are now about to unleash upon a world that dares to deny them their destiny and freedom. From this moment on, change is upon the kingdoms and beyond, borne on the wild thunder of Kassa's charge into legend.

The majestic lion lets out a mighty roar from somewhere deep in the jungle as if to announce, the conquering Lion of Judah has risen.



CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Mothers and Sons

A wise son makes a glad mother, but
a foolish one is the grief of her.

A dense emerald belt of jungle sways as if pelted by an unseen tempest, though no clouds darken the massive mountains rising behind it. Slowly, a legion of warriors, hundreds strong, trickles out from the verdant jungle onto the grassy slopes, winds through the misty highlands, crests the hills, and converges upon the vast expanse of Lake Tana in the Western realms.

At the forefront of the procession rides Kassa Hailu, his presence commanding atop his magnificent stallion. Beside him is his stalwart companion Gabreye, their camaraderie evident in every stride.



Following them is a contingent of fierce Shifta warriors, their stoic demeanor speaking of battles fought and victories won.

The sun casts a golden hue over the landscape, lending an air of tranquility. The warriors traverse through a small village that lies nestled in a verdant valley, surrounded by gently rolling hills blanketed in lush greenery. Thatched-roof huts dot the village, their walls woven from sturdy reeds harvested from nearby marshlands. Smoke rises lazily from cooking fires, mingling with the earthy scent of damp soil.

“Kassa! Kassa! Kassa!” young children run out of their huts in excitement. As the procession passes through the narrow streets, the villagers emerge cautiously from their homes. Skepticism gives way to awe as they witness the spectacle unfolding before them. Burlap satchels filled to the brim with life-sustaining grains are distributed with care to the elders, each bag offering a lifeline to those in need.

Men, women, and children gather around, their faces lit with gratitude. Where once there may have been fear of marauding armies, now there is only profound appreciation for these unexpected benefactors. In their eyes, Kassa and his companions are not mere mortals but angels of mercy, sent to deliver them from hardship and despair in the time of warfare.

Breaking from their dusty entourage, Kassa and Gabreye, trailed by two riders leading mules laden with bulging grain sacks, take a detour down the village’s muddy central path. Kassa dismounts and strides purposefully to a small but well-kept hut, his heart pounding with anticipation.



As soon as Kassa enters the hut, ducking his head under the low doorway, an old woman launches herself towards him with a cry of pure, unadulterated joy. “Lije! Lije! My son, my beloved son! You have returned to me!” She showers him with kisses, her wrinkled cheeks glistening with freely flowing tears of relief and happiness. Kassa envelops her frail body tightly, as if to shield her from all the suffering she has endured in his absence. With utmost tenderness, he clasps his mother’s delicate hand in his strong, callous ones, pressing a reverent kiss upon it, as he kneels in a silent acknowledgment of the sacrifices she has made for him.

“Emmaye, it’s your unceasing prayers that keep me safe,” Kassa whispers, his voice thick with emotion as he blinks back tears of his own.

Weizero Atitgeb, in tears, gives his hand a gentle squeeze and, as he rises, tenderly cups his face, her eyes searching his for any signs of harm. “As David emerged unscathed from the forest of Hareth, so too have you, Lije. Bless our Mother

Mary for protecting you, Lije.” Her voice trembles with a mixture of pride and relief.

“And, like David, we come bearing spoils from the enemies of the Lord to be presented to the peoples of Qwara,” Gabreye’s voice booms from behind them, his presence filling the doorway.

Weizero Atitgeb, turns to face Gabreye, her noble beauty once again evident in the way she carries herself. “Ante? Meenmetta? They say bodies grow with comfort, but do you grow just by breathing air?” She teases affectionately as she wraps herself around his girth like he is her own child.

Gabreye, robust and muscular as a bull, self-consciously grabs at the small bulge around his sides, his face flushing slightly. “Is it really that bad, Emmaye?” he asks, a hint of insecurity creeping into his voice.

“You look like you’ve eaten an entire ox by yourself since I last saw you! Don’t you know that by eating alone, the buttocks expand?” Atitgeb

beams a warm smile as she guides them towards a comfortable sitting area, her laughter tinkling like bells in the small space.

In the background, a flurry of activity unfolds as maids hurriedly prepare fragrant coffee and a sumptuous meal, their movements filled with purpose and excitement. Weizero Atitgeb

delicately lights incense, the sweet aroma enveloping the space like a comforting embrace before she gracefully joins her guests.

“I hope you shared some of that ox with this slender one,” she says, passing Kolo to Kassa as if to fatten him up, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Your son, Emmaye, he doesn’t eat much nor sleep much, but don’t you worry. He’s wiry, yet unbreakable, like the finest steel,” Gabreye reassures her, his voice filled with admiration and respect for his friend.

Kassa reaches out and grabs a handful of Gabreye’s flesh around his waist, a playful grin on his face. “And a plump one is not easily torn, is that not so, brother?”

Gabreye slaps his hand away.

“Let me have a good look at you two,” Atitgeb says, her voice softening as she takes in the sight of her son and his loyal friend. “By Mary’s grace, it has been eight long months and fourteen agonizing days. How was it this time, Lije?” she inquires, grasping Kassa’s rough hands in her own once more, as if to reassure herself that he is truly there before her.

“A stump one stumbles over, Emmaye,” Kassa’s gaze drops to the floor, his jaw clenching as he speaks, each word heavy with the weight of his experiences. “. . . famine, danger, living in the forest—one does not fully grasp the toll it takes until living through it.” He swallows hard, avoiding her searching eyes, as if afraid to reveal the depths of the hardships he has endured.

“A Shifta’s life, Emmaye,” Gabreye interjects, his voice filled with a mixture of pride and sorrow,



“on cabbage, on honey, on berries, and whatever scraps we can find, we survive on until a caravan crosses our path.” He downs a handful of Kolo, the crunching sound filling the momentary silence. “And speaking of what came our way, we encountered one of his relatives,” he adds, his tone growing serious.

Weizero Atitgeb turns to Kassa, her eyebrows knitting together in concern, a silent question in her eyes.

“Kinfu is gone” Kassa takes a deep breath, his voice strained as he confirms the news that his mother has been dreading. “The rumors you heard about him are true, Emmaye.” He reaches out and grasps her hand, his touch gentle yet firm, as if to lend her strength.

Atitgeb approaches Kassa, her weathered hands trembling as she holds his gaze, searching for any glimmer of his feeling on this monumental event. But the sorrow and anger she finds there confirm her worst fears, and her heart clenches painfully in her chest. She knows that her gentle touch cannot contain the endless torrent of rage churning within her son, the fury that threatens to consume him whole.

“The time has come to stake our claim on Qwara, Emmaye,” Kassa declares, his voice rising with each word, his eyes burning with a determination that both frightens and awes her. “I will not rest until our birthright is restored, until the injustices done to our family are avenged!”

“My little Tewodros,” Atitgeb whispers, her voice trembling with a mixture of pride and fear, “you have grown so strong, so fierce. But I worry that the weight of this burden will crush you, that

the flames of vengeance will consume you Lije.” Her eyes glisten with unshed tears, her love for her son warring with the knowledge of the difficult path that lies ahead of him.

“Kinfu, gone?!” she murmurs, her disbelief echoing in the stillness. “By Mary’s grace. . .+”

Kassa takes her hands, his grip firm and reassuring. “The downfall of a father is not the end of his life, Emmaye, his sons have claimed Qwara,” A flicker of vengeance ignites within his eyes, “But we will rise again, stronger, and more powerful than ever before. This, I swear to you on the souls of our ancestors.”

“Have no doubt of it!” Gabreye nods solemnly, his eyes fixed on Atitgeb. “Emmaye. When the wicked man dies, his deeds die with him. Kinfu and his ilk, they are nothing like Kassa, nothing like the true sons of Qwara that stand with him!” he assures, his voice a balm to her wounded spirit.

The maids reappear, bearing a Mesob that, upon unveiling, releases a burst of colors and enticing aromas, nearly toppling Gabreye from his seat in his eagerness. He hurries to get his hands washed, his eyes locked on the Doro



Wat, a sumptuous and spicy chicken stew that cuddles beside the injera. He takes in the Tibs, adorned with spices, and vibrant lentil stews like Misir Wat form a mesmerizing kaleidoscope on the steaming hot communal platter. Gabreye, unable to resist the temptation, dives into the feast with gusto,

forgetting to pause for the customary prayer in his excitement.

Mother and son share a solemn moment, their eyes locked in a silent communication, both grappling with the news of Kinfu's end and the implications it holds for their family and their homeland. The weight of the past and the uncertainty of the future hang heavy in the air between them, but in this moment, they draw strength from each other, united in their love and their determination to overcome whatever obstacles lie ahead.

"Weleta, that mother of his," Weizero Atitgeb breaks the silence, her voice tinged with bitterness, "she'd sooner hand the reins to her mad brother than relinquish what she believes to be rightfully hers." Her words slice through the air like a chilling wind, a grim warning laced with sorrow and apprehension.

"They cannot stop me!" Kassa's response is immediate, a surge of anger coursing through him like wildfire. His eyes blaze with an intensity that matches the fervor in his voice. "I cannot think of anything else but the injustice they've inflicted upon us!" he bellows, his fists clenched tightly at his sides. "I will not rest until Qwara is ours again!" His mother watches him, a silent witness to the tumult of emotions that churn within him, a mix of sorrow and pride reflected in her tear-filled gaze.

"The patient person fine Arake the coming year drinks, Emmaye, I have yet to build an army and test their strength." Kassa reassures his mother, his tone softening as he reaches out to comfort her. Kassa then turns his attention to the maids. He meticulously washes his hands, his motions deliberate and methodical, a stark contrast to the

turmoil brewing within him. With genuine concern, he inquires about the maid's family, his gestures reflecting a kindness that belies the fierceness of his resolve.

"Ante, Tew, eating in haste leads to disaster," Atitgeb admonishes Gabreye gently, her voice a soothing counterpoint to the tension that hangs heavy in the air.

"Emmaye, when hunger gnaws at your belly, any food is a blessing but this. . ." Gabreye's retort carries the weight of desperation of past suffering, a hunger that transcends mere physical sustenance. "But this. . .this is something else entirely, Emmaye. We've known nothing but cold rations for months."

Gabreye turns to Kassa, "Test their strength? In a bad year, our people eat snakes!" He laughs, "Why wait? Our men are hungry, we can move against those weaklings' sons of his today and eat them for lunch."

"A single swallow will not sate the hunger of many," Kassa's response is measured, his gaze steady, "We must build our strength, once we enter the cauldron, all the houses will be aligned against us." He waits patiently as his mother blesses the meal, a silent prayer hanging in the air as he takes a modest bite, his eyes never leaving hers, a silent vow etched in the depths of his soul.

"May the Lord guide your path, my little Tewodros," Atitgeb's voice echoes in the stillness, a whispered prayer for her son's safety and success as she wraps a large injera around a tasty meat and stew, and feeds her son with tenderness in the time honored tradition of bonding. "May He grant you the wisdom to lead and the strength to endure

what comes," she squeezes his hand once more, "And may He bring you back to me, whole and victorious, when the battle is won."

"Every night, Emmaye," Kassa chokes from the gursha meant to fatten him in one instant, his voice trembling with a fury born of relentless purpose, "I hear nothing but your prayers for me." The oath thrums through him, a relentless rhythm driving his resolve forward.

Atitgeb's tears fall freely watching him cry, with anguish etched upon her face. With trembling hands, she wipes her eyes with the worn shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Kassa, unyielding in his mission, reaches into the depths of his soul and retrieves the emblem of the Order of Solomon from his shimma, placing it before her with solemn reverence.

"You need not weep and pray for me any longer, Emmaye," he declares, his voice steadfast. "I know who I am and what I must do—" She reaches out, her hand quivering, to claim the emblem from him.

"Hush now," she interjects, her voice a gentle plea to quell his fire. "Let the sorrow of the past fade away." Kassa grabs it before she takes it.

"Emmaye," Kassa's voice rises like a gathering storm, his eyes ablaze with fury that pierces through the fabric of time itself. "You taught me that the past endures only in our memories. I remember, Emmaye, I remember everything!" His fury, a force as relentless as the mighty Blue Nile, courses through him like an endless torrent, "I will not rest until your honor and the honor of all that came before me is restored." He declares, ready to consume all in his path.

"But not yet," he adds, his voice now a low, ominous growl that echoes like distant thunder. "The victor is not the one who rushes headlong into battle, but the one who knows when to bide his time, to strike when the moment is ripe."

As his words hang heavy in the air, and the emblem of his destiny shines in his determined eyes, a crack of thunder splits the sky, a harbinger of the tempest to come.



In the heart of Gonder, the Yejju stronghold, Empress Menen and her son, the Endresse Ras Ali, occupy the opulent chamber at the center of the palace, surrounded by an assembly of chiefs and advisors.

The air is thick with tension, the weight of recent events hanging heavy over the gathered nobles. The recently defeated and humiliated Endresse at the hand of Dejazmach Wibe, his position precarious despite the hollow triumph with the rescue of his rule by his uncle Dejazmach Aligaz, sits with a heavy heart, his eyes downcast and his shoulders slumped. Empress Menen, ever the shrewd observer, discerns the threat within their midst, the unspoken fears and doubts that threaten to unravel the very fabric of their rule.

With a subtle gesture, the Empress directs her son's gaze towards the clergy and Imams in the chamber, their fervor palpable, their whispered conversations carrying an undercurrent of discontent. She shares a knowing look with Ras Ali, a silent communication that speaks volumes of the challenges they face. In one swift motion, she seizes his hand and guides him through the throng of religious figures, her grip firm and unyielding, a reminder of the strength they must embody in the face of adversity.

"Woe to those who've never tasted the bitterness of defeat," the Empress declares, her voice cutting through the murmurs like a knife through silk. "For they shall never truly savor the sweetness of victory in this life." Her gaze sweeps the chamber, piercing and unflinching, like a lioness surveying her domain for any sign of weakness or defiance.

"And there are those among us," she continues, her tone dripping with disdain, "Who've never known the agony of being vanquished, for they have never had the courage to venture into the heat of battle." Her words hang in the air, heavy with accusation, and a murmur ripples through the

gathered clergy and Imams, their faces flushing with a mixture of shame and indignation at being so openly called out by the Empress herself.

"But let me tell you this," Empress Menen presses on, her voice rising with each word, "there is no such thing as true victory or defeat. There is only movement, the constant ebb and flow of power and influence, the eternal dance of those who would seek to shape the destiny of our great kingdom."

She comes to a halt then turns to her son, her eyes locking with his, a fierce intensity burning within their depths. "We do not know what tomorrow holds for any of us," she admits, her voice softening for a moment, "but what we do know is that the Yejju power remains unbroken, preserved through our commitment to peace and unity, rather than the pettiness of bloodshed and warfare."

The fractures and divisions sown in the aftermath of the Debra Tabor battle have thrown the Yejju into disarray, but the court, moved by the Empress's words, erupts into cheers for their rulers, their loyalty and devotion rekindled in the face of her indomitable spirit.

Seizing the moment, the Empress ushers the Endresse into the hallway for a private conversation, away from the prying eyes and ears of the court. In the sanctity of this secluded space, she grasps her son's hands, her regal demeanor slipping for a moment to reveal the profound concern that lies beneath.

"My son," she whispers urgently, her voice trembling with a mixture of fear and frustration, "a wise leader knows that true power lies in securing the loyalty of his own people, not in chasing after

the scraps that others would see fit to throw at his feet.”

Ras Ali opens his mouth to protest, but the Empress silences him with a look, her grip on his hands tightening almost painfully.

“These scattered adversaries, the Goshus, the Wibes, the Kinfus,” she hisses, her

eyes narrowing to slits, “they would rather fight amongst themselves for crumbs than sit at our table and partake in the bounty that is rightfully ours.” She whispers in his ear “They are nothing more than jackals, scavenging at the fringes of our empire, waiting for the moment to strike at our heels.”

The empress releases her son’s hands and begins to pace the hallway, her Kemise swishing aggressively with each step, like the tail of an agitated lion.

“We cannot allow these weaklings to threaten our reign,” she insists, her voice rising once more, echoing off the stone walls. “We must be careful, Lije, in how we wield the power that has been entrusted to us,” she stretches her hand and

grips his hands once again “We must use the firm Yejju hands that have held this kingdom together through countless storms and trials.”

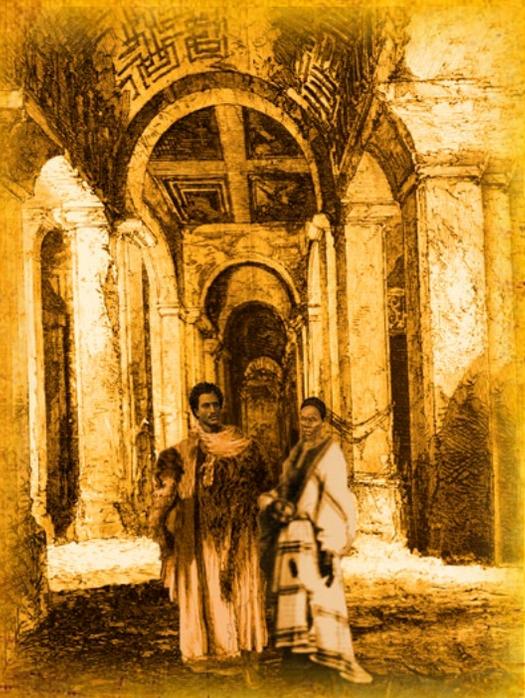
“It’s better to have a little with peace than much with strife, Emmaye,” the Endresse declares, his voice laced with defiance as he withdraws his hands from his mother’s grasp, the warmth of her touch replaced by the chill of the palace air.

The Empress’s eyes flash with frustration, her face hardening like a mask of stone. “After all these years of tutelage under my guidance, the cruelty and treachery of the men in this kingdom have yet to truly settle in your mind, Lije,” she scolds, her words sharp and biting, each one a dagger aimed at her son’s heart.

She steps closer, her presence imposing and regal, the very embodiment of power and authority. “I am not just your Empress, but your mother,” she reminds him, her voice softening for a moment, a flicker of tenderness in her eyes. “And all the negotiations you have made without my guidance will cost us dearly.”

Ras Ali’s jaw clenches, his eyes narrowing as he meets his mother’s gaze head-on. “He who forgives ends the quarrel, is that not what you taught me, Emmaye?” he counters, his words a challenge and a reminder all at once.

The Empress’s lips curl into a sneer. “To forgive is wisdom, but to forget is stupidity,” she retorts, each word a lash against her son’s pride. “I raised you to have a forgiving heart, to offer mercy to those who seek it. But never forget the names of your enemies, for they will surely not forget yours.”



She leans in closer, her breath hot against Ras Ali's face, her eyes boring into his with an intensity that would make lesser men quail. "That treasonous Wibe will come for the throne again, mark my words," she warns, her voice a hiss, a promise of retribution to come.

Ras Ali's hands ball into fists at his sides, his anger a tangible thing, a fire burning in his veins. "Our enemies stretch across the lands like a plague," he snarls, his voice rising with each word. "Gojjam, Damot, Dembeya, Lasta - they all seek to undermine us, to tear us down from within. But above all others, there is one name I will never forgive or forget, one man whose very existence is an affront to all that we hold dear."

He meets his mother's gaze, his eyes blazing with a fury that matches her own. "That wife-stealing Goshu," he spits, the name a curse upon his lips. "He is the one I must erase from this earth, the one whose blood will wash away the stain of his betrayal."

Empress Menen nods slowly, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth, a glimmer of pride in her eyes. "You are right, Lije," she concedes, her grip on his hand tightening once more. "Our enemies are many, and they grow bolder by the day. I know you freed Wibe to appease the Abuna, but his lies have poisoned the hearts of the Begameder and Amhara against us, even as you remain entangled with that bastard Goshu on his amba."

Ras Ali's brows furrow, his face a mask of determination and resolve. "There will be no reconciliation with one who has violated the sanctity of marriage," he declares, his voice a low growl, a promise of vengeance to come.

The Empress nods, a laugh bubbling up from deep within her, a sound that is at once incredulous and resigned. "Even our staunchest allies in Wollo grumble about your decision to grant Birru Aligaz governorship," she muses, her eyes distant, as if seeing a future that only she can divine. "And now, his brother speaks of invading the lands of the Muslim chiefs, a move that could upturn the delicate balance we have worked so hard to maintain."

She turns to face her son once again, her eyes glinting with a feral light. "If you have no enemies, you are nobody," she declares, her voice ringing out like a clarion call. "But a cow with many owners will be skinny and weak. We must be stronger, Lije. We must be better."

Ras Ali nods, his own exhaustion shining through the weariness in his eyes. "I understand, Emmaye," he says softly, his voice a whisper, a promise. "But victory is victory, no matter how it is achieved. Wouldn't it be better to discuss how to negotiate for peace, than prepare ourselves for the battles to come?"

"No!" The Empress shakes her head, her conviction unshakable. "No, Lije," she replies, her words a decree, a commandment. "Victory is always on the side of the strong!" She peers at him, judging his commitment, "For now, our enemies are like hyenas, scavenging on the leaves of lions."

She stops him cold with a look, her eyes piercing his very soul, laying bare the doubts and fears that lurk within. "But there will come a time when a lion must fight another lion," she warns, her voice a whisper, a promise of blood and glory to come.

“Do you hear me, my son?” She grabs hold of her son’s hand once more, her grip a vise, a tether that binds them together in this moment of reckoning. Ras Ali falters, uncertainty clouding his features, the weight of his mother’s words settling heavily upon his shoulders. “What would you have me do, Emmaye?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper, a desperate plea for guidance in the face of such overwhelming odds.

The Empress pauses mid-stride, her eyes softening as she takes in the sight of her son, the man who has inherited the burden of leadership, the mantle of power that she has carried for so long. “A leader must know when a quarrel cannot be settled through words alone, when it is time to let the sword speak for itself.” She gets closer, her hand coming to rest on his cheek, a tender gesture that belies the steel in her eyes.

“The Yejju have always finished what they started,” she reminds him, her voice barely above a whisper, a secret shared between mother and son. “And if these rebels and traitors think that they can test our resolve, that they can challenge our right to rule, then they will learn the true meaning of the wrath of the Yejju, the fury of a dynasty that has endured for generations.”

With those words, Empress Menen turns and strides back towards the throne room, her head held high. Ras Ali watches her go, his heart heavy with the knowledge of the battles that lie ahead, the sacrifices that must be made in the name of power and destiny.

And so, mothers and sons prepare themselves for the challenges that await them, the

trials and tribulations that will test their strength, their cunning, and their resolve. For in the game of thrones that is the Ethiopian empire, there can be no half-measures, no room for weakness or hesitation. There is only the relentless pursuit of power, the unquenchable thirst for dominion, and the knowledge that, in the end, only the strong will survive to shape the course of history and claim their rightful place among the legends of their people.



The Endresse

When a man is hated, he does not go where he is loved.

Cotton clouds drift lazily over the mountains of Gonder, their slow march consuming the once-bright sun that shimmers over the vast inland sea of Lake Tana. The skies rumble ominously, a gathering thunderstorm threatening to break loose at any moment, mirroring the brewing tempest within the palace walls.

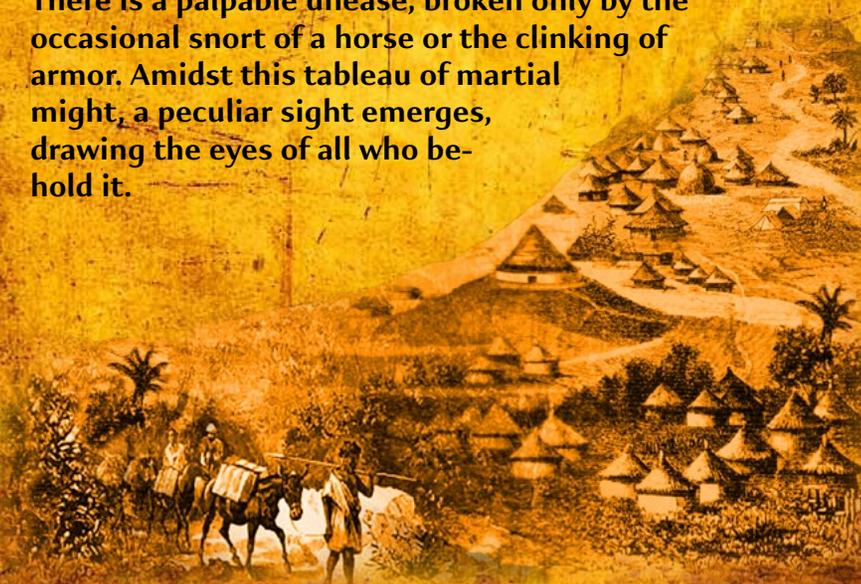
In Debre Tabor, the Yejju cavalry stands alert, their posture rigid and their vigilant stance immovable, a silent sentinel guarding Ras Ali's residence. There is a palpable unease, broken only by the occasional snort of a horse or the clinking of armor. Amidst this tableau of martial might, a peculiar sight emerges, drawing the eyes of all who behold it.

A baggage train of mules, laden with exotic treasures from distant lands, moves slowly through the ranks of the Yejju warriors, a serpentine procession that winds its way towards the heart of the compound. The mules, adorned with colorful tassels and jingling bells, carry an array of European and Turkish goods, their silver and gold embellishments glinting in the disappearing sun, a dazzling display of opulence amidst the austerity of the military encampment.

At the head of this curious caravan rides a British officer, Walter Plowden, a figure of regal bearing and impeccable style. He sits astride his mount with an air of confidence, his red tunic resplendent with shining silver buttons that catch the light with every movement, with smoke filtering out from his pipe curling and twisting in the air.

Walter Plowden constantly wipes dust from his uniform in a futile attempt to keep it pristine, in a subconscious obsession to clean and separate himself from the grime of the surrounding landscape. He places a hand on his side where a ceremonial sword, a gleaming blade, and a holstered pistol are prominently displayed on his waist. He carries himself with quiet dignity, a man secure in his position and superiority, an emissary of a distant land come to forge new alliances and expand the reach of the sovereign power of the empire he represents.

As the baggage train moves through the ranks of the Yejju cavalry, Plowden raises a hand to his mouth and blows a serpentine trail of smoke that coils around the heads of the warriors like a living thing. The locals, their eyes wide with fury, watch the spectacle with a wary gaze, their lips curled in revulsion at the sight of the foreigner and



his strange habits. To them, the act of smoking is a symbol of the hated Turkish Muslim enemies.

Yet Plowden seems oblivious to the hostility that surrounds him, lost in his own world of privilege and entitlement. He puffs on his pipe with a nonchalant air, savoring the rich flavor of the tobacco, as the caravan halts by the palace.

In the dimly lit chamber, Ras Ali, the Endresse, reclines on a plush divan, his piercing gaze fixed upon a magnificent steed as turbaned merchants from Somalia extol its virtues with honeyed words. The animal's sleek coat glistens in the flickering candlelight, its muscles rippling with every movement. Yet even the horse's allure cannot dispel the palpable unease that permeates the room, a suffocating blanket of tension that threatens to smother all in its grasp.



On opposing sides of the chamber, Ras Ali's Muslim and Christian counselors stand rigid, their faces etched with barely concealed scorn as they argue over the appraisal of the horse. Their voices rise and fall like the crashing of waves, each side unwilling to yield, arguing nonsensically over the animal, their words laced with venom and contempt for one another. The Endresse's eyes drift listlessly, taking in the chaos that erupts at the arrival of a most peculiar guest, a foreigner whose very presence seems to ignite the simmering tensions within the chamber.

Consul Walter Plowden strides into the throne room with guides pestering him. The wide-eyed chiefs, nobles, and clergy cast hostile glances at the foreigner, their distaste evident in the curl of their lips and the hardening of their eyes.

"This way, Turk," the consul's guide snaps, his voice cutting through the air like a whip, ushering Plowden forward with a rough shove.

"I told you, I am not a Mohammedan!" the Consul protests, his voice tinged with exasperation. The guide meets his gaze, a silent question in his eyes, challenging the perceived distinction with a raised brow. "Come, Turk, follow my path!"

A sudden tap on the shoulder startles Plowden, and he spins to face an oddly dressed white man, wholly unrecognizable amidst the sea of light-skinned Ethiopians, a pale ghost among the living.

"John!" the Consul exclaims, relief washing over his features like a balm to his frayed nerves.

"It's Yohannes now," John Bell, a general in Ras Ali's army and Plowden's old adventurer friend,

corrects with a warm smile, his eyes crinkling at the edges. He leads the Consul to the Endresse.

Ras Ali remains fixated on the horse, his fingers absently rubbing its chest, tracing the contours of its musculature as the Afe-negus announces the foreigner's presence with a booming voice that reverberates through the chamber. Plowden clears his throat, the sound like the scraping of gravel, and bows deeply before the Endresse, his forehead nearly touching the ground in a display of deference.

"Your Highness," he begins, his voice carrying a practiced air of diplomacy, each word carefully chosen. "As we have written to your court many times without response, I have come personally from Aden as the representative of the British Empire. On behalf of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom, Empress of India, Queen of Canada, Queen of Australia, Queen of New Zealand, and Head of the Commonwealth, I am here to sign a Treaty of Friendship with—"

"Yes, yes, Blowden, is it?" Ras Ali cuts him off, his gaze leaving the horse and landing squarely on him. "Your friend Yohannes there has told us about you and your treaty," his voice dripping with impatience. "Now, why would the ferenji want to sign a treaty with us? What good would come of this so-called friendship?" The Endresse demands a response, but his attention is drawn back to the magnificent horse.

Consul Plowden straightens. "Your Highness, no sovereign nation can do without a treaty of friendship with the greatest empire in the world."

Ras Ali's eyes snap back to the Consul, a cold fury simmering beneath the surface, a volcano

ready to erupt. "Have you brought guns as you did for the Northerners?"

A bead of sweat trickles down Plowden's temple, glistening in the candlelight as he tugs at his collar, the fabric suddenly feeling like a noose around his neck. "Your Highness, I bring friendship to you and all your vassals." He takes a breath, steadying himself, his voice trembling almost imperceptibly. "Her Majesty herself has requested friendship with your kingdom. In time, you will perceive the great advantage to Abyssinia from her intimate connection with the sovereign of the British Empire, whose dominions extend from the rising to the setting sun—"

"Which you conquered with guns, no?" Ras Ali snarls, his frustration boiling over. "I need guns to bring my enemies to heel, and you ferenjis have them!" He points to the Consul's holstered pistol. "I need guns to crush Wibe in the North, the rebellious people of Wag and Lasta, and the treacherous people of Gojjam. I want guns, not some useless treaty of friendship!"

The chamber falls silent, the tension thick enough to cut with a blade. Plowden shifts uncomfortably under Ras Ali's piercing gaze, acutely aware of the firearms at his hip, the weight of the metal suddenly feeling like a burden. The Endresse's advisors and nobles look on, their faces etched with a mixture of apprehension and anticipation, a morbid fascination with the unfolding drama.

"Your Highness. . ." Plowden clears his throat once more, his words measured and deliberate. "There shall be a firm, mutually cordial, and lasting friendship between the ruler of Abyssinia and Queen Victoria, the Queen of England, whose fleets

are to be met with in every part of the seas which encompass the earth.”

As the Consul recites the carefully prepared treaty terms, Ras Ali’s attention drifts back to the horse, his interest waning with every word, a candle flickering in the wind. The official reading commences, and the Endresse feigns interest, stifling a yawn as his advisors and nobles grapple with the meaning of the Queen’s lengthy missive, their brows furrowed in concentration.

“Your Highness,” Plowden persists, attempting to clarify the confusion, his voice strained with the effort. “England wishes the ruler of Abyssinia to receive and protect the envoys or consuls of the Queen of England. And likewise, the Queen of England shall receive and protect the envoys or officials of Abyssinia.”

An advisor approaches Ras Ali, a document in hand, his steps tentative, as if walking on eggshells. “Endresse, there is no harm in signing this treaty. It speaks of trade and friendship.”

“Trade?” Ras Ali scoffs, his voice rising to a shout, a thunderclap in the stillness of the chamber. “Not one ferenji merchant can enter our markets in ten years!”

The outburst jolts Plowden, and he jumps in surprise, looking to John for some help, but he does not interfere on his behalf, regarding him as an outsider.

“Your Highness. . .” A Muslim trader interjects, his tone conciliatory. “As the ancient empires did with outsiders, we too can enter into friendship—”

“It seems useless to me, Endresse,” a Christian noble counters, his contempt for the Muslims evident in the venom in his voice. “You are right. No merchant will ever reach our markets. The ferenji wants something else.”

The chamber erupts into a frenzy of arguments, the nobles quarreling over the details of the pact, their voices once again rising and falling like the crashing of waves against the shore. Their wild gesticulations and heated words create a scene of utter chaos, quite unsettling to the stoic Englishman who stands mute amidst the maelstrom.

“Enough!” Ras Ali ends the discord with a stern command. He fixes his gaze once more upon Plowden, his eyes smoldering with intensity.



“I will sign, ferenji. . .” He points at the Consul’s pistol, his words cutting through the din, “. . .when you provide your pistol and the finest sword your men wield. Then, and only then, shall we have friendship.”

A smile cracks through the Consul’s bearded face, a glimmer of hope in the negotiations, a light at the end of the tunnel.

“Of course, Your Highness. Guns for your friendship.” His hands tremble slightly as he reaches for the gun, the weight of the moment bearing down upon him. He retrieves the pistol and hands it over to the Endresse.

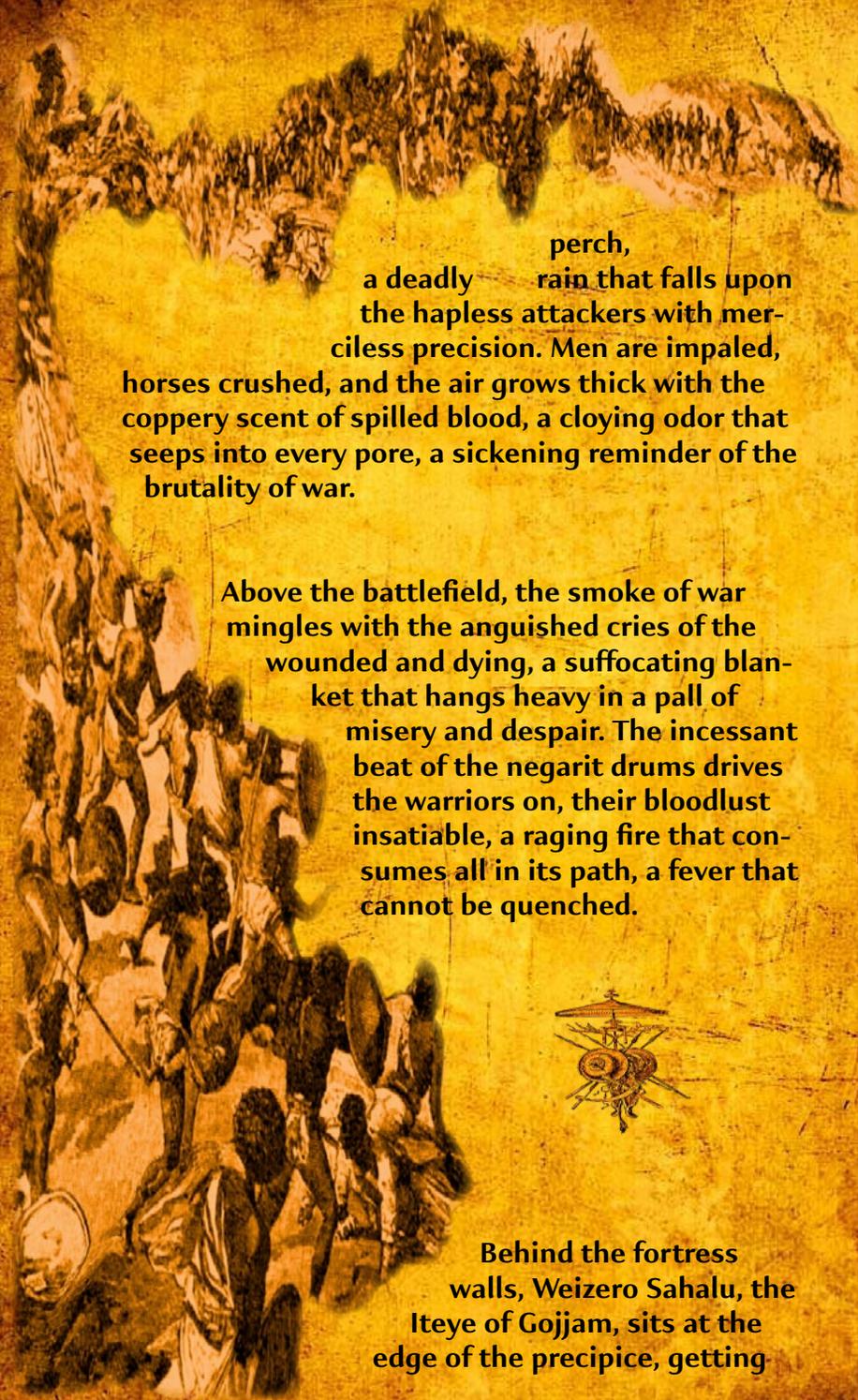


The sound of a pistol shot echoes through the highlands, a crack of thunder that splits the sky in two. In the kingdom of Gojjam, the realms of Dejazmach Goshu and his sons, Biru and Tessema, the heart-pounding rhythm of the negarit war drum stirs the land itself, a pulsing beat that echoes through the hills and valleys, a call to arms that cannot be ignored.

Endresse Ras Ali, astride his caparisoned mount, urges his fearsome Yejju cavalry onward, a tide of fury and vengeance that sweeps across the plains below the fortress of Biru Goshu, an unstoppable force of nature hell-bent on retribution.

“I want his head!” Ras Ali roars, his elaborate lion’s-mane cape billowing behind him, a banner of war that flutters in the wind. His face contorts with rage, a grotesque mask of hatred and betrayal, the knowledge of his sister’s husband’s treachery an unforgivable sin that burns in his veins like molten lava. “Keep charging! I want the testicles of that back-biting, wife-stealing fool!”

The Endresse’s fury fuels his warriors, their fervor building, they advance as a relentless tide of destruction. Biru Goshu directs his warriors from behind the impregnable walls of the fortress, his face set with grim determination, a mask of resolve that belies the fear that gnaws at his gut. The Yejju forces rush up the steep hill, but the defenders of Gojjam are ruthless, unleashing a ceaseless volley of spears, arrows, and boulders from their lofty



perch,
a deadly rain that falls upon the hapless attackers with merciless precision. Men are impaled, horses crushed, and the air grows thick with the coppery scent of spilled blood, a cloying odor that seeps into every pore, a sickening reminder of the brutality of war.

Above the battlefield, the smoke of war mingles with the anguished cries of the wounded and dying, a suffocating blanket that hangs heavy in a pall of misery and despair. The incessant beat of the negarit drums drives the warriors on, their bloodlust insatiable, a raging fire that consumes all in its path, a fever that cannot be quenched.



Behind the fortress walls, Weizero Sahalu, the Iteye of Gojjam, sits at the edge of the precipice, getting

her hair braided while enjoying the sun, a cruel smile playing upon her lips as she watches the carnage unfold below, a twisted spectacle that fills her with a perverse sense of satisfaction. Beside her, Weizerit Yuireb-dar, Ras Ali's sister, trembles in horror, her eyes fixed upon the slaughter of her brother and the Yejju forces at the hands of her husband's army, a nightmare from which there is no escape.

"A fool, when stealing, cannot decide which to take," Sahalu taunts. "Does he fight for you or his other wife?" Her words, a poisonous barb, pierce Yuireb-dar's heart like a dagger.

Yuireb-dar remains silent, her throat constricted with fear and sorrow, a knot of anguish that threatens to choke the very life from her body. Sahalu glares at Biru Goshu, her bastard son conducting the war with fury, then turns to her legitimate son, Tessema Goshu, who stands behind the fortress, as a second line of protection, trembling in terror amidst the chaos.

"I know how you feel, dear," Sahalu says, her voice laced with disdain. "I, too, have been at war," she mocks as she fixes her attention on Biru Goshu with a storm of fury that threatens to break loose at any moment. "Your bastard husband has destroyed my family from the inside out." Sahlu steels a maid's shaking hands "His jealousy and ambition know no limits. He is but a rotten finger that we should have cut off and cast aside long ago, before he grew to infect us all," she laments.

A maid brings a mirror to Sahalu's face, revealing her tightly braided and buttered hair, a vision of regal beauty that belies the hatred that lurks beneath the surface. The Iteye notices the mirror shaking in the maid's hand and grabs her



wrist firmly, her fingers digging into the soft flesh like talons. "Stop your quivering, you weakling!"

Iteye Sahalu berates the maid, her eyes flashing with annoyance. "Five times our fortress has been attacked. You've seen that large army of her relatives, used up against us for nothing, and still you tremble in fear?"

Rising to her feet, Sahalu radiates confidence, secure in the knowledge that the Yejju forces can never penetrate their highland forts, a bastion

of strength that will stand tall against the Yejju assaults. She turns to Yuireb-dar, a cruel smile playing upon her lips, a twisted reflection of the suffering that surrounds them. "Make her presentable, for we shall go down and meet them once they have exhausted themselves."

A sudden commotion draws their attention, and Yuireb-dar flinches as a pike impales a scrambling warrior, his shrill cry cut short as he slumps forward, lifeless. The tide has turned fully against the Yejju cavalry, Biru Goshu's men unleashing a relentless barrage of spears, boulders, and arrows from their mountain stronghold, a maelstrom of death and destruction that threatens to consume all in its path.

Wibe's War

When a person's troubles are many,
it is as if he has treasure hidden



Yet Ras Ali's fury only intensifies, the fires of betrayal and anguish consuming him from within, a raging inferno that cannot be quenched. He drives his weakened forces forward with a maniacal passion, a man possessed by the demons of vengeance, determined to see Biru Goshu's blood paint the hillsides crimson in retribution. The sound of battle fades as Sahalu primps without concern, assured of her fortress's impregnability in the face of overwhelming Yejju assaults.

The morning sun ascends over the Northern highlands, its golden rays casting a luminous glow upon the majestic mountains of Adowa, painting the landscape with hues of amber and rose. The air is filled with an eerie calm that belies the impending chaos.

Dejazmach Wibe's eyes reflect a steely determination as he marches forward. His army, reinforced and armed with the weapons reclaimed from



the battle of Debre Tabor, moves with precision and purpose, a formidable force with a singular goal — to decimate the lords of Tigray and restore the once-divided realms to their former glory under his rule.

The terrifying sounds of battle reverberate across the plains, echoing the clash of steel, the thunderous hooves of war horses, and the pounding feet of warriors. Dejazmach Wibe, draped in battle-worn armor, leads his army into the heart of the conflict. The lords of Tigray fiercely resist their advances, creating a tumultuous and chaotic carnage of war.

The armies of the various feuding Tigrayan families — Mercha Wolde Kidan of Tembien, the Shum Agames of Agame, and the Shum Seloas of Enderta — stand independently against the advancing forces of Dejazmach Wibe. The air is filled with the battle cries of the warriors, each proclaiming their allegiance to their respective lords and their defiance against the man they consider an illegitimate leader of Tigray.

“This disgraced Wibe is nothing but a usurper!” shouts Ras Sellase, the leader of Agames, as he charges forward, his sword gleaming in the sunlight, leading a sizable force to confront the invaders. “Tigray will never bow to a Semien rule!” His forces fight with the desperation of those defending their homeland, while Wibe’s army, hardened by years of conflict and driven by their leader’s ambition, presses forward with relentless determination, destroying them with ease.

“We will fight to the last man,” roars Ras Wolde Kidan of Tembien, echoing the sentiment. “It is our duty to protect our land and our people from

this tyrant!” He rallies his warriors to meet the enemy head-on.

The clash of armies is fierce and bloody, but Dejazmach Wibe’s well-armed warriors have the advantage.

The Shum Seloas of Enderta, under the command of Fitawrari Gebre Medhin, and thousands of their combined warriors join the fray of defending their piece of Tigray, their spears and shields at the ready. “Tigray belongs to the true heirs of the land, not to a pretender from Semien!” Gebre Medhin declares, his voice rising above the din of battle.

The ground trembles beneath the hooves of the war horses as they charge, their riders wielding swords and spears with deadly precision. The foot soldiers, armed with shields and blades, engage in brutal close combat, their faces contorted with the strain of battle and the pain of wounds.



Amidst the chaos, Dejazmach Wibe rides at the head of his army, his armor splattered with the blood of his enemies. His eyes blaze with fierce determination as he urges his troops onward, his voice rising above the clamor of the battlefield.

“Forward! Let us crush these rebels once and for all and reclaim what we have lost!”

The Tigrean lords, divided against each other, are easily cowed. They meet Dejazmach Wibe’s advance with little defense, helpless in the face of the merciless onslaught by a better equipped army. The battle to pacify Tigray is swift, with the ground littered with the bodies of the fallen, as Wibe secures the future of Tigray and the right to rule over its people.

“The weak, the weakness of the strong love,” a confident Dejazmach Wibe stops in the middle of warfare to address his chiefs with cold determination, his eyes burning with intensity. “You told me the rebels had captured my realms, but these divided people, who lack understanding among themselves, cannot even catch a flea.” His chiefs laugh, reveling in the carnage, as the Tigrean forces fall without much resistance.

Dejazmach Wibe’s attention is drawn to a young warrior, Belgada Arya, whom he recognizes as a child now fighting in his twenties.

“From Tembien, Enderta to Agame, all the worthless alliances have come crumbling down like a house without a foundation. They are but dust that blows in the wind, my lord,” a chief boasts of the fallen ruling families.

Dejazmach Wibe, the weight of the battles to reclaim Tigray etched on his face, turns to his

matchlock men who have yet to join the slaughter. He points to Belgada Arya, singling him out amidst the ranks. “Bring me that male donkey there who cannot survive without suckling on his mother’s tits,” he commands, his voice harsh and filled with disdain. Belgada is the son of Tabotu Woldu and the nephew of the late Dejazmach Sabadigis of Tigray—the once-powerful lineage that ruled Tigray for centuries. His matchlock men move out to carry out his orders.

“Any word on where that treacherous serpent of a brother is hiding?” Dejazmach Wibe turns on his horse, his voice dripping with venom as he seeks information about his brother, Merso, who had betrayed him by joining the Yejju against him.

“He has amassed his army and waits for you at Adigrat, my lord,” a chief replies.

The sting of betrayal cuts deep, fueling the fire of Wibe’s rage.

“When the younger brother becomes wise, he looks for his older brother, but that lost fool still looks to the Yejju!” A furious Dejazmach Wibe curses the name of Merso, his half brother.

“It’s the Yejju bloodline in his veins my lord” A chief quips, hinting to Merso who is the designated heir of their father Haile Mariam, who was his third son from his Yejju wife. In the struggle which ensued among the



heirs, Wibe had defeated Merso to be recognized as ruler of Semien, but his brother's relentless attempts to seize power in his absence gnaw at his very core.

"That vile offspring of a venomous snake cannot smell its own stench." Dejazmach Wibe laments, "Dispatch the best of our Kitet warriors and hunt down that mangy dog who dares to think himself a lion," commands Wibe, his words laced with a cold fury that sends a shiver down the spines of those around him.

Dejazmach Wibe takes a moment to survey the entire battlefield. The war rages on, with his army relentlessly pushing forward against the defiant forces of Tigray, fueled by a desire to reclaim what is rightfully his and to crush the treachery that threatens to tear apart all he has built.

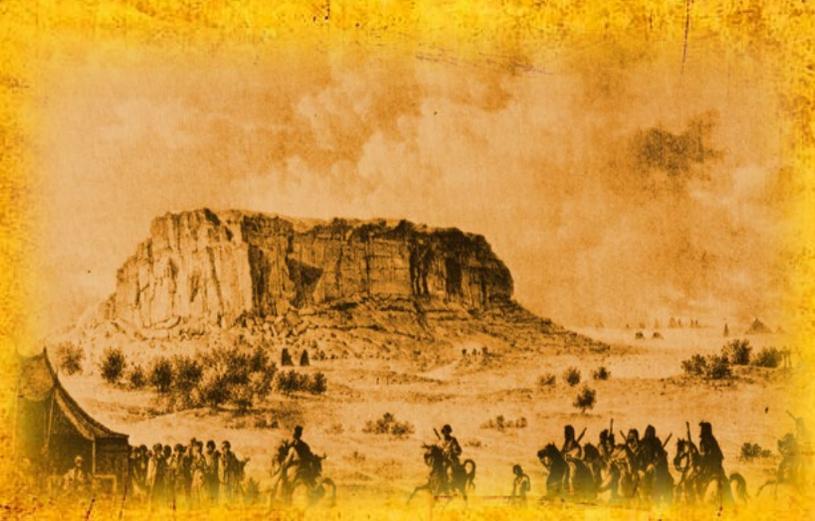
"Just for once, I would like to know how it feels to enter a peaceful house when I return from away," he quips, turning away on his horse, a bitter smile playing on his lips.

Dejazmach Wibe faces the coastline where the real trouble awaits. He peers at the outlines of massive foreign ships docked at the ports of Massawa.

"My lord, when the internal war drums are deafening, the external enemy cannot be heard," a concerned chief confides. "The Naib of Arkiko, emboldened by the Turks and Egyptians in Massawa, has refused to return the looted guns he stole from our coffins," he confesses, his words heavy with the weight of the implications.

"We need access to the coast," proclaims Dejazmach Wibe, who, although he had temporar-

ily given up his imperial aspirations, aims to battle for the throne. "We cannot replace the firearms we lost at the battle of Debra Tabor if we do not get a foothold on Massawa!"



"My lord, your European friends, the French and Catholics, tell us that they cannot facilitate the free flow of firearms while the British collude with the Turks against them," a chief retorts. "The coast remains sealed by their armies."

Dejazmach Wibe contemplates for a moment, his mind racing with strategies and machinations. "Dispatch an army to Samhar, threaten to attack their ally the Na'ib on the pretext of reclaiming the looted matchlocks they signed for Sabadigis," a wry smile breaks through his tight lips. "We shall see who comes to defend him; then the real war begins."

"We already have scouts on the mountains surrounding their forts, my lord," a chief adds. "We have seen redcoats with the Egyptians."

"The British?" Dejazmach Wibe silently observes the coastline, spotting the British flag fluttering on the embarked ships of the British empire in the far distance.

"I will discuss this matter with their British consul when he arrives, but camp a strong force to show them we intend to march on Massawa if we must!" Dejazmach Wibe declares, his resolve hardening in the face of the multitude of conflicts that threaten to engulf him from all sides. Dejazmach Wibe knows that the path ahead is fraught with danger and deceit, but he is ready to face it all, to conquer the enemies within and without, and to forge a new destiny for himself and his people, no matter the cost.



The British consul and his caravan make their way through the great routes in Adowa, winding through the mountainous territories of Wibe's stronghold. A large contingent of Wibe's warriors, their eyes sharp and vigilant, meets them and guides them through the bustling town in the war-torn region, their presence a silent reminder of the power that Wibe wields in this land.

In the palace, Dejazmach Wibe receives consul Plowden in grand ceremonial style, with hundreds of the most distinguished leaders of the provinces present for their meeting. The air is thick with tension, a palpable sense of suspicion and unease permeating the grand hall.



Dejazmach Wibe, adorned in the resplendence befitting an emperor, seated behind an opened curtain, with chiefs and the clergy in their finest, welcomes the consul with regal grace. His attire and mannerisms, impeccable and majestic, mirror the grandeur of his diplomatic reception, but beneath the veneer of cordiality, Dejazmach Wibe's eyes burn with a fierce intensity, his gaze never leaving the consul's face.

In the assembly, a notable presence of French and Spanish Catholic missionaries stands out, their gazes marked by open suspicion as they sip from imported wine, scrutinizing the consul, their whispers a low hum in the background.

Maids offer the French Consul French wine as he is seated by Dejazmach Wibe, who wants it known that he has amicable rapport with Europeans, and follows in the footsteps of the late Dejazmach Seb'agadis by actively cultivating relationships with European powers, but today, his demeanor is guarded, his smile a carefully crafted mask.

Dejazmach Wibe introduces the Consul to the foreigners to let him know that through correspondence and exchanges of gifts, he has been actively engaging with European powers to facilitate the free flow of firearms and trade to the highlands with the British rivals.

Consul Plowden is all smiles, but Wibe, observing him with care, wonders if the British are truly his allies or if they harbor hidden agendas. This diplomatic spectacle is not merely ceremonial; it is a deliberate message to the British representative, a test of their loyalty and intentions.

Consul Plowden, acknowledging the authority and stature of Dejazmach Wibe, bows respectfully before taking his seat on a chair set right in front of Wibe for the formal conversation with the esteemed leader of the north. His movements are measured, his expression carefully neutral, but Wibe can sense the unease that radiates from him, the slight tremor in his hands as he cleans and smooths his pristine coat as if there is some invisible pollutant around him.

"As you are aware, my ancestors were in possession of, and governed, all the coast of the Red Sea, and the Islands of Massawa," Dejazmach Wibe begins the real conversation after the formal exchanges and pleasantries, his voice low and measured, but with an undercurrent of steel. "... but when we quarreled amongst ourselves, the Turk had taken possession of it." Wibe laments, his eyes narrowing as he gauges the consul's reaction.

"Then, they sent their troops into the mainland, and occupied Monokuluu and Arkeeko." Wibe continues, a hint of anger in his voice, his fist clenching at his side. "So, I sent down my forces

and drove the Turks back into the Island of Massawa alone," he proclaims, his voice rising with each word, a challenge in his tone.



"You say you are a friend of Christians. You say, you are a powerful empire. Then why are you allowing the Muslims to ravage and occupy our Christian lands?" Dejazmach Wibe demands, his gaze boring into the consul's eyes, searching for any hint of deceit or evasion.

"My lord; the Queen is a friend of Christians, and we wish friendship with Abyssinia, but we do not interfere with the politics of other nations," Consul Plowden answers calmly the way he did Ras Ali, but Wibe can hear the slight waver in his voice, the careful choosing of his words.

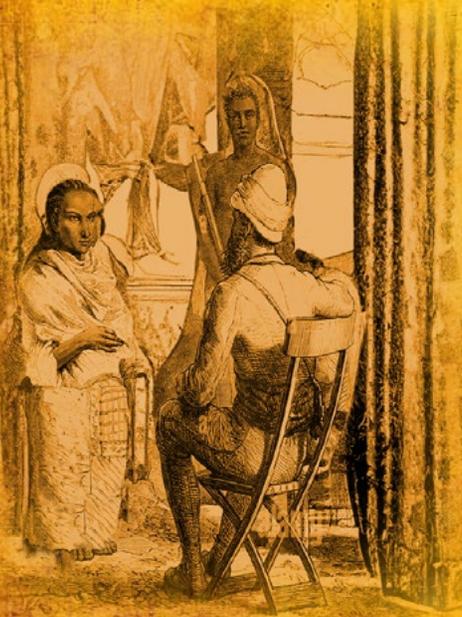
"Are you not close to the Turks who are in charge of Egypt?" Wibe interrupts, "Are you not the empire that rules the whole world from sea to sea," he muses, his tone sharp and accusatory.

"No, my lord, the Pasha is the ruler of Egypt; we only seek friendship with all kingdoms in Africa," He defends himself, but Wibe can see the beads of sweat forming on his brow, the slight shifting of his eyes, as the other Europeans around the table murmur with disapproval.

"So if I insist that they remain content with the possession of the Islands of Massawa, which they do not even have the right to, without setting foot on the mainland, or interfering with the Naib that I appointed at Arkeeko and the coast, you will accept?"

"My lord. . ." Consul Plowden hesitates, his discomfort evident in the way he tugs at his collar, the way his eyes dart around the room, seeking escape from the rival Europeans. "The affairs of Abyssinia and Egypt remain with their rulers. Britain does not involve itself militarily."

"Yet you supply the Muslims arms but deny us the same. How is that not interference?" Dejazmach Wibe's tone grows angrier, his suspicion and frustration boiling over. He rises from his seat, towering over the consul, his eyes blazing with barely contained fury.



"My lord, the Queen only wishes to establish friendship in trade, not in armaments," Consul Plowden proclaims, his voice trembling slightly under the weight of Wibe's gaze.

"That is the policy of our government," consul Plowden says carefully, his words measured and diplomatic, but Wibe can see the lies in his eyes, the way his hands grip the armrests of his chair. "Each nation controls its affairs." The Consul adds.

Rising from his seat, an enraged Dejazmach Wibe stares down at the consul, his voice a low growl. "You claim friendship yet arm our enemies!" Wibe repeats his accusation "We Christians are surrounded by Muslims—will you not help?" Wibe watches the consul wipe his sweat under pressure, his impossible demands only a pretext to reconquer the coast or part of it by dislodging the Egyptians.

"Do I have to seek friendship, as you say, with your rivals?" Dejazmach Wibe turns to the other Europeans. The tension in the room is palpable, the air crackling with unspoken accusations and veiled threats. Dejazmach Wibe knows that the Europeans are not to be trusted, that their words are hollow, and their intentions suspect. He will not be swayed by pretty speeches and empty promises, not when the fate of his people hangs in the balance.

Dejazmach Wibe's mind races with plans and strategies, his resolve hardening with each passing moment. "We do not need anyone to dislodge the Egyptians and the Turks to reclaim what is rightfully ours," Dejazmach Wibe proclaims as the meeting draws to a close.

"If you do not interfere, I will move my army and crush them myself!" Dejazmach Wibe makes

it clear that he will not rest until the coast is once again under the control of the true rulers of the land. And if the British stand in his way, then they too will feel the wrath of Dejazmach Wibe, the undisputed ruler of the north.

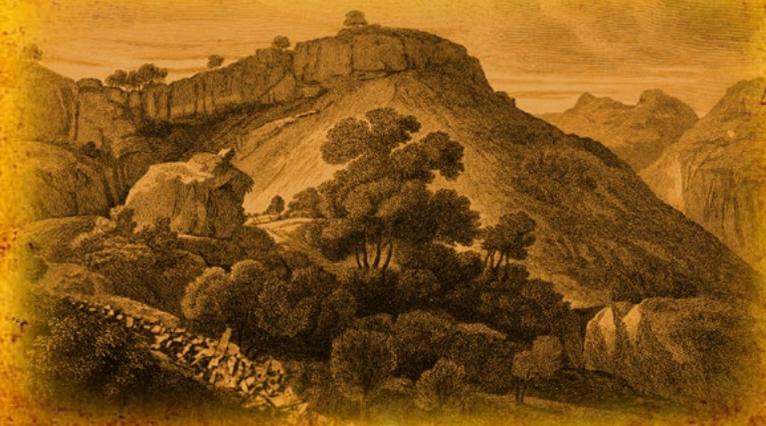


CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The Fenja Return

The rejected stone that will become the cornerstone shines brighter in the dust.

In the heart of the dense Qwara forest, the relentless echoes of the negarit war drum reverberate, a pulsating call that weaves through the ancient trees, summoning warriors from every corner of the realm to the imminent battleground. Kassa and Gabreye, commanders of a modest yet fierce contingent of Shifta warriors, navigate with feline grace through the labyrinthine thicket, their every movement shrouded in the thick undergrowth. The haunting cries of distant combatants pierce the air, prompting Kassa to cast an anxious gaze across the expanse of their surroundings, acutely aware of the gravity that the unfolding war brings to the enchanted forest.



“What troubles you, brother?” Gabreye breaks the silence, “Going to battle, I have never seen your face frown.”

“Birds where they will land, having examined only,” Kassa cryptically replies as two scouts suddenly emerge from the lush foliage. Kassa visibly relaxes at the sight of his trusted men.

Meanwhile, out on the open plains, the Gojjam armies of Ras Goshu rage against the armies of the sons of the late Dejazmach Kinfu, their swords and spears glinting in the harsh sunlight as they attempt to conquer the wounded Qwaranias of Western Gonder. Blood soaks through the cotton shimmas worn by the warring men as they savagely hack at each other. The Gojjam forces of the elder Dejazmach Goshu seem to overpower their rivals — but they remain oblivious to Kassa and his deadly Shifta contingents closing in under the forest’s shade.

Peering out at the chaotic battlefield from his cover, Kassa wheels around to face his ferocious fighters who have battled alongside him for years amidst the shadowy jungle greens but have yet to engage in full frontal warfare with armies.

“Men, who are you?” Kassa loudly demands, prompting baffled looks from the weathered warriors. “What do we fight for?” The men begin to stir, recognizing the leadership that has brought them to their homelands.

“My family! My father! My wife! My Children! Our home!” the men bellow back eagerly, gripping their spears in anticipation.

“Who am I?” Kassa demands an answer.



“Kassa! Kassa the Shifta! Kassa the Qwarania!” The Shifta warriors erupt as one, itching to join the battle and fight for their leader.

Kassa turns once more to the plains bleeding out before him. “How long have you been with me in the jungle?”

“Years!” The warriors erupt with spirited cries of “. . . years, many years!” Thirsty to prove their loyalty and skill for their fabled leader.

Kassa draws himself up tall in the saddle, pointing his own spear toward the chaotic melee. “We are no longer in the jungle! We are home!” He declares “Are we not the Qwarainia, are these not our lands they are fighting on?” A resounding affirmation comes from his men.

“Mark this day men, for in the name of our lord and savior, we shall begin here and conquer all kingdoms under our arms!” With that, Kassa spurs his stallion “With me! With me brothers! Are you ready to reclaim your homes?!” Kassa bursts out of the darkened forest shadows at full gallop. Hundreds of shrieking warriors surge out behind him

with death gleaming in their eyes and spears aimed high.

The Gojjam forces do not react to their advances as they engage the much smaller forces of the Gonderian West gathered by Kinfu's sons. At the last moment, the closing thundering of hooves captures the attention of some of Goshu's men, but it's too late. Spears sail through the air and burst out of chests, stomachs, and backs of Gojjam warriors.

Ras Goshu turns to see Kassa and his Shifta forces smash into their ranks with unbridled violence. Spears pierce through flesh, spraying hot blood across the riders as they plunge their weapons down into their enemies.

The Shifta warriors attack individually, swinging their swords with terrifying accuracy. Kassa is as brutal in open battle as he is in the jungle. His strength, skill with the sword and movement on the horse, and ability to direct and encourage his men are all on display as he fights with fierce energy, driving his men forward to the dismay of the Gojjam army that is beginning to disintegrate into disarray.

"Victory! Victory! Victory!" a shout goes up in the command hill. Far away from the battlefield, Dejazmach Mekonnen and his brother Yilma, donning black capes decorated in filigree over their shimma, watch in disbelief as Kassa and his shifta warriors' wild power is unleashed on the battlefields like a raging storm. The legendary shifta leader has swiftly converted defeat into utter rout. The Western Gonderian army roars at the slaughter before them as the disorganized Gojjam army melts under the furious Shifta assault.



"Kassa! Kassa Maru! Kassa Kinfu!" The rallying cries echo across the battlefield, igniting a fervor among the warriors as they charge forward with renewed vigor, their spirits emboldened by the familiar chants of victory. Amidst the chaos of battle, the sudden cheers swell into a crescendo, echoing across the plains like a new dawn breaking over a troubled horizon.



A wild celebration fills the air as the victors of Qwara revel in their triumph with a great feast. Heavily drunk warriors stagger amidst the revelry, azmari drummers herald victories in song, and maidservants scuttle with barrels of Tej, the traditional honey wine. The atmosphere is electric, charged with the euphoria of victory and the heady rush of alcohol.

Kassa and his disheveled Shifta warriors weave through the throng, drawing both curious and wary glances from the local fighters, some of whom recognize Kassa from his early days at the Fenja house. Kassa peeks at the captured Gojjam warriors, tending their wounds and awaiting the draconian punishments of the House of Fenja. They steal nervous glances at him as he passes, his presence a looming shadow of terror and awe.

Years have passed since Kassa was banished from his homeland, but his reputation as a fierce warrior and a ruthless leader has only grown in his absence.

The raucous celebration stills to an uneasy hush as Kassa and his wild-looking Shifta warriors stalk through the hall, their steps measured and purposeful. Whispers of “the murderous bandit,” “Maru’s ghost,” and “the jungle Shifta” ripple through the crowd, the air heavy with a mixture of fear and fascination. The anticipation of Kassa’s return has been building for months, and now that he is here after delivering victory to his house, the tension is palpable.

In the palace, Dejzmach Mekonnen and Yilma, along with their chiefs, nobles, and powerful relatives, gather in tense silence, the weight of Kassa’s return hanging over them like a suffocating cloak. The once-great House of Fenja has been weakened by years of infighting and political maneuvering since the death of Dejzmach Kinfu, and the brothers know that Kassa’s return could upset the delicate balance of power.

“Why has he come?” The older Dejzmach Mekonnen mutters, unease creeping into his voice,

his brow furrowed with apprehension. “We paid well enough to keep him away.”

“No one knows, my Lord, but a hyena to a place where they know him best does not return to bite,” an advisor responds confidently, but his words ring hollow in the face of the palpable tension. The advisor’s eyes dart nervously around the chamber, searching for any sign of dissent or rebellion.

“Tewbackeh!” A feeble cry emerges from the shadows, followed by incomprehensible muttering ending with “. . .the orphan comes to take over your lands.” The brothers turn towards the shadows, where an aged and frail Weleta Tekle struggles to breathe, burdened by the hereditary disease that afflicted her brother. “He comes to conquer!” Bent by time, her once-resounding voice now carries the weight of bitterness and regret, a haunting reminder of the past. “Kill! Kill! Kill the Orphan!” She mutters silently to herself. Once a powerful influence in Qwara, she is now but a mere shadow of her former self.

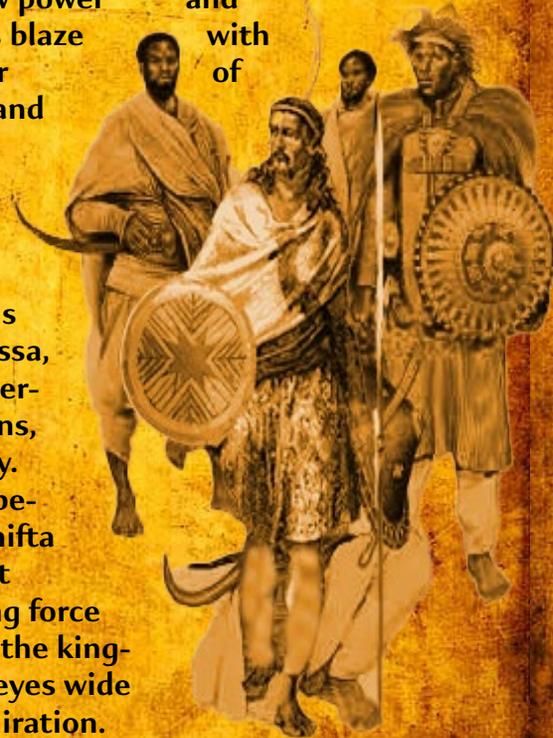
“End him now!” Her voice echoes through the chamber, a proclamation that cuts through the dimness like a possessed spirit, keenly aware that Kassa’s return signifies an unyielding purpose. “Kill, kill. . .the orphan. . .” Her words carry the weight of a haunting past, a reckoning for the mistreatment she once orchestrated from a position of authority, where her attempts to silence young Kassa ultimately failed. The brothers exchange uneasy glances, knowing that Weleta’s words carry a dangerous weight.

“Your birthright!” Weleta hisses, her eyes gleaming with a feverish intensity. “He comes to take what is rightfully yours!”

The tension in the chamber is suddenly broken by the entrance of the agafari, the chamber herald. “Lords of Qwara, Kassa Hailu from the Western realms,” he announces, his voice ringing through the hall like a thunderclap. The nobles and chiefs fall silent, their eyes fixed on the entrance.

Kassa strides into the chamber, his Shifta warriors at his back, their presence a formidable wall of strength and loyalty. His shimma hangs tattered and blood-spattered over his powerful frame, contrasting the luxurious attire of the court nobles and his seated brothers on a twin throne. The years away have honed his presence, transforming him into a figure of raw power and untamed ferocity. His eyes blaze with fierce intensity, a reminder of the battles he has fought and the enemies he has vanquished.

Dejazmach Yilma, the younger of the two brothers, rises from his throne and approaches Kassa, his steps hesitant and uncertain. “My brother,” he begins, his voice trembling slightly. “The people say you have become a bandit, a bloody Shifta lost in the jungle, but what we saw today was a fighting force stronger than any army in the kingdoms.” He steps back, his eyes wide with a mix of fear and admiration.



Kassa’s gaze sweeps the chamber, taking in the faces of the nobles and chiefs who once shunned him. “Fighting is in our blood,” he declares, his voice a deep rumble that echoes through the chamber. “We are the descendants of the great ancestors of the West.” Weleta shrieks upon hearing his words, but Kassa ignores her, his focus solely on his brothers and relatives.

As Kassa moves through the chambers, greeting his relatives and the servants, the tension continues to mount. The once-powerful matriarch Weleta Tekle sits in a corner, her eyes fixed on Kassa with a mix of fear and loathing. Kassa finally approaches her, his steps measured and deliberate, and bows before her, his voice low and fierce. “The one who plants the corn is the one who harvests it,” he whispers, his words a chilling promise. “I forgive you for all you have done to me.”

Weleta’s eyes widen in shock, and she begins to weep, her tears a silent acknowledgment of the pain she once inflicted. “Kassa,” she whispers, her voice trembling with emotion. “I never thought. . . Kassa, in life. Not after. . . not after everything I did. . . forgive me.”

Kassa’s gaze hardens, his jaw clenching with barely contained anger. “You were a test the Lord put before me, nothing more.” Kassa reaches out and wipes her tears. “We all have a role to play in one lifetime.” He whispers “You had yours, and I have mine.”

“Forgive me. . .” Weleta lowers her head, unable to meet Kassa’s gaze. “I was a fool,” she admits, her voice barely above a whisper. “Fear and ambition. . . blinding” she mutters “. . . my family, our legacy,” she abruptly looks up and locks eyes with

Kassa "I created an enemy far more dangerous than I ever imagined." She mutters, owed by his very presence before her, fear and contempt sneaking back into her soul.

Kassa leans in closer, his breath hot against Weleta's face. "And now, here I am, just as I promised you long ago," he says, his voice a menacing whisper. "The boy you tried to destroy, grown into a man with the power to destroy everything you hold dear." Kassa guides her eyes to his half-brothers. "Tell me, was it worth it?"

Weleta's shoulders heave with silent sobs, her face twisted with grief and regret. "No," she chokes out, her voice raw with emotion. "I see that now. I destroyed the one thing I cherished most: my family."

Kassa's expression softens slightly, his anger giving way to a flicker of empathy. "I could have let the hate consume me," he says, shaking his head "... the fear of death that haunted me each night under this house poison my mind" he recalls the terror, his voice growing distant. "I could have become the monster you feared. But I chose a differ-

ent path because I was born to fight for something greater than myself." Weleta looks up at Kassa, her eyes shining with tears. "I have seen this moment coming. I am the one chosen to bring an end to the cycle of violence that has plagued us for so long."

"Help them, please help!" she pleads, her voice trembling with emotion. "You are the hope for our family legacy, the one who will carry on the name of Maru and Kinfu into posterity."

Kassa places a hand on Weleta's shoulder, his touch gentle but firm. "I forgive you, Weleta," he says, his voice soft but resolute. "Not because you deserve it, but because I refuse to let the past define me." Kassa rises. "I will never forget the lessons I learned from your cruelty. I have used them to become a better leader, a better man, and to build a future where no child will ever have to suffer as I did." With those words, Kassa turns and strides away, leaving Weleta to ponder her past crimes.

The governor of Dembeya, a broad-shouldered man with a lion's mane and a scar etched across his face, watches Kassa with a wary eye. As Kassa approaches, the governor tenses, his hand moving instinctively to the hilt of his sword.

But Kassa ignores him, his focus returning to his brothers, Dejzmach Mekonnen in particular who has yet to say a word to him. "In the name of our God and our great ancestors, I beseech you to return to the Fenja house, to the realms of Maru and Kinfu, and serve as a protector of Qwara," Dejzmach Yilma says, his voice hesitant and uncertain.

The chamber buzzes with murmurs; relatives, the clergy, the nobles protest. Kassa, with a



sly smile, plays with the children of the maids, embodying a complex blend of innocence and menace.

"Awo, a good Christian seeks out the habits of peace, to live in peace with his family is better than to remain a sinful Shifta," a clergy priest chimes in. "A thief who steals from others like Adonibezek who was pursued from the city of Bezek, will have his hands and feet chopped off if caught." Another clergy priest interjects, his threats reverberating through the room.

"Who is going to chop my hand off?" Kassa whirls, his voice a growl, silencing the clergy with a single glance. Kassa, hands on his sword hilt, approaches the clergy. "You?" He faces the trembling priest, his eyes blazing with fierce intensity. "Or one of your finely robed and well-fed monks?"

His gaze sweeps the chamber. "Has not David departed to the forest of Hareth?" The chamber holds its breath at his daring and intimidation.

"I steal only from the greedy to give the spoils back to the poor." Kassa holds the priest's stare. "Still wish to sever my hands for that?" The priest looks away, cowed by Kassa's resolve and the weight of his words. The chamber falls silent, the tension thick and heavy.

"What comes into our possession, we do not hoard for ourselves but divide and share with the people!" Kassa declares, his voice ringing through the chamber. "I give back the very spoils stolen from the people, as David had done when he divided the spoils of the Amalekites..." His words are a challenge not just to the clergy, but to the rulers who enforce their wishes.

"Kassa!" Dejazmach Mekonnen rises from his throne, his face a mask of barely contained anger. "Brother, there is no denying your fighters brought us victory today," he begins, his words a desperate attempt to maintain control. "But the strangers that have come to fight for us will celebrate and go home, while a family remains to see what comes after if you stay." He steps forward, desperate to keep the peace and form a bond with Kassa. "Our father knew what we see now, we need your arms to defend our realms!"

The murmur among the relatives grows into a restless hum. The imposing figure of the governor of Dembeya rises, casting an unintentional hush upon the assembly.

"That is true. With Goshu's defeat, now is the time to advance on Gojjam, take Semien, and declare war on the weakened Tigreans!" The governor advocates for an assertive expansion reminiscent of his late master Maru. Amidst the ensuing cacophony of voices from nobles, chiefs, and even the clergy, Kassa glances at the governor, then at his half-brothers who suddenly look like mute children controlled by him.

Without a word, Kassa pivots and strides out, his retinue of Shifta men flowing seamlessly behind him, their footsteps echoing like a thunderous drumbeat in the suddenly silent chamber. The air crackles with tension, the weight of Kassa's departure hanging heavy in the chamber.

"Brother! Where are you going?" Dejazmach Yilma, alarmed by Kassa's abrupt exit, calls out, his voice cutting through the stillness like a knife.

Kassa whirls around, his eyes blazing with fierce intensity. "You've barely vanquished one

house but celebrate as if it's the Yeju you've defeated," he snarls, his words dripping with contempt. "By talk, prayers, and desire alone, the houses beyond the river are not taken down." His gaze bores into his brothers, a silent challenge hanging in the air.

Dejazmach Mekonnen steps forward, his face a mask of determination. "We have defended what is ours. Goshu was the main ally to the Yeju, and we have cut the big vein that feeds their hearts," he retorts, his voice ringing with pride. "What would you have us do?" he asks, curiosity mingling with a hint of defiance.

Kassa's eyes narrow, his voice dropping to a low, impassioned plea. "By the name of our ancestors, you cannot make the same mistakes they committed with talk of allies!" he exclaims, his words reverberating through the chamber. "There are no allies, we are one people, one kingdom, one empire!" The assembly falls silent, stunned by the weight of Kassa's declaration, the implications of his words hovering heavy above them.

Dejazmach Mekonnen breaks the silence, his voice tinged with skepticism. "You've seen the strength of our men. Do you really think they can overcome the strong houses of the kingdoms, let alone the Yeju?" he asks, his eyes searching Kassa's face for any hint of doubt.

Kassa's frustration boils over, his words sharp and biting. "You will have to fight each house one by one and humble them or go fight for the crown, then crush them afterwards!" he snaps, his voice rising with each word. "Either way, you have to show them, there are no houses but only one kingdom!"

Dejazmach Mekonnen turns to his relatives, seeking support. "We cannot do it all on our own. We need allies!" he insists, his voice tinged with desperation. "Our father taught us, if there is will and desire, strong houses with each other make friendships, then together they go to fight their common enemy."

"If the people are united, no house, no region, can overcome them!" proclaims Kassa.

The chiefs and noblemen in the chamber erupt in protest, their voices rising in a cacophony of dissent.

"A Shifta pretender!" The governor's mocking laughter cuts through the noise like a blade, his derision palpable. "Easy for a bandit who hides his face in the forest to talk so boldly!" he sneers, his words dripping with scorn. "I remember your father too, the one who thought of himself as greater than Maru, talking of such foolishness, delusions of grandeur."

In a flash, Kassa's warriors unsheathe their blades, the sound of steel ringing through the chamber like a call to arms. Tempers boil to the surface, the room poised on the brink of violence. The chiefs and noblemen take a step back, their eyes downcast, as the brothers look on at Kassa and the hardened governor, the tension crackling like lightning in the air.

Sudden silence descends as Kassa takes a step forward, the weight of his presence filling the chamber. He seems to transform before their eyes, the bloody warrior of the battlefield emerging once more, his eyes blazing with fierce resolve.



"I am the murderous Shifta, the Qwara-
nia that would rather stay in the
shadows of the forest until I am
strong enough to cut the heads
of every ruling house that
stands against me and my
ancestors!" Kassa roars, his
voice a thunderous declara-
tion of his identity. "My life is
not my own but of my father
and mother and all the ances-
tors that came before them,
who ruled an empire strong
enough to conquer Jerusalem!"

The chamber falls silent, the
weight of Kassa's words wafting
through the tense atmosphere.

The governor's face pales, his
bravado crumbling in the face of

Kassa's fury. The brothers exchange uneasy glances,
the realization of the true depth of Kassa's ambi-
tion dawning on them like a cold, hard truth.

"The end of Zemena Mesafent is near broth-
ers, I wish you luck against all the future battles
that are to come." With those words, Kassa turns
and strides out of the chamber, his warriors fall-
ing in behind him. The chamber is left in stunned
silence, his words suspended in midair.

As Kassa disappears into the night, the
House of Fenja is left to ponder the implications of
his return. The once-great family is now faced with
a choice: to unite behind Kassa and his vision for a
united Qwara, or to cling to the old ways and risk
being swept aside by the rising tide of change. The
future is uncertain, but one thing is clear: Kassa

Hailu has returned, and nothing will ever be the
same again.



The Goshu's Dilemma

*A child who says his
father is the best is lying.*

In the heart Gojjam, majestic trees stand as silent guardians, their fading emerald leaves filtering shards of sunlight down upon Dejazmach Goshu's marching warriors. Dejazmach Goshu rides at the head of the column, his weathered face set with grim resolve, his eyes scanning the surrounding forest for any sign of danger. His son, young Dejazmach Tessema, rides confidently by his side, the youthful determination in his eyes reflecting his father's seasoned spirit. As the army marches onward, russet and crisp leaves flutter down from the trees, painting the path before them in a tapestry of autumn hues.

Suddenly, a powerful gust of wind sweeps through the forest, unleashing a flurry of brown leaves that swirl around the men like a whirlwind of nature's fury. Under the rustling din, Goshu's trained ear detects a new sound — the thunder of approaching hooves, growing louder with each passing moment.

"Halt!" Dejazmach Goshu commands.

A spine-chilling sound of war cries echoes through the woods, sending a shiver down the spines of even the most battle-hardened warriors.

“To arms!” Goshu bellows, his voice slicing through the chaos like a blade. “Form ranks!”

But his cry is drowned beneath the blood-curdling war screams bursting from all around them, as the shadows come alive with armed horsemen, their spears glinting in the dappled sunlight as they encircle and charge the helpless infantry in a crashing wave of steel and fury.



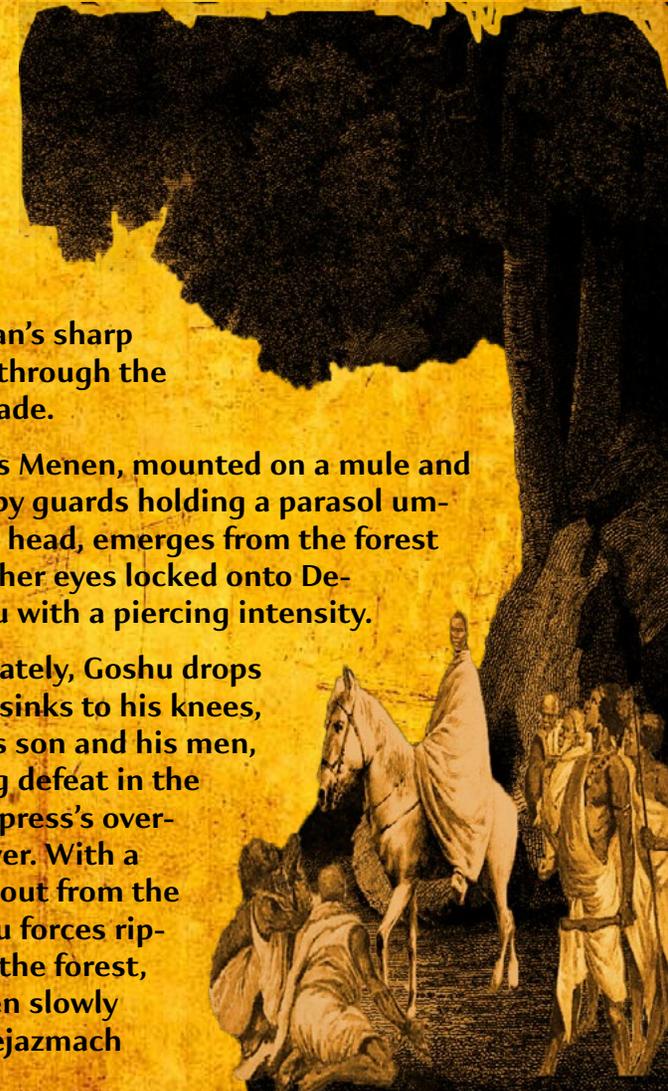
Swords slash through the rain of drifting leaves, the clash of metal against metal ringing out in a discordant symphony of violence. Blood sprays across the forest floor, staining the earth crimson as bodies pile around father and son, who desperately fight back against the overwhelming onslaught. But the Yejju cavalry is relentless, their ferocity unmatched as they mercilessly cut down the infantry like wheat before a scythe.

“We surrender!” Realizing the hopeless situation, Dejzmach Goshu raises his sword, though shame sears his cheeks like a brand. “In God’s name, we yield!” he shouts, his voice hoarse with desperation. “In the name of our Lord and savior, Mercy! We surrender!” he declares, shielding his frightened son from the impending danger with his own body.

“The man who fighting will not give up, he is the one who will be given up, put down your swords!” commands a woman’s sharp voice, cutting through the chaos like a blade.

Empress Menen, mounted on a mule and accompanied by guards holding a parasol umbrella over her head, emerges from the forest like a specter, her eyes locked onto Dejzmach Goshu with a piercing intensity.

Immediately, Goshu drops his sword and sinks to his knees, followed by his son and his men, acknowledging defeat in the face of the Empress’s overwhelming power. With a triumphant shout from the victorious Yejju forces rippling through the forest, Empress Menen slowly approaches Dejzmach



Goshu, who bows lower, his forehead touching the blood-drenched earth.

“Well, well, once a traitor, always a traitor,” she smirks, her voice dripping with disdain.

“Iteye, I beg —”

“Zembel! The conduct of a traitor will always shame him,” the empress taunts, a hint of mocking laughter in her voice as she glances at the father and son, with a mixture of scorn and amusement on her face.

“There is nothing more pitiful than a lion that has grown old with flies buzzing around him and a young male bull who still suckles from his mother’s tits,” Empress Menen adds, her words slicing like a dagger as she turns her attention to the guards, instructing them to bring heavy chains for the prisoners.

The clinking of metal echoes through the forest as the chains are hammered around the ankles and wrists of the Goshus, securing them as captives of the victorious Empress. Dejzmach Goshu, his pride shattered, attempts to speak. “Iteye, I beg of—”

“Tewbackeh! Save your tongue!” she shouts “Friends resembling does not spare an enemy whose wife-stealing son is the bane of my son’s existence!” Menen silences him, her voice sharp and biting as she expresses her disdain for the actions of Biru Goshu, his absent son engaged in battle with her own child.

Dejzmach Goshu’s eyes widen in shock, his face paling at the revelation of his son’s misdeeds. “Iteye,” he stammers, his voice barely above a whis-

per. “I swear on the holy cross, I had no part in my son’s actions.”

But Menen’s gaze is unyielding, her fury palpable in the tense silence that follows. “The sins of the son are the sins of the father,” she declares, her words a condemnation that hangs heavy in the air. “You will answer for his crimes, just as you will answer for your own treachery.”

Dejzmach Goshu bows his head in shame, the weight of his defeat and his son’s actions crushing his spirit like a millstone. Beside him, young Tessema trembles, tears streaking his dust-covered face as he clings to his father’s side, the reality of their fate sinking in like a lead weight in his stomach.

The sun sinks low on the horizon, bathing the gory scene in a crimson light that seems to echo the blood-soaked earth beneath their feet. Dejzmach Goshu and young Tessema trudge behind the conqueror, their chains clinking with each shameful step, the last gasp of their defiance now crushed beneath the iron heel of the Empress’s warriors.

As the victorious army marches on, leaving the carnage behind, the forest seems to whisper with the ghosts of the fallen, their souls forever trapped in the dappled shadows of the towering trees. And at the head of the column, Empress Menen rides tall and proud, her eyes fixed on the horizon and the future that awaits, a future where her enemies will tremble at the mere mention of her name, and her power will know no limits.



In the gloom of the chamber, Emperor Yohannes III sits dwarfed by the shadows, his once-regal frame now a mere shell of its former glory. Heavy iron chains dig into his neck, the links clinking with each subtle movement, a constant reminder of his confinement and the price of his betrayal. The air hangs thick with the stench of despair and the weight of months spent in darkness, a punishment for joining the rebels against the mighty Yejju.

Empress Menen sweeps into the chamber like a force of nature. Her ladies flank her, their heads bowed in deference to their formidable mistress. Menen's keen gaze rakes over the fallen emperor, her eyes sharp as a falcon's, missing nothing in their assessment. "You have been feeding this wastrel far too well," she remarks, her voice dripping with irritation and disdain.

"Iteye, he eats nothing at all, I swear on Mary's name—" a maid pipes up, her voice trembling with fear and desperation.

"Silence! Afenya!" The empress snaps, her voice cracking like a whip in the oppressive stillness of the chamber. "I should cut your tongue out for using our mother's name in vain!" Her eyes blaze with a fury that sends shivers down the spines of all present, the maid recoiling as if struck.

Empress Menen prowls closer to her captive, her movements graceful and predatory, like a lioness stalking her prey. "Yet I smell Tej on your breath, husband," she purrs, her voice low and menacing. "Someone betrays me to ease your burden, but from whose hand I do not know!"

Emperor Yohannes III meets her glare, his eyes defiant and unyielding, refusing to expose

whichever brave soul smuggles him brief comfort in this hellish existence. He rattles the chains in a futile attempt to free himself, the metal biting into his skin, leaving angry red welts in its wake.

With a scoff, Empress Menen dismisses the cowering servants with a flick of her wrist, until only she remains, circling her chained foe like a vulture circling its prey. Her robes glide soundlessly over the stone floor, the fabric whispering against the cold surface.

The young emperor's eyes flicker with suppressed anger as the chamber empties, and he curses silently at his captor, his jaw clenched so tightly it aches. The air between them crackles with tension, the unspoken animosity hanging heavy in the space between them.

"A thin man will become fat, but it's a pity that the shameful man will not come out of his shame," Empress Menen intones, her voice rich and smooth as honey. She moves gracefully to her dresser, her movements fluid and hypnotic, and pours herself a brimming brilla of Tej, breathing in its sweet aroma before raising it to her ruby lips. Emperor Yohannes watches helplessly, his tongue dry as sun-bleached bone, his throat constricting with thirst and longing.

Empress Menen takes a slow sip, savoring the taste, letting the liquid linger on her tongue before swallowing. She approaches her husband, holding his crown in her hand, the metal glinting in the dim light of the chamber. "Today, I captured the most elusive of my son's enemies," she declares, a triumphant glint in her eyes, her voice ringing with satisfaction and pride.

Emperor Yohannes III looks up, surprised and intrigued, his curiosity piqued despite himself. He watches as she indulges in another sip of Tej, the scent of the honey wine tempting him, taunting him with its promise of sweet oblivion.

“Your old ally Goshu is in my Yejju hands!” A proud smile curves her mouth, her satisfaction evident in the way she holds herself, the way her eyes shine with a fierce, victorious light. She moves to the table and pours more Tej into her brilla, the liquid sloshing against the sides, the sound echoing in the stillness of the chamber.

“I sent word to his bastard son that I will exchange his father for my beloved daughter he holds hostage on that amba, but that fool refused,” she laughs, the sound mocking and cruel, her eyes glinting with a wicked amusement. “That disgraceful bull, no one can negotiate with but the likes of you. Only those who resemble one another can come to terms.”

She lifts Yohannes’ tarnished crown, the metal dull and lifeless in her hands. With a tenderness that belies the cruelty of her actions, she sets it atop his filthy locks, the weight of it settling on his brow like a burden he can never escape. The promise of freedom lights his eyes with the first ember of hope in an



eternity of darkness, a flicker of life in the deadness of his gaze.

Empress Menen lifts her refilled Tej cup to his cracked lips, the aroma of the honey wine filling his nostrils, the scent intoxicating and alluring. The emperor hesitates for a moment, his pride warring with his desperation, the fire of anger and humiliation burning in his throat, scorching his very soul.

With a final, defiant glare, he gulps down the Tej in one swift motion, the liquid searing his parched throat, the sweetness of it a bitter poison on his tongue. He seals the unspoken agreement with this act of submission, knowing that he has no choice but to play the game by her rules, to dance to the tune of her twisted desires.



Kassa guides his stallion up the corpse-strewn hill, flanked by his inner circle, the stench of death and decay hanging heavy in the air. The remnants of decimated Yejju forces surround them, a haunting reminder of the fierce battle that had taken place, the ground stained crimson with the blood of the fallen. Kassa halts to observe the scene, his eyes taking in the carnage, contemplating the challenge that lies ahead.

“How would you attack such a strong fort?” Kassa asks Gabreye, his voice low and measured, seeking his counsel on the formidable Gojjam fortress situated atop the escarpment, its walls loom-

ing like an impenetrable barrier against the darkening sky.

Gabreye waits until they are inside the fortress, his eyes scanning the battlements with a calculating gaze. "That rampart lies unguarded," he notes, pointing to an isolated segment glowing orange in the flames of a lonely bonfire, the flickering light casting eerie shadows across the stone.



The Gojjam warriors, battle-weary from the constant attack by the Endresse but ready for another confrontation, eye Kassa and his men, their hands hovering over their weapons, ready to strike at a moment's notice. A jeering voice draws their attention, cutting through the tense silence like a knife.

"So, that is the infamous Shifta?" A hulking Gojjam warrior strides forth, his muscles rippling beneath his sweat-soaked shimma, hefting his spear with a menacing air. "I am larger and more handsome than this Gondarian whelp!" He taunts

Kassa, his voice mocking "Well, are you the Shifta that everyone is afraid to face?" he points the spear, goading him for a fight.

"Yes, I am, friend," Kassa replies calmly, his voice carrying across the courtyard, undeterred by the brute's provocations. "And if you do not lower that spear or make me dismount from my horse, you will find out what the men say about me." His words hang in the air, a silent challenge, a promise of violence barely contained.

The brute guffaws, his laughter echoing off the stone walls — until, in one swift move, Gabreye leaps from his mount and kicks his feet out from under him, sending the giant crashing into the mud, his spear clattering to the ground. Swords sing as the Gojjam men surge to retaliate, their faces contorted with rage, but Kassa's warriors stand unflinching before their leader, their blades glinting in the firelight.

Gabreye presses his blade tip under the fallen warrior's chin, the metal biting into his flesh, drawing a thin line of blood. "Draw your sword and fight him, or go crawl back into whatever space is left between your mother's womb!" Gabreye challenges, further asserting their dominance. Cowed by the show of strength, the fallen giant yields, his eyes wide with fear, clearing the way for Kassa and his men to proceed onward undeterred.

In the compound, Dejazmach Biru Goshu hones his sword by the fireside, thick muscle rippling beneath his cotton shimma, the blade glinting in the flickering light. His chiefs gather around him, voices lowered in conference — until whispers of "the Shifta arrives" capture Biru's attention, his head snapping up, his eyes narrowing.

Dejazmach Biru's eyes measure Kassa as he dismounts, taking in the warrior's formidable presence, the coiled power in his movements.

"Welcome to the amba that is a deathtrap to those who attempt to climb it," his voice booms "I hope you and your men have made peace with your maker" Biru Goshu approaches with a grin on his face.

Kassa steps closer to Biru, his expression hard "It is the Yejju that need to make peace with their maker. I have heard the tales and have come to see your exploits myself," Kassa flatters Dejazmach Biru with a smirk.

"So, you witnessed the wreckage of my defeated Yejju foes down below," he remarks, pride swelling in his voice, his chest puffing out with the thrill of victory.

Kassa nods, his expression impassive. "I thought they said the Yejju had a heavy cavalry that can crack through a rock," Kassa remarks, his tone neutral, betraying nothing.

Dejazmach Biru barks a laugh, the sound harsh and grating. "On the open plains of Debre Tabor, perhaps! But



here, in the steep hills of Gojjam?" He mimes hurling a spear, his movements exaggerated, almost comical. "We pick the Yejju riders off like vultures." His mouth splits into a fierce grin, his teeth flashing in the firelight. "Have you seen my warhorse Damtew, the flattener?"

Kassa indulges Biru's boasting, aware that the proud man finds kinship in their shared mastery of violence, the bond of warriors forged in blood and battle. "The Yejju we know how to resist, the Gala only with the handle of a spear will dance," he remarks, offering Kassa a private audience as he walks out beside him, in a gesture of respect, trust and camaraderie.

"Yet, they hold your father and brother hostage," Kassa says, his voice low and intense, looking deep into Biru's eyes, noting the way the Dejazmach's fiery gaze dims with bitterness, the weight of his family's capture hanging heavy on his shoulders.

"They were taken in an ambush by his mother, no less! By that witch!" Dejazmach Biru spits, his hatred for Empress Menen palpable in the air between them. "That woman makes trouble for her own ambition, but it's her vengeance-crazed son that gives me no peace," he laments, his voice rough with emotion, his hands clenching into fists.

Kassa puts his arm around Biru's shoulder, his touch a gesture of solidarity, of shared understanding. "A man struggling with two battles cannot afford to be shy," he says, his voice firm and resolute. "I am here to help you settle some conflicts." He extends his arm to Biru, offering his help in settling the battles that burden him, a promise of aid in the face of adversity.

Fury and Doubt

When you pray, move your feet

Dejasmach Biru's meaty hand encloses his in solidarity, pleased to have the renowned warrior of fortune and mercenary by his side, he nods, his eyes glinting with newfound hope. "Then let us two warriors bring down the Yeju and live in peace eternal." Biru grasps Kassa's arm, their alliance sealed in the heat of the moment, the promise of victory hanging in the air between them.

But even as they stand united, Kassa's mind races with calculations and strategies, his gaze taking in the lay of the land, the strengths and weaknesses of his new ally. He knows that this alliance is but a temporary one, a means to an end, and that someday, he may face Biru Goshu on the battlefield, their friendship forgotten in the heat of battle. But for now, he will use the Gojjam leader to further his own ambitions, to test the mettle of his future foe, the Yeju, and to lay the groundwork for his own rise to power.



Iron chains rattle as Ras Goshu drags his worn body across the stone floor, the sound echoing through the grand court of Gonder like a mournful dirge. Behind him creeps young Tessemma, defiance burning in his eyes despite the restraints visibly weighing down his proud shoulders, the metal biting into his flesh with every movement.

In the center of the court, Ras Ali and Abuna Salama observe the prisoners, their faces etched with a mix of contempt and pity. The clergy from Gojjam stand behind them, their presence a silent show of support for their fallen leaders, their robes a stark contrast to the grim surroundings.

"My Endresse. . ." Tears stream down Dejasmach Goshu's face as he kneels before the Abuna and the Endresse, his body trembling with the weight of his shame and desperation. "From one Christian to another, for the sake of Christ, forgive my sins, forgive me, my Endresse," he implores Ras Ali, his voice cracking with agonized desperation, his hands clasped in supplication.

"My Endresse, I—"

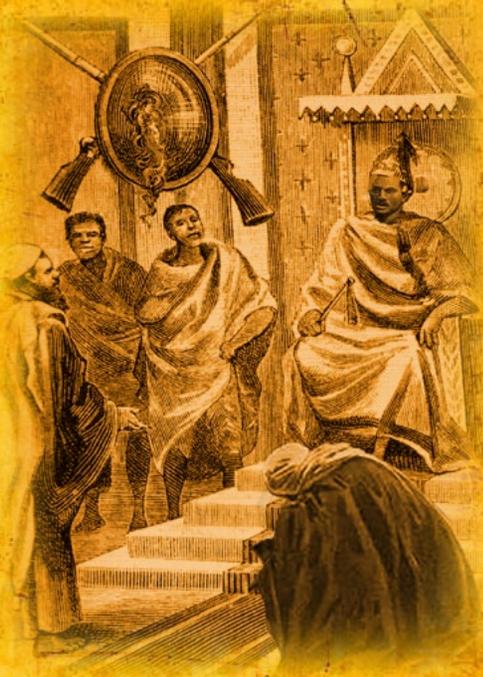
“Stand up!” Ras Ali’s face contorts with disdain, his eyes flashing with barely contained rage. “Stand up, you old fool. Have you gone senile?!” he shouts, his voice booming through the court like a thunderclap. “The tears of a traitor by themselves flow! I was but a child when you sprayed them all over!”

A startled Ras Goshu wipes his tears and rises, his movements slow and labored, his son Tessemma stands tall beside him, his chin lifted in defiance, his eyes locked on Ras Ali in a silent display of rebellion.

“Ever the groveling snake,” Ras Ali spits, his narrow frame taut with contempt, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. “How often have you soaked this floor with traitor’s tears?”

Dejzmach Goshu flinches from the verbal blow, his shoulders hunching as if struck, but he continues scrubbing tears from his beard with trembling fingers. “I vow on my sons’ lives — never again shall I—”

“Silence!” Ras Ali thunders, his patience fraying like a threadbare rope, his eyes blazing with fury. “You slithering turncoats know no truth nor



honor.” His simmering gaze finds the Abuna, standing with the Gojjam clergy, their faces a mix of fear and defiance. “If it were not for the good Abuna here who begged me to spare you from my mother’s wrath, you would be hanging on a tree somewhere, with your eyes gauged out!”

Dejzmach Goshu takes a step forward, his chains clanking with the movement, his voice trembling with conviction. “A lie is like darkness without fire, truth like the light of the candle. I swear in the name of our maker, I swear in the name of my sons, I will never again betray the Yejjju until the day I die.”

Ras Ali scoffs, his lips curling into a sneer, his anger boiling beneath the surface like a volcano ready to erupt. “A candle a house does not light, good behavior a great house lights! Your defiant son, who holds one of our own, will soon learn that when I burn him out of his fort!” he declares, his voice rising to a crescendo, rage flashing in his eyes like lightning.

“Forgive them, my Endresse” The Abuna steps forward, his face a mask of serenity, his voice calm and measured. “If you want peace, work for justice. If you want justice, work for forgiveness,” he says, his words hanging in the air like a benediction. “Forgiveness is above all a personal choice, a decision of the heart to go against the natural instinct to pay back evil with evil.” He pleads with Ras Ali on behalf of the Gojjam rulers, his eyes beseeching, his hands outstretched in supplication.

Ras Ali turns to Dejzmach Goshu, his face a mask of cold fury. “The deaf child only the father their language knows!” he remarks, his words dripping with venom. “Until I am sure the house of

Goshu in Gojjam behaves, I am keeping your good son here as my house guest," he proclaims, his voice ringing with the finality of a death knell.

With a wave of his hand, Ras Ali motions to the Yejju guards. "Free him and get him out of my sight before I change my mind!" he snarls, his eyes flashing with barely contained violence.

The guards swiftly move in, their movements precise and brutal, striking at the chains that bind Dejazmach Goshu. The metal falls to the ground with a resounding thud, the sound echoing through the court like the tolling of a funeral bell, the chains resembling a serpent coiling at the feet of the fallen ruler. Dejazmach Goshu turns to his son Tesemma, still bound and trembling in terror, his eyes wide with fear and desperation.

Ras Ali stands tall, his anger barely contained, his chest heaving with the effort of restraint. He turns his gaze to Abuna Salama, seeking solace in the symbol of the giant cross the Abuna holds in his hands, the metal gleaming in the dim light of the court.

The air is thick with tension, the weight of past betrayals and simmering hostilities hanging heavy over the proceedings. The fate of young Tesemma Goshu hangs in the balance, a pawn in the game of power and revenge, his life held captive in the heart of the Yejju kingdom.



In the grand main chamber of the palace of Debre Tabor, golden and silver filigree embroiled vestments twirl as Etchege Mahzantu and his acolytes stand amidst the widest gathering of the clergy, their crosses of gold and silver shining brilliantly in the light, casting a sacred aura throughout the room.

Suddenly, like a tempest, Empress Menen storms into the chamber, her opulent silks swirling violently around her in a display of regal fury, the very air crackling with the energy of her presence. The clergymen scramble to their feet, an uneasy tension filling the sacred space as the palpable wrath of their sovereign radiates through the room, electrifying the atmosphere with a sense of impending confrontation. The Empress, marches forward, her steps purposeful and determined, cutting across the bewildered clergymen, her eyes fixed on the cross-crowned Etchege Mahzantu, and

takes her seat on the throne.

"Abba," she respectfully bows her head as the Etchege extends the largest golden cross in the chamber for her to kiss, the metal cool against her lips, a momentary respite from the fire burning within her. The exchange between them is a ritual, a dance



of power and respect, as the opulence of the palace bears witness to their meeting, the very walls seeming to hold their breath in anticipation.

The atmosphere remains charged as the Abba stands before the empress, the air thick with the weight of unspoken words and simmering emotions. "Abba, I trust the Lord's grace has been your steadfast companion on your arduous journey, what tidings do you bring from the distant realms?" Empress Menen asks, her opulent silks settling like a storm reluctantly receding, her voice a mix of warmth and urgency, belying the turmoil that rages beneath the surface.

"The Shoans under their Negus have built a strong and secure kingdom, Iteye," replies Etchege Mahzantu, his voice resonating with authority, echoing through the chamber like a clarion call. "They escorted me up to Ankobar with a large army. It's by our Lord's will that they remain close to your kingdom and steadfast in their faith."

Empress Menen nods, her eyes betraying a hint of worry, a flicker of uncertainty that dances across her face, the weight of her concerns settling heavily upon her shoulders. "The close relative to the corpse is near, abba. They have yet to show themselves here, but only deliver tributes through others," she scoffs "Their ruler fancies himself a Negus, defying others. Time will reveal if they are friends or foes."

Her expression turns grave, the lines of her face deepening with the burden of her thoughts, as she hesitates, the words caught in her throat, before she decides to share her deepest concerns. "I wish to discuss a sensitive matter that needs your wisdom, abba. . ."

"I have heard the rumors Iteye, your son?" Etchege Mahzantu looks at her knowingly, his eyes piercing through the veil of her words, seeing the truth that lies beneath.

"More than my son, it's the Axindarian bishops whispering in his ears that I fear the most," she confides, her voice low and urgent, the words spilling forth like a torrent, unleashing the depths of her fears. The Etchege, a rival to the Axindarian Abuna Salama and his teachings, has been battling for the soul of the nation, a struggle that has now reached the very heart of the palace.

"He has poisoned my son against me," she hisses, every word acidic, dripping with rage. "He fills his mind with his vile Axumite heresies," the anger spills out from her, a tangible force that seems to fill the room, pressing against the walls and ceiling.

"Only yesterday he arrived and aims to convert us, just like the Ferenji Jesuits did to Za Dengel," Etchege Mahzantu fumes, his voice trembling with barely contained fury. "He seeks to take over our faith and sell us out to Axindaria." The Abba trembles in fury "In Shoa, his Coptic teachings are banned, and the clergy are being hunted down across the regions for spreading their vile doctrines." The Etchege shakes his head, his hands clenching and unclenching as he vents his frustration through psalm prayers, the words a balm to his troubled soul.

"Sahlä Sallase had asked for his excommunication to be lifted, but the recalcitrant ferenji had refused. If outside it rains, one flees to the house, but when in the house it rains, where does one flee?" he adds, his voice heavy with the weight of

his concerns, the words echoing the desperation that grips his heart.

Empress Menen listens intently, her rage mounting again within her, a fire that threatens to consume her from the inside out. "It's not just his twisted teachings, but the harsh truths this ecclesiastic believes he can say to me, abba! The things he says to me!" Her anger floods, threatening to shatter the fragile peace that hangs in the air.

"I was so indignant, I spoke to my son about exiling him back to the north or locking him up in one of the monasteries on Lake Tana, but he won't listen to me!" the Empress fumes, her voice rising with each word, the frustration and helplessness evident in every syllable. "And now, he claims to know what is in the heart of my own son!"

"Only God knows what is in the hearts of men," Etchege Mahzantu replies solemnly, his voice a beacon of calm amidst the storm of her emotions. She trembles, rage and anguish commingling, a toxic brew that threatens to consume her. "My own blood denies me for that silver-tongued ferenji sorcerer." The empress shakes in fury "He grants land to dogs like Wibe and Aligaz, and all his enemies, taking away bread from our mouth!" she shouts, her voice raw with the depth of her pain. "Something has to be done about that high-priced Egyptian harlot!"

The Etchege nods gravely, his brow carved with lines of resentment, the weight of the situation etched into every crease and furrow. "The Abbott and his foreign witchcrafts have wormed deep into court, I fear. Radical teachings urge open arms to the Yejju while Islam and other pollutions of the faiths spread like a plague."

Empress Menen rises and resumes her feverish pacing, her silk gown billowing like smoke, a physical manifestation of the turmoil that rages within her. "I offered up my greatest captive that torments his soul, but at Abuna's honeyed urging, my son betrayed me to release our sworn foe!"

She rounds on Mahzantu, her eyes aflame, teeth bared to the roots, a wild animal caught in the throes of desperation. "I should exile the viper to Lake Tana or lock his deceitful lips in a forgotten cell!" Her voice drops to a guttural whisper, "But my son falls ever deeper under his spell."

The assembly watches, cowed, as their fury-maddened Empress trembles with emotion's terrible weight, the very air seeming to vibrate with the force of her anger. The clergy can sense the violent reckoning that awaits should Abuna Salama continue his defiant course, the storm that is gathering on the horizon, ready to break at any moment.

The golden crosses held by the assembled Ethiopian clergy shimmer with an otherworldly brilliance, outshining even the flickering torches that illuminate the room. The sacred symbols reflect not only the light but also the weight of the moment, a tangible representation of the intensity that permeates the air. The fate of the kingdom hangs in the balance, as the forces of religion and the machinations of the throne collide in a battle for the soul of the kingdoms.





Fiery dusk engulfs the plateau, painting the land in hues of blood red beneath the broiling sun, a hellish landscape that mirrors the carnage unfolding below. Dejazmach Wibe and his men survey the scene with grim determination, their eyes fixed on the Tigrean warriors in wild retreat from the disciplined ranks of Muhammad Ali's Egyptian army, the chaos of their flight a stark contrast to the unyielding order of the enemy's advance. The air is thick with the stench of death and the clamor of battle.

"How many do they have with them?" Dejazmach Wibe asks, his voice a low growl, the words dripping with barely contained fury.

"About five thousand, my lord," responds the Tigrean chief, his voice trembling slightly, unsure of the numbers of the enemy.

Dejazmach Wibe, his face half covered with a shimma against the gale wind, raises a telescope to his eye, the lens focusing on the fort bristling with Egyptian troops, a veritable hornets' nest of enemy

activity. "There are about ten thousand regulars hold that garrison," he mutters, his jaw clenching with barely contained rage. "Cavalry number at least two thousand now — tripled since last I rode for Debre Tabor." He informs the chiefs with his correction.

"They have farmed out the borders along the coast right under the Turks, and once again, they are farming our borders from our neighbors, threatening to push into the highlands, my lord," the chief adds, his voice heavy with the weight of the implications.

"Damned the Yejju!" Another general spits over the precipice in disgust. "The bastard Musliman outcasts creep further inland whilst those Yejju dogs treat with them in God's holy city," he snarls.

"Never mind about the Yejju" Dejazmach Wibe grinds his jaw, visions of desecration igniting his azure eyes, the fire of his anger burning bright within. "Their greed for power shall be their end," he declares, his voice a thunderous proclamation. "Once Tigray is secured, we shall cleanse Gonder of their Islamist taint, and purge the land of their filth!"

"The Habab only recognizes the authority of the Pasha, the Sheik of Galabat too had submitted to them. From here to Sennar, my lord, Muhammad Ali aims for conquest," adds a chief, his words a dire warning of the enemy's ambitions.

"No matter what the Muslim Yejju say, their true desires expose them as enemies of our faith!" Dejazmach Wibe exclaims with conviction, his voice rising with each word, the passion of his beliefs a tangible force. "Ali! Even in name, they resemble

one another!" he spits "and with the help of our Lord and Savior, we will crush these Muslims once and for all, and send them screaming back to the hell from whence they came!" Wibe vows.

"They say the Endresse has reached out to them for alliance, just as Dejzmach Amade did before, now fearing your attacks," interjects another Tigrean chief, his words a reminder of the shifting allegiances and the ever-present threat of betrayal.

"That old lady and her son wander much from one faith to another in Gonder," Wibe shakes his head "They have set the insides of the country to burn, and they must be removed!" he declares, his words dripping with contempt, clearly seeking to unseat the Yejju once again, to claim the throne for himself.



Dejzmach Wibe dismounts from his horse to face his men, addressing them with authority. "Support our raiders and keep them in check for now. They are not strong enough to challenge us yet," he commands, his eyes blazing with the fire of his ambition. "I will reach out to the ferenji powers to put pressure on them before we move to dislodge them and claim what is rightfully ours!"

"Send word to Nimir" turning to another chief, Wibe instructs, "Tell him to increase his raids in Senar, to keep the enemy

off balance and distracted, while we gather our strength and prepare for the final assault."

"My lord," the Tigrean chief interjects, his voice hesitant, as if unsure of how his words will be received. "There is also another raider whose name is known from here to their land, a Shifta, a high-wayman for hire who is a bane to the Egyptians in Sudan."

Curious, Dejzmach Wibe turns to face the chief, his eyebrows raised in a silent question. "Who is he?" he asks, his voice low, the words a silent demand for information.

"A relative of Dejzmach Kinfu, I believe," the chief replies, his words measured and careful. "They call him the Nimir of Qwara, the Lion of the west."

For the first time, Dejzmach Wibe hears about Kassa. But in this moment, he doesn't think much of it, his mind consumed with the more pressing concerns of the Egyptian threat and his own ambitions for power.

"What is his name?" he asks, his voice dismissive, as if the information is of little consequence.

"Kassa Hailu, my lord," the chief responds, his voice barely audible above the din of battle.

Dejzmach Wibe nods, his mind already moving on to other matters, the name of the unknown raider fading into the background, a mere footnote in the grand scheme of his plans for conquest and glory. Little does he know that this name, Kassa Hailu, will one day come to haunt him, a specter of his own downfall, a reminder of the fickleness of fate and the ever-shifting tides of power in the land of Abyssinia.

Kassa Rises

*The lion does not turn around
when a small dog barks*

Kassa! Kassa! Kassa! In the heart of the dense jungle, ancient trees quake with the thunderous chants of a thousand warriors, their voices rising in a feverish chorus. The name reverberates through the foliage, a battle cry that sends tremors through the earth itself.

Without warning, Kassa explodes into the ranks of his enemies like an unleashed force of nature, a whirlwind of deadly precision. Astride a mighty steed, he embodies the essence of a fearless leader, his resolve etched into every line of his battle-hardened face. He charges headlong toward the waiting line of Sudanese warriors stationed at the forest's edge, a phalanx of military might backed by their Egyptian overlords.

Behind Kassa, the Shifta warriors stream like an unstoppable torrent, their numbers swelled tenfold since that first audacious raid mere seasons ago. They move as one, a spectral army possessed by a singular purpose, bound to their leader by unbreakable bonds of loyalty and shared destiny.



The Sudanese soldiers stand rigid, a wall of gleaming weapons and taut muscles, steeling themselves for the impending onslaught. The air crackles with tension as the distant chants grow louder, a war drum beaten by a thousand ghostly hands. Fear flickers in the faces of the men like a guttering candle flame, threatening to engulf them as the enormity of what approaches becomes clear.



From the shadows of the dense foliage, Kassa materializes like a wraith, a figure of dread cloaked in an aura of invincibility. Flanked by the might of his Shifta warriors, he seems to grow larger than life, an avatar of war itself. The sight of him sends an icy ripple of primal terror through the ranks of the opposing soldiers, men who suddenly feel the cold breath of mortality on their necks. In that instant, the battle is decided before it even begins. Kassa and the Shifta warriors decimate the Sudanese without mercy.

In far-flung village squares, drunken revelers raise their voices in exultant praise, hailing the coming of a legend: “The promised one is here! Maru’s true heir! The Qwarania has risen to restore our ancient glory!” Their words slur with intoxicated fervor, but the conviction in their eyes burns bright and hot.

Dejazmach Mekonnen and Yilma, riding around their town, ensconced in their royal compound with their retinue of chiefs and the governor of Dembeya, overhear the jubilant cries echoing through the halls of the Fenja house. The two leaders exchange uneasy glances, the weight of a shared realization hanging between them.

“We should have crushed that viper in his nest when we had the chance,” Dejazmach Yilma snarls, his words dripping with regret.

“This shifta, the so-called Lion of the jungle. . .” A nervous Qwara chief, sensing the tension, speaks up to break the suffocating silence. “His legend grows with each passing day, his name on every tongue from here to the horizon. The coming



year will see his star ascend beyond our reach." His words are laced with a mixture of awe and trepidation, acknowledging the inexorable hand of fate at play.

Dejazmach Mekonnen, his face a mask of stern resolve, trots his horse faster as if to outpace the doubts nipping at his heels. "You dare lay the blame for this at my feet? That brigand is a fool if he believes he can challenge the might of our house!" Yet even as the words leave his lips, uncertainty flickers behind his eyes. He turns to Dejazmach Yilma and the governor of Dembeya, seeking their counsel in the face of this growing threat.

"The loudest roars come from the weakest lions." The governor of Dembeya responds, his voice ringing with false bravado. "Fear not the bleating of a fawn who scurries for cover at the first hint of the tempest," he boasts, ". . . just as his father before him. I shall dispatch my most skilled spies to infiltrate his ranks and sow the seeds of his destruction from within." But his words ring hollow in the charged air where Kassa's name still echoes. For in the shadowed depths of the forest and the clamor of the village streets, one name rises above all others, whispered with a reverence once reserved for legends: Kassa.



In the maze of trees that stands as a silent witness, the clash of wills and the struggle for dominion unfolds, the echoes of a legend in the making. With each victory, the name of the Qwarania

spreads like wildfire, an unquenchable blaze that sears itself into the hearts and minds of the people, a beacon of hope and a portent of upheaval.

Deeper in the woods and valleys, Kassa and his battle-hardened warriors press forward, the spoils of their triumph over the Sudanese forces a testament to their burgeoning might. The glint of captured matchlock guns in the hands of the Shifita fighters heralds a new era of warfare for the jungle dwellers, a seismic shift in the balance of power.

At the head of the column, Kassa strides alongside Gabreye, a leader who walks among his men as an equal. His hand rests on the hilt of his sword, the steel an extension of his indomitable will. He sets a punishing pace, a wordless challenge to those who follow to match his tenacity and dedication.



Under the pale glow of the moon, Kassa transforms the forests and plains into a theater of violence, a crucible in which he forges his legend with each fallen foe. His momentum propels him deeper into the heart of the West, across the am-

bas and valleys to provinces where he shatters the armies of the small regional houses like kindling, their defenses crumbling beneath the relentless onslaught of his ever-growing forces.

In the town of Dembeya, the thunder of hoofbeats heralds the approach of Kassa and his Shifta warriors, announcing the impending reckoning for the soul of Qwara. They descend upon the governor's fortress like an inexorable tide, the earth trembling beneath the weight of their determination.

The governor, once a pillar of strength, now trembles before the gathering storm, his voice quavering as he demands answers from his subordinates. "What news of our spies? What have they learned of this shifta's plans?"

A messenger, his face ashen with dread, delivers the crushing blow: "My lord, our spies have been discovered and slain, their bodies left as a warning. Some have even abandoned their posts to join the enemy ranks."

The governor's eyes widen, disbelief warring with mounting terror. "How vast is the force that marches against us? How many men does this would-be conqueror com-

mand?" But the messenger's tongue cleaves to the roof of his mouth, the enormity of the truth too terrible to voice.

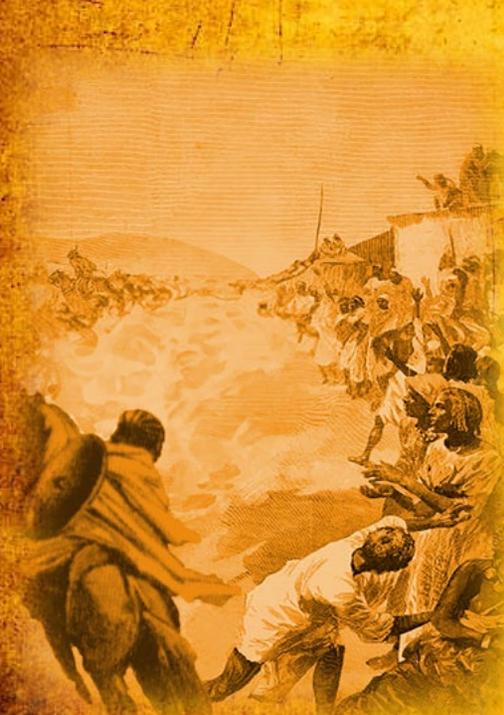
Beyond the fortress walls, the streets of Dembeya erupt in a cacophony of jubilation as throngs of villagers abandon their daily toils to cheer the advancing army. The air thrums with the chant of a thousand voices, rising in a crescendo of exultation: "Kassa! Kassa! Kassa!"

Within the citadel, the clash of blades and the cries of the dying paint a grim tableau of the desperate struggle unfolding. Kassa, a whirlwind of death, cuts a swath through his foes, his sword an instrument of retribution.

"Come here, you orphan bastard!" the governor shouts as he advances on Kassa. "Your father died squealing like a speared hog! You shall too!" he taunts, his words striking Kassa like thunder.

He is the man responsible for Kassa's father's death, a secret that has haunted him for years. Fueled by years of anguish and rage, Kassa strikes back with cold, calculated fury, his movements precise and deadly.

"You little fly on a corpse, death would be a mercy for the likes of you," Kassa retorts, his skill unmatched. He overpowers the governor with lightning-fast



strikes, his blade a blur of motion. "I should let you live with the shame that a 'speared hog' produced a better man than you."

The blood-red sun flares in Kassa's eyes as he executes a masterful feint, slicing through the governor's calves. The governor crumples to the ground, his sword clattering uselessly beside him. The Shifta warriors erupt in a triumphant cheer, their voices building to a deafening roar of victory.

"For my father, whose death you so vainly announce. . ." Kassa growls, crossing his swords against the governor's throat. After a moment that hangs in the air like an eternity, Kassa's blade flashes, slicing through the governor's neck in a clean, swift stroke.

As the head of his father's killer rolls to the ground, Kassa takes a moment to breathe, the gnawing bitterness in his heart finally quieting. Honor and justice have been served this day, a long-awaited reckoning fulfilled.

Outside the fortress walls, Kassa's army advances with the precision of a well-oiled machine, a testament to their leader's iron discipline. There is no wanton destruction, no flames consuming the village, only the methodical seizure of control by an unstoppable force.

Across the expanse of the Western Gonder plains, Kassa's army swells to a tide of thousands, an inexorable wave that crashes against the crumbling bastions of the old order. The Western great houses fall like dominoes, their once-proud banners trampled beneath the feet of the conquering lion.



In the halls of power back in Qwara, a messenger bursts into the chamber where Dejazmach Mekonnen and Yilma confer with their advisors, his face a mask of urgency. The news he bears is a thunderbolt from a clear sky: Kassa's forces are on the move, their sights set on the very heart of the West to reclaim the house of Fenja.

The West teeters on the brink of a new era, the old certainties crumbling to dust in the face of the rising storm that is Kassa and his unstoppable march to power. The very foundations of the kingdoms tremble as the legend of the Qwarania grows, a name whispered with equal parts dread and awe, a harbinger of the cataclysmic change to come.

In the suffocating gloom of the hallway, Ras Ali follows his mother's servants, their flickering candles casting serpentine shadows that writhe along the narrow walls. His footsteps, leaden with trepidation, resound like drumbeats in the oppressive silence.

The chamber of Empress Menen emerges from the darkness like a gaping maw ready to devour him. Ras Ali, his nerves fraying, steps inside to find his mother, a once-formidable figure, now stooped and withered beside the dying embers of a fire. Her face, a map of disillusionment and bitterness, is framed by the concerned visages of her advisors and maids. Empress Menen's eyes, sharp as daggers, pierce through her son as he approaches, his attempt at warmth crumbling under her scrutiny.



“Emmaye, how have you been?” Ras Ali inquires, his words a fragile olive branch in the chasm between them.

“Aye, Lije. . .you come at a late hour,” Empress Menen’s response is a barb. “I feel like a mare plagued by restlessness, thanks to the enemies you so graciously liberate to torment me.” Her words drip with sarcasm, each syllable a testament to her profound disappointment. “It’s a bitter irony that when our foes rob a mother, her own child rushes to cut her gains and hand them back.”

Ras Ali, well-versed in his mother’s tempestuous moods, absorbs the slight without flinching. A shadow of unspoken worry hangs over him, an invisible burden that seems to press down on his shoulders with the weight of a boulder.

“Emmaye, a new rebellion stirs in the West,” he ventures, his tone grave.

“Of course unrest festers!” Menen’s voice cracks like a whip, echoing off the cold stone. The Empress, a master of the game of thrones, dismisses the news with a cynical wave. “What else do you expect? When we hold our enemies close, they are too weak to stand, but once released, they spread like a plague, their tongues dripping with defiance and their hearts plotting treachery.”

Ras Ali, undeterred, presses on. “This one is different, Emmaye!” He shouts.

“Leave us!” The Empress commands, her voice a thunderclap. The advisors and maids scurry from the chamber like mice fleeing a hungry cat. Menen rises from her seat, her silk robes billowing as she paces, a lioness stalking her cage. “This new outlaw—what name does he bear?”

“A commoner, a Shifta, a bastard brother of Kinfu named Kassa.” Ras Ali forces the words out, bracing for ridicule. Instead, Menen’s laughter pierces the air, a crow’s harsh cackle that claws at the stagnant atmosphere.

“That little orphan of Kinfu’s blood?” She muses. “Another false messiah, easily dispatched,” she scoffs, her words dripping with contempt. “Emmaye!” Ras Ali’s frustration boils over. “This bastard claims no house yet proclaims himself the second coming! They say his Shifta warriors fight like men possessed and cannot be defeated.”

“So, my son, who lacks the spine to confront two bastards himself, finally seeks the counsel of his mother, who understands the ways of men,” The empress taunts, her words a razor’s edge.

“He seized Dembeya, your land!” Ras Ali counters, his anger rising.

"The land you so generously stripped from your mother to bestow upon Biru Aligaz, you mean? I would have—" Menen's fury ignites, but Ali interrupts.

"Emmaye!" he pleads, struggling to maintain composure. "This Shifta conquers without mercy. The lowborn masses flock to his banner, seduced by his mad ravings of divine rule."

"Heed me, Lije!" Menen's eyes narrow. "We face greater threats than a mere Shifta!" She approaches Ras Ali, her gaze a piercing lance. "That Egyptian Abuna who whispers poison in your ear understands nothing of our ways! These vipers you strike and release will only retreat to their holes, biding their time to strike again! We must be ruthless in crushing their defiance!"

Ras Ali's temper erupts like a volcano. "What would you have me do? Burn the empire to ashes like Gran? The rebels are everywhere, a hydra with countless heads!"

"A cruel leader dies twice, my son. That is not the path I raised you to walk!" Empress Menen retorts, her words a searing brand. "But a true leader must know when words fail, it is the sword that speaks the final truth. We, the Yejju, have always settled our quarrels thus."

Endresse Ras Ali, his anger spent, deflates like a punctured bladder. "And what of this Shifta? What is to be done?"

"Do not worry yourself over an orphan!" Empress Menen's pronouncement is a death knell. "We shall bring him to his knees. I will send men to test the mettle of his Shifta wolves. Either this mongrel dies, or we leash him and his pack at court."

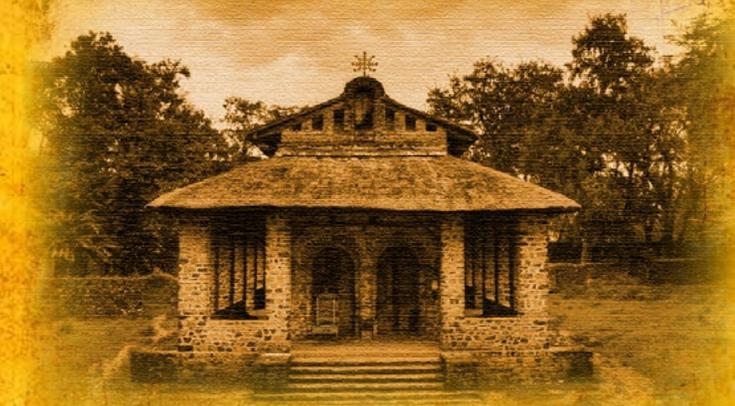
"And if he proves too proud to kneel?" Ras Ali presses, uncertainty gnawing at his gut.

Empress Menen's lips peel back in a feral smile, her yellowed teeth gleaming in the dying firelight. "Should promises and threats alike fail, if this bandit truly has the common vermin hailing him as a prophesied king. . ." She clamps her claw-like hand on Ali's shoulder, her touch searing through his robes, a brand of shadow and malice. The unspoken threat hangs heavy in the air, a sword poised to fall. "There are ways to extract the secrets of Revelation from a man, my son. Even from a man who believes himself to be divinely chosen."

Empress Menen, her resolve hardening, contemplates. "If he proves to be as formidable as they claim, we must forge an alliance by bringing him into our sphere of influence," she declares, her eyes glinting with calculated determination. "We shall lure him directly into the grasp of our Yejju hands."



In the awe-inspiring ancient monastery of Debre Berhan, perched on the tranquil shores of Lake Tana, Kassa stands tall and proud before a gathering of elders and clergy. His simple warrior robe is a stark contrast to their resplendent capes adorned with gold and silver studs, yet his presence commands the chamber. The flickering candlelight casts a celestial glow behind Kassa, as if the heavens themselves are anointing him in this sacred moment.



"As King David ended the suffering of the Children of Israel during the Time of The Judges , so shall the rise of Kassa bring an end to the tumultuous era of Zemena Mesafent," a clergy priest declares, his voice resonating through the hall, drawing a powerful parallel between Kassa and the biblical King David. Kassa's heart swells with pride as his gaze sweeps across the congregation, taking in the devoutly holy priests and the fervent sight of thousands of dedicated warriors who would lay down their lives at his command.

The crowd erupts into ecstatic chants of "Kassa! Kassa! Kassa!" The name reverberates through the monastery and spills out into the surrounding lands, heralding Kassa as the spiritual successor destined to crush the era of disunity beneath his feet. Kassa feels the weight of destiny surging through his veins, a fire-limned future unfurling before him, promising greatness and change.

In this moment of triumph, Kassa turns to his mother, Weizero Atitgeb, and a wave of joy

washes over him, watching the entire chamber bow before her. He sees her delight, her face beaming with pride at the sight of her son being embraced and respected by the people.

Kassa strides towards his mother, his steps measured and purposeful, and as he reaches her, he sinks to his knees, bowing his head in reverence. "Emmaye," he whispers, his voice thick with emotion as tears threaten to spill from his eyes, "All that I am, all that I have achieved, is because of you." He takes her weathered hands in his, pressing his forehead against them in a gesture of deep respect and gratitude. "The honor bestowed upon me today is but a reflection of the strength, wisdom, and enduring love you have poured into me all these years. I am forever indebted to you for your sacrifices."

Weizero Atitgeb, her own eyes brimming with tears, looks upon her son with a mixture of pride and overwhelming joy. The memories of the young boy she was once forced to abandon flood her mind, and she marvels at the man he has become, a leader crowned by the love and trust of his people.

"My son, my Tewodros. . ." she whispers, her voice trembling with emotion, "I have always known the greatness that lies within you. Today, they see it too."

Kassa rises to his feet, his hand still clasping his mother's. "I make this solemn vow to you, Emmaye," he declares, his voice ringing clear and strong, "Every step I take on this path, every triumph we achieve, will be in honor of you. I will make you proud, today and always."

In a gesture that sends ripples of astonishment through the gathered crowd, Kassa raises his mother's hand to his lips, pressing a fervent kiss upon it. Such a public display of a man honoring his mother in the presence of the patriarchal clergy is unheard of, and the act speaks volumes of the unbreakable bond between them.

In the grand dining hall, nobles and chiefs from various regions of the West revel in celebration of Kassa's crowning. The opulent chamber that once belonged to Kinfu and Maru buzzes with a new energy as guests are seated in circles based on their rank and favor with the new rulers to honor Kassa. Servants and maids attend to their every need, serving raw beef, stews and Tej, the intoxicating honey wine that loosens tongues and fuels the revelry.

The victory feast threatens to collapse under the weight of its own self-congratulation. Nobles preen and jostle, their sycophancy a desper-



ate attempt to bask in the warlord's glow. Kassa watches them with a knowing eye, amused by their attempts to outshine each other in their praise, rising and sitting down in exaggerated displays of admiration. Amidst this cacophony of flattery, Kassa leans towards his trusted confidant, Gabreye, and whispers in his ear, seeking his insight.

"Which one of them do you think is being pressed by the Yejju?" Kassa asks, his voice low and conspiratorial.

"Whoever howls the loudest like a hyena. . ." Gabreye responds with a wry smile, his eyes twinkling with mischief, ". . .and the one who goes in and out with diarrhea."

Despite the humor in Gabreye's words, Kassa's expression turns serious, his brow furrowing with concern. "Speaking of those pampered Muslims, our infantry lines would crumble before their lancers' charge."

"They will run right through our men, no doubt of that," Gabreye agrees, his tone grave.

"Then we make sure the horse brings the Yejju to war only, it does not fight for them," Kassa declares, his mind already formulating a strategy. Puzzled, Gabreye inquires, "How?"

"Do you not remember the scattered dead horses on the ambas of Gojjam?" Kassa asks, his eyes alight with a fierce determination. "These are our lands, we know them better than they do, we have to turn the plains into a hill before them." Gabreye's eyes widen as he grasps the audacity of Kassa's plan — to transform the plains into a jagged, horse-breaking deathtrap. A silent understanding passes between the two leaders, their

resolve unshakable in the face of the challenges that lie ahead.

Kassa's eyes return to his mother, remembering the silent vow he made as a child. Kassa knows that this is but a moment in his struggle for greatness, a testament to the love and strength of the woman who shaped him, the mother who never lost faith in him, even in the darkest of times.



CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Faith Turmoil

When you have prayed for victory, you have prayed for many unmentioned defeats.

The Yejju cavalry stands alert, their eyes scanning the horizon as a spectacular caravan of caparisoned mules approaches, each step kicking up clouds of dust that catch the golden light of the sun. Atop these regal mounts, Abuna Salama and the clergy proceed toward the stone palace, their colorful vestments and ornate parasols creating a dazzling display against the stark landscape. The devout Orthodox Christians of Gonder have gathered in great numbers to support the Abuna, their cheers rising in a crescendo of praise and prayer as the procession passes by, the air electric with their elation.



Mounted on a majestic white mule, Abuna Salama, his bushy face shielded by a red velvet umbrella, blesses the crowd with his cross as he passes, his presence a beacon of divine grace and authority. Inside the palace, the procession moves in and out of the sunlight streaming through the large open windows, the play of light and shadow creating a dramatic backdrop for the approaching Abuna. The Yejju nobles and chiefs stand on either side, their postures stiff and faces inscrutable, while Christian monks exchange pleasantries with their counterparts, their voices a low murmur against the charged silence. Yet, a palpable tension hangs in the air, the divide between Yejju Christians and Muslims a chasm that threatens to swallow any semblance of unity.

Empress Menen, surrounded by her court, remains seated, her gaze steely and unmoved by the Abuna's presence. In response, the Abuna acknowledges her with a slight nod, a calculated gesture that speaks volumes, but refrains from offering his cross in blessing, the absence of the act a glaring omission that sets the stage for the impending confrontation.

"Beloved brethren," the Abuna clears his throat, his voice resonating through the hall, "it's good to see such solidarity among you. In one spirit, we were all baptized into one body, and we all were made to drink from the same cup of the one God, for the Son Himself is the anointing." His eyes sear into the Empress, a smug smile playing on his lips, a challenge in his gaze. "The adherents of the blasphemous Sagga school, who expelled our clergy, now wish me to remove the excommunication of their Negus in Shoa. What say you?"

A loud protest rises from the Orthodox clergy, their voices a cacophony of support for the centuries-old Alexandrian interpretation of the Orthodox faith. The Abuna, emboldened by their response, rubs his great bib of graying beard, the action a display of his wisdom and religious authority.

"I would not allow for such a thing!" He slams down his staff, the sound reverberating through the chamber, eliciting shouts of surprise. "I will never abandon fellow Christians whose spiritual life was corrupted by their leaders!" he proclaims, his voice a thunderclap that ignites a loud cheer from his followers. The empress narrows her eyes, her fingers drumming an impatient rhythm on the arm of her throne, a snake poised to strike.

"Now is the time to confront those who defile our faiths, in all lands that practice the radical faith of the Qeb'at, weld-ba-Sagga, for they are trapped in the shadow of death," the Abuna continues, his words a rallying cry that sets the hearts of his priests ablaze. "Shoa must be humbled before the Lord!" A deafening shout rises, the priests nodding fervently behind him, their hands clutching relics and prayer sticks, ready to defend their faith to the bitter end.

Empress Menen shoots to her feet, her robes swirling around her like a tempest. "If you cut out Shoa, you cut the fat that comes to us! Our armies are stretched thin as is — where will the funds to keep the wolves at bay come from if you dismantle a key province? Do you want our heads on platters for the Muslims?" She descends from the dais towards the Abuna, each step a thunderclap, her guards bristling like a thicket of spears, their weapons glinting in the torchlight.

“What God distributes, He distributes, Iteye,” the Abuna responds, his voice steady despite the white-knuckled grip on his staff.

The empress laughs, the sound bitter and sharp as a blade. “What’s mine and what is yours are not the same, Abuna. My coffers are not overflowing like those of the Church.” She gestures angrily at his vestments, the gold thread gleaming in the light. “The little we do possess, we are forced to split and share with others.” She sighs, the sound heavy with the weight of her burdens. “Have you so quickly forgotten what happened at Debre Tabor?”

The Abuna turns to the great robed hosts of monks and priests, their faces a sea of devotion, their hands clutching prayer sticks and glittering crosses. Then he turns back to the Empress, his confidence bolstered by the strength of his numbers.

“How could we forget? A fight over prosperity had almost destroyed the kingdom!” He sighs, the sound a lament for the follies of humankind. “Prosperity and rulers like the flood come and go, but faith remains forever, Iteye.” He steps closer to the Empress, his presence a challenge. “There are rumors that the Yejju lords have all been converted by the Etchege to the faiths of the others.”



Empress Menen laughs, the sound sharp and mocking. “First, we were accused of being Muslims, and now, we are made to feel shame for accepting our own local Christian faiths?” The incredulous Empress seats back on her throne.

“As I warned you last time, when you quarreled over booty with your officers, Iteye, when you came to me with stone on your back, begging for forgiveness, prosperity and faith are not intertwined,” the Abuna chides, his words a reminder of past humiliations.

“You dare accuse me of heresy? When you are but a slave, bought and sold for coin? You are a puppet dancing on Wibe and Alexandria’s strings!” Empress Menen’s laughter is a bitter poison. “How else do you think you came to our kingdom after years of absence?”

Empress Menen turns to her nobles, their faces a mix of shock and outrage, then to the amassed clergy, their expressions aghast. “That treacherous Wibe paid 7000 thalers for your appointment in Alexandria!”

Gasps and shouts erupt from the stunned imperial court and clergy alike, the revelation a bombshell that shatters the fragile peace. The Abuna flushes, his face a mask of fury, his mouth opening to deliver a scathing retort, but the empress presses on, her eyes alight with contempt.

The Abuna leans in close to the Empress, his whisper a venomous hiss. “Well, at least I was an expensive one. If you were put on sale, I doubt you would bring in twelve!”

“What did you say?!” The Empress’s shout is a roar of outrage. She turns to her Yejju guards,

her face contorted with fury, and they move closer to the Abuna, their spears pointed at his head, ready to strike at a moment's notice. A loud and frightening sound, like a final prayer, escapes from the throats of hundreds of the Abuna's clergy. The monks and priests charge forward to protect their spiritual leader, their robes billowing like war banners, and chaos erupts as differing sides take up positions against each other with shouts, cries, and protests.

Empress Menen fixes her gaze on the Abuna, her eyes twin pools of molten rage. "You are but a high-priced slave to us! Do not forget who holds true power in the kingdoms!" She rises from her throne, her presence a towering inferno. "Get them out! Get him out of my sight before I slaughter a whole lot of them!"

The monks and priests rush the Abuna out of the palace, their hearts pounding with fear, their feet flying over the stone floors as they flee for their lives and his.



A little later, Empress Menen paces wildly, her face a mask of rage, her fury a palpable force that fills the chamber. "I want that worm-tongued foreigner brought before me in chains!" She hurls a Tej brilla at the wall, the sound of shattering glass echoing through the chamber. Tej stains spider out onto the silk tapestries, the patterns of destruction a mirror of her wrath, as the advisors shrink away, their faces pale with fear.

"The Abuna holds sway across all the realms, Iteye," an elder chief cautions, his voice a trembling whisper. "We risk losing face even with the Shoans."

"No snake that deals in sacrilege and sedition will undermine me! I want him exiled now!" She shouts back, her words a whip that cracks through the air.

"Iteye, if they see you're unable to bend the Abuna to your will, they will not respect you," the elder chief tries to calm her down, his hands raised in a placating gesture.

"Shame where it is not, respect there is not!" A clergy chief comes to her defense, his voice a resounding call for support.

"That foreigner who thinks of himself with great knowledge shame does not know!" The empress erupts, her words a volcanic blast. "Shame that should have been kept outside has come to poison us!" The empress's eyes flash in pure rage. "Send our men, beat him within an inch of his life if you must! And remove this thorn that festers in my court." She commands in fury, "I want him fleeing back to those who brought this shameful man into our kingdoms!" A warrior chief steps up and bows hastily, his forehead touching the ground in obeisance. "I shall assemble the guards at once, Iteye."

In the middle of the night, a contingent of Yejju guards, their faces hard as stone, brandishing spears and swords, move swiftly to dispatch the armed personal guards of the Abuna scattered around a small church. They assault the guards brutally, the sounds of clashing metal and cries of pain rising into the air, as they take their place around the Abuna's residence, a ring of steel and menace.

Inside the Abuna's residence, the unarmed monks and priests can do nothing but pray, their voices rising in a desperate chorus as the Yejju warriors call for the Abuna to step out. The Abuna, dressed in his resplendent gown with the cross-scepter in hand, comes out alone, his face a mask of serenity as he watches the guards assaulting his personal guards, the violence a stark contrast to his calm demeanor.



"Stop!" The Abuna commands, "For whoever sheds human blood, by humans their blood shall be shed. For in the image of God, God has made mankind," his voice a trumpet blast of righteousness rings, but the assailants blankly stare at him, their eyes devoid of mercy.

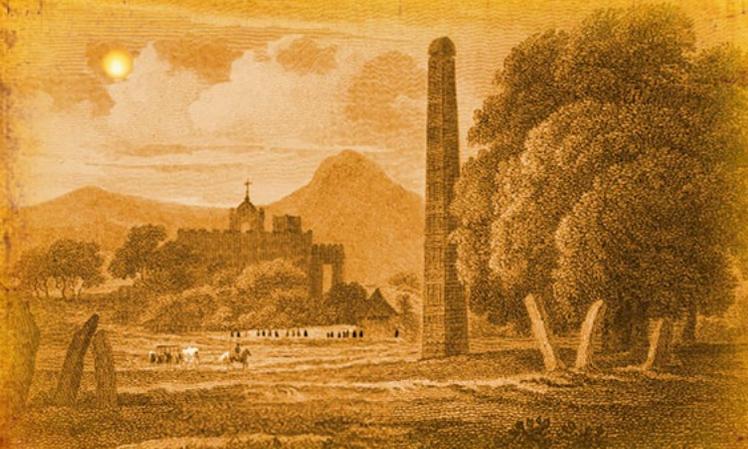
"I do not wish to be the reason for further bloodshed here. Do what you've come to do to me, for the Lord works through everything to accomplish His purpose through me," he repeats in words they can understand, his tone a gentle admonition.

A chief Yejju warrior steps out from the others, his face a mask of grim determination. "Your

good works in Gonder are done and over with, Abuna." He steps closer, his sword glinting in the moonlight, a promise of violence. "Gather your things; we are here to escort you back to Tigray under the orders of the Empress and the Etchege."



The blistering highland sun beats down mercilessly, the heat a tangible force that weighs upon the land like a smothering blanket. Shimmering waves distort the distant horizon, the parched earth cracked and thirsty, offering no respite as the escort caravan traverses the expansive field toward the church. Abuna Salama sways weakly in his saddle, his face haggard, rivulets of sweat pouring down his brow, his robes clinging to his body like a second skin. His band of monks fare little better, their faces drawn and exhausted, their steps faltering under the onslaught of the unforgiving sun.



On a nearby hill, Dejazmach Wibe and his Tigrean chiefs await the arrival of Abuna Salama, their faces a mix of anticipation and concern.

“Behold the anointed one, who will rally the faithful, on his return to ruin what you have rebuilt with the ferenje,” a chief turns to Dejazmach Wibe, who brought the pious bishop from Egypt in an attempt to overthrow the Yejju. “He might even hurt our dealing with the Catholics, my Lord” another chief remarks, voicing his concerns about the Abuna’s presence, with Wibe now seeking the French support by courting a Catholic priest, Father De Jacobis.

“When the Sheperd comes home in peace, the milk is sweet, but this. . .” Dejazmach Wibe scoffs, the Abuna’s return complicates matters, a wrinkle in his carefully laid plans. Dejazmach Wibe surveys the disheveled company, his face a mask of impatience and doubt warring for dominance.

“It’s like watching butter that falls into the fire. The old man is useless,” another chief remarks mockingly as the Abuna mops his brow, the sweat staining his once-pristine robes.

Dejazmach Wibe reflects thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing as he considers the situation. “On the road, by ambitions, one passed, returning for a person is difficult. I should know,” he responds, his words a cryptic acknowledgment of his own struggles of return home from defeat by the Yejju. “The Muslim Yejju are not blessed with the gift of foresight. The Abuna holds importance far in excess of his person.”

Along the roadside, peasants gather in swelling numbers, their faces alight with fervor, their hands waving palm fronds in a gesture of rever-

ence, despite the oppressive heat that beats down upon them. To them, the Abuna wears the crown of a martyr, his suffering at the hands of the Yejju testament to his holy status, further fueling their zeal, their prayers rising like incense to the heavens.

“Mark my words, they have sealed their fate by this expulsion, for the God-fearing Christians of the kingdom will rise up against them,” Dejazmach Wibe declares, his voice a prophecy of doom, his eyes alight with a fierce determination.

His Tigrean chief concurs, his head nodding in agreement. “You have reason, my lord. Even his ferenje enemy, De Jacobis, has said Menen and the Etchege had outraged God Himself,” he affirms, his words a confirmation of the divine wrath that awaits the Yejju.

As the caravan halts at last before the nobles, the Abuna steadies himself to standing, his face a mask of exhaustion and determination. His robe hangs in sweat-stained disarray, his eyes burning with a fire that refuses to be extinguished, the conviction of his faith a palpable force. He turns to watch the Yejju warriors retreating south, their forms obscured by shimmering clouds of dust, the heat haze distorting their figures into phantoms of a fading nightmare.

Abuna Salama, his face glistening with sweat, his hands still wiping away the evidence of his ordeal, turns on his white mule to face the retreating Yejju warriors. He raises his scepter high to the sky, the golden cross catching the blinding light of the sun, a gesture of defiance and divine authority, a challenge to those who would dare to oppose the will of God.

“Let no rain fall, nor women give birth, let the Yejju come crumbling down like old Babylon,” Abuna Salama proclaims, his voice a thunderclap of righteous fury, his words a curse that hangs heavy in the air, a pronouncement of divine judgment upon the heads of his enemies. The peasants fall to their knees, their faces upturned to the heavens, their prayers a swelling chorus that rises to meet the Abuna’s declaration, a symphony of faith and retribution that echoes across the barren landscape, a promise of the reckoning to come.



A thunderous crack rips through the heavens, unleashing a torrential downpour that seems to reflect the impending storm of battle about to engulf the land. The relentless pounding of horses’ hooves against the muddy ground creates a terrifying sound as the Yejju cavalry charges forward, their hearts set on decimating Kassa’s Shifta warriors. Chilling war cries erupt from both sides, filling the air with a sinister fervor

that sends shivers down the spines of even the bravest among them.

The Yejju cavalry cuts a swath through the Shifta warriors, their blades glinting in the muted light that filters through the ominous clouds above. The torrential rain transforms the battlefield into a muddy abyss, where visibility becomes a luxury and the line between mud and blood blurs into a grotesque canvas. Kassa, his eyes intense and calculating, bellows orders amidst the chaos, scrambling to signal secondary flanking positions as more Yejju cavalry emerge from the gloom like wraiths. The Shifta warriors around him move with a furtive grace, their bodies poised and ready for the impending onslaught. A few brave Shiftas unleash their spears, the weapons cutting through the rain-soaked air, as the large force behind them breaks into smaller units, desperately trying to hold off the relentless Yejju charge.

The Yejju riders, though not without losses, continue their hot pursuit of the suddenly fleeing warriors, their determination to chase them down and claim victory etched upon their rain-streaked faces.

The exchange between the two forces persists throughout the early dawn, the rain turning the battleground into a treacherous and muddy terrain that threatens to swallow both man and beast alike. In the midst of this fierce struggle, a small force of Shifta warriors breaks away from the larger group, peeling off to engage the Yejju cavalry that is slowed down by the mud before tactically retreating to rejoin their comrades, their movements a dance of calculated precision.

As daylight breaks through the clouds, the true intentions of Kassa become evident. Positioned on a high amba, with the Yejju cavalry far below, he looks down upon the enemy with a fierce smile that speaks of cunning and triumph. The master strategist has maneuvered his forces to take advantage of the high ground, effectively trapping the Yejju from all sides like a spider in its web.



With his sword held high, Kassa gives the signal for his warriors to advance. The Shifta forces descend from all sides, their movements fluid and lethal, like shadows descending upon their prey. The Yejju cavalry, undaunted, gallops up the steep hill, but the ascent proves challenging and slow for their horses, the mud clinging to their hooves like a vengeful curse.

From above, a hail of spears and arrows rains down upon the Yejju, creating a deadly barrage that thins their ranks with each passing moment. But the Shifta warriors are far from finished. With deadly precision and unrelenting determination,

they close in on the struggling Yejju riders, picking them off one by one from their mounts, their faces etched with the primal fury of battle.

The battlefield becomes a gruesome sight, the muddy ground now stained crimson with the blood of the fallen, scattered bodies littering the once-pristine landscape. The war cries have morphed into screams of pain and desperation, a haunting sound of agony and defeat. The Shifta warriors fight with relentless resolve, their eyes blazing with the desire for victory.

The air, thick with tension and the acrid stench of death, hangs heavy over the battlefield, but the Shifta warriors press on, their unity and cunning tactics proving to be a formidable force against the might of the Yejju. As the last of the Yejju cavalry falls, Kassa's sword remains raised in triumph, a gleaming symbol of his strategic brilliance and the fierce bravery of his warriors, the blade catching the first rays of sunlight that break through the dissipating clouds like a guiding light, a radiant signal of success, a luminous herald of conquest.



In the heart of the grand palace, a group of Yejju chiefs and noblemen gather in hushed tones, their whispers barely audible, as if they fear the very walls might betray their words to unwelcome ears. The atmosphere is thick with tension and unease, the weight of the news they bear hanging over them like a suffocating shroud.

“Not a single one survived?!” a shocked nobleman exclaims, his voice trembling with disbelief and horror. “Yes, my lords, they disappeared like the enemy was a flood that carried them off,” a Yejju chief laments, his words heavy with dread and despair, the gravity of the situation etched upon his weathered face.

“Which one of you will bear the burden of telling Iteye?” another nobleman questions, his eyes wide with anxiety and trepidation, the prospect of delivering such dire news to the empress filling him with a sense of impending doom.

“Iteye had been in such a liberated spirit since she rid herself of that meddling Abuna, and now this?!” another nobleman adds, frustration and concern warring across his features, the weight of the empire’s fate resting heavily upon his shoulders.

The men exchange glances, each of them silently assessing the others, their minds racing with the dread of the task that lies before them. Finally, one of them, a stout nobleman, turns to a tall maid who seems engrossed in her chores, her presence a momentary distraction from the suffocating tension that permeates the room.

The nobleman guides the tall maid to the Empress’s chamber. “Go on, she is in there,” he beckons her, his voice low and urgent, and the terrified maid follows, her heart pounding in her chest like a caged bird, the echoes of her footsteps swallowed by the oppressive silence that engulfs the palace halls.

Within the confines of Empress Menen’s chambers, an oasis of serenity amidst the storm that rages beyond the walls, the maid finds the em-

press preparing to retire for the night. The melody of an Oromo song drifts through the air, the empress’s voice a soothing balm that belies the turmoil that is about to unfold.

“Iteye. . .” the maid hesitates, her voice trembling with trepidation, the words caught in her throat like a tangle of thorns, the gravity of the news she bears threatening to overwhelm her.

“What is it?” Empress Menen responds, her voice calm and measured, seemingly unfazed by the interruption, her regal bearing a mask that conceals the tempest that rages within her soul.

“The men have received word from Qwara,” the maid replies, her voice barely above a whisper, the fear that grips her heart palpable in every syllable, the weight of the revelation pressing down upon her like a physical force.

Empress Menen’s face transforms in an instant, the serene facade crumbling away to reveal the fury that burns beneath the surface. She spins towards the maid, her eyes ablaze with an intensity that threatens to consume everything in its path, her regal demeanor amplified by the anger that now courses through her veins.

“Spit it out! You imbecile!” Empress Menen demands, her voice sharp and commanding, the maid’s hesitation a spark that ignites the inferno of her impatience.

“They say Kassa, the Shifta, has defeated them,” the maid reveals, her words tumbling out in a rush, as if she fears the very act of speaking them aloud might bring down the wrath of the gods upon her head.

Empress Menen slowly sinks onto her alga, the weight of the unexpected news settling upon her shoulders like a mantle of lead. The defeat of the Yeju forces at the hands of a mere Shifta is a blow that strikes at the very core of her being, the implications of this turn of events reverberating through her mind like the tolling of a funeral bell.



“Kassa, Kassa, Kassa. . .” she repeats the victor’s name, her voice a haunting melody that echoes through the chambers, each syllable a note in a composition of contemplation and unease. The name of her adversary, once a mere whisper on the wind, now resounds through the halls of power like a battle cry, a harbinger of change that threatens to upend the very foundations of her empire.

The empress lies back on her bed, her thoughts a maelstrom of anger, frustration, and grudging admiration for the formidable foe that has emerged from the shadows to challenge her rule. In the quiet solitude of her chambers, she contemplates the path that lies ahead, the uncertainty of the future a weight that presses down upon her

soul, the fate of the Yeju hanging in the balance like a sword poised above a slender thread.

As the night deepens and the palace slumbers, Empress Menen remains awake, her mind awl with the implications of Kassa’s victory. She knows that his name will no longer be a mere footnote in the annals of history, but a force that will shape the destiny of her empire, an echo that will reverberate through the corridors of power and forever alter the course of fate. In the darkness, she steels herself for the battles to come, her resolve hardening like a diamond forged in the crucible of adversity, the name “Kassa” a challenge that she must meet head-on, a man that threatens the Yeju destiny.



The Alliance

The roots of a fruitful marriage alliance run deep

The ancient kingdom of stone, Fasil Ghebbi, stands majestic, its towering castles bathed in the amber glow of early morning light. Kassa scans the grandeur of the fortress that echoes centuries of rich history, its walls bearing witness to countless tales of power and intrigue. Amidst the palace grounds, Kassa, with a handful of his loyal Shifta warriors, marches through the Yejju stronghold, their presence a daring act of suicidal defiance against the defacto rulers of the land.

Surrounding them, the armies of Empress Menen stand on high alert, their hands poised at their hilts, ready to strike at the slightest provocation from the rebels. Gabreye, his eyes vigilant, rests his hand on the hilt of his broadsword, prepared for any sign of trouble that may arise.



“How can you be certain this is not a trap?” Gabreye asks, his voice low, giving voice to the unspoken concern that hangs heavily in the air.

Kassa, his eyes gleaming with confidence, leans in close and whispers, “When the enemy fears that you’re the little enemy that might expose them to the greater enemy, they do not yet see you as a threat,” he declares with assurance, “Rest assured, my friend, our safety is guaranteed.”

The stone halls of the palace resonate with palpable tension as Kassa and his Shifta warriors stride into the throne room, their footfalls echoing off the time-worn flagstones. Shafts of early morning light pierce through the windows, casting an ethereal amber glow that mingles with tendrils of fragrant frankincense smoke. Kassa eyes the walls that are adorned with intricate tapestries depicting glorious battles and hunts of old, each one depicted in a biblical drawing as a testament to the kingdom’s rich history steeped in blood and conquest.

Upon the alga throne lounges Empress Menen, covered under a resplendent gabbi, with the clergy and chiefs below her, an embodiment of absolute authority that is comfortable under warm and relaxed atmosphere.

Her piercing gaze sweeps across the grand hall, taking in the assembled nobles and clergy, their opulent robes and glittering jewels a stark contrast to the rough-hewn garb of the approaching Shifta rebels. The air is thick with tension, the scent of frankincense mingling with the unease that permeates the room. At last, the Empress’s eyes come to rest on Kassa, the notorious Shifta leader from Qwara.



Kassa inhales deeply, drawing in the heady aroma of the incense, and puffs up his chest, embodying the image of a formidable leader of the fierce Shifta warriors from the untamed wilderness. He stands tall and proud, his hands resting confidently on the hilt of his sword, relishing the discomfort that ripples through their ranks, their unease palpable under his smoldering stare. Kassa's presence commands attention, a wild force to be reckoned with in the heart of the imperial court.

Approaching the throne, however, Kassa drops to one knee before the empress in an ostentatious display of obeisance, his eyes blazing with a barely restrained ferocity, like a feral wolf grudgingly baring its throat to the pack leader. "Iteye, most exalted mother of this glorious empire," he intones, his rich baritone echoing with genuine sincerity, "I, Kassa Hailu, a son from his beloved mother, Weizero Atitegeb, come before the mother of mothers as her humble and loyal son," he bows his head, "I come to ask for your forgiveness, Iteye. I want nothing but to dwell peacefully beneath your benevolent protection."

Empress Menen arches one delicate brow, her lips curling in a smile that does not quite reach her eyes. Though her overall expression remains an inscrutable mask, her mind races with calculations of risk and reward. The whispered rumors of this mercenary Shifta hint that he could be the key to solidifying the Yejju's iron grip on power and quelling the simmering embers of rebellion that threaten to ignite into a firestorm. A dangerous gambit, to be sure, but one that could yield untold rewards if played with masterful precision.

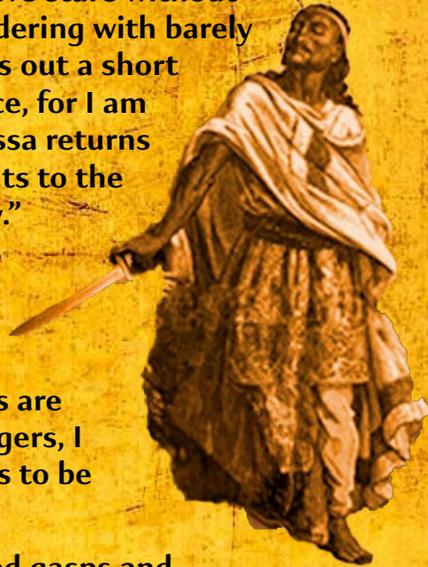
"Such honeyed words from a man whose name is synonymous with brigandry and chaos," she remarks, her melodious voice tinged with an undercurrent of ice. "Experience has taught me to be wariar than a mouse in a serpent's den when dealing with those who speak so sweetly of peace while concealing daggers behind their backs."

Kassa smiles as the Empress carefully assesses his calm and composed reaction. "It's a shame, really. The men of this kingdom are all short on truth but long in their lies." She continues, seeking to ignite a fire under him.

"Iteye, I have lived my life so far in truth and dignity," Kassa contends, rage rising. "Rumors may paint me a monster, but assumption is the shadow's edge to falsehood, Iteye," he asserts with a smile.

"Every rebel in this kingdom has stood where you stood and sang the same songs that came out of your mouth, their tongue burning red with deceit, lies upon lies about friendship and forming alliances with the Yejju," the Empress scoffs, unmoved by his words.

Kassa meets her incisive stare without flinching, his own eyes smoldering with barely contained intensity, he draws out a short dagger. "Forgive my ignorance, for I am but a brute Shifta, Iteye," Kassa returns smoothly. "The blade that cuts to the bone is the only truth I know." Kassa gestures to the nobles with his dagger. "If I were in your place, the breath that passes between anyone in this chamber, where words are thrown about instead of daggers, I too would assume utterances to be an act of falsehood."



A chorus of scandalized gasps and muttered oaths ripples through the assembled courtiers at his brazen insult, but it's a young woman's laughter that draws Kassa's attention. Tewabatch Ali, the illegitimate daughter of Ras Ali, cannot suppress a throaty chuckle of amusement, the sound as rich and intoxicating as honey mead. Kassa's eyes dart to her unbidden, a flash of appreciation kindling in their depths before he swiftly masters his expression into one of stony resolve.

Empress Menen's lips compress into a thin line, a muscle twitching almost imperceptibly along her sculpted jaw, but she chooses to let the impertinent outburst pass unchallenged.

"We have summoned you to this hallowed hall to extend an unprecedented gesture of mercy → a chance to wipe clean the blood-soaked slate of your past transgressions." She captures his full attention. "It is said that you are a man of your word, Kassa of Qwara. Is there any substance to such claims, or are they yet more empty wind?"

Kassa parts his lips to offer a fervent avowal of his sincerity, but Menen silences him with a curt, imperious gesture. Rising from her throne with fluid grace, she turns to beckon the bewitching Tewabatch to her side. "Come forward, child."

An electric excitement crackles through the court as the Empress takes her granddaughter's slender hand in her own and extends it towards the kneeling rebel. The younger woman's cinnamon eyes sparkling with mischievous delight land squarely on Kassa "A true leader must be girded with strength in war, yes," Empress Menen declares, her voice ringing through the chamber like a herald's call, "but also cemented with unity."

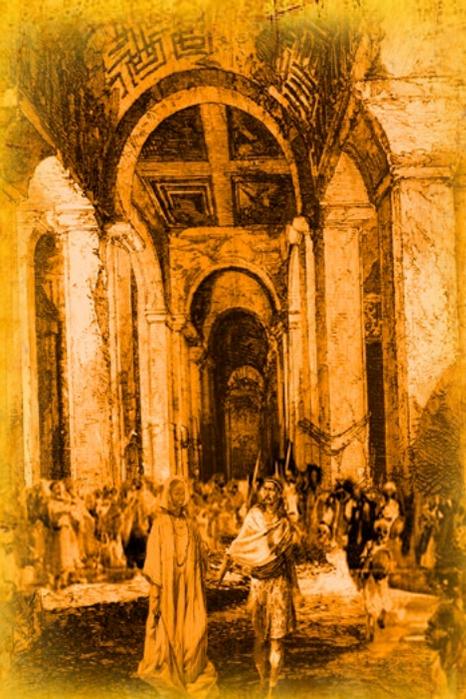
A surprised and breathless Kassa takes in the reactions of his Shifta warriors.

"Bind your cause to ours through the sacred rites of marriage, and let the clamor of rebellion fade into a distant memory. Prove to us, once and for all, the verity of your desire for peace. . ." Empress Menen demands, allowing the unspoken implication to hang heavy in the air, as thick and cloying as the suffocating incense.

Kassa scarcely registers her words, he turns to Tewabatch, utterly enthralled by her radiant beauty and the enigmatic smile that plays about her lush lips. With one breath, one calculated offer, the Empress has ensnared him more inescapably than a hare in a falcon's talons. To refuse her proposition would be to confirm every dark suspicion that poisons their thoughts, undermining his oath of peaceable intent. Yet to accept would be to tie his fate inextricably to hers, yoking the wolf to the lion in an uneasy and unnatural alliance.

At Kassa's side, Gabreye shifts his weight uneasily from foot to foot, one hand twitching reflexively towards the hilt of his broadsword. The shrewd warrior clearly recognizes the cunning trap that has been laid, the subtle snare disguised artfully as a magnanimous gesture, and yet he holds his tongue, ever the dutiful lieutenant.

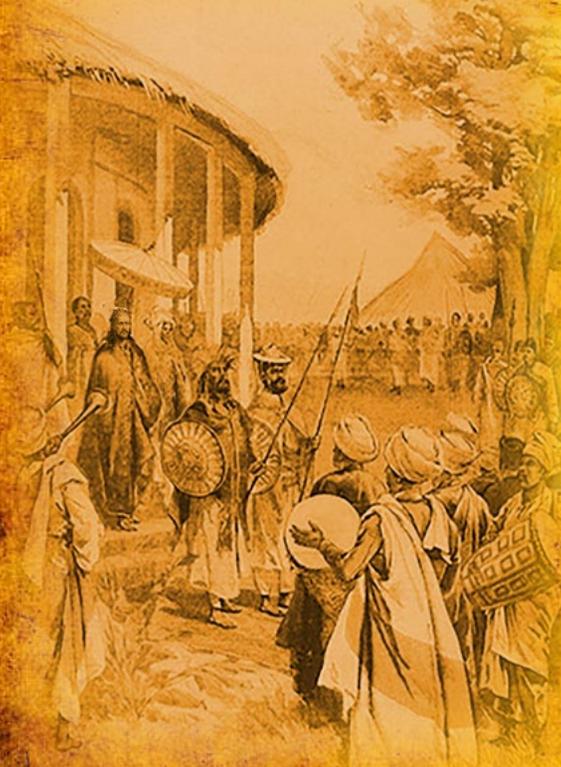
The weight of a hundred stares bears down upon Kassa's broad shoulders as the assembled nobles and clergy wait with bated breath for his response, a response upon which the future of kingdoms and the fate of thousands may pivot as surely as a dagger's point upon a fulcrum, poised to shift the delicate balance of power for generations to come.



Streams of lighted candles shine bright in the darkness, their soft glow emanating from opposing directions and converging at the entrance of the sacred Qeddus Mikael church. Distinct processions of men and women approach the holy site – Kassa, accompanied by a handful of loyal Shiftas, and Tewabatch, encircled by a bevy of bridesmaids from Empress Menen's retinue. The two groups unite, merging at the gateway to the revered sanctuary, the air heavy with anticipation and the scent of frankincense.

Kassa, flanked by his trusted friend Gabreye, stands at the entrance, exchanging greetings with Tewabatch and the slew of Menen's court women. While Kassa's adoring eyes remain fixed on his newly beloved, captivated by her radiant beauty, Gabreye finds himself drawn to one of the bridesmaids, a flicker of attraction sparking between them.

The Shifta men, awkwardly clutching candles, ogle at the significantly



larger assembly of women surrounding Tewabatch, their rough-hewn appearance a stark contrast to the opulence of the court ladies.

A venerable high priest emerges from the church, guiding Kassa and Tewabatch, each holding unlit candles, into the sacred edifice. Within, a myriad of lit candles casts a warm glow on walls adorned with depictions of saints and angels, conjuring an ethereal ambiance. The 16th-century church exudes a breathtakingly divine aura, the weight of centuries of faith and tradition palpable in every stone. Songs and prayers permeate the air, evoking the solemnity of a holy mass rather than a mere wedding ceremony. A congregation of priests, deacons, and dignitaries awaits to receive the bride and groom.

The incense hits Kassa first, fragrant smoke curling around memories of prayers with his mother and his old mentor at the monastery as a child. He smiles at the familiar faces of his Shifta compatriots, but it's his mother beaming through happy tears, her pride shining despite wrinkled skin, that resonates with profound significance, touching the very core of his soul.

As the ceremony unfolds, whispers of "savage Shifta," "Orphans," and "illegitimate bride" fill the church from sour-faced Yejju attendants, their eyes burning with barely concealed fury at the couple's union. Tewabatch, clasping Kassa's calloused but assured hands, finds solace in his steady gaze, knowing that this warrior will protect her future, no matter the challenges that lie ahead.

In the soft glow of the candlelight, Kassa and Tewabatch stand united, their hands intertwined as they light their candles together. The flames

dance and flicker, growing brighter with each passing moment, casting a warm, ethereal glow around the couple. As they proclaim their marriage vows, their hands resting upon the ancient Bible, Kassa and Tewabatch find themselves lost in each other's eyes, the world around them fading away until only their strange attraction remains.

Echege Mahzantu, Empress Menen's favored Ethiopian clergy leader, presides over the sacred ceremony, his rich voice resounding through the church in the ancient Geez tongue. The Yejju, however, continue to mutter under their breath, their words laced with contempt and hostility. Kassa, sensing Tewabatch's unease, tightens his grip on her hands, his strength and love flowing through their growing connection, steeling her nerves against the hissed insults that threaten to mar their special moment.

"Do you, Gebre Kidhan of Qwara, take Tewabatch Ali of the Yejju to be your wife?" Echege Mahzantu asks, addressing Kassa by his baptismal name.

"Yes, I do," Kassa replies, his voice unwavering and filled with conviction, his eyes never leaving Tewabatch's.

The Echege then turns to Tewabatch, his gaze softening as he speaks, "Do you, Tewabatch Ali, promise to stand by your husband in times of hardship, in sickness and in health, to love and support him always?" Tewabatch's face radiates with joy, for she knows in her heart that Kassa is the man who will stand by her side forever, through any challenge that life may bring.

“Yes, I do,” Tewabatch responds, her voice ringing out clear and confident, echoing through the sacred space.

A golden cup, filled to the brim with rich wine, is blessed by Echege Mahzantu before being shared between the kneeling couple. As they sip from the cup, the sacramental wine spreads a warmth through their bodies—Kassa and Tewabatch, in deep prayer like they are meditating, with Tewabatch in tears, acknowledge the profound meaning this union holds in silence. They squeeze their hands tighter, the depth of their commitment to one another evident for all that witness it.

“I shall partake in the cup of salvation, and I shall invoke the name of the Lord,” Kassa and Tewabatch declare in perfect unison, their voices intertwining like the threads of their destinies.

Ceremonial crowns, resplendent in their beauty, are placed upon the heads of the bride and groom, signifying the union of a king and queen that every marriage represents. Echege Mahzantu, his voice filled with reverence, pronounces, “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. O Lord, Our God, crown them in glory and honor, blessing their union and their love.”

As Echege Mahzantu leads Kassa and Tewabatch to the middle of the church, presenting them to the assembled congregation, his words resonate through the sa-



cred space, silencing the doubters for a moment: “Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways, for marriage is the union of two souls, two lives becoming one in the eyes of God.” He guides them back to the altar, continuing with the solemnity of the moment, “As they enter your holy kingdom, Lord, thus the two become one in a life of mutual love and mutual subjection to each other in Christ.”

Suddenly, a jeer erupts from the Muslims at the back of the church, causing Tewabatch to tremble. However, Kassa’s lips curve into a tender smile, “We will wear the real crown of the great ancestors, this I promise you,” he whispers in her ear, his confidence and love, a reassurance radiating from his eyes, reminding her of the unbreakable bond they now share, shielding her from any malice or ill will.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Kassa and Tewabatch, standing tall and proud at the foot of the altar, turn to face the assembled church, their faces alight with joy and love. Yet, as they gaze out at the congregation, they are met with the burning hatred in the eyes of the Yeju, a stark contrast to the celebration of their union. Kassa, ignoring them, bows to his weeping mother, then turns to his beloved wife, a private grin and nod passing between them, rekindling the fire in Tewabatch’s heart. Together, they silently vow to defy anyone who dares to deny the righteousness of their love and their sacred bond.

In a formal meeting between the two sides, Kassa carefully reads through the marriage contract, his eyes scanning the words set down by the Fitha Negast, the ancient laws that govern unions of regional leaders. With a steady hand, he signs

the document, sealing his commitment to Tewabatch and their future together.

An Afenigus announcer, his voice ringing out clear and strong, reads the names of the districts bestowed upon Kassa by the Yejju rulers, a gesture of goodwill and alliance with the powerful house. Witnesses from both the Yejju and Qwara stand present, their eyes watchful and attentive. They cheer as each acquisition is announced.

A grand parade of gifts, including luxurious carpets, finely crafted lances, and powerful muskets, is presented by the various ruling houses, a display of wealth and power that underscores the influence of the Yejju and the significance of bringing a rebel into their fold.

As the Gibir, the royal feast, commences, the air is filled with the pulsing rhythm of drum beats and the joyful sounds of dancing. Tewabatch emerges from a closed tent, her beauty resplendent in her impeccable attire, accompanied by a retinue of attendants adorned in gold and silver. She takes her place by Kassa's side, her head held high with pride and love. Kassa, his heart swelling with emotion, turns to his mother, Eteye Atitgeb, who radiates with happiness and pride as she is introduced to her new daughter-in-law, the woman who has captured her son's heart.



Amidst the songs, dances, and drumbeats, Kassa salutes his loyal Shifta men, who celebrate his marriage with unbridled joy and enthusiasm. Their laughter and cheers mingle with the music, creating a tapestry of happiness that envelops the newlyweds. Kassa, ever aware of his surroundings, acknowledges the gathering of Yejju elites and Gonderian nobles who observe the Shifta warriors with a mix of curiosity and scorn, their eyes betraying the complex political dynamics at play.

The wedding celebration shifts to the grand addarash, a cavernous hall filled with dignitaries and representatives from the Yejju and Qwara provinces. The divisions between the two sides are as clear as the stark lines drawn in the sand — the Yejju on one side, the Qwara men on the other, their eyes flickering with distrust and unease.

The tent buzzes with energy as guests dine lavishly, the air heavy with the aroma of spices and roasted meats. Kassa, his senses heightened, locks eyes with Empress Menen across the room, her



piercing gaze as sharp as a dagger, weighing his every move with calculated intensity.

The Empress, resplendent in her royal attire, sits beside a heavily intoxicated Emperor Yohannes III. She nods to the newlyweds from across the vast tent, a gesture laced with hidden meanings. Her eyes, cold and assessing, fall upon Kassa's mother, Eteye Atitgeb, as whispers of Kassa's humble origins reach her ears. A smirk, as venomous as a serpent's bite, plays across her lips as she regards Kassa with barely concealed scorn.

Kassa, his jaw clenched tight, catches Menen's glance as he rummages through the plates presented before them, his discerning palate detecting the less-than-ideal culinary elements — overcooked and undercooked meats, unbalanced sauces that lack proper seasoning. He turns and observes his mother, who has barely touched her food, in silent protest to this subtle insult. Tewa-batch, already attuned to her bethroned's every emotion, sees the anger flare in his eyes. She reaches for his hand, her touch a soothing balm, schooling his features into a mask of composure. Kassa turns to her, a warm smile gracing his lips, finding solace in her support.

"A harlot, you say?!" Empress Menen's acidic remark cuts through the air like a whip, her words drenched in spite. "How fitting, then, that her son marries an illegitimate love child who cannot even claim a dowry from her father."

"A camp follower, Iteye," a Yeju lord, his face twisted in a sneer, adds fuel to the fire, "A woman who slipped into Hailu's tent to warm his bed and captured his heart with her seduction."

Empress Menen, her eyes glinting with malice, turns her gaze to her inebriated husband. "The stomach a tapeworm can bear, why a secret to bear does it refuse?" she inquires, her voice as smooth as silk. "Why do people spill out rumors like drunkards do with their guts?"

"Gossip is good for the ear, Iteye. . ." A noble chief, eager to curry favor with the empress, chimes in with a mocking tone, "They say she was a Kosso seller, and the savage Shifta cuts the tongues of anyone who utters the word Kosso near him."

"I too have heard gossip!" Suddenly, Emperor Yohannes III erupts, his voice slurred, "The coming of the new king! The King of Kings, Tewodros has come!" His shouts draw the attention of everyone in the hall, the air crackling with tension.

"Zembel!" Empress Menen, her eyes flashing with fury, silences him with a snarl, "You drunken fool of a child, sit down, or I will have your tongue cut and your eyes hollowed out!"

A cheerful ululation rises from Kassa's table as Atitgeb and her maids react to the Emperor's praise of Kassa as Tewodros. Empress Menen, her smile as sharp as a blade, regards the elated Eteye Atitgeb, who humbly bows to the emperor. Bitterness laces Menen's threatening glare at Kassa's proud mother, a silent warning of the danger that lurks beneath the surface.

"A Kosso-seller?!" Empress Menen sighs, her voice soaked with animosity. "A servant maid and a bastard child, this is too shameful to call a union," she discreetly mocks to the other nobles, her words spreading like wildfire.

"You have been very generous to them, Iteye," a Yejju lord, eager to please, adds, "If it were not for you, this would not have been an open marriage but a secret one, where both would lose out in shame."

"The Yejju are finished!" Emperor Yohannes III rises unsteadily to his feet, stumbling his way to the Shifta side. "He has come to end the Yejju!" he proclaims, his words slurred. "I bow before the King of Kings who has come to free us all!"

Empress Menen, her fury barely contained, throws a single look at the Yejju guards, who swoop in to restrain the drunken emperor. But it's too late. Cheers for the intoxicated emperor ignite a powder keg as the Shiftas roar in celebration of their prophesied leader.

"As David said, 'Who am I? And what is my life, or my father's family in Israel, that I should be son-in-law to the king?'" Emperor Yohannes rambles drunkenly as he is dragged away, his words met with deafening cheers from the Shiftas.

"To Tewodros, to the King of Kings!" he proclaims as his last act of defiance, his voice echoing through the hall.

The Yejju scramble to placate the embarrassed Empress Menen, whose growing suspicions of the ambitious couple rise by the moment, her eyes narrowing with calculated malevolence.

"Iteye, the rixt you have given him alone, all the districts, is more than enough to keep him content and in his place," a Yejju lord assures her, his words dripping with flattery. "All this you've done for a Shifta, it's true what they say, Iteye, the

house of the generous, miserliness does not have," another noble adds, doubling up on the praises.

Empress Menen, her gaze as sharp as a serpent's fang, snares, "Once a Shifta, always a Shifta. I want our spies to follow his every move." She commands, her eyes fixed on Kassa. "This one. . ." she borrows deep into Kassa "This one must be watched closely." She surveys the Shiftas with contempt as they cheer for their leader.

Tension coils like serpents around the Yejju side, the air thick with unspoken threats and barely concealed animosity. On the Shifta side, Kassa, his wrath barely contained, finds solace in Tewabatch's devoted eyes, drawing strength from her, losing himself in her charm as the night progresses.

The celebration continues until dawn, and the newlyweds prepare to depart Gonder, the vibrant energy in the air palpable, yet underscored by the still-simmering tension. The gifts, carefully wrapped and adorned, are loaded onto mules, their



Kassa Rebels

*When insults are thrown at you,
like the wind, do not let them
pass through your ears*

backs heavy with the offerings of well-wishers. Fearsome Shifta warriors mount their steeds, ready to escort the newlyweds on their journey. The streets are alive with a mass movement of souls as the local people who had come to support this renowned stranger flood the thoroughfares.

Kassa and Tewabatch, a vision of regal grace, both don golden embroidered capes that drape elegantly over their shoulders. The newlyweds lead a grand caravan of loyal followers; all around them, their supporters sing joyfully, their voices carrying the melodies of happiness and hope. Blessings are showered upon the newlyweds, as if each word spoken adds to the magic and strength of their union.

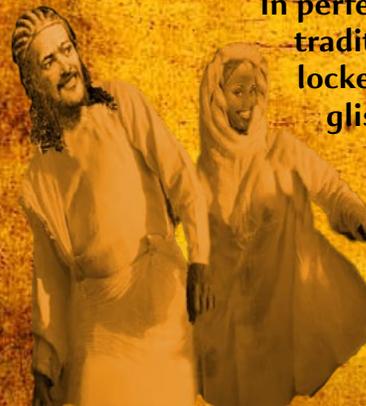
As accolades for their unity resound, Kassa makes a silent vow to exceed all expectations, his resolve intensifying with each passing moment. His keen gaze sweeps over the followers behind him, his perceptive Shifta guards identifying Empress Menen's spies one by one as they advance. From a distance, Kassa's eyes lock onto the palace, the weight of Empress Menen's admonitions looming like an ominous cloud, threatening to eclipse their joy. She will be watching, and the dangers that brings haunt the darkened dreams of what challenges their love may yet face.



The bonfire crackles and pops, sending sparks dancing into the night sky, as the rhythm of the drums pulses through the air. The beat is primal, urgent, and infectious, compelling the silhouettes around the fire to move in time with its cadence. Shadows flicker and sway, their forms distorted by the dancing flames, creating a mesmerizing display of light and darkness. The dancers' feet pound the earth, their bodies undulating and twirling like majestic birds in flight, as if possessed rhythmic music.

As The reception at Qwara bursts with vitality and motion, the newlyweds, Kassa and Tewabatch, take center stage in a lively spectacle.

In perfect harmony, they engage in the traditional Eskesta dance, their eyes locked in playful choreography, sweat glistening on their skin as they execute precise and agile rhythmic movements, footwork, and upper body gestures in fluid synchronicity. The drumbeat reverberates through the air, saturating the celebration with infectious joy



that envelops everyone present. Positioned around them, the Shifta warriors seamlessly join the festivities, dancing alongside the women of Qwara, showcasing the rich and diverse tapestry of Western Ethiopian styles.

As the night progresses and the couple retreats to the privacy of their bedchamber, the drumbeat persists, echoing the passionate embrace of the enamored newlyweds. In the quiet intimacy of their sanctuary, Kassa gazes earnestly into his wife's eyes, his voice low and intense.

"Do you support your husband in all his ambitions?" he asks, seeking her devotion.

"Yes I do" Tewabatch meets his gaze steadily, her voice filled with conviction. "I am with you, for life, my love," she responds, disappearing into his embrace.

As the first light of dawn filters through the windows, Tewabatch's fingers dance across Kassa's skin, tracing the ridges and valleys of his battle-worn body. Each scar is a testament to his resilience, a map of the trials he has endured. Her touch is feather-light, yet it ignites a fire within him, a burning desire to protect and cherish the woman who now holds his heart.

"My God, so many. . ." Tewabatch whispers, her voice trembling with a mixture of awe and sorrow. The realization of the pain he has suffered, the sacrifices he has made, threatens to overwhelm her.

Kassa's hand slips beneath the covers, his fingers closing around the Emblem of the Order of Solomon. He draws it out, the golden jewel catching the first rays of the morning sun, casting a warm glow across their entwined bodies. With a

tender touch, he guides Tewabatch's hand away from his scars, placing it upon the emblem instead.

Tewabaych's eyes widen as she feels the intricate contours of the emblem, the weight of its significance settling upon her like a mantle. "What is it?" She brings it closer to her face, the golden light dancing in her eyes, becoming aware that this holds great importance and reflects the hope and purpose burning within Kassa's soul.

"The Lord has granted me strength," Kassa murmurs, his lips brushing against her hand in a reverent kiss. "Raising me up under His protection, and by His divine power, I have come this far without harm."

His gaze locks with hers, a connection that transcends mere words. In the depths of his eyes, Tewabatch sees the conviction that has carried him through countless battles, the unshakable belief in his destiny.

"My whole life, I have known I can only be one thing," Kassa continues, his voice low and fervent. "He chose me to restore what was lost, and I shall dispel all enemies of His chosen kingdom that stand in my way." With a gentleness that belies his strength, Kassa folds his hand over Tewabatch's, the emblem pressed between their palms. It is a gesture of unity, a silent plea for her allegiance and support in the battles to come.

"Will you love me eternally, never betray my trust, and heed my counsel always?" Tewabatch asks. Kassa's response is immediate and resolute, his words carved from the very bedrock of his soul. "Always. I am what I am because of the wisdom of all the great mothers that came before me, we walk this path together now, for life." The declaration

hangs in the air, a sacred vow that even the gods themselves dare not challenge.

In this moment, as the world beyond their chamber begins to stir, Kassa and Tewabatch are one—bound by love, faith, and a shared destiny that will shape the course of an empire.

As the sun rises above the western horizon, its rays paint the sky in a breathtaking array of oranges and pinks. Atop a cliff, Tewabatch cradles Kassa in her arms, their silhouettes merging into one against the fiery backdrop. Her voice, soft as a whisper yet filled with the weight of a thousand promises, breaks the tranquil silence. “Let us begin a new and bring-forth an empire of peace that lasts for generations.”

In the flickering light of their chamber, shadows dance across Kassa’s face as he sits deep in thought, his warrior attire laid out before him like a second skin. Tewabatch moves with the grace of a priestess, each touch a benediction as she transforms her husband from man to warrior.

“If you must fight for what is right, to end the suffering of our people with the meaningless wars of division, I will be at your side,” she declares,



her voice ringing with clarity. She hands him his sword, the metal gleaming like a star plucked from the heavens. “But you should know, husband, to challenge the Yejju and take their place, you must prepare yourself well.”

Her eyes blaze with a fire that could rival his. “Gird yourself well, husband, and you must fight them to the very end!”

Kassa rises, his body now adorned with the trappings of a true warrior. He stands tall, ready to face the trials that lie ahead. A mere month into matrimonial bliss, he is poised to embrace his destined fate.



Kassa rides on a magnificent horse with Gabreye by his side and halts in front of a colossal army that sprawls before him like a sea of allegiance, with his name pulsating through the breeze like an immortal legend—Kassa, Kassa, Kassa! The evening sun, a benevolent witness, casts a divine



halo upon him, shrouding him in an ethereal aura of otherworldly energy.

“My brothers!” Kassa’s voice rises like a thunderclap, his words reverberating through the very souls of his warriors. “We have been called by our Maker to end an endless war that bears nothing but misery for our people!” The Shifta warriors lean in, their hearts beating as one, “How long must we be humiliated? How long must we live in shame?!” Kassa recounts the harrowing tragedies they all have all endured. The weight of their collective suffering hangs heavy in the air, a palpable force that binds them together.

“My brothers, the Lord grants every life on earth only two things!” Kassa declares loudly “Time and energy!” His voice crescendos, his passion igniting the flames of rebellion in their hearts. “How much loss must we suffer in one lifetime? How many of our families, our countrymen, must perish before their time while the Mesafents war over some piece of land here and there amongst themselves?!”

The warriors’ voices rise in a chorus of agreement, their grief and anger merging into a single, powerful force. They have borne witness to the devastation wrought by the endless conflicts, and they are ready to fight for a better future.

“I have come to destroy all the Mesafents!” Kassa’s eyes blaze with righteous conviction. “My mission is to annihilate them! From the right to the left, from the north to the south, and make them recognize our one and only empire so we can all live in peace!” Kassa glares at his men “Are you ready to give your time, and use your energy to birth a new empire?!”

The warriors erupt in a thunderous cheer, their spirits soaring with the promise of a new era. Kassa’s words have ignited a fire within them, a burning desire to reclaim their dignity and forge a path to lasting peace.

“I see a new breed of my countrymen assembled before me,” Kassa continues, his voice ringing like a beacon of hope amidst the darkness. “We will not fight to hold on to a little piece of land we stand on, we will not fight for any group, any region, we will only fight because the Maker of all things has granted us power to end the humiliation of his blessed people!”

The warriors’ roar, their hearts now beating in unison with Kassa’s vision. “We will only fight to unify our divided kingdoms! We fight for an empire!” They are ready to follow him to the ends of the earth, and crush all who stand against them and restore the dignity of their people and unify the empire.

As Kassa and his warriors march through the Western highlands, the sun itself seems to shine upon them with favor. They move as one, their Shifta roots evident in their fluid and precise movements. Kassa watches with pride as his newly formed army consumes enemy forces like wildfires.

With each passing season, the Shifta army grows in strength and skill, becoming a formidable force rising from the ashes of their shared pain.

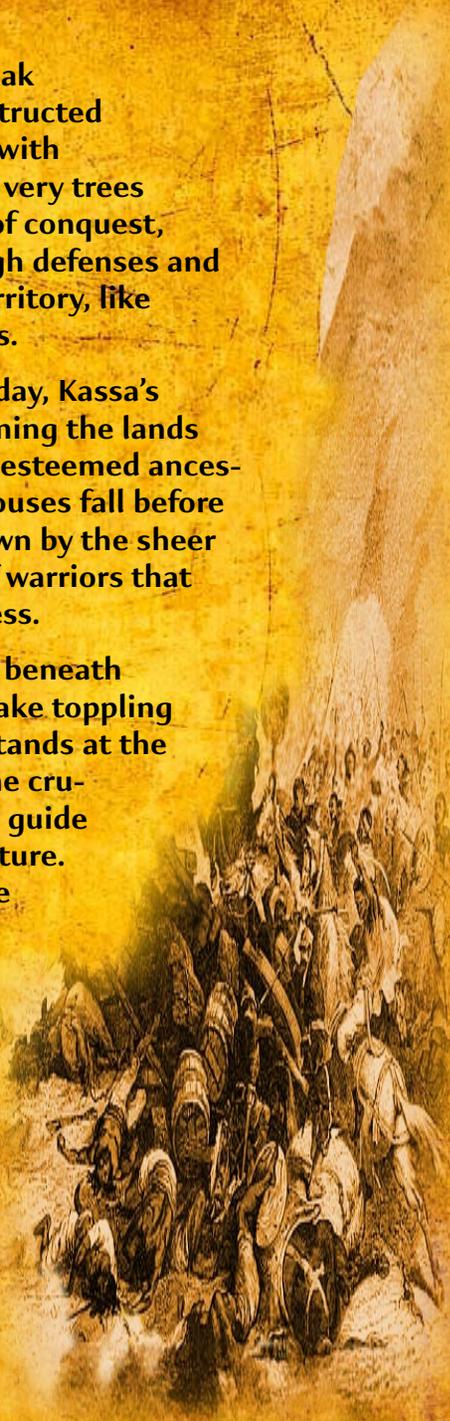
Like phantoms, they vanish and reappear, using the terrain to their advantage, wearing down their enemies until they are left exhausted and defeated. Their stealth tactics prove invaluable, allowing them to overcome even the most formidable foes.

As they conquer weak provinces and poorly constructed forts, Kassa's army swells with each victory. They use the very trees of the highlands as tools of conquest, battering their way through defenses and claiming territory after territory, like hurricanes uprooting trees.

With each passing day, Kassa's dominion expands, reclaiming the lands that once belonged to his esteemed ancestors. The great Western houses fall before them, their armies cut down by the sheer determination and skill of warriors that seem destined for greatness.

The earth trembles beneath their feet, like an earthquake toppling a mighty fortress. Kassa stands at the helm, a leader forged in the crucible of suffering, ready to guide his people to a brighter future. Together, they will reshape the very fabric of their world, one battle at a time.

As the sun dips below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of crimson and gold, the large town of Begmendir is gripped by a palpable sense of terror. The news of Kassa's relentless advance spreads like wildfire, consum-



ing the hearts and minds of the inhabitants. Dejazmach Aligaz, the elected governor of the Yeju and the uncle of Ras Ali, watches in horror as the townspeople flee in droves, their faces etched with fear.

From his vantage point atop the high hill fort, Dejazmach Aligaz spots a lone Yeju rider, clad in vibrant red tunics, cutting through the sea of fleeing bodies. The rider's urgency is unmistakable as he makes his way towards the governor's grounds, bearing a message of grave importance.

The rider navigates the chaos with practiced ease, maneuvering past the small band of warriors stationed around the governor's palace.

"Well! What did they say?!" Dejazmach Aligaz, his voice booming from the fort, demands to know the news the rider brings.

"Iteye says she cannot send you more warriors because she is on the march to aid Ras Ali in Gojjam," the Yeju messenger calls back, his words carrying the weight of a bombshell.

Dejazmach Aligaz staggers back, the revelation hitting him like a physical blow. "In Gojjam?! Every house in the West is falling to this Shifta!" he exclaims, his voice laced with terror and disbelief.

The shouts of the warriors outside draw their attention, and they see a group of Yeju riders frantically delivering urgent messages. "He advances!" the riders cry out, their faces contorted with fear.

"To what town?" Dejazmach Aligaz asks, desperate for any scrap of information.

"To the only one left standing in the West, to here!" one of the riders replies, his words dripping with dread.

"You fools better run! Behind us comes the flood!" the rider warns before spurring his horse into a gallop, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake.

Dejazmach Aligaz turns to his warriors, his eyes blazing with fierce determination. "Stay where you are, men, you cowards! We will not allow a bandit of Shiftas to take over the strongest town in the West!" he roars, his voice a rallying cry in the face of impending doom.

The Begmedir riders scatter like leaves in the wind, carrying the warning of Kassa's advancing army to every corner of the governor's palace. The sound of war drums grows louder, the very earth trembling beneath their feet as the battle draws near.



Dejazmach Aligaz and his chiefs brace themselves, their hearts pounding in their chests as they prepare for the inevitable confrontation.

Kassa's warriors stretch out as far as the eye can see, a vast array of determined faces marching towards Begmedir fort. At the vanguard of this awe-inspiring force rides Kassa himself, an embodiment of power and leadership. As they advance, Kassa spots a few panic-stricken Begmedir warriors fleeing, accompanied by women and children, desperate to escape the looming assault.

Kassa turns to his messenger, his voice steady and resolute. "Tell them, if they wish to defend a deserted town, so be it. Let them come; we embrace nothing but war!" he declares, his confidence unwavering in the face of the enemy.

Amidst the turmoil, whispers of his name reach Kassa's ears—the Shifita, the Qawarnia—but he remains unshaken. "I am Kassa, the son of Hailu and Atitgeb, the blood of Kinfu, Maru and the rightful heir of the West, and no house can defeat me!" he proclaims, his voice a thunderous affirmation of his invincibility, reverberating across the land.

As they approach Begmedir fort, the remaining warriors inside surrender their arms, their weapons clattering to the ground in a symphony of submission. Their once-fierce pride is humbled by the sheer might of Kassa's army, a force they dare not challenge.

Among them stands Dejazmach Aligaz, the fiercely proud protector and rescuer of the Yeju powers, his face twisted in a scowl as he watches Kassa's warriors pour into the compound, an irresistible tide of change.

Kassa rides to Dejazmach Aligaz's palace, accompanied by Gabreye and his loyal warriors. The air crackles with tension, the fate of Begmedir hanging in the balance as a new era unfolds.

Inside the palace's hallowed halls, Kassa and Dejazmach Aligaz stand face to face.

In a flash, Dejazmach Aligaz lunges forward, his sword held high in a surprise assault. Steel clashes against steel as Kassa's blade meets Aligaz's, the sound echoing like a thunderclap.

The Shifta warriors draw their weapons, ready to defend their leader. But Kassa, with a single commanding gesture, freezes them in place, quelling their rage.

Kassa turns and faces a Dejazmach for the first time.

"I have waited a while for this!" Dejazmach Aligaz snarls, "Another pretender like Wibe who seeks the crown?!" his face contorted with hatred, Aligaz mocks. "A son of a whore shouting of insanity in my own domain!" He presses the attack, his blade flashing as he drives Kassa back.

"Come on! You bastard!" The Dejazmach hurls himself at Kassa with reckless abandon. "Face me, you foul spawn of a jackal! I will slice you to pieces as I did to the accursed rebels of the north!"

But Kassa, his face split by a feral grin, meets the charge with the assurance of a man who knows his destiny.

Dejazmach Aligaz's blade flashes in the torchlight, a blur of lethal intent, but Kassa's own sword is swifter still. He slashes at the knees of the

governor, bringing him down to the ground like a felled tree.

"What is wrong with the men of this country?!" Kassa, towering above him, shakes his head in disbelief, "What kind of man insults a mother?" casting his shadow like a harbinger of death, Kassa raises his sword high.

Dejazmach Aligaz opens his mouth to speak, but in a single, brutal motion, Kassa knocks him out with a blow, silencing him for the moment.

When Kassa turns to face the Begmedir warriors, he sees reluctance in their eyes, a hesitation to accept the changing tides. But as they bow before him, it is not only a show of respect for Kassa himself but an acknowledgment of the winds of transformation that sweep across the Western highlands, heralding a new era.

As the echoes of war fade and the dust settles, Kassa stands victorious, the fort of Begmedir now firmly under his control. This triumph marks another milestone in his journey towards realizing his vision for a united Ethiopia, a dream that grows closer with each passing day. With the fort secured and his enemies vanquished, Kassa and his warriors turn their eyes to the horizon, ready to face



the new challenges and triumphs that await them, their hearts filled with the unshakable belief that destiny itself is on their side.

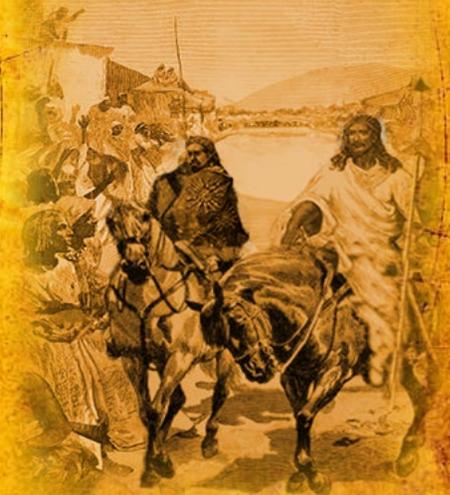


CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

A Mother's Revenge

When a mother is scorned, the earth shakes

In the heart of the Western kingdom, the air is electric with celebration as Kassa, the victorious conqueror, rides into the royal court. Accompanied by his loyal companion Gabreye and a band of valiant Shifta warriors, Kassa is greeted with a hero's welcome. The ruling houses of the West shower him with praises, their voices rising in a chorus of adulation as they recount the ancestral ties between Kassa's bloodline and the esteemed House of Maru. The clergy, their eyes shining with reverence, hail him as a prophesied leader, a savior sent to guide their people to greatness.



Amidst the pomp and grandeur, Kassa remains humble, his demeanor a stark contrast to the extravagant displays of admiration surrounding him. In the quiet of the royal chambers, he grapples with the weight of command, the responsibilities that now rest upon his shoulders. With a composed yet assertive tone, he raises his hand to interrupt the ceaseless flattery.

“Before you praise me highly and jerk me like meat,” Kassa begins, his voice rising above the clamor, “. . .you should keep in mind that the restoration of our Western rule would not have been possible without the contributions of my brothers.” He gestures to his loyal Shifta warriors, their faces etched with the scars of battle and the pride of victory. “You honor me by honoring them, and they will need your support.”

The Westerners, chastened by Kassa’s words, shift their attention to the warriors, their eyes now filled with a newfound respect for the men who fought and bled alongside their leader. The clergy, sensing an opportunity, approach Kassa, their robes rustling with each step. But Kassa’s focus lies elsewhere, his gaze drawn to a peculiar figure standing among the Dembeyans—a young Yejju man, dressed in a vibrant red tunic, his features and mannerisms setting him apart from the rest.

“You there, friend, by the way you stand with those thick calves to support you, I can tell you’re a messenger,” Kassa remarks, his tone equal parts curiosity and authority. “Where do you come from?” He gestures for the man to come closer, his eyes never leaving the messenger’s face.

“My lord. . .” The messenger, clearly flustered by the attention, stammers out his response.

“From. . .Gonder, my Lord, my Negus,” he kneels and bows, his voice trembling slightly. “. . .Wollo too, my Negus.” He adds.

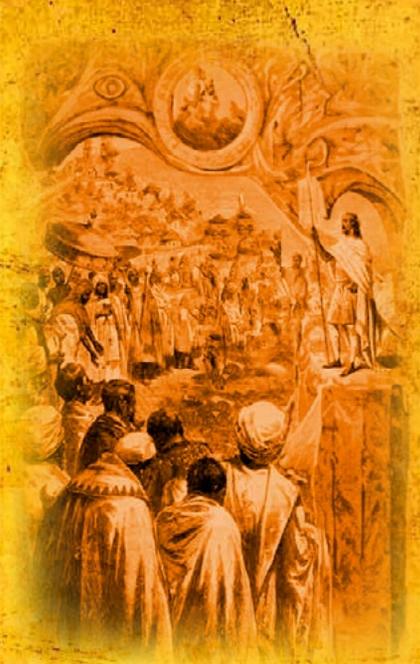
Kassa’s eyes narrow, a hint of amusement playing at the corners of his mouth with the messenger addressing him as a king. “How fares Iteye?” he queries, his words a thinly veiled reference to the Empress.

The messenger, his discomfort palpable, avoids eye contact, his body trembling in place as he struggles to find the words to respond. Kassa, sensing the man’s fear, rises, his voice loud and commanding.

“I need you to deliver a message,” he declares, his words deliberate for all present to hear. “Tell her, woe, the wrath of God; woe, the wrath of the red tongue when the mouth is idle, it backbites a relative.”

The messenger, confusion etched across his face, remains speechless, his body shaking like a leaf in the wind. Kassa, undeterred, continues, his voice ringing with authority.

“And whoever insults by falsehood deserves not just to be caned from the throne but have their tongue removed from their thoughtless mouth,” he adds, his words a direct threat to the Empress.



Gabreye, unable to contain his amusement, laughs at the messenger's predicament, his eyes dancing with mirth as Kassa points at the poor man. "Take that message to Gonder tonight!" Kassa commands, his voice brooking no argument.

"My Negus, but Iteye is in Alfa." The messenger, finally finding his voice, manages to respond in a complete sentence "She left with her warriors to support Ras Ali in Gojjam."

Kassa turns to Gabreye, shock evident on his face for a fleeting moment before he regains his composure, a laugh escaping his lips. "A kingdom of a woman, she leaves the capital open for others," Kassa muses, his mind already racing with the possibilities.

"We shall take it then!" With a determined resolve, Kassa rises to his feet, his voice ringing out like a gun blast. "Get the men ready, we march on Gonder tonight!"

"We march tonight?" Gabreye, ever the voice of reason, voices his concern. "The men have not slept or eaten well in days! They need time to recover before we march again."

"Tell them. . ." Kassa, his eyes sweeping over his exhausted but determined warriors, turns to his commander, a promise on his lips. "I will give them the greatest feast they have had since Masgele in the holy shrines of our ancestors in Gonder! I promise it on my mother's life." The warriors, their spirits lifted by Kassa's words, let out a resounding cheer, their voices rising in anticipation. The die is cast, the path to Gonder laid out before them. With Kassa at the helm, they are ready to march forward, ready to claim their destiny and reshape the very fabric of the empire.



In the tranquil confines of her residence, Kassa's mother, Weizero Atitgeb, hears the thundering hoofbeats of approaching horses. Her heart leaps with excitement, anticipation coursing through her veins as she rushes to the door, expecting to be greeted by the sight of her beloved son. Instead, she is met with a menacing group of Yejju horsemen, their faces twisted with malice as they descend upon her. Weizero Atitgeb, her instincts sharp as a blade, runs to grab a sword, determined to defend herself against the intruders. But the Empress's men are too quick, too many, and she is seized before she can mount a proper defense.

Empress Menen's eyes flash with cold rage as her warriors drag the struggling Weizero Atitgeb. The mother of the rebel leader, glares back defiantly even as the rough hands of the guards dig into her arms. "Stop resisting!" The Empress hisses. "Your pathetic son will pay for his treachery with your life." She nods to a guard who knocks Atitgeb with a blow to unconsciousness.



The Empress leads a formidable contingent of Yeju warriors into the heart of West, on a mission to reclaim the lands lost to the rebellious son, with his mother secured on a mount as a prisoner. The menacing horsemen flank her, their presence a silent threat to any who dare oppose her. They ride with an air of power and authority across the land as they retrace the path Kassa and his warriors once took in their conquest of the Western strongholds. But as they arrive, they find the stronghold abandoned, Kassa and his men having vanished like ghosts in the night.

The ruling houses of the West bow their heads in reverence as Empress Menen enters the palace, her presence commanding submission. She takes her seat on the throne beside Dejazmach Aligaz, his head wrapped in a shimma, still nursing the wound inflicted by Kassa's blow. Despite the outward display of loyalty, Empress Menen senses the underlying threat posed by Kassa. Furtive glances and fleeting expressions of doubt from the people reveal that Kassa has already captured the hearts of the nobles and clergy, their allegiance shifting like sand beneath the Empress's feet. However, the capture of Kassa's mother provides Empress Menen with a measure of credibility, a valuable bargaining chip in the treacherous game of power.

"Where has this Shifta gone to, back to the jungle, I presume?!" Empress Menen mocks, her voice dripping with disdain but there is no response from the terrified gathering. "I am going to weed out this savage from wherever he is hiding," she declares, her will hardening like steel, but deep within, she is aware that bulldozing this uprising will not be as simple as she hopes.

"I will not stop until the savage is in a cage!"

The Empress stresses her duty to stem the chaos Kassa brings to the Yeju rule, rising from the throne with a flourish, she takes her leave, with her warriors dragging the mother of the rebel with her for all to see in plain insult to Kassa.

In the privacy of a secluded chamber, Empress Menen sits with the kidnapped Weizero Atitgeb by her side, conferring with the same Dembeyan nobles and clergy who, just weeks ago, were showering praises upon Kassa.

"A man in love with his own valor is a dangerous man, Iteye," Dejazmach Aligaz remarks, attempting to recover from the humiliation of submitting to a rebel. "This one thinks he has grown powerful enough to challenge anyone."

"A pretender is all he is! An orphan playing a king" Empress Menen turns to Weizero Atitgeb, disdain etched upon her face. "I thought such a man with hopes would not be a poor choice for my granddaughter, but the moment he ran off with her from the wedding without saying a proper goodbye, without showing the slightest gratitude, I knew he—"

"I have brought up my son with manners," Weizero Atitgeb interjects, cutting off the Empress. Though terrified, she holds tight to her dignity. "My son will not take kindly to anyone who dares to tell lies and insult him, even in his absence" she adds with a warning. "Also, it's the bride, your own granddaughter who wanted to leave because she felt they were both being mistreated and insulted by you —"

"Raised him?!" Empress Menen shouts, her fury boiling over. "Water takes on the color of the

earth, an orphan takes on the manner of the Shifta or whoever raised him in the jungle with those savages!" Her voice rises to a crescendo. "He is the one who insults himself with this foolishness! When I get my Yejju hands on him, I will teach him proper manners!"

"My son is the sunrise!" Weizero Atitgeb, her eyes blazing with defiance, declares, "He is the chosen. You cannot defeat him, you cannot stop his coming, he is Tewodros in the flesh!"

"When I cut his throat and send his head to you, I shall—" Empress Menen erupts, her words a venomous promise.

"You are not the first to make that claim, and my son still lives and thrives," Weizero Atitgeb retorts, her voice unyielding.

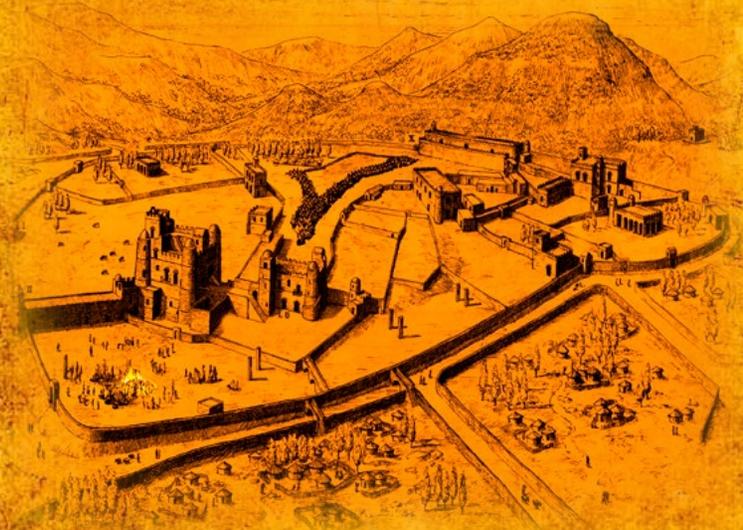
"I will have his head, I promise you" scoffs Empress Menen, with a hint of doubt in her tone. Amidst the tense atmosphere in the palace, Weizero Atitgeb's heart is heavy with worry for her son, but Menen sees the truth of it. How this wild upstart has defied expectations is beyond explanation. Perhaps she underestimated him.

"You have much spirit for a captive," Empress Menen bristles at the audacity. This low woman is speaking to an empress as though an equal. "But mothers have long wept for sons who picked unwise battles." The Empress rises "You too shall weep for the one who dared cross arms with the Yejju!" she forcefully puts her hand on Weizero Atitgeb as if to comfort her for the upcoming death of her child, then marches out, her footsteps echoing through the halls.

Outside the palace, Empress Menen's warriors, with the Yejju cavalry at the lead, continue their march, ready to assert their power over those who dare challenge the Yejju. The kingdoms now lies in turmoil, torn between allegiance and rebellion, as the winds of change sweep across the Western land.



In the heart of Gonder, the night comes alive with a carnival atmosphere as Kassa and his victorious warriors revel in their triumph. The capital city thrums with energy, the streets filled with laughter, music, and the tantalizing aroma of delicious dishes, a feast fit for the new conquerors.



Kassa, his eyes sparkling with unbridled joy, can barely contain his excitement as the high priests of Gonder parade before him, adorned in their full ceremonial vestments. They sing and dance in reverence, treating Kassa as if he were the long-awaited second coming, a savior destined to lead their people to greatness.

Amidst the jubilant atmosphere, a familiar figure enters the throne room—the same sweaty Yejju messenger from Dembeya. His nervousness is palpable, his steps hesitant as he approaches Kassa. The conqueror, sensing the messenger's apprehension, waves his personal guards away, acknowledging the man's presence with a nod.

"My Negus, I bring a message from Iteye Menen," the messenger says, his voice trembling.

In an instant, Kassa's smile vanishes, his face darkening like a gathering storm. The air in the throne room grows heavy with tension, the weight of the unspoken message hanging between them.

In the privacy of a secluded chamber, Kassa gathers with Gabreye and their chiefs, joined by select members of the Gondarian clergy. The warriors indulge in Tej and Arake, the potent beverages fueling their celebration, while some of the clergy sip from church-brewed Tela, their faces somber.

Kassa, his fury barely contained, tightens his grip on his sword, his knuckles turning white. "If she touches one hair on my mother, I swear in the name of our Lord, I will strangle every turbaned Yejju I see in Gonder and send them to her stuffed!" His voice is a low growl, the threat of violence simmering just beneath the surface.



"It's all a ruse brother" Gabreye, ever the voice of reason, places a concerned hand on Kassa's shoulder. "Non-combative family members are not targeted in the struggle for the throne" he says, his tone soothing. "She's holding your mother captive for what? You are married to her granddaughter!" He turns to the elders in the chamber "Are we going back to the days of mount Wehni?" He muses

"Perhaps she aims to use her for bargaining for Gonder?" An elder tries to calm Kassa, to temper the fire that rages within him. "The Yejju know there is only one way to stop you brother." Gabreye adds "She aims to enter and weaken your resolve."

A murmur ripples through the gathered clergy, their voices rising in a chorus of discontent. An elder chief priest steps forward, his eyes blazing with righteous indignation. "In the hands of a woman, this type of tyranny is fruitless! It's less supportable than a man's. That woman has to be stopped!" The Gondarian clergy joins in, their prayers and expressions of disdain for Empress Menen filling the chamber.

“Her husband, the blessed Emperor, could have established discipline over her, for he was brave and popular,” a priest adds, “but she was jealous of his slightest involvement.” He laments “Such a disgraceful act would not have taken place under his rule!”

“She drove him to the Tej. . . she did. . . that woman does not know how to perform her role properly. . . she drove our holy Abuna from us!” The complaints pile on, each voice adding to the growing chorus of discontent.

A puzzled young priest raises his voice, his brow furrowed in confusion. “What kind of a woman, holding on to another’s mother and telling the son she is his, what kind of woman does this?”

“A mad woman who shames the Lord, that is who!” An elder erupts “. . . a mother who kidnaps the mother of another—no one in the kingdom is bound to respect her, she—”

Kassa, his patience wearing thin, interrupts the clamor. “Send word to her son,” he commands, rising from his seat. His voice is like thunder, silencing the room. “Tell him, his mother is driving me into a corner.”

His eyes, filled with a fierce determination, sweep over the Yejju representatives in the chamber. “Tell him, if he does not settle it, then I will do it for him!”

The Gondarian clergy, awed by Kassa’s display of leadership, bows before him, recognizing him as their potential leader, their Endresse who is about to take on not just the mother but the son. The fire of determination burns brightly in Kassa’s eyes as he prepares to face the challenge before

him—a battle not just for power, but for the life and freedom of his beloved mother. The stage is set for a confrontation that will shake the very foundations of the empire, a clash of wills between two formidable forces, with the fate of a nation hanging in the balance



The Son's Response

The loftier the pride, the harder the stumble.

The Yejju forces bow before Endresse Ras Ali, their weary yet indomitable leader. Dismounting from his horse, he carries the weight of countless battles etched upon his weathered face. Each step towards his mother, Empress Menen, is laden with the burden of a man who has seen too much, fought too long. The Empress awaits him, her eyes alight with a tempestuous mixture of fury and betrayal.

“Lije?!” As Ras Ali approaches, fear and concern creep through the Empress’s veins, her composure faltering as she takes in her beloved son’s rapid aging. Despite his youth, his once vibrant face is now a map of trials and tribulations, with tired eyes that speak of sleepless nights. In a moment of maternal tenderness, she softens her expression and fiercely embraces her weary son, pouring love and strength into the embrace before pulling back, tenderly caressing his bearded face.

“They say exhaustion leaves no scar, but Lije,” she murmurs, her voice a gentle whisper laced with a mother’s worry.

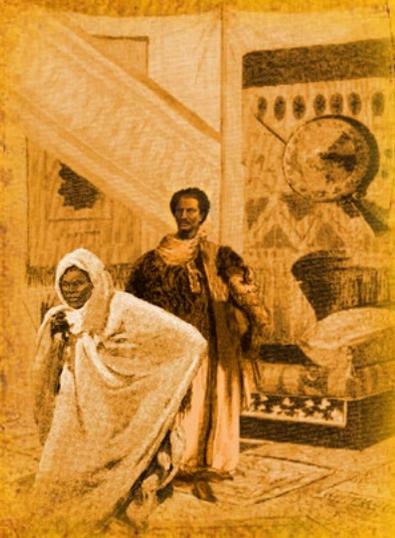
Ras Ali, finding solace in his mother’s presence, affectionately kisses her cheeks, a gesture of filial devotion and momentary respite from the surrounding chaos.

“Only the one tired of hunting a Shifta understands,” he replies, a flicker of doubt dancing behind his eyes.

Empress Menen leads him into the palace, her steps measured, her mind plagued by gnawing doubt. Each crushing blow Kassa delivers to the Yejju echoes like thunder through the halls, a harbinger of an impending storm. “That Shifta grays my hair by the day too, Lije,” she scoffs. “He is out there, screaming to the heavens that soon the reign of the Yejju spindle will end,” she confides, a silent question hanging in the air—is her son

still sharp and strong enough to protect their rule?

“Emmaye, he promised that if you release his mother and restore his province that belonged to his heirs, you can count on his affection as your obedient son,” Ras Ali reveals, his voice a mix of hope and trepidation, a fragile olive branch amid a raging storm.



Fury blazes across Menen's face, but the sight of her son's sunken eyes and the weariness clinging to him like a shroud gives her pause. "And if not?" she asks, her voice a forced calm, barely containing the tempest within.

"He knows we are weakened, Emmaye. We cannot afford him as an enemy," Ras Ali's words, tinged with resignation, carry the weight of a desperate plea for peace.

"That Shifta thinks he can bully us?!" Empress Menen exclaims, her anger seeping through the cracks in her calm. "I do not want to hear his name spoken before me again!" she roars. "Not until I have his head dangling on a spear!"

"Then there is nothing to be done but go to war," Ras Ali accepts, his voice heavy with the inevitability of the outcome.

Assured by her son's acknowledgment, Empress Menen holds her ground, her confidence in their strength a beacon in the darkness. "That Shifta will never fight an army up front. All he knows is to run, flee, and hide in the jungle," she declares, secure in the knowledge of her own power.

"They say his numbers grow, that he has enough to match armies," Ras Ali counters, his voice tinged with conflicted awe and grudging respect for their enemy.

"Once a Shifta, always a Shifta!" Empress Menen dismisses his concern with a wave of her hand. "He has never faced our cavalry. If he wants to rescue his mother, let him come for her. He will have to fight on our terms," she says, her confidence in their superior strength a shield against

the doubts plaguing her mind. "We will gallop right through the rabble he has collected from peasants and farmers. And this time, you will have to join me, and we—"

"—Emmaye, there are bigger lice we are living with than him!" Ras Ali counters. "Is that not what you told me in our last conversation?" his words a reminder of the many threats the Yejju face, the enemies lurking in every shadow.

"Lije, this one is not Biru" she warns "We are fighting to restore not only our honor but a greater threat to our close realms than that wife-stealer who has captured your fury!" Empress Menen challenges, calling to arms against the obsession consuming her son, the desire to capture Biru Goshu in Gojjam.

"Biru is holed up in Jabala, but it's Wibe in the north who threatens us more!" Ras Ali shouts, his eyes burning with rage. "I will send you some reinforcements, but that's all I can do for now."

"Isshi Lije" Empress Menen taken aback by her son's sudden outburst attempts to calm him. She moves closer, her face etched with concern "You handle the periphery while I deal with the center, and may the Lord let the work we start together come to a quick end," the Empress asserts firmly, grabbing her son's hand as she did when he was a young child, a gesture of unity and strength in the face of adversity.

"It's time Lije" she tightens her grip "To show the kingdom's rebels the firm hand of the Yejju," she proclaims, declaring their readiness to face the challenges ahead with brutal force.



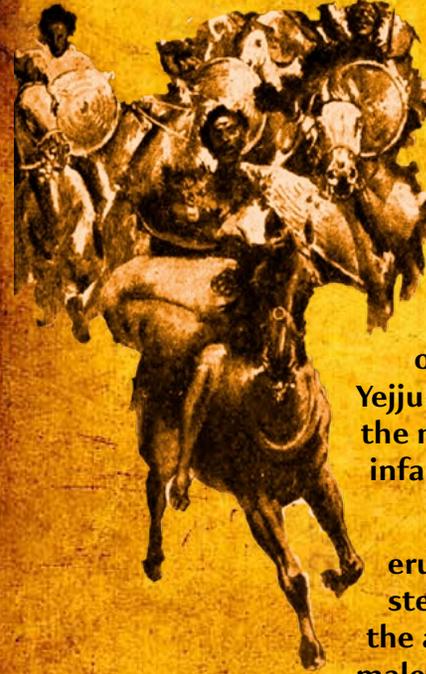
Lightning cracks over the cloudy sky, illuminating the battlefield below as furious wind howls. Amidst this elemental turmoil stands Kassa, his eyes burning with an intensity rivaling the storm itself, locked onto the woman who dared kidnap his mother.

Empress Menen, resplendent in her full war attire, her hair tied back with a red bandanna, meets his gaze with a fury emanating from the depths of her being. Across the muddy plain, as Kassa and his warriors appear, the two leaders seem to exist in a world of their own, their focus solely on each other, oblivious to the surrounding chaos.

Without warning, Kassa lets out a primal scream, his tightly braided cornrows shaking with the force of his fury—and he leads a terrifying and relentless charge. His Shifta warriors follow suit, their war cries merging with his, driven by their leader's wrath.

Empress Menen responds in kind, her own guttural shriek piercing the air as she urges her Yejju warriors to advance and the cavalry pours down from the valley like an avalanche.

Kassa gallops at the head of a 10,000-strong force, their footsteps thundering across the plain. Despite the chaos of the charge, there is a terrifying semblance of discipline and order as the army advances toward the Yejju forces in perfect uni-



son. Empress Menen, not to be outdone, leads the reinforced Yejju forces, 12,000 warriors at her back, with 6,000 fierce Yejju cavalry at the head, their breath forming steam in the chilly air.

The Yejju warriors gallop through the wet field, their charge slowing slightly as the muddy ground threatens their speed. But they press on, undeterred, as they approach the incoming Shiftas. The two forces collide with a bone-shaking impact, the sound of metal against metal ringing out across the battlefield. The Yejju cavalry, their blades glinting in the muted light, cut through Kassa's infantry with brutal efficiency.

In an instant, the battlefield erupts into total chaos, clashing steel and anguished cries filling the air. Hate and vengeance, like malevolent spirits, course through the warriors' veins, transforming them into instruments of destruction under their leaders' command.

The Yejju cavalry charges with merciless fury, slashing and spearing their way through the Shiftas, leaving a trail of devastation in their wake. Yet, the Shiftas, fueled by savage determination bordering on madness, counter with unimaginable brutality. They wrench horsemen from their saddles, hacking them to pieces before they even touch the blood-soaked ground.

At the forefront of this maelstrom is Kassa, a masterful conductor of death atop his steed, orchestrating the demise of enemy riders with surgical precision amidst the chaos. On the ground, Gabreye dances through the fray, a maestro of assault, effortlessly overcoming any Yejju challenger with a lethal combination of hacking and dodging, leaving his opponents in awe.

Amid this pandemonium, Empress Menen fights valiantly alongside her men, her own blade singing a song of death. But even as she cuts down Shifta after Shifta, the prowess of Kassa's forces becomes undeniable. The Empress fights on, her fury tinged with growing desperation.

Kassa, slashing his way through the battle like a living nightmare, closes in on the Empress with his royal guards. His elite warriors, clad in blood-soaked armor, move with a terrifying synchronicity, cutting down the Empress's defenders with ruthless efficiency. The clang of steel against steel and the cries of the fallen fill the air as Kassa's

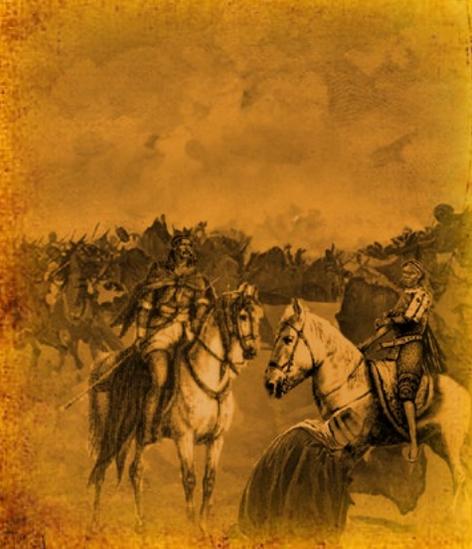
guards carve a path through the chaos, their sole purpose to reach the Empress.

His guards, their faces etched with grim determination, dispatch the Empress's men with a brutal elegance. As Kassa draws closer on his mount, his eyes lock onto the Empress, and in that moment, he catches a glimpse of the first traces of fear in her eyes.

"Iteye! It's over!" Kassa roars. Empress Menen backs away, surrounded by his Shifta warriors, yet still clinging to the fraying notions of Yejju superiority.

Through the haze of the blood strewn ground, Kassa emerges, battered and bloodied, yet driven by a singular purpose burning within him like a raging inferno. He strides through the carnage, his spear pointing directly at Empress Menen. "It's over!" he announces her defeat with a voice echoing over the battlefield, taunting and triumphant,

but the defiant Empress won't budge. "Iteye, it's over. The one you hate now holds the one you love!" He screams with finality as Shifta warriors drag her heavily drink husband before him, throwing Emperor Yohannes III to the ground at Kassa's feet. Empress Menen's gaze remains unbroken, her spirit unyielding even in the face of this ultimate humiliation.



Kassa, driven by vengeance and a desire to inflict one final blow on the one who kidnapped his mother, steps forward, ready to seal the fate of the Empress, his spear slicing through the air to cut deep into the Empress's hip. Empress Menen screams, a grimace of pain flickers across her face, but her resolve remains unbroken, displaying the strength that has carried her this far.

"Finish it! You coward!" she shouts at Kassa, ready to end her humiliation on the battlefield.

"Take her down!" Kassa commands, his voice rising above the din of battle. And with those words, the war, now nearing its tumultuous end, echoes with the triumphant cheers of his men. The battlefield, once a canvas of carnage, now holds the bitter taste of victory and the lingering shadows of a brutal confrontation that ushers in the beginning of the end of the Yejju rule.



In the aftermath of triumph, Kassa's encampment emerges as a sea of tents bathed in the warm glow of bonfires, their flickering light casting dancing shadows across the war-torn landscape. Victorious Shiftas revel in their conquest, their cheers and laughter echoing through the night air as they bask in the glory of overcoming the mighty Yejju, their once-formidable foe now lying vanquished at their feet.

Yet away from the jubilant camp, inside a sprawling tent nestled by the river shore, Kassa and Gabreye traverse a scene of agony, a stark contrast to the celebrations outside. The thick scent of medicinal leaves mixed with the coppery tang of blood hangs heavy in the air, a suffocating blanket weighing upon their souls. Priests murmur last rites, their voices a somber melody amidst the groans of the wounded, while maids wrap gruesome gashes with crushed and grounded medicinal leaves, their aprons soaked in the crimson lifeblood of the fallen.

Kassa, his face etched with the stoic weariness of victory's burden, moves through the tent, his eyes taking in the devastation that surrounds him. Each step is heavy with the weight of responsibility, the price of his triumph written in the broken bodies and shattered lives that lie before him.

"Ase!" A young voice cries out, cutting through the din of suffering. "Did we birth the new era?" Blood trickles from the dying boy's mouth



as Kassa grasps his trembling hand, offering what little comfort he can in these final moments.

“Yes, we did,” his response is warm and genuine, “because you gave your time and energy, something new is ready to be born. . .” Kassa’s voice trails off, his vision shrouded by the countless dying souls sprawled in the tent. “We will birth an empire worthy of your memory,” he utters as he grapples with the enormity of the sacrifice laid bare before him.

The warrior convulses in Kassa’s arms, his body wracked with agony. “Do not fear,” Kassa whispers firmly, holding him close. “As water becomes vapor, so our flesh becomes spirit. This is not your end for your soul is timeless”

Tears stream down the young man’s face as he weeps, each spasm of pain a reminder of all he is leaving behind. Kassa holds him steadfast until the shaking stops and the life fades from his broken body.

“I will see you in the next life, brother, as your spirit becomes flesh once more.” Kassa’s words are a solemn promise, his heart heavy with sorrow. Reaching out, he gently closes the fallen warrior’s terrified eyes, now fixed eternally on a distant shore. Each death on this bloodstained battlefield cuts like a knife into Kassa’s very soul, a wound that will never fully heal.

“..my lord?” Another voice rasps, blood trickling from his mouth as he struggles to speak. Kassa reaches out and takes the trembling hand of another dying warrior, offering a lifeline of comfort and solace in his final moments.

The young warrior spits out blood, choking in the throes of death, his words a desperate plea. “I am dying, Ase. . .” he whispers in terror, “. . .oh how I wish I was with my family, to see them, one last time.” Disoriented, the warrior weeps in agony, his tears mingling with the blood that stains his face.

“You’re dying because you love your family more than you love yourself,” Kassa grabs his hand firmly. “You fought to save them and those that are not even born yet,” he says softly, his voice a gentle whisper amidst the chaos. “Like all the great warriors that came before and will come after us, we are building a new empire, one that will be peaceful so they can flourish and endure in their time.” The young warrior’s body rattles, his life slipping away, and Kassa closes his eyes, mourning the terrible sacrifice made this day.

As Kassa rises and passes by the wounded warriors, Shiftas who have been with him for years reach out to pat their leader on the back, a gesture of solidarity and understanding in the time of tremendous loss for their ranks. They know he is one of them, that he feels each loss as keenly as they do. Suddenly, Kassa stops, his eyes falling upon a fierce-looking Shifta warrior, and a smile of recognition crosses his face.

“Tesfu, you are still with us?” Kassa inquires, his voice tinged with a mix of relief and concern.

“I am well and good, my lord,” Tesfu replies, proudly showing off the large gaping scar that mars his shoulder, amidst the many scars earned in the battles he has fought and survived.

“How is the family? Your children?” Kassa asks, a moment of normalcy amidst the chaos.

"My wife is blessing me with a second child by the end of the rains, my lord," Tesfu replies, his voice swelling with pride at the thought of his growing family.

"Are you sure you're up to it?" Kassa chuckles, expressing concern for his loyal warrior's well-being.

"Not to worry, my lord. I will be ready for a third one." Tesfu gestures at a large scar on Kassa's arm. "Compared to yours, my lord, it's nothing but a little scratch here," Tesfu replies bravely, even as a maid wraps a gaping hole in his shoulder, the wound a stark reminder of the price of victory.

Shifta warriors call out for Kassa, some already addressing him as Ase, their voices filled with reverence and respect for the man who has led them to this moment. But as Kassa moves through the tent, the sadness in his eyes is unmistakable, tears welling up as he comes to each warrior, offering words of comfort and gratitude for their sacrifice.

The weight of leadership and the sacrifices demanded become all too apparent, even in this moment of triumph. Were these crushed lives the fuel for the united future he had promised? The victory, once so sweet, now tastes bitter on his tongue, a reminder of the terrible cost of his ambition.

Yet even as he grapples with the burden of his choices, Kassa knows that he cannot turn back now. The path he has chosen is one of blood and sacrifice, but it is also one of hope and possibility. With each step, he moves closer to his dream of a united empire, a nation that will stand strong against all who would seek to tear it apart.

With a heavy heart and a resolute spirit, Kassa continues on, bearing the weight of his victory and the sacrifices made in its name. For he knows that the future he seeks is one worth fighting for, no matter the cost.



In the deathly silent Yejju encampment, Kassa's guards stand alert by a tent, their eyes sharp and vigilant as one of Kassa's emissaries enters. Inside the carpeted tent, Empress Menen lies flat on a luxurious alga, her wounded hip attended to by a maid who tends to her with gentle hands. The emissary bows before the empress, his voice respectful as he conveys his goodwill for her quick recovery.

"Iteye, Kassa has sent me to see if you would receive him," the emissary asks, his words carefully chosen, laced with deference.

Empress Menen's face contorts with contempt, her eyes flashing with barely contained rage. "Spare me his presence. I will not endure his twisting the knife in the wound that he had such remarkable bravery to inflict on a woman," she responds, her tone dripping with sarcasm and scorn.

The emissary, taken aback by her vehemence, remains speechless for a moment before bowing deeply and taking his leave, the weight of her words hanging heavy in the air.

In the jubilant camp of the victors, the emissary enters Kassa's tent, delivering Empress Menen's response with a mix of trepidation and respect. Kassa, upon hearing her words, merely smiles, a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"Prepare a last meal and have it sent to her tent," Kassa instructs his men, his voice calm and measured, belying the intensity of the situation.

As night falls, Kassa, flanked by his loyal guards, marches out of his camp and through the Yejju encampment, his steps purposeful and determined. He enters Empress Menen's tent alone, the weight of the moment palpable in the air.

Inside, he finds the empress dining from a lavishly prepared meal, filled with Tibes and kitfo, accompanied by raw meat from the finest parts of the lamb and bull, all prepared by the chef Kassa had assigned to her. As Kassa approaches, Empress Menen wipes her mouth, her expression one of cool indifference, unimpressed by his presence.

Kassa approaches with his hands raised in a gesture of peace, showing her that he is unarmed



and comes with no ill intent. But the brooding Empress, her wounds dressed, merely picks at the feast he has offered—a conciliatory gesture, not a taunt.

"I would have been happy with a piece of injera or some raw seeds you feed my warriors. Forcefully feeding just one captive does not bring the results you desire," she retorts, her words sharp and cutting.

Kassa smirks, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "Forgive me, Iteye. When a royal blood asks for a supper, I do not send them the meat of the foreshank."

Silence hangs in the air for a moment, then laughter escapes Empress Menen's lips as she registers the meaning behind his words, the tension between them palpable.

"What was I expected to send you? They told me you are a Shifta, a renegade orphan who came out of the jungle, eating mushrooms and singing to the sky that he is the King of Kings here to take over our rule!" she parries, her tone sharp and accusatory.

"It was my marriage to your granddaughter; you could have at least served me a fattened goat," Kassa counters, his voice tinged with a hint of mirth.

The two titans, trading blows of wit and will behind thin veils of courtesy, eye each other warily, their gazes locked in a silent battle of wills.

"You stole her like a thief in the night!" The empress accuses, her voice rising with each word. "You turned my innocent Tewabatch against me?!"

"She told me you are a half-wolf who cannot be trusted, and I must gird myself to protect our province and honor, and that's what I did," Kassa defends himself, his voice firm and unyielding. "And now here we are, with the Yejju in the palm of my hand," he asserts confidently, his eyes gleaming with the knowledge of his victory.

"The wrath of my son will soon be upon you, and it won't be just the honor but that palm you will have to lose!" Empress Menen retorts, her words dripping with venom and cunning.

"If you do not persuade your son to come to a settlement, you will be what you insulted my mother to be," Kassa issues a stern warning, his voice low and dangerous.

"What would that be, do tell," the Empress mocks, her eyes narrowing in defiance.

"A woman of the tent!" Kassa moves closer, his anger flaring. "I will drag you along from one camp to another, I will flee back into the jungle as the monstrous Shifta you accuse me to be, and I will make sure that the men treat you as nothing but a commoner to warm their beds." Kassa smiles, a cruel twist of his lips, as he grabs a piece of injera, wraps it around a large piece of beef, and swallows it whole.

"I survived two years on nothing but berries in the jungle. I doubt you would last a day."

"Is that what you're feeding my poor granddaughter, even after I gave you a province of your own?" Empress Menen remains defiant, her pride unwilling to bend.

"I am here to escort you out of my camp and my territories, for I am now a Dejzmach." Empress

Menen's composure breaks as Kassa reveals that he has already landed the decisive blow. "Your son has restored all of the lands you've stolen from my ancestors back to me," Kassa twists the blade, his words cutting deep.

"And my warriors and my husband?!" The Empress erupts in shock, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"The warriors you can take with you, but your husband stays for a while longer." Kassa steps closer, eyes flaring with fury once again "I will count the days you've kept my mother from me before I return him to you." The Empress glares at Kassa as though she faces not a man but an indomitable force created to punish her, her gaze burning with a mix of rage and despair.

"An arrogant man the evil of himself does not know! It's settled, you're doing this to punish me!" Empress Menen cannot bear his presence any longer, her voice rising to a shout. "Get out and let me be rid of this filthy camp of Shiftas!" She commands, her hand slicing through the air in a gesture of dismissal.

"You can see your granddaughter, though. She just arrived tonight at the camp to be with me," Kassa announces, his voice calm and measured, a stark contrast to Empress Menen's fury.

"Her only duty is to strangle you in your sleep if she knows what is good for her!" A fuming Empress Menen rises from her seat, her eyes blazing with a fire that threatens to consume everything in its path. "Leave now!" She shouts, her voice echoing through the tent.

The Bargain

*You cannot build a house for
last year's summer.*

Kassa bows before her, still showing a modicum of respect, even in the face of her rage. "Tell your son his daughter talks affectionately of him, and it's because of my trust in her that he can count on an honorable alliance with me," he declares. "Dignity, Iteye, respect and honor, without them, there can be no peace but chaos," his words a parting shot linger in the air, leaving Empress Menen fuming with rage.

As he exits the tent, the victorious Dejazmach Kassa holds his head high, aware that he has dealt a powerful blow to the once-mighty Empress Menen and the Yejju dynasty. The camp remains abuzz with celebration and triumph, the air filled with the sounds of jubilation and the scent of victory.

But for Kassa, the taste of victory is bitter-sweet, knowing that the struggle is far from over. He takes no joy in forcing mighty royalty to kneel, understanding that great change never comes gently but through hard choices that must be made by those who seek it.



In the heart of Debre Tabor, within the grand hall of Ras Ali's court, the air crackles with anticipation as nobles and chiefs from the Yejju region gather, their eyes fixed on a central figure — Endresse Ras Ali. Dressed in his regal attire, he paces restlessly, his footsteps echoing off the polished stone floor, his gaze darting towards the entrance as he awaits the arrival of his freed mother.

The atmosphere is saturated with urgency, as if the very walls of the hall are holding their breath, sensing the impending storm. Ras Ali's pacing grows increasingly frantic with each passing moment, his nervousness palpable to the anxious



court surrounding him. They all know the Empress they fear and revere, and the fury that is sure to come with her.

Suddenly, the doors swing open, and Empress Menen strides into the room, her presence commanding the attention of all those present. Anger rolls off her in waves, her eyes flashing with a rage that threatens to consume everything in its path.

"I want him dead!" Her voice slices through the quiet tension. "I want the eyes of that Shifta extinguished and him sitting below my feet for the rest of his life!" The Empress's words thunder through the chamber, rattling the very foundations of the court.

"Emmaye," Ras Ali bows slightly, his face a mask of respect, but the bitterness and frustration straining his measured tone are evident to all. "In a battle with a young lion, in one hand grass and in the other a spear," he replies, his voice tinged with a nervousness he cannot quite conceal.

"A lion?!" The Empress's features contort with fury, her anger rising like a tidal wave. "A coward who flees about like a fawn in the jungle?" she seethes, her words dripping with contempt. "I had to chase him all day before he came out to fight in the open. It's time to throw the spear, son!"

Ras Ali's shoulders tense, his jaw clenching as he locks gazes with his mother. The air between them crackles with tension, a silent battle of wills unfolding before the court.

"Emmaye, let him be, let him stay in Dem-beya at a distance so I can rebuild my army. I am

dealing with fire in Gojjam," he says, his voice steady despite the fear gripping his heart.

Empress Menen's eyes narrow, her gaze sharp and calculating as she scrutinizes her son. "How long are you going to send your men climbing up that wretched amba singing of victory before descending down in tears?!" Her words are cutting, each syllable a demand for action, a challenge to her son's authority.

Ras Ali's rage is palpable, his eyes flashing with a fury that matches his mother's. "The big spear is on the mountain, Emmaye!" he growls, his voice low and menacing. But as he continues, his tone softens, his anger yielding to reason. "Give me time, Emmaye" he pleads "Biru Goshu's revolt distracts! I will not fight a little fawn, as you say, that runs around on the other side of that mountain. He can wait until I come for him!"

"Lies!" The Empress snaps, her voice cutting through the air like a whip. "You cower before this rogue! You did not have to negotiate with him!" Her gaze remains fixed and unrelenting on her son, a challenge he cannot ignore.

Ras Ali stands rigid, his jaw clenched, his private doubts warring with his external composure. He knows his mother is right, that he has been too lenient with the Shifta who threatens their rule. But he also knows he cannot afford to fight a war on two fronts, not with Biru Goshu still holding out in the mountains.

"Send the father of that bastard Biru!" the Empress demands, her voice escalating to a fevered pitch. "You cannot hear the war drums this Shifta is beating across the West because you're holed up in an amba!"



The strain proves too great for the Endresse, and he yields to his ruthless mother, his shoulders sagging in defeat. The weight of the decision hangs heavily in the air, the court watching in silence as the two most powerful figures in the kingdom clash in a battle of wills.

“Send Goshu to bring me his eyes!” the Empress commands, her voice ringing out through the hall, a final word that cannot be denied. Ras Ali bows, accepting the fate of the Shifta sealed by the words of the Empress. He knows he has no choice but to obey, to send the father of his enemy to do his mother’s bidding. But even as he nods his assent, he cannot shake the feeling that this decision will come back to haunt them all, that the Shifta they seek to destroy may prove to be more than just a little fawn in the jungle.



In the heart of Gojjam, within the confines of a dimly lit chamber, the air is heavy with the weight of unseen troubles.

The feeble glow of oil lamps flickers against the darkness, casting dancing shadows upon

the walls, evidence of the turmoil plaguing the room’s

occupants. At the center of this somber scene lies Eteye Shalu, the Lady of Gojjam, her plump form wracked by illness, shivering, and drenched in the clammy embrace of sweat. Her face contorts in discomfort, each breath emerging in shallow, ragged gasps, a painful reminder of her declining health.

Maids and healers surround Shalu, their presence both a comfort and a torment. One maid firmly holds Shalu’s head, her fingers gently prying open the woman’s mouth, while another, her face a mask of sympathy and duty, administers a bitter concoction – a mixture of Enset and Myrrh. With a struggling swallow, Shalu takes in the medicinal potion, her eyes watering from its pungent taste, a physical manifestation of the bitterness permeating their lives.

“Gently, gently. . .” Across the chamber, a man lingers in the shadows, his countenance etched with worry and sorrow. Dejazmach Goshu, the aging governor of Gojjam haunted by the weight of responsibility, observes his ailing wife with a mixture of helplessness and deep concern. “Rest, rest my love. . .” he murmurs, his hands

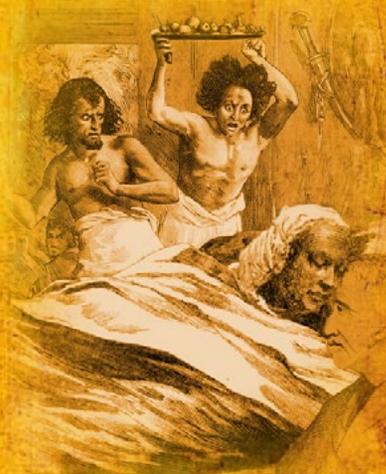
clenching and unclenching at his sides as he stands in silent vigil, a gesture of his own inner turmoil.

“Do not,” Shalu’s voice trembles as she speaks, her words layered with a desperate plea. “Please don’t go again. I can’t let you go. . . I fear I’ll never see you in life again.” The raw emotion in her voice cuts through the gloom, proof of the depth of their bond and the gravity of their situation. Her plea is met with a weak smile from Goshu, his lips parting to reveal a glimmer of affection amidst the sorrow he feels. “Let us concede then,” he responds, his voice solemn, “You promise to take care of your health, and I promise to come back alive, as I always do.”

Suddenly, a series of convulsions wrack Shalu’s once-regal frame, the illness ravaging her body with relentless ferocity. Dejazmach Goshu rushes to her side, his hands steadying her as the maids scream in alarm. Each labored breath cuts like a knife, a painful reminder of the fragility of life.

As the seizure subsides, Dejazmach Goshu gently places Shalu’s head upon his lap, his fingers tenderly brushing against her glistening brow, a silent gesture of comfort amidst the suffering.

“Promise me,” Shalu’s voice carries a tenderness borne of their shared history, “to take care of our son. . . Biru is very jealous of him.” The words hang in the air, a



reminder of the complex web of relationships binding their family together.

“Our son is safe.” Dejazmach Goshu’s response is laced with reassurance, his voice steady and calm. “Tessemma is in Gonder with Ras Ali himself and is safe, my love.” He seeks to allay her fears, to provide a measure of comfort in the face of their uncertain future.

“Promise you will return. . .” Shalu rasps through blood-flecked lips, her vulnerability laid bare in the quiet moments that follow. “A woman that is divorced, even the death of her husband will not hear of. . . Where did we go wrong?” Her tears flow freely, a river of sorrow engulfing the room. Even the maids join in her anguish, their emotions reflecting the pain permeating the chamber.

Dejazmach Goshu’s eyes glisten with unshed tears, his own heartache barely contained beneath the surface. “Our family will rise again,” Dejazmach Goshu lies desperately, seeking to infuse hope into their bleak situation, even as they both know the harsh truth — the Yejju will never restore their lost privilege. He reaches out, his fingers tracing a path through Shalu’s hair, a gesture of comfort amidst their shared pain. “Please stop crying, I beg of you,” he gently admonishes, “for too much weeping and sorrow, a family will finish.”

“Death. . .” As Shalu’s sobs subside, her voice takes on a delirious quality, the words carrying the weight of despair. “The cruelty is death. . . we are not safe. Our sons can never be safe under the Yejju rule. . . these cursed Muslims have taken everything from us, everything. . .” her tears flow freely once again “may the Lord kill them all twice!” The venom

in her words is palpable, a reflection of the deep-seated resentment festering within their hearts.

“We will rise again!” Dejazmach Goshu wipes his own tears, his voice trembling with raw emotion. “Enough, this is our chance to revive our house!” He clings to the belief that their loyalty and service to the Yejju will be rewarded, that they may yet reclaim what they have lost. Slowly, he relinquishes his hold on Shalu as the maids take over her care, their touch gentle and attentive as she drifts into a fitful sleep.

Dejazmach Goshu rises from his seat, his gaze locked onto her peaceful form. “My possessions from me they did not take, my children from me they did not take,” he reflects somberly, the weight of his own choices bearing down upon him. “I lost them because of my self-serving ways.” The admission hangs oppressively in the air, a recognition of the role he has played in their downfall. With a heavy sigh, Dejazmach Goshu watches his wife slumber, the oppressive steam of the chamber seeming to follow him as he turns to leave.

As he steps out into the hallway, his mind is already racing, his thoughts consumed by the task that awaits him. He knows he must confront Kassa, the Shifta leader who threatens the Yejju’s rule and, by extension, his own family’s precarious position. It is a daunting prospect, but one he cannot shy away from, not if he hopes to secure a future for his loved ones.



In the highlands, a thick fog blankets the landscape, casting an eerie shadow over the land. The mist clings to the rolling hills and rocky terrain, creating an atmosphere of foreboding anticipation. Amid this ethereal landscape, a formidable force emerges. Dejazmach Goshu, a survivor through and through, leads his vast Gojjam army, numbering twenty thousand strong. His presence is commanding, his posture proud, as he marches with determination, the weight of his family’s fate resting heavily upon his shoulders.

The spirits of the Gojjam warriors soar, a palpable energy coursing through the ranks. Songs of bravery and the resounding beat of war drums reverberate through the air, filling the space with a potent sense of readiness and resolve.

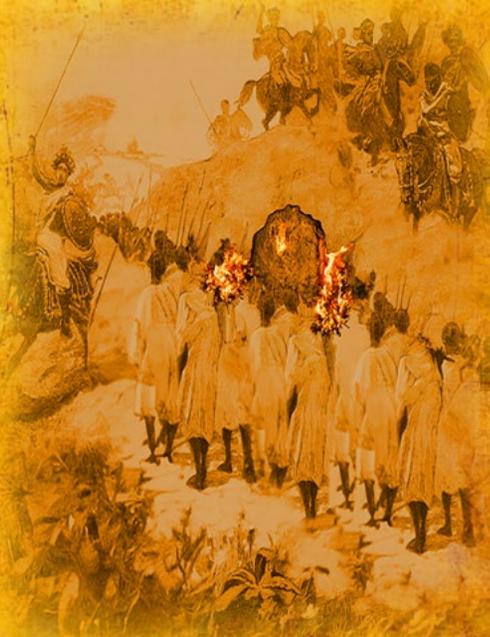
Among the warriors, an anomaly catches the eye—a peculiar-looking white man, clad in Ethiopian warrior attire, rides at the head of the army. He’s mounted on a caparisoned horse, his stance confident, and he sings in the native language with conviction, seamlessly blending in with the fervor of the troops.

“Where is this Shifta scatterbrain?” a man calls out, his words carrying a mocking edge. Amidst this fervent atmosphere, a minstrel, Lij Tefach of Agaw, takes center stage, his voice loud and taunting. “Hiding in his mother’s womb!” The warriors respond, “In the jungle, fiddling with a monkey!” The insults come with a chorus of negativity, fueling taunts against the Shiftas. As the Gojjam forces continue to sing, the atmosphere becomes charged with an undercurrent of defiance. “You son of a whore!” Fitawari Tamere, a lion-maned commander, stands at the head of the Gojjam army, riding close to Dejazmach Goshu.

His voice, laced with scorn, rings out, "You son of a Kosso merchant, won't you wait for me and stop fleeing?! A great shame! The great Kassa flees like a woman!"

Suddenly, a terrifying and rumbling sound quiets the Gojjam army. A deep, guttural rumbling, as if the earth itself had unleashed a primal growl from its very core. The army, mere moments ago filled with the fervor of impending battle, now stand frozen in terror, their eyes wide with disbelief. From the crest of the nearby hill, an avalanche of enormous, flaming boulders descend from as if hurled by some unseen force.

The dancing flames cast an eerie, flickering light upon the faces of the petrified soldiers. With a sickening crunch, the blazing boulders find their mark, smashing into the front lines of the Gojjam army. Men and horses alike are crushed beneath the immense weight, their agonized screams cut short as their bodies were reduced to a pulverized mass of flesh and splintered bone. The unexpected assault sends shockwaves through the ranks, the warriors caught off guard by the devastating attack.



In the midst of the turmoil, riders descend, and the sky becomes a deadly hail of arrows. Thousands rain down, cutting through the air and finding their mark—skulls, chests, legs. The Gojjam warriors and horses are decimated in an instant, the battlefield transformed into a scene of chaos and carnage.



From this maelstrom emerges Kassa, leading his forces with an air of sinister determination. The Gojjam forces scramble to respond, their efforts disjointed and desperate. Horses and infantrymen charge in various directions, while the heart of the Gojjam army remains with Dejzmach Goshu, who struggles to regain control, his mind racing with thoughts of his family's fate should he fall.

The Shiftas seize the moment, charging forward with a ruthless intensity. Swords clash, bodies fall, and the battlefield becomes a gruesome tableau of violence. The clash of steel and the cries of the wounded fill the air, a symphony of destruction echoing across the highlands. The conflict rages throughout the day, and the sun's journey across the sky marks the passage of time as blood rains in torrents across the battlefields. Both sides become engulfed in a frenzy of brutality, discipline lost amidst the chaos.

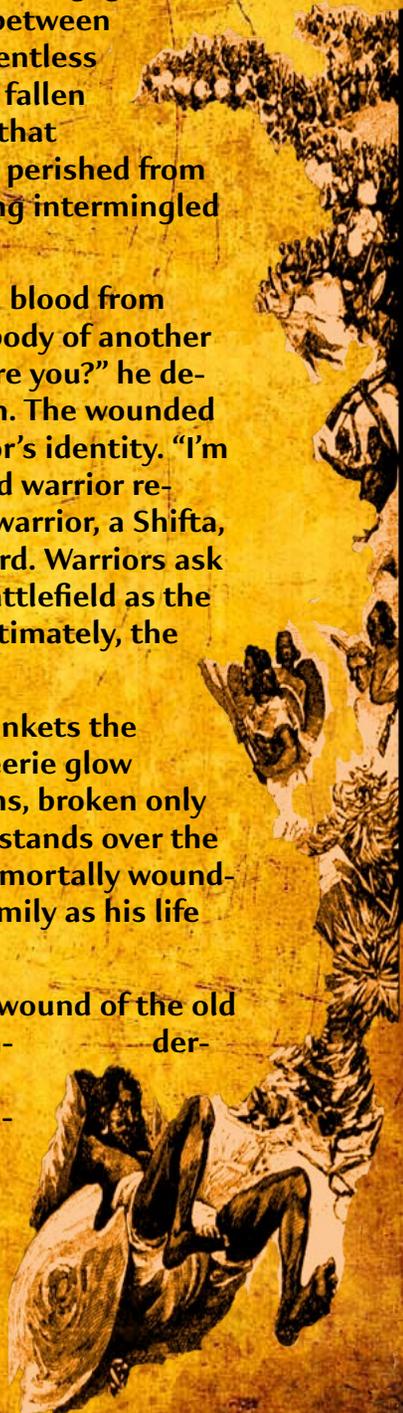
Dejzmach Goshu fights with a desperate ferocity, his sword cutting through the enemy ranks, driven by the knowledge that his family's survival hangs in the balance. As evening descends, the car-

nage continues unabated. Warriors engage in merciless slaughter, the boundaries between enemy and ally blurred by the relentless brutality. The field is strewn with fallen bodies, evidence of the savagery that has unfolded for days. Many have perished from both sides, bodies of warriors lying intermingled all over the battlefield.

A fallen warrior, covered in blood from head to toe, drags the wounded body of another warrior to him. "Whose warrior are you?" he demands to know in utter confusion. The wounded warrior cannot discern the warrior's identity. "I'm Dejazmach Goshu's," the wounded warrior responds, his voice uncertain. The warrior, a Shifta, slices his throat with a short sword. Warriors ask the same questions across the battlefield as the horrific killing continues until, ultimately, the Shiftas emerge victorious.

In the aftermath, night blankets the battlefield, and bonfires cast an eerie glow upon the landscape. Silence reigns, broken only by the crackling of flames. Kassa stands over the fallen body of Dejazmach Goshu, mortally wounded, weeping and calling for his family as his life force wanes.

Kassa gently cleanses the wound of the old warrior, offering a moment of tenderness and understanding. "How is it, abbatte, that you fought alongside Maru against the Yejju, yet now you come on behalf of their enemies to fight me?" Kassa's voice is a mix of anger, dismay, and confusion as he addresses the dying Dejazmach Goshu.



"Only a man who lacks common sense asks such a question. . ." the old man spits out blood, ". . . Your kin, Maru served them too." Dejazmach Goshu looks at Kassa with pity. "The eye that chases the crown must serve with others until strong enough to—" Dejazmach Goshu coughs out more blood, his response a plea for understanding, his final moments marked by regret and reflection.

"If they came after his sons, I doubt he would have joined them," Kassa retorts, aware of the weakness in the Goshu family.

"Lord, it was the worst of all days," Dejazmach Goshu cries. "Who had in mind to kill my son Biru? Who had in mind to throw me to the vultures of the kingdoms?" He stares at the star-filled sky in agony, the weight of his choices bearing down upon him.

Kassa rises, grabs his sword, aware that Dejazmach Goshu is near death. He scans the horizon, then his eyes land on the battlefield strewn with the dead. "I served under your son, I fought against Ras Ali by his side," Kassa says, his voice thick with emotion as he tightens his grip on the sword. "Go to your ancestors, abbatte, knowing full well that I am the one they and Lord has chosen to bring down the Yejju and break the rule of the houses of princes and unite the kingdoms." With a swift motion, Kassa ends Dejazmach Goshu's suffering, his blade a final act of mercy.

"Kassa! Kassa! Kassa!" The chants of his warriors fill the air as Kassa rises and surveys the battlefield. The stench of death hangs heavy, and he stands amidst the sea of fallen warriors, his expression a mix of weariness and determination. The

weight of his destiny presses upon him, the fate of a kingdom resting on his shoulders.

Overwhelmed by the violence, Kassa walks among the captives—among them, Lij Tefach and Fitawari Tamere, the same men who had insulted him and his mother earlier. His gaze is penetrating, his intent clear bring them to the tent.



Inside the tent, Kassa, seating on a carpeted throne, shifts his demeanor, with a cruel smile graces his lips. “Please, recite for me that lovely rhyme of yours,” he demands, at the captives kneeling before him, his voice dripping with sarcasm. But they remain silent, fear etched on their faces like death. “Well, have it your way then. Bring them their drink!” Kassa commands as the scene takes a chilling turn.

Warriors bring forth a container of dark liquid, its mysterious contents swirling with a threatening essence—a Kosso concoction. “The tongue that is red from insulting is on fire,” Kassa declares as his warriors yank the heads of the two captives

and draw the liquid from the container with jugs. “Here is the Kosso collected by my mother to cool it down!” The warriors pour the vile tasting medicinal drink, lethal in large quantities, right down the captives’ throats.

Kassa rises and observes the rest of the captives tremble in terror, their fate sealed as the darkness of night deepens around them.

Kassa and Gabreye make their way to another tent, the horrors of battle and the decisions made on the battlefield etched in their minds. Warriors and guards clear their path, bowing and bending the knee in reverence of their rising leaders. Silently acknowledging their hard won victory with a nod or the occasional pat on their shoulders.

A bloodied and injured man, the white warrior from earlier, bows his head as Kassa and Gabreye enter the tent, panic swirling in his eyes. The tent flap billows ominously, carrying the thick scent of smoke and spilled blood from the battle. Kassa, his armor splattered with viscera, his expression grim and predatory, exudes an intimidating aura that dominates the tent. Gabreye walks stoically by his side, hand resting on the hilt of his curved sword.

Kassa and Gabreye pay little attention to the captive as they beeline for a jug of arake being prepared by maids and down it in one gulp. The fiery liquid burns their throats, momentarily banishing the taste of battle from their mouths. The heavy toll of the battle radiates from them. They share a long look, unspoken plans simmering between them. This is a major victory and a watershed moment for their army but it is not time to celebrate

yet for it only marks their arrival as a major force to be reckoned with in the kingdoms.

Kassa breaks away first, stalking toward the trembling captive. His calloused hand wraps around an extra jug of the powerful arake spirit. With purpose, he approaches the captive and offers it to him. The foreigner's eyes are wide with a mix of surprise and gratitude. He takes the jug, his fingers trembling slightly as he raises it to his lips. A gulp follows, the fiery liquid doing its part to calm his rattled nerves. He then dabs what remains of it with his shimma to clean the wound that mars his skin.

"They tell me you serve as a captain under Ras Ali," Kassa begins, his tone a mix of curiosity and suspicion. "What possesses a ferenji to meddle in our affairs?"

The warrior clears his throat but does not respond, afraid to say the wrong thing. He remains quiet, his eyes downcast.

"What do they call you?" Kassa demands, his voice cutting through the tense silence. "John. . . John Bell. Your people call me Yohannes, my lord," the warrior responds, his voice laced with respect.

"Yohannes, like the prophet who prepared the way for our

Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ," Kassa remarks, his eyes narrowing. "What are you doing here John, fighting in a country that does not belong to you?" he inquires, but John Bell remains silent, afraid to suffer the fate of the other captives. "Have you come to prepare the way for your masters like the Portuguese and the Spaniards?" Kassa's mocking tone and puzzled expression land squarely on him.

"No, my lord," John Bell responds steadfastly. Kassa offers him more arake to calm him.

"Tell me, how did you end up here?" Kassa repeats, "As a mercenary no less" he closes in, observing him with curiosity. John Bell remains silent and Kassa moves his hand to his sword.

"My lord, " a startled John Bell responds "having a full share of my youthful folly in other continents, I came to Africa and spent time in Cairo. I served under the Dervish Ali, and loving adventure, I sought to lay my eyes on the source of the Nile. So, I came to your kingdom with Council Plowden—"

"You know the British Council?" Kassa interrupts, surprise flickering across his face.

"Yes, my lord," John Bell replies, the drink taking hold of him. "We are good confidants." Kassa turns to Gabreye, a knowing smile on his lips, his hand still on his sword.

"You did not answer my question," Kassa continues, his gaze returning to John Bell. "Why do you fight in wars that do not concern you?"

"I am a warrior, my lord. And not being averse to war, I was drawn to the many warlord princesses of the kingdoms who summoned me to



serve under them." John Bell's gaze remains steady as he answers.

"How did you learn our ways, our tongue? Even the way you fight resembles the way we do," Kassa gets closer to him, examining his warrior attire with a mix of surprise and skepticism in his eyes.

"I learned your tongue because I am married to Weizero Sestet," John Bell confesses, his voice carrying a note of pride. "She captured my restless heart the way your kingdom has arrested my soul."

Kassa and Gabreye burst out in loud laughter that fills the air in the tent.

"So, you came looking for love. Is that why you are truly here?" Kassa presses, his tone growing lighter.

John Bell winces but answers with caution, "I come to find peace in this life that I could not find at my homeland, my lord."

Kassa smirks darkly. "Peace? Your arrival coincides with whispers of rebellion and unrest. Is that your intent, to sow more discord so your British masters can take our lands like they did in India?"

John Bell pales, his eyes widening. "No, I assure you my lord, I am not like the people of—"

"I hear you people hang and burn my kind that dares to even look at one of your pale women." Kassa muses. "Enough lies. Tell me the truth, and I may spare your life. Lie again, and you will share the fates of the others." Kassa's voice is cold, his ultimatum hanging over the captive like a suffocating air.

John Bell hesitates, then bows his head. "I speak the truth, I submit to you, my lord."

Kassa smiles coldly. "A wise choice. Now we shall see if you prove more useful alive. . .or dead." Kassa feigns to draw out his sword.

John Bell shudders, trapped in a web of terror and intrigue not of his own making. "My wife has blessed me with three beautiful children who are born on this land!" John Bell declares desperately, a genuine conviction in his voice that surprises Kassa. "I consider myself an Ethiopian, my lord." Kassa is intrigued by this strange figure before him, a foreigner whose loyalty and connection to the land are uncommon.

"Will you be as loyal to me as you are to your wife and serve under me for life?" Kassa's voice is firm, his eyes locked onto John Bell's for any sign of hesitation.

"If you spare me today. . ." John Bell raises his eyes to meet Kassa's, a mixture of determination and loyalty in his gaze ". . .my life belongs to you as to her for we live to bring peace in the kingdom for our children." He bows his head lower until his forehead touches the ground just like a native "I will serve you, until my dying days. I swear it on our Lord and Savior, my lord."

A moment of silence hangs in the air, thick with unspoken possibilities. Then, a smile tugs at the corners of Kassa's lips, a smile that speaks of acceptance and newfound camaraderie. "Welcome to my ranks, Yohannes," Kassa declares, removing his hand from the sword and extending it to him in a gesture of fellowship. "You have served under the Endresse, I want full accounting of his forces!" John

Four against One

*When the going gets tough,
the tough get going.*

Bell's hand meets Kassa's in a firm shake, sealing a bond forged in the crucible of battle.

As the night wears on, the sounds of celebration and mourning mingle in the air. Kassa and Gabreye sit with John Bell, sharing strategies and plans, the beginnings of a partnership that will shape the future of the kingdoms.

Kassa rises from the gathering and steps out of the tent, deep in contemplation, his eyes staring in the distance at the concluded battlefield, the echoes of Dejazmach Goshu's final words lingering in his mind — a haunting reminder of the sacrifices made and the challenges that lie ahead in the battle for the throne.



Four Yeju horsemen, messengers of destiny, burst forth from a stable, their steeds' hooves pounding against the earth like war drums. The Yeju Solomonic banner, an emblem of might and loyalty to tradition, flaps proudly atop a staff, its colors a symbol of hope amid the encroaching darkness. The riders advance as one, a flawless formation, resolute in their mission to spread the summons of the Yeju dynasty to defend their realms.



As the Ethiopian highlands loom before them, the horsemen split like the branches of a great river, each carrying a message that will forge the destiny of the kingdoms. Their purpose is unambiguous: a call to unite the disparate houses under the Yejju banner against the imminent threat of Kassa.

The heart-pounding cadence of the negarit drum resonates across the empire, a primal rhythm that stirs the blood and hastens the heart. Its beat is a rallying cry, a call to stand united against the gathering storm.

In the highlands of Gojjam, amidst a sea of fallen warriors, their shrouded bodies mingling with the dew-soaked grass, the late Dejazmach Goshu's sons, Biru and Tesemma Goshu, stand in silence, their faces a tapestry of grief and smoldering anger. The weight of their father's demise hangs heavy in the air, a suffocating presence.

Tesemma, the younger son, clenches his fists, his knuckles white with the force of his rage. His eyes, once bright with youthful fire, now blaze with a cold, unyielding hatred. "Kassa," he spits the name like poison, his voice quivering with barely restrained fury. "That murderous Shifta!"

Biru Goshu, the elder brother, paces wordlessly among the fallen, fury consuming him. "Kassa is no ordinary Shifta," he warns, his tone somber. "He is a demon on the battlefield, a force of nature that leaves devastation in his wake."

The sun rises over the blood-drenched fields, casting an eerie glow upon the carnage. Biru and Tesemma turn away from the devastation to face the new day, forged in the crucible of loss and tempered by the flames of vengeance. In the distance,

the drums of war begin to beat once more, an ominous call heralding the approaching tempest.

In the grand halls of the Gojjam palace, the air is rich with the fragrant aroma of freshly brewed black coffee. An immense Jebena, an earthenware pot, pours forth steaming liquid, splashing into lined cups to be served to the mourning Gojjam allies. The act of lamentation transcends personal sentiment; it becomes a collective response to the challenges that lie ahead, a shared sorrow that unites them in the face of adversity.

Biru Goshu and Tesemma Goshu sit at opposite ends of the grand chamber, their physical separation mirroring the fractures that run deep within their family. The alliance that once held strong is now strained, tested by shifting loyalties and the machinations of the Yejju lords who have become their nemesis.

Tesemma Goshu, newly freed from Ras Ali's clutches in the wake of his father's death, approaches his elder brother with cautious steps. There is a fire in his eyes, a fierce resolve that echoes the relentless beat of the Negarit drum. But Biru, lost in his own world of grief and inebriation, avoids his gaze.

"The Yejju summon us to action," Tesemma declares, his voice slicing through the heavy silence. "Will you drown yourself in drink while our father's death goes unavenged?"

Biru's expression darkens, a tempest brewing behind his bloodshot eyes. "Do not question my resolve, little brother," he growls, his words slightly slurred. "I am the one who fights your Yejju master day in and day out. It is Ras Ali's blood I thirst for, even more than the Shifta's."

“From Tigray to Wollo, Lasta to Bege-meder. . .” Tesemma’s voice rises, ringing out with the conviction of a man who understands the stakes. “The Negarit drum sounds. It is time to join hands with the Yejju and finish the one who killed our father!”

But Biru, lost in the haze of alcohol and despair, merely shakes his head. “The one who longed for me,” he murmurs, his words heavy with regret, “has said it was the worst of all days when the Yejju came to power to ruin us.” He lifts the bottle of Arake to his lips, taking a long, desperate swig. “The Yejju are no ally of ours,” he asserts, his voice trembling with defiance. “They use our hatred to further their own ambition, and I will not join my enemies.”

Tesemma’s eyes pierce into his brother’s, the weight of their shared history hanging heavy between them. “A house whose relatives are weak cannot take revenge,” he imparts, the truth of his words sharp as a blade.

Biru’s gaze holds a mix of pain and resolve, tears mingling with sweat. “Mark my words,” he declares, his voice a broken whisper. “This one, Kassa, is different. What our father found at Gur-Amba was death, and so will all of you who decide to face him.”



He takes another swig of arake, the liquid fire burning his throat and dulling the pain in his heart. “This Shifta killer,” he mutters, his words heavy with dread, “He is merciless. He is Satan himself.”

Amidst their pain and division, the two brothers are split in their understanding of the looming threat. The beat of the Negarit drum continues, a relentless force propelling them towards a decision that will shape the destiny of Gojjam land and their people. Biru and Tesemma exchange a look of grim resolve, knowing that the road ahead will be long and treacherous, that the battles to come will test the limits of their strength and determination.



A Yejju messenger stands before Dejazmach Aligaz, the uncle of Ras Ali, the man who once rescued Yejju rule by defeating Wibe in a surprise assault but was humbled by Kassa in their confrontation in the battle for the west.

The chamber in which they meet is filled to the rafters with chiefs and warriors, milling around under high walls adorned with intricate tapestries, each thread weaving a tale of conquest and power to the might of the Agaw.

“Speak,” Dejazmach Aligaz commands, his voice low but laden with authority. His piercing gaze falls upon the messenger, the chiefs around

him fixated on him like he holds the fate of their kingdom.

The messenger clears his throat, the gravity of his news evident in his tone. "A message from the Endresse," he announces. "He wants you to lead the Yejju offensive against the rebel Kassa."

"Finally, the time has come to destroy this pretender!" A smile spreads across Dejazmach Aligaz's face, the corners of his lips curling with predatory satisfaction. The news ignites a spark within him, a promise of glory and a chance to rise to even greater prominence. He has gained a lot from defeating Wibe and now, he is called upon once more to defend against a new threat — the dangerous rebel from the West.

"Who joins us?" Dejazmach Aligaz asks, his voice a mix of surprise and excitement. The list is long and it included every region including, the north which he had fought against.

"Have they even heard of him outside of the West?" The chiefs chuckle, as if the Agaw have been granted a divine gift, an opportunity to crush a pretender and expand their dominion under the Yejju.

A long moment passes, the anticipation palpable. At last, Dejazmach Aligaz nods slowly. "On our ancestors' memory, then. My force is my nephew's, until the debt to me is paid in full once again."



The rugged expanse of the Axumite highlands stretches out before another Yejju messenger, the mountains of Tigray rising as tall as the ancient Obelisks. The steady rhythm of his horse's hooves echoes the importance of his mission as he rides towards the capital of Dejazmach Wibe, its ancient structures a testament to the long history of power in the northern rulership.

Inside the opulent confines of his palace, Dejazmach Wibe stands, a figure of regal stature, flanked by Abuna Salama, the banned spiritual leader of the country. As the messenger approaches, Dejazmach Wibe's brow furrows with curiosity. With a practiced flick of his fingers, he breaks the seal on the message handed to him.

"Kassa?" Dejazmach Wibe's voice carries a note of confusion as his eyes scan the contents. "Who is this Kassa?"



A lone Tigrean chief steps forward, his voice laden with both explanation and concern. "The Shifta from the far West, Maru's blood in Qwara." Dejazmach Wibe scours his memory but comes up blank. "My lord, we hired him last rainfall in the West," the chief continues, recognition weighing heavily in his words.

"The one who lost to the Turks at Metemma?" Dejazmach Wibe muses, his lips curling into a mocking expression. "The ones the Yejju fear most are the ones who are the furthest and weakest," he adds, bewilderment coloring his tone.

"This upstart Shifta the Yejju overlords fear?" Turning his gaze to the chief, skepticism evident in his eyes, Wibe continues, "This is the threat that now looms over them?" His laughter fills the chamber, a sound both amused and disbelieving. "Send them a few battalions, three ambels," he instructs his chiefs, dismissal evident in his tone, "and nothing more."



As riders bear his arrogant orders westward, the die is cast. Dejazmach Wibe is unaware that the destinies of kingdoms hang in the balance, that the clash between power and ambition looms on the horizon, and that the fate of an empire will be decided without his involvement.



In the Western realms, Kassa and a portion of his Shifta forces converge on a small hill overlooking a mist-shrouded field. Tension crackles in the air, hearts pounding in sync with the drums of war. The hill provides a strategic vantage point, revealing the unfolding enemy forces on the battlefield below.

A dense jungle rises behind them, a wall of foliage that serves as both a natural barrier and a mysterious backdrop. Unlike previous battles where stealth was their advantage, the Shiftas stand out now, adorned in gleaming armor and conspicuous attire. Colorful sashes and banners flutter in the breeze, as if daring fate itself to take notice.

Morning mists veil the field. Yet, from the opposite side of the bridge, a distant sound carries on the wind—the clattering of a massive army in motion.

Scouts gallop toward Kassa, their faces set with determination, their reports swift. "About thirty thousand, with four commanders and seven

battalions," they announce, the gravity of the situation clear in their voices. Kassa absorbs the information in silence.

"I spoke to the Lord last night," Gabreye steps up, his voice resolute amid the tension. "And He has decided." Kassa's expression turns playful, his gaze piercing Gabreye's eyes. "I saw who came out of your tent last night," he smirks, a hint of mischief in his tone.

"I speak the truth." Gabreye's demeanor shifts, becoming serious once more. "After that angel left me, the Lord Himself came, as He did with Abraham. He told me not to fear, for the battle has already been decided." Gabreye's words carry conviction. "He told me. . ." He turns to Kassa with conviction ". . . it ends with their death and the triumph of Kassa, for he is the elect of God."



Kassa spurs his horse with Gabreye following him close and halts before his Shifta warriors. Visible to the enemy forces below.

On the opposite side of the field, the full might of the Yejjju army marches into position, commanded by the formidable Dejazmach Aligaz. The commanders survey the scene, their confidence evident in their stance.

"This is the man of the lowlands that everyone fears?" Dejazmach Belew of Wollo laughs, derision dripping from his words. "The invincible Shifta that cannot be defeated?!"

Dejazmach Abaye of Lasta scans the Shifta forces, his comment laced with incredulity. "A bunch of peasants and jungle dwellers, these growers of red peppers and beast fondlers are warriors?"

Dejazmach Yazew of Begemdir shakes his head in disgust. "How does he dare? We outnumber him thirty to one!"

Dejazmach Aligaz, ready to avenge the humiliation he suffered at the hand of Kassa, turns to the superior force, assuming the role of leader. "At least he has come out to fight us in the open!" he declares, his voice ringing with anticipation. "The pride and hubris of this fool! He has made a fatal mistake facing us in open field! Commit everyone; we cannot afford to miss the chance to cut them all down at once!"

Horns blare, shouts fill the air, and the Yejjju forces surge forward, a terrifying spectacle of churning hooves, glinting armor, and a forest of spears. Lances and banners rise as the earth trembles beneath the thunderous charge of the Yejjju cavalry, a display of unstoppable power.

As the Yejjū forces draw nearer, the thunder of hoofbeats reverberating through the mist-shrouded field, Kassa's ragtag band of Shifta warriors descends from the hill like a tide of vengeance. Their faces are etched with grim determination, eyes ablaze with the fire of warriors prepared to meet their destiny. They move as one, a unified force bound by the unbreakable bonds of loyalty and the unyielding desire for victory.



The two forces collide with earth-shaking fury, the impact sending shockwaves rippling through the earth. The air becomes alive with the discordant symphony of battle — the screaming of swords against shields, the hissing of arrows as they cut through the air, and the agonized shrieks of mounts as they tumble to the ground, their riders crushed beneath the relentless tide of violence.

Amidst the chaos, Kassa emerges like a force of nature, his broadswords swinging in lethal arcs, each blow a testament to his unrivaled skill and indomitable spirit. He cuts a swath through the en-

emy ranks, his blades finding flesh with sickening ease, severing limbs and felling fighters with every devastating stroke. The ground beneath his feet grows slick with the blood of the fallen, a crimson carpet that marks his path of destruction.

The Shifta warriors fight with a ferocity that belies their smaller numbers, their movements a blur of speed and precision. They dance amidst the chaos, their blades and arrows finding their marks with deadly accuracy. The air is filled with the war cries of the Shiftas, a primal roar that rises above the din of battle, a declaration of their unwavering resolve.

But even as they fight with the strength of lions, the Yejjū forces push back with an unrelenting onslaught, their superior numbers a tide that threatens to engulf the smaller Shifta bands. The Yejjū warriors advance like a wave of destruction, their spears and swords thirsty for Shifta blood. The ground trembles beneath the weight of their charge, the earth itself seeming to groan under the burden of the carnage.

Kassa's compatriots fight valiantly, their bodies and souls pushed to the limits of endurance. They meet the Yejjū's advance with courage, their blades clashing against the enemy's in a desperate dance of life and death. The air grows thick with the stench of blood and sweat, the coppery tang of spilled blood mingling with the acrid smell of fear.

The battle rages on, the ground painted a vivid crimson, a macabre canvas that tells the story of the day's brutality. The bodies of the fallen litter the field, the savage nature of the conflict in full display. Broken swords and shattered shields lie

scattered amidst the corpses, the detritus of a war that knows no mercy.

Yet even as the tide of battle seems to turn against them, Kassa and his warriors refuse to yield. They fight on with savage determination, their hearts filled with the fire of righteous fury. They know that surrender is not an option, that to fail here would be to condemn their cause and offer the people to further destruction. They fight, their bodies pushed beyond the point of exhaustion, their minds focused solely on the task at hand. They become a whirlwind of steel and fury, each blow a declaration of their unconquerable spirit. The ground beneath their feet grows treacherous, slick with the blood of both friend and foe, but still they press on, driven by the unquenchable thirst for victory.

“Retreat!” Kassa’s voice rings as the tide of brutal battle threatens to become a massacre, “Retreat!” Kassa’s voice rises above the chaos, a thunderous command that cuts through the cacophony of clashing steel and agonized screams. “Retreat!” he bellows, his words a signal that echoes through the ranks of his beleaguered warriors.

The Shifta forces, their bodies battered and their spirits tested, heed their leader’s call. They disengage from the fray, a disorganized tide of desperate men scrambling for their lives. They melt into the mist like phantoms, their forms swallowed by the swirling tendrils of vapor that cling to the battlefield.

But the Yejjū, drunk on the scent of blood and the promise of victory, give chase with savage intensity. They pursue the retreating Shiftas like a pack of ravenous wolves, their eyes alight with feral

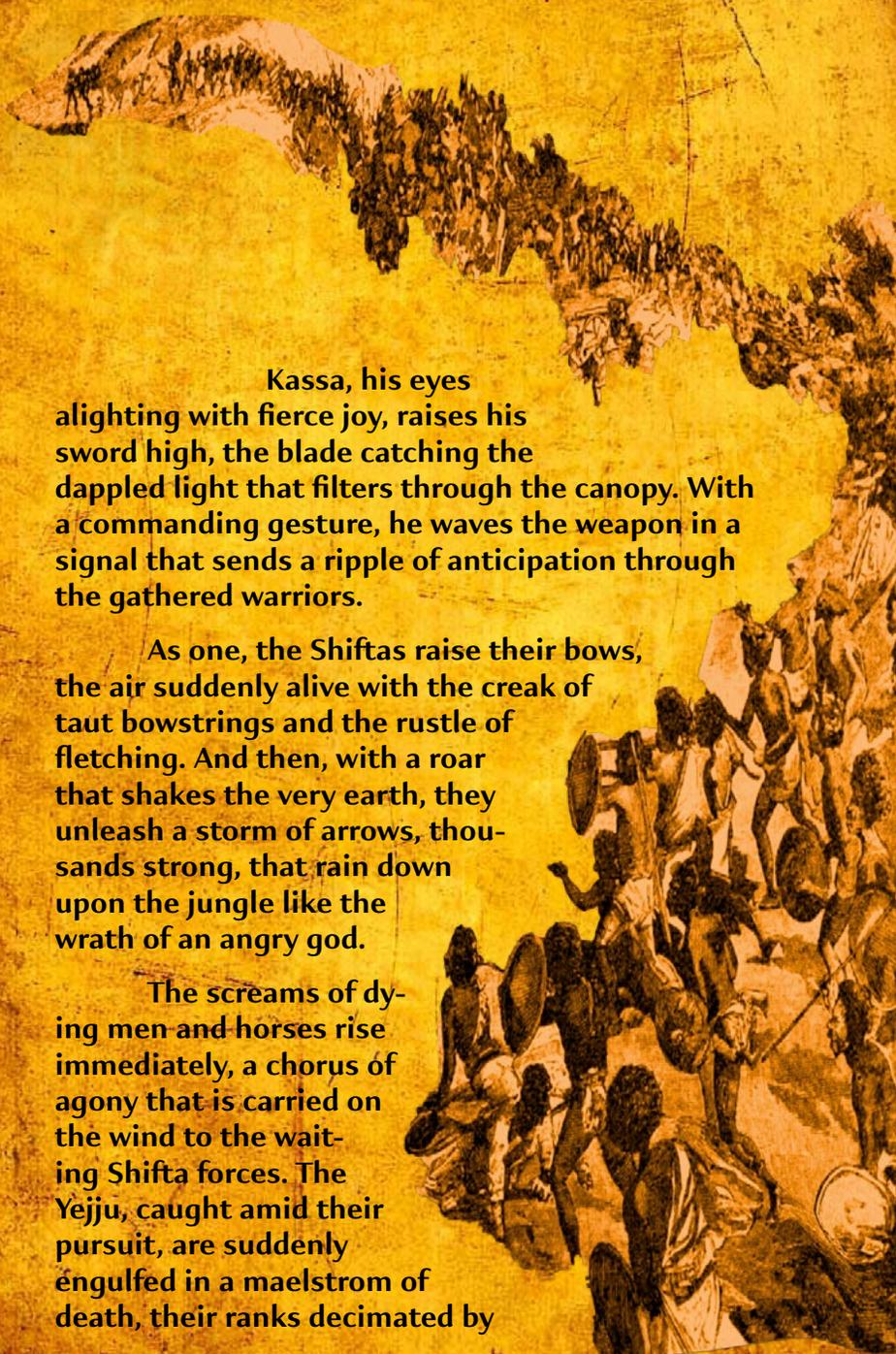
hunger. The air is filled with their taunts and jeers, a clamor of torment that mingles with the pounding of hoofbeats and the clatter of armor.

The chase leads them up treacherous slopes, the terrain a nightmare of jagged rocks and hidden crevasses. Insults and missiles hurtle through the air, the Yejjū determined to break the spirit of their prey. The Shiftas, their lungs burning and their limbs leaden with exhaustion, push themselves to the brink of collapse, driven by the primal instinct to survive.

As they reach the edge of the jungle, the Shiftas plunge into the welcoming darkness, the dense foliage swallowing them whole. The Yejjū, undeterred, follow close behind, their bloodlust a palpable force that drives them forward. Ferns and leaves tear at their faces, roots threatening to trip them at every step, but still they press on, the thrill of the hunt consuming them.

In the heart of the jungle, the chaos intensifies, the sounds of battle echoing through the dense foliage. Shouts and screams mingle with the clash of weapons, an overture of onslaught that rises to a fevered pitch. The Shiftas, their numbers dwindling, fight with the desperate fury of cornered beasts. Only a few hundred warriors remain, a paltry force against the thousands-strong Yejjū horde that shakes the very foundations of the forest.

But as Kassa, Gabreye, and his men emerge from the jungle on the other side, a sight greets them that stills the breath in their lungs. A sea of Shifta forces, hidden from view until now, awaits them, ready for battle. Their ranks stretch out like an endless tide, a force that dwarfs the Yejjū in both number and determination.



Kassa, his eyes alighting with fierce joy, raises his sword high, the blade catching the dappled light that filters through the canopy. With a commanding gesture, he waves the weapon in a signal that sends a ripple of anticipation through the gathered warriors.

As one, the Shiftas raise their bows, the air suddenly alive with the creak of taut bowstrings and the rustle of fletching. And then, with a roar that shakes the very earth, they unleash a storm of arrows, thousands strong, that rain down upon the jungle like the wrath of an angry god.

The screams of dying men and horses rise immediately, a chorus of agony that is carried on the wind to the waiting Shifta forces. The Yejju, caught amid their pursuit, are suddenly engulfed in a maelstrom of death, their ranks decimated by

the hail of arrows that tears through their flesh like cotton.

The Shiftas, their own war cries rising to mingle with the screams of the dying, surge forward with renewed fury, the trap sprung and their enemy caught in its jaws. Kassa is everywhere at once, his broadswords a blur of motion that carves through armor and bone with sickening ease.

All around him, his warriors fight with an unrivaled ferocity, their movements swift and purposeful, their strikes lethal and precise. They move through the enemy ranks like a scythe through wheat, cutting down all who stand in their path. The Yejju, their arrogance shattered and their formations broken, can only watch in horrified disbelief as the tide of battle turns against them.

“Hold your line!” Dejazmach Aligaz screams as the Yejju reform, their resistance brutal but ultimately futile. They fight with the desperate fury of men who know they are doomed. They launch a savage counterattack, their blades and spears seeking Shifta flesh with a hunger that borders on madness. But the Shiftas, their own determination a force that cannot be denied, meet them blow for blow, their own strikes lethal and precise.

As the battle rages on, the arrogance of the Dejazmaches begins to crumble, the reality of defeat dawning upon them like a cold and unforgiving sun. They see the Shiftas closing in, a tide of vengeance that will not be denied, and they know that their own fates are sealed.

Through it all, Kassa fights like a man possessed, his broadswords carving a path of destruction through the enemy ranks. He is a force of nature, a warrior born to lead and conquer, and in

this moment, all can see that he embodies the very essence of victory.

The ambush is a triumph of strategy and skill, a testament to the cunning and prowess of the Shifta forces. And as the Yejju fall before their onslaught, their dreams of conquest shattered and their armies broken, the true power of Kassa and his warriors becomes clear. They are a force to be reckoned with, a people unbroken and unafraid, no matter what the odds are stacked up against them—on their way to claim total victory against four regional powers at once.

As the battle reaches its climax, Kassa's eyes lock onto Dejazmach Aligaz, the man commanding the Yejju forces. Aligaz, once a figure of arrogance, now stands at the center of the chaos, his face a mask of desperation and fear. Kassa charges forward, his broadswords flashing in the dappled light of the jungle, a vision of righteous fury incarnate.

With a roar that echoes through the battlefield, Kassa's blade finds its mark, the first of the four Dejazmaches falling before his onslaught. The blow is a signal, a rallying call that sends a shockwave through the Yejju ranks. The first line wavers, then cracks, the soldiers' resolve shattering like glass before the hammer of Kassa's fury.

Leaderless and lost, the Yejju resistance crumbles, the Shifta warriors surging forward with renewed intensity. They crash against the enemy like a tidal wave, their blades and arrows finding flesh with relentless precision. The jungle floor becomes a maze of corpses, the once-proud Yejju reduced to a mass of broken bodies and shattered dreams.

As the battle rages on, the remaining Dejazmaches struggle to rally their forces, their voices lost in the cacophony of clashing steel and agonized screams. But it is a futile effort, their defenses weakening with every passing moment.

Kassa, his eyes alight with the fire of victory, focuses his attention on the remaining Dejazmaches, their once-arrogant faces now clouded with terror. They see their own deaths reflected in the warrior's gaze, a fate that cannot be avoided. One by one, Kassa's swords find their mark, each blow a testament to his unrivaled skill and dogged determination. The Shiftas press forward, their war cries rising to the heavens, a sound that strikes fear into the hearts of their enemies. The Yejju retreat in disarray, fleeing before the onslaught of the Shifta fury, their once-proud banners trampled into the mud of the jungle floor.

The tide of destiny has shifted, the balance of power forever altered by the actions of a single man and his loyal warriors. "Negus! Kassa! Ase!" As the Shifta warriors gather around Kassa, their faces etched with the weariness of battle but their eyes alight with the joy of victory, the air is filled with the sound of triumphant cries. "Negus! Kassa! Negus! Kassa! Negus! Kassa! Negus! Negus!" they chant, their voices rising to the heavens in a chorus of exultation. They crown their leader with their words, hailing him as the undefeated Dejazmach who has achieved the impossible, the warrior who has brought low four of the mightiest leaders in the land.

In this moment, Kassa has shaken the very foundations of power. The Yejju, once an unstoppable force that held sway over the land, lie shattered

at his feet, their arrogance and might reduced to ashes.

“Kassa! Kassa! Negus! Ase!” As the echoes of victory resound through the jungle, the kingdoms take notice. Kassa, the Shifta from the far West, has arrived as a force to be reckoned with, a man destined to shape the future of an empire. In the days and years to come, the name of Kassa will be spoken with reverence and fear, a symbol of hope for the oppressed and a warning to those who would seek to oppose him. He will rise to heights undreamed of, his actions shaping the course of nations and the lives of countless thousands.



But for now, in this moment of triumph, Kassa stands tall, his spirit unbroken, his resolve unshakable. He has proven himself a leader of men, a warrior without equal. And as the sun sets on the battlefield, casting a golden glow over the carnage and the glory, the future stretches out before him, a canvas waiting to be painted in the colors of his own making.



The Response

After the storm comes a calm.

The ancient city of Gonder thrums with a palpable tension, the very stones seeming to vibrate with the weight of the gathered Yejju warriors. They encircle the city like a steel vice, a living bulwark against the gathering storm that threatens to engulf the kingdom. The air is thick with the scent of anticipation and fear, a potent mix that sets the nerves of all who breathe it on edge.



“We can no longer pretend this Shifta in the West poses no threat!” Ras Ali roars, his voice cutting through the din like a knife through silk. In the grand court of the palace, the Endresse and his mother command the attention of everyone present. The audience hangs on every word spoken during the tense proceedings, as if their lives depend on it.

Ras Ali, resplendent in his regal finery, stands at the center of a maelstrom of turbaned noblemen and chiefs, their voices rising and falling like the crashing of waves upon a rocky shore. At his side, Empress Menen, an island of icy fury amidst the chaos, occupies a distant seat, her regal features etched with a disdain that could cut glass.

“We must decide on how to accommodate this warlord!” The words are an undeniable truth, a gauntlet thrown down before the assembled nobles, and the mutters that rise in response are like the buzzing of angry hornets.



Empress Menen's scoff is a whip-crack of derision, her features twisting with a contempt that could wither a lesser man. She yearns to rebuke her son's folly, to strip away the veil of his naiveté with the lash of her tongue, but she bites back her words, a coiled serpent waiting to strike.

From the midst of the gathered advisors, an aged figure shuffles forth, his face creased with the weight of a thousand concerns. "By lies and denial, the kingdoms are not governed," he intones, his voice a raspy whisper that somehow carries to the farthest corners of the chamber. "By wishful thinking, one does not defeat a strong enemy. Only by discussions can we rule. . ."

The cluster of chiefs mumble their assent, a low rumble of agreement that seems to fill the air. But then, like a thunderclap, voices rise in opposition from the turbaned Muslims, their dissent crackling through the tense air like lightning through a storm cloud.

"It's better to die in one's own province than to die among the land of strangers!" cries a Balambaras, his voice a call that sets the hearts of his comrades afire. They roar their agreement, a primal sound that shakes the very foundations of the palace. The Balambaras' gaze sweeps the room, his eyes locking with those of Ras Ali and Empress Menen in turn, a challenge and a warning all in one. "Let us cross over to our own area in Debra-Tabor, to Ayhsal. If he comes there, we will have many supporters on our side."

But before the royals can respond, a new voice cuts through the clamor, a voice heavy with the weight of years and the wisdom of a thousand battles.

"The problem with our country is not land!" An elder intones, his gait slowed by the weight of many campaigns as he strides from the back of the chamber. "Land is plentiful and not lacking, anyone who travels our kingdom knows that!" He comes to a halt before the royals, his eyes boring into theirs with an intensity that seems to strip away all pretense. "Good leaders who build their houses in their ancestral land and live in peace with their neighbors, now that. . .that is what is lacking!"

A hush falls over the chamber, the weight of the elder's words settling over the assembled nobles like a shroud. The elder pauses, his eyes shadowed with a sorrow that speaks of a lifetime of loss and regret. "If this Shifta, this warmonger wants the West, he can have it!" he proclaims. "Land is plentiful, the size of our empire is undisputed. But if he wants to push on and invade his neighbors, then we have no choice but to fight for it."

The words are a rallying cry for the Yeju forces, but Ras Ali, emboldened by the scent of compromise, steps forward, his voice rising above the clamor.

"Let this Shifta keep his wastelands beyond the Blue Nile, so long as he bends knee to the Yeju!" The Endresse declares, his words a fragile bridge spanning the chasm of discord that threatens to swallow them all.

The chamber erupts into chaos once again, the voices of the chiefs and clergy rising in a cacophony of anger and accusation. Fingers wag, voices shout, and the air grows thick with the scent of impending violence.

"Enough of your cackling!" Her voice rattling everyone like a thunderbolt from the heavens, Em-

press Menen rises from her seat, her patience at its limit. She strides directly toward her son, her eyes dancing with the flames of righteous fury, her every step a declaration of war.

“Would you parcel our empire like scraps for every rebel?!” The empress demands, her voice a whip-crack of scorn that sets the very air atremble. “Have you no pride in our glorious history?” She comes to a halt mere inches from the Endresse, her razor-sharp gaze boring into his with an intensity that could melt stone. “The one who sits on the throne does not offer up the lands she rules over or flee like a coward, not before putting up a fight!”

“Emmaye, he defeated four Dejzaches in one battle!” Ras Ali flinches before the onslaught of his mother’s fury, but he holds his ground, a reed bending before the wind but never breaking. He turns away from her, his gaze sweeping over the assembled chiefs, his voice a low rumble that somehow carries to the farthest corners of the chamber.

“Go and collect all the priests from all the holy Churches from Gojjam and tell them to go to him. . .” He commands but Empress Menen’s voice cuts through his like a knife through butter, “What good would that do?” Her words are a warning and a curse all in one. “Save them and yourself the trouble, Lije. That Shifta is on a warpath now. . .” She pauses, her eyes glinting with a feral light that sends a shiver down the spines of all who behold it. “And that wolf will not be satisfied until his fangs tear the throne itself!”

She turns her gaze upon the gathered chiefs, her lip curling with revulsion at their cowardice. But Ras Ali, his resolve unshakable, spins to face her once more, his voice as hard as steel.

“I remember when negotiation and mercy freed you, Emmaye. Must more sons die to slake one warlord’s ambition?”

The words hang in the air, a challenge and a plea all in one. But Ras Ali is not finished. He turns back to his advisors, his features etched with a determination that could move mountains.

“Send the priests and tell him that we can be reconciled like father and son if he accepts to remain in the West with what he owns.”

The court falls silent, the weight of the Endresse’s words settling over them like a shroud. The fate of the land and its rulers hangs in the balance, teetering on the precipice of decision. And as the gathered nobles and chiefs bow their heads in acquiescence, the air grows thick with the scent of impending doom, a gathering storm that threatens to engulf them all.



A grand procession of clergy messengers, a river of holy men amidst a sea of warriors, winds its way through the sprawling expanse of Kassa’s camp. High-ranking priests, handpicked from the most revered churches of Gojjam, their resplendent ceremonial robes of gold-embroidered silk and richly dyed cotton dragging over the dusty, wet earth, clutch their gleaming bronze and golden crosses to their chests as though they were talismans against the aura of barely restrained violence that permeates the air.

The warriors, fierce men with eyes that have seen the face of death and hands that have dealt it, pause their sparring to watch the incongruous procession, their gazes a mix of curiosity and thinly veiled derision — priests amidst hardened killers, lambs among lions.

The men of God, their faces lined with the wisdom of years and the weight of their holy mission, cast their eyes upon the peculiar tableau before them. Shifta warriors, their tattered garments of war fluttering in the breeze like battle-torn flags, meticulously hone their swords and guns, the rasp of whetstone against blade and the click of metal on metal a discordant symphony that sets the teeth on edge. Archers and spearmen, their bodies lean and hard from a lifetime of warfare, dart and scamper across the camp like wraiths, their projectiles piercing the air with a hiss and a thud as they find their marks on distant wooden targets, each bullseye a promise of death to come.

Amidst the fervor of preparation, clusters of inebriated combatants, their blood singing with the fire of alcohol and the thrill of impending battle, engage in feats of raw strength and prowess. Massive boulders, their surfaces worn smooth by countless hands, are hefted and hurled into the distance, others grapple and strain in tests of one-on-one body wrestling, their muscles bunching and sweat slicking their skin as they seek to best their comrades and prove their worth as warriors.

The air is thick with the symphony of clashing arms, the swoosh of projectiles, and the uproarious cheers and taunts of the gathered fighters. The atmosphere is electric, a heady brew of tension and anticipation, of barely restrained aggression

and the palpable sense that something momentous is about to unfold.

At the heart of this maelstrom of barely contained chaos stands Kassa, a bastion of calm amidst the storm. He is barefoot, a simple white shimma draped over his broad shoulders, the very picture of humility and quiet strength. As the priests approach, their steps faltering and their hearts pounding with a mix of awe and trepidation, Kassa greets them with an inviting gesture, his eyes warm and his smile genuine. The holy men, their resolve bolstered by the aura of serenity that seems to radiate from the warlord, bow before him, their crosses extended in a display of devotion and respect.

“Bless you all for coming,” Kassa exclaims, his voice a rich baritone that seems to fill the air with its resonance. “For without Christ, I am nothing! I am but the slave of Christ!” The priests, their hearts swelling with a mix of relief and admiration, follow as Kassa leads a select group of their highest-ranking members into his tent, the remaining clergy taking up positions outside, their voices raised in chants of praise and blessing.

Inside the tent, the air is cool and heavy with the scent of incense and the musk of leather and sweat. Kassa exchanges cordial greetings with each clergyman, his manner warm and engaging, before settling himself beside Gabreye.

Maids, their movements graceful and their eyes downcast, enter bearing trays laden with cups of Tej and Areke, the traditional beverages of the land. The priests, their mouths dry with nerves and their hearts filled with the weight of their mission, politely decline the offer, a display of their unwav-

ering dedication to their faith and their holy purpose. Kassa, his lips curling into a gentle smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes, nods in understanding.

As the clergy messengers stand before Kassa, their resplendent robes now seeming like fragile shields against the storm of his fury, the Shifta leader's piercing gaze bores into the elder priest, his words laced with a sarcasm that drips like venom.

"Forgive me, my fathers," Kassa intones, his voice a mocking caress that sets the priests' teeth on edge, "I heard that the priests under the Muslim Yejju had become polygamists, sorcerers, and drunkards."

The accusation hangs in the air like a cloud of noxious fumes, and the cordiality that had marked their initial exchange evaporates in an instant. The clergy erupt in a cacophony of outrage, their objections genuine and fierce. The elder clergyman, his voice straining to be heard above the din, steps forward to address the seething warlord.

"We come from the holy churches of our ancestors in Gojjam as mediators and lovers of peace," he declares, his words a fragile lifeline in the tempest of Kassa's wrath. "The house of



God does not take sides." He bows before Kassa. "Our hope is to advance the kingdom of God here on earth through peacemaking."

But Kassa is unmoved, his eyes narrowing to slits of barely contained rage as he fixes the elder priest with a stare that could shatter stone. "What honeyed lies has my enemy sent to appease me?" he demands, each word a razor-sharp barb. "Abbatoch, What is this peace message you have been told by the Muslims who keep you fed to bring to me?"

The elder priest, his throat constricting with fear, clears his throat and begins to speak, his voice a tremulous whisper against the roar of Kassa's fury. "The Endresse wants a fertile alliance with you." Kassa cracks a smile like he's heard a cruel joke. "He wishes to be reconciled and be like father and son; and as the favorite son, you will have all the lands beyond the Abbay to rule as your own."

"You mean the lands I have already seized by my own hand?" Kassa's response is swift and merciless, a hammer blow of rejection that leaves the clergy reeling. "Abba, I already own all the lands in the West, some even in the north," he snarls, his voice a thunderclap of defiance.

He rises to his full height, his frame towering over the cowering priests like a colossus of war. The air crackles with the charge of destiny, the weight of history bearing down upon them all. "I am a Christian, a crusader, an heir of David, the elect of God, the dutiful slave of Christ, and I shall not be bargained for like some wayward child!" His voice resonates with an iron conviction that brooks no argument, no dissent. The clergy take a step back, their faces ashen with fear and awe. Kassa's

gaze sweeps over them like a scythe, reaping the last vestiges of their resolve.

“I do not share a land of my ancestors with a Muslim who colludes with the Turks!” The words are a death knell, a final severing of any hope for reconciliation. Silence falls like a suffocating shroud over the tent, broken only by the ragged breathing of the terrified priests.

But Kassa is not finished. He jabs a finger towards the cowering clergy, his voice rising to a righteous fury. “You can tell him to make his grave nicely on the plains of Ayshal and to wait for me there, for I am coming for him!”

The words hang in the air like an executioner’s blade, poised to strike at any moment. The priests stand frozen, their faces a mask of horror and disbelief.

“And if he cannot wait for me,” Kassa continues, his voice a sibilant whisper that slithers through the tent like a venomous serpent, “then tell him not to desecrate our Christian churches as a refuge, tell him to leave St. George because it is not Mesgid to hide in when I come to hunt the defilers of our Christian lands!”

His passions swell to a roaring inferno, consuming all in its path. Kassa points in the direction of Mecca, his arm a spear of accusation, his tone unyielding as the mountains themselves. “Tell him to grab his Kocho and prayer rug and flee until the sky hits his forehead!”

Gabreye’s laughter rings out, a jarring counterpoint to the suffocating tension that grips the tent. The priests stand mute, their faces a study in

fear and awe, their minds reeling from the sheer force of Kassa’s conviction.

“I shall tear down his temples of false idols and drive him wailing into exile! This I have sworn before almighty God!” Kassa’s declaration is a thunderbolt, a searing brand upon the souls of all who hear it.

And then, in a voice that drops to a menacing whisper, Kassa delivers his final warning, a promise of damnation that chills the blood of even the most stalwart among them. “And if any of you fail to deliver this message just as I have said it to your Muslim master, be it out of fear or reprisal of death. . . I will have you all excommunicated by the Abuna himself when I come to Gonder as your king!”

The words hang in the air like a miasma, a suffocating pall that seems to leech the very life from the tent. In the echoing silence that follows, the first throbs of the war drum begin to filter through the camp, a pulsing heartbeat of destiny that reverberates across the land.

Kassa stands tall amidst the chaos, a titan of war and faith, a champion of destiny whose will cannot be denied. The clergy, their robes now seeming like tattered rags, bow their heads in mute submission, their hearts heavy with the knowledge that they stand in the presence of a force beyond their reckoning.

And as the drumbeats grow louder, a swelling tide of inevitability that washes over them all, Kassa’s eyes blaze with the fire of a thousand suns, a conflagration of purpose that will consume all in its path. The die is cast, the Rubicon crossed, and the world will tremble before the coming storm.



In the shadowed halls of the northern palace, Dejazmach Wibe sits as if carved from stone, his face ashen and his eyes haunted by the specter of defeat. The air is thick with the coppery scent of blood and the sour tang of fear as a lone warrior, his body a canvas of wounds and his voice a hoarse whisper, recounts the tale of Kassa's crushing victory. The man's words are a knife to the heart, each syllable a twist of the blade that sends shockwaves of despair rippling through the assembled chiefs and dignitaries. They listen in rapt silence, their faces etched with the weight of sorrow and the grim realization that the flower of their kitet force has been obliterated, swept away like chaff before the storm of Kassa's fury.

To the south, in the mountain vastness of Gojjam, Biru Goshu labors like a man possessed, his hands raw and his brow slick with sweat as he toils day and night to fortify the cliffs and peaks that are his last line of defense. The news of Kassa's victory against the Yejju has shaken him to the core, and he knows that the amba, the towering plateau that has sheltered his people for generations, is now his



only hope of survival. The air in the encampment is thick with tension and anticipation, a sense that the reckoning is at hand and that the fate of the Goshu clan hangs in the balance. Across the plains, the distant beat of kebbero and negarit drums echoes like a funeral dirge, a haunting reminder of the gathering darkness that threatens to engulf them all.



In the lush pastures of Begemdir, the traditional allies of the Yejju gird themselves for war, their hearts heavy with the knowledge that they must now march to the aid of Ras Ali, their beleaguered ruler. The atmo-

sphere is charged with a sense of duty and dread, a grim acknowledgment that the bonds of camaraderie and honor will compel them to stand against the rising tide of Kassa's ambition. They know that they are marching to their doom, that soon they too may kneel before the new conqueror, but they do not falter, their resolve as unyielding as the mountains that loom on the horizon.

In the heart of Gonder, Empress Menen moves like a ghost through the halls of the palace, her once-proud figure shrouded in the black of mourning and in the red bandana of blood that is about to run on the battlefield. She leads a procession of courtly ladies, their faces pale and their

eyes hollow with grief,
as they make their
way to the sacred
church, the last
bastion of hope
in a world that
is turned upside
down for the
Yejjju. The air is
thick with the
scent of incense
and the murmur
of whispered
prayers as Em-
press Menen kneels
before the altar, her fingers stroking the smooth
surface of her prayer stones in a desperate plea
for divine intervention. She knows that soon her
son will depart, called by fate to the blood-soaked
plains of Ayshal, and her heart pounds with the fear
that he will never return, that the abrinet's whis-
pered comforts will prove hollow in the face of the
coming storm.

And on the vast plain of Gojjam, the armies
gather like storm clouds on the horizon, the Yejjju
forces a sprawling tapestry of cavalry, infantry,
archers, and spearmen that stretches as far as the
eye can see. This assembly dwarfs even the com-
bined forces that fought against Kassa at Tekusa,
a sea of glinting steel and fluttering banners that
seems to swallow the very earth beneath their feet.
At the forefront rides the Endresse Ras Ali, his eyes
hard and his jaw set with grim determination as he
surveys the dark mass that looms in the distance.
He knows that this is the moment of truth, the final
reckoning that will decide the fate of his people
and his empire, and he steels himself for the battle



to come, his heart a maelstrom of icy fury and an-
guished despair.

Kassa! Kassa! Kassa! The very wind seems to
carry the name of the Shifta conqueror.

And like a nightmare made flesh, Kassa's
army emerges from the gloom, a tide of warriors
that seems to blacken the very sky above them.
Their chant rises like a storm, a thunderous cre-
scendo that shakes the earth and sets the heavens
ablaze with the fire of their fury. At their head rides
Kassa, a figure of terrible beauty astride a white
charger, his face serene and his eyes aglow with the
light of destiny. He is the angel of death come to
reap a bloody harvest, the harbinger of a new age
that will be born in blood and fire.



As the armies draw ever closer, the very
ground quakes beneath the thunder of hooves and
the relentless surge of feet. The air is thick with the
scent of sweat and leather, of steel and blood, and
the sky above seems to tremble with the weight of
the coming storm. At the forefront, Kassa leads the

charge, his name a rallying cry that rises above the din of battle, a herald's call to glory and to death.

"Kassa! Kassa! Kassa!"

The chant is a living thing, a beast of fury and flame that consumes all in its path. It is the sound of destiny, the trumpet blast that heralds the dawn of a new era, and all who hear it tremble before its might.



CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

The Final Showdown

War does not determine who is right, only who is left

In the scorching cauldron of the Ayashal plains, beneath a sun that pounds like the hammer of an angry god, the armies of Kassa and Endresse Ras Ali converge in a clash of destiny that will decide the fate of the kingdoms. The ground quakes and shudders under the immense weight of their combined might, their vast ranks blanketing the land like battling storm fronts, the air crackling with tension as the two rivals poise on the precipice of a reckoning written in blood and fire.

Kassa and Ras Ali stand as immovable forces at the heart of the maelstrom, two titans locked in a battle of wills, their gazes as sharp as the blades at their sides. Around them, their warriors surge forward like the crashing waves of a tempestuous sea, their war cries rising to the heavens in a deafening thunder that threatens to rattle the very foundations of the empire.

The earth trembles beneath the thundering hooves of the Yejju cavalry, an unstoppable juggernaut of death that descends upon the Shifta lines like the wrath of an avenging deity. The air is

thick with the hiss of arrows and the crack of gunfire, a lethal hail that darkens the skies and turns the battlefield into a churning vortex of chaos and destruction.

Kassa, a figure of terrible beauty astride his warhorse, his broadswords singing a blood-curdling screech as he carves a path of ruin through the enemy ranks like a man possessed, is unstoppable and unforgiving. His eyes blaze with homicidal rage, his every movement a dance of death that leaves a trail of broken bodies in his wake. Around him, his men fight with the desperate valor of cornered beasts, their blades and spears seeking Yeju flesh with a savage hunger that knows no limits.

But even the fury of Kassa and his warriors is not enough to stem the tide of the Yeju onslaught. The enemy cavalry crashes into the Shifta lines like a tidal wave of steel and flesh, their hooves churning the earth into a bloody mire as they trample men by the hundreds. The screams of the dying mingle with the shrieks of wounded horses, an



infernal chorus that rises to a deafening crescendo.

Sensing the dire turn of the battle, Kassa signals an immediate retreat, his voice rising above the din like a call to salvation before annihilation. His band, their ranks thinned and their spirits battered, flee before the relentless storm of Yeju fury, their hearts pounding with the desperate hope of survival.

In mere moments, the once-mighty Shifta lines are reduced to a sea of mangled corpses, a gruesome tribute to the brutality of the Yeju assault. The survivors stagger breathless beside their mounts, their faces etched with the haggard lines of exhaustion and despair. Kassa scans the enemy lines before him, his heart sinking at the sight of the jeering Yeju host that spreads out in an endless sea of glinting steel and fluttering banners.

“Is this the extent of your courage?” Kassa roars, his voice dripping with contempt for their pursuers. “Will you now bend the knee to these preening peacocks? Courage, men! Courage!”

With a fierce cry, Kassa leads his men back into the maelstrom in a desperate charge, his blades flashing like lightning as he cleaves a path through the heart of the Yeju center.



But Ras Ali, his eyes glinting with cruel anticipation, is ready for the move. He directs the bulk of his cavalry to focus their might on the fleeing Shiftas, his voice rising above the chaos in a cry of vengeance that chills the blood.

The battle rages on beneath the pitiless sun, the Shifta fleeing and stopping to charge, the Yejju pursuing and decimating any resistance — the combatants locked in a deadly embrace that seems to stretch on for an eternity. The ground grows slick with blood and entrails, the air heavy with the stench of death and the cries of the dying. The Yejju cavalry, their ranks thinned but their spirits unbroken, press their advantage with ruthless resolve, driving the Shiftas before them like chaff before the wind.

Amidst the chaos, a grim realization sweeps through Kassa's ranks. Warriors and chiefs alike concede the bitter truth of their defeat, their hearts heavy with the knowledge that they are being overwhelmed by the sheer might of the Yejju host. There is no escape from their inevitable demise under the Yejju deluge.

"Crush them all!" Endresse Ras Ali, sensing victory, his eyes alight with feral hunger, dismisses any talk of quarter or mercy. He signals his remaining reserves, his voice rising above the din in a final, terrible command.

"Slaughter every last one of them!" he roars, his words a death knell that echoes across the battlefield. "Crush them and send them to hell!"

The last of the Yejju warriors surge forward in a tide of vengeful fury, their blades and spears thirsting for Shifta blood. Kassa, his heart pounding with the desperate knowledge of impending

doom, calls for a full retreat, his voice cracking with urgency.

The Shiftas, their spirits broken and their ranks shattered, flee before the Yejju like rabbits before the hounds of hell. They run with the desperate energy of hunted animals, their lungs burning and their legs trembling with exhaustion. Behind them, the triumphant cheers of the Yejju infantry fill the air, a mocking chorus that echoes across the blood-soaked plains of Ayashal.

But even as the Shiftas flee, their hearts heavy with the bitter taste of defeat, Kassa's mind races with the desperate calculations of a cornered beast. He leads his surviving warriors on a desperate sprint across the barren expanse, his eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of salvation.

And then, just as all hope seems lost, he sees it — a chance, slim and desperate, but a chance nonetheless. He calls his men to a halt, their chests heaving and their breath coming in ragged gasps. Behind them, the Yejju cavalry closes in like a pack of ravenous wolves, Ras Ali at their head, his eyes alight with cruel anticipation.

But Kassa, his eyes twinkling with feral mischief, knows that he has the Yejju exactly where he wants them. The trap is set, the pieces are in place, and the game is about to take a turn that will shake the foundation of the empire.

As the Yejju forces close in, the ground trembling beneath the thundering hooves of their cavalry, Kassa rides along the line of his weary warriors, his voice a beacon of calm amidst the gathering storm. "Rise!" he commands, his words a rallying cry that seems to infuse his men with renewed purpose. They struggle to their feet, their



faces etched with exhaustion and despair, but their eyes alight with the fire of determination.

“After all our victories, do these turbaned Muslims astride their steeds frighten your soul?” Kassa’s voice is a thunderclap, a challenge that sets the hearts of his warriors ablaze. “Was it not your spears that shredded

them in Qwara? Did the bones of their dead horses not resemble heaps of straw on a threshing floor in Tukusa?”

A roar of affirmation rises from the ranks of the Shifta, a primal sound that drowns out the approaching thunder of the Yejju charge. Kassa turns to face the enemy, his eyes flashing with feral light. “The horses bring these weaklings to the field only, they do not have the strength to fight for them!” he bellows, his words a resounding call to impending glory.

“Our enemies stand on their graves, but they do not know it! Are you ready to bury them and end the rule of the Yejju for once and for all times!?” The response is a murderous war-cry that chills the very marrow, a sound that speaks of the unbreakable spirit of the Shifta and the fury that burns in their hearts. Kassa nods to Gabreye, a silent signal that sets the final piece of his plan in motion. Gabreye dips a large arrow into a pot of black oil, the liquid clinging to the shaft like a shroud of darkness. Another warrior steps forward, torch in hand, and

sets the arrow ablaze, the flames licking hungrily at the night sky.

The arrow arcs upward, a fiery comet streaking across the heavens, and the Shifta warriors watch with bated breath as it reaches its zenith. And then, like flaming rain, answering arrows rise from the east, west, north, and south, a searing net that encircles the Yejju forces like the jaws of a trap.

Ras Ali, his eyes widening with the realization of the danger, halts the Yejju charge and wheels his horse in a desperate circle, his gaze darting from one horizon to the next. But it is too late — the trap has been sprung, and the Yejju are caught like rats in a cage of their own making.

With a roar of bloodlust, Kassa leads the charge, his warriors surging forward like a tidal wave of fury. The Shifta forces converge on the Yejju from every direction, their timing perfect, their movements a dance of death that leaves no room for escape. The Yejju, caught in the encircling as-



sault, have no choice but to thin their lines, facing the onslaught from every side.

The Shifta descend upon them, their blades and spears rending flesh and bone with savage fury. The Yejju lines dissolve into a blood-slick mess, their resistance crumbling before the relentless barrage. The battlefield becomes a nightmarish tableau of death and destruction, the ground slick with gore and the air thick with the horrific sounds of dying men and horses.

Ras Ali, his face a mask of desperation, rallies what remains of his cavalry in a last, futile bid to hold the line. But it is like trying to hold back the tide with a sieve — the Shifta pour through the gaps in the Yejju defenses, their weapons finding flesh with relentless precision. Thousands of horses and men fall beneath the torrential strike, their bodies piling high in a grotesque monument to the savagery of war.

Amidst the chaos, Kassa and Gabreye stand firm, their eyes locked on Ras Ali as the Endresse spurs his horse in a desperate bid to escape. The Shifta warriors rush to intercept, but the Yejju cavalry is swift and cunning, weaving through the attackers with deftness born of desperation. Kassa's voice rises above the din, a command that sets his men in motion once more, their charge aimed at cutting off the fleeing enemy.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, Tesemma Goshu and his Gojjam warriors burst through the fray, their sudden appearance creating an opening for the beleaguered Yejju to retreat. Kassa's fury burns white-hot at the daring rescue, his unwillingness to let Ras Ali slip away driving him to new heights of savagery. He orders his men to unleash



a final barrage upon the retreating riders, the air suddenly alive with the hiss of arrows and whistle of spears.

Kassa himself takes aim at the fleeing Ras Ali, his spear flying true and tearing the lion's mane from the Endresse's head. For a moment, Ras Ali wobbles in his saddle, his eyes wide with

terror as he faces his attacker. As he regains his balance, the determination to escape burns bright in his gaze, and Ras Ali spurs his horse onward, disappearing into the gathering darkness.

The Shifta warriors erupt in triumphant cheers, their voices rising to the heavens in a song of victory that echoes across the blood-soaked plains of Ayashal. The defeated Yejju flee for their lives, their once-mighty dynasty lying shattered beneath the feet of the conquering Shifta.

"Ase! Kassa! Ase! Kassa! Ase!" The chant rises like a tidal wave, a deafening roar that drowns out all other sounds. "Kassa! Ase! Ase!" The Shifta warriors, their voices hoarse with emotion, cry out the name of their leader like a prayer, a promise of the glorious future that awaits.

Gabreye, his armor drenched in the blood of his enemies, emerges from the fray and falls to his knees before Kassa, his eyes brimming with tears of joy and reverence. "The Lord decreed your destiny," he weeps, "From the moment you saved us as a boy, I have known it." He declares, emotions overwhelming him, "He ordained your survival, your rise, your triumph, for you are destined by His favor to be our king."

"Ase! Ase! Ase!" The chant rises once more as the Shifta warriors, one by one, kneel before their leader, their faces alight with the fire of devotion. Kassa's gaze sweeps over the battlefield, taking in the thousands upon thousands of fallen, wounded, and dying, the price of his victory written in blood and bone.

But even as the people roar their approval, their voices rising in a chorus of jubilation, Kassa raises a hand for silence. "Rise, my brothers!" he commands, his voice slicing through the clamor like a sharp blade. "We stand far from claiming the throne." He places a hand on Gabreye's shoulder, a gesture of gratitude and affection, but his eyes are hard with the knowledge of the battles yet to come.

"Don't tarnish the victory; one becomes king only once." Kassa wipes the blood from his sword, his gaze sweeping over the ranks of his Shifta warriors as they rise to their feet, their spirits unbroken and their resolve unwavering. Kassa knows that the road ahead will be long and treacherous, that there will be other challengers to the throne, other battles to be fought and won.

But in this moment, as the sun rises over the blood-soaked plains of Ayashal, Kassa stands tall and proud like a golden statue, a conquering lion



of a warrior that is a king in all but name.

The Yejju dynasty lies shattered at his feet, and the future stretches out before him like a canvas waiting to be painted. And as he strides forward, his warriors falling into step behind him, Kassa knows that his destiny is just beginning to unfold, that the greatest battles are yet to come.

"Kassa! Ase! Kassa!" the deafening cheer erupts as he leaps back on

his war horse. "Ase! Kassa! Seyon!" Kassa spurs his mount as the cheers wash over him, ready to face whatever challenges the future may bring.

His Shifta warriors flow behind him for he is Kassa, the Shifta king, the anointed of God, and his iron will is as unyielding as the mountains themselves. And as he leads his forces into the dawn of a new era, the world trembles before the coming storm, the storm that will bear the name of Kassa, the king that will forever alter the face of the empire.

The Hunt

A wise man is not ashamed to ask for help; a fool is too proud to learn

In the fading light of day, Debre Tabor is a city steeped in melancholy and trepidation. The once-proud Yeju forces, now reduced to a mere handful of battered survivors, limp through the winding streets, their wounds and weariness undeniable evidence to the catastrophic defeat they have suffered. Alongside them, the formidable Gojjam army, led by the resolute Tesemma Goshu, marches in solemn silence, the weight of the moment bearing down upon them all. The very air is thick with the sense of an era ending, the inexorable tide of change sweeping away the last vestiges of Yeju dominion.



From her vantage point in the palace windows, Empress Menen watches the grim procession, her heart sinking with each passing moment. The sight of her son's shattered army, their shields splintered, and their swords still caked with the blood of their foes, is like a dagger to her soul, a bleeding wound that will not be staunched.

The bitter taste of bile rises in her throat, a manifestation of the despair that threatens to consume her and she lets out a terrible shriek, a haunting cry of anguish that seems to shatter the very foundations of the palace, a chilling toll that heralds the end of an era and the dawn of their uncertain future. All that her forefathers had built, all the glory and power of the Yejju dynasty, now lies in ruins, ground to dust beneath the relentless march of Kassa Hailu and his shifta warriors.

As the sun dips lower on the horizon, painting the sky in shades of orange and crimson, Empress Menen hears the first eerie cries of hyenas and jackals pierce the gathering gloom, a harbinger of the death and decay that seems to permeate the very stones of the city. And then, like a specter of defeat, Ras Ali enters the palace, his once-proud shoulders sagging beneath an invisible weight, his face etched with the same bone-deep weariness and despair that Menen sees reflected in her own visage. Without a word, he collapses into a gilded chair, his head cradled in trembling hands, a broken man in a broken world.

"It's over Emmaye!" he chokes out, his voice raw with rage and anguish, his teeth clenched so tightly that Menen fears they might shatter. "Our empire turned to dust in a single battle."

Empress Menen's heart breaks anew at the sight of her son's despair, and she moves to kneel before him, her hands gentle as she lifts his chin, forcing him to meet her gaze. In his eyes, she sees the frightened boy he once was, the child she had held and comforted through countless nightmares, now lost and adrift in a nightmare from which there is no waking.

"You fought for our destiny, and there is no shame in losing in battle," she murmurs, her words a balm to his battered soul. "I am proud of you, Lije." But even as she speaks the words, Empress Menen feels the weight of their hollow comfort, the bitter acknowledgment that the symbols of her family's reign are crumbling like the ancient walls of the city itself. With a sigh, she rises and moves to sit beside Ras Ali, the silence that settles between them as heavy as a funeral shroud.

"They called him Ase, Emmaye!" Ras Ali whispers, his voice quivering with a toxic mixture of disbelief and desperation. "This Shifta is the substitute to the ring on my finger? This cannot be the way!"

Empress Menen's heart aches with the force of her son's pain, and she longs to offer him the solace he so desperately craves. But the words stick in her throat, the bitter truth of their situation like ashes on her tongue. Her hand hovers in the air, a hesitant gesture of comfort that she cannot quite bring herself to complete. "This castle is but a giant house that leaks, Lije," she says at last, her voice a soft lament heavy with the weight of generations past. "As long as men have the appetite for the throne, no matter how good the rule we give the people, no matter how fair our reign, the warring and conflict will never end to possess it."

Her hand finally falls upon Ras Ali's shoulder, a fleeting connection in a world that seems to be crumbling around them. Tears gather in the corners of her eyes, and she turns her gaze away, locking onto the figure of Dejazmach Tesemma, the man she had once deemed unworthy of her daughter's hand, now the unexpected savior of her only son.



"Forgive me for not seeing you for who you truly are," she murmurs, her voice thick with sorrow and regret. "May your patrimony not go to a stranger. . . May the Lord give you blessed issue." The words are a benediction, a prayer for the future that seems to slip further away with each passing moment.

Ras Ali's tears flow freely now, his heartache pouring forth in a river of grief that threatens to drown them all. And Menen weeps with him, her own tears falling in silent sympathy, a shared anguish that binds them together in this darkest of hours. But even in the midst of their sorrow, Menen knows that they cannot afford to succumb to despair. With a shaky breath, she turns to face her

son once more, her words a mixture of encouragement and hard-won wisdom.

"From a cold-blooded snake like this Shifta, to the south one escapes and bides one's time," she says, her voice carrying the weight of bitter experience. "Mark my words, Lije, one alone the empire does not rule."

Ras Ali's head snaps up at her words, his eyes blazing with a sudden, desperate fire. "I know trouble has reached up to my neck, Emmaye," he shouts, leaping to his feet in a sudden burst of manic energy. "But I will not run like a dog with its tail between its legs!" He paces to the window, his gaze fixed on the dying sunlight that sets the sky ablaze in shades of crimson and gold, a macabre echo of the blood that has been spilled on the plains of Ayashal. Empress Menen watches him in silence, her heart heavy with the knowledge that this may well be the last sunset they witness as the rulers of Gonder.

"The Etchege has made peace with Shoa for us" as the familiar scent of palace incense fills her nostrils, Menen knows that it is not enough to mask the approaching stench of death that will surely follow if they remain. With a heavy sigh, she rises to her feet, her bearing regal even amid her sorrow. "Bide your time in exile, Lije, gather strength in the southern lands," she urges, her voice echoing with the wisdom of ages past. "Only then can you take back what they wish to take from us."

As if on cue, a group of servants and maids enter the chamber, their arms laden with saddles and provisions, a sign that the Empress has already set the wheels of their escape in motion. But Ras

Ali's resolve remains unshaken, his jaw set with a stubborn determination that both frightens and amazes his mother.

"Send a messenger to Hayle-Melekot in Shoa," he relents, his voice laced with a desperate hope. "Ask him if he would receive me." Then, turning to Tesemma, Ras Ali speaks again, his words a plea for aid in this darkest of hours. "I ask once again if you would have mercy on me and escort me through Mahidere-Mariyam before you return to your lands."

Tesemma Goshu steps forward, his head bowed in solemn reverence. "You spared me when I sought refuge, and now I pledge to be your shield," he vows, his voice ringing with the force of his conviction. "As my late father put his trust in the Yejju, to die in your name and cause, I too will not let you fall into the hands of our common enemy."

The words hang in the air like a promise, a glimmer of hope in the gathering darkness. And as the sun sinks lower on the horizon, casting long shadows across the palace walls, Empress Menen feels the weight of destiny pressing down upon them all, the sense of an era drawing to a close and a new one rising to take its place.

"The scepter of power is but a fleeting illusion, Lije" Empress Menen muses ". . .like a shadow; it passes away quickly." But even in the midst of her despair, she knows that hope is not yet lost, that alliances may still be forged and destinies interwoven in the face of this greatest of challenges. And so, with a heavy heart and a determined spirit, she steels herself for the battles yet to come, the echoes of a fading era resounding through the halls of Gonder like a requiem for all that has been lost.

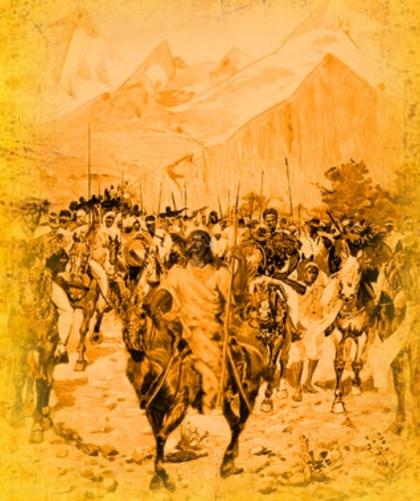


The lush landscapes of Gojjam spread before Kassa's army like a deceitful paradise — gentle hills and babbling streams belying the bloodshed to come. Though his warriors number in the thousands, only a vanguard of hundreds thunders across the realm with fire in their eyes, chasing whispers of the elusive Ras Ali's whereabouts. Peasants and farmers, their weathered faces etched with defiance, attempt to put up a fight, but their feeble resistance crumbles swiftly under the onslaught of Kassa's battle-hardened warriors.

In the sleepy hamlets and fertile valleys, an eerie silence hangs heavy in the air as the full Shifta army advances. In the trackless forests, a storm of arrows rains down from the boughs, the air singing with the hiss of feathered shafts. Peasant and farm bands, their spirits ablaze with desperation, harry the invaders day and night, sensing vulnerability in Kassa's surging horsemen. Yet, an inexorable wave of inevitability sweeps over the realm of Gojjam as the conqueror's advance tolls like an omen of doom. The people of Gojjam, their crude weapons splintering against the might of Kassa's seasoned troops, scatter like leaves in a hurricane's fury. The very earth trembles with the echoes of shifting power across the West.

Kassa rides with a wary eye on the shadows, spurring his men onward through winding wood and plain, an unstoppable force driven by unyielding purpose. His inner circle, their faces cast in

flickering firelight, raids the copses by night, flushing Gojjam rebels from their lairs with billowing smoke and flashing steel. By dawn's first light, a dozen villages lie smoldering in their wake, tendrils of black smoke curling into the silent woods.



In the heart of Gojjam, within the confines of the late Goshu's palace, Kassa and his warriors stride unopposed, their footsteps echoing through deserted halls. The once-proud Gojjam forces have been reduced by Kassa's warriors on the battlefields, and those who remained to protect their realms seem to have melted away like mist before the rising sun. As Kassa's warriors advance, the local populace bow in submission, their weapons cast aside in gestures of surrender. The weight of Kassa's conquest hangs palpable in the air; he moves through the palace grounds with the bearing of a man who has seized destiny by the throat, the power of his victory etched in every line of his face.

In the far distance of the palace, the Gojjam royals stand in stark contrast to the diminished clergy, a reception party awaiting the victor with trepidation in their eyes. The clergy, their holy attire a poor shield against the conqueror's gaze, bow before Kassa's might, their gestures of submission intermingling with the whispers of fate.



Inside the dining hall, a sumptuous feast awaits the Shifta warriors, a bounty conjured from the land's abundance, each dish a testament to the weight of this newfound alliance. Amidst the spread, Kassa's commanding presence looms like a gathering storm.

The air fills with a chorus of praises and obsequious congratulations, a cacophony of flattery raining down upon the conquering Kassa. He moves silently about the laden table, his eyes sweeping over the sumptuous feast laid out before them.

"You royals of Gojjam," Kassa's voice cracks like thunder, seething fury resonating through the hall, ". . .with such abundance, whose feet never touch the mud during the rainy season," he shakes his head, eyes flashing, "you're blessed with fertile lands and rivers all around that provide your every whim," rage rises in his tone, building like a tempest, "I have not even had time to rest from defeating the Muslims but the trouble you stir has already drawn my attention!" His words hang heavy in the air, the accusation sharp as a blade.

"M-my Lord, we are you humble servants. . ."
" an elder gasps, clawing at Kassa's invisible grip, desperation etched in every line of his face.

"Where is he?" Kassa interrupts with a sharp rebuke, his glare sears the assembled royals, his anger blazing with the heat of a thousand suns as dead silence engulfs the chamber. "Where are you hiding that Muslim?" The question pierces the silence.

"My lord, we do not protect the Yejju here"
Protestations rise from the clergy, their voices a discordant chorus of denial. "My lord, we have no dealing with the Muslim Oromo, we swear it by all that is holy," they exclaim, their words desperate and pleading, tinged with mounting fear.

"We do not betray the one who has come to restore our Christian monarchy," The Gojjam royals, seemingly dwarfed by the towering presence of the clergy, offer their own defense, their voices quavering. "We are tied by blood and tradition to our brothers in Qwara and Gonder, and we are loyal to you, and no one else" they declare, their words a feeble mix of loyalty and pride.

"You dare hide the truth from our king?" Gabreye's voice drops with a deadly intent, his wrath unquenched like his friend, simmering like magma beneath the surface. His gaze sweeps the room, his hands on his sword caked in blood. "Then who are these peasants that left their ploughing and digging and came rushing at us with branches of uprooted trees in Daga-Damot?" His question hangs in the air, unanswered, the silence deafening.

Laughter ripples through the ranks of Shifta warriors, the sound mocking and sharp, a cruel counterpoint to the royals' discomfort. "Tell them

their wives can go collect their hair-pins and slit-sack cloth from their dead bodies," one of the warriors jeers, the dark humor unsettling the chamber.

Kassa's focus returns to the royals, his presence a storm that seems to darken the room, shadows deepening in the corners. He approaches an elder royal, his steps measured, his voice dripping with contempt. "You will be chased away, you killer of Goshu and adversary to Ali. . .that is what they were screaming at us, at me!" His words cut through the air like a serrated blade.

"What you hide, the behavior of those you rule reveals," Kassa declares, his voice laden with the weight of truth, his eyes boring into the elder's very soul. "I have come to restore the greatness of our once mighty empire! I will not tolerate division in our realms!" The tension escalates, the air crackling with unspent energy as Kassa turns his full attention to the bearded elder royal, his words pointed and accusatory, sharper than any spear.

"The truth is true, a lie is a lie." Kassa glares at the royals "I killed Goshu because he was sent by the Muslims to kill me." The Gojjam chiefs lower their eyes as Kassa leaves no room for denial, no place to hide. "I know that Muslim is under your protection, I have arrived before Tesemma so that I can capture both traitors to our new kingdom upon their arrival," his words are cold, a promise of retribution etched in every syllable. Kassa's gaze travels down the line of royals, his eyes scanning the faces for any flicker of recognition, any betrayal of guilt. With measured steps, he returns to the elder royal, his voice a blend of accusation and frustration, a barely leashed tempest.

**“The truth will be revealed soon enough”
Kassa finally sits for his meal.**



Outside, the trap is set, and in the blackest depths of night, Tesemma Goshu and his small contingent march into the palace grounds, unaware of the fate that awaits them.

The trap springs in a flash — Kassa’s warriors pouring from the shadows like specters of vengeance long denied, their eyes glinting with the promise of blood. Steel sings from scabbards as they fall upon Tesemma Goshu’s men, the clash of metal on metal ringing through the night. Cries of pain and fury echo under the bleeding moon, a macabre symphony of violence.



In the shadows, Gabreye’s eyes blaze with triumph, the flames of victory dancing in their depths. “Drop them! Or all of you die where you stand!” he bellows, his voice cutting through the chaos like a whip crack, as Tesemma’s swords clatter to the stones, the sound of defeat. Gabreye’s trusted general Ingeda, wrenches Tesemma’s arms behind his back, shoving him forward, a lamb to the slaughter.

In the hall, Gojjam’s royals cower in chains — some weeping, some staring thousand-yard stares, their faces pale and haunted. Kassa, sitting on the throne, the firelight casting eerie shadows across his face, sizes up the young Tessema Goshu, his eyes glinting with a predatory light.

They rise up then kneel back down as Tesemma is led to join them as a prisoner.

Kassa leans forward, his eyes boring into Tesemma’s soul. “Are you the one who can tell me where Ras Ali cowers.” His voice is a razor’s edge, slicing through the tense silence. “I know the Goshu loyalty to the Yejju runs deep, but it ends now.” Kassa warns the young prince.

Tesemma meets Kassa’s gaze, a flicker of defiance sparking in his eyes. “You speak like we are allies,” he spits, his words laced with venom. “My father fell by your hand. You claim to —”

“I held your father in my arm as he wept and renounced the Yejju, you hear?!” Kassa’s eyes narrow, a dangerous glint flickering in their depths. “All that sacrifice for what?!” Kassa rises “He thought only of the greater good of Gojjam, even if meant forming a united front against his sworn enemies.” He leans back, his voice dropping to a menacing whisper. “But you, Tesemma, you

have a chance to redeem yourself, to atone for the misguided loyalty to those who aim to divide and conquer." Kassa sits back down "Tell me where Ras Ali hides, and perhaps mercy will find you in the afterlife."

Tesemma Goshu weeps in silence.

"How far along the south is the Muslim?" Kassa's iron gaze rakes Tesemma's sorrowful face, searching for any sign of deceit. Silence engulfs the hall, heavy and oppressive.

"Has he crawled his way to the Muslims in Wollo?" Spittle flies with each snarled word, Kassa's rage bubbling just beneath the surface.

Tesemma's shoulders slump, the fight draining from his body.

"Ras Ali. . ." he begins, his voice barely audible above the crackling of the flames. "He seeks refuge in Shoa," he confesses "I led him to the mountains of Wollo" A bitter sound escapes his lips. "You have driven him to the edge of desperation, he knows his days are numbered."

"What kind of provisions does he have with him?" Kassa inquires, his thoughts racing, plans forming and reforming with each new piece of information.

"Not much. . . a few bales of wheat and some ears of ripe sorghum," The weight of the truth settles heavily on Tesemma Goshu's shoulders, his words a mixture of resignation and honesty, the last vestiges of defiance slipping away.

"What will you do to me?" Tesemma rasps, his mouth bone dry, fear and defiance warring in his eyes.

"Only a fool inquiries about the details of a place he won't return from," Kassa, his anger subsiding to a cold, calculated fury, delivers the chilling reminder of the consequences that await the protectors of the Yejjju, each word a nail in Tesemma's coffin. He motions to his guards, who step forward, their chains clinking ominously. "Take him away. Let him contemplate his fate in silence of the mountains."

The chains clang once more, sealing Tessema Goshu's fate, the sound echoing through the hall like the bells of a betrayers fate. Kassa's gaze pierces the darkness, his determination unquenched, he rises and towers above the Gojjam royals like a force of nature given human form.

"There is one more fool in Gojjam left who thinks his secret is safe high on an amba while his ass is exposed to the sky," Gabreye announces to the laughter of the Shifta's in the chamber, his words are a declaration, a challenge to Biru Goshu, a promise of reckoning to come.

"I have come to unite all the kingdoms, and I do not plan to waste my time climbing up and down an amba like the Muslims" Kassa presses, a wolf scenting blood, the thrill of the hunt singing in his veins. "Your kin hides behind stone and superstition" His voice echoes, the sound harsh and grating. His eyes sweep over the royals, his tone commanding, brooking no disobedience. "For anyone who has anything important to tell me about Biru Goshu, I promise full liberty," he announces, his words a tantalizing offer dangling in the air.

The elder royal cringes as Kassa wheels on him, iron-tipped feet striking sparks on the floor, the sound like the tolling of a bell. "You're not the

The Last Goshu

*Trying to hold back the tide will
only leave you drenched*

Dejazmach Biru Goshu stands atop the ramparts of his fortress, his keen eyes surveying the bustling activity below as his men prepare for the impending assault. The amba rises from the heart of the rugged Soma mountain like a titan of stone and defiance. The fortress, carved into the very rock itself, dominates the surrounding landscape, a bastion of resilience.

much-disliked Yejju Muslims, my lord” the elder states, his voice heavy with irony. “Your deeds are legendary, and the men have celebrated all your victories against all the enemies of the kingdoms.” He bows before Kassa “Ase, you’re amongst friends in Gojjam, not enemies.”

A smile breaks through Kassa’s face, the weight of his presence filling the chamber, the force of his inescapable will bending everyone towards him. The tide of history is turning, the old order crumbling under the onslaught of his ambition. The empire holds its breath, waiting to see what the future will bring, as Kassa’s shadow looms ever larger over the land as he conquers reluctant kingdoms one by one



“My valiant warriors!” Biru calls out, his voice ringing with conviction. “Today, we stand as the shield of Gojjam, the unbreakable wall that will shatter the ambitions of this Shifta!” Biru Goshu, his bearing proud and confident, oversees the preparations with the practiced eye of a seasoned warrior.

Perched atop the mountain’s plateau, the Gojjam fort stands sentinel, its watchful gaze surveying the lands below for any sign of approaching enemies. This natural vantage point has proven invaluable in thwarting countless invaders, its strategic position key to its enduring strength. The fortress itself is an imposing sight, with thick, sturdy walls bristling with weaponry and provisions — a silent yet powerful challenge to all who would dare test its might.

“Kassa, the so-called mercenary from the forests, dares to challenge us on our own ground, the same ground where he saw us flatten the Ye-ju?!” Biru scoffs, his voice tinged with scorn. “Let him come! Let him see what it means to face the true sons of Gojjam!” Having previously vanquished the armies of Ras Ali, Biru Goshu knows the taste of victory, the thrill of watching his enemies break against the unyielding stone of his defenses. He has fortified the amba with cunning and foresight, transforming it into an impenetrable bulwark that stands as a symbol of Gojjam’s unconquerable spirit. The mountain fortress, with its winding paths and treacherous cliffs, is a labyrinth of death for any force foolish enough to attempt an assault.

As Biru Goshu gazes out over the rugged terrain, his eyes alight with fierce resolve, Kassa’s forces, a rising tide of ambition and fury, march towards the amba, their numbers vast and their

determination unshakable. But Biru Goshu stands ready, his fortress a bastion of defiance against the coming storm, his men prepared to fight to the last.

Kassa, astride his warhorse, surveys the imposing amba, his eyes tracing the soaring stone ramparts that crown the mountain heights. The towering fortress looms large, its sheer cliffs and winding paths creating an impregnable natural defense. Its very presence exudes an aura of defiance, a testament to the resolve of those who have defended it through the ages.

Kassa knows its secrets as intimately as any, memories of fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with Biru on these very slopes flickering through his mind, he raises a spyglass to his eye, and picks out the ant-like figures of Biru’s warriors swarming the parapets, their movements precise and purposeful. Though they number in the few hundreds, their resolve evident in every gesture. The irony of their reversed roles hangs heavy in the air, a testament to the capricious nature of power and allegiance in the age of Zemena Mesafent.

Kassa leads a ten thousand strong army, a tide of steel and spears blanketing the hillside. Siege towers and battering rams glint in the dawn light amidst a canvas war-city, a display of Kassa’s military might. The very air crackles with anticipation, the tension palpable as the two forces stare each other down across the expanse.

“Send word to him,” Kassa instructs Gabreye, his voice a low, menacing rumble. “Only by meeting face to face can we resolve the matter of handing over the amba.” His gaze remains fixed on Biru’s distant form. “I do not wish to force my sword as

I did with his father or brother. If I must ascend these hills, no amount of yelling or pleading for forgiveness will save a single soul trapped in this middle of nowhere.”

Gabreye nods, his features set in grim determination.

“Tell him, I will be holding a hearing for the people of Gojjam who have submitted to my rule,” he declares with authority. “And until he comes to his senses and surrenders the fort, I will be in Gojjam as its rightful conqueror!” Gabreye exits to dispatch the message.

Kassa and his formidable force establish their camp at the foothills of the amba, a sprawling encampment that seems to stretch to the horizon. Amidst the sea of tents, a distinctive red pavilion rises, marking Kassa’s presence like a beacon, a declaration of his status as the king in all but name.



In the heart of Gojjam, Kassa, as the new ruler of the realms, holds court, his presence a palpable force that permeates every corner of the region. He effortlessly assumes the mantle of the de facto ruler, his charisma and authority radiating from his every gesture and word.

Each morning, long before the sun’s first rays paint the sky in hues of gold and crimson, Kassa emerges from his tent, his bearing regal and commanding. He strides forth, his steps measured and purposeful, his eyes alight with the fire of a man who knows his own power. The camp stirs to life around him, the bustle of activity in tune with his magnetic presence, as men and women alike scramble to attend to their duties, to bask in the glow of their new ruler’s favor.

Kassa dedicates himself to the task of listening to and resolving the grievances of the surrounding regions, a display of his leadership and understanding of the people’s needs. He knows that a true ruler must yield to the concerns of his subjects, must show them that their voices are heard and their struggles acknowledged. It is a delicate balance, a dance of power and empathy, and Kassa navigates it with the skill taught to him by his master Debre Markos since young age.

A procession of peasants and former warriors, their faces lined with hardship and hope, lines up outside the red tent, a sea of humanity stretching into the distance. They come from far and wide, drawn by the promise of Kassa’s justice, by the whispers of a new era dawning upon the land. Kassa’s ever-vigilant guards keep watch over the throng, their eyes sharp and their weapons at the ready, a silent reminder of the power that flows from the man they serve.

Kassa, a man who has yet to face a challenger he couldn't overcome, sits upon his makeshift throne, his mind consumed by thoughts of the greater battles to come. He knows that his work here is but a prelude, a gathering of strength before the true storm breaks. In his mind's eye, he sees Biru Goshu and Tedla Gawlu, the rebellious lords who dare to defy his rule where he sits, their defiance a thorn in his side that must be plucked out.

As the hours stretch on, the line of supplicants seems to grow rather than diminish. Kassa feels the weight of their expectations pressing down upon him, a burden that would crush a lesser man. But he is no ordinary man, no mere mortal playing at kingship. He is Kassa, the man who would be emperor, the one destined to unite the fractured kingdoms under his iron rule.

And so, he listens, he judges, he pours over the Fetha Negest legal code documents, he commands, the hours bleeding together in a blur of faces and voices, of pleas and promises. The sun climbs high in the sky, its heat beating down upon the camp like a physical force, and with each transition from day to night, tension thickens in the air. As the relentless siege of the amba persists, days stretch into weeks, enveloping the Gojjam realms in anticipation of a response from the unyielding Biru Goshu.

After weeks, a figure emerges from the red tent, his attire marking him as a member of the Gojjam clergy. He addresses the waiting villagers, his voice carrying across the assembled crowd. "Return to your homes," he announces, his tone leaving no room for argument. "His Majesty has directed village headsmen and church administrators to at-

tend to your concerns until he appoints officials for you." A murmur of disappointment ripples through the crowd, their protests rising like a wave, but Kassa's armed warriors step forward, their presence a silent threat that compels them to disperse.

Amidst the dispersing men, a figure garbed in thick gabbies like a commoner marches purposefully towards the tent with a messenger in a distinct animal garb at his side. John Bell, Kassa's trusted chief advisor, enters the tent, his presence attracting the attention of all those gathered within. Kassa nods to his captain, acknowledging his arrival, before turning his gaze to the messenger, the man dressed in a patterned animal hide that identifies him as a tracker by trade.

"My lord, we have found him." The messenger's words hang in the air, a declaration that sends a ripple of excitement through the tent. Kassa's eyes narrow, skepticism etched in his features. "Are you sure it's him?" he inquires, doubtful after weeks of fruitless searching for the elusive Ras Ali.

The tracker nods, a hint of amusement playing at the corners of his mouth. "At first, from afar in the mountains, we thought it was a baboon who had strayed from the group, coming in and out of the cave at odd times," he explains, his words eliciting laughter from the gathered Shifta warriors.

"So, I sent one of my men with some food to test him." The messenger continues, undeterred by the mirth. "He admitted it, my lord. We took pity on him and shared some Tela with him. When he got drunk, he told us to leave him alone, for he is Ras Ali, the Endresse and he said the warriors of Haile Mekelot from Shoa were on their way to escort him south."



“Shoa?!” Kassa springs to his feet, fury ablaze in his eyes, his voice a thunderous roar. “Have they too regressed to their Muslim past to come to his aid?!” He redirects his ire towards the clergy in the tent. “And here I believed the tales that the self-proclaimed Negus is the one to whom the people of the south turn to confess, to tell the truth in their God-fearing Christian courts.”

Kassa’s anger is a palpable force, his presence seeming to fill the tent, dwarfing all those around him. “Let the Muslim run to those that resemble him!” he asserts, his fury ringing with conviction as he seats himself once again, the undisputed Negus of the empire. “I will catch up with him when I march on Shoa and crush them, restoring the ancient glory of our one united Christian empire.”

The words hang in the air, a promise and a threat, a declaration of Kassa’s determination to forge a new era for the empire. The gathered warriors and advisors exchange glances, the weight of the moment settling upon them like a mantle.

The hunt for Ras Ali may have reached its end, but the greater battle for the soul of the empire is only just beginning, and all know that Kassa will stop at nothing to see his vision realized.

“Now,” Kassa turns to a young messenger from his camp, his eyes burning with a fierce intensity, “What did that wife-stealer say again?” The messenger trembles, his voice barely above a whisper. “I want it repeated, word for word!”

“My lord—” the messenger stammers, his face ashen, “. . .he says, a Shifta killer who, like a bull, bellows in a land that is not his, like a heifer, I will make him sniff my ass if he comes up for a kiss.” The words hang in the air, dripping with scorn and defiance. Kassa’s jaw tightens, his features hardening like stone. So be it. The hills shall run red this night.

“Well, let him have what he has sentenced himself to then.” Kassa’s voice is a low, menacing growl. “We will attack tonight and every moment until they are spent!”



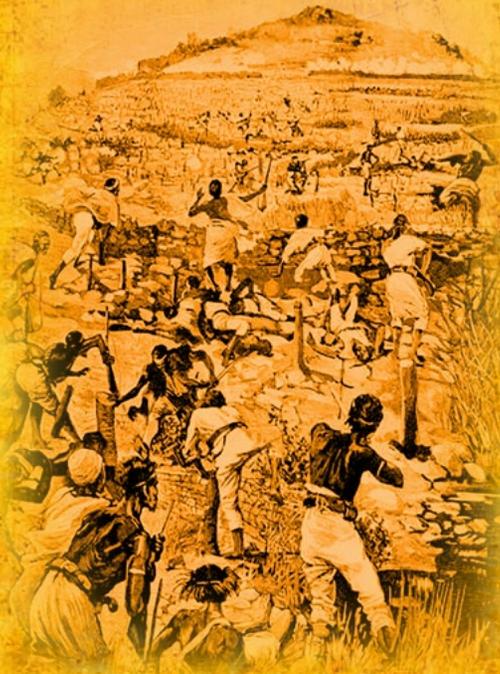
The moon hangs over the fortress-crowned heights, casting an ethereal glow over the undulating slopes. Kassa’s army ripples like a tide of shadows up the mountainside, their gabbies bobbing and swirling, steel winking in the pale light. Kassa leads them, mounted on his warhorse, his wild eyes aflame with a primal fury.

“Come out and face me, you coward!” Kassa’s voice rings out, echoing across the rocky expanse.

High on the ramparts, Biru Goshu’s warriors swarm like angry hornets, ready to repel the oncoming surge. A hail of arrows hisses down, plucking men off their feet, transfixing them screaming to the stony earth. The air rings with the deadly melody of battle-song and death rattle.

“Come on out with your war-horse, Abba-Damtew. Let me take over his name for you!” Kassa taunts, his voice a thunderous roar. He instructs his matchlock men, embedded within the Shifta warriors creeping up the hillside, to ready their weapons.

“Call him Tengwalel if you like,” Biru Goshu retorts, his voice dripping with mockery, “. . . come on up, you killer. Don’t let the bragging tire your legs. Come up like a fool and die!”



Kassa’s men fire a volley that bursts against the fortress, the impact reverberating through the night, yet the walls stand firm.

Night and day, the Shiftas press their relentless attacks from all sides, a ceaseless tide of steel and fury. The Gojjam forces respond with a tempest of arrows and spears that whish down like a dark storm, tearing through the Shiftas’ ranks. The inexhaustible Kassa, always at the heart of the fray, unleashes a barrage of spears and small daggers that arc through the air, splitting heads and piercing chests with deadly precision.

Each time, Biru Goshu, his excitement mounting at the sight of Kassa’s apparent recklessness, orders his men to target the Shifta leader. Arrows fly, spears hurtle through the air by the thousands, yet Kassa rides across the fort like a man possessed. Arrows bite into his horse, his clothes, yet they seem to merely graze him, leaving the flesh of the invincible warrior untouched. Stunned Gojjam warriors lower their weapons, awe and disbelief etched on their faces as they witness a man who defies death itself.

After weeks of constant assault, with every waking moment consumed by the deadly contest that rages until night, Kassa and the Shifta warriors, unable to penetrate the impregnable amba, withdraw from the fort. The Gojjam warriors erupt in cheers, a cry of elation rising from Biru’s men—victory! Their azmaris strike joyous notes of triumph, the music echoing long into the night.

The Gojjam celebration continues, the air filled with music and laughter as Kassa’s massive camp begins to break away, seemingly in defeat. The siege of the amba appears to have ended.

Jeering and insults rain down from the fort as the azmaris and drummers entertain the victors, while the losers pack up their belongings to leave.

“The bully galloped up to snatch up Biru’s horse; instead, he got an arrow in his ass,” a Gojjam azmari mocks, his words eliciting raucous laughter. “O master of the universe, O Lord of Abyssinia, tell this fool to be humble and polite, or we will pierce and pierce him until he dies.”

Inside the red tent, Kassa and Gabreye can hear the celebration of Biru’s forces. Kassa, drinking arake as if he too is celebrating, sings along with the mocking songs, his voice dripping with irony.

“Only by deception can one mount the glorious horse Abba-Damtew,” Kassa jests, his eyes glinting with a hint of mischief. He turns to Gabreye, who stands with the elder Gojjam royal from earlier, the man still trembling in Kassa’s presence.

“We have done our work, Abba. He has spent his arrows and spears,” Kassa approaches the elder, his steps measured and purposeful. “Let us see if he will still be singing when I snatch away all his weapons from him,” he adds with a sly grin, his words carrying the weight of a promise.

The mountain of amba Jebelli rises in the night, torch-lit figures ascending the steep paths, a large river raging through the gorges far below. The elder royal prisoner from Gojjam leads Kassa and Gabreye through the fortified mountaintop, their footsteps echoing in the eerie silence. Kassa stalks the mountain paths under the cowl of night, a dozen shadowed warriors at his back. An expectant hush grips his band, broken only by the sound of the river’s fury.

At the summit fort, they steal through silent halls, past Gojjam guards standing mute as statues, weapons held slack at their sides. Word of their coming has spread ahead like wildfire.

“Your majesty, her only request is not to be reunited with her husband and to be free of him,” the elder royal explains to Kassa and Gabreye, his voice low and urgent.

“I pity that woman,” Gabreye responds, his face twisting in sympathy, “for the bones of that man are of a leopard’s. She has our word that her problem will be dealt with soon enough.”

They reach a large opening and enter the Gojjam armory cave, where firelight dances over stacks of spears and rows of swords, enough to arm a war-host thrice their number. Kassa’s eyes reflect the glint of steel, a predatory gleam in their depths.

Dawn crests bloody red over Amba Jebelli. Dejazmach Biru Goshu marches out of the strong fortress with a contingent of his army, descending towards the plains on their way to the fort of Jebelli to replenish their dwindling arsenal.

Kassa awaits, a patient spider with his web spread wide.



Biru Goshu leads his proud warriors onto the plains, but the ranks that march behind him are thin and fractured. Eyes white-rimmed with fear search the horizon, more unnerved by the absence of foes than an army in their sights.

As they crest the plains of Jebelli, Kassa's massive force spreads out before them like an endless sea, armed to the teeth with looted weapons, stirring like a rising storm.

A terror-stricken Biru halts his army, spies the looted weaponry from on high, comprehension breaking across his face like a shattering mirror.

"Courage! Courage men!" Wheeling his mount, he faces his warriors "We do not let a Shifta, a killer of our Goshu to take the amba!" He strives in vain to rouse his men trembling before the ambush in pure terror. He gallops to the front, rallying his forces. "For Gojjam! And for Goshu!" he shouts, but the spark has left their hearts. His rallying cries die forlorn across the plain. Only half of his forces heed his call, while the rest put down their weapons in surrender, the fight draining from their bodies.



Across the plain, Kassa smiles as he watches the dispirited Gojjam charge, with Biru Goshu screaming for his blood, a man possessed by fury and desperation.

"Bring the brave one to me!" Kassa commands, his voice ringing out across the battlefield. He wheels his horse, the battle of Jebelli over before it has truly begun.



In the aftermath of the battle, a defeated Biru Goshu, bloodied and battered like his father before him, is dragged along by Shifta warriors and brought before Kassa, his hands fastened to a dulla behind him. The once-proud Gojjam rebel nonchalantly bends his knee before a mounted Kassa to beg for forgiveness. Kassa savors the reversal of fates—the proud Gojjam lord now pleading for mercy from a forest wanderer.

"A brave person is like a snake," Biru begins, his voice strained with humiliation, "when poked, he jumps and strikes, but when beaten by many sticks, he squirms and asks for mercy and forgiveness." He locks eyes with Kassa, who remains silent, savoring the moment.

"Ante only won against me because I was betrayed by my jealous relatives!" Biru Goshu screams, fury erupting from his battered frame as he springs up on his feet. "If you had not taken what does not belong to—" He curses at Kassa,

anger overcoming his judgment.

"The cub of the lion is spotted. Irswo truly are brave like your father," Kassa observes, his voice calm and measured, "...to fight against my forces when you know your defeat is an act of bravery" Kassa complements Biru "But being humble does not suit you like it did with your father." he remarks with pity.



"Ante, remove the name of my father from your mouth!" Biru erupts, his eyes blazing with a mix of rage and pain.

Kassa calmly shifts on his horse, locking eyes with the defeated lord. "Why do you still say ante to me like I am still in your services, when I honor you with irswo even after I defeated you?"

Biru Goshu meets Kassa's gaze defiantly, his spirit unbroken. "How else am I supposed to address a shifta who comes from the forest?" he mocks.

"One thing I like about the forest is the freedom," Kassa smiles, a hint of wistfulness in his voice. "The limitless wide-open space." He turns his head to the fort that has beguiled many conquerors. "But here, in ambas where everything is narrow, I can't even breathe. There is not enough room, you see. Even the chains I put on your brother has to be short."

"How does one live in such a way? Confined behind stones for life?" Kassa leans closer to Biru, his voice dropping to a whisper. "If it had been me before you, what would you have done?"

"Hanged you!" Biru Goshu doesn't hesitate, his voice lashes out with venom. "I would have you beaten all the way to the fort, then hanged you from the ramparts."

Kassa's smile broadens, a glint of admiration in his eyes. "I was tempted to gut you for your arrogance," he admits to Biru under his breath. "But your ferocity today reminds me too much of myself." He turns to his men "We may speak again, some sun-washed day in exile." His guards approach with heavy chains.

Kassa looks up at the ambas and the high mountains surrounding the camp, his gaze distant, lost in contemplation. "It's time for you to join your brother and move away from the intrigues of power and think of what you have done in the confines that you seem to like too much."

And with those words, Kassa seals Biru Goshu's fate, a king marking his dominion over the once-proud lords of Gojjam. The world shifts beneath their feet, a new order rising from the ashes of the old, as Kassa's shadow lengthens over the land, a harbinger of the empire to come.



Wibe in the North

A leopard cannot change its spots

The towering Semien mountains glow golden in the morning sun as Kassa's massive force marches relentlessly north, their footsteps resounding against the rugged terrain like a drumbeat of fate. Kassa rides at the head of his army, his gaze fixed on the horizon, radiating an air of regal determination. He drives his men onward, day and night, in an unrelenting advance towards Tigray, the domain of the greatest rival to would be rulers, the formidable Dejazmach Wibe.

As the conquering army traverse the treacherous paths of the Semien mountains, the warriors' labored breaths mingle with the thin mountain air, their hearts pounding with anticipation of the looming battle. Kassa's resolve propels them forward, his charisma and leadership a beacon in the unforgiving terrain.

At last, their weary steps lead them to the basin at Derasge, a location near Dejazmach Wibe's capital, and Kassa orders a halt. The colossal army, a force of nature that has consumed all rebels before it like an inexorable tide, surges into the valley like a sea of steel and flesh. The valley seems

to contract in the presence of such a vast host, the hills and ridges diminished by the sheer scale of the encampment that emerges like a city birthed from the earth itself. Tents and banners rise from the dusty ground, the bold colors of Kassa's standard of the Lion of Judah whipping in the wind like a proclamation of his invincibility.

Kassa and his chiefs ascend a steep hill, and Kassa breaks away with Gabreye, his eyes narrowed and focused on the distant horizon. Amid the brown peaks, a white glint shimmers in the distance, a tantalizing hint of the enemy's presence.

"Summon Yohannes and a messenger," Kassa commands, his voice a compelling whisper that carries across the stillness of the mountain air. Gabreye descends and escorts John Bell and a messenger to Kassa's side. John Bell, his mount steady, meets Kassa's piercing gaze without wavering. Kassa gestures towards the distant glint, his voice low and insistent. "Look through your telescope and tell me if those tents belong to Wibe's forces."

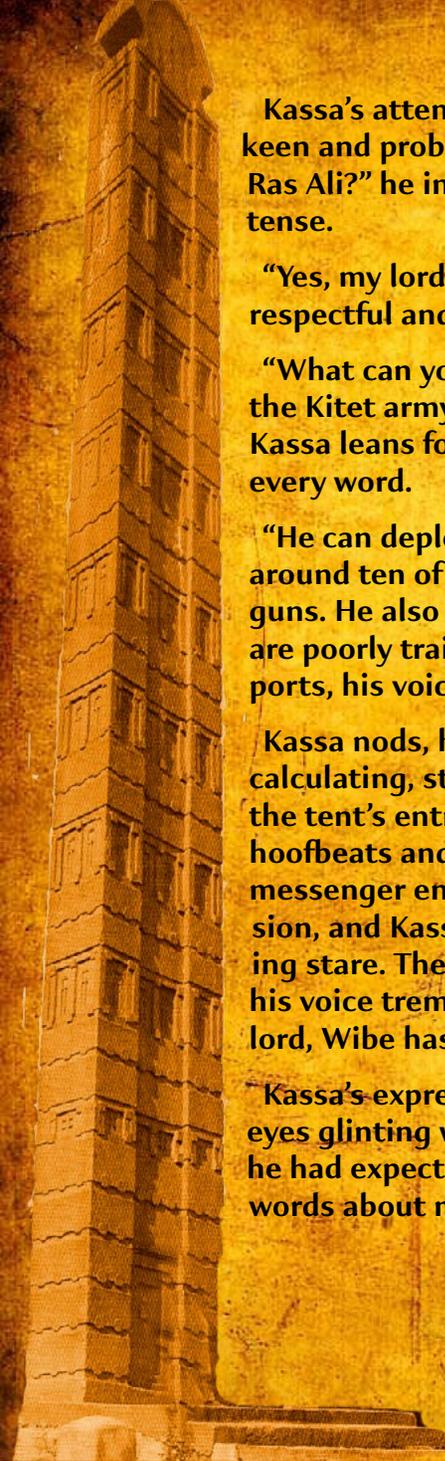


John Bell raises the telescope to his eye, scanning the distant landscape with the practiced ease of a seasoned observer. He surveys the scene, holding his breath in concentration, until at last, he lowers the instrument and turns to Kassa with a nod.

“Yes, my lord, those are Wibe’s men,” he confirms. Kassa’s eyes flash with a predatory gleam, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He turns to Gabreye. “Send word to him,” he directs, his words laced with quiet intensity. “I am the one whom God anointed to rout and reduce his enemies to dust.” He declares with assurance, “If he submits with tribute and acknowledges my crowning by sending the Abuna to my camp, I will leave him in peace.” Kassa wheels his mount and faces the messenger. “But if he forces me to beat the drums of war, let him know it shall be his end, for I am the chosen one!”

Kassa’s army moves with the inexorable force of a breaking wave. They surge into the valley, a sea of determined warriors, their footsteps raising clouds of dust that catch the fading light of the sun. The day’s golden hues gradually give way to the encroaching shadows of evening as the army settles into their temporary encampment in Derasge’s dusty plains. Campfires flicker to life, their warm glow pushing back against the deepening twilight, as the warriors gather to rest and prepare for the battles to come. The air grows cool and still, the silence broken only by the soft murmur of voices and the occasional snort of a horse.

In the glowing regal red tent, Kassa gathers his closest advisors, with Gabreye and John Bell at the forefront, their minds churning with strategies and plans for the impending attack.



Kassa’s attention falls on John Bell, his gaze keen and probing. “Did you fight Wibe under Ras Ali?” he inquires, his voice low and intense.

“Yes, my lord, I did,” Bell responds, his tone respectful and measured.

“What can you tell me about his forces? Are the Kitet army as formidable as they say?” Kassa leans forward, focused intently on Bell’s every word.

“He can deploy about fifty companies, with around ten of them armed with matchlock guns. He also has a few cannons, but his men are poorly trained in using them,” Bell reports, his voice steady and clinical.

Kassa nods, his mind already racing ahead, calculating, strategizing. His gaze shifts to the tent’s entrance, drawn by the sound of hoofbeats and the messenger’s return. The messenger enters, his face etched with tension, and Kassa’s eyes lock with his in a piercing stare. The messenger bows before Kassa, his voice trembling slightly as he speaks. “My lord, Wibe has refused your offer to submit.”

Kassa’s expression remains composed, his eyes glinting with a hint of amusement, as if he had expected nothing less. “Relay his exact words about me,” he commands, his voice firm and self-assured.

The messenger hesitates, his eyes darting nervously around the tent,

taking in the intimidating presence of Kassa's warriors.

"Speak without fear, he is but an empty vessel that makes loud noise before I smash him to pieces." Kassa muses.

"He called you a shifta without a drop of royal blood in your veins," the messenger begins, his voice barely above a whisper. "He said, who are you that he should pay tribute to? He called you a mercenary chosen to be hired to fight invaders, not a king chosen by our maker!"

Kassa rises to his full height, his demeanor unruffled, his bearing calm in the face of the insult. "What else did he say?" he prompts, his voice steady and measured. "Continue, and do not be afraid. I want everyone to hear it."

The messenger swallows hard, his voice shaking slightly as he continues. "He called you a killer whose head itches for a bullet rather than a crown, a fool who has come to the north to face an army twice as powerful and armed to the teeth with matchlocks."

Gabrey chuckles, his laughter a sharp contrast to the tension in the air. "The prideful never foresee their downfall," he remarks, his eyes glinting with a hint of malice.

But Kassa's lips merely curl into a faint smile, his confidence unshaken by Wibe's taunts. "Tell him I come from Abraham, David, and Solomon," he declares, his voice rising with each word, filling the tent with its power. "From Menelik to Fasil, I am the one who lays a single stone before all enemies, no matter their size or strength, and emerges victorious."

"Inform him. . ." He steps forward, his presence seeming to fill the tent, his eyes blazing with an inner fire. "Tell him, you shall witness what transpires on the battlefield when you face David, you great Goliath!" he roars, his voice a challenge, a declaration of war that echoes across the mountains and valleys of Tigray.



And with those words, Kassa takes his seat, the die is cast, the battle lines drawn. Kassa turns to his men, his eyes alight with the promise of glory, his voice ringing with the certainty of victory. "Prepare yourselves, my brothers," he commands, his words a rallying cry that sets their hearts ablaze. "For tomorrow, we ride to war, to destiny, to the very gates of the throne itself!"

The tent erupts in a chorus of shouts and cheers, the warriors' voices rising in a cacophony of excitement and bloodlust. And at the center of it all stands Kassa, the man who would be king, the one chosen by God to unite the empire and lead it to greatness.



At night, Kassa sits alone in an ancient monastery in Axum, his brow furrowed with the weight of the impending battle, when a familiar figure enters, her presence a soothing balm to his troubled mind. Eteye Atitgeb, his mother, moves to his side, her eyes filled with a wisdom born of years of hardship and triumph. Kassa, his gaze fixed on a golden statue of the crucifixion of the Lord, his heart filled with the fire of ambition, ready to face whatever challenges lie ahead, ready to seize his destiny with both hands and never let go, remains silent and contemplative.

“Lije,” Atitgeb breaks the silence, her voice soft yet filled with an unshakable strength, “I sense the burden you carry, the doubts that plague your mind.”

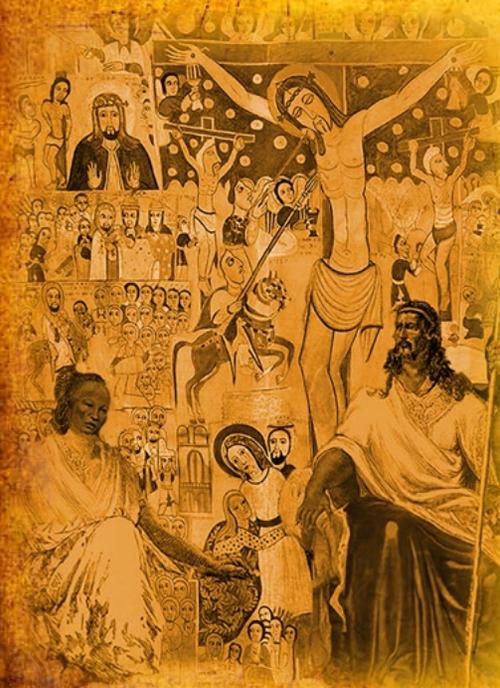
Kassa turns to his mother, his eyes locked with hers, a flicker of vulnerability dancing across his face. “Emmaye,” he whispers, his voice trembling under the weight of his responsibilities, “I stand at the threshold of greatness, yet I feel. . .” Kassa’s words falter, his gaze distant, as if searching for answers in the depths of his soul. “Why do I feel like an impostor in my own skin? Why does the fear grow stronger with each step closer to my goal?” He clenches his fists, his knuckles turning white. “I am consumed by. . .” Kassa’s voice cracks, the words lodged in his throat, the turmoil within him too profound to express. He lowers his head, his unfinished thought hanging heavily in the air between them.

Atitgeb takes his hand in hers, her touch a comfort and a reminder of the love that has always guided him. “You are destined for greatness, Lije,” she reminds him, her voice filled with a fierce pride. “He has chosen you and no one else to lead our people, to unite the empire under one banner, and until the task is done, you soul will not and cannot rest.”

Kassa nods, his jaw tight with determination. “Wibe is the last obstacle standing in my way of crushing the princes and beginning the reunification of our empire,” he declares, his voice ringing with conviction. “But unlike the rest, he has superior arms he gained from the Ferenje.” Kassa shares the uncertain path of facing him.

Eteye Atitgeb’s eyes flash with a hint of mirth, her lips curving into a knowing smile. “Ah, Lije,” she chuckles, “you forget the lessons of your youth. It is not the strength of arms that determines the victor, but the strength of will, the fire that burns within the heart.”

Kassa leans forward, his gaze intense and searching. “But what if my men falter like they did against the better armed Egyptians?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper. “I am so close, yet I. . .”



Atitgeb's grip on his hand tightens, her voice filled with a fierce conviction. "You are my little Te-wodros," she reminds him, her words a declaration of faith. "You have faced trials and tribulations that would break a lesser man, and you have emerged stronger for it." She traces the veins on his arm. "You have the blood of kings flowing through your veins, Lije, the blessings of the gods upon your brow."

Kassa's eyes shine with unshed tears, his heart swelling with the love and belief he sees in his mother's gaze. "I fear the throne, Emmaye," he confesses, his voice raw with emotion. "I fear the power it holds, the temptations it offers. Am I rushing to hold something beyond my control?"

Atitgeb's smile is gentle, her eyes filled with a deep understanding. "The fact that you fear it is what makes you worthy of it, Lije," she reassures him, her words a beacon of solace in his sea of doubts.

"A true leader is one who knows the weight of his responsibilities, who fears the consequences of his actions. It is that fear that will keep you humble, that will guide your hand and your heart."

Kassa nods, his shoulders straightening with a newfound resolve.

"You are chosen, so you will be tested by the Lord," Atitgeb repeats his destiny she has promised him since childhood, her voice filled with a quiet strength. "You cannot let doubts consume you; you cannot let your fears hold you back." She guides his eyes to the Lord hanging on the wall. "You must trust in Him, in the destiny that has been laid out before you."

Kassa's heart swells with a fierce pride, a deep love for his mother and the people he fights for, and the calling he is willing to answer to the very end. And he rises with a certainty that resonates through every fiber of his being, knowing he will emerge victorious.



The air crackles with tension as the plains of Derasge become the stage for an epic clash. The competing beats of Kitet battle drums from the north and Shifta battle drums from the south reverberate across the landscape, their rhythms a prelude to the impending storm of steel and fire. The very earth seems to tremble in anticipation, as if aware of the momentous battle that is about to unfold upon its surface.



As the morning sun casts its golden light over the battlefield, it reveals a vast expanse of warriors on both sides, their numbers stretching to the distant horizon. Dejazmach Wibe stands at the forefront of his impressive northern army. His men stand tall and proud, their spirits high and their voices raised in triumphant songs that speak of their unshakable belief in victory. They line up with fierce determination, their weapons at the ready, eager to face off against the Shiftan invaders who dare to challenge their might. Dejazmach Wibe's eyes gleam with a feral intensity, his every gesture a promise of the devastation he will unleash upon his foes.

Two small cannon guns glisten in the sunlight, their polished metal reflecting the rays like beacons of death. They are positioned strategically on a small hill, a vantage point that allows them to survey the battlefield and rain down destruction upon the enemy ranks. These weapons of war, along with the thousands of matchlock-armed warriors, stand as a symbol of the northerners' military might, a stark reminder of the firepower that Kassa's ill-equipped Shifta forces must overcome.

On the opposing side of the field, the weary Shifta forces of Kassa assemble, their ranks a patchwork of battle-worn warriors. They take their positions with a mixture of exhaustion and grim resolve, their attire stained with the blood and sweat of countless campaigns. Their weapons, once gleaming and new, now bear the scars of endless battles they have endured.

As they gather, their movements lack the vigor and energy of their well-rested opponents, and an air of solemnity hangs over them, a weight that speaks of the challenges that lie ahead. They

have come so far, fought so hard, but now they must summon the strength to prove their mettle once more against a formidable foe.

Mounted on his horse, Kassa surveys his warriors with a discerning eye, taking in the weariness etched upon their faces. He can sense the wavering spirit among them, the doubts that gnaw at their resolve. The challenge ahead is immense, and Kassa knows that victory here would cement his status as the rightful King of the kingdoms. But as he gazes upon the vast array of northern forces, with their superior arms and well-rested ranks, a flicker of uncertainty takes root in his heart. Can he afford to be complacent, to rely on past successes against such a wily and formidable foe? The weight of the moment bears down upon him, and he knows that he must find a way to ignite the fire in his warriors' hearts once more.

"My brothers!" Spurring his horse forward, Kassa rides along the lines of his warriors, his voice ringing out with a forced joviality. "If fatigue could leave a visible mark, each of you would be mistaken for a leper," he jests, and a ripple of laughter washes over the exhausted warriors, a momentary respite from the gravity of their task.



But Kassa's tone soon turns serious, his eyes blazing with intense determination. "Brothers, I understand that weariness weighs upon you, as it weighs upon me, but remember—weariness is fleeting." Kassa halts, raises his sword to the heavens. "Our reputation as the chosen warriors called upon by the Lord to unite our nation is what endures forever!"

His words seem to stir something within the Shifta warriors, their spirits beginning to rekindle as they turn their gaze across the field, taking in the sight of the formidable northern forces arrayed against them.

"Do not falter now, when redemption is within our grasp!" Kassa pierces the doubt that still lingers in the air. He presses on, his voice rising with a note of challenge. "Does this old man's mere presence frighten you? After all we have achieved?" The warriors remain silent, their expressions guarded, and Kassa feels a flicker of frustration rising within him.

He points to the well-armed northern matchlock and cannon men, his voice dripping with contempt. "Do his cannons, loaded with rags, send a chill through your hearts?" Still, no response comes, and Kassa's frustration simmers, threatening to boil over.

But then, in a moment of raw emotion, Kassa's voice rises to a roar, his words a thunderous declaration of faith and purpose. "When Christ decided the humiliation of his chosen kingdom was enough, he roused me from nothingness and gave me power through your arms!" He gallops across the line of his chiefs, his eyes blazing with a holy fervor. "Aligaz, Goshu, Biru, Ali, Yeju, Gojjam, Agew,

Begemedir, Gonder. . . it did not matter who or from where they came. They were but all legions of obstacles that had to fall before His grace!" His eyes turn to the heavens as if to announce that the Lord Himself is shining down His favor and protection upon them.

The words seem to ignite a spark within the Shifta warriors, their weariness falling away as a surge of determination courses through their ranks. Kassa turns his gaze back to Wibe's forces, his voice ringing out with a challenge. "And now we stand before a false king, seeking to strip away our victories and claim a throne that is not his but ours!" A wave of protest erupts from his Shifta warriors, their voices rising in a chorus of defiance.

Kassa wheels his horse around, facing his men once more, his expression one of unwavering resolve. "Will you let that happen? Will you allow our struggles, our sacrifices, to be in vain?"

As if in response, a surge of fury and fiery determination courses through the Shifta lines, igniting a fervor among the warriors. Moments ago sluggish and weary, they now pulse with renewed energy, beating their chests and shields in a collective display of resolve.

Kassa's voice rises above the din, his words a rallying cry that echoes across the battlefield. "Until this pretender stands before us, his true nature exposed, until we overcome this mockery of our presence, our struggles have been in vain!" The air crackles with the intensity of their cries, as if the very essence of their spirit has been set ablaze.

Raising his sword high, Kassa's voice rings out once more, a promise and a challenge all in one. "Deliver me victory today, and I shall bestow

upon you the triumph of Semien!" The warriors respond with a renewed fervor, understanding the layers of meaning in his words.

'Semien,' a play on words that signifies both "My Name" and the rich province of Dejazmach Wibe in the Semien mountains, resonates with a sense of reward, purpose and unity.

The fervor of Kassa's speech spreads like wildfire, igniting a chorus of voices that rise as one, a battle cry that shakes the very earth beneath their feet. The battlefield transforms into a cauldron of heated emotions, and the once-muted warriors emerge as a formidable force, ready to face whatever challenges stand before their destiny.

As the thunderous battle cries of the Shifta warriors echo across the battlefield, Dejazmach Wibe surveys his forces with a sense of pride and confidence. He takes in their superior numbers and weapons, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. But even as he basks in the assurance of victory, a small seed of doubt takes root in his mind. Could this so-called shifta before him truly have felled so many mighty opponents through divine backing alone? The thought is a fleeting one, but it is enough to give him pause.

Dejazmach Wibe shakes off the momentary uncertainty, his voice rising in a rallying call to his men. "Someone pretending to be someone, that person does not become. A Shifta pretending to be a king, a ruler does not become!" His words are met with a roar of approval from the northern ranks, their resolve to crush the Shifta invaders strengthened by their leader's conviction.

"We, northerners, stand against enemies from all directions—both external and internal!"

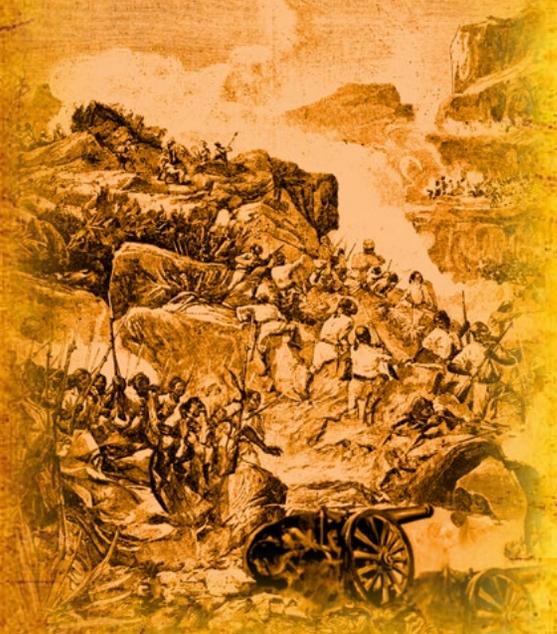
Dejazmach Wibe continues, his voice a thunderous roar. "We have defended our country from the Ferenje Turks, Egyptians, and the Yejju Muslims, and yet here comes a deranged challenger from our own jungle looking to mock our sovereignty!" The defiance in his voice rises to a crescendo, and the Semien and Tigrean ranks erupt with a fierce determination to put an end to Kassa's ambitions once and for all.

"Who deserves the throne more than us?" Dejazmach Wibe raises his sword high. "Who has sacrificed more for our country?" He lowers it and points it towards the Shifta lines, his eyes blazing with a ruthless intensity. "Mercy shall not be shown to these pretenders! We shall not depart this battlefield until the thunderous roar of our cannons reverberates in their ears!" A roar of approval ripples through the northern forces, each warrior ready for the impending charge.

"Not one shall stand! Our bullets shall descend upon them like a hailstorm!" Dejazmach Wibe's voice is a rallying cry, and the northern warriors respond with fervent shouts, their spirits high as they ready themselves for the advance.

Across the battlefield, Kassa can sense the growing confidence of Dejazmach Wibe's forces, and a flicker of unease stirs within him. He has faced many challenges before, but never one quite like this. The weight of his warriors' lives hangs heavy upon his shoulders, and for a moment, he wonders if he has led them to their doom.

But then, as if in answer to his doubts, a raw, primal cry splits the sky, and the Shifta warriors surge forward, their charge as swift and deadly as a bolt of lightning. They fly toward the Tigrean lines



with a fury that seems to defy the very laws of nature, their swords and spears flashing in the sunlight like the talons of avenging angels.

The Shifta army closes the distance, undaunted even as the thunderous roar of matchlocks cuts through the air, and Wibe's gun lines unleash a relentless barrage of lead and smoke. The initial volley tears through the

Shifta ranks like wildfire through dry brush, felling scores of warriors in a heartbeat. Those behind stumble over the writhing heaps of dead and dying, their vision obscured by an apocalyptic crimson mist.

From his vantage point, Dejazmach Wibe watches with cold satisfaction as his gunsmoke-wreathed troops maintain their withering fusillade, hope rising within him that he might cripple the Shifta horde once and for all. "Now, cannons!" he commands, his voice ringing out above the din of battle.

The order is relayed, and the cannons roar to life, belching fiery smoke and hurling iron death into the heart of the Shifta ranks. The cannonballs

crash down like the fists of an angry god, leaving a grisly trail of pulverized bodies in their wake.

Amid the chaos and carnage, Kassa takes in the scene with a hunter's keen eye, his mind racing as he seeks a way to turn the tide. Memories of past failures against better-armed Egyptians flash through his mind, fueling his rage and determination. He knows that he cannot allow his warriors to fall victim to the same fate.

"Break formation!" he roars, his voice cutting through the din like a blade. "Scatter and close in! Let them taste the steel of our resolve!"

The Shifta warriors respond with the swiftness and precision of a pack of wolves, splitting into nimble bands that dart and weave across the battlefield, making themselves all but impossible to target. Kassa leads the charge, his sword flashing in the sunlight as he rallies his men forward.

Under cover of the smoke and chaos, Kassa sends John Bell and a contingent of warriors sprinting towards the cannons, their mission to silence the northern guns and turn the tide of battle. At the same time, he drives his own band of warriors ever closer to the Tigrean lines, his eyes fixed upon the figure of Dejazmach Wibe in the distance.

The battlefield transforms into a tempest of smoke and fury, a whirlwind of clashing steel and thundering hoofbeats. The air grows thick with the stench of blood and gunpowder, and the ground beneath their feet turns to a churning morass of mud and shattered bodies.

The Shifta army answers the barrage of assault weaponry with resolve, a surge of raw, primal fury coursing through their veins, and they throw

Wibe's Fall

There is no fighting against fate

themselves into the fray with a renewed sense of purpose. Kassa, at the head of them, leads the way like a man possessed. He will not let his warriors down, will not let their sacrifices be in vain. He will fight on, no matter the cost, until victory is his or death claims him.

The battle rages on, a tempest of smoke and fury as the two indomitable wills collide on the plains, hills and mountains of Derasge, locked in a struggle that will shape the destiny of an empire. In the end, only one can emerge victorious, but the cost will be high, paid in the blood and sweat of countless warriors.

Kassa knows this, feels the weight of it in his very bones, but he will not falter, will not yield. He is the chosen one, the man destined to unite the fractured empire, and he will see it done, no matter the price. And so, he fights on, his sword flashing in the sunlight, his heart aflame with the fires of destiny.



The night air, thick with the acrid scent of gunpowder and blood, throbs with the unrelenting din of clashing steel and agonized cries long after the cannons have fallen silent. Kassa, his silhouette a stark contrast against the moonlit sky, stands atop the ridge, his weary eyes surveying the savage dance of death below. The pale light casts an eerie sheen upon the battlefield, revealing a grotesque tapestry of broken bodies, their twisted forms a testament to the day's ruthless struggle.

Dejzmach Wibe's forces, their spirits unbroken by the long hours of fighting, press their brutal assault on the Shifta warriors, their fierce resolve



undeterred by the darkness that envelops the battlefield. The clash of weapons and the cries of the dying pierce the night air, creating a cacophony of chaos and bloodshed that seems to stretch on into eternity.

There is no respite, no moment of peace in this hellish landscape. The skilled gunners and marksmen of the northerners unleash their firepower in a relentless barrage, their bullets and shot transforming the battleground into a macabre graveyard of pierced flesh and shattered bone. Each volley is a reaper's scythe, cutting through the Shifta ranks like a searing blade, leaving a trail of devastation in its wake.

Kassa, his determination as unyielding as the mountains that surround them, surveys the grim tableau with a strategist's eye, his mind racing as he seeks to counter the ceaseless firepower of the enemy. He sends more men to support John Bell and his band of Shiftas darting through the shadows, their rapid and unexpected assaults a flickering flame of hope amidst the darkness. But as the night gradually gives way to an even deeper darkness, the moon's pale light seems to mock their efforts, casting an eerie glow on the piles of the dead and dying that litter the field.

Reluctantly, as the darkness deepens to an impenetrable shroud, Kassa signals a retreat, his heart heavy with the weight of the losses they have suffered. The Shifta warriors, their spirits battered but unbroken, melt into the shadows like ghosts, slipping from the northerner's grasp with silent defiance. Yet the gun crew, their blood up and their thirst to annihilate their enemies at its peak, search the darkness with fervor, determined not to let their foes escape under cover of night. They

stalk forward, their eyes straining to pierce the veil of shadows, but find only the lingering traces of their adversaries, silhouettes fading into the depths of the night.

Tension hangs thick in the air on the ridge as the Shifta warriors regroup, their hands busy with the task of readying fresh weapons taken from the stores of Biru Goshu's amba. Dejazmach Wibe's gun crew, undaunted by the lack of light, press forward with grim determination, their senses straining for any sign of their elusive adversaries. The air is charged with a palpable sense of anticipation, a coiled spring ready to unleash its fury at any moment. The Shifta seem to have vanished into thin air, leaving only an eerie silence in their wake, but the northerners know better than to let down their guard. They creep closer and closer, their weapons trained on the shadows, ready to unleash hell at the first sign of movement.

Without warning, the silence shatters as the Shifta spring their ambush, the flash of their weapons cutting through the darkness like lightning in a midnight sky. Amid the chaos and

confusion, they surge forward, stripping more arms from the surprised northerners and pressing their attack without pause. The battlefield becomes a canvas of shifting shadows and intermittent fire, a deadly game of cat and mouse played out in the flickering light of gunpowder and steel. Flashes of fire and the sparks of clashing wills provide the only illumination, as both sides struggle on with dogged persistence, neither willing to yield an inch of ground.

The deadly dance continues throughout the long hours of the night, a series of isolated battles and firearm duels that leave both sides exhausted and bloodied. As dawn begins to paint the eastern sky with the first hints of light, the two armies finally draw their main forces back from the battlefield, a temporary pause in the relentless struggle for dominance.



In the red tent that serves as Kassa's command center, exhaustion weighs heavily on the Shifta leader and his companions. They tend to their wounds with grim focus, the sharp scent of arake mingling with the acrid smoke of battle that clings to their clothes and skin. Their faces are etched with lines of weariness, the toll of the long night's fighting written in every crease and shadow. But beneath the exhaustion, there is a glimmer of something else in their eyes, a spark of defiance that refuses to be extinguished. They know that they must struggle on, that there can be no rest until victory is finally within their grasp.

Suddenly, the heavy silence that hangs over the camp is shattered by an eruption of shouts and cheers, a burst of jubilation that pierces the predawn gloom like a ray of sunlight through storm clouds. Kassa and Gabreye exchange curious glances, their attention drawn to the source of the commotion outside the tent. The sound is so unexpected, so out of place in the aftermath of the night's battle, that for a moment they can only stare at each other in confusion. But as the cheers continue to rise, Kassa's curiosity gets the better of him. He sends a messenger to investigate, a silent command to discover the cause of this sudden outburst of joy.



But before the messenger can even take a step towards the tent flap, a young warrior bursts into the command center, his chest puffed out with pride, his eyes shining with a fierce light. He carries himself like a man bearing the weight of destiny on his shoulders, every movement infused with a sense of purpose and resolve.

“My Lord,” the young warrior proclaims, “you promised all of Semien to the one who delivers you a victory!” His words hang in the air, a bold declaration that draws every eye in the tent to his face.

Kassa rises slowly from his seat, his gaze fixed on the young warrior, his expression unreadable. He approaches with measured steps, his bearing regal and commanding, every inch the king he was born to be. “That is right, my young friend,” he says, his voice calm and even, “I will give you Semien. I promise to give you my name and all the glory that comes with conquering these rich lands.” The words are a solemn vow, a promise that carries the weight of the moment.

The young warrior’s eyes shine with fervent light, his voice trembling with barely contained excitement as he speaks again. “Your majesty, we are your hand of destiny, guided by our Lord and Savior to carry out His deeds.” His words are laced with a conviction that borders on fanaticism, a belief in his divine calling that is as unshakable. He grips his spear tightly, the muscles of his battle-hardened arms standing out in sharp relief.

“He who chases tries to capture the main prize, my lord,” the warrior continues, his voice rising with each word. He raises his spear high, the blade catching the flickering light of the lamps and drawing every eye in the tent to its deadly point. “It’s bravery and not firepower that wins the day!” The proclamation is a challenge, a defiant shout in the face of the enemy’s superior weapons.

Gabreye and John Bell rise to their feet, their expressions a mix of curiosity and concern as they watch the young warrior’s strange display and showmanship. Kassa’s eyes follow the warrior’s

gaze as he turns to the shadows that dance behind the tent curtains, a flicker of anticipation crossing his face.

“Bring them in!” The warrior’s command cracks like a whip, cutting through the air with a force that makes every man in the tent straighten their spines. The air is thick with anticipation, a storm about to break.



The tent curtains are drawn back with a flourish, and a stunned silence falls over the gathered men. There, in the center of the tent, stand a group of Shifta warriors, their faces flushed with triumph. And in their midst, head bowed and hands bound, is none other than Dejazmach Wibe himself, the great lord of the north, the man who had seemed undefeatable just moments ago, stands before all in chains.

Beside him stands the Abuna, the highest religious authority in the land, his robes disheveled and his face pale with shock. The sight is so unexpected, so utterly astonishing, that for a long moment no one speaks, no one even seems to breathe.

Kassa is the first to break the silence, his voice low and filled with quiet intensity. "The Lord finds a way" He whispers to himself in shocked silence at his mother's prediction of God's favor.

"How?" he asks, the single word heavy with a thousand unspoken questions.

The young warrior's grin is a flash of white in the dimness of the tent, his eyes dancing with barely contained glee. "We were inspired by your message of destiny, my lord," the young warrior proclaims. "We could not rest until we captured our enemy, so we ventured deep into enemy territory." His voice trembles with excitement. "And there, in the heart of their camp, we found them unguarded, unprepared for our attack."

A deafening cheer goes up from the warriors gathered outside the tent, a roar of triumph that shakes the very earth beneath their feet. In that moment, the exhaustion and pain of the long night's battle are forgotten, swept away in a tide of joy and relief.

Kassa steps forward, his eyes locked on Dejazmach Wibe's bowed head, his expression unreadable, his fate resting in the hands of the man he had sought to destroy. The Abuna, his face a mask of shock and disbelief, can only stare at the scene before him, his lips moving in silent prayer. The world has turned upside down, the old order crumbling before their very eyes.

Kassa surveys this strange scene with calm detachment, his mind already racing ahead to the challenges that lie before them, but for now, in this moment of triumph, he allows himself a small smile, a flicker of satisfaction that dances in his eyes. The road ahead will be long and hard, but with

this victory, with Dejazmach Wibe and the Abuna in his grasp, he knows that the tide has turned, that the destiny he has always believed in is finally within reach.

The Shifta warriors, their faces alight with joy and pride, crowd around their leader, their voices rising in a chorus of praise and adulation. The long night of warfare has ended, and it is Kassa who stands tall and proud, while his challengers bow, for he is the man who dared to chase the impossible and emerged victorious against all odds.

As the captives are led into the middle of the tent, a stunned silence falls over those present, the air heavy with disbelief and anticipation. The clanking of chains heralds the approach of Dejazmach Wibe, his once proud and powerful figure now reduced to a shattered husk of his former self. Despite his diminished state, sparks of defiance still glint in his eyes as he surveys the gathered audience, a lion caged but unbroken.

Abuna Salama, the weight of his nobility bearing heavily on drooping shoulders, the burdens of his holy office putting him in the path of danger, remains in silent prayer. Trailing the group are ashen-faced dignitaries, their trembling forms a stark reminder of the fickleness of fortune in this tumultuous age of Zemena Mesafent.

Kassa spins to face Gabreye, his eyes flashing with a mixture of disbelief and triumph. He pivots back, his gaze drinking in the sight of the captives, as if to confirm the reality of this stunning turn of events. His eyes lock with Wibe's, and in that moment, a clash of unrelenting wills ensues, a silent battle in which words become redundant.

A tremor courses through Kassa's body as the full weight of this coup settles upon him, his mind reeling with the implication of this monumental victory. His fingers curl faintly into fists, knuckles stark against taut skin, struggling to contain the storm raging within him, barely composed by the force of his iron will.

"O beloved archangel Urael, you've raised me from the beginning to rout out the enemies of the kingdoms!" Kassa's shout of disbelief echoes through the tent, his voice charged with a sense of destiny and divine purpose. "And what is born of the house of David will bring an end to the era of Zemena Mesafent and unify the kingdoms once more!"

Dejazmach Wibe's fury ignites at Kassa's words, his eyes aflame as they bore into his captor with a hatred that burns like the fires of hell itself. "Devil!" he spits, the single word dripping with immeasurable contempt, but Kassa seems lost in his own reverie, deaf to the insults hurled his way.

Gabreye steps forward, placing a steadying hand on Kassa's shoulder, a gesture of support and acknowledgment of the magnitude of this stunning defeat, the final obstacle on their path to the throne now lying shattered at their feet.

Dejazmach Wibe, his fury overpowering him, raises his head and locks eyes with Kassa once more, erupting in a torrent of bitterness and rage as the full weight of his misfortune crashes down upon him. To be captured not once, but twice, on the very cusp of victory, is a blow that strikes at the very core of his being.

Kassa remains ice-calm in the face of Wibe's wrath, a stark contrast to the tempest raging be-

fore him. His eyes narrow, appraising his defeated foe like a predator assessing its prey, searching for any sign of weakness or vulnerability. He leans closer, challenge and intent pouring off him in palpable waves, a silent declaration of his dominance and unassailable position.

"You're but the devil that has taken what I've long desired and labored to possess!" Dejazmach Wibe's scorching fury rises with each word, his voice a snarl of bitterness and thwarted ambition. "Upstart! No shifta will rule here in the north!" His words are punctuated by flecks of spittle, venom dripping from every syllable as he rails against the injustice of his fate.



Kassa merely smiles in the face of Wibe's tirade, a small, enigmatic curve of his lips that serves only to fuel his captive's rage. He allows Dejazmach Wibe to continue, to vent his fury and frustration, a king indulging the impotent wrath of a fallen foe.

"Mark my words, as your grandfathers, as your ancestors tried and failed, no one that comes from obscurity will rule the north but die here in the mountains!" Dejazmach Wibe's words

are laced with a bitterness that speaks of centuries of regional pride and rivalry, his accusations an echo of the thwarted ambitions of generations past.

Outside, the sounds of battle return with a vengeance, the Kitet army raging against the captors of their leaders, and a visceral cacophony of gunshot, steel, and screams erupts as a brutal reminder of the harsh realities that have brought the two armies into this moment. Kassa allows the sounds of war to permeate the tense atmosphere of the parley, a deliberate choice to thicken the brewing tempest between the two rivals, to underscore the stakes of their confrontation.

"A Semien pretending to be an Axumite, a ruler of Tigray does not become!" Kassa's voice is low and measured as he begins to circle Dejzmach Wibe like a predator stalking its prey. His measured steps echo ominously in the tense silence between verbal blows. "That is why I saved coming to you for last." He mocks "A man who is deranged is a dangerous man."

Kassa's eyes miss nothing as he studies Dejzmach Wibe, noting every minuscule tell and shift in his adversary's demeanor, assessing potential triggers or weaknesses to exploit. His implacable gaze rakes over the defeated ruler, a silent promise of the reckoning to come.

"I do not expect them to accept my rule; I want them to fear and respect me, for I am but a substitute, just like you!" Kassa's words are a stark declaration of his intentions, a king who seeks not love, but obedience and submission. He locks eyes with Dejzmach Wibe once more, a half-smile

playing at the corners of his mouth. "Who has ever heard of a Semien getting along with a Tigrean?"

There is a touch of wry amusement in Kassa's voice, his words a mixture of candidness and humor that speaks to the historical tensions that have long defined their kingdoms. The atmosphere in the tent lightens for a moment as laughter ripples through the gathered chiefs and warriors, a shared understanding of the deep-seated rivalries that have shaped their world.

Gabreye and the others watch transfixed, the air electric around them as they bear witness to this momentous confrontation. Fingers toy unconsciously with weapons, a reflexive gesture born of a lifetime of conflict, as they await the verdict of this trial by fire, the judgment of their soon-to-be emperor.

"Gather the ruling houses he had terrorized into submission," Kassa commands, his voice ringing with authority, "and tell them there is nothing to fear from the one who comes after the Semien." He locks eyes with Wibe. "I am Kassa, the son of Christ who has captured the illegitimate ruler who gained his position from the Muslim Yeju by battering the great Sabagadis to death!" A cheer goes up from the Shifta warriors "I have come to restore the empire of our great forefathers that built the glorious empire that lasted for centuries here in Axum where I shall be crowned as your emperor!"

Kassa spins to Gabreye. "Go and be quick in finishing his headless rabble!" With a single command, he sets his plan into motion, entrusting Gabreye with the task of pacifying the north and bringing the rebellious fighters to heel. Gabreye, his eyes burning with the fire of purpose, grabs

his gun and leads the chiefs and warriors out of the tent, ready to carry out his emperor's orders. The clatter of weaponry mixes with the clanging of chains as Dejazmach Wibe strains against his restraints, muscles cording in his neck as he watches Kassa with a mixture of hatred and begrudging respect.

Kassa turns his attention to Abuna Salama, and the atmosphere in the tent shifts once more. He approaches the holy patriarch with measured steps, halting directly before him, his expression a mix of earnestness and reverence.

"Abuna, a weak mind hates unity, a strong one loves it. The man who fights for truth, the man who fights for the Lord, even if he dies, even if he is forgotten by the ungrateful, he still lives." Kassa's words are a declaration of faith, a confession of the driving force behind his relentless pursuit of power. He bends the knee before the Abuna, his gaze that of a faithful servant seeking the blessing of his spiritual leader. "When Menen and Ras Ali became angry and expelled your holiness from Gonder, I knew it was time to remove them from power." He gazes deep into the Abuna's eyes. "I am but the child of Christ; without him, I am nothing, and you are the father of our empire!"



Abuna Salama, who has long lived in an uneasy relationship with Dejazmach Wibe since his return to the north, is touched by this display of humble devotion, a stark contrast to the proud and often dismissive attitude of his former patron. He stiffens as Kassa cranes to kiss his cross raised in a gesture of blessing and restraint, their gazes locking in a moment of uneasy recognition of their intertwined fates.

"I have pursued unity through fire and blood to honor the Lord's divine purpose," Kassa continues, his words jagged with a fervor that borders on the fanatical. "I have come to free the one man sequestered from the rest of the kingdoms because I believe in him to unify us as God's chosen children."

The weight of Kassa's words hangs heavy in the air, a declaration of his commitment to the cause of unity and the role of the church in that grand design. The Abuna searches Kassa's face, seeing in him a potential zealot king to be both revered and feared, a man whose faith and ambition are inextricably linked.

"Lies upon lies!" Dejazmach Wibe barks a harsh laugh, his voice dripping with cynicism and scorn. "The heart that desires the throne, no matter where it comes from, is the same!" he mocks, his words a pointed barb aimed at Kassa's lofty rhetoric. "Every utterance that comes out of your mouth, the good Abuna has heard me utter before." Dejazmach Wibe mocks "Forgiveness first, he says, yet still craves the throne."

Kassa whirls to face Dejazmach Wibe, his eyes flashing with sudden fury at the interruption, but before he can speak, the Abuna steps between

them, his presence a calming force amidst the rising tensions.

“If you commence your reign in a noble way by forgiving those who have wronged you, starting with the good souls that have taken sanctuary at the Mary church at Deresge, the people of the north will not oppose you.” The Abuna’s voice is gentle, a soothing balm on the fractious air. “Guide them from darkness, mighty Kassa—this shall reveal the nobility within.”

A tense silence falls over the tent as Kassa considers the Abuna’s words, and Dejzmach Wibe shakes in fury at the Abuna’s betrayal. At last, Kassa exhales, his shoulders loosening as he steadies himself, the fire in his eyes cooling to a simmer. He turns to a nearby chief, his voice firm and commanding. “Tell the men to offer peace to those who seek it and not to desecrate the holy churches of our ancestors!” The chief bows hastily and departs, a sense of hope and uncertainty mingling in his footsteps as he goes to relay the emperor’s orders.

“Abuna, I am the humble slave of Christ who subdues himself before our Lord and Creator.” Kassa’s voice is but a whisper as he kneels once more before the Abuna, his head bowed in prayer. “As Abiathar joined David and came to the service of the Lord to build a new kingdom, I wish you to join hands with me, Abuna, for my aim is to unite our kingdoms.”

The words hang in the air, pregnant with possibility and the weight of history, a declaration of a new era dawning over the fractured lands of Ethiopia. The Abuna rests his hand on Kassa’s head, a gesture of blessing and acceptance, knowing that destiny has left him no other choice.

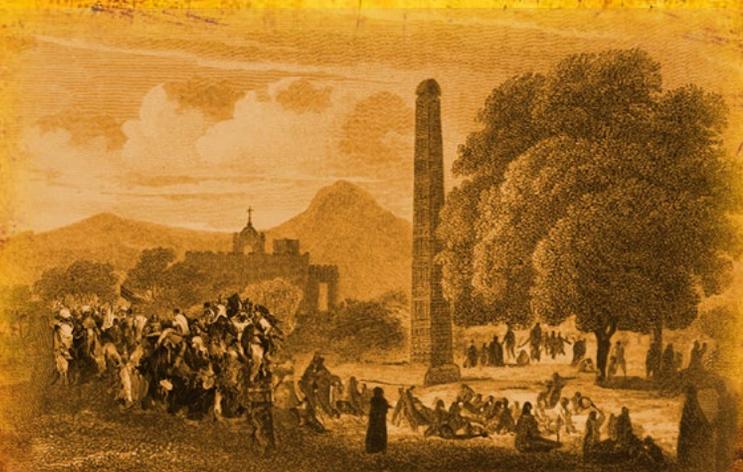
Around them, the future of the empire takes shape, a rich fabric woven of faith, ambition, and the unbreakable will of a man who would be king. And in that moment, as the sounds of war fade and the first light of a new day breaks over the horizon, the course of a nation is forever changed, set upon a path that will lead to unity, to greatness, and to a legacy that will endure for generations to come.



The Coronation

The weight of a crown: responsibility it bears.

Under the vast and boundless sky, anticipation permeates the air, a tangible excitement that resonates through the gathered masses in the ancient city of Axum, where legendary kings have reigned over an extensive empire for centuries. The sun, a brilliant golden orb, bathes the vibrant and colorful spectacle of the assembling multitude in its benevolent glow, illuminating the intricate patterns of traditional garments and the gleaming armor of the warriors. The earth itself seems to quiver with the significance of this historic juncture, as if the spirits of the great rulers of the past have risen to witness the ascension of a new emperor.



Beyond the palace walls, the thunderous hoofbeats proclaim a grand declaration. Royal messengers, their steeds adorned with the majestic banners of the Lion of Judah, ride forth from the gates with urgent purpose. Their voices resound, delivering the official awaj, a decree that will reverberate through the ages: "Hear ye, hear ye! Let all gather, for Kassa Hailu, the valiant 37-year-old warrior who has united our lands and vanquished our foes, prepares to ascend the throne as the Emperor of Ethiopia! Come forth and bear witness to this defining moment, as a new era dawns upon our great empire!"

The palace grounds resonate with a swelling rhythm, a rumbling energy that stirs the hearts of all who have convened. Banners bearing the emblem of the Lion of Judah flutter in the breeze, as the clergy and esteemed dignitaries from across the kingdoms fill the space, their presence amplifying the mounting anticipation.

Amidst the preparations, an immense and colorful tent takes shape, skillfully crafted by devoted hands from across the regions. This massive denkuan, a sanctuary for the impending celebrations, is adorned with the finest carpets, their intricate patterns narrating stories of the land's rich history. At the heart of the denkuan stands a magnificent throne, arranged in accordance with biblical tradition, its grandeur reminiscent of the legendary throne of King David.

The air pulsates with the harmonious rumble of drums, their beats intertwining with the lowing of thousands of cattle, brought as offerings for the occasion. As night descends, the warm glow of bonfires illuminates the plains, casting dancing shadows as preparations for a truly historic feast



continue under the veil of darkness.

As the sun rises in the morning, the reverberating drumbeats intensify, harmonizing with the fervor of the crowd as the royal insignia — the orb, the crown, and the royal robes — are escorted by thousands of Kassa's warriors. Mounted on horses and mules, resplendent in their finest attire, they march in strict formation towards the church of Derasge Maryam in Axum. There,

the clergy awaits, ready to receive the sacred items and commence the coronation rituals.

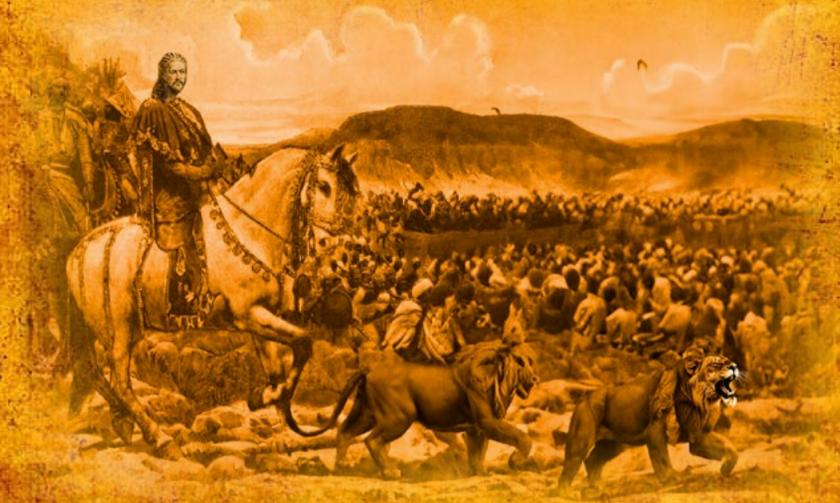
At the front of the procession, two majestic lions stride with regal bearing, their presence embodying strength and nobility. They serve as a powerful symbol, signifying the return of the three-thousand-year-old Solomonic rule of the tribe of the Lion of Judah.

Atop his caparisoned steed, Kassa appears both simple and grand, his form wrapped in silk cloth that seems to reflect the sunlight like a vessel channeling divine energy. As he surveys the colorful banners and vast crowds stretching as far as the eye can see, Kassa is momentarily overwhelmed by the magnitude of the moment. As he makes his way through the crowd, the people part before him, their eyes wide with awe and reverence. They have heard the tales of his exploits, of how he defeated

the formidable armies of Goshu, Ali and Wibe, of how he brought peace and stability to a land torn asunder by conflict. And now, they behold him in the flesh, a living embodiment of their hopes and aspirations.

“He deserves it, Lord! Grant it to him, for he truly merits the throne!” the gathering cheers, their voices rising in a crescendo of support for the victorious Kassa.

Kassa nods to his warriors, acknowledging their steadfast loyalty, and they respond with a humble yet proud cheer for their king. After years of strife and struggle, they have united here, in this sacred place, to celebrate all they have achieved together. Gabreye and the chiefs, resplendent in their finest state attire, adorned with lion manes and bearing shields and swords that shine brilliantly in tribute to their leader, escort Kassa into the grand tent. Banners of the Lion of Judah flutter overhead, and the rhythmic thunder of drums sends vibra-



tions coursing through the earth itself, as if the land is awakening to bear witness to this historic moment.

Azmari singers step forth, their melodic voices lifted in song, extolling Kassa's deeds and ancestry with lyrics that paint vivid pictures of his triumphs and lineage. Their anthems swell, fueling the crowd's fervor to new heights.

"Who is the one who vanquished Wibe, the one who wrecked the Yejju?" an Azmari calls out, whipping the crowd into a frenzy.

"Kassa! It is he! The favorite of the Lord, descended from King Fasil, from the great kings of Axum and Gonder!" Kassa who fought with the strength of a lion, and who emerged triumphant once the dust settled, bows to his Shifta warriors. "He is the rightful inheritor of the throne, in the line of the great Amda Seyon and Zara Yaqob!" The clergy join the warriors in praise of their new emperor, their voices rising in a chorus of devotion. Kassa acknowledges the clergy for his victory was not merely a military one. He understands that true power in the kingdoms stems not from the sword, but from the hearts and minds of the people guided by the influential clergy.

"Who humbled Ali, Birru, Aligaz, Goshu, and all the enemies of God, those who came at him with their big guns, only to fall like leaves in the wind?" The Azmaris play on, their words establishing the unquestionable legitimacy of Kassa's ascension.

"The one who came seeking to unite the kingdom, the son of David, Solomon, and Menelik, who cannot be overcome, for he has kept the commandments of God and is favored by Him." The clergy's prayers resonate as Kassa marches into the

tent, his presence commanding reverence from all who behold him.

Within the grand tent, Kassa's Shifta warriors, clergy, and selected dignitaries convene, an assembly of power and purpose, each member a vital thread woven into the tapestry of a new destiny. The warriors take their designated seats on the carpets, while the clergy and dignitaries are placed closer to the throne, their positions reflecting their rank and hierarchy. All eyes follow Kassa's every movement as he steps forth, accompanied by Gabreye and his loyal guards.

Genuine camaraderie emanates from Kassa's interactions with those who have fought beside him. He clasps hands with warriors, shares embraces with chiefs who have served him since his early days in Qwara. Kassa embodies humility in every gesture, bowing before the clergy with respect and reverence. The warriors gaze upon their leader with a mixture of awe and affection, seeing in him not just a commander, but a man whose strength lies in his connection to them.

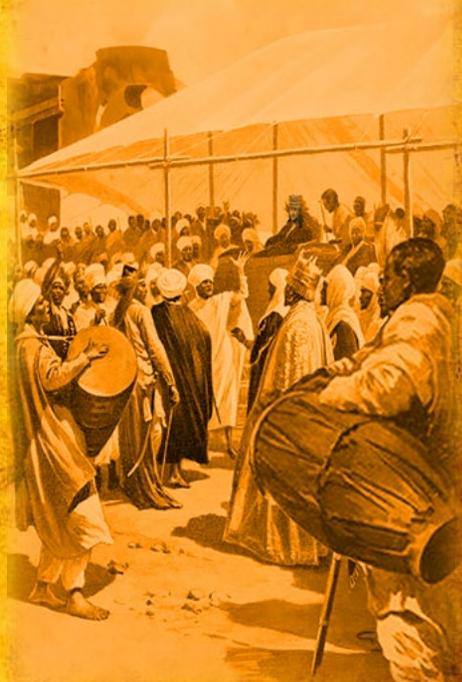
As Kassa takes his seat upon the throne chair, the warriors rise in unison, their gazes fixed upon him, their king, their emperor who has kept his promise to them. Kassa returns their reverence with a simple yet profound bow, a gesture that speaks volumes of his character — a king who willingly submits to his subjects, acknowledging their vital role in his ascension. Before him, a gathering of trusted men and clergy officials assembles, clad in their finest attire — velvet tunics and trousers as rich as their colorful capes. They stand in formation, awaiting their emperor's commands with anticipation and readiness.

Kassa, the newly anointed sovereign, begins the momentous task of bestowing appointments and decorations upon those who have proven their loyalty and valor. The air trembles with expectancy as each warrior, each servant, is acknowledged and uplifted before all, their deeds and sacrifices recognized by the highest authority in the land.

The cheers of the warriors reverberate through the space as Kassa crowns Gabreye, his childhood friend and trusted general, conferring upon him the prestigious role of commander of the imperial army.

“Gabreye, my brother in arms, my steadfast companion,” Kassa declares, his voice resonating with the depth of their bond. He reaches out, grasping Gabreye’s shoulders, his eyes locked with those of his most trusted friend. “From the innocent days of our youth, when we dared to dream of greatness, to the blood-soaked fields of battle where we stood side by side, facing down our enemies, you have been my rock, my constant support.”

Kassa’s whispers some private words to Gabreye, imbued with raw emotion, that seem to hang in the air, painting a vivid picture of their shared history, the trials they have endured, and the victories they have claimed together.



Gabreye, his eyes glistening with unshed tears, nods, unable to speak, his heart too full to find the words.

“In you, I found not just a warrior of unparalleled skill and bravery but a true friend, a brother in all but blood,” Kassa continues for all to hear, his grip tightening, conveying the intensity of his feelings. “Your strength has been my anchor, your counsel my guide. Without you, I would not stand here today.” As he speaks, Kassa draws Gabreye into a fierce embrace, the two men clinging to each other as if their very lives depend on it.

In that moment, the rest of the world falls away, and there is only the unbreakable bond between them, forged in the crucible of shared struggles and triumphs since childhood. “And now, as I ascend to the throne, I can think of no one more worthy to stand by my side as the commander of our imperial army,” Kassa declares, his voice ringing out with conviction. “Together, we will lead our people to a future of prosperity and glory, just as we have always dreamed.”

“Ase” Gabreye, his voice thick with emotion, finally finds the words to speak. “My king, my brother,” he manages, his tears now flowing freely down his cheeks. “I am yours, in this life and the next. My sword, my heart, my very being are forever at your service.” As the two men embrace once more, the gathered warriors erupt in cheers, their voices rising in a deafening crescendo.

The next group of appointees are those chosen to become the emperor’s closest court officials — many are chiefs who have led Kassa to great victories, comrades who have provided invaluable counsel and deserve to continue as officials in

his court. Some are Shifta warriors who have distinguished themselves on the field of battle, their bravery and skill earning them a place of honor.

Among them is Fetwari Ingida, his vanguard warrior, Tesfu his reserve commander, and Temesgen, the young warrior who captured Wibe and won the battle of the north, their feat forever etched in his rise. John Bell, Yohannes, the British man who traversed worlds to serve Kassa as an adopted Ethiopian, receives a place of honor, his position as chamberlain and captain affirming his role not only as a confidant but also as a bridge between cultures, a military advisor to the emperor.

It is only after his army is recognized that the moment of Messhelem begins, a ritual of recognition and elevation for the regional governors. Kassa, who has humbled all regions with sheer force, shows no hesitation as he names successors picked from among the defeated, in a tribute to the time-honored tradition of central power's ability to forgive, and follow the wisdom and foresight of their ancestors that have bonded many regions under one rule. The threads of continuity are woven into the fabric of governance as Dejazmach Araya, an emblem of Tigray, is selected to succeed Dejazmach Wibe. Dejazmach Tedla Gewalu of Gojjam steps forward to replace the fallen Goshu families, ensuring a smooth transition of power.

Local ruling houses, integral to the pulse of each region, find their place in this mosaic of power and unity, as Kassa, with the wordless command of his presence and the hope of a new beginning shining in his eyes, confers decorations upon potential future allies and former adversaries alike.

Abuna Salama, the highest-ranking bishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, leads the distinguished monks from the clergy as Kassa's gesture extends to the appointment and elevation of these men of faith, ensuring the symbiosis of Church and State in his reign. The Abuna conducts a solemn prayer, his words justifying the enthronement of the new king by drawing a parallel between Kassa and Christ himself, a comparison that resounds through the gathered assembly. Headdresses and capes are bestowed upon the appointees — monks and high priests from the renowned monasteries of Däbrä Damo in Axum, the church of Däbrä Brehan Sellase in Adowa, and every corner of the new empire. Famous clergy officials living between Shoa and Massawa are present, their attendance a testament to their commitment to spreading the uniform religion under the guidance of the Abuna and Kassa's new beginning.

As the day stretches on, the ceremony unfurls like a magnificent scroll, each moment etched in the hearts and minds of those who bear witness. The banquet commences, an outpouring of abundance and joy, as warriors and people alike indulge in the lavish offerings bestowed by the new emperor. The feast, intended to span days, embodies not only sustenance but also a celebration of unity, strength, and the unbreakable bond between the ruler and the ruled.

As the last rays of the evening give way to the bonfire and candlelit night, Kassa, accompanied by his mother, Eteye Atitgeb, conducts a prayer in the holy shrines of the secluded monastery of Dabra Damot.

Kassa firmly holds his mother's hands as she surveys the gathering onlookers, some of whom

had once doubted her son but now cheer him on as they become believers that it's only through him that their heritage and destiny will be secured. "There will be some envious people who will say they have never seen the son of a negus's daughter become a negus," Weizero Atitgeb whispers in Kassa's ear, her words alluding to his claim to the throne through her bloodline and not his father's, as tradition dictates.

"These backbiters and wicked men have not heard that the son of Empress Helena, even the ferenje Constantine, became a negus through his mother," Kassa reassures her, placing a gentle kiss on her cheek. "It is you who taught me that I belong to the great ancestors, to never forget who I am, and I am nothing without you, Emmaye!"

Eteye Atitgeb weeps, overwhelmed by the love and devotion of her son, who has grown to surpass her wildest dreams and aspirations.

The sound of drums and celebration continues, the jubilation taking the form of a great holiday. Within the ancient monastery perched on a mountain top, a hushed reverence pervades as members of the clergy, their vestments resplendent, oversee the sacred rites that will culminate in Kassa's formal enthronement. Bishops and maids tend to Kassa's body with meticulous care, treating his form, once that of a hardened warrior, with the reverence befitting a divine calling.



Amidst the ceremonial murmurs and the gentle rustle of garments, Kassa is led to a pool of water, its surface reflecting the sanctity of the moment. As his body submerges into the liquid embrace and the waters ripple, prayers rise like incense, the clergy's voices intertwining with the whispers of the divine. The act of immersion becomes a rebirth, a baptism into a new life, a transformation from warrior to emperor.

Emerging from the pool, Kassa is draped in a robe that shimmers like moonlight on a tranquil sea, the silk fabric kissed by gold, imbuing him with an aura of regal elegance. Belts of gold and silver encircle his waist, and shoes adorned with precious gold complete the transformation.

Even as he assumes these symbols of opulence, a flicker of discomfort remains, a remnant of his humble origins, forever a part of his essence. Amidst the grandeur of the imperial palace, Kassa

stands tall, the weight of the newly acquired status hanging heavy upon his head. Tewabatch Ali, his devoted wife, joins him in their private chambers, resplendent in her own royal robes that match his yet-to-be-worn regalia in every intricate detail.

Their eyes lock, and Kassa takes her hands in his, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the moment that will forever change the course of their lives.

The soon-to-be Empress Tewabatch smiles warmly, her eyes reflecting pride and boundless love. "You were born for greatness, my love. All this is but a symbol; your heart remains unchanged,"



she declares, placing her hand on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath her palm.

"And it beats for you, and only you," Kassa professes, drawing her close and placing a tender kiss upon her lips. "I promised to listen to your advice, and I have, and look where it has brought us." They both take a moment to acknowledge their new life. "You are my other half, and I want you by my side through this journey and for all eternity."

"Always, my love. Your strength is my anchor, and my love and support for you shall endure for-

ever," Tewabatch promises, her words a solemn vow. As Kassa embraces her, the weight of the moment fades in comparison to the comfort and strength found in their shared love, a bond that will endure the challenges of ruling an empire.

His eyes, framed by hers, shine with a sense of awe and responsibility as they turn to the gleaming presence that awaits him — the royal robe, a luminous tapestry woven from gold and threads of history, beckoning him to embrace his destiny. The crown, a testament to his lineage and authority, sparkles as diamonds catch the light, each facet a reflection of the centuries of tradition that have led to this moment. These artifacts, gleaming with the wisdom of ages past, embody the transition from warrior to sovereign, a journey that Kassa undertakes with unshakable resolve.

Outside, a sea of priests, clad in ceremonial robes, assembles, bearing the tabots — sacred replicas of the Ark of the Covenant. Their voices rise in unison, singing prayers that seem to meld with the very air, filling the space between heaven and earth. Ritual dances, their patterns intricate and purposeful, weave a tapestry of devotion and celebration, as the people, united in their fervor, draw closer, converging from every corner of Tigray and beyond to witness this historic moment.

As the sun sets and stars emerge like celestial sentinels, Kassa is led by bishops to an altar of prayer. Here, under the watchful eyes of saints and icons, he communes with the divine, his soul laid bare before the heavens. The night becomes a weaving of introspection, a deep dive into the heart and mind of the man who would be emperor, as he seeks guidance and strength for the journey ahead.

With the first rays of morning, Kassa rises from the throne of contemplation, his steps guided by a profound sense of purpose. He emerges from the palace, resplendent in his royal robes, the crown upon his head a symbol of his sacred duty to his people. As the sun arcs across the sky, casting its golden light upon this land of ancient history and newly forged destiny, Kassa stands ready to change the course of history.

The rites of coronation, echoing with the reverberations of an empire reborn, await him, a testament to the enduring spirit of a nation and the indomitable will of its new emperor. And so, with the blessings of the divine and the love of his people, Kassa Hailu steps forward into his destiny, ready to lead the kingdoms into a new era of unity, prosperity, and greatness.

The journey ahead may be fraught with challenges, but with the strength of his convictions and the support of those who believe in him, Kassa stands on the precipice of destiny, his unbreakable conviction pulsating through every fiber of his being.

In this pivotal moment, he can almost taste the sweet nectar of triumph, knowing that his lifelong ambition is within his grasp. The dream that has consumed his every waking thought — to carve his name indelibly into the annals of history as the emperor who united a



fractured nation and forever altered the trajectory of an empire — is now tantalizingly close.

Kassa can feel the weight of his impending legacy settling upon his shoulders, a mantle he has long been destined to wear since his birth.



Emperor Teowdros II

The past is a stepping stone to a milestone.

The radiant morning sun bathes the sacred Miriam Dere-sege church of Axum in brilliance. The ongoing coronation festivities pulsate with the zeal of fervent followers, their jubilant singing and chanting escalating. Men, women, the elderly, and the young, spanning from clergy to peasants, gather on either side as Kassa—screaming and praying—propelling him towards the church. The resounding beats of Kebero drums reverberate, proclaiming, “Yedallewo, yedallewo mangest. . . he deserves it, he earned it, he deserves the right to the kingdom, give it to him, Lord!” The populace chants, decorating the ground with ornate cloths and flowers as Kassa approaches the revered temple.



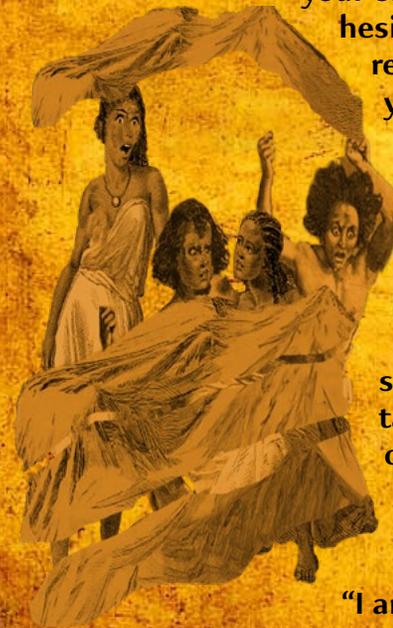
As Kassa nears the entrance, a group of young women, adorned in pristine white Kemises and sashes, stand resolute, holding out delicate silk cotton threads, forming a symbolic barrier across his path. The air crackles with anticipation as Kassa dismounts, the women’s voices piercing the momentary silence with a frenzied cry.

“Who are you?! Who comes this way?!”

Halting before the threshold, Kassa’s gaze remains steadfast, his eyes fixed upon the entrance. With a voice that resonates with authority, he declares, “I am the king of Zion!”

“Seyon! Seyon!” Some of the women weep, their emotions raw and unrestrained. “What is your name?” they repeat, their grip on the silk threads tightening, a physical manifestation of their intense questioning.

“Who are you, and what is your name? Is your coming in peace?!” Kassa hesitates to respond. “Do you remember who you were, who you are?” The women’s voices rise in pitch, their words carrying the weight of centuries of tradition and the gravity of this pivotal moment.



Kassa, recognizing the significance of the ritual, takes a deep breath, beads of sweat forming on his brow. He begins to speak, his voice a potent blend of authority and vulnerability. “I am Kassa Hailu, son of Hailu

Wolde Giyorgis and Atitegeb Wondwossen. Brother to Kinfu Wolde Giyrgis, husband to Tewabatch Ali. Let my actions, words, and sincerity be the answer sought."

The young women exchange glances, their hold on the silk threads easing slightly, and the chanting softens to a hushed anticipation. Kassa holds their gaze, his eyes conveying the depth of his conviction and the weight of his journey. Slowly, the threads begin to yield, the path to the entrance gradually opening before him. The women's initial skepticism morphs into tentative acceptance as they sense something profound and transformative in Kassa's demeanor.

With cautious hope, they lower the threads completely, creating a passage for Kassa to step through. He nods in gratitude, his eyes still shimmering with the reflection of the silk-light, and moves toward the church entrance. Suddenly, a piercing scream erupts from the youngest woman, jolting him to a halt, her voice demanding and urgent "Tell the truth!"

"Who are you truly? Tell the truth!"

In that instant, a vivid montage of memories floods Kassa's mind, transporting him back to pivotal moments of his past. The searing heat of a fire, the acrid smell of burning coals, and the billowing steam of clouds envelop him as his mother's face emerges through the mist. "Lije. . ." Her voice, gentle yet insistent, echoes in his ears, "My son. . . my little boy. . . not a thing will bring you harm, not a thing will get in your way, my special little Tewodros." Baby Kassa, caught in the throes of a fever, trembles in his mother's embrace, his senses heightened and attuned to every detail around him.

The women's voices filter through the haze of memory, their cries growing more insistent. "Who are you?! Do you remember?!"

Kassa's voice wavers as he responds, "I am the scared. . ."

His memory shifts, and Kassa finds himself fleeing alongside his mother, terror etched on their faces as pursuers, bent on ending their family line, close in. The memory is vivid, the fear palpable, as Kassa relives the harrowing escape.

"Why are you hiding? Who are you, tell us!" the women demand, their voices cutting through the fog of remembrance.

"I am the abandoned. . ." Kassa's words are heavy with emotion as tears stream down his face. He recalls his mother weeping before him, her anguished plea echoing in his mind. "Lije please listen to me!" Kassa fights back, his body trembling in fear and anguish "Don't leave. . . What is going to happen? To you, to me, I —" Kassa chocks on his tears "Listen to me Lije, the Lord —" Kassa won't hear it, he weeps "What am I going to do, Emmaye? Don't leave me, please, let me stay with you, please don't —" His mother's warm embrace envelops him, her whispered words a bittersweet comfort. "Your path and mine are not the same, Lije, the Lord has willed it so. You will survive, you will have to, Lije, my little Tewodros, because he chose you. . ."

The memory shifts again, and Kassa, a mere seven years old, weeps uncontrollably amidst the chaos of a brutal massacre, his mother's voice urging him to be strong. A bolt of lightning illuminates the world around him, and he sees her face once more, a beacon of love and guidance amid the burning skies.



The images continue to flash before his eyes, each one a defining moment in his journey. Kassa, his face inscrutable, as if possessed, retaliates against a would-be castrator, burying the knife meant for him into his assailant's flesh. The women's voices rise in a chorus of shock and disbelief, "What have you done, what have you done? Who are you?!"

"I am the victim, I am the killer. . ." Kassa's words are heavy with the weight of his experiences, the duality of his existence laid

bare.

He sees himself stumbling over dead bodies alongside Gabreye, terror gripping their souls as they flee into the dense forest. Spears and arrows whistle past them, yet they emerge untouched, as if shielded by an invisible force. His mother's voice echoes in his mind, a soothing reminder: "Do not be scared, Lije. The Lord will test you, but He will always protect you. . ."

With Gabreye by his side, Kassa survives the trials of hunger, pillaging, and life-threatening diseases in the unforgiving jungle.

"I am the hungry, I am the thirsty. . ." he murmurs, the memories of deprivation and perseverance etched into his very being.

"You must be strong, Lije. . ." His mother's words continue to guide him, like a prophecy unfolding: "He will send his flock to you. . .some will



be good and care for you, others will be cruel and try to stop you. . ."

Kassa's voice trembles as he confesses the truth of his abandonment.

"I am the forgotten. . ."

The imposing figure of Dejazmach Kinfu looms over his battered, lifeless body, the question ringing out once more: "Who are you?!"

In the throes of a death-fever, Kassa stretches out his arm, revealing the Order of the Seal of Solomon, his identity hanging in the balance.

"I am the chosen. . ."

"Young Kassa of Qwara" His memory shifts as the old fortune teller from his childhood appears, her words a prophecy that solidifies his mother's wish: ". . .the favor of God you have, and He has chosen you to rise as Tewodros, but your fight has only just begun."

Blood splatters across his face as Kassa engages in a fierce battle with a warrior twice his size.

"I am the angry. . . I am the vengeful" he admits, the raw emotion palpable in his voice.

The memories continue to unfold, each one a testament to his resilience and the divine protection that surrounds him. Kassa, at the tender age of fifteen fights as he serves as an auxiliary in small-scale battles, surviving multiple assassination attempts by Weleta Tekle, who recognizes the power within him. Throughout his rise, it becomes evident that Kassa is blessed, miraculously surviving the countless dangers that come his way, from treacherous relatives to enemy warriors, he is indestructible.

The women's voices crescendo, their demand for truth unyielding. "Tell us! Who are you, and what is your name?!"

Kassa's eyes snap open, the weight of his past bearing down upon him as he stands before the holy church, the young women blocking his path. Sweat beads on his forehead, as if he has relived every pivotal moment of his journey. He closes his eyes once more, allowing the trance to envelop him.

In his mind's eye, he sees himself as a young boy again, sitting at the feet of Debre Markos, the soft glow of the fireplace casting a halo-like light around him. The old man studies the emblem of the Order of the Seal of Solomon, a symbol of Kassa's destiny. With a toothless smile, Debre Markos imparts his wisdom: "As you go through life, young Kassa, you cannot help knowing,

you can always get help, but only the way you are going. . ."

Debre Markos rises with difficulty and lifts the covering of his bed to reveal stacks upon stacks of books and parchments, the foundation of his knowledge. "I was a Debentra that served the royals, young Kassa," he reveals, his smile expanding.

At every opportunity, Kassa devours the books under Debre Markos' guidance, the old man's words echoing in his mind: "No matter what life throws at you young Kassa, you persist, young Kassa, you keep on keeping on."

Even at the Fenja house, Kassa continues his relentless pursuit of knowledge, amassing wisdom through dedicated and disciplined reading. Debre Markos' voice grows louder, urging him on: "If you want to become what your destiny calls for, there will be many obstacles in your way, but you must stay on your path." His mentor's voice washes over him like thunder.

"This world is beyond cruelty. . ." The voice of his old master at the convent reverberates through his mind: "It's only through a good leader, the return of the blessed King Tewodros on the throne, that God's wrath will be averted, and our people will live in peace."

A horrific sound of death shatters the reverie, and Kassa sees Debre Markos, tears flowing from his blind eyes, grasping his hand and placing the Order of Solomon in it. "Lead them, become what you are meant to be. . ." the old man implores, his final words a benediction.

Kassa, his own tears falling, witnesses his beloved master being savagely cut down by a de-

mented warrior. His memory shifts to a brutal massacre once again, innocent victims falling prey to the ruthless onslaught of warriors, villages burning, and horror unleashed all around the convent.

The women's voices pierce through the veil of memory once more. "Who are you?! Why do you cry?"

"I am all alone," Kassa responds, the weight of his experiences and the sacrifices made for him heavy on his heart.

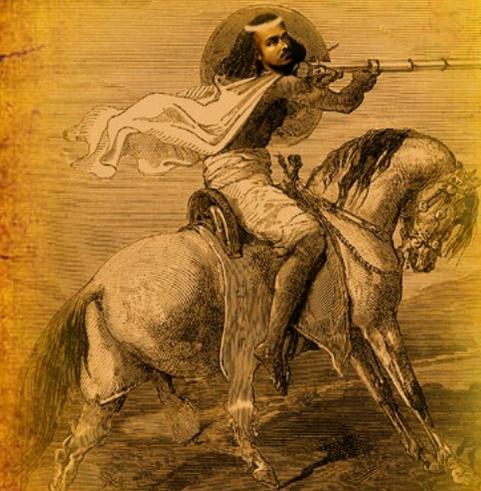
"A good leader is never alone. He must observe and learn what he needs to become from others that the creator has put before him. . ."

Kassa studies the warriors and chiefs at the house of Fenja, learning from the best, honing his skills to become a formidable warrior himself.

"A leader is a vessel," The voice of Debre Markos is just as strong and powerful in Kassa's mind after his death, ". . .for he remains forever connected to the wisdom of his ancestors." The voice rumbles from within him as Kassa consumes books with a voracious hunger, as if his very life depends upon the knowledge they contain.

Kassa engages the learned Debentras in fierce debates, honing his oratorical skills, his arguments fortified by the ancient wisdom passed down through generations. The spirit of Debre Markos guides his path, its timeless insights a lantern illuminating his way.

At the age of eighteen, Kassa finds himself in the midst of a chaotic war, his life hanging in the balance, yet a newfound confidence emanates from him, a testament to his growth and the trials he has endured.



"Who are you?! What is your name?!" the women demand, their voices rising in a feverish pitch.

"I am a warrior. . ." Kassa declares, the words ringing with the truth of his shifted forged identity.

Debre Markos' voice pounds in his mind, a guiding force even from beyond the grave. "A leader must be courageous; he must be fearless and in control of himself at all times. . ."

The memory shifts once more, and Kassa finds himself surrounded by dozens of Egyptian soldiers, a bloody sword descending slowly towards him. His eyes open wide in terror, blood dripping onto his face, death mere inches away, he raises his sword to counter the deadly blow.

Suddenly, a deafening roar fills the air, and a majestic lion leaps into his vision, the sword and the hand holding it disappearing in a blur of movement. Shrieks and screams erupt as warriors scatter, a pride of lions descending upon them, tearing into their flesh with primal ferocity. Gabreye and the surrounded Ethiopian warriors hit the ground, other flee seeking shelter in the trees, but Kassa remains frozen in place, his eyes closed, listening

to the sickening sound of bones cracking and men screaming as they are torn apart around him.

“You are not alone. You are the ancestors that all live through you” Dejazmach Kinfu’s voice filters into this mind.

Miraculously untouched, Kassa opens his eyes as a lion approaches him, its jaw dripping in blood and spittle. In a trance-like state, young Kassa rises, as if channeling all the ancestors that came before him. He stands very still as if accessing something from beyond him to dominate his fear. He stretches out his hands towards the majestic creature as if it were a beloved pet.

“Who are you?! Tell us!” the women cry out, their voices a relentless chorus.

“I am my ancestors. . .” Kassa whispers, the words heavy with the weight of their protection.

As a Shifta warrior, Kassa becomes a leader of men, crushing every bandit that crosses his path. With astonishing victories against the major

houses of the kingdoms, he witnesses the fall of massive armies twice the size of his own, his legend growing with each triumph.

In the aftermath of each battle, a sudden still-

ness descends, and Kassa stands tall, the same halo that shone upon him as a child now surrounding him as a man. It becomes clear that nothing can stand in his way, that Kassa is blessed with the protection of God himself as he forms his army and vanquishes the Kinfus of Dembeya, the Goshus of Gojjam, the Yejjus of Begemider, and the Semiens and Tigreans of Wibe—all falling before his Shifta forces.

Kassa, the halo-like sun glowing around him, gallops alone towards the rising sun, hands stretched out to the heavens, his destiny and the dawn of a new era shining upon him.

“Tell us, who are you truly?!” the women demand, their loud voices soaring towards the heavens.

“I am Tewodros, the chosen” Kassa declares, his voice ringing with conviction.

“Ase Tewodros! Ase Tewodros! Ase Tewodros!” The warriors erupt in a frenzy, bending the knee before the victorious Kassa.

The hysterical shouts from the women become deafening as the crowd screams at them to let him pass. Kassa opens his eyes, the sounds of cheering from his memo-



ries and the present melding into a symphony of adulation.

A sudden silence falls, the crowd holding its collective breath, awaiting his words.

“I am the king of Zion, the king of kings of Ethiopia.” Kassa grasps a sword and raises it high, the blade glinting in the sunlight. “I am Emperor Tewodros, the descendant of David, of Solomon, and Menelik. . .” With a resounding slash, he cuts through the silk ribbon, the echo of the blade reverberating through the tense air.

“I am the past, the present, and the future that has come to unify the kingdom of God!”

Dead silence engulfs the gathering, all eyes turning to the closed door of the church, anticipation hanging thick in the air.

“The king of glory, henceforth to be known by his chosen name Emperor Tewodros may come in!” The resounding voice of Abuna Salama emanates from within the holy sanctuary, his words a benediction and an invitation.

The celebration’s energy seems to hold its breath, the crowd watching this pivotal moment with bated anticipation. Kassa steps over the threshold, leaving the brilliant sunlight behind, and enters the brightly lit sanctuary. The young women follow, their apprehension giving way to reverence.

As Kassa crosses the sacred threshold, the weight of his past, the trials he has endured, and the destiny that awaits him converge in a single, transcendent moment. The future of Ethiopia hangs in the balance, and Kassa, now Emperor Tewodros, stands ready to lead his people into a new era of unity, prosperity, and divine grace.

Inside the sacred confines of the Deresge church, the air hangs heavy with the fragrant scent of incense, mingling with the hushed murmurs of fervent prayers. Kassa moves forward, each footstep echoing in perfect harmony with the beating of his heart, a rhythm that now pulses in unison with the hopes and dreams of his people and the legacy he is destined to forge.

As Kassa enters the inner sanctuary, he is joined by his beloved Yejju wife, Tewabatch Ali, her presence a steadfast anchor in this momentous occasion. Before them, Abuna Salama, resplendent in full Alexandrian apparel and a shimmering golden robe, bows in reverence. Together, Kassa and Tewabatch take their seats before the congregation of nobles gathered within the sacred walls, their eyes fixed upon the unfolding ceremony.

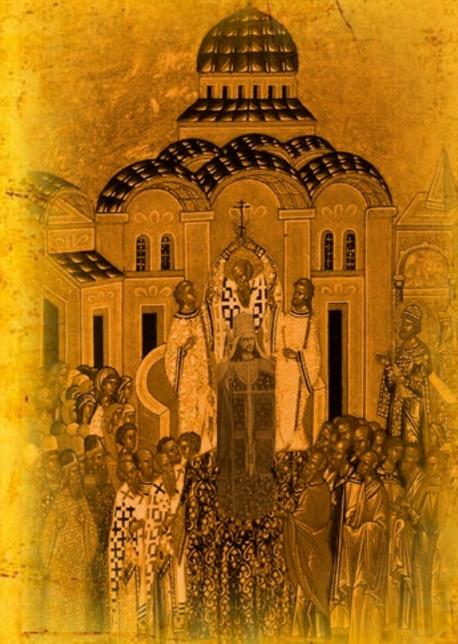
The Abuna, his steps measured and purposeful, makes his way to the gathered bishops, deacons, priests, and monks, who are lost in deep prayer by the altar. Upon the altar, the royal insignia—the scepter, the orb, the crown, and the gown of the kingdom—lie carefully arranged, each item imbued with centuries of tradition and divine significance. With great solemnity, the Abuna begins to spray these sacred objects with holy water, his actions a blessing and a purification.

“God, the Heavenly King on behalf of the Earthly King of Zion, O Lord, we beg you to bless the crown that is about to be placed upon your chosen head,” the Abuna intones, his voice rising in supplication. “Bless this gown that is to adorn the body of the one who is one with the holy flesh and the blood of Christ.” The prayer of the holy mass swells, filling the air with a palpable sense of reverence and expectation.

The Abuna reaches for an intricately carved horn filled with sacred oil, a symbol of divine blessing. Kassa, kneels before the Abuna, his head bowed in humble submission and reverence. With deliberate motions, the Abuna tilts the horn, allowing the consecrated oil to pour forth. The oil cascades through Kassa's long, meticulously braided hair, each strand glistening as it becomes anointed. This physical act serves as a tangible manifestation of the divine choosing, marking Kassa as a leader blessed by the heavens.

"The Lord anoints you with oil by my hand, which distinguishes those like you, so that you may rule over all the people within the kingdom of Ethiopia," the Abuna proclaims, his words resonating with the weight of destiny.

As Kassa raises his head, his gaze finds his mother among the attendees, her eyes brimming with tears of pride and ecstasy. In this moment, her voice echoes in his mind, a cherished memory from long ago: "Look how big and strong you have become. . . you belong to the great descendants, do not forget who you are Lije. You're a king, my love, you are my Tewodros!"

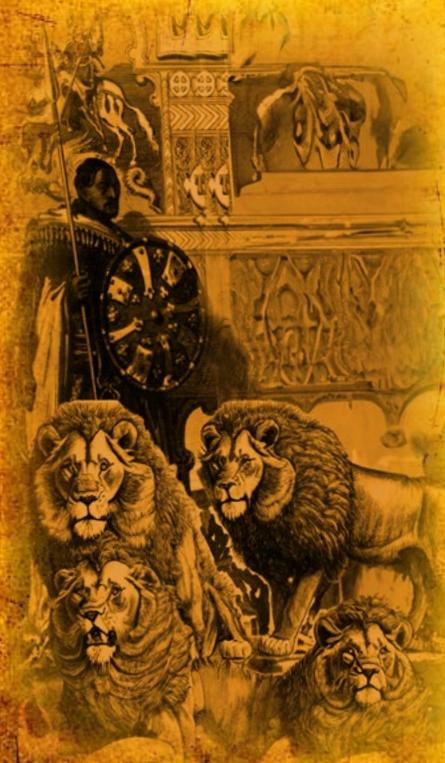


With his mother bearing witness to this sacred rite, Kassa, in full devotion, receives holy communion, the divine sacrament further solidifying his connection to the heavenly realm. Lost in a deep trance, he barely registers as Abuna Salama clothes him in the golden gown of the state, pressing the royal insignia and scepter into his hands. Finally, the diamond-studded crown is placed upon his head, the weight of leadership and responsibility settling upon his brow.

"God bless Emperor Tewodros II, King of Kings of Zion, King of Kings of Ethiopia!" the Abuna proclaims, his voice ringing out like a proclamation. From this moment forward, Kassa Hailu will be known as Emperor Tewodros, a name bestowed

upon him by his mother's unwavering belief in his destiny to fulfill the legendary myth. As one, the entire congregation rises, their voices joining in a resounding salute to their newly crowned emperor.

Emerging from the church, Emperor Tewodros is greeted by the delighted cheers of thousands gathered outside, their joy palpable in the air. In his hands, he carries the insignia that bears a striking resemblance to the Order of Solomonic Seal he once carried as



a child, a symbol of his lineage and divine right to rule. Behind him, Abuna Salama, the Etchege, and the newly appointed notable nobles and officials follow in a grand procession. The clergy, adorned in their resplendent church ornaments and bearing decorated umbrellas, flow out in a river of color and reverence.

The joyous eruption of singing and chanting mingles with the sounds of celebration as the procession accompanies Emperor Tewodros, who greets his subjects with a benevolent smile and a regal wave. As he reaches an open space, the noise dies down, and an ancient royal seat carved from stone rises before him—the holy throne of David, steeped in Axumite tradition that stretches for centuries.

With great solemnity, Emperor Tewodros takes his place upon the throne, the weight of history and the hopes of his people resting upon his shoulders. To his right stands the Abuna, a pillar of spiritual guidance, while Gabreye, his loyal friend and confidant, takes his place to the left. In this moment, Emperor Tewodros fulfills the ancient custom of the Axumite kings, a living embodiment of the divine right to rule.

The clergy, their voices rising in unison, recite passages from the Psalm of David, their words a testament to the unbroken line of succession. “We give you Emperor Tewodros the Second, the son of King David, the King of Ethiopia,” they proclaim, their declaration echoing through the gathered throng.

As if on cue, a series of gunfire erupts from the warriors, their weapons raised in a salute to mark the fulfillment of the sacred procedures. Em-

peror Tewodros rises from the throne, the sounds of ululations and celebration swelling around him. He mounts a richly decorated and caparisoned mule, followed by horsemen from his innermost circle of warriors, each adorned in glittering silver, gold, and regal purple.

An army of thousands stands at the ready, their swords, spears, and shields held aloft in a display of steadfast loyalty and strength. Matchlock-armed men fire in unison, the sound of their guns punctuating the air with a resounding declaration of the new emperor’s ascension.

As the day’s celebrations continue into the fading light, the newly crowned emperor is filled with a mix of gratitude, trepidation, and determination. He knows that his reign will be defined by his actions, by his ability to navigate the complex web of political alliances, religious tensions, and societal challenges that make up the tapestry of Ethiopian life. Emperor Tewodros II understands that his legacy will be shaped by the choices he makes, the vision he pursues, and the strength of the bonds he forges with his people. As the sun sets on this momentous day, the emperor steels himself for the journey ahead, ready to face whatever the future may hold and to carve his name into the pages of history.



The Unifier

A house divided cannot stand

Amidst the pre-dawn stillness, Emperor Tewodros emerges from the crimson tent that stands like a bold sentinel amidst the slumbering warrior camp. The night's lingering darkness clings to the edges of the sleeping forms as he moves swiftly through their midst, his purpose evident in every purposeful stride. He mounts his warhorse and rides away as if heading to war alone. Stirred by an innate instinct, his royal guards rise from their slumber, their movements hurried as they struggle to keep pace with their emperor.

The In the gray light of early morning, Emperor Tewodros' commanding presence is amplified by the surrounding stillness, his restless energy palpable in the crisp air. With the urgency of a man driven by a higher calling, he leaps from his mount, his feet hitting the ground with a resounding thud. The emperor ascends the small amba with the agility and grace of a seasoned warrior, his movements fluid and precise, like a sacred dance performed to an unheard rhythm.

The wind whips around him, tugging at the edges of his thick gabbie, as if nature itself is urging him forward. His guards, startled by the emperor's sudden burst of energy, scramble to keep up, their efforts marked by slips and stumbles on the steep incline. But Emperor Tewodros charges ahead, undeterred, a vision of steadfast resolve and raw power.

"Keep up!" He shouts at the guards, his actions like those of a warrior preparing for an imminent battle, driven by an unseen force that beckons him to the summit.

Emperor Tewodros closes the distance to the crest of the hill, his heart pounding in sync with the urgency that courses through his veins. He reaches the top long before his guards, leaving them trailing far behind, as his firm drive, stoked by the flames of his aspirations, propels him forward.

As he stands atop the hill, his chest heaving with exertion, Emperor Tewodros turns to face his guards, who are still struggling to reach him. "How is it the young with strength by the old are beaten?" he calls out, his words hanging in the crisp air, a rhetorical question that underscores the expectations he holds for those who serve him.

The guards, their faces etched with exhaustion, finally reach the summit, some falling to their knees, gasping for air. Emperor Tewodros towers over them, his presence both awe-inspiring and humbling, a living embodiment of the strength and vitality he demands from his subjects.

“Go back down and climb it once more!” he commands, his voice a thunderous mix of authority and camaraderie. “You are the future of the empire, and you must be stronger than I am!” His words echo across the hilltop, a challenge and a promise, urging his guards to demonstrate their readiness and loyalty, to rise to the standards he sets for the empire he envisions.

Invigorated by their emperor’s challenge, the guards rise to their feet, their weariness replaced by a renewed sense of purpose. They descend the hill with newfound energy, eager to prove their worth and meet the expectations laid before them.

Left alone once more, Emperor Tewodros mounts his horse, his heart still racing with the urgency that propels him forward. He rides through a forested enclosure, the trees a blur of green as he navigates the path with the speed and precision of a man on a mission. The surroundings evoke memories of the island monastery of his childhood, but he pushes the nostalgia aside, focused on the present and the future he must shape.

As he approaches the ancient church nestled among the trees at the hill’s zenith, Emperor Tewodros slows his horse to a trot. The centuries-old walls emanate an aura of sacredness, a reminder of the enduring faith that permeates the land. The ethereal echoes of priests’ dawn prayers spill from the sanctuary, their haunting melodies a

testament to the spiritual foundation upon which he must build his empire.

But Emperor Tewodros does not linger. With a sense of purpose that borders on impatience, he turns away from the solemn sounds and rides to the edge of the hill. His gaze sweeps over the vast expanse before him, taking in the hills and mountains that stretch into the distance, their contours softened by the gentle embrace of morning sunlight. The breathtaking tapestry of natural beauty that unfolds before him serves as a reminder of the empire he must unite, the lands he must bring under his rule.

As he surveys the landscape, Emperor Tewodros’ heart pounds with the urgency of his mission. The restlessness that had driven him to the hilltop now propels him forward, urging him to take action, to seize the moment and shape the destiny of his people. He knows that the path ahead is fraught with challenges, but he is ready to face them head-on, armed with the strength of his convictions and the fire of his ambition.

“Have you come to absolve me of my sins from last night, Abuna?” Emperor Tewodros’ words are soft, contemplative, spoken to the wind and the unseen presence that surrounds him.

As the shadows retreat slowly, dawn creeps over the mountain pass, casting its golden glow upon the figure of Abuna Salama, who winces at the cramp in his leg as he shifts in the saddle of his mule. He wonders how long he must keep pace alongside his supreme overlord, Emperor Tewodros, the man some are already hailing as the Promised One.



“God himself has anointed you, your Majesty. It is you who must forgive me and all of us for our sins,” Abuna Salama replies, stealing a glance at the emperor’s stern profile, his wind-whipped robes suggesting a coming storm. The Abuna wonders if the same tempest that troubles the sky also rages within his fierce leader’s heart this morning.

“What disturbs you, my Ase?” the Abuna asks, approaching closer to the emperor, his voice filled with concern and reverence.

“I cannot sleep Abuna. . . I have not slept well in ages. . .” Emperor Tewodros confesses, his gaze burning across the vast vista, his jaw clenching tightly before he speaks again. “My dreams overflow with milk and honey, yet my waking hours spill blood,” he murmurs, his words heavy with the weight of his actions. “Tell me, Abuna, do you believe all this carnage will someday yield a kingdom of peace?”

A pregnant silence falls between them, laden with unspoken thoughts and unmeasured depths of emotion. The Abuna, sensing the emperor’s in-

ner turmoil, chooses his next words carefully, seeking to offer comfort and guidance.

“It is by the will of the Trinity and the favor of the creator of Heaven and Earth that the kingdom is finally blessed with a capable ruler like you, your Majesty,” the Abuna confides. “A ruler who possesses more power than any of the former sovereigns of Abyssinia,” the Abuna proclaims, his voice ringing with conviction. “You tear asunder an ancient land only to raise it up whole again. Have faith, Ase!”

“Faith?” Emperor Tewodros turns to him, shadows crossing his face, his eyes searching for answers in the holy man’s countenance. “You speak to me of faith after all the men I’ve put to the sword, all the widows’ and their children’s cries haunting my restless nights?”

The Abuna feels the emperor’s torment, the weight of his actions bearing down upon his soul. He grips his scepter tighter, the metal edges digging into his palm as he considers his response, seeking to offer wisdom and solace.

“If we desire true unity, your Majesty, it cannot come merely by imposing your royal will, as a conqueror conquers,” the Abuna advises, his words measured and profound. “The people’s hearts are the greater prize. Win them, teach them your enlightened ways, show mercy where you may.”

The silence that hangs between them is thick, palpable, like the morning mist that clings to the land. Emperor Tewodros, his brow furrowed in contemplation, ponders the Abuna’s counsel, the weight of his aspirations and the burden of his actions warring within him.

"They say ambition is a sin, Abuna," Emperor Tewodros muses, his tone reflecting the magnitude of his desires and the depths of his inner conflict.

"Your Majesty, ambition can be a powerful force for change, but it must be guided by moral principles," the Abuna sizes the emperor, gauging how much he can push him. "I urge you to ensure that your ambitions are aligned with the divine will of our maker and contribute to the prosperity and harmony of your people," retorts the Abuna.

"Abuna, ambition, for my kind, in a world like this one, has led to a swifter downfall than progress, a bloodbath to nowhere but to hell" the Emperor confides.

"Your ambition must be equal to the strength you possess, your Majesty," Abuna Salama responds, his words a sacred hymn, imbued with reverence and understanding. "It is the ambitions of great kings that bend the world to their will, like fire to iron."

Emperor Tewodros turns to face the Abuna, his gaze piercing yet thoughtful, as if seeking to unravel the mysteries of his own destiny. "Last night, I dreamt of the archangel Urael, who came to me as he did to my ancestors, Yekuno Amlak, Amda Seyon, and Emperor Libna-Dingel, I saw them as I see you now Abuna. . ." he reveals, his voice hushed with the weight of his revelation. "He showed me a vision of those born of the tribe of Judah ruling the lands from the sea to Shoa and beyond. . ."

The emperor turns back on his mount, his eyes sweeping over the vista spread out before him, a kingdom waiting to be united under his rule. "My ambition, Abuna, has no limits," he declares, his words a proclamation of his unyielding resolve.



"And in my pursuit of my ambition, there will be more blood that has to be spilled."

Abuna Salama, his heart racing with the gravity of the emperor's words, inches forward until their eyes meet, blurring the lines between ruler and spiritual guide. The connection between them crackles with an undeniable electricity, a shared destiny coursing through their veins.

"You've begun your reign nobly, denouncing the nonbelievers and condemning heresies," the Abuna intones, his voice a solemn echo. "Your Majesty, your visions for the kingdom are extraordinary." He imparts support "A righteous leader makes righteous choices. I would be honored to stand with you in your march on Shoa."

Emperor Tewodros' surprise melts into resolve as he gazes upon the holy man before him, recognizing the staunch support and guidance he offers. "I've already set my men in motion to advance southward," he reveals, his words a clear

demonstration of his resolute tenacity. "With the Trinity by my side, I believe we can unite the entire country."

A smile quirks at the Emperor's lips as he takes a step toward Abuna Salama, a silent acknowledgment of their shared purpose. "Bless me Abuna for I seek divine guidance to lead my people to greatness." Without hesitation, he reaches for the Abuna's cross, bending to kiss it, sealing their commitment to unite the kingdoms under his divinely ordained rule.



Amidst the quiet morning, as the sun's rays stretch across the sky, painting the land in a golden hue, the thunderous roar of war-drums rises, a stark contrast to the peaceful prayers that had echoed just moments ago. The drums' rhythm reverberates through the land, a declaration of the challenges that lie ahead and the indomitable spirit of a ruler ready to lead his people into a new era of unity and greatness.

Emperor Tewodros, his heart filled with a potent mixture of ambition, faith, and resolve, gazes out over the kingdom that awaits his conquest. The path ahead is fraught with trials and tribulations, but with the blessings of the divine and the unwavering support of Abuna Salama, he stands ready to forge a new destiny for Ethiopia, to unite the scattered kingdoms under his iron-clad rule and usher in an age of unprecedented prosperity and strength.

As the war-drums continue to pound, their rhythm a summons to battle, Emperor Tewodros and Abuna Salama exchange a final glance, their eyes locked in a silent understanding of the momentous task that lies before them. Together, they will march on Shoa, their hearts set on the grand vision of a united Ethiopia, a kingdom that will stand as a beacon of power and righteousness in the face of all who dare to oppose it.

As the ground trembles beneath the weight of an enormous line of warriors, both mounted and unmounted, the air crackles with anticipation. The emperor's warriors move in perfect order, their disciplined steps echoing through the hilly path as they advance with unfaltering determination. Dust rises in their wake, casting an ethereal veil over the spectacle that unfolds, a haze that seems to shimmer with the promise of impending conflict.

Among the ranks of warriors, golden glints catch the morning sun, shimmering brightly through the dusty haze. At the forefront of this majestic assembly, Emperor Tewodros stands resplendent in his imperial regalia, observing and interacting with the local peoples with cordial greetings, his presence commanding attention and demand.



ing respect. Beside him rides the Abuna, adorned in his full clerical attire, a figure of spiritual authority whose presence lends divine sanction to their march. Caparisoned horses carry the two figures of authority, their hooves striking the earth with purpose, while umbrellas shield the pale Abuna from the sun's unrelenting gaze.

The emperor basks in the sunlight. The procession is one of grandeur and power, a testament to the might of the new empire being birthed before all as they lead this massive force on a conquest march to the south.



Suddenly, Emperor Tewodros halts his stallion, his eyes sweeping over the magnificent set of hills that stretch before him. His gaze finally fixes on the biggest of the ambas that dominates the skylines, a site of immense significance—the Magdella fortress. Its impregnable form rises like a monolithic ship amidst the surrounding terrain like a symbol of the challenges that lie ahead, a bastion

of resistance that must be overcome if his vision of a united empire is to be realized.

Within the confines of the Magdella fortress, the interior teems with masses of warriors, their muscular forms gripping spears and shields with determined resolve. The air is thick with tension and the murmur of voices, a palpable sense of readiness and defiance. Among the warriors are figures with turbans, a representation of the diverse forces united within these stone walls, in a grand display of the resolute resolve and unity of the southern regions.

Assembled in a circle, the powers of the Wollo region sit on luxuriously carpeted floors, their ranks forming the majority of the warrior class hierarchy. At the heart of this gathering sits Queen Workqitu, an imposing figure in her prime. Her intricate hairstyle is adorned with a sinuous leather shasse, perfectly complementing the vibrant hue of her tunic. Every subtle motion sets her golden jewelry aglow, a show of her opulence and commanding rulership over the southern realms. Resting upon an elevated platform, the Queen exudes regal power, her scarlet tunic ablaze amidst the grandeur of the chamber, embodying the power of the Oromo clans.

Her gaze locks onto the haggard man standing apart from the circle of nobles—Ras Ali, the defeated Endresse, once a conqueror, now a wanderer under her protection. His presence serves as a stark reminder of the shifting tides of power and the precariousness of their position.

“Our ancestors turned back every would-be Christian conqueror from the north,” Queen Workqitu declares, her voice steel, cutting

through the murmurs of the assembled nobles. "What makes you think this self-proclaimed prophet emperor will prevail against us?" Her words are a challenge, a defiant proclamation of their strength and resilience in the face of the advancing threat.

"We have faced thousands of enemies from the north, all their threats are but empty bragging until they face our arms on the battlefield!" Roars her son, Amda Liben, a powerful leader of the Oromo cavalry, seated by her side. Amda smokes from a water pipe contraption, his demeanor exuding both confidence and nonchalance, a man secure in his own power and the strength of his people.



The circle's attention converges on Ras Ali, the once-powerful figure among the defeated Yejju Oromo, now unrecognizable, emaciated, and turbaned, a shadow of his former self as he steps up to address the Queen.

"I have fought him myself, your grace. His army pursues a mad dream under the banner of holy war." The former Endresse warns "They will show no mercy to anyone that stands on their

path," Ras Ali's words ring out, carrying the weight of his experience. "An army bred in the jungle, under a tyrant, cannot be beaten." His proclamation ignites an uproar from the Oromo circle, each member reacting to his pronouncement with a mixture of disbelief, anger, and defiance.

Amda Liben shifts forward, his eyes narrowing, his voice rising above the clamor. "No army bearing their holy cross can conquer us!" he scoffs. "From the ancients to now, Waqqa wills it!" he declares, invoking the divine protection of their god, a rallying cry that reverberates through the chamber.

"I say again!" Queen Workqitu's voice cuts through the fervor, her words laden with ancestral pride. "We have resisted each and every one of those Solomonic hordes that have come across our frontiers since the time of Tekle-Giyorgis," she reminds them, her gaze fixed on Ras Ali. "We even turned back your feared cavalry. . .or did you forget, like you and the Yejju, who have forgotten their tradition long ago to become like them?" Her accusation hangs in the air, a pointed reminder of the betrayal and assimilation of their once-powerful Oromo clan allies.

"Resist him, and he will take everything you have." Ras Ali rubs his scarred face, his lone eye looming out of the shadows, his presence a haunting reminder of the cost of defeat. "This Shifta shall swallow your lands whole if you do not submit to him," he warns, his words laced with a subtle challenge to the Oromo who roar in defiance.

"I know him better than any of you. Your forces are no match for him!" Ras Ali continues, his voice heavy with the bitter taste of defeat. His

words are met with a renewed surge of anger and defiance from the assembled chiefs and nobles.

"Maybe he attacks, or he does not." Amda Liben's response is fervent, his conviction resolute. "It does not matter. War is inevitable for anyone who crosses into our realms!" he declares, his words a rallying cry that echoes through the chamber. But among the gathered chiefs and nobles, voices of differing perspectives rise, seeking to balance the imminent threat with measured consideration. They speak of the people of the north falling to their knees before the advancing emperor, of the possibility of peace through submission.

"Peace with submission?! A disgrace!" Amda Liben silences them with a sweep of his hand, his voice ringing out with steadfast conviction. "Peace begotten by bending the knee before a tyrant is unnatural!" he proclaims, his words a searing indictment of the very notion of surrender.

As the men stir with fury, Queen Workquitu quietly observes Ras Ali, her gaze a window into her thoughts. "Some say this one is a madman who thinks he is the second coming of their Lord, a Messiah," she intones, her voice a solemn echo in the chamber. "What does he know of us?"

"It is not what he knows but what he aims that makes him dangerous!" Ras Ali snaps, his words a harsh reminder of the reality they face. "He knows war, he has no fear of death, and his army is headed for the south because he believes he is building an empire." His words ignite another eruption of anger and defiance from the chamber.

"He believes you are on the land of his ancestors, and he will remove you by force if he must," Ras Ali shouts, his voice rising above the clamor,

and the Queen bristles at the implications of his words.

"A deranged madman!" Amda Liben rises to his feet, his hand on his sword, his voice a thunderous declaration. "We shall fight him to the death! Allah wills it! Waaqa wills it!" he proclaims. "Are you ready for War?!" he demands, and the chamber erupts in a chorus of cheers and shouts in a show of unity and readiness.

"You will not win this war!" Ras Ali's warning cuts through the fervor, a sobering reminder of the harsh realities that await them.

"Yes we will!" Roars Amda Liben to the cheer of his warriors.

"Pray that Allah or Waaqa wins it for you because, in the end, you will not!" Ras Ali declares, his words a chilling prophecy of the fate that may befall them.

Insulted and enraged, Amda Liben lurches to his feet behind the Queen, his hand on his sword, his eyes blazing with fury. "That sort of thinking is why you and the Yejju lost to him!" he spits at the former Endresse, his words dripping with contempt.

For a breath, violence brews, the air electric with tension. A furious Ras Ali moves his hand to his sword in response, the two leaders eyeing one another with an intent to harm, their enmity palpable.

"Halt!" The Queen raises one hand, her voice deathly calm, cutting through the tension like a blade. "You are in my court, wanderer. Remember yourself," she warns Ras Ali, her words a reminder

of his diminished status and the precariousness of his position.

Ras Ali hesitates, his lone eye boring into Amda Liben, a silent battle of wills playing out between them. Then, with a dip of his head, he acquiesces to the Queen's command, the guards relaxing by a fraction as the immediate threat of violence dissipates.

The Queen straightens, her next words sealing their fate. "We shall meet this would-be emperor blade to blade," she proclaims, her voice ringing with determination and resolve. She sweeps a blistering gaze over the chamber, her eyes alight with the fire of defiance.

"Assemble the warriors!" Her command hangs in the air, a summons to all the Oromo clans to appear on the battlefield. The chiefs and nobles rise, their voices joining in a crescendo of war cries and pledges of loyalty, their spirits united in the face of the advancing threat.

As the chamber erupts in a frenzy of activity, the weight of the impending conflict settles upon them, a sense of destiny and doom intertwined. The die has been cast, the path to war irrevocably set, and the fate of the southern regions hangs in the balance.

Outside the fortress walls, Emperor Tewodros and his army continue their relentless march, the drumbeat of their advance a portent of the battle to come. The sun beats down upon them, the dust of their passage rising in a shimmering haze, a veil of destiny that shrouds their path.

In the heart of the Magdella fortress, Queen Workqitu and her warriors prepare for the on-

slaught, their resolve hardened by the knowledge that they fight not only for their lands and their way of life but for the very soul of their people. They are the last line of defense, the bulwark against the tide of conquest that threatens to engulf them, and they will meet it with all the fury and determination of a people who have never known defeat.



As the two forces converge, the fate of an empire hangs in the balance, the destiny of a nation to be written in blood and fire upon the hills and plains of the south. The stage is set for a clash of the north with the south, a battle that will echo through the ages, and the outcome will shape the course of history for generations to come.

Magdella

Every mountain top is within reach if you just keep climbing

In the stillness of the night, Emperor Tewodros tosses and turns, his mind consumed by a vivid dream that refuses to release its hold. "Wake up, my love," Tewabatch's gentle voice penetrates the veil of his nightmare as she caresses his sweat-dampened skin. "What troubles you so?"

Emperor Tewodros's eyes flutter open, haunted and distant. Sitting up slowly, his heart pounds as the remnants of the dream cling to his waking mind. "I saw it," he whispers hoarsely. "The mountain fortress, impregnable and unyielding. Just as you said. It beckoned me to conquer it, to make it the seat of my empire." Wiping the sweat from his brow, the emperor adds, "But there was more—a shadow at the edges of my vision, a sense of impending doom I could not shake."



Tewabatch takes his hand, her touch a comforting anchor amidst his troubled thoughts. "What shadow do you speak of, fekre?"

Closing his eyes as the echoes of cannon fire and gunshots reverberate in his mind, Emperor Tewodros lowers his head, the weight of his worries bearing down upon him.

"I was falling, falling and falling from the summit. . ." He utters, barely above a whisper, "I fear the path to unity will be treacherous. The people are divided, their loyalties fractured," the words flow out like a confession "Bringing them together will require more than conquest—it will demand sacrifice, perhaps even my own life."

"In the name of our Lord and Savior, what a dreadful thought" Tewabatch's eyes widen as she pleads, "Don't say such things. You are the Emperor, chosen by God to lead our people to greatness. You cannot let fear and doubt cloud your judgment."

Rubbing his eyes, Emperor Tewodros locks his gaze with hers. In the depths of her eyes, he sees the faith and love that have sustained him through countless trials. "I know, fekre," he says softly, caressing her cheek. "But I cannot ignore the warnings my ancestors bring. Magdella may be my destiny, but it may also be my undoing. No matter what comes, I must carry this burden."

"You are not alone." Leaning into his touch, Tewabatch declares fiercely, "Let me stand by your side. Let me be your strength and comfort, your rock in the face of any storm that may come."

Emperor Tewodros feels a surge of love and gratitude wash over him. "I could not do this without you," he whispers, pressing his forehead

against hers. Pulling back slightly, he gazes into her eyes. "Truly, I believe the Lord sent you to me. You are the moon to my sun, the calm to my storm. Together we create balance and harmony that I had not known or felt in this world."

Smiling through her tears, Tewabatch locks her hand with his. "Our fates are divinely entwined. Together, we will face whatever the future holds, no matter the cost. The south may be our destiny, but it is not our end. You will conquer it, and we will rule over a united kingdom, an empire that will endure for eternity."

Emperor Tewodros nods, his resolve strengthened by her faith in him. "Magdella will be ours, and our empire will be a beacon of hope and unity for generations to come." As they lay bonded, their bodies intertwined and hearts beating as one, Emperor Tewodros feels a sense of calm settle over him.

The next morning, Emperor Tewodros stands stoically upon his war horse, his eyes blazing with fierce intensity, reflecting the fire that burns within his soul. Surveying his assembled forces, pride and determination well up inside him. Through sheer force of will, he has forged a formidable army from disparate lands and peoples, driving them into the heart of the expansive central plains, where the atmosphere crackles with anticipation.

A formidable legion of Wollo horsemen forms an imposing line in the distant plains, their spears poised with lethal precision, glinting like a thousand deadly stars. Undeterred and confident in their disciplined order, they present a display reminiscent of the Oromo Yejju cavalry that dominated the highlands mere months ago. At their

helm stands Amda Liben, a commanding figure astride his mount, radiating an aura of indomitable resolve. Encircled by the chieftains who convened with the Queen in the council of war, their faces etched with determination, they lock eyes with the oncoming imperial forces, ready to defend their lands and way of life with every ounce of their be-



ing.

“Zeraf, Zeraf, Zeraf!” The battle cries from the Emperor’s army rise from thousands of throats, a thunderous rumble that reverberates across the plains, shaking the very ground beneath them.

Amda Liben and his chiefs observe with bated breath, their faces etched with tension. “Ebegeme! Galla! Ebegeme! Galla!” Commands echo through the ranks, and the Wollo cavalry sets into motion, the hoofbeats of their steeds pounding the earth like war drums.

Emperor Tewodros turns his attention to his well-armed army, a mixture of warriors carrying matchlock guns recovered from Tigray and Gojjam, their weapons glinting in the sunlight. With a steely gesture, the emperor sends an unspoken command rippling through the ranks, a silent declaration of his resolve.

As the Wollo cavalry charges forward in a thunderous stampede, their spears glinting with primal fury, the air is rent with the sound of their war cries. But within moments, their momentum is shattered, their advance brought to a devastating



halt. The rifles of the emperor’s army bark as one, an earth-shattering roar that splits the air, followed instantly by anguished screams.

A swirling storm of bullets churns the swarming horsemen into a madness of shredded flesh and ruin, a nightmarish vision of carnage and destruction. The once-proud Wollo warriors are reduced to a tangle of broken bodies and shattered dreams, their blood staining the earth crimson.

Queen Workquitu, watching from afar, clutches her breast against the anguished lurch of her heart, her eyes wide with horror and disbelief. As the gruesome reality sinks in, fierce determination takes hold of her very being. With a heart-wrenching cry, she rallies her remaining forces, her voice cutting through the chaos like a final call to arms. Mounting her steed, she charges forward, sword drawn and eyes blazing with the fire of vengeance, leading her warriors in a furious onslaught.

Through the swirling gun-smoke, glimpses of the unfolding carnage assault her fevered gaze—limbs splayed at unnatural angles, horses heaving their final breaths. Her cries are drowned by the groans of the dying, an agonized litany for her lost son hanging in her throat, a silent scream of grief and despair.

“Where is he? Where is my son? Find him!” she cries out, her voice carrying the weight of a mother’s anguish. Her words seem swallowed by the wind, lost amidst the chaos and clamor of war, but her men rally around her, their faces harsh with determination as they aid in the search for her missing son amidst the grim tableau of death and destruction.

A rider finds her at last, his face tight with grim news. “Amda is captured!” he says gravely. “Amda is captured!” The word spreads like wildfire, a roar of cries erupting as the gravity of the situation becomes known to the Wollo warriors, their hearts sinking with the realization of their leader’s fate.

“He and the chiefs have been taken by the emperor’s men!” the rider continues, his words a dagger to the Queen’s heart. Workquitu’s heart

clenches, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears, a well of grief and rage threatening to overflow. She steadies herself, drawing upon deep reserves of strength, her resolve solidifying into an unbreakable diamond.

“Send ambush parties on every road their army treads,” she commands, her voice resolute as the victorious imperial army disbands to secure the territories gained. “Castrate every man you lay hands on until my son is freed.” Her words are a vow, a blood oath sworn upon the memory of her fallen warriors, a promise of retribution and vengeance that will not be denied.

“My queen. . .” The rider’s face reveals his apprehension, a mix of fear and concern etched upon his weathered features. “Your son has been taken to Magdella’s dreaded heights.” The name of the fortress falls like a hammer blow, a pronouncement of doom that sends a shiver down the spines of all who hear it.

Queen Workquitu’s fingers twist in torment as the implacable mountain looms in the distance, an insurmountable tomb for her beloved child, a bastion of stone that defies all hope of rescue. “None can breach Magdella,” the rider continues, his words a grim confirmation of their worst fears.

The queen’s gaze fixates on the impregnable mountain that dominates the skyline, her thoughts veiled by shadows of despair, her heart gripped by an icy hand of dread. “What disgrace has Allah brought down upon us?” she murmurs, her words a lament, a prayer, and a plea all at once, a desperate cry to the heavens for mercy and deliverance.

“My son! My son!” She erupts in disbelief and horror, her anguish a palpable force that radi-

ates from her very being. Dark thoughts crowd her mind's eye—visions of Amda broken and alone, her spilled tears his only comfort against the merciless skies.

As her lament floats upon the breeze, carried by the winds of sorrow and despair, Queen Workqitu swears a blood oath that only her son's return can sate, a vow that will consume her every waking moment until he is safe in her arms once more. Her kingdom's fate hangs by a thread as thin as her wavering hope, a fragile life-line threatening to snap at any moment,



plunging them all into an abyss of darkness and despair.

A victorious Emperor Tewodros, resplendent in his imperial regalia, sits upon a commanding throne that exudes an aura of unquestionable authority. The meticulously orchestrated ceremony unfolds before him as esteemed regional leaders and representatives approach, their steps weighted with a mix of awe and reverence. Admiration shines in their eyes, their hearts brimming with the desire to bask in the presence of their new sovereign. Yet, amidst the grandeur of the spectacle, keen ob-



servers catch glimpses of an undeniable unease, a palpable tension permeating the air.

As the dignitaries draw closer to the emperor's presence, the hesitant footsteps of a select

few betray their inner trepidation. It is as if they are walking a tightrope, balancing their desire to show respect with the fear of incurring the emperor's displeasure. The weight of their concerns hangs heavily upon their shoulders, a burden they carry with each measured step.

"I am the vanquisher of our Christian kingdom's foes, the one who has brought low those who dared to challenge our divine right to rule," Emperor Tewodros declares, his voice resonating with the power of his triumphs. "I am the harbinger of peace and unity among all realms, the one destined to bring our people together under a single banner." His words carry the weight of authority unheard of in these parts for centuries, a declaration of his supremacy that brooks no dissent.

Yet, as he surveys the gathered leaders, Emperor Tewodros cannot help but notice the flicker of uncertainty in some of their eyes. With a piercing gaze, he addresses them directly, his voice tinged with a mix of frustration and incredulity, "Why do you tremble before me as though I come to bring destruction upon you?"

A momentary pause follows his question, the silence heavy with unspoken fears and doubts. Then, an elder among the gathering steps forward, his voice quivering yet resolute, "Your Majesty, the Gala have seized our ancestral lands, the very soil upon which our forefathers toiled and built their lives." He weeps as if in great pain. "The Muslims have pillaged everything that rightly belonged to us, leaving us with nothing but the bitter taste of loss and despair."

Emperor Tewodros's gaze shifts to his confidant, Gabreye, a knowing glance passing between

them. It is a look that speaks volumes of the repeated encounters they have had with such pleas, the same tales of woe and dispossession that have echoed through the halls of power for far too long.

Another chief steps forward, desperation etched upon his face, his voice laced with a fervent plea, "Your Grace, when the Muslim Yeju held dominion in Gonder, we had no one to turn to but the Lord in heaven." He bows as low as he can before the emperor. "We have come seeking your intervention, your divine guidance to restore what is rightfully ours."

"What does land mean to you?!" The emperor interjects. Silence falls in the chamber. "I have come as a just and fair ruler, one who seeks the betterment of all our people," Emperor Tewodros loudly proclaims. "What does land mean to you?" He demands again, his question hanging in the air, a challenge to the very core of their concerns.

The chief, taken aback by the Emperor's query, looks around at the others with confusion, then turns back to the emperor. "How do you mean, Your Majesty? Land is everything!"

"I have traversed vast territories of our ancestral lands to reach you, and believe me when I say that land abounds within our kingdom," Emperor Tewodros rises, his voice filled with a mix of exasperation and determination. "What is lacking is unity, the love of a populace willing to share it with their neighbors." He gets closer to the chief. "Can you see beyond the narrow confines of your own interests and embrace the greater good of our people?"

"But your Majesty," the chief, his voice trembling with emotion, tries to argue, "my ancestors

do not hail from the lands you traversed. I am the son of balambarass Tekle —”

“You are my subject!” Emperor Tewodros abruptly cuts short the chief’s plea with an authoritative gesture. “The land rights from Tigray, Semien, Begemidir, Gonder to Gojjam, and soon to Shoa, and every land in between and beyond them, are all one and the same!” His voice booms through the chamber, a declaration that leaves no room for debate. “They are the birthright of our people, the sacred soil upon which our empire shall rise, reunited and strong once again as in the time of our ancestors!”

With a resolute stride, Emperor Tewodros exits the chamber, his entourage scrambling to keep pace with his determined steps. Gabreye, ever loyal, follows closely behind, the weight of the Emperor’s words hovering in the air like a pronouncement of destiny.

As the Afenegus, the spokesperson of the Emperor’s court, steps forward, his voice rings out with the majesty of the imperial decree, “In the name of His Majesty Emperor Tewodros II, the King of Ethiopia and descendant of the Lion of Judah, let it be known that those whose fathers were once landowners shall have their ancestral lands restored, while those without fathers shall beseech His Majesty at the palace gates.”

The proclamation echoes through the chamber, a promise of justice and restoration, yet tinged with the bitter reality of the challenges that lie ahead.

Outside, Emperor Tewodros strides towards the edge of the Magdella cliffs, his frustration seething beneath the surface. The wind whips

around him, scattering courtiers in its gusts as they struggle to keep pace with his relentless march.

“Leave us!” With a voice that cuts through the chaos, he commands. The shaken courtiers, their faces etched with a mix of fear and reverence, hasten to retrieve the discarded imperial attire before disappearing from sight, leaving the Emperor and his trusted confidant alone in the swirling winds of change.

Stripped of the trappings, Emperor Tewodros stands resolute, his garments fluttering in the wind, like he is in the middle of his nightmare. He inhales deeply, his gaze fixed upon the sprawling panorama before him, a kingdom ripe for transformation. Gabreye joins him, their bond of camaraderie silently reaffirmed in the face of the monumental task that lies ahead.

“How does one mend a people divided by their attachment to a piece of land, as if the Lord made it exclusively for them?” Emperor Tewodros muses aloud, his voice heavy with the weight of the challenge he faces. “How do we unite a kingdom fractured by centuries of strife and discord because the landowners change over time?”

“When weeds invade the land, your Majesty,” Gabreye offers his counsel, his voice filled with conviction,



"it signifies the owner's absence. When the land is usurped, it must be restored to its rightful owners." He points to a small village in the distance. "To secure their loyalty, we must expel the Gala who have seized their lands and bring justice to those who have been wronged."

Emperor Tewodros, his brow furrowed in contemplation, grapples with the complexity of the situation. "Land, whether stolen or not, becomes sacred to its inhabitants," he asserts, his voice tinged with a mix of understanding and frustration. "Did you not witness their fervent defense up in the hills by their Queen?" The exasperated emperor reminds his friend. "To them, we are the invaders of their homeland, the ones who seek to strip away their very identity."

Gabreye, seeking to offer a solution, suggests, "In unfamiliar territories, one should always seek refuge among their kin, Your Majesty. Perhaps we can encourage those who have lost their lands to find solace and support among their own people."

But Emperor Tewodros rejects the notion, his head shaking with certainty. "No," he declares, his voice filled with uncompromising resolve. Bending down, he scoops up a handful of soil, allowing it to slip through his fingers as his gaze sweeps across the vast expanse of land surrounding Magdella. "I seek unity, and all must share it equally. The land belongs to all our people, regardless of their ancestry or allegiance."

From this elevated vantage point, the empire he envisions conquering sprawls out before him, a tapestry of potential waiting to be woven into a new era of prosperity and unity. "If only you could

see as I do, Gabreye," Emperor Tewodros says wistfully, his voice tinged with a hint of longing. "This is the heart of it all. The new capital, grander than any before. From here, my vision for a new empire shall commence, an empire far greater than that of Amda Seyon where all our people can thrive as one."

Gabreye, though he may not fully comprehend the Emperor's grand vision, places his unwavering trust in his leader. "Then let us finish what you have begun, Ase," he declares, his voice filled with loyal determination. "Let us forge a new path, one that leads to a brighter future for all our people."

"There cannot be two kings in one empire!" Emperor Tewodros, his gaze fixed upon the horizon, declares with resolute determination. "First, we must crush the Shoans, for they stand as a defiant obstacle to the unity of our ancient empire," he proclaims, his voice ringing with the certainty of a man destined for greatness. "Only then can we truly begin to build an empire of our ancestors, an empire that will stand the test of time and serve as a beacon of hope for generations to come."

As the sun begins to set over the majestic landscape of Magdella, Emperor Tewodros and Gabreye stand side by side, their silhouettes etched against the fiery sky. The challenges that lie ahead are immense, the obstacles numerous, but in this moment, they are united in their resolve, their hearts filled with the unshakable belief that together, they can overcome any adversity and forge a new era of unity and prosperity for their beloved kingdom.

Shoa

*No land stands firm against
the tide of conquest*

Emperor Tewodros, an imposing presence in his warrior attire, sits astride his massive war-horse at the vanguard of his army. His piercing gaze surveys the battlefield, assessing his exhausted army's readiness for the impending invasion of the south. Gabreye and John Bell, steadfast and loyal, sit rigid in their saddles beside him, their eyes fixed on the enemy ranks amassing in the valley below like a roiling sea of defiance. With a sweeping gesture, the emperor directs three distinct forces against the ragtag army—a collection of united forces from the various provinces of Geshe in the northern expanse of Shoa.



A deafening roar erupts from the depths of the imperial ranks, a primal cry that shakes the earth. Thousands of warriors surge forward, their bare feet pounding against the sun-scorched ground, an unyielding tide of determination and might. Spears and swords glisten in the harsh light, a forest of steel fangs poised for the kill, thirsting for enemy blood. The imperial forces, a well-oiled machine of disciplined power, deftly corral the separate enemy factions, their movements fluid and precise, a lethal dance of strategy and strength.

The battle ends swiftly, a testament to the emperor's growing tactical prowess and his army's unwavering resolve under his command. Faced with the overwhelming might of the imperial troops, the opposing Shoan forces break ranks in a desperate bid for survival, their formation disintegrating like sand before the relentless tide. There is no escape from the emperor's meticulously laid trap, no refuge from the inexorable advance of his forces.

The imperial army masterfully divides the Shoans into smaller, weaker groups, herding them together like lambs to the slaughter. As the Shoans converge, they find themselves surrounded on all sides, a sea of imperial steel and fury engulfing them, a razor-sharp noose tightening around their collective neck.

Emperor Tewodros wheels his charger, his sword raised high, the blade gleaming in the morning sun like a beacon of triumph.

"For Abyssinia! For your ancestors! For one united empire!" His bellow, deep and resonant, echoes across the valley like thunder, a rallying cry that ignites the hearts of his warriors. Hooves pound the earth in a deafening crescendo, a drum-

beat of war that reverberates through the valleys like an earthquake.

From below the valley, a desperate echo rises from the trapped Shoans, a final, defiant roar in the face of annihilation. Horsemen and infantry charge forth, their battle cries mingling with the howling winds, a tempest of desperation and fury. But the imperial forces, a colossal assembly of unstoppable might, surge down the valley like a tidal wave, a relentless force of nature that rumbles to life behind their emperor, ready to crush all who stand in their path.

With astounding swiftness, the imperial forces close the gap, overtaking the Shoan warriors in a devastating collision of steel and sinew. Lances clash, men and horses scream, an unholy cacophony of battle that rends the very air. Emperor Tewodros' troops, a ravenous maw of destruction, engulf the outnumbered Shoans, their blades and spears finding flesh with ruthless efficiency, painting the battlefield in a grim mosaic of carnage.



The imperial forces, driven by an unshakable fervor, dismantle the Shoan cavalry and infantry with brutal precision, leaving a wake of devastation and broken bodies in their path.

Elsewhere, a small band of Shoans, desperate and defiant, make their last stand atop a rocky outcrop, raining missiles down upon the advancing imperials. They fight with the courage of the doomed, a valiant bulwark against the surging tide of imperial might. Arrows and spears fly from their protective trenches and natural cover, a deadly hail of resistance, but the deluge of imperial numbers presses onward, an overwhelming tide of destruction that will not be denied.

The Shoan contingents' futile resistance in the north crumbles under the ceaseless assault, their lines breached, their hope extinguished. Lives are snuffed out in a blur of chaos, the ground growing slick with blood and the detritus of war. Amidst the turmoil, prayers for mercy mingle with the anguished cries of the defeated, a haunting chorus of despair that echoes across the battlefield.

Across the northern expanse, Emperor Tewodros' massive army advances like a great beast devouring its prey, ripping through enemy ranks with ruthless efficiency, trampling those who fall beneath the thundering hooves. Their movements are a display of precision and power, shifting seamlessly to counter threats and dispatching excursion forces to crush opposition with a resolve born of countless encounters—a well-oiled machine of conquest and subjugation is being birthed with each advance into the southern realms.

The conquering and victorious imperial army makes camp in the fertile land of Menz, a sea of

tents and banners. The verdant valleys of northern Shoa lie smothered beneath the pervasive presence of the imperial army, a vast expanse of martial might stretching as far as the eye can see.



Governors and clergy from the farthest northern reaches of Shoa trickle into the imperial camp, their expensive robes and headdresses crusted with the dust of the road, a testament to the arduous journey they have undertaken to pay homage to their new sovereign. One by one, they dismount from weary mounts and prostrate themselves before Emperor Tewodros, their submission a tangible force that confirms the changing currents.

Emperor Tewodros, a man whose aura of authority eclipses all around him, stands humble and immutable as the homage washes over him, his presence a pillar of the shifting winds in the kingdoms where no one had dared to penetrate for centuries. His simple shimma robe, crafted from the deepest indigo silk, catches the morning sun-rays, refracting them into a mantle of authority that drapes his broad shoulders.

At his side, Abuna Salama, resplendent in ornate ceremonial raiments that shimmer with dazzling embroidery and inlaid gold, stands as a beacon of spiritual power, a manifestation of the new doctrine that has come to sweep away the division threatening the unbreakable bond between church and state. Together, the two make a striking pair, the nation's spiritual and secular powers united as an indomitable bulwark against all who would challenge the emperor's divine right to rule.

In the early dawn, Emperor Tewodros rises before the camp, restless, his vision for a united empire consuming his every waking moment. Atop a lofty amba, his piercing gaze sweeps out over the sprawling southern realm of Shoa that stretches before him—a tapestry of lush fields and bustling villages extending to the horizon, tantalizingly close to his grasp, yet still so far away.

In the distance, beyond the patchwork of farms and settlements, the emperor's squinting eyes discern movement, a gathering storm that banks on the horizon, a portent of the trials yet to come. There, amassing like a great beast stirring from slumber, the formidable forces of the true Shoan power under King Haile Malakot muster, a sea of warriors ready to defend their lands and their way of life. Thousands upon thousands of battle-hardened fighters gather, their weapons glinting in the sun, awaiting the clash that their liege has set in motion, a final, desperate bid to resist the tide of imperial conquest.

But Emperor Tewodros, his heart steeled by the fire of his ambition and the certainty of his destiny, stands ready to face this final challenge, to crush the last bastion of resistance and forge a united Ethiopia from the ashes of war. With his

loyal generals at his side and the might of his army at his back, he prepares to lead his forces into the fray once more, to fight and bleed and sacrifice until the dream of a united empire is made manifest, until the flag of the Lion of Judah flies over every corner of the land, a symbol of hope and unity that will endure for generations to come.



In a grand display of martial prowess, a vast assembly of Shoan warriors, their ranks swelled by both mounted cavalry and foot soldiers, engages in a meticulously orchestrated military drill. The air crackles with anticipation as they wield an array of deadly weaponry: thunderous muskets, razor-sharp spears, impenetrable shields, and lances poised to impale. They stand as a united front, a formidable bulwark against those who dare threaten their realm, their determination etched upon every face, a testament to their resolve in the face of imminent invasion.





At the heart of this fearsome spectacle stands King Haile Malakot, an imposing figure whose piercing gaze is obscured by a regal chain scarf of gleaming gold that cascades around his visage. Clad in a double layer of gabbies beneath a black cape emblazoned with golden insignias of power, he radiates an aura of authority that commands respect and obedience from all who behold him. Yet, beneath this veneer of

strength, a faint tremor courses through his frame, his condition akin to one gripped by the unrelenting clutches of a raging fever, a sign of the inner turmoil that plagues his spirit.

Suddenly, the pounding of hooves shatters the air as a barbed chief gallops forth on his steed, his arrival punctuated by a cloud of dust that billows in his wake. Urgency laces his words as he dismounts before the king, his voice strained with the weight of dire news. "My Negus, the north has fallen, and the invader advances south with a formidable host of thousands, his sights set upon Ankobar."

"Send a message to the Queen of Wollo and convene a meeting!" King Haile Malakot, his voice strained by the weight of this revelation, summons the council of generals with a wave of his trembling

hand, his body shivering as if aware of the gravity of the developing situation.

Within the grandeur of the throne room in Ankobar, the air is redolent with the rich, heady fragrance of frankincense, its tendrils curling and swirling like wisps of smoke from the roaring fireplace. The might of Shoa is in display with imported cannons and matchlocks being assembled in the chamber. King Haile Malakot reclines upon a Turkish divan, high above the heads of the gathering, seeking the meager warmth it offers as tremors wrack his frail frame, a stark contrast to the strength he projects to his people.

Standing nearby is the ever-vigilant Queen Workqitu of the Wollo-Oromo, her grave expression at the capture of her son a reflection of the weight of the impending decisions that must be made to free him—a burden that rests heavily upon her shoulders.

By the king's side sits Prince Menelik, the youthful heir to the throne at a mere twelve years of age, who observes the gathering with a penetrating gaze that belies his tender years. His



presence serves to the Shoan rulers and chiefs as a reminder of the future that hangs in the balance, the legacy that must be protected at all costs. The king's younger brother, Seifu Sellassie, who bears a striking resemblance to his ailing sibling, stands amongst the chiefs and generals on one side of the chamber, his presence a symbol of the dynasty's enduring strength and the bonds of blood that bind them together as Shoan royals.

On the opposite side, the clergy occupies their designated space, their robes a sea of vibrant colors that stand in stark contrast to the somber shimmas of the warriors' garb. This divide within the assembly is a rift that mirrors the diverging ideologies and loyalties that threaten to fracture the kingdom from within. The air is thick with tension, as tangible as the smoke that curls lazily from the hearth, as the council convenes to decide the fate of their land.

Amidst the ruckus and passionate exchange of words, Seifu approaches the king, his voice ringing with a bold proposal. "Our fighting men still hold strong, though diminished. Let us make haste to cross swords with the invaders on open field, that we may yet turn the tide of this war!" His words are met with a mix of approval and dissent, the chamber erupting in a cacophony of voices.

"Your Majesty, the eyes of the fighting warriors fail to see the true extent of the people's plight," an elder priest, his voice heavy with the weight of wisdom, counters Seifu's plan, his words a stark warning of the consequences of continued defiance. "The emperor's numbers swell like a plague of locusts, his wrath a scourge that we cannot hope to withstand. It is folly to defy him

further, lest we bring ruin upon ourselves and our people."

"We must fight or die trying!" a voice cries out. Chief Bezzbehz, a broad-shouldered warrior with an aura of authority, approaches the emperor. "Hear me, my Negus! The Queen stands with us, her forces ready to join our cause. We must unite with her to defend the south!" His words ignite a protest from the clergy, their voices rising in a chorus of dissent. "Her warriors, though different in faith, share our goal to curb the emperor's ambition. With her alliance securely bound, we gain both strength and strategy, a chance to turn the tide of this war," Bezzbehz expresses his support to form an alliance with the Oromo Queen to challenge the imperial forces.

"We will not conspire with heathens!" The elder priest declares, his voice heavy with warning, countering the chief's proposition. "Damnation follows such a pact, a stain upon our souls that we cannot hope to wash away," his words echo through the chamber like a clap of thunder.

The Queen rises with disgust at the conduct of the Shoans. King Haile Malakot, his body wracked by wet, hacking coughs that shake his frail form, struggles to rise from his divan to prevent her departure. Young Menelik, his face etched with concern, moves swiftly to his father's side, lending his strength to support the ailing monarch. With his heir's steadying presence, the king turns to face the assembly, his voice carrying a mixture of indignation and resolve.

"The northern lords may abandon honor for safety, but we Shoans were forged in the crucible of defiance!" The Negus proclaims with authority.

"While life remains, our spirits shall not yield to the tyranny of this so-called emperor!" He declares his intention to resist.

"Lije!" Bending down to his son, King Haile Malakot seeks young Menelik's counsel. "What do you say?" Menelik meets his father's gaze unflinchingly, and then, in a moment of profound clarity that shatters the boundaries of his youth, he turns to address the gathering of men who bear the weight of their kingdom's fate upon their shoulders.

With a voice that resonates with conviction, a clear call that pierces the smoke-laden air and silences the discordant cries, Prince Menelik declares, "Shoans do not submit to an invader!" His proclamation reverberates through the grand chamber, a defiant rallying cry that marks a turning point in the destiny of their land, a gauntlet thrown in the face of those who would dare threaten their sovereignty.



Yet, even as the young prince's words ignite a fire in the hearts of the assembled warriors, the brutal reality of warfare unfolds across the scarred earth. The battlefields of the Shoan south become a tableau of carnage, strewn with the lifeless bodies of steeds and warriors tangled in gruesome embrace. Through the thickening chaos of unceasing warfare, King Haile Malakot strains, his health failing rapidly.

In the midst of brutal warfare, the ailing king, gripping tight the reins of his mount, surveys the unfolding horror of his decision to confront the imperial forces.

A thin line of Shoan cavalry, their faces grim with determination, stands resolute between the king and the encroaching storm of the imperial onslaught. Although they face the emperor's forces with courage, hope grows increasingly faint with each passing moment. Soon, they are overwhelmed, hacked apart by the emperor's superior numbers and ruthless tactics, their blood staining the earth in a crimson tide.

The despondent King retires from the battlefield, carried off by his chiefs as it becomes clear that there is no hope of stopping the conquering imperial forces.

Emperor Tewodros, a figure of merciless purpose, cuts a swath through the fray atop his war steed, his blade moving with chilling precision as he metes out indiscriminate death. His presence is a force of doom, a harbinger of the destruction that follows in his wake. With ruthless efficiency, he directs his gunmen regiment to target the King's brother, Seifu, and the commander of Shoan forces,

chief Bezzbehz, seeking to decapitate the Shoan leadership in one fell swoop.

Amidst the chaos, the futility of further resistance becomes painfully clear. Shoan warriors, their spirits broken, surrender en masse, clutching crosses in desperate hopes of mercy. Others attempt to flee, only to be swiftly silenced by the bite of spears and the bark of bullets. Bezzbehz, his face a mask of grim determination, fights on, undeterred by the blood-soaked earth that threatens to pull him under.

“Retreat!” Seifu, his eyes wide with the realization of their dire predicament, cries out in a desperate plea, “Withdraw, or we all die here!” His words are a final attempt to salvage what remains of their forces in the face of certain annihilation.

The call to retreat resounds across the battlefield, a mournful dirge that echoes in the hearts of the Shoan warriors. Amidst the maelstrom of violence, countless lives have been extinguished, their forms discarded upon the scarred earth like broken sticks. Seifu and Bezzbehz, their duty to protect the king unwavering even in the face of defeat, recognize the grim reality of their situation as the imperial forces close in around them, a tightening noose of steel and fury.

Behind the Shoan lines, the imperial army, under the strategic command of Gabreye, moves with ruthless efficiency to assail the reserve forces protecting King Haile Malakot. The emperor’s troops bear down upon them like a tidal wave of destruction, slaughtering royal guards with impunity, their advance an ominous march of impending doom.

King Haile Malakot, his face etched with the weight of defeat, issues a final, desperate command. “Burn it all! Scorch the earth before this tyrant possesses it!” His words are a cry of defiance, a last act of resistance against the unstoppable might of the emperor’s forces. The Shoan king, aware that his faltering health casts an ominous shadow over the future of his kingdom, pleads with his warriors to deny the emperor the spoils of conquest, to leave nothing but ashes in their wake.

The once-proud Shoan forces, reduced to a mere shadow of their former glory, disintegrate in the face of the imperial onslaught. They scatter in all directions, propelled by the winds of desperation, their hearts heavy with the knowledge that their land, their very way of life, hangs in the balance.

As the smoke of burning fields and villages rises to choke the Southern sky, the emperor’s army marches inexorably onward, their conquest an inescapable reality. The Shoan kingdom, once a bastion of defiance and pride, teeters on the brink of collapse, its fate resting in the hands of the emperor who will stop at nothing to bring the entire land under his iron-clad rule.

The flames of war consume the southern land and the cries of the dying fill the air. The future of Shoa hangs in the balance as imperial forces penetrate the deep South. The choices made by the rulers in shambles, for better or for worse, the weight of that responsibility rests heavily upon the shoulders of those who remain to fight back in the face of overwhelming odds.

CHAPTER FORTY SIX

The King of Kings

*Atop the throne of thrones,
the chosen one ascends*

The inferno engulfs the once-verdant land of Shoa, consuming everything in its wake. The sky above mirrors the destruction below, painting the heavens crimson as if the firmament itself bleeds in sympathy with the scorched earth.



Emperor Tewodros, Gabreye, and Ingeda stand atop a hill, their eyes wide with disbelief at the sheer scale of the conflagration that unfolds before them, an apocalyptic tableau stretching as far as the eye can see. Yet their mission remains incomplete. The sprawling imperial camp churns with frenzied activity as mighty forces mobilize once more to pursue the scattered, elusive Shoans across the southern domains, now shrouded in a veil of blinding smoke and flame. The distant echoes of skirmishes punctuate the hazy atmosphere like a discordant symphony.

Where lush forests and grassy fields once flourished, an ashen wasteland now spreads in the wake of the fire's relentless march. Entire villages vanish within the churning walls of flame, their inhabitants faced with the brutal choice of fleeing or perishing in the inferno's pitiless embrace. Even from the hilltop vantage, individual figures emerge only briefly through the shifting curtains of smoke before being swallowed once more by the roiling murk. Steeds and warriors alike flounder amidst the carnage, as much prey to the blaze's fury as any foe of flesh and bone.



In the depths of the imperial camp, shadows dance across the faces of Emperor Tewodros and his chiefs, their features obscured by the thick, acrid smoke hanging heavy in the air. The emperor's intense eyes gleam with frustration as he leans forward. "Where is the sense in letting fire devour all in its path where people live?" he laments, his voice low and disheartened. Beside him, Gabreye, his trusted advisor, listens intently, brow furrowed in concentration.

The men gather around the flickering flames, their skin and clothing covered in a fine layer of ash, a testament to the battles they have fought and the challenges that lie ahead. The emperor speaks of the futile Shoan resistance, his words filled with a grim resolve to dismantle their remnants as swiftly as possible before they destroy everything in sight.

"We must not lose hope, Your Majesty. Our people are strong, and together, we shall rise from the ashes of this devastation," Gabreye comforts the despondent emperor.

"Ase. . ." A messenger trembles as he approaches. "Ase, the Abuna seeks audience," he announces, his voice barely rising above the distant roar of the flames. The emperor, seeking solace, lifts a cup of arake to his lips, the warmth of the liquid flowing through his parched throat and weary mind. The months of relentless invasion weigh heavily in his gaze, but with each lingering sip, the troubles seem to drown, if only for a fleeting moment.

As Abuna Salama and the esteemed clergy step into the royal tent, tension thickens the air, the weight of spiritual matters mingling with the

chaos of worldly turmoil. The emperor's eyes, bleary from fatigue and drink, lift to meet the approaching Abuna, recognition stirring amid the haze.

"Your Majesty," Abuna Salama begins solemnly, his voice carrying the gravity of his purpose, "we come with good news."

"Good news?" A bitter smile tugs at Emperor Tewodros' lips. "News here in Shoa spreads like a wildfire," he remarks, his words tinged with world-weary resignation.

"I beg your pardon, your Majesty?" the Abuna inquires, drawing closer, concern furrowing his brow.

"News of this land, torn by conflict, Abuna. . . " The emperor's voice rises, his words rasping like a confession torn from his soul, ". . . spreads like a disease from the people's mouths, and one cannot help but catch it." His nonchalance belies the gravity of the moment as he takes another sip of areke. "Did the Lord whisper something to you that my spies could not hear, my good bishop?"

The Abuna surveys the assembly, noting the frustration dancing behind the eyes of courtiers and chiefs alike. Stepping closer to the emperor, he softens his voice, imbuing it with reverence. "Your Majesty, the spirit of the mighty Lord is in you, and because you have anointed me, I am your ear and mouth."

Leaning close, his breath carrying the weight of divine purpose, the Abuna continues, "We are here in Shoa to proclaim our righteous cause that is just. The Lord has sent us to bind the broken-hearted and the heathen believers to—"

"The news!" The emperor's words slice through the Abuna's oration like a sharpened blade.

"What is the good news, my good bishop?" His patience running thin, the emperor eyes the Abuna with desperation-born fury.

Undeterred, the Abuna presses on, his voice ringing with fervor. "The priests at Debra Lebanos wish to abandon their heretical faith and reconcile with us your Majesty."

Despite the murmurs of hope rippling through the assembled dignitaries, exhaustion veils the emperor's face, his demeanor a mix of weariness and detachment.

"Are you a man, my Abuna, who looks only to his own interest?" The emperor's question hangs in the air like a sharpened blade, catching the Abuna off guard. "Like the wicked men of the kingdom who come to me with good news only to churn their own butter?"

Silence falls thick and heavy until the holy man affirms his devotion. "I am the servant of God, your Majesty," he proclaims. "Only by giving to others does one receive back from God. That is my reputation in the kingdom."

"Do you not see what our reputation is for these people?" The emperor's voice rises once more, tinged with despondency. "I hoped for an empire bound by blood, faith, and unity, yet there are some who erode the very foundation I seek to build by setting it on fire!" He gulps down more areke, the pause that follows pregnant with unspoken tension.

"Your Majesty, as long as you remain faithful and on your path, we are with you!" Breaking the si-

lence, the Abuna proclaims loudly, his voice ringing with conviction.

The emperor's bleary eyes lift once more to meet the Abuna's gaze as the holy man bows before him, then approaches, imparting the tidings that have brought him to the royal presence.

"Those who have received my message at Debra Lebanos are the ones who told me that the Negus of Shoa is gravely ill." The emperor's weariness momentarily retreats at hearing these words. "He has requested last rites. He is on his deathbed," the Abuna continues, announcing the imminent demise of the Shoan king.

"Gabreye!" A glint of revived purpose sparks in the emperor's stare. Rising to his feet, he bids, "Fetch Ingida at once!" With a solemn bow, Emperor Tewodros acknowledges the intricate weave of faith and duty in the theater of war, where burdens mix and fate's strings intertwine in a complex tapestry of destiny.



In the Debre Lebanos monastery, within the hallowed walls of the sacred shrine, a scene of profound solemnity unfolds. Shoan priests, clad in ceremonial robes, bow reverently before the lifeless form of King Haile Malakot, his body draped atop an ornate altar, a golden scarf veiling his face in eternal repose. The chamber is suffused with a serene stillness, as if the monarch were merely slumbering, suspended between the realms of life and death.



Nearby, Young Menelik, a figure of poignant grief, weeps openly as the priests conduct the final rites, their ethereal chants intertwining with the tremors of mournful prayers. Their voices rise and fall in a lament not just for the passing of a king, but for the fading sovereignty of Shoa itself. The weight of history and destiny presses upon the young prince's shoulders, the flames of independence flickering and dwindling before his eyes.

Beyond the confines of the sacred space, on the fringes of a reality fractured by turmoil and uncertainty, a group of once-proud chiefs and nobles stand, their expressions etched with the bitter taste of defeat.

"He has sent his men searching for him," Seifu Sellassie intones grimly, gesturing toward the young prince, his words heavy with resignation. "We have no choice but to submit, like the others." Seifu Sellassie, a symbol of leadership now battered by circumstance, gives voice to the harsh reality that looms over them all.

"The heir is all that matters." Beside him, chief Buzzbehz, a glimmer of defiance sparking

in his eyes, concurs "The emperor knows it," he asserts, urgency lacing his voice. "Let me take him into Wollo territory, rather than let him be captured." He offers an alternative, his stiff body language conveying his resolve.

Seifu Sellassie's gaze shifts towards young Menelik, the future sovereign whose fate hangs in the balance, his expression a mix of concern and doubt, underscoring the challenges that lie ahead.

"What is the use?" Seifu Sellassie's words are tinged with pragmatism. "He is but a minor, not yet capable of providing the leadership we need to rally the houses to fight under his banner."

"The gala of Angolala are putting up fierce resistance!" Buzzbehz, unyielding, counters with a thread of hope woven into his voice. "The Wollo have sworn eternal vengeance and are fighting back under their Queen. Let me go to them with him and form an alliance."

Seifu Sellassie falls silent, the weight of his decision palpable in the air. Eventually, he nods in agreement. "Go in secret. Do not let the clergy know of your departure, for they have been compromised." Seifu eyes the priests and deacons suspiciously, his words carrying a solemn warning. "And may the Lord grant you a safe and swift passage."

Under the veil of night, Buzzbehz leads a band of Shoan riders towards the forested horizons, their figures melding with the shadows, cloaked in a mantle of darkness and determination. Prince Menelik, his eyes fixed on the looming forests, surveys the uncertain destiny that awaits him, an orphan fleeing his homeland in search of refuge and allies.

"What happens if we get caught?" the young prince asks as the hoofbeats of their steeds thunder through the night, his mind racing with a tempest of thoughts and emotions. The weight of his responsibilities, the fate of his people, and the looming specter of the emperor's wrath all bear down upon his young shoulders. He knows that his every decision, his every action, will have profound consequences for the future of his kingdom and his people.

The imperial army, with the lowland forests concealing their journey, an unstoppable force in its relentless march, advances through the highlands. Emperor Tewodros and his men tread the path of conquest, their arrival into the abandoned capital of the Shoans in Ankobar met with an unexpected warmth from the local clergy and the surrendering Shoan army. The holy men, draped in their flowing robes, bow their heads in deference to the emperor, their voices rising in a chorus of welcome that echoes through the empty streets.

The imperial army floods into the capital like an unrelenting deluge, their footsteps resounding on the cobblestones as they take hold of the center. The emperor's banner of the Lion of Judah, a resplendent symbol of his power and authority, flutters in the breeze, casting its shadow over the conquered city as the Shoan army is added to bolster the might of the imperial force.

In a gesture of respect to the surrendering warriors, Emperor Tewodros pays quiet homage at the grave of Haile Malakot, the fallen king who put up a fierce resistance against him. The emperor's eyes, usually hard and unyielding, soften for a moment as he acknowledges the bravery and determination of his former adversary.

As the emperor kneels before the grave, his mind wanders to the young prince who has escaped with the rebels. Menelik, the heir to the Shoan throne, represents a threat to his rule, a symbol of resistance that must be crushed. The emperor's brow furrows with determination as he rises to his feet, his resolve hardening like steel. He has sent his most trusted servants as a hunting party, tasked with finding the young prince and his rebel allies, and he is certain that it will not be long before his capture.

The hunters, led by Gabreye and Ingida, with a contingent of warriors, have set out into the wilderness, their keen eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of their quarry.

As the imperial army advances for the hunt, the lowland forests of Shoa echo with the whisper of danger—arrows and bolts from those loyal to the young prince pierce the darkness, felling guards and chiefs in a deadly volley. Buzzbehz and his followers, their stealthy movements punctuated by the release of each lethal projectile, fight back against the larger imperial force, striking down ambushing warriors in a dance of death illuminated by the flickering shadows. But with each advancing day and night, the noose around the fleeing prince

tightens until they are finally isolated by the imperial forces.

With a steely resolve igniting his spirit, Buzzbehz charges headlong into the encircling imperial force, his heart pounding with the weight of destiny upon his shoulders. Like a warrior king leading his loyal knights, he lunges boldly into the swirling melee, rallying his comrades to face the relentless onslaught of their adversaries, led by Ingida and the overwhelming imperial forces.

“Go! Now!” Buzzbehz's voice cuts through the cacophony of battle, his command echoing with urgency as he entrusts the safety of prince Menelik to a trusted chief. With swift determination, the chief, flanked by guard riders, heeds his leader's order, grabs the young prince, and mounts him on his horse. They gallop through the tumultuous battleground, the chaos and clamor blending into a disorienting symphony.

Young Menelik shields his eyes, holding on tightly to the chief as they ride, guided only by the weight of their mission to survive and evade capture.

On a distant hill, far from the heart of the battle, Gabreye and a smaller force observe the primal clash of swords and spears that resonates through the forest, as Buzzbehz faces off against Ingida in a desperate struggle. Gabreye's sharp, calculating gaze shifts to the true prize: Prince Menelik, riding away with the chief and his loyal riders.

As the plains stretch on, the chief hurries into the quiet sanctuary of a small church, seeking a momentary respite for prince Menelik and his protectors. Inside the church gates, the clergy greets the arriving party with cautious cordial-



ity, whispered exchanges and desperate decisions shaping the course of their uncertain future.

An old priest, dressed in the same manner as the figure familiar from earlier as a member of the clergy who paid homage to emperor Tewodros, emerges with a plea for surrender. Yet, the chief and the riders remain resolute, their eyes fixed on the horizon as a commotion outside heralds the approach of imminent danger.

Beyond the flickering torchlight and dancing shadows, the clash of wills and the inevitability of fate converge. Priests and bishops gather, their gazes locked on the approaching imperial party of Gabreye and his warriors, their figures a ghostly presence in the night, a harbinger of the inescapable destiny that awaits them all.



Amidst the tranquil backdrop of the shoan palace, Emperor Tewodros sits surrounded by local officials, a scene bathed in the golden glow of royal might. The officials, representing the furthest reaches of the defeated southern land, come bearing offerings of respect and submission: long guns and wide-barreled rifles, their polished surfaces gleaming in the light, with loads of polished spears and swords collected from the fallen adding to the brilliance are presented to the new ruler of the land.

The victorious emperor, a figure of calculated poise, inspects each firearm with a discerning eye,

his fingers tracing the intricate engravings on the barrels as he adds them to an ever-growing pile of captured weaponry.

A shift in the atmosphere signals the arrival of a different sort of submission. Lij Menelik, now bound in chains, is brought before the emperor, his footsteps heavy with the weight of his predicament. The young prince's gaze meets the emperor's, his face a canvas of both fear and defiance, a testament to the fire that burns within his soul. Emperor Tewodros, with a mix of fascination and perhaps a touch of empathy, studies the young noble, his eyes searching for a glimpse of the man he could become.

The young prince lowers his gaze and bows before the emperor, a single tear dropping from his defiant eyes.



“Why do you cry, young prince?” the emperor inquires, his tone a blend of curiosity and authority, but the young prince does not respond or look at him. The Shoans weep in silence, watching their prince being humbled before the emperor.

"Do you cry because you are in chains?" The emperor's voice cuts through the tense silence.

"No! I cry. . ." Lij Menelik, his voice laced with both sorrow and strength, answers, "I cry for my father, whom I loved very much." His words hang in the air, a raw and honest admission of his grief and loyalty.

The emperor rises from his seat, his demeanor both regal and fatherly. "Remove his chains!" He issues a command, his voice firm, and the chains that weigh upon Lij Menelik are struck down, liberating him from his physical burden.

The young prince stands tall, his shoulders squared, as he faces the emperor once more.

"I too am a father," The emperor burrows into the young prince's eyes ". . .but to an entire nation that is about to be born," the emperor's words resonate with paternal wisdom, his eyes softening with understanding. He places his arms on Lij Menelik's shoulders, their eyes meeting in a silent exchange, a moment of connection between two souls bound by the responsibilities of family and leadership. "Someday, when you come of age, you will understand that a father loves all his children, even the ones that rebel and will not acknowledge him or the motherland that gave birth to them."

"Your father is not gone. He lives in you as all the great ancestors that came before you Lije, mourn him not for he is in you." The young prince stares at the emperor, something inside of him changing and steeling his nerves as if he can feel something beyond him.

The emperor's attention shifts to one of his chiefs. "Take him to Magdella," he issues an order,

his voice filled with authority and purpose. "And make sure to put Wibe to be his guardian."

"Ase!" Gabreye, hearing this command, approaches with a whisper of caution, his brow furrowed with concern. "Do you think that is wise?" he asks, "To put the most powerful northern and southern threats to the empire together?" his voice low and urgent.

"How else are we supposed to build a future for our empire?" The emperor asks, then eyes the young prince. "This one has the shine on him." Emperor Tewodros, his gaze unwavering, responds with a touch of self-reflective recognition, his words filled with a quiet intensity. "He reminds me of myself." His eyes linger on the young prince, a flicker of understanding passing between them.

As the young prince is led away, his steps more confident now, assured of the safety and protection of the emperor, his eyes scan the moment of intense grandeur as the whole of Shoa submits to the new sovereign.



Emperor Tewodros, accompanied by the thunderous applause of a legion of warriors, marches into the heart of the Shoan kingdom, his presence a beacon of power and authority. The warriors, their faces painted with the colors of battle, raise their weapons in a salute to their emperor, their voices rising in a deafening chorus of loyalty and devotion. The emperor, his head held high, surveys

his domain, a conqueror and a father, ready to lead his people to a new era of unity and strength.

The conquering Emperor Tewodros strides into the warrior's camp. The very air trembles, his presence commanding awe and reverence from all who behold him, stands before the greatest imperial power the kingdom has known for centuries.

The earth itself seems to shake with the deafening affirmation of imperial might, as thunderous cannon blasts reverberate through the air, their echoes resounding across the land like a proclamation of unassailable power. The highly disciplined imperial army, a sea of unwavering loyalty and fervor, erupts into frenzied cheers at the sight of their indomitable leader, their voices rising in a crescendo of adulation and triumph.



Emperor Tewodros, the figure of unparalleled adulation, mounts his magnificent warhorse, a beast as fierce and indomitable as the rider atop it. With a fluid motion, he grasps the sword that has united the kingdom under his arm, the blade gleaming in the sunlight as a symbol of his resolve and the battles he has fought to bring his vision to fruition. The emperor charges forth, his steed's hooves pounding the ground with each powerful stride as he cuts through the ranks of his army, a living embodiment of conquest and destiny.

In a moment of pure, unadulterated triumph, Emperor Tewodros erupts into a victorious scream, his voice rising above the din of celebration as he raises the sword that has united the empire under his iron will. Pride and satisfaction etched upon his face, the emperor celebrates the impossible feat he has accomplished with his warriors, acknowledging the sacrifices they have made on his behalf for the fulfillment of a dream that has consumed him for so long.

Emperor Tewodros, with his arms stretching towards the heavens, breaks out in tears of joy, as if humbled before his maker that has allowed him this fortune to fulfill the sacred duty bestowed upon him. As if in acknowledgment of his monumental achievement, the sun breaks through the clouds, its rays landing squarely upon the emperor, bathing him in a celestial glow that seems to confirm his divine right to rule.

The emperor raises his arms to the heavens, and with a sense of unstoppable purpose, Emperor Tewodros storms into the palace grounds, dismounting from his steed and landing forcefully with his bare feet. Gabreye and Ingida cover him as every head bows in reverent submission before

this living embodiment of divine conquest. The air is thick with the weight of history, the culmination of a journey that has tested the very limits of human endurance and ambition — the elated Emperor hugs chiefs and warriors who have been with him for years, paying homage to their loyalty and sacrifice.

Inside the throne room, Abuna Salama, the very incarnation of spiritual and secular authority, stands before the emperor, the holy cross clutched in his weathered hand as he bows deeply, his gesture a profound acknowledgment of the emperor's unassailable power. The Etchege, the rival leader of the Shoan clergy, once proud and defiant, now utterly humbled, prostrates before the emperor as the Shoan clergy follows his example to bow before this unstoppable force of imperial unity, their submission a testament to the emperor's indomitable will and the sheer magnitude of his accomplishment in unifying the church under him.

As Emperor Tewodros enters the throne room, the air crackles with the jubilant cadence of thundering drums, their rhythm a pulsing heartbeat that seems to match the emperor's own. The opulent chamber reverberates with the swelling tide of celebration, the immense pride of a king who has achieved the seemingly impossible, who has restored the glory of an ancient kingdom once shattered, now palpable in every corner of the room. The atmosphere is electric, charged with the sheer force of history unfolding before their very eyes.

“Emperor Tewodros II, the Lion of Judah, the King of Kings of Ethiopia!” announces the Afenigus as the emperor, the only remaining King in the empire heads to claim the throne of the Shoan king.



All leaders and courtiers, their faces etched with a mixture of awe and reverence, bow as if worshipping at the altar of a living god as Emperor Tewodros strides into the throne room with an almost unearthly grace. His every step is imbued with purpose, his regal bearing radiating an aura of invincible dominion over this land he has forged into an unbreakable whole through sheer force of will. He advances inexorably towards the throne that will cement his conquest of the south, and announce the reunification of the empire under his banner.

As Emperor Tewodros reaches the throne area, his eyes fall upon the two women who have been the pillars of his life — his mother, Eteye Atitgeb, and his beloved wife, Queen Tewabatch. With reverence and humility, Emperor Tewodros kneels before the two women, his head bowed in a gesture of deep respect and love. Eteye Atitgeb, her face lined with the love of a mother who has believed in him since birth, reaches out to touch her son's

cheek, a single tear rolling down her weathered face. In this moment, the emperor is no longer the conqueror, the ruler of the kingdoms, but a son acknowledging the person who guided him more than any other, even in her absence.

In a solemn and ancient act of Queen mothers, Eteye Atitgeb and Queen Tewabatch tenderly approach the emperor. With reverent hands, they carefully remove his ornate shield and spear, the symbols of his role as a fierce warrior and protector of the realm. Layer by layer, they disrobe him of his regal battle attire. As the last adornment falls away, the emperor is left standing in a simple white undergarment, a stark contrast to the finery that had encased him moments before. In this vulnerable state, stripped of the trappings of his station, he is no longer a ruler, but a man — mortal, exposed, and at the mercy of the divine will that guides the kingdom.

As the conquering lion of Judah approaches the throne, four magnificent lions lounging regally by his throne rise, and the atmosphere takes an electrifying turn. The air itself seems to tremble with anticipation, the crowd holding their collective breath as the lions' thunderous roars reverberate through the throne room, their primal power sending shivers down the spines of all who bear witness. Yet, its Emperor Tewodros, his gaze filled with the steel of unassailable authority, commands a paradoxical mix of awe and primal trepidation. The enraptured crowd leans forward, their very breaths suspended, as emperor Tewodros steps fearlessly into the lions' den, a king among beasts.

The lions encircle him, a quartet of rippling amber-eyed muscle and primordial majesty. Each beast exudes its own distinct, untamed essence, a

raw power that seems to emanate from their very beings. Yet, Emperor Tewodros handles them all with an otherworldly command, his presence alone enough to tame their feral instincts. He plays with some, his touch a gesture of dominance and affection, while others yield to his unquestionable authority. These guardians of forgotten wilderness, these embodiments of primal strength, bow, if only for a fleeting moment, to his transcendent dominion. Emperor and lions engage in an entrancing dance macabre, treading the razor's edge between reverence and conquest, a display of power that leaves the audience breathless.

As one, the stunned crowd prostrates themselves before this unique emperor, their faces pressed to the ground in a gesture of ultimate submission, Emperor Tewodros finally ascends to claim his throne, the lions standing in furious resplendence as his personal guard, a living testament to his unparalleled power and the dawn of a new era for the empire.

"Your Majesty" In the midst of this charged atmosphere, a familiar figure with a tremulous voice cuts through the silence like a knife. Consul Plowden, in his impeccable uniform as the emissary of the British Empire, lowers himself in a sweeping, deferential bow before the emperor, his movements betraying the visceral terror inspired by the lions' thunderous roars. With a voice that wavers ever so slightly, he utters the words that will forever change the course of history: "Your Majesty, I come on behalf of her majesty Queen Victoria of England."

Cónsul Plowden's eyes are wide with disbelief as he watches Emperor Tewodros stroke the manes of the lions protecting his throne, his touch

as casual and confident as one would pet obedient hounds. The emperor fixes the consul with an inscrutable stare, his gaze seeming to penetrate the very depths of Plowden's soul. The words hang suspended in the air, pregnant with historic implication, the weight of two empires meeting in this indelible moment.



The emperor's piercing gaze remains locked upon Consul Plowden, the air itself seeming to still under the sheer weight of destiny that hangs in these fateful moments. The two men stare each other down, their wills clashing in a silent battle of dominance and diplomacy. On one side stands the fearsome lion of Judah, a king of Kings who has clawed and roared his way to unite an ancient kingdom through sheer force of will, his presence a testament to the indomitable spirit of an empire reborn. On the other, a calm, almost meek emis-

sary, bearing the weight of the most powerful empire that spans the globe, his words carrying the promise of a future yet unwritten.

In this moment, as the world seems to hold its breath, the lion to the emperor's left roars at the consul as if to announce the stage that is set for a clash of civilizations, a meeting of two worlds that will forever shape the course of history. And at the center of it all stands Emperor Tewodros, a figure of unparalleled power and vision, his eyes fixed upon the horizon of a destiny that only he can see. And though the future remains uncertain, one thing is clear: the reign of Emperor Tewodros has only just begun, and the world will never be the same again.



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The process of writing this book has been a transformative journey of personal growth. Initially conceived as a means of self-discovery, its purpose evolved into a contribution to a potential series of books within the Lions of Africa Saga, delving into historical narratives leading to the great Battle of Adowa. This monumental event symbolizes the triumph of a united Ethiopian force against an invading Italian army, asserting independence against the shackles of European colonialism. The envisioned series aims to complete the Adowa saga with nine more installments covering a century from 1820-1920.

I extend my deepest appreciation to those whose works inspired and shaped my thinking throughout the organization of each chapter. The following acknowledgments recognize the profound contributions of historians from diverse backgrounds and eras, whose insights were instrumental in the creation of this historical account.

Unfortunately, Ethiopian history has often been dominated by European perspectives. While recognizing the influence of notable works such as Bahru Zewde's "Modern History of Ethiopia" and

Harold G. Marcus's "The History of Ethiopia," and acknowledging the unique contributions of historians like the late Richard Pankhurst with "The Ethiopians" and Abir, Mordechai's "Ethiopia, The Era of the Princes." My aim is to present a new vision for the world-wide Black race. My narrative seeks to address conflicts and diverse viewpoints, using modern works to unveil the true history of Africa grounded in Pan-Africanism, challenging the imposed racial caste system that has persisted for centuries.

In presenting the biographical account of Emperor Tewodros II, a charismatic and enigmatic figure in Ethiopian history, I am indebted to the extensive body of work by historians from both local and European perspectives. Works such as Marqos Yesanew's "Ase Tewodros," Tekla Sadiq's "Asé Téwodros 'en ya'Ityopi 'andenat," and Philip Marsden's "The Barefoot Emperor" offer varied insights. However, the comprehensive work of Sven Rubenson, particularly "Tewodros and His Contemporaries 1855-1868," supported by Ethiopian editors, stands out as the complete biographical account of Emperor Tewodros II.

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Ben T. Mel

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Ben Tekle Mel is an African writer, a member of the global south, and a close ally of peoples degraded by racist ideas and policies. His works in both fiction and non-fiction center around the black experience, and when he is not writing, he is engaged in social activism in antiracist movements like the Black Lives Matter and Pan-Africanism movements with fellow activists who are striving to equate and empower racial and gender difference of all kinds. Ben divides his time between New York, California and Addis Abeba.

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