

SUDAN

BY
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CHAPTER 1

Southern Sudan

March 2000

The sound of running feet dashing past her tukul was the first sign that something was not right in Dada Manut's world. She'd been tickling baby Reisha's tummy, sending the little girl into gales of giggles, but now she stopped and listened. She heard shouts in her sharply punctuated Lokuta dialect and then another sound, a sound she had never heard before, a high-pitched whine that couldn't possibly have come from any animal or human she'd ever seen.

She snatched the naked baby into her arms and hurried outside. Her neighbors pointed at something in the eastern sky above the mountains. She squinted into the rising sun, but couldn't make out the source of the strange noise that grew louder by the second.

She shifted Reisha to her hip, shielded her eyes with her left hand and peered into the glare. There! Now she could see it, see *them*. Two silver objects streaked across the sky toward her village, dropping lower and lower as they approached. The sound of them grew louder, rumbled like the thunder of a summer storm. Her heart began to hammer in her chest; her eyes widened in wonder—and growing dread.

Dada had never seen an airplane of any kind, much less a Soviet Antonov fighter. But she didn't have to understand the incredible firepower bearing down on Nokot to sense the danger. Was this the death from the skies some of the other villagers talked about in hushed tones around their campfires at night, the tales of devastation too monstrous to comprehend? Information about the world outside their remote little valley was sketchy at best, but descriptions had filtered into Nokot of massive destruction and bloodshed, vague, shadowy stories as terrifying as bad dreams. Dada had dismissed the stories when she heard them, but now she began to back slowly toward the safety of her tukul, with its solid thatched roof and strong wooden support posts.

She didn't make it inside before the first bomb fell.

The earth-shattering blast detonated less than 100 yards away, knocked her backward off her feet and slammed her to the ground so violently she almost lost her grip on Reisha. She lay there stunned, trying to catch her breath, her eardrums throbbing. In a daze, she turned in the direction of the blast, blinked her eyes, and struggled to focus. But the world was not right.

The stately balanite tree she and her friends had climbed when they were children was gone, replaced by a smoking crater of blackened earth with half a bloody zebu carcass draped over the edge. The rest of the animal was scattered in pieces around two other zebu that lay motionless nearby. Another blast hammered the earth on the other side of the village. Its roar mingled with the bleat of panicked goats as they stormed out of their pens, the screaming caw-caws of terrified guinea hens, and the shrieks of women and children in a frantic stampede away from the carnage. Then she heard, as if from a great distance, the terrified screams of her infant daughter in her arms.

Dada staggered to her feet and lurched toward the doorway of her hut. Inside, both her sons sat on their sleeping mats, too frightened and bewildered to move. Dada knelt and pulled them close, held their trembling bodies tight, felt the staccato pounding of their little hearts against her chest. Above the screams of the villagers and the cries of terrified live-stock, she could hear the high-pitched whine of the fighter jets grow louder and louder.

They were coming back.

The strange other-worldly sound again became the rumble of thunder and Dada had time to wonder if she should run for cover in the woods or stay here where her husband and older son could find her. Then the bombs began to fall.

Four deafening explosions rocked the earth at two- to three-second intervals, cutting a swath of devastation 50 feet wide from one end of Nokot to the other. Huts that took direct hits vanished; others burst into flames. People and animals were indiscriminately blown apart, scattering body parts in a bloody hail in every direction.

Dada placed her shrieking baby on a sleeping mat, but couldn't get Isak and Kuak to sit down beside their sister; the boys were too terrified to let go of their mother. When she finally peeled them off and forced them to stay with Reisha, she stuck her head out past the elephant grass partition in the doorway. Her tukul was one of the few left standing. Four or five of her friends lay motionless on the ground nearby, and she could see the blood-soaked form of her 7-year-old nephew, Kagak, struggling to claw his way out of the remains of his family's shattered, burning hut. But he could not crawl; both his legs had been blown off above the knee. His wailing mingled with the cries of the other injured villagers and animals in a symphony of terror and pain.

Dada's eyes darted frantically from one horror to the next, took it all in. Her heart boomed and she could barely breathe through the rising knot of panic that gathered in her chest and flooded her mouth with a taste like blood. A purple light bloomed inside her head, and Dada felt hysteria crawling up the back of her throat, felt herself slipping, spiraling down toward the oblivion of total collapse. It was close, so achingly, temptingly close.

Everything in the world around her was wrong, *all wrong!* How could this be when the morning had started out like every other morning she had ever known? Dada's mind suddenly reached out and grabbed hold of the morning, fiercely clutched the memory of normal and hunkered down into it. She left the acrid stench of burning bodies behind and snuggled up in a reality that was safe, a reality not defiled by exploding death, flames, and blood.

She had awakened to the sound of the small herd of zebu lowing outside her tukul, and had slowly raised herself on her elbow, careful not to disturb Reisha, curled up beside her breast. Two of her other children had been asleep on straw mats on the dirt floor of the one-room dwelling, but a third straw mat lay empty. Her oldest son, Koto, was gone. He'd risen early to deliver the first of the zebu, large gray and white cattle with droopy ears, humps, and huge horns, to the pasture lands below their village.

Dada got up from the mat as quietly as she could and carefully nudged a tattered blanket closer to the baby to give her something to bump up against if she awoke. Then she edged past the sleeping forms of her two other children, and marveled again at how alike they were. There were times when even she would have struggled to tell them apart were it not for their lone distinguishing characteristic. Isak, the older of the 8-year-old twins by several minutes, had been born with a mark on the back of his right hand. To Dada, the mark was a shapeless blotch; to Isak, it was a butterfly! She paused briefly above each of the boys and gazed at them tenderly.

The face of the sun had just peeked over the Imatong Mountains on the border of Sudan and Kenya, and smiled down on the village where a half-dozen clans of migrating Lokuta tribals had settled 60 years earlier. Nokot now numbered 45 to 50 tukuls—round, mud or straw huts with conical, thatched roofs.

Several women already squatted by their cast iron pots, stirring their family's morning meal of porridge and cassavas. One of them was her sister, Bette, and she smiled a greeting. Koto was nowhere to be seen, so Dada walked over to their smoldering fire, picked up a stick and began to poke the embers, adding leaves and twigs, and blowing gently until flickering flames leapt from the red coals. Yesterday, she and Koto had gathered a large pile of acacia limbs, enough to fuel the family oven for several days. Like the rest of the families in their isolated village, they kept their fire stoked through the night and added dried zebu dung to produce a pungent smoke to hold at bay the seroot flies that carried the dreaded sleeping sickness. Everything in the village, every hut, mat, dried animal skin, thatched roof—and all the villagers,

too—smelled like the smoke, the stink was woven into the fabric of their everyday lives.

Gauging from the position of the sun, she estimated that her husband John, her father, brothers and the other Nokot men had been in the millet fields for at least half an hour, planting the seeds that would produce a crop of sorghum. John's face formed in her mind, and she smiled. She was married to a good man, and not all the women in the village could say that. Some of the men were lazy, but John worked extra hard because his withered right hand made simple tasks more difficult. No one knew exactly what had happened to him. He'd been only 2 years old, too little to tell his mother what had bitten him. A spider, maybe. A millipede. A snake. The list of suspects was huge. His mother had washed the wound with river water and put a poultice of leaves and boiled acacia bark on it. The toddler had been very sick for days; his hand had swollen to three times its normal size. When he recovered, he could no longer move his wrist, fingers or thumb, and over time, the hand withered and hung useless.

When John's father had come to her father to negotiate a marriage, her father had been reluctant to agree, even when John's father offered nine zebu. He'd feared John couldn't properly care for Dada and a family, but Dada had pleaded with her father to approve. For years she had hoped John would be selected as her husband. He had kind eyes, and she'd watched him with his younger brothers and sisters. She knew he would be a good father. And she'd been right. When Isak had been born with the butterfly mark in the same spot on his hand where John had been bitten, Dada was certain that the spirit of John's dead mother had put it there to protect her grandson from the fate of his father.

With the fire going strong, Dada sat back on her heels and relished the early morning. The cool air that caressed her skin was a welcome balm, a short, gentle reprieve from a life sentence of soaring temperatures in the glaring Sudanese sun. The stillness was just as soothing. She cherished the quiet. It nourished her soul, strengthened her for the demands of her family and her life. It was a good life—a gentle, hard-working husband, healthy children, enough to eat. She asked for nothing more. But she loved the stolen minutes of the morning because they were hers alone. In that delicious time before the village awoke, she was not fetching water in a clay pot balanced on her head from the river that flowed southwest into the White Nile, grinding sorghum for the next family meal, washing clothes, gathering wood, tending to a child or nursing an infant. For a brief moment in time each morning, Dada was alone with her thoughts, at peace with her world.

But the solitude of the moment as she knelt by the fire was soon shattered by the piercing cry of her youngest child. Dada poked a few more

sticks into the growing flames and then stepped back inside the tukul. As she did, she pulled her left breast out from under her wrap, one long piece of red and purple cloth draped under her right arm, with the ends tied together in a knot over her left shoulder. She snuggled her daughter close and took care of motherly business.

Reisha sucked furiously for 15 minutes until she'd finally had enough. A single drop of milk hung suspended from Dada's breast like a raindrop above the baby's pink lips, but Reisha turned her head away. She was finished. Dada smiled as she reflected on how different her oldest and youngest children were—had been since the moment they were born. Koto had been easily satisfied, hardly demanded any attention at all, and ate solid food before he could walk. Now 15, Koto was tall for his age but thin, not yet filled out with the muscles of a man. He had a high forehead, wide, round eyes, and like the other members of the Lokuta tribe, he was as black as the night sky. Koto had always seemed vastly more mature than his years. His gaze was steady, his movements compact and economical, his temperament calm and confident—almost like a grown man in a child's body.

Ah, but this Reisha!

She placed the baby back on the sleeping mat, smiled and tickled her bare tummy. The baby's giggles mingled with another sound. Running feet. Her neighbors shouting. A strange keening noise rumbling in the sky before...

No more than a few seconds after her mind had rejected it, Dada was sucked back into the reality of agonized screams and the stench of burning death, back into the deep, airless ditch of terror. And when she felt Isak wrap his small arms tight around her leg, his body trembling, she knew she had to stay there. She couldn't abandon her children, couldn't leave them alone in this nightmare while she escaped into hysteria. With every ounce of will she possessed, she forced herself to stand perfectly still, to calm down—to *think*. John! She had to find her husband! He would know what to do. He would save them. She scooped Reisha into her arms, grabbed Kuak's hand and told him to hold onto his brother. Together, they left the tukul and headed toward the sorghum fields where the men had been working. They cut behind two burning huts and came out into the open where Dada could see the fields, and her heart leapt with hope when she saw all the Lokuta men—40 or more of them—sprinting toward the village.

Then she saw why they were running.

Behind them, soldiers in jeeps bounced across the dark earth of the freshly planted fields, the weapons in their hands shiny in the early morning sun. The sharp crack of a rifle shot reached her ears a heartbeat before one

of the Lokuta men crumbled and fell. Then another shot rang out. And another. Two more men fell. The gunfire grew more intense; the bodies kept falling, one after another, until there were no more targets left.

Dada did not see John, her father or brothers fall. She couldn't make out anyone in the crowd of running farmers. But she knew John was there somewhere, knew that a bullet from one of the gunshots she'd heard had ripped into his back, and he lay dead in the field beside the bodies of all the other men in her family.

Kuak and Isak stood speechless beside their mother, too dumbstruck even to cry. But there was no time now for grief. The men in jeeps raced toward them, and Dada spun around and began to run with the boys back into Nokot.

In less than 10 minutes, the idyllic village in the green mountain valley had become a fiery deathtrap. Mothers grabbed their children and raced toward the river where they hoped to find safety in the marsh and reeds. Bellowing zebu and bleating goats ran helter-skelter in wild-eyed panic. Dada and the boys dodged burning huts, zigzagged past blast craters and stumbled over the body parts of dismembered villagers, as they made their way to the northern edge of Nokot to the field where Koto had taken their small herd of zebu that morning to graze.

Dada's eyes frantically searched the field for her son, but there was no Koto. Her mind flatly refused to countenance the possibility that he had been hurt or killed. Koto was fine, she assured herself desperately, he had escaped the convoy of trucks carrying well-armed soldiers in combat fatigues that barreled across the field toward the village.

For just a moment, Dada stopped and stared at the approaching trucks bumping down the rutted path, scattering the terrified zebu and kicking up an ominous cloud of dust as they drew near. They reminded her of a pack of jackals she'd seen once, as they circled a wounded doe and fawn. Then she turned to join the rush of other families that scrambled toward the river. But there was no escape there either. Soldiers ran up from that direction, too, cut off any flight, grabbed the screaming women and children and herded them into groups.

Dada stood very still on the dirt path she'd walked every day of her life. She realized she was utterly alone and totally helpless. With all her options gone, she turned toward the village and led her sons back to the only refuge she had left—their own tukul.

Once inside, Dada clasped the still screaming Reisha to her chest and sat the boys against the far wall of the hut. They obeyed her direction without protest. With identical faces that wore identical looks of abject terror, they scooted as far as possible back into the shadows and huddled close with their

arms around each other. Then Dada placed herself between the boys and the doorway, and waited.

The sounds outside were hard to follow. She could make out some of the voices, but others shouted in a language she'd never heard before. She tried to soothe her frightened baby—*Shhhhh! Shhhhhh! Hush now, shhhhhh*—as she edged to the lone window her husband had cut in the side of the tukul and peered out. The entire village swarmed with soldiers. She saw one of the trucks parked only three tukuls away. Already, groups of women and girls had been bound with lengths of rope, strung together like beads on a necklace.

jumped back startled as a soldier ran by. He stopped in the doorway of the tukul where the newly wed Sama Pomwe and her husband, Karal lived. Karal had gone out with John that morning to work in the sorghum fields.

The soldier stood for a moment and stared into the tukul, then shouted something in his strange tongue and two other soldiers ran to him. The first soldier began to unfasten the pants of his uniform and stormed into the tukul with the other two close on his heels. Then Dada heard Sama scream, a high, piercing wail that went on and on and on.

Dada's knees almost buckled out from under her, and she had to grab hold of the pole that supported the wall to stand up. She leaned there for a time, trembling violently; the sound of Sama's cries sliced into her soul.

Then she slowly lifted her head and straightened up. Her hands steadied. The trembling stopped. Desperation had wedged steel down her spine.

She kneeled and whispered instructions to her sons, then picked up the back pack she'd used to carry each of her babies when she gathered sticks or food. She placed Reisha inside and tied it snugly across her shoulders. Reisha loved to ride in the back pack and her cries quickly changed to soft sniffles. Dada had counted on that; Reisha *had* to be quiet now. Then Dada peered carefully out the window. To her far left, soldiers herded a group of women and children into a circle next to a large truck as Dada readied herself for one final flight.

A detachment of soldiers went from hut to hut and dragged out the few remaining inhabitants. They had reached the tukul two down from hers where an older couple lived. If Dada meant to make a break for it, time was running out. With her baby daughter on her back, she gripped each son's small hand, stepped to the door of the hut and prepared for the most important two minutes of her life.

The path leading into the village, the one the trucks had used, looked to be her only escape route. She had been the fastest runner in Nokot when she

was a young girl. If she could make it just 200 yards down the road, there were large fields of elephant grass where she and the children could hide.

As soon as there were no soldiers in sight, she eased out her door, hurried toward the road, and caught a quick glimpse through her neighbor's doorway as she passed Sama's tukul. The young girl sobbed quietly as two soldiers pinned her down while a third raped her.

Dada led the children stealthily from the back of one tukul to the next. She saw no one. Most of the soldiers were on the other side of the village where they herded women and children into transport trucks. She reached the last abandoned tukul on the edge of the village by the road and paused. She edged slowly around the circular hut and searched for soldiers. When she saw none, she prepared to make her move.

Ron Wolfson looked down at the little girl who sat in the dirt at his feet and wanted to cry. Or rip somebody's throat out.

But if he cried every time his heart broke for a brutalized child, or a dead baby, or a slaughtered villager, he wouldn't be able to do what he'd come here to do.

And if he went looking for somebody's throat to rip out, where would he start? The Murahaleen raider who burned down her village, killed her parents and carried her away? The slave-trader who sold her to the highest bidder? The master who bought her? The government that condoned it? Where would he stop?

He knelt beside the vacant-eyed child, flipped the catch on his camera case, reached inside and took out his battered old Nikon. He slid the camera strap over his head and around his neck and wiped the sweat out of his eyes on the dirty sleeve of his shirt. Was it hotter today than usual? Better question: Could a—Masapha would say “pampered”—American from a little Indiana town on the bank of the Ohio River ever get used to the frying-pan heat of Africa?

The blonde man moved so the glare of the sun was at his back, set his knees in the dirt and made his body a human tripod. Then he put his game face on. *I have to tell this little girl's story without any words.* He lifted the camera to his eye and began to fire.

The girl rocked back and forth as she tenderly cradled the cold, stiff body of her little sister in her arms. She was oblivious to the other refugees huddled together in groups around her, speaking in dialects she couldn't have understood even if she'd been listening. She was oblivious to the American, too, who knelt in the dirt in front of her, his aged Nikon click, click, clicking as he captured her pain on film. The child was oblivious to the blistering heat, to

the stench of unwashed bodies and human excrement, to everything except her little sister's face—at peace, finally at peace. As she hummed the ancient melody her grandmother had sung to her mother, and her mother had sung to her, she shooed the flies away from the blood clotted in her sister's ears and smeared in caked, dry streams down her neck.

“Some tribals brought her in this morning,” Jack Hadley said, as he came to stand beside where Ron knelt. With his red hair and freckles, the Canadian looked even more out of place in a Sudanese refugee camp than Ron did.

“From what I understand, they found her staggering across a field in a daze, carrying the body,” Jack continued, his words colored by the Irish-sounding lilt of his native Prince Edward Island.

Jack had told Ron about the child when the 36-year-old photographer showed up that morning to process film in the makeshift darkroom Jack had allowed him to hide in a closet behind the kitchen at CARA, the Canadian Aid and Relief Association's refugee center near Nimule in southern Sudan.

“The other little girl was already dead, had been for some time apparently, but she wouldn't let them touch her. The villagers didn't know what else to do with her so they brought her here.”

Ron removed the 28-mm wide-angle lens from his camera and replaced it with an 80-mm portrait lens. He framed the child's expressionless face in a couple of shots, then focused on the still-raw burns on both the little girls' left shoulders. Click-click.

“Those brands are fresh,” he said as he stood up and dusted the dirt off his pants. “Slave-traders don't waste time branding captives, so these two must already have been sold. Doesn't look like it's been more than a few days since their new owner put his mark on them to identify his property.”

Ron spit the word “property” out of his mouth as if the taste of it on his tongue made him nauseous. “I wonder how they got away.”

“Don't know, but perhaps I can find out. Let me see if I can locate somebody who speaks her dialect.”

Jack cocked his head to one side and studied the child. “She has a certain look, don't you think? High cheekbones, a thin nose. I've seen that look before.”

Ron watched Jack disappear into the teeming city of tents, lean-tos and makeshift huts that housed more than 25,000 people who had nowhere else to go, the hemorrhage of humanity from a society that was rapidly bleeding out. The camp was home to just about every one of the country's 597 tribes—men, women and children speaking 400 languages who had fled the plains, valleys and mountains of southern Sudan to escape the indiscriminate, brutal slaughter of genocide.

Ron turned back to the child and decided that Jack was right. She did, indeed, have a certain look, and he'd seen that look before, too. It was the look of vacant, hollow-eyed shock occasioned by horror way beyond a child's capacity to process. He'd seen it on children's faces in Rwanda, in Kosovo and in Uganda.

"You know what killed her." It was a statement, not a question. Ron's assistant, Masapha, had stepped up un-noticed beside him, and the smaller man's words came out in a voice gruff with restrained emotion.

Ron turned to face the Arab; their eyes met and locked. "Yeah," Ron struggled to keep his own voice under control, "I know what killed her, all right. The insect treatment."

Idris Apot was tired, bone-weary tired. The day had begun at first light in his small field on the village communal land, where he'd hacked all morning at the ground with a grubbing hoe to break the crust on soil baked rock hard by the unrelenting, dry season sun. It had ended as evening crept into the sky from behind the forest, after he'd scattered handfuls of tiny anyanjang seeds onto the ground for hours and then gently covered them with a thin layer of dirt. When he harvested the sorghum he was planting, his wife, Aleuth, would grind the kernels into flour to make the staples of his family's diet, including injera, the yellow flatbread Idris liked to eat hot, dipped in melting moo-yahoo butter made from shea nuts.

The 33-year-old Dinka farmer grimaced when he arched his back and stretched his cramped muscles. He was stiff from bending his lanky, six-foot, four-inch frame almost double all afternoon as he checked to make sure the anyanjang seeds lay no deeper in the freshly raked soil than the distance from the tip of his finger to his first knuckle. He looked toward the western horizon, squinted and shaded his eyes, to gauge how much daylight he had left. When he turned from the glaring sun, he spotted wispy gray and white streaks slowly rising from the first evening fires in Mondala. The broad smile that lit his face revealed the gap where four of his lower front teeth had been pulled at age 12 as the first part of his rite of passage into manhood. He took in a great gulp of air that held the faint scent of rain and let it out slowly. It was good to be home, he thought.

His village of Moinjaang, "the people of the people" as the Dinka called themselves, had just gotten settled in after their annual migration across the western floodplains to graze their herds of zebu on the banks of the great river. At the beginning of the dry season in mid-December, everyone in Mondala, except the old, the sick and nursing mothers, had gathered up the village cattle and herded them to temporary camps along the Bahr el Jebel,

the White Nile, where the annual floods laid down a rich layer of silt that produced lush, plentiful grass. They had remained there for three months, then returned home, a little earlier than usual this year, before the rains came and the river overflowed its banks, making the shoreline camps uninhabitable and turning the verdant grasslands into swamps.

It would never have occurred to Idris to question whether he liked his semi-nomadic life. He had never known any other. He had only twice ventured more than 100 miles from his home, had only been in a city once. But Idris knew that a profound peace always settled over him when he left the vast, featureless, grassy plains behind and returned to Mondala, to the hills and the forest. And he knew that the fulfillment he felt when he harvested the millet he'd planted with his own hands was rivaled only by the satisfaction of bringing home an antelope, gazelle or eland he'd tracked down and killed with a spear or his bow and arrow. Both experiences made him feel strong and capable and in charge of his life.

Some of the other farmers gathered up their tools, and two of the older men headed up the hard clay path toward the village. They shouldered their hoes, spades and rakes as they walked along together, chatting. Like Idris, they wore nothing but loincloths and beaded necklaces. They were tall men, too—several were taller than Idris—with very dark skin, almond-shaped eyes and narrow, square shoulders. Their height identified them as Dinka, the tribe that had given American basketball fans one of the two tallest players in NBA history—Manute Bol, the seven-foot, seven-inch Washington Bullets' center known as the Dinka Dunker. The intricate pattern of scars on their foreheads identified them as Dinka, too.

Idris stood for a moment undecided. He wanted to plant one more row. He surveyed the partially seeded field and estimated he would have to work three more full days to get the crop in the ground. Given the early planting, he hoped the harvest would yield a bumper crop, like the one he'd produced 11 years ago, the year his first child, Akin, had been born. He hadn't said anything to his wife at the time, but he'd yearned for a boy. As a Christian, Idris no longer believed the ancient traditions that required a man to produce a son or face oblivion after death. He didn't want a son to carry on the family name, to maintain the lineage link from the past, through the present to future generations. He just wanted a boy who would one day help him farm the land, care for the cattle and hunt for game, a boy he could teach to hold a bow steady, shoot an arrow straight and throw a spear accurately. He'd struggled mightily to hide his disappointment when he learned his firstborn was a girl.

Idris almost laughed out loud at the memory. It was hard to imagine that he'd ever been dissatisfied with Akin! She'd been the absolute delight of his life since the moment the midwife placed the squirming infant into his arms.

The child had instantly stopped wiggling and looked at him solemnly, her round eyes wide and unblinking. And then she had smiled at him—a wide, happy smile that planted twin dimples in her chubby cheeks and bathed her tiny face in joy. Oh, everyone said he'd imagined it, that newborn babies didn't smile. It must have been some trick of the flickering campfire light, they said—or gas!—and they chuckled good-naturedly at the fancy of a proud, new father. But Idris knew different.

As she grew older, that same dimpled smile lit Akin's face whenever she saw him. She'd toddle toward him on wobbly legs, her chubby arms outstretched, her face beaming, and he'd scoop her up and cuddle her close, certain that she was the most beautiful little girl and he was the most fortunate father in the world.

The image of Akin's smiling face, and the eager faces of his other two children, 9-year-old Abuong and 5-year-old Shema, waiting at home to greet him sealed his decision. He'd stop now; the rest of the work would just have to wait until tomorrow. He picked up his hoe and rake and headed up the clay path toward home.

A village of about 100 tukuls, Mondala was built on a knoll overlooking the river that flowed down out of the range of hills to the north and wrapped around the east side of the village. Beyond Mondala, the river continued southeast, one of hundreds of tributaries feeding the White Nile.

On the other side of the river, the landscape changed, gradually became flatter, with small stands of trees scattered here and there in a sea of grass that in some places grew waist high. It was there that the villagers hunted bigger game like reedbuck, gazelle and kudu.

To the west and south of the village lay the woodland that supplied the tribals mangos, papayas, dates, shea nuts and guavas, and kindling the women carried back to their tukuls in baskets balanced on their heads. The forest of stately mahogany and ebony trees, palms and date palms, was home to flocks of colorful tropical birds, chattering monkeys and hooting Hamadryad baboons. The villagers hunted dik dik and bushbuck there, tracking them through the woods as soundlessly as the leopards that also stalked the small antelope.

North of the village lay the sorghum fields and the grassland where the villagers' cattle, sheep and goats grazed. Beyond the fields, tall, rocky hills rose high above the village, with a trail winding up the side of the nearest one. Steep, narrow and cluttered with rocks, it was the only path north from Mondala.

His stomach began to rumble with hunger and Idris quickened his pace along the path. Aleuth would be preparing boiled potatoes and fava beans by now, and perhaps fresh injera, too. His mouth watered. As he started up the

last rise in the path that led to Mondala, he could just make out the form of a young girl running toward him. The light was failing, but Idris didn't need the sun to see the smile on the child's face. He could see her dimples with his heart.

Dada was drenched with sweat. Her heart pounded so hard she could literally hear it thud in her chest. Peeking around the edge of the last tukul, she could see women—her lifelong friends—and children, their hands bound behind them, tied one to the next by a long length of rope. The soldiers herded them into the transports like cattle.

She paused to gather her strength, stood as still as the big rock in the river. Then she sucked in a great gulp of air, leapt like an antelope from behind the tukul and sprinted down the road.

Even with a chubby 10-month-old on her back, she ran so fast she had to drag her terrified sons, gripping their little hands tight in her sweaty palms as they struggled to keep up.

She didn't feel the sharp edges of the stones on her feet nor hear the crying/shouting/screaming death throes of the mangled village behind her. Every molecule of her consciousness was riveted on the elephant grass that swayed in the morning breeze 100 yards away, a refuge that beckoned her and her children to safety.

If Dada could make it to the tall grass where they could hide, she and her children would live. If she didn't ...