

he voice had

amazement, but

CHAPTER SIX

Southern Sudan, 2008



Nya's family had been coming to the lake camp for generations; Nya herself had been there every year since she was born. One thing she liked about the camp was that, even though she had to dig in the clay and wait for water, she did not have to make the two long trips to the pond every day. But this year she realized for the first time that her mother hated the camp.

They had no house and had to sleep in makeshift shelters. They could not bring most of their things, so they had to make do with whatever was at hand. And for much of each day, they had to dig for water.

But the worst was the look on her mother's face when Nya's father and older brother, Dep, went off to hunt.

Fear.

Her mother was afraid. Afraid that the men in the family would run into Dinka tribesmen somewhere, that they would fight and get injured—or worse.

They had been lucky all these years. No one from Nya's

family had been hurt or killed by Dinka. But she knew other families in the village who had lost loved ones in this way.

Nya could see the questions in her mother's face every morning: Would they be lucky again?

Or was it now their turn to lose someone?

Southern Sudan, 1985



Salva's mouth closed and opened again, as if he were a fish. He tried to speak, but no sound came out of his throat. He tried to move, but his feet seemed stuck to the ground.

"Salva!" the man said again, and hurried toward him. When the man was only a few steps away, Salva suddenly found his voice.

"Uncle!" he cried out, and ran into the man's arms.

Uncle Jewiir was the younger brother of Salva's father. Salva hadn't seen him in at least two years, because Uncle had been in the army.

Uncle must know about the war and the fighting! Maybe he will know where my family is!

But these hopes were dashed as soon as Uncle spoke. "Are you alone? Where is your family?" he asked.

Salva hardly knew where to begin his answer. It seemed like years since he had run away from his school and into the bush. But he told his uncle everything as best he could.

As Salva spoke, Uncle nodded or shook his head. His face became very solemn when Salva told him that he had not seen nor heard a single word of his family in all that time. Salva's voice trailed off, and he lowered his head. He was glad to see Uncle again, but it looked as if he might not be much help either.

Uncle was quiet for a moment. Then he patted Salva's shoulder. "Eh, Nephew!" he said in a cheerful voice. "We are together now, so I will look after you!"

It turned out that Uncle had joined the group three days earlier, but since there were more than thirty people traveling together, they had not found each other until now. As they began walking, Salva saw that Uncle had a gun—a rifle that he carried on a strap over one shoulder. Already Salva could tell that because of his army experience and because he had a gun, Uncle was seen by the group as a kind of leader.

"Yes, when I left the army they let me keep my rifle," Uncle said. "So I am going to shoot us a fine meal as soon as we come across anything worth eating!"

Uncle was true to his word. That very day he shot a young antelope, the kind called a topi. Salva could hardly wait for it to be skinned and butchered and roasted. As the smoky, meaty aroma filled the air, he had to keep swallowing the saliva that flooded his mouth.

Uncle laughed as he watched Salva gobble down his first piece of the meat. "Salva, you have teeth! You are supposed to use them when you eat!"

Salva could not reply; he was too busy stuffing another chunk of the delicious charred meat into his mouth.

Even though the topi was a small one, there was more than enough meat for everyone in the group. But it did not take long for Salva to regret his haste in eating. After so many weeks of near starvation, his stomach rebelled mightily. He spent most of the night vomiting.

Salva was not alone. Whenever his heaving stomach woke him, he would hurry to the edge of the camp to vomit and find others there doing the same. At one point, Salva found himself in a line of half a dozen people, all in an identical pose—bent over, holding their stomachs, and waiting for the next wave of nausea.

It might have been funny if he hadn't felt so miserable.

* * *

The group continued to walk through the land of the Atuat. Every day they saw lions, usually resting in the shade of small trees. Once, in the distance, they saw a lion chasing a topi. The topi escaped, but along the path Salva saw the bones of prey that had not been so fortunate.

Salva and Marial still walked together, staying close to Uncle. Sometimes Uncle would walk with the other men and talk seriously about the journey. At those times, Salva and Marial would drop back respectfully, but Salva always tried to keep Uncle in sight. And he slept near Uncle at night.

One day the group began walking in the late afternoon, with hopes of reaching a water hole before settling down for the night. But there was no water anywhere, though they searched for miles. They kept walking, into the night and through the night. For ten hours they walked, and by dawn everyone was exhausted.

Uncle and the other leaders finally decided that the group had to rest. Salva took two steps off the path and fell asleep almost before he lay down.

He did not wake until he felt Uncle's hand shaking his shoulder. As he opened his eyes, he heard wailing. Someone was crying. Salva blinked away the sleepiness and looked at Uncle, whose face was very solemn.

"I am sorry, Salva," Uncle said quietly. "Your friend . . ."

Marial? Salva looked around. *He should be somewhere nearby. . . . I don't remember if he slept near me—I was so tired—perhaps he has gone to find something to eat—*

Uncle stroked Salva's head as if he were a baby. "I am sorry," he said again.

A cold fist seemed to grip Salva's heart.

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