Queen of Sheba and King Solomon: A Novel

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DRAFT

Amhara, Ethiopia. 984 B.C.

The land has a wound long before it's called Ethiopia. A triangular desert to the northeast, the Awash River withering before it reaches the sea, pools of sulfur, volcanoes, torrents of lava. Tectonic plates collide and repel, the earth's own surface wielding the knife. Three million years ago this was forest. Humanity's foremothers and forefathers lived here. Only the darkest and hardiest people have survived in the mouth of hell since. To the south the land is divided in two, mountains enclosing a rift valley that cleaves deeper into the continent. To the south: lowland, lakes, rivers, jungle. To the north: the highland. Rugged peaks, cliff sides, scattered plateaus, ravines, and grassy plains. Red and brown and white in the dry months, lush green with flowers that bloom like fires after the monsoon season.

The bird's eye is a wreath of fire, its charred pupils scanning for insects and larvae. Soaring in the sky, the bird watches a shifting point far below: A human, at first crawling on all fours then rising to its feet and staring at the bird. As of yet, only birds have seen the landscape from high above, and the girl admires its flames and stripes and the ease with which it travels. In the air, the hoopoe's crown of feathers lies flat against its skull. The two hunters aren't chasing the same prey. She follows the bird with her eyes, until the vision bursts in light and water, then she props her bow against the ground and rearranges her leather quiver, right where the strap rubs against her skin. A young girl wearing a dress made of leather, a braided rope wound around her waist, a woven woolen shawl around her shoulders. Her skin is blackened by the sun, and her hair is plaited tight and flat, the ends wrapped in strips of bark that makes them stick out. The short hairs around her temples are covered with clay; on the right side she's carved the

sun as a circle in the cracked surface, on the left side the moon. She kept the necklaces she usually wears at home, so the animals won't be forewarned by the clattering of her pearls.

Makeda has been on the road for several days. She left her village before the others awoke and could force her to stay. She has never been this far south, and she uses the sun, and others' stories, to orient herself. At first she'd followed the customary hunting route, crossing the river at the farthest wading pool just as the sun was rising and the first animals had come to drink. Instead of turning back at the scorched stone she continued onward. Every time she passed one of the places she'd heard about—the Plow of the Gods, the Sun Shield, the Sickle—she knew she was headed in the right direction. The stories didn't cease until she'd reached the Blood Plains and its circle of trees.

If she'd gone the opposite direction, she would have come to the great city where she's also never been. Murderers and decent folk call it home, thieves, beggars, and people so prosperous that servants carry them aloft so that their feet don't ever touch the ground. There are teeming marketplaces and foreign merchants and priests without eyes and the Sun God's temple with a roof made of gold.

Some say the dead journey south to gather in underground caves. Makeda knows the stories of the great wars, and she has heard of the southerners' brutality, of murdered infants spitted and roasted like lambs, and of people who've had their throats slashed in front of their own families. These days the tribes from the golden mountain pass and the great lake are the biggest threat. The villages near her own have suffered enormous losses; in several they speak of kidnappings, and of rapes that have conceived deformed Spirit Children, and of men who never return from the hunt but are found dangling from trees, their bodies dismembered and molested by strangers.

Makeda found a rust-red feather just after dawn, and she put it in her hair. One day she will fashion an arrow with it that others will admire. It's nearly midday now, cloudless, windless, blazing hot in the wide ravine. At home in the hills, the days are cool and the nights are cold. She seeks shade under a short tree, skating her fingers across the smooth bark as she searches for prints. There's a reckless defiance in continuing to wander during these sweltering hours. The sky is like a chalk-white ash, and the romping sun dances and flickers the air with dust and pollen. It's the season of fertility, of swaying grass, of flaming red bushes, of yellow mescal flowers carpeting the earth. Makeda drops

to her knees again, lays her forehead against the ground, and stretches her back before continuing, on all fours, across the open plain. Beneath her weight small flowers are pressed to the ground, a beetle with a shield of gold scuttles across her wrist. She flicks it off and watches it arc through the air. Humans must seem just as tiny to the gods, so accustomed to power the gods must be. The scorching heat is the Sun God's way of testing the obedience of humans. Without him no one survives: he helps the plants rise from the ground, he reveals where the animals are hiding, and he grants the hunter keen eyesight. With his heat the Sun God Shamr reminds them daily that the sister of generosity is cruelty, so they won't grow lazy and spoiled.

The breeze carries the dry and spicy scent of bark. If she had the nose of an animal, she could unravel the air like a piece of fabric, find threads of pelt and urine and quickly locate her prey. Instead she must crawl for hours in search of prints; yesterday evening she found paw-prints in the soft earth beneath the bushes where she'd pitched her tent for the night. The claw marks were clear, and it was easy for her to see that the prints came from a wary cheetah. She could hardly believe her luck.

Here and there are barren swaths of landscape, domed and bleached as if the earth had gobbled up the people and left only their skulls. A light, swift creature leaves almost no footprint, and she must concentrate in order not to lose the trail. She has crawled the entire morning against the wind, seeking places where the leopard will hunt, waterholes, forested grassland, and rock formations under which it can hide. There are poisonous lizards and snakes, plants with barbs and thorns. It is a slow and mindful process. In one spot, the animal had urinated on the trunk of a tree to mark its territory; at another the remains of an antelope's pelt indicated a recent meal. She'd found the chewed-up carcass by following the drag marks through the grass, the flies, the vultures. The cheetah may be able to hide wherever, but it is unlikely to run far when its stomach is full with its breakfast.

Heat scorches her nostrils, and she curses the eagerness that compelled her to continue. The light makes her eyes water. She fixes her gaze on a cluster of trees farther ahead. Her hands tingle, prickle, itch. She rises slowly to her feet, certain she saw something move between the trees, a ripple of shadow, immediately gone. She hardly

dares to breathe, a mosaic of light and dark, of fur and animal body, sun like crystals in the predator's eyes.

She sneaks forward, closer, closer. Every muscle must obey, every sinew, one eye on the ground, one eye on the animal. Dizzy now, she stops. The slightest sound and her hunt will be in vain. A moment later she knows it's true: the cheetah's waiting for the heat to subside, it hasn't heard her approaching. Elation arouses her fear. She flexes her muscles, transforms her stomach and back into a shield. Soon she will know whether she will return home as the victor or the vanquished.

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Makeda, Makeda, you can shoot a hare, a warthog, a gecko, but acting like the boys won't make you a man. Tafari had scorned her once she'd announced her hunting plans. This was just after the long monsoon season. Plants were blooming from the moist soil, the river was swollen and roaring. They'd gone hunting and spent the night under the open sky. They both knew this could very well be the last time: they were two twigs growing out of childhood, becoming inflexible roots—woman and man. Children run freely with bows and arrows and homemade knives, naked and unified until puberty separates them. In the village they keep goats and hens and oxen strong enough to pull a plow. They cultivate plants and beans on the hills, they gather berries and roots. They are hunters and farmers: men plow, women sow. Later, the women harvest and the men go hunting; they spit deer and hares while the women stoke the fire.

When they were nearly home, Makeda told Tafari of her dream, and afterward she'd said she would head south to find the cheetah. After he'd stopped laughing and realized she was serious, he asked if he could come along. She spat at him, and he jammed a clenched fist under her chin. *Should I go with you too, Tafari, when it's your turn? Will you need your girl's help when you're out to show you're a man who can bring your prey home?* He put a hand around her throat. *It won't turn out well for you, Makeda*, he said, then loosened his grip. *They are right when they say you'll wind up a shadow like your mother.*

They'd stood under the big tree where the village council assembled; its crown was bursting with orange flowers, and the ground was littered with furry shells. When he walked away from her, she continued to feel the burning sensation of his hand on her

skin. She watched him, his straight back, the bow, and over his shoulder a badger and an upside-down hen, its feathers in the jouncing quiver. They grew up together; she knows his footsteps and his voice, his movements, his body, the ends of his sentences. Several times recently he has said things that indicate how he wants to be her husband. She knows she should accept his offer; it's time, and he would be a good match. She doesn't understand what comes over her when she pretends not to hear him, changes the subject, and runs away. She stood rooted in place long after he'd gone off. The light-brown path like a scar in the evening light.

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Three, four, five light, soundless steps closer. The cheetah lifts its head. She holds her breath, pauses, the feather of an arrow prickles against her palm. She raises the bow halfway, each movement divided in two, one belonging to her, one to the animal. The day before she'd plucked seeds from poisonous climbing plants and crushed them with a stone. She mixed them with spit and juice from the fruits and berries that are all she's eaten since leaving the village. With a stick she rubbed the paste on the arrows, and, to be certain it wouldn't snap off in the animal's pelt, on the shaft right behind the point. The climbers' poison is the deadliest, and their poison works so swiftly the prey cannot get very far. It's easy to be harmed when handling such a strong poison, and only adult hunters are allowed to use it. If one of the children gathers the seeds, he is punished. Even so, it's a secret pleasure to do it.

Until she found the trail, she sang to herself as she wandered southward. The melody discovered the cheetah's name well before she knew she'd encounter it: Abeb, she calls it, the flower to be plucked. To go hunting alone transforms boys into men. While their bodies are changing, they wait for the gods to reveal their prey in dreams. During that period they talk of nothing else; it's unbearable. It has been a great while since anyone has dreamed of the cheetah, and as proud as they would naturally be to receive a visitation by such a fine, reclusive animal, they are relieved when they dream of the honey badger or the antelope. Even the lion, the powerful leopard, or the dangerous porcupine—which can only be pursued by crawling into narrow shafts—are easier to contend with, because they don't force the hunter on such a long journey. Makeda is

certain that most of the boys at home would prefer the furry apes that graze on the mountains and sleep on the cliffs, and it makes her laugh. Apes wander the countryside in numbers so vast that there's no art in taking one. Their pelts have little value. The boys like to brag and rile each other up, but when it comes right down to it, they're not very brave. In the village everyone knows about hunting and wild animals, and even small children can draw a bowstring. But loneliness is dark and foreign to someone who has always slept, eaten, worked, and hunted with others. There is also a great risk of returning empty-handed when hunting reclusive animals. For a young hunter there is no greater shame. Tafari laughed at her, but he couldn't conceal his anger. *No one cares what animals a girl can take down*, he'd taunted. *You risk being kidnapped by strangers. If you don't understand how dangerous it is your head must be filled with air. Strangers could easily jab a knife between your legs and slice you in two, Makeda.*

Makeda is certain the creature is a full-grown male. Judging by its prints it's a heavy animal, and at this time of year the females aren't pregnant. She sees it clearly now: it sniffs at the air, the soft curve of its ears, and rolls onto its back, lazy, lively. It's a miracle it hasn't noticed her yet. Without lifting her hand she draws a circle, the sign of the sun god Shamr, in the air with her index finger. She needs his blessing. Her eyes are full of fire, leaping sparks, like branding pain in her throat. The nocked arrow and a soft whistling, as if her shadow-mother momentarily laid her cheek against hers. *Makeda, Makeda, be alert, Makeda*, and she strikes the cheetah right between its ribs, not close enough to its foreleg to pierce the heart. The animal, disoriented, rises to its feet, and she hits it with another arrow before it flees. Her final arrow skims the grass. She chases it. The poison works quickly, and the cheetah is hampered by its wounds. Instead of hiding in the trees, it runs into the open where it's easy to follow its flight. Makeda forms a circle with her index finger and thumb and observes the animal through it; she speaks to it with her mind, saying: *Thank you, Abeb, thank you, smart animal. I called and you came. Thank you death. Thank you life. Thank you sun, who colored your pelt and glinted in your eyes*. Death comes like this, and the cheetah collapses. Makeda walks calmly through the grass. The cheetah clambers to its feet, collapses again. Dizzy now, Makeda lies on her back with her hand on its belly, a white and glowing sky, a sun that only slowly allows the heat to exit the quivering body.

For some time Makeda doesn't move. High in the sky feathered scavengers circle. As long as she stirs, they keep their distance. She's in a wrestling match with the sun, and inevitably she will lose. With her tongue she moistens her lips, and the taste of sweat reminds her of Tafari. Her lips against his throat, the scent of his skin. She gets to her knees. She jerks the arrows from the animal's flank, and returns them to her quiver. Then she drags the cheetah underneath a tree and loosens the long, braided leather rope she's wrapped around her waist. One loop around its hind leg, the other thrown over a branch: a dead body brushes against a living one as she hoists the cheetah into the air. It's hard, grueling work, and the grass and the pelt and the sweat make her body itch. She digs a hole in the ground, tears up tufts of grass, and slits the animal's throat to paint her hands and arms with blood and soil. She paints her lips and cheeks and legs and feet and breasts, her skin tightening where the blood congeals. The cheetah's entrails smell sweet and strong, they slip slickly and unctuously through her fingers. She tosses the pile in the grass, so that she can quickly grab a hunk of meat should she need to feed a hungry animal before she's able to nock an arrow on her bowstring. The vultures are fearless, and the branches creak beneath their weight; they crane their downy white necks, pacing, capering, and one lands on the ground, spreads its wings, and shields her from the others' curiosity.

Shortly before her mother died, Tafari's father, Jabbar, presented her with a copper knife. She carries it with her now, but prefers to use the flint-knife she'd carved herself. It would be impossible to drag the entire animal back; she'll cut it up and take only the meat she can eat on her journey. She works carefully because she mustn't make holes or slashes in the pelt. The head is the hardest part. She has to save the snout and the ears and the eyelashes, so that the fur's striking enough that Jabbar can get a good price for it at the market in Yeha.

The market in Yeha. It's only an eight-day journey from the village, and yet it's as though the place doesn't exist. Makeda stretches her neck, then shakes her hands to loosen them. It's late in the afternoon. At first, after all the excitement, she was brimming with energy, but now she's exhausted. The crackling of the skin slipping free with every tug is the sound of triumph. Jabbar has told her that people far away keep cheetahs to hunt with. They collar them and tame them by alternatively starving and rewarding

them; they lock them in cages and call the animals they kill their own quarry. Forcing an animal into submission is cruelty. Those same people have gods who take the form of animals, and Makeda cannot fathom this. She'd asked Jabbar whether they imagine they rule over the gods, too, and whether their animal gods are stronger than the Sun God—since he does not punish them.

She will return to the village and she will again request—no, she will demand—that Jabbar take her with him to Yeha the next time he goes. She will pay him with the handsome pelt, which will also be proof that she's strong enough and courageous enough to go. She's nagged him since she was a little girl. In the beginning he'd lampooned her pig-headedness, but later he took care to explain that it's much too dangerous for an almost fully-grown woman from the prairielands to visit Yeha. He wouldn't be able to protect her. Her youth is a tradable commodity, and he doesn't want anything to happen to her.

"You are like my daughter," he'd always say, but this never appeased her.

He spoke of cultures where women did not have the same rights as men, of forced marriages, and of people who bought and sold human slaves. He became angry when she claimed he was telling her all this just to frighten her.

But he laughed whenever she suggested she could defend herself. The times have changed now. When they hear of new kidnappings or gory skirmishes, Yeha almost seems safer than their village.

"You'll only be trouble," Jabbar says now, "you mustn't ask me again."

She does anyway. Every time he travels to Yeha, and every time he returns. The first time Tafari was allowed to go, he didn't gloat, but he didn't care to answer all her questions afterward. It was humiliating, because she couldn't help herself.

"Did you see my father?" she asked when they were finally alone, several weeks after he'd returned home, and sitting beside the Hunting Stone. Tafari shook his head. Hesitant, irritable.

"Did you?" she insisted. "Answer me."

He pulled her close, and she became angry.

"If you don't tell me the truth," she said, "I'll never let you touch me again."

"You don't want to anyway," he said, and accepted her slap.

As long as the man didn't penetrate the woman, youths were allowed to explore each other's bodies. Once he enters her, she belongs to him. Tafari was good to be with, because he didn't force her.

"No one knows where your father is," he said, glancing up at the sky. She could see that he was speaking the truth. She apologized for having slapped him. He didn't reply.

Makeda had gone to Tafari's father instead:

"Where is he?" she asked. "You lied to Tafari, but a daughter has the right to hear from her father."

"I will tell you only if you promise to stop nagging me."

When she said nothing, but simply stood before him, unyielding and straight-backed, with the pale shawl that he'd brought home for her gathered around her shoulders, he added, softly, as if to himself:

"Maybe you will finally understand it's not possible."

"What?" She stepped closer. He made a deprecating gesture, his hand like a temperamental broom swept through the air.

"He's gone," he said, then stood.

They are the same height. He's from a faraway place, where the people are shorter, with lighter skin and narrow noses.

"He journeyed across the sea many years ago. To the place where I am from. According to rumor, he's an advisor to the king."

"Where is that?"

"To the edge of our world, where the kingdom of Saba ends," he'd said before walking away.

She wants to go to Yeha anyway. It's an obsession, a necessity, a beautiful, golden snake coiled so that she's never at peace. Go, go, it hisses, farther, farther, come! Many years ago she tried to explain to her mother how a snake lived within her. Isme put her index finger against her index finger, and thumb to thumb, and said that Makeda must force the snake to bite its tail so hard that it never lets go. A circle is the sun. It is the snake god that lies like a wreath around the world and forms the outline of the egg the creator god cracked at the dawn of time, releasing fire and water and air, letting the rain

come for the first time, the roots grow, filling berries with juice, and creating animals and humans in the nourishing yolk. A snake must be respected and it must be tamed: If it lets go of its tail, the world will rupture anew. If it gets too little food, it will eat itself and the world will be destroyed. Makeda was small and understood none of it. *I am not a world*, she'd said, and Isme had slapped her. *Dumb girl*, she'd said, and Makeda never asked again. Every time she thinks of Yeha the snake shifts inside her. She wants to tame it by feeding it something other than its own tail: Once she is allowed to see the city, it will be calmed, and she will be at peace.

Jabbar has told her of women who travel, and of nomad tribes and the goddess queens who reigned at the dawn of time, and yet in the village the women are rooted in place. In the grassland the women are trees and the men are wind; young girls are born as wispy bushes, and the wind carries them for a while. That's why children are allowed to run free, even outside the enclosure surrounding the village—as long as they are small. But when their bodies change, the bushes turn into trees; they develop powerful trunks and huge, compliant treetops while their invisible roots grow deeper and stronger for every child they bring into the world. At the same time the wind gains strength until it becomes a storm wind conveying the rain and the sun. An encounter between man and woman can only bear fruit if she is a tree.

"Why do some of the girls move away when they marry?" Makeda had asked her mother, "when the men always stay in the village?"

"Because a wife must follow her husband."

"But then the roots are torn from the ground?"

"Sometimes roots grow deeper in new soil. If all the young women marry the men they are raised with, their children will belong to the spirits."

Some may remain, others may not. After each monsoon season, the youths meet others from nearby villages on the Sky Plain. Men dance with bows and spears, showing off their heavy jewelry They smile at the girls, touch their hair, look them over, wait, laugh. They bring fruits and throw them at the girl they are interested in. The girl accepts the fruit or she does not; it's up to her. It's a game and it's serious, but it takes more to seal a marriage. Tafari can simply ask Makeda to be his, because Jabbar has more power than most.

That Makeda has been allowed to hunt with the boys for as long as she has is unusual. When Isme was alive they turned a blind eye, because a shadow-woman with only one child needs someone to bring her meat and to take care of her. No one wants to be dependent on charity, and though Jabbar—even before Makeda was born, out of loyalty and a sense of duty to the child's vanished father—had promised to help Isme, it wasn't strange that she preferred her own daughter to bring home birds and other small animals. But Isme is dead now, and Makeda knows that they whisper about her behind her back. She who is raised by a shadow becomes skilled at pretending nothing bothers her.

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Her hands slide across the skinless flesh, congealed blood, everything that glistened before is dull now, the flies, the smell, the scavengers' impatience. She loosens the rope and lets the animal fall to the ground. Dust plumes in a cloud when the earth accepts the body with a sigh. She wraps the cheetah's pelt around her like a hooded robe, its forelegs dangling across her chest. She rubs the claws with her spit until they are shiny and black. The vultures are impatient. *Help yourself*, she says, *may your stomachs burst from greed*. A predator's blood smells different than that of a goat or antelope, a fat, dark smell, charred and sharp and blended by wind and prey. Makeda returns in the same direction from which she'd come. Walking is more pleasant than crawling. She's looking forward to seeing their faces when she gets home.

Later that evening clouds drift across the edge of the earth. An invisible army stomping ragged footprints across the sky. The evening sun spills into every cavity, golden, rose-pink, purple. Makeda gathers firewood and lights a fire, rubbing a stick against another and igniting dried grass and twigs. As long as she keeps busy, she doesn't think about the night. Though she's not cold, she swaddles herself in her scarf. She lays her head against the cheetah's pelt. The stars make the slits between the clouds sparkle. In the darkness there are sounds. Makeda listens: the crackle of the fire, the wind stirring the grass, the insects that make the world tremble. The hyenas and their ugly laughter emerge with the darkness. The females with their dangling genitalia are larger and stronger than the males, and they kill other females in the same cackle as soon as they are

able. They are the beasts of burden to the witches; they give birth in hidden caves, and they let their masters milk them. Although they are despicable, you must never kill a hyena, for witches count their animals every night and they exact revenge if one is missing. An animal so ugly and greedy must carry evil within. It is said they crave the flesh of newborns and howl because human mothers are good caretakers of their offspring. When she was little Makeda asked her mother why the hyenas, if they wanted meat, had never leaped over the enclosure surrounding their village. Isme slapped her instead of replying. Another time Isme called hyenas the world's dumbest animal, saying that they'd worked themselves into a frenzy the night Makeda was born. It is said that the child who enters the world to the sound of hyenas' laughter will become a thief, and Makeda's mother had been so afraid of this that she tried to not give birth to her until dawn's first light. The story was worse than the slap.

"I'm no thief," Makeda had said. It was hard to decipher the expression on her mother's face.

"I'm no thief," she'd repeated. Isme shushed her, and Makeda began to cry, so Isme took pity on her after all.

"You were born at the very instant the sun arose," Isme said, drawing her close. "You are a sun-child, not a hyena-child."

The night before had been cloudy. Makeda's fire had flickered wildly against the darkness. Curled-up with her bow in her lap, it occurred to her just how far away from home she was, and the landscape that had gradually revealed itself to her throughout the day and received her with strong, soft grass, with damp aromas, birdcalls, and small flocks of nimble antelopes, has dissolved into the powerful nothingness of night. Every time the sky's cool breath transformed into animal screeches and cries and obscured the constant whirring and rustling of insects, it was as if something transformed inside her, so that a strange fear emerged, and she'd hardly slept. She'd pressed herself against the ground, a small creature, darkness crawling through her eyes and nose and mouth, and she'd been about to drown.

Tonight the moon is out, a bone-white world between the shadows. The moon goddess Ashta likes to see her prey, and Makeda smoothens the pelt with both hands and lays it upon the grass for her. Ashta bears a shield bedecked with a cheetah hide, she's a

hunter like Makeda, and also Shamr's wife and the mother of all the stars. When the sun-god sleeps, Ashta keeps vigil before his hut. She makes a circuit of the globe, keeping an eye on all corners. When she turns her gaze and her glowing shield toward humanity, no living being can sneak unseen past her. When she turns on her side, the shield seems as narrow and sharp as a sickle. Every month the sun-god calls to her, asks her to lie with him. When she sets down her shield, at his door, the people are left alone to keep watch in the impenetrable darkness, even on cloudless nights. When the wind moans, when the sun burns doubly hot, when Shamr journeys from his camp in the morning. The children conceived by the sun and moon enter the world in a downpour, the moon hides in her bed, and the sun leaves home as the amniotic fluid nourishes the soil. It's the season of blossom, of lushness, of succulent buds, of leaves, of growing crops—when the earth is slushy with birth pangs and bleeds red and brown. Hyenas and wild dogs howl at night to cover the wails of the newborn star-child. The sun proudly lifts its offspring up to the black bowl of the sky. Like dew, the child and its countless siblings shimmer, telling humanity the time to sew and to harvest, or the time for drought and rain and wind.

Deep within the vast night Makeda is again the little girl in Isme's hut. The heat of her mother's skin, her long arms, her hands that punish and caress. She pulls her scarf up to her chin, lays across the pelt. She's more courageous tonight. She smells of animal blood. She clutches her bow and is so exhausted she nearly faints. Wild animals don't dare approach her campfire. The dangers that lurk in this lonely night are no worse than what can pounce on a girl asleep in her own hut. The only thing she really fears are people. She's as small as a seed on the savanna. She finds consolation in dwelling on her own insignificance, in reminding herself how improbable it is that anyone who'd wish her harm would find her out here. The dead watch over the living.

"Mother," she whispers. "Watch out for me."

Isme had the blackest eyes and the softest skin. Her fingers were quick and gentle. When she sang you either laughed or cried.

Makeda squeezes her eyes shut, and the stars swim and dive. She fights against sleep, afraid to wake and discover that the hunt was just a dream. *Silly child*, her mother whispers, and Makeda smiles. *Little speck, shadow-child, Maké, Maké, I will breathe on your eyelids so that you cannot keep them open without crying*.

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One day at the end of the short monsoon season, her mother lay down to die without warning, curling up on the mat, her back to the opening of the hut. She wasn't sick, she didn't want to eat. Makeda had stayed with her expecting Isme to rise again. A gray and white world, a wall of moisture. In those days everyone waited for the rain to stop. Getting around in the sludgy muck was difficult. In their enclosures the braying goats clustered under thatched huts covered with blotched animal hides. The sound of thunder, of lightning, of monotonous, slashing rain masking voices and laughter. The pauses between the storms were shorter than usual. For several days rain fell without cease. No matter how well they'd sealed the roof, the rain found its way in. It stank of rot and offal. The worse the odor, the more discouraged they became, and the closer they were to the dry season. Isme stayed on her mat, and Makeda couldn't get her to talk. After two days of this Makeda went to Jabbar and his wife Desta.

"Death decides," Jabbar had told her as she stood in the pouring rain between his huts.

Desta stood with her arm through his. Makeda would have answered that her mother's obstinacy was in cahoots with the cursed death Jabbar had talked about, as if death meant nothing. That this was the very alliance she needed help breaking, that it was more than illness and accidents and sudden death. But it was so frightening that she couldn't make herself say it.

She returned to sit beside her mother. As she grew weaker, Isme's skin darkened. Makeda wanted to hold her hand, but Isme mustered all her strength and turn her back on her.

"Mother," she'd said, "at least tell me what I should tell my father if I ever find him?"

She laid down on her mat, letting her hand rest on Isme's shoulder. She wanted to huddle up next to her, but she didn't dare.

Makeda gave up. She kept vigil, somewhere between sleeping and waking, drifting between flakes of childhood memory that flowed into dreams. She didn't hear her until Isme said it again.

"The mirror," Isme whispered.

"The mirror?"

"Wrapped," Isme said. "That's how he'd recognize you. Under the tree by the flat rock. He promised to return."

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He promised to return. There was a tragic irony in that this was the last thing Makeda heard her mother say, for it had been the end of all the stories about her father since the time she was very small. Mosi and Jabbar had come to the village before Makeda was born. Jabbar had worked as a bookkeeper for one of the king's governors in the kingdom of Saba. Mosi had attended to the governor's trade interests on this side of the sea. He and Jabbar and their retinue were on a journey. They wanted to see how deep into the territory they could go. They made agreements with villages and nomadic peoples. They promised them good trades if, in exchange, they would first offer their wares to the governor's representatives. Leather, ivory, horns, resin from the incense tree, decorated ostrich eggs, feathers, live monkeys, raw gems, and, farther north: nuggets of gold from the river. People were often cheated in Yeha. The merchants came from everywhere. They were rich and well-spoken, and it was hard for the villagers, who couldn't read or write, to demand anything from them, hard to argue with their jewelry and their colorful capes whenever they spoke of taxes paid on their own journeys, for this, that, and the other—meaning they had very little money left and could only offer the villagers half price on their wares. If you said no, you might wind up returning home with your own wares, and the village would have to get by without tools, proper weapons, seeds, and marriage jewelry. Jabbar was a pale foreigner from the desert country, Mosi looked more like them. Most places it was easy for the two to sign pacts with tribal peoples, because people didn't have much to lose.

Their village was the final stop on Jabbar and Mosi's journey back to Yeha. They had been gone for a long time. They told fantastic stories about warrior tribes deep within the continent, about their bloodthirst and unpredictability, and how by little more than a stroke of good fortune they'd gotten away with their lives intact. This was shortly after the long war that had given the Blood Plain its name. Back then, no one dared venture

farther than to the Plow of the Gods to hunt, and there had been no reports from so far away since the time before Isme was born.

In the village they laughed at Jabbar, at his slender nose, at his small stature, at his accent. They wanted to touch his skin and hair. Mosi had grown up in the salt desert near the sea, he was darker than the villagers, and he laughed at Jabbar along with them. It was good-natured ribbing; the two men were clearly friends. The strangers brought gifts: bracelets, necklaces, and arrowheads from the north, well-made products from city craftsmen, ornamented vessels, and curved knives in handsomely-decorated sheaths from the desert country. Jabbar noticed Desta immediately. Isme had never seen a man as beautiful as Mosi. Many of the travelers took ill and the entire retinue was forced to stay longer than anticipated. Two men perished, and the others' conditions improved only when the short monsoon season made any journey impossible—so they had to remain even longer. Jabbar ate with Desta and her family. He held onto her hand when she passed him the bread, and she did not pull it away. At that point Isme was promised to a man from the mountains, but now she rejected him and wouldn't accept his gifts. Mosi pretended not to notice her, but she could think of nothing else. One night she smeared herself in grease and visited Mosi in his hut. Afterward she bragged to her friends that convincing him hadn't been difficult. Desta gathered her courage and asked point blank if they'd lain together, and Isme laughed and swaggered as she answered yes. The other unwed women didn't dare comment, since none wanted to anger Isme, and besides it couldn't be undone. Hopefully Mosi understood that it was now his obligation to marry Isme, and yet it was impossible to notice anything different between them. If he didn't wish to marry her, her status would be worse than the widows'. She could never hope to become a first wife and would always be subservient to her husband's other wives. Isme spent every night with Mosi, but during the day he made no distinction between her and others. He didn't bring her family gifts and didn't ask about a marriage ceremony; Isme stood tall and pretended that all was well. There was no shame in love. Over time he would do the right thing. Early in the morning on the day he was to leave, he told her he loved her. Isme was relieved, but there was no time to marry. She told him she was pregnant, and he promised he would return. He gave her a bronze mirror, its shaft shaped like a woman holding a polished, shiny disk above her head. It was defective—the

woman was missing one of her forearms—but all the same, Isme had never seen anything so exquisite. In it she could see her own face clearer than in motionless water: dark, soft, distant. She stood with the rest of the village and watched the retinue slowly make their way down the hill. Once, Mosi turned and raised his hand, but Isme stood immobile as a tree and ignored her mother's shameless moaning.

At the end of the dry season, when everything smelled of dust and was soon to go up in smoke, Jabbar returned. For Desta's parents he brought jewelry, expensive and completely useless gifts, and asked to marry their daughter. Her father nodded, silent, while her mother hid in their hut and cried, because she would never see her daughter again. You couldn't ask a man to remain with his wife's family. A man from the mountains was bad enough, but this was more than a day's journey. The desert country on the other shore of the sea was like death, Yeha almost the same. That's why she first scolded Desta, then laughed in disbelief when Desta strolled over and embraced her, whispering that Jabbar wanted to live with them in the village. After the first wave of joyful relief, people couldn't help but wonder whether or not he'd committed some offense or was somehow in disfavor with his own people, since he was volunteering to live with them. No one wanted to ask, and over time they almost forgot about it. Clearly, a man who could read and write and calculate, and who had connections to a governor, would bring certain advantages. Only when he made poorer trades than anticipated or there happened to be internal village strife—when he didn't intuit which party to side with—did they recall that he was a stranger and possibly a man in exile.

Isme waited until Desta and Jabbar's wedding ceremony to ask. Jabbar had noticed her round belly upon his return, and putting two and two together was easy.

"When is Mosi coming?" she'd asked after the men had danced their courtship dance and were seated by the great bonfire once again.

"I don't know." Jabbar replied, his mouth stuffed with food.

Desta adjusted her bridal veil and coughed lightly.

"I don't think he will," he went on.

"He promised to return," Isme said.

"We separated in Yeha shortly after we left here," Jabbar said. "I had the impression that he planned to journey across the sea."

"The impression?"

He swallowed and nodded and could think of nothing more to say.

As the birth approached, Isme spoke less and less. Desta pressed Jabbar.

"Mosi had important things to do. He couldn't drag Isme with him," he said, and it was so unfeeling that Desta became angry.

"She wouldn't fit in his world anyway," he tried to say, "and he'd never do what I am doing. A man like Mosi has greater ambitions than winning better trade agreements for a governor and securing the protection of tribal peoples. Don't you understand that much more is at stake? That he is the one who has had to sacrifice the most?"

He wasn't making any sense, and Desta couldn't make him explain. They had argued. Defeated, he'd gone to Isme's hut to speak with her. He knew he couldn't reasonably expect her to understand that Mosi had left because he'd needed to, that he could not have allowed himself to consult his heart. The village elders didn't even understand how the outside world functioned. They were a peaceful people who grew uncomfortable whenever they were told stories of warrior cultures and heard of the brutality of other tribes. When one of their young girls or boys vanished, they mourned. As though to be invisible, the village was braced against the hill. For a while it seemed to work, no doubt because the most warmongering tribes found it meaningless to conquer territories near the mountains, where the hunting was mediocre and the preservation of life depended on hard fieldwork. The peoples of the great lake quarreled and killed over nothing, but these were random and isolated incidents that you couldn't prevent. The village women weren't the kind the far stronger southern people desired; they preferred their own round-headed, thick-bellied girls. Things were different with people from the north or from the other shore of the sea. Clans and tribes were assessed, then lumped together like pelts by foreigners. Their assumptions became their own truths, and they've decided that mountain girls were quick learners, silent, and dogged. The men didn't particularly interest them, they only need someone to take care of their children and to prepare their meals. Merchants prefer to buy the girls through honest means, when a drought or some other catastrophe makes it difficult for the villagers to feed their own. In good times, when no one wants to sell their daughters to foreigners, no one would dream

of allowing a young girl to ride along to Yeha; it would be considered an invitation to trade.

Desta's tribe knew that merchants often cheated them in Yeha and they didn't much like it, but they considered it an inevitable part of an unjust world. Jabbar had discussed the advantage of a united kingdom with them, one with a strong central administration, from the land's innermost lakes and forests to Ma'rib in the desert country on the other shore of the sea. He'd told them of his dream of one king who'd put the kingdom and the people ahead of himself, and of the not quite unrealistic dream of a vice-king in Yeha, who could hold the powerful priesthood in check, manage the tribes, and the villages' interests while maintaining the peace through the enactment of communal laws and a court system. The villagers know of the relations in Yeha, they know that the city has become a dangerous place in which to live, they know of the lawlessness and the bandits and the rumors of bloody assaults on small merchants like themselves. But while it was self-evident to Jabbar that the lawlessness and rawness are the result of a weak and absent provincial administration, the villagers regard it either as the whim of the gods or as an expression of changing times—which they can do nothing about. Jabbar was used to being called a dreamer and many worse things. Naturally, the villagers had heard about the Egyptian kingdom to the far north, but when he told them he imagined something similar for them, they laughed at him. Of course they'd heard about the king, the court, and the priesthood, but they couldn't imagine what a united kingdom meant. That the priests sent out delegations from time to time to collect the fattest goats or even their children, who were then brought to Yeha as unpaid laborers in the temple, was a harsh but unavoidable price to pay for the protections they hoped to obtain in exchange. No one dared challenge those who knew and spoke with the gods. In their world, Yeha was the fat spider in a web that included the tribes and the villages in the part of the highlands and mountains they knew. They looked after their own interests, and Jabbar couldn't blame them for that. As time passed, what happened among the powerful far away also seemed to him more and more inconsequential. That's why he thought it would be impossible to explain to Isme that the vision of a better life for them all that had been what took Mosi from her, but he didn't know what else he could do.

She had listened to everything he'd said. When he was finished, she nodded.

"Does Mosi want to be king?" she asked. He didn't understand how she'd gotten that idea.

He reiterated that Mosi had intended on traveling to the Kingdom of Saba's royal city, Ma'rib, in the desert on the other shore of the sea, to be installed in the king's court and to thereby, over time, assert his influence on the administration of the kingdom's most remote province.

"Will he return as a vice-king in Yeha then?" she asked, and Jabbar just shrugged.

"Maybe," he replied to escape the conversation.

"He promised to return," she said, the same wishful incantation as always.

Following the conversation she had nevertheless seemed happier. She began talking again, and Desta thanked Jabbar for whatever he'd done. He told himself that his efforts hadn't been the failure he'd thought. Not until the child arrived did he understand how wrong he'd been, and it was much worse than he'd imagined. In the village, mothers and fathers named their children after their forebears, one name from the father, one from the mother. In this way they offer the dead a new residence and curry their favor. Isme named the girl Makeda, though no one had gone by that name for as far back as the elders could remember. The name meant "greatness," a name fit for a queen, but not for a village girl.

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Before she falls asleep and after she awakes, Makeda thinks about her mother. Maybe they're right, she thinks, as she smothers the coals. Maybe the dead really live in the shadows to the south. Death is cruel, and death is good. She misses her mother, and she is ashamed at how her death also seeds in her an intoxicating freedom. Walking with the cheetah's head covering her own like a hood is hot. Makeda drapes the skin across her neck instead. The paws drum against her chest when she walks. Isme appears and then disappears. Makeda wanders for days, she eats the meat before it's properly cooked, she sucks juice from roots and berries. She approaches her village.

Makeda leaps across the rocks near the wading place. She's almost home. Water splatters her skin and forms beads on the pelt. Instead of going straight back she detours up the

slope to where she and Isme once lived. Their hut was like every other: A circular, mud-packed house with a frame made of branches and a conical grass roof. The hut was surrounded by squat thorns and fig trees on the plateau above the river. It's not very far from the village, and she can hear goats braying and children screeching. The hut was built beside the sheer drop to the river. At night they floated among the stars.

Flies swarm, drawn by the blood. They buried Isme at the burial site near the Bird's Bend. Makeda helped dig the grave alongside Jabbar and Tafari. Before they'd returned, the men from the village had set fire to the hut so that Isme's soul wouldn't forget she was dead and haunt them. The men saved the pot and the metal knife for Makeda, but they'd overlooked the leather purse filled with mussel shells. Because she was a shadow and lived outside the enclosure, Isme had no right to a share of the goods Jabbar purchased at the market in Yeha. He had given her shells every now and then on the sly, though she had nothing to spend the money on. He told her if there's anything she wanted at the market, she could give him shells and he'd get it for her; the others would believe Mosi had given her the money before he went away. Though she never spent a single shell, she always kissed the bag like an amulet, whenever she'd stuffed it with Jabbar's gifts, before shoving it back between the branches under the roof.

In the nights following Isme's death, Makeda slept on the ground beside the fire that had once been their home. Jabbar had asked her to move into the hut where his unmarried daughters lived and become part of his family. Desta had come to fetch her, but Makeda said she needed more time. They left her alone. She waited for the fire to die out, then rooted around in the coals with a stick to find the purse. She didn't know what she would do with the shells, she just wanted to have them. Just as she was about to give up hope, she noticed one of the woven strings; it was charred, and twisted like a snakeskin. She reached for it but stumbled and burned her hands and one of her feet. The bag was burnt, but the shells were unharmed, and so she buried them in the soil before cooling her wounds in the river. Some young village girls found her there. She reeked of smoke and singed flesh. The icy mountain water had numbed her legs, but every time she stood the pain was unbearable. Desta waded out to her and embraced her. She didn't say a word, just stood in water up to her knees rocking Makeda back and forth. Jabbar remained on the bank, waiting. He turned his face so he would not embarrass her.

He'd brought the medicine man and they bandaged her with grass and leaves, but the foul odor lingered. The medicine man said it could go either way. They unrolled a mat for her in Jabbar and Desta's daughters' hut, they fed her, and kept watch over her when she came down with a fever. At night Isme laid her dream-hands on hers and healed her wounds. A fine, thin skin covered Makeda's palms, and before long there was no visible trace of injury. There was a thick, swollen scar on her foot, formed like a bird-print, and when she walks past the village children, they caw like crows.

Makeda hasn't visited the hut since she was burned. The ashes have nourished the grass and the small flowers, and soon it'll be impossible to see that anyone ever lived there.

"Mother?" she whispers, squatting. A brittle-winged insect lands on the cheetah's pelt.

The river hisses like a snake. The wind lifts hairs on the pelt, then immediately sets them down again. A bird circles, dives, halts in mid-flight, its shadow caressing Makeda's feet before shooting higher in the sky. She wants to sing a song of thanks, but she can't. Her head is filled with sounds that do not yet exist. For a moment the world is perfectly still.

Jerusalem, Israel. 985 B.C.

God only wants the finest goat kids. He wants their blood and their braying. The boy's mother says: Obey. His father says: Come.

Blubbering doesn't help. His brothers already laugh at him. The boy's mother says: They're just envious, you're only three, and it's clear you're called to a greater destiny. The boy is father is a king; the king says: Come.

His father laughs as he lifts his youngest son into the air on the square before the shrine; he doesn't notice when one of boy's sandals falls from his feet. He spins him around and around, until the wall of light dissolves and splashes faces, animals, and the blue, blue sky. His father laughs as the son tugs at the rope and the kid resists, he laughs as he asks if the boy is really no stronger than that, and the child struggles until he's hot and out of breath. The boy's mother stands with the women in the shadow of the date

palms. She holds her scarf to her mouth. The boy hauls the animal through the gate in the wall that circles the shrine; the earth burns his naked foot. He doesn't feel cool until he reaches the overhang. The niches in the oil lamps look like black eyes and flaming mouths. Friezes beneath the roof shine in rich color: blue, yellow, green. He's never been inside the tabernacle before; only men and older boys are allowed in. Mother shook her head at first, but father insisted, and Sadok the priest said nothing. The tent doesn't look like anything special. God lives inside a chest of wood and gold, and only priests may see it. The stone alter is under a purple baldachin, and the pillars of wood that prop up the canvas glint with gold; the boy has never seen anything like it. The kid slips out of his grasp and a servant leaps on it. Then the father pulls the boy along, up the steps to the sacrificial alter. His hands are larger than anyone else's; between his fingers, the shiny knife looks like a sewing needle, and it hurts when he clutches the boy's arms.

Blubbering doesn't help. Mother said: You are of warrior blood, you will bring us honor. David's sons are the hope of Israel. The kid stares directly at the boy; it looks like a little person, warm and soft. He likes to feed the goats and the birds. Usually he grabs their small horns and straddles their backs and, laughing, chases them after they've gotten away. He's given them secret names; now Little Star of Date Seed's feet are bound and it brays pitifully on the sacrificial rock. Father says: In the name of the Lord. Though his father is the one who raises the knife, it's the boy's hand that holds it; they are of the same flesh, the same resolve. The boy's not sure that he's allowed to close his eyes, but he does so. The kid screams with its human voice; a boy of three may only slaughter the sacrificial animal if his father is a king. His father said: the animal bears your sins, the knife purifies you. Warm blood sprays onto their hands. Afterward, silence. The boy didn't cry at all.

The king's expression says: Well done. His mouth says: Walk.

Baal Hazor, Israel, 984 B.C.

The sheep-shearers have pitched their tents on the hill. The tents glow in the daylight. Bathsheba's part of the little caravan's vanguard; she's sits behind her youngest child on the mule. He couldn't keep quiet on the first leg of the journey, but now his head nods against her breast, and she releases her grip on him. She hasn't been to Baal Hazor for

many years. Back then Absalom's camp was quite small, but now his dark goatskin tents wind like a double-breasted wreath around the hilltop. He's a farmer and a shepherd, but he lives like a king. He already has more wives than his own father, Bathsheba's husband, King David. She's given up trying to keep track of how many children he has. Absalom invited his father and brothers to the sheep- shearing festival. David sent a servant with a message: They didn't wish to be a burden and take advantage of his hospitality. The next day, Absalom stood in their courtyard in Jerusalem, refusing to leave until they accepted his invitation. Everyone says that David loves his eldest sons more than some of his other children. Bathsheba spits on the ground every time she thinks about this.

"I give you my word that your brothers will come," David said, embracing Absalom in the garden, "but you will not be burdened either by myself or my royal retinue."

Absalom kissed his father's hands.

"So it shall be," he said, and Bathsheba couldn't fathom how David didn't notice the mocking tone of Absalom's voice when he turned toward her and added, "I trust you'll allow my youngest brother to come the festival?"

She'd behaved in the proper way: Remaining silent, she placed her hand over her heart to express her solidarity with her husband. Afterward, David would not listen to her when she said that Absalom was trying cause division. David believed he was only teasing her affectionately, because she was an overprotective mother hen. But she was certain that Absalom had looked at her and his youngest brother crossly, she said, because David allowed him to make a temple sacrifice. For that very reason, everyone figured that she'd never let Solomon go to the festival unless she went with him. The journey would be almost impossible for her, since she would soon give birth to her fourth child. David laughed and called her foolish.

"Absalom is well aware that he need not fear a child," he said. "You're imagining things and elevating your son's power."

Not even in the company of her most trusted maidservant would Bathsheba be comfortable letting her four-year-old son out of her sight. Sons of kings are born with two belligerent mindsets: their mother's hopes and dreams of future greatness swirl in their milk like bitter poison. The most capable among them will succeed their fathers on the

throne whether or not he's the eldest or the youngest, and there are countless examples of brothers eliminating their closest rivals. For that reason, it was a relief that her third child was a girl—her first had been stillborn, and her second was Solomon. David was hoping for another boy, but she kept her thoughts to herself. Unless David grows very old, the most likely outcome is that his eldest, Amnon, or his third-eldest, Absalom, will become king one day. Bathsheba understands that no one in their right mind would choose a child regent. David's second-eldest son, Daniel, whom he'd had with mournful-eyed Abigail, is a child in a man's body, dumb, incapable of forming or articulating thought. Still, Bathsheba is convinced that Absalom feels threatened by Solomon. She is careful not to brag, but it's easy to see that her son is special. His knows more words than his wet nurse, his pronunciation is equal to an adult's, and he asks questions about things the wet nurse cannot answer: Why is the male peacock prettier than the female? How many wives may a king have? If God knows everything, does that mean that he is with me all the time? Why can't I see my own eyes? Where does evil come from? Why are some born poor and others rich? Why is the sky blue, white, gray, violet, and red like the blood of a lamb?

Absalom came to Solomon's naming ceremony, and afterward he asked her why she gave her son a name that means "his replacement." He laughed and embraced her at the same time. He squeezed her so hard that she could hardly breathe.

"Whom shall he replace?" he whispered. "Is he your firstborn who will sacrifice his life for my father's sins? Or your deceased husband who was sacrificed for my father's lust? Or is it nothing more than a young and naïve mother's wish for the future? Will he replace David some day?"

"I thank God," she'd replied, "that children are like pearls on a string: when one breaks, another takes its place."

He'd thrust his head back and laughed at her response.

"Your youngest wife is clever," Absalom said to his father. "Take care that she doesn't occupy your throne."

Parents have one eye that's keen and one that's dull. With the keen they see their children's weaknesses clearer than others and fill with worry and anger when the children

let them down. With the dull they see only dimly; the worst in the child is blurred. The rest they forgive or find excuses for.

A small child easily takes sick or gets hurt. If someone lets him drink deadly poison, it'll look like a fever; if he's pushed down a well during an unguarded moment, it would appear to be some inattentive child's accident. Bathsheba doesn't know a single wet nurse, young or old, whom she trusts who cannot be turn softheaded by Absalom's eloquence and handsome face.

Absalom's mother, Makab, glows with pride over her son as well as her daughter Tamar's beauty, though Absalom has never shown his worth. The apple does not fall far from the tree. Makab insists on being called princess, even by her sister-wives, because she's the only one of David's seven companions who is of royal stock. Behind her back, the others whisper that Absalom is so pampered that he would've died of hunger if his mother hadn't spoon-fed him until he was nearly an adult, and that he would own nothing, and achieve nothing, if everything hadn't been handed to him.

David's second wife, Ahinoam, could have easily taken advantage of the special privileges she's earned as the first to bear him a son. But she has a gentle and docile nature. Though she never goes out of the way to help others, she likes Solomon a great deal and has been a big help Bathsheba. Abigail, Haggit, Abital, and Egla were all married to David before Bathsheba arrived; they are quite accommodating, though they often gang up on her and order her around because she's the youngest. And because everyone knows that she is David's favorite. He likes her youth and her beauty. He calls her *little bird* and confides things in her that he wouldn't dream of telling the others.

To avoid traveling during the hottest hours, Bathsheba and Solomon journey to the sheep-shearing festival before the brothers. She left her daughter at home and was guided by two servants and a guard. Four hours on a donkey's back takes its toll on her and her boy, and she plans to spend the night before the festival in Absalom's guest tent. At first David forbade her to go; there's no reason for a woman to attend a sheep-shearing festival—which abounds with men, strangers: day-laborers, servants, slaves, harsh, and hardworking men. A group of brothers who—for much-too long—have been divided by hatred and internecine strife need to reconcile without feeling watched by their father's youngest wife. But she knows how to get her own way with David.

Bathsheba said no more about the festival until a few days before the journey, and then she once again asked his permission while lying by his side. The thought of being separated from her son for several days, she said, made her chest hurt. David was falling asleep. He told her that asking him after they'd made love was scheming. She promised to keep a low profile at the festival—as if she'd been a slave. She had no desire to get mixed up in the brothers' affairs. She took his hand and brought it to her mouth, then gazed at him with eyes comically wide, and he'd laughed.

"Go ahead then," he'd said, "but don't you dare spoil my youngest son with your softness."

She leaped out of the bed and pounded her chest dramatically.

"Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, grandchild of your military advisors. If you ever call me, a woman belonging to a line of warriors, soft again, you will come to regret it."

David pulled her down next to him, chuckling.

"Solomon is lucky," he'd whispered, "in your love and in your severity he will find nourishment and strength."

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The road from Jerusalem to Baal Hazor, where Absalom lives, swarms with barefooted, raggedy people. They are sent away by guards at the foot of sheep mountain. After David raised taxes and began confiscating commoners' land, it is easy to find good day-laborers on the cheap. This helps the king and his administration increase their wealth, and David believes it's also necessary to keep the kingdom united. There are strong, sunburned men with shears and canteens in their belts, hot and dusty following their journey; a small crowd begins to argue with the guard, because he won't let them stay overnight on Absalom's land if they're not helping with the shearing.

"We'll sleep under open skies outside the enclosure," one of the day-laborers insists. "We'll leave as soon as the sun rises. What good is it for us to waste a day in some place where we cannot earn a day's wages?"

The guard shoves the man unnecessarily hard, and he stumbles and clenches his fists.

"Away with you all," the guard says, and the other guards begin to gather, "scat."

Bathsheba and her retinue sit and wait. Just as she's about to gesture to the servant riding in the far back to give the rejected laborers something to eat, the man who'd been arguing with the guard slaps her donkey so that it whickers and prances nervously. When the man flees down the slope, the guard gives chase, leaping on him when he stumbles. Bathsheba turns away as the guard flogs the runner. She accepts the remaining guard's apology without emotion. Solomon wakes up whimpering. She kisses his head and feels bad about making the exhausted animal pick up its pace.

Absalom receives them in his tent. He's been with the animals all day, and from a distance it's possible to confuse him for a servant in his paled tunic. His hair, shining with a sweet-smelling oil, spills loosely down his shoulders; he reaches out and takes his little brother into his arms. He swings him around until the boy begins to howl, then he kisses him on both cheeks and hands him back to his mother. From Solomon's ear he conjures a dried fig, and Solomon stares at him before bursting into tears. Bathsheba scolds him, but he doesn't react, just buries his head in her dress.

There's a tart aroma of tanned hide, and of coriander and cumin and garlic. Absalom apologizes for the primitive meal; bread and lentil soup is for fieldworkers, not for a king's most beautiful wife. He laughs as he says this. They're happy to have something to eat, Bathsheba replies, especially since they've interrupted preparations for the festival; she knows how much is required to hold such a large event. Absalom's wives are friendly, asking about their journey. One of them, pale and fine-skinned, speaks a foreign language. She holds her stomach and points at Bathsheba's thick belly. Then she puts up three fingers and looks at her quizzically. How many moons left? Bathsheba laughs, raising two fingers. The woman clasps her hands and blushes. It's her first child, one of the others whispers. She was already pregnant when she arrived, but though she continues to drop her eyes every time he comes near, Absalom is convinced the child is his.

After Solomon has fallen asleep in the guest tent, Bathsheba lies awake. Absalom has found room for her servants in a tent near the corral farther down the hill. She listens to the boy's breathing, to the soft moans and wheezes of his body. She thinks about the meal. Lentil soup is served to those in mourning, but as far as she knows, Absalom has suffered no loss. Round as a lentil, grief rolls from person to person, always en route to a

new place to dwell. When she lost her firstborn they filled her with red lentil soup, so for several years afterward her stomach churned at the very thought of them. Maybe Absalom has lost a child, maybe a newborn. It would justify his serving lentil soup and that you couldn't tell with him. But his wives seemed happy, and as far as she could see, they were all there—and all clearly chosen for their beauty. Perhaps he's lost a sheep, she thinks, chuckling. He who guards his riches zealously. Perhaps he'd have preferred to serve only bread and wine, but didn't want her to tell his father about his stinginess. Perhaps. She puts her hands behind her head. Her pelvis and lower back are sore, and she cannot get comfortable. As the delivery approaches, her limbs are giving way, an insistent portent of what awaits. As the body begins to open, unquiet thoughts gain entrance. Expectant mothers entertain the other wives, telling them of their bloody, frightening dreams. Saying them out loud serves as a counter-spell. But nightmares end when the mother-to-be awakes. What's worse is the eternal circling of her thoughts, which keeps her from sleeping. Bathsheba turns on her side, and the child kicks against her belly as it's if already learning how to walk. She places her hand on her taut skin and pushes softly until the little one settles down. It occurs to her that lentil soup might be a kind of mockery, a warning that something bad is going to happen. How could she be so foolish, bringing her son with her to Baal Hazor? There's nothing but animosity and hatred between the older brothers; a good deal of wine will be served at the sheep-shearing festival. Absalom has discussed reconciliation so often recently that it's hard not to be suspicious. To their father they pretend that all is well, so that he won't disown the one who will harm another, but you don't have to be a genius to understand that past events and crimes continue to separate them. She listens, stiffening, certain that she'd heard something outside the tent. She trusts no one here: hospitality and smiles can turn out to be the sheath concealing the sharpest knife. Cicadas sing so loudly that she's forced to concentrate in order to recognize what's behind their screechy mesh of sound. She hears crunching footsteps on the dry grass, and she fumbles to thrust the tent flap aside. She crawls outside, but there's no one; stars shoot across the great bowl of sky. The air is dry and cool. Now and then a lamb cries despairingly. She calms herself beside the fire. She throws logs onto the blaze so that the flames rise defiantly against the darkness.

She hears subdued voices beside Absalom's tent, and two figures glide through the twilight: a woman and a man. Her guard turns his head in the same direction. Bathsheba puts a finger to her lips, then points at the darkness behind her tent. It's better for him to stay out of sight if she needs a witness or someone to save her. She clambers to her feet. Absalom's arm is draped around the shoulder of a shrouded woman. He offers Bathsheba his hand, but she refuses it. He squats beside the fire.

"You must be exhausted after your journey," he says. "Can't you sleep?"

She shakes her head, and holds her belly with both hands.

"I can make room for you in my tent," he says, "it would be more comfortable for you."

She blushes with shame, glancing at the veiled woman who stands motionless. What he's just said is unforgivable, and before she responds she wants him to repeat it so that it'll burn his lips.

"Would you like that, Bathsheba?"

She shakes her head, then crosses her arms. She wants to call for her guard, but she can't speak and doesn't know what she should ask of him.

Absalom stands. He brushes invisible flakes from his tunic.

"Oh," he says, offering her his hand again. She pulls away from him when he brushes against her arm. "You misunderstand me."

Bathsheba is used to people laughing at her because of her lively imagination, but there's nothing here to misunderstand. If a king's son beds his father's wife, he will soon call himself king. She whispers this to him, and he laughs.

"You have a low opinion of me, Bathsheba, and a high opinion of yourself. My father stole you from Urias, may he rest in peace and not be martyred by the misdeeds committed against him. It's easy to understand my father's enchantment at your beauty."

She raises her hand in warning. Absalom looks displeased.

"A rotten fruit can be beautiful with its crisp, shiny skin," he whispers, "but it despoils the entire meal with its aroma and its taste, and it gives whomever eats of it a slice of death."

He has no right to speak to her this way. Her heart pounds with anxiety and anger.

"Tamar will sleep in your tent," he says, once again draping his arm around the veiled woman. "She doesn't feel comfortable around many people."

He tugs on her veil, and she loosens it herself. Bathsheba embraces her mechanically.

"Is your mother here?" she asks. Tamar shakes her head.

Absalom leaves his sister with her, and the two women sit by the fire for some time. Bathsheba doesn't understand why Tamar's here, but she doesn't dare ask. Makab said nothing about Tamar appearing at the festival. They could have come together; it would've been the most obvious thing to do.

"Don't hold it against him," Tamar whispers, taking her hand. "He didn't mean it that way."

Bathsheba chews at her lip. Regardless what she says, it makes no difference. Maybe her servant heard what Absalom said, but if she requires him to give his testimony, that would arouse Absalom's wrath and it might cost the servant his life. Tamar says very little; though he failed her when she needed him, she admires her older brother. Tamar shivers and gathers her shawl around her shoulders. She's much too thin; her hands resemble an old wife's, though she's younger than Bathsheba.

"No one may know that I'm here," Tamar says, "Absalom must really trust you."

She sniffles, clears her throat, and makes the same small gesture with her head again and again, and Bathsheba looks away.

*

Tamar once outshined everyone. She even aroused her own half-brother Amnon's desire. At first the women laughed at his intensity, and the way he followed her around like a dog. Though it's customary among other nations, Israelites may not go to bed with their half-siblings. The women have felt ashamed for him ever since. He humiliated himself: restless and out of sorts, he drank too much wine and was driven to idiocy and brainless lust. At last he didn't even both hiding his desire. At a gathering in David's house, he stood before the women and declaimed a bombastic, vulgar poem that he'd learned from a troubadour. David looked the other way; he found nothing to fault in his first-born. Makab insisted David find a husband for her daughter as soon as possible, but he insisted

that Tamar was too young, that it wasn't her turn. Where other men play board games, David's pleasurable diversion was to find husbands for his daughters. Given Tamar's beauty and gentle nature he could allow himself to be picky and strategic. Makab requested that, in the very least, he should allow Tamar to join the harem and not go out, but David thought she was asking for special treatment, because she wanted to keep her daughter from participating in the daily chores; and he became angry at her.

One evening shortly before Sukkot, the feast of tabernacles, they had all dined in the garden. The evening had been a light and mild one. They convinced David to play harp for them, and Tamar wanted to sing along. Dew had fallen, and the sky teemed with winking stars. Women rubbed their hands with lemon zest, and when Tamar stood, the aroma wafting from her was warm and sharp. In the middle of the performance, Amnon stood and walked out. The following day they learned he was ill. Chest pains and fever. He was so unwell that he'd sent a messenger to his father. Amnon's mother, Ahinoam, examined her son and didn't see any grounds for concern. He was a little pale-faced and hot, but it was nothing that a portion of Matzo-ball soup couldn't take care of. The other women laughed behind her back, saying that Amnon resembled a man on his death bed. When later the same day David sent a messenger to Tamar requesting that she take care of Amnon, the others stopped laughing. Amnon had told his father that all he wanted was for Tamar to bake her special apple cake and pour him tea. It was impossible to disobey David's command, and Tamar cried when she left them. Bathsheba sat with her newborn son, Solomon, in her arms and listened to Makab talking to her daughter. Makab promised Tamar that she wouldn't be left alone with Amnon. His house was full of servants and guards. No one would let him harm her.

When Tamar returned, she'd torn the sleeves from her maiden's dress and smeared her face with ashes. Amnon had ordered his servants out once she'd arrived with her cake. At first he'd tried to convince her to lie with him, and then he'd simply taken her by force when she refused. Afterward he'd told her that she disgusted him. She pleaded with him to marry her, at least, because the unmarried woman who was no longer a virgin has no future. He'd commanded his servants to physically remove her from his residence. She walked around the courtyard on the women's side of the house, keening and lamenting. She clawed at her hair and throat and face until they were

bloody. Makab ran to her. The others clustered in a group, not knowing what to say, watching what looked like a fight. By the time it was over Makab had subdued her daughter. Tamar dropped to one knee, but she was so disoriented it was impossible to bring her inside. They called for Absalom. Makab wailed for her child. Absalom pushed her away and kneeled before his sister.

"Hush, Tamar," he said. "It won't do any good."

Absalom carried her into the women's house. He laid her in bed and ordered his mother to wash her.

"Just you," he said. "No one else may see what's been done to her."

But everyone saw. Everyone saw the terror and the shame and the madness erupting from her eyes. Everyone saw her swollen face and the blood that colored her linen day after day and day. Her disgrace was a sun so scorching hot and merciless that everyone around her sought the shade. David didn't set foot in the women's house and never visited his daughter. Makab scolded the servant girls and allowed no one to enter Tamar's room; each time she left her daughter's bedside, she whispered that she would kill David for not forcing Amnon to marry Tamar so that she wouldn't spend the rest of her days husbandless and childless at the back of the harem, or for not punishing his son. David was angry at Amnon, but this meant nothing to Makab. She called him an animal, a blind man, a coward. The other women let her stew; they did not admonish her. At night Tamar wailed. Absalom embraced Amnon, as usual, but Makab could not be angry at her own son. The wives agreed that Bathsheba was the only one who could talk sense into David. She had been his wife for less than three years and had only recently been purified from her bleeding following Solomon's birth. A few days earlier, Bathsheba had brought the priest a sacrifice. David was aware of this, but he hadn't asked her to lie with him. Bathsheba tried declining the women. What could she say to him, after all? She was David's favorite only because she was the newest. But since she was so young he still didn't listen to her. It was the first meal of the day, and they were dining indoors. The other women kept at her, but Bathsheba said she was sorry: there was nothing she could do to help Tamar. Makab rose from her seat and yanked at Bathsheba's hair. As Makab punched her and dragged her into Tamar's chamber, Bathsheba shrieked. The room was much too hot, much too stuffy; it stank of pus and wretchedness. Though Bathsheba

fought hard to free herself, Makab clutched her hair. On the other side of the wall, Solomon wailed in his bed, his tears causing Bathsheba to panic, her milk to run. Makab noticed.

"May they split your boy's head in two. Though he'll survive, he will never enter battle. Nor have sons. Nor love a woman," she whispered, winding Bathsheba's braid around her hand. "If you haven't the sympathy to speak with David, may your future daughters be disgraced the way my child was. You are the only one he will listen to."

Because she and Solomon's bodies remained so closely bound that it hurt her whenever he called out for her, she cried anxiously. She cried because she was afraid of Makab and David, because what had happened to Tamar could have happened to her, and because it was as if the girl's shame and Amnon's sin were infecting her. They were all thinking it: David hadn't taken Bathsheba by force the first time, but calling her to him was still a terrible sin, because she was married to another man. Her own desire, her own youthful, lustful, tempting, supple body hadn't helped. She left her husband at the king's entreaties and did not resist when David asked her to undress and lie with him. As she bathed on her terrace in the home she shared with Urias, he had observed her from his roof. She knew very well that he was keeping a watchful eye on her, and she'd burned with excitement. Later, David made sure that Urias was killed in order to hide the fact that he'd impregnated her at a time when Urias was away and couldn't possibly have been the father. And to ensure that Bathsheba would be his.

"You mustn't say that," she whispered to Makab, who pressed Bathsheba's face down against Tamar's. Terrified eyes, ash hair and mouth, breath reeking of smoke.

"If you refuse to speak with David, that's what I hope happens," Makab whispered, releasing her so that she fell forward on Tamar.

Ahinoam picked up Solomon, who continued sobbing though she rocked him in her arms, continued sobbing even when Bathsheba could finally press her nipple into his mouth. The milk wouldn't flow as it usually did, and he screamed and screeched, red, violet, wet with sweat, screeched the entire morning and nothing would calm him. In those days, no one wanted to have anything to do with Amnon's mother, Ahinoam. Bathsheba was the only one to seek her out. She spoke to Ahinoam as a child speaks to its mother, blathering on about Makab casting a curse on her boy and on her, which was

why Solomon wouldn't sleep or eat, and why she feared for his life. Ahinoam stroked her hair, and she cried with Bathsheba. In the evening Solomon finally found peace at her nipple. Makab offered Ahinoam a piece of bread during supper, but held on to it when Ahinoam tried to take it.

"You probably prefer to see that your son, the virgin defiler, is pardoned," Makab said to Ahinoam. "I trust you're not going to dissuade Bathsheba from talking to David."

"He shall serve his punishment," Ahinoam replied, "but Bathsheba has done nothing."

Several weeks passed before David called for Bathsheba. She brought Solomon with her, so that she could nurse him, and he was happy to see his youngest son. She tried to bring up the issue of Amnon, discretely enough that David wouldn't hold it against her, and yet clearly enough that she could tell Makab afterward. No one doubted that Amnon had sinned. Only the Lord can judge him, David said, but he didn't mention Tamar at all.

*

Tamar stirs so fitfully in the tent that Bathsheba hardly manages to get any rest. She doesn't fall into a deep sleep until dawn, and when Solomon wakes her, Tamar is gone. Bathsheba sees her as soon as she steps under the festival baldachin. Veiled like a foreign bride, she sits among Absalom's wives as if she were part of his harem.

The brothers will stay the night following the festival, but not Bathsheba. The festival begins around at midday, and there's an abundance of wine. Bathsheba has alerted her retinue to pack and prepare the mules, so they can get home before nightfall. She doesn't touch her wine. She sits among the women. Absalom keeps raising his cup, giving toast after toast with each of his brothers. But most of all Amnon. Bathsheba doesn't know if Tamar's presence is a coincidence, or whether Absalom is trying to teach her a lesson her by showing her this kind of reconciliation. His way of telling her she should put it all behind her—though everyone knows that's neither possible nor important. Her life no longer has any significance. The thought of being violated in such a manner is the splinter in every woman's flesh. Tamar will live like a slave in her father's house, because no man will want her now.

The brothers enjoy giving Solomon sips of wine. Bathsheba admonishes them, scooping up her son. She feeds him cakes dipped in honey and kisses his sticky cheeks. Absalom's sons want to teach him how to play marbles and then tease his clumsy throws until he begins to cry. Bathsheba scolds him roughly; he shouldn't give them the pleasure, he must act like a warrior, silent in his vengeance, docile in his foolishness. He stays by her side. One of Absalom's wives hands him a stick wrapped in newly-sheared wool, a toy sheep that he brushes up and down her arm. He yawns, and Bathsheba gestures to her servant sitting among the other servants on the bare ground at the entrance of the tent. It's time to go. Absalom kisses her cheeks, asks her to wait a moment. He has invited a dance troop from Tyre to perform for them, and he promises her that she has never seen anything finer. She tries to excuse herself, telling him that she knows how good the dancers from Tyre are, but that Solomon is tired and their journey home is a long one. Absalom insists that she stay for a single dance; they can leave afterward. There's no way around it. He snaps his fingers and the troop enters the tent. Three men and one woman. They wear small bells around their ankles, and they are clothed in expensive Phoenician garments; their employer is evidently no commoner. The woman is the only one not wearing crimson, and her body is clearly visible through the thin fabric. A naked shoulder, the firmness of her bosom, the clinking of gold rings on her soft wrists. She pulls the veil off her hair, revealing coal-black locks and a rich red sheen of henna. The brothers clap in rhythm with the music. Amnon laughs, lurching for the girl every time she dances past him. The three men dance behind her, shoulder to shoulder, their faces placid. Dust swirls within a wedge of light that penetrates a slit in the tent flap. Bathsheba has to hand it to Absalom: the performance is exceptional. Though one of the men seems a little clumsy. With his pale complexion and his shoulder-length hair, which hasn't been artfully braided like the others', he stands out like a sore thumb. Bathsheba leans toward Absalom's first wife, and she whispers that the clumsy one looks like someone who's there only because he's been forced, and they laugh. One by one the men step out of line, dance with the woman. She pulls off the sheer veil that's around her shoulders and waves it in Amnon's face. Some laugh, some whistle. Without lifting his eyes from the dancer, Amnon raises his hand to acknowledge his brother. Bathsheba observes Absalom, his stony face. All movement is sucked into his face, then freezes. He squints. He lifts his

finger to indicate the servant should pour him more wine. He looks at his brother, who's now on his feet, dancing before the woman, pathetic and inebriated and indifferent to the others laughing at him. Absalom moves his lips as though counting, and Bathsheba is seized by a crushing anxiety. She picks up Solomon and braces him against her hip, instinctively shielding his face even before it happens. She turns toward the tent entrance, her boy slapping her hand away, his face, his open mouth, his wide-open eyes are a mirror, and she understands. She runs down the hill, she calls and calls for the guard and the servants and the mules, while Solomon issues a delayed scream. *What happened mother? What happened? There was blood, mother, the dancer. Amnon's throat was a mouth, a white and red mouth, what was it? What was it?*

*

When they get home that evening, David is standing by the stable. His torso is bare and he's roaring, grief-stricken. He pulls Solomon from Bathsheba's arms and squeezes him so hard the boy shrieks. He doesn't want to let go of his youngest son. From David's advisor Nathan, the prophet, Bathsheba has learned that a messenger arrived in advance, bringing the news that Absalom has murdered his brothers. Bathsheba doesn't know what to believe. She shakes her head and follows David up the stairwell to the terrace. Solomon cries. She does her best to speak softly to her husband; she has never seen him this way, and his crazed, ruined expression frightens her. When he finally lets go of the child, Solomon darts away, first toward the stairwell, then toward the kitchen. Bathsheba catches him and rocks him in her arms. He keeps talking about the blood, and she tells him to close his eyes. She will sing to him. But he should try to sleep, to forget. His face is swollen with tears. She was too upset to calm him, and he cried the entire journey home. She lays him on the low wooden bed under the baldachin, where David usually sprawls when they eat together. David squats against the wall.

"My sons," he cries, "where are my sons? What I have I done to deserve this punishment?"

Bathsheba wraps her arms around him. Daughters and wives cluster on the terrace. She shushes them, shaking her head: they mustn't inquire now. The women cry

and embrace, and Makab falls to her knees before Bathsheba. Bathsheba's heart goes out to Makab when she meets her questioning gaze.

"I don't know anything," she whispers. "The brothers were all there. Absalom signaled for the dancer to slice Amnon's throat. Amnon's dead, that much I know. That was the last I saw."

Bathsheba can't sit still. She twines her hands tightly in her scarf so that no one can see her trembling.

"Absalom has killed them all," David roars. He stands, collapses, slams his clenched fist into the wall again and again, until it bleeds.

The roaring turns to shrieking, then howls of dismay. The wives tug at Bathsheba. They want to know what's happened to their sons. Makab stays on her knees, her face pressed against the ground: a bundle, a rock, a death.

"Tamar was there too," Bathsheba whispers, as if it might make a difference. "She sat between Absalom's wives."

"Tamar?" David frees himself from Bathsheba's arms. "Why was she at the sheep-shearing festival?"

And suddenly *that* becomes the most important thing. Bathsheba has no answer. David hauls Makab to her feet, shakes her, slaps her face, spits on the ground.

"What have you done, Makab?" he shouts. "What notions did you put into my son's head?"

Makab, howling like a dog, shields herself from his blows.

"I don't know anything," she shrieks. "I did nothing but indulge my son's wish of seeing his sister. I thought it would be good for her to get away from her father's house. I thought about the simple life in the mountains and …"

"When?" David growls, shoving her against the wall. "When did she leave?"

Bathsheba lays her hand on his back: a mosquito on an animal with a twitchy tail.

"No more," she whispers. "No more now."

He lets go of Makab, who collapses to the ground, sobbing and battered. Then he presses against Bathsheba with all his weight. She takes a step back. She holds him, her arms unable to wrap around him. She guides him into a chair. She signals for Makab to

hurry away. Once David has gathered his strength, he will lash out again, raging at the injustice that has been committed.

Makab's nose is bleeding. David lunges for her, and grabs her wrist. She struggles to break free.

"Tell me the truth, Makab," he whispers. "Tell me what you know."

But Makab knows nothing more than what she's already said. Absalom took Tamar to Baal Hazor the day he came to invite them to the festival. He'd been in a good mood; he'd kissed his mother and his sister, and after he'd spoken with Tamar, she'd seemed calmer than she had in some time.

"Tamar," David repeats, "is the daughter I lost."

Makab can't control herself. She makes a loud, angry noise. She jerks free of his grip.

Bathsheba guides David's hands to her lips. His knuckles are creased, and there's a stripe of blood across the back of his hand. She puts her own hand to his cheek. He closes his eyes, she asks him to open them, and he does as she says. A strange look, an unfamiliar face, the effort it takes to hold him tight. He'll drown if she doesn't. One of the little girls shouts something that Bathsheba can't make out and the women rush to the wall, a wild commotion.

"They're coming," Abigail shouts, already on her way toward the stairwell that leads to the stables. "They're alive."

Ahinoam is the only one with no son to greet. Unlike fathers, a mother bears the guilt for her children's misdeeds, and Ahinoam has no one to share her burden. When Makab's anger settled, when for the first time after the rape she offered to let Ahinoam help prepare the orange cakes for Purim, Ahinoam understood that she would never again be part of the women's house, not like before. The others noticed Makab's magnanimity; they embraced her, grateful for her mercy, for the way she re-established the peace. Though Ahinoam had done nothing wrong, and though the grief her son caused her as the result of the terrible crime he'd committed still kept her awake at night, Ahinoam had to be thankful. And whenever she does sleep, she awakes from nightmares in which she is the criminal being led to her stoning.

Ahinoam stays under the baldachin. The women are a billowing sail, waving hands, shouts, laughter, tears. They thud down the stairs: little girls out front to greet their brothers, mothers to embrace their sons. Ahinoam takes the sleeping Solomon in her arms and carries him into the women's house. He doesn't wake up as she deposits him in his bed. She falls to her knees beside him. He's the youngest son, and he's made no one suffer yet. He sighs in his sleep, he clenches a fist next to his face. Slowly it dawns on her that Amnon is dead, and for the rest of her days she will forget now and then; but every morning when she rises, she will remember, and she will break anew. Amnon's throat was slashed, Bathsheba said. A short time ago these had been nothing but words to her, but now she saw it all: the knife slicing his throat, the blood, the gash, the maw of death, it burns, burns, burns, tearing everything apart: The evening, the distant sound of the women's voices, the child's breathing, the heart that rests and beats, rests and beats. She gets to her feet, sits down, stumbles, turns to stone. After the fire comes the cold. Earlier, the sweat had poured from her, but now she's freezing so terribly that she can think of nothing else but getting warm. She snuggles behind the sleeping boy, squeezing his soft body. He's not hers, he whimpers in his sleep, he bites his hand, he bites her finger as she tries to pull it back, and she slaps him in the mouth in alarm. He sits up, screaming. *You hit me, you hit me*, and she wants to punish him. It's not revenge, she tells herself, and yet she's afraid to discover how far she'll go. Grief impels people by the lash of the whip. Although she has doing nothing to him, Solomon wants to run away. She grabs him before he reaches the door, says: You were dreaming. It was just something you dreamed, and he settles down, easing back into her familiar arms. Ahi, Ahi, Ahinoam, donkey sounds, donkey kicks, the way she pretends to be angry when the children tease her. She won't exact her revenge—she has nothing to avenge—death has lifted a burden off her, a thought that appalls her. What mother thinks this way about her own child? Sleep, little boy, sleep. And she rocks him, guides him deep into that strange land between waking and sleeping. He calls for her, he straddles a restless donkey. Mother, he says, come Mother. And she laughs, hugging him until his body becomes hers, until his blood mixes with hers, roaring and pulsing, until he dances like dust and she breathes through his mouth.

#

Solomon doesn't understand. He slept, then he was awakened. His mother yanks the scarf from Ahinoam's hair, she knocks her to the floor, slapping her face, and Solomon shrieks until it pierces their ears. Other mothers come running, they grab his mother, they get her to her feet, and they leave Ahinoam alone. They don't look at him, they don't hear him; he's a screaming shadow. He hears the sound of his own voice, he can taste his tears, he can't move, his throat hurts, his chest, his neck. Ahinoam lies on the floor, and the women form a circle around Bathsheba: they cry, they laugh, they are angry and they are cheerful.

"Ahinoam?" he calls, but she shakes her head. "Mother?"

She pulls him to his feet, shouts at Ahinoam, curses and vulgarities. Solomon wants her to be quiet. He never wants to sleep again.

"Mother, stop, mother. Why are you shouting? Mother?"

"Ahinoam is not allowed near my son," she says. "I saw the vengeance in her eyes."

The others whisper, uncertain, doubtful.

"There's only one worthy to follow your father on the throne," his mother says close to his face, so softly that the others can barely hear it.

The silence creeps uncomfortably. Ahinoam crawls away and hides in the darkness. Makab steps forward, and she folds her arms across her chest.

"I heard that, Bathsheba. You are a fool," she says, "a dreadful fool."

"Your poor son," says one of the others, "his own mother's words put him in danger."

"Do you want him to be killed?"

"Why don't you just do it yourself? Find a knife and get it over with."

"So foolish. So dreadfully foolish."

Bathsheba crosses her arms. She gasps for breath, and says nothing more. She continues to clutch Solomon. The others fall silent; in spite of everything, the evening is still one of good tidings. The children are hustled off to bed. Bathsheba stays. Solomon cries, but his mother doesn't notice.

"Mother?" he calls. "Mother?"

"The king is talking to you," Makab says, nodding at the boy. The others laugh. "Maybe you should wash the ointment from his head and make sure he gets some rest."

Bathsheba continues staring into space. She clears her throat. Solomon touches his hair; he doesn't understand what they mean. He tries to coax himself free of his mother's hand, but she only tightens her grip.

Makab sits heavily on the mat beneath the overhang. Her bracelets and pearl chains clatter, and she draws her skirt around her, resting her head against the wall. It's a humid evening. The stars pace and stomp restlessly.

"I was there when it happened," Bathsheba says, finally releasing her son.

A tight and invisible ring around his arm causes him to remain on his feet. He puts a snatch of his tunic into his mouth. He wants to say something. That he saw it too. That there was blood everywhere. That Amnon's head lurched back heavily. That it was completely silent before the screaming began. He rubs his arm. Makab furrows her brows, as if she doesn't care what Bathsheba's saying, as if it couldn't possibly interest anyone.

"Obviously the brothers knew nothing. They didn't understand what had happened."

"Is that so?" Makab says, reaching for the bowl filled with almonds and honey. Her fingertips grow shiny, her lips greasy.

"We don't know who …" Abigail starts to say, then shifts uncomfortably. Even she with her dumb son shrieked with joy when she was reunited with him.

"I was there," Bathsheba says. "I saw it."

Haggit offers a slice of orange cake to Solomon. He wants to accept it, but he doesn't dare so long as his mother is there.

"Absalom lives," Bathsheba says, "but he's as good as dead now. David loved Amnon so much that he turned the other way when he committed his crime. This will not go unnoticed."

Makab rises halfway up, then sits down again. No one dares to say anything, and the silence is uncomfortable. Solomon tugs at his mother's dress, and finally she looks at him. Her gaze is like a cup being filled. She nods once. Then she lifts him up and he buries his face in her shoulder, the well-known scent, a little like aromatic bindweed, a

little like lemon and freshly-squeezed oil. She rocks him. Sleep is like a small animal, difficult to entice. She carries him into the darkest room. She lays beside him on the mat and sings to him. *The Lord is the Lord, the king is the king. The prince is the prince, the boy is the boy. Sleep will come when sleep wishes, and death when the Lord commands. Hoopoe, gather your wings, child, close your eyes. The Lord makes a king of whom he will.*

Amhara, Ethiopia. Near the Semien Mountains, 984 B.C.

Makeda wasn't yet five years old. She and Isme still lived in the village. It was the night her mother became a shadow, and they were forced to move outside the enclosure. She lay on her mat in the hut. Isme had just sung for her when Jabbar squatted outside the door.

"Isme," he'd whispered. "Has the darkness swallowed you?"

Her mother had laughed when she got to her feet and crawled out through the low opening. The warmth went with her. Makeda had pulled her animal hides up to her chin. Jabbar often came to visit them in the evenings, and now and then announced offers from men seeking another wife. Isme rejected all of them. He called her proud and stubborn. She often made him laugh. That evening they stood just outside the doorway. Jabbar would not sit as he usually did. He didn't want her to bring him anything.

"You can't say no to Bekele," he said. "There's no one greater."

Isme said nothing. Bekele was one of the village elders and had many children and grandchildren.

"If you say no to him, I can't help you anymore. The other women whisper behind your back. They say that you've rejected the others because you believe you're better than them."

"Women whisper," Isme said. "Their words are made of smoke."

"Bekele is a good man," Jabbar said. "He wants to take care of you and Makeda."

"Mosi," she began, and Jabbar interrupted her.

"Bekele is a good man," he repeated. "You must also consider Makeda."

"No," she said.

"Would you rather be a shadow than live with one of the village's most powerful men? Is it because he's old? Do you think your stubbornness helps your child? Have you already been abducted by the shadow without us noticing?"

"You'll have to tell me," Isme said. "Do I look like a shadow? Or can you still see my face?"

Jabbar shushed her, then scraped the ground with his cane.

"A wife who does not love her husband is but a shadow that clings to his foot," she'd said, ignoring Jabbar's agitated shush. "If you wish to call me a shadow because I live alone, then do so. I do not care. I will be joyful that loneliness sings me to sleep each night, so long as I don't have to hear you talk about good husbands when I know that Mosi will return."

"What do you know?" he'd said, and Makeda heard everything. "Have you lost your mind? Don't you know that the dead find nourishment in the shadows? It's no place for the living. Why must I have to tell you that it cannot continue like this?"

"You don't have to," Isme replied. "So I'll tell you directly so there's nothing more to discuss: I would rather live as a shadow than marry Bekele or any other man you suggest."

Makeda didn't understand what it meant. Jabbar's long silence was agonizing.

"This village has no shadows," he'd said finally, low, mild. "It's been that way as far back as the elders can remember."

"Now it does," she'd replied.

Though Makeda continued to ask, Isme would tell her nothing. Jabbar explained it to her so gently and calmly that it didn't seem that peculiar. Only later did she realize that Isme had broken the rules so egregiously that she could no longer be part of the community as before. A woman who wouldn't marry must live outside the enclosure, and men must look down when she passes by, constantly keeping their gazes fixed on her shadow: the darkness the sun god abandons once he's taken his share. It was unimaginable, a woman having children without a husband to accept a father's natural role. For one, the children become the village's burden, and for another, ensuring that siblings don't break the rule and have children together is impossible if you do not know the father. The others would take care of Isme as much as they could, but they no longer

had any responsibility for her, apart from ordinary compassion. If there was ever a drought or a pandemic, she would be the first they would forget. She who doesn't comprehend the importance of friendship and the community of family has a breach that makes it easier for evil spirits to take up residence. That is why most avoid a shadow.

Isme's brothers built a hut for them. She sent them home as soon as they'd constructed the roof frame, and she insisted on sealing and braiding the fence on her own. Jabbar gave her a goat, her sister brought her two hens. Isme worked the entire day to assemble the fence. The first few nights she slept with a sharp rock in her hand.

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When her mother mentioned the mirror shortly before her death, Makeda feared she was delirious. A few days after Isme had died, Makeda found the mirror as she waited beside the hut. It lay in a hollow at the base of the tree, concealed under a flat, mud-painted stone that Makeda had never before seen, though she'd walked past this tree thousands of times. At first she didn't dare pick it up; it might be a trap put there by evil spirits. But she couldn't help herself. As soon as she lifted the stone, she noticed a package wrapped in a fold of cloth, part of the scarf Isme had torn when she'd gotten caught on a bush shortly before her death. The mirror couldn't have been in the ground long—the fabric still smelled of Isme. Makeda held the mirror in her hands and imagined her mother on her knees beneath the same tree, exactly like she was doing now, an insignificant ember removed from an insignificant fire, still smoldering before the moist soil and the film of dew could put it out. In that moment she was struck by Isme's loneliness; it became the dirt encrusting her hands, the cut stalks, the cold metal in her hands, the woman who held the disk of sun up with one arm, or a servant girl sentenced to carry the reflection of another's face. The loneliness was heavy with memory: A glimpse of Isme's turned back; her somewhat stiff, hesitant gait, which—along with her narrow feet and hyperextended knees—had prompted her nickname, the stork; her silhouette in the gloaming, as Makeda arrived home following a hunt, squatting by the fire in the hut with her arms wrapped around her knees, her gaze sliding toward the hill during conversation, toward the river, toward the horizon—away. It was a sudden caress, rejected caresses, hard-handed admonishments, the way she tossed her head back now and then and gasped for breath

when she held Makeda. Makeda considers digging the mirror up again, but she can't think of a better place to hide it. She drapes the cheetah's pelt over the hiding place, smooths it down with both hands, then lies on her back and stares into the treetop. She's very tired, she realizes. The air is still: a cool draught from the shadows. Since Isme's passing she has heard death's call a few times, a mild and gentle enticement. Her limbs grow heavy, her neck, her head, her back; small plants could shoot through her body, the grass could envelop her, snail food, predator teeth. Those who would miss her will soon forget her. She's too sluggish to stand. She jerks herself free, clambers gasping and frightened to her feet, and she runs and runs, wild and breathless, stopping only when she reaches the village square. Her throat burns, her body, her eyes. Isme is good and Isme is evil. Places can be so gorged with death that they leave the living breathless. Never again, she whispers with her hands cupped by her face, never, never, never give in to death, never make such an expensive trade with loneliness, never crumble with sorrow. She lays her cheek against the trunk of the Healing Tree, and it calms her. Her hands smell of animal and pelt and soil. She's ready to go home.

Makeda stands silently on the rock near the large fire at the festival place. Though they mock her, she remains calm. When they go to touch the pelt, she lashes out at them, but they don't leave her in peace. It's almost evening, and the village smells of smoke and spicy bean stew. Jabbar had gone with Tafari to repair a gap in the fence on the south side of the village; all they'd needed to do was pack it with mud and grass. It was easy work, and Jabbar had hoped to speak with his eldest son, but they'd skirted the essential: The lost opportunity for Makeda and Tafari's marriage. Now all the hullaballoo calls them home. Tafari tries his hardest to walk calmly, but it's easy to see how agitated he is. Children of all sizes have formed a circle around Makeda, and Jabbar can't believe his own eyes. Tafari sees the same thing: The animal pelt draped around her neck, the red feather in her hair, her skin dulled by dust and streaked with dry blood. He stops a good distance away, and Jabbar does the same. It would be a fine gesture if Tafari were to disband the flock and be the first to greet Makeda. But unexpectedly, Tafari turns and disappears between Jabbar's huts. The howls of the youths has drawn the grown ups. They shoo the children away, they point fingers at Makeda. Some look so frightened that

Jabbar thinks it adds a touch of comedy to the situation. It's only little Makeda, a young woman now, to be sure, but seen with Jabbar's eyes still Isme's unruly rug-rat, full of questions, excitable, gentle as a lamb. The crowd parts for him, and he offers her his hand. She steps down off the rock, without accepting the hand. A murmur passes through the crowd, excited, expectant. He embraces her. He'd been concerned after she'd suddenly gone away, and what else could he do? Tsh, tsh, tsh, a woman dances around them brandishing a bundle of smoking sticks meant to purify her of whatever evil she's been exposed to. The village buzzes with frightful stories of spirit kidnappings and witchcraft, of rapes and bride kidnappings, and Jabbar coughs at the smoke. Desta hurries toward them. He doesn't need to turn to know that it's her. She struggles to place an amulet over Makeda's head. She only reaches her shoulders, and Makeda doesn't assist her. The leather cord sticks in her hair, and Jabbar coaxes it free. He touches the amulet with two fingers, a small leather sack with two earth-colored pearls dangle at the end of the clasp. He feels the heat of her body. The sack rests on the cavity between her collar bone, sharp as wings made of bone.

It's a beautiful pelt. Makeda was very careful when she'd skinned the animal. Jabbar would never have been able to do it as well, would probably not even have been able to bring down the animal. He wants to dig his fingers into the pelt, but he doesn't. She washes herself behind his hut, because Desta asks her to, and she sits next to the fire with the others. Desta's stew is good and strong. Makeda eats slowly in order not to show how hungry she is. Tafari arrives only after they've finished. Makeda watches him, but he pretends he doesn't see her. She props her chin on her hands. Jabbar regards her surreptitiously. It was obvious that she come live with them instead of with her relatives when Isme died. It had been Jabbar's own decision to accept responsibility for her, and Isme's brothers had let him. In the beginning he'd felt that it was his duty, because Mosi was his friend, and because it wasn't good that Isme had isolated the girl completely. Besides, Makeda was easy to like. He'd taught her and Tafari, even though Desta considered it a waste of time. Isme had never protested. He was proud to have taught them how to count and read and write, and how to speak his own language. No doubt it also brought Tafari and Makeda closer, knowing something others didn't.

"You shouldn't have killed it," Tafari says, and all talk around the fire ceases. "A living animal is worth more than a pelt."

Makeda continues to stare at the fire.

"Because that's what you're planning to do, isn't it?" he goes on. "To urge my father to take you to Yeha so you can sell the pelt?"

The fire crackles, children throw on sticks and branches, the youngest yawn and nurse noisily, in embrace, tumble over. No one dares intervene, not even Jabbar.

"I'll go wherever I wish," Makeda says. Soft and normal, not threatening at all.

Tafari laughs, a raw, artificial laughter. He walks around the fire, neck arched like a bird, arms hooked behind him. Desta shushes—maybe him, maybe one of the screechy little ones.

"Father?" he says.

"Yes," Jabbar says. "Makeda shouldn't have gone off by herself, but let's not be unreasonable: Would it have been possible for Makeda to bring home a living cheetah? No one in this area sells live predators. Wouldn't we rather hear about the hunt? Wouldn't we rather be happy about the unexpected income the pelt will bring the village?"

Desta shakes her head at Jabbar, and it irritates him. Neither Tafari nor any of his other sons and daughters would have shown nearly as much courage as Makeda.

"Letting wild animals serve you is cruelty," Makeda says in the same gentle tone of voice as before. "Why should they be others' slaves?"

Tafari laughs mockingly while the others remain silent.

"The wealthy peoples of the north do that," he says. "They have different habits in the court of the pharaohs. In the desert country they make slaves of people."

Makeda raises her eyebrows. When she doesn't respond, Tafari's lecturing is thrust back on him.

"I just want to go to Yeha once," she says, "before I marry you, Tafari."

Tafari's anger doesn't fade right away. When he tries to assert himself or give her good advice about her upcoming journey, Makeda ignores him. He doesn't care for Yeha, and he's certain that Makeda won't, either.

"There are foreigners everywhere," he says. "I once saw a man stab another man's thigh with a knife during a quarrel over a sack of beans."

They've gone down to the river early in the morning. They've brought their bows, but hardly notice the animals that come to the water to drink.

"They bargain and trade and cheat each other, it's the only thing that matters." He smacks his tongue. "Though Jabbar does better than most, he still has to deal with it. The merchants act like kings, and some of them wear so many gold rings that their fingers can't touch. They bring goods with them from other lands, which no one needs but which everyone wants."

"You'll never be a good merchant," she says, and he returns her smile.

"The village could easily do without Yeha," he replies, picking the bark from a stick, "if we wanted to."

Makeda doesn't like it when Tafari talks like this. It's disrespectful to Jabbar and the others in the village, though in one way he's right. Ploughshares keep for ages. No one will die without jewelry or metal knives, and they can cultivate the seeds themselves.

For a while they sit in silence. Tafari puts his hand on hers. Rough and heavy. She leans her head against his shoulder; he smells warm and good.

"I'll be back soon," she says, and he cautiously strokes her thigh with the back of his hand.

"Will you bear my child with you to Yeha?" he whispers.

She shakes her head, laughs, and leaps to her feet. He follows her along the riverbank. A murder of crows loudly take wing. Makeda and Tafari stumble up the slope, and he pushes her down and gets on top of her; she writhes under him, laughing. He tries to kiss her, but she wriggles free. He's furious. She can see his desire.

"An unborn child draws the energy from its mother," she whispers, "I need my strength for the journey."

"You exaggerate," he says.

She wants to go back to the village. He walks right behind her. Before they reach the fence she stops and puts her arms around his neck.

"I belong with you," she says, "you don't need to worry about anything."

He throws back his head, laughing haughtily. He's not afraid. He shakes his torso, a dizzying, disconnected dance step. Makeda turns away—she knows his pride.

"Jabbar will take care of me," she says over her shoulder, and adds, laughing, "I promise I'll take care of him, too."

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Makeda is smart, but there's a form of evil she doesn't comprehend. In their region, the number of missing has increased in recent years. In the bush and in the mountains, flocks of young men wander around slicing the throats of those whom they meet, and shepherds speak of the abandoned, mangled bodies no one will bury. Some young women escape, but they can't describe what's happened to them because their tongues have been cut out. Makeda is fifteen, Tafari a little older; they've grown up in peace and safety, but now Jabbar fears everything's about to fall apart. The young boys are too afraid to hunt alone, and the girls stay near the village. It was unimaginably foolish of Makeda to head south to hunt the cheetah, and Jabbar hopes that her luck proves that Isme or a god is watching out for her. The villagers make amulets, they sing and dance and make sacrifices in the gods' honor; they donate a portion of what they earn at the market in Yeha to the temple. No one understands the will of the gods. People can only hope for their benevolence. In this Jabbar agrees with the villagers, but war and the attacks are the doings of humans, and humans, in his view, are best held in check through laws and the consequences of violating those laws. With little success he has tried to convince them that the only thing that will solve their problems with other tribes' aggression is to make alliances with villages scattered across a greater distance than usual. Having a vice-king in Yeha would be best, someone who could ensure the enactment of just laws for this part of the Sabaean kingdom, and see to it that they are followed. They don't even want to hear about the latter anymore, so he keeps that one to himself. Laws can't transform evil to goodness, they say. Laws don't soften men's hearts; only the gods can do that. Law and the management of law are like the shepherd who knows where his flock hides; they're like the river that supplies them with water and ensures their survival. So they laugh at him, telling him that he speaks in riddles. They have laws already, ways of doing things, which their forefathers' forefathers have dispensed and which have proven sound. They have

taboos and rules. They know what's right and what's wrong. So he stays silent and feels like a traitor when he considers how the world hasn't necessarily been made better with their rules. The taboos are animal fences, he thinks, small pens that keep the flock together. Humans are restless goats and oxen: they don't break through their enclosures, they don't know whether there's greener pasture on the other side or whether the pen could be transported to another place where they would be safe from wild animals. He likes the village, he needs the people, just as they need him. And he won't let them down. More and more, he thinks they are right and that his own thoughts are a manifestation of megalomania. In any event he's convinced it is only a matter of time before a tribe from the great lake challenges them in war, and he's used a great deal of energy speaking with elders from nearby villages. After much discussion, they've agreed to arm themselves and patrol the mountain pass, but it's slow going. Apparently no one sees how serious the situation is. No one understands that a more tactically intelligent people will see the advantage of controlling the valleys and the regions at the foot of the mountains, where they can easily push toward the trading routes deeper inland and gain access to enormous riches. Jabbar has met the leaders near the great lake; they understand the value of a union stretching beyond their own clan; they are greedy and smart and spare no one. The king in Ma'rib probably knows nothing of the danger, though it would also weaken him if his emissaries no longer controlled trade from the south. There is no longer any communication between the kingdom's farthest reaches. There are rumors that the king is a pleasure-seeking despot who thinks only of protecting his own interests and those of Ma'rib. Jabbar doesn't know whether that's true or not, but it's clear that he's not invested in this part of his kingdom. If Jabbar could give him a piece of advice, he would warn him that he will soon be sitting on a throne of sand and governing nothing but a desert city. He and Mosi had big plans. He would like to believe that Mosi has done everything he could, but when he thinks of his friend now, it's more with disappointment and anger than hope.

As it stands now, every man must take care of himself as best he can, and in Yeha Jabbar wants to examine javelins, arrowheads, and shields. They leave before dawn. Makeda laughs when the sun rises above the Hedgehog Ridge, and they wander straight toward the light.

Her endless stream of questions doesn't end until they approach Yeha. Silently she points at the city, which circles the slope like a belt, and he nods. Even when they were forced to shift places and he took the lead, slashing thorny brush to the side with his switch, even when they struggled across the final stretch along the mountain path, even when they crossed the Tekezé River and had to raise their packs and bundles above their heads, she continued to talk. Jabbar would like to prepare her for their arrival, but after several days of constant chatter he's so drained that Yeha's teeming streets and Makeda's silence are a relief. It's then he realizes that all of his lectures on foreign tongues, temples, and priesthoods, the administration of the kingdom, merchants, and trade routes still can't prepare her for her initial encounter with the city. They pass the burial site first. The gravediggers toil all-day; the corpses, bundled in fabric, resemble bright pupas, and the constant scraping and shoveling is the city's irregular heartbeat. They walk through the least ostentatious city gate, then onto narrow streets where animals and people continually bump into one another. Street urchins paw at their clothes and spit at them when they give them nothing. There's shouting and screaming and foreign tongues. A goat is pulled from a stable and slaughtered in the middle of the street, and its blood sprays dark and hot. The area around the temple, in the heart of the city, is kept clean. Between the craftsmen's booths it's bearable, but around the marketplace and in the outlying districts, where people live in heaps, there's a penetrating stench of human and animal offal, of rottenness, illness, dust. All the life that's lived, all the death. In the butchers' street, men squatting side by side and wrapped in cloth slice meat and bones and skulls as their milk-white eyes stare into the street. Horse flies, deranged dogs, butcher's children who, it is said, are born lacking the sense of smell. Everything is slopped together by the soil. Dust colors skin and clothes and hair.

Jabbar answered Makeda's questions about wealth and inequality by telling her about slaves and about people so poor and sick and disregarded they aren't allowed to enter the city walls, but are forced to beg for bread near the golden gate, wretched and often invisible to the white-robed priests with their silver staffs, and to the well-to-do tradesmen on camels with ornamented saddles.

Makeda asked many questions about the slave trade. The notion of owning another person is peculiar to her, but she seemed most interested in whether she herself

could be kidnapped and sold as a slave. Since she was traveling with him, Jabbar didn't believe that was likely, but he didn't bring up any possible scenarios where her freedom could be stolen from her. In many places marriages are often the result of man's violent assault of a woman, who then belongs to him. At first Makeda said she'd use her knife if anyone tried to harm her. Later, she said she'd flee home to the village if any man dared lock her inside his house. Jabbar, perhaps a little too roughly, called her foolish. The fantasy that there was such a thing as security made each and every idiot even more vulnerable.

"People," he'd said—and though by that point he was tired of walking and tired of her endless stream of questions, he meant every word—"aren't interested in each other unless there's something for them to gain. If they don't come from the same tribe or clan, and are not therefore dependent on each other, then nothing would interest them less than the welfare of others."

They were sitting by the fire at sunset. For once, Makeda had not replied right away.

"I mean," he'd gone on, "that the sole purpose of compassion and love is to secure your own position and to grant you the feeling that you're a good person."

Makeda was silent, and he was filled with anger and shame. When he spoke like this to Desta, she cried and told him his heart was hard as obsidian. She forbade him to speak like that to their children, and he obeyed. He tried only once with Tafari. It was during a trip to Yeha, when the boy was complaining about this and that. Jabbar had grown tired of listening to his son's naïve belief that he should be treated fairly because that's how he strove to treat others. Tafari had been incensed at Jabbar, and he'd accused his father of speaking against the gods and bringing their wrath upon them.

"If one of my siblings or my mother is dead when we get home it's all your fault," he'd shouted.

They hadn't spoken about it since, and Jabbar thinks it was unwise of him to share his view of humanity with others. He'd gotten carried away with Makeda; it was hard to believe that he still hadn't learned. Especially since these were the kinds of ideas that had made it impossible for him to ever return home to the desert country, which had sent him

into exile in a village where, when he'd arrived, he'd owned nothing except certain feelings for a woman he hardly knew.

"Then you love no one," Makeda finally said, "and you wish neither good nor ill for anyone."

"I didn't say that," he said, and all at once he was so heavy-hearted that he wanted to cry.

"You did," she said. "But you didn't mean it. You're not as smart as you think you are."

That last she'd said with such assurance that he found it difficult to fall asleep afterward. The next morning they walked in silence for some time, and he thought that his outburst had at least ushered in a blessed silence, when she assaulted him with a new round of questions. Like every other youth, she preferred to hear about the rich and the powerful, about the incense tree's precious resin, about the extraction of gold in the mines to the north, and about the desert's wealth of salt. She was interested in knowing everything about the caravans from the north and east; their travel routes and methods absorbed her attention, and she laughed as he explained about the time an Assyrian king had ordered three hundred monkeys and half of them got out of their cages and laid waste to the food merchant's locale.

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They arrive late in the afternoon. When he offers her one of the aromatic, onion-filled breads from the booth near the city gate, Makeda shakes her head. She looks down and lets him guide her. First they walk to Shamr's temple and give him gifts. Jabbar has explained it to her many times, but Makeda refuses to understand: Why build temples? Why is it better to make a sacrifice here than in the village?

"It just is," he says at last, "one sacrifice here equals five years of sacrifices in the village."

She doesn't believe that. It's hard for her to imagine the gods preferring that his subjects demonstrate their gratefulness in a temple. It may be elegant and well made but surely it falls far short in comparison to the abode of the gods, where even the temple's

gold-inlaid frame has nothing on the magnificence with which the sun illuminates the sky and lends the landscape its color.

"Consider the first rays of the day striking the river," she says. "Consider the sunrise, the dew, the pink mountain peaks, and glistening leaves."

"Yes," he says. "But what about the priests?"

"What about them? The god that created the people surely wants to hear what the people have to say."

"People are so small and can see only as far as their eye allows," Jabbar replies. "We need assistants who can speak with the creator-god on our behalf."

"Yes," Makeda says, "but wasn't the creator-god the first to exist, and isn't he the one that will never die? Didn't god give the people everything they need so that he would never take his gifts back? And weren't the gods created because they carry life forward—to those who establish order? And don't god's messenger-spirits live in the trees, in the river, between the rocks? Why build such a temple to Shamr and not to Ashta or to the god of wind or the god of the earth? Why not build a temple to the great god?"

"That is done elsewhere," Jabbar replies. "But who can refute that Shamr is the second mightiest god behind the creator-god?"

"The moon creates light where it is dark. It lets us see lurking dangers, and it saves our lives."

"And the sun doesn't?" Jabbar raps his knuckles on his forehead. "Think about it."

"The sun does too," Makeda says. "But not when it's darkest."

Jabbar swipes at her in irritation, and she falls silent.

They find a place to sleep outside the city walls, side by side with other travelers. There's noise and commotion far into the night: dancing, singing, loud arguments, someone fighting after chewing khat and drinking strong, tart millet beer. At night the prostitutes descend on the square; they wander among the fires in a cloud of sweetish oil, their breasts and bellies and faces glistening with grease. Men and women copulate where the darkness is densest. Jabbar asked Makeda to leave her jewelry at home in the village. When they reached the Tekezé River he asked her to wind fabric tightly around her chest and dress like a boy from the mountains, with a cloth folded diagonally over her body and

bound behind her back, a shawl around her shoulders, and another wrapped loosely around her lower half. For once she did what she was told without asking any questions. In the city he introduces her as his son. When people ask how such a light-skinned man can have such a dark-skinned son, he makes them laugh by responding: You should have seen my wife. It's a miracle I even found her on the dark night that my son was conceived.

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The first night in Yeha, Makeda fell asleep at once. Jabbar awoke in the middle of the night with Makeda pressing herself against him. In his dream her warm body had been transformed into Desta's, and he'd settled his hand on her breast and awoke horrified. Luckily she was asleep. He lay awake for some time fighting with his shame. The following night he lay on the other side of the fire. They were on the far edge of the square. She slept with her back to the great darkness. During the day she was irritable and complained about having slept so poorly. He called her a child. She took it so personally that she grew demonstrably independent: She wouldn't allow him to get involved when she sold the cheetah pelt, instead letting him sit on the mats next to the beer booth chatting peaceably with old acquaintances as she walked between merchants. He can tell she doesn't feel comfortable, but who does in such a city? Her unease will make her more guarded, and that can only be a good thing. On the last day they take a goat kid to Shamr's temple. The narrow, dark room smells of smoke. Light cascades through windows under the roof; the windows are the same shape as the doorway: a half-circle atop a rectangle to symbolize the god and his sun crown. Its legs bound, the kid brays, and Makeda insists on carrying the animal to the alter herself; when she lays it on the sacrificial rock her hands are covered with hair. The priest scrutinizes her. Jabbar's heart races at the thought of him discovering she's not a boy. With great difficulty, a little boy with a shaved head and heavy gold jewelry holds the animal still, while the priest hands Makeda the knife. The old man looks from Jabbar to Makeda, his eyes cutting like a sickle through wheat, and the gold shaft is swallowed up by his hand; his knuckles are ash gray. Jabbar has described the ritual for Makeda. She takes the knife, then regards for a moment the figures, tall as men, that flank the stairwell leading to the sacrificial rock.

They are wearing animal hides and are bejeweled with a circle of hammered gold; they are carved from stone, with smooth faces and vacant eyes. The kid's blood splatters her clothes and hands, a dark-red flower blooming across her chest, the quivering, steaming body, the silence afterward. The priest sticks his index finger into the hole in the kid's throat, they taste the blood, he draws a sign on their foreheads.

Following the sacrifice, they sit on the ground in the shade of one of the tall fig trees. Makeda leans her forehead against her knees. He lays his hand on the back of her head. Before their journey they'd shaved their heads, and she looks younger and more tender without hair. He nods at a group wearing colorful outfits and holding a baldachin made of bark over a blind priest. Makeda gets to her feet, following the procession with her eyes. But she doesn't kneel or bow as others around them do.

"Is it true that their eyes are plucked when they are children?" she asks when they've entered one of the mud-built houses.

Jabbar shrugs. There are many rumors about the blind priests. Because they no longer use their energy observing the physical world, they are especially holy. They live in communion with gods and spirits. They possess the sun's sharpness and the moon's mildness.

"I've heard the priests pick the smartest of the stolen children and poke their eyes out to make sure they don't run home to their mothers."

Jabbar clutches her arm and squeezes.

"Five days in Yeha, and you're already listening to cruel-minded rubbish," he whispers. "Stolen children? Do you even know what you're saying?"

She wrenches free of his grasp. She turns away, so that he can't see the tears in her eyes. They head back toward the square. At the end of the butchers' street, she pauses.

"Children decide nothing," she says.

"And what do you think adults decide?" he asks. "If there were no priests to speak our cause to the gods, what do you think would happen to us?"

She doesn't respond, but gathers her shawl around her and walks on, strutting like a queen. As he makes his final errands, she follows, but she remains silent for the rest of

the afternoon. When they return to where they will sleep, she takes his hand and squeezes it. She doesn't apologize, just bows her head.

*

It's their last day in Yeha. She insists on finding food for them so that he can get some rest. She's gone for a long time. He plays kalaha and chews khat with other men, and starts to worry about her. When she finally returns with injera and beer, she's wearing a broad, pearl-studded bandana, the kind that marriage-ready boys from the desert country carry; their geometric patterns reveal the clan to which they belong. She bought it with Isme's money, she says, a gift to her future husband. Jabbar laughs.

"You wish to make my son a camel driver from the desert country?" he says, and shows her with his index finger how to read the pearls' message. "Should I be offended?"

"I don't know," she replies promptly, "should you?"

"You've become a man in Yeha," Jabbar says, and they both laugh.

"Strong and brave," she replies, thumping her chest with a clenched fist.

They eat in cheerful silence. Afterwards he asks if she's ready to go home. She is.

"And for your arrival?" he asks cautiously.

She smiles and avoids his eyes.

"I'm lucky," she says, "I'll be able to live in the village. And I know my future husband as though he were my own brother."

"Maybe better," he says, stretching.

She smiles, head tilted to one side.

"Maybe," she says, letting her fingertips follow a chain of pearls on her bandana.

*

Although she's lain awake most nights in this strange city, on the very night that she absolutely cannot she's continually on the edge of sleep. Jabbar breathes heavily, laughing in his sleep now and then. To subdue her unease, she pretends that nothing has changed, that she will wake up at dawn, cinch the straps around her breasts and shoulders, and head home with Jabbar. That Tafari, before long, will wind the bridal bracelet she watched Jabbar buy—and which she knows is intended for her— tightly around her

upper arm. The sky is overcast and oppressive. Late in the night the hyenas move through the square like garbage men. They are the biggest hyenas she's ever seen, and they're not afraid of people. Their eyes glint in the darkness. She is a river and deep inside her lives a snake that, over time, has grown fat and strong; every time it moves, she's on the verge of rupturing. It bites its tail, and as it grows, the space it surrounds expands. She knows everything that's around the snake's body. There lives the Makeda who has followed Jabbar to this strange city and almost couldn't let go of the cheetah pelt when the fat Nubians wanted to buy it. The obvious thing would be for her to return to the village where the night breathes quite softly, and listen for Isme's voice on the wind. The girl who finds joy imagining the heft of a bow in her hand, the harvest dance, the dawn's light across the valley, and the way the river goddess spreads her legs for the sun, who sprays the water red and gold. It's that girl who imagines Tafari's face, his smile, the space between his front teeth, his laughter, the pleasure she derives from thinking about his fingers drumming against her belly, his hand that cupped her sex many times on nights they were out hunting. In the hollow, inside the circle the snake guards, she convinced herself that nothing was there. Maybe she imagined that it was a deep, placid waterhole in the middle of a torrential current, that this is where her unborn children sleep and, with Tafari's seed, will awaken and grow. Or that it's *there* she bears that part of her unknown father Isme had to force away during her birth pains so that she wouldn't choke. For a long time Makeda has listened to a song from the darkness. The waterhole floods its banks, carves a wild and turbid stream. Before the cheetah hunt she thought the song wasn't hers. She thought it was the cheetah calling for her. That it was the predator's fiery breath that makes the hunter leap and dance so as to avoid burning up.

What does she know about herself? What doesn't she know? Across time, blood and thoughts and pulse are bound by an invisible network, just as real as the entire world's geographic formations, like mountain chains, ravines, valleys, and rivers. They are streams that flow through the secret hollows of mind and body, which pull people along, whether they want to or not, forms their paths through minutes, days, years, life after life after life, so that people with vastly different personalities approximate each other because they strive for the same goal. Without realizing it, groups of people swirl together via different channels regardless of distance, circumstances, and time. On top of

the topography of life, new maps are being superimposed. Between the farthest points, some streams flow calmly, transporting those who are more easily satisfied, those who sleep well at night, those who don't always burn or freeze, those who are not torn by an ambivalence they don't themselves understand. Two streams stand out: One that flows in a circle from the past, another that swirls and roars, its source in the future. In the stream from the past, those filled with longing are cradled with their cool skin, their gentle and dark eyes. Those who are full of history, of traditions and roots and loss, of their melancholic and wistful defense against time, where shiny, polished objects are scrutinized and gathered, where ancestors' names are repeated and kept alive. In the future stream, on the other hand, the restless wander about with their open gazes, twitching, dancing toward what is yet invisible, onward, always onward, toward what has yet to take shape. They are the searching, the faltering, the ones who are bursting with a longing for peace yet at the same time know that when others let their eyes rest and soften at the sight of the familiar, their own eyes see a continually changing landscape; for them, one question is merely a stepping stone to another; for them, peace is but stars glimmering far away—stars they must continually navigate without ever reaching their destination.

Makeda has been seized by this stream, but she doesn't know it. She considers the past, considers its shadows and fluidity, considers the future a difficult and unwelcome promise of transformation, considers that she doesn't understand what makes her do what she does, but that there's no way around it. It frightens her to feel both weak-willed and decisive, as if everything has been agreed upon beforehand, and she can do nothing more than go along. The feeling rises to a sense of panic nourished by the realization that soon after she returns home to the village she may no longer hunt. She'll live with her new family inside the enclosure. She'll give birth and nurse her children, she'll sing as she works in the fields alongside other women, near the fire pit, at festivals, with her broom in her hand, swish, swish, swish, until the day she dies. She hasn't discussed it with anyone. Whom would she talk to? Maybe Jabbar would understand. Because with his stranded dreams of a better society he is, in spite of everything, faintly bound to the same future stream. But her desire to make him understand would put him in an impossible position; he would be mad to do anything but force her to stay and do what was expected of her.

When Jabbar talks about the horrors, about the attacks and assaults, she knows that such things happen. And yet they seem to have nothing to do with her. When he says the village is in danger, that he's afraid there may be war, she thinks, without understanding why, that it had nothing to do with her. She wonders if it's because she has lived far too long on the slope, where the wind mixes with blood, making your thoughts cold and transparent. She frightens herself by thinking she's a person without a sense of responsibility or the ability to connect to anyone. She closes her eyes and sees a bridal wreath ripped apart.

Even before the journey to Yeha she understood that the whispering, rising song didn't come from the cheetah, but from herself. It's a cacophony of noise that drives her relentlessly away from the place to which she belongs.

Earlier that same day she could still make herself believe it was only a fantasy, but she can no longer do that. She has done something unforgivable, and she knows nothing about what's to come. When she found food that same evening, she visited one of the young men from the salt caravan. It seemed both impulsive and inevitable. The caravan had come to the city on the same day as she and Jabbar, and they'd watched them unload their wares. The salt-bearers are sad and gray, but they are just as valuable as gold. Men with the same light skin as Jabbar kept lookout, keeping their hands on their knife belts the entire time. The boys' hands were white and gray and cracked from tying the coarse ropes around the salt blocks.

Jabbar had explained it to her as they watched them: The salt desert was between the highlands and the sea, and it was so hot that it was almost impossible to live there. At the dawn of time Shamr had had an affair there with the goddess of the wind, but he was too violent: the crust split and the earth's core was set aflame. Then she turned her back on him, hid in her dry, golden kingdom. To show her loyalty, the animals changed their colors to resemble rocks and sand. Shamr courted her like a madman, searching everywhere for her, fervently and unhappily spilling his seed across the earth where it ran together in white, glittering salt lakes. He didn't know that she'd already secretly given birth to their children, and she held them up for him to make him to stop. He kissed their cheeks and hands. He couldn't get enough of his beautiful children, and when they returned to their mother they were happy and proud and scorched black by the sun. The

earth has never stopped quaking and cracking, and to this day only the darkest people can live in the desert, those who understand the adversarial heat, the waterholes, those who can locate the scarce areas where their animals may graze. They build huts out of branches and pelts that can be easily packed up, and they lead goats and donkeys from place to place in search of water. The salt lakes belong to them. They carve blocks of salt, which is prized at the market in Yeha and in the royal city of Ma'rib. Both the women and the men wear splendid jewels. They carry beautiful and exclusive weapons, ornamented shields and light, Egyptian bows. It is said that the clan leader's goats wear bells of gold and that his wives have many servants to carry them from place to place if they don't wish to walk. But they are a shy, mistrustful people who would rather keep to themselves. They control the area and demand strict taxes from everyone who crosses the desert. The dromedary caravan from the coast is the only group they trust, because in days long past they established a trading pact with them. The caravan people travel back and forth between the coast and Yeha; on the way into the country they pick up the desert people's salt blocks and make sure they get the best price at the market. After they've traded, they return with all the items the desert people requested. Then they carry salt to the coast and return to Yeha with more wares.

Makeda asked Jabbar why the nomads didn't buy camels themselves and sell the salt for full profit. Jabbar pointed at the ugly creatures.

"Look," he laughed, "would you want to ride on one of those?"

When she asked again, he stroked his scalp several times before replying.

"They're convinced they are only protected in the places they know," he said. "They're certain their people will be wiped once they leave the desert. That's why they make rather risky pacts with foreigners."

They'd stood watching until the men were done unloading. Jabbar said that the desert is the same color as the dromedary. You'd almost think the huge animals were born of sand and rocks.

"Your father was from the salt desert," he said when they were on their way back to the sleeping area.

Makeda nodded. He'd told her that before. That's why she was much darker than everyone else in the village.

"He was the son of the greatest clan leader." Jabbar shook his head and offered no more.

She nagged him to continue. He told her that some things are better left unsaid. She began to cry, exhausted from their journey, overwhelmed by the city. She shielded her face from him and sobbed. At first he ignored her, then he took her hand.

"I'm never going to meet him," she said. "At least tell me what you know about him."

Jabbar stoked the fire with a stick, unpacked the clay bowl, and then shook out their mats.

"In his clan they name the traitors Mosi," he said.

"Who would name a newborn child a traitor?" she asked.

"It's the other way around. He left them when they were at war with another clan; they cursed him because he didn't stay and fight and wouldn't accept his responsibility as leader following his father's death. He'd figured he would return, but it didn't work out. No one names their sons Mosi anymore. Now they speak with loathing of those who let them down, deserting their own kind: He's a Mosi."

Makeda wanted to know what had caused him to abandon his people.

Jabbar didn't know. He'd never understood why. Maybe it was about power, maybe some internal strife he wasn't aware of. Maybe he was in love with a girl he couldn't have. He was young, Jabbar apologized for him, and probably just looking for adventure. Later he tried to make it right by dreaming of a united kingdom. No, Jabbar didn't know whether he'd ever longed for home. Yes, Mosi had been the best and most trusted friend he'd ever had. No, he didn't want to discuss it anymore.

She couldn't ask anymore questions. Jabbar had already told her more than he wished to, and she was embarrassed that she'd cried, because she had done so with a certain degree of calculation. She'd never longed for Mosi. Isme had done more than enough of that for both of them. Now and then she'd wondered what he looked like. If he was as handsome as Isme claimed. Otherwise nothing. After Jabbar's story, she couldn't shake the discomfort off her. Family is the spider's web, nearly invisible but impossible to avoid. Shame is passed on, running like dew into the mouth of offspring.

*

A few days later, Makeda approached the young man from the caravan. By the time they spoke again this evening, he'd talked to the caravan leader, as promised. She bought the bandana from him to show her respect and to become a part of his world. Fir laughed when he put it around her forehead.

"So we have an agreement," he said. "But if you oversleep we're not waiting for you."

She gave him half the shells from Isme's purse. He counted them carefully. Though she was supposed to work while en route, she still had to pay.

"You know anything about animals?" Fir asked. "You're too skinny to carry much."

She was a quick learner, she said, and stronger than she looked. He thumped her shoulder hard enough that she stumbled backward. Then she thumped him back, and he winced.

"You have nothing but small, bowlegged goats where you come from," he said.

She brayed at him.

Truth be told, she'd never seen a dromedary before arriving in Yeha. She had buried her face behind Jabbar's shoulder, frightened. The ugly animals have human eyes. They move lazily, but get to their feet quickly or jerk their heads, knocking down the boys who take care of them. Only traveling merchants from Jabbar's homeland use dromedaries to haul cargo, and those who aren't carrying all that much weight leave them behind in the port city, continuing on to Yeha with donkeys. Salt traders journey through the desert instead of through the mountains, and they are dependent on the great beasts. The Egyptians and Nubians and the peoples of the south use donkeys. They have no need for animals that can go without water for days and won't sink into the desert sand but who are also believed to be the favorite hiding place of Tricksters. The people of the caravan, on the other hand, treat them better than they treat their own children, strapping the foals to the backs of the adult animals and walking alongside them. They slurp the fatty milk and thank the gods for every single drop.

The same evening that Jabbar told her about Mosi, it occurred to her that Tafari already knew the story. The thought makes her angry: the shame she must live with from

now on. Maybe he imagined he was doing her a favor by marrying her, pretending the fact that her father was a traitor wasn't important. She thinks herself into a corner until only one solution seems to remain: To search for Mosi and find out what really happened. Jabbar told her that Mosi had traveled to the sea while he went to the village to marry Desta. He was a tax collector in the port city of Adulis, at one point, but it was a long time ago. It's possible that he's gone on to Ma'rib, which he'd planned to do back then; maybe he's settled with one of the clans along the way. Maybe he's dead. He's apparently given up their joint plan to bring a vice-king to Yeha.

Most of the caravans that come from the east take the shortest route through the mountains to Adulis. From there they sail down along the coast to cross the strait at its narrowest point into the desert country. Makeda has agreed to travel with them to the coast. The boy's name is Fir. He's the son of the caravan leader, and he assured her that it would be no problem at all for her to continue toward the desert country once they reached the sea.

"If you're still alive," Fir said, closing his mouth shout tightly. When she laughed, he didn't laugh with her.

"You don't know the heat," he said. "The salt desert is your worst enemy. If you survive it, you can make it to Ma'rib easily. You're foolish not to join one of the Egyptians' caravans instead. They take the shorter route through the mountains."

He'd spat when he said it, and she knew why. The Egyptians viewed themselves as the mightiest rulers. They could be cruel to animals and to people; they reached for her black skin and laughed at her with their pursed mouths. Makeda wants to steer clear of them. Besides, for the person who doesn't wish to be found, it's smarter to choose the least obvious route. She reiterated her desire to go with them, then asked if he was satisfied with her payment.

"You're almost as dark as them," Fir said.

"I am from the mountains on the other side," she replied. "This is my first time in Yeha."

#

When Jabbar awakes, Makeda is gone. As are his headscarf and his staff. His purse is lighter than it was the day before; everything that he'd earned on the trip is gone. There's nothing left to buy weapons. He cries out, Thieves! Kidnappers!

"My daughter," he shouts. "No, my son."

Sleepily the men around him get to their feet. A man with a dirty beard shakes his head.

"I saw your boy leave," he says. "He must be the thief."

Jerusalem, Israel. King David's Court. 980-974 B.C.

Hot summer nights on the rooftop, the moon a dewdrop, Jerusalem in white. Columns of cypress trees, their aroma wafting over the wall: herb beds, lilies, and roses that close at sunset. Oil lamps flicking tongues of light. Sudden laughter wedged between the shadows of bodies. Pistachios and almonds fished out of golden honey and mixed in the mouth with tart pomegranates. Dates, figs, grapes, soft cheese, watermelon juice dribbling down chin and chest. Crushing seeds between teeth. Glazed hands, greasy lips, voices that sink and rise on the night breeze. Wine trickles in mugs made of metal. The women's jewelry: anklets, bracelets, necklaces, rings, combs in hair. They clink as they walk, every movement a rush of scents: leather, wool, moist skin, flower oil, a bouquet of the day's dusty, sunbaked bricks, bread baking, sour milk. Children bustle about elsewhere in the palace, but when David holds court, Bathsheba brings Solomon with her to the upper terrace.

The other wives accuse Bathsheba of playing favorites with her children whenever she treats Solomon like her only child. It's not his fault. They feed him raisin cake and yank his hair, and they poke him until he laughs. He sings with a clear voice and performs whenever he's asked to. Now and then he plays Dogs and Jackals with his father. Although he's the youngest seven at seven years old, he studies the board with ease and wins just as often as he loses. He tries his best to be stone-faced like his father. Solomon likes the storytellers the best. David lies halfway on his side with his hand under his head. His beard and hair are peppered with gray now. Potbellied and thickset, he

looks like the king he is. He breaks in and takes over when the storyteller goes too far. Of course he paid for the philistine's foreskins as a bridal tax to King Saul for his first wife, but he didn't defeat an army singlehandedly. Yes it's true that he fought against Goliath and dropped him with a rock and a slingshot, but he wasn't nearly as tall or broad as they make him out to be. David would rather talk about the Lord, about the times God has talked to him, about how he brought the Ark of the Covenant—God's earthly residence—to Jerusalem, and God won't let him build a temple because David has spilled so much blood that his hands will never be clean. Solomon regards his father's hands on the sly, and though his mother has explained what spilling blood means, he looks for signs and his flesh pimples with goosebumps when he sees dark rings under his father's fingernails. Everyone calls David a good king; the dead were the price to be paid for peace in the Israeli kingdom: Long ago God made a pact with Abraham. Abraham's people would obey god and, in return, they would be protected by the Lord. Following a famine many, many years ago, the Israelites were forced to flee to Egypt where they lived as prisoners. There Moses, the holy one, was born. As an adult God promised him that he would lead the Israelites back to their land, Canaan. During the journey through the desert Moses received the Ten Commandments, which he carved in stone, the commandments all were to obey. The tablets were kept in the Ark of the Covenant, in a chest so holy that only the highest priests were allowed to approach it. A man died once after touching the chest.

David united the kingdom. Canaan is called Israel now and its capital is Jerusalem, where Solomon still lives in his father's harem. But God wants a king of peace to build his temple, and he has promised David that one of his sons will construct it when he ascends to the throne. Until then, the Ark waits in the goat-skin tent on the Temple Mount. Miracles happen underneath the tent flaps. Solomon closes his eyes and tries to picture God's residence as a doll's house that looks like his father's palace, with God lying in his bed. No matter how hard he concentrates, Solomon cannot see Him clearly. Sometimes he gets headaches from trying, but God always squirms free and disappears in the muddy water, like a fish.

David is the king, but the Lord is the Almighty. He's a strict and just ruler who must be obeyed. He decides what days they fast and who will be sacrificed, what days

they will celebrate and what days they will grieve. He decides who will live and who will die, who will be happy and who will be unhappy. He even decides what will be in the mightiest king's house. David ensures that all of Israel's tribes obey the Lord's commandments, that they observe the days of fasting and worship no other gods. Sometimes he spends days in the barren scrub land surrounding Jerusalem in order to speak with God, and often he prays half the night. David loves his people, his wives, children, and animals. But he loves God most of all, and God has rewarded his love. Solomon wants to love God, too, but he doesn't dare tell his mother that he doesn't know how to do that, or how he knows that what he feels is love.

It's late in the summer, a fine, fruitful time: they sow and harvest in the fields and in the orchards surrounding Jerusalem; they keep a watchful eye on the water level in the reservoirs and they inspect the irrigation systems. These are the source of their wealth. During this hot period the school days are short. Solomon has his own animal to ride on, and David took him on a trip to his birthplace, Bethlehem. Solomon had never before journeyed in such a way with his father. A retinue of servants and guards, a flock of mules to be moved from one place to the other. Wherever they went, people bowed to the king. Solomon felt proud and strong by his father's side. David was there to inspect the construction of a home that he'd approved close to his childhood home. It's smaller than the palace in Jerusalem, and surrounded by olive groves and vine fields. His dream is to get away from time to time, exhaling, and to live from season to season, becoming a farmer's boy again. They made a detour along the rocky slopes, stopping somewhere to sit on a boulder, so that David could point out particular spots in the area. The air lapped over the valley, white as milk. The almond trees were in bloom.

"When I was your age," his father said, "I was a shepherd. I was the youngest son of a farmer and I had seven older brothers. The prophet Samuel came to our house, and because he saw with the Lord's eye, he understood that I was the one who would unite the tribes of Israel and rule over them."

When they returned to Jerusalem, Solomon told his mother how his grandfather had only brought his seven oldest sons when the prophet had asked to greet them. Samuel knew that one was missing, and made them fetch David, the shepherd boy with his

homemade sitar and willow flute. When he played for King Saul, Samuel said: Lord, this boy will bring you joy.

Solomon didn't understand why Bathsheba was so happy when he told her his father's story.

"Your father listened to the wind in the hills around Bethlehem as a boy," she said. "He learned the secrets of the heavens. He sang for the Lord and chased off wild animals with his switch and his slingshot. He didn't know then that he'd been born to lead. Your father's words and thoughts overflow with the wisdom of the Lord, like milk from a swollen udder. Do you understand, Solomon? Do you understand that what he was telling you is a prophetic sign?"

Solomon shook his head. That's not what it was—they'd just been talking.

"You are your father's son," she whispered. "The gate of his house is open."

He is his father's son, but he's only a child. At night the gate is closed. During the day the guards keep an eye on those who come and go.

The army general Joab joins their company this evening. He and David speak in subdued tones; they seem troubled. Darkness thickens the air, and it's difficult to breathe. Every time Bathsheba approaches, the men fall silent. When she saw Joab, she made Solomon promise that he would sit near his father and pay attention. When David talks, people listen. Solomon rests at his father's feet and catches the stars with his hands. He's pretending they are predatory fish that will capture all the fireflies in the world, and that he's the only one who can save them. Bathsheba's stern look brings him back to reality, reminding him of his promise, and Solomon lets go of the stars. David is heavy and tired of wine and sorrow. Solomon doesn't understand what they're talking about and loses his focus. Joab has a scar above his lip; he's so ugly the women of the harem make fun of him behind his back. They say he's flat-faced because his mother was so alarmed by the sight of him that she tried to shove him back inside of her. David doesn't notice his youngest son. A name emerges from the conversation like a heavy moth: Absalom, Absalom.

After Absalom killed Amnon, he fled to Geshur, where he lived with his maternal grandfather, King Talmaj. That was four years ago, and David has sworn that Absalom will never return to Jerusalem.

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A person must learn to bear a certain measure of grief: there is no maturation without pain. Grief is a seed, and no one knows the soil on which it will fall or how large it will grow within a person. Secret mines, oases, rich earth that accepts the unhappiness, that is dispersed and allocated. David's misery has grown like bindweed, has become a wilderness of rushes that threaten to squeeze the life from him. The Lord will be his gardener; he will sew and harvest and cut his plants down. The Lord must trust me more than I trust myself, David says. He must recognize my strengths better than I do. Or maybe he's tired of me and doesn't mind if I fail.

No one wants to hear their husband, their father, their king speak like this. They shush him, they console him, they talk sense into him. And yet the bindweed continues to grow in his eyes until he can no longer see as before; it fills his throat and distorts his voice, unfurling in his ear like a small, blunted funnel. David tore his tunic into tatters when Amnon died, and the fabric was then made into a child's tunic; whenever he sits like a judge on his throne, he wears a cape of purple Phoenician cloth around his shoulders. On sultry nights on the terrace he cries whenever Solomon sings, and the tears run in each direction: from his eyes and into his body. First the cloak bulges, then the tunic. His undergarment grows tight, and he pulls it over his head and lies half-naked on the carved-out bed. Solomon sees: The broad chest, the curly black hair, the smell of sweat and body. It's difficult to imagine that his own body will one day transform into a man's. Solomon observes his father and thinks about starfish and the fish in the pond. Glistening, lazy, they emerge only to descend again.

Bathsheba frequently confides in her son. She's told him that David called for Amnon in his sleep every night for a year. That his grief, over time, went away and was replaced with another kind of grief. Now he mumbles about Absalom while he sleeps, wracked with longing. You and I won't forget, Bathsheba likes to tell her boy. And Solomon is ashamed, because he does everything he can to forget. The throat being slashed, the fresh blood.

David used to talk loudly and gesture with his hands, he used to let dancing girls and troubadours perform every evening, he used to gather the kingdom's most beautiful women, he used to take hold of his son's and daughter's waists and throw them up so high

that the clouds rent with their laughter. Solomon doesn't remember. During the day his memory of the sheep-shearing festival is blurry, but at night he awakes screaming, Bathsheba shaking him, his throat parched but afraid that his drinking cup is filled with blood. Bathsheba has told him to remember what he saw. It should be carved like a scar across his heart, it should serve as a reminder, an ambition. Solomon nods. Still, he does everything he can to forget.

Solomon loses focus again. David's wives are seated against the wall around the terrace. They talk a lot, they laugh, sometimes they argue. Absalom's mother Makab pours tea for Ahinoam, and winks at him when their eyes meet. Tamar still lives in David's harem, but she never comes up to the roof. She keeps to herself. The women talk about her as if she were the living dead. From Bathsheba Solomon understands that David hasn't called for Makab since Amnon's death. That's how she's paying for her son's sin, but nothing has changed otherwise. She's old. Grief has aged her, putting a damper on her quarrelsome ways. She fulfills her duty, but Tamar does nothing useful; she cannot spin, weave, or sew. Solomon often sees them sitting together in the little garden. Now and then Tamar will lay her head in her mother's lap, but the two women don't talk.

David sits up, and the chatter ceases. Solomon looks at Bathsheba. He wants to shift closer to his father, but ends up knocking over a bowl of grapes. David hardly notices. He's on his feet now, and the grapes roll beneath the bench. Joab lifts an admonitory finger. Tears form in Solomon's eyes and he turns to his mother, hoping she'll finally call him to her. She's leaning against the wall next to Ahinoam, glaring at her boy with eyes of stone. He makes her sad, he makes her happy. He's the future and the past bound up in one small, hard package, with his rounded knees and apple-cheeks. The boy who still plays with his potbellied clay animals, talking to them in an animal language, who has learned to read and write, and who is being taught the art of war and the laws of the Lord. Who secretly sucks his thumb before he falls asleep, who listens to the sounds of the house, who thinks so much his thoughts ignite into flame.

"I have something important to tell you," David says. "I've made a decision that will effect Israel."

Apprehension builds again. Solomon squashes a grape under his foot. He glances at his mother. When David says Absalom will return, she leaps up and covers her mouth with her hand. "I have asked Joab to bring him from his grandfather's house."

Solomon wants to go to her, but he's not sure he's allowed. He crushes more grapes, until his feet grow sloppy and sticky. Makab emits a loud, piercing sound, then falls silent. It's impossible to tell whether she's happy or unhappy, but it's clear she's just as surprised as the others. David's servants assist him into his tunic and sandals. He touches Bathsheba's shoulder as he passes her on his way to bed.

"Come," he says. "It's late."

Uncharacteristically, Bathsheba hesitates. She doesn't move, and she tells his retreating figure that first she must put Solomon to bed. David turns toward her.

"You prefer a child prince over a king?" he asks.

The king humiliates his favorite wife. It's the perfect opportunity for the others to cut the tension with their laughter. Bathsheba looks down, waiting for it to subside. Then she meets his gaze without hesitation, but she doesn't reply. He kisses her cheek, and she squeezes Solomon's hand so hard that he whimpers.

"Come when the boy's in bed then," he says, lightly tapping his fist on Solomon's shoulder.

*

You are never alone in David's house. When the children are small, they sleep with their mothers. When they turn five they move into bigger sleeping quarters. And when they turn twelve they move up to the floor above, where they will remain until they leave home. Solomon prefers daytime's bustle over the hushed moans of night. He likes the animals, the grinding of the mortar, the squeaking of wheels, the water brought up from the well, the clattering of bowls and jars, shouts, games. The night secretes droplets of sound that are sucked into the nothingness of the dark. People yammer, smack their lips, snore, turn in their beds, talk in their sleep, shush, argue, console. Wives, concubines, servant girls. Children enter the world in the maternity room. The women's birth pangs, their illnesses and sorrows. The secretions of the body: sweat and oil, vomit, piss, the relief of the chamber pot. The babies, the children, the young, the old, they live and die side by

side. David's house grows. More arrive than leave. His wives usually outlast the concubines at the back of the harem. Bathsheba says it's because the Lord favors the king's true heirs.

When Solomon closes his eyes Joab becomes Absalom, then the giant Goliath, who lifts one leg like a dog and squirts a sour yellow stream, flooding fields and houses. A brother shares blood with his brother, though he may not know him. Absalom, Absalom. A stone tossed into the pond: the fish flee, then return to find out if it's the hunter or the prey that has plopped into the water. Solomon calls for his mother, but she's already with David. He pretends to be asleep when Ahinoam sneaks into the room. She strokes his hair, and he thinks about soldiers, about showing no weakness, about the soldiers' weapons, about skin that ruptures and bodies ripped to shreds. He wants to show honor to his mother and father. He wants to show that he's part of his mother's warrior tribe. He wants to remain quiet but bursts into tears instead. Ahinoam wraps her arms around him and her softness makes it worse. Tears and snot go down the wrong pipe. They push his visions and his words down into his belly. There, there, Ahinoam says. There, there my boy. But he is not Ahinoam's boy, Amnon was her boy, and Solomon watched him die. The image flits through his head again, braided with Bathsheba's warnings and her talk of prophets and the Lord that wants this or that, wants people to follow Him, blind in the darkest darkness. He presses his face against Ahinoam, her warm body, soft and compliant; his night tunic is drenched, and he can't breathe. At last she takes pity on him and pulls him close. Her hair and body smell different than his mother's. She sleeps on straw mats and wool blankets, this warm, gentle drowsiness. She waves at him, her eyelids half-closed, when he stumbles back to his own bed early in the morning.

*

Joab is ugly, but smart. He's brutal, but he can be gentle when it benefits him. He can see that David's grief threatens to destroy everything: his desire to live, his judgment, his courage, his wisdom. At first he'd suggested to David that he could get rid of Absalom, but the king was appalled. Since then he's advised David to forget him, but he couldn't. David had taxed his people hard. Jerusalem has become an attractive city, commerce is healthy, and wealth continues to grow. In the countryside they care little about all the

splendor. The price they get for their crops and their animals is not much more than before. The landless lead wretched lives as day laborers; many recall the time when they weren't forced to survive on the mercy of others. The people need a king. David is close to the Lord and because of this, Israel's security is guaranteed. But doubts are quick to come by when you don't know the prophet's divinations, when your children don't get enough to eat, and you have to go barefoot. Since the winter, rumors have circulated that Absalom is behaving like a king in the kingdom's farthest provinces, though he ought to be home in Geshur. The worst part is that people are apparently falling for it. Absalom knows his father's strengths and weaknesses. David does not deny his farmer roots: he appreciates pretty things but dresses simply, not going out of his way to appear kinglike. Rather than valuing the fact that he does not wallow in luxury, the people are apparently naïve enough to believe that the most attractively ornamented jar is always the best, even if it's made of unfired clay. No one will deny that Absalom is handsome. He's well spoken and bristling with energy. Often he takes one of his children riding in order to show off his fruitfulness and to display the fatherliness that would also encompass his countrymen were he to become Israel's king. If David begins to show signs of weakness, then he could be in trouble. The people have no mandate either to choose or to overthrow a king, but without their support David is nothing.

For a long time, whenever Joab mentioned this to him, David wouldn't even listen. Joab allied himself with Akitofel, who advised the king to lower taxes in the hardest hit areas. David followed his advice, but it wasn't enough. They prevented a farmer rebellion near Mount Ebal in the spring. No harm was done, but it could be a warning. Idolatry has increased, and though David beats back the idolaters and won't hesitate to wipe out entire villages to frighten or issue warnings, Joab fears it's the first sign of the kingdom's dissolution. God is David's guarantor and ally, uniting the people around a strong belief in the Lord's laws—a more effective shield against destruction than all the soldiers in the world. David has teased Joab, telling him that he's grown fearful and suspicious in his old age. If there was no resistance somewhere in his kingdom, then they would live in Paradise. Joab was unable to make him understand that it would at least be wiser to keep Absalom nearby, where they could keep an eye on him.

Joab stated this directly after listening to David's yearning complaints.

"Let me send a messenger to Absalom," he said, "it's not right that a father expires pining for his son."

But David wouldn't hear of it.

"Never," he replied. "I loved Amnon more than life itself. I will never forgive Absalom."

Joab was forced to be silent, to wait. David panted through the evenings on his roof, holding the kingdom in hands slick with his tears. Joab needed another plan. First he went to Makab, who told him everything she'd say to David if only he would speak with her. She kept repeating that Absalom's mind is soft and meek, and when Joab reminded her of the planning that must've happened before Amnon's murder or of the cynicism he'd shown by letting someone else wield the knife, it made no difference. After that conversation Joab persuaded one of David's concubines to put in a good word with the king for Makab. She did everything she could to convince David that it would be kind and loving of him to spend time with his eldest wife, but David was dismissive. Makab no longer aroused his desire. She was too melancholic to entertain him, too trifling to inspire him. He claimed that it wasn't meant as punishment her for the crime her son had committed or for her daughter's fall from grace. Then Joab moved on to the wise woman Tekoa. He paid her handsomely, and they came up with a plan to make the king listen. On the day of her visit with him she threw herself at David's feet, stricken with false grief, and told him that she'd once had two sons.

"They were alone in the field," she said, and David asked her to stand. She'd arrived wearing mourning clothes, unwashed like a woman who's borne her sorrow for some time. "When they began to fight, no one was there to separate them. One killed the other."

The sun sail fluttered above the open courtyard, and though his servants fanned him on his throne, sweat poured from the king. His face glistened, dark and swollen, and Tekoa understood that Joab was right: her lies would serve Israel. And yet she avoided his eyes when she explained how her family wanted the murderer brought to them, how they wanted to exterminate her husband's only surviving heir.

"They will snuff the only ember I have left," she whispered, throwing herself on her knees again.

David cried. His effeminacy was outrageous.

"I will take care of it," he promised. "You have nothing to fear."

He made a sign for her to go, but she remained.

"I must implore you to swear to the Lord," she whispered, "that the avengers will not harm my only living son."

And the king, his hand over his heart, swore the oath. It was time for her to leave, but she didn't move.

"Though I am hardly worthy even to be your slave," she said, "there is something I must say."

And she asked him how he could advise her as he'd done and, at the same time, do the very opposite himself by not allowing his exiled son to return to his father's house.

"You have the wisdom of an angel," she said, "does God really wish an exiled man remain in exile?"

David stood, angry and hurt.

"Is this Joab's doing?" he shouted, the continuous fanning of palm leaves ceasing for a moment.

Waiting on the other side of the gate were those who'd come to ask for his advice or his verdict, the sound of voices like an army of cicadas. In the courtyard everyone held their breath. The king threatened Tekoa, calling for Joab to come at once.

Tekoa, crawling to the plateau on which he was standing, showed no sign of fear.

"Joab is intelligent," she said, "you chose him as your army general. He knows how to think as friend and as enemy. If he couldn't see things from both sides, he would be useless."

Tekoa simultaneously insulted him and flattered him. His advisors always hoped that he would be firm, believing he'd grown too soft, weak, apathetic. He let his eyes wander over the heads of the Elder Council members who sat in the shade. Unmoving, they waited to carry out their tedious act of theatre, and in that instant he saw them wearing masks and makeup. The woman at his feet was right. An invisible hand on the back of his neck, burning, tight, pressing his head forward in a nod.

"You can go," he said. "But Joab should come at once."

*

On the day that Absalom returns to Jerusalem, David is in Bethlehem. The house has been completed, and the king has invited Bathsheba to sample the first wines of the year with him. Joab hinted how strange it would be to leave the palace empty, but David laughed at him.

"Do you think he'll move into my rooms? Should I stand at the city gate and welcome my son's murderer?"

"If the father's house is empty when the son is homeless," Joab began, but David cut him off.

"The son isn't homeless. There's a house for him near the Sheep's Gate. He has stables, storerooms, animals, and barley fields outside the wall. Besides, the father's house is never empty. Let's not make mountains of mole hills."

Joab retrieves Absalom in Geshur. The exiled man accepts the terms without a second thought: He must return to Jerusalem, but he must not seek out his father or visit the palace. David will have nothing to do with him.

The small boys run ahead with messages from the guards as soon as Absalom's retinue comes into view from the north. Solomon is sitting under the overhang in the garden of wells. He's been writing on his clay tablet the entire morning. The other children were allowed to leave long ago, but Solomon made one single mistake and so he must stay. Protesting does little good, but he can't help himself. He's smarter than the others, he writes better, and he remembers his lessons better. He could write and read long ago, and he could recite, mistake-free, from the Holy Book. What he wants is to learn all the exciting, essential things the older boys get to learn. And yet he's being punished—over nothing—and made to endlessly repeat. It doesn't surprise him that the words for education and corporal punishment are the same.

"Knowledge is no punishment," the teacher responds, unexpectedly friendly. "Maybe you are the one who is lucky."

When Solomon responds sulkily he gets rapped on his neck. The slate pencil falls from his hand, and he earns another rap picking it up. He shows no weakness, and angrily continues writing.

His fingers and back ache from hunching over his exercises for hours. His father gave him the hand-carved pencil after he heard him reading aloud from the stone tablets near the monument to the tribes of Israel. It's made of bone, and it's smooth and white, with a snakehead on one end. Although he's allowed to write with ink on animal hide now and then, he usually has to use the clay tablet.

"I'm surprised you don't enjoy writing about Israel's people," the teacher says. Solomon hesitates, not knowing whether or not he's supposed to reply. "You really don't enjoy it?"

He nods. Says tonelessly and politely: Of course, esteemed Master.

The teacher nods, satisfied.

"You must understand that I'm only fulfilling your mother's wishes," he laughs. "She pays me extra to make you sweat."

Solomon's mouth goes dry. He wants to destroy something.

"Those of us who've watched you wrestle," the teacher continues, "understand how smart it is of her to focus on polishing your intellect."

Sweat forms on his palms, and he wipes them on his neck and tunic. To make him sit still, the teacher tugs lightly on his hair. Solomon is aware of how little the others think of him; they bait him and laugh at him whenever they rile him up enough to fight back. He may be strong enough, but he's chubby and slow and clumsy, and he's never won a fight. He considers how to reply, a subtle yet crushing dig that the teacher will understand only later, after school's over.

Instead he's saved by a sudden commotion. A moment ago the palace was asleep, now it's teeming with servants, children, women. They hurry, excited, nervous, and Solomon doesn't know what's going on.

"Go," the teacher says. "Absalom has returned."

Solomon barely reaches the city gate in time. He knows all the city's shortcuts and secret passages. He storms up the stairs to the watchtower. No one stops the king's youngest son. The procession halts beyond the gate. Joab's riding at the front with

Absalom. Never have two men been more dissimilar. Later, Solomon will remember how everything stopped in that moment, a sucking sensation, a dream. Absalom is wearing a pale tunic, so white, so clean. His hair is tied up with a band of gold. Around his shoulders is a red cape. Absalom climbs from the mule and leads it through the gate. A crowd gathers around the king's son, the one who forfeited everything to punish his brother and avenge his sister. Killing your brother is a terrible deed, and yet the motive could be a redeeming factor. The women, in any case, forgive him. Who wouldn't want such a protector? The men admire his courage; a man is not a man unless he exacts revenge where revenge is warranted. David has done the right thing by allowing him to return to Jerusalem. A king's house that is divided will crack right down the middle. Some fall to their knees. Absalom offers his hands to them, talking and laughing as if they were his best friends. He doesn't even push away a cripple with an ugly, pus-filled growth on his face. Nor the sick pregnant woman whose mouth glistens with bloody slime. Solomon joins the crowd, right behind a group of older boys. He hops from side to side, both to hide and to see. When they reach the palace, Absalom stops. He falls silent, bows, folds his hands across his chest. It's easy to understand what kind of grief he must feel at the sight of his father's house. People feel for him. They crane their necks to see. His hands are large, with a ring on each index finger. The tunic he wears has cobalt-blue tassels on the tips of the sleeves. The tassels dance when he lets his arms fall. He leans toward Joab, then whispers using his hand as a mouthpiece. Joab looks around, then points at Solomon, who no longer wishes to hide. Absalom calls for him. He squats down and offers his hand. The outstretched hand is the world's dizzying center, and Solomon wants to obey. His big brother says something soft and welcoming; his eyes are clearer than every eye Solomon has ever seen. Absalom gestures, up and down, waving Bathsheba's reprimands and anxieties away.

"Solomon," he says, "brother."

Solomon can't help but return the smile. It's as if his mother is standing right behind him, tugging at his clothes, but he wants to go anyway. One hesitant step, then another. A lizard crawls lightly over his foot, and he jerks back in shock, stopping. His brother's eyes, friendly at first, grow impatient. Absalom stands up, claps his hands, and turns his back on the boy. It's embarrassing to stand there staring, cheeks flushed, at a

back walking away. Though the crowd is more interested in Absalom's homecoming than the shambling of the king's youngest son, who is unable make up his mind to welcome his big brother, he senses that everyone is watching him. Even those who've turned to watch Absalom—their bobbing necks, their steps, their chatter—are a rumble of humiliation. He runs through the gate toward the palace. The guards must have seen everything, but they pretend nothing is amiss. Peevishly he rips off his sandals, tears free the little bells Bathsheba decorated them with, and throws them against the wall. It's silent in David's house. Women and children rest during the midday hours. Solomon stands in the shade, barefoot like a beggar. His mother and father are far away. He sneaks up the stairs to David's terrace—he's not allowed there by himself. At the wall he watches Absalom as he continues down the broad street tailed by a crowd of people. Solomon watches until the final mule and the final servant disappear down Baker's Pass near the Temple Mount. The sunbaked stones scorch his feet; the barren roof is a strict and strange place. He sits on the edge of David's cot. The light is so white and sharp that it brings tears to his eyes. His skin prickles underneath his clothes and he pulls his tunic over his head, then sits down in the shade, half-naked and sunken. He can't think of Absalom without getting dizzy. He should be more ashamed that he'd wanted to follow his brother than that he'd hesitated for so long that Absalom grew impatient. He can't focus his thoughts; they spread in every direction: Amnon's wounds, Absalom's hair spilling to his shoulder, shiny as a river, beggar children in the street, barefooted, infected, half-naked. He glances down at his own body. Bathsheba admonishes him in his mind: Put your clothes on, act like a king's son, come, go, come. Absalom smiled, and he still has all his teeth. His skin gleamed. Anyone can see that he looks more like a king than David. His heart skips a beat. The greatest shame, the greatest fear. Solomon creeps across the terrace, his clothes in his arms, and hides in the darkness of the harem. He crawls underneath the blanket and stays there well into the afternoon. Ahinoam approaches. She asks if he's feeling ill. She puts her hand to his cheek, and he shakes his head. She shoos him out of the bed, then helps him into his clothes as if he were a child. He shrinks. He doesn't want to play or speak. The entire time he's thinking of Absalom. He doesn't understand the restlessness that's been injected in him like the poison of a scorpion.

*

Bathsheba returns five days later. She presses her mouth to the scorpion bite and sucks out the poison. She spits right and left, and curses Absalom, mocking his arrogance and kingly mannerisms. She chastises David for inviting a murderer to live among them. Normally David is gentle with his wives, but Bathsheba won't be quiet until he raises his hand, and she keeps at it even when David is not present. Around Solomon she sees no reason to be silent. If his father won't see reality in the face, the responsibility rests that much heavier upon her. The walls surrounding Jerusalem are like threadbare clothes, and soon they'll unravel; the city will be penetrated. When a father forgives his son's murderer, it's nearly the same as excusing the crime. *A person can only take precautions with her eyes open*, Bathsheba says to her son. *You should remember that there will always be someone who dreams of killing you.* Solomon is no longer allowed to walk outside the palace walls alone. David's other wives roll their eyes, calling Bathsheba conceited and paranoid. Solomon tries harder in school. He no longer strives for praise, but bows his head when it comes his way.

Bathsheba notices the changes in her son. She believes his somber attitude suits him. His silence proves that he will be a man soon, and this causes her to feel joyful and fearful and to watch over him even more zealously. David knows nothing; he changes the subject as soon as the discussion comes around to Absalom. Bathsheba knows her efforts make little difference, and she keeps her views locked up within until she's close to losing her self-control, but she does her best to be a good wife. David rewards her with his affection. Solomon never argues with her. She believes that he understands her unease and shares her anger. He's nine years old and growing like a weed, with black, darting eyes and a constant stream of questions that no one can answer. He'll be a stranger around her in a way a boy should be a stranger around his mother. She observes him when he sleeps, just as she did when he was little. His eyelids quiver. He clenches his fists, and his facial muscles relax when she strokes his curly hair. No one understands her fear and anxiety. She's certain they think she's like every other woman who is primarily interested in her son's status as a way of improving her own position. A woman is nothing by herself, especially once she's lost her innocence and her youth. Bathsheba is dependent on her husband and sons. Her father has been dead for many years, and her brothers are

far away, with their own families to take care of. But she's not afraid for herself. No mother can bear the thought of someone harming her child. Equally horrific is the possibility that he's being treated unfairly, stripped of what is rightfully his. She excuses her fantasies of Solomon becoming the next king by telling herself that only if he succeeds David on the throne will Israel remain Israel, the peace maintained. He's smart and understands people. He's peace-loving and justice-seeking. She wishes she wasn't the only one to see this, and she toys with the idea that perhaps she possesses the gifts of a prophet. When she was a child she'd had premonitions, vague and blurry and true. God has been good to her, has held his hand over her. If she continues to strive to do the right thing, she believes he will reward her family. After Absalom's return, the notion of her as a kind of prophet has filled more and more of her thoughts. She doesn't dare tell anyone, but fortifies herself nevertheless with her wisdom and grows bolder. She seeks the counsel of the high priest. Solomon is her alibi for pursuing Sadok. He listens to everything she tells him when she, pretending to be interested in her son's religious curiosity, discusses Absalom with him. Sadok hears the same rumors as everyone else: Absalom stands at the city gate every morning as people arrive in Jerusalem to visit David for a ruling or for counsel. He kisses these strangers' cheeks and asks about their affairs. He sides with them and supports them, and though he says the same thing each time, everyone feels he speaks to them personally: *If I were the judge, he says, you would have—my good man, wife, friend, stranger—my support. Alas, I am not the judge in this land.*

In his garden Sadok plucks small, juicy cucumbers for Solomon, and his servant offers mint tea and raisin cakes to Bathsheba. They whisper. Solomon isn't allowed to hear what they're saying, and he grows peevish. He wants to show them that he's no longer a little boy, so he kicks at a water jar; it falls over and soaks his feet and tunic. Sadok and Bathsheba hardly notice. Solomon edges closer and they shoo him away. He pokes at a fat, lazy dog, harder and harder. It doesn't react. At last it snaps at him and the shock of this makes him dizzy. He has to lie down on the rush mat under the overhang. Before they leave, Sadok advises Bathsheba to trust her husband, but he shakes his head, too.

The goodness that makes David a loving husband also makes him believe the best in people, even when all evidence suggests otherwise. The situation is untenable, Sadok

and Bathsheba agree. The security of the kingdom is at stake. If Absalom knocks his father from the throne, who knows what will happen.

Solomon wishes he could see how Absalom welcomes visitors to the city. He wishes that he could sneak around in his brother's house, unseen, and find out if it's true that he lives like a king, or that he spends his nights with multiple women, or that he's already accumulated bodyguards. On the way home from Sadok's, Bathsheba holds onto her son's neck tightly, though he's too old to be guided that way. Every time he dips forward to free himself from her grasp, her hand latches on like a bird of prey.

The palace children speak of nothing but Absalom. The rumors grow wilder and wilder. Somebody saw something, somebody else another thing. Solomon's own hesitant meeting with his brother soon becomes three days in his house and riches the likes of which have never been seen. Over time the interest in Absalom cools. The adult's attitudes drift down to their children. They feel bad for the returned son, but they don't criticize David openly. A king must be consistent, but Absalom's the one forced to live like an outcast in his own city.

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After two years in Jerusalem, Absalom sends a messenger to his father. Bathsheba is with David when the message arrives, and she hears everything. He responds at once: Absalom can stay in Jerusalem, but he must keep his distance from the palace. Shortly afterward Makab dies without warning. The women moan as they prepare her body, and the keeners wear down day and night with their wailing. Absalom rips up his shirt on the square, so that everyone may see the grief he feels for the mother he wasn't allowed to visit after he'd avenged his sister. He has a daughter, also named Tamar. She stands at her father's side, her eyes flickering. She is not nearly as pretty as her aunt, and she has a slight limp, but Absalom worships her and brings her everywhere. When they convey Makab to her final resting place, David forbids Absalom from joining the burial procession. David, acting like a proper husband, walks right behind the bier with his own silent daughter Tamar at his heels. His mourning clothes don't reveal how much time has passed since he last exchanged a word with his departed wife. He kisses Tamar's forehead

and dries the tears from her cheek; she collapses without a sound. Ahinoam and Bathsheba have to drag her to the tomb.

When the period of mourning is over, Absalom sends a messenger to David, but the king is implacable. Solomon is almost twelve years old now and he wonders whether his father was sorrier to lose Absalom or that he'd split the family by exiling him. When Absalom was in Geshur David was never at peace, but though David has yet to meet his returned son, he no longer seems weighted by sorrow.

One morning just before the harvest, thick, black smoke wafts from one of David's fields outside the city wall. Barley and golden wheat on swaying stalks. The rumor carries faster than the smell: Absalom had lit the fire. He'd come riding with a torch, making no attempt to conceal it. David is livid. With four armed guards at his side he rushes out of the city. He doesn't climb off his mule when he sees his son. The animal steps to and fro at the edge of the field when he brings it to a halt.

"My father," Absalom says, kneeling on the bare ground, "why must it take so much effort to get you to talk to me?"

And David, who is seldom at a loss for words, finds his mouth filling with smoke and ash. A fish thrown up on land, braised and roasted. Absalom resembles his mother when she was young; rumors of his beauty are not overblown. Absalom offers his hand to his father, and in his voice there's something foreign, a dialect he has picked up at the court in Geshur.

"I sent a messenger to you many times, Father," he says, and without actually wanting to, David extends his hand.

Absalom squeezes his father's hand. Melancholy and yearning are bellows, so hot, so dizzying, so strong a grip that not even David will let go.

That evening David invites Absalom into his house. Only Joab hears what they discuss. Absalom says he'd rather return to Geshur than live like a clipped bird. He grieves every time he sees one of his siblings without being able to speak with them. David softens at this. Joab and his other advisors approve of his decision: Absalom has become more and more uncontrollable since he's returned to Jerusalem. They must make him feel more secure, more at home, so that it'll be clear what he's up to. David's servants are told to let Absalom enter the palace whenever he wishes. In exchange, however, he needs

permission to leave the city. David's wives are informed of this decision, but there's nothing they can say. The girls sigh when they see Absalom, as do the boys. Solomon is still afraid of his brother, but shows this to no one. At the center of his fear is a pearl of fierce admiration, and when Absalom strolls across the terrace, high and mighty, he can't take his eyes off him.

Over time the stirring that Absalom awakens in him begins to subside. He gets used to him. They rarely talk—what is a grown man to discuss with a child? And yet he invites Solomon to the *Brit Milah* for his newborn son. Absalom says it directly to Bathsheba, with his younger brother standing at her side. A sign that Solomon is old enough to be trusted, and it makes him feel proud. Bathsheba spits, cursing Absalom after he's gone, and Solomon is appalled. He tells her she shouldn't talk that way about his brother, that he plans to show his respect and accept the invitation. It's the first time he's ever admonished his mother. She stares at him impassively, then laughs brusquely and pushes him until he loses his balance.

"So you like Absalom's ceremonies?" she asks, pushing him again. "You like his hospitality?"

He tries to get away from her, but she follows him. Forces him into a corner, slapping at him, arms, chest, head, face.

"Then remember to sit in the front row when he calls for the dancers," she says. "Or why not just put the knife in his hands right away? Why not just say: Here I am. Dumb as a goat, fresh meat? What? What? Comb your hair and dress in the finest clothes. Hurry to your ceremony. He knows your mother won't be coming because women aren't allowed!"

She goes on and on, and he shields himself with his hands. There's no strength behind her punches, but still he cries.

She doesn't stop until he's balled up on the floor. Snot and tears and air that won't go in or out. She strokes wet locks of hair from his forehead, she kisses him, and this affection is worse than the blows.

"You're sick that day," she says. "You'll stick your finger down your throat and throw up. You'll lie on your mat and say you don't feel well. Under no circumstances will you go to Absalom's if I can't keep an eye on you."

Solomon nods. In one glimpse he sees his mother, precisely as she must look to everyone else, and he's ashamed at her bitterness, her overbearingness, her distrust. And it occurs to him that a person is never safe. For most, death arrives while they are asleep. Few people fall by another's hand. There is a fear and a strength in this thought. If Bathsheba's protection is an illusion, he no longer needs to do what she says.

"I want to go," he whispers.

"What did you say?" she asks, so softly that his anger rises. He clenches his teeth.

"Nothing," he says. "Forgive me, Mother."

*

Once Solomon turns twelve, he's not allowed to live among the women of the harem. Bathsheba delays moving him out so long it's embarrassing to witness. At first she won't let him share a room with the concubines' boys, though no one has ever taken offense to David's legitimate sons sleep alongside their illegitimate brothers. She insists that he live with her nephews, whom David has accepted as his own. But the room they're supposed to sleep in isn't good enough for her. When she asks him to post a sentry to watch over Solomon, David laughs, refusing. Then she demands that the beds be shifted around, so that her son sleeps farthest from the entrance. As usual, she's so insistent that she gets what she wants. The boys are forced to rearrange their room for the king's youngest. They hold a grudge, and they whisper when he passes near. Bathsheba inspects Solomon's new place, she shakes the blankets and arranges the mats, but he just wants her to leave. She kisses his cheeks, then returns to kiss his forehead, too. Silently she threatens the boys standing beside their bunks on the terrace, pointing at her eyes, then at them. Though it's embarrassing, it works: they leave David alone. They treat him with polite indifference; when they sit on the terrace after meals, they don't speak to him, even though they've known each other and played together since they were little. He shares a room with his cousins, Abiel and Jada. It's better than in the harem, and they have their own servants. To win over his brothers, Solomon gets it into his head that he should fetch wine and cakes before bedtime every night—until Bathsheba grabs his arm and publically admonishes him one evening on David's terrace.

"Behave like the person you are," she says, "not like some idiot."

He shushes her, but he knows she's right. He does his best: he loves her and he fears her. Abiel and Jada cry themselves to sleep every night. Solomon pretends not to hear, but he sympathizes with them. They've lost their parents, and now they live in a stranger's house. Solomon feels bad whenever he thinks Bathsheba is difficult, since she only wants what's best for him. He listens to them breathing and doesn't relax until they're asleep. His thoughts circle Absalom. He pictures his wives letting their servants pull them through the city in small wagons; they hold their narrow, bejeweled hands to their faces whenever they laugh; they wear expensive clothing made of thin, embroidered fabric that highlights their breasts and hips. One is from Tyre, another from Sidon in the north; it sounds as if they're singing when they converse. Solomon has never been there, where they are from, but he fantasizes himself as a grown man following them in their bridal procession. That he was the one with them when they saw Jerusalem for the first time. That he stopped and pointed out the sights: The garden near the Gared Mountain, the north gate, the king's fields, the reservoirs, the dark-green fish pond. That he explained to them everything. They would whisper appreciatively that they'd never seen such a beautiful, lush city. Solomon closes his eyes and imagines the wives in Absalom's house, which in his fantasy becomes his own. They undress in the half-darkness, their skin glistening. They reach for him. Solomon tingles until the shame rises from him like chalk-white smoke.

*

Solomon and his cousins aren't allowed to leave the palace on their own. Bathsheba's rules. David playfully calls the boys her baby doves, and it angers her. Solomon and Jada sneak out one wild, intoxicating evening. They run through the streets, past the marketplace and the tabernacle, and almost randomly reach the street where Absalom lives. They stop to gawk through the open windows in the semi-darkness of sunset, at the armed guards, at the opulently painted gate. When she finds out, Bathsheba insists that David punish Solomon. He promises to take care of it and sends her away. She threatens her son before going down the stairwell to the harem. David strokes his hair.

"Don't make your mother sad," he says finally. "She wants what's best for you."

Solomon doesn't respond.

"You're like your father," David goes on, "stubborn, willful. What will become of you?"

Life outside the harem is freer, and although he doesn't want to, Solomon still misses his mother. When he sends his servant to bring her, on the pretense of stomach pains, he feels weak. Putting her forehead to his, she chides him softly. But he does it again the following week, and again the week after that. At some point she simply stops coming. They don't discuss it at dinner. He avoids her eyes, and she pretends nothing has changed. She doesn't admonish him, but turns a blind eye when he gives in to temptation and leaves the palace with Jada. She doesn't even protest when David takes him to Absalom's house. Solomon doesn't understand why she's lost interest in him, and he's almost relieved when she inquires about Absalom's house the following day. He answers with a question of his own: Why don't you ask Father to take you with him? Earlier she would have slapped him. But now she just turns and walks away, and Solomon winces guiltily. He tries to steel himself, but can't do it. If she shadows him, he can't get away fast enough. If she keeps her distance, he's lonely.

Absalom's children go to school with David's. He insists that his daughter, Tamar, be educated along with the boys. David doesn't object. His wives take it hard; they don't understand what good will come from thrusting so much knowledge into the head of a girl who ought to be helping around the house. The wives shake their heads whenever Absalom's children stop by with their servants in tow, they stand in the shade underneath the overhang, they complete their daily routines with impossible slowness, whispering and murmuring the whole time—until finally the teacher has to seek out David and he makes them stop.

Solomon likes Tamar. She's a year younger, but she reads and writes fluently and answers the teacher's questions just as well as he does. When they're asked to recite their favorite sayings, he frets about having said *wisdom fills your heart and knowledge makes you good*, after she says: *Do not let go of loyalty and truth. Hang them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart*. Her presence makes him try harder. He has the same effect on her. They compete, they work hard, they bump heads. After school, she provokes him by sticking out her tongue or rolling her eyes, and he chases her. They wrestle like boys. She's strong

but he wins. He climbs on top of her and pins her down by her wrists, which makes her laugh and wriggle to break free. He lets go and her hair brushes against his face; he grabs it, and she laughs again. Bathsheba sees all this and goes to David. He brushes it off.

“They’re still children,” he says, “Tamar is twelve, Solomon is thirteen. He’s a good boy. He wouldn’t dream of harming her.”

Of course Solomon wouldn’t harm her, but Bathsheba doesn’t like seeing him pant after Solomon’s daughter. She’s not worthy of him, but she can’t tell David that. So she makes sure Absalom gets the message instead, and he takes it just as seriously as she’d imagined he would. He arrives at David’s house under the pretense of wanting to speak with his father. He calls for Solomon, and seizes him by the chin.

“Look me in the eyes,” he says, poking Solomon in the belly until he scrunches up. The other children laugh.

Absalom tosses a nut into the air and catches it in his mouth. He throws another to Solomon as if he were dog meant to do tricks. Solomon lets the nut fall without any effort to catch it. He asks permission to go, but Absalom holds him tight.

“Tamar lived in Geshur when she was little,” he whispers. “In that country girls marry when they reach the age of twelve.”

Solomon swallows. He doesn’t understand what Solomon wants from him. He stammers, Yes, sir! Which causes Absalom to burst out laughing. He pats Solomon on the cheek, first one, then the other, a little too hard.

“Maybe you’d like to take root in some foreign country and have your own house?” he asks, squeezing his arm. “Do you know how a man satisfies a woman?”

Solomon flushes. He shakes his head.

“Stay away from Tamar,” he says, “or you’ll bear a mark and a loneliness so great that you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

Absalom grabs his crotch and spits on the ground. Solomon is afraid. When David asks him to go to Absalom’s house, he declines. He confides in Bathsheba and regrets it immediately. He’d hoped it would lessen his shame, but now he’s forced to hear his mother’s fury once again. She thanks him for letting her know, and he wants to escape. Soon afterward, Tamar stops coming to school.

Danakil, Ethiopia, 984, B.C.

The land flattens out. The sky is a hand pressing the caravan to the ground, a heavy, stifling hand urging them on, squeezing the juice out of every pore until they're crawling low, struggling through bushes thick with angry thorns. The men sing to the camels in a language Makeda only partially understands, a language that reminds her of the words Jabbar would write with a stick in the soft earth while teaching her and Tafari how to pronounce them. When she responds in Jabbar's native tongue, they laugh at her. But they understand her: Water. Cheese. How far to go? At night the camels respond with their guttural melodies, their creaks and grunts and prolonged, throaty bellows. Makeda's still afraid of the huge beasts, but she's grown used to them. The nights grow colder as the days grow hotter. The boys sleep atop the animals. She gives up on sleep, tired of jerking awake every other moment, her teeth chattering, her body shot through with cold. After a few days she can no longer smell the animals, no longer sense if she, too, stinks like a dromedary. They stay for a few days in a village on the border of the great desert; the animals must rest, and the travelers must gather their strength. The villagers slaughter a goat for them, then cook a strong sauce, and Makeda has never tasted anything so wonderful. Rest days are worse than the journey, and she has to make an effort to see the difference. After walking for hours and pitching camp at night, there's no room for doubt or regret. When idle, water trickles through the dyke, the snake inside her lying immovable; she would be happy if it were dead. She doesn't want to think of Jabbar. She stole the village's money, and by not returning to be with Tafari, she'd humiliated him. If only she could make herself believe there was a reason for her flight, if only she could believe that the dangers she's put behind her are bigger than the ones she's moving toward. Every day she falls asleep at midday. In her dreams, wild animals with human faces fight: One shouts *thief*; another shouts *traitor*. A snake flicks its tongue and hisses: Mosi, Mosi, Mosi. She sweats, feeling ill. She thinks it'd be easier to die and let Isme repay her with a box to her ear. Isme's hands are burning hot and wrapped in red Egyptian cloth, which bursts into flame, the ash from her body forcing its way into Makeda's mouth and nose.

Fir jolts her with his foot. He offers her the bowl of dromedary milk.

"How can you sleep so much?" he asks. "We continue before the sun rises, heading straight into the fire."

And she must've looked frightened, because he laughs and points two fingers at her.

"Into the desert," he says.

She drinks and the milk dribbles, a lukewarm stream running down her throat and breast and stomach, and he nods at a creek glinting in the evening light. The boys and men have removed their clothes and are washing themselves. It'll be weeks before they can bathe again.

"Before our journey you need to wash your clothes and body to honor the gods," Fir says, "and so that you don't reek of sour milk."

She follows him to the rocky bank, observing the men, their smooth, wet bodies; they splash water at each other, they laugh, they wrestle in the cool water. She enters with her clothes on. The others point at her, tilting their heads back and roaring with laughter, then reach for her playfully. She scrambles onto the bank before they get hold of her. She doesn't want to think about what they'd do to her if they discovered she was a girl. Peeing is bad enough. She can't sit down and pretend she's making excrement every time, so she holds it all day and, under the cover of darkness, sneaks away from the fire and the group. Then half-standing, half-squatting she squeezes out a stream of piss as fast as she's able, so that her water splashes on her feet and legs, all the while imploring the earth and the wind and the sky to keep the scorpions and the snakes and the wild animals away. She has never understood the distinctive way the boys piss together, how they stand side by side painting the ground and plants with their urine. Do they compare sizes? she asked Tafari once. Do they peek at each other? Out here it serves another purpose: there are reptiles and wild animals and maybe enemy tribes in the bush, it's better to be a group. She's discovered a way to piss where she's squat-standing with her back to the others; she clutches her sex with three fingers and tugs it upward, a wild, scattershot stream. It's tough not splashing all over her clothes. She fashions a belt out of rope and binds it around her waist, and under her clothes, then makes two more that run down between her legs and up her back. She braids a thick roll of dromedary wool and inserts it inside

her so that her menstrual blood won't give her away. She loses all sense of time, and of her cycle, it's as if the days, nights—even her body—changes form in this strange landscape. She dries it out—there's not a drop on it—but she can't trust it'll continue like that. If they discover that she's a girl before they reach the desert, they'll leave her behind. If they discover it later, she doesn't want to think about what will happen. She didn't want to be Tafari's wife, and she doesn't want to be anybody else's. Especially someone who would take her by force. She sleeps with her stone-carved knife in her hand, and she wakes at even tiniest sound.

"My clothes are just as clean as yours," she calls back when they continue teasing her about her bath, "and in half the time."

She tells them her people would never dream of taking their clothes off as others observed, because of an ancient conflict between God and the wind god. The words come to her easily, making up a story about how, at the beginning of time, God forbade the people at the foot of the mountains to bathe naked: the wind god wanted to conquer the world and the people and to force its way through their orifices with its ice-cold spear.

"Back then men could also become pregnant," she goes on, the men's eyes opening wide. "The wind god's descendants live deep within the continent, outcast and disfigured, with their chalk-white skin."

A boy wants to know how the men gave birth to the wind god's children, and she makes an exaggerated gesture at her behind so that the others jiggle with laughter.

"Of course all the men died during labor," she says. "They cracked like ripe figs. It wasn't a pretty sight. Though it happened a long time ago, you can never be sure. I won't risk it anyway."

They laugh raucously, mocking each other and leaving her alone. Once they've eaten, they want to hear more stories.

She tells them true stories and false stories; she makes things up, enchanted by her own words. Mostly she makes them laugh, but sometimes they cry. She has to make up something new every night.

"Tell us about where you're from," they say. "Tell us about your people, about the wind god, about those freaks of the mountain, the long-haired baboons. Tell us about the snakes and the birds and the cheetah hunt. Tell us why you left."

The stories keep all of what she knows away and yet also draws it nearer. She builds a heaven and an earth with her words. She lies awake, dizzy and afraid to have offended the gods and her forefathers, well after the others have fallen asleep. Sometimes she's afraid that a Trickster spirit lives inside her.

The earth transforms, low ridges, narrow chasms. Colors thin, the lush green is long gone. Red, brown, and golden give way to gray and white and dust, earth and sky swirl together and they're forced to cover their mouths and noses with cloth. The heat rises, it cleaves small bushes, sporadic tufts of grass, unyielding, thorny plants apart; and there's less and less for their animals to eat. The people of the caravan wrap leather around their feet and legs to avoid poisonous stings and the scorching ground. The leather gnaws at their ankles, bunches up, gives them sores. The earth burns, the air burns, the crackling wind is like fire. Makeda's skin itches under the binding wound around her breasts. She learns the men's songs. They sing to encourage the dromedaries, and they praise her voice. A man with a soft voice is a brave man, they say. A woman with a gruff voice is a coward. Now and then they see light-footed animals. Everything melts into one flickering, dusty light, stones breathe, animals turn to stone.

A few of their donkeys drop dead, their carcasses meals for the creatures of the desert, a tax to be paid. The dromedaries are loaded to the brim with wares and food and water, and what the donkeys are to carry is divided between the drovers. At one stop they must stay longer than expected because one of the boys faints. Beneath his leather boot is a filthy, yellow wound and a red stripe running up his shin. A few hours later the stripe has reached his groin; the others whisper, saying it's the slash marks of a demon. Only the elders may approach the boy. They haul him up onto a boulder, and into a narrow wedge of shade. He screams whenever they touch him. He sweats, and the skin of his face is covered with blisters. The others wait under the sun. The sick boy has taken all the shade. They hear him calling for someone who isn't there; he begs for water, gets none. The filled waterskins are the most valuable item they carry until they reach the oasis, and they don't have enough water to waste some on a dying man. Eventually some of the hardened drovers grow impatient. They want to go on, to leave the sick boy behind. The caravan leader ignores them for a while. When they grow loud and obnoxious, he strides

over to them. A powerful punch and blood sprays onto the rocks, small droplets that shrivel in the heat. Then silence. The vanquished man squats, head between his knees.

And yet they go on before the boy is dead anyway. It's not a good place to pitch camp. There are warrior tribes nearby, and it's too dangerous to spend the night out in the open. The men know of a place farther ahead where they can be concealed between boulders. They make clicking sounds with their tongues and the dromedaries slowly and lurchingly get to their feet. Like the others, Makeda has to carry a jar and a sack of sesame seeds; the strap's pulled taut across her neck and back. The heat makes her dizzy and irritable. The boy breathes erratically, a honey badger wheezing through his throat. They leave him swaying between the kingdoms of the living and the dead. He doesn't appear to be in pain anymore. Makeda silently asks Isme to stay with him. No one speaks. Silence flows through her like an infection. Her temples throb. A swarm of black insects draggle a trail of embers and fire that can't be waved away.

"Drink," Fir says, offering her his waterskin. "You tolerate the heat as badly as I expected. That's how it always is when foreigners travel with us."

She was gone a moment. The water is good, but Fir sounds angry and he continues to squint at her.

"You fainted," he says, nodding in the direction they'd come from. "We had to carry you a ways."

She sits upright. Fir's arms are crossed, and Makeda's afraid. They could've easily discovered that she's not a boy. Her back aches, and both of her arms are scuffed: a frayed wreath of small, pink abrasions. She licks her wounds; metal and sand crunch between her teeth. He tells her she shouldn't do that. She tells him spit helps.

Before it sinks the sun dissolves into motes of dust. What the daylight had made sharp softens. Shadows lengthen and filter into the ground, the firewind eases. Before the light disappears, colors surge. A light-brown lizard darts past with a silver-gleaming worm in its mouth.

"I once saw a honey badger bite the head off a snake," she says to break the silence. "The snake kept whipping the badger in the head even though it was dead."

Fir shrugs, then walks away. Makeda lies down on the blanket again, fearful and exhausted, and says a prayer for each star that shoots across the sky. She prays to the sun

and to the night, to the wind and the dust, to the dead she knows, and the dead she's never met. To Mosi and his entire tribe. One thing: Help.

Beside the fire, Fir crouches toward one of the elders. She's certain they're talking about her. Their faces blaze in the flames' reflection. In Yeha a man held a piece of metal over fire and hammered on it. When he pulled it out, it had transformed into a demon's face. The night breeze is cool and gentle across her face. Her head's still pounding and she can't eat. No one's in the mood to listen to stories; they long for sleep to gently build a fence between one day and the next, letting the dying boy vanish among the dead. They are halfway to the oasis, and they're already losing their courage.

*

Makeda lies awake for some time. She can pluck the stars like she plucked berries with Tafari as a child. She can hold them between her hands, wash them in river water, and put them in her mouth juicy and wet, she can dance across the sky, she can sparkle like the stars. She wakes to the sound of her own laughter, then feels a rough jab to her ribs. Fir's standing above her. He kicks her once more, and she squeezes herself into a ball.

"Be quiet," he whispers. "We need to sleep."

She sits up. He lays down on the mat beside her. She fell asleep before the others and doesn't know whether he's lain beside her the entire night. He stares at her.

She wants to tell him she'd dreamed, she wants to tell him something to drive away her fears and this new hardness that's come between them.

"Be quiet," he repeats, raising his hand as if to strike her. He leaves it in her face for a moment. She squeezes her knife, which she has fastened beneath her clothes. It's as warm as her body.

"You be quiet," she says, "Your snores are keeping me awake."

He says nothing more. But she can tell that he's not asleep. She calms down, drifts off, then startles, certain she'd heard him whisper: *Wench.*

The moon is out, and it fills his mouth with a cold light. He's lying like a baby, one hand clenched by his ear, the other by his mouth. The wind, which had let up in the early evening, picks up again, grinding stones and skin with particles of crackling dust. Animals roam nervously on clear nights like this, covering the ground with traces of their

moist snouts, their claws, their slithering forms. They collide with a cornucopia of smells, with the heat from living bodies. They dig, scratch, and devour all they find.

The people of the caravan awake before dawn. Before journeying on they eat sleepily, squatting on their haunches. Every evening, when they pitch camp, the cook mixes flour and water and fat in a bowl and lets it stand until the next morning. When the fire has burned low, he rolls the bread into a round dough and stokes aside the coals and the charred wood, then lays the dough directly on the warm rocks underneath and covers it with white ash. The flat bread tastes like sod and fire. They dip the bread in the dromedaries' fatty milk. Fir helps Makeda by tying the dead donkey's cargo onto her back, neither of them saying a word. It's still dark when they head out. The lead animal wears braided bands with golden bells on its legs; the dromedaries are bound together when they walk, the donkeys are guided by the youngest boys. The men's songs grind and polish the caravan's irregular rhythm of hoof clops and animal snorts so distinctly that it wedges between heaven and earth and cleaves them apart, so that the light bleeds, so that the light scoops out a bowl of dust and rock and fills it with heat until, by midday, they are about to drop. They hoist canvases and gather beneath their shade. They sleep, play with balls of clay, bicker, gaze into the air. Late in the afternoon they move on until the horizon becomes one and darkness returns. They eat the remains of bread and cheese and milk. The people of the caravan are clumsy hunters; desert animals are quick and light-footed, and their number are fewer and fewer the farther they travel into the desert: Snakes and reptiles, cautious wolves, small birds, ostriches, and wild donkeys panting in the shade of rugged rocks. Now and then they capture snakes, but the meat doesn't feed many. Only the eldest among them are allowed to eat it. Makeda wishes she'd brought her bow, but Jabbar had forbidden her.

The dromedaries roll in the dust whenever they can. They are less irritable and more cooperative when they are free to roam in the evening. A dromedary gives birth to an underdeveloped calf and it dies within a few hours. The mother groans until it hurts their ears. The men skin the dead calf, then wrap the skin around branches and stones and throw it to the grieving animal. The dromedary falls silent as she sniffs at her calf's skin. The meat is a welcome indulgence, and the dromedaries don't notice the smell, but chew on dried beans and hay that the drovers have spread out on a cloth.

Her concern that Fir has discovered she's a girl goes away. Makeda's stories grow shorter. Everyone is petulant and exhausted, they're behind schedule, the water will soon run out and the dromedaries must drink before long. The youngest donkey drover is stung by a scorpion, a sharp, hot pain, and he can't stand properly. This delays them further, and the donkey that's forced to carry him collapses in the midday heat, a quiet and sudden death. No one speaks during the last two days. Another donkey drops dead, and they leave it where it fell. The firewind courses through its pelt, and the carcass sticks out on the flat landscape; from a distance the angular ribcage looks like wings. Makeda hears the elders talking near the fire. The boy's reaction to the scorpion's sting is worse than expected. He has a fever and his leg is swollen and purple. If they leave him behind, it will arouse the gods' anger and the men's fears, because everyone knows that he'll get better with time. And yet, concern for one person's life cannot justify endangering the lives of others. They say their journey seems cursed. The conversation ends without a solution. Makeda can't sleep, her body aches and throbs. Fir crawls through the darkness, drops to his knees, and leans over her.

"We're almost at the oasis," he whispers, and she nods. He strokes the top of her head, and she edges away. Her hair is still short from when Jabbar cut it, but Fir takes hold of it and pulls so hard that tears form in her eyes. She lashes at him with her left hand. He tumbles backward, laughing, surprised at the strength in her blow. He scrabbles to his knees again, staring at her with animal eyes.

"You've got a lot to thank me for," he whispers. "You should know."

She doesn't respond. She's sitting halfway up, and doesn't know what to do. If she could flee, she would. Death and the demons of the desert await just a few feet beyond the caravan. It's what she feared: He discovered she was a girl pulling her to safety after she'd fainted. Her desire to interpret his change in attitude as the result of exhaustion was nothing but self-deception. His gentleness gone, he now rages at being mislead, and his nattering about treachery and deception is stupid.

"What's it matter to you," she whispers, "I've carried my share like a boy, I've paid you to take me with you. The money doesn't have less value if I'm not what you thought I was."

He claims it brings unluckiness, that the desert's demons seek the sweet blood of women, that it's her fault a boy died and another can't walk, that she bears responsibility for the dead donkeys and the dromedary calf, the delay. When she dismisses his argument, he only gets angrier. He clutches her again, hard, on the arm.

"I'll take you first," he whispers. "Afterward the others can have their share."

He crawls on top of her. She coaxes the knife free from under her tunic and presses the blade against his throat.

He jerks back, startled. She holds the knife to his face. He rubs his throat. Tiny droplets of blood from an invisible cut.

"I'm the son of a great leader," he says, regarding her hand. "What do you think the punishment is for killing me?"

"I'll do it anyway," she says, "if you touch me again.

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They spot the oasis shortly after their midday rest the following day. Scattered tents, skins, and sheets pulled taut over the skeletons of low trees. The dromedaries pick up the pace. The men can hardly keep up with them.

Makeda has never seen such dark people. The women toil nonstop: they're crouched over pans, bowls, babies, brooms, goats, their mending. They haul water from a well with buckets. The men welcome the guests under a baldachin in front of the clan leader's tent; he has many wives, and the youngest serves them without glancing up. Fir whispers filthy, terrible things every time he walks past Makeda. He barely moves his lips. She sits close to the boy with the scorpion bite, who cries in relief that he's survived. One of the other donkey boys holds his hand. The desert people slaughter a goat in full view of everyone. Makeda asks a young man if they hunt. He laughs, not understanding what she's saying. She tries to speak Jabbar's language, but it doesn't help. She gestures, making a sign for a bow and arrow, and slices a knife through the air, into the flesh of an invisible animal. He claps his hands, gets to his feet. He returns with a bow more magnificent than anything she's ever seen. Others approach. They want to show her their weapons; they talk over each other, eager and proud. She shows them her knife, but they're not impressed. Some of the caravan drovers interpret for her. She learns that the

desert people enjoy hunting, that they regard it as a necessity and an art. They have expensive Egyptian bows, which the caravan once brought them from the market in Yeha, polished and beautiful with inlaid patterns of horn. When Makeda guarantees she can shoot better with a homemade bow than they can with their splendid bows, they laugh. They challenge her to a contest, wanting to place bets, but she shows them her empty hands. They challenge her anyway, a competition before their meal, and even the clan leader wants to participate. He sends his son into the tent for his bows. As his guest, Makeda gets to pick one. Fir stands at the edge of the group, arms folded across his chest. He stomps off after she's chosen her weapon. She calls out to him: What about you, friend? Will you show us what you can do? He pauses, stiff with anger, and raises a clenched fist. The others laugh at him because of his behavior, knocking him down a peg. It was risky of her to count on him to stay quiet, but she wins the first round over him. He refuses to participate in the competition.

"My people are not hunters," he says. "It's not necessary."

He smiles as he says this, but the others remain silent. Did they misunderstand him? Did he belittle a people who hunt for their own food? Is he stupid? Does he know nothing? They finally agree that he's trying to be funny and laugh it off politely, nodding.

They stand between date palms, their faces transformed by the palms' tasseled shadows. A boy arranges a target out on the expansive, sunlit ground. Makeda can't fathom how the desert people can walk barefooted on such hot soil. She signals for the boy to put the target farther away, it's too close, she says, and the others nod appreciatively. It's a strange bow, it feels different in her hands. She misses the mark three times, and the others say nothing—which is worse than laughter. She composes herself, letting the clan leader's son take his turn. He strikes the target on his first attempt, the arrow a darting shadow that she follows with her eyes. Another archer steps forward and he strikes the target, too. His third shot misses, but barely. She studies their faces, the way they hold their bows, their grip, their fingers with nails pink as her own. She signals that she's ready again. She mimics their way of standing, holding her breath a moment. A swoosh and she strikes the target clean, the air shifting like water on the horizon, and the snake lets go its tail for an instant. After each shot the target is moved farther away, the boy dashing back and forth. She's found her rhythm, and she hits the target every time.

By the final duel it's just her and the clan leader's son. When she wins, he's angry. She stands straight-backed, looking right into his eyes as he shouts and gesticulates. A moment of dead silence. A moment later: the others' laughter. He bows his head, laughs along, first artificially, then heartily. He embraces her, calling her brother in Jabbar's language. Later that evening the clan leader gives her a bow and a quiver with arrows, her trophy. She's so moved and thankful that she's unable to speak. It's more of a sensation than anything she can explain, but she is certain this bow will save her.

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Makeda's skill with a bow will make life easier for the caravan people when they march toward the sea. They can supplement their diet with meat: Small birds and maybe even a deer. There are robbers and bandits on the opposite shore of the salt lake, and with Makeda's bow they will be able to defend themselves better than ever.

With its dark, shiny fragment of horn in the center of the bow, the transition to the polished wood is almost seamless. Where the string's nocks are fastened there are pearls of stone and metal, so slight and smooth they nearly align with the wood. Makeda wonders how anyone can make something so fine. She would give it a name, but can't think of anything appropriately fine. She sits in the guest tent with the bow resting in her lap. She's glad they don't have to sleep under the open sky. Out there you have to keep one eye open all the time. She puts the bow to her lips, then sniffs it, feeling rich and in better spirits than she has since leaving Yeha.

She's stuffed and would like to ask the women how they get the meat to taste so good, but she reminds herself that she's not one of theirs and they are not allowed to talk to foreign men. She'd watched as they'd gathered the hardy herbs that grow near the well, then crushed them between rocks before rubbing the animal's body with them. Though the desert people know where the wells are and have enough water for themselves and their animals, the landscape here is dry and furrowed. It's not how she'd pictured an oasis: all the vegetation sprouts in scattered patches, cowering under the enormous sky. They bathed before midday, and her skin itches beneath her clothes. She would do anything to get out of this tight fabric. She can ply her fingers under the bandage around her chest and fish stuff out. Her skin reeks, and it's numb and sore. She

hasn't been naked since Jabbar wrapped her up. A moment's despondency: thinking of Jabbar, about whether she'll ever feel free again, and her awful regret. The snake writhes halfway around her diaphragm and coils between her ribs, making her uncomfortable. She presses the palp of her hand against her belly, following her pulse and her breathing until her discomfort abates.

Even before he throws the curtain aside, she knows it's Fir. She recognizes his gait, the way one of his legs seems more sluggish than the other, his outline. Though the sun is yet to set, the light is murky inside the tent; a thick layer of leather and cloth keeps out the heat. He crawls across the mats to her.

"I've decided to tell them you're a girl," he says, "before we rest."

She says nothing. He smells like the roasted meat. His teeth gleam when he smiles.

"Unless you want to make a trade," he whispers. "Then I won't say anything."

She wants to thrust her knife into him, but instead she replies with the question he's anticipating.

"Trade?"

He goes into elaborate detail for her: The desert people will be furious when they discover a woman beat them in an archery competition. Proud as they are, they will view it as a disgrace, the role of men and women being strictly defined here. When they find out they won't just punish her, they will punish the entire caravan. And not only will she have that collective punishment on her conscience, but she should expect the caravan leader to refuse her to travel with them.

"I can hunt," she replies, and he laughs.

"You're the prey," he says, punching his fist against the surface of his palm. "You can hunt as much as you want. But no one survives here on their own."

She knows he's right, and she remains seated, unmoving. He continues, chains of words in the odd, drawling rhythm that she's come to imitate after weeks with the caravan. They will probably not kill her right away, he figures. They'll let the snakes and wolves do that when they're done with her. He explains, in quiet and colorful language, how he once saw the desert people punish one of their own women. He doesn't know exactly what she did, only that whatever it was would've hardly have raised an eyebrow in Yeha or the place she's from. They'd let the woman dehydrate out under the sun,

they'd scolded her, they'd spat on her. He shrugs, then says that some will no doubt think what happened to that woman was worse, while others will think such a fate would be preferable to what will happen to Makeda if he waits to reveal her secret until they've traveled on. When they are in the barren desert again, the animals, the men, her. She has lived like a man among them. She knows their passions and their desires for a woman. She has heard their fireside boasts as they entertained each other, riling each other up. He goes on and on until finally she interrupts him, just as he wants her to.

"What do you want?" she asks. "You can have my bow."

"Dumb girl," he says, grimacing. "Don't you know I can buy whatever I want? Do you think your pathetic bow interests me?"

He laughs, scratching at his hair, his crotch, observing her.

"You'll do everything I say," he says, "if you resist me even once…" he wrings the neck of an invisible animal.

She doesn't reply, but continues to return his stare, until he looks down

He thrusts his hand under her shirt, he presses his fingers against her sex. She has been sitting on her knees for so long that her legs hurt. The pain is a mild distraction. He positions her hand on his member, then orders her onto her back.

"When do we continue our journey?" she asks, her voice squeaking. He tells her to shut her mouth, to let him do as he pleases. She repeats the question, and he jerks her chin up so that it stretches her throat. She asks the question again. In seven days, he says. By then she'll be used to it.

"You'll end up begging me for more," he whispers, "begging me with your ugly face and your open hole."

"It's not wise to travel with a baby in the belly," she says, "I would be slow and a burden, and when the others realize that you're to blame…"

"A child doesn't grow that quickly," he says, squeezing her throat harder. "You better keep your mouth shut, understand?"

"The mother's most tired when the baby is getting ready to grow," she says, and he lets go of her suddenly, her head dropping back to the ground.

She should keep her mouth shut, he says; he doesn't care how exhausted she is, or whether she dies, or whether they need to leave her behind in the desert, alone, rotting,

dying of thirst. She doesn't concern him in the least. She sits up as he sniffles, sitting with his back turned slightly away from her, a dumb boy, hardly fully grown, she's certain that he's never been with a woman before. The vision of him shatters: she imagines the knife gliding through his clothes, his skin bared, his pink flesh, his fresh blood, sinews, bones, growing brighter and brighter the deeper her knife penetrates, frothy milk, fermented dough, white and blue, his spine divided into small, angular bones, a scrawny bird, carrion, prey.

"You can't do it, because deep down you're a good person," she says, putting her hand between his shoulder blades.

He slaps her hand away. She swallows her hatred, bitter bile, her throat constricting with rage, so that her body and head swell and sway and are close to bursting. The smartest thing to do is to suppress her impulse to injure him. All that remains is this: She will survive, he mustn't win. She has been unable to justify fleeing from her village and stealing from Jabbar. If she dies it will have all been meaningless. Her fear of the gods exacting revenge on her is greater than her fear of what Fir will do. She has wandered the desert, singing, dreaming this one thing: Protect me, make me greater than myself alone, so that my desertion turns from evil to good. Sunlight wedges sporadically through the fabric. Women sweep the entire time, the dust dancing as it does. A slight, sweaty odor wafts from him, sour and sweet and dark, and she senses that he's afraid, too. Pretending she doesn't wish to hurt him requires inhuman powers. She touches him again, touches him with Isme's and Desta's hands, a mother calming her child; she hopes it will clip his wings. Think, don't think, voices against the impulse to destroy. The body must be tamed to serve as friend and weapon.

"You're not getting away," he says. "I have a right to you now."

"There are other ways," she whispers. "I can show you…"

He presses his hand against her nose and mouth, droplets of spittle land on her face, and her temples pound with terror. She doesn't blink.

"You can't teach me anything," he says. "You'll keep your mouth shut."

But she can hear him trying to hide something behind his words. Sniffles, snot, blubbering.

"Of course not," she says and, for the first time, bows her head.

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Her victory in the archery competition has drawn attention. Fir's father, the caravan leader Hasib, invites her to sit with the elders; she's shaken up following her confrontation with Fir, and horribly aware of her inability to express herself in their language as well as in her own. No matter how much she drinks, her thirst is unquenchable. She needs to concentrate to follow the conversation; she understands what Hasib says, but not everything the elders say in response. She listens for words she knows, hoping they will mention Mosi, but they don't. They discuss trade alliances and shipping routes across the sea. They discuss a governor in the port city who may have been murdered—or not—by his own advisors. The city council ultimately decided a snakebite had killed him, but the desert people don't believe that. They snap their fingers and shake their heads, they cluck their tongues, they laugh. Later they discuss the leadership in Ma'rib and the tyrannical king there who demands strict taxes and executes his opponents for no reason, but who also guards and defends his kingdom against enemies from the east, and who makes shrewd pacts with foreign merchants to assure the continued prosperity of his kingdom. They quarrel about who this prosperity benefits. Hasib wags his finger. He has seen poverty and misery that would make anyone feel ashamed, but the clan leader argues such misery is the result of laziness and the gods' wrath. Hasib points out that the desert people don't know anything about the outside world but what they come to learn through the caravan, and so the conclusions they draw can't possibly be anything but speculation. For a moment it appears that they will come to blows, but then the clan leader claps his hands and embraces Hasib, laughing and winking and calling for music. Drums and flutes and bells. The men hold hands and dance, asking their guests to join them. Makeda's head hurts, but she can't get away. Walking like a man is hard. In her mind she calls for Tafari, trying to merge into his body, around and around the fire, stiff-legged, straight-backed, unhappy. She slips away, dazed and sweaty, as soon as she's able to. She stumbles behind the tent, a moment's peace to collect herself. She longs for Tafari and Jabbar and Desta. And Isme of course. She misses the sound of the village on mornings. The feeling of security and of knowing everyone: to know everything, to understand. The moon's low above the desert, narrow and nearly gone, a night as dark as sleep. She

doesn't hear him until he knocks her down. Her head slams against the ground again, so violently that she momentarily loses consciousness, the pain from her skull and her sex fusing into one. He pushes and pushes, clamping down so hard on her throat that she cannot move. He manages to penetrate her, then slips out. He punches her mouth, and it fills with blood.

"You know other ways," he whispers, and she's never heard anyone so furious. "You'll show me every single one."

He positions her on the ground, then kicks her once in the side. Calls her a dog. His member is soft. He takes it in his hand and walks off.

Her lip throbs, snot and blood. She approaches the enclosure, quietly talking to the dromedaries, and crawls between them. The smell of animal is powerful; they chomp and grunt. She wedges between two of the large beasts; they sniff at her, but let her stay. She plucks fur off their warm bodies, rolls it up, and plugs it inside her. At home in her village the women sew marriage dolls and leather and fur. They stuff the dolls with grass and stitch eyes made of black, shiny seeds; they ornament them with feathers to give them a part of the sky: rain, thunder, lightning—what causes life to sprout and grow, what provides the people with heat and gave them fire at the dawn of time. They make chains of fur and polished snail shells: the homes of animals that once were alive symbolize long life. A lock of the man's and the woman's hair is threaded together and stuffed into the opening at the bottom of the bride's doll; on the groom they affix a jutting member made from a branch. The evening before the marriage ceremony, the priest sings to the dolls and calls forth kind spirits. Afterward, the women put the dolls to bed in the hut where the couple will live. They lay them under leaves and cloth, they sing to them, and put out small bowls filled with beer and berries for them. The ensouled dolls guard the hut and provide the couple with fruitfulness and strength. If the dolls split apart of break, it only shows that they've prevented an invisible attack against the inhabitants of the hut, and they are immediately repaired.

Isme's hut had no guardian dolls, but she was better at sewing than anyone else. The other women laughed at her originality. When the dolls were decorated, she made them appear exactly like the bride and groom.

Makeda thinks about Isme and the dolls, about marriage ceremonies and Tafari. As she plugs herself full of wool, plugging until it burns, she cries. Her hands are tacky with blood, and she smells strange.

She sleeps fitfully, waking up right before dawn and stumbling back to the tents. The women have been up for some time already, and they pause a moment when she walks past. They carry their children on their backs and Makeda thinks of Isme again, how Isme cradled her like that when she was little. She can't even remember anymore. She weeps and senses the women are watching her, but they say nothing. Exhaustion and despondency. She despairs over what has happened and what has yet to happen. Grief for a mother's love, her promises and wishes and dreams, her lullabies and prayers, which vanish between days and nights and provide no shield against anything at all.

Makeda would like to offer to help, but it would be inappropriate. She doesn't understand why men and women's lives have to be so segregated, and even less that men seem to do so little while the women toil constantly. She asked Hasib the first day they were in camp, but he didn't understand what she meant.

She sits beside the fire accepting bread and cheese and the hot, bitter herbal tea the desert people drink. The women's hands and hips are narrow, their jewels jangle, and their hair is tucked under colorful scarves. The people of the caravan wake up. The women's implacable faces are lit by fleeting smiles, wondering, laughing, teasing. Fir confronts her, wants to know where she slept. She doesn't respond. The sky lightens, the stars disappearing. She offers him half of her bread, but she doesn't say a word.

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Fir assaults her repeatedly on their way to the sea, getting more and more brutal, each time vainly mashing against her to penetrate her. He tries to enter her bottom hole, but he can't do that, either. He squirts his semen across her buttocks and the ground; he clutches her head and forces her to take him in her mouth. When he ejaculates she throws up, and it angers him. No longer does she believe that friendliness will weaken him or make him stop. She stops trying to convince him that he's really a good person. She thinks about fleeing and revenge and is paralyzed by her powerlessness. The knife under her clothes and the bow beside her head make no difference. Falling asleep is difficult,

and she awakens at the slightest noise. When others sleep, he grabs her hair and pulls her away from the fire, into the darkness, kicking her, crushing his knees against her ribs. She learns to say nothing. If she yelps in pain or alarm, he covers her mouth and nose with his hand so that she can hardly breathe. One night he nearly chokes her. Her eyes flicker, and she disappears beneath the glittering surface of the river back home. After the rainy season the current is powerful. When she was a little child she was tugged underneath the water once, and she wasn't afraid until she popped out in the middle of the roaring water. Below the surface it was silent, and she merged with the cool water. On the bank grew thick clusters of rushes, their roots invisible beneath the turgid water, their rustling leaves reflected in the shiny surface: a perfect symmetry, as if someone had bound them like a sheaf. She loses consciousness and comes to as such a sheaf, her body a reflection now, no longer made of flesh and blood, and she floats.

In the morning they ask her about the marks on her throat, and she tells them all she knows is that she dreamed of a snake that wanted to squeeze the life out of her. It scares them. They ask her if she's got connections to the desert's evil spirits, and their distrust and unease are constant pecks against her already thin shell. In the following days they don't speak to her, and no one will walk beside her. She's forced to walk at the back with the donkey boys. Several times she thinks about stopping. Dropping behind, falling to the ground, letting the sun god Shamr take whatever he wants. Everything she has left behind clusters behind her, growing with the soil and the dust and the rocks. The faces she knows are stripped to the bones by the scorching wind, pushing her forward, forward, forward without knowing how. She's sacrificed everything she had for this meaningless journey. She's a thief who's been overpowered by an even greater thief: the desert. Now and then she loses her orientation, can't remember whether it's morning or evening, and doesn't understand why they pitch camp. The landscapes changes. They'd passed the salt sea a few days after they'd departed the desert people's camp, guided by their hosts, and spent a day packing their animals with the salt blocks they will sell by the sea. The blinding white water, glittering, moist, one with the sky. It hurt her eyes. She stared and stared until all the tears in her throat and chest surged from her. At the salt sea she became ill, saw strange dancing visions, and the people of the caravan let her lie in peace under an outstretched canvas. They brought her food and water, but she ate nothing. Fir,

for once, stayed away. Free of the fever, she again considered revealing her secret to at least be free of him. She thought about the women, their downcast eyes, their serious faces. About how the only way to escape is to follow the caravan. And even if she could come to terms with the meaningless of her flight from her village just to come live among foreigners dominated by men and the harsh sun, she can't think of one good reason that the desert people would accept her. She considers simply telling the clan leader that she's Mosi's daughter and that she's looking for him. Considers telling Hasib she's a woman, offering him the bow, the rest of his shells, her body. He has a family, wives and children. If she gets pregnant she'd done for. She gives up, every refuge stomped to bits, her head pounding as it contemplates impossible solutions. She tries to console herself with the thought that it's over as soon as they reach the sea. It can't last much longer, and she will survive. But the consolation runs down between cracks in the earth; there's no reason to believe it'll be better just because she escapes from the caravan. She doesn't know what she'd been thinking. The money won't last. She has nothing, can do nothing, knows nothing. If she finally finds her father, she can't be certain he'll recognize her. Isme's defective mirror lies on the bottom of the bundle she's carrying. Mosi grew up with the desert people. They take care of each other and marry only those from other clans in the same tribe. They know family relations and they sing about the history of their clan. The only reason that she thinks it's a good omen is that she's got nothing else to put her faith in but the hope that he'll defend his forefathers' traditions and accept her because she's his flesh and blood. He might've had many women, he might've sired a city filled with children, and she'll drown among them, uninteresting to him. She's never been able to ask about Mosi. He might even be dead or missing somewhere in the world, which grows bigger and bigger with each passing day of this journey.

She was weakened and tired when they left the salt sea. Hasib noticed this and let her ride the first day. She cried with gratitude. The donkey nearly stumbled several times, the landscape being rocky, the terrain uneven. The next day she was walking again. The leather on her feet is nearly worn through. She hopes it's a sign that they will soon be free of the desert.

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Two nights after he tried to strangle her, she's saved by the first thieves they meet on their journey. She kills two people. As a result, the others forget about the marks on her and their suspicions, but she's afraid it means they're right after all. The caravan has stopped in the shade of a ravine. They finally have the wind at their backs the entire day. As soon as the men hear the first shouts, they snuff the fire. They hold their breath and listen in the darkness. The animals don't recognize the danger; they grunt and groan until everyone is tired of hearing them. It sounds as if the strangers are riding toward them. They shout at each other, distinct voices, but it's impossible to tell how many there are. They continue to approach, circling vultures, around and around. One calls out that he's dying of thirst, the other responds that they've almost arrived. The first shouts that he won't survive, the other that his waterskin is torn. At first Makeda doesn't understand why the caravan won't help them. They've refreshed their supplies with the desert people, and they could give water to two wretches who've gone astray. She nudges the gentle boy with the scorpion bite and gestures with her hands. He puts his finger over his lips, and whispers how they're going to trick the thieves. He makes a slashing gesture across his throat. Among the desert people she'd heard about bands of thieves, that they are cruel and skilled with a bow. They go after the leader, robbing them all as they hold a knife to his throat. The caravan has weapons, but there's never enough. When the thieves are done, they'll poke holes in all the waterskins. Some years before Hasib became leader of the caravan, eleven drovers died while the others barely reached the sea in the nick of time, hallucinating and dying of thirst and exhaustion. There will be a full moon soon. Ashta keeps her eye on them bearing her cheetah-spotted shield, pouring light to every side. The caravan will be exposed as soon as the thieves reach their side of the rocks. The men sit with their cheeks against their knees, waiting, listening. Makeda has seen how terrible they are shooting bows, and their spears won't do any good. She gets to her feet when the voices are so close that it seems unavoidable—that they will soon be discovered. The gentle boy tries to make her to sit down, she stumbles back when she wriggles free of him. She leaps past the armed, fear-stricken pillars, and crawls up the rocks with her bow slung over her shoulder. The thief's donkey wears a cloth around its hooves, and its smothered hoof-beats cause her to believe they are farther away. The first thief is no more than ten steps away when she sees his shiny moon-glinting eyes, uncovered head, and

naked torso. All he manages to do is lift his bow before she shoots. He tumbles to the ground, and the donkey trots off, leaving his master behind. To be certain, she approaches him. A moment ago he was looking at her. Now the eyes, pointing skyward, are dead and impenetrable as stone; his limbs are twisted up, and beside him is a primitive bow and arrows with light-brown feathers. She kisses her bow, then takes his, then his knife, then his quiver and arrows. Then silence. Then hoof-beats, and she draws her bow back again, aims, strikes her target, another fleeing donkey, another dead man. She waits, tense, listening to the sound of her own breathing, a distant and lonely animal call. The moon is distant, it approaches for a split-second, hangs in the air, blinks, as if Ashta wants to see her victims. Makeda bows her head, drops to her knees, lays her cheek against the ground, hard and uneven, the dry, pale air that the wind steals. When she stands, the moon is again far away. She holds her hand to one eye. It's as if the goddess bows.

She pushes her way back down the rock to the caravan. She holds up two fingers, points at the bow. No one knows whether more will come, so they wait, tense and alert until the break of dawn.

The next day they inspect the corpses. The vultures are already busy, and the drovers shoo them aside with switches. The thieves had nothing with them but weapons and waterskins. Makeda forces herself to look at them: skinny, shriveled, their skin paled by death. She straightens up, won't let the others see her unease while they're praising her. They grab her hands, forcing her to lift her bow high and triumphant, laughing.

She doesn't say what's on her mind until midday.

"I had no right to kill them," she tells Hasib. He breaks off a hunk of his bread and feeds her as a sign of his gratefulness. "They had nothing."

"We would've had nothing if you hadn't killed them," he says, dipping his bread in milk before putting it into her mouth.

They speak no more about it. She continues to walk at the far back with the donkey boys, though she is no longer required to do so. She tells no more of her stories, and she's no longer asked to tell them. The evenings are brooding, heavy. No one seems to notice when she startles at the slightest touch, or that she's silent and given to weeping.

Even the most experienced drovers are spent; it would seem strange to them if she remained unmoved. Once they reach their destination by the sea, the people of the caravan will return to their families to gather their strength. Later they will make this same journey, again and again and again. Hasib says he'll soon be too old to make the journey. The others tell him he's only trying to get them to say that he's still strong and resolute. Makeda tells him he should stay home if he feels that way. Which makes him laugh. She stays close to him while they eat. He asks about her village, and she replies as curtly as possible without being impolite. When he wants to know why she left, she says: illness, death, war. He doesn't ask her again. It was a lie, and it was not a lie. Isme is with her, but she's shrinking, getting smaller and smaller. Makeda's afraid she will disappear. When she awakes early in the morning, she can picture her. She no longer appears as the mother she knows, she appears only in bits and pieces: An eye, black and moist, crying for her daughter; a mouth closed; a hand turned to caress; a hand raised to strike. Hasib notices the scar on her foot one evening as she removes her leather. The skin's now thick and raw where the leather gnawed. Rubbing the skin in fat every night keeps the sores away. She doesn't dare sleep with naked feet anymore, as the others do. It's bad enough that Fir drags her off into the darkness. She doesn't want to be bitten or stung by reptiles.

The flora changes, as does the air. The firewind burns out. They don't meet any more thieves. The men say they were lucky this time. One of Makeda's eyes is puffy and red. One night she tells Fir that it's a sign, and maybe it is.

"I can infect you," she says. "My entire village died."

It no longer surprises her how easy it is to lie. Only that she didn't make up this story before. Because she can see how it frightens him.

"Infect me?" he says, shaking her. "What do you mean?"

He gets angry when she doesn't reply, but he leaves her alone for the first time since the archery competition.

Her eye heals and he returns, more brutal than ever, and even more indifferent. He says he doesn't care if she dies or not. They'll soon reach their destination. He'll kill her one night and leave her in the bushes. When the others ask about her, he'll help them search for her. When they find her, they'll think she'd been raped by a wanderer or a spirit. If they don't find her, she'll be quickly forgotten.

The next evening she goes to Hasib. There's nothing to lose now. The wind bears a foreign scent, thick as honey, the taste of sweat. They say it's the sea.

"Do you know Mosi from the salt sea?"

He's sitting beside the fire, and he's busy unwrapping the leather from his feet. He wants to know why she asks, but she repeats her question.

"My uncle was the caravan leader back when Mosi was permitted to travel with us to the sea," he replies. "Though it wasn't our fault, it took a long time before they forgave us that he didn't return."

He doesn't know much: Mosi was still unmarried then. He'd convinced his father that it would be a good idea to let him travel to the sea to buy jewels for his wife. But it was there he vanished. Several years later they saw him in Yeha. He was surrounded by a flock of wealthy men. Hasib's uncle spoke to him, but Mosi pretended he didn't recognize him. Makeda needs to prod Hasib to get more of the story. She tells him that Mosi is the father of a young woman in her village, and that she'd been sent to find him. Hasib clicks his tongue, shaking his head.

"That's too bad, having a father like that."

Makeda can hardly stomach it, a log that dries out and burns. Hasib lies down on his back, rubs his face, beard, throat. Makeda gets to her knees beside him.

"I've heard he's an advisor to the king in Ma'rib," he says after a long silence. "I don't know how you will get there."

"Was it good that he left then?" Makeda whispers, hardly knowing herself what she wants with the question.

Hasib chuckles. After that he's silent so long she thinks he's fallen asleep.

"I suppose that depends on how well he advises the king," he says finally. "May the gods judge us by our own acts and by the weight of our hearts."

She stays by Hasib's side. She wants to do nothing else. When Fir arrives, she wants to thrust the knife in his throat. She lies beside Hasib to sleep. The others notice, but say nothing. Fir comes anyway. She sits up. He buries his fingers in her hair and she does something she's never done before: screams so loud the world cracks apart, screams until her eyes fill with blood. She doesn't fall silent until Hasib takes hold of her. Fir has let her go. Everyone is awake now, and pulling their scarves around their shoulders. The

moon is gone. Someone starts the fire, and its glow swells around them, an animal's distended belly that has swallowed them whole. Darkness is the wall of the body that mashes them together; whenever the animal breathes, it sucks the air from them until their voices are shrill and frenzied. When they ask her what happened she points at Fir.

"Ask him," she says. "He wants to kill me."

Their disbelief, amazement, *why*? Fir doesn't refute this, just points at her and tells them her secret as if it's nothing, then walks away from the fire. At the sight of their alarmed faces it occurs to her that maybe Fir hadn't planned on exposing her because, in reality, they wouldn't want to harm her at all. That it was something he'd made up to frighten her into submission. She waits, ashamed and nauseated. Only a wretched and untrained hunter allows herself to become the prey, fear bleeding from every pore. Something freezes them, delaying their reactions. Then the transformation from surprise to anger: hands that slowly reach for her, Hasib clutching at her clothes, tearing at them, forcing his hand underneath her material. She gets to her feet, stumbles half-into an embrace. Someone clutches her wrist, gropes along her throat and shoulders, underneath the wrap of fabric, shouting: It's true. And she thrashes wildly, biting a hand until it bleeds. She grabs her knife and lunges for the closest person, slashes his forearm. A terrifying silence that crescendos in a roar: Stop her. But she rips loose, flees into the darkness, tumbling, running. Her bow and knife. No one will ever make her stop. They call out for her, they shout at each other. The fire glows in the distance in this flat landscape. Following her into the darkness is too dangerous. Tomorrow she will be long gone or dead.

End of Excerpt