

Bahr al-Jebel Province, Southern Sudan, 2001

Ayen leaned into the wall of tingling heat, pinning her infant son closer with a clenched knot in the jade cotton against her belly. She whistled through missing teeth, teasing the black stumps in her mouth with a hungry tongue.

“*Tss-tss-tss*,” Ayen said to her son Chok, bouncing him in time to her shuffled step down the pinched dirt road. “No more crying now, until we are home. Soon, soon, soon.”

The crumpled paper of the baby’s face squeezed into a howl. Born early, as the brightest planet rose in a blank sky, the child grew into himself in hesitant stages. Four days after Chok slipped into the world, he found his sucking reflex while his family prepared the death rites. He was three weeks old before he displayed his voice.

At six months, Chok’s stunted limbs still chased his head, which sometimes lolled on a rangy neck. But he lived up to the promise of his name. Chok Malith Deng. By the will of God, he survived.

“Thunder,” his mother said. “Thunder means rain.”

Despite the promise of moisture, the chalk dust of relative drought cantered at Ayen’s ankles. As she walked, the seventeen-year-old mother sang to her child and planned the sparse meal ahead. The water, cradled in a rusty five-litre oil container scavenged from the outskirts of Bor, would be plenty to mash the last of the *dura*. Dried fish hung from Ayen’s ceiling. Her milk ran strong and white, like a calf born in the moonlight. It would be enough.

The ripple of sound strained Ayen’s ears. She smiled, shifting Chok’s weight into the small of her back. The end of the dry season meant Kolai would be whole again: her husband Mayam and his four brothers, the cohort of *parapuol* initiates with their prize cattle and the other women would abandon the *toic* grazing lands for the trek home to the village. Only Ayen and her sister-in-law remained in Kolai this year. Too far to go with a new child.

Through the three short months of sparking air, Ayen and Manyanga reweave the *tukkul* roofs, the round huts hollow. Manyanga's boys, three under seven, entertained each other. Allowing the littlest to tag along, they played *alweth*, jumping from hiding spots with banshee yells and making balls of mud and straw for an improvised game of *madallah*. Achot's daughter, narrow-shouldered and clumsy at eleven, prepared the earth for the maize, *dura* and sorghum planting. Everybody waited for the rain.

As Ayen reached the crown of an outcrop, thunder rippled into screams.