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# A Stranger's Map

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*To Robert Ardrey, for reminding us of  
risen apes, not fallen angels.*

## **Bahr al-Jebel Province, Southern Sudan, 2002**

Ayen leaned into the bank of tingling heat, pinning her infant son closer with a clenched knot in the jade cotton against her belly. She whistled through missing teeth and teased 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.”

Born early, as the brightest planet rose in a blank sky, the child had grown into himself in hesitant stages. Four days after Chok had slipped into the world, he had found his sucking reflex while his family prepared the death rites. Three weeks later he had discovered his voice. He had lived up to his name: Chok Malith Deng. A survivor, by the will of God.

At six months, wrapped against Ayen, Chok’s

stunted limbs chased his mushroom head and rangy neck. The crumpled paper of the baby's face squeezed into a bellow.

“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, their staple grain. Crusty spokes of dried fish hung from Ayen's ceiling. Her milk ran strong and white. 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 young initiates with their prize cattle and the other women would abandon the seasonal grazing lands for the trek home to the village. Only Ayen and her sister-in-law, Manyanga, remained in Kolai this year. Too far to go with a new child.

Through the short months of sparking air, Ayen

and Manyanga reweave the roofs of the hollow, round tukkul huts. Manyanga's boys, three under seven, entertained each other. Allowing the littlest to tag along, the older two jumped from hiding spots with banshee yells. The boys slapped together balls of mud and straw, baking them in the sun for a game of chase and toss. Manyanga's daughter, narrow-shouldered and clumsy at eleven, prepared the earth for the maize, millet and sorghum planting. Everybody waited for the rain.

As Ayen reached the crown of an outcrop, thunder rippled into screams. Screams like starving hyenas; shouts like barking lions. The screams and the shouts carried words. She did not understand them all, but Ayen heard every one.

She knew of the raids. Knew that fifteen years ago they had been many, and in recent years, few. Her father Akob, the eldest son of a family of twelve, attended Juba missionary schools. He learned English, which he sometimes chanted for his children; he learned counting and division, which made him the adjudicator in cattle trade disputes across three villages along the White Nile.

When Ayen and her sisters were young, Akob scattershot his glowing reports of education with the terror of his final days in Juba. “The lights went out,” he said, a daughter on each knee and two more at his feet. “First for a day, then a week.”

Building his tale, Akob folded his wings to protect them from his words. “In the great southern city of Juba, where once scholars taught at the university, bridges and buildings of faultless stone trembled and cracked. The storm came from the north, rolling through our homes like a rogue elephant, crushing everything that cringed in its way.”

Her father called the mortal shells ‘slugs of death.’ “I fled to your uncle’s village, this village, and made a home here with your mother.”

Always, his happy ending, a release into ancient rhythms of cattle and children. He’d lived to see six grandchildren.

From the whitewashed stories of her childhood, Ayen knew nothing of her father’s escape. Six days hiding in the bush from the militia, drinking from puddles and scavenging tangy fruit from tamarind trees barely out of bloom. She knew less still of the political

sphere, which declared shar'ia law in 1983, the same year Ayen was born. An illusion, spawned by a government that craved power over land and people. A catastrophe, blanketed by the malignant twin pretences of ethnic unity and development for the south.

Later, rumours from other villages had wandered down the river and into the bush of Kolai's permanent settlement. Ground attacks by uniforms from Khartoum, or western Nuer neighbours with sanctioned freedom to roam and destroy. Aerial bombings in some places, with rusty gun ships that belched tar and oil when they landed, scattering the herds.

But Kolai was safe as a thatched roof from howling rain, tucked in the crook of the river between Bor and Juba. Large enough to fend off animal incursions; small enough to duck roving militia. Twelve circular huts offered cattle-hide mattresses and scant ornaments of bead and bone. Three communal fire pits, two dull from disuse, crowded the open centre. A handful of pounding mallets rested in grooves on rouged basalt tablets. Nothing to want in Kolai. Nothing to take. Until now.



Ayen began to pray before she scrambled to the top of the mound. Reaching for a handhold, she sliced the web of flesh between thumb and forefinger of her left palm. She sucked the blood, crouching.

“By the will of Jesus and Nhialic, praise be to God.” Wheezing, Ayen melted Christianity into the animism of her ancestors. “Lord of the sky, keeper of the spirit, please bless your faithful servants of Kolai and keep us safe.”

A lone arum, its serrated bill trailing the tail of a olive-green plated lizard, heaved into the sky on white-tipped wings. The hornbill banked toward Kolai and dipped over the short horizon.

Jolted by the climb, Chok battered coal fists against his mother’s back. He corkscrewed his neck, peering into the distance to trace the flapping arc. “Kaw-kaw-kaw,” said Chok, babbling an imitative response at the disappearing bird.

His mother checked her first instinct, to lunge forward down the far side of the hillock. She reached for her son, cradling him against her chest to quieten his ill-timed play.

Ayen whispered into her baby’s ear, bouncing

him on one jutting knee. “Games are for later, little one. Shush, now, shush.”

Ayen risked another head bob over the rise. Less than a hundred metres from her vantage point, the scene of expected sister-in-law, nephews and niece churned out fire, gunshots and death. Ducking her head, Ayen counted three—no, four—screams. She covered Chok’s ears, forcing her hands to his head and ignoring the smear of blood that slid up his cheek from her cut.

The shouts subsided into snorted laughter, like hippos breaking the surface. The screams dropped in number, until Ayen could only make out two distinct howls. Those went on and on.

The shouts subsided into staccato orders. “Bring the torches! Move, move, move!”

“Coming, sir.”

In the still air before the jeep spun away into the bush, Ayen listened to the aftermath, catching a few words.

“These are no use now.” Leather crunched bone with an invisible kick.

A deeper voice. “Pity. We could have used them on our side. Old enough to fight.”

“We’ll focus on setting the mines. Time later to collect a few new recruits, if we need them.”

All ended in silence, the floodplain after cloudburst. Metal doors clanged. An engine ticked over, twice.

Shielding her eyes, Ayen collapsed like a puppet on severed strings. Ayen flattened her body against the stubborn ground, quelling her son’s protests with mouthed prayers of deliverance. She cupped her ear to listen as the strutting rev died with distance. She pressed herself into the earth for an hour after they left.

The potted path, more elephant trail than road designed for vehicles, challenged the truck to stay on course. Holding the steering wheel like a ship’s helm in a storm, the corporal eyed his captain. “Think that she-goat and her brood belonged with the stragglers we ran down first?”

“Doesn’t matter. None of them can trouble us. They were slave-dirt like the others.”

Laughing, the captain turned to his three men in the back. He pointed to the unconscious lump at their feet. “Don’t use her up all at once, boys. The traders

will pay good money for that young slave, when we transport her north with the rest.”

Dread spurred Ayen from her hiding place. She considered leaving Chok on the far side of the mound, bundled in her outer wrap.

“The men got what they came for. They won’t be back.” In a voice reserved to lull Chok to sleep, Ayen wheedled courage from her own useless words. Alternating the incantation with prayer, she rocked to her feet and raised her head just enough to calculate her next step down.

She found the youngest facedown in a pile of cattle dung ash. The toddler’s right leg scratched his shoulder, in grotesque parody of a tick-infested dog. His two older brothers carried a single mark each, thumbnail-sized powder burns at their temples. The twins looked asleep.

When her ears heard another noise, Ayen assumed the keening was her own. She bit her tongue, trying to smother the clamour. The moan bulged, retching. Ayen whipped her head around, catching Chok’s nose with her chin. Startled, he began to cry.

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