

PROLOGUE
WAITING



1974

SHE DOES NOT WANT TO REMEMBER BUT SHE IS HERE AND MEMORY IS gathering bones. She has come by foot and by bus to Addis Ababa, across terrain she has chosen to forget for nearly forty years. She is two days early but she will wait for him, seated on the ground in this corner of the train station, the metal box on her lap, her back pressed against the wall, rigid as a sentinel. She has put on the dress she does not wear every day. Her hair is neatly braided and sleek and she has been careful to hide the long scar that puckers at the base of her neck and trails over her shoulder like a broken necklace.

In the box are his letters, *le lettere, ho sepolto le mie lettere, è il mio segreto, Hirut, anche il tuo segreto. Segreto, secret, meestir. You must keep them for me until I see you again. Now go. Vatene. Hurry before they catch you.*

There are newspaper clippings with dates spanning the course of the war between her country and his. She knows he has arranged them from the start, 1935, to nearly the end, 1941.

In the box are photographs of her, those he took on Fucelli's orders and labeled in his own neat handwriting: *una bella ragazza. Una soldata feroce*. And those he took of his own free will, mementos scavenged from the life of the frightened young woman she was in that prison, behind that barbed-wire fence, trapped in terrifying nights that she could not free herself from.

Inside the box are the many dead that insist on resurrection.

She has traveled for five days to get to this place. She has pushed

her way through checkpoints and nervous soldiers, past frightened villagers whispering of a coming revolution, and violent student protests. She has watched while a parade of young women, raising fists and rifles, marched past the bus taking her to Bahir Dar. They stared at her, an aging woman in her long drab dress, as if they did not know those who came before them. As if this were the first time a woman carried a gun. As if the ground beneath their feet had not been won by some of the greatest fighters Ethiopia had ever known, women named Aster, Nardos, Abebech, Tsedale, Aziza, Hanna, Meaza, Aynadis, Debru, Yodit, Ililta, Abeba, Kidist, Belaynesh, Meskerem, Nunu, Tigist, Tsehai, Beza, Saba, and a woman simply called the cook. Hirut murmured the names of those women as the students marched past, each utterance hurling her back in time until she was once again on ragged terrain, choking in fumes and gunpowder, suffocating in the pungent stench of poison.

She was brought back to the bus, to the present, only after one old man grabbed her by the arm as he took a seat next to her: *If Mussoloni couldn't get rid of the emperor, what do these students think they are doing?* Hirut shook her head. She shakes her head now. She has come this far to return this box, to rid herself of the horror that staggers back unbidden. She has come to give up the ghosts and drive them away. She has no time for questions. She has no time to correct an old man's pronunciation. One name always drags with it another: nothing travels alone.

From outside, a fist of sunlight bears through the dusty window of the Addis Ababa train station. It bathes her head in warmth and settles on her feet. A breeze unfurls into the room. Hirut looks up and sees a young woman dressed in *ferenj* clothes push through the door, clutching a worn suitcase. The city rises behind her. Hirut sees the long dirt road that leads back to the city center. She sees three women balancing bundles of firewood. There, just beyond the roundabout is a procession of priests where once, in 1941, there had been warriors and she, one of them. The flat metal box, the length of her forearm, grows cool on her

lap, lies as heavy as a dying body against her stomach. She shifts and traces the edges of the metal, rigid and sharp, rusting with age.

Somewhere tucked into the crevice of this city, Ettore is waiting two days to see her. He is sitting at his desk in the dim glow of a small office, hunched over one of his photos. Or, he is sitting in a chair drenched in the same light that tugs at her feet, staring toward his Italia. He is counting time, too, both of them tipping toward the appointed day. Hirut stares at the sunlit vista pressing itself through the swinging doors. As they start to close, she holds her breath. Addis Ababa shrinks to a sliver and slips out of the room. Ettore slumps and falls back into darkness. When they finally shut, she is left alone again, clutching the box in this echoing chamber.

She feels the first threads of a familiar fear. I am Hirut, she reminds herself, daughter of Getey and Fasil, born on a blessed day of harvest, beloved wife and loving mother, a soldier. She releases a breath. It has taken so long to get here. It has taken almost forty years of another life to begin to remember who she had once been. The journey back began like this: with a letter, the first she has ever received:

Cara Hirut, They tell me that I have finally found you. They tell me you married and live in a place too small for maps. This messenger says he knows your village. He says he will deliver this to you and bring me back your message. Please come to Addis. Hurry. There is unrest here and I must leave. I have no place to go but Italy. Tell me when to meet you at the station. Be careful, they have risen against the emperor. Please come. Bring the box. Ettore.

It is dated with the *ferenj* date: 23 April 1974.

The doors open again and this time, it is one of those soldiers she has seen scattered along the path to this city. A young man who lets noise tumble in over his shoulder. He is carrying a new rifle slung on his back carelessly. His uniform is unpatched and untorn. It is free of dirt and

suiting for his size. He is too eager-eyed to have ever held a dying com-patriot, too sharp with his movements to have ever known real fatigue.

“Land to the tiller! Revolutionary Ethiopia!” he shouts, and the air in the station flees the room. He lifts his gun with a child’s clumsiness, aware of being observed. He points to the photograph of Emperor Haile Selassie just above the entrance. “Down with the emperor!” he shouts, swinging his gun from the wall to the back of the nervous station.

The waiting room is crowded, full of those who want to leave the roiling city. They breathe in and shrink away from this uniformed boy straining toward manhood. Hirut looks at the picture of Emperor Haile Selassie: a dignified, delicate-boned man stares into the camera, somber and regal in his military uniform and medals. The soldier, too, glances up, left with nothing to do but hear his own voice echo back. He shifts awkwardly, then turns and races out the door.

The dead pulse beneath the lid. For so long, they have been rising and crumbling in the face of her anger, giving way to the shame that still stuns her into paralysis. She can hear them now telling her what she already knows:

The real emperor of this country is on his farm tilling the tiny plot of land next to hers. He has never worn a crown and lives alone and has no enemies. He is a quiet man who once led a nation against a steel beast, and she was his most trusted soldier: the proud guard of the Shadow King. Tell them, Hirut. There is no time but now.

She can hear the dead growing louder: We must be heard. We must be remembered. We must be known. We will not rest until we have been mourned. She opens the box.



THERE ARE TWO bundles of pictures, each tied with the same delicate blue string. He has written her name in loose-jointed handwriting on one, the letters ballooning across the paper folded over the stack and held in place by string. Hirut unties it and two photos slide out, sticking

together from age. One is of the French photographer who roamed the northern highlands taking photos, a thin slip of a man with a large camera. On the back of the picture it reads, Gondar, 1935. This is what we know of this man: He is a former draftsman from Albi, a failed painter with a slippery voice and small blue eyes. He holds no importance except what memory allows. But he is in the box, and he is one of the dead, and he insists on his right to be known. What we will say because we must: there is also a photograph of Hirut taken by this Frenchman. A portrait shot while he visited the home of Aster and Kidane and requested a picture of the servants to trade with other photographers or exchange for film. She turns away from it. She does not want to see her picture. She wants to close the box to shut us up. But it is here and this younger Hirut also refuses a quiet grave.

This is Hirut. This is her wide-open face and curious gaze. She has her mother's high forehead and her father's curved mouth. Her bright eyes are wary but calm, catching light in golden prisms. She leans into the space in front of her, a pretty girl with slender neck and sloping shoulders. Her expression is guarded, her posture peculiarly stiff, absent the natural elegance that she will not know for many years is hers. She looks away from the camera and struggles not to squint, her face turned to the biting sun. It is easy to see the sharp slope of her collarbone, the scarless neck that rises from the V collar of her dress. It is this picture that will preserve the unmarked expanse of skin that spreads across her shoulders and back. No other way to recall the unblemished body she once carried with the carelessness of a child. And look, in the background, so far away she is hard to see, there is Aster, pausing to watch, an elegant line cutting through light.

BOOK
1
INVASION



1935



HIRUT HEARS ASTER SHOUTING HER NAME, CALLING FOR HER IN A voice threatening to break from strain. Hirut looks up from the slow burning fire she is tending in a corner of the courtyard. She is hunched into a stool, next to a pile of onions waiting to be peeled. The cook is behind her in the kitchen, chopping meat for the evening meal. Aster should be drinking her coffee in bed, tucked inside a soft blanket, perhaps looking out the window and gazing at her flowers. This should be a quiet morning. Hirut stiffens at the intrusion. Then Aster calls Hirut's name again, and this time, she is speaking so loudly, with such exertion, that the cook pauses her rapid slicing, the morning birds fall silent, and even the large tree just outside the gate seems to catch the breeze to hold itself still. For an instant, nothing moves.

What did I do? Hirut feels her hands shaking.

The cook leans out of the kitchen door, startled: She's in our room. She points toward the servants' quarters. What's she doing in there? Hurry, get up.

Hirut drops the twig she was using to shift charcoal and scrambles up. The thought forms: Aster is in the servants' quarters. She is in that small box of a room that Hirut shares with the cook, that place where they go at night to shed their usefulness and sleep. It is a room separated from the many-roomed house where Aster lives with her husband, Kidane. It is a space that is not a space, a room that is less than a

room. It is a dark hollow carved into endless tired nights. It is not meant to be seen in daylight. It is not meant for someone like Aster.

She's in there? Hirut asks.

She's never gone in there before. The older woman is leaning out of the doorway, her strong arms holding on to each side of the frame as she stretches to look at the narrow path that extends toward the servants' quarters, as if she is afraid to leave the safety of her kitchen. Did Kidane come back?

Hirut shakes her head. Kidane took his horse and left before dawn.

So it's just us, the cook says. She was arguing with Kidane when I was getting his things ready.

Hirut wants to tell the cook that Aster should, in fact, be in bed. She should be lying still to ease the pain of her monthly bleeding. They should be proceeding through their day as usual, working until the dome of sky hangs heavy above them, weighted by thick stars.

Go on, go. The cook steps back into the kitchen, but she stares intently at Hirut, the knife held limply in her hand. She can't start looking in our things, she adds. She adjusts the scarf on her head, pushes back the few stray strands of gray hair poking out in front.

The cook is talking about the old rifle Hirut's father gave her just before he died. Along with the dress she came with and the small necklace she is wearing, Hirut has nothing else that is hers in this world.

Everything's hidden, she says, because the cook seems unusually nervous.

Aster calls her name again, insistence giving way to unrestrained anger.

The cook bends as if pulled by that voice. Go! she shouts. And answer her!

Hirut spins on her heels. I'm coming! She dashes to the servants' quarters.

She stands at the door of the servants' quarters and she sees for the first time how truly small it is, how dingy and shrunken the space she

has called home for almost a year. In the semidarkness of the cramped room, Aster, dressed in a lovely abesha chemise, feels too much for this space that is barely enough for anything. It is less than a box, it is an airless hole enclosed in mud and straw and dung. There is no proper door, no crisp windowpane. They sleep on flimsy mattresses they have to roll up so they can walk. There are only scraps of discarded blankets nailed over narrow openings, rags that trap dust and dark. It is a space made to fit two people who have been made to fit their lives around one woman and her husband. It was not built for someone used to fine clothes and fresh breezes wafting through silk curtains.

Where were you? Aster turns to her. Her short hair carves a perfect arc into the band of weak sun sliding through the window above her head. The tepid light brushes a warm glow across her smooth cheeks. She is standing in the only place where the sun can enter the room, through that tiny hole no wider than Hirut's head, dug out of the wall like an afterthought. Each morning, the cook hooks one side of the torn curtain onto a nail to air the room, and every night she unhooks it to close it.

Where's the necklace? Give me my necklace.

Hirut watches a feeble patch of sunlight stretch at Aster's feet as if it, too, were at the woman's command. Her head is down when Aster pushes through to Hirut's side of the room.

He's just trying to protect you. Aster lifts Hirut's mattress and lets it fall, wiping her hands on the corner of the dress that looks too white in the dim room. She picks up the small crate that Hirut and the cook use to store their few belongings and shakes out the meager contents. He said he lost it but I know it's here.

Aster drops the crate and peers down, one hand smoothing the front of her long abesha chemise. She is a graceful woman with soft flesh where Hirut has angles and bone. She is not much taller than Hirut, but on the uneven dirt floor, she appears large and imposing.

My mother gave that to me to give to my husband when I married.

I know he didn't just lose it. She narrows her eyes as she looks down at Hirut. He's hiding something.

Hirut hunches her shoulders the way the cook has taught her. She wants to say it is not her fault that Aster fights with her husband, Kidane. It is not Hirut's fault that he is kind to her, she cannot help that this makes Aster cry.

I don't know where it is, she says. She knows that in the early days of mourning for their only son, Aster threw away many things. She made a heap of her finest dresses and capes and even jewelry and set them on fire in the compound, pounding her chest as flames began to chew into the items. The cook said there were some things Aster still looked for, forgetting she burned them. I've never seen it, Hirut adds.

So you want me to believe Kidane threw it away? Then she laughs. Or do you want me to think he gave it to you himself?

Kidane is the one her mother used to call "brother" and "friend" and sometimes she even said, Hirut, he is like my son though we are not so far in age. I cared for him when his mother died. I carried him on my back when I was no more than a child myself. He and I, we grew up together. This is a man who has shown me kindness, and if I am ever gone, he will take care of you. And because he was so loved by her mother, Hirut came to this house after her parents' deaths already loving him. It is not her fault that he loves her, too, that he calls her Little One, and Little Sister, and Rutiye.

Do you know what we do to thieves? Aster asks. In the somber light of the room, it is hard to see the beauty she is always so proud to display: the bright eyes and high cheeks, the full lips and the slender neck that slopes down to shoulders that have not borne the breaking weight of water jugs and firewood. If I find it here, not even Kidane will be able to help you.

Hirut knows what happens to thieves. She has seen those pitiful boys and men begging in the mercato, their skinny bodies hobbled by a missing leg and hand, their eyes still wide from the shock of the cruel loss. A sourness seeps into the back of her throat.

Aster lifts Hirut's mattress. Then she is unrolling it and undoing the rope Hirut uses to cinch her gun in place. The cook said Aster would take it away if she saw it, but Hirut never thought that Aster could come into this place that was only for servants. She thought there were places that Aster did not go. Hirut cannot breathe as she watches the rope slip off the mattress. It has been so long since she has been home, so long since she has known what it was like to move without asking permission, to do what needed to be done rather than what was demanded. Once, she had been more than a servant. She had been someone unafraid to own what was rightly hers.

And then Aster says, What's this? She is still standing below the window, the blanket and gun dangling from her hand.

A stench that Hirut has never gotten used to wafts by. It comes from a short stack of stones near the entrance where, as a boy, Kidane learned to slaughter sheep for special occasions. Beneath those stones is a small shallow ditch where blood used to flow. That's what you smell, the cook said to her when she first arrived at the house. It's the rot of blood, you'll get used to it. Still in the room is the stink of old blood, of helpless animals, of the piss and excrement that seeped into dirt, instinct and fear working together.

Whose gun is this?

Hirut says, It's mine.

The rifle was Hirut's father's most prized possession. It was too big for the small crate so Hirut kept it tucked into the pile of straw and blankets that she uses as a mattress, all of it covered by a large sheet that she knots at the corners to keep intact. On those nights when she is at her most tired, she sleeps so she can feel the rifle by her side and pretend it is her mother's arm.

Aster holds the rifle to light. It's old, she says. She runs a finger over the five grooves in the barrel, marks that Hirut's father said helped him count the Italians he killed. Do you know how to use it? She weighs its heft, testing its balance. My father taught me, like he taught my broth-

ers. She presses the butt against her shoulder, one hand steadying the barrel. Where did you get it?

From home, Hirut says.

Home: exactly five kilometers from this place that is also called Aster and Kidane's house. Five kilometers: a distance that Hirut will not comprehend until later, when she realizes that all things, even those things lost, can be put down on paper and measured. What she comprehends, standing at the threshold of her tiny room staring at Aster, is that even if she could run back at a fast sprint, it would not decrease the distance separating her from the plot of land that holds her parents' bones. She is far from home.

Home, she says again. My father gave it to me.

Then Hirut feels a hand on her shoulder. She turns around and it is Kidane, bathed in the bright afternoon light.

What are you doing here? Kidane's frame fills the door and blocks the light. A slender line of sweat trails down his neck, darkening his white tunic. The bottoms of his white jodhpurs are dusty; a leaf drags from the hem. What happened?

Ask her where she put the necklace.

Kidane searches Hirut's face, then he turns back to his wife. Where did you get that gun? He is surprised. The cook had it?

It's hers, Aster says. Then she coughs, her nose curling. It stinks in here. They don't clean themselves.

Give it back to her. It is spoken in the tone Kidane takes when he expects to be obeyed. It's not yours.

Aster's laugh cuts through the room. So you'll let her disobey the emperor's orders? According to your leader, this now belongs to the armies of Ethiopia.

Kidane wipes his neck with a handkerchief he shoves back into his pocket. He dusts off his jodhpurs. He seems to be thinking. Then he says, Little One, can I see it?

He waits until Hirut nods before he takes the gun from Aster. He

holds it in both hands. He hefts it to his shoulder the same way Aster did, the same way Hirut's father showed Hirut how to do.

It's a Wujigra, he says. My father used one in the battle at Adua when we faced these Italians the first time. This must be at least forty years old, maybe closer to fifty. He raises it higher and looks down the barrel, points it out the door, into the courtyard as if he can see beyond it, through walls and past the gate, toward Hirut's old home all those kilometers away. Do you have bullets?

Hirut has memorized the contents of the crate that are scattered around Aster's feet: the cook's spare scarf, knotted around three Maria Theresa thalers and two blue buttons; the outgrown dress that Hirut came with; a piece of charcoal she uses for drawing; a broken ceramic plate with pink flowers that is the cook's; the chipped handle of a water jug that is also the cook's; and a bullet that is Hirut's.

Where are the bullets? Kidane lowers the gun. How many does she have?

There is only that single bullet. There has only ever been one bullet and it belongs to that gun and that gun belongs to her. Her father made her promise to keep the two separate until she was in real danger and then, my child, you hold it like I've taught you and you aim it at the heart like I've shown you and you must fear nothing except leaving your enemy alive.

I didn't even know she had this. Aster puts her hands on her waist, and in the semidark, Hirut can see her chin trembling, her gaze on Kidane shifting between tenderness and unease. What did you do with it?

Not now. Kidane's voice is a whisper. Little One. He clears his throat.

This gun is important to me. Do you know a war is coming?

The war is all that the cook and the servants who meet at the mercato can talk about. They gather and whisper about freed slaves and liberation by the *fèrenj* army. She shakes her head.

She's lying, Aster says. Look. She holds up a piece of paper.

It is one of those leaflets scattered everywhere in the mercato. She did not know the cook had it. She did not know it was something the cook was keeping hidden.

This was in the cook's blanket. These are the papers the Italians have been dropping from planes. I've been hearing about them. They're telling them they'll be free if they join the *ferenji* side.

Kidane takes the slip of paper and holds it toward the light. A lopsided drawing peeks through from the back. There is a scrawny beggar in chains kneeling in front of a large-headed man wearing a crown. Below it and beneath a series of words, the same beggar stands, his chains broken off, the emperor's shattered crown at his feet. The beggar, now with a slight paunch, is waving at a soldier, his arm stiffly raised, his smile jubilant.

These Italians want to start a revolt before they try to take our country, Aster says. Mussoloni wants these people to join his army.

But they can't read. Kidane is staring between the leaflet and the gun.

They can understand pictures. Aster flings aside the cook's blanket and searches again, shaking the mattress. Puffs of dust bloom around her. Now, what do you say to this one?

Hirutiye, Kidane says. I need this gun. We're going to war and we need all the weapons we can get. These Italians have many more than we do. He looks at her with those kind eyes of his, pleading with her in a way that gives her the courage to say:

My father gave it to me. He said to always keep it near me.

If we don't gather every weapon in this country, we'll lose before the war begins, Kidane says. He's not loosening his hold on the gun, he's not extending it to her. He still grips it firmly in both hands. The emperor himself told everyone to contribute their weapons. He said it himself, on the radio. We all have to do it. Even your father would do it if he were alive.

No. It's mine. She has looked into his eyes before: where there was kindness, there is now a sternness that is new to her, a reprimand veiled

by something else she cannot understand. But all Hirut can think about is the day her father handed her the rifle when he was already sweating and shivering, his cheeks unnaturally gaunt. She will not give the gun away.

You'll get it back. I promise you, Kidane says. He is kind again, gentle.

Stop talking to her like she can reason, Aster says, reaching for the gun. Just take it.

She's a child. Kidane pulls the rifle away.

A child. Aster stops. A child. She leans toward Kidane. You think I don't realize you brought her here exactly one year after our son died? Her voice is low but it holds a bitterness that makes Kidane step back.

He places a hand on the doorframe and speaks slowly: Her parents died. I made a promise to Getey, she was like a sister to me.

Aster stares down at her hands, uncharacteristically hesitant. She came exactly one year after Tesfaye died, she says. Aster lifts her head and repeats it, more confident. You brought her here after the mourning period. So you could do what you pleased without gossip.

She came here the day they were buried. There was nowhere else for her to go. Kidane takes a deep breath as if to steady himself.

You brought her here to insult me. Aster places a hand very quickly on her stomach and drops it. You brought her here to try to teach me my place.

On their faces, identical grim expressions, as if they have fought like this before, as if both are tired but cannot help it.

The necklace isn't here, Kidane finally says. I lost it a long time ago. I told you.

And she's not a child anymore. Think of what you knew of me when I was her age.

Kidane looks at his wife, his face faltering around the twisting line of his mouth. He says it softly, so softly Hirut thinks she is the only one who can hear: She's Getey's daughter. Then he walks out of the room with her rifle and after one long look, Aster follows.

They were both in here? The cook leans against the wall and tugs at the collar of her worn dress. Beads of sweat roll down on her neck. She wipes the back of her hand across her chin and chest. Stop looking at me like that, she mutters.

Hirut sits in the middle of the room with her arms around her legs. She buries her face into the crevice of her folded arms.

She was still looking for that necklace? the cook asks. Now she is standing over Hirut, her feet in that wide stance of hers, and Hirut doesn't need to look up to know that her hands are on her waist and her chin juts out. She sets the crate upright, then stops at her unrolled mattress. What did they do in here?

Hirut looks up. The cook's round face looms above her.

The cook's mouth begins to tremble. Why's everything a mess? She spreads her arms wide, and turns in a slow, stunned circle. She sinks to her knees and slides her hand inside the straw filling and begins to slowly pull it out, scattering the clumps. No, she is saying.

Hirut watches her stupidly, reminded of a bird she once saw, aged and thick-bodied, fall out of a tree already dead.

Why didn't you call me? The cook's mattress lies depleted across her lap. My flyer. She starts to tip to one side before she rights herself. You let them take it. You couldn't think about anyone but yourself?

Hirut turns to her and sees her clenched jaw, the rigidity of her back. She cannot understand what the cook is talking about. You can get another one. She hears the bitterness creep into her voice. He took my rifle.

It's so simple for you, isn't it? the cook says.

Both sit in silence, staring around the messy room. Over the cook's head, a wavering strand of light flickers past floating dust. There is no pool of sun that collects at her feet, like Aster. No sunshine glimmers over her shoulders, drenching her in golden light, like Kidane. She is the cook: square and stout, in her drab dress and the same stained scarf, standing in a room that still holds all she owns.

I was younger than you when I came here. The cook says this in a voice that Hirut has to lean forward to hear. My father was killed by those people who came to steal us away to work in rich houses. I saw it. She speaks with a quiet anguish. You think you're better. She pauses. But I'm stronger.

I don't, Hirut says, keeping her voice low.

I'm too useful. The cook plants her hands on her stomach and slumps. She is lost in her thoughts, still whispering in that tone that scrapes against her chest. I wasn't always like this. Look at me. She extends her arms like wings, lifts her chin.

Hirut looks at the cook's hands, the bones that are lost in all the flesh, the burns that crater her skin, the callouses she knows line her palms and are rough to the touch. Today her short fingernails are tinged yellow from turmeric, on the back of her wrist a dot of awaze, the red pepper paste gleaming like fresh blood. She woke before dawn to pack Kidane's food for his trip to recruit villagers into the army. She stayed up all night preparing the meal and filling jugs of water. She is often the first to wake and the last to sleep, working with a persistence and steadiness that Hirut has never questioned. She never considered what the cook would be, if not this.

You don't think I had a family before this. The cook reads her mind. You think I was born with these scars.

She has never heard the cook speak about the life she led before this one.

Some of us came by force, the cook adds. This war will help us go back. Berhe and I could have gone home. But now. She stops. They know everything.

Berhe said I can leave when I want.

The cook's laugh is a brief, sad sound. He said the same to me when we came here.

My father gave me that gun. Hirut turns to the wall and blinks away the tears.

The cook slides to the ground and sits next to her. In the long silence, loneliness stretches between them and draws them close.

You didn't know Berhe when he was a young man, the cook finally says. He was so proud, so strong. She picks at her nails. They dragged his father behind a horse and that man still wouldn't surrender. He refused to give them his land, so they took it and his son.

Hirut thinks back to her father's stories of the war against the Italians, the same ones who lost long ago and now want to come back. Those *ferenjoch*?

The devil has always lived in this country to torment people like me. The cook quiets and stares out of the door, toward the courtyard. The day you came, she begins softly, Aster was burning her clothes. She burned the flowers in the garden too.

Hirut nods. She remembers the barren courtyard, the charred bushes and grass. And now she remembers something else: the day she arrived, Aster met her on the veranda dressed in black.

Get her out of my house, she said to Berhe.

This is Getey and Fasil's daughter, Berhe said. She buried both of them today, she has no one left, Kidane brought her.

And Aster lifted a trembling hand to her face. Berhe, she said, is this how he intends to do this?

Kidane didn't know what to do, the cook adds. When their little boy died he was a broken man, you wouldn't believe it. Then you came and something changed. The cook shoves a twig out of the door with her foot. You can blame her for many things, but don't blame Aster for everything.



EVERY DAY, HIRUT SEARCHES FOR HER RIFLE AS SHE CLEANS. SHE goes into the sitting room and lifts the sofa. She shakes out the curtains and the rug and shifts the radio to either side. She runs a flat palm under the dining table and lifts each of the four chairs and looks underneath. She begs the cook to help lift the bags of teff and check their weight, to knock on the side of the gourd with the injera mixture. She looks in the sack of potatoes and the bag of lentils. She rustles through the rosebushes in the courtyard and the piles of hay near the horse's pen. She unstacks then restacks Berhe's neat pile of firewood at the side of the stable. She peers into the water well outside of the compound. She crawls under the veranda. She refolds all of Aster's scarves and beautiful dresses in her cupboards. Though she is not allowed in Kidane's office, she sneaks in when he leaves for his war meetings, and sweeps. She cleans thoroughly and diligently until every room sparkles, until all the silver and copper centerpieces glow like a slow-burning fire.

Aster grows tense and watches her with careful eyes. Kidane gets up and walks out whenever she enters a room. Every night the cook says: But you've cleaned these rooms already, enough. She says: They've given it to one of Kidane's recruits. She says: Berhe, make her stop. But Berhe follows her quietly when she rechecks worn paths outside the compound, an infinite sadness on his weathered face. Then one day, weeks later, he stops her at the gate and gathers her in his arms and whispers into her ear: What is lost is gone, my child, what is lost makes

room for something else. But still, she washes and dusts and polishes and sweeps and does it all again as if it had never been done, and with every new day, the dread builds:

The rifle has disappeared. It is as if it never existed. As if this life, in this house, is all that she has ever known, as if she has been no one else but this unloved girl. Soon, she will have to admit that it is nowhere. It has slipped into a crevice that can swallow girls just as easily as it devours guns. She feels herself disappearing, senses her bones softening and sliding in her skin. She wakes, feverish, convinced that invisible hands are dragging her away, and she, defenseless without a weapon, is too weak to face the enemy. I'm sorry, Abbaba, she says each night. She apologizes to her father then waits for sunlight to blaze its angry heat and burn the darkness away.

Aster's necklace: She finds it one day, tucked deep in the top drawer of Kidane's desk, that splendidly carved wooden desk now always piled high with maps and newspapers and a portrait of their son, little Tesfaye. Hirut jerks her hand out of the drawer, clutching it in her palm. It is a thick gold crucifix on a splendid chain, heavy and solid in her shaking hand. It slips out of her hold and clinks onto the floor like a bag of coins and when she snatches it up, heart pounding, something breathes in the room. She spins around: In front of her are the two chairs facing the desk, on the wall is the faded photograph of Kidane's father and another of the couple in younger days. There is the same heap of documents and newspapers that cover the surface of the desk and on top, a picture of truckloads of marching men in their abesha *libs*, and a picture of Emperor Haile Selassie peering accusingly at her. There is the same sword that leans in the same corner. Nothing has moved, but Hirut feels as if the walls are expanding and a hand stretching to snatch the necklace away, so she grips it even tighter and runs.

She buries it at the side of the stable, in a hole that she digs beneath Berhe's firewood. She continues to clean. She continues to look for the rifle. Hirut goes about her days mindful of being seen, of being

observed, of being a curious spectacle in the house that still shines from her thorough work. It is at night that she lets the change take effect, lets her heart swell with triumph, and allows herself to smile. Quietly, she pats the place beside her where the rifle once lay then she shuts her eyes and dreams of a girl standing on a mountain, gazing at her fallen enemies with the gun in her hand, victorious.



AND THEN IT is nothing, nothing at all, to take again and keep on taking. The things she takes: a yellow bead, a swatch of red silk, a golden tassel, five rubber bands, six thalers, a broken pencil, a rusted pocket-knife, a torn umbrella, a horseshoe, a small amber stone, a hand mirror, an incense burner, a delicate gold-rimmed coffee cup, an inkpad, a broken compass, a folded map, a leather-bound miniature Bible, two closed amulets, a palm-sized wooden cross, a green wool scarf, a segment of a delicate gold chain, a shiny blue stone, a fragment of soapstone, a silver-handled letter opener, a wine goblet, six matchboxes, two crushed cigarettes, an empty pillbox, a leather bracelet, a strapless watch, a horsehair fly swatter, a collapsible hand fan, an ashtray, a stack of stamped documents, two folded envelopes, a wooden cross pendant, a leather cross pendant, two silver chains, a scrap of black velvet, a spool of discarded cotton, a ball of green yarn, a bent miniature frame, a beaded necklace, a leather satchel, a glass tea cup, a gold-handled spoon, a hand-sized painting of Iyesus Cristos, a child's bracelet, a pince-nez, silver anklets, one gold earring, a black scarf with gold embroidery, binoculars, a plain black scarf, a pair of gold and ruby earrings, a matching bracelet, and a brilliant ruby ring.

She buries the items with the necklace late at night, unstacking the firewood noiselessly, then restacking it precisely. She is careful, reveling in the thrill of possession, made bold by the sudden freedom of theft. She is no longer afraid to pause at the radio while Kidane listens to announcements and speeches in a language she comes to understand

is called French. She lingers in the corridor when he talks to Aster in his office. She hears new words: League of Nations, Mussolini, Britain, Mauser, artillery, steamships. She hears him giving his wife commands as if she were his servant: Get the supplies ready, bring us enough water for three days, don't waste time on the scarves, let the other women do the knitting, tell them to get ready, it's coming soon. Hirut shoves the unnecessary details aside while listening for the name of the rifle that belonged to her father and once belonged to her: Wujjira.



WUJIGRA: ALSO KNOWN AS FUSIL GRAS. ORIGIN: FRENCH. A BOLT-action, 11mm rifle designed to deliver a single lethal shot with consistent accuracy, a hardy gun able to withstand cold and rain, repeated and rapid firing. Watch how I do this, Hirut, sit still and pay attention. Her father loads the bullet cartridge by opening the chamber. He does this by pulling back on a small handle situated toward one side of the barrel. Hirut looks at the handle. It is shiny and smooth, a silver knob as round as a full moon. Do you see this? He raises his right hand. This is the hand all good soldiers use with this gun. Hirut makes her left hand into a fist. It is the hand she is most comfortable using. It is the hand her mother is starting to tie down. She looks and sees he is right: the handle of the Wujigra does not favor left-handed fighters. So when she becomes a soldier, she thinks that day with her father, she must shoot with her right, the hand that resists when she tries to make it do anything. The left hand, her mother says, is the hand the devil uses. It is the hand a thief uses, and you are not a *leyba*. It is the hand to use for things no one should see you do, Hirut. You do not eat with it. You do nothing with this hand except for the most secret things. Hirut is too young for secrets, she is too young to be aware there are some things that should stay tucked out of reach of knowledge.

Her father raises the rifle and presses the end into the muscle between his shoulder and his upper chest. You rest it here, he says, exactly where your head goes when you fall asleep on me. He smiles. He uses his right

hand to pull the handle back. This unlocks the bolt, he says. She sees a cradle-shaped groove inside, mottled with age. This is where the bullet goes. Her father holds the bullet between two fingers. When the barrel is opened, he says, you insert it, like this, into the chamber. He slides the handle and it locks the bolt. He lifts the rifle and his voice changes. It grows deep and it wavers as he tells her, You look until you can see your enemy through this space. He taps a finger on a small metal point farther up on the barrel. He brings his finger to the base of the gun, where there is a resting place for it. This is the trigger, Hirut. He does not sound the same. He does not sound like her father. When he looks at her, it is as if he is not looking at her. His face is collapsing around the eyes and she sees that he pretends to squint to hide it. This, he says, you do not touch unless you are prepared. Prepared for what, she asks. He slips the bullet back into his pocket. Prepared to be something you are not.