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Chapter 1

Exile

THE YEAR 1964 was a turbulent one. The eyes of the world were on Leonid Brezhnev as he assumed leadership of the Soviet Union, and on Lyndon Johnson as he escalated U.S. support to South Vietnam. While the newsmakers focused on the cold war, the Beatles "invaded" the States on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The Western world, busy with other concerns, was barely aware of the unrest sweeping the African continent.

Colonial rule was ending for many African nations, and several African states gained their independence from European control. Rival factions seeking to gain power created tensions in many regions, sparking military confrontations and ethnic conflict. Corruption and violence were commonplace as each group promoted its own self-interest.

Sudan, the largest country in Africa, had been "liberated" from Great Britain ten years prior, and was still in political turmoil. The northern region of Sudan was predominantly Arab and Muslim, while the southern region was mainly African and Christian. Under British rule, religious and ethnic differences had been controlled by carefully isolating the northern and southern regions from one another.

The English government, growing ever more sensitive to Arab criticism of their management of the "southern problem," made a disastrous decision as they withdrew their colonial administration. Even though they knew that northern and southern regions were fundamentally incompatible, they determined that the whole of Sudan should be governed as one country. And so, Great Britain handed over the reins of leadership to the northern Arabs.

Predictably, the new regime replaced several hundred British colonial officials with northern Muslims. Violence erupted as the southerners rebelled, and the two regions of the new independent republic were plunged into conflict. Outnumbered, the southern freedom fighters were no match for the guerilla-style warfare of the northern Arabs.

The Muslim leader General Ibrahim Abboud, hoping to cut off the spread of Christianity, expelled all of the Western missionaries. It was the prelude to increased persecution of anyone who refused to convert to Islam.

This was the violent world into which I was born.

Refugee Days

My mother delivered me beneath the spreading branches of a tree, with only the help of a midwife. I was the seventh among twelve siblings—five boys and seven girls. One of my sisters and two of my brothers died in infancy.

Our home was in the small village of Moli on the eastern bank of the Nile River in the equatorial district. My parents, Ajjugo and Anna Levi, were messianic Hebrews of the tribe of Levi, the son of Jacob to whom the hereditary priesthood had been entrusted.

In 1965, a year after my birth, the situation in Sudan became increasingly unstable. The war escalated and spread from the larger population centers out into the countryside. No one was safe. Our future was uncertain. Churches were burned, schools closed, and crops destroyed. The parents in our community feared for the safety of their families, and many people determined to escape from southern Sudan across the border into Uganda. Late that year, my parents decided that the time had come to leave their beloved homeland. With heavy hearts, they set about the difficult task of moving to Uganda.

The trip was perilous. The country of Sudan is nearly one million square miles, about the size of western Europe. Unlike Europe, however, there was no infrastructure in place across the vast interior—no roads to travel and no means of transportation. Families, often with several small children, were forced to hike the African wilderness on foot for hundreds of miles, struggling to cross rapid rivers

and to avoid predators—both animal and human. Older children helped to carry younger ones over the treacherous terrain. My parents trusted that God would be with us, just as He had been with the Israelites as they wandered through the wilderness so long ago.

I do not remember the trip to Uganda, but I do know that God was faithful to my family. We were able to settle temporarily in Atyak, in northern Uganda. Although safe from the war in Sudan, things were nonetheless difficult. We did not speak the Ugandan language, and the culture and environment were foreign to us.

The United Nations descended on the country to set up refugee camps for the Sudanese people. My parents, however, were suspicious and did not wish to be detained in any sort of camp. Sudan's civil war had stirred up the specter of slavery, and my father did not want us to become victims. My family had firsthand knowledge of slave-raiding Arabs who kidnapped African children and sold them into bondage. Arab slavers had murdered my great-grandfather; and his wife, my great-grandmother, was taken as a slave. She was pregnant at the time with my grandfather, Karan Levi, and she was determined that her child would be free. Emboldened by her faith, she made a daring escape just in time to deliver a healthy baby boy.

The British had outlawed the practice of slave raiding, but the Islamists imposed no such restrictions. The large groups of Africans who huddled helplessly in refugee camps provided irresistible tar-

gets for kidnapping, mass murder, and other abuses. My parents refused to live in such a vulnerable situation, so they decided to settle in the small village of Abalo Kodi, in Atyak, Uganda. My father had an uncle who had moved to Abalo Kodi many years prior, and it was good to know someone in the new land.

My first memories as a child are those of growing up as a refugee in Uganda, but I didn't think of myself as a "refugee" because my parents provided us with the stability of their love and worked hard to build a home for us without the help of the UN camps. I knew that I had been born in the Sudan, and that our family would return there someday. But I didn't know how distant that day would be. For nearly ten years, our family would have to make the best of a bad situation.

Pillars of Strength

My parents were farmers, hardworking and industrious. But the land in the Abalo Kodi region was not fertile, and the population was too dense. The overcrowding brought about by the refugee crisis made the area untenable for long-term living. There was simply no way to grow the food necessary to support a family.

My parents were soon forced to move on, trusting God to provide a place for us. With fervent prayer and careful inquiry, my father learned of a region near Mount Ambuluwa, where the soil was virgin and unspoiled, an ideal area for growing crops. So, we set off into the untamed Ugandan wilderness,

away from the safety of Abalo Kodi, with nothing but willpower and strong faith to sustain us.

My father's name, Ajjugo, meant "pillar" in our native tongue, and it was prophetic of his character. He was strong, tall, and upright. Although he had no formal education, he was a master farmer and builder. He was also a strong spiritual leader, and his opinion was well regarded in the community.

My mother, Anna, was his partner in everything, and she completed him in every way. She had an inner beauty that radiated through her life and in her actions. Mama was gracious, hospitable, and tough —she and my father made a great team. Mother was not afraid of settling in the Ugandan wilderness.

God blessed me with two wonderful parents, and I loved them very much. I still cherish my first memories of my parents working together to open the wilderness, building a home and a productive farm with nothing but sweat and prayers. And it was a beautiful home. It was as if God had re-created the garden of Eden right there in Uganda. Every type of animal and plant flourished in the unspoiled jungle.

We built our home atop a hill beside a huge tamarind tree. This leafy giant grew to over fifty feet tall, and its pretty yellow flowers gave way in season to a wild edible fruit. I remember that its broad boughs provided a dense shade, suitable for family gatherings away from the hot equatorial sun. Tamarind fruit, called *iti* in the Madi tongue, changes from green to brown when it is ripe; and the juicy flesh is both sugary and sour. I loved to peel away the fibrous brown pod and suck out the juice, spit-

ting out the seeds as I ate. Mama knew it was an excellent source of vitamins, and she used it to flavor porridge and also for medicinal purposes.

When work was done, I learned to climb in the sturdy limbs of our tamarind tree. My brothers and sisters could play hide-and-seek among the green branches. Sometimes we would even climb to the top to get a better view if we heard an airplane fly overhead. Living next to that tree was like living next to a park—complete with a playground and a free picnic basket. It kept us younger children busy while Mother and Father set about the serious business of home construction.

Building a home with no nails, materials, or power tools is a skill passed down from father to son. I remember watching my father select the proper trees to build our new home. The dense tropical forest was rich with trees, reeds, bamboo, and herbs to be used in the building process.

"How about this tree, Father?" I asked, pointing out a sturdy-looking trunk. Father smiled and reached out to strip away a portion of the bark. Every part of life was an opportunity to teach, and Father was preparing a lesson for me.

"Fine-looking bark, isn't it?" he said as he peeled away the loose outer layer. "People tend to judge by appearances, but God looks upon our hearts."

As the bark was loosened and fell away, I could see the telltale burrow marks of insect infestation. The tree was rotten inside!

"When you build your house, Son, be sure to use the type of wood that will stand the test of time. If

you don't, it will collapse and you will be right back where you started."

I watched with fascination as Father selected and cut the finest wood and reeds from the richness of the forest. When the materials were assembled, the process of construction could begin.

With no nails and limited tools available, wood was lashed together with rope that was knotted and wrapped in a special way. My elder brother Michael (called *Odu*) and I were eager to learn how. I tied and wrapped with great care, imitating my Father's experienced style.

"Is this the right way?" I asked. I was anxious to be helpful, but another lesson was on its way.

Father scrutinized my rope work with care. Finally, he shook his head. "You must follow the method I teach you," he said. "If you do not, the house will collapse."

Patiently, he demonstrated the proper lashing technique again, until I was able to master it.

As the wooden frame progressed, we prepared an adhesive for the walls of the house, using mud and herbs to form a sticky plaster. Soon, a sturdy frame house was standing. The last part of home building involved raising the roof. This was a crucial process for the integrity of the house, and we were careful to weave tight mats of bamboo to keep the weather out.

While our home was being built, my parents did not neglect the planting of food. When my father had said the land near Ambuluwa Mountain was unspoiled, he was understating the truth. The land

was so fertile that plants seemed to spring to life wherever seed touched earth. When we first moved into the wilderness, we had nothing but some provisions that we had carried from my uncle's village. It wasn't long, though, before we were truly self-sufficient. I can't remember a time when we didn't have plenty of fresh, delicious food provided for us from God's bounty.

We drank from running streams. There was no pollution. Birds and animals of all kinds, such as ostriches, giraffes, leopards, elephants, buffalo, and many others inhabited the forest. The work was very hard, but the land rewarded our efforts lavishly.

We were a happy family. Though we were refugees driven from our true homeland by war, we did not live as oppressed people. My parents protected us from that. We just knew that we were temporarily living in another land. My parents would often talk about going home to southern Sudan someday.

Putting Down Stakes

By the time we were settled in our wilderness home, all of our relatives were scattered throughout Uganda. My maternal grandfather, Rabbi Vuni, left with his remaining family to settle in Gulu. We were unable to maintain contact with them during this time of political chaos, but we did find out later that Grandfather built and pastored a church in Gulu. He sent two of my uncles, Abednego and Niklaus, to study at a seminary in Nairobi, Kenya.

In the Ugandan wilderness, we knew nothing of going to church. But we came to realize that we were part of the body of Christ. My parents taught us about God and told us stories from the Bible. Our home was always open for fellowship and prayer. The great tamarind tree became a sort of outdoor chapel where we all would gather to sing and worship. We had no money, so we joyfully brought the firstfruits of all our labor as an offering to the Lord. In keeping with our Hebrew heritage, we never failed to remember the traditional feasts and holidays. We were so thankful for God's provision of a refuge for our family.

Soon, several Christian friends of ours from South Sudan began to hear of the little village that my father had started, and they came with their whole families to join us. Little by little, our tamarind tree covered a congregation. Over time, with many hands to help, the work of plowing fields and raising roofs became lighter. Eventually, we had a flourishing community with men to build silos and women to weed the gardens and children to grow up together.

We called our new village Ambuluwa. Our home was no longer a wilderness.