

A DOUBLE-EDGED INHERITANCE

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Shiromeda

Meskerem didn't believe in fate. Fate was one of those silly things her Orthodox aunts whispered about in their singsong voices, starry-eyed and full of desperate, ill-advised hope for something, anything. Fate was for people who had abandoned control, the last refuge of the weak and uninspired. Fate was for women who didn't know any better.

So when the call came from back home that the aunt who had named her—the great-aunt who shared her birthday—had died, she felt no grand cosmic realignment, only a churning grief, the kind that empties out your stomach and makes unseasoned mincemeat of its remains.

Almaz had loved Meskerem with a kind of uncommon, unreasonable fervor that bordered on desperation. From the moment she first learned of her youngest niece's pregnancy, the stern woman had softened her heart for the child no one else wanted. This child would be born into blame; this child would need protection.

The whole family had recoiled in performative horror as news of Tigist Negash's pregnancy snaked through their networks. Tigist, the youngest and brightest of seven girls, was the beacon on whom all their hopes had rested. She'd received the highest marks in her class at Kidane Mehret, a future engineer

whose first semester at Addis Ababa University had been so impressive that her professors called her mother on several occasions to insist she consider sending Tigist abroad to continue her studies.

It was Tigist who had turned their offers down with a sudden, furious anger. The flash in her eyes was quiet, a lightning-fast break from the pools of warmth with which she normally saw the world. She didn't want to leave—Addis Ababa was home. What could exist beyond it? She hardly left Amist Kilo. Quiet and pious, Tigist spent all her time studying or following her *emaye*.

Until, of course, she met Robel.

Robel Girma smelled like whiskey and freshly printed birr. It was nauseating at first, his scent so strong it knocked Tigist off balance when their shoulders bumped against each other in Shiro Meda one early *kremt* day.

“*Yekirta, ehitey,*” he'd whispered through a crooked grin that sent her head spinning. He reached down to help her up, gold rings on three of his calloused fingers. “*Asamemkush? Be shai le'adenish?*”

She'd been shopping for *gabis* that morning, nervous about her first night in university housing. Her oldest sister had moved back home after her husband's disappearance, carrying two children with a bad back and a broken spirit. Tigist's room in their mother's house soon became the children's playground, their constant tugs at her *netela* a consistent interruption to her strict studying regimen. But still, she loved them. And so she planned to spend more time on campus, burrowed in the libraries. That would have to do.

Almaz was a literature professor at her niece's university, a stoic career woman who lived alone in an apartment tucked between Siddist Kilo and embassy row. Sharp and poetic, she

prided herself on her pragmatism—even and especially when others told her she didn't behave like an Ethiopian woman should. Almaz wanted Tigist to take her professors' advice and leave; she didn't understand why a bright young girl would want to stay in Addis tending to her family when the world was calling. Almaz had never taken much interest in her nieces and nephews, but she found housing on campus for Tigist the moment she heard the girl insisted on staying in Addis Ababa.

"Don't thank me," Almaz had said, less a demure platitude and more an agitated demand. "Please, *ebakesh*, just meet people who do not live inside your books or your mother's house."

Tigist had been thinking about her aunt's directive as she shopped for *gabis*, pressing them against her face. They smelled strange and dirty, unlike the *gabis* her mother had washed meticulously each season. None of them were soft enough; none of them felt like home.

When Robel Girma bumped into her, Tigist Negash stopped thinking of home.

Girma Woldemariam never wanted his son running around with some common girl in the first place.

Girma was the Ethiopian army's most respected general, and he had a reputation to uphold. Robel could spin lies to these college girls all he wanted, but the oldest Girma son did not have time for romance—and he certainly couldn't be seen walking around Siddist Kilo with his hands intertwined with some girl from a *balager* family no one could name. Robel had business to attend to: his final year of law school was coming to an end, and his father wanted him to spend more time accompanying him to work. His path had been forged for him, and all the ungrateful brat had to do was show up.

All he had to do was stay away from distractions.

When Tigist told Robel she felt sick, fingers fidgeting in her lap as she sat across a table from him at Enrico's, he joked that the cake must have gotten to her. She shouldn't have eaten it during *tsom* anyway, he insisted, before noticing a quick flash in her eyes.

"Are you sure?" he asked quietly, the words hanging in the thick air between them. He didn't bother repeating himself. He knew.

Girma smelled the fear on his son the moment Robel walked into his office the next morning.

"What did you do?" the general barked, pushing Robel into the carvings in the oak door that listed his military honors in Ge'ez.

Robel shrank, his voice cracking as he tried to relay the information. His head spinning, he explained how the girl had come to feel like home. He wanted to do this right, he insisted, eyes trained on the floor.

"I love her," he whispered, his attention suddenly turned to the row of rifles hanging above his father's desk. They shone with a menacing gleam, crafted to be beautiful even in their violent precision. Robel gulped as the last word escaped his lips, a foolhardy attempt at pulling it back into himself.

Girma laughed, a throaty snarl that rose from the pit of his stomach. Spitting at his son's feet, he growled two words, each its own sentence: "Fix. It."

Turning to walk away from the trembling young man before him, the general mumbled something in Amharic through gritted teeth. Reeling from the encounter, Robel could hardly hear what escaped his father's lips, but he didn't need to.

"Or else I will."

When Tigist woke up in Tikur Anbessa Hospital a week later, her nurse did not address her. Instead, she turned to Almaz, who was reading Baldwin with heavy eyelids in a wooden chair beside her niece's reclining bed.

"She's awake," the nurse announced plainly, meeting neither the woman's eyes nor Tigist's. "Maybe she'll talk now."

Almaz had been sitting in the cold room with her niece for seventeen hours. Each second had felt longer than the last, but she didn't dare sleep. The thin girl lying in the bed looked more fragile than Almaz had ever seen her. She was gaunt, broken. With her body a maze of tubes and plaster, Tigist was lucky to be alive. The doctors had regarded Almaz with concerned eyes when they asked about her niece: Who would want to hurt someone so young, with eyes so warm? What could she have done to earn a beating reserved for prisoners of war?

"*Teseberech*," Almaz heard herself telling Tigist's mother when she could finally access the phone in the hospital's gray-ing lobby. "She fell down the stairs on campus. I am here with her now. The doctors said not to worry."

Before racing back toward Tigist's room, Almaz spun a toothless lie she knew her sister would not question until the girl recovered. "She was racing to class. *Beka*, she missed a step and so she fell. That's all.

"I'll pay for it," she'd added before hanging up abruptly as she caught sight of the clock. Tigist might be awake now, and Almaz had no time to argue with the girl's mother over money she knew her sister did not have. Tigist needed her aunt; everything else could wait.

"Tigist? Can you hear me? Almaz *negn*," she offered tentatively when the girl's eyes first opened. "You . . . you fell, *lijey*. But you will be okay."

The girl tried to move toward her aunt, but the IV yanked her back. Eyes bloodshot and filled with tears, she strained to move a bruised hand toward her stomach. Her breathing quickened, her body tensing. Turning her gaze downward, Tigist whispered: "They can take me, but not my baby."

She couldn't lose this baby, not to the swarm of uniformed men who'd descended upon her. She blinked back tears as images of their terrifying grins played themselves back on an infinite loop.

"*Babiye!*" she'd screamed as the first man pinned her arms back so another could kick her so viciously that she lost consciousness. The word came back to Tigist as a whisper now. "*Babiye.*"

Almaz sighed. "Why didn't you tell me? We could've fixed it. This would never have happened."

Almaz had known her niece was gallivanting around the city with some general's son. She'd warned the girl not to get too close. Powerful men were dangerous, their lust for dominion more potent than any love they might claim to feel for a woman. Powerful men enchanted easily, but their affections waned with all the grace of poison.

By the time Almaz saw the two of them together, waltzing around Shiro Meda in search of a second *gabi* for Robel's room, she knew it was too late. This boy, half teeth and half arrogance, had gotten under her niece's skin.

It did not matter to the girl that the boy's father was a man whom her aunt spoke of only in hushed tones. Almaz had called her that evening, whispering into a pay phone near Meskel Adebabay with fearful contempt: "The only thing that boy's father loves more than his son is his power, Tigist. Do not stand in his way; you will be trampled."

The memory of those words filled the space between Al-

maz and Tigist for hours, the silence punctuated only by the staccato beeps of the machines attached to the girl's body.

Robel had never defied his father before. Mischievous as he was, the boy had never transgressed beyond disobeying orders regarding his schoolwork or telling white lies about khat.

But when Robel ran up three flights of stairs at Tikur Anbessa and saw the girl he loved fighting for two lives Girma had tried to extinguish, his resolve ossified. He didn't want to walk in his father's footsteps if it meant this.

Breathless and full of youthful indignation, he laid his head in Tigist's lap as she slept. Terrified, Robel had waited behind the hospital until he saw Almaz leave. She'd stormed out of the hospital after Tigist had fallen asleep, presumably to tell her superiors at the university that she would not be teaching class the rest of the week.

In Almaz's absence, Robel cried thick, heavy tears into Tigist's lap. He pressed his head against her stomach, praying for some sign of life as he knelt against the edge of her bed. The girl looked gray now, her skin purple in places where he'd once worshipped its brown richness.

His face a gnarled mess of tears and shame, Robel did not move when he heard Almaz's footsteps approach. He knew she would be enraged at the sight of him. He knew she had a right to be. Still, even the jolt of her heel nearly puncturing his thigh could not match the blunt force of the words Almaz flung at him upon seeing that he'd sneaked his way into Tigist's room.

"How dare you touch her? Her blood is on your hands already!" the woman heaved at him as the girl lay sleeping. "The best thing you can do for her is forget about her. May you and your father carry the shame of your sin until Satan calls you both home!"

Robel whimpered. Wiping tears from his face with scratched, ashen hands, he made a simple plea: “Let me fix it. Let me keep her safe. I will sacrifice my happiness to keep her alive.”

When Tigist landed in Washington, DC, she asked the first Ethiopian cabdriver she saw if she could use his cell phone to call Almaz.

The rest of the family had stopped speaking to her, content to pretend the foolish pregnant girl now leaving for America had never existed at all. The days preceding Tigist’s flight all seemed like a blur now. Only one thing stood out to her amid the dizzying sequence of packing, pain medication, and rushed goodbyes: Robel had never called.

Dialing Almaz’s number as the cabdriver smiled at her for two seconds too long, Tigist wished more than anything that she could apply her family’s miraculous power of memory erasure to Robel. If it weren’t for Robel, she wouldn’t be standing here alone, cold and vulnerable. If it weren’t Robel, she would still be home.

When her daughter was born months later, Tigist again called Almaz. “She came early,” Tigist said simply, looking down at the child whose eyes already mirrored her own.

The baby had not been due for another four weeks, but Almaz smiled when she got the call in the late-night hours of September 11. “*Meskerem ahnd, ende!*” she’d laughed. “*Ye Meskerem lij naht,*” she mused before the line disconnected. “*Ye Meskerem lij.*”

Exhausted and alone, Tigist resolved then that she’d never tell this dangerous miracle of a child about her father. *Girls are already born into a world of heartbreak,* Tigist reflected. *It’s best not to saddle this new life, this new year, with details of the pain that runs through her blood.*

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Meskerem was a brilliant, preternaturally insightful child. As a result of her mother's sacrifices and her great-aunt's blessings, she grew up with the two women raising her from opposite sides of the Atlantic. Their love buoyed her through childhood and adolescence, their faith in her a guiding light.

Meskerem didn't learn that her great-aunt shared her birthday until her sophomore year of college. Tasked with writing about a woman who inspired her, Tigist's only child chose to call Almaz, the woman who had carried them both. Almaz comforted Meskerem when the girl asked why God had let her mother die alone in a car accident while she had been away taking classes earlier that year. Almaz told Meskerem story after story of Tigist's engineering brilliance and the family's hopes for her education. Their calls lasted hours, each one longer than the last. Meskerem delighted in learning more about her family, even if her great-aunt had no answers about the death of her father. It was the only balm she had, the only time she didn't feel alone.

Talking to Almaz made things make sense for the first time in Meskerem's life. The quiet, sullen young woman smiled a little easier. She walked into class feeling more excited than bored. Still, when all her classmates spoke passionately about their aspirations to embody the spirits of women like Eleanor Roosevelt and Susan B. Anthony, Meskerem suppressed the urge to laugh. She had learned of bravery and brilliance that made these women pale in comparison, and she couldn't wait to overshadow their foolhardy presentations.

Standing in the front of the lecture hall wearing only black, except for the yellow Meskel flower pin attached to her combat boots, Meskerem presented the details of her research: a woman named Almaz Gessesse had been born into

a poor family in Addis Ababa and became a prominent literature professor; a woman named Almaz Gessesse had found a way for Meskerem's mother to come to America after her husband had died mysteriously (in the war?); a woman named Almaz Gessesse had come all the way to America to hold her after her mother died in a car accident; a woman named Almaz Gessesse had named her after the month in which they were both born.

Meskerem was working on her doctoral thesis when the news came of Almaz's death several years later. Exhausted and angry, she'd yelled at her boyfriend for waking her from a much-needed nap just to answer a phone call.

She saw the +251 pop up on her Viber app and immediately sat up in bed, her whole body an electrical current. Why would someone whose number she didn't have be calling from Ethiopia? She hadn't been back in years—she only spoke to Almaz.

A solemn voice asked for Meskerem Negash, then said simply, "Almaz is gone."

The last time Meskerem had been in Addis Ababa, she'd stayed with Almaz the whole summer. She was young then, a voracious reader about to start high school. She spent weeks cooped up in Almaz's small apartment near Addis Ababa University, reading Baldwin and Fitzgerald and the Brontës. She'd accompanied Almaz to campus and sat in the back of the classroom while the professor taught, eagerly absorbing new phrases in Amharic. After class, Meskerem would beg Almaz to quiz her on the material she'd learned.

The two of them walked through Shiro Meda together for hours, buying whatever they pleased. It had been their first destination the morning after Meskerem's first night in Al-

maz's apartment, when the visiting child had woken up shivering. Almaz had laughed at the American girl for being so cold in such light *kremt*. "Isn't it freezing in your country?" she'd joked before suggesting the two take a trip to the market to grab another *gabi*. Meskerem had never been so excited to shop.

The chaos of Shiro Meda calmed Meskerem in a way she couldn't explain, even to Almaz. She wanted to lose herself in its alleyways, let herself become anonymous amid a sea of people focused on anything but her. The road felt endless to her, the paths themselves as plentiful as the bounty sold there.

Yet during this trip, Shiro Meda felt like a cage. Even as the sun shone on her shoulders, Meskerem felt cold. She'd walked from Almaz's apartment all the way to Shiro Meda in search of a distraction from the upcoming funeral processions, headphones in her ears. This place wasn't home without Almaz. When she finally reached the market, she was horrified. Where was the charm she'd romanticized all these years? Before she'd seen freedom and excitement, whereas now she saw only the bleak repetition of commerce. Vendors seemed sinister, shoppers selfish to the point of revulsion.

Meskerem walked toward the first seller whose makeshift booth held a selection of *gabias*. Dust and sun in her face, she tried to force a smile on her face when she made eye contact with the vendor. He stared back at her with a mixture of pity and irritation.

"What do you want?" he asked roughly as she stood silent in front of his display. She walked away, unsure if he'd even been asking about merchandise.

With Almaz's favorite songs blaring in her headphones, Meskerem was the last person to notice the general approaching. Shiro Meda had slowed from its usual frenetic pace, shop-

keepers and tourists alike pausing to marvel at the tall man with the stunning smile.

“General Girma!” a child squeaked as he raised his hand in salute, running into the middle of the road. His mother scooped him out of the way moments later, and the general looked straight through them both.

General Robel Girma had not been to Shiro Meda in years. Shiro Meda was for poor tourists and even poorer locals, he’d told his son Elias. But today was different. Today he had learned of Almaz Gessesse’s death. Today he was thinking of Tigist. Eyes fighting back tears behind his reflective aviators, the general walked down the road with determination.

When all 6'1" of him barreled into a young woman and sent her careening onto the ground, the general didn’t apologize. He was not a man who apologized. He simply adjusted his sunglasses and kept walking.

But the girl caught up to him a moment later, pushing his shoulder from behind. The shock prompted him to remove his sunglasses as he spun around to face her, forgetting for a moment that his eyes betrayed the very anguish that had brought him to Shiro Meda that day.

Meskerem opened her mouth to chastise the gruff man who’d knocked into her. She didn’t care that he was in uniform. She did not owe some soldier her loyalty; she certainly did not owe him the skin on her knees. He turned to face her, and she was certain in the split second between her push and his pivot that he would hit her.

Robel did not hit the girl who’d pushed him. He grabbed her face with his calloused hand, rings imprinting themselves into her cheek, the second he saw her eyes. They were warm, sad. They went on for days.

They looked so familiar.

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The next time Meskerem went to Shiro Meda, she needed gifts to send back to America.

She'd promised her boyfriend she would return after taking care of Almaz's funeral, but weeks later the thought of leaving her great-aunt's flat caused her anguish. She could hear the irritation bubbling up in John's voice every time he asked why her trip had been extended a week, and then another week, and then another. She missed him, but John would have to wait. She hoped a set of paintings from back home, maybe some jewelry or a *netela* for his mother, would help ease his anxieties. Day after day she went to Shiro Meda, telling herself she'd keep going until she found the perfect gifts to make up for her absence.

Most days, Meskerem just walked to the market. Passing the campus where her mother had studied and her great-aunt had taught became a soothing ritual, a way to bide the time while she delayed her trip back to America. Each day, new people greeted her along the road, but it was the familiar faces who punctuated her path. When she walked past the embassies, important-looking men took stock of her all-black attire and asked who she'd lost. She didn't know where to start, so she'd laugh and tell them, "No one."

One morning, Meskerem sacrificed this curious anonymity for something even more peculiar: a sense of direction. The general came to pick her up in his truck, having promised to steer her toward the things she needed to see. In the weeks leading up to Genna, the market was even more busy than usual. Diaspora returnees with stories less tragic than Meskerem's flooded its streets with their fast-paced strutting and their embarrassing Amharigna. A group of them gawked at her as she hopped out of a military truck they'd only seen

in movies. Shopkeepers stared as she stood next to the man who'd been driving: she was General Robel Girma's daughter, and she was no longer a secret.

Chickens ran around her ankles, and Meskerem laughed. This wasn't quite home, but it was something like it. The general (she couldn't bring herself to call him "Dad," not after all these years) picked out some housewares and "manly" art for John ("*Habesha aydelem?*" he asked, raising his eyebrows. Meskerem raised hers back; the general wasn't allowed to ask those questions yet). He insisted on paying for the gifts then and later for pastries from Enrico's, and Meskerem protested only once in the grateful, facetious way all Ethiopian children do.

Meskerem walked back into Almaz's apartment that afternoon feeling lighter. She placed John's gifts in a drawer near Almaz's bed, taking care not to upset the balance of the dresser's contents. She wanted to leave before Genna, she decided. She'd already missed Christmas with John in the US, and the prospect of bypassing the awkwardness of the Ethiopian holiday by going back to the States seemed perfect. The general was friendly, but he was not yet family. Leaving would be for the best. It would be like Christmas had never come at all.

She nodded to herself, pacing around the bedroom after grabbing her laptop. Yes, this was right. She would head to the nearest Internet café and buy her ticket now before having dinner at the general's home. It would be easier that way, to let go of all the pleasantries at once. There would be no fight over how long she should stay, no obligatory suggestions that she and his other children get to know each other.

Meskerem had settled into the kitchen easily, cooking herself *shiro* and *kik alicha* almost nightly. The bedroom had taken longer; for the first four nights, she'd slept on the love

seat in the living room. When her neck protested violently, she conceded, eventually rummaging through Almaz's closet in search of the outfits that most reminded her of the woman whose spirit still moved through the space. But it had taken weeks for Meskerem to let herself open the door to Almaz's office—the space felt sacred, like the source of her brilliance. She knew it was the space her great-aunt had cherished most.

Meskerem opened the door slowly, like she might still be caught. She walked to the bookshelf instinctively, hands grazing the spines of the books she'd read here as a teenager and the many that had been added in the time since. Pausing to sit at Almaz's desk for a moment and let the scent of their pages wash over her, Meskerem noticed a thick piece of paper sticking out of the same Baldwin novel Almaz read every year. Almaz had treated *Giovanni's Room* with more tenderness than she treated most humans; Meskerem knew she would never shove a random paper into its pages so carelessly.

Pulling it out slowly, Meskerem braced herself for what she immediately sensed would be something she shouldn't see: *WE WILL FIND HER THERE. WE WILL FINISH WHAT WE STARTED.*

Meskerem stared at the thick, torn sheet. She turned it over, searching for any sign of its origin. The script itself was nondescript, the English letters resembling *fidel* in the way every Ethiopian's handwriting did. Sighing to herself and unsure of what to do, she stuffed the sheet into her pocket and ran out the door.

The general lived in a massive house near the American embassy, the kind that dwarfed all buildings in its immediate area, not for practicality, but to make a statement. When she was younger, Meskerem had walked past these houses and

scoffed at the arrogance of the people she'd imagined living inside their walls. What kind of people built monuments to their own grandeur?

Meskerem had been uncertain what to wear for dinner, but she knew nothing she'd packed was right. She had no intention of wearing any color other than black, so she settled for the same black jeans she'd worn earlier that day at Shiro Meda. They still smelled of dust, chickens, and children. She grabbed a top from Almaz's closet, a blouse she'd always loved. It still smelled of Almaz's perfume. Dior.

The family was pleasant enough. The general's wife didn't seem to have a name or many original thoughts. His son, Elias, stared at her from across the table, asking repeatedly why she didn't play video games. He did not call her "Sister," and for that she was eternally grateful.

When the house staff cleared up after dessert and the general's wife retired to her parlor, Meskerem asked to see her father's office.

The two walked the two-kilometer path talking mostly about why she still smelled of the market. She may not have been ready to call him "Father" yet, he insisted, but surely she could at least try to act like a general's daughter. The thought bothered her, but Meskerem tried to laugh anyway. The sound of her ambivalent chuckle reverberated off the trees lining the road.

"I think John will really like the *jebena*," she offered. "I don't make coffee, but he loves it. I told him about it before I came to dinner, and he sounded so happy," she said, unsure of what compelled her to add a lie.

The general was pleased to hear his suggestion would be adored, even if it was by a man he'd never met. He reveled in the feeling of being needed somehow. When he opened the

door to his office, he offered Meskerem some whiskey. Turning away from her for a moment, he walked toward his desk to pour from the decanter he saved for special guests.

“Usually this is for diplomats. Or colonels. Sometimes kings even,” he said, back still turned. Meskerem stared at him in this environment, suddenly struck by how harsh his consonants sounded when they echoed among all the oak. The door was so heavy, the chairs so tall. She didn’t belong here.

As the general moved toward her, Meskerem slipped her hand in the pocket of her jeans and pulled out the piece of paper.

“Do . . . do you know what this means?” she stammered, shoving the sheet toward his face, filled with rage.

The force of her movement caught him off balance, and he fell to the floor. His glass crashed down with him, shards embedding into his palm as the whiskey mixed with his blood. Meskerem screamed at the sight of the blood, then started to crouch toward him until she saw the look in his eyes.

He knew. He had to know. He’d known all this time, and he’d never called after her. He’d known all this time, and he’d never stopped any of it.

Pressing down on his palm to extract the glass, Robel started to choke on his own words. They came tumbling out rapidly, his heaves interspersed with thick tears that only served to intensify Meskerem’s anger. She hovered above him as the general told her everything, her body shaking. Robel’s blood seeped into the paper as he spoke of his father’s threats, and she snatched the sheet out of his hand. Turning toward the door, she noticed Girma’s name carved into the oak frame. This had been his office too. This is where he had made the decision. This is where her mother’s life had been wagered.

She knew then that they could never coexist, that the general had a debt to pay.

Robel tried to steady himself and stand again, calling after her. “*Babiye*,” he whimpered, stumbling as he rested one palm against the desk where his father had drawn up the plans to have Tigist killed.

“*Babiye*,” he repeated, finally resting his weight against the desk where he’d begged for her life to be spared, for the baby to live.

“*Benatish*,” he whispered, stretching the bloody palm out to touch her shoulder.

She turned to face him quickly, her body moving with an untrained agility more frightening than his own.

Meskerem’s eyes were the last thing Robel saw before she reached the last rifle Girma had left him. They were warm, sad.

They looked so familiar.