



## Desta and the Great Mystery

**Getty Ambau**

Icon Press International

(354pp)

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*Desta and the Great Mystery is a bridge novel in an ongoing fantasy series in which a student on a spiritual mission reflects on the differences between cultures.*

In Getty Ambau's fantasy novel *Desta and the Great Mystery*, a shepherd who's studying abroad searches for the second of two ancient coins.

Desta, an Ethiopian student, gives up medical school in Bulgaria and makes his way to New York to attend Lincoln College and better his chances of being accepted at an Ivy League school. Then, on a camping trip with his friend David, Desta meets the Great Mystery, a spiritual guide. However, the search for the second coin is delayed: school is Desta's focus in this volume.

Once school starts, Desta is consumed by cross-country running; after vigorous training, he wins the state championship. He also bonds with his host family, the Johnsons, during their quintessential Christmas break in a cabin and learns that he has a gift for skiing too. Because of his athletic prowess, Desta is given a full scholarship. He ends up planning for his next school year at Princeton University.

The fantasy elements are in the background of this series novel, which does not function well as a standalone, though it does culminate with a return to its quest focus. In time, Desta is told that the coin he seeks is with an underground group and that they also want the coin already in Desta's possession. After racing through underground tunnels, he has a brief encounter with the power-hungry group too.

Presuming previous series familiarity, this volume is also light on character development and vivifying details. It has wish-fulfillment elements that impede investment in its storyline, as with the copious number of gifts that Desta receives to help him, in the form of both money and convenient information. When it comes to the coins, the stakes are low; indeed, in this text, the stakes are the highest when it comes to Desta's cross-country training and pursuit of an athletic scholarship. Even his education is in the book's background, with mentions of his high grade point average and minor struggles in English.

Inconsistencies arise in tone and with details, as when it comes to Desta's transfer status and acceptance to Princeton. Further, the information that Desta gains related to the second coin is not the result of much effort on his part; luck, random passersby, spiritual guides, and the Johnsons (who treat Desta as a source of inspiration) exhibit more agency than Desta does on the topic, making related developments feel underwhelming. And characters' exchanges are too expository and stilted throughout, while Desta's reflections on American life and the differences between cultures sometimes feel forced. He makes note of the ways people eat, dress, and view love and intimacy, and there are some distractions involved, as with the book's gratuitous and moralizing masturbation scenes.

A series entry that reflects on differences between cultures, *Destia and the Great Mystery* is a bridge novel in a fantasy series, laying the groundwork for its hero's forthcoming mission.

STERLING HOOKER (June 26, 2024)

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