

*(A small town market in the West African Savannah. Time - the present. In the background the noise of traffic and market sounds. SUNJATA, a disabled beggar is sitting on a little cart)*

**SUNJATA** Alms for the love of God! Alms for the love of God! I beg you, madam. *(No luck)* God love you all the same. Sir, alms for a boy who can't walk. God love you all the same.

*(MANDEN enters)*

**MANDEN** Hey, Jatta, look. *(He shows him some money)* I found work today.

**SUNJATA** I've grown invisible.

**MANDEN** We've money between us.

**SUNJATA** Your money, Manden.

**MANDEN** Your Ma fed me when mine died. Shall I push you home?

**SUNJATA** There's no use staying here.

**MANDEN** Tomorrow might be a better day.

*(BALLA enters. He claps his hands to get attention)*

**BALLA** Children of Mali, listen to your singers and learn who you are.

**SUNJATA** You're wasting your time. They won't pay you for old stories.

**BALLA** Why do people think they were born into an empty world? We are like that cotton tree over there. It looks impressive. But without roots, any storm could blow it down.

**SUNJATA** Messy.

**BALLA** We're the same. No roots and down we go. History is our roots. I'll tell you a story to prove it.

**SUNJATA** We've no money.

**BALLA** I'm a Griot. I was born to tell stories. If those who should pay me won't, I'll tell them to those who

can't.

**SUNJATA** We've nothing better to do.

**BALLA** That's truer than you think. Now listen to the past and learn your greatness.

**MANDEN** Don't you make fun of him.

**BALLA** You'll understand. You've heard of Alexander? The Mansa of Greece who fought the whole world. Well, there was a man born here, in our own Mali, who was greater still.

*(The traffic noise fades)*

**BALLA** We have gone back eight hundred years to a town called Niani.

*(MAKAN enters and sits, deep in thought)*

**BALLA** That's Makan the handsome, Mansa of Mali.

**MANDEN** A king?

**BALLA** Don't be too impressed. There used to be High Kings who kept the peace, but they're shadows now. Anyone can call himself Mansa. All you need are many swords and few scruples.

**SUNJATA** He's a kind man. A beggar always knows.

**BALLA** There are always some good men, even in the darkest days.

*(An ANTELOPE enters, twisting and turning as DANKARAN hunts)*

**BALLA** Dankaran, his son.

*(ANTELOPE and DANKARAN exit. SASSUMA enters, followed by her blind slave KONKOMBA)*

**BALLA** Sassama Bereteh, his wife.

**SASSUMA** Why so gloomy, Makan?

**MAKAN** These are dark times, Sassama. It's not easy to protect our people.

**SASSUMA** They are safe with you.

**MAKAN** Today. Everywhere we look there's war.

**SASSUMA** Jackals don't bite the lion.

**MAKAN** Something your father said?

**SASSUMA** He was a wise man.

**MAKAN** Did he say what happened when the lion died?

**SASSUMA** Dankaran will be a great king.

**MAKAN** He'll need to be. The bush is on fire, Sassama. Nothing your father says can change that.

*(DANKARAN enters)*

**DANKARAN** I got it.

*(The HUNTER enters)*

**HUNTER** That was my kill.

**DANKARAN** Yours?

**HUNTER** Five days I've been tracking that buck.

**DANKARAN** You're a woman.

**HUNTER** You can see when you want to.

**SASSUMA** You're talking to a prince, girl.

**MAKAN** Let her finish her story.

**DANKARAN** There it was, cornered at last, ready to kill. Then he blunders in. If you want glory, earn it.

**DANKARAN** I didn't see you.

**HUNTER** If you had?

**DANKARAN** It would have been your kill.

**MAKAN** It's her buck, Dankaran. Your own words say so.

**HUNTER** I thought justice was dead. Ask me a favour. I'll give it you.

**MAKAN**           There's no need.

**DANKARAN**       You could give us the buck.

**SASSUMA**       We're not beggars.

**HUNTER**         It's a gift, great king. Not a payment.

**MAKAN**           A woman who hunts must have power.

**HUNTER**         Perhaps.

**MAKAN**           What will happen to Mali?

**HUNTER**         It takes a brave man to know his future.

**MAKAN**           I've asked a favour. You said you'd give it me.

**HUNTER**         As you wish. *(She takes out some stones, tosses them on the ground and studies them)* Ask me for something else, great king.

**MAKAN**           Kings only ask once.

**HUNTER**         For you, peace; after... I see two sons. One will take all and lose it; one will lose all and conquer all.

**SASSUMA**        She's talking nonsense.

**HUNTER**         I've said what will be.

**SASSUMA**        It won't. I've only got one son.

**HUNTER**         Did I say the other was yours?

**SASSUMA**        She thinks you going chasing any pretty face.

**HUNTER**         The buffalo woman will not be pretty.

**MAKAN**           What do you mean?

**HUNTER**         Lift the veil she wears. Then you will know.

**SASSUMA**        We have Balla Fasekeh to us stories.

**MAKAN**           I'd like to know more.

**HUNTER**         Your son will be a great conqueror. Isn't that enough?

**MAKAN** Her son?

**HUNTER** You ask too much, great king.

**SASSUMA** You've had your fun. Now go.

**HUNTER** I don't need to be your father to say things you should listen to.

(**HUNTER** exits)

**SASSUMA** Have her beaten.

**MAKAN** Suppose it's true?

**SASSUMA** It isn't. And she insulted Pa.

**MAKAN** No, my dear, she told the truth about you.

**DANKARAN** Do you think it was me she was talking about?

**SASSUMA** Pa would have burned her for a witch.

**MAKAN** I thought it was nonsense?

**SASSUMA** Men! You believe anything.

**MANDEN** I don't believe it.

**SUNJATA** Perhaps you should.

(**SUKULUN** enters, bareheaded, her face covered by a veil)

**SUKULUN** Is the Mansa of this place kind to strangers?

**MAKAN** I hope so. Who is he being kind to?

**SUKULUN** My name is Sukulun Kedju.

**MAKAN** From? (*She doesn't answer*) I won't send you back.

**SUKULUN** I was born in Do.

**SASSUMA** Sukulun Kedju, born in Do, it is manners to show your face to the Mansa.

**SUKULUN** I can't.

**SASSUMA** Won't.

**MAKAN** Lift your veil, Sukulun. If you don't, I'll do it for you.

**SUKULUN** I don't want to hurt you.

*(MAKAN steps forward. SUKULUN crouches like a wrestler )*

**MAKAN** Don't be silly, girl. All right, if you want...

*(MAKAN, amused reaches for the veil. She throws him)*

**SASSUMA** How dare she throw a king.

**MAKAN** Please, Sassuma. Don't shout it to the whole world.  
*(He picks himself and crouches down himself)* This time for real.

*(They circle. Eventually MAKAN wins and lifts the veil)*

**MAKAN** The hunter didn't lie about your beauty, did she? I need a son, Sukulun. Can you give me one?

**SUKULUN** Me?

**SASSUMA** Her?

**MAKAN** I'm afraid so.

**SASSUMA** Do you believe every nonsense you're told?

**MAKAN** The woman's here, isn't she? If that much is true... Believe me, I don't want to do it.

**SASSUMA** Then don't. When I come back, Sukulun, make sure you're gone. Come, Dankaran we're leaving.

*(SASSUMA storms out, followed by DANKARAN)*