

(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)