

THE SONG OF TIYYA

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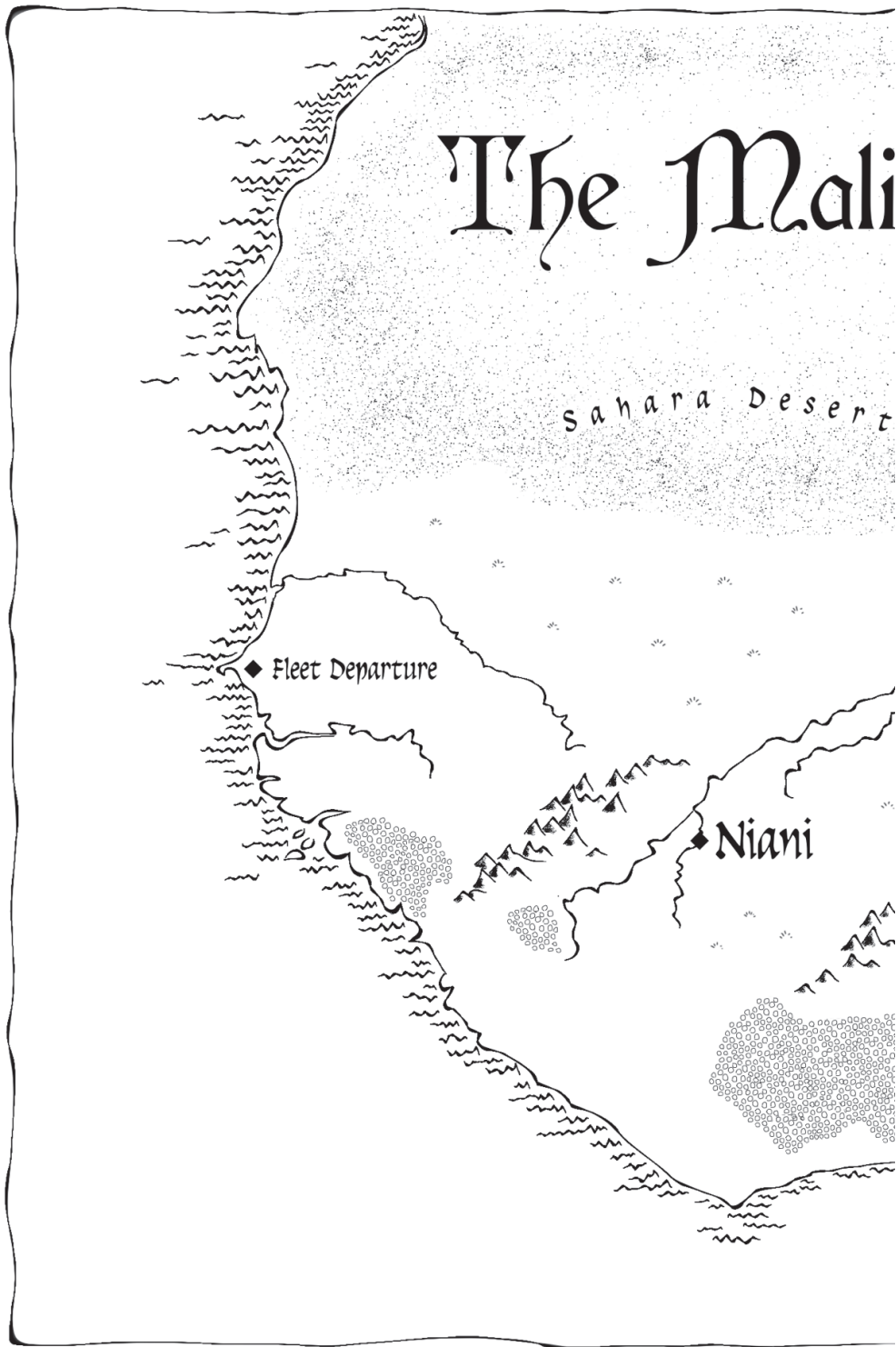
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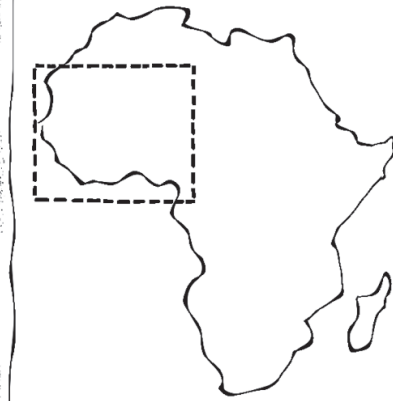
sahara Desert

◆ Fleet Departure

◆ Niani



Empire



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PROLOGUE

For decades I have traversed the empire of Mali, regaling kings and commoners alike with tales of magic and adventure. I've combed vast expanses of savanna, mountain, and desert in search of the forgotten legends of great heroes. As one of the most sought-after griots in the kingdom, I'm well rewarded for my work. But there is one story I've never told to anyone: my own.

It's not that my life isn't worth telling. Far from it. It's remarkable enough that a young girl should thwart the schemes of a powerful sorcerer and live to tell the tale. But my story converged with that of the empire and altered its trajectory forever. Of course, I didn't do it alone. And whether I changed the course of history for better or for worse is a question for future generations to decide.

Now that the emperor who swore me to secrecy is dead, I am free to share what really happened. I've asked my good friends, the royal calligrapher and the chief record-keeper, to set my story down in writing and store it in the library at

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Timbuktu. There the dry desert air will preserve it for centuries, so that the descendants of humanity may one day read it and remember the glory of Mali.

AT THE TIME these events began, I was about as unlikely a figure as you could imagine to determine the fate of an empire. Though my father was king or Mansa, my mother was a foreigner and a captive and this put me beneath the other members of the royal household. Even my father was an odd sort of king, more interested in discovering new lands than in conquering and ruling those that were already known.

One of his first acts upon ascending the throne was to send a colossal caravan of explorers to find out what lay beyond the alluvial goldfields to the south. The remnants of the expedition came back two years later, telling of endless rainforests inhabited by tiny people who sang like birds, wore clothing made of leaves and could disappear at will.

Word spread of the Mansa's eccentricity, and foreign travelers flocked to the court to exchange tall tales for gold. But my father was unable to discover anything about the subject that interested him most: the lands beyond the Atlantic Ocean. He was certain they existed. The Indian Ocean, far to the east, was regularly crossed by Arab merchants, who brought silk and porcelain from distant China to grace the halls of his palace. Mali's empire now extended across West Africa right up to the edge of the sea, yet no Mansa had sent an expedition to the other side. He was determined to be the first.

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So instead of conquering new territories in the interior, my father turned westward. He ignored ambassadors from the rich and powerful kingdoms that were allied with Mali and lavished attention on the fishermen who braved the rough waves of the Atlantic in their wooden boats. In my thirteenth year he sent several hundred of these boats out into the ocean, carrying plenty of gold and enough food and water to last a year. He commanded them not to return until they discovered the lands at the other end of the sea or their provisions ran out.

For a long time nothing more was heard of the expedition. The Malian court was relieved. At last, they said, the Mansa will accept that the western ocean goes on forever, or else that it is the home of malevolent jinn or other perils that make a crossing impossible.

Weeks later a single boat came paddling slowly back to shore. Its captain, brought trembling before the Mansa, claimed that the other ships had been caught in a mysterious river that flowed west through the middle of the ocean and only his ship escaped.

If my father had listened to his counsellors, he would have let the matter rest there, and I would surely have lived out the rest of my life as a pampered, minor princess. But by now he was in the grip of obsession. He ordered a vast new fleet to be built and filled with enough provisions to last for many years. This time, the Mansa himself would lead the expedition. The court was in despair.

I was ecstatic. A journey across the ocean was just the kind of impossible adventure I'd always dreamed of. I was sure my mother and I would be chosen to go along. The

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Mansa's most trusted guards, officials and servants had all been ordered to prepare for an imminent departure. Then, as I'd hoped, my mother received word that she was to join them.

The villages renowned for their expertise in boat construction had been hard at work for months, felling great redwood trees in the southern jungles and fashioning them into ships for the Mansa's fleet. Now the beach was a rainbow of boats painted with geometric designs, verses of the Quran or local symbols of protection. Workers hurried past, steadying baskets of dates and gourds of water on their heads.

Griots up and down the coast still sing of the beauty of my father's ship. I, who saw it with my own eyes, can attest to the truth of these legends. Its high prow was carved in the shape of a lion, with gleaming ivory teeth and mane of soft hammered gold. On the deck was raised an ebony throne, covered with a leopardskin and protected from the elements by a canopy of crimson silk.

I wondered what it would be like to sit atop this floating palace in the middle of the ocean, riding up and down waves with no land to be seen in any direction. My mother had told me about travelers who got lost in the desert and ended up wandering in circles. Perhaps that had happened to the first fleet of ships, and they were still navigating helplessly somewhere out in the vast sea.

My mother was a Tuareg. Her people lived amid the scorching dunes of the Sahara, where they boiled forth to attack the caravans that plied the desert laden with gold, salt and slaves. My mother had been captured during one of the

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many skirmishes with these nomads. Perhaps because of her unusual leaf-green eyes, she was deemed worthy of the royal court and given to the crown prince. In time the prince succeeded to the kingship, and my mother became one of his principal wives. But the people never forgave him for bestowing such honor on a foreign captive.

It didn't occur to my mother to take advantage of the Mansa's favor. She had a natural distrust of luxury. Maybe she felt it would weaken her spirit, make her dependent on palace living and soften the toughness imparted by her Tuareg upbringing. Maybe it was just habit. Whatever the reason, she went around in a plain cotton robe in a place where even the dogs wore golden collars. If the Mansa presented my mother with a piece of fine jewelry or other largesse, she would discreetly pass it on to one of the servants.

Once he sent her an exquisitely carved mahogany stool, all inlaid with ivory and coral. My mother gave it to her fan bearer and kept right on sitting atop an old mat woven from palm leaves. Meanwhile, the fan bearer sold the stool and used the proceeds to purchase her own freedom. When my father heard the story, he laughed and said he had better stop giving out presents before all the palace slaves were freed and the queens and princesses were forced to pound millet, empty chamber pots and fan each other in the hot afternoons.

My mother failed utterly to instill the austere values of her people in me. If I complained about my food, she told me the Tuareg were accustomed to crossing the desert on a diet of a single date per day: the first day they ate the skin, the second day the fruit, and the third day the pounded seed.

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But I coveted fancy meals, jewels, gold-embroidered clothing, anything that would mark me as a true princess. Instead of indulging these desires, my mother filled my head with fabulous stories, songs and poetry from the faraway desert.

The evening before the expedition was to embark, she was unusually quiet. We sat in the courtyard, enjoying the cool ocean breeze as we shared a plate of couscous, fish and vegetables cooked in palm oil. As I looked up at the glittering stars and imagined following the Milky Way to discover mysterious new lands across the sea, my mother pushed some pieces of yam—my favorite—across to my part of the dish.

At bedtime my mother studied my face for a long time, as though she were trying to fix it in her memory. When I asked her what was the matter, she turned abruptly and blew out the lamp. Later I thought I heard a sob or two coming from the direction of her bed.

I AWOKE to bright sunlight streaming through the high windows of our room. Why had I not been roused earlier? It was strangely quiet. Normally at this hour, the royal compound was a cacophony of griots singing praise songs, servants quarreling, prayers and chanting from the mosque.

A metallic gleam caught my eye, and I saw my mother's amulet coiled neatly on top of her smooth wooden headrest. I had never seen my mother take off her amulet, even to bathe. Trying to ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach, I grabbed it and stumbled outside.

The royal compound was empty except for a few chickens wandering around near the kitchen hut. I opened

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the front gate and looked around wildly. A crowd was gathered on the beach where the row of ships had been. I ran over and began pushing past wiry boatmen, statuesque courtiers in gold-embroidered robes, hefty market women smelling of fish and incense. They took little notice of me. Everyone's attention was fixated on something in the ocean.

Even before I made it to the front of the crowd, I knew what awaited me. The massive fleet was already far out to sea, bobbing on the waves like a swarm of colored insects. The sun flashed on something that might have been the gilded stern of the Mansa's ship. The one my mother and I were to board.

I had been left behind.

CHAPTER I
THE HIGH-
WALLED HOUSE

So it was that while the great fleet made its way ever farther into the unknown sea, I found myself riding down a dusty red trail alongside a man named Bangura. Bangura was one of the couriers who carried messages between my father's stronghold in the far west and Niani, the ancient capital in the heart of Mali. My father had appointed one of his relatives there, named Musa, to rule as Mansa in his absence. Bangura was charged with escorting me to the court of Mansa Musa, where I would be cared for until my father's expedition returned.

Bangura's dainty Arab mare trotted up a hill and I flapped my legs against my own mount's sides to catch up. He was a lightly built man clad in a fringed shirt from which dangled dozens of shells, animal teeth, tiny leather pouches containing charms, and other talismans I couldn't identify. A polished bow hung from one side of his saddle, and a rawhide quiver tapped against his back as he rode. A lance was propped upright in a sheath attached to his saddle skirt.

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“Are there bandits in the hills?” I had asked on the first day of our journey.

“I doubt it, princess,” he answered. “Our caravans would not transport thousands of donkey loads of gold and kola nuts over them each year if they were unsafe.” He grinned, showing off his white teeth that were fashionably sharpened to points. “And in the unlikely event that a bandit did decide to kidnap you, he would take one look at those strange honey-colored eyes and send you back without even demanding a ransom.”

I tried to ignore his teasing. Bangura’s clan had a *sanankuya* or joking relationship with my father’s family, the Keitas. Someone with whom you had *sanankuya* could insult you with impunity, and you were supposed to laugh and let it go.

Besides, my eyes were strange. As far as I could tell from peering into pools of water or my mother’s brass mirror, they looked green in some lights and tawny brown in others. My mother told me this was common in her clan, but people south of the desert are unused to colored eyes and often found mine disconcerting.

Instead of retorting, I lifted my chin imperiously. “Then why carry so many weapons?”

“The arrows will drive off hyenas. They are light, made from the stalks of wild fennel, and are tipped with poison.”

“What about the spear?”

“With luck, it will stop a lion’s charge. Maybe even a buffalo.”

“How about a hippopotamus?” I remembered stories of

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women who had been killed by hippopotamuses while washing clothes in the Gambia River.

“No weapon can defend against a hippo. Only this.” He lifted one of the leather pouches that were tied to his shirt. “I have traveled this route many times, and my amulets have always served to ward off danger. God willing, they will protect us both during this journey.”

Whether thanks to Bangura’s amulets or not, we had crossed the savannah and the foothills of the Fouta Djallon without incident, stopping to change horses at the relay stations used by the imperial messengers. We were now approaching the city of Niani. Stony peaks opened out onto the emerald rice fields of the Sankarani River floodplain, and the dusty path glowed like an ember in the light of the setting sun.

We began to pass homes of farmers, collections of round huts surrounded by short fences made from millet stalks. The smell of manure mixed with fish frying in palm oil wafted over the thatched roofs. A bent old woman wearing an enormous cotton headdress sat at the entrance to one of the compounds.

“Hey, Bangura!” she called. “What gifts did you bring me from the western realm? Silk gowns and golden earrings, yes?”

Bangura laughed until he nearly fell off his horse. “Your radiant beauty needs no adornment, my lady.”

“Who is the girl?”

“She is Tiyya, a daughter of the voyager king. Her mother has gone to accompany the old Mansa on his journey across the sea.”

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The woman hobbled over and peered at me. “Such interesting eyes. Has Mansa Musa already made arrangements for her marriage? It’s a shame she’s so thin.”

I kept my peace, reminding myself that nobles must remain unperturbed by the talk of common folk. But inside I seethed. In truth, the reminder that I had been left out of the voyage aggravated me more than the old woman’s rudeness.

“I have orders to take her to the compound of Fatoumata Sissoko,” said Bangura. “There, no doubt, she will become as plump and beautiful as the other ladies of the court.”

“You can’t be serious!” The old peasant woman stared at him. “Why, Fatoumata Sissoko is a...”

“She is the wife of the old Mansa’s half brother. A great lady.”

“No doubt. But I wouldn’t set foot inside her compound myself, not for a donkeyload of gold! And to stay inside there at night...”

“Don’t be foolish.” This time Bangura’s laugh sounded forced. “Lady Fatoumata has a large and comfortable residence, second only to the palace itself. And she has no daughter to keep her company. I am told she personally offered to host Princess Tiyya.”

“Well, if you take my advice, you’ll turn right around and take this child back where she came from.”

As Bangura exchanged farewells with the old woman, my mind churned. I had been furious with my mother for leaving me out of the expedition, but a deeper part of me understood that she had done so in order to protect me. By remaining on shore, I would be safe from the unknown

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dangers of the ocean and the lands beyond. Surely, I thought, my mother would not have left me in the care of Mansa Musa's court if anyone there meant me harm.

Unconsciously I fingered her amulet where it now hung under my robes. It was intricately worked in the shape of a diamond with protruding corners and a loop at the top. The smiths of my mother's clan had crafted it for her when she was a child. On it was inscribed her name, Taheyat, in Tifinagh, the ancient script that the Tuareg had used for as long as anyone could remember. Would it protect me from evil so far away from the desert where it was made?

We arrived at the crest of a hill and I forgot my worries in amazement at the vision that spread itself before us. A vast expanse of dun-colored buildings extended as far as the eye could see. Thick earthen walls topped with crenellated towers sloped gently around the city. The last rays of the setting sun flashed from gilded domes and minarets. As we descended, the call to evening prayer broke forth in melodious tones from first one mosque, then another and another.

"The Kouyaté griots give the call to prayer in all the principal mosques," said Bangura once the last echo had subsided. "Their voices are famous throughout the kingdom."

Griots were the wordsmiths of Mali. They were masters of song and the spoken word, in the same way that blacksmiths were experts in forging iron and leatherworkers in crafting leather. Every noble household maintained a family of griots who were charged with keeping alive the memory of

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ancient heroes, reciting their stories and enlivening gatherings with music and song.

We merged into a crowd that got thicker as we approached the city gates. A tattooed farmer sang to himself as he walked, hoe resting on his shoulder. A throng of goats herded by a skinny boy jostled a woman in bright patterned fabric who was balancing a basket of okra on her head. The people parted good-naturedly to make way for us. At the gates, a guard in a leopardskin mantle raised his spear and greeted Bangura.

“Ho, Bangura! Where are you off to?”

“To the compound of Fatoumata Sissoko.”

The guard started, then his face relaxed into a smile. “You’re such a joker, Bangura. I admit I took your words seriously for a moment. Go in peace.”

Bangura urged his horse forward before the guard could question him further. I struggled to keep close to him in the crowded street. Part of me wanted to demand an explanation for the way the old woman and now the guard had reacted to the name of Fatoumata Sissoko. I thought about begging him to take me somewhere else, even to the hut of a peasant, rather than to the home of this personage that seemed to have such a fearsome reputation.

But even more than the ominous Fatoumata Sissoko, I dreaded Bangura’s ridicule. If I admitted that I was afraid, I would look like a gullible child, easily frightened by stories of jinn and witches. Besides, I thought, refusing the offered hospitality would be deeply offensive. I had no friends in Niani, and was completely dependent on the generosity of

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Mansa Musa and his court. Insulting my hostess would make a terrible first impression.

The sunset glow faded to darkness as we wound our way through the streets. The aroma of stewed sesame and baobab leaves drifted across the path and made my stomach growl.

“How much farther is it?” I asked.

“Lady Fatoumata lives on the outskirts of the city.” Bangura grinned slyly. “Don’t worry, you’ll soon be rid of me.”

After what seemed like hours, we turned onto a long, desolate street. Something there seemed different, and I finally realized it was the silence. Up until now, we had been surrounded by sounds: neighbors calling greetings, women pounding grain, chickens squawking, children crying. This street was so still that it seemed like another world. My horse shied away from a shadow cast by the hazy light of the moon. Even Bangura seemed to have lost his bravado, and glanced nervously from side to side.

As we came to the end of the street, a towering earthen wall reared up in front of us. Its lumpy mud spikes and protruding wooden beams made me think of toothbrush tree roots caught in the gums of an old woman. In the center was an ornately carved wooden door studded with iron fixtures that gleamed dully in the moonlight. We dismounted and Bangura clapped his hands to announce our presence.

After a long pause, the door creaked open.