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Under the Baobab Tree

The Gambia, Africa 1761

She heard it again—that unmistakable *bwaamb, bwaamb* sound. It came from far away, but she was sure it was the tama, the talking drum.

Janxa stood still, straining to hear. She waited. Though she could do nothing about the buzz of insects and chattering of monkeys over the wet rice field, she barely breathed. Yes, it was the rhythmic tama voice carrying through the forest. The tonal variations sounded like a man talking.

“What do the drums say, Maamanding?” Janxa could pick out a few words, but her mother understood the language of the drums. “What are they saying?”

“Hush.” Her mother had been bending over the young rice plants all morning, weeding and thinning. She planted her hands on either side of her back and straightened her body

up, rubbing circles on her back. Her dress—her mbubba—had been tied up between her legs to keep it out of the water as she worked. She reached down to untie it as she continued to listen to the talking drum.

Other women who'd been working the rice fields stopped to listen as well. Janxa could see excitement light their eyes.

“What?” she asked her mother.

“The tama is from the village downriver. The griot is leaving their village. He will be here before the sun goes to sleep.”

The griot!

Janxa wrapped her thin arms around herself as if she needed to squeeze in her excitement to keep it from exploding. Janxa had been birthed just before the start of the rains. But now, she had already passed her seventh rainy season. At seven, she was big enough to help her mother in the rice field and to keep her little brothers entertained back in the village. And, at seven, she had seen the griot at least that many times. Maybe more. She knew the fathers had been expecting him, but they never knew for sure when he'd arrive. Sometimes he had to stop in a village for a naming ceremony or to sing praises for the visit of an important person.

She had heard that some villages, very big villages, had their own griots. What would it be like to have the storyteller in your village every single day? How would you get any work done?

Her mother reached down to pick up her basket. “Come, child, we must go back and prepare food.” She called out to

the other women as they gathered children and tools. “What will you cook?”

“I have groundnuts to prepare,” said one of the young mothers as she took a length of bright cloth and tied her baby around her chest for the walk back to the village.

The thought of groundnuts made Janxa’s stomach rumble. She loved them no matter how they were cooked. She especially liked to eat them fresh.

“I will prepare couscous,” said Dunxa. “My son supplies me with more millet from his last harvest than I can possibly use.”

Janxa smiled. She knew the other women had grown tired of hearing Dunxa brag about her son. Today it wouldn’t matter though. The griot was coming. Tonight would be a celebration.

As she balanced her mother’s tools and hurried to keep up, she couldn’t help thinking about the griot. She wondered if he’d bring his son.

“Why must the griot pass down his calling to his son?” she asked her mother. “What if a new storyteller were to come from another family?”

“It goes from father to son because it is Allah’s will,” her mother answered.

She should have known. That was the answer to everything. “But what if Allah chose someone else to become a griot?”

Her mother didn’t answer. She just picked up her pace.

Janxa had to run and hop through the thick elephant grass to keep up. “What if a girl wanted to become a griot?”

Her mother stopped walking and turned to look at Janxa, who stopped as well. Maamanding spoke no words, but her look told her daughter she had asked one too many questions. "Come, daughter. We have work to do." Her mother turned again toward the village. "Women's work."

When they got to the village her mother went straight to their hut to begin making maize porridge. "Go fetch your brothers home," she said.

As Janxa drew close to the grandmother's hut she saw her little brother, Baaku, playing with sticks on the packed dirt outside the door. The grandmother sat on a bench holding the baby. Baaku ran to Janxa. "Did you hear the tama? Did you hear about the griot? He's coming."

"I did," she said, laughing at the excitement in her brother's voice. She turned toward the grandmother. "How do you fare today, Grandmother?" The grandmother was not her own grandmother, but everyone called her that out of respect.

"I fare well, Janxa." She jostled the baby to wake him. "I hope this one's not too sleepy to walk."

"I can carry him."

The grandmother made a hooting sound. "You are too thin to carry this one." She squeezed the baby's thigh. "Little Caaman is nearly your size already."

Nothing irritated Janxa more, though she would never let on so as to dishonor the grandmother. She knew she was small, but it didn't mean she couldn't do things. It was true, her brothers were both born plump and sturdy. They had

broad features and a rich dark skin. When her mother rubbed palm oil on them they were beautiful. Why did her own build have to be thin and delicate?

“He will walk,” she said to the grandmother as she helped Caaman wake. “If they are good, I’ll tell them a story while Maamanding prepares food.”

Both boys clapped their hands. “We love Janxa’s stories,” Baaku said. He began to run ahead but stopped and came back to the grandmother. “Thank you for taking care of us today.”

She patted his head before he took off. Janxa and Caaman followed.

“Slow down, Baaku. Caaman cannot keep up with you.”

“Can you start the story?” he asked as he slowed his pace.

Janxa took a breath and began to wind out a tale in the soft tones of their Wolof language. Anyone listening closely could catch the rhythm of the talking drum in her telling. The rise and fall of her words conjured up crafty baboons, wise elephants, and no-good hyenas. Her brothers slowed their pace so as not to miss a single word.



The griot had been as good as his word. He arrived in the village just as the sun slipped behind the trees. He was welcomed by all the fathers and given the place of honor under the giant baobab tree. The oldest and most honored men sat nearest him, followed by the younger men and then the boys.

The women and girls served food, carrying large decorated bowls made from calabash gourds. Even Janxa carried food.

The griot's son sat on the ground near his father's feet. He must have seen about ten or twelve rains. Janxa offered him a maize cake. How fortunate he was to be the son of a great griot.

Following the meal everyone stood to stretch. The women cleared the baskets and gourds and carried them to the huts. As soon as they returned, the drummer began to beat out a rhythm on the tama. It started slow but rose to a fevered pitch as dancers jumped into a clearing in the center of the swaying people. The griot joined the beat of the tama with music from his kora. Janxa loved watching the explosive movements of the dancers. They'd jump and lift their knees high into the air, colorful mbubbas flapping, all while keeping perfect rhythm.

After the dances and the food, everyone settled back to listen to the griot. The women sat apart from the men and boys but close enough that they didn't miss a word. Janxa settled herself against a nearby tree to listen.

The village elder began by asking questions about the other places the griot and his entourage had visited.

"I will tell you in due time," the griot answered, "but first let me sing of your village." He placed his kora in front of him and began to pluck the strings and sing.

You offer shelter to the wandering.
Under your tree the wise ones sit and talk.
You feed the children and the ancient ones.

Under your tree the wise ones sit and talk.
Your fields yield rice, juju beans, and millet.
Under your tree the wise ones sit and talk.
You tend to the goats and chase the baboons.
Under your tree the wise ones sit and talk.

He continued to sing praises of their village. Janxa watched his son mouthing the words after his father. Before he could become a griot he'd have to learn how to measure a village at a glance and create a song for them without any practice. He'd also have to be able to recite all the history of their people from as far back as anyone could remember.

Once the griot finished the praise song, he began to sing songs and tell stories of the great deeds of their people. How did he remember all the names, generation after generation? As her mother stood up to leave, carrying a sleepy Caaman and trailing a reluctant Baaku, Janxa begged to stay. She looked over at her father and he nodded, so her mother let her stay.

She could have listened all night. The griot's stories would stay forever in her memory, mingled with African night sounds—birds fussing as they settled in to roost, the roar of a faraway lion, the eerie laugh of a hyena scavenging for food, and the soft wind rustling the leaves of the baobab.

“After morning prayers,” the griot said finally as the fire began to die, “I’ll tell news of other people and about the great trouble.”

No one dishonored him by asking further questions, but Janxa could see that many wanted to hear the news tonight.

She hadn't realized how tired she was, but when her father came over and picked her up to carry her back to her mother's hut she didn't protest. As she snuggled into his arms, she thought, *This is my happy seat—right in the middle of my family.*



Janxa watched her brothers sleep while her mother went out before dawn to draw water. Caaman made little sucking sounds with his lips as he slept. What kind of men would her brothers become? Would they be great hunters like their father?

She sat in the doorway of the hut so she could witness the beginning of the day and smell the richness of the damp earth before the hot sun began baking it.

Janxa watched her mother coming back with the gourd filled with water. For as long as she could remember, her mother had greeted the sun by raising her gourd high above her head and pouring a drizzle of water out as an offering. She'd then fall to her knees in prayer. Janxa loved watching her mother, straight and tall, lifting water to the sky.

"Come," her mother said as she brought the remaining water to the hut, "let's feed the family and go to the baobab to hear what the griot will tell us. Take this bowl to your father. When he has eaten you may go with him, and I'll meet you there."

Janxa took the bowl of porridge to her father's hut and waited quietly while he finished it. She washed the gourd with sand until it was clean.

"Will you go to your mother or come with me?" her father asked.

"May I come with you?"

He smiled at her. "Yes, little one, but you know you cannot sit with me."

She knew that. The fathers were honored and always sat apart. The boys as well. Her father even lived in a hut set apart from theirs—that was the way of her people.

As they drew closer, they could see that the griot had already started to sing a song of the morning.

When he finished, they all sat silently, waiting for him to begin.

"The treachery of the *tubaab* grows."

Janxa knew the word *tubaab*. It meant people with no color—white people. She heard the stories whispered often, but she'd never seen a *tubaab*. She had seen a white baboon once, but never a white man.

"The *tubaab* continues to steal our people. He's now taking more than just the slaves captured in battle."

Janxa knew that when one tribe fought another tribe, they took captives. Her village had not fought in her lifetime, so she didn't know anyone who'd been taken, but the mothers talked about people they once knew who never came back. They believed those captives had been sold to the *tubaab*.

“More often now, *tubaab* has African helpers who ambush warriors caught alone in the bush or young men guarding goats or crops.” He stopped and pulled a piece of elephant grass from the ground. “They disappear never to be heard from again.”

“What happens to these captives?” the elder asked.

“None have returned to tell. There are some who believe the *tubaab* take our people to eat them.”

Janxa’s heart beat hard against her chest. *Eat them?* She looked at her father. What would she do if someone took her father? She jumped when she heard the sudden chattering commotion of a group of monkeys far up in the branches of the baobab. Had they seen something? She looked at the faces of the fathers, but no one seemed concerned.

“They’ve begun taking many more of our people than ever before. We need to be on the lookout for these evil ones.” He stopped and put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Even more troubling is that they’ve been taking children when they can’t find men or women.”

Children! Janxa looked around for her mother and scooted closer to where she sat with Baaku and Caaman. Who would ever take a child away from family? What kind of people were these *tubaab*?

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