

Balla took them to a separate room in the palace and made sure they were alone. “We are close. We are very close. I have spoken to Ministers Mamadou and Adama. They are with us. Have any of you spoken to Saghmanja?” Balla asked.

“No,” Amaris answered, though she did not know exactly what she was saying, ‘No,’ to.

Balla thought for a moment. “Our plans can move forward without him, but with him, they become so much easier,” he said.

Plans? What plans? The children wondered. And just as they asked themselves the question, the answer came to them, and Sochima blurted out, “We’re going to kill Mansa Musa.”

“Keep your voice down, fool. Do you wish to let the entire palace know?” Balla said.

“Sorry,” Sochima said, as he had surprised himself when he spoke aloud.

“If I did not know better, I’d think you were a child,” Balla said.

“Forgive his outburst. He is—we are just excited,” Aminata said, attempting to cover for Sochima.

“Passion is good. But passion alone will not get it done. If our plans are to succeed, we must have General Saghmanja, or risk civil war,” Balla said. “I’ve called a meeting, just of the ministers and myself. We will present a united front and get him to join us. We may even offer him the throne if need be,” Balla said.

“You want General Saghmanja to be emperor?” Amaris asked.

“No. He is a fool. But he is a powerful one. We offer him the throne to appease him. When the deed is done. We kill him as well,” Balla said.

“What if he refuses and doesn’t want to be emperor?” Aminata asked.

“Then we kill him then and there. He does not leave the room. Walk with your knives,” he said to them. “I’ll convene the others. We’ll meet here in half an hour.”

Balla left the room and left the children with a lot to think about.

“Holy—whoa,” Amaris said. “Like what the hell?”

“We’re going to kill Mansa Musa?” Sochima said as a question.

“No. We’re not killing anybody,” Aminata said.

“Yeah, and thanks for blurting that out,” Amaris said.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it,” Sochima said.

“It doesn’t matter now. And I almost said the same thing,” Ami said.

“See, I wasn’t the only one thinking it,” Sochi said.

“No, you’re just the only one who said it.”

“Stop it, you guys. We don’t have time for this. I’ve been getting flashes of memories and it looks like we’ve been planning this with Balla for a while,” Ami said.

“Yeah, I’ve been seeing memories too. We really don’t like him,” Mari said.

“So, we are going to kill Mansa Musa,” Sochi said.

“Stop saying that,” Mari snapped at him. “And we’re not killing anybody. What we’re doing is getting out of here, like right now.”

“Yeah. Hopefully, we can get to the well and get the next piece before they realize we’re gone,” Ami said.

They left the room and walked down the steps to the palace hallway leading to the exit. The sooner they left the palace, the better. They were so anxious they considered running or even speed walking but thought better of it. They kept a steady pace and made the long walk down to the palace doors. There were guards posted. The head guard greeted them, “As-salāmu ‘alaykum.”

“Wa ‘alaykumu s-salam,” Ami replied.

“How may I help you, Ministers?” he asked.

“Just stepping out for some air,” Ami said.

“Very well, Ministers. But do let us know if you plan to leave the palace grounds,” he said.

“Certainly,” Ami replied and stepped a foot outside when a member of the Gbara ran up to her.

Aminata was the Minister of Trade, and he worked under her. He was an ambassador to Morocco. After the emperor’s pilgrimage, Morocco became a great trading partner. The empire imported cotton and oil as well as goods from Granada through there. He was leaving for Fez tomorrow to meet with the Marinid Sultanate to negotiate a preferential trade agreement. He was seeking Aminata’s advice on how to proceed. Aminata did not hear a word he was saying. She smiled and nodded, and said, “Hmm . . . interesting . . . and what do you think?” repeatedly while praying for him to shut up so they could leave.

Sochima and Amaris stood by anxiously. Amaris had gotten so anxious she wanted to bash the ambassador over his head. And just as he was about to leave, “Oh, it seems the Belen Tigui is calling you,” he said.

The children turned around and saw Balla up the hall. He was with the two other Ministers. Seeing the children at the doors, he gave them a hard look and beckoned them to him with his eyes.

“Dammit,” Amaris mumbled. Stupid idiot, she thought of the ambassador.

They had no choice now. They had to go back. If Balla was bold enough to kill Mansa Musa and the general, he would undoubtedly kill them.

“This is not good,” Sochima said as they walked back up the long hall. “What are we gonna do, guys?”

They kept their heads straight and spoke through their teeth to avoid drawing attention to what they were saying.

“Balla isn’t going to let us out. I don’t think we have a choice. If we were with the plan to kill Mansa Musa all along, I think we should go along with it, at least until we can get away from them and get to the well,” Aminata said.

“No, we shouldn’t do that,” Amaris said.

“Why not?” Sochima asked.

“We should be quiet and wait and see what everybody else says. If they’re all down with killing him, then we’re down. If they’re not, then we’re not,” Amaris said.

“But Balla said they were all down, except for Saghmanja,” Sochima said.

“Yeah, and he controls the army. And a lot of people say they’re down with something until the time comes, and then they back out. I’ve seen it,” Amaris said.

“Okay, Mari. We’ll do it your way,” Aminata said.

When they arrived at Balla’s position, he looked at them suspiciously. “Why were you at the doors?” he asked.

“We thought we had time before the meeting and wanted to get some air,” Aminata said.

“No time for that. The time we’ve been waiting for is now.”