

The Golden Prince

Panting, the young prince kept climbing block after block, enlivened by the effort. Local peasants had warned him that the Great Pyramid was cursed, but once he reached the summit, prince Maghan found the view to be well worth the curse. From up here, everything looked so small, so vain. He felt above it all, on top of the world. *Is this how God feels when beholding His creation?*, he wondered. He wished he'd never have to climb back down to his ordinary life which, seen from up here, was a mere tiny black dot. Laying his hands upon the blocks, he foresaw that this pyramid would see the the Mamluk Empire and all subsequent empires collapse around her through the centuries like waves on a rock... And his own life, the prince realized, was in all of this but a grain in the hourglass. Shying away from this unpleasant thought, he set his gaze towards Cairo, where he would enter in the morrow with his father's caravan. So there it was, the greatest city in the Muslim world, the proud capital of the Mamluks! From up here, it was just a patch in the landscape, though from its countless minarets piercing the dense urban fabric like needles, Maghan estimated that it must be the size of Timbuktu, Gao and Djenne combined. He then looked down upon the camp where he and his kind would spend the night, but he quickly had to turn his eyes away. Even from this height, its shine was blinding. From the walkers' sticks to the camels' mounting brackets to the tents' pikes, all was made of gold. And whatever couldn't be made of gold was rather made of silk, even down to the slaves' clothes. His father, Mansa Musa, wished to make the most of his pilgrimage to Mecca by showing the Mali Empire's infinite wealth to the world. Back at the start of the journey, Maghan had been surprised that they'd use gold to show wealth. Why gold and not something more rare and precious, like salt? He'd then been told that where they were heading, unlike in Mali, salt was abundant but gold extremely rare. That explanation had not satisfied the young prince, however. How could gold be more precious than salt, if it could not be eaten?

When the Malians arrived before a gate of Cairo crowned with two slender minarets, they found it was shut. On the ramparts, the Mamluk officer tasked with welcoming them was looking nervous. As an impatient clamor rose from behind the closed gates, Maghan threw a worried look at his father, but saw him steering his black horse forward with a strange smile. Once he arrive just below the ramparts, the officer told him:

– Your majesty, the Cairenes have amassed behind this gate by the thousands. If we open, they'll rush on your caravan like a swarm of locusts on a fertile field. We will have to let you enter through another gate.

– This gate is good enough!, the Mansa replied.

– I fear for your safety, your majesty. If we let so many of them approach you...

– Open now!

The officer bit his lips, turned around and shouted some orders. The gate opened. As the caravan entered the city, the soldiers tried to contain the Cairenes to the sides of the street, but the crowd soon closed down on the Malians like the Red Sea on the pharaoh's army. As they drew closer to him, Mansa Musa plunged a hand inside a bag and drew a handful of gold nuggets. A thousand

arms stretched towards him. He savored the impatience growing around him for a moment or two, then threw the nuggets as one sows a field. All along the caravan, the other pilgrims did the same from their camels loaded with gold. The generosity of Musa was to be known by men and by God. Maghan first cowered on his saddle as the begging hands approached him; but not wanting to disappoint his father nor God, he too plunged his hand in his bag, as if to burry down his shyness, and began throwing the nuggets here and there, trying to aim at women and children. Thanks to God and the soldiers' hard work, the crowd did not stampede and the caravan slowly made its way towards the Citadel of Saladin, home of the sultan. Soon Maghan realized he was smiling just like his father. Now he could see that gold was indeed the most precious thing in the world for these pale-faced people, and he let himself be intoxicated by their beseeching and grateful eyes. For the first time, he was not anymore the neglected son of a forever absent Mansa, but an important presence, a savior, an angel... *Is this how God feels when humans pray to Him?*, he wondered. He began screaming of joy as he threw the gold. Cairo was so beautiful, its people so welcoming... After Cairo, Medina and Mecca, instead of coming back to Mali, why not continue on and give away gold in all the other cities of the world from Grenada to Delhi? Yet halfway towards the Citadel, something came to trouble his joy. The more he was giving gold, the more that gold, as he touched it... Maghan knew not how to name his peculiar touch: gift, ability, clairvoyance...? By touching an object, that object's destiny unfolded in his mind and soul. As a child, he had supposed that everyone possessed that forward-seeing touch, but with adolescence he understood that he was alone. Why had God given it just to him? Only God knew. The punishment his father reserved for those Muslims suspected of using magic had dissuaded him from ever telling anyone about it... But that gold, he foresaw without the shadow a doubt, was about to bring a great woe to all those who'd receive it.

With its massive walls plunging half of Cairo in their shadow, the Citadel of Saladin looked like a rough stronghold more than a sultan's residence. Maghan was thus all the more dazzled when, beyond those ramparts, he found exquisite palaces and mosques, built and rebuilt by sultans to surpass in magnificence what their predecessors had built. Most Malians halted at the Citadel's caravansary while Mansa Musa, his most important dignitaries and the young prince were led to the Striped Palace, so called for its stripes of yellow and black marble. Maghan wondered if the sultan had chosen this palace to receive them because its colors evoked both the gold and people of Mali. Looking at the Mamluk warriors escorting them through the palace, the prince noticed their hair were blond, brown, even red... None of the Mamluks looked like the Arabs they were ruling over. As he entered the audience hall, he saw that the sultan Al-Nasir had black hair, but a round face with prominent cheekbones, narrow eyes and a straight beard. Musa and Al-Nasir exchanged all the greetings and courtesies expected from two great Muslim monarchs. From Musa, two slaves brought before the sultan a heavy gold nugget, as big as the belly of a pregnant woman. In return, Al-Nasir gave Musa a sword with a blade inlaid with fine calligraphy and a knob that, curiously, was a dinar coin.

"Is this the money to buy our gold?", the prince asked.

He'd been sure he'd just thought that question in his head, but the words had escaped through his mouth. His father threw him such a fiery look it could have melted the giant nugget down. Fortunately, before the Mansa could demand immediate apologies to his impertinent son, Al-Nasir laughed and said:

“Oh, but that coin is well worth your giant nugget!”

“How so?”, the prince asked timidly.

“You may have heard, young prince, that my father was nicknamed *the Thousander*. Do you know why? Because he has cost a thousand dinars. Years later, by the will of God, among those thousand dinar coins that were used to buy him, my father achieved collecting three of them. This sword’s coin is one of those three.”

“Your father was bought?”

“Don’t you know anything? We, the Mamluks, were all born as slaves or sons of slaves. Each generation of Mamluks buys new slave children from all corners of the world and trains them to fight from the earliest age; once their harsh training is complete, they are freed and become Mamluks. This is why we are the best warriors in the world. This is how we defeated the mongols and the crusaders. We grew up in chains, blood and sweat, not in silk, purple and rose water. Thus you should understand that those thousand dinars to buy my father were quite a good deal. Today, if I should be bought, a pile of gold as high as the Pyramids wouldn’t be enough!”

And the sultan laughed again. Both monarchs then went to discuss important matters behind closed doors, and the prince was brought back to the caravansery. As soon as he was left alone in the Mansa’s quarters, he hurried to unwrap the satin around the sword gifted by the sultan to close his hand on the knob’s coin. So strong was his vision that he let go almost instantly. All he had time to see in this coin’s future was that not only would it go back into circulation like an ordinary dinar, but its value, far from matching the giant nugget as the sultan had claimed, would rather match that of a piece of bread handed to a beggar...

On the next morning, Maghan sprayed his face with rose water, but his reflection in the basin still looked back at him with red, swollen eyes. All through this past night, he never could close his eyes without some vivid nightmare reopening them immediately. He saw Cairenes cry burning tears of melted gold, nuggets raining down on them like a hailstorm, children drowning in the Nile flowing with liquid gold... Finally the muezzins’ voice calling to the dawn prayer set him free from that interminable night. Despite his fatigue, the prince performed the prayer, as it was unthinkable to miss a single one during his pilgrimage. Focused on his movements, he almost forgot his nightmarish visions. After the prayer and a light breakfast, he climbed up the ramparts of the Citadel to observe the city sprawling below. No one was crying, no nuggets were raining and the Nile’s water was still greenish. Yet he had undeniably felt a woe was coming when he’d touched the gold. Surely it was still yet to come, and he’d be powerless in stopping it, as his visions always preemptively adapted to his own attempts at preventing them from happening. Nevertheless, if he could learn more about the woe, he could at least warn the sultan. Before he’d coward and change his mind, Maghan decided to venture outside the Citadel and try to obtain a clearer vision.

The streets were very calm and empty this morning. Perhaps the Cairenes were thinking that work could wait today, thanks to all the gold earned yesterday. Maghan walked deeper into the urban maze, touching the walls, the doors and even the pavement on his path. They said walls are mute and indeed, they didn’t reveal much to the prince, which was good news: at least the woe wouldn’t be such to make houses collapse. If only he could touch the gold he’d thrown to the people once

again, he was sure he'd find his answers. Maghan came accross an old lady at a street corner, whose veil was hiding hair as white as salt. He tried to call her, but as soon as she saw him, she hurried back the way she came. Same thing with a little boy a few streets further. Puzzled, the prince stopped in the middle of the silent and deserted street, wondering if the woe had actually already caused Cairo's population to disappear... Yet he'd soon find that the Cairene hadn't disappeared at all. Something pulled down at the back of his clothes. Turning around, he saw the little boy from earlier. And behind him, his father, his brothers, his uncles and his cousins all the way down the street, each carrying a bag at arm's length. The prince tried to turn away but on the other side, the old lady from earlier had brought her children and grandchildren with their own bags... What did these people want from him? The commotion attracted still more people, and soon the word contaminated all mouths in Cairo: gold, once again... Maghan stayed frozen with fear. How could he have hoped to go unnoticed a single instant, with his black skin and his silk clothes inlaid with golden beads? Those beads, by the way, were starting to be torn away by childish hands. The clamor was becoming unbearable. His gaze fell down the dark maws of those gaping bags. He didn't even have gold to give them. What to do? What to say? What... Reason, incapable to save him, led way to beastly panic. The prince ran, elbowing his way through the astonished crowd. As he passed, hands tried grabbing his clothes, his arms, his hair... At each new street, a new thirsty crowd. His eyes tried to find the citadel up above the roofs, but he only saw clouds and minarets indifferent to his fate. He was already too far away from the citadel, and never had the citadel seemed so far away... Passing by an ajar door, his instinct hurried him inside. He slid the bar down to shut the door behind him, collapsed on his knees and covered his face with his clothes to muffle his cries. Ruffled threads poked from between his fingers: all the golden beads had been torn off. Tasting the salt of his tears, he had a painful laughter, thinking of the irony that, by begging him gold, more precious to them than to him, the Cairenes had drawn salt from him, more precious to him than to them.

As Maghan finally stood up, the darkness around him took on a golden shine. Basins, vases, figurines... Everything glittered from the shelves. Yet it was not gold. It was, the prince thought, far more beautiful, far more precious. Why didn't the crowd run after such exquisite artifacts rather than after a crude yellow metal? He startled. Just a few steps away from him, a small man was sitting at a table covered with tools, looking at him with an annoyed pout.

– Do all men cry like women, where you come from? I did see you giving away your gold, yesterday. You were looking even happier than the beggars who, by the will of God, caught your nuggets. So why are you crying now?

– I didn't have any gold to give them, so...

– So next time, be a man and acknowledge that you have nothing to give them.

The prince lowered his eyes. In his skull echoed the booming voice of his father, which he imagined in his place in the streets of Cairo, commanding those wretches to go out of his way. That's how a true prince of Mali should behave... But never would a true prince of Mali have ventured alone in the city. Lost in the maze-like streets, was he still a prince? Maghan mused aloud:

– Looking at me, people see a gold fountain instead of seeing me, Maghan ibn Musa.

– And looking at me, people see a coppersmith who can make them a pretty vase, instead of seeing Muhammad ibn al-Zayn. So what? I only ask my wife and my daughter to see Muhammad ibn al-Zayn. The rest of people, I just ask for their gold in exchange for my craft.

Maghan drew closer to the shelves to admire this craft in all its refined details. His eyes quickly stopped on the surface of a magnificent basin alive with many strange characters and beasts. He was sure never to have seen anything so beautiful.

– Is this basin to your liking? Come back with ten gold dinars, and it's yours!

– Ten gold dinars? But it's worth so much more!

Ibn al-Zayn, who didn't seem the kind of man to laugh often, was almost smiling.

– You are my first client who haggles prices upward rather than downwards. There I recognize the boy who grew up in a palace. The Mamluks are stern sultans, but at least they know the harsh reality of life.

– Is it me who's ignorant of the reality of life? How can a bare yellow metal be more valuable than a basin which is not only beautiful, but also useful?

Two hard knocks bumped the door. Those weren't the base and vain knocks of a disappointed crowd, but knocks that demanded the door be opened at once. Ibn al-Zayn slid away the bar and showed the Malian guards on his doorstep that their prince was safe. In exchange, their officer offered him a nugget as big as a fist. Maghan now saw on the coppersmith's face the same shabby smile as the Cairo populace waiting with their gaping bags. Such a despise filled his soul that as he left under the guard's escort, he couldn't stop himself from throwing to the coppersmith:

– So for you too, I'm just a gold fountain? You do deserve the woe that will befall you!

Mansa Musa was crouching, immersed into his reading of a Quran written with gold, quietly chanting the verses. In front of him, his son was standing still. An hour or two must have already passed, and the Mansa let his son wait, never taking his eyes off the golden holy pages. Tired of this scene, Maghan finally broke:

– Father, shall we study this surah together?

Musa responded by making his psalmody louder. Now, it was impossible for the prince to speak again without interrupting the revealed word of God. Finally, as he reached the end of a surah, Musa carefully closed the book and started scrutinizing his son.

– Such is the price that God has me pay for listening to your mother. Instead of forcing you to study the Quran from dawn to dusk, I've let you frolic like a gazelle. Now I see the result. Your greed covers our Mali with shame. You haven't just lacked generosity: you fled generosity like a coward. I hope that at least you regret your double sin?

– Father, I foresaw... I have the intuition that our gold will only bring doom to this people.

– Intuition is the Devil whispering in your ear! Against your intuition, there's the truth God has revealed to us. If you decide to flee generosity, your flight will lead you straight into the flames of Hell! I do not wish my son to end up in Hell, so I'll force you to give away gold. When we arrive in

Medina and Mecca, you'll have to give away twice as much gold as me and the other Malians. That will teach you to be generous!

– Is it truly generosity, if I don't have the choice?

The prince did not flinch as his father stood up in rage to grab a stick. Not wanting to disappoint his father even more by running away like a coward, he decided to take the hits.

As the muezzin was calling for the noon prayer, Maghan had already closed his book, ready to leave the sultan's library for the adjacent mosque. During those few weeks spent between the library, the mosque and the caravansery, he had grown accustomed enough to the rhythm of his identical days to know the times of prayer without ever seeing the sky. His father's stick – his shoulders, arms and back still carried its marks – had dissuaded him from trying to leave the Citadel again. Fortunately, the sultan had a great collection of books accumulated through the centuries by the rulers of Egypt. Maghan had never been much of a reader, but that no real fault of his: the very few books that made it across the desert to Mali were all copies of the one and only Quran. The first time he had entered the sultan's library, he had been intimidated to discover the existence of so many different books. Was a single life enough to read all of them? After gently stroking the leather bindings, however, he felt a soothing warmth. It mattered little to Maghan whether this warmth was actually came from the flames that would one day consume these books, as it felt welcoming like a hearth. Since then, day after day, he immersed himself in Aristotle, Averroes, Maimonides, Omar Khayyam... and even without understanding half of it, he felt understood, enlivened, enlightened by those great minds as by better fathers than his own. Today, after he squeezed back Saadi's poems on the shelf before going to the prayer, he looked upward to those thousands of other volumes reaching the ceiling, and bit his lips. Tomorrow, the caravan would leave for Medina, and he wouldn't have read even a hundredth of it all. As on every Friday, his father, the sultan and the whole Malian and Mamluk elite had gathered in the mosque. During his sermon, the imam praised Mansa Musa, adding that all the people of Cairo should thank God to have brought here such a noble, pious and generous monarch. Hearing this, Maghan looked around him to see if anyone shared his surprise. All seemed to acquiesce. Apparently, the woe that he had predicted had not yet come. After the prayer, the prince wondered how he'd spend his last day in Cairo. He wanted to explore the city, but the memory of his last try was still too painful. Thank God he was able to take refuge in the shop of that coppersmith... whom he had insulted in return. How ungrateful he'd been! Today was his last chance to ask forgiveness to this man. He rushed to the caravansery to pick up thirteen golden dinars and a few nuggets to give to the people along the way; he then approached a Mamluk named Baybars, who'd been given the honor of protecting the Malian pilgrim guests during their stay in Cairo, to ask him timidly:

– Do you know how I can reach the shop of one named Muhammad ibn-Zayn? I'll give you a dinar if you can guide me there today.

– You weren't even born yet, my boy, that I was already patrolling this city. I know in which hole dwells each rat in Cairo. But keep your dinar. My loyalty is to the sultan and my comrades, not to gold. Now, follow me!

The streets were quiet this time as well. As he left the Citadel, Maghan's fingers were already fidgeting with the nuggets inside his pocket. His guts tightened. There was an old lady turning the opposite direction, and then a little boy too. If God had decided to replay the same scene, Maghan was determined not to take the craven's role again! He kept forward, his chin raised as he followed his guide. They crossed a few streets, went from one neighborhood to the next, and the Cairenes kept on slipping away as they saw the young Malian... but none came back. No gaping bags, no stretched hands. Looking up he noticed windows closing as he passed. Eerily, most shops were closed too. Muhammad ibn al-Zayn's made no exception. With his huge fists Baybars knocked so hard the whole street trembled. Nothing. He knocked again. Finally, the peephole revealed the eyes of the small man inside. With a Mamluk warrior on his doorstep, he had to open. Before the coppersmith could speak a word, Maghan entered, emptied the thirteen dinars of his purse on the table and said:

– I came back here to apologize. You offered me the asylum of your shop and I've insulted you. Your splendid basin, that one, is worth ten dinars if I remembered well. To make myself forgiven, I'm buying it to you for three dinars more!

– Are you mocking me?

– Is that not enough? Here are some gold nuggets... Those five nuggets should be worth twelve dinars, so you'll have twenty-five dinars instead of just ten.

– If you want to laugh at me, go mock someone else. Are we the common people just joking material to you? With your twenty five dinars, how am I supposed to feed my wife and my girl? You, the rich prince, you really can't understand, can you?

– But twenty-five dinars should be a big amount! I know it, because you sell such a wonder for ten dinars only...

– For ten dinars only? I sell it for fifty, not less!

– Fifty? But a few weeks ago...

The coppersmith threw a side look at Baybars, and politely suggested the prince to come see, at the back of his workshop, some more affordable vases. Once they were both alone in a small dark room with a subtle silvery glitter, ibn al-Zayn looked back to make sure the Mamluk hadn't followed them and said with the lowest voice:

– Listen well to what I'm about to say, Maghan ibn Musa. These past few days, there aren't enough gravediggers available for all the poor piling up in the graveyards. My own daughter can't sleep because of hunger. I myself am fasting since yesterday morning. People would rather barter whatever wealth they have for food, than for my superfluous works. Those of us who don't starve, our shops are closed, our jobs are lost and our last valuables swapped for a piece of bread.

– Yet with all the gold we gave them, isn't everyone rich?

– Where you come from, gold is abundant, isn't it? Does that make everyone in Mali rich?

– In Mali, people are rich from their salt or their cowries.

– And what if I brought a mountain of salt and cowries to Mali? Since you and your kind have brought us a mountain of gold, that metal here is now worth less than silver or even copper! So you understand that something once worth ten dinars is now worth fifty, and I was being generous with

you. As a result, in all Cairo people work less or don't work at all, since they were working for gold and now gold is worthless. To buy bread, we must barter it for something valuable enough, but nothing else has value anymore... And food is getting scarce. Those who have some keep it for themselves.

– So that was our gold's woe! We need to warn the sultan immediately...

The coppersmith grabbed the prince's forearm with a strong grip.

– Fool that you are! Do you think the sultan ignores it all? He knows it better than anyone, but he fears the people would revolt, so he forbade talking about it on pain of death.

– Precisely!, Baybars answered.

Maghan and ibn al-Zayn jolted and cowered among the vases. The huge warrior looked down on them with eyes blue like water, but burning like torches. He grabbed the small coppersmith by the hair and lifted him above the ground.

– I've patrolled this city for years: when someone whispers seditious lies, I can hear it from miles away!

– Please! I have a wife and a little girl...

The Mamluk hit him hard in the guts and threw him on the ground. Maghan then saw the poor man raising supplicating and tearful eyes up to him. And the prince stayed silent, petrified with fear. Baybars stunned his prey, tied it and carried it on his enormous shoulders. As he went for the exit, seeing the prince still frozen, he told him:

– What do you have to fear? I won't hurt you! Oh, by the way, you wanted that basin? You can take it.

Not daring to do otherwise, Maghan lifted the basin. It was much heavier than he'd expected. Suddenly, the smell of incense filled his nostrils as he saw that basin very far from here, in some cavernous church. He felt the holy water pouring in as infidel princes were being baptized. And now it was shielded in a transparent glass cage among countless other masterpieces from all over the world... Maghan realized that indeed, that basin's value was beyond any amount of gold. But its creator would never know it. The next day, a few moments after Maghan had left Cairo with the caravan, coppersmith Muhammad ibn al-Zayn was cut in half on a public square.

The prince had thought himself used to the harsh monotony of desert roads; the long crossing of the Sahara to Cairo had, in his memory, lasted a mere instant; but the journey to Medina felt an eternity. In the Nile's water he saw the tears of poor ibn al-Zayn and in the dry rocks of the Sinai, he saw that fearsome Mamluk Baybars. To gnaw on him, rumination was invited to the feast by solitude, thirst and the scorching heat. The memory of al-Zayn's arrest replayed under his eyes again and again. And each time it replayed, he, Maghan, acted in a different way: he'd bravely stand between Baybars and the coppersmith; he'd throw himself at Baybars's feet to pathetically implore his mercy; he'd try to bribe him with gold; he'd insult him in a subtle way; he'd insult him in the basest way possible; he'd simply ask Muhammad ibn al-Zayn to forgive him for being powerless... What haunted him most were not the tears of ibn al-Zayn nor the violence of Baybars, but what the latter had told him so mundanely: "I won't hurt you". This statement pushed the door wide open for his

shame to pour in. If the Mamluk was not going to hurt him, then he could have opposed him! Or he could just as well have asked the sultan to pardon the coppersmith; he could have asked for his wife and daughter to be saved from certain starvation; he could have... When the caravan finally saw the slender green dome of the Prophet's Mosque poking out of the desert under the zenith sun, the prince had already gone through millions of pasts better and fairer. None of them, unfortunately, could ever repair the only past that had actually past.

The rumors about the Malians' generosity had reached Medina well before them. As soon as the horn announced the approach of the caravan, not a single Madani missed the call. During the preceding days, the women had sewn bags, the men had agreed where each family would be placed along the path, and the children had trained to catch nuggets by tossing pebbles at each other. Even the muezzins, supposed to call to prayer at this hour, had climbed down their minarets when they saw the column of horses and camels charged with gold on the horizon. Upon his white horse, Maghan had three bags filled with nuggets, and his father's stick was awaiting him if he were to fail emptying all three. Forcing on himself a generous smile, he did throw the gold handful after handful... and again he felt the woe this gold would bring. Only this time the future wasn't all dark. The calamity would come, yes, but he, Maghan ibn Musa, would fight against it. He couldn't predict how or to what extent, nor could he wholly believe his own vision, but that spark of hope was what he needed. The caravan would stop only two nights in Medina, just enough time to visit the Prophet's grave and resupply in water. On the last night, after the night prayer, the prince went to walk alone. As darkness was camouflaging his black skin, he didn't have to fear the greed of passersby. He craved to touch the dried-mud walls of the Madani houses, those same walls in the shadow of which the Prophet had walked seven centuries earlier. He was hoping that with his power he could also see the past, see what the man God had chosen as His messenger looked like. But he only saw forward in time. And nothing he touched would remain. The houses, the other mosques and even the graveyard of the Prophet's family would be leveled by Arabian kings even richer than his father. *Would they be so rich that to them, even relics of holy relics would be worthless?*, Maghan wondered. He shivered. If gold and even holy relics could lose their worth, what about his own worth?

After a few more days of hard journey, at long last, Maghan saw the caravan's final destination. After they had crossed half of the world, he and his kind had made it! Despite fatigue, he rose straight on his saddle and peered in the distance, searching for the Kaaba. But he only saw a small mosque with five minarets in the middle of a city twice as small as Medina, and a thousand times smaller still than Cairo. Could it be that Mecca was that mere desert town? The Holy Mosque was just a prayer hall, five modest minarets and a courtyard enclosing the Kaaba, the cubic black stone sanctuary towards which the prayers of all Muslims converge. Maghan, who'd imagined a cube as gigantic as the pyramids, was somewhat disappointed to discover that the *House of God* wasn't any larger than an ordinary house. Nevertheless he accomplished all the pilgrimage rites at his father's side with diligence. When the time came to kiss the Black Stone, that meteorite at the corner of the Kaaba, he felt the kisses from millions of future pilgrims and was so moved he lost his speech for two days. The other pilgrims and the Makkis attributed that intense emotional reaction to piety, and Mansa Musa congratulated himself for having raised a son so fearful of God. As such, once all the rites were accomplished, Musa came to imam Ibrahim, praised as the greatest Sunni expert in

Islamic Law, to tutor his son. Thus the imam and the prince sat face to face and, while the former talked at length about the interpretation of this or that hadith, he didn't notice how much the latter was growing bored. And even if he'd noticed, he wouldn't have complained too much given the size of the enormous gold nugget the Mansa had promised him as payment. After long hours of monologue, the imam asked his student if he had any questions. Maghan thought a little before asking:

- God rewards those who do good deeds and punished those who do evil deeds, isn't it?
- Indeed, God is the most just. On the path of our lives, God always gives us the choice to act in either the good or the bad way. Those who accomplish good deeds in the fear of God will find their reward in Heaven. Those who don't, for them is hellfire.
- But if, for example, it is because I wish to go to Heaven rather than Hell that I decide to give away gold, am I truly being generous?
- By giving away gold, how can you not be generous?
- Because that generosity doesn't emanate from me. Rather it comes from the fear of being punished and the desire to be rewarded. Therefore I don't have a choice but to act as if I was generous.
- You always have a choice. God has given us free will. You are free not to be generous. But if you want your place in Heaven, you must do what pleases God.
- That seems a little strange. Why would God have given us free will if, in any case, we must strictly follow His commandments to be accepted in Heaven? Why has God created humans in such a way that some would end down in Hell?
- Because otherwise it would be too easy! What would be the point of life, if our existence was a flat road without any challenge?
- Yet earlier today, you read me a hadith describing Heaven as a sinless world, where we can drink wine, fornicate with our virgins... What point, then, to go live in Heaven, if our existence there has no challenge? With your logic, we should rather go to Hell!
- God help us! I'll tell your father that you spoke such blasphemy.
- Please, no need to tell my father!
- He must know. You won't like it, but it's the right thing for me to do. With his wrath, you will hopefully learn a good lesson!
- And with his wrath, he won't give you that gold nugget.

The imam looked away for a moment, before sighing:

- I advise you to run immediately to the Holy Mosque and pray all night to ask Him for forgiveness. Perhaps He'll forgive you, as indeed He is the Most Merciful.
- So, because you fear he won't give you that nugget, telling my father is not the right thing to do anymore? Between acting by fear of not being paid and acting by fear of going to Hell, the gap isn't very wide.

The imam stood up without taking care to respond. Only once he reached the doorstep did he turn back towards the prince to say with a weary voice:

– When you can do good, it's not because free will enables you to do evil that you should choose evil. The Day of Judgment is soon to come, but I hope God will have time to forgive us.

Maghan let the imam go. Through his predictions often reaching many centuries forward, he knew the Day of Judgment wouldn't come soon. *Thus surely God will have enough time to forgive us all*, he mused.

At this sweet hour between the dusk prayer and the night prayer, the air in the desert was halfway from the arid heat of day to the the freezing cold of night. Maghan was walking alone in the uninhabited outskirts of Mecca. The next morning, the caravan would leave. The young man had believed that once his pilgrimage had been accomplished, he'd feel lighter, relieved; yet instead, the thought that this adventure was ending now was weighing on him. But even if they had wished otherwise, the Malians had no choice but going back home, since Mansa Musa had given away so much gold in Mecca that they were only left with barely enough to finance the return journey. Moreover, feeling inspired by faith, Musa had declared the liberation of all Malian slaves who would convert to Islam... The noise of hooves extracted Maghan from his thoughts. Thinking it came from his father's soldiers sent to look for him, the prince shouted that he was there. No voice answered. So he ran towards the noise and found himself in the trajectory of a group of horsemen galloping hastily. The foremost horse, seeing Maghan late in the darkness, reared just in time not to trampled him.

– Who's there?, boomed a feminine voice.

The prince looked up to see upon the saddle, for the first time, a woman in armor, her long hair flowing in the wind. She was the incarnation of what he'd imagined, as a little child, when he was told the story of warrior-queen *Al-Kahina*.

– Ah, you are the son of Musa!, she finally said.

The son of Musa didn't dare speak, astonished by the scene: behind this new Al-Kahina, other women were riding, carrying arms and wearing mismatched, oversized pieces of armor. They were all black. He recognized his father's slaves – fleeing. Terrorized, he screamed:

– I won't tell my father, I promise! Please don't kill me!

– Ah, don't worry. You always treated us well, you. I won't hurt you, unless you don't get out the way!

I won't hurt you. The same words as the Mamluk Baybars. In each of the thousand times he had replayed that scene in his head, he'd answer something instead of yielding. So this time he decided to answer, without making way:

– Where are you going?

– To freedom, of course!

– But the Arabian desert is too dangerous.

– Your father wanted to give us to imam Ibrahim. We'd rather die!

Maghan remembered that imam Ibrahim. Free will doesn't matter, he had said, since we must always make the right choice. But...

– Is it the right choice?, he naively asked.

– The right choice? Other slaves given to Ibrahim have refused to flee with us: they will be sheltered and fed, but their lives will only serve the purpose of being raped; others still have converted to Islam: they'll be as free as a woman can be in this land, but they've betrayed the faith of their ancestors. These women are no doubt convinced they made the right choice, and so are we! As for you, if you care to live, the right choice is to make way now!

Maghan didn't wait to hear her sword unsheathe to run away, letting the horsewomen ride to their freedom. The rumor about the runaway slaves would quickly spread around and outside Arabia, and soon the whole Muslim world would curse and mock those women. And yet, Maghan was sure that in their place, he'd have made the same choice.

The Malians had arrived in Mecca in the most opulent caravan ever seen in living memory, and were now leaving like humble pilgrims. Most of the gold, slaves and camels had been given away, liberated or lost. Many weapons and armors had been stolen by the runaway slaves. The governor of Mecca offered Musa the escort of a regiment of Mamluks specialized in protecting pilgrims, but the proud monarch refused. The road was long and Maghan, who didn't have enough strength left in him to even ruminate, just numbly focused on the wobbles of his saddle. Somewhere in Northern Arabia, after a harsh day of marching, the caravan's rear lagged behind so much so the front lost sight of it. Musa ordered the advance to stop for a day to let the laggards catch up. The day came and went. They never arrived. The remaining half of the caravan had to leave them to the desert's mercy, and with them the better part of the water and food reserves. The dignitaries insisted that they must go up to Gaza or Jerusalem to resupply, but the Mansa's deaf pride lead the caravan straight to the Sinai. A few days later, when raiders appeared on the horizon, the Malians watched them come like a dying man facing the Angel of Death. The leader of the raiding band rode towards the Mansa. Maghan deemed that with his mustache and his majestic way to sit on horseback, he looked more a great man than a crude bandit.

– O Musa ibn Abu Bakr, he said, forgive me for coming to loot your caravan.

– If you're regretting it already, then don't do it!, Musa retorted.

The man showed a smile under his mustache.

– I would much better have avoided coming all the way from Lebanon, but our community is in dire need. Your gold will feed our women and children, be assured of it.

– If you wish to make a good deed, don't go looting a caravan of pilgrims. Otherwise, when the Mamluks are done tracking you, you and your companions will be sent straight to the flames of Hell!

– Then we are fortunate that, in our faith, death doesn't bring Hell, but a rebirth. As for the Mamluks, they're already persecuting us ever since Al-Nasir became sultan. Has he forgotten that we, the Druze, have fought on his father's side to defeat the crusaders? Without us, the Mamluks would never have won this victory of which they hog all the glory!

– Am I responsible for the way the Mamluks treat the heretics you are?

– We need that gold more than you who owns mountains of it in your country. Come on, in this arid desert, each minute passes like an hour. We won't hurt you so long as you don't resist, and we won't take your water and food. After all, it would be ironic for one named Musa (Moses in Arabic) to die in the Sinai while returning to Egypt. I'll now let you order your kind to dismount and unload all the valuables they carry.

The Mansa turned to the captain of his guard and ordered him to fight, to be brave. By dying in combat against infidels, they would... The captain dropped his sword in the sand and dismounted. All the other Malian soldiers did the same, too exhausted and thirsty to fight. Musa remained on his saddle for a while, immobile and speechless. Rather than wrath, for the first time, Maghan read sadness on his father's face. Finally, Musa closed his eyes and, with his subjects at his back, repeated the Druze leader's order to them. They obeyed. The prince unwrapped the basin of ibn al-Zayn and contemplated it one last time. His touch unfolded its immediate future to him: he saw himself approaching the Druze leader, who was busy counting gold nuggets and filling them in a bag, to hand him the basin. Not daring to go against his own destiny, so he went. The Druze leader looked at him with surprise while the prince repeated what he had heard himself say in his prediction:

– I wish you do not destroy this basin, but sell it at its fair price.

– I'll gladly grant you that wish. Here, that's for your father.

And the man gave him the bag he had just filled with gold. He explained:

– I've estimated that there is enough gold in there for you and your kind to sustain yourselves until you arrive in Cairo. Once there, the sultan would do well to give you back some of the gold you gave him, so you may return to Mali.

– Why... me?

The Druze gestured Maghan to come closer and whispered:

– Just look at your father. I think his pride has sufficiently been torn. He would never have accepted that his looter give him back some of his gold, so you'll have to accept it for him.

As the prince returned to his horse to fasten the bag of gold to it, he wondered if he should have thanked the Druze leader. Once the looting was over, the man strapped ibn al-Zayn's basin on his own horse. Watching him mount, Maghan couldn't help but cry out:

– Wait! Why have you left us our lives, our supplies and some gold, when you could just as well have taken it all?

– Indeed, the man answered with a thoughtful smile, I could have left your carcasses to the desert. But I could just as well let you live. I'll let you figure for yourself whether I made the right choice.

Mansa Musa never spoke a word until they reached Cairo. He didn't even ask his son for the gold the Druze had given back. Thus it was for Maghan to lead the caravan and purchase the necessary supplies. Each time he had to make a decision for the Malians, he first turned to his father, but Musa's red eyes were still peering into the sand below. One evening, as the caravan had stopped

along Nile, Maghan saw his father sitting by the riverside. Afraid that he'd throw himself in the water, the prince rushed towards him but after a few steps, he hesitated and halted. How does one comfort a father who has never shared with us any emotions aside anger and pride? After a few moments the prince decided to leave him alone and, as he was walking back to the camp, he felt cowardly.

The Mamluks had the Malians enter by a gate leading directly from outside the city to the Citadel of Saladin. Mansa Musa, Maghan and other dignitaries were brought in front of the Striped Palace, and waited. And waited some more. The summer sun was reaching its zenith, with no palm tree on the palace's esplanade to shield the Malians from it. They stayed still and quiet, too exhausted to complain. Maghan felt like he was part of a group of slaves awaiting their master outside. *BAM, BAM, BAM...* Out of the silence, the prince heard a clatter repeating itself again, and again, and again. Standing under the blazing sun, he was sure that noise would drive him mad. He looked around at the soldiers. They weren't immune to impatience and heat either, and were now nervously swinging from one foot to the other. So Maghan slipped between them and ran towards the source of the noise. He went past several palaces and found, near the walls, a vast brick building. The clatter was now deafening. Luckily the door was ajar. As he tip-toed inside he felt he had entered an oven. Panting in the atrocious heat, he looked up to be dazzled by thousands, millions, billions of coins so numerous they formed actual dunes like so many grains of sand. He climbed the nearest dune. The coins were quite hot. On the other side, he saw molten metal flowing down to be endlessly chewed by a huge machine. One of the slaves running the mechanism fainted. The others tried to stop for their comrade, but the crack of a whip kept them going. The prince now wanted to climb down that dune and flee, but he slipped and fell down the coins to the ground. The machine had stopped. His fall had been heard. Knowing it would be pointless to hide, Maghan picked a dinar coin to read its future. That future was the same as the gold he had distributed on his first day in Cairo. Yet as he bit the coin, rather than gold, he tasted iron and copper. And iron, much colder iron, was now on his throat.

– I did tell the sultan you Malians had come to spy on us!

Maghan's heart stopped. That voice... It was the Mamluk Baybars!

– Did you think that since you're a prince, we'd keep you alive after that? I could cut your throat here and now, but I won't sully our dinars with your blood. I'm taking you to the sultan!

– That blade... That's the sultan's sword!

– It's the sultan's sword that will cut your neck, yes!

– Non, the sultan's sword is your sword!

Baybars chuckled and, never keeping his blade off the prince's throat, carried him to the Striped Palace. He finally dropped him to the ground in the audience hall, before Al-Nasir. Next to him on the floor, Maghan was horrified to see his father bowing down.

– Look at your father!, the sultan said. He's been bowing before me for a while already, and he'll keep bowing as long as it pleases me. Now, you should follow your sire's good example!

Terrified, Maghan dared neither to refuse nor to bow. He startled as he heard, for the first time since they'd been looted, his father's voice.

– My son, bow down now! It's one of the conditions the sultan gave us to keep us alive and provide us the supplies to return to Mali.

Heavy-hearted, Maghan bent a knee, then rose again and stood straight in front of Al-Nasir, who laughed:

– Ha, you are choosing bravery, now? I see that pilgrimage made you less of a coward than before. But that's too late. If you don't present me your complete submission in the name of Mali, I shall kill you before your father's eyes! Now you should make the right choice.

– I choose to keep standing not to put our Mali to shame. That's the right choice for me.

– Unfortunately, Al-Nasir said unsheathing his sword, it's not up to you to decide which is the right choice.

The sultan hadn't needed to speak any order for the prince to be put into place to be decapitated. Musa rose and shouted:

– Have some mercy, my son doesn't deserve death!

– Your son is guilty of espionage and disobedience. Of course he deserves death.

As Maghan's neck was now horizontal, ready to be cut like a log, Al-Nasir contemplated his shining blade and told the prince:

– It's such a shame you shall die for a stupid decision. I often wonder why God gave us free will if it's for men to act like fools. In a moment, perhaps you'll be able to ask him that question.

Seizing his last chance, Maghan proclaimed in the most perfect Arabic possible, stammering as he started:

– *Free will is not only the freedom to do bad when we can do good; it is also the freedom to do good when we can do bad.* I judge that giving up my honor and my people's honor just to save my petty life is bad. You are free to think otherwise. God only knows which of us is right.

The sultan sighed and lowered his sword. Then he raised it again above the prince's neck:

– If only that was so simple, Maghan ibn Musa. It doesn't matter if God approves you. I must eliminate you nonetheless for the good of our sultanate. You've heard and seen things from which you've no doubt drawn false conclusions about the state of our economy. If I keep you alive, you risk propagating false rumors worldwide.

– Keep me alive, and I'll tell you how to save the economy!

– The economy doesn't need to be saved, because it's doing very well. As proof, we are minting millions of new dinars.

– And so we'll need a thousand dinars to buy a piece of bread.

– Enough, now!

The sultan swung his blade towards Maghan's neck, but a clatter rang, then came the sound of a hundred swords unsheathing, then silence. When the prince finally dared looking up, he saw Al-Nasir disarmed. Baybars was threatening him with his sword, himself being threatened by all the other Mamluks.

– So you too have chosen to die, Baybars?, asked Al-Nasir. I don't understand you. We grew up together; we trained together; you've always been one of my best men with spotless loyalty... If you wish a quick death, drop your sword and bend down next to the Malian prince. You'll die before him.

– And why should I obey you?

– Imbecile, have you forgotten who your sultan is?

– You became sultan through your father, but your father is just worth a piece of bread.

– You dare insult my father, you piece of garbage!

– I'm not insulting your father, but *you* are! Since you're minting an infinity of coins, a thousand dinars won't be worth a piece of bread, as the Malian cub said. And hasn't your father cost a thousand dinars? But it's not only your father you're turning worthless: it's each one of us Mamluks whose value you're shredding to crumbs! Cause I've been bought for fifty dinars. Ali, here, cost forty; Idris sixty-five; Hasan fifty-three...

And Baybars kept one listing all the Mamluks in the room. Each one lowered his sword when he heard his name and price. Seeing his men's loyalty swing away, Al-Nasir exclaimed:

– What does the value of coins matter! Do you really think the populace is clever enough to understand how the value of a coin today can be different from yesterday? Moreover, if I find myself needing to mint all those coins, it's the fault of those Malians! And obviously it's also the fault of all those Druze, Copts and Jews...

– Your words are worth as much as the coins you mint, Al-Nasir.

And all the Mamluks laughed, mocking their fallen sultan. Even Maghan caught himself laughing, evacuating with each spasm the angst of near-death. Al-Nasir signed his abdication within the hour, and was magnanimously named governor of a province in Syria by the new sultan Baybars.

Maghan and Musa were sitting together in an antechamber of the Striped Palace, without saying a word nor knowing what they were awaiting. When the door finally opened, sultan Baybars entered holding a big block of salt in his hands, which he handed to Musa.

– Here too, he said, salt is now a commodity more precious than gold. Isn't that ironic? When you first came, we had wished you'd feel at home in Egypt, and you've indeed made Egypt just like your home. As such, here is the best gift I can present you. I've ordered your caravan to be loaded with plenty enough salt, water and food for you to cross the Sahara back to Timbuktu. You shall leave tomorrow at dawn.

Once Musa had thanked him, Baybars turned to the prince:

– O Maghan ibn Musa, when you said that my sword would be the sultan's sword, was that a vain attempt at flattering me, or can you foresee the future?

– Foresight? No... I... I just have a good intuition. And sometimes, intuition is an Angel whispering in our ear.

Only after having improvised that explanation did Maghan realize he also had just contradicted his father, who attributed intuition to the Devil. He shivered but to his surprise, Musa quietly acquiesced.

– Is there anything else you’d need before leaving?, the sultan asked.

– I would also like to ask you something, Maghan answered. You once told me that your loyalty was to the sultan. Then, why betray him?

– I told you my loyalty was also to my comrades. And Al-Nasir was about to lead us all to ruin. You should know that in Cairo, there are rival Mamluk factions who’d gladly take our place in the Citadel. That fear alone, however, wouldn’t have been enough to betray my master. I was so tempted to overthrow Al-Nasir, but wouldn’t have dared. What pushed me to act was what you said about free will. I understood that God gave me freedom to act according to my own conscience. So I have. If I had stayed obedient, as I always have living as a slave and then as warrior, I’d have also been responsible for my comrades’ downfall and the sultanate’s ruin.

Those words stirred Maghan, but the acid memory of Ibn al-Zayn’s arrest poured back, poisoning whatever burgeoning sympathy he could have for Baybars. He asked him:

– Muhammad ibn al-Zayn had a wife and a daughter. What became of them? Have they starved to death?

– Worry not, they are safe and well. I took them into my service.

Maghan lowered his eyes, not wanting to know what kind of service that was. Next to him, his father finally spoke:

– I should also thank you, o Baybars, for saving my son.

– I have believed your son to be a craven, but in the end he proved braver than you. And indeed, he was right about not wanting to give away all that gold.

– I am sorry my generosity turned more costly to those receiving it. In that case, it wasn’t really generosity. God will judge me. In the meantime, as the sultan, what are you intending to do about this situation?

– Nothing. Al-Nasir wanted to act like a sultan can act, but flooding the country with diluted new dinars; but water will never cease to be murky if you keep dipping your hand in it. Sometimes, the best thing a sultan can do is doing nothing.

– That indeed sounds like the wisest decision.

– Ah, wisdom! There can be too much gold, but never too much wisdom. Therefore, o Musa and Maghan, next time you come to Cairo, please rather bring an abundance of wisdom!

The next morning, Maghan and Musa were riding side by side, the rising sun and the city of Cairo glimmering behind them. After a few long miles crossed in silence, the father told the son:

– Maghan, my son, I brought you with me to this pilgrimage to see if you had the mettle to become the next Mansa. At first I was convinced otherwise. And still today, to speak truthfully, I’m still not sure. I’m still considering to name my brother Suleyman as my successor.

– What!

Musa had just opened the breach, and all the anger Maghan had accumulated against his father poured down:

– You did bow down before another man, and I kept standing. You shamed Mali, and I didn't! Haven't I demonstrated enough courage, honor and wisdom for you?

– You have courage and honor, perhaps, but that's not enough to make you a good ruler.

– If you want to be succeeded by a perfect ruler, why don't you ask God to come rule Mali Himself?

– Listen to your father. Did I ever tell you how I became Mansa?

– My grand-father Abu Bakr disappeared while going on his pilgrimage, isn't it?

– So I've told you the official version, the lie I've been spreading to cover the shameful truth.

– That was a lie?

– It does hold a portion of truth, like all lies. Your grandfather has indeed disappeared on a journey. But he didn't go to Mecca, nor even to the East. He went the opposite direction. On the other side of the Ocean, he claimed, lay a land unknown by scholars, a wealthy continent we could trade with. To the imams telling him he should rather go to Mecca as God demands, he answered that the Earth being round, he'd cross the new continent, then China and India to reach Arabia from the East. Thus he sailed with two thousand ships. Only one ship ever came back, and her sailors said the rest of the fleet had been carried westward by a current so strong it would be impossible to sail back. We knew my father would never come back... I was younger than you are now. My father abandoned his son and his wife and his entire people in pursuit of an illusion. He put his own dream before the people's reality. Do you understand how that was unworthy of a father and of a ruler?

– Surely, but I myself did go to Mecca and not beyond the Ocean.

– Because I wouldn't have let you do otherwise. Nevertheless, you talk about listening to your intuition and follow whatever your heart feels is the best choice. If you wish to rule one day, and raise your own successor, get rid of that mindset.

– Yet with that mindset I didn't bow before Al-Nasir.

– And Al-Nasir was about to cut off your head. Thanks to God, Baybars saved you. Had he not been there, you'd have returned to Mali in two pieces. In the foolishness of your youth, you thought it right to play the martyr! Did you wish your father to see you die before his eyes? I did bow, yes, for the good of Mali. It matters not if I was humiliated. One can recover from humiliation, but never from death. And I'd rather not have killed Mali's Mansa and his heir apparent. One day, I hope, you'll understand there is also courage in doing something you don't like, honor in swallowing your pride and wisdom in putting common good before your own.

Maghan would ponder on those words for the entire journey through the Sahara. After that adventure which had convinced him to always exercise his free will, there was his father drawing the opposite conclusion. He tried to find a definitive counterargument to prove his father wrong, but he couldn't. Even if he had found it, unfortunately, he would never have the occasion to debate his father again. On their return to Timbuktu, after the banquet celebrating the end of their pilgrimage,

Musa fell gravely ill. Maghan sat on his bedside in silence, unsure of which words to say. After a long moment he finally heard his father's feeble voice:

– My son, it's time we speak seriously... I had hoped we'd have this discussion much later, in many years... but God has decided otherwise.

– My father, you talk as if... The physicians assured me your condition is benign and that you'll recover quickly.

– Fool that you are! Their mouths say something while their faces speak something else. If you wish to be a good ruler, you must know how to decipher the truth the flatterers are trying to hide from you... I won't stay much longer in this world. I am happy that God let me do my pilgrimage before he took back the life he gave me. Now you must choose: do you wish to be my successor?

Maghan tried to hold back his tear, knowing how much his father hated seeing him cry. The question of succession only reached his mind after a delay, like thunder after lightning. He had a choice. His father gave him a choice. But he didn't want to disappoint him by refusing. For the sake of respect, and love, he didn't want his father to die disappointed by his son. Did he have another choice than accepting?

Mansa Maghan was invisible, sitting on a throne hidden away inside a proud domed room. In the courtyard before this room, a man threw himself to the ground, grabbed a handful of dust and poured it on his head. He spoke his complaint to a crier, and the crier repeated what he'd just heard high and loud, so that the Mansa could hear it. There was a silence. Surely the ruler was thinking about his response. The silence lengthened. The bowing man wondered whether there was truly a Mansa under that dome. At last another crier shouted the Mansa's response from inside. The man went away, leaving his spot for another. What he didn't and shouldn't know was that Mansa Maghan himself hadn't said anything. Once again, it was his uncle Suleyman who had spoken for him. At the end of that audience session, while Maghan was standing up to leave the room, Suleyman couldn't keep himself anymore from rebuking him.

– Are you truly the Mansa, here? Why must I always speak in your stead?

– I cannot speak against my heart. There isn't a single decision I can take that doesn't involve war, slavery or oppression.

– It's not for your heart to speak. During the audiences, the Mansa sits hidden from sight purposefully so his decisions be made impersonal.

– But that only draws me away from my people.

– Why have you accepted to succeed your father, if you hate that role so much?

– I didn't want to disappoint him in his last moments.

– Yet if your father saw you today, he'd be disappointed.

Those words hit Maghan like a punch in the stomach. He faltered and lent on a wall... and the predictions poured out of his mouth:

– That wall will collapse...

– Pardon?

- The Mali Empire will collapse...
- What are you saying?
- This palace won't even remain as ruins...
- How can you say such things?
- It's just the future!

That exclamation, like his predictions, had slipped through his usual filter. The whole court looked at him abashed. Suleyman replied with despise:

- You talk like your damn grandfather. He too claimed he could foresee the destiny of things... He was an unworthy Mansa. His so-called predictions made him see a new continent beyond the Ocean, and he abandoned his people in pursuit of that illusion. Do you want to be like him?
- You are right. A Mansa must always act for the Empire, not for himself. If my grandfather wished to explore the world, he first should have abdicated. Therefore, dear uncle, I'm leaving the throne to you.
- And what will become of you?
- As God gave me the ability to grasp the future of things, and thus their true value, I'd make a good merchant. I shall travel across the world all the way to India, to China, to that unknown continent beyond the Ocean... I choose to live so that I always can choose.

THE END