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The Spear

Western Africa, A.D. 1235

A single spear could change the course of a war. A young Mandinka warrior named Adama knew that better than anyone.

Adama's skin was dark as ebony, his eyes alight with an eagerness to prove his worth, and his muscular arms were testaments to his expertise at throwing spears. He looked every inch the hero. Yet, he had not always been confident. His tale began when he was eighteen-summer-old, after his family had fled their home.

The warlord of the Sosso people, Sumanguru, led his armies into other lands. Like a swarm of vultures, they flew from one village to the next, murdering anyone they wanted, trapping the rest under a dark cloud of fear and subjugation. Adama's own village had been raided. In the aftermath he had tended wounded villagers, then helped his mother and younger sisters walk on a treacherous journey of several days to territory not yet captured by the Sosso. The whole time, all he could think was *I must do something to stop this*.

His mother had been shocked when he told her he planned to join the guerrilla war against Sumanguru.

“I am not a boy any longer.” Adama spoke gently, yet firmly. “You will be safe here, but I must return and fight. There is a good leader fighting back, his name is Sundiata Keita, and I plan to join his army. Sundiata has overcome tremendous odds throughout his life. He has brought together many small tribes to defend against the Sosso.”

“Do what you must,” his mother said after a moment. “But make me a promise...” Her eyes lit with determination, an expression Adama knew better than to dismiss. “*Promise* that you will survive. Promise me that, and I’ll let you go.”

Adama gripped her hands tightly. “I promise.”

He set off.

On a searing hot day, Adama did his best to keep up with the other Mandinka warriors as they traipsed through the grasslands. They were on their way to a Sosso encampment, whose fighters awaited orders to strike a nearby village. A scout had warned the Mandinka of their plans, and the warriors were in a rush to get there, to stop the Sosso before they could massacre the village.

One foot in front of the other. One foot in front of the other. Adama glanced upwards at the burning sun, hoping they would reach the Sosso’s encampment soon. Ironically, he was more frustrated with the long, sweltering hike than he was nervous about the upcoming battle. He took a drink of water from the pouch he carried and gripped his spear even tighter.

Suddenly, one of the warriors raised a hand and everyone fell silent. Many of them ducked into the tall grass, recognizing the signal that suggested someone else was nearby.

Adama knelt too, muscles tense, heart pounding. Did the Sosso have scouts of their own? Had the Mandinka been spotted before they could reach the camp?

How long they waited, Adama didn't know. They may as well have been solid rocks for all the life they showed. Adama didn't dare move a single muscle; his mind raced with imaginings of battle.

After a while, apparently satisfied the alarm was false, the warrior who'd ordered the halt stood up again.

Still, Sundiata wasn't about to take chances. He beckoned Adama and three other men towards him. "You four need to spread out—cover each of the four directions, make sure no scouts are watching." He pointed them all in their assigned directions, and Adama nodded and hurried several meters towards the east.

From a long distance, Adama could barely make out the other warriors...they were stealthy and cautious, yet they moved quickly as well. Time was running out before the Sosso would move out to attack the village.

Adama meandered to a sloping hill to the east. As he climbed it, he stayed low, glancing around periodically to check for enemies. The sun went behind the clouds, and he was grateful for the shade.

He looked back towards the others. Again, he could barely see them. He was reasonably sure *no one* could see them unless they knew exactly where to look.

Then he heard it. A tiny thud, followed by the sound of stumbling.

Adama ducked into the grass. His heart pounded so loud he was sure someone would hear. He recognized that sound...someone tripping over a rock. And they were close by.

Because he was listening so hard, Adama heard a footstep, the slight sound of breath. And a figure moved into view, only twelve strides from where Adama hid.

Slowly, very slowly, Adama raised his head inch by inch until he could peer over the grass.

A tall, muscled man, a Sosso warrior twice his size, was kneeling on the hill, half-hidden behind a rock. He was gazing directly at the Mandinka army. And he was hefting a spear in his hands.

With a shiver, Adama realized the others would not see the attacker from where they stood—the rock provided good cover. But he couldn't call out because that would alert the other Sosso that there were enemies nearby. Adama's hands suddenly felt sweaty.

In front of him, the Sosso warrior tensed, his muscles hardening as he drew back his arm, eyes locked on the leader of the Mandinka—Sundiata.

There was no time to think. No time to doubt.

Adama hurled his spear. Time dragged out into a single moment. The spear seemed to move tauntingly slow, as if flying through thick mud.

At the same time, the Sosso warrior's arm began to thrust forward, muscles rippling, giving his spear momentum.

It was a race between spears—one spear would kill Sundiata, the other spear would save him. One spear would turn the war's tide in favor of the Sosso, the other in favor of the Mandinka.

As Adama watched his spear get closer and closer to the Sosso fighter, he was confronted by an unchangeable fact: he'd done what he could, but it was out of his hands now. All that remained to be seen was if Adama's spear would kill the Sosso fighter before the spear left the other man's hands.

There was a sickening thud. A body went rigid. Then it fell to the ground.

One of the spears had found its target.

Adama stood up quickly, eyes wide with shock. Was he seeing things, or was this really happening?

He was not seeing things. The would-be-assassin lay dead, sprawled onto his front, with Adama's spear protruding from his back. The Sosso warrior's spear had fallen harmlessly onto the rock.

The Mandinka warriors kept moving towards the Sosso encampment. Adama kept his eyes wide open, searching for more assassins. He needed to stay focused. But the same thoughts flew through his head: he had saved his leader. He had stopped the killer.

But he had also become a killer himself.

Adama survived the battle with the Sosso encampment, as did most of the Mandinka warriors. Their surprise attack had worked. They had driven off the surviving Sosso fighters and prevented the massacre of the nearby village. They sat around a campfire late that night beneath a blanket of stars, telling each other what they had seen and done. Sundiata came to sit beside Adama. "One of the others tells me you killed a Sosso scout."

Adama nodded somberly. "He was aiming a spear at you. I had to stop him."

Sundiata didn't say anything at first, but gratitude showed in his eyes, and in the reassuring hand he laid on Adama's shoulder. "You were brave today, Adama. We won this battle, but the Sosso are not defeated. It will not be easy. But if we keep showing courage like yours, we should be able to protect our families and friends from harm."

Adama's heart glowed at the praise, but he simply bowed his head the way a grown man was expected to, solemn and respectful.

“I may have met my end today if you hadn’t thrown your spear.” Sundiata murmured. “I owe you a debt I can never repay.”

Adama lowered his eyes, embarrassed by the praise. “I just did what any of the other warriors would have done.”

“We have a long path to travel on.” Sundiata observed. “It will take many acts of courage to protect our people. Each act will be a spark, and those sparks together will fuel our fire.”

Adama watched the sparks from the campfire flitting into the air as Sundiata spoke, the smoke curling above the warriors’ heads. He knew the strength of a fire and respected its power. If unchecked, fire could be as destructive as a blaze started by a bolt of lightning. But if respected and handled properly, fire could also be a source of warmth and comfort. Adama believed the invader Sumunguru to be like the wildfire, destroying everything in his path. But Sundiata was like a campfire, bringing hope to the Mandinka people. If Adama could be a part of that, even as one small spark, he was proud of it.

Sundiata’s fight against the Sosso would climax in the Battle of Kirina. This battle would lead to the defeat of Sumanguru and his conquering ways, as well as freedom for the Mandinka people. Sundiata would be remembered in songs and stories for centuries because of his actions in the war, as well as the creation of the Mali Empire.

It is little known that Adama had saved his life a month earlier, that Sundiata would not have been alive to lead his people to victory if not for Adama’s action. But Adama did not care about being in legends or tales. All

he cared about was that he had survived and returned to his family. He'd kept his promise to his mother. For now, at least, the Mandinka didn't need to fear attacks by enemies.

Adama's spear had changed the course of the war. But, as Sundiata reminded him later, the spear was just a tool. Adama had really been the one to turn the tide.

It was overwhelming, in a way, to think of what could have happened had he not stopped the assassin. Sometimes he found himself thinking of the assassin's family, what kind of grief they must be feeling right now. Adama knew he'd done right in saving Sundiata, but those thoughts made him somber. He couldn't let himself linger too long on such thoughts, though. Now that the fighting had stopped, Adama needed to learn how to help his people in peacetime, a challenge he much preferred over war.

The End.