

## PART ONE

### Chapter 1: Mo'destee Vert

#### 1789 – Baila Village, Senegambia

When Mo'destee was a child, she played Savanna Hare with the other children of the village. The point of the game was to see how quiet and scarce they could be, moving quickly from shadow to shadow. They challenged each other to walk through the low scrub without making a sound, staying hidden. It was what all the kids played until they were old enough to have a purpose and serve their tribe.

Never did they practice with a pursuing predator. Never did she practice running for her life.

Her breath came out in quick puffs as her bare feet slapped the sunbaked earth. She couldn't imagine a rabbit's heart beating any faster than her own was now, or its fear being any more sickening. Right behind her, the heavy boots breaking twigs and hitting the earth with thumps seemed to be closing the gap. She knew not to chance a glimpse behind her as it may slow her down. With animal-instinct thoughts still in her mind, she darted right then left into tall grass.

"Volte aqui, sua cadela," the words were foreign but the tone was universal.

Like magic, or an answered prayer, her feet were running upwards on air, her body being pulled toward the heavens. Praise Allah! The stars flashed into her line of vision, the thin moon a beacon of hope. For a moment, she thought she had shot into the sky. A miracle.

With panic knotting in the pit of her stomach, she realized her pursuer had snatched her by the back of the neck and lifted her from the ground, her legs still pumped furiously. A hairy white hand clasped over her mouth and nose as she struggled against his strength.

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Three Months Earlier –

The sun was setting, the sky changing from blue to the gold of the evening. It was Mo'destee's favorite time of the day. As the people of her tribe came together for their nightly meal, the fire in the center created an orb of light that gave her comfort. Her baby brother, Emeka, was sitting on her lap sucking on a wooden bead that was suspended around his slender wrist by some frayed twine. The drool had darkened it and left it shiny. He offered it to her lips before plugging it back into his own little mouth.

Tonight was special, more than just a systematic gathering. On this evening, the older boys of the village would transition into manhood. They had been preparing for three days, all of them banished outside of the walled compound as they made their journey into the bush as boys and emerged as men.

She wasn't paying much attention to her little brother, or the other children that were left in her charge. They were also anticipating the spectacle, the energy high throughout her people. Parents who had been working the field or tending the irrigation system stopped to scoop up their children and causally talk to Mo'destee.

"Are you excited? It's almost time for you, too," they teased with a smile and wink. Mo'destee was coming of age this year as well, making her own transition from childhood to adulthood.

Soon, Mo'destee would have a new assignment in her village, ideally with her mother and her father's second wife, working the bark from fig trees or the fibers from the raffia palm into fabric. This was a family trade she was proud to be a part of, weaving, sewing, and dying the

clothes the villagers wore. Another teenager would take her place in the tending of the children. She would have a mate, eventually children of her own, maybe even a sister-wife down the road. That was always a possibility, as the more stature a man had the more wives he was able to take. On one hand, she wanted her husband to have stature among her people as her father did, but on the other hand, she wasn't sure if she could share as her mother did.

Mo'destee could see the outline of Jabari's head silhouetted by the setting sun. She knew it was him, she could pick him out of the tribe's crowd. The lines of his neck into his shoulders, the shape of his skull, his height and hair. Her mother had once proudly proclaimed the shape of her father's head indicated high intelligence. Jabari had that same distinct shape, a larger forehead and a nice gentle curve on the top. Elongated, not round. Round heads were not as desirable, she thought.

The boys had been brought back into the compound and were practicing their acrobatics, their warrior stances, and the proceedings of the ceremony for later that night. Smells of the food the women were preparing wafted through the golden air and Mo'destee's stomach gurgled with anticipation.

A noise brought her attention back to the brood that was left in her charge. She looked at Emeka, he also had the same shaped head, then she glanced around at the other children. A few had curled like dogs, exhausted from the day's heat and activities. Others chased each other in small circles, whining or laughing depending on if they were the chaser or the chasee.

Although their farming village always seemed safe, the presence of hunting lionesses was always an innate thought. Since their village lay between the Senegal and Gambia rivers, lions, jackals, and even crocodiles were potential intruders. Senegambia had many farming villages

peppered up and down its banks. Baila Village was set perfectly south, the river running east and west, for easy irrigation and easy navigation.

Mo'destee was small, like her mother, but she was strong. As with many first born-children, she looked just like her father in face. A miniature version of the man in tone and attitude placed on her mom's petite frame. Most of the Wolof people were tall and broad in the shoulders, dark as black coffee. Djibril, GB to his family and friends, was no exception. He was a farmer, fisherman, father, and husband, just like his father and his father's father.

Mo'destee and her mother were the exceptions in the tribe, built small and short. Mo'destee's mother, Fanta, had lost two children between her and Emeka. The babies came too early, one born navy blue and never taking a breath, the other not living past the first sunrise. Emeka had a small frame too, it seemed tiny children were the only ones to make it in the Vert family. Tamala, GB's second wife, had no problem bringing children into the world. She'd had three in five years, each healthy and rambunctious, part of Mo'destee's daily charges. Recently, Mod'estee had noticed the pumped-up abdomen of her second mother and wondered if perhaps she was expecting again.

Fanta was still nursing Emeka, although he also nursed from Talmala. It had pained Mo'destee to see her mother during childbirth. She wasn't sure what was worse, the physical pain, the grunts and howls like an animal during the labor, or the low wail of mourning when the babies died. She hoped her mother was through having kids. Let Talmala do the screaming and laboring into the night. The weight of the toddler on her lap made her think of the family she would have with Jabari. Her own labor and love.

Jabari would be a fine husband and father to her children. She wondered if she would be able to deliver babies healthy enough to live, or if she, too, would have to suffer as her mother did. Jabari was tall, big. Would she only be able to deliver babies born small like her and her brother?

Even though the screams of every woman in the throes of labor haunted her, she wanted to give Jabari a son. It was a daydream that danced in her mind each day that brought her closer to their joining ceremony. Smiling to herself, she couldn't help but feel content, her life was set. Their fathers had arranged their pairing when they were babies. Long-time friends, they knew it was the perfect way to bring the two bloodlines together and strengthen their tribe. The joining ceremony would be the week of the summer solstice with the other adolescents who were ready to join the ranks of adulthood. Her best friend, Amina, was going to be joined at the same time to Jabari's cousin. They had all grown up together, it made sense they should all grow old together.

Marriages were arranged, tribes strengthened. It was a way of life.

They also attended school. The girls were taught sewing, weaving, and food preparation. The boys were taught to hunt, fish, and build structures with mud. The universal lessons for both sexes were language, math, and reading. Mo'destee could speak several Afrikan languages, and they had recently been introduced to European languages since the French had come to the west coast and begun colonizing.

Mo'destee watched her beau, her brother still perched on her lap. His little squirming body provided a convenient obstacle to conceal her gazing. Every now and then, she would catch Jabari's eye and see a flash of his white teeth poking out from a grin. She knew he felt the same

towards her. Their relationship was a perfect recipe, their friendship life-long and true. She hoped her babies would have an elongated head, long limbs, and grace with a lot of cleverness, and sparkling pitch-black eyes that danced when the reflection of the fires caught them. Babies. Jabari's babies. The thought made her swoon for a moment until Emeka clobbered her in the head with his baby fist and drool ran down her cheek from where his open, toothless mouth tried to taste her.

The idea of sharing a hut with Jabari was thrilling, even though having a baby inside of her was nerve-racking. She was in her fifteenth year and had seen women bear children. It wasn't pleasant, it was horrifying. She remembered her mom's anguish with the last miscarriage, just two years ago. Her mother's sobs as the blood ran down both legs and the medicine woman, with her dotted, pierced, and tattooed face, bustled in with her strange herbs and smells. Finally, the baby literally fell out of her mother; it was the color of midnight.

When Emeka came, it was also a painful and difficult delivery. Outside the grass hut many of the villagers had gathered to offer comforting words of support.

"This one is a boy," her father had told her with frankness. They heard another low animalistic sounding groan from the hut. "He will live, this one will live. My son will survive." The muttering seemed more like a prayer. The plea had worked. Their father had picked the name; Emeka meant God did great deeds, it suited his place in their hearts perfectly.

The ceremony began with the four boys performing acrobatics. Jabari's cousin did three fast, tight, front handsprings then landed in a warrior pose and gave a mighty battle yell. The second young man did two back handsprings, stopping near the first and together they bellowed the warrior cry. From each side, Jabari and his brother came doing a series of flips and jumps and

landed so the four of them were lined up. Their performance then was synchronized, two did back flips and the other two went forward. They stomped, clapped, and engaged the crowd. They chanted and roared the warrior's track as they tumbled and did physically impressive acrobatics. Everyone cheered and encouraged them, the energy getting higher and higher.

Mo'destee could see on Jabari's bare chest where he had gotten his tattoo from Mambo, the sign of manhood. His snaked from his slender waist up towards his chest, parting as it climbed over his shoulders. She saw that there was more on his back, but between the lighting and Jabari's movement, she couldn't see what. Each man in their tribe received a unique tattoo from the medicine woman, Mambo, when they went through the rite of passage. She told each of them the dream that inspired the ink she permanently put on them or, sometimes, the drawings were inspired by family history and ranking among the tribesmen.

The young men continued their feats of calisthenics, growing sweaty and wearing themselves out, pushing each other's physical abilities. Mo'destee looked around her at the village where she had been born and raised. She watched the people she called family as their attention was directed at the men that were coming of age. The pride and love on each of their faces made her own feelings multiply, so much so that tears spouted at the corners of her eyes. She thought of the teachings of the Quran and her heart was so full of gratitude that she could not picture her life getting any better. When she turned her attention back to Jabari, she knew her life would get fuller. Her mind filled with thoughts of their lives together as her attention turned back to the people surrounding her. Jabari's parents, smiling, clapping, her own parents, her mother tucked under the arm of her father, her arms wrapped around his waist. She glanced down to see her little brother pantomiming the older boys in miniature.

Once they were done, the village roared together the warrior's ode and began to individually congratulate the boys as the women finished the meal preparation.

The food was served. Adults gathered around and scooped portions with their fingers for themselves. The children waited until the grown-ups sat on their woven mats before they began to eat, picking from the leftovers in the pan. Jabari and his two brothers stood next to Mo and Emeka. They were all very tall; their shadows from the fire created an illusion of a canopy above her head. She felt safe with Jabari's broad shoulders looming protectively over her and her father seated on the ground near them. Again, a wave of contentment and pure happiness washed over her.

"Sit with me and eat, little Mo," Jabari said to her. She loved when he called her that.

She adjusted Emeka to her other hip as he offered her a bit of thick naan with a banana spread and some rice. He took the toddler and gave Emeka a bit of his banana. As the baby boy maneuvered his mouth over the fruit, Mo got another glimpse of what her life would be like when she was married and a mother. She beamed up at Jabari as she ate. He set the toddler at their feet and moved closer so her bare shoulder touched his arm. They ate with their eyes downcast to her brother, who was happily chomping the banana.

Their attention was diverted when drums and more dancing began by the fire. Jabari scooped up Emeka and moved towards the pit to watch. He motioned for Mo'destee to follow and made room at the fringe of the gathering for them all. They crowded in, stacked together like mangos on a cart. Their fathers began to stomp and clap, moving as one around the fire pit. Everyone joined in, clapping, chanting, or stomping to the beat the patriarchs created with their performance.



Jabari's father motioned for his sons to join in. Emem jumped up and moved in line with the elders. Jabari looked into Mo'destee's eyes and she encouraged him with a grin. He got up and began to move with the other men around the fire. Mo's eyes found her mother's beaming at her with pride. She couldn't help but grin and feel the sense of belonging. Her mind was filled with Allah's love and teachings. *Happiness is not out there, it's in you*, she thought.

Laughter rang out when they finished, the men hand slapping amongst themselves. Mo's eyes filled with love as she watched her papa. He turned and smiled at her, his big white teeth contrasting against his dark skin. His eyes moved and she followed his gaze to where her eyes met with Jabari's. He was looking at her with love, or maybe something more physical. It made her stomach do a flip and she felt heat rise to her cheeks; she quickly turned her attention to her little brother who was beckoning to their father. Without hesitation, GB pulled Emeka to him and kissed the top of his son's head.

Beyond the men, Mo'destee saw the medicine woman, Mambo, walking towards the center of the ring of people. She was moving slowly, with purpose. White dots adorned her cheeks, set in a circular pattern; they seemed to glow against her black skin. Tattoos ran from her jaw line up over her ears and onto her bald skull. More could be seen above her eyes and across her chest along her clavicle. A thin bone was protruding from each side of her nose, the slender rod pierced through the septum. Scars, raised and white, were visible on her arms and ankles, drawn in rows, purposely put there. As she moved closer, the light caught the rings around her neck, the reflection moved with her. The rings stretched her neck to an unnatural length, marking her as a superior being.

Strands of brightly painted beads adorned her head and wrists. Her colored boubous had delicate needlework at the deep cut neckline; the garment moved with her as if it was a part of her skin. To make her appear larger than she was, feathers were used at her shoulders, fanned, creating a crest above her head. Her composure and attitude made her larger than life.

Mo'destee heard the hush fall on the villagers as she passed and moved to the center of the gathering. The medicine woman's thick lips were set in a rigid line. Was she angry? Or scared? Mo'destee couldn't place the emotion painted on the woman's face. As she arrived at the head of the fire pit there were still