



Excerpt: A boy called Silence

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The market was heaving and he had covered very little ground. He was on the run. He steadied himself on stall tables in the hope of finding something to eat. He was a shadow of his former self. The sound of haggling made the air crackle with energy, but he was not part of that world. He was invisible. Many passersby at this time of day were careful to examine the fresh food that had slowly stewed as the shadows shortened and the sun shone hot in the sky. Everything throbbed as the rays beat down on them.

He had not been seen by the large fried-yam-seller, who spoke to an equally intimidating woman. She skillfully handled a huge frying pan, big enough to bathe in he thought. The vat of hot oil bubbled away and the starchy pieces of yam hissed and whispered promises of how good they must taste. The earthy smells wafted slowly in the thick humid air and lingered in his nostrils before swirling into the hollow of his stomach.

He examined the tight skin on his belly then looked up at the two women, faces lined by life's labour. The ridges in their foreheads formed channels for beads of sweat to trickle down their faces. Their arms were strong from carrying heavy loads. They towered above him like strange dancing trees. If he risked stealing from her, he was more likely to be beaten to death by anyone in a four-body radius than feast on fried yam for his supper. Death by yam, he thought. It wasn't worth it. *"You must run, don't let them find you!"* His mother's urgent whisper hit like a talking drum in his head. He had not seen her for days, maybe weeks. He had no real sense of how much time had passed. Baba had not noticed the boy slip out his chains. The captives had managed to create a diversion to allow him to escape. He would have died before reaching Gao.

Buipe was an inland harbour connecting the savannah to the coastline. The boy had heard Baba's men talk about it. He wanted to stow away on one of the boats heading downstream, but he was so hungry. He paced forward unnoticed, half assessing his next move, looking for a lifeline. Maybe he could hide on one of the boats after he found something to eat. He shifted focus to eye-level. Maybe he'd have more of a chance looking closer to the ground. His change of tact seemed to work, as he spotted a girl in a momentary clearing of the crowd. He had seen her move away from Baba's caravan. She seemed to know where she was going so he followed her, keeping his distance.

She was slight, young enough not to pose a significant threat. She studied glistening crystals in a small salt slab on top of tightly packed sheets. Her back was turned. A tempting banana hung loose from her satchel.

He crept towards her, slowly.