



# what elephants know

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# 1 :: the village

October 27, 2004

“Come on. We have to get into that room before the sun goes down,” Lidea said. She glanced back over her shoulder at her daughter. “Hurry. We’re running out of daylight.”

Lidea crossed the council chamber with quick short steps, then down the short hall to the bedchamber. She stopped at the door and peered into the half-light of the small room. At first, she saw nothing unusual. Then, just for a moment, she could have sworn Racdair was floating in mid-air.

*I’m in no mood for this today.*

When she stepped across the threshold, Racdair sat cross-legged on the floor, his back to the entrance, the hood of the old black robe he loved pulled up over his head.

*I never know what I’m going to see when I walk in here.* Lidea, hands on her hips, turned about, giving the area her usual close inspection. *What a mess!*

“Some spiritual leader. You can’t clean up after yourself?” Lidea gathered up the robes and other clothes forming a small mountain on the chair by the door. “It’s a good thing you don’t teach our people how to keep house.” She snorted under her breath as she sorted the dirty garments.

“Woman, you are beginning to sound like a wife,” Racdair said without looking up. “I do not recall marrying you.”

“You’ve had so many wives, how can you be sure? In either case, didn’t any of them show you how to clean?”

“Mother!” Lidea’s daughter went to her knees in the doorway. “You can’t talk to the *Miandai* like that. He could . . .”

“He could heed her scolding and stop living like a pig, my child,” Racdair said. “Lidea, I apologize for my slovenly ways.” He rose, gathered up an armful of clothes and approached her in a low bow, an impish grin playing at the corner of his mouth. “I am sorry, Lidea.”

“Yes, you are,” Lidea said.

“Mother!”

“Don’t worry. Our *Miandai* can stand a fussing-out now and again,” Lidea said. She took the clothes from his arms and turned to give them to her daughter. “Take these and make sure they’re cleaned.”

The girl didn’t respond. She stared, bug-eyed and slack-jawed, as if she expected snakes to leap out at her.

“Come on, girl. They don’t bite. Take these and go. We still have a lot of work to do before the sun sets.”

Her daughter’s eyes grew wider as she reached out for the clothing. She took them, hands shaking, and bowed her way back out of the room.

“I will never understand or be comfortable with that,” Racdair said.

“Understand what? Why people fear you?”

“Yes.”

“They don’t fear you as a man, Racdair. They fear the power,” Lidea said. “And you, my old friend, are power in the flesh. They fear you because they’re not stupid. Who wants to live out their life as a field mouse or water stump?” She

smiled and pushed him into the now empty chair and turned her attention to the bed.

Racdair's bed lay covered from headboard to footboard with the collected history of their people. Papyrus in all sizes and shapes, scribed from corner to corner with arcane symbols and ancient writings; parchments and papers and tablets of stone, wood and wax; and skins, thin and brittle, stained but beautiful with intricate drawings done in an indigo ink. Time standing still. Lidea's shivered.

"Have you slept at all?" She asked with a dubious eye on the bed.

"I get all the sleep I need," Racdair replied.

"If you say so; but if those eyes of yours weren't covered with that white veil, they'd probably be the color of blood." She moved to the bed and crouched down to get a better look at one of the documents. "So old. Even older than you," she said smiling.

"Beware, woman. I just might marry you yet."

"I wouldn't have you. You make far too many babies." They both laughed.

Lidea poked tentatively at one of the crumpled parchments perched atop a stack of odd stone tablets. Her face grew solemn as she regarded the scroll.

"Racdair, what does it say? Will the *Mašíáh* come?"

"The *Mašíáh* has always come."

"That's not an answer and you know it," she said. She couldn't stop, all the words she'd been holding in for weeks came spilling out in a torrent. "Racdair, what's going to happen to us? So many of us are dying – Kadif would like you to bless his mother on her way. And the rain – what happened to the rain? The river runs so low you can see bottom in some places, and I hope you know the well is

almost dry. Our crops don't have a chance if the weather doesn't change. Have you seen that strange plant coming up in the gardens? Huge leaves. Who planted it? And do you know how long we've waited for the birth of a child? We're barren; all of us. My daughter is the youngest person here and she'll be fifteen in just a few days and . . ."

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. But if the *Mašiah* doesn't come to help us . . ."

"Lidea, now is the time. All the texts say so." Racdair rose and took her by the shoulders. "You must have faith. The *Mašiah* will come."

"But if the *Mašiah* is born – what about the rest of the prophecy? Will you be the one to face the demon?"

"Stop, Lidea. Please. One obstacle at a time."

"But, Racdair . . ."

"Shhhh. It is getting late and I need to prepare."

She stared into his face. *Those blind eyes – they see so much and reveal so little. That white shield can't hide everything, though. He's tired. I can see it. But will he tell me? Stubborn! He's carrying the weight of our people on his shoulders – all of us. He's blaming himself for everything, and it's not his fault. I'd tell him . . . show him . . . but those damned clouded eyes block the way. He won't tell me the truth . . . He'll give up his life to protect us. And I can't help him!*

"All right, I understand. Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?"

She glanced about the room. "That bed . . ."

“Here, I’ll take care of it,” Racadair said. He removed his left hand from her shoulder and gestured in a nonchalant manner toward the bed. All the documents vanished and the covers moved into their proper place.

“I will never get used to *that*,” Lidea said with a smile. “You do it just to make me squirm.”

“Indeed.” Racadair smiled. “It is my only weapon against you. Now, leave me. We both have things to do.” He placed a soft kiss on her forehead. “No matter what happens, you have sustained me, woman. Now, out!”

“Yes, *Miandai*,” Lidea said softly. She bowed and left the room.

He tasted the salt from her tears still lingering in the air.

*I love you, too, Lidea.*

Racadair settled himself on the foot of the bed, took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Night eased into his body and his mind grew calm in the gentle blackness. Behind his eyes, the first diamonds of star light twinkled and Racadair felt his power warming in his heart.

And stinging bites on his arm.

A sharp, blue-white flame splintered the darkness. A hiss, a sizzle, and the bloodthirsty insects vanished. “Sorry, little ones. I am happy to co-exist, but I refuse to provide a meal for your entire clan.” White sparks danced across his fingers.

“Ah, the moon rises.”

Racdair strode to the only window and leaned out in search of a cooling breeze, but there was none. The stifling heat diminished the wind along with everything and everyone in the village. When a breeze did arise, the vapid gusts deposited grit in every pore and crevice of the skin. The slightest draft stirred up thick dry dust that left a taste in the mouth like old dried bones.

To Racdair came whispers, soft and distant; but they drew closer, louder, faster. Racdair opened his mind and the emotions of the community streamed in.

*Anxiety?*

No, not anxiety. Fear.

*Hope deserts us and despair hovers like a vulture. We have one final chance – just one night. We have waited 200 years, and now one lunar eclipse is all we have left. If the Mašiah is not born tonight, we are lost.*

Racdair pressed his knuckles to his temples. He took another deep breath, but try as he would to calm himself, his spirit sought a different place. He closed his eyes and the past consumed him.

He ran, as boys will do, everywhere, feeling his strong muscles power his legs along the path to the river. Even as he ran, he daydreamed about the pretty girls that would be at the feast. He cut through the vegetable patch, avoiding the beans and cabbages, and leaped the low-growing berry bushes that marked the end of the garden. Racdair waved to his friends as he reached the bank. He waded in among the green paddies, leaving his catch of fat sunfish lying in the thick grass growing along the shore. General rowdiness and fun ensued as he and his friends pelted each other with water and rice.

The day moved toward evening, and the smell of savory stews and baking bread filled the air. The aromas soon drew them away from the water and back to

the village where Racdair sneaked and peeked into ovens and cook pots. “Mother, I’m going to eat with my friends. We want to eat now so we can get to the common before the stories start. Everyone’s going to be there and I want a good seat.”

She gave him a bowl of stew and he grabbed an entire loaf of bread and ran off to the spot he and his friends called their own. It was a small stand of trees near the river and they met there to talk the serious business that occupied their days. Racdair gobbled up his food and was the first to break away. The stories were calling.

That night the *Miandai*, the village leader, told them the story of the *Mašiah*’s birth. He told them how the creature was born every 200 years as a protector and savior to the village. Racdair had never seen a *Mašiah*, but he believed the story. He believed all the stories. No one could pry him away as long as there were stories to be heard.

The heat of the fires was on his face, but when he opened his eyes, the past faded to a ruined present. The homes still stood in half-circles around the common, but now most of them were empty with the occupied huts in desperate need of repair. Racdair could hear vermin scurrying through the neglected storage sheds, and the smell of rot and decay assaulted his nostrils.

*Death is everywhere and my power is useless. But there is still time, if I believe. I must believe.*

Racdair inhaled deeply and found his calm by opening his heart to the stars. With the power of their cold white light burning hot within his chest, he focused his senses out into the jungle.

He waited.

He listened.

And then he smiled.

A brief wind, quick and fierce, blew up a consuming dust that placed a muffler over the entire area - no sight, no sound. The cessation of movement by every human being intensified the silence. Even the whine of the mosquitoes ceased.

A low rumble began in the earth, followed by a slow, rhythmic pounding. The thick cloud of dust and sand parted like a curtain and, from the depths of the jungle came an elephant – a cow. She entered the village as if coming home.

Racdair heard the great thuds of the beast as she drew closer.

*Is she the one? I must see.*

The white film covering Racdair's eyes grew luminous as his power merged his vision and thoughts. Gathering the fire within, Racdair sought the creature's mind and became . . .

. . . the enormous beast, oblivious to her gawking followers, as she trudged through to the common. Her gait did not slow, never wavered as she lumbered toward the birthing stones.

*I am with you. We seek the sacred stones.*

Even now women were there with rushes and rags trying to remove the accumulated dust. The stones formed three giant steps at the geometric center of the village. They had been there since the beginning, and many thought their home grew up around them. The topmost step, the actual birthing stone, measured eighteen feet at its diameter. The slab was polished by age and the feet

of playing children, but the incised images around the rim remained deep and clear. The glyphs depicted the phases of a lunar eclipse. Symbolic flames embossed the center of the stone's face. Many found themselves mesmerized by the optical illusion of dancing flames when they walked across the stone's surface.

*Her – our destination.*

*My baby . . . so heavy now . . . I . . . we are near our time.*

She approached the common with the entire village in her wake. When she reached the first step, she hesitated, swaying from side to side.

*She . . . we . . . want to flee.*

The indecision, however, lasted but a moment. The elephant threw her head back, raised her trunk high into the air and trumpeted loud enough to bring down the walls of heaven.

The multitude dropped to their knees.

The elephant lowered her head, slowly rocked back, and then reared onto her hind legs and exposed her huge belly.

The people prostrated themselves around the stones.

She mounted the three stone steps – slowly, clumsily; she tottered under the weight of her child. *This is the last place we – she will ever be.*

*Our pain . . . so much pain.*

“Now . . . no time. Have to let go.”

*I . . . we . . . he will be born.*

“Kidogo changu pokea na dua njema nakuombea . . .” The villagers sang a prayer for a swift and safe delivery.

*A song for us. So beautiful. These are the last sounds we . . . she will ever hear.*

“Mche Mungu upate rehema zake milele . . .”

*I must . . . pull back.*

*So much pain – we are afraid.*

*Let go.*

*We will die here . . .*

*I MUST!*

Racdair broke his connection with her, but the fire continued to dance up his arms and across his shoulders.

*Control.*

The fire burned across his back, piercing his light robe.

*Control yourself or burn down the entire lodge.*

He regained his composure by focusing on the gentle voices of his people. They would sing until the calf was born. The elephant had to be sustained at all cost, and the energy of the village was what she required.

Racdair let the birthing song flow through him, adding his strength to that of the other villagers. Old memories rose on the strains of the prayer.

*I was a young man when I sang at the base of those stones. The words are still in my throat. My stomach boils with anticipation. The Mašiah will come at the height of the eclipse, and those blessed by the fire will be granted the power of the stars.*

The eclipse began. Racdair’s vision removed the distance between him and the common. Everything, everyone, lay before him. He looked skyward as the moon crawled reluctantly into shadow. *At last.*

The song quickened until it seemed too fast for a human voice to make. Racdair’s pulse kept pace. Faster and faster, until –

The moon went dark. A cry issued from every person, a crescendo of bliss and agony. Racadair's power erupted in him as a blue-white flame ignited around the elephant. Blazing hotter than any furnace, the flames engulfed the birthing stones. The fire blossomed, swirled, sizzled, whispered – finally dying as the moon emerged. The cow was gone, and in her place stood a magnificent baby elephant – strong, erect and alabaster white.

The villagers, spent and barely able to stand, came to their feet, cheering as loudly as their weak voices would allow. Racadair sank to his knees. His power faded, the white flame extinguished in the blanket of sweat covering his body.

Racadair came to his feet slowly. His arms and legs had turned to lead. His eyelids drew closed, weighted with the fatigue of his exertions. He forced himself upright and stripped the smoking robe from his shoulders. Jahindar, his son, was on his way for him, and he needed to dress in the ceremonial robes he wore as the village leader and caretaker of the *Mašiah*.

*My duties end tonight. Now I must pray the worst for us is truly over.*

