

Chapter 1 :: what elephants know (unedited)

Miandai

1794

More than once his feet left the ground. He stumbled, tripped; the strong hands of his escorts alternately dragging him and tugging him upright. He groaned as small tree limbs and twigs slapped his face and pricked his skin. Blackness crowded him like hard shoulders.

The men stopped.

A voice in the darkness, one he thought he recognized, "We can go no further."

He stumbled as the supporting hands dropped away. "I have to go alone?"

"Yes." It was a strong voice, a sure voice; nothing at all like his own.

"Put your hands here." Someone pushed him forward. His nose made contact with cold rock. "Follow the face of the cliff. You will find the opening to the cave."

Snapping twigs, crunching leaves; scurrying insects – he heard them; felt the men's footfalls as they walked away. His jaw clamped down on words that would have begged them to stay. He had lost everything but his pride. Now, even that seemed a small thing to give up if it meant not being alone.

But Pride would not relent. He said nothing.

The compulsion he felt to move forward was not his own, but he responded to it all the same. He rubbed his fingers across the craggy surface of the stone and for the first time acknowledged that his hands were shaking. A brisk wind swept up small rocks and

bits of sand to pelt his skin. He pulled the hood of his robe up over his head, placed his fingers into the cliff's stiff veins and moved in what he hoped was the right direction.

The rocky surface beneath his hands became an anchor of sorts – something safe. He clung to it, unsure of what lay ahead. Still, his feet continued to move, the compulsion driving him onward.

The path was solid and wide enough that his heels didn't hang over the outside edge. He slid his feet along, pushing pebbles and larger stones before him or off the edge. He kept his fingers tight to the rock face, and as the path began to incline upward, that grip became the only reassuring thing he had.

He tried not to dwell on the fact he was blind. It was night, after all. Even a sighted man would have been blind out here. He counted his steps, primarily to keep his mind from wondering where he might be stepping – if he might actually be far enough off the ground that a fall would kill him. A small stone kicked away from his foot and he stopped to listen to it bounce its way down to the ground. He waited a long time to hear it finally hit bottom. That next was the most difficult step he'd taken in his life.

He'd been climbing for a long time – that's all he could think, a long time. Hours and minutes no longer meant anything. That contemplation of time should have been a consideration of space, as the ledge had begun to narrow. Careless, he slid his right foot outward and found it had nothing under it but air.

His balance flew away like a bird.

All around him, darkness pushed at him, unsettling his sense of place and cheering for the panic that took control of his mind. He flailed and grasped, but caught nothing. He fell, slowly, almost floating.

When his mind caught up with his body, when time once again put him back in the moment, he reached up and forward, digging his fingers into the rocks. He ripped off

fingernails, dislocated the middle finger on his right hand. Still, he groped for a handhold – anything to halt or slow his decent.

He found it.

A small branch, he thought. He really didn't care what it was. His fingers seized it. His shoulder snapped and cracked as it absorbed the strain of his body's weight. He hung there by one hand, trying to still his body and reduce the strain on his arm. Instinct guided his left hand to his savior. He strangled the branch, and it held fast against his weight.

Sweat poured down his face. He scrubbed his feet up and down the rock face, finally finding a niche that first his toes, then his entire right foot could squeeze into. Slowly, his left foot found a place to rest. He pressed himself hard against the cliff, wishing he might meld with the stone. Sharp pebbles dug into his skin. Perspiration pooled in the pitted surface beneath his face and finally drizzled down the rock underneath him.

How long? He didn't know. His courage, his desire to continue – it returned at some point. His hands sought and found little outcroppings, veins, fissures – anything they could dig in or hold onto. He tried not to think about down, only up. A lifetime passed as he groped and clawed his way back to the ledge. The broken place was wide enough that he could pull himself up through it.

Flat on his face – he lay there, wanting never to move again; but the compulsion would not be denied. He rose to his knees and crept forward. His fingers took point, feeling ahead for gaps and broken places in the ledge. He continued upward, inching along on his knees like a child.

Gradually, his sense of upward movement eased, as did his breathing. The ledge leveled out. Surely he must be close to his destination. He thought his heart might stop its erratic pace now, but it did not. He could hear it thudding at a clip . . .

That was not his rhythm.

He stopped and listened. That heartbeat – he was not alone.

The terrain here was treacherous, but it was not the only hazard. This place, these cliffs – at night, they belonged to the ultimate predator. At night, these cliffs were home to the leopards.

He inched forward a bit, hoping his own fear was echoing in his ears. The heart rate increased. Somewhere . . . the sound came from above, and the animal knew he was there. He lay down flat and tried to still his heart and his breathing. His body trembled as his heart beat against the stone.

The leopard made no sound, but the wind spoke when it leaped. The weight of the animal seemed to embed him into the rock beneath him. Bones cracked, tendons strained – the creature must have weighed a hundred stones. His breath was crushed from his lungs and terror sucked all thoughts from his mind except one. *I am going to die now.*

The creature's claws should have been tearing into his flesh, but they did not. Hot, fetid breath heated his freezing skin through the robe's hood as the leopard buried its face into his neck. The big cat's fangs brushed at his shoulder, the animal sniffing, but it did not rip at his flesh, did not sink its teeth into his neck. It sniffed at him again.

The leopard growled.

He could not think or breathe. His mind was black with terror, a thick mud swallowing him up, filling his eyes, nose and ears. This was what death felt like.

The leopard stepped over his head, off his body. Its tail flicked across his face. The predator growled once, then pebbles rained down as the animal returned to the top of the cliff.

He couldn't move. He was dead. His heart refused to beat. His lungs refused to breathe. Still, he felt blood flowing and the burning pain from the cuts on his back, the snapping of his ribs as they tried to assume their normal position, the screaming ache from every muscle that had fought so valiantly to support the monster's weight.

Tears flowed down his face, over the rocks, and into little rivers. Fear piled boulders on his shoulders and he could not move.

And still, the compulsion returned, overturning his fear, forcing him forward on hands and knees, even though he cried as he went. When the ledge narrowed again, he eased to his feet, his fingers once again groping across the cliff's cold face, sliding his feet, praying for an end to his nightmare.

When his fingers found no rock beneath them, he waved his arms, trying to judge the size of the space. It was larger than he, so he kept his back against the wall and side-stepped into the cave. He jumped at the sound of another voice.

"Come . . . sit. I have been waiting for you."

Terror squeezed his lungs and denied him breath. He thought he had already faced death, but now he knew the end of his life was truly at hand. He tried to escape, edging further around the wall, but a strong hand grabbed his arm and pulled him away into the cavern.

"Sit," the man said.

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The two men sat on the ground across from each other, the cavern dark and the stone floor cold. The cave was the site of the joining, but the ceremony could not be completed. On this night, no power visited these walls. No savior dwelled within.

The new village leader shivered in his black linen robe. It was summer on this portion of the African continent, the breezes hot and dry; but in this place, the stone was cold and the air damp. The young leader rocked slowly back and forth – his knees drawn up to his chin, his face in his hands, his eyes blind. He had barely seen twenty-four years, and he still suffered from the shock of his transformation. His hands shook, his bones trembled and the memory of the previous night’s agony still burned in his skin. The blessing – being touched by the sacred fire – had exacted a severe price.

The old ruler watched him. Despite his many years of service, his dark face remained unlined, his hair black, his brown eyes clear and sharp. He scarcely looked ten years older than the man who sat before him; but unlike this young one, he had known no malady or physical injury. His Masiah had always been there for him.

The new Miandai was not so fortunate.

“Racdair,” the old ruler said softly. “You were chosen to be the new leader of our people, and it is my duty to advise you, no matter the circumstances. The murder of a Masiah is unprecedented, but we must still complete the ceremony. The words I have to say, you must hear. The knowledge I have, you must know. And the transfer of power, no matter what you have endured, must be made.”

The young man did not respond, did not move other than to wrap his arms about his legs, to press his forehead hard to his knees.

“We are Miandai,” the older man began, his voice taking on the resonance of one accustomed to power and ceremony. Small rocks fell to the floor as the cave trembled.

“There is no greater blessing than to be touched by the fire. We are opened to the spirit, to the stars, to the universe. All that is, lives within us.”

“We are Miandai.”

“We are born in the fire of our Masiah’s birth. Every 200 years, the creature is born to us – to protect us, to provide for us. The Miandai is born to protect the Masiah, to be

its voice, its hands, its connection to our people. We are born with it, joined with it, and we live long, strong and powerful lives through it.”

“We are Miandai.”

“The loss of our eyes is a curse and a blessing for the Miandai. The fire ruins our eyes, but the Masiah restores our vision. You are the first, my son, to lose your sight without the benefit of a Masiah to right your condition. I am sorry for this, and I am afraid.”

He leaned toward the young man. “All of us face our years with fear – fear that the darkness will arise during our rule. The prophecy warns that we must not only defend our people, but all mankind. This is the honor and the duty of our power.”

“We are Miandai.”

“In the following days you must be wary, for the omens will come unheralded. If the end be nigh, within days following the Masiah’s coming, the signs will begin to appear. The ancient scrolls tell us, in the sunset of man’s free reign, how the demon will come among us. He will wear the face of a man and evil will flow as blood in his veins. The signs will be known by all or none, but they come in this way . . .”

“The seer will be blind.

Death will come to his threshold in pairs.

Stone will sour with the tarnished blood of innocents.

And Evil will come on iron wings.”

“Every Miandai since the covenant has lived with the dread that he might be the last of us, but none have done so without the Masiah’s guidance. You are the first to tread your path alone.”

The old leader placed a hand on the young man’s knee. “For two hundred years I led our people; and now I pass leadership to you. It is my hope you will have two hundred

years of peace and prosperity; and although you are blind, I hope you will find a way to see.”

He gripped the young man’s arm and found him trembling. “Learn all you can. Let knowledge give you strength. Discover the power living within you, and do everything you can to prepare. Be a wise and benevolent leader, and protect our people at the risk of your life. You are the keeper of their future. The next Masiah will be born in two hundred years. You must find a way for our people to survive until then.”

“You are Miandai.”

The old man straightened his back and held his hands out in front of him. A blue-white fire ignited in his palms. The fire spread rapidly up his arms to his head and down his chest to his legs and feet until he was silhouetted by the flames. The fire flickered, but the man did not burn. He reached out and touched the young man’s hands, and the fire followed his touch until the new leader was bathed in white fire.

“You are Miandai.”

A mournful wind whispered through the cavern and the echo silenced the flames. The older man held his hands up before his face. One last time he tried to summon the fire, but it did not answer. The flames were no longer his to call. A lone tear trickled down his cheek.

“My work is done. The end is upon me, and I welcome my rest. I will spend my last moments in prayer for you and our people.”

The old man bowed his head and began to pray.

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His fingers probed his arms and legs. The flames had disappeared into his skin leaving no burn or blemish behind. Racadair struggled to his feet. He staggered and

stretched his arms, his hands groping the air for anything to steady him, to help him find his way. He turned about several times, finally settling on a direction. He took a few steps, tripped and fell. He lay with his face in the dust, shuddering under the grief of his loss. Dejection threatened to overwhelm him.

Get up, Racadair thought. "Get up!"

Racadair bit his lip and blew the dust from his nostrils. Feeling around for support, he found none; but after two attempts, managed to gain his feet. He wobbled, then stumbled to the nearest wall. He stood with his back against the smooth rock; waiting. While he waited, the old man stopped praying. Racadair heard the soft thud when the man fell over on the floor, felt the heat when he ascended.

Swift journey, my friend.

After what seemed like hours, he felt what he was hoping for. There was a draft on the left side of his face. He turned his nose into the breeze and groped his way along the wall to the cave's opening. As he exited, he could hear the old man's voice, soft in his mind.

"Learn everything you can. Knowledge will bring you power."

Racadair was never one to turn down good advice. *I think the first thing I had better learn is how to see.*