

1 :: racdair

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“Come on. We have to get into that room before the sun goes down.”

The edge in Lidea’s voice bespoke her impatience. She glanced back over her shoulder at her daughter. “How can one so tall walk so slowly? Hurry!”

The girl hastened to catch up as they crossed the village common, dust puffing out from beneath their sandals. The sun peered through the tops of the trees beyond the lodge, making its way to the comfort of the horizon. Lidea quickened her pace, running the last few feet before climbing the steps to the porch of the lodge.

“Come on!”

With quick short strides, Lidea crossed the council chamber, then down the narrow hall to the sleeping quarters. She stopped at the entrance, her daughter halting at her elbow. The girl placed a trembling hand on Lidea’s arm.

“It’s alright,” she said, patting her daughter’s hand.

Lidea stooped and peered into the half-light of the small room. At first she saw nothing; but then, just for a moment, she could have sworn the man floated in mid-air.

I’m in no mood for this today.

When she stepped across the threshold, she saw Racdair sitting cross-legged on the floor, his back to the entrance, the hood of his old black robe 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; can’t you clean up after yourself?”

She gathered up the robes and other items 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 out the 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 speak to the *Miandai* that way. He could . . ."

"He could heed her scolding, child, and stop living like a pig," Racdair said. "Lidea, I apologize for my slovenly ways." He rose, gathered up an armful of clothes and approached her in a low bow. The white film concealing his eyes glowed slightly; and as he came closer, Lidea could see a smile playing at his lips. "I am sorry, Lidea."

"Yes, you are," she 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, 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 hands trembled as she reached for the clothing. She held them at arm's length as she bowed her way back out of the room.

"I will never understand that," Racdair said.

“Understand what? Why people fear you?”

“Yes.”

“They don’t fear you, Racdair. They fear the power,” Lidea said. “And you, my 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 pushed him into the 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.

Lidea shivered. *Time standing still.*

“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 would be the color of blood.” She moved to the foot of 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 poured 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. And 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? My daughter is the youngest person left in the village and she’ll be fifteen in just a few days and . . .”

She took a deep breath, taking hold of herself with shuddering arms. “I . . . I am 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 . . .”

“Shhh, it is getting late and I need to prepare.”

She stared up into his face, into his eyes.

Those blind eyes – they see so much and reveal so little, but that white veil can’t hide everything. 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 is 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,” she said. “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 shimmered and vanished. Then the covers moved into their proper place.

“I will never get used to *that*,” Lidea said, her lips quivering into 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 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 starlight 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.

The moon eased its way into the sky, casting its white light across the tops of huts and homes, the light slicing through the darkness of the common. To Racdair came whispers, soft and distant; but as the moon rose higher, the whispers drew closer, louder, faster. Racdair opened his mind and the emotions of the community streamed in.

Anxiety? No, not anxiety. Fear.

Racdair leaned against the window ledge.

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 Maš'iah is not born tonight, we are lost.

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

He ran everywhere, feeling his strong muscles power his legs beneath him. On this day he tore along the path from the river, carrying his catch of fat sunfish and daydreaming 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 marking the end of the garden. The aroma of savory stews and baking bread pulled Racdair along home. He presented his catch to his mother before sneaking and peeking into the oven 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.”

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 copse 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* 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 common’s 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 still-occupied huts in desperate need of repair. No stews bubbled or breads baked; the hearths and ovens stood empty and cold. 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 if I believe, there is still time.

Racdair inhaled deeply and calmed his mind 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 female. The cow 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 removing any remaining dust. The stones formed three giant steps at the 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, polished by age and the feet of playing children, had incised images around the rim that 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 villagers dropped to their knees.

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

The people prostrated themselves around the stones.

The moon seemed to hover over the common; its light illuminated the birthing stone. The elephant 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.

Racdair gripped the window sill. “Now . . . no more time. I 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.

White flames waltzed from his fingers, up his forearm to his elbow.

So much pain – we are afraid.

Let go!

We will die here . . .

I MUST!

Racdair broke his connection with the elephant, 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 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. Racdair'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 – dying as the moon emerged.

The shimmering moon showered the birthing stones with pearlescent light, but the cow was no longer there. 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. Racdair sank to his knees. His power faded, the white flame extinguished in the blanket of sweat covering his body.

He dragged himself to his feet, his arms and legs now dead weight. His eyelids drooped, closed, heavy with the fatigue of his exertions. He forced himself upright and stripped the smoking robe from his shoulders.

My duties end tonight. The worst for us is finally over. The new Miandai will guide our people back to prosperity. We averted the prophecy, and now I can die in peace.

“Father!”

His son’s voice arrived several seconds before he appeared in the room. “Father, you must get dressed!” Jahina lit the candles in the wall sconces, and then went to the large trunk in the corner and began removing linen robes.

“What . . . what are you doing, Jahina?” Racdair stumbled to the bed and collapsed on his stomach. “Robes will be made for the new *Miandai*.”

The young man spun back to his father. “You did not see? Father, you don’t know?”

“Know what?” Racdair rolled onto his back. “I saw the birth. The *Mašiah* is well. I will meet with the *Miandai* tomorrow to complete the ceremony.”

Robes in hand, Jahina came to the bed and looked down on his father.

“You must get dressed, Father. You are needed.” He paused, his voice failing to hide the concerns he felt. “You know I’ve never believed the stories . . . the prophecy . . . but, the fire . . . the fire did not choose a new *Miandai*.”

“At the beginning of the dark time, the fire will touch no soul,” Jahina said. “Isn’t that what it says in the text?”

The white veil over Racdair’s eyes flared with blue-white light. He shut his eyes tight, squeezing the light behind his tired lids.

“Father . . .”

Racdiar did not answer, move, or respond in any way. He lay still, feeling the ignition of his power, even as he hoped it had left him for another. Denial died screaming in his throat.

It is true.

“Father, the people . . . they’re calling.”

Racdair stood and accepted his son’s help donning the ceremonial robes.

Jahina regarded his father, his eyes bright with respect. “You are still leader of our people. You are *Miandai*.” He bowed low from the waist.

Racdair lowered his head in response, pale white light emanating through his lashes. Yes, I am *Miandai*; and I may also be the destroyer of my people