

AN ELEPHANT'S JOURNEY
THUNDER II
FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND

by Erik Daniel Shein
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Chapter 1

Playful Friends

The sun's rays filtered through the canopy of the rainforest. The ground below was filled with shadows and light as a caravan of dwarf shrews rustled across it. The babies followed their mother with their whiskers tickling the air around them as their tiny feet moved silently across the ground. When they passed a solitary shrew, the grey rodent hissed at them until they dashed into a shrub nearby. His long fuzzy snout sniffed after them to make sure they were no longer intruding on his space.

Crystal forest tree frogs made their voices known as they searched for mates from afar. Their acoustics added to the bright warbling birds above them. The rainforest was filled with life that stretched all across its canvas from the air above to the ground below.

Thunder, an African pygmy elephant, was proud to call the rainforest his home. Thunder's large ears flapped around the baby like face that his kind was blessed with. His white tusks stood out among the rusty colored skin and hair that covered his body. His long tail swished a few insects away from his body as he turned to look up at his friend sitting on a branch above him.

"Peek-a-boo, see you." Penelope, an African grey parrot, said. Her stomach was covered in light grey feathers that contrasted with the darker ones on her wings and back. She shook her red tail feathers lightly as she hopped from foot to foot excitedly.

"In a minute, Penelope. I'm foraging." Thunder lifted his trunk up to the branch and patted her gently on the head, then went back to using his left tusk to dig into the soil below for any roots that rested beneath. When a few bugs flew from the hole, the shrews hiding in the bushes darted across the ground to claim their feast. Thunder laughed. "At least someone found some food."

"Food?" Penelope shook her head up and down.

"Not yet, Penelope. Did you find anything?" Thunder looked up at her.

"Peek-a-boo, foodie food, food, food." Penelope flew off the branch and disappeared from his sight.

Thunder sighed. "Must be nice to fly." He looked down at his large feet and sighed, then lifted his trunk and pulled a few leaves from the tree above him.

A twig of berries dropped at his feet and a whoosh of wind hit his face as Penelope landed on his head. "Ding! Ding! Time for grub!"

A small chuckle rumbled in his belly. "Breakfast's served. Thank you, Penelope." Thunder grabbed the twig and sucked the berries into his mouth. "Where are the others?"

"Peek-a-boo, hide-a roo," chirped Penelope.

"Oh. I see. Well, you better find them."

Thunder scanned the leaves around him. He saw a few white tufts of feathers and knew that one of the egrets was hiding nearby. He walked over to the tree and pulled one of the

branches down. It snapped slightly and a loud squeak erupted.

“Hey! I’m hiding here!” Sydney hopped down from the branch and landed on top of Thunder’s trunk. “Don’t be a cheater! You’re not even it!”

“Sorry, Sydney. I couldn’t resist.” Thunder smiled and moved closer. “Shouldn’t you find a less predictable place?”

“What, like behind a tree?” Sydney teased him.

“It’s not my fault I’m too big to hide behind a tree.” Thunder remembered when he had tried to hide behind a tree with Soma many years ago. He sighed softly as he thought about the cantankerous rhino who had helped him return to his herd. Soma had been a fierce protector who they had lost way too soon.

“I miss her too, Thunder.” A tear was in the corner of Sydney’s eye.

“Big birds don’t cry...cry...cry....” Penelope rotated her head from one side to the other and flapped her wings before she swooped off Thunder’s back and dove into the bush nearest them. A loud squawk echoed around them.

“Hey, watch it! That beak’s sharp!” Persius raced along the ground, his white crown shaking in the air as Penelope dive bombed him again. “Okay, I get it. You got me. Geesh. Can someone call off the attack bird already?”

“Penelope...don’t forget Cedric.” Thunder gestured to the rock near them.

“Aye, aye, captain.” Penelope flew up into the air and flapped her wings a few times before she soared to the rock below.

“Ouch! Do you have to peck my tail feather?” Cedric flew up to Thunder’s back and rubbed his backside. “Yowzers! I think that one will scar. Did anyone ever tell you to stop sharpening that beak?”

Penelope flew up to the tree above them. “Peek-a-boo, I found you.”

“I think I want to play a different game,” complained Cedric, who was still rubbing his behind.

“We could go to the water hole,” suggested Thunder.

“And get wet? No thank you,” grumbled Persius.

“Well, I’ll go with you.” Sydney primped and fluffed her white crown.

“Oh geesh. I thought Phil had a bird already.” Persius stomped his foot in disgust. The idea of his sister finding a mate clearly disgusted him.

“It’s not my fault if you haven’t found a potential mate yet. And Phil’s not the only bird there. A girl has to have choices, you know.” Sydney was slightly huffy when she answered him.

“Ah, Persius, why did you mention that bird? You know how he makes her act,” added Cedric.

Sydney closed one eye and narrowed the other one on her brother. “What do you mean?”

“Like a girl!” Cedric spit on the ground in disgust.

“Hey, stop with the g-word,” warned Persius.

“I may be a girl, but I can still knock you on your backside.” Sydney stepped closer to Cedric and was about to knock him off when Thunder’s trunk pulled her back.

“Time out.”

“Fine.” Sydney moved to his head and crossed her white wings in front of her.

Thunder turned toward the water hole, knowing the others would follow him. This was their pattern. Ever since they had returned to Thunder’s herd, the five of them had been inseparable. Within moments the other three birds had flown to his back.

“So, who thinks the flamingo will be there this time?” asked Cedric.

“I don’t know. I heard he found some new items on the beach. He’s probably redesigning his lagoon again,” Thunder answered.

“Oh, that will take weeks. You know how picky that bird is.” Persius put a hand over his eyes and sighed.

“I hope he saved some of that fluffy stuff. I need to line my nest.” Sydney tapped her beak thoughtfully. “Or maybe some shiny shells. I always did like a little flash.”

“I would stay away from that, Sydney. Those bonobos monkeys are attracted to shiny things. You wouldn’t have a nest for much longer,” warned Persius.

“Bonobos, bonobos, watch your nose.” Penelope hopped from one foot to the other.

“Oh, they’re not so bad. Last time I saw them they were in a grooming pile. Nice friendly lot. Got my feathers fluffed.” Cedric held his wings up in emphasis.

“Here we are.” Thunder stopped so the birds could find their favorite spots. They flew off as predicted and he smiled. None of them liked to get wet, which he never understood. Wading in the water was one of his favorite things.

The water hole was not as crowded as it usually was. Some of the elephants were spending their time foraging for food today. Maybe they would have better luck than he had. The water hole was filled with mostly adolescent elephants like him. Thunder hated that he was stuck somewhere between child and adult. While he knew what it was like to be without his herd, having almost lost them all to poaching a few years ago, he was ready to enter the next stage of his life, the exciting life of bachelorhood, which was just a few years away. Time seemed to pass slowly. Not that he should complain about that. At least he had a safe life with his herd, now that the uprights were fighting to protect his kind. His heart did yearn for adventure though. Perhaps his earlier years had created this need for something more.

Thunder splashed the water absently and was surprised when another splash came at

him. “Hey!” Thunder looked to his left and found that one of the other males had splashed him. “Oh, it’s on!”

Soon the water hole was filled with splashing elephants as they doused each other with water. This took his mind off his thoughts as the splash war took over the rest of the morning.



Chapter 2

Watch Out Below

After spending the morning drenching himself in the water hole, Thunder decided it was time to find Serenity with the other adults. He made the slow trek toward the coastal plains where the grasses flowed gently in the breeze. The bright burning sun had already dried the rest of the water from his skin.

He was walking through the rainforest, minding his own business, when he was pelted with something small and squishy. Thunder turned and looked up into the trees, since the offending object seemed to come from skyward. “Hello?”

“Shhhh! He’s on to us, Jazz,” a voice whispered from above.

Thunder tilted his head slightly and tried to see between the leaves. He could see a pair

of brown eyes glancing at him from above. “On to who?”

“Get him, Lou!” another voice called out.

Before he knew it, more projectiles came flying from the leaves and a flurry of fur rushed across a branch near him. A tiny talapoin monkey raced across the limb in a flash of grey and white. His happy chattering was contradictory to his vicious aim as he threw berries at Thunder in the midst of his flight.

“Why are you attacking me?” Thunder tried to snatch the monkey with his trunk, but was distracted by the other one who leapt from the tree, grabbed onto his tail, and swung through the air.

“Talapoins rule! Take him out, Lou.” Jazz flipped onto the ground and ran a few circles around Thunder.

Thunder, unprepared for their hijinks, lifted up one of his legs to avoid the talapoin. This gave him an idea. Stomping one leg, then the other, made the ground shake around them like a small earthquake rumbling through the ground. The monkeys were jolted as their bodies trembled with the movement.

“Eeeeeeeek! Is the sky falling, Jazz?” Lou clamped his hands on his head and ducked as if the sky would rain down upon him at any moment.

The other talapoin just stood there next to him, with one leg stretched out and his arms crossed over his chest. He tapped his foot on the ground and smirked at his brother. “Don’t you know who this is, Lou?”

“What? Who?” Lou lowered his hands and stood up cautiously. “Is he lord of the flies?”

“Oh, dear me, Lou. You really do need to get your head straight. That’s George,” Jazz corrected him.

“The looney banded half-toed gecko?” His eyes widened in disbelief.

“Don’t be fooled by the size of his toes. That gecko could swallow a fly faster than you can blink,” his brother answered him.

“Then who is Thunder?” Lou crossed his arms over his chest and waited for Jazz to answer him. He was clearly not patient at all.

Jazz pointed up at Thunder. “That elephant. They say he stomps as loud as a thunderstorm.”

“Oh really? I don’t believe you.”

At this point, Thunder was feeling just as exasperated with Lou as the tiny talapoin who was jumping up and down. He decided the only thing he could do to solve this argument was to prove the monkey’s point. He stomped his feet up and down a few times and watched the monkeys bounce a few inches from the ground.

“Wow, you’re right. He’s making the ground shake, all right.”

Lou peered up at Thunder. “Hey, you mind doing that some more? I think I need to

shake a few more fleas off.”

Jazz looked at his brother in disbelief. “Lou!”

Lou shrugged his shoulders. “What? The girls missed some of them earlier. I didn’t have the heart to tell them.”

Jazz rolled his eyes. “My brother, the womanizer.”

“You know you’re jealous. I got mad skills with the ladies. Don’t be a hater,” Lou grinned brightly.

“Guys!” Thunder interrupted their banter. When they both looked up at him, he shook his head in disbelief. “Do you mind if I go now? Or are you going to attack me with another barrage of berries?”

“No, I think we’re done here, right Lou?”

“Yes, Jazz. Besides, I think we’re out of berries now.” Lou gave a small wave to Thunder. “Carry on, sir.”

“Thanks?” Thunder smiled uncomfortably. These talapoins were a little nutty for his taste. He took a deep breath as he moved slowly through the tree line that led out to the plains.

Glancing out along the grasslands, Thunder spotted a few of the female elephants congregating together. A few of them tended the young calves as they explored the coastal plain around them. Rusty colored ears flapped alternately as they brushed away the insects from their skin.

His mother was not hard to find among them. All he had to do was shuffle his feet on the ground to create the tremoring waves that his mother could detect easily with the receptors in her sensitive feet. He stomped softly on the ground and waited for Serenity to respond.

Serenity lifted one foot off the ground to put more pressure on the other three. This allowed her to get a better sense of the infrasound of the waves reverberating through the ground. Turning from the group, Serenity trumpeted softly with her trunk.

Thunder’s spirits were always lifted whenever she was near. His mother had been there not only for him, but for several of the other calves when they were younger. As one large family, the females all helped with watching over the calves. Serenity had been the one to teach the youngsters how to use vibrations in the ground to communicate with other elephants. His mother had also taught them how to forage for food when their tusks had started to come in. Some favored one side or the other. Thunder favored his left tusk. That was the one he used for digging for roots, or scraping bark from the trees. These skills were the foundation for survival for each one of them. Communicating kept them safe from dangers such as predators or uprights who hunted them.

“Good afternoon, Mother,” greeted Thunder as he approached her.

“Hello, Thunder.” She ran her trunk lovingly against his face. “What brings you here?”

“I thought we could go to the farm today,” Thunder answered her.

“Has it been that long?” Serenity’s face broke into easy reflection.

“Yes, almost a full moon since last time we visited.” Thunder picked at the grass below them, pretending the blades were just as tasty as the fresh vegetables at the nearest upright farm.

“That’s sounds about right.” Serenity smiled. “I’m game if you are.”

“Great! I’ll tell the others.” The others were his feathered friends who had become a major part of his life. “I’ll meet up with you on the path.”

Thunder moved away from the herd and headed across the grasslands to where the birds were snoozing nearby. He ruffled the leaves in the tree by the sleeping egrets, who were sprawled haphazardly across the branches. Cedric’s feet were dangling off the edge of one of the limbs. Persius had his wings precariously close to Sydney’s mouth, and she was snoring loudly.

Putting his trunk near their feathered bodies, he let out a large gust of air. The egrets went zooming through the air and crashed into the trunk of the tree behind them. Cedric and Sydney jolted awake and flapped their wings erratically until they flew up in a frenzy. Sydney took out a few small limbs on her way up, which smacked Cedric in the face.

Persius slid to the ground below. He put his wing tips to his head, and moved them in slow circles as if he were trying to focus his eye sight. “Do you see them? Like blinking lights in the sky. Are those fireflies?”

Sydney giggled at him. “One day you’ll be bird-brained for sure.”

“News flash. I *am* a bird!” Persius snapped at his sister before turning on Thunder. “Would it kill you to give us more warning next time? We’re not getting any younger, you know.”

Thunder let out an amused puff of air. “Well, you’re not dead yet, even though you sleep like you are.”

“Pfft! Some of us need our beauty sleep.” Persius groomed his feathers absently.

Sydney chuckled at her brother. “And you call me a girl.”

“Guys! Enough already. We’re heading to the farm. Who’s coming with me?”

At this point, Penelope’s face came down from a branch further up the tree. “There was a farmer had a dog and Bingo was his name-o.”

“Yes, Penelope. We’re going to the farm. Coming?” Thunder smiled up at the grey parrot.

“B-I-N—,” Penelope started to sing, but ended up on a loud squawk as Persius chucked a rock at her beak.

“Don’t sing that song. Any song but that one. Come on...you have to know another farm song.” Cedric held up a wing threateningly.

“The farmer in the dell, the farmer in the dell....” Penelope swooped down and landed on Thunder. “Farm time?”

“Yes. Anyone else?” Thunder asked them.

“Might as well. Like we have anything else to do.” Sydney flew up to Thunder’s back and settled in for the ride. She was followed by her brothers, who sat inches behind her.

“Off we go then.” Thunder started on his way to the path where he would meet up with his mother.



Chapter 3

The Farm

Thunder and his feathered friends made their way to the path where Serenity was foraging for roots. “Ready, Mother?”

“Of course.” She smiled at Thunder and his friends. “I see everyone decided to come.”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world,” Persius answered.

“Like he had anything better to do.” Cedric covered his mouth with his wing and whispered to Sydney.

Persius swept one of his legs under Cedric's legs and he fell on his behind. "I'll have you know I had a date with an egret that makes the rest of you look like chopped liver."

"He must have hit his head harder than we thought." Sydney rolled her eyes.

"Or just one too many times. Maybe he needs a check-up?" suggested Cedric.

Persius huffed at them. "If anyone is going crazy, it's the parrot."

Upon hearing her name, Penelope swooped down and grazed the egrets slightly as she zipped by them. "Cuckoo-cuckoo...crazy you."

"See, even Penelope thinks you've lost it," Sydney snickered.

"Relax, you guys. You've been fighting all day," Thunder admonished them.

"We're related, what do you expect?" Cedric asked him.

"For you to at least try to get along." Thunder's ears flapped lightly in the breeze as he continued to walk behind Serenity.

"Bah. We're fine. This is what we do," explained Persius. "We may pick on each other from time to time, but heaven help the fool who tries to mess with my family." Persius held up one of his wings in emphasis. A loud gust of air came from behind him and the other two looked mortified, as they were standing behind him.

"Persius!" Cedric waved a wing and tried to hold his beak.

"That's disgusting!!" Sydney flew from Thunder and landed on Serenity. She pointed at Persius. "Not cool!"

Persius shrugged his shoulders. "What? Don't like the view over here?"

"It's not the view that's unpleasant, but the foul odor coming from your behind." Sydney scooted back another few inches in emphasis.

"Meh, it's already gone," answered Persius.

At this point, Cedric was turning blue in the face. He gasped for air and breathed in a big whiff and almost gagged. "How can you stand that?"

"I'm not downwind." Persius winked at his brother and chortled hysterically.

Thunder rolled his eyes. "Oh, brother!"

When the smell started to die down, they traveled in silence. Thunder spent his time taking in the rainforest around him. He loved how colorful his world was. The vivid green leaves hanging from the large trees above were like an umbrella above him. They blocked the searing sun from his skin and provided shelter from gentle rain. Red tipped fronds from bushes were on both sides of him. Birds of every color were sitting at varying levels around them. Their music filled the air with a vibrant chatter. To others it may be loud, but to Thunder it was peaceful.

As he walked, Thunder remembered the first time he had visited the farms. When he was much younger, Thunder had attempted to cross the fields to return to his herd, but the

electrical fences had proved to be a hindrance. The uprights who lived there had not been very happy with elephants like him, because elephants had trodden on their gardens and eaten their crops without their permission. But now they lived together in almost harmony. That was not to say that everything was perfect all the time. There were still uprights who poached elephants for reasons Thunder never could understand. Danger could come at any turn. Thunder had learned that while some of the uprights were untrustworthy, the ones who lived at the farms nearby actually cared about them. This might be because Thunder and a few of the other elephants had saved an upright child from the flooding waters nearby. Thunder thought perhaps it was that combined with the words of the Great Tusker, that man and beast should walk the path together, not at opposite ends.

After half the day had passed, they finally approached the small farms just outside the rainforest. From here Thunder could see a few of the uprights tending the farms inside the fences. The women were bent over their vegetables, looking for those that were ready to harvest. Their colorful dresses flowed gently in the breeze as the hot sun filtered down upon them. Thunder saw grass woven baskets near the outside of the fence and hooted. "Just in time!"

"I can't wait to see what they brought this time." Cedric flew up and headed toward the baskets.

The baskets were an offering that Mosi left for the elephants every couple of weeks. After the villagers had decided to live in peace with the elephants, some had decided to leave food out for them. At first it had been a small offering here or there. When the villagers saw that the elephants were interested in the food put before them, more started to donate to the cause. It was not a feast, not by any means, but it was certainly worth the journey, and tastier than some of the other food they ate during their days.

That was not the only reason Thunder liked to visit the farm. His sense of adventure was appeased on the days they made the journey. Sometimes a few elephants would join them, but today it was just Thunder and Serenity. Well, and the birds too. They did not eat nearly as much as an elephant, though.

Thunder walked slowly over to where Serenity was picking through a basket. He watched his mother eat a cassava. "That looks good."

Serenity answered between chews, "It is. Try some."

Thunder dug in and was pleasantly surprised. The cassavas were a few days old, which meant they had softened slightly under the sun's heat. While still crunchy, there was just the right amount of squish inside them. The tuber sure beat tree bark any old day.

Closer to the fences, a few pygmy goats were chasing each other around. Their miniature antics were hilarious as they plowed into each other like bumper cars with no brakes. One jumped over another and ended up falling on his face. Another pair was racing along the fence line.

Noticing that the egrets were no longer near the baskets, Thunder got a bad feeling.

What were they up to now? He scanned the length of the fence and saw a group of goats near it. “Oh no, not again.”

Thunder saw three small dots of white overhead and knew what they were up to at once. One at a time, the birds shot from the sky and dive bombed the group of goats, lifting up into the air seconds before impact. The goats, scared out of their gourds, stiffened their legs and fell over on their sides.

“Hey, stop killing the goats!” Thunder called up to them.

“We’re not dead,” one of the fainting goats shouted.

“Could have fooled me,” giggled Sydney.

“That’s just uncalled for,” another one of the goats called out. His legs were locked so tight there was no way he was getting up any time soon.

A teenage girl ran over to the goats and shooed the birds away. She stood with one hand on her hip and shook a finger at the annoying egrets. Shifting one eye to Persius, who was starting a second approach, she shouted up at him. “No more, you! Scat!”

Thunder recognized the girl. Even though she was taller and wore a long tunic and skirt, he always knew her. That was Imani. She was sure growing into a beautiful young woman. Thunder walked closer to where she stood, his footsteps hardly making a sound. When he was a few feet away from the fence, he waited for Imani to come closer.

Imani moved near the fence cautiously. When Thunder lifted his trunk and stuck it beneath the free space between the wires, Imani reached out and touched it. “Hello, my friend.”

Thunder let his trunk caress her cheek softly. Years may change a person, but the eyes were always the same, and hers were always filled with love and compassion every time Thunder came to visit. He imagined she must see him the same way, a timeless friend who would always care. She was part of the reason why he traveled here. The food was great, but Thunder felt a sense of kinship with Imani. Their stories seemed to be linked together.