

THE SPIRIT WALKER

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For Dottie,
from the beginning

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All things are connected. The Earth to the Sun. The Moon to the Earth. Man to the land he walks on. All creatures to the wind, to the sky, to a blade of grass. Each bound by a spirit within. All connected to one hearing, one voice, one breathing. Through the wings of a butterfly, a man can hear the Earth in motion. He can hear, if he listens. If he learns to listen.

Materna, The African

Chapter 1

REMEMBERING

There were four lions, all females, stretched out lazily on their bellies. They lifted their heads and watched him as he passed, studying him. He was a big bull elephant. They could feel him tread the earth.

The lions did not fear the elephant. It was their way to watch all moving things. Far back from them, the other members of the pride, another female and several cubs, were feeding on a zebra carcass. The big male cat had already fed and gone off in the shade to sleep away the heat of the day. The females watched over the pride.

The elephant passed on. He tossed his trunk and turned his head slightly in their direction, but that was his only acknowledgment of them. One lion yawned sleepily with a halfhearted roar, then rolled over on her side. The others turned their attention to a warthog pushing through the grass nearby. The lions had eaten, and their stomachs were full. They would not kill again this day.

The sky over Africa rolled out to touch dark clouds threatening rain. From these came sudden bolts of lightning and echoes of thunder. The earth was wide and the sky endless, with the storm churning in the distance.

A long way off, almost lost against the fast-moving storm, a dozen or more vultures circled slowly, mechanically winding down out of the sky. They were waiting for a pack of hyenas to leave a kill so that they might have their turn.

To the elephant's right, a group of baboons climbed a small hill of rocks. The largest took the highest place and settled on his hind legs. He was big-shouldered, powerful, and threatening. His family gathered below him.

Hurrying through the grass, a line of guinea hens just cleared the elephant's swinging trunk. They moved like anxious little ladies crossing a road. But the big elephant wouldn't have crushed them; he knew they were there, just as he knew that a newborn gazelle, not yet able to run on shaky legs, was hiding nearby. The mother grazed within sight, chewing the sweet grass as though she knew nothing of her young.

A cluster of acacia trees stood out on the grassy land, marking the horizon. The elephant moved toward them. There would be water there. The watering hole was no longer dry, for the dry season had ended. Already there were new shoots of green below the yellow grass, and the acacias were washed with green. New life, brought by the rains, was all around. And it was not just the vegetation that was sprouting to life; all of the creatures were having babies—the lion cubs, the newborn gazelle that couldn't yet stand, and even the baboon family. There was birth.

There was death as well. Some died to feed others. The gazelles were born when the new grass came, but they spent

the first weeks of life in fear of the jackals. The lion cubs were born when the hunting was best for the lions. The young of the baboon fed the young of the leopard. It was the flow of things; nature had ruled that it should be that way. It was Africa, a land immense and overpowering, and the stories of life and death were all playing out under the coming storm—the storm that brought the rain that made life possible.

The storm was coming faster. The wind pushed through the acacias and bent the grass. Lightning cut to the earth, and thunder rolled. Long before he reached the trees, the elephant felt the first drops of rain on his body. It hit his old, gray hide, washing away the red dust. It was cooling and comfortable. It relieved some of the pain in his ancient bones.

The elephant had lived more than fifty years of life, which was old for his kind. He was big—an honest seven tons and a full twelve feet to his massive shoulders. He was what the ivory hunters called a “sure hundred-pounder” because each one of his tusks weighed at least a hundred pounds. He was a prize, and he carried the scars to prove it. There were scars from lions in his youth, from standing his ground against other bull elephants, and from battles with men. Most had happened so long ago that they were faded memories. Some were not so old. The one that bothered him the most was recent. In that one he still carried a bullet. It was lodged below his left shoulder, under this thick hide, close to his heart, and it caused him pain with every movement. It was

slowly killing him, he knew, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Now the feel of the rain pleased him, and his pace quickened. The watering hole encircled by trees was marked in his mind. It was an old place, like himself. His mind knew the way. It had taken him several days to reach this place.

When he neared the trees, he stopped and turned back to look the direction from which he had come. He lifted his trunk and slowly shook his head. The air was empty except for the smell of the rain and that of a jackal prowling nearby. There was no man smell in the air. He turned and started again for the trees.

When he entered the trees, the elephant stopped again and lifted his trunk. Still there was only the smell of the jackal and the rain. The rain began falling in hard, silver sheets.

There was no grass under the trees. It had long ago been trampled by the many animals coming to drink at the watering hole. The earth was bare and rocky. The water was a muddy brown. A crocodile slipped over the rocks and disappeared under the water. A fish eagle cut through the rain to the far side of the water. The elephant noted these things in his mind. The jackal appeared now, coming close to the water and dancing away again, fearful of the crocodile that he could not see. But the crocodile did not worry the elephant; it was men that worried the old bull. Even though there was no scent of them, they had left their mark here. This was the place where it had all happened, and he remembered well.

The elephant moved into the water and drank, filling his trunk and bringing it up to his mouth. Out on the surface of the water, the crocodile's eyes appeared. The ancient reptile studied the giant for a moment and then moved away, putting some distance between them.

After he drank, the elephant moved back up onto the rocky ground and walked around the perimeter of the watering hole. He had gone only a short distance when he came across the first bones. Even though they had been huge bones, there was little left of them, for when the lions had finished, the hyenas had come. After the hyenas had been the vultures and the jackals. And finally, and still working, were the ants. This was the place the old bull remembered. This is where his herd had been slaughtered.

He lowered his right tusk and moved a bone over the earth. The ants that were exposed to the rain scrambled toward the new underside of the bone. The elephant moved on, stepping over one place of death and going to the next. Here an old cow had died, and a young one over there. He could still hear the loud crack of the rifles, the trumpeting screams of the dying, the bewildered cries of the young.

It had taken place when the herd had come to drink. It was before the rains had come, when most of the place was soft mud. In that mud, many of them had died, and what was left after the men was taken by the crocodiles. The killing had lasted only minutes, and a silence had followed, when even the air was hushed. Then the men moved in. They finished off the animals that were still moving with shots to the brain for certainty, until all of the herd was still—the

cows, the calves, the young and the old. After that it was a place of dead elephants, a place where the earth no longer trembled with the great creatures as it had. That quick it was done.

Now it was quiet. It was quiet for the fish eagle, except for the rain and the thunder. It was quiet for the jackal, for he listened only for the crocodile as he drank the muddy water. And for the crocodile, there was only the rain and the wind on the surface of the water. But for the elephant, this place would never be quiet again. It would always hold the screams of the dying herd.

The elephant remembered it. Now, in remembering, he lifted his trunk and trumpeted so loudly that the jackal jumped back from the water. The elephant sliced the air with his tusks and continued to bellow. The bullet that was lodged deep in his body, festering, caused tremendous pain. It added to his agony. It fired his anger. Men had been here. They had left their mark on this place. And the old bull was challenging them.

Chapter 2

GETTING THE BEST OF THE DEAL

It was getting dark fast, and Teich didn't like it. Already the far side of the river was falling into shadow. The sun was sinking into a slant of rose-colored clouds just above the trees. The sky above was a deep purple.

It was the hippos that bothered Teich. He hated hippos. He had always hated hippos. There were crocodiles in the river, though he hadn't seen any on this evening, for here the water ran fast and deep. Farther down, the Zambezi ran slow and quiet. That's where the crocodiles gathered. Teich didn't like crocodiles either, but he would choose them over hippos. Of all the creatures in Africa, hippos were the most dangerous. They killed more people than any other animal.

Teich figured that he had about thirty minutes to get the two small boats to the far side of the river, unload the ivory, and return. After that the river would be lost in darkness, and he did not like coming back in darkness. He looked behind him at the man working the outboard motor. The young African smiled at him. Teich shouted back over the noise of the motor, and the man leaned forward to hear. Teich shouted again. "Won't this bloody thing do any more?"

The African shrugged his shoulders. His smile faded. “It’s all she’s got,” he called back. “The throttle is open.”

Edward Teich shook his head, cursed out loud, and turned his back again to the driver. He looked at the second boat, off to his left in the half darkness. It was much closer to the far bank, skipping smoothly on the surface of the river. He could see Tebe’s black face looking at him worriedly from that boat. Tebe was clutching the side of the boat, his sun-bleached shirt flapping loosely about him. The second boat, Teich thought, was definitely faster. He’d be certain to be in that boat coming back.

Teich had had nothing to do with arranging the boats. It was Tebe who had hired the men from a small village upriver. Teich had asked only one question: “Are they fast?”

Tebe had nodded. “The men say they are very fast.”

Teich cursed himself now for not checking out the boats himself, and for paying too much for them. He had paid a handsome sum for a single run across the river and back. Even though they were carrying illegal ivory, it was still only one run. Teich thought again of the Zambian he was meeting on the other side. “That damn Zambian,” he said under his breath.

The Zambian had set up the meeting on the far bank of the Zambezi. Teich didn’t like it. He didn’t like any of it. He had no way to reach the man. He had no way to change it. The Zambian never left an address. He just came into an area to do business and then went away again. If Teich

wanted to be rid of his ivory, he had to meet the Zambian at the set place, at the set time, and that was the end of it.

Teich looked at the far side of the river as the boats neared the bank. He searched for the Zambian, but there were too many shadows to see much of anything in them.

The river marked the boundary between countries. At this place the Zambezi River separated Zambia from Zimbabwe. Only a few miles upstream, where the Chobe River joined with the Zambezi at Kasane, was Botswana. Teich had spent the last four years of his life in this part of Africa, ever since things got too difficult for him up north in Kenya. He often missed Kenya. He had done well there for several years, but in truth, he had done just as well in Zimbabwe and Botswana—except for one incident. Running his hand now over his leg, he thought about it. He knew that such things were part of the trade; they came with poaching, but still they angered him.

A spray of river water caught him as the boat turned sharply to the right. Taking his hand from the pain in his leg, Teich pulled up his rifle. He looked back at the man running the outboard. The man pointed. Teich saw the big gray head of a hippo slipping under the water, the small ears and pink flesh around the eyes vanishing last. The driver had steered the boat away from it. Watching, Teich saw two more hippos come to the surface a short distance away. One was swimming with the boat, the other watching. Then they both went under.

Again Teich felt the spray of the river on him as the boat turned sharply. It turned so hard this time that it lifted from the water, leaning up on one side. Teich could feel the ivory shifting under the heavy canvas behind him. He turned and shouted at the driver, “Careful, you bloody fool! You want us to go over!”

“Hippo!” the man called back.

“Yes! I saw the hippo!” Teich shouted in return. “You trying to put us in the water with him?”

The driver did not respond. He looked past Teich to the riverbank. Teich shook his head, pulled his gun close, and turned his back to the man. Again he thought about how he should have checked the boats. He was angry at Tebe for not making sure.

The faster boat reached the far bank. Teich watched as Tebe climbed out and pulled it up on solid ground. Teich saw three men come out of the shadows under the trees to meet Tebe. One of them was the Zambian. Teich knew him even from a distance. He was a small, round man. Teich didn’t like him, and he didn’t trust him.

The outboard motor slowed and then fell to a murmur, kicking white smoke back over the surface of the water. A moment later the driver cut the motor completely, and the boat drifted in toward the riverbank. The sudden silence from the outboard hung on the falling darkness. Teich could hear the low voices of men whispering, arguing. He recognized one as Tebe’s. The louder was that of the Zambian. The boat floated in by some large rocks. Teich used the butt of