

FALL of the BEASTS
SPIRIT
ANIMALS™
THE BURNING TIDE

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FROM THE STARS

THE SKY WAS FALLING.

It had started seven moontides before. The elder ape of the tribe was about to commence the last feast when he spotted something in the heavens above—a small speck of light burning in the sky. But unlike the stars, this speck was moving straight toward Erdas.

This was long ago, back before Kovo even had a name.

He remembered his entire tribe stopping their eating to stare up through the dark canopy of trees, all of them thinking the same thing—

The sky was falling.

“What?” Kovo’s mother had asked, signing the question with her black gorilla hands.

The elder ape had wrinkled his gray brow and gestured with his hands. “Do not know.”

Concerned grunts moved through the tribe. It was the first time Kovo or anyone else had heard the elder ape say he did not know something. Usually such an

admission would mean death—the other silverbacks in the tribe would have attacked, in order to take his place—but they, like Kovo, were transfixed by the light above.

Kovo knew their land was surrounded by a vast ocean of stars, which spun in their own paths. But even as the sky churned in its usual course, this burning piece broke the harmony, cutting a path in its own direction.

Every night Kovo's tribe gathered and watched the speck again, and every time it looked bigger and burned brighter. Soon they were able to see the speck even during the day. It became clear that this falling piece of sky was moving toward the land.

The other animals in the jungle knew of the sky falling too. Kovo had seen some boar herds in the lower brush congregating to watch the approaching speck. He heard the nervous chatter of the falcons in the east as they circled the sky in a wide arc. Kovo could not commune with other beasts, but even so, he knew the meaning of their falcon cries: This was where the burning piece of sky was to land.

It was a place Kovo knew well. A place every creature knew.

The tree.

The tree was sacred. Its roots stretched to every corner of the world. Every blade of grass, every beating heart, had sprung from it. And now the sky was plummeting toward it.

Kovo remembered wondering what would happen when the piece of sky reached the tree. A thing like this had never happened before.

The silverbacks in Kovo's tribe gathered together. One of them should go to the place where the falcons

flew—to bring back news of the thing that fell. They needed a young ape who could still move quickly through the trees. Someone who could be trusted not to become lost or distracted by the creatures and sights beyond their jungle canopy. They picked Kovo.

It was a great honor. And before Kovo left, the elder ape began to sing for him, cooing into the night air. He was joined by the others, one by one, in a chorus more wonderful than anything Kovo had heard since.

Kovo's mother joined last. Her hands found his and she pressed her nose to Kovo's. To this day, he still remembered the smell of her.

Kovo left the safety of the canopy in search of the place where the sky would land. The world was a vast continent that contained jungles and dunes and mountains and snowfields, all connected together. As he traveled, he saw other beasts moving in the same direction as him: a lion from the plains, an octopus from the sulfur delta, a serpent from the desolate bogs, even a polar bear from the high glacier rim. Usually Kovo would have tried to fight with these beasts, or they would have fought with him, but it seemed they all had a similar mission.

Kovo and the other beasts finally found themselves at the top of a high mountain covered in lush vegetation and strange greenery. There were thousands of animals, all different species, all come to bear witness. The trees were low and not good for climbing, but they were heavy-laden with fruit. Kovo did not recognize the fruits growing in this place, and so he ate nothing.

At last he reached the tree. It stood within an emptied mountain—its trunk impossibly tall. The enormous, lush

branches stretched out in every direction, strong and silvery. Kovo could feel the tree's life-giving roots whispering in the rich soil beneath him. He climbed atop a large, mossy boulder and watched the falling piece of sky. From here, Kovo could see the land stretching out for a thousand miles in every direction.

By now, the piece of sky burned as large and hot as a second sun. The speck had a trail of flames behind it, as though it were leaving a tear in the very atmosphere, roaring as it hurtled straight toward the tree. The roaring reverberated through the entire forest around Kovo, and many of the watching beasts fled in terror. Kovo felt that same fear, but he did not run. The fur on his arms had a static tingle of expectation. He wanted to hold his breath.

And then it landed.

Kovo shielded his eyes as the great piece of sky crashed through the branches of the tree and plunged deep into its trunk. When it finally struck the ground, the impact was like nothing Kovo had ever conceived.

In a flicker, the trees all around him bent sideways, as if they were blades of grass flattened under Kovo's foot. The sound, if it made a sound, was so great that Kovo's ears stopped working—his head filled with a devastating thrum that threatened to crack his skull in two. The ground beneath Kovo seemed to ripple and heave, throwing him backward.

And then there was the storm.

At the moment of impact, a burst of blinding light struck Kovo—searing his eyes through his eyelids. Wind and fire enveloped the sky, everything around him

coming ablaze. It was like a crack of lightning had moved right through the land.

Kovo did not remember landing—for the next moment, his whole world went black.

When Kovo woke again, it was as though waking from death. Steam rose up from the scorched ground, burning the side of his face. The sky overhead was a swirling darkness that blotted out the sun. Kovo pushed himself up on his knuckles, retching some horrible black sap that seemed to have pooled beneath him, coating his fur. He could feel his bones screaming in protest as he stirred, and he wondered how many of them had been shattered.

Kovo rose and beheld the forest around him. But there was no forest. The trees were gone. The rocks were gone. Indeed, the very ground had been turned into an enormous smoking crater.

He looked to the place where the sky had landed.

The tree was still standing—ever standing—but its trunk was twisted and scarred, torn down the middle where the sky piece had struck it.

Kovo could still feel the life of the tree moving beneath the ground, but something about it had changed.

The tree wasn't the only thing that had changed. Despite his injuries, Kovo felt somehow stronger, and his mind felt more clear. He scrambled up over the steaming rubble to the crest of the crater.

Destruction. For miles in every direction. Huge black cracks had formed in the earth, and already he could see water flooding into the gaps, dividing earth, pushing the lands apart from one another. Storms were brewing, and

he knew somehow that the rest of his tribe was gone. Perhaps other creatures from farther lands had survived the impact, but Kovo's jungle was no more.

The young ape flared his nostrils, squeezing his eyes tight. He wanted to beat his chest, to roar and rage. But who could hear such a cry? He was alone.

Kovo turned, hearing a wheezing *snuff* nearby. Rubble pushed apart and he saw the trunk of an enormous elephant burst from the earth, dripping with black sap. The beast had somehow survived, just like him. There were more sounds and soon other survivors emerged.

There were fifteen of them in all.

Like Kovo, the beasts looked different—stronger, larger than before. Kovo and the others slowly moved toward the tree in the center of the steaming crater. The thing that had fallen from the sky had burrowed deep into the earth, leaving a trail of foul black sap in its wake.

Some of the beasts were unable to make the descent, or too afraid, but Kovo had to see. He had been sent by his tribe, by the elder ape, by his mother, to witness the falling sky, and he would finish his task.

He approached the gash in the trunk of the tree. It looked so fragile, and he feared it might break under his touch. But when he grabbed hold of the smoldering bark, he could feel the tree shifting beneath his fingers—fighting back against its own destruction, forcing itself to grow anew.

The sky had plunged straight through it and deep into the ground. The hole was steep and treacherous, but Kovo felt strong and agile. Soon even the falcon and swan had given up the pursuit, but Kovo traveled on.

At last he found the bottom of the hole, deep within the roots of the tree. The space was a little bigger than the canopy where his tribe ate their meals.

The hole was so dark that Kovo could barely make out his own hand. But the silver light from the tree's roots was enough to see what he had come for. Lodged deep within the ground was something large and round.

It looked like a rock, only made of a substance Kovo had never seen before. Something strong enough to cut through the world itself.

Kovo drew in his breath. He could sense something moving beneath the surface. A tremor of life that pulsed like a heart. Something was inside, trying to get free. Kovo stepped back, staring at the thing below, and realization washed over him.

This was not sky.

This was not stone.

This was an egg.



HUNTER AND PREY

THE HOODED MAN MOVED LIKE A SHADOW BENEATH the moonlight. His skin was impossibly pale—purple veins could be seen tracing along his temple and neck, pulsing like little tendrils just beneath the flesh. The man’s eyes looked inhuman—pupils so large there was almost no white to speak of. “And these travelers,” he said, his lips stretched thin, like his patience. “Where are they now?”

“I do not know, sire!” Hazeel cried, his voice shaking. “The travelers docked for only a night to replenish supplies and get fresh water.” It was hard for Hazeel to speak on account of being suspended by his ankles over the edge of the stone pier. A pulley and rope—meant for loading and unloading ships—was looped around his feet, leaving him dangling above the water. Thirty feet below, violent white breakers smashed against the rocks along the shore. He had been hanging like this for hours and the air had turned cold with the sinking sun. “P-p-please,” he stammered. “I am only a humble harbormaster.”

“You’re more than that,” the hooded man said, tugging off one of his leather gloves. Hazeel caught a glimpse of a tattoo running the back of his hand—a spirit animal under his control. “You are the last living person to see those I seek.” The man flashed a poisonous smile. “Whether you *continue* to be living is entirely up to your friend up there.”

Hazeel twisted his neck and stared above him—stared at the silver-furred rat who sat at the top of the pulley, chewing on the knot that kept Hazeel aloft. The rat was Hazeel’s spirit animal, Poe. His only friend. Except Poe did not belong to Hazeel anymore. The hooded man had done something to the creature, infected him with some sort of wriggling black parasite that severed Hazeel’s spirit animal bond . . . and now the rat was a slave to the hooded man.

Hazeel swallowed. Even though it was cold, he felt a rivulet of sweat running down his upside-down head. He watched Poe greedily gnawing at the strands of the rope, which was already groaning under Hazeel’s weight. A few more strands and Hazeel would fall to his death.

“These travelers,” the hooded man said, “did they have spirit animals with them? A falcon and a lion and a swan?”

“I saw no animals, sire,” Hazeel said. But then he decided that his best tactic might be to tell the man what he clearly wanted to hear, so he quickly added: “But it would not surprise me! It was obvious they were hiding something. The entire crew wore red cloaks and masks that concealed their faces. And when they paid me, they used silver fronds—the currency of Zourtzi.”

The hooded man fixed his dark-dark eyes on Hazeel. “And which way did they go when they left your port?”

“They went south. Straight for the Frozen Sea.” Hazeel shook his head. “I warned them that only shipwreck awaited them in those frosty waters, but they would not listen.”

The hooded man nodded, pleased with this information. He turned toward someone behind Hazeel—one of his own crewmen—and snapped his fingers. “Prepare the ship with fresh rations. We sail into the Frozen Sea. Tonight.” The crewman, dressed in a green cloak, bowed and rushed to fulfill the orders.

Hazeel watched the crew, all of them dressed in tattered green cloaks. He felt a prickle of confusion—these were not the Greencloaks he knew. They all had pale faces and hideous, pulsing black marks on their brows—like coiled worms buried just beneath the flesh. Perhaps they were under the hooded man’s control, like his own Poe. But when he looked at the hooded man, he saw that the man, too, had the mark. Was he also under the control of something even more powerful than himself?

Hazeel’s body lurched and twisted as another strand of the rope broke under the rat’s gnawing teeth. He closed his eyes, forcing himself not to look at the rocky shore below. “I’ve told you what you asked! Will you not release me?”

“You have set us in the right direction,” the hooded man said. “And for that, I will spare your life.” He clucked his tongue and Poe scampered immediately from the ropes and to the man’s side—as if they’d been practicing that trick their whole lives. He turned and

started walking toward the gangplank of his waiting ship.

Hazeel was overcome with relief . . . until he realized that the hooded man meant to leave him dangling above the water. “And what of me, sire?” he cried to the man’s receding figure. “Will you not take me with you? It could be weeks before another ship comes to this remote port.”

“You had better hope it’s sooner,” the man called over his shoulder.

“Sire!” Hazeel cried to the hooded man. “You will never find your quarry in those waters. It is a graveyard for ships. Even if you knew where you wanted to go, it would be impossible to get there without a guide. I’m sure you’ve heard tales of how in the Frozen Sea a compass’s needle never stops turning—it’s true. You will be chasing your own wake before sundown. I alone know those currents. Spare my life and take me with you. I will guide you to those you seek!”

The hooded man paused at the edge of the pier. “An interesting offer,” he said. “But I already have a guide.” He lifted up the edge of his tunic and touched a tattoo on his side that seemed to depict some sort of spotted cat. There was a flash of light, and then an enormous leopard appeared next to the man. The creature narrowed its violet eyes, licking its gleaming fangs.

Hazeel had little to show for education, but he knew enough to know what he was looking at. “Is that . . . Uraza?” he said, his voice a whisper. “The Great Beast.”

“It is indeed.” Zerif knelt down and pet the leopard, touching a spiral mark on her brow. “And she’s all mine.”

He peered into the face of the beast, whose nostrils were flared. Her fangs glowed white in the dim light, and she was growling. “I have no need for your services,” the hooded man said. “Uraza is a huntress. She will lead us to her prey. And then her prey will die.”



THE FROZEN SEA

ABEKE CROUCHED IN THE CROW'S NEST, STARING OUT over the choppy surface of the water that stretched clear to the white horizon. She clutched a small obsidian stone in her hand, which she was chiseling to a razor point to create an arrowhead. One of dozens she had stowed in the pack of her quiver. The water was bitterly cold, just like the air. But neither was half so cold as she was inside. She pulled her tattered cloak around her shoulders, but even that gave little comfort. She wore the colors of a Greencloak, but what right did she have to such a title? Greencloaks had spirit animals. And Abeke had nothing.

The ship, a creaking frigate named the *Expiator*, keeled to one side, and Abeke had to grip the ropes of the crow's nest to prevent being flung into the water a hundred feet below. Beneath her, she could hear the sounds of the crew working the lines to keep the ship upright as they charted a course ever southward. She and Rollan had been traveling for several days, moving

swiftly through an uncharted sea whose only reputation was for storm and shipwreck. Even now, she could see the jagged shards of floating ice that stuck from the water's surface like fifty-foot teeth, waiting to devour them. Cold wind shivered past the top of the mast, and she wondered how many ships had found their ends in these waters. And where did these waters even lead? All they had been told was that they were being carried to a place called "the snare," but none of the crew was willing to tell her more.

Abeke was startled from her work by the sound of someone ascending the rungs. "Mind if I join you?"

She glanced over her shoulder to see Rollan hoisting himself up onto the deck of the crow's nest. His face was chapped from the cold, and she knew that he, like her, was unused to such weather. That he had come upon her so stealthily was not surprising, but it was distressing. If Uraza had still been with her, Abeke would have sensed his approach.

"Shouldn't you be babysitting our new recruits?" she said, helping him up the top rung. Rollan had been tasked with keeping tabs on two newer children who had recently summoned Great Beasts, Kirat and Tasha. The thought of Rollan playing the role of Greencloak mentor almost made her smile. Quite a change from the boy who once loudly claimed to care for no one but himself. She suspected their own mentor, the late Tarik, would have shared her amusement.

"I set Kirat to swabbing the latrine," Rollan said. "Thought it would build character." He dug into the pockets of the fur-lined coat that the Redcloaks had

given him and removed a rasher of dried shark meat. “I swiped a second helping of lunch. Thought you might be getting hungry up here. . . .” But even as he said this, his eyes fell on the pile of untouched food at her feet—several days’ worth of rations.

Abeke gave a tight smile. “Not a big fan of seafood, I’m afraid.” The truth was, she hadn’t eaten in two days. She simply didn’t have an appetite. “It gives me a bad stomach.”

Abeke saw worry flash across Rollan’s face, which he quickly replaced with a forced grin. “Oh, well. More for me!” He chomped down on a strip of meat and settled in beside her, apparently unable to take the hint that she wanted to be alone.

The deck of the crow’s nest was designed for one adult, and there was hardly enough room for the two of them. Rollan sat with his back against Abeke’s, each of them staring out in a different direction.

“You haven’t seen Essix up here, have you?” he said through bites of shark meat. “She’s been acting strange for days now, swooping around in big uneven loops, high then low then high again. . . . I can feel her uncertainty, as if the air were making her dizzy. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she’s been nipping at the Redcloaks’ grog barrels.”

He probably meant this as a joke, but Abeke couldn’t manage even a smile. “I tried bringing her into passive state, but the moment I did that, *I* started feeling dizzy, too. Just this morning I threw up my whole breakfast on the deck. Hence the fresh appetite.” He sighed, chuckling. “I swear that bird will be the end of me. My life would

be ten times easier if I'd gotten a three-toed sloth . . . or maybe a nice, slow beetle. A beetle would have been grand!"

Abeke pulled her knees tight against her chest. "At least you *have* a spirit animal," she said quietly.

She felt Rollan take a deep breath behind her. For once, he seemed to be at a loss for a witty retort. "Wonder how much farther it is to this mysterious Redcloak base?" he asked more seriously. "Never imagined a place could be so crushingly cold. No life, hardly any fish even. Just huge chunks of jagged ice. This place makes Suka's ice palace look positively cozy."

Abeke nodded, smiling despite herself. What felt like a lifetime before, she and Rollan had ventured to the northernmost mountains of Eura to find the talisman of the Great Bear, Suka. But that particular talisman had been stolen by Shane, the Devourer. The very same Shane who now captained the ship they were traveling aboard. Even now, it was unclear whether they were guests or prisoners.

"Do you really think we can trust them?" Rollan said, as if reading her thoughts. "I know they saved our lives back in Nilo—more than once, even. But still. We've been deceived before."

Abeke eyed the crew moving far below, all of them wearing long red cloaks and cloth masks over their faces. Each mask was marked with the image of a different animal. The masks provided some warmth from the bitter cold, but that was not why they wore them.

These "Redcloaks" wore masks to hide their faces. Every single one of them, down to the last woman and

man, had a pair of inhuman eyes peering out from the folds of her or his mask. The few who had been bold enough to take their masks off around Abeke and the others revealed patches of skin that were disfigured into a twisted hash of animal and human.

Abeke still wasn't sure what had happened to produce this strange result, but it was unnerving to say the least. Shane himself had greeted her in Nilo with the cruel yellow eyes of a reptile—the eyes of his lost spirit animal.

Perhaps that was no less than he deserved. The boy's crocodile tears had once convinced her to lead him right into Greenhaven, where he promptly betrayed her. That Shane now wore the symbol of his deception seemed only fitting.

But thinking of Shane and his crocodile only made her think of Uraza. Abeke closed her eyes, remembering the moment when Zerif's parasite infected her beloved spirit animal. How Uraza's violet eyes had suddenly clouded over. And worse than that, how a part of Abeke's own heart and soul had just as suddenly *vanished*.

Once in control of Uraza, Zerif had ordered the leopard to kill Abeke . . . and Uraza had *listened*. Without a moment's hesitation, Uraza had pounced at her, claws out. Had it not been for Cabaro intercepting the attack, Abeke would be dead. But then, how much worse could death really be from what she was already feeling?

All that would have been difficult enough for Abeke to process, but the recent discovery that the leader of the Redcloaks was none other than Shane—the Devourer who had once set out to destroy them all—was more than

she could handle. She had trusted Shane once before and paid a dear price for it. And yet here she was, sailing to a secret location on a ship under his command.

But what choice did they have? With Zerif's army of infected Greencloaks hunting down the other Great Beasts, they had nowhere else to turn.

"I don't know if we can trust him," Abeke said at last. "But when I look at him now . . . some part of me thinks he really has changed."

"Oh, he's changed all right—into a lizard-eyed freak. If anything, he looks more like the Devourer than ever before. Not exactly reassuring."

"Still," Abeke said. "If he wanted us dead, he could have just let Zerif do the job. He needs us for something. It's just a question of what." She shivered, pulling her cloak tighter. "Wherever he's taking us, let's hope we get there before we freeze to death."

Their conversation was interrupted by a faint cry of a bird. "It's Essix!" Rollan said, climbing to his feet. "She sees something." The cry had come from far ahead, somewhere deep in the clouds. Abeke watched as Rollan closed his eyes and put a hand to his temple—trying to *see* through his spirit animal's eyes. Abeke had seen him do this many times before, but only now did it fill her with a pang of jealousy. A moment later he stepped back, blinking. He had the slack-jawed look of someone who had just beheld a wonder beyond his own imagining.

"What is it?" Abeke said, standing. "Did you see the Place of Desolation?"

"One thing's for sure," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "We're not going to freeze to death."