

# SPIRIT ANIMALS™

WILD BORN

Brandon Mull



SCHOLASTIC INC.

*For Sadie, who loves animals.  
And for Fluffy, Buffy, and Mango,  
who are animals.  
– B.M.*

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# BRIGGAN

**G**IVEN A CHOICE, CONOR WOULD NOT HAVE PICKED TO SPEND the most important birthday of his life helping Devin Trunswick get dressed. In all honesty, he would not have volunteered to help Devin Trunswick do anything, ever.

But Devin was the eldest son of Eric, the Earl of Trunswick, and Conor was the third son of Fenray, Herder of Sheep. Fenray had incurred debts to the earl, and Conor was helping to work them off as a servant to Devin. The arrangement had begun over a year ago, and was set to last at least two more.

Conor had to hook each fiddly clasp on the back of Devin's coat correctly or the folds would hang crooked, and he would hear about it for weeks. The fine material was more decorative than practical. If caught in a storm, Conor knew that Devin would wish for a simpler, more durable coat. One without clasps. One that might actually keep him warm.

"Are you done fussing around back there?" Devin asked in exasperation.

“Sorry for the delay, milord,” Conor replied. “There are forty-eight clasps. I’m just now linking the fortieth.”

“How many more days will this take? I’m about to die of old age! Are you just inventing numbers?”

Conor resisted a sharp reply. Having grown up counting sheep, he probably knew his numbers better than Devin. But arguing with a noble caused more trouble than it was worth. Sometimes Devin seemed to deliberately tempt him. “It’s my best guess.”

The door flew open and Dawson, Devin’s younger brother, burst into the room. “Are you *still* getting dressed, Devin?”

“Don’t blame me,” Devin protested. “Conor keeps napping.”

Conor only gave Dawson a brief glance. The sooner he finished the clasps, the sooner he could get himself ready.

“How could Conor fall asleep?” Dawson called, giggling. “Everything you say, brother, is so *interesting*.”

Conor resisted a grin. Dawson seldom stopped talking. He often got annoying, but he could sometimes be pretty funny. “I’m awake.”

“Aren’t you done yet?” Devin complained. “How many are left?”

Conor wanted to say twenty. “Five.”

“Think you’ll summon a spirit animal, Devin?” Dawson asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Devin replied. “Grandfather called a mongoose. Father produced a lynx.”

Today was the Trunswick Nectar Ceremony. In less than an hour, the local children who turned eleven this

month would each try to call a spirit animal. Conor knew that some families tended to form bestial bonds more regularly than others. Even so, calling a spirit animal was never guaranteed, no matter what your family name. There were only three kids scheduled to drink the Nectar, and the odds were against any of them succeeding. It was certainly nothing to boast about before it happened.

“What animal do you think you’ll get?” Dawson wondered.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Devin said. “What do you expect?”

“A chipmunk,” Dawson predicted.

Devin lunged at his brother, who scampered away, giggling. Dawson was not dressed as formally as his older brother, which allowed him freer movement. Still, Devin soon caught him and tackled him to the floor, pinning him down.

“A bear would be more likely,” Devin said, grinding his elbow into his brother’s chest. “Or a wildcat, like Father. First thing I’ll do is have it taste you.”

Conor tried to wait patiently. It wasn’t his place to intervene.

“You might get nothing,” Dawson said bravely.

“Then all I’ll be is Earl of Trunswick, and your master.”

“Not if Father outlives you.”

“I’d mind my tongue, second son.”

“I’m glad I’m not you!”

Devin twisted Dawson’s nose until he yelped, then stood up, brushing off his trousers. “At least my nose isn’t sore.”

“Conor will drink the Nectar too!” Dawson cried. “Maybe he’ll be the one to call a spirit animal.”

Conor tried to look invisible. Did he hope to summon a spirit animal? Of course! Who wouldn’t? You couldn’t help hoping. Just because nobody in his family had done it since some obscure great-granduncle decades ago didn’t make it impossible.

“Right.” Devin chuckled. “And I suppose the smith’s daughter will summon one as well.”

“You never know,” Dawson said, sitting up and rubbing his nose. “Conor, what would you like to have?”

Conor stared at the floor. He had been asked a direct question by a noble, so he had to answer. “I’ve always gotten on well with dogs. I’d like a sheepdog, I guess.”

“What an imagination!” Devin laughed. “The sheepherder dreams of calling a sheepdog.”

“A dog would be fun,” Dawson said.

“And common,” Devin said. “How many dogs do you have, Conor?”

“My family? Ten, last I counted.”

“How long since you’ve seen your family?” Dawson asked.

Conor tried to keep his voice even. “More than half a year.”

“They’ll be there today?”

“I expect they’ll try. It depends on whether they can get away.” In case they couldn’t make it, he didn’t want to show that he cared.

“How novel for you,” Devin sniffed. “How many clasps remain?”

“Three.”

Devin turned around. “Let’s not dawdle. We’re running late.”



An impressive assemblage had gathered in the square. It was not every day that the son of a great lord quested for his spirit animal. Commoners and nobles alike had come for the event—old, young, and in between. Musicians played, soldiers strutted, and a peddler sold candied nuts. A grandstand had been erected for the earl and his family. Conor thought it looked as if a holiday had been declared. A holiday for everyone but him. The day was cool and clear. The green hills where Conor would rather be roaming loomed far beyond the blue rooftops and chimneys of Trunswick.

Conor had attended a few Nectar ceremonies. He had never witnessed the calling of a spirit animal, although he knew it had happened several times in this square during his lifetime. There had been little pageantry at the ceremonies he had seen. None had been well attended. And none had involved so many animals.

A common belief held that bringing together a variety of animals increased the chance of summoning a spirit animal. If so, Devin might be in luck. Not only were many domestic animals present, but Conor saw mews full of birds with exotic plumage, a corral containing deer and moose, several caged wildcats, a penned trio of badgers, and a black bear chained to a post by an iron collar. There was even a beast that Conor had only heard about in stories—a huge camel with two furry humps.

As Conor walked toward the center of the square, the

hordes of onlookers made him self-conscious. He wasn't sure what to do with his hands. Should he fold his arms or let them dangle at his sides? As he scanned the intimidating crowd, he tried to remember that most eyes were fixed on Devin.

Suddenly Conor noticed his mother waving. His elder brothers stood beside her, and his father. They had even brought Soldier, Conor's favorite sheepdog.

They had all made it! The sight of them thawed some of his fear and awoke a longing for home – meadows to wander, creeks to swim in, groves to explore. His work had been honest and outdoors – chopping wood, shearing sheep, feeding dogs. Their home had been small but cozy, and nothing like the drafty immensity of the earl's castle. Conor gave his mother a little wave.

The future Earl of Trunswick led the way to a bench near the center of the square. Abby, the smith's daughter, awaited them, sitting still and looking overwhelmed. She was clearly dressed in her best clothes, which were laughably inferior to even the most casual dress owned by Devin's mother or sister. Conor knew he must also look very plain beside Devin.

A pair of Greencloaks stood before the bench. Conor recognized the woman, Isilla, her graying hair gathered up in a glittering net over her pale face. Her goldfinch, Frida, was perched on her shoulder. Isilla normally officiated at the Nectar ceremonies. She had given the Nectar to both of his brothers.

The other Greencloak was a stranger, tall and lean, with wide shoulders and features as weathered as his cloak. His skin was darker than the people around him,

as if he came from northeastern Nilo or southwestern Zhong—an unusual sight in the middle of Eura. His animal was not evident, but Conor noticed a hint of a tattoo winding away into his sleeve. The sight gave him a thrill. It meant the stranger’s spirit animal was currently hibernating on his arm.

Abby rose and curtsied as Devin approached the bench. He sat down and motioned for Conor to follow his lead. Conor and Abby sat.

Isilla raised her hands to still the crowd. The stranger backed away, leaving her the center of attention. Conor wondered why the man had come. As with the rest of the pageantry, Conor decided it must be another nod to Devin’s high status.

Isilla began in a penetrating voice, “Hear ye, hear ye, good people of Trunswick! Before the eyes of man and beast, we are gathered here today to participate in the most sacred rite in all of Erdas. When human and animal unite, their greatness is multiplied. We have come to witness whether the Nectar will reveal such greatness in any of these three candidates—Lord Devin Trunswick; Abby, daughter of Grall; and Conor, son of Fenray.”

The cheering after the mention of Devin all but drowned out the other two names. Conor tried to remain impassive. If he sat still and kept calm, soon it would be over. Devin would drink the Nectar first, in the place of honor. Common belief held that the first to drink the Nectar in a ceremony was the most likely to call a spirit animal.

Isilla bent over to raise a plugged flask, the leather tooled with intricate designs. After raising the flask above

her head to display it to the assemblage, she unstopped it. “Devin Trunswick, come forward.”

The crowd whistled and clapped as Devin approached Isilla, then quieted down as she put her finger to her lips. Devin knelt before her, a sight Conor had seldom seen. Euran nobles only knelt to greater Euran nobles. The Greencloaks knelt to none.

“Receive the Nectar of Ninani.”

Conor could not help but feel excited as the flask tipped toward Devin’s lips. This might be the first time he witnessed a spirit animal summoned from the unknown! With all of these animals present, how could the Nectar fail? Conor wondered what the beast would look like.

Devin swallowed. Isilla stepped back. A deep hush fell over the square. Eyes closed, Devin tilted his face skyward. An empty moment passed. Somebody coughed. Nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Perplexed, Devin looked around.

Conor had heard that a spirit animal either came right after the Nectar was tasted, or never. Devin arose and turned in a full circle, eyes roving. There was no sign of anything appearing nearby. The crowd began to murmur.

Isilla hesitated, considering the grandstand. Conor followed her gaze. The earl sat grimly on his throne, his lynx nearby. Although he had summoned a spirit animal, he had chosen not to wear the green cloak.

Isilla glanced back at the foreign Greencloak, who gave a faint nod. “Thank you, Devin,” she intoned. “Abby, daughter of Grall, come forward.”

Devin looked queasy. His eyes were blank, but his

posture betrayed his humiliation. He glanced furtively toward his father, then looked down. When he lifted his eyes again, his gaze had hardened, the shame turning to fury. Conor looked away. It would be best to avoid Devin's attention for a while.

Abby drank and, as Conor expected, nothing happened. She returned to the bench.

“Conor, son of Fenray, come forward.”

Hearing his name called gave Conor a nervous thrill. If Devin had failed to call an animal, Conor doubted he had any chance. Still, anything could happen. Never had so many eyes been trained just on him. Rising to his feet, Conor tried to ignore the crowd by focusing on Isilla. The tactic didn't really work.

If nothing else, it would be interesting to discover what the Nectar tasted like. His oldest brother had compared it to sour goat's milk, but Wallace liked to tease. His other brother, Garrin, had likened it to apple cider. Conor licked his lips. Whatever the taste, sampling the Nectar would officially mark the end of his childhood.

Conor knelt before Isilla. She looked down at him with a strange smile, curiosity lurking behind her eyes. Had she stared at the others this way?

“Receive the Nectar of Ninani.”

Conor put his lips to the offered flask. The Nectar was thick, like syrup, and richly sweet, like fruit in honey. The consistency became more liquid once it was in his mouth. He swallowed. It tasted amazing! Better than anything he had ever tried.

Isilla withdrew the flask before he could steal another sip. One swallow was all he would ever sample. Conor

stood in order to return to the bench and a burning, tingling sensation spread through his chest.

Animals began to cry out. The birds shrilled. The wild-cats yowled. The bear roared. The moose trumpeted. The camel snorted and stomped.

The ground began to tremble. The sky darkened, as if a swift cloud had overtaken the sun. A brilliant flash pierced the gloom like lightning, but much nearer than any lightning Conor had experienced, nearer even than the time he saw a tree struck at the crest of a hill he was climbing.

Onlookers gasped and murmured. Dazzled by the flash, Conor blinked repeatedly to restore his vision. Hot tingles spread from his chest along his limbs. Despite the oddness of the moment, he felt irrationally joyful.

And then he saw the wolf.

Much like any shepherd in the region, Conor had experience with wolves. Wolf packs had stolen many sheep under his care. Wolves had killed three of his favorite dogs over the years. Livestock lost to wolves was a big part of the reason his father had become indebted to the earl. And of course there was that night two years ago, when Conor and his brothers had stood against a brazen pack that had tried to steal sheep out of their pen in the high pasture.

Now the largest wolf he had ever seen stood before him, head held high. It was a remarkable creature – long-limbed, well fed, with the most luxurious coat of gray-white fur Conor could have imagined. He took in large paws, keen claws, savage teeth, and striking cobalt-blue eyes.

*Blue eyes?*

In the history of Erdas, only one wolf had such deep blue eyes.

Conor glanced at the Euran flag hanging from the earl's grandstand. Briggan the Wolf, patron beast of Eura, stood depicted upon a rich blue banner, eyes shrewd and piercing.

The wolf padded forward calmly, stopping directly before Conor. It sat, like a trained dog yielding to its master. Its head came well above Conor's waist. Muscles tense, Conor resisted the impulse to leap away. Under other circumstances, he would have run from this animal, or yelled at it. He would have thrown rocks or grabbed a stout staff to defend himself. But this was no chance encounter out in the wild. His whole body was tingling, almost vibrating, and hundreds of people were watching. This wolf had appeared out of nowhere!

The wolf stared up at him with confidence. Though large and fierce, the animal seemed very much in control of itself. Conor was awed that a predator such as this would show him so much respect. Those blue eyes hinted at a greater understanding than any animal should possess. The wolf was waiting for something.

Conor held out a trembling hand and the wolf's warm pink tongue caressed his palm. The touch was electric, and the tingling in Conor's chest immediately ceased.

For an instant, Conor felt courage, and clarity, and an alertness like he had never known. He smelled the wolf with enhanced senses, and somehow knew it was male, and that it considered him an equal.

Then the strange moment of expanded perception passed.

In spite of the abundant evidence, it was the look on Devin Trunswick's face that brought home to Conor what had transpired. Never had Conor been the focus of such naked rage and envy. He had summoned a spirit animal!

And not just any spirit animal. A wolf. Nobody summoned wolves! Briggan the Wolf had been one of the Great Beasts, and spirit animals were never the same species as the Great Beasts. Everyone knew that. It simply didn't happen.

Yet it had. Undeniably, inexplicably, it had. A full-grown wolf was nuzzling Conor's palm. A wolf with deep blue eyes.

The bewildered crowd kept silent. The earl leaned forward attentively. Devin seethed, and Dawson's mouth was spread in an astonished grin.

The stranger in the green cloak approached and took Conor's hand. "I am Tarik," the man said in a low voice. "I came a long way to find you. Stay near me, and I will let no harm befall you. I won't press you to take our vows until you're ready, but you need to hear me out. Much depends on you."

Conor nodded numbly. It was all too much to digest.

The foreign Greencloak raised Conor's hand high and spoke in a powerful voice. "Good people of Trunswick! News of this day will echo across all of Erdas! In our hour of need, Briggan has returned!"