

# ASPIRIT ANIMALS™

AGAINST THE TIDE

Tui T. Sutherland



SCHOLASTIC INC.



## SHARKS

**S**ALT SPRAY PELTED MEILIN'S FACE AS SHE SWUNG FROM ONE of the ropes that connected the ship to the rockback whales. Dark water yawned far below her, eager to swallow her up if the sharks didn't get her first. She heaved her feet up to the rope and wrapped them around, and then she started pulling herself down toward the whales, hand over hand. The sharp edges of the rope cut into her palms in a million places, but she kept going, ignoring the shouts of her friends back on the ship.

*Someone* had to help the whales, and they certainly couldn't do it from up there.

The rope jounced and swung precariously as she dipped toward the restless ocean. Her heart skipped a beat as one of the shark fins sliced through the water right below her.

*Nope. Don't even think about it. I refuse to be eaten by sharks.*

Her shoulders were yelling with agony by the time she glanced down and finally saw the rocky slope of

the whale's back below her. Taking a deep breath, she unhooked her legs and dropped into a crouch on top of the whale. The rope continued past overhead, connecting with a kind of harness near the whale's mouth.

*Nothing to panic about. It's like walking on a beach,* she told herself. A beach strewn with rocks and boulders . . . which happened to be moving very quickly . . . and was incredibly wet and slippery underfoot . . . oh, and PS, also had *deadly sharks* snapping and lunging only a few feet away.

The whale beneath her let out another mournful bellow of pain. The vibrations echoed through Meilin's bones and made her heart ache. She placed her open hand on the whale's back, in a clear spot between the rocks.

"It's all right," she whispered. "I won't let them hurt you anymore."

Meilin rose, took a step, and immediately slipped, cracking her knee on one of the rocks jutting out of the whale's back. She let out a hiss of pain and then stood again, gritting her teeth. After a moment she figured out how to balance and how to grip the slick surface with her boots. She edged forward, pulling out the spear she'd strapped to her back.

She counted seven sharks around this whale, but it seemed like more from the way they thrashed and churned the water. Bloody froth splashed up the sides of the whale and across Meilin's boots. The wind yanked fiercely at her cloak and hair, still heavy with rain.

One of the sharks spotted Meilin and suddenly lunged up onto the whale, whipping its tail back and forth and

smashing its teeth together only inches away from her legs. Meilin stumbled back but managed to stay upright. *Do not fall. Most importantly: Do not fall into the water.* She'd be ripped apart in seconds if that happened. *Definitely do not think about that.*

With a yell of anger, she lifted the spear and drove it into the shark's open mouth. A burst of energy flooded her as she did, and the point of the spear came stabbing out the top of the shark's head. It tried once to gnash its teeth again, then flopped sideways, dead.

Meilin yanked the spear free – it took a few tries; it was harder coming out than going in – and kicked the shark until its momentum carried it sliding down the side of the whale into the ocean. It disappeared below the surface in a flurry of red bubbles.

Encouraged, she darted along the whale's back to the next shark, which had its teeth firmly embedded in the side of the whale and was thrashing as if trying to rip out as big a piece as possible. Meilin paused above it, and for one chilling moment the shark's eye stared right into hers. Then she plunged the spear straight through that eye with skillful accuracy.

The shark convulsed powerfully, nearly jerking Meilin right into the ocean. She fell forward and had to scramble with her legs and one hand to find a grip on the rocky whale, while clutching the spear with her other hand. For a long, awful moment, she thought she was going to be dragged into that seething mass of sharks, and she nearly let go of the spear.

But at last the shark stopped moving, and she was able

to kick it off the spear point into the water.

The whale made another wounded sound and Meilin saw three sharks circle around and head straight toward her, faster than any animal should be able to swim. Their teeth gleamed sharply, even below the water.

She clambered back up to the middle of the whale's back and stood up again, facing the sharks with her spear held high. From here she could see all the spots where blood was pouring from twenty different wounds. The whale was slowing down. It was vast enough that one shark bite couldn't do too much damage—but this many injuries . . .

Reluctantly, she held out her arm, and a moment later, Jhi appeared beside her on the whale's back.

The panda's paws immediately slipped on the wet surface and she sprawled out like an ungainly puppy.

"Hruff!" she grunted, giving Meilin a startled look.

"I know," Meilin said. "We're on a whale. Sorry about that. Is there anything you can do to help it?" She pointed to the multiple injuries.

Jhi tried to stand up, scrabbled her paws frantically for a moment, and then collapsed onto her back.

"Hruumf," she observed at the sky.

"Well, see what you can do," Meilin said impatiently. "And don't fall in the water."

She hurried away from the panda, heading for the next shark. She could feel Jhi's energy filling her, slowing time down so that she could see every step to take and move faster than she could on her own. Filled with that dreamlike peace, she swung her spear at another shark

and impaled it through the side, then flung it out into the water. A fourth shark lunged up onto the whale, snapping at her boots, and Meilin dispatched it swiftly.

The next shark saw her coming and dove, sinking its teeth into the whale underwater, too far down for Meilin to reach it with her spear. She stopped, frustrated, and saw the next closest shark do the same thing. There was a lot of whale underwater, and no way for her to get there to protect its vulnerable underbelly.

She looked back at Jhi. The panda was crouched low with her paws splayed out, braced against the biggest rocks she could find. Her head stretched toward the closest shark bite and her nose twitched helplessly. Her furry black-and-white rump stuck up in the air.

Meilin rolled her eyes and sighed. *Oh, Jhi. That's what I get for bringing a panda to a shark fight. A leopard or a falcon could at least do some damage.* But she also, unexpectedly, felt a stab of sympathy for the giant panda. The top of a rockback whale was clearly no place for her, and yet Jhi was trying her best to do as Meilin had asked. But how could anyone heal the whales in a situation like this, even a Great Beast?

Beyond her, Meilin could see the *Tellun's Pride*—and she could see the Conquerors swarming up its sides. On deck, Rollan and Tarik were each grappling with opponents who were bigger and burlier than they were, while Abeke leaned over the side, shooting at the ones still climbing aboard. *Where's Conor?* She finally spotted him, whacking his ax into one of the ropes the Conquerors were using to shimmy over the railing.

*Maybe that's what we have to do,* she realized, looking up at the whale's harness. *If we cut the whales free, they can submerge and escape the sharks.*

But if they did that, the ship would have no chance of escaping the Conquerors. The speed of the whales was their only advantage, if they could just break free and use it. Without the whales, they'd be dead in the water until they got the sails up . . . if they could even do that in the middle of a battle . . . and then they'd be as slow as the ships chasing them.

She looked down again at the sad, wounded whales. None of that mattered; cutting them free was what she had to do. She'd never be able to fight off all these sharks by herself, especially since she could see even more menacing fins slicing through the dark water now, drawn by all the blood.

Meilin swore and darted back toward Jhi. The panda blinked her soft silver eyes at Meilin, who held out her arm. Jhi glanced woefully at the whale's injuries and then vanished into the tattoo again.

*Once I get back on ship, I can cut the whales free and then help fight off the Conquerors. Maybe with my help, we can drive them off,* Meilin thought. She didn't really believe it.

She turned to find a spot where she could jump up to the ropes—and then she saw a girl in the water.

Meilin blinked, and the girl was gone.

*What?*

Surely that was impossible. A girl in the water, out here?

Then she saw her again – a flash of dark hair and brown arms, out beyond the sharks.

*Is she swimming? Here? Now?*

Did she need to be rescued?

The girl's head rose out of the water and Meilin realized that she was riding something – a dolphin – just as they submerged again.

Was she a Conqueror? A dolphin didn't seem like the kind of animal a Conqueror would choose to bond with, but maybe.

She squinted through the haze of sea spray and light rain until the girl came up again. Now Meilin could see that she was wearing a long green cloak woven from seaweed. The girl lifted both arms in the air and waved.

*Is she waving at me?*

Meilin raised her arm to wave back – and then she spotted movement on the closest islands.

It looked like almost a hundred people were suddenly hurrying down onto the beaches and launching long war canoes. The boats leaped into the water and flew toward the battling ships.

*Oh!* Meilin realized. *She was signaling them.* The native islanders were joining the fight – coming to help the Greencloaks, Meilin guessed. Well, she hoped.

She looked up at her friends struggling on the deck of the ship.

Would they reach the ship in time?

Would it be enough to save the whales?