

ASPIRIT ANIMALS™

RISE AND FALL

Eliot Schrefer



SCHOLASTIC INC.

*For Ombwe and Oshwe,
two bonobos who captured my spirit
– E.S.*



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PRISONERS

T_{HUD!} Abeke startled awake, shivering. At first she thought she'd dreamed the noise. Then she heard it again.

T_{HUD!}

Abeke leaped, nearly knocking her skull against the ceiling. The chain fastened to her ankle slammed against Meilin, waking her.

"What is it?" Meilin asked, groping in the dark.

Abeke groggily remembered where they were: still imprisoned in the brig of a ship, on their way to the Conqueror camp in southern Nilo. Abeke had once before found herself on a Conqueror ship just like this one – only on that journey she'd been a guest of honor. She'd had a feather bed, a mirror framed in gold, and had been allowed to roam wherever she liked. She hadn't been locked in the brig, a tiny, lightless, reinforced closet deep in the depths of the ship, where the shrieking of the ship's timbers joined the skittering of the rats.

To make their imprisonment complete, Abeke and Meilin were chained together at the ankles with heavy links of iron.

“Voices,” Abeke whispered urgently. “Someone’s coming. Get up!”

Meilin eased gracefully to her feet, managing to stay noiseless even with the heavy chain linking her ankle to Abeke’s. She might be shackled and broken, but she still had the reflexes of a warrior.

The candlelight that leaked in would have been dim in any other circumstance, but after days in near darkness, Abeke was dazzled. Once her eyes adjusted, she saw a boy in the doorway. He was tall and well built, with pale skin and soft, apologetic eyes. Shane.

Though she held no love for any of the Conquerors, Abeke knew Shane was the closest they had to an ally. Throughout their long boat journey, he’d been the only one to bring them food to eat and fresh water to drink. They’d have died without him.

Abeke could sense the fury coming off Meilin in waves, but her friend held silent. This was Abeke’s relationship to navigate.

“Are you two okay?” Shane asked. His tone was gentle, but Abeke was well aware of the saber glinting at the boy’s waist, of the power Shane had over them. He was still one of their captors. And Shane was capable of summoning his own ferocious spirit animal, a wolverine. Abeke was confident her leopard, Uraza, could best the creature in normal circumstances, but wolverines were perfectly suited to fighting in close quarters, and Uraza was not.

“We’re as good as can be expected,” Abeke said curtly, conspicuously rattling their chain.

“I’m truly sorry about that,” Shane said, sighing. “I told them there was no need for shackles.” He broke off, staring at the ceiling. Scraping sounds came from above. “Your time in the hold is over, anyway. We’ve arrived at our stronghold.”

Abeke narrowed her eyes. Was he expecting her to be relieved? She had no fondness for the brig, but knew that whatever awaited in the Conqueror base was worse. Were they planning to sacrifice Abeke and Meilin to Gerathon, the Great Serpent? Or force Abeke to drink the awful Bile, so she’d be a puppet the Great Beast could control at will, like Meilin?

Abeke struggled to keep her composure, but when she thought of that day at Mulop’s grotto, frightening images passed through her mind: Meilin’s fingers tight on her arm, digging to the bone as she cruelly hauled her down to the rocky beach. Fighting to get free, only to see Meilin’s quarterstaff come smashing down hard against her skull. The world fading from view. . . .

“*Our* stronghold?” Abeke said, swallowing back the memory. “Whose was it before the Conquerors took it over?”

“It’s a palace of one of the lords of the Niloan steppes,” Shane said with another sigh. “Listen, I’m not proud that we’ve taken over someone’s home. The lord is still alive, and I’m doing my best to make sure the Niloans who work and live here are kept safe and have enough to eat. I’m trying to make the best of this situation.”

Abeke crossed her arms and frowned at him.

“Please come easily with me now, Abeke,” Shane said, eyes downcast. “For your sake, and Meilin’s.”

Abeke glanced at Meilin, who nodded imperceptibly. If Shane was the closest they had to an ally, best to keep him on their side while they got as much information as they could.

“Yes,” Abeke said. “We’ll submit, Shane. Lead the way.”

The ship’s ladder was difficult to navigate with chained ankles. Abeke went up a rung, waited until Meilin was right behind her, then took another step. Finally they broke outside. It was overcast, at least, but still the light was blinding. The moment she hit daylight Abeke had to scrunch her eyes shut, tears streaming down her face.

Shane was there waiting, and with strong hands pulled Abeke and Meilin from the last rung so they were sitting on the deck.

Only slowly did Abeke’s eyes adjust. The moment they did, she gasped.

On deck was a score of Conquerors, loading up a skiff to head to shore. The soldiers wore a uniform of simple leather armor, with breastplates rubbed black with oil. This armor wasn’t ceremonial. It was made for unencumbered fighting.

It’s for fighting Niloans, Abeke thought bitterly. Fighting people who are defending their homes.

Zerif was there, not a foot away, the man who had once tricked Abeke into thinking she was joining the side of good. He still had the same handsome, severely lined face and tight-cropped beard. Beside him was a slender woman

Abeke hadn't seen since her time in the North: Aidana, Rollan's mother. Though she was unchained, she looked a bit like a prisoner herself, with a gaunt face and exhausted eyes. For the first time, Abeke was relieved that Rollan wasn't near; seeing his mother in such a wretched state might have destroyed him.

That wasn't all, though. Next to Aidana was a girl Abeke didn't recognize. She was tall and pale, with large eyes and a sly, curving smile. The girl wore a suit of black leather, banded with strips of ivory carved to look like spider legs. She cut her gaze to Abeke and Meilin, then to Shane, her lips barely moving as she spoke. "*These* are the moths you've worked so hard to net, brother? I'm disappointed."

Brother! Abeke took in the girl's sharp jaw, her high cheekbones and thick white-blond hair, and saw the resemblance. This girl was one of the Marked too; a spider, as large as a seagull, was perched on her shoulder. Banded in yellow, its swollen abdomen declared that it was venomous.

For a moment Shane seemed taken aback by his sister's words, but when he spoke his voice was mocking. "Drina. Want to tell us again about your many times losing to the Keeper of Greenhaven? Or would you prefer not to talk about it?"

Shane had drawn blood. Now it was Drina's turn to look wounded, though when she noticed Zerif watching her face hardened, turned scoffing. Abeke sensed that this conversation between siblings would have gone differently if Zerif hadn't been there.

“Enough!” Zerif barked, right as Drina opened her mouth to retort. “Victory in Nilo is almost at hand – there is no need to squabble like children.”

Abeke risked a glance at Meilin – dissension among the Conquerors might be something that they could use to their advantage. But Meilin sat still on the deck, palms open on her knees, eyes shut. Taking in nothing.

The four Conquerors – Shane, Zerif, Aidana, and Drina – stared down at Abeke and Meilin. As they did, the sun emerged from behind its clouds, and in the sudden light Abeke couldn’t make out their faces. They were just four figures cut out of the sky, looming over the chained girls. She felt wretched to be so helpless before them.

“Not much to look at, are they?” Zerif asked. “But then, I knew from the moment I met Abeke that we had nothing to fear from her. Even her father seemed disappointed in the girl. He must be even more disappointed now, with Okaihee in the middle of conquered territory.”

A familiar feeling of powerless rage swelled in Abeke. It was like back in her village, when her sister, Soama, would hold Abeke’s hair from her face and catalog her flaws. What Soama had most wanted was to feel pretty, and the easiest way to accomplish that had been to make Abeke feel ugly. She’d learned to keep her face perfectly still then, and she tried to do that again now. All the same, she yearned to release Uraza and see the leopard lock her fangs around Zerif’s throat. But the Conqueror had his jackal spirit animal threading between his ankles. The beast had alert eyes, and it revealed sharp teeth as it panted. Drina’s spider was up high on her

shoulder, crouching, as if to pounce. It would be foolish to attack.

“On your feet,” Zerif ordered.

Abeke hesitated, but Meilin dragged herself up, chains clanking. Abeke looked at her friend’s face and found it blank. For a moment, she worried that Meilin wasn’t Meilin, that she’d been possessed by Gerathon. But then Abeke saw that Meilin’s fists were clenched.

“Now,” Zerif said, smiling cruelly. He crossed his arms. “Get back onto your knees.”

Abeke glanced at Shane, who seemed at a loss in the face of the man’s sadism. Meilin quivered with barely repressed rage. *Don’t attack*, Abeke mentally pleaded. *Now isn’t the time*.

“He said *on your knees!*” Drina kicked her foot out. She was quick, much more so than Abeke would have anticipated. It was like the girl had the very same reflexes as her spider. Before she knew what was happening, Abeke and Meilin were on their knees. Abeke’s chin hit the deck hard, and she tasted blood in her mouth.

“Drina!” she heard Shane say. “Stop it.”

Abeke kept her eyes closed in the long moment that followed. She was surprised to hear how repentant Drina’s voice sounded when she spoke again. “I’m sorry, brother.”

Zerif chortled. “Gar wants them brought ashore, but dear me if he didn’t say *how*. When we last met, Abeke tried to fire an arrow through my heart. It’s my right to exact payment. I say they swim.”

Shane started to protest, but the words were lost. Abeke felt a heavy boot at her back, and then she was rolling

forward across the deck. For a moment she was stopped by the chain that linked her to Meilin. Then she heard a whump and a cry as Zerif kicked Meilin too. Abeke heard her friend skid across the deck, and then she was falling.

Overboard.

Abeke clawed at the deck's planks, desperately trying to get a handhold, but all she got were fistfuls of splinters. She could hear Meilin's cries from over the side of the ship, her weight dragging Abeke over. Shane's shocked face was the last thing she saw as she whipped over the deck and through open air. She heard Meilin splash, and then impacted the water a moment later.

Abeke's stomach plummeted, and the shock of cold salt water ripped at her mouth. The heavy chain was dragging them into the depths. Abeke swam against it on impulse, stroking toward the surface. It was nearly impossible to make any headway; only by pulling at the water with all her might could she stop from sinking farther. Meilin foundered somewhere below, dragging Abeke down.

Finally the pull on the chain lessened, and Abeke was able to break into open air. She slapped frantically at the water to prevent being pulled back under. Through stinging eyes she saw that Meilin was beside her, fighting just as hard to stay above the surface. Abeke's muscles were already on fire. They would only be able to keep this up for moments before they'd succumb and sink.

Meilin was gasping, and the chain got heavier and heavier. Abeke couldn't spare the energy to look up, but she distantly heard Shane's voice calling for help. Drina was shouting at Zerif, and even she sounded panicked.

Shane yelled down. “Abeke, swim to shore! Swim to shore! It’s not far.”

Desperate, Abeke searched for the shoreline. Shane was wrong. Between the drag of the chain and the searing of her salt-scoured lungs, the shore looked impossibly far away. But it was their only hope.

“Meilin!” she cried. “This might be our chance! Come on!”

Amid Drina’s screeching and Shane’s bellowing, Abeke began to swim. It felt like someone had set fires in her exhausted legs. Meilin was beside her, at least, matching Abeke’s crawling pace through the water. The Zhongese girl, too, was screaming with the exertion. “Come on, Meilin!” Abeke urged as she swam. “We can do this!”

Despite her determination, Abeke’s arms began to slow. Her legs submitted to the merciless chain, sinking lower and lower in the water, and salt water dribbled into her mouth with every gasping breath. She felt Meilin’s hands under her arms, trying to help keep her afloat, but it was too late. Abeke was foundering, the water closing tight over her head.

And then her feet touched ground.

A sandbar!

Meilin got to her feet beside Abeke and laughed with relief. Seawater might have been up to their throats, but they weren’t drowning anymore. For a long minute both girls panted and recovered.

Meilin glanced back at the ship. “Zerif is insane,” she said. “The Conquerors clearly want us alive, or they would

have killed us back in Oceanus. So why would he risk drowning us?"

"I nearly killed him," Abeke said, distracted. "I guess that can make someone testy. But for now we have other things to worry about. Meilin, look!"

At the shore, the sea itself was walking. In front of them, the surf split into two as a huge shape planed through the water. At first Abeke imagined that an under-sea boulder was rolling with the tide. But then she saw, beneath the wave, a thrashing tail covered with leather plates. A giant crocodile came to a stop in the surf not a dozen yards away. It stared at the two exhausted girls.

A tall armored figure waded in from the shoreline, a horned mask covering his face. He approached the crocodile and laid a hand on its snout. The man crossed his heavily muscled arms and stared at Abeke and Meilin, trapped on the sandbar.

General Gar, the leader of the Conquerors, was waiting for them. The Devourer.