

FALL of the BEASTS
SPIRIT
ANIMALS™

IMMORTAL
GUARDIANS

Eliot Schrefer



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ERDAS



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MARKET DAY

IF ONLY SHE COULD TURN RIGHT AROUND AND GO HOME. Normally Kaiina lived with her tribe, day in and day out—she hadn't been around this many unknown people for years, not since she had once come with her mother to this very marketplace as a little girl. But she was twelve now, which meant she'd have to start taking her turn trekking to the jungle market to buy supplies for her tribe.

Everyone had requests. Oranges for her father. A new hunting blade for her mother. Sugarfruit for her brother.

Thinking of how happy her family would be with their presents gave Kaiina the courage she needed. Holding her head high, she stepped into the clearing.

She picked her way between the woven mats, perusing the goods carefully laid out on each. Fragrant herbs, wild pineapple and celery, grouse eggs—her stomach growled as she passed among the vendors. To prevent herself from wasting her tribe's money, she recited her short list in her mind, like a mantra. *Oranges. A hunting blade. Sugarfruit.*

Vendors beckoned to Kaiina as she passed, but she timidly avoided their eyes. She'd never bartered before and was worried they'd take advantage of her the moment she showed interest in what they were selling.

“Kaiina!”

She looked up, startled, and was relieved to see a familiar old woman scamper agilely through the crowded vendor mats and come to Kaiina's side, warmly taking the girl's hands in her own. Kaiina relaxed: Prana was an elderly woman who traveled between the tribes, bartering her pottery. Kaiina had known her for years, and had never seen Prana without a smile on her old, cracked face.

Prana's spirit animal, a brilliant brass kingfisher, was perched on the woman's long gray braid, its delicate feet hooked into the folds of silvered hair. The bird hopped to Kaiina's shoulder, warbling a cheerful, tuneless song.

I wish I had a spirit animal, Kaiina thought. *Then I'd always have company, and wouldn't have to come to market day alone.* But some people bonded with spirit animals and some didn't—there was no predicting it. And Kaiina hadn't summoned one.

“He is not usually this excited to see anyone—he really likes you!” Prana said.

Kaiina took a moment to run her hand over the bird's smooth and glossy plumage. He raised his chin, inviting her to preen his underfeathers. Kaiina smiled and obliged.

Just then, Prana's kingfisher took to the air and began to shriek. From all around, the trees shook. Monkeys screamed. Cicadas droned. Songbirds chattered.

Kaiina felt a strange dizzy sensation wash over her, and the market fell into silence.

The ground seemed to tilt beneath Kaiina's bare feet. "What is happening?" she cried out.

Though only moments before she'd been so hot she was sweating, Kaiina shivered with a sudden chill. The sky went dark, and the clouds turned rageful and knitted together. She heard a boom and a crack, and her eyes filled with light.

The explosion knocked Kaiina and Prana to the ground. Ears ringing, Kaiina's first thought was to help the elderly woman up. But Prana was already back on her feet, tears in her rheumy eyes. Blinking her own eyes rapidly to clear the purple flash, Kaiina raised herself onto her elbows.

As quickly as they'd formed, the clouds scattered. The clearing was once again full of radiant sunshine, its brilliance frosting the silhouette of a giant creature where just moments before there had been nothing.

"It is not possible," Prana whispered. But it was. An elephant had appeared.

The massive beast bowed its head, trunk slung low and snuffling along the ground. Kaiina had seen plenty of forest elephants in the jungle, but none as big as this one. Its broad ears swayed as it made its way toward Kaiina and Prana. Vendors and tribespeople alike fled to the edges of the market, watching with fearful curiosity.

Kaiina's legs were rooted to the ground.

"D-do you know this elephant?" she stammered to Prana. "Where did it come from? And why is it coming toward you?"

“Not toward *me*, child,” Prana said, wonder in her voice. “It’s coming toward *you*.”

“I don’t understand!” Kaiina cried, tears blurring her vision.

“You’ve summoned a spirit animal,” Prana said. She had placed a wizened hand over her mouth, making her words almost inaudible. “But an elephant, the eyes . . . it’s impossible! Kaiina, you’ve summoned Dinesh.”

Dinesh? A creature of legend, one of the Great Beasts of Erdas? It felt as if the earth went soft beneath Kaiina, as if she’d stepped into slipmud.

The elephant slowed as it came near, and Kaiina was shocked to see it lower its great head. Brilliant aqua eyes met hers, and they flashed with intelligence and something almost like amusement as they took in the cowering marketgoers. Could this animal truly be the great Dinesh?

“Say hello,” Prana encouraged. “He’s waiting to meet you.”

The creature’s expression softened, and Kaiina found her legs were able to move again. Despite the dozens of eyes she could feel on her back, despite the ruckus of the upturned earth and the bizarre sight of an enormous elephant standing on the woven mats, Kaiina didn’t shrink away. She *wanted* to touch him. A charge was building up inside her, setting her skin tingling, and she knew instinctively that only one thing would settle it.

Hands trembling, she strode to the elephant and leaned in close so their faces were mere inches apart. As she ran the back of her hand along his leathery ear and closed her eyes, a serene warmth filled her.

Kaiina felt a moist touch on her neck. Opening her eyes, she smiled as she saw that Dinesh's large trunk was nuzzling her. *Comforting* her. Suddenly she felt as large as the elephant, somehow—too large to be intimidated by a crowded marketplace. It seemed ridiculous that she'd ever been.

Kaiina hesitantly laid a hand against the elephant's flank. His flesh was rough and thick, his giant torso rising and falling beneath her fingers. She looked into the elephant's eyes and saw a vast intelligence gazing back.

"How could I have summoned Dinesh?" Kaiina asked in wonder. "And why to *me*?"

Before Prana could answer, a man in a black tunic stepped forward. "This is indeed an auspicious morning!" the stranger called. "The Great Beasts are returning, and I have been sent to shepherd them to safety."

Prana's golden kingfisher pointed his sharp beak shrewdly at the man. Kaiina's attention was drawn to the charcoal-colored spiral on the man's forehead. She could see now that it was raised and swollen, more of a brand than a tattoo. It almost appeared to ripple in the wavering heat, but after the shock of the last few moments, Kaiina wasn't sure she could trust her senses. She leaned into Dinesh's side for security, and took comfort in the slow rise and fall of his ribs.

"You may leave the girl and her elephant in my care, old one. I will handle it from here."

The elephant raised his trunk into the air, letting out a deep trumpeting call, the sound powerful enough to reverberate deep in Kaiina's chest. From elsewhere in the

jungle, other elephants called in response. When she heard distant crashing sounds, Kaiina realized the other elephants were converging on them.

Dinesh tossed his head in the stranger's direction, lowering his tusks and leveling them toward the man in the black tunic. Kaiina stroked Dinesh's ear and saw that the elephant's eyes were full of distrust.

"*Kalistan-ah*," Kaiina whispered to Prana in the local language. *Beware*.

Before Prana could respond, the stranger stepped toward them. He was handsome and tan-skinned, a trim beard covering his jaw. "*Sia-ga*," he said, a wicked grin splitting his face, "I speak your language, and yes, you should be afraid."

The treetops again began to shake, and the nearby monkeys and birds recommenced their shrieking. The cicadas went from a low drone to a roar. Kaiina looked to Dinesh, hoping to discover in the elephant's soft eyes that she had nothing to fear. But fear was precisely what Kaiina found there.

Dinesh took a step forward and then a step back, lowering his head nervously. Kaiina followed his gaze and saw a thicket of spiny jungle growth tremble and shake. As the branches bent farther and whatever creature was behind them began to emerge, Dinesh trumpeted again.

"What's wrong?" Kaiina cried out. The powerful vibration of the elephant's call rattled in her head.

Marketgoers had begun to approach from their safe vantage, but paused after they heard the elephant's trumpet. It was a good thing they did, too, as Dinesh suddenly

charged. They scurried to get out of the way, but the elephant was only halfway across the clearing when he abruptly halted, momentum hurtling his body through the dirt and nearly pitching him forward.

Emerging from the thicket was another huge creature. It was a bear, but unlike any Kaiina had ever seen. She'd been taught that bears were always brown or black, but this one was white, its fur as light as morning clouds against the vibrant blacks and greens of the jungle. Baffled, Kaiina wheeled and caught Prana's startled eyes.

"What wrongness has come to our world?" Prana cried, her hand to her heart.

There was a cry from the sky, and a large eagle descended, lowering so it was flapping above the polar bear. Then there was a roar from the other side of the clearing, and Kaiina pivoted to see a giant boar, thick-tusked and bristly.

Blinded by fear, Kaiina ran toward Prana but was blocked by a new creature—this one a muscular beast on all fours, like a stocky antelope, but with curling horns on its head. It used those horns to butt into Prana, who staggered and fell before Kaiina's eyes. Her kingfisher hovered, trying ineffectually to stop the beast's assault.

Kaiina backed up, hands outstretched as she sought the company of her newfound spirit animal. Dinesh wasn't hard to find, trumpeting and screaming as he whirled in the center of the clearing, facing off against both the polar bear and the boar. Standing calmly between the two attacking beasts was the stranger in the black tunic.

"Why are you doing this?" Kaiina cried.

The man didn't answer. Hearing Kaiina's distress, Dinesh pivoted to face her. With one clean motion he whipped his trunk around, caught the girl around the waist, and deposited her securely on his broad back. He immediately returned to fending off the bear and the boar, whipping his great tusks through the air to keep them at bay.

The stranger grinned at Kaiina. The spiral on his forehead was definitely moving now, writhing under his flesh. "Haven't you figured it out? I am collecting the Great Beasts. And Dinesh is my next trophy."

With that, the man pulled an obsidian vial out of a pouch at his waist and unstopped it. A feeling of cold dread passed through her.

The polar bear and the boar had spread out. The elephant turned in nervous circles. With the other Great Beasts flanking him, Dinesh could no longer fend off both attackers at once. Kaiina wondered how much longer his tusks would keep them safe.

With a rush of wind, the eagle was there. It hovered beside the bearded man, who placed the mysterious black vial in its talons. With a few flaps of its strong wings, the eagle flew up toward Kaiina. She cringed, clenching her legs tightly against Dinesh as she instinctively threw her arms before her face.

But the eagle wasn't coming for her.

Kaiina watched in horror as it dexterously turned the vial in its talons, letting the contents fall onto Dinesh's broad forehead. At first Kaiina thought it was a piece of gray mud inside, but then she saw the glob start moving, and realized it was a worm, or a leech—the same size and

shape as the twisting spiral on the stranger's forehead. Kaiina leaned forward desperately, hoping to use the back of her hand to wipe the little monster off Dinesh.

But the worm was surprisingly fast. It wriggled over Dinesh's forehead, easily sticking to the elephant's hide, no matter how frantically he tried to shake it. The worm pressed its toothy sucker mouth against Dinesh time and again, but was clearly finding it hard to get through Dinesh's tough skin. Kaiina swatted at it, but the wriggling creature was too fast. It lurched for Dinesh's ear, soon disappearing in the folds. She realized how far it had gotten when she heard the elephant cry out in pain and shake his head furiously.

Dinesh began to tremble and shudder beneath Kaiina's thighs. He lifted his head and trumpeted one more time, a terrible, anguished cry. Then he went quiet and still.

The bear and the boar relented, stepping back from the elephant.

"Dinesh!" Kaiina yelled. Her hands were clamped on the elephant's head. "Are you okay? Dinesh!"

He was motionless.

"At least you had a few moments with your spirit animal," the man said. "Some I don't even give that much."

Kaiina rubbed the elephant's hide, hoping Dinesh would reawaken to her touch. But the electricity was gone, and the elephant remained still.

The boar relaxed and sat in the dirt while the bear panted heavily in the jungle heat, tongue lolling out of its mouth. Kaiina felt suddenly light-headed, like she might pass out from shock.

The stranger in black tugged at the length of rawhide that tied the collar of his shirt closed, exposing a broad chest. In the middle of it, right in the triangle where his abdomen began, was a tattoo of what looked like a cobra. The stranger closed his eyes, his brow wrinkling with concentration. Then, with a flash, the bear and boar had disappeared, appearing on the man's chest, one on either side, forelimbs reaching out onto the muscles of his shoulders. Kaiina heard popping sounds behind her and saw two more tattoos appear on the man's chest: an eagle and a ram. There was a large space left in the middle, right below his throat.

"No, no . . ." Kaiina moaned, realization dawning.

"Oh, but yes," the man said, his voice a low purr.

There was another flash, this one right below her, and suddenly Kaiina was falling. She fell hard onto the muddy ground, the breath knocked out of her. Wheezing and shaking, she raised herself on her hands and saw a new tattoo in the center of the man's chest, riding over his breastbone. Dinesh.

"Who are you?" Kaiina gasped. "Why have you done this?"

The man loomed over her, crossing his arms over the animal tattoos on his powerful chest. The strange spiral brand on the man's face writhed. He winced as the flesh on his forehead puckered and stretched. His eyes took on a dim glow, became the color of twilight.

"The whole world knew my name once, and soon it will know it again. I am Zerif."



THE EVERTREE

IT WAS A BREEZY, BEAUTIFUL DAY, AND THE EVERTREE WAS singing. As the wind passed through its leaves, they tinkled together and played a song as chaotic and joyous as a burbling stream. Lenori raised her hands to the sunshine and closed her eyes, taking in the magnificence of the moment.

Part of her wished she could stay here forever.

Back in Greenhaven, Lenori had kept a simple herb garden. She'd loved the daily labor of it—running her fingers through silky black soil, picking just the right spot to place each batch of seeds. She supposed that growing plants wasn't that unlike training the new Greencloak recruits. When a child summoned a spirit animal and joined the ancient order, it had been Lenori who would care for them. Not just their training, but their hearts and well-being, too—something blustery Olvan often overlooked.

But all the same, when she'd lived in Greenhaven, Lenori had often found herself taking long walks along

misty battlements, looking down longingly on a forest world that seemed all too far away. She'd never quite taken to gray stone walls.

Her new job taking care of the Evertree was much more suited to her.

For generations, it had been the secret source of the spirit animal bond—perhaps the source of life itself on Erdas. But the world fell into war. Kovo the Ape, one of the Great Beasts, betrayed his brethren in a bid to control the Evertree. During the resulting conflict, it had been destroyed.

Then, through a miracle that Lenori had yet to fully understand, after the Great Beasts sacrificed themselves, the tree was born anew.

Above her, the Great Tree's branches groaned in the wind. Its golden leaves rustled, their song growing louder.

How beautiful the tree was! Every day its splendor grew. The height of a mountain, its great silver spire rose so tall that its highest branches stroked the clouds, generating a constant patter of rain on the ground below. After its first months of rapid growth, the tree had begun to sprout golden leaves, each an intricately wrought marvel, as delicate as the finest filigree, fanning out from the elegant arcs of the tree's branches. The Evertree changed colors according to the sun's mood, going from silver-white at dawn to blazing yellow at midday, then maturing to muted, steely afternoons and purple explosions at sunset. Living with the tree was the opposite of lonely, not when Lenori had that magnificent canopy above her. And of course there was also Myriam, her rainbow ibis companion.

In Greenhaven she'd been a vain, preening creature, taking great pains to arrange her feathers just so, ensuring that every color of the rainbow was on display somewhere on her body. But now Myriam was too busy playing host to worry about that—the ibis kept busy greeting each newly arriving bird as Lenori made her long daily trek around the vast trunk of the Evertree. Myriam would join Lenori at camp at the end of each day, snacking on a few tasty bugs from the mud before plopping down beside Lenori's bedroll, exhausted.

One day, though, Myriam hadn't come to her before sunset. That was unusual, but not much cause for concern; some new peacocks had recently arrived at the tree, and Myriam had spent the day following them around, keeping tabs on which was the most beautiful. When Lenori finally tracked Myriam down, she found her staring at a patch of bark along one of the tree's silvery exposed roots.

Lenori knelt beside the ibis and stroked her spirit animal's iridescent plumage. Her focus remained on the tree. Lenori looked where she was staring, and her heart stuttered.

Rot.

It was a patch no longer than her finger, as purple-gray as a bruise on a pear. When Lenori tentatively pressed her finger to the blemish, she found it was soft, squishing beneath her touch with a wet, sighing sound.

She'd never considered that the Evertree could be susceptible to the same minor infections that plagued all trees. Lenori examined it for any other signs of illness, but

the Evertree was shining and healthy. As she lay down in her bedroll that evening, her thoughts were on that strange black mark.

The next day Myriam kept close to Lenori's side, hopping along the shady ground, never more than a few feet away, even ignoring the upstart peacocks when they brazenly strutted by. When Lenori returned to the spot where she had last seen the rot, she held her breath.

And let it out in a sharp gasp.

The patch had grown. When Lenori placed her hand over the rot, the blemish was the size of her middle three fingers. She tentatively tried to peel the rotten bark away, and when the black sludgy paper came free in her fingers, she saw there was a crevice behind the rot, a black arc slicing into the tree's pristine silver.

Lenori had grown up in the mangrove forests of Amaya and knew a few tricks for curing tree rot. She gathered lichen and wedged it into the narrow black crack, wetting the patch with pond water. Lichen had its own ways of fighting invaders and could work like a poultice to stave off this black sickness, if the Evertree couldn't manage it on its own.

But when Lenori next returned, the lichen had withered and the rot was bigger. It was as big as *her* now, a Lenori-sized patch of decay along a root of the tree. It loomed over her, like an accusation.

Lenori stepped toward the rot reaching up the trunk. As usual, she tested it with her fingers, removing whatever bits of black mush she could, hoping to slow the infection's progress. This time, when she pressed against the rot, it

gave way with a soft tearing sound. Her arm passed right into the humid space behind.

Lenori ripped away at the cavity, heedless of the black goo caking her arms and face. The dead bark was like a curtain, hiding an empty space that extended back into the tree. She took a tentative step into it and gasped.

The rot must have been eating at the tree for a long time, longer than Lenori had known. She was in a cavern that led deep into the tree, bits of dying wood dropping around her. Everywhere was the strangely sweet smell of death and rot, and the soft slimy blackness of the Evertree's sickness.

Looking down, Lenori saw that the rotten hollow extended down, into caverns and dank tunnels under the earth.

The Evertree was the source of all bonds between humans and spirit animals. If it fell, those partnerships would cease to exist.

And there was no mistaking it: The tree was dying.