

FALL of the BEASTS
SPIRIT
ANIMALS™

BROKEN
GROUND

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SHADOWS IN STETRIOL

CLOUDS RAKED ACROSS THE SKY, BLOTTING OUT THE MOON and stars.

It was not a night for looking up.

If it had been, someone in Stetriol might have seen the shadows slipping over the rooftops, the shapes perched like gargoyles atop the walls. Someone might have seen the young man standing at the peak of a roof like a weathervane, his face hidden behind a pale, horned mask, his dark cloak snapping in the breeze. But all eyes were down, focused on books and hearths, meals and fires and drinks, and no one noticed.

The figure straightened and began to walk lithely along the spines of the shingled roofs, the cloak billowing behind him. In the color-stripped night, the cloak looked black, but when he paused and the lamplight flickered up from the roads and courtyards below and caught the fabric, it shone *red*.

All around him, Stetriol was alive in a way it hadn't been in ages. The city had a pulse again, and it was beating, beating, beating in time with his heart, his steps.

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The streets fell away below him as he moved with animal grace over the tops of shops and houses until he found the one he was looking for. He paused against a chimney, then sank into a crouch, the horns of his mask catching the light before vanishing with the rest of him into shadow.

In a courtyard below, a girl sat on the rim of a fountain, her long white-blond hair twisted up around her head like a crown. Her legs swished absently in the shallow pool, where a large swan drifted, its feathers as white as sunlight on snow. Behind the horned mask, the young man's eyes—not human eyes, but slit sideways, like a ram's—widened at the sight of the animal, and he leaned forward at an almost impossible angle, entranced as the swan slid gracefully over the water's surface.

So the rumors were true.

Ninani had come to Stetriol.

The girl's hair and the swan's feathers made twin pools of pale white light against the muted greens and blues and shadow grays of the courtyard. The girl had a book open and was reading aloud to the swan, her voice soft and sweet, the words lost beneath the gentle swish of the water around her legs.

Back on the rooftop, a flash of movement caught the man's eyes; another cloaked figure appeared on the opposite wall of the courtyard, only the snout of a coyote mask visible against the slated roof. Howl. The canine figure shifted his weight; on the ground, he was unstoppable, but he'd never been comfortable with heights.

Howl, the first signed in greeting.

Stead, the second signed back.

A third cloaked shadow sprang out of the darkness to Howl's right, a feline smile carved into the mask that hid her

face, her movements so smooth he hadn't even noticed her approach.

Shadow.

The girl signed a dismissive hello, then sank into a crouch and steadied herself on the roof, her nails glinting, curved and sharp as a cat's.

The three perched like stone statues above the courtyard, surrounding the girl and her spirit animal as she read on, unaware of their presence. Howl shifted his footing a second time.

What now? signed Shadow, her fingers dancing lazily through the air.

The young man in the horned mask—*Stead*, they called him—squinted, and then signed his command. *Send word to King.*

Shadow drew a finger around her head in answer. The sign for horns was the same as the one for crown. They had wanted to call him that. *Crown*. He was, after all, King's second-in-command. But the gesture made Stead uncomfortable—his loyalty to their leader was absolute, unflinching—so he'd opted for Stead. As in *steadfast* or *steady-on-your-feet*.

He waved Shadow's tease away.

Below, the girl trailed off and went to turn the page when the book slipped from her hands. She fumbled with it, but it fell, bounced off her knee, and landed with a splash in the fountain.

The swan bristled, fluttering her wings.

"Oops," whispered the girl, dragging the sodden book out of the water. She held it up by one corner, and sighed as water dripped from the pages. "Don't tell Father."

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She set the book aside; it landed with a soft wet smack on the fountain's edge.

Just then, Howl shifted his footing a third time, and slipped.

A loose tile beneath his boot came free and went skittering down the peak of the roof. Howl managed to catch himself against the nearest chimney, but he was too late to save the tile. It rocketed forward toward the edge of the roof and the courtyard below. Stead recoiled, back pressed against the chimney, already braced for the crash, but Shadow lunged, body arcing gracefully, and caught the slate with a claw-like nail before it could plummet down to the courtyard floor.

Mortar pebbles skittered down the roof and over the edge, as soft as rain.

The cloaked figures held their breath.

Below, the swan stilled in her pool.

The girl looked up, but it was dark above the lanterns. "What was that?" she asked softly. She and the swan both craned their necks. The girl squinted, as if she could *almost* see the outline of a figure, the edge of a mask.

"Tasha!" called a voice from within the house. The girl's attention wavered, drifted back down to the fountain and the house behind her.

"Must have been a bird," said the girl. "Or a mouse. Or the wind." She swung her legs out of the water, and then trailed her fingers through its glassy surface.

"Come on, Ninani," she said pleasantly.

The swan fluttered for a moment, lifting her wings as if about to take flight, before disappearing in a flash of light. As she vanished, a mark appeared, black as ink

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against the girl's fair skin, a swan wrapping from wrist to elbow. With that the girl padded inside, leaving a trail of damp footprints in her wake.

Tasha. So that was her name.

The moment she was gone, the feline Shadow uncoiled and hauled herself upright on the roof. Her usually green eyes were black, the pupils blown out in the low light, and they glared daggers at Howl. She looked as if she planned to chuck the discarded tile at his head.

"Idiot," she hissed aloud.

"We weren't all meant for scaling buildings," he growled in return.

"Enough," ordered Stead, his voice low and even. Howl and Shadow both drew breath, as if about to go on, when Stead's hand shot up in warning.

A sound, like the shuffle of bare feet on stone.

An instant later Tasha hurried back out into the courtyard to retrieve the book she'd left on the fountain's edge. Halfway there, she caught her foot on a mat, and nearly stumbled before righting herself and taking up the sodden book. She pressed the covers together to squeeze out the last of the water and turned back toward the house.

And stopped.

She hesitated, cast a last look at the rooftops and the night sky above.

"Tasha!" called the voice again.

And then the girl was gone, retreating back inside.

When the courtyard had been still for several moments, Stead made a signal with one hand, a silent command to retreat. Shadow set the roof tile against the nearest chimney, and she and Howl peeled away, vanishing into the

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dark. He watched them go with his sharp, slit gold eyes, and then looked back at the courtyard, the damp footprints already beginning to disappear.

Tasha.

They knew where she was now.

Where *Ninani* was.

And they would be back.

With that, Stead slipped away and followed the others into shadow and night.

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