The Burning Tide

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SCHOLASTIC INC.
The sky was falling.

It had started seven moontides before. The elder ape of the tribe was about to commence the last feast when he spotted something in the heavens above—a small speck of light burning in the sky. But unlike the stars, this speck was moving straight toward Erdas.

This was long ago, back before Kovo even had a name.

He remembered his entire tribe stopping their eating to stare up through the dark canopy of trees, all of them thinking the same thing—

The sky was falling.

“What?” Kovo’s mother had asked, signing the question with her black gorilla hands.

The elder ape had wrinkled his gray brow and gestured with his hands. “Do not know.”

Concerned grunts moved through the tribe. It was the first time Kovo or anyone else had heard the elder ape say he did not know something. Usually such an
admission would mean death—the other silverbacks in
the tribe would have attacked, in order to take his place—but they, like Kovo, were transfixed by the light above.

Kovo knew their land was surrounded by a vast ocean of stars, which spun in their own paths. But even as the sky churned in its usual course, this burning piece broke the harmony, cutting a path in its own direction.

Every night Kovo’s tribe gathered and watched the speck again, and every time it looked bigger and burned brighter. Soon they were able to see the speck even during the day. It became clear that this falling piece of sky was moving toward the land.

The other animals in the jungle knew of the sky falling too. Kovo had seen some boar herds in the lower brush congregating to watch the approaching speck. He heard the nervous chatter of the falcons in the east as they circled the sky in a wide arc. Kovo could not commune with other beasts, but even so, he knew the meaning of their falcon cries: This was where the burning piece of sky was to land.

It was a place Kovo knew well. A place every creature knew.

The tree.

The tree was sacred. Its roots stretched to every corner of the world. Every blade of grass, every beating heart, had sprung from it. And now the sky was plummeting toward it.

Kovo remembered wondering what would happen when the piece of sky reached the tree. A thing like this had never happened before.

The silverbacks in Kovo’s tribe gathered together. One of them should go to the place where the falcons
flew—to bring back news of the thing that fell. They needed a young ape who could still move quickly through the trees. Someone who could be trusted not to become lost or distracted by the creatures and sights beyond their jungle canopy. They picked Kovo.

It was a great honor. And before Kovo left, the elder ape began to sing for him, cooing into the night air. He was joined by the others, one by one, in a chorus more wonderful than anything Kovo had heard since.

Kovo’s mother joined last. Her hands found his and she pressed her nose to Kovo’s. To this day, he still remembered the smell of her.

Kovo left the safety of the canopy in search of the place where the sky would land. The world was a vast continent that contained jungles and dunes and mountains and snowfields, all connected together. As he traveled, he saw other beasts moving in the same direction as him: a lion from the plains, an octopus from the sulfur delta, a serpent from the desolate bogs, even a polar bear from the high glacier rim. Usually Kovo would have tried to fight with these beasts, or they would have fought with him, but it seemed they all had a similar mission.

Kovo and the other beasts finally found themselves at the top of a high mountain covered in lush vegetation and strange greenery. There were thousands of animals, all different species, all come to bear witness. The trees were low and not good for climbing, but they were heavy-laden with fruit. Kovo did not recognize the fruits growing in this place, and so he ate nothing.

At last he reached the tree. It stood within an emptied mountain—its trunk impossibly tall. The enormous, lush
branches stretched out in every direction, strong and silvery. Kovo could feel the tree’s life-giving roots whispering in the rich soil beneath him. He climbed atop a large, mossy boulder and watched the falling piece of sky. From here, Kovo could see the land stretching out for a thousand miles in every direction.

By now, the piece of sky burned as large and hot as a second sun. The speck had a trail of flames behind it, as though it were leaving a tear in the very atmosphere, roaring as it hurtled straight toward the tree. The roaring reverberated through the entire forest around Kovo, and many of the watching beasts fled in terror. Kovo felt that same fear, but he did not run. The fur on his arms had a static tingle of expectation. He wanted to hold his breath.

And then it landed.

Kovo shielded his eyes as the great piece of sky crashed through the branches of the tree and plunged deep into its trunk. When it finally struck the ground, the impact was like nothing Kovo had ever conceived.

In a flicker, the trees all around him bent sideways, as if they were blades of grass flattened under Kovo’s foot. The sound, if it made a sound, was so great that Kovo’s ears stopped working—his head filled with a devastating thrum that threatened to crack his skull in two. The ground beneath Kovo seemed to ripple and heave, throwing him backward.

And then there was the storm.

At the moment of impact, a burst of blinding light struck Kovo—searing his eyes through his eyelids. Wind and fire enveloped the sky, everything around him
coming ablaze. It was like a crack of lightning had moved right through the land.

Kovo did not remember landing—for the next moment, his whole world went black.

When Kovo woke again, it was as though waking from death. Steam rose up from the scorched ground, burning the side of his face. The sky overhead was a swirling darkness that blotted out the sun. Kovo pushed himself up on his knuckles, retching some horrible black sap that seemed to have pooled beneath him, coating his fur. He could feel his bones screaming in protest as he stirred, and he wondered how many of them had been shattered.

Kovo rose and beheld the forest around him. But there was no forest. The trees were gone. The rocks were gone. Indeed, the very ground had been turned into an enormous smoking crater.

He looked to the place where the sky had landed.

The tree was still standing—ever standing—but its trunk was twisted and scarred, torn down the middle where the sky piece had struck it.

Kovo could still feel the life of the tree moving beneath the ground, but something about it had changed.

The tree wasn’t the only thing that had changed. Despite his injuries, Kovo felt somehow stronger, and his mind felt more clear. He scrambled up over the steaming rubble to the crest of the crater.

Destruction. For miles in every direction. Huge black cracks had formed in the earth, and already he could see water flooding into the gaps, dividing earth, pushing the lands apart from one another. Storms were brewing, and
he knew somehow that the rest of his tribe was gone. Perhaps other creatures from farther lands had survived the impact, but Kovo’s jungle was no more.

The young ape flared his nostrils, squeezing his eyes tight. He wanted to beat his chest, to roar and rage. But who could hear such a cry? He was alone.

Kovo turned, hearing a wheezing *snuff* nearby. Rubble pushed apart and he saw the trunk of an enormous elephant burst from the earth, dripping with black sap. The beast had somehow survived, just like him. There were more sounds and soon other survivors emerged.

There were fifteen of them in all.

Like Kovo, the beasts looked different—stronger, larger than before. Kovo and the others slowly moved toward the tree in the center of the steaming crater. The thing that had fallen from the sky had burrowed deep into the earth, leaving a trail of foul black sap in its wake.

Some of the beasts were unable to make the descent, or too afraid, but Kovo had to see. He had been sent by his tribe, by the elder ape, by his mother, to witness the falling sky, and he would finish his task.

He approached the gash in the trunk of the tree. It looked so fragile, and he feared it might break under his touch. But when he grabbed hold of the smoldering bark, he could feel the tree shifting beneath his fingers—fighting back against its own destruction, forcing itself to grow anew.

The sky had plunged straight through it and deep into the ground. The hole was steep and treacherous, but Kovo felt strong and agile. Soon even the falcon and swan had given up the pursuit, but Kovo traveled on.
At last he found the bottom of the hole, deep within the roots of the tree. The space was a little bigger than the canopy where his tribe ate their meals.

The hole was so dark that Kovo could barely make out his own hand. But the silver light from the tree’s roots was enough to see what he had come for. Lodged deep within the ground was something large and round.

It looked like a rock, only made of a substance Kovo had never seen before. Something strong enough to cut through the world itself.

Kovo drew in his breath. He could sense something moving beneath the surface. A tremor of life that pulsed like a heart. Something was inside, trying to get free. Kovo stepped back, staring at the thing below, and realization washed over him.

This was not sky.
This was not stone.
This was an egg.