

ASPIRIT ANIMALS

THE BOOK OF SHANE

PART I

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The First Book of Shane
VENOM

by Nick Eliopoulos

SHANE'S LIFE CHANGED FOREVER THE DAY HE WOKE TO the sound of screaming.

It was a scream right out of a nightmare—a sound of terror, and mourning, and fury all tangled together. It was barely human.

He'd never heard anything like it before, yet he knew at once that it was coming from his sister.

Shane leaped from bed and bolted from his room. At some point he stubbed his bare toe on stone, but the pain wouldn't register until much later. At the moment there was only Drina, and the distance that kept him from her. He didn't hesitate, didn't pause at her threshold to wonder what terror awaited him, what monstrous sight could tear such a howl from his sister's throat.

But he paused when he entered the room and its unnatural twilight. His own bedroom had been bright with morning's light, and the hallway too. Something in Drina's room was blocking the light. A frayed and tattered tapestry? Thick strands of cotton? Shane couldn't quite make sense of it.

Drina had stopped screaming, but she lay convulsing in bed. Something was terribly wrong.

He went to her and gripped her by the shoulders, willing her to be still, but her body jumped and jerked beneath his fingers. She looked up at him with eyes that didn't see him. They registered only horror.

He realized he was saying her name, over and over again. "Drina. Drina."

Then he saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

He didn't turn all at once. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and his ears prickled. He knew somehow that making any sudden moves would be a terrible mistake. So he kept his hands on his sister's shoulders, and turned his head slowly, very slowly, until he was looking into the far corner of the room.

Squatting there in the shadows was the largest spider Shane had ever seen.

It saw him too. It stared back at him with eight eyes, alien and unreadable. Other than the bands of yellow along its abdomen, it was entirely black. Venom dripped from its fangs to the floor.

It stayed absolutely still, and Shane tried to stay still too. But he couldn't suppress a shudder of fear and revulsion.

He had to do something. Others would arrive soon—others must have heard Drina's scream. And the next

person through that door would step right beneath those dripping fangs.

He took a heavy brass lantern from Drina's bedside.

He turned away from her slowly, so that he faced the spider. He would have to put all his strength behind his throw. He might only have one chance at this.

Those alien eyes stared back, unblinking.

Shane shifted his weight and gritted his teeth. He reared back with the lantern, ready to let it fly when –

Suddenly Drina screamed again. This time, she produced a word: "No!"

She lurched from her bed, shoving into him with all her might. Shane went flying; his head smacked against stone. The world reeled, and he hit stone again, and the lantern shattered all around him, covering him with broken glass.

"He's mine," his sister said. Through a haze of red he watched her take an unsteady step toward the creature on the wall, her arm outstretched, palm up. "He's mine."

It was only then that the true horror of the situation finally dawned on Shane. Despite his fervent hopes, his sister had summoned a spirit animal.

Unconsciousness came for him, and he did not fight it. He didn't want to see what happened next.



Shane never woke slowly. In the two years since Drina had summoned her spirit animal, he jolted awake each morning, usually in a cold sweat, always with a sense of dread. This morning was no different. He immediately scanned the ceiling, then checked the four corners of his

bedroom for any sign of an animal. He kept the stone walls bare and the room clear of any clutter: the better to be sure nothing could hide from him. Finally, before daring to place his feet upon the floor, he leaned over the side of his bed, peering into the shadows beneath it like a young child checking for monsters.

It was only after he was satisfied that he had not summoned a spirit animal in his sleep that he remembered to breathe.

Shane knew the odds of being Marked were slim. He reminded himself of that fact every day. Yet despite the odds, every member of his immediate family had summoned an animal. People said they were cursed, and there were times Shane himself believed it.

He was nearly thirteen years old now. If he was going to get a spirit animal – and the bonding sickness that usually came with it – it would happen soon.

Shane slipped from bed and pulled his damp nightclothes over his head. He took a fresh tunic and trousers from his wardrobe – a wooden antique from which he'd removed the doors. That way it was one less hiding place for him to fear. And besides, Shane's uncle had use for any wood he could get his hands on.

As he dressed, Shane remembered a time in his childhood when a servant would wake him, bathe him, dress him. But nearly all the servants were gone now. And it was just as well – there was no money with which to pay them, little food with which to feed them.

Shane knew very little about the lands outside of Stetriol, but he suspected he was the poorest prince in the world.

He walked the long hallway that led to the dining hall,

trailing his finger along the stone wall and tapestries, leaving a line in the dust. The tapestries showed legendary scenes of Stetriol's ancient past. On one, torrents of water flowed from the mouth of a frog, creating all the lakes and rivers. Another showed two lizards painting patterns on each other, one with a fine brush and an eye for detail, the other without care.

Shane knew of other tapestries – forgotten tapestries that still hung from the rafters in a dark and disused corner of the castle. Those artworks celebrated other animals entirely: formidable birds of prey, and huge, vicious cats, and an octopus with startlingly intelligent eyes. But the Great Beasts had cursed Stetriol. They were better forgotten.

Lost in thought, Shane jolted with surprise when he rounded a corner and saw a cloaked figure standing before him. He hoped she hadn't seen him flinch, but it was hard to sneak anything past his tutor.

“Yumaris,” he said, nodding his head in greeting.

“My prince,” she said, lowering her own head in a sort of bow. Shane imagined if she attempted to lower herself any more than that, she might never manage to get up again. She clutched her staff as if without it her heavy robes might drag her to the floor.

He wasn't sure exactly how old she was, but during her history lessons it was easy to imagine that she spoke from personal experience. The oddest thing about her, though, was that she sometimes spoke of the future as if it were history too.

Shane watched curiously as the woman produced a sheathed sword from the folds of her robes. It was the saber he had been training with lately, at his uncle's insistence.

“You will be glad to have this blade,” she said, holding it out to him.

He wasn’t so sure, but he took the sword and affixed it to his belt. “You’re my tutor, Yumaris. Aren’t you supposed to favor the pen?”

“A prince must have many tools in his arsenal,” Yumaris answered, a faraway look in her eyes. “For words and learning do little to impress a jackal.”

Shane tightened his belt and gave his tutor a questioning look. “There are no jackals in Stetriol.”

Yumaris shrugged. “A figure of speech, my prince. Now, I fear you have more pressing business this morning than breakfast.”

Shane sighed. “What is Gar up to this time?”

