

Tales of the Great Beasts Special e-Extra

# SPIRIT ANIMAS

## NINANI



BILLY MERRELL



TALES OF THE  
**GREAT BEASTS**

SPECIAL e-STORY

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# Ninani





# NINANI'S NECTAR

By Billy Merrell

**A**T FIRST, ALL TEPIN COULD SEE WAS SKY. A WARM WIND raked across his face, as steady as the pull of gravity at his back. Then he saw what he thought was snow blown from the top of the neighboring mountain. It was white and moved like the fringe of his friend Ifa's skirt when she danced. It wasn't until the boy saw the feathers that he knew he was looking at wings. A huge white bird was landing. Right where Tepin lay.

Usually Tepin would have felt afraid. But this time he didn't. He stared straight at the bird, more curious than scared. In fact, there was a strange calm in his chest. Strange enough for Tepin to notice it, even as the bird's huge webbed foot touched down next to him.

The bird was much larger than any Tepin had ever seen. Its neck alone was as long as a tree snake, its woody black beak bigger than the boy's arm. Yet it reminded Tepin of the graceful birds that flew over the mountain twice a year, never seeming to land. All but its face, legs, and feet were as white as the sun.

Sitting up, Tepin noticed that the bird was wearing something on a chain around its neck. It looked like a stone carved from marble in the shape of a bird. Tepin caught the bird's eye, round and shining. It was as if it somehow *knew* Tepin, as if it had been searching for the boy for a long time.

"What is it?" Tepin asked. He half expected the bird to speak back to him.

Instead, it craned its head around to get a better look at him. It opened its dark beak, rearing back like a startled pony. The bird beat its white wings and cried a warning. The sound seemed to echo back at Tepin, hurting his ears.

Tepin realized that he was actually lying on water, drifting backward. The current was picking up speed. He turned around and gasped, just in time to see the edge of a waterfall flash into view. With a scream, Tepin plunged over the side.



Tepin woke, feeling startled. It was as if all the fear he should have felt in the dream suddenly flooded his heart and throat. The sound of the bird's cry still shook in the air as Tepin opened his eyes in the dark, finding it hard to breathe. Tepin had never seen a bird like the one from his



dream. Nothing like that lived on the mountain. Only greedy condors and mud-colored partridges came to roost in the thin trees of the boy's village. And yet Tepin couldn't shake the premonition that the great bird meant something. The dream didn't feel like any other Tepin could remember. But there was something familiar about the bird.

"Ifa!" Tepin cried. But when Ifa didn't answer from the hut next to his, he remembered where she was.

"What's wrong?" Tepin's little brother, Gobe, asked, startled awake too.

"I had a bad dream," Tepin said, knowing his brother would make fun of him.

"Oh, Ifa," Gobe teased. "Save me!"

The older girl had told the boys to think of her as a friend, though officially she worked for Tepin's parents. Sometimes Ifa took care of Tepin and Gobe as a favor to the family, but Tepin preferred to believe she actually was his friend. And that he was hers.

Tepin's parents slept in a room cut right into the side of the mountain, just below the green cliff where his family's herd of alpacas fed. They had to climb down from the highest part of the cliff face to get there. Tepin and Gobe slept at the foot of the cliff, in a hut built from woven valley grasses. Usually Ifa slept in the hut next to theirs while her spirit animal, a chinchilla named Cachi, hopped up and down the cliff at night, hunting for bugs. But Ifa was sick, and her illness had become serious enough that she had been taken to live with the village's healer.

"Maybe Cachi can save you." Gobe continued his teasing.

As if the chinchilla had been summoned, the rodent appeared. Soft and round, Cachi looked like a fat gray mouse with a bushy white tail. He squeaked as he flashed his big pink ears at the foot of Gobe's mattress.

"I thought you'd be with Ifa," Tepin said. Cachi's ears pointed toward him. The chinchilla crawled weakly over Gobe to get to Tepin. He squeaked again, his puffy white tail curling up as he stared into the boy's face. And then the rodent sneezed, blinking his tired black eyes.

"Not feeling good either?" Tepin asked. He pet Cachi on the back of the head with one finger, and then scratched the animal behind the ears. Cachi closed his eyes and squeaked wanly. He looked sick.

"Maybe he was up late protecting you from bad dreams," Gobe crowed.

When Gobe was born, Tepin had thought he'd be the one of them to do the teasing. But somehow, Gobe was the faster and stronger of the two brothers, which hardly seemed fair.

Worst of all, Gobe was braver. And he knew it.

Every morning, the boys had chores to do on the green cliff. Gobe was used to climbing up the rock face, even in thick morning fog. The smaller boy pulled himself up easily, having done it a thousand times or more. All the way up to the high cliff top.

Tepin was six years older than Gobe, but he still walked up the long mountain road to get to the cliff top. Every once in a while his father would force him to try climbing, but he couldn't. His hands shook every time he looked down, and yet he couldn't stop himself from looking. Once,



Tepin's hands shook so badly that he lost his grip and fell, scraping skin off his arms and badly bruising his leg.

The first time Gobe had tried climbing, he made it all the way up without looking down. Tepin's father had never seemed prouder.

A sound in the distance startled Tepin from his thoughts. A cry, almost like the one in his dream, made the hairs on his neck stand on end.

Cachi heard it too, and lifted his head to listen. But the chinchilla seemed tired, and quickly closed his eyes again, pressing into Tepin's side.

"It's just Shumbi," Gobe said, rolling his eyes and lying back down.

Of their father's alpacas, Shumbi was Tepin's favorite. She was usually the first awake too. And the first to bleat in the early morning light, crying for her breakfast.

For that reason, she was Gobe's least favorite anything.

"Time to get up, then," Tepin said, but Gobe just lay there.

Following Shumbi's lead, the other alpacas started crying too. If the boys didn't get up soon, their mother would begin calling down from the cliff face for them.

Usually Ifa would hurry the boys along from her hut. Or send Cachi in to tickle them with his fluffy white tail. But with Ifa away, Tepin took over the task.

"Come on, Gobe. Get up," he said. His brother pretended to be asleep, pulling the blanket over his head and letting out a loud fake snore.

"Cachi, you know what to do," Tepin said. But Cachi

wasn't acting like himself. He burrowed into Tepin's own bed.

That was when Tepin noticed the note, lying on the floor near the doorway. Cachi must have brought it in from his parents.

Tepin could only barely read – there weren't many books in their village – but the words were simple enough for him to make them out.

*Heard from Anyati, the note said. Ifa is worse. Tepin – go visit.*

"Anyati," Tepin asked. "Is that the healer's name?"

"She's a Greencloak," Gobe answered from under his covers. "The only Greencloak on the mountain. Why?"

Tepin knew little about the mysterious woman. Only that she was newly home from a great war. When Tepin was Gobe's age, Anyati was famous among the children of the village for throwing sweet granadillas over her orchard wall. The round orange fruits would roll down the road, and the children would chase after them, laughing.

"Ifa's gotten worse. Mother says I should go check on her."

"Are you sure that's what it says?" Gobe asked, pulling the covers down. For the first time – possibly ever – Gobe looked afraid.

"I'm positive," Tepin said. "Why? What's wrong?"

"I heard that Greencloak woman is a witch," Gobe said.

"Who told you that?" Tepin asked, searching his brother's face. Greencloaks were supposed to be good, not evil. Everyone knew that.

"I heard merchants in the village talking about her. She hasn't come out of her house since she first returned from

Stetriol. They say she sends her spirit animal out to collect rare poisons at night. She's making potions and testing them on herself!"

"What kind of spirit animal?" Tepin asked.

His brother crossed his arms and shrugged. "No one knows," Gobe said. "But they say it drinks blood."

"Stop trying to scare me," Tepin mumbled.

"Because *that's* so hard," Gobe said.

Tepin glanced out the door, then back at his bed, where Cachi lay shivering. The animal looked very sick. Could it be connected to Ifa's illness?

Was it something the Greencloak was doing?

Tepin pulled on his boots and headed for the door.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Gobe called after him. "What about our chores?"

"I guess you'll have to take care of them yourself," Tepin called back.



Twice a year, Tepin's father would take the entire herd of alpacas down the mountain to an animal healer. Those two mornings—and those two mornings only—Tepin and his brother were blissfully free of their chores. Usually both brothers would sleep in, staying in their hut practically until lunchtime. But one morning, only a few months before Ifa got sick, Tepin had woken to the sounds of his father leading the alpacas down the mountain. Try as he might, he couldn't fall back asleep.

Tepin had heard a single high note, like a songbird calling to the morning sun. Only it seemed too early for there

to be any sun in the sky. And Tepin had never heard any bird sing so beautifully. As more notes followed, Tepin strained to make out the melody. That's when Tepin realized it was Ifa singing. He hurried out of the hut, looking for her. As he suspected, it wasn't yet light out, and the mountain air was thick and slow. Then Tepin saw Ifa in the fog, starting up the mountain road. She was carrying bundles of yarn in front of her. Tepin chased after Ifa. When he'd finally caught up with her, he offered to help carry the yarn.

"It's a long way up the mountain," Ifa warned, even as she struggled to keep the colorful skeins from rolling off the pile. "And it might not be an exciting trip. I'm going up there to work."

"I don't mind," Tepin said. One of the coils of yarn fell from Ifa's grasp, and he scrambled to grab it before it rolled away, earning a grateful smile from the girl.

As Ifa set half of the bundles gently into his arms, Tepin noticed Cachi was nuzzled between two colorful tangles.

It was a long climb, as promised. When they reached the lookout, Cachi leaped out of the bundle and onto the highest rock. Ifa sat with all the colors splayed out in front of her. She started with nothing, but then, knot by knot, made a spiral. Tepin watched as the spiral became a round carpet, all made of knots.

Ifa didn't have to look at her hands as she worked. She tied the knots fast, staring into the distant fog.

"This is my favorite part," Ifa told Tepin, nodding to the overlook. "It's like being alone on an island." Tepin

followed her gaze and realized she was right. The sun appeared, pouring in over the fog below. It rippled brightly, like a great glowing sea surrounding the mountain.

“Have you ever been on an island?” Tepin asked Ifa. She shook her head no, looking down at her yarn.

“Have you ever been off the mountain?” he asked her. When she shook her head again, Cachi looked up at her too.

Ifa stared down at the yarn in her hands. She furrowed her brow, as if it were tangled. Then she set the circle she was knotting onto the ground and put her hands on Tepin’s shoulders.

“I love your family,” Ifa said. “I’m so grateful to your parents. And you know I think the world of you and your brother.”

Tepin nodded, feeling suddenly nervous. The conversation had taken a strange turn.

“Please don’t be angry with me if I leave someday,” she continued. “I have dreams much bigger than this mountain. One day I hope to travel all across Erdas, selling my carpets as I go.”

“Can I come?” Tepin asked.

Ifa shook her head, smiling sadly. “I don’t think your parents would appreciate me stealing you away. But you can visit me, wherever I end up.” She picked the disc of carpet back up into her lap, and began knotting again.

Tepin didn’t like the idea of Ifa leaving, but he liked that she had big dreams.

“I’m glad we’re friends,” she said after a moment of quiet.

Tepin nodded in agreement.



The Greencloak's hermitage was near the top of the mountain. Tepin thought about that morning with Ifa at the lookout as he hurried up the same steep path. His legs were tired from racing, but when he saw a small orange granadilla fruit in the road, Tepin knew he was close.

He thought about what his brother had said, how Anyati's spirit animal sucked blood. He wondered what skills a Greencloak might draw upon from a bloodsucker.

The stone wall that surrounded Anyati's home was twice as tall as Tepin. There was no way for him to see what dangers waited on the other side. Gobe could have scaled the stones easily, but not Tepin. He listened closely as he followed the wall to a dark gate tangled with dead vines. He had an eerie feeling. It was as if he had seen the gate before, in a nightmare.

Chills crawled up Tepin's back, from his waist up to the top of his scalp.

It was the same feeling he'd had when he had woken from the dream of the great white bird. But as the image of the creature appeared in Tepin's mind, he remembered the strange calm that had come over him. How, for once, he hadn't been afraid.

*Why can't I be like that now?* Tepin thought.

He closed his eyes and recalled the sensation of lying in the grass, and the look of the bird as it came down to him out of the white sky. He pictured the marble amulet hanging from the bird's long neck, and how it held an

otherworldly gleam inside it. Tepin searched for that feeling of calm, like a stillness inside himself. When he found it, he opened his eyes.

He felt ready.

Tepin pushed the heavy gate open. It scraped loudly at the ground. He slipped through, into Anyati's shaded orchard. A strong mountain wind followed behind him, sending a spiral of leaves straight to the Greencloak's doorway. Tepin pushed the gate closed and the rustling stopped. He heard a squeaking, and for a moment thought it was Cachi, somehow calling for him. But when he turned around, he saw it was only the chain of a lantern swinging ever so slightly next to the door. Smoke snaked from holes in the top of the lantern. A gust of wind must have blown out the flame. The door was too dark to see clearly in the gloomy orchard.

Tepin crept up toward the door, despite his fears. He could see the smoldering wick inside the lantern, but little else. He put his palms to the door, feeling around for a knocker, but there wasn't one. Tepin rapped his knuckles against the wood as loudly as possible.

He heard a commotion just above his head and looked up.

A cloud of dark wings suddenly exploded out from a gap between the stones. A colony of bats surrounded Tepin, beating their wings wildly against his skin. They were so fast. Their faces blurred past as they all flew at once into the dappled light of the orchard.

When they had all gone, Tepin just stood there, panting, searching for his earlier reserve of calm. But his heart was clenched from some other feeling instead. The



commotion had tousled Tepin's hair. Afraid to move, his hands shook as he reached to straighten it. He wanted to run home down the mountain, even if it meant Gobe would tease him.

"I'm coming!" a voice called from beyond the door. Tepin looked back toward the closed gate, his whole body trembling. It was too late to run. He heard a thump, like a sack dropping to the floor. And then another, louder. The thumps were definitely coming closer.

Then the heavy door opened a few inches, and light poured out onto Tepin's startled face. Anyati squinted at the boy. He stared at a pale red scar that cut across the woman's round face. Her eyes darted to the dark lantern and back to Tepin.

"What is this?" Anyati hissed. "I'm very busy!"

Tepin was too afraid to answer the Greencloak. He opened and closed his mouth uselessly.

"Is it fruit you want, boy? Take all you like, and throw the rest over the wall. Just leave me alone!"

Anyati started to close the door, but Tepin pushed back.

"Is Ifa here?" he asked the woman, afraid to look her in the eyes.

Hearing the name, Anyati opened the door all the way. Tepin could see the woman was not wearing a green cloak, but a healer's tunic.

There were smears of blood all over the front of it.

"Ifa!" Tepin cried, pushing past the woman, nearly knocking her down. "What have you done to her?" He ran through the house, calling his friend's name, but the place was silent except for the sound of Tepin's own

footsteps . . . and the echoing thud of Anyati's as she followed angrily behind him. He passed a wall where animal skeletons were mounted. Another held a tapestry, emblazoned with foreign symbols.

Finally Tepin turned a corner and found Ifa lying motionless on a long table. A yellowed book lay open at her feet. Beside it was a lit candle and a bowl of black powder. There was a statue on the table too, carved from red stone in the shape of a chinchilla, just like Cachi. Vials of what looked like blood were scattered all around the room. Ifa's nail beds and nose were crusted with blood. Her lips looked pale and lifeless.

"No!" Tepin cried. "I won't let you touch her!"

When Tepin had last seen Ifa, she was tired and weak. Too weak to pour her own bowl of broth from a kettle. But she hadn't looked this bad! He rushed to the girl's side, but Anyati grabbed Tepin's wrist, wrenching him away.

"Let her rest," the woman commanded impatiently.

Tepin screamed, writhing to escape Anyati's grip. Suddenly a small bat, the size of the woman's hand, leaped out from under her tunic. But instead of flying, it *ran*, scuttling on its wings and feet down the length of Anyati's arm, and then up Tepin's. It was headed for his neck! Tepin screamed louder, trying to shake the animal off of him. He didn't want to find out if the bat sucked blood, as Gobe claimed.

"Tonga, behave," Anyati warned. The bat paused, cocking his head at the woman. Then he flew off Tepin's shoulder and onto the woman's. He let out a series of chirps, even higher pitched than Cachi's squeaks, and bared his tiny fangs.

“Stop that,” the woman scolded, letting go of Tepin’s wrist. Tonga closed his mouth.

“Why are you doing this to her?” Tepin asked.

Ifa looked worse than sick. She seemed on the edge of death. Fresh blood seeped from the girl’s nose, rolling down her pale face. Seeing the blood, Anyati reached for a clean rag and began to gently sop it up.

“So you think I’m to blame?” the woman asked, raising an eyebrow at the boy. She hurried around the table as she cared for Ifa, thudding the whole way. Tepin looked down and saw that Anyati only had one leg. In the other’s place was a wooden peg leg.

Ifa groaned, and Anyati whispered something into the girl’s ear. She told Tepin to hold Ifa’s hand. “Gently,” Anyati insisted. “Otherwise her nails will bleed again.”

The Greencloak cut a piece from the bloody rag and held it over the candle flame with a long pair of tweezers. She picked up a crystal prism and looked through it, watching closely as the scrap sizzled and burned.

Tepin could see why people might think Anyati was a witch. But as best as he could tell, she was sincerely trying to help Ifa. Anyati scribbled something in the book that lay open on the table. She stood there for a moment, lost in contemplation.

Tonga flew down to suck Ifa’s blood from the discarded rag. Anyati swatted the bat away, and he perched on the wall.

“It’s bonding sickness,” the Greencloak muttered, almost to herself. “The worst I’ve ever seen. It’s happening all over Erdas. And no one knows why.” Anyati washed her hands in a bowl filled with blue liquid.

“This illness of hers, it only afflicts the Marked,” she explained. “Ever since the great war with Stetriol, the bonds between spirit animals and humans have become . . . fraught. The strange thing is, it’s different for everyone who gets it. As different as the animals themselves. Has her spirit animal been acting strangely?”

Cachi *hadn’t* been his usual energetic self that morning. “He did seem sick,” Tepin told the woman.

She nodded thoughtfully and then thumbed through her book, as if she had an idea.

“Has Ifa been having nightmares?” Anyati asked.

Tepin’s face went white. He shook his head. The Greencloak squinted again at the boy, just as she had in the doorway. She could tell there was more to the story.

“Well, *I* had a dream last night,” Tepin confessed. “I guess you could call it a nightmare, though I wasn’t afraid.”

“I don’t care about your dreams, boy,” Anyati snapped. Her scar blushed bright red. “You’re not my patient. Ifa is.”

But Tepin couldn’t shake the feeling that his dream *meant* something.

“You were in the war, right? You’ve seen all kinds of animals. Have you ever seen a big white bird with a black beak?”

Anyati ignored the question. She began wiping Ifa’s forehead with a cool cloth.

“It had a long neck and black webbed feet,” Tepin told her. “And it was huge.”

“Do you know *when* Ifa first bonded with her spirit animal?” the Greencloak asked, clearly eager to change the subject.

“Have you seen the bird or not?” Tepin asked. He didn’t understand why the woman wasn’t taking him seriously.

Tonga chittered irritably at Tepin from his spot on the wall.

“Erdas is a big place, boy. There are thousands of birds. A lot of them look like that. Geese, herons, swans. Many of them are white with long necks. And many of them have black beaks.”

“And are any of them as big as this table? Wearing a stone amulet?”

Tonga flew from the wall, circling Tepin’s head, then landed on Anyati’s shoulder.

“What kind of amulet?” Anyati asked, sounding suspicious.

“I don’t know. I think it was marble. I saw it hanging around the bird’s neck.”

Tonga let out a series of high-pitched chirps. He leaped onto the table and ran on his folded wings, snatching the bloody rag in his mouth, then flew off with it.

“Are you sure?” the Greencloak asked, ignoring the bat. She searched Tepin’s eyes skeptically.

“Definitely. Why?”

“Ninani is said to have a talisman like that. She’s one of the Great Beasts. A swan, no less.”

Tepin felt a prickling sensation rise up along his arms and legs. A Great Beast? He knew only a little about the Great Beasts—huge, legendary animals that supposedly roamed the wilds of Erdas. They were said to have incredible abilities—even more amazing than the Marked. But could a Great Beast visit him in his dreams?

Tepin gently let go of Ifa's hand, wiping the sweat from his palm onto his woolen shirt.

Anyati handed him a clean rag, then sat on a stool by the table. She shook her head somberly.

"Ninani sided with the Four Fallen – with Briggan, Uraza, Jhi, and Essix – though she didn't join them in the final battle against the Devourer. She blamed the Bile for the war. At least, that's the story I was told."

Tepin didn't know anything about the Bile, aside from what the Greencloak had told their village when she returned from the far-off continent of Stetriol. But it seemed obvious that Ninani's warning had something to do with Ifa.

"I have to find Ninani," Tepin said.

Anyati shook her head. "One doesn't find a Great Beast. He is found by one."

"The swan revealed herself to me!" Tepin argued. "She was waiting at the top of a waterfall. She must want to be found."

Anyati considered what the boy said, then stood with a grunt, searching among her books. She pulled an old tome down from a high shelf and thumbed quickly through the pages. She set the open book in front of the boy.

Tepin stared down at the page helplessly. Only twice before had he been able to catch glimpses of the maps carried by traveling merchants. He barely recognized the drawing as a sketch of Amaya.

"Have you ever left this mountain?" Anyati asked, pointing to a peak drawn into the center of the continent. "Do you even know what jungles surround this place?"

There are rain forests stalked by the most deadly predators alive! Venomous snakes, bloodthirsty caimans, and jaguars bigger than lions! There are rivers filled with piranhas as hungry as Tonga. The closest waterfall is twice as tall as any cliff you've ever climbed." Anyati indicated a spot along the river with her hand.

Tepin's face dropped. He'd clung to his bravery for as long as he could forget what his limitations were. But if Tepin couldn't bring himself to climb up his family's cliff, how would he manage something taller? And with water falling down on him!

"What if you came with me?" Tepin asked. "Tonga could help us find her."

Anyati scowled at him. She waved a hand impatiently over her wooden peg leg. She couldn't climb a waterfall any more easily than Tepin could.

"We have to try!" Tepin insisted.

"I appreciate your bravery," Anyati said. "But it's a fool's errand. If Ninani truly has a message for you, she'll make sure you get it."

Just then, Ifa groaned, as if suddenly in pain. She coughed loudly, and tiny droplets of blood sprinkled onto her tunic. Tepin reached to wipe his friend's mouth clean with the rag Anyati had given him. But before he could, the woman caught his hand.

"That isn't clean enough. There are more in the other room," she said, stepping past him. Tepin could hear her thumping her way through the hermitage.

He glanced down at his friend. "Ninani will know what to do," he whispered to Ifa. Then he tore the map out of Anyati's book and ran.





It was dark by the time Tepin found his way down the mountain. According to the map, there was a fork in the road, with one path leading deep into the rain forest, and the other winding up into the neighboring mountains. But Tepin didn't see a fork in the road, even though he was watching for it. The gravel path simply disappeared at the foot of the mountain, leaving Tepin to find his own way through the wilderness.

The forest air felt like syrup in Tepin's throat. It seemed too hot and wet to breathe. And yet the boy forged ahead into it, pushing past palm frond after palm frond, until there was no turning back. He crossed through creeks too wide to jump, not knowing what lurked in the dark water at his ankles. He crawled under a glistening spiderweb as tall as his hut. He half expected to meet the tarantula that had built it every time he reached ahead into the wet leaves.

The moon was bright, but little light reached the stinking floor of the rain forest. Tepin had to use his other senses to know which steps were safe and which were not. It slowed the boy down considerably. And yet he didn't stop to sleep, slithering like a snake on his belly through patches of swampy mud, and then dashing upright across fallen logs as they collapsed under his weight.

Tepin could hear a thousand animals around him, awake and hungry. Chirping insects and frogs, screeching owls. Something bayed at Tepin from the low branches above the boy's head, scraping its nails against the tree bark ahead of him.

Whatever it was followed Tepin for half a mile or more, howling and scampering, making itself known. Tepin realized with growing dread that he was being hunted.

At one point, Tepin could see the moon shining through the high branches. It wasn't bright enough to light his path, but Tepin spotted the silhouette of the animal as it darted in front of him over a log. It reminded Tepin of a dog, with its long muzzle and thick black tail, but one that had been stretched like an afternoon shadow. It looked back at him briefly, eyes flashing in the moonlight, before disappearing again into the darkness.

"What do you *want*?" Tepin screamed in the animal's direction.

The entire forest went suddenly quiet. Then, one by one, distant animals called back, hissing and growling.

*Now all the forest knows exactly where I am*, Tepin thought. He pushed blindly forward, toward the river.

When Tepin heard the distant sound of rushing water, he gasped. Finally he could figure out where he was, and how far he had still to travel. He hurried toward the sound, and eventually the thick forest gave way to the moonlit water.

Tepin searched the shore for landmarks, hoping to locate himself on Anyati's map. But all he could see were dark trees across the far shore. On the map, it looked like the river became narrower as it flowed south toward the falls. He hoped that if he followed it long enough, he might come across some means of safe passage.

Having spent his entire life high on the mountain, he hadn't the faintest idea how to swim. Nor had he ever seen

a boat, even at a distance. And yet Tepin had faith he would find a way, if he looked long enough.

He had only been walking south for a few minutes when he heard something splash behind him. Tepin turned, but he didn't see anything in the water. He remembered what the Greencloak had said about caimans and piranhas. Maybe it wasn't the best idea, sticking to the water's edge.

Something splashed onto the rocks a few feet in front of the boy. Its dark fur and black eyes made the animal hard to see, but Tepin recognized the shape of its long silhouette. It was the animal that had been hunting him.

"Hi," Tepin said cautiously. The animal cocked its head to one side. There was a yellow patch of hair on its neck, like a small bib. Whatever the creature was, it didn't seem to want to harm Tepin.

"You're kind of cute," Tepin said, looking into its black eyes.

As he said it, the animal reared back, the yellow patch of hair catching in the light. It gnashed its teeth, barking loudly.

Tepin yelled, stepping backward. But the farther away the boy got from the animal, the louder it seemed to bark. Until suddenly it leaped into the air with a growl.

Tepin dove out of the way, realizing too late that it wasn't him the fierce creature was after. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of green scales. A snake, larger than any Tepin had seen on the mountain, was dangling from a tree just behind him. Tepin watched in terror as the black creature dove to bite the snake just below its

massive head. The python fell to the rocks with a crash, tying itself instantly in a knot, desperately looping around the animal's long, black body. The furry hunter bit the snake harder, growling loudly.

Tepin stepped back again, startled, and his feet slipped. He fell backward into the river.

The strong current dragged him underwater immediately. He flailed, trying to pull himself toward the air. Tepin managed to gulp for breath, but the swift water soon pulled him tumbling back below the surface.

Something slick brushed against Tepin's legs as he kicked. He screamed underwater, wasting the last of his breath. The boy reached through the dark water for anything he might grip to pull himself up.

Tepin felt sharp teeth tearing through his woolen shirt. Something was biting his ribs and shoulder. He swatted at whatever it was, and his skin seared with pain.

There was a ringing in Tepin's ears, followed by the sound of the rushing river. The noise grew louder as he heaved, choking out water. Then, all of a sudden, Tepin realized he could breathe.

The boy opened his eyes to see what was biting him. His body had drifted into the branches of a fallen tree, which stabbed at his skin and clothes. The force of the current pushed his face up out of the water. He gasped for air, his strength coming back to him.

Tepin pulled himself up into the tree branches, a few feet above the river's surface. Exhausted, he closed his eyes.

He realized that he'd lost Anyati's map in the river. Without it, he might never see his parents or brother again,

let alone find Ninani's waterfall. His mind wandered fearfully, until finally his body gave itself over to sleep.



"I want you to take it," the swan said to Tepin in his dream that night, lowering her long neck so that the boy could grab her talisman.

"Will it save me?" he asked the swan. Ninani nodded gracefully. The marble stone was as heavy as a granadilla fruit. It seemed to glow in the boy's hand.

"Will it save Ifa?" Tepin asked. But when he looked up, the swan was already gone.

Tepin stared at the talisman a long time in his dream, feeling its power nourish him.



Tepin woke to the sound of his name being screamed through the jungle. It was morning, and the river was bright with the early sun. He blinked toward the far bank, where Anyati stood in a green cloak, waving. Tonga crawled across the woman's shoulders.

Tepin sat upright, shocked and grateful to see the old woman. Then he remembered where he was, perched on a fallen tree branch just over the rapids.

"I can't swim," he called to her.

Tepin wondered if he could climb the branch back to shore without breaking it. He shifted his weight slightly and heard the wood crack. The branch fell closer toward the rushing water.

“Don’t move!” the Greencloak called. She was pointing to something below him. Tepin followed her gaze. The sun was glinting brightly off the water, but when he squinted and shaded his eyes with his hands, he was able to make out the danger Anyati was signaling to him.

A school of piranhas waited in the water. Dozens or more of the carnivorous fish had gathered below Tepin, flashing silver in the clear river. His woolen shirt was wet and bloody from where he’d scraped against the branch the night before. It dripped, luring the fish with the scent of blood.

Tepin had an idea. He pulled the sopping shirt from his back, careful not to shake the branch, and then he threw it weakly into the water. He hoped the shirt would rush downriver, and that the terrifying fish would chase the bait far away from him. But instead, the ravenous school tore immediately into the wool, ripping it violently apart right before his eyes. Their attack was instantaneous.

And worse, Tepin had managed to draw the attention of even more piranhas. As the boy squinted into the clear water, he realized they were everywhere he looked, too many to count.

“What do I do?” Tepin cried to shore.

Anyati called back, again telling the boy not to move. She quickly pulled off her green cloak, then tugged at the neckline of her shirt, calling on Tonga. Tepin expected the bat to return to his passive state at the top of her chest.

Instead, he sank his fangs right into her neck!

Tepin watched Anyati’s strained face as Tonga sucked her blood. Was this what the Greencloak meant by spirit

animals having fraught bonds? Had her bond with Tonga somehow broken? Tepin cringed at the thought of the bat enjoying it. He felt helpless watching, unable to come to her aid.

“Enough!” Anyati said. The vampire bat let go. He flew from her wound straight into the air, arcing high over the river. The boy watched, confused, as Tonga sped toward the far shore and began dribbling the woman’s blood into the water.

Within seconds, the hungry piranhas had forgotten all about Tepin on the fallen branch. The boy watched as the entire school sped away.

“Now!” Anyati yelled, holding her neck. “Pull yourself to shore!”

Tepin had no way of knowing if the piranhas would return once he dropped shirtless into the water, but he could tell by Anyati’s voice that there was no time to lose. He lowered himself quickly into the strong current, keeping his hold on the tree. He pulled himself, branch by branch, toward Anyati.

“They’re coming back for you!” the Greencloak warned.

Tepin kicked hard as he pulled at the frail limbs of the rotting tree, afraid that at any moment he’d feel the sting of razor-sharp teeth at his legs.

Anyati called for Tonga to draw her blood again. But Tepin knew that a few drops of blood wouldn’t be enough to lure the fish away a second time. The woman reached her hand out as far as she could above the water. As Tepin leaned forward to grab it, the thin branch he held snapped, and he was swept once again under the surface of the water.



Anyati whipped her green cloak far out toward the spot where Tepin sank, just in time for him to grab it with his flailing arms.

“Pull!” the woman commanded. And soon she was hauling the frightened boy safely onto the shore, using her peg leg as an anchor.

Once he caught his breath, Tepin clung to Anyati, hugging her tightly.

It must have been a long time since anyone had shown the secretive Greencloak any affection. As she hugged Tepin back, tears were pooling in her weary eyes.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” Tepin said.

Then he realized – if Anyati had joined him in his search for Ninani, Ifa must be alone back in the village.

As if reading his thoughts, Anyati placed a heavy hand on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry,” she said to him, tears still trailing down her face. “Ifa’s gone.”



It was afternoon by the time Anyati and Tepin finished crossing the river. And Tepin still hadn’t cried.

Fear and confusion had filled the boy’s heart the moment he learned that Ifa was dead. Tepin didn’t want to believe the woman. Why, if Ifa could no longer be saved, would Ninani have revealed herself in a second dream? Tepin remembered Ninani had offered him her talisman, and he had accepted it before even asking about Ifa. Perhaps it was he who had killed her? Tepin had greedily taken all of the Great Beast’s power, leaving nothing to save Ifa.

“Do my parents know where I am?” the boy asked the Greencloak as she led the way forward. Tepin felt lucky that Anyati knew where she was going, even without the map.

“Your mother thought you were with Ifa,” Anyati told him. “When I told her that you’d already left us, she nearly threw a fit. They’re waiting for us now, back at your home.” Tepin sighed. He knew how worried his mother must be.

Tonga squeaked, but it sounded more like a yawn. Anyati patted her chest, inviting Tonga to sleep in his passive state. The bat disappeared with a flash.

“You’ll see her again soon,” the Greencloak assured the boy. But Tepin wasn’t comforted by the promise. He was thinking of Ifa, of how she’d looked the last time he’d seen her. It made the boy nauseous to think about it.

He decided instead to picture her dawn-lit face from the morning they sat alone at the lookout. The morning she had shared her dream with him.

Anyati lifted a branch so Tepin could pass below it without its thorns pricking his skin. Then she thudded ahead of him on the path, keeping a fast pace.

“Why would you choose a vampire bat for a spirit animal?” Tepin asked Anyati, now that Tonga was resting as a tattoo on the Greencloak’s skin.

She frowned at Tepin. “Why do you assume it’s the human who chooses the animal?” the Greencloak asked the boy. “Or that there’s any choice at all?”

Tepin didn’t know how it worked being one of the Marked, only that he was the age Ifa had been when she bonded with Cachi. He wondered if the chinchilla was

gone too, but was afraid to ask Anyati the question. Tepin wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Vampire bats are marvelous creatures," Anyati said eventually. "Tonga can hear like you wouldn't believe, and can tell where the blood is closest to the skin. A useful trick for a war nurse."

"You were a nurse during the great war?" Tepin asked. "I thought you fought." His eyes wandered to the woman's artificial leg.

"Oh, I fought," Anyati said. "The Greencloaks were falling left and right. It was me and Tonga who kept them alive until they were ready to fight again."

"And your leg?" Tepin asked, hopefully respectfully. "Your scar? What happened to you?"

"It's not a story I can tell," Anyati said. The Greencloak shook her head decisively. "There is . . . pain best left behind in war. It isn't easily shared with those who don't know it themselves. There are things I have to live with that will die with me. Understand?"

Tepin nodded.

"Besides, we have climbing to do," Anyati said. And then the Greencloak lifted another branch for Tepin. As he passed below it, the boy saw the billowing spray of a magnificent waterfall. He looked up. Midday sun sparkled against the high water.

As beautiful as the waterfall was, it struck fear in Tepin's heart. The swan was not waiting at the base. He would have to climb it.

"This might be a bad time to tell you this," he said. "But I've never climbed a cliff before." Anyati smiled. She didn't

think Tepin was being serious. “My hands shake when I look down,” he explained.

“Then don’t look down, silly,” she said, as if it were that simple. “You’re strong enough. You made your way alone through the dark rain forest, didn’t you? You pulled yourself out of the river!”

Tepin crossed his arms in front of his chest tightly. He looked up into the falling water, watched how the wind caught the high spray so that it never touched the ground.

“I’m not saying it’s going to be easy,” Anyati said. “But I know that you can do it if you try.”

Tepin wondered if climbing was like being brave, if he could keep his hands from shaking by summoning stillness within himself. Anyati had been right about everything else. She had been the one to recognize Ninani in his dream, and to rescue Tepin from the river. Even when it meant hurting herself. Why would she put Tepin in danger now? If Anyati believed in him, why couldn’t he?

Tepin walked straight up to the waterfall’s edge. Once he reached the sheer face of the stone, he took a deep breath and began to climb. He had seen his brother do it every morning. Except the cliff was always dry when Gobe scaled it.

“Pull with your arms and push with your legs,” Gobe had told him once. “There’s nothing else to it.” Tepin pictured his brother climbing just ahead of him, showing Tepin the surest way up.

“You’re doing great!” Anyati called up to Tepin. He started to look down at her, but reminded himself not to.

Tepin could feel the spray of the falling water. It ran down his forearms, streaming from his elbows. The rocks weren't too slippery, but he had trouble figuring out which to hold on to. He looked up, and it felt like needles of rain hitting his eyes.

*Don't look up either,* he told himself.

Anyati called something, but Tepin couldn't hear it. Without thinking, he looked down. For a moment it felt as if the waterfall itself was toppling toward her. Tepin closed his eyes and found his balance, but the vision of the great height was burned into his mind.

Rock by rock, the boy pulled his way up the falls. He was too high up and too close to the water's spray to hear Anyati's calls, but he felt her cheering him on as he climbed toward the rocky outcrop. And then, with a cry of surprise, Tepin felt his hand grip the top of the ledge. He heaved himself up and over, then stood shakily. He waved down to the distant Greencloak. She waved back.

*What now?* he thought. But no sooner had Tepin thought the question than a presence unlike anything he'd ever experienced filled his mind, radiating calm and compassion. He heard Ninani's tranquil voice before he saw her.

"Thank you, Tepin," she said. "I'm grateful you came. I know you need to rest, but there is much to be done."

Tepin whirled around. The Great Swan towered over him. Over everything. Her white feathers practically glowed in the clouds of mist from the falls. She inclined her long neck, and it was like watching the mountain flowers bending in the wind. There was authority to her, but also delicacy.

Tepin felt relieved by the swan's welcome. He glanced at Ninani's talisman, hanging from a chain at the base of her neck. It radiated with power, stronger than what he had felt in his dream.

Unsure how to proceed, Tepin bowed before the Great Beast.

"Have you come alone?" she asked the boy. Tepin shook his head. He explained about Anyati, the Greencloak who had saved him. "She was a healer in the war against the Devourer," he said. "With the Four Fallen. They were your friends, right?"

Ninani lowered her head regally. "I see. I'm glad to hear the Greencloaks have endured beyond the war. I may need Anyati's help now as well. Climb onto my back."

Tepin crawled onto the base of the Great Swan's neck and pressed his face into the bird's white feathers.

"Hold on," Ninani said. She extended her enormous wings and jumped from the falls, diving straight down into the mist. The Great Beast dragged the air with her wings, leveling out, and then flapped hard, landing as she had in Tepin's first dream of the swan.

Anyati stared at the swan with her mouth wide-open. Finally collecting herself, the Greencloak bowed in welcome.

Tepin lowered himself from Ninani's neck, his arms still aching from the climb. When he'd taken his place beside Anyati, the swan spoke once again.

"I know why you have come," she said. "But there is no cure for the bonding sickness." Her clear voice was heavy with grief. Both Tepin and Anyati gasped. "The harm caused by the war is permanent. The natural bonds

between humans and animals have been jeopardized for generations to come. Perhaps forever.”

Anyati rubbed the tattoo on her chest as she listened. The scar across her face paled to a ghostly white.

“But there is hope,” Ninani continued. Tepin reached for Anyati’s hand.

“The Bile was made from a talisman,” the swan said. “While I can’t move the shadow that has fallen across Erdas, I can offer the world a bit more light.”

The boy and Greencloak watched as the swan slid her glowing talisman down the length of her neck and set it gently on the ground. The Marble Swan glowed brightly as it sank into the wet soil.

Out of the ground a vine sprang up suddenly, climbing the waterfall where Tepin had before. It split and flowered as vines shot up the edge of the falls, unscathed by tumbling water. Fleshy white flowers sweetened the misty air. Ninani picked one of the flowers with her huge black beak and dropped it at the boy’s feet.

“Are you ready to find your destiny?” the swan asked.

Tepin nodded. The flower was almost the size of the boy’s head, and wet with spray. He bent to pick up the blossom, surprised by how heavy it was. When he looked inside, he saw clear liquid was pooled inside of it.

“Then drink,” the Great Beast said. “It is your time.”

Tepin looked at Anyati, her face glazed with water. The old woman nodded.

Tepin sipped the nectar. His mouth filled immediately with the sweet memory of granadilla fruit. It was delicious! He almost laughed from the surprise of it.

A flash of light caught Tepin off guard. He recoiled



from its glare, covering his face. Then, squinting, he looked into the whiteness. An animal had appeared in front of Tepin, as long as an afternoon shadow. A yellow patch of fur hung under its black neck.

The boy recognized it as the doglike mammal from the rain forest. It looked similar to the one that had protected Tepin from the snake.

“A tayra!” Anyati exclaimed. “It’s fitting. Tayras are expert climbers.” The woman nudged Tepin with her elbow, and he blushed.

The tayra stared Tepin in the eyes. The boy felt restless and electric. Before he realized what he was doing, he extended a shaking hand toward the creature. Gently, he touched its fur. In that moment, Tepin could feel the animal’s intelligence, its fearlessness.

The tayra rolled onto its back, trilling up at him playfully. Tepin kneeled to rub its belly.

“The nectar you drank will protect you and your spirit animal from the bonding sickness,” Ninani said, her voice carrying through the jungle. “Though it cannot cure a sickness that has already come. I will teach you how to make more, using my talisman.”

Anyati’s eyes shot up, staring at the Great Swan in shock. “Your talisman? You would honor us with such a gift?”

The swan dipped her head. “A gift *and* a responsibility, Greencloak healer. I ask you to protect it, and to bring my nectar to all the people of Erdas – every single child.”

“We will,” Tepin said, standing. His eyes stung with tears, the first he’d shed since learning about Ifa. He wished she could be here with him now.

“If I have to devote the rest of my life to it,” he said, “I will keep your talisman safe, and bring this gift to all who need it.”

Ninani nodded. Her kind eyes watched him for a long moment, as if deciding something. “Thank you . . . my Keeper,” she said finally.

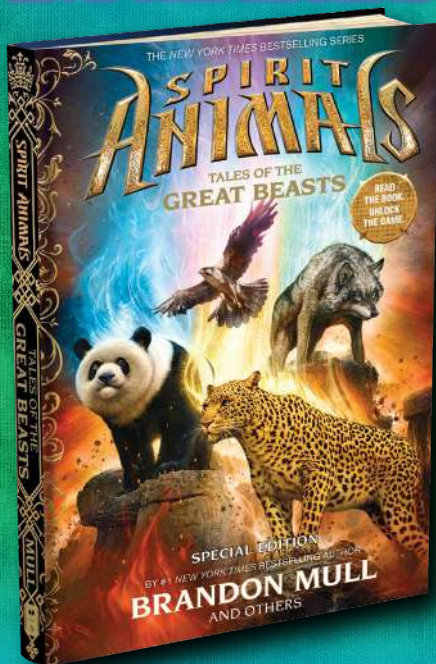
Keeper? A warm feeling of pride filled Tepin’s chest when he heard the word.

Anyati placed a hand on his arm and smiled. Slowly she removed the green cloak from her shoulders and placed it over Tepin’s.

*This is for you, Ifa,* Tepin thought as the clasp clicked shut over his heart. *For your dream. Wherever the Nectar of Ninani goes, may you also follow.*

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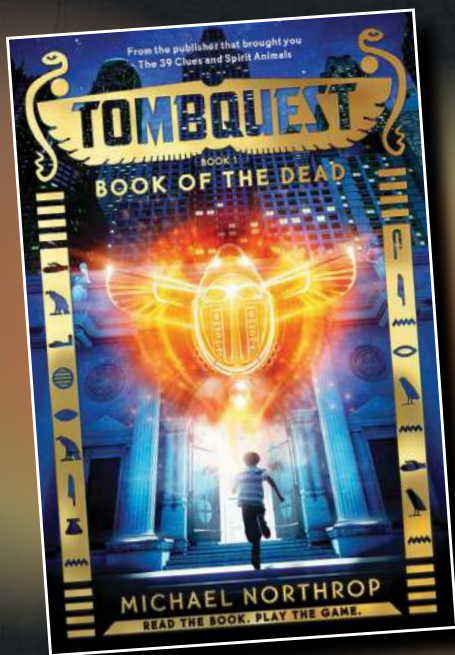
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