

ASPIRIT ANIMALS™

WILD BORN

Brandon Mull



SCHOLASTIC INC.

*For Sadie, who loves animals.
And for Fluffy, Buffy, and Mango,
who are animals.
– B.M.*

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BRIGGAN

GIVEN A CHOICE, CONOR WOULD NOT HAVE PICKED TO SPEND the most important birthday of his life helping Devin Trunswick get dressed. In all honesty, he would not have volunteered to help Devin Trunswick do anything, ever.

But Devin was the eldest son of Eric, the Earl of Trunswick, and Conor was the third son of Fenray, Herder of Sheep. Fenray had incurred debts to the earl, and Conor was helping to work them off as a servant to Devin. The arrangement had begun over a year ago, and was set to last at least two more.

Conor had to hook each fiddly clasp on the back of Devin's coat correctly or the folds would hang crooked, and he would hear about it for weeks. The fine material was more decorative than practical. If caught in a storm, Conor knew that Devin would wish for a simpler, more durable coat. One without clasps. One that might actually keep him warm.

"Are you done fussing around back there?" Devin asked in exasperation.

“Sorry for the delay, milord,” Conor replied. “There are forty-eight clasps. I’m just now linking the fortieth.”

“How many more days will this take? I’m about to die of old age! Are you just inventing numbers?”

Conor resisted a sharp reply. Having grown up counting sheep, he probably knew his numbers better than Devin. But arguing with a noble caused more trouble than it was worth. Sometimes Devin seemed to deliberately tempt him. “It’s my best guess.”

The door flew open and Dawson, Devin’s younger brother, burst into the room. “Are you *still* getting dressed, Devin?”

“Don’t blame me,” Devin protested. “Conor keeps napping.”

Conor only gave Dawson a brief glance. The sooner he finished the clasps, the sooner he could get himself ready.

“How could Conor fall asleep?” Dawson called, giggling. “Everything you say, brother, is so *interesting*.”

Conor resisted a grin. Dawson seldom stopped talking. He often got annoying, but he could sometimes be pretty funny. “I’m awake.”

“Aren’t you done yet?” Devin complained. “How many are left?”

Conor wanted to say twenty. “Five.”

“Think you’ll summon a spirit animal, Devin?” Dawson asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Devin replied. “Grandfather called a mongoose. Father produced a lynx.”

Today was the Trunswick Nectar Ceremony. In less than an hour, the local children who turned eleven this

month would each try to call a spirit animal. Conor knew that some families tended to form bestial bonds more regularly than others. Even so, calling a spirit animal was never guaranteed, no matter what your family name. There were only three kids scheduled to drink the Nectar, and the odds were against any of them succeeding. It was certainly nothing to boast about before it happened.

“What animal do you think you’ll get?” Dawson wondered.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Devin said. “What do you expect?”

“A chipmunk,” Dawson predicted.

Devin lunged at his brother, who scampered away, giggling. Dawson was not dressed as formally as his older brother, which allowed him freer movement. Still, Devin soon caught him and tackled him to the floor, pinning him down.

“A bear would be more likely,” Devin said, grinding his elbow into his brother’s chest. “Or a wildcat, like Father. First thing I’ll do is have it taste you.”

Conor tried to wait patiently. It wasn’t his place to intervene.

“You might get nothing,” Dawson said bravely.

“Then all I’ll be is Earl of Trunswick, and your master.”

“Not if Father outlives you.”

“I’d mind my tongue, second son.”

“I’m glad I’m not you!”

Devin twisted Dawson’s nose until he yelped, then stood up, brushing off his trousers. “At least my nose isn’t sore.”

“Conor will drink the Nectar too!” Dawson cried. “Maybe he’ll be the one to call a spirit animal.”

Conor tried to look invisible. Did he hope to summon a spirit animal? Of course! Who wouldn’t? You couldn’t help hoping. Just because nobody in his family had done it since some obscure great-granduncle decades ago didn’t make it impossible.

“Right.” Devin chuckled. “And I suppose the smith’s daughter will summon one as well.”

“You never know,” Dawson said, sitting up and rubbing his nose. “Conor, what would you like to have?”

Conor stared at the floor. He had been asked a direct question by a noble, so he had to answer. “I’ve always gotten on well with dogs. I’d like a sheepdog, I guess.”

“What an imagination!” Devin laughed. “The sheepherder dreams of calling a sheepdog.”

“A dog would be fun,” Dawson said.

“And common,” Devin said. “How many dogs do you have, Conor?”

“My family? Ten, last I counted.”

“How long since you’ve seen your family?” Dawson asked.

Conor tried to keep his voice even. “More than half a year.”

“They’ll be there today?”

“I expect they’ll try. It depends on whether they can get away.” In case they couldn’t make it, he didn’t want to show that he cared.

“How novel for you,” Devin sniffed. “How many clasps remain?”

“Three.”

Devin turned around. “Let’s not dawdle. We’re running late.”



An impressive assemblage had gathered in the square. It was not every day that the son of a great lord quested for his spirit animal. Commoners and nobles alike had come for the event—old, young, and in between. Musicians played, soldiers strutted, and a peddler sold candied nuts. A grandstand had been erected for the earl and his family. Conor thought it looked as if a holiday had been declared. A holiday for everyone but him. The day was cool and clear. The green hills where Conor would rather be roaming loomed far beyond the blue rooftops and chimneys of Trunswick.

Conor had attended a few Nectar ceremonies. He had never witnessed the calling of a spirit animal, although he knew it had happened several times in this square during his lifetime. There had been little pageantry at the ceremonies he had seen. None had been well attended. And none had involved so many animals.

A common belief held that bringing together a variety of animals increased the chance of summoning a spirit animal. If so, Devin might be in luck. Not only were many domestic animals present, but Conor saw mews full of birds with exotic plumage, a corral containing deer and moose, several caged wildcats, a penned trio of badgers, and a black bear chained to a post by an iron collar. There was even a beast that Conor had only heard about in stories—a huge camel with two furry humps.

As Conor walked toward the center of the square, the

hordes of onlookers made him self-conscious. He wasn't sure what to do with his hands. Should he fold his arms or let them dangle at his sides? As he scanned the intimidating crowd, he tried to remember that most eyes were fixed on Devin.

Suddenly Conor noticed his mother waving. His elder brothers stood beside her, and his father. They had even brought Soldier, Conor's favorite sheepdog.

They had all made it! The sight of them thawed some of his fear and awoke a longing for home – meadows to wander, creeks to swim in, groves to explore. His work had been honest and outdoors – chopping wood, shearing sheep, feeding dogs. Their home had been small but cozy, and nothing like the drafty immensity of the earl's castle. Conor gave his mother a little wave.

The future Earl of Trunswick led the way to a bench near the center of the square. Abby, the smith's daughter, awaited them, sitting still and looking overwhelmed. She was clearly dressed in her best clothes, which were laughably inferior to even the most casual dress owned by Devin's mother or sister. Conor knew he must also look very plain beside Devin.

A pair of Greencloaks stood before the bench. Conor recognized the woman, Isilla, her graying hair gathered up in a glittering net over her pale face. Her goldfinch, Frida, was perched on her shoulder. Isilla normally officiated at the Nectar ceremonies. She had given the Nectar to both of his brothers.

The other Greencloak was a stranger, tall and lean, with wide shoulders and features as weathered as his cloak. His skin was darker than the people around him,

as if he came from northeastern Nilo or southwestern Zhong—an unusual sight in the middle of Eura. His animal was not evident, but Conor noticed a hint of a tattoo winding away into his sleeve. The sight gave him a thrill. It meant the stranger’s spirit animal was currently hibernating on his arm.

Abby rose and curtsied as Devin approached the bench. He sat down and motioned for Conor to follow his lead. Conor and Abby sat.

Isilla raised her hands to still the crowd. The stranger backed away, leaving her the center of attention. Conor wondered why the man had come. As with the rest of the pageantry, Conor decided it must be another nod to Devin’s high status.

Isilla began in a penetrating voice, “Hear ye, hear ye, good people of Trunswick! Before the eyes of man and beast, we are gathered here today to participate in the most sacred rite in all of Erdas. When human and animal unite, their greatness is multiplied. We have come to witness whether the Nectar will reveal such greatness in any of these three candidates—Lord Devin Trunswick; Abby, daughter of Grall; and Conor, son of Fenray.”

The cheering after the mention of Devin all but drowned out the other two names. Conor tried to remain impassive. If he sat still and kept calm, soon it would be over. Devin would drink the Nectar first, in the place of honor. Common belief held that the first to drink the Nectar in a ceremony was the most likely to call a spirit animal.

Isilla bent over to raise a plugged flask, the leather tooled with intricate designs. After raising the flask above

her head to display it to the assemblage, she unstopped it. “Devin Trunswick, come forward.”

The crowd whistled and clapped as Devin approached Isilla, then quieted down as she put her finger to her lips. Devin knelt before her, a sight Conor had seldom seen. Euran nobles only knelt to greater Euran nobles. The Greencloaks knelt to none.

“Receive the Nectar of Ninani.”

Conor could not help but feel excited as the flask tipped toward Devin’s lips. This might be the first time he witnessed a spirit animal summoned from the unknown! With all of these animals present, how could the Nectar fail? Conor wondered what the beast would look like.

Devin swallowed. Isilla stepped back. A deep hush fell over the square. Eyes closed, Devin tilted his face skyward. An empty moment passed. Somebody coughed. Nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Perplexed, Devin looked around.

Conor had heard that a spirit animal either came right after the Nectar was tasted, or never. Devin arose and turned in a full circle, eyes roving. There was no sign of anything appearing nearby. The crowd began to murmur.

Isilla hesitated, considering the grandstand. Conor followed her gaze. The earl sat grimly on his throne, his lynx nearby. Although he had summoned a spirit animal, he had chosen not to wear the green cloak.

Isilla glanced back at the foreign Greencloak, who gave a faint nod. “Thank you, Devin,” she intoned. “Abby, daughter of Grall, come forward.”

Devin looked queasy. His eyes were blank, but his

posture betrayed his humiliation. He glanced furtively toward his father, then looked down. When he lifted his eyes again, his gaze had hardened, the shame turning to fury. Conor looked away. It would be best to avoid Devin's attention for a while.

Abby drank and, as Conor expected, nothing happened. She returned to the bench.

“Conor, son of Fenray, come forward.”

Hearing his name called gave Conor a nervous thrill. If Devin had failed to call an animal, Conor doubted he had any chance. Still, anything could happen. Never had so many eyes been trained just on him. Rising to his feet, Conor tried to ignore the crowd by focusing on Isilla. The tactic didn't really work.

If nothing else, it would be interesting to discover what the Nectar tasted like. His oldest brother had compared it to sour goat's milk, but Wallace liked to tease. His other brother, Garrin, had likened it to apple cider. Conor licked his lips. Whatever the taste, sampling the Nectar would officially mark the end of his childhood.

Conor knelt before Isilla. She looked down at him with a strange smile, curiosity lurking behind her eyes. Had she stared at the others this way?

“Receive the Nectar of Ninani.”

Conor put his lips to the offered flask. The Nectar was thick, like syrup, and richly sweet, like fruit in honey. The consistency became more liquid once it was in his mouth. He swallowed. It tasted amazing! Better than anything he had ever tried.

Isilla withdrew the flask before he could steal another sip. One swallow was all he would ever sample. Conor

stood in order to return to the bench and a burning, tingling sensation spread through his chest.

Animals began to cry out. The birds shrilled. The wildcats yowled. The bear roared. The moose trumpeted. The camel snorted and stomped.

The ground began to tremble. The sky darkened, as if a swift cloud had overtaken the sun. A brilliant flash pierced the gloom like lightning, but much nearer than any lightning Conor had experienced, nearer even than the time he saw a tree struck at the crest of a hill he was climbing.

Onlookers gasped and murmured. Dazzled by the flash, Conor blinked repeatedly to restore his vision. Hot tingles spread from his chest along his limbs. Despite the oddness of the moment, he felt irrationally joyful.

And then he saw the wolf.

Much like any shepherd in the region, Conor had experience with wolves. Wolf packs had stolen many sheep under his care. Wolves had killed three of his favorite dogs over the years. Livestock lost to wolves was a big part of the reason his father had become indebted to the earl. And of course there was that night two years ago, when Conor and his brothers had stood against a brazen pack that had tried to steal sheep out of their pen in the high pasture.

Now the largest wolf he had ever seen stood before him, head held high. It was a remarkable creature—long-limbed, well fed, with the most luxurious coat of gray-white fur Conor could have imagined. He took in large paws, keen claws, savage teeth, and striking cobalt-blue eyes.

Blue eyes?

In the history of Erdas, only one wolf had such deep blue eyes.

Conor glanced at the Euran flag hanging from the earl's grandstand. Briggan the Wolf, patron beast of Eura, stood depicted upon a rich blue banner, eyes shrewd and piercing.

The wolf padded forward calmly, stopping directly before Conor. It sat, like a trained dog yielding to its master. Its head came well above Conor's waist. Muscles tense, Conor resisted the impulse to leap away. Under other circumstances, he would have run from this animal, or yelled at it. He would have thrown rocks or grabbed a stout staff to defend himself. But this was no chance encounter out in the wild. His whole body was tingling, almost vibrating, and hundreds of people were watching. This wolf had appeared out of nowhere!

The wolf stared up at him with confidence. Though large and fierce, the animal seemed very much in control of itself. Conor was awed that a predator such as this would show him so much respect. Those blue eyes hinted at a greater understanding than any animal should possess. The wolf was waiting for something.

Conor held out a trembling hand and the wolf's warm pink tongue caressed his palm. The touch was electric, and the tingling in Conor's chest immediately ceased.

For an instant, Conor felt courage, and clarity, and an alertness like he had never known. He smelled the wolf with enhanced senses, and somehow knew it was male, and that it considered him an equal.

Then the strange moment of expanded perception passed.

In spite of the abundant evidence, it was the look on Devin Trunswick's face that brought home to Conor what had transpired. Never had Conor been the focus of such naked rage and envy. He had summoned a spirit animal!

And not just any spirit animal. A wolf. Nobody summoned wolves! Briggan the Wolf had been one of the Great Beasts, and spirit animals were never the same species as the Great Beasts. Everyone knew that. It simply didn't happen.

Yet it had. Undeniably, inexplicably, it had. A full-grown wolf was nuzzling Conor's palm. A wolf with deep blue eyes.

The bewildered crowd kept silent. The earl leaned forward attentively. Devin seethed, and Dawson's mouth was spread in an astonished grin.

The stranger in the green cloak approached and took Conor's hand. "I am Tarik," the man said in a low voice. "I came a long way to find you. Stay near me, and I will let no harm befall you. I won't press you to take our vows until you're ready, but you need to hear me out. Much depends on you."

Conor nodded numbly. It was all too much to digest.

The foreign Greencloak raised Conor's hand high and spoke in a powerful voice. "Good people of Trunswick! News of this day will echo across all of Erdas! In our hour of need, Briggan has returned!"



URAZA

STAYING LOW, ABEKE STALKED THROUGH THE TALL GRASS, moving at a slow, steady pace. She stepped carefully, as her father had taught her, advancing in silence. Sudden motion or sounds would send her prey running. If this one got away, she wouldn't have time to approach another.

The antelope lowered its head to nibble at the grass. It was young, but she knew that it could easily outrun her. If it bounded away, she would return empty-handed.

Coming to a standstill, Abeke eased an arrow to the string of her bow. As she pulled it back, the bow creaked. The antelope abruptly looked up. The arrow flew true, skewering the beast's heart and lungs from the side. The antelope staggered only briefly before collapsing.

This antelope would matter to Abeke's village. The drought had made food scarce, and since it showed no sign of relenting, every morsel counted. Abeke knelt beside the fallen animal and spoke in a soft voice. "I'm sorry for taking your life, friend. Our village needs your meat. I got in

close and made a clean shot so you wouldn't suffer. Please forgive me."

Abeke glanced at the bright sky. The sun had moved more than she had realized. How long had she stalked her prey? Fortunately, she had found game that was small enough to carry. Abeke slung the antelope over her shoulders and started home.

The sun glared down at the baked, brown plain. The brush was dry and brittle, the shrubs withered and thirsty. A few lonely baobab trees stood in the distance, trunks thick, branches sprawling, blurred by shimmering ripples of heat.

Abeke kept her eyes and ears open. People were not the prey of choice for big cats, but that became less certain when food grew scarce. And big cats were not the only dangerous animals roaming the Niloan savannah. Anyone who ventured beyond the village palisade took a risk.

The farther Abeke walked, the heavier the antelope seemed. But she was tall for her age, and had always been strong, and she was excited to show her prize to her father. She tried to ignore the hot sun.

In her village, the men normally did the hunting. Women rarely ventured out alone. What a surprise this antelope would be! What a perfect way to commemorate her eleventh nameday.

Her sister, Soama, might be more beautiful. She might sing and dance better. She might weave better. She might even be a more gifted artisan.

But she had never made a kill.

Just over a year ago, Soama had presented the village

with a beaded tapestry on her eleventh nameday, depicting herons in flight over a pond. Many had remarked that it was the most impressive work they had seen from a young artist. But could they eat it in a famine? Would the beaded pond cure their thirst? Would the fake herons ease the pains of their hunger?

Abeke could not resist a smile. To her knowledge, no child had ever brought game as a nameday gift. Did the village need another decorative jar? To hold what water? Her gift would serve a purpose.

To avoid being spotted by the lookouts, Abeke approached her village stealthily. She entered how she had exited—through the damaged slats in the side of the wall facing the ravine. There was some tricky climbing involved, made no easier by the carcass on her shoulders, but Abeke succeeded.

Time was short. Ignoring the stares of her neighbors, Abeke hurried to her home. Like most of the other dwellings in her village, her rondavel had a round base, with stone walls and a conical thatched roof. When she burst inside, she found Soama waiting, looking gorgeous in an orange wrap and a beaded scarf. Abeke was not bad-looking herself, but had long ago lost the contest of beauty to her sister. In any case, she favored more practical clothing, and braids that could be tied back.

“Abeke!” Soama said. “Where have you been? Does Father know you’re back?”

“I went hunting,” Abeke explained proudly, the antelope still resting on her shoulders. “Alone.”

“You went outside? Past the gate?”

“Where else would I get an antelope?”

Soama put a brown hand over her eyes. “Abeke, why must you be so strange? You vanished. Father was worried! You’re late for your bonding ritual.”

“It’ll be all right,” Abeke assured her sister. “I’ll hurry. I’m not as fussy as you. Nobody will complain once they see my fine kill.”

Behind Abeke, the door opened. She turned and looked up at her father, a tall man, lean and muscular, with a shaved head. His eyes were not friendly. “Abeke! Chinwe told me you had returned. I was preparing a group to go search for you.”

“I wanted to offer a fine nameday gift,” Abeke explained. “I brought home this antelope.”

Breathing heavily, her father closed his eyes. He could barely keep control of his tone. “Abeke. Today is important. You are late. You are covered in dust and blood. Your disappearance has put the village in an uproar. Have you no sense? Have you no dignity?”

Abeke withered inside, her pride dissolving, her happiness spoiling. For a moment she could find no reply. Tears threatened to fall. “But . . . I came to no harm. You know how well I hunt. This was a surprise.”

Her father shook his head. “This was selfishness. Wrongheadedness. You cannot offer the antelope as your nameday gift! It is evidence of your misbehavior. What would it say about you? About us? What lesson will it teach other children? You will offer the jar you made.”

“But the jar is ugly!” Abeke said desperately. “An ape could make a better one. I have no talent there.”

“You make no effort there,” her father said. “Returning alive with a kill shows skill, but it also shows poor

judgment. We will discuss a punishment later. Make yourself ready. I will go tell the others that we will have your bonding ritual after all. Let Soama help you. If you would look to her example, you would disgrace us less.”

Abeke felt desolate. “Yes, Father.”

After her father left, Abeke unslung the antelope from her shoulders and set it down. Now that she was paying attention, she saw that her father was right—she was covered in dust and blood. She stared flatly at her fine kill. It had become a trophy of shame.

Abeke could barely restrain her tears. Today was supposed to be her day! Her one day. Everything was always about Soama. How thoughtful she was. How lovely. How talented. Today Abeke would drink the Nectar of Ninani. Would she call a spirit animal? Probably not. But today she became a woman. A true citizen of the village. And she had wanted to contribute a special gift.

Abeke wished for her mother. Her mother had understood her better than anyone. But her mother had never been strong, and had been taken by sickness.

Finally surrendering, Abeke started to weep.

“No time for that,” Soama ordered. “You’re late, and you look bad enough already.”

Gritting her teeth, Abeke fought her emotions. Did she want her sister to see her cry? “What should I do?”

Soama crossed to her and wiped the tears from her cheeks. “On second thought, maybe you should cry. We don’t have enough water to wash you.”

“I’m done crying.”

“Let’s get you clean.”

Abeke became as passive as a doll. She didn’t complain

about the scratchy brushes or the barely damp cloth. She didn't offer any opinions about her outfit or her accessories. Abeke let Soama arrange everything, and tried not to look at her antelope.

When Abeke emerged, she found the whole village waiting. After all, today was her day. Starting at her door, everyone stood in two long lines forming a pathway. Abeke had looked forward to this. It had been fun to do it for others.

Her father stared at her sternly—as did most of the other men. Some of the women observed her with disgust, others with pity. A few of her younger acquaintances snickered.

Abeke walked between the people of her village, keenly aware of how she had disappointed them. She wished she could run away and get eaten by a lion.

Instead, she clutched the awful jug at her side, held her head high, and kept walking. The wind had risen, blowing dust. A cloud muted the sun. Abeke did not smile. She kept her expression neutral.

Abeke followed the winding path of people. After she passed, the lines behind her collapsed as everyone followed her to her destination.

Up ahead, Abeke spotted Chinwe. Standing beyond the end of the path, she wore the green cloak only brought out for bonding rituals, draped casually over one shoulder. The tattoo of her wildebeest was visible on her thin, bare leg.

As Abeke approached, Chinwe started chanting. The villagers echoed each phrase using the old tribal language. Abeke didn't know what most of the words

meant, and neither did the others, but it was tradition.

When Abeke reached Chinwe, she knelt, feeling the gritty dirt beneath her bare knees. Still chanting, Chinwe dipped a small bowl into a large vessel and gazed down at Abeke. She didn't look angry or disapproving. She looked the same as she did during any bonding ritual—relaxed, and maybe a little bored.

Chinwe offered the bowl and Abeke accepted it. There was only a little fluid at the bottom, colorless like water, but thicker. She drank it. The Nectar tasted like unheated soup, the kind her mother used to make with crushed nuts. It was sweeter, but otherwise strikingly similar. The taste brought tears to Abeke's eyes.

Handing the bowl back, Abeke looked up at Chinwe curiously. Had that really been the Nectar? Or had Chinwe replaced the Nectar with root-and-nut soup? Chinwe took the bowl from Abeke and kept chanting.

Abeke felt unsteady, sort of dizzy and charged. Did everyone have this reaction? Her senses reached wide. She caught the vivid smell of rain on the wind. She could single out each individual chanting voice, and could tell who was off pitch. She could even hear her father and her sister.

The sky rumbled and darkened. The chanting broke off as everyone looked upward. Only once had Abeke seen a spirit animal called. Hano had done it, the grandnephew of the old Rain Dancer. Abeke had been six at the time, but she didn't recall any thunder. A soft glow had appeared behind Hano, and an anteater had ambled out of the radiance.

There was nothing soft about this light. A dazzling column blazed into existence, more intense than a bonfire, casting long shadows around the village. Several people shrieked. When the light disappeared, a leopard remained.

Buzzing from head to toe, Abeke stared in wonder. The leopard was large and sleek, almost the size of a lion. Her glossy hide was flawless. Out in the wild, standing this close to such a cat would have been the last thing Abeke ever did.

Nobody spoke. Muscles churning under her pelt, the great leopard walked to Abeke with liquid grace, and nuzzled her leg. Upon contact, the charge throughout Abeke's body vanished.

Acting on reflex, Abeke coiled slightly. The village suddenly seemed foreign and confining. She needed to get away! What if she jumped? She had the impression that if she desired, she could spring onto the nearest rooftop. She wanted to run free on the savannah, to prowl and hunt and climb.

The leopard rubbed against her hip and brought her back from the bewildering rush of instincts. Abeke straightened, hardly able to believe what was happening. The animal beside her could kill her with a single bite.

"It looks like Uraza," a child said, breaking the silence.

The comment started a wave of murmurs. The leopard prowled a few paces away from Abeke, almost as if uninterested, but then looked back. The cat did look like Uraza! She even had those legendary violet eyes, flashy as amethysts. But that was impossible. People didn't summon leopards. Cheetahs maybe, but never leopards or lions, let alone leopards with violet eyes.

Thunder grumbled overhead, and rain began to fall. What started gently soon became a downpour. People tilted their heads skyward, mouths open, arms extended. The crowd offered up laughter and joyful exclamations. A hand gripped Abeke's wrist. It was Chinwe. She wore a rare smile. "I believe we have found our new Rain Dancer."

The old Rain Dancer had died more than two years ago. Rain had not fallen on the village of Okaihee since. A few little storms had come close, but not a drop had landed within their walls. Several of the reliable wells had dried up. There had been much debate about how they would break the curse.

"A Rain Dancer?" Abeke marveled.

"It would be difficult to argue against it," Chinwe said.

Abeke's father approached, eyeing the leopard warily. "We should get indoors."

Abeke squinted at him through the downpour. "Can you believe this?"

"Truly, I cannot." He seemed distant. Was he still angry with her?

"Your daughter has ended our drought," Chinwe said.

"So it would appear."

"And she has summoned a leopard. Perhaps *the* leopard."

Her father nodded pensively. "The lost guardian of Nilo. What does this mean, Chinwe?"

"I don't know," Chinwe said. "It goes against . . . I'll have to consult someone who sees more deeply."

Her father considered the leopard. "Is it safe?"

Chinwe shrugged. “As safe as any wild thing can be. It’s her spirit animal.”

Her father regarded Abeke, droplets bombarding his bald head. “The rain is making up for lost time. Come.”

Jogging after her father, her fancy wrap soaked, Abeke tried to understand why he seemed displeased. “Are you disappointed?” she ventured.

He stopped and gripped her shoulders, heedless of the rain. “I am confounded. I should be happy that you summoned an animal. But you have called a leopard! And not just any leopard – one that resembles our legendary guardian. In good ways and bad, you have always been different. And now this tops all of it! Will your beast bring good or evil upon you? Upon us? I don’t know what to think.”

The leopard gave a low growl, not terribly threatening, but not pleased either. Abeke’s father turned and led the way to their home. The leopard followed behind. When they reached the front door, they found a stranger waiting. He wore Euran clothing – boots, trousers, and a lavish blue cloak with the hood raised against the rain. The hood obscured his face.

Abeke’s father stopped near him. “Who are you?”

“I’m called Zerif,” the man replied in a lively voice. “I journeyed here from afar. Your daughter has accomplished the impossible, as was foretold weeks ago by Yumaris the Inscrutable, one of the wisest women in all of Erdas. What happened today will reshape the world. I’m here to help.”

“Then, enter,” her father said. “I am Pojalo.”

The three of them went through the doorway. The leopard followed smoothly.

Soama awaited them, her outfit damp but not soaked.

She must have hurried indoors. “There it is,” she said, cautious eyes on the leopard. “Am I dreaming?”

“Isn’t she amazing?” Abeke said, hoping her sister would be impressed. The leopard briefly sniffed the room, then crouched beside Abeke. Stooping, Abeke stroked the damp fur, not minding the smell of it.

“I don’t feel safe,” Soama said. She looked to her father for help. “Must it be indoors with us?”

“She belongs with me,” Abeke replied immediately.

The stranger lowered his hood. He was middle-aged, with light brown skin and a neatly sculpted beard that only covered the end of his chin. “Perhaps I can help. This must all feel confusing. When you awoke today, Abeke, you could not have expected to alter the world’s destiny.”

“Where are you from, Zerif?” Pojalo asked.

“A traveler like me hails from all corners,” Zerif replied.

“Are you a Greencloak?” Abeke felt he had the confidence of a Greencloak, if not the garment.

“I am one of the Marked, but I do not wear the green cloak. I’m affiliated with them, but I concentrate on matters relating to the Great Beasts. Have you heard talk of the battles in southern Nilo?”

“Only rumors,” Pojalo said. “Foreign invaders. Our concerns of late have involved water and food.”

“These rumors are the groans of a dam about to burst,” Zerif said. “War will soon overtake not only all of Nilo, but all of Erdas. The Fallen Beasts are returning. Your daughter summoned one of them. This places her at the center of the conflict.”

Pojalo turned toward the leopard with alarm. “We thought it looked like . . .”

“Not just looks like,” Zerif corrected. “Abeke has summoned Uraza.”

“How . . . ?” Soama whispered, eyes wide and frightened.

“*How* is unanswerable,” Zerif said. “What she does now is the only question. I offer my assistance. You must act swiftly. This leopard will earn Abeke many enemies.”

“What do you suggest?” Pojalo asked. “She is our new Rain Dancer, and is much needed.”

“Her power,” Zerif stated somberly, “will bring much more than rain.”

Abeke frowned. This stranger Zerif clearly had plans for her, and her father seemed eager to hear him. Did he want to be rid of her? Would he act so eager if Soama had summoned this leopard?

Zerif rubbed his facial hair with two fingers. “We have much to do. First things first—you may have noticed that Uraza appears edgy. I suggest you either give the leopard the dead antelope, or else separate them.”