

ASPIRIT ANIMALS™

TALES OF THE
GREAT BEASTS

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Uraza





THE FIRST GREENCLOAK

By Gavin Brown

VIOLET EYES GLEAMED IN THE DARK. THE ENORMOUS CAT glided under red acacia trees, a shadow outlined by dim moonlight. Uraza sniffed the wind. The scent of prey was on the air. But it was not the antelopes, deer, or wildebeests that she hunted for food. No, this was the ugly scent of men, polluting her hunting grounds with their stink. Filling her peaceful night with their coarse songs and flickering fires. Waddling across her lands with their ungainly two-legged walk.

Uraza was twice the height of a normal leopard, with blinding speed and the ferocity of a tornado. She was not just a normal predator. She was a Great Beast, one of the fifteen who had walked Erdas since the earliest days.

She crested a hill, looking down across the savanna at the small group clustered around a campfire. More foreigners, with their metal helmets and swords, and their destructive habits. The predators of Nilo had learned to stay clear of her hunting grounds. Only thick, prideful men insisted on straying in. Generally the locals honored her, showing her the respect and admiration due a Great Beast. But even they had become more insolent in recent days.

A delegation of elders from the eastern villages had come last week, begging for her assistance. “Great Uraza, beautiful queen of the savanna,” their leader had entreated her. “Please help us fight these foreigners. They attacked without warning, betraying many years of peace. We need your aid to drive them from Nilo.”

Uraza had snarled at them, chasing them across the river marking the boundary of her hunting grounds. Who did they think she was? One of their village dogs, to be ordered around when they needed her? One of their precious spirit animals, to be forced into a life of cohabitation with them? This was just a conflict between two human tribes. And humans needed to deal with their own problems. Let them appeal to a soft-hearted Great Beast like Ninani, who enjoyed meddling in everyone else’s business.

All Uraza cared about was that none of them entered her hunting grounds. The camp below her had been made in her territory, so those humans would pay. She prowled forward, her keen ears picking up their conversation as she advanced.

“Samilia ordered us to scout out the hunting grounds. I’d rather be ripped up by a giant leopard than come back

to her empty-handed,” one of them was saying.

“I heard stories at the last village,” another one answered. “She’s massive and vicious. She doesn’t even let the locals enter. They say she’s so large that she can eat a man in two bites. If we go in there, we’re as good as dead.”

Uraza’s teeth gleamed in the darkness as she smiled. Perhaps that one would be suffered to live, if only to spread tales of her glory to the rest of the foreigners. The huge cat waited a moment, until the watchman posted at the edge of the firelight looked away. Then she charged forward. He turned back and stared at her in slack-jawed shock as she rocketed into the light of the fire. He went down with one swipe of her claws.

The night erupted in screams and shouts. Some of the soldiers panicked, but others grabbed swords and shields and advanced on her. Uraza simply laughed, a deep rumble booming across the savanna. She leaped at them, extending her claws and batting aside the steel as they swung it. One she raked across the face with her claws, another she sent careening with a thrust from her shoulder.

Uraza crashed through the camp, slashing tents and sending pots and pans falling into the mud.

“Please!” one of the soldiers said, throwing up his hands in surrender as she bore down on him. Uraza leaned in close, able to smell the fear that she saw in his wide eyes. She snarled, using a single claw to draw a cut across his chest.

“Go,” she rumbled at the pathetic man. “Cross the river, and leave my hunting grounds forever. Tell your people that anyone else who enters my borders will end their journey in my belly.”

The man nodded, face completely drained of color.

“Now go!” Uraza roared.

The man fled into the night, immediately followed by his companions. She heard them stumbling through the dark long after she could no longer see them. Uraza kicked a massive clod of dirt onto the fire and slipped back into the night.

Half an hour later, she sniffed the air and growled with satisfaction. The stink of humans no longer clung to the air.



For the next week, Uraza thought that the foreigners had learned their lesson. The sweet smell of distant fires reached her when the breezes blew westward, but no humans violated her borders. Then, on the ninth day, as she stalked a herd of gazelles across the grassy highveld, Uraza’s nose once again caught the smell of invaders on the wind. She reluctantly turned from her prey and made her way down to the savanna.

She circled around the group at a distance to get upwind of them, wary of so many. They had crossed the Kwangani River and were already well into her hunting grounds. This was a crowd of humans, but also many other animals. Coyotes, dingoes, wallabies, kangaroos, snakes, and several others. And there was another smell with them – something sour and unnatural. It was nothing that Uraza could recall having encountered before, even with her thousands of years of memory.

She pulled up short as she peered over a small hillock to determine the best route of attack. She caught a slight

movement out of the corner of her eye, but pretended not to notice. Instead, she looked over the hill and tensed, as if to charge forward. Then, with no warning, she leaped to the side.

The two figures hiding in the grass were caught by surprise, and Uraza effortlessly brushed aside the green cloak they were hiding under and pinned each of them with one of her front paws. They struggled instinctively, but she gave a low growl and they immediately stopped.

Under her left paw was a vervet monkey, looking up at her sheepishly with its pinched black face and gray fur. But the monkey didn't concern her. Nearly crushed under her right paw was a boy, still gripping a spear in his right hand. She leaned in close, sniffing him and staring into his eyes.

The boy and the monkey had been hiding under a green cloak the same color as the grasses of the savanna, and the boy was covered from head to toe in mud. Despite herself, Uraza smiled. The mud would have locked in his scent, allowing him to stalk the savanna unobserved, even by humans accompanied by spirit animals with a strong sense of smell.

“What are you doing here?” Uraza demanded quietly. “You wear the goatskin of the Vendani, and know how to hunt the grasslands. So you must know that it is forbidden to trespass on my hunting grounds.”

The boy gulped nervously, but then looked her straight in the eyes. “Yes, I know the laws of the savanna. But they don't matter now. I'm here to save you.”

Uraza rocked back on her haunches, shaking with laughter. “You're just a boy with a spear. Perhaps I'll spare

you, since you're clearly insane. A Great Beast doesn't need a little kitten like you to help her."

But the boy looked back calmly. "I'm not a boy. I endured the Nights of Fire and summoned Omika, my spirit animal. I'm a man, a warrior. I'm Tembo of the Vendani – and I'm going to save you, Great Beast or not."

Uraza pulled her paws back, and the monkey jumped around the boy's neck, hissing at her. "Very well, little warrior. I know enough of the Vendani – the word means 'goat thief' in many languages. How is a goat thief possibly going to save a Great Beast?"

The boy bristled. He looked her in the eye. "The Conquerors below aren't here to hunt your game. They're here to hunt you. To capture you and to steal something from you."

Uraza growled, and the boy's monkey dove to hide behind his back. Tembo himself didn't flinch. "How do you know this?" she asked.

"One year ago, they offered my people a truce, but on the first night after the peace was made, they took us by surprise. They torched our village. They slaughtered our goats, every one of them."

The massive leopard knew what that must have meant to the boy's tribe. The Vendani were goat herders. They ate goat meat, goat milk, and goat cheese. They wore goatskins. Vast herds of goats were their pride, and their wealth. The Vendani were renowned throughout Nilo as fierce warriors who would defend their herds from thieves, jackals, and even lions.

"Most of us surrendered on that day. But I swore that my people would be free. I am part of a small resistance.

Three days ago, I snuck into the camp of the men below to steal their supplies. I overheard them bragging that they were coming into your territory to capture you. They hope to find something hidden in your hunting grounds.”

Uraza stretched, flexing her muscles. “Human swords and bows are no threat to me.”

Tembo shook his head. “They have some sort of weapon that they think will give them an advantage. Give me time to sneak in again and discover their secret, and then we’ll beat them together.”

Uraza simply laughed at him, sending his monkey scurrying for cover again. “They are arrogant fools. And you are just as much a fool for thinking I need you. Watch me drive them from my lands, and I’ll let you go home to tell stories of the ferocity of the Great Cat of the Grasslands.”

She expected him to continue begging her not to go, but the boy just gave her a long look, then shrugged. “If you want to fight alone, I won’t stop you.”

The cat reached out a paw and pinned him to the ground again, letting her claws come out just enough to press dangerously into Tembo’s neck.

“I’m the greatest predator on the continent. Better even than that miserly fool, Cabaro. I don’t need your help. I don’t care for your kind, and I will have nothing to do with your petty conflicts.”

Tembo just raised an eyebrow as the claw dug into his flesh. “Are you trying to convince me, or to convince yourself?”

Uraza pushed him away, sending the young warrior rolling into the tall grass. “Watch,” she thundered, and

leaped over the hill, then charged down the grass toward the invaders.

In the camp below, there were shouts of alarm. The huge leopard let out a roar that shook the grasslands. Her body flew, legs surging with ancient strength. She was fury in the flesh, and she smashed through the first Conquerors without slowing. She dove into a knot of them, sending humans and spirit animals flying. Swords barely nicked her fur, and arrows felt like tiny pinches. *Let that foolish kitten on the hill watch how a Great Beast protects her territory*, she thought.

The center of the camp was emptied in moments, with most Conquerors fleeing and those who stayed falling easily to her claws. The sour scent was stronger here, and as a woman with an ax charged her, she noticed that its edge was coated with a sticky black substance.

Poison? Uraza smiled, baring her fangs. That was their secret weapon? Humans had tried to poison Great Beasts before. Arsenic, hemlock extract, plagues – it didn't matter. They were the rulers of the wild, and they were immune to poison and sickness. She batted the ax away effortlessly with a paw, and sent the Conqueror reeling with a sweep of her tail.

There were shouts from the grasslands outside of the camp, where the Conquerors were re-forming. Uraza stalked out of the camp to meet them, slashing a few tents and leaving them collapsing behind her as she went.

The foreigners had formed a shield wall, a barrier of tall steel shields bristling with spears. Uraza advanced, and arrows flew from behind the wall. They mostly bounced harmlessly off of her, but occasionally one would dig into

her hide. There was a tingle with each puncture, but the sensation was no worse than a slight prick.

She surged forward, trying to push their spears aside with her paws, but there were too many. Uraza leaped to the left, and the Conquerors pivoted in unison, spinning the wall to face her. She jumped back to her right, but they hustled to adjust, keeping the forest of spears pointed at her. She backed up slowly, growling.

Then she charged, paws thundering on the ground as she gained speed. The soldiers ahead of her dug in, lowering their spears and bracing against their shields. More arrows flew at her, buffeting her like a wind of thorns. She grinned, showing them the white of her fangs. She could see their eyes go wide, but the spears stayed pointed straight at her.

Just moments before she reached the spears, Uraza leaped. She launched into the air, sailing high over the shields. Only one of the enemies managed to raise his spear in time, and it raked along her side. She felt a burning as the black substance coating its blade rubbed into the wound.

The leopard landed among the archers, sending them sprawling. With a few slashes from her claws, more Conquerors fell before her. But something was wrong. She leaped backward and felt a strange weakness in her legs. More arrows thudded into her at close range, each bringing with it a burst of the burning sensation from the black substance.

Uraza backed away slowly, her muscles quivering feverishly. Something was sapping her strength, weakening her with every passing moment. Now the Conquerors

advanced, forming a ring with their spears pointing in at her. This was how tribes like the Vendani hunted lions, not a Great Beast like her. This was an insult.

“I am Uraza, undisputed queen of the grasslands,” she bellowed. “You will leave my lands, or I will kill every one of you.”

The leader of the Conquerors motioned, and the circle tightened. She was a tall, imposing woman, with teeth sharpened into points that matched the serpentine crest on her helmet and the lizard curling around her neck. “Be a good kitty, and lie down nice and easy,” she said.

Uraza roared and charged forward, but she was greeted by a cluster of spearpoints and was forced back. The poison-tipped weapons left several new wounds in her coat. She knew that a Great Beast’s body would adapt to this substance, but it would take time. That wouldn’t help her now. Her feline instincts told her that she didn’t have the strength to defeat this many. She turned to run, but they had her surrounded.

As her vision became blurry, the circle tightened. She gave a feeble roar and attempted to charge for the weakest point in the ring, but her legs buckled. The enemy advanced, spears lowered and dripping with the black poison.

She lashed out, but the more weapons pierced her, the more the burning grew, coursing through her legs and making her shoulder muscles spasm. She fell down into the grass, and struggled to stand again. Her legs refused to respond. She could do nothing but snap her jaws at the humans.

The last thing she saw before a curtain of darkness

descended was the Conqueror woman's crocodile grin as she advanced.

