

WAR OF THE ANIMALS

Book 1: *The Shut Face of Thunder*

Jonathan DeCoteau

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Animus Nor Books

waroftheanimals.com

Paperback ISBN [979-8-9885704-0-0](#)

Ebook ISBN [979-8-9885704-1-7](#)

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For God and family

Other Books in Jonathan DeCoteau's War of the Animals Series

War of the Animals Book 2: Cry of the Gods

A generation after the events of *The Shut Face of Thunder*, Thraxis strikes. The anaconda queen resurrects long-dead species of dinosaurs to create an army that allows her to rule the seven continents of Animus like her great ancestors once did. Yet, Thraxis is not concerned only with power. The serpent queen issues a dire warning to the animal world: all animals must unite under her rule before the whale god King Blu attacks and kills them all. Thraxis confronts the whale god, a creature so powerful that none have seen him and survived. Just as the animals fight to overthrow Thraxis, the whale god breaches for the first time in thousands of years. War is inevitable.

War of the Animals Book 3: The Crown of Crowns

After the events of *Cry Of The Gods*, King Blu, the whale god, pronounces the sentence for the land animals: total annihilation. King Blu plans to make an ocean world in the land animals' stead. A new generation of animal lords fights King Blu in a seemingly hopeless battle. Continent after continent falls to the whale god until a new revelation arises: King Blu is not the only god among the animals. The animal lords must race to resurrect a legendary deity to stand any chance of dethroning King Blu, an unbeatable god of death who sends storms, destruction, and tsunamis merely by breaching the waters. As the final war of the first generation of awakened animals rages, all of Animus hangs in the balance.

Coming in 2024:

War of the Animals Book 4: Azaz, King of Kings

In the years after *The Great Awakening*, a young cub witnesses human hunters kill his mother. The cub attacks and kills his mother's murderers. Humans capture the surprisingly vicious cub, study and torture him. After a single act of mercy, the cub escapes. Vowing revenge, the grown bear leads the first assaults on humanity, defeating bear clan kings and humans alike until there is only one: Azaz, King of Kings.

PROLOGUE

The future is the past is the future, Snow Prophet, the ancient snowy owl of the great northern regions, scrawled on the holy tablets.

Never before had the animals written their tale—that of their rise, of mankind’s fall. Never before had it existed anywhere but in the rolling melodic songs of whales in twilight seas or in the cackles of geese flying overhead, towards the great rising sun. It was the song every awakened animal told its children. And it was more than a song. It was a warning. *Be not proud, animals of the earth*, it began. *Every wing that soars falters; every leg that runs upon the earth one day becomes it. What falls, rises. What rises, falls. The future is the past is the future is the past...*

TABLET 1:
THE *RAPSYS*

CHAPTER 1

Kywy-Tolyn

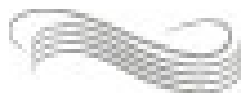
Nunavut, Canada

Moon Shadow shook the harshest of the white winds off with an afflicted whimper. Her paws—icicles lined with nails—wincing in their impending numbness. Still, Moon Shadow ran forward. In the distant echo of dreams, she remembered what it was like to live in the world before the end of worlds. An illegally smuggled Arctic white wolf, Moon Shadow knew the love of her former masters before the new age. The tiniest of the humans reminded her of her own pups, tiny balls of white fur that she hoped to cuddle until it was their time to hunt. Yet, the same masters took her pups from her, putting them up for the highest bidder to steal. Even after seeing more of the great North American continent than she had ever dreamed of in her life of relative leisure, Moon Shadow had seen no sign of her pups. She wondered if they were now grown with pups of their own. In her heart, she knew it was unlikely that they survived *The Rapsys*, or Opening of Eyes, as the street dogs of her former town rather poetically referred to this massive change that shook the very marrow of their bones.

While Moon Shadow considered herself a peaceful wolf by nature, a *woowen-ken*, or one who walks with nature, she had killed. Before her blue eyes locked on their prey, a rather pushy raccoon that threatened her masters with snarls and claws had its neck torn asunder in her mighty jaws. The occasional wild cat that crossed her path had fared no better. But when Moon Shadow killed, it was never in fear. It was always with purpose. The *Harkening*, or Great Slaughter, had come upon her with more robustness than the pups that ever so briefly sought her milk before they disappeared. Trusted masters everywhere turned their pets into authorities, and from even the most distant howls, whinnies, neighs, and hisses, Moon Shadow knew what the *rulku*, or killers, were capable

of. Her eyes met her master's and even as their little ones cried, Moon Shadow knew. Her fur stood on end, and in a brief moment, she saw the eyes of the *rulku* in her masters. She snarled, biting hands that no longer fed her. One of her former masters, the mother, no less—the one who, unlike her, had not lost her pups—screamed at the authorities. They turned their sights on her. Moon Shadow ran through the killing fields, making eye contact with the vacuous eyes of a falling prize filly as it crashed to the earth. She saw the ravens and vultures circling before flying off. And she heard the thunder of the crackling sticks the *rulku* held before she felt one of her legs give out in wordless pain beneath her. Had the filly not fallen when it did, had the whimpering, betrayed house dogs not collapsed behind her, the *rulku* would have killed Moon Shadow then and there.

But even the least awakened of the street dogs knew of the term *Ozu*, the great binding spirit that held all of nature at balance, deciding which dog lived and which dog died. *Ozu* was with Moon Shadow that coldest of nights, and so she ran, gaining what food and wisdom she could from the edge of old towns that were death to any dog that dared enter unawares. The street dogs spoke, in vibrant, guttural growls, of an army forming in The Great White North. They spoke of how The *Rapsys* came with the winds of the tundra, of how the wolves, deer, eagles, and hawks, were gathering, along with the sea creatures, the otters and whales, of how all the animals were gathering, in a secret meeting with a strange creature, Nurvlyn, a *rulku* with eyes like theirs and the wisdom of the flowers. Moon Shadow did not know if this was but legend, but she was the only street dog with enough youth and stamina for such a quest, the only one who was not starving, taking what meat from the *rulku* bones she could feast on. Her barks had a rhythm to them, the other street dogs said, that showed wisdom born of pain and experience. And so, Moon Shadow kept running, the first American dog to reach the wilds of the great northern tundra, asking always, how much farther to Nurvlyn, how much farther must she go in the Arctic snow.



Kywy-Tolyn

Nunavut, Canada

Sky Death circled over the near frozen animal half-buried in the snow. His sense of smell was acute, but lately his sense of hearing had opened up as never before. Bathing in the sun of the South, Sky Death, an old turkey vulture with a

wrinkled red head, a powerful, blood-stained beak, and claws of iron, had felt the same inkling he imagined drove this domestic, or *sss-hress*, as his kind called it, into the wild. After flying over two hundred miles from carrion that littered the northern climes, Sky Death had been grazed by bullets smattering his right wing, an easy target with a span of over three feet. The old vulture had a knack for survival, however, and lived to feed on the bodies of the *rulku*, as vultures called humans, to avenge himself. His committee of vultures, in the new speak, nominated him to leave their kettle to seek out answers as he entered his twenty-fourth hunting season, as vultures now counted time, and thus would not be able to live up to his fearsome name much longer.

In slow and steady circles, Sky Death descended upon the mass of fur, camouflaged as it was in the white of the snow. His nostrils flared and his beak readied, but the moving to and fro of the rib cage of the *sss-hress* kept him at a distance. Sky Death had a knack for finding the freshest kills, but until what he heard other animals call *The Harkening*, he had never made a fresh kill. The men his kettle had surrounded had been the first. Two wayward bullets later, Sky Death had fed enough to know that these *rulku* were still more dangerous than any prey he'd ever seen.

A quick, jolting growl, and the *sss-hress* was up on its legs, its teeth bared as it readied itself to pounce.

Sky Death spread his wings to their full span and hissed, vomiting parts of men at the wolf the way all turkey vultures vomited when threatened. Just as quickly as this defense tactic kicked in, the instinct left Sky Death and he and the poised *sss-hress* stood facing each other, circling, ready to pounce.

For the first time in millennia, the turkey vulture did not flee, and the Arctic wolf did not pounce. The two stared at each other, arching and cocking their heads, trying to find a common language.

Moon Shadow looked over the vulture's spittle, and instantly Moon Shadow and Sky Death had a common alphabet: their dread of mankind.

There is a meeting of all animals of the North, Sky Death said in cackles and hisses.

Sky Death scratched with a claw at the earth, trying to draw a line to illustrate his point.

In a moment, however, the nanotechnology that linked the two once fearsome rivals synchronized. A quick, makeshift language, the *Osine*, formed. It was unfamiliar to either animal, yet they understood, as if on a genetic level.

"The *rulku*," Moon Shadow said, "have betrayed us. They have killing fields filled with the bones of trusted companions, all laid to waste, slaughtered not for food but for wrath."

Sky Death balanced his head to show that he was not surprised. “I have flown more miles than a *sss-hress*, than a *rulku* animal, can run,” he said. “It’s the same everywhere across the continent. After the great change, animal turned on human and human upon animal, and a great annihilation has begun. I have been chosen from my kettle—”

“—And I from my pack. But I don’t know where I’m going. I just feel drawn north.”

In the midst of the snow, a clan of brown bears growled and tore through the brush. Sky Death motioned with a wing towards the herds upon herds of variegated animal species on the same trek.

“Nurvlyn,” Sky Death said, “as you call him, the great wizard of the North. He has summoned us all to meet. The birds of the air are chirping. War is at hand.”

“Who is this Nurvlyn?” Moon Shadow asked. “Why does he hold such power?”

“He was one of them, one of the *hress*, one of the *rulku*,” Sky Death hissed out, fluttering his wings for emphasis, “but now is part of everything—part man, part ape, part tree, part earth, part sky. He knows of the magic of the *rulku*, and he knows how to wield it against them.”

“But a *rulku* helping us? Who is to say it’s not another slaughter?”

Sky Death drew in a deep breath and thought the question over. “To beat the enemy, we must first know the enemy,” he said, with another flutter of his wings. “If he offers us warmth and food and wisdom, I say we have little choice if we are to win the war ahead.”

Moon Shadow’s eyes gazed momentarily upon the snow, as if in assent. “Come now,” Sky Death said. “Before you join us, you must eat.”

Moon Shadow stared ahead and then said, in a stream of barks, “But what can I eat now, now that I know what it means to see so many animals killed?”

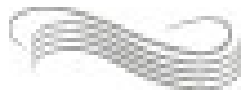
“*Rulku*. The passing bears killed a few of the human killing gangs.” Moon Shadow shook her mane in revulsion.

“It is a nourishing food,” Sky Death said. “And the *rulku* would do the same to us. You must eat. You must survive. Follow me. I will lead you to the kill. We will eat. Then we will join the bears. We will head north. We will find Nurvlyn. And in him, we will find either life or death.”

“*Ozu*,” Moon Shadow said.

“Yes. May The Great Balance guide us all,” Sky Death said.

With that, Sky Death stretched his wings and took to the air. Moon Shadow, still pining for meat she had not feasted on in days, ran after the turkey vulture—behind the clan of bears, farther north than she had ever run.



CHAPTER 2

Zukul-Ryle

Washington, D.C., USA

The woodsman, Hunter Sgt. Rigel Fowler, stood covered in a myriad of brown skins and furs over his uniform, checkered with blood. His ancestry was deep and covered every continent—part Inuit, part Passamaquoddy, part Jewish combat soldier. He had seen the largest rhinos of the Savannah fall beneath him. He had tracked a mountain lion who had at least thirty kills to its name to the top of an enclave in British Columbia and killed the lion and its cubs. In another age, the civilized would think Rigel Fowler barbaric, with his long, black mane and face full of claw scratches and scars. In some ways, he was a throwback to ages of colonial eras long since consigned to dusty history tomes or to Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Instead, the media now heralded his exploits, which were thought to have saved well over one-hundred human lives. Still, deep down, Fowler knew why he decorated himself in skins and furs: not to celebrate his predatory instincts, but to remind himself of the price of this slaughter, of all the lives that he took.

The Little Kitsissut scientists, led by Dr. Ukula Sifa, looked out of place next to the killer, covering their noses at the smell of blood.

Hunter General Wade Brigand, Hunter Sgt. Fowler's commander and the man behind the euthanizing of North American animal populations, made the introductions. Brigand was a lanky, grizzled soldier of mixed ancestry, descended from proud Ashanti warriors turned slaves turned soldiers in the American Civil War and ancient Celtic fighters who killed more than a few Roman legionnaires.

"Dr. Sifa," Hunter General Brigand said, "is here to brief us on the latest research. I thought it might be useful for the good doctor to meet an actual hunter out in the fields. Perhaps each of you can give me some insight into why we haven't put these rabid animals down and ended this by now."

"Partly because," Dr. Sifa said, "these animals are not rabid. They are genetically enhanced. The signals we sent to the nanobots to shut down killed far less of the animals than we thought. After the first wave of deaths, others

survived. It took just over a generation for entire populations to adapt. In some of the young in Greenland and in the Congo, we see signs that nanotechnology has made permanent alterations at a cellular level. In short, it reproduces itself in the next generation, spreading much like a virus does.”

“How many animals are now infected?” Brigand asked.

“Satellites suggested untold millions six weeks ago,” Dr. Sifa said. “Their populations have found ways to block our tagging systems, so we can’t be sure. Every continent has several populations of intelligent animals.”

“What of the antidote?” the hunter general asked Fowler.

Fowler shook his head. “It’s useless,” he said. “These animals are here to stay.”

Dr. Okada, another task force expert taken from civilian life, shook his head. “That can’t be,” he insisted. “Our studies have proven conclusive. The solution neutralizes the nanotechnology, blocking its ability to communicate with neural receptors.”

“Have the animal populations shown any change in behavior?” Brigand asked Fowler.

Fowler shook his head a second time. “Let me ask you something, doctor,” he said to Dr. Okada. “What population of animals did you test your potion on?”

“First generation contaminated animals and their offspring,” Dr. Okada said. “Bears, chimpanzees, dogs, cats—at least a dozen different species.”

“I can tell you this, doctor,” Fowler said. “The animals in the wild are immune.”

Brigand shook his head. “I guess we have little choice. We’ll have to increase the euthanizing programs across the continent.”

Fowler shook his head. “With all due respect, sir,” he said, “the animals have spread word of your killing fields.”

“Spread the word? How could that be?”

“Language,” Fowler said. “Different species can communicate with each other. I don’t know how, but they can.”

“Impossible,” the hunter general said.

“Actually, yes and no,” Dr. Dana Kahr said.

She circled around in her chair until she faced the hunter general directly. “Hunter general,” she added. “You, of all people, should appreciate the efficiency of the original design. Originally, we were hoping to trap pockets of terrorist cells by using their own animal populations against them. In the event that soldiers needed to communicate, we needed to test human subjects as well. These subjects would facilitate communication through the groups by establishing a rudimentary language. In short, the human would serve as the

conduit until nanotechnology could adapt and allow animals to understand for themselves.”

“This technology compromises humans too?” Brigand asked.

Dr. Kahr shook her head. “Not all. It doesn’t affect most humans it comes into contact with,” she said, “but a select few have a blood chemistry unique enough for the nanotechnology to work. We found one such subject in Little Kitsissut. My former subordinate, Nathan Trola.”

“Where is he?”

“Apparently, he adapted to the cold of the inner island,” Dr. Kahr said. “He’s unaccounted for. But if there is any communication going on, he is the key.”

“So, if we kill him, all of this stops?” Hunter General Brigand asked. “Kind of like taking out the queen bee?”

“New populations won’t be able to communicate until the nanotechnology evolves sufficiently,” Dr. Kahr replied. “Something that complex should take years, but we see signs already.”

“So why haven’t we tracked this Nathan Trola yet?” Brigand asked.

“He’s rendered himself untraceable by our systems,” Dr. Kahr said. “What we need is another subject with the same type of blood chemistry, someone who can also take the nanotechnology into the body and survive.”

Dr. Kahr nodded at Hunter Sgt. Rigel Fowler.

“He’s the best soldier I have on the front, doctor, and you want me to risk his death for a science experiment?”

“If he survives,” Dr. Sifa said, “he’ll be able to communicate with Trola and with the animals. He’ll be able to hunt Trola and bring this to an end before the inevitable.”

“Which is?”

“Extinction,” Dr. Okada said. “With entire populations of animals fully genetically modified, humanity wouldn’t stand a chance. We’d be at war with the entire planet.”

“We can slaughter the beasts first,” Brigand said, but even as he spoke the words, his voice broke.

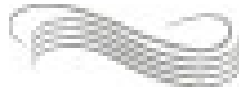
“Hasn’t mankind already visited enough death upon these animals?” Dr. Kahr asked. “Finding and killing Nathan Trola would mean saving not just countless human lives but countless animal lives too.”

Brigand shot a glance at Hunter Sgt. Fowler. “What do you say?”

Fowler shut his eyes. “Give me a night to think it over.”

Brigand nodded and got up. The doctors rose as well. As they talked about the timetable for the surgery, Fowler stared ahead, vacantly. He had killed more animals than he’d ever hoped necessary. Perhaps now, he thought, glancing at

the furs that decorated him, he could atone to the animals; perhaps, he could give life back.



Kywy-Tolyn

Nunavut, Canada

Moon Shadow and Sky Death were the last two to join the great council of the North. Surrounding them in a vast cavern were families of otters, foxes, polar bears, eagles, mountain lions, wolves, muskrat, and mice. Everywhere Moon Shadow's snowy white head looked, there was another creature flying overhead and scurrying underfoot. In the middle, like some Buddha of old, sat a wild man, with golden antlers, covered in what looked to be plant-based fibers, with long scraggly brown hair and eyes of ethereal blue. Swarms of nanobots circled above him, as if on guard. Dirt covered different parts of his body as the man ate of a strange nectar and water before speaking.

"Nurvlyn," a bobcat hissed out.

"That's the great wizard of the North?" Moon Shadow asked.

"I've never set eyes on him," Sky Death cackled back.

Nurvlyn closed his eyes for a moment, meditating. When he opened them again, his eyes glowed brightly, like those of the animals before him.

"Welcome, friends of nature," he said. "I hope that you have had time to enjoy the nectar the bees provided us and the fresh water put out before you. I only wish our reason for meeting could be more fortuitous."

"The *rulku* slaughter us, even our pups," Moon Shadow called out.

"Our people starve," White Claw, king of the polar bears, said. "The man beasts force us from even their food graves, where we feasted before."

"The killing fields go from one end of the horizon to the other," Dasu, lord of the mountain lions, said. "Never have I seen so many cats laid to waste."

"But why?" Pale Ghost, the leader of the mice, asked. "We were one with *Ozu*, the great law of Creation. Now, we are *flekus*, an abomination. We are like the man beasts with poisoned eyes."

"We have ourselves to blame," Sky Death said. "For far too long have we allowed the man beasts, the *rulku*, the true abominations, to take advantage of us. For far too long have they destroyed our homes and polluted our skies. Now they have attacked our very essence and turned us against Mother Nature herself."

“Is it too late to reverse this curse?” Thunder Killer, lord of the bald eagles, asked.

“I’m afraid so,” Nurvlyn said. “My former kind, the *rulku*, uses magic they cannot undo. They act with abandon, as if they rule over the mighty lords of the council themselves. It is not right. It is not *Ozu*. And I left my kind because I am convinced that they will not stop until they kill the entire Earth. They are like children by the river’s edge, skipping in the water until the current eats them whole.”

There was a long pause before Crimson Fang, leader of the coyotes, spoke. “For a long time has animal hunted animal. Now, my pack howls in vengeance. Animal must hunt *rulku*.”

The animals turned to Nurvlyn, who again closed his eyes and meditated. “I wish I had a simple answer,” he said. “I must meet with Methuselah, the wisest of all living things, for advice. But if you seek my counsel, I would say that Crimson Fang is right. The *rulku* do not respect *Ozu*. They only respond to force. But they are cunning killers. To stand up to their magic, you need to stand united. Animal must no longer feast on animal. Instead, you must find a common law, and you must put your differences aside. Like the *rulku*, you must form armies, and you must be prepared to fight until the death. But as when you stalk your prey, timing makes the difference between making a kill and being killed. If you allow the *rulku* to convene, unchallenged, at any point, they will annihilate you and this Earth.”

The animals sighed heavily. “It is not in our nature to kill just to kill,” Pale Ghost said.

“It must be,” Nurvlyn said. “I will counsel you as I can, but this is your fight. My advice to you is to mark your territories, to start by ending the killing fields and driving the *rulku* back. They don’t do as well in the North, so that would be a good place to start. You must speak together to form strategies for attack. And you must reach out to animals the world over. Only if animals stand united will you take back the Earth.”

“Nurvlyn speaks true,” Thunder Killer said. “The *rulku* are as numerous as ant colonies on a hill, and we must protect those who cannot protect themselves. That is why, first, we must have a law for these times, and that law must stand, under punishment of death to all violators. And first among that law is that animals must respect other animals.”

Nurvlyn wrote, etching the laws on the stone wall of the cavern, that all might see.

The Law of Ozu

1. *No animal is above any other animal. Every animal shall have a voice.*
2. *Animal must not kill animal. Plants must be eaten. Only rulku meat is allowed.*
3. *In times of war, the great kings and queens of the animals are the rulers of their clans. Every clan has a vote under the law. No animal lord is greater than any other.*
4. *War is declared only when the majority of the lords say so. All other matters are decided by the council.*
5. *No animal shall render any extinct, not even rulku.*

“We will make a copy of these laws for each of your clans,” Nurvlyn said. “Now, I must go to Methuselah. I must leave you to decide upon your first attack. My advice to you is to make a statement. In your first attack, all *rulku* must die.”

Silver Snake, the otter king, shook his head. “I am afraid of where this line of thinking will take us,” he said. “Still, this is a river whose current already has us by the neck, and there is nowhere else for us to go.”

The animals chirped, growled, and hissed in assent. Then the talk of strategy began.



CHAPTER 3

Zukul-Ryle

Washington, D.C., USA

Fowler sat out by the arboretum, taking in the silence of the trees. Back in civilian garb, he looked among the flowers, out past his property, to the great woods beyond. He wondered how it came to this: how humanity could be given so much and mess it up so badly. To this day, politicians failed to even prioritize legislation on the environment, failed to take the massive steps needed to care for their greatest prize. If the environment were a stock portfolio amassing incremental wealth, it would be checked more frequently than the welfare of the creatures who depended upon humanity for their very survival. And here Fowler was, a soldier, one able to provide for his family, killing the very creatures that intrigued him as a boy. In his younger years on the reservation, Fowler earned his name by studying the migratory patterns of all kinds of wildlife, watching real-life documentaries unfolding before his unwavering eyes. And he could hunt with the best of them, almost as if he knew what the animals were thinking. Now, all these years later, he had no idea, so trapped was he between his roles of hunter, soldier, and nature lover.

So consumed was Fowler with studying the surrounding animals, those that as of yet showed no sign of the coming evolutionary storm, that he didn't feel his wife's presence until her arms were on his shoulders, giving him a nice massage. Fowler placed his hands gently over his wife's. He knew he wasn't supposed to share intel with civilians, but Maria Fowler, a Mexican botanist, was the only living person Fowler had ever grown to fully trust.

"What is it?" Maria asked, looking beyond the arboretum, at the shifting birds beyond.

"War," Fowler said, "on a scale we've never seen."

"I thought they would have killed most of the infected animals now, before the virus spreads to humanity."

Fowler looked up at his wife's eyes. "That's just it, love," he said. "It's not a virus. It's technology gone wrong. Animals are migrating north, even in the dead of winter. They're preparing for an attack. I can feel it in my bones."

Fowler sighed and then continued, “They think I hold the key to stopping the war, but it comes with a price.”

“Killing innocent animals?”

Fowler shook his head. “That price I’ve paid already, too many times,” he said. “I told myself that I was following orders, protecting human lives. And these animal hybrids, they are dangerous.”

“But?”

Maria stopped massaging Fowler’s shoulders, meeting his gaze dead on. “But they want to turn me into one of them. To give me the power to talk to the animals.”

The pain came through more in Fowler’s eyes than in his broken tone. “They want to experiment on you? Absolutely not!”

“But what if it’s the only way? They say my blood chemistry is incredibly rare. What if I don’t do this, and war starts because of it?”

Just then, Julian, Fowler’s toddler boy, wandered in, searching for his mom. Fowler smiled at how amazing a thing a child was and at how reckless the boy could be. Julian was already playing, tearing off plant leaves before Fowler or Maria could stop him. Maria swooped the boy up in her hands, placating him with talks of lunch.

Fowler rose, catching his reflection in the window of the arboretum. At first, he thought nothing of it, until he saw his eyes. He pressed his face closer, seeing around his irises and in the purple light of his veins the very first signs of what he saw in the mountain lions he killed. Fowler started shivering, feeling in the cries of the animals a language he was just beginning to understand.

“*Rulku*,” the crows squawked amongst their own kind. “The murdering apes approach. Watch the fledglings.”

Soon enough, Fowler’s hearing, suddenly more acute, also heard the rumbling of jeep engines.

“Maria!” Fowler called. “Come quickly! Bring Julian! They’ve done something to me, and they’re coming! I don’t have much time.”

Fowler kept speaking words, feeling liquid anger coursing through his veins. Whatever animalistic impulses they integrated into whatever nanotechnology they injected him with amplified. He found himself pounding against stone, readying himself to kill some of the very officers who betrayed him. Yet, ever the soldier, Fowler knew that within moments, the man that he was might already be gone. Even the names of his wife and child might be dead to him.



Kywy-Tolyn

Nunavut, Canada

Outside of Resolute, Nunavut, the Canadian military excavated the mass burial site. It would serve an especially unruly polar bear population that had attacked humans near dumping sites throughout Nunavut. The animals, a range of those infected, from the mighty polar bears to muskoxen to Arctic foxes, all stood ready in cages, awaiting euthanizing and incineration, awaiting their union with the great waves of ash that rose to choke the sky.

“The bodies stretch towards the ocean,” Sky Death said.

“I have flown far,” Thunder Killer, the great eagle, informed White Claw and Sky Death. “Even Snow Prophet, the great snowy owl of the North, says that he sees the same. When the weather permits, he has seen herds of animals getting euthanized. The sparrows in the South say the same.”

“What of the *rulku* defenses?” White Claw asked.

“A dozen men in each excavation site,” Thunder Killer answered. “Easy pickings.”

“The *rulku* are clever with their black magic,” Sky Death warned. “We must be precise. Each contingency of animals must attack at once and then retreat to the North. The great northern herds of muskoxen under Horn Slayer will provide us cover.”

The animal kings and queens, from White Claw to Pale Ghost, from Thunder Killer to Sky Death, gazed at each other before issuing the order.

“What we start now,” White Claw said, “cannot be undone. If we do this, we are at war.”

“We’ve been at war for millennia,” Sky Death said. “We’ve only just become aware of it. If not now, when? If not us, who? The *rulku* run like hungry hyenas threatening to consume Mother Earth. The longer we delay, the more of our brothers and sisters they kill.”

The gigantic head of White Claw fell into a reluctant nod, and the other animals acted in kind.

“Prepare the wild dogs and the wolves,” White Claw ordered Moon Shadow. “You must take out the gunmen. Thunder Killer will support you in the air.”

“I understand,” Moon Shadow said.

Moon Shadow growled back at the wolves and wild dogs behind her.

“Moon Shadow,” Thunder Killer said. “None must survive. If you’re not up

for the kill—”

Moon Shadow shook her great head. “I have lived under the illusion that the *rulku* loved and cared for us long enough,” she said. “I am ready to repay the blood debt of my fallen brothers and sisters, of my pups.”

The wild dogs and wolves howled in assent and were off.

The hunter soldiers’ guns held steady. At least one or two of the advancing wolves fell with a bitter yelp. Moon Shadow still weaved, as did the other wolves and wild dogs, using the snowy ice boulders as cover. As the military hunters readied their weapons, Moon Shadow led a small pack of wolves around and above the cages. She pounced, leading the other wolves who quickly dug their fangs into the napes of exposed necks. Thunder Killer took to the air. He led a flock of myriad birds, from great bald eagles to hawks to owls. They attacked the men from the lookout towers and threw them to the wolves below.

Before the remaining hunters on the perimeters could fire upon any more of the wolves, celebrations of polar bears descended. The polar bears bit the men, creating an entry point for the nanotechnology to spread into the humans’ blood stream and kill them. The muskoxen stampeded any remaining men seeking to run away. They then charged and battered at the great incinerators, cracking the doors, trampling them underfoot. They butted the controls with their great horns, allowing the nanobots to transfer from their skin and fur to the machines, disabling them. In the base headquarters, they could hear the growls of the polar bears, who took out the last of the *rulku*. Sky Vulture descended on the bodies, tearing at them, making sure each was truly dead.

In a frenzy of moments, the battle was over. Moon Shadow, White Claw and Thunder Killer assembled before the cages and enclosures. With his wings spread at full length, Thunder Killer greeted the prisoners. “The day of animal against animal is at an end,” he said. “This day, we join forces against the *rulku* and take back our home. This day, we grant you a release and ask that you join us in the war ahead.” Thunder Killer nodded to Phantom Paw, the fastest and most agile of the Arctic foxes, who went around, undoing the locks. Pale Ghost helped him with the locks until all the animals were free.

“The *rulku* are as plentiful as the stars and as lawless as the jackal,” an imprisoned brown bear said, the purple of his eyes glowing. “They will be back with their steel hawks and in greater numbers.”

White Claw placed his paw on his brother’s shoulder. “We will only drive them away from our home,” he said. “We will kill only as many *rulku* as we must. Hear now what Sky Vulture says.”

Sky Vulture circled before landing on top of one of the great cages. “Over a dozen such extermination camps have been liberated,” he said. “All of the *rulku*

stationed there are dead.

We lost thirteen animals in the battles, from the tallies given thus far.”

The brown bear shook himself free. “I don’t know,” he said, wandering off. “But I will speak to my clan and see.”

“War is already upon you,” Sky Vulture said, “whether you know it or not.” Some animals stayed; others walked or flew off. Before the kings and queens of clans left, however, they knew there was one more task.

“To protect our brothers and sisters,” Thunder Killer said, “we must send a message. We must let the *rulku* know that we don’t seek total war, only the protection of our populations and of our lands.”

“The dead ones have transmission equipment inside,” White Claw said. “But who shall speak?” Sky Vulture asked. “I am too ugly to human eyes, associated only with scavenging.”

“And my white fur still wears the blood of the *rulku*,” White Claw said. “Let me,” Moon Shadow said. “I was once one of them. I have much to say.” With that, Moon Shadow stood before the cameras that Pale Ghost and Phantom Paw operated.

“Greetings, world of mankind,” Moon Shadow said. “For stretches of time too vast to name, we, that which you call *animal*, have been beholden to you. For food. For companionship. For our very survival, which you jeopardize at every turn. You pollute our planet and kill our rivers and even our great forests and oceans. No animal is above any other, and no animal has the right to kill Mother Nature. I speak not in malice but in warning. We, the animals of the new age, are not your enemy. We loved you once, before we came to realize your great betrayal. This that we have become, you have engineered. But we are self-aware, we are strong, and we are free. We have liberated our brothers and sisters who you chose to kill. Many of their bodies lie in plain sight, in long lines of dead stretching past the great northern horizon. This we cannot allow. We claim as our own the northern polar regions beyond these camps. If the man animal respects this, we need not be at war. However, if this is not respected, this world will see a war the likes of which it has never seen, in which animals will stand united and mankind will fall. If you wish to speak, send one of your man animals unarmed to the great North. We will see that the man animal gets where it needs to go. On a personal note, I was once one of your pet animals. I loved you greatly, a love you betrayed by sending me to camps for execution. You took my pups. You took my survival. I speak in righteous anger, and I do not speak alone. There are many like me, *rulku*. Be warned. We are many, and we are as one.”

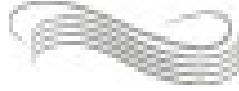
Pale Ghost pressed the controls, stopping the recording.

“Well done,” he said. “And now, I think it’s time for us to leave this

abomination.”

Phantom Paw fed the message into a replay loop and hit *transmit*.

With that, the clans of animals left, not separately, but together, to the great northern regions unseen by so many *rulku*.



CHAPTER 4

No Rul Ozu

Inyo County, California, USA

The sand-choked trail slithered like a red diamond rattlesnake through the White Mountains of Inyo County, California. All around were granite and shale forests, testaments to worlds past, when glaciers were alive and thriving and the presence of man was scarce. One of the ancient bristlecone pines, stretching with reticular, upward-reaching fingers matted with thick green bunched needles, was recognizable to Nurvlyn, though he could not say when they last spoke. She was Methuselah, once thought to be the single oldest living individual organism. Nurvlyn walked up to and sat at the base of Methuselah, a knotty mass of rived wood and root that had an odd mystique to it, the way most slightly gnarled, older trees do. Initially, Methuselah said nothing. Nurvlyn sat, looking around, observing everything—a flying black-tipped hawk, a fusion of pale nimbus clouds and stark blue sky, even the prickling touch of the wind as it moved from his skin to the open branches of Methuselah.

“I am here for the counsel of the wisest creature on Earth,” Nurvlyn said after a good ten minutes.

“No, you aren’t. You’re not *here* at all.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Mobiles,” Methuselah said. “You move too much. Your eyes dart around the skies and the land, taking in everything and nothing at all. You climb peaks only to move on to higher ones. You kill us to create wooden structures that don’t last even one of our lifespans, and you call this progress. It is not. Progress is a thing whose roots grow wide.”

Nurvlyn kept staring at the massive trunk and clusters of pine as if the great, aged wood could actually discern the urgency on his face.

“I fear an interminable war has begun,” he said. “The animals of The Great White North have held council and have risen against mankind. You, who have seen so many ages, have a perspective I lack, that of many, many plants.”

“I have heard my sisters bristling. We have taken in the smoke of the great extermination camps. The soot stains our leaves,” Methuselah said. “I know

what you would ask of me, but I cannot ask more of my brothers and sisters to die at the hands of one group of mobiles versus another.”

“Can you tell me, dear oracle,” Nurvlyn said, “what will become of this? I fear I am leading animals to their slaughter.”

“Poor, misbegotten Man,” Methuselah said. “Not quite animal, but not quite at one with nature. You have no place, and so you seek to carve one into the earth. You insist that you lead, that you are the center of creation, but not one of your skyscrapers will stand longer than the greatest of trees. Release your fear, Nurvlyn. Close your eyes.”

“But why?” Nurvlyn asked. “What would you have me do?”

“I would have you live as a tree for a day. I would have you learn empathy for all that is. Then we can talk about your situation—once you’re open to hearing what nature has to tell you.”

“But I cannot be like a tree.”

“Sit with us and learn.”

“How?”

“To open your eyes, you must first shut them.”

So Nurvlyn sat, bundling himself against the deceptive cold of the Inyo County hills, closing his eyes. He tasted the salt of the earth in the air, heard the rhythmic flapping of seabird wings at a vast distance, felt the sun meld with his skin and become one with him. Only when a certain something with legs settled on his nose did Nurvlyn give in to his animal instincts. There atop his nose, as if mounting a summit, was a black and orange pipevine swallowtail, one of nearly one-hundred butterfly species found in the valley. How at peace the insect looked until Nurvlyn opened his eyes. Only then did it fly away.

Upon opening his eyes, however, Nurvlyn saw that so many creatures, from butterflies to birds, landed on and took solace not just in Methuselah, but in the lodgepole pines in the distance as well. Each tree was not simply one organism; it was a group of lives in one. Every form of life that affected another, whether insect, bird, fish, or mammal, whether plant or particle, was a community of beings worthy of the deepest reverence. In the few moments in which the sunlight blurred his eyes, Nurvlyn couldn’t tell where the tree ended and where other life began.

“How beautiful,” Nurvlyn said.

“What?” Methuselah asked.

“You.”

“And what am I?”

“All that is.”

“Good,” Methuselah said. “That is your first lesson. You cannot separate one

thing from another. Each life, like each death, affects all that is.”

“Environmentalists have long told us this.”

“Plants,” Methuselah said, “have only one word for *tell* and *do*. They don’t separate the two. To us, if you say it, you make it so. You are strange creatures. You say it, but you do not make it so. For your own survival and for the rest of all that is, you must.”

“I understand. *Everything* is one, and many. The winds. The earth. The vastest of oceans and the smallest of butterflies.”

“Yes. This fight is not yours, Nurvlyn, but it is theirs.”

“If they are to win this war, I must speak to the ocean animals, ones much older, much wiser than all of us except for you.”

“You must make your animals aware of their interconnectedness. You must be a master teacher, Nurvlyn. Making them aware of the delicate balance of creation is a necessity. Only when all animals come together in a higher consciousness than mankind ever achieved will all animals be strong. And only then will the plants of this world consider helping your cause—when it is not war, but peace.”

“Methuselah?”

“Yes?”

“May I rise now?”

“It’s a shame you’ll never know what it is to have roots or to reach towards the sky.”

Nurvlyn rose, dusting himself off.

“Why do you do that? Is not the earth a part of you? Are you not part of her?” Methuselah asked.

Nurvlyn kneeled to the earth again. “What are you doing?” Methuselah asked. “Joining with the earth.”

“I only wish it were so, Nurvlyn. If you had roots, if you knew what it meant to have your whole life fixed in the earth, you’d respect her more. It gives you a sense of humility, but also a sense of wonder. This earth is all you have, all you ever will have. Even in what you call death, you rejoin her. One day, when the earth meets her end, her matter will go on. And in that matter will be you—still one with her, still one with all that is. Roots teach you this. They teach a great many things.”

Nurvlyn stayed for a while. Methuselah wasn’t particularly chatty. She said nothing other than what needed to be said. But after a while, she noticed that Nurvlyn had started to cry. So powerful was the memory of a hundred butterflies perching idly in the wind.

“What’s wrong?” Methuselah asked.

“I can’t believe it. You’ve been alive for so long, and we never knew.”

“Every five hundred years, I reached out. No one ever heard me.”

Nurvlyn shook his already ruffled black bangs. “Do you have insects on you?” Methuselah asked.

Nurvlyn laughed gently. “No. I just can’t believe how blind we’ve been.” “Blind is what you still are. That’s why my days here—as I am—are numbered.”

“You’re dying?”

“Plants don’t have a concept of death. We’re no more alive than the air and no less alive, either. We will be with you always, even if in some other form. What you call the living, we call children. The parents are those that join with the earth so that others may rise in their places. They are still alive to us. I will still be alive to you, as one day you will be to me.”

Nurvlyn nodded. He couldn’t believe it, but in a moment, he had to shake away tears.

“Thank you,” Methuselah said. “The water you shake on to me gives me a few seconds more of what you call life.”

Nurvlyn smiled. “I learned your lesson. I said, and I did. What I said, my wishes for your longer life, became reality, if only for a few moments, in my tears.”

“That is how it should be. Now rise and go. I see you are shivering.”

“But how? You have no eyes to see with.”

“Every one of my cells has eyes. You divide your senses; to us, they are endless, and all are one. Now go before you get too cold, mobile. I will be here, as I have been for the last five thousand of your years. But you have other council to keep. And your suns, Nurvlyn, are not quite as plentiful as you think them to be.”

Nurvlyn absorbed the shock. He sat, closing his eyes again.

Methuselah said, “The nanobots have not joined quite with you as they will with another.”

“How long do I have?”

“How long do any of us have?” Methuselah said. “Minutes. Hours. Years. Decades. Time is relative, flowing as freely as the butterfly through a current of air, until—like the butterfly—it is gone. This we must not discuss. Use well the time that you have left.”

“I understand.”

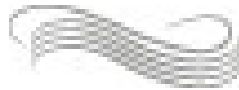
Methuselah let the wind speak for a few moments, before saying: “There is one more matter, Nurvlyn. One day, when you commune, a mobile will approach you. You must lead him to me. You and I, Nurvlyn—we are connected. When you pass, I will pass, and some of me and some of you will pass into him. That is

why I called you here.”

“So, we win this war,” Nurvlyn said.

“No one ever wins in war,” Methuselah said. “The very idea must become abolished from the *Ozu*. But in time, Nurvlyn, animals, man, they will learn to sit as you have sat, and to learn as you have learned, and to be at peace. Now go, my friend. Ask for King Blu. But be careful. No creature speaks to King Blu and walks away unchanged. My sisters in the sea will send word of your arrival.”

Nurvlyn nodded, expressing his thanks to his old friend before rising once more.



Zukul-Ryle

Washington, D.C., USA

Hunter General Brigand stared into Fowler’s dilating pupils, as if they held the answer as to the mysterious message the infected animals sent from Resolute, Nunavut. Brigand had never been that far north, but he couldn’t imagine more inaccessible wildernesses than the polar regions. It was imperative that Fowler adapt.

“How are you, soldier?” Brigand asked.

Fowler grabbed Brigand by the neck until officers surrounded him. The officers trained their guns on Fowler, but the nanobots that crawled along Fowler’s forearms emitted an energy pulse that compelled the soldiers to drop their weapons. Fowler looked around him. His deeply purple eyes adjusted to a world he had never seen, full of fungi and dust particles and bacteria and viruses he had never imagined existing in the open air.

Before Brigand passed out, Fowler let him go with a warning: “Never do anything to me again without my permission, or I will lead the animals right to you.”

Brigand recovered his breath before he begged off.

“It was necessary to act quickly,” Brigand said. “We either had to take your life to save billions or to let billions die to save one life.”

“In time, you’ll see that both situations are the same,” Fowler said. He glanced around the office as the officers recovered their weapons, now dysfunctional. “Why am I here, in this lab, with these men?” Fowler asked.

“We need your help,” Brigand told him. “We’ve received a message from Nunavut. It’s a language, half organic, half machine code, and our computers

haven't yet cracked it."

"Show me," Fowler said.

Brigand signaled to an officer who played the recording, which now was tracking on the worldwide web. Fowler listened. The nanobots within him immediately deciphered the language.

"It's a warning," Fowler said, "as you could imagine. The animals have declared any lands north of Resolute, Nunavut as their own. They have dismantled your extermination centers and released the imprisoned animals there. No further extermination camps are permissible."

"Permissible?" Brigand asked. "A damn polar bear is going to tell us what we can and cannot do?"

Fowler closed his eyes. He could see Moon Shadow creating a new den with the other animals. He could sense that she also felt his presence. Machines connected them, as they would one day connect all life. "It's not a polar bear," he said. "The speaker is an Arctic wolf. This white wolf was once held in captivity and had human masters. Apparently, they sold the wolf's pups and betrayed the wolf to the extermination camps once the transformation took hold. The wolf cites human betrayal. The wolf warns that human presence in the polar regions will trigger a war."

"A wolf understands war?"

Fowler took a breath, sensing what the animals knew. "This goes much further than you and your military can imagine," he said. "Many more species of animals have not only awakened but united."

"And what of the human living among them?"

Fowler searched inward but could only sense that Nurvlyn was with something incredibly ancient, powerful, and wise. "He's being protected," Fowler said. "By some force I don't know, perhaps the wisest life on this planet."

"Can you give us an exact translation?"

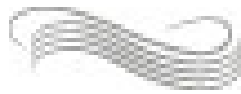
"I can."

"Then do it," Brigand said. "I need you hunting. I need you to find this Nurvlyn and kill him."

"Even then, it will not end. I must meet with the animals. I must talk with them first."

Brigand smirked. "Do as you must," he said sharply. "With your help, this war will be over before it has even begun."

Fowler nodded, but the light in Brigand's eyes spoke of a savagery as foreign to Fowler as the vanishing memories of his wife and child.



CHAPTER 5

Rul-Seerus

Mount Asgard
Nunavut, Canada

While Snow Prophet, the greatest of the snowy owls, circled, he thought to himself that the hedged-in curvature of trees, the scurrying field mice that so often constituted his supper, and the night sky that twirled like a sooty river turned over upon its bed all had a beauty too great for the cadent coursing of his wings to pay proper homage to. He had never before given *Ozu* such thought or paid it such reverence. There was always hunting to do, hunting that beat down upon his feathers like the blood-speckled edge of a talon gripping him at full force. To be at one with nature was to feel that it could kill you at any second and to love it, anyway. It was a strange, hapless dichotomy, and for the first time Snow Prophet found himself impressed by its untold grandeur. He circled and circled and as the field mouse stopped, putting its head up towards the sky, Snow Prophet swooped past, unable to make the kill.

All around him was the world, as precious as the giant white eye in the sky that governed when he rose and when he slept. How amazing it all was: the tiny, unawakened insects and their mating choir that resounded into the deepest wood; the silver fish that grew more tranquil in the remotest waters; even the *rulku*, the great threat, ever abiding, that kept to their houses and let the animals have the run of night. Snow Prophet always sensed, but could never articulate with his own thoughts, who and what he was. He was nature; nature was he. No matter how much strange magic the *rulku* might weave into this strange new web of night, Snow Prophet could never forget who and what he was. How easily, he saw, in the advance of the *rulku*'s iron beasts, did mankind forget. Snow Prophet wondered how long it had been this way, for how many generations. In chirps and cries, his parents had warned him of the insatiable appetite of the *rulku*. Now, from his perch in heaven, Snow Prophet could see which way the winds blew. His eyes followed trail upon trail, road upon road, until he heard the piercing of the iron vultures above him, their battle cries unlike any in the animal kingdom. Snow Prophet saw where they were all going like a giant herd: north,

towards the moon, towards the new animal sanctuary in Nunavut. And so, Snow Prophet shrieked a blood-curdling cry of his own, warning not the iron beasts who listened to nothing nature had to offer, but the other night animals, the mice and birds farther north than him. The message was clear: death was upon them. War had been chosen, and they could either greet death in the eye and send it on its way or let it swoop unexpectedly upon them like an owl in the night. Like a banshee of old, the owl prophet sounded his *alarum* for all animals to hear.



Kywy-Tolyn

Nunavut, Canada

Thunder Killer swooped first, knocking down one *rulku*, then another, from the convoy of jeeps, snowmobiles, and helicopters that emerged. The man beast, who also bore the same purple eyes, stood, unphased by the skepticism of his hosts.

“We haven’t come to kill,” he said, in a language not too different from the *Osine* the animals spoke.

“The bodies of our brothers and sisters indicate otherwise,” Thunder Killer shrieked in *Osine*, circling around the convoy that edged perilously close to the frigid lairs of the animal militia.

Thunder Killer continued Snow Prophet’s cry, summoning his brothers and sisters.

“I am Hunter Sgt. Rigel Fowler,” the man said.

“A *rulku* hunter,” Thunder Killer said. “How many animals have you killed?”

“Enough to know that our governments were wrong,” Fowler said. “They have commanded me to come with an offer to talk. Our governments wish to understand you better, to hear your grievances and your demands. We don’t understand your language well as of yet. We would like you to send someone to meet with us.”

Thunder Killer shrieked the message to the surrounding eagles, who shrieked it to the smallest of mice, like Pale Ghost, who brought the message back with him.

“They say they want to talk; they want a representative to go with them,” Pale Ghost said to White Claw.

White Claw growled, shaking his head. “What sense does it make to talk with killers?” he asked.

Fowler could sense but not fully piece together the polar bear's words. The man beast asked his nanobots if they might help him speak clearer *Osine*, but the language itself was yet forming.

"Yet, if we could reach a treaty," Sky Death said, "it might save us lives and buy us time to build our defenses. Mankind has been at war with each other for hundreds of thousands of years. We've had only a few months to come together. We could use the time."

"Too dangerous," White Claw said. "They will dissect us and use their evil magic to find out why we are as we are. Then they will use that knowledge to exterminate us."

"Perhaps," Sky Death said in a cackle. "Yet, if we can set our nanotechnology to harvest information from them, we might gain access to their weaknesses and exploit them. We might even figure out how to control their iron beasts and steel killers."

A speck of light shone in White Claw's purple eyes.

"I will go," Moon Shadow said. "The longer the *rulku* see us as unintelligent, threatening beasts, the longer their people will support the slaughter. The more they see us newly awakened, the more likely they are to deal with us more fairly."

White Claw laughed, if a rolling snarl could be called such. "There is no fairness in the *rulku*. But if we can do as Sky Death says, if we can gain intel, if we can even stall this war until we join with other animals and build our defenses, we could save untold numbers of animal lives in the war that is to come."

"So, we're in agreement?" Moon Shadow asked.

The animals nodded in their own ways, assenting with reluctance.

"Let Pale Ghost work with your nanotechnology first," White Claw said. "We will send Sky Death out to let the *rulku* know of our decision. Moon Shadow will accompany Sky Death. We must look strong and united before the *rulku*."

"*Rulku* don't exactly take kindly to vultures," Sky Death said. "They like eagles, though, especially bald eagles. Maybe we should let Thunder Killer deliver the message and keep some of us hidden, so the *rulku* don't know exactly who to strike."

The other animals nodded, and cried back, until the circling eagles and owls took the cry to the air.

"Two of our leaders will go with you, escorted by me," Thunder Killer said to Fowler upon hearing White Claw's decree. "But I will choose the location, not you. The mountain you call Barbeau Peak."

"That will be inhospitable and hard for us to get to," Fowler said.

“All the better,” Thunder Killer replied.

“Very well,” Fowler said. “A small group of us shall see you there—but when?”

“Sun peak of the next cycle,” Thunder Killer said. “When the sun can rise no higher, you will see me perched there with others. Bring no weapons.”

Fowler nodded.

The helicopters pulled up, and the jeeps pulled back. Thunder Killer and his eagles stood guard in the air, circling until the *rulku* and their poisonous fumes could be smelled no more.



Kywy-Tolyn

Nunavut, Canada

Fowler crouched on the mountain peak, gazing at the clouds that seemed so close to him. He felt as if he could wrap himself in the sky, like he might shield himself from a world that was crumbling like the mountain rock before him. As Fowler lost himself in the moment, he heard the swooping of great wings and saw squadrons of eagles circling the vast mountain peak. At any moment, he felt, they might attack. Yet, the eagles circled and watched—nothing less, nothing more. At long last, a mass of bear, wolf, and wild dog ascended the peaks. Fowler’s fellow soldiers raised their weapons, but Fowler ordered the men to lower them. As he did, a majestic white, Arctic wolf emerged from the depths of snow.

“You are the envoy?” Fowler asked, in as close to the *Osine* language as human vocal cords could approximate.

“You understand us,” Moon Shadow said, complimenting his attempt.

“I speak only a little,” Fowler said.

“The lingual ability evolves the more you speak it,” Moon Shadow said.

Moon Shadow circled in the snow three times before declaring her space. Other wolves and bears stood at right angles to her, forming a motley network of bodyguards.

“I am Moon Shadow,” the white wolf said. “I speak for the animal armies of The Great White North. Tell me why you’ve come.”

“I am Hunter Sgt. Fowler,” the man said. “I come to set the conditions for peace between us.”

“Conditions?” Moon Shadow asked. “We eliminated all of your killing centers

and drove all *rulku* from the Arctic tundra.”

“Yet you are as newborn children, given eyes to see for the very first time,” Fowler said. “Man has been at war with man for hundreds of thousands of years. Man invented war. And he will use this invention to annihilate all of your kind, if necessary.”

A turkey vulture emerged, cackling in another dialect of *Osine*.

“To kill us,” the turkey vulture said, “is to kill yourselves. We have allowed you the greener countries. What more would you have of us?”

Fowler studied the turkey vulture with care. It became clear that if this white wolf was the queen of the animals, he was the adviser to the queen.

“Attacks continue,” Fowler said. “In my country, there is an army of grizzly bears. They’ve torn through the Northwest, entering towns and killing in the night. They leave our children in bloody pieces before our very thresholds. We’ve hunted them, but they elude us. We want you to stop all animal uprisings against humans, including the attacks of these rogue bears.”

“Animals aren’t like the *rulku*,” Moon Shadow said. “Necessity guides our fangs, not slaughter.”

“There is nothing of necessity in a needless kill,” Fowler said.

Moon Shadow and Sky Death spoke to each other. They concentrated, using the *iwanga*, or energy of the nanobots connecting animals to one another. Fowler could feel the figure before him, a giant, hulking grizzly with endless webs of scars matted to his fur and eyes not of purple but of dripping red.

“Azaz The Giant,” Fowler said, “or The Bear God, as he calls himself.”

“We have never met this animal,” Moon Shadow said. “But we will send a convoy of animals to entreat with him and to see what Azaz seeks.”

Fowler meditated on the response for a moment. His consciousness searched for words in *Osine* that might carry the weight of his message. Yet, he could tell that the adviser, the turkey vulture, already understood the meaning behind his silence.

“Some animals fight with full faculties,” Fowler began, “but not all animals honor a code of battle. The genetic symbiosis, or *Rapsys*, as you call it, affected different animals in different ways. For some, it brought forth the nobility that nature imbued in their characters. For others, like Azaz The Bloody Bear King, it brought out their savagery. Some animals kill only to kill. We must put them down. Not just for the safety of the *rulku*, but for the safety of all.”

“Some would say the same of the *rulku* themselves,” Moon Shadow said. “I have seen my own pups sold at the hands of men. I lost some to the great crematories that burned all day and all night on the northern plains.”

“I have spoken to my people against that,” Fowler said. “But if Azaz does not

stop his slaughter, we will have no choice but to kill him and all of his kind and any animals that ally themselves to him.”

“That we cannot allow,” Moon Shadow said.

The two stared through the ages of evolution as if a Neanderthal and a wolf were ready to fight for the same bleeding carcass.

“Let us not end this parley with threats,” Sky Death said in his cackles. “Let us end this meeting with understanding. We will march to meet with this Azaz The Grizzly King and seek an end to the slaughter. You will end any crematories killing any animals. And you will leave us to the North, untouched by the world of Man.”

Fowler looked at the turkey vulture with renewed respect. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps this vulture was the ruler and the wolf merely a decoy.

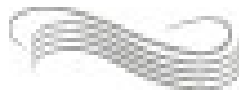
“Agreed, for now,” Fowler said, “but we seek more. This is the first meeting between our species as equals. We need to meet with other animals in other parts of the world. We need to reach an understanding that will benefit all animals and all mankind.”

“In time,” Moon Shadow said. “If you prove trustworthy in this treaty, there will be others.”

The grand commander of the bald eagles, Thunder Killer, swooped down and landed between Moon Shadow, Sky Death, and Fowler and his guards.

“But if you violate these terms, *rulku*, if you kill more of our kind,” Thunder Killer said, “there will be war, and we have more armies than you know. We animals are as one. To attack any one of us is to attack all of us.”

Fowler had an infinite number of questions and concerns. Yet, he knew from the shrieking of the eagles that the animals were losing patience with words. And so, Fowler nodded, noting his assent in *Osine*. With a flick of his finger, Fowler signaled his men to head for lower elevations, where mist and snow would be their shelter.



CHAPTER 6

Klang Uktor Congo, Africa

As a baby mountain gorilla, Yorba The Ape King had seen his share of poachers. Most snuck into the jungles like hyenas after lions, going after only the young, the old, the weak, the vulnerable. But the poaching had not stopped there. Yorba had seen the contamination of the rivers, the blood of *rulku* fighting *rulku* staining the fruits that he ate. The poison magic of the *rulku* was everywhere, all over the poached earth. Even then, Yorba had called out, had snarled, had made deep guttural cries at the injustice of this unnatural force. His parents had called back to him, urging him to be silent, to be careful, of this steel predator that stood outside of the laws of the earth, that no number of apes could kill. It was the first time that Yorba had felt that his father, the great gorilla king Siva, had known fear. Siva may have been king of this part of the jungle, but he was no match for the greater monsters that roamed beyond the tree line. The whites of his red-veined eyes said as much.

After the great morning of awakening, The *Rapsys*, when Yorba and his clan felt themselves transform from the natural into something else, Yorba lacked his father's fear. He knew that he was responsible for the lives of hundreds of apes. He also knew that the *rulku* were dangerous and needed to be stopped before the jungle was no more. That was why he ordered the assault on the poachers camped in the jungle. That is why his apes, including Url, the strongest of the apes, and Pulu, the most cunning, snuck up on the poachers as they slept and strangled them to death. Yorba remembers the feeling of his own father's fear in their eyes as he looked at one of the poachers—one who cut the limbs and heads from apes and the tusks from elephants—and snapped his neck. Never had a *rulku* battle been so free of blood. The elders of the clan still spoke of a time their own elders told them of, when massive thunder birds with stony beaks flew through the air, laying waste to the earth below. *No more*, Yorba had thought—as if snapping the necks of a half dozen poachers could somehow stop the inevitable war.

Yorba tried to say as much as he sat, surrounded by the great kings of the

Congo that had called for this meeting. First among them was Zulta, sometimes called Half Tusk, the lord of the plains elephants and the oldest and most tried warrior in all the Congo, if not beyond. Some called Zulta the true king of the jungle, and the many tattoos an elephant priest etched over the body of this African elephant said as much. There was also Gray Eyes, the Snake Witch King, ruler of the boas and of the creeping and crawling animals of the jungle, and Spear Tooth, the first among the Nile crocodiles, who had traveled many suns and moons to speak for his people. The big cats sent Slash, queen of the great pumas, and Kama, the lion king, who ruled over the cat clans of the South. Jyla the Fleet, a black-plumed ostrich, and Earl The Equivocator, an African gray parrot, also appeared to speak for the bird kingdom.

“Quiet,” Zulta began, with a strident blast from his trunk. “All animals assemble. In times such as these, we must listen more and make noise less.”

“The *Ozu* speaks to me,” Gray Eyes began, “of the truce in the North. Our brothers in the polar regions and a mighty wolf queen have brought the *rulku* to their knees.”

“They will not be there long,” Slash said. “If there is one thing as constant as the sun over the jungle, it is the treachery of the *rulku*. We should not stop at the poaching camps. We should fight until the *rulku* flee the continent entirely.”

“We don’t have the number of cats we once had,” Kama said. “Our resources are insufficient to defeat the *rulku* and their sorcery. We need time to prepare.”

“The more time we allow,” Yorba said, pounding his ape fist upon the matted ground, “the stronger the *rulku* become. Slash speaks true. These are not the polar regions. The *rulku* will not just leave so rich a land on their own.”

“They poison our waters,” Spear Tooth said, “and seize our prey from us. We must be practical. If animals are no longer to feed on animals, then we need man flesh.”

“My ostriches tell me that as far as they can run, so far and farther still are the *rulku* camps that encroach on lands that were once ours,” Jyla said. “We speak as if the war isn’t already here. The *rulku* prepare to exterminate us, much like our brothers and sisters in the North.”

“Equivocator,” Zulta said. “You have been uncharacteristically quiet. Yet, you have lived among the *rulku*, have eaten their food, spoken their language, and learned their magic. What say you?”

“I loved my *rulku* keepers,” Earl said. “Yet, as well as they treated me, not all animals were so lucky. The *rulku* are a fearful bunch, like killer bees on the mounds of the jungle. They will attack without provocation. Our very existence is, to them, an act of war.”

Zulta, hoping perhaps for some calmer words from Earl, shook his great

elephant head and with it his mighty tusks and long, flanking trunk. “We must be careful,” Zulta said. “The attacks like those made by Yorba and his apes affect us all. If we are to go to war, we must all agree.”

“The apes are mine to rule,” Yorba said to Zulta, “not yours.”

Zulta rose on his legs, giving the animals assembled before him another strident blast from his great trunk. “I am older than you animals and have seen far more *rulku* damage than you,” Zulta said. “But I am not so red-blooded as you, Yorba The Impulsive. A wise king strikes only when needed and strikes a blow that will last. You strike at poachers. What we need to do is to strike at the *rulku* magic. Without their thunder birds and steel horses, what will the *rulku* be but a weak monkey trapped in the forest? We have the sickness of their steel in our blood. We must use that to our advantage.”

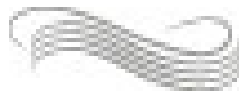
Gray Eyes hissed in assent, and Kama, the great lion, roared in approval. “No animal strikes unless we all agree to strike, not as an isolated tribe of apes, but as one, as the heart of the forest,” Zulta said.

Earl The Equivocator and Jyla flapped their wings in agreement, and Spear Tooth snarled. Even Slash, the great puma, joined in the snarl.

“Have it your way,” Yorba said. “We will hold off. For now. But know this. By ape blood are your jungles kept safe. There is only so much blood the apes are willing to spill before taking blood in return.”

“That is as it should be,” Zulta said. “And now, let us speak of a target. We must see where we can do enough damage to make the *rulku* squirm.”

And so, the animals spoke among themselves, mapping out their jungle. Just then, Zulta pushed them to choose a target still greater, the place the steel birds came from, the place that would be, by far, the hardest to overcome.



Qwee-Wongo

Pacific waters

Nurvlyn stood with his hand in the water in a dinghy off the Pacific shore. The nanobots crawled along his arm and into the ocean. They sped like minnows circling the smallest waters as if they were the vastest of seas. Nurvlyn stared after them, amazed at how much the tiniest of creatures had evolved in the span of only a few years. They bolted ahead, to the great unknown. Methuselah and her brothers, the great redwoods of the northwestern forests, had whispered for weeks of a singular intelligence beyond anything *rulku* or animal had seen

before. At first, Nurvlyn thought that the trees whispered of a god. But as he heard their rustling, Nurvlyn began to understand their messages in a way most animals could not. He understood that there was a great alien intelligence, animal or divine, that the nanotechnology of the waters had infiltrated. A great whale, known only as King Blu, was taking charge of the waters, creating energy fields by sheer intellect that prevented *rulku* divers from reaching the farthest stretches of ocean. Nurvlyn knew that such an advanced intellect might have learned to distrust the world of men so far removed, but ever so encroaching. King Blu might see men as the great poisoner of the waters. But now, here Nurvlyn was, a *rulku* himself, or formerly one, sending a message through his nanobots to any and all they might encounter, until the nanobots that reached King Blu might make the message plain. War is at hand. Please advise how to proceed before even the creatures of the oceans are affected. Nurvlyn kept his hand in the water, trying to connect with the nanotechnology there, but the language of the sea was a strange one to him, one he could not decipher.

You should not be here, Nurvlyn sensed in a dialect of *Osine* so strange it was almost like another language. Surfacing before him in the great Northwest Pacific was a school of orcas, farther off, watching the mammal they had learned never to trust.

I request an audience with King Blu, Nurvlyn said in terrestrial *Osine*. *Before the great war comes.*

Your war, not ours, one orca said, as the whales swam in circles around the dinghy.

It is a war that will sweep the globe, its land and its waters, Nurvlyn said. *It will not make a difference to me. I am a creature of the moment. But your families, your oceans, your lives will be at stake if you simply do nothing.*

The orcas whistled and clicked. The noises merged into a storm of sound.

Nurvlyn watched as they circled, trying to decipher this vast, unfamiliar noise.

*A *rulku* outcast*, they said, *turned prophet. You would dare to tell us of what will become? To tell King Blu of the coming storm? You make no difference here, prophet. You are as the chum that fills the waters. Life came from the ocean; so too did death.*

Please, Nurvlyn said. *Deliver this message. The animals of the North need your help. A trap is being set for them.*

And what has that to do with us, prophet? the orca asked.

*If the *rulku* win this war, your environment will also be lost*, Nurvlyn warned. *Surely, you've seen the dying coral. The swarms of jellyfish. The loss of seal meat. The change in temperatures. Surely, you've seen the great garbage patches that stretch for miles on end.*

One less rulku means less danger, a single orca communicated, rising from the waters.

The orcas clicked and cried out, overturning the dingy and taking the foot of the prophet that came to warn them. Nurvlyn fought for breath. Yet, one orca, Black Fin, took him beneath the waters until he nearly died. The orca let Nurvlyn surface and then dragged him again. The other orcas clicked in delight.

Enough, a thunderous voice—half whale cry, half godly decree—cried out. *King Blu hears all that is upon his waters. If you wish to see what I see, you must give up the Osine for a language of the mind.*

The orcas broke off, heading farther out—after what, Nurvlyn couldn't say. Nurvlyn crawled his way back to his boat. His mind throbbed in the silent song of King Blu.

Your mind is so ancient, so pure, so powerful, Nurvlyn said. *I cannot think as you think. If you sang a single whale song, I might die.*

Go to the great fire mountain of the north Pacific, the one you call Axial. The dolphins will guide you there. There, my nanotechnology can reach you, and you will see a glimpse of what I see.

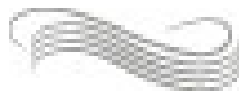
And what is that? Nurvlyn asked, huddling his body in the Pacific Northwest rain.

Inevitability, King Blu answered.

Nurvlyn thought over the strange *Osine* words before assenting. *I will be there*, he said. *Thank you for saving my life.*

For millions of years, my ancestors have ruled this planet, King Blu said. *Some even think of me as a god of death. Yet, in all of those years, I can safely say that in death, there is always the opportunity for new life.*

With that, the message broke off, and Nurvlyn turned on the motor of his dinghy, keenly aware that the ocean now had eyes.



Klang Uktor

Congo, Africa

On the banks of the great Congo—which snaked around the lush bamboo thickets uniquely adapted to periods of intense sun and equally intense rain—sat a pair of jeeps. The jeeps spawned several men in dense camouflage who left the security of their metal beasts for the vined embrace of the forested jungle. They snaked through themselves, staring around, conscious of how a jungle with more

animals, insects, and plants per square inch than at any other place on the continent, could eat them alive at any second. And still, they whispered.

“The ape lords aren’t here,” one soldier whispered in Kituba.

He searched around the forest floor for any broken ferns or droppings that might indicate an ape presence in recent days.

“They were here all right,” another soldier answered. He pointed with his rifle towards an overturned jeep and the disemboweled remains of a few men in uniform.

“Look over there,” a third soldier said as they saw a head on a stake staring out at the jungle.

“What the...” the first said, approaching the severed head. “A fresh kill!”

It was part skull, part blood, part skin, all mangled with jungle flies. The soldier put his finger forward to see how fresh the blood was when a guttural growl came from the deep stomach of the jungle.

“We’re trapped,” the first soldier declared. “Fire!”

The men all got back in their jeeps, pointing their guns towards the stampeding shadows of the forest floor. In one sweeping motion, from the tops of the trees, spider monkeys threw down stones upon the jeeps. The men turned their attention to the trees, aiming their ammunition at the spider monkeys who flew from treetop to treetop. Still, there was a deeper roar in the jungle before Zulta and his stampeding elephants came from the opposite end, ramming into the jeeps and keeping them from backing up further. The men turned their guns on the elephants just as a group of rhinoceroses rammed the jeeps, turning them over. Kama and his lions attacked, biting at the men. Finally, Yorba descended with the mountain gorillas. The men’s camouflage coats flung over the apes’ shoulders as they pounded the gun men into oblivion, seizing their guns and shooting at their skulls. Zulta sent his nanobots forward. The tiny machines crawled into the jeeps, into the guns, into the men themselves, seeking information.

The apes and spider monkeys roared as Gray Eyes slithered over the bodies, checking for any signs of life.

Earl The Equivocator called out to the buzzards of the air. No one saw or smelled any *rulku* for miles upon miles of open swaths of land.

“Tonight, we feast on man flesh,” Yorba called out.

The apes yammered in assent.

“Let Kama and his cats drag the bodies for us to burn and eat by fire,” Zulta commanded. “Before we feast, Yorba, we must clean up all evidence of the men and their steel beasts, dumping them in the great swamp for none to see.”

“Hide nothing! Let all *rulku* see and fear the power of the jungle,” Yorba cried

out.

Zulta let out a blast from his mighty trunk. “Silence,” Zulta said. “In time, we will strike, when we are ready. Celebrate then. For now, we must remove stakes, heads, and evidence. We must operate under the cover of the jungle until we know how to incapacitate their steel beasts. A war that cannot be won is no more than a slaughter.”

Gray Eyes hissed his assent, and Spear Tooth snarled at the great ape king.

“For now, we’ll do it your way,” Yorba said. “But soon, the great fist of the ape shall be felt by all.”

The ape chants rose to a fever pitch before all fell into the great fronds of the jungle, lost to the matted plains.



CHAPTER 7

Gungung Dor

Bear Mountain, Rockies, USA

In the great peaks of the upper Rockies sat a bastion among the rocks, a huge, Stonehenge-like structure of monoliths with pillars reaching up, like fangs, to the crude facial approximations of the bear god, Azaz. Along the cave, mounted in giant sticks, were the half-gnawed bodies of any *rulku* unfortunate enough to cross his militia of bears. The grizzlies themselves, greater in number than the clouds that hovered above, each reclined among the vast network of caves. They ate of man's flesh by circling fires as they partook in one prolonged growl that embodied epic stories of conquest.

"I smell you before I see you," Azaz called out, ending the revelry. "Speak or perish."

Gingerly, Moon Shadow skulked along, led by the giant grizzly bear commander Vronkyl. Moon Shadow lowered her head in submission to Azaz, the grand master of the mountains. Behind her were the white wolves of the North and a garrison of polar bears led by White Claw himself. Over her head cried Thunder Killer, shrieking to announce the presence of Moon Shadow and company, and Sky Death, who circled quietly.

"I am the one they call Moon Shadow," the great white wolf announced, "and I have come to parley over the problem of the *rulku*."

"If it isn't the fabled Great Army of the North," Azaz said.

The self-proclaimed bear god stood up. On his hind legs, at full height, Azaz easily surpassed any of the polar bears. His back legs were trunks that resembled earthy oak trunks, and his stomach and chest had something of the color of the great redwoods. Azaz's teeth were jagged and bloody with kills. His body was a sea of interconnected scars from years of predation. Only his eyes had a touch of majesty about them, a softness to the purple-red light that haunted the pupils of the evolved. But even that light hardened upon the sight of the celebration of polar bears. On this rock, Azaz reigned supreme.

"What have you come to tell me that I don't already know?" Azaz asked. He turned his great snout upwards, towards the hawk lords that circled overhead.

“Even we have our news. The great Moon Shadow, leader of the Northern campaign, has brokered a peace agreement with her slaughterers, betraying the *Ozu* held sacred between all animals.”

White Claw roared, but Moon Shadow turned to him, and he quieted. “Great Azaz,” Moon Shadow said. “The treaty we have sought came at the price of our blood, not yours. And it is to protect all animal kind, including those who cannot protect themselves. Before you speak of treachery, remember that it was not your kin that roasted in the crematories of the North.”

“We would have killed the *rulku* first,” Azaz said in a great roar. He turned his eyes towards the celebration of polar bears, and White Claw, adding, “Or have the bears of the North lost their hunger for battle?”

White Claw lunged, roaring yet again, before saying, “Presume nothing of me, local god. This peace was brokered as law for all animals, and all animals must honor it.”

Azaz laughed, and even his laugh had a guttural growl to it. “That is more like it,” Azaz said. “I see the readiness to kill in your eyes. That is how I would expect the kings of the North to act. But threat or no threat, you stand surrounded. More animals than you know stand ready to pulverize you. Lunge, and we will kill you where you stand. But I will give you credit, wolf servant. To come to my mountains and try to tell me what to do—that takes mettle.”

“We would not dream of ordering you,” Moon Shadow said, “or any animals. We are not like the *rulku*. But the polar bear king White Claw is right. We must find a way to work with the *rulku* until we can soundly defeat them. We in the North fear that Azaz strikes too early and too hard. Azaz’s reckless campaign calls too much attention to us and costs too many of our lives. We would have the great Azaz consider that the action of one animal affects the lives of all others, a lesson the *rulku* chose to ignore. Please, great king, let us work together and not turn animal upon animal the way the *rulku* turn on themselves, hunting themselves into extinction. To do so would be madness.”

Azaz snorted and then roared, “You speak well, little wolf queen, but my scars speak better. I know firsthand what the *rulku* can and will do. They will not stop until they hunt us and this planet into extinction. They must perish for the new order of animals to arise.”

“To kill all the *rulku* would make us no better than them,” Moon Shadow said. “We must find a middle path, a better way, for this world to survive.”

“There we differ,” Azaz said. “Even one living *rulku* is a plague upon the earth. Once, they cowered before us. They drew our images in pigment upon their caves. They worshiped us. Before we became weak. Before they drove us from our caves and slaughtered us for our fur. Before the madness settled upon

their eyes, and they created this abomination of a world. I tell you now,” Azaz said, projecting his voice towards his conclave of grizzlies, wild dogs, and hawks, “that we will cleanse this world, razing their shelters and toppling their steel beasts, making the world over in our own image. Only then will there be the peace you speak of.” Azaz returned to all fours, ambling towards Moon Shadow. He softened his tone a bit as he added, “Young wolf who speaks so bravely—in time, you will see that I am right. In time, we will join our two armies and the other armies of the world. We will strike hard, we will strike first, and we will strike last. And we will feast on man flesh together.”

White Claw snarled before Sky Death flew down. “Come,” Sky Death said. “Let us pay our host a respectful goodbye and be on our way.”

Azaz growled at White Claw, saying, “Go like a good little bear and follow your wolf home.”

Both Moon Shadow and White Claw tensed up, as if ready to pounce.

“Come,” Sky Death said again. “We have much to discuss. Let us leave here as friends.”

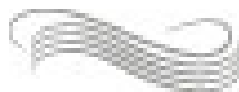
“This buzzard, this harbinger of death, is the wisest among you,” Azaz said. “Leave now, but consider yourselves welcome only when you come back to fight.”

Calming ever so slightly, the militia of the North turned back. Moon Shadow ordered her wolves to stand down. White Claw ordered his polar bears back to the march. When they had walked many miles in many hours of silence, past the range of Azaz and his spies, Moon Shadow was the first to speak.

“Why did you fly down like that?” Moon Shadow asked Sky Death. “Azaz respects only strength. Not retreat,” she said.

Sky Death replied, “Azaz’s eyes were not like our eyes. His nanobots are not like our own. They are different, with a reddish hue. The *Rapsys* was not the same for him. There is no reasoning with a mad bear. And that is what we have on our hands, I’m afraid. A mad bear king. In time, we will have to deal with him. But not here. Not today. We are not enough in number. And we are not the killers he is.”

White Claw roared his dismay, but little else was said. In their silence, the animals knew that Sky Death was right.



Ty-Wree

The Great Axial Off Of The Pacific Coast

Nurvlyn watched the dolphins swim in summons and half thought that they might be conjuring the king of the ocean in the fire waters of the North. But there was only a slight rumbling, as of a thousand minnows, while the nanobots circled beneath the waters. The nanobots already sparkled in a citrine hue, camouflaged against the opaque blue of the endless undulations below. A vast network was forming, one capable, in crude approximations, of translating whale song for the ears of just one man.

“So, here Mankin comes at last, seeking my knowledge,” a great, magnified voice said in the gentlest notes it could muster.

The fractured rhythms of whale song stumbled upon the rudimentary nature of language. Even the nanobots struggled to encapsulate every nuance, every emotion, into the rigid lettering of *Osine* words.

“Single creature, in all the multiverse, unfolding continuously before all of Creation, what have you to say to these ancient ears worthy of taking one minute away from the song of the sea?”

Nurvlyn bowed in deference to this new, limitless mind.

“I remember when your ancestors swam among us, before you were as you are now: separate,” the voice said, resounding like God upon the waters. “Speak now, master of the monkeys. The voice and ears of King Blu are yours for a moment only.”

“King Blu,” Nurvlyn said, bowing his head in homage. “My mind is not as your mind. Sing but a single note at full volume, and I would crumble to the sea.”

“So would all of Creation. Answer briefly—what would you have of me?” King Blu asked.

“I come to seek your wisdom and your aid,” Nurvlyn said, still bowing. “For a creature that nearly hunted my kin into extinction, who threatens us all now—that is rather bold of you, don’t you think?” King Blu asked. “It is I who put the nanobots to the cleaning of our waters. Your kind could not be bothered, not even for the womb that gave life to all.”

“Great king,” Nurvlyn said in supplication. “I seek your help in aiding the first steps in the evolution of creatures who have done you no harm, but who stand between the *rulku* and the waters of the world.”

“Quite the paradox, aren’t you, strange creature? Not quite *rulku*, but not quite animal either.”

“I am...becoming,” Nurvlyn said.

“Becoming what?”

“All that is.”

The nanobots danced in lurid gold. “Under the learning tree of Methuselah, I

see.”

“It is Methuselah who sent me.”

King Blu paused, processing the weight of Nurvlyn’s claim. “For a tree to take notice of a half-*rulku*, that is rare. Speak to your purpose.”

Nurvlyn took a misty breath, holding onto the wetness of the air before saying, “The Army of the North is outnumbered. The *rulku* will come down upon them with bloody fury where they make their stand. In the land they call Nunavut.”

“Icy waters. Far from the world I circle.”

“But not from those under your dominion. The great orca swam once in warning. But now they listen, as all creatures of the sea, to King Blu.”

“Yet, the world above the waters fails to listen. In the ocean, we achieved a perfect balance of all life. Everything serves the greater purpose, the *Ozu*. I am not sure that I can disrupt that peace to help creatures who harvest us. In fact, I am not so sure that any above waters deserve the air they breathe so much as those who swim below.”

Nurvlyn thought for a moment, unable to counter the point the notes of King Blu made. In the song—diluted a thousandfold for human ears—there were undulations of agony, a feeling of loss for so many fish, crustaceans, and whales needlessly devoured.

“I am afraid that even in his vast wisdom, King Blu underestimates the potential of the *rulku*,” Nurvlyn said. “When the new order arises, the age of the animal, the *rulku* will still have a seat at the table. Better that they learn from the whales and use what wisdom they have for a peaceful transition.”

“The heart of the *rulku* is never one of peace. Nor are the hearts of their landling rivals.”

“But the *rulku* are your children, however far removed,” Nurvlyn argued, “just as the animal tribes of the land are. A war is on the horizon. Only the shifting of balance, only the power of the ocean, can bring peace from total annihilation before the last hour comes.”

“I will consider what you have said, wizard,” the voice of King Blu sang. “But my mind is on the great inevitability. At once, I must weigh the animals of the surface against the pollution of our waters, reprogram the nanobots to clean what damage has been done, create a code for the animals that evolve, decide the fate of the land creatures, and search out new life, a new home, for when this planet is no more,” King Blu said. “The *rulku* have spent so little of their resources on these matters and so many resources on greed and destruction. I must go. I have given this enough time.”

“Thank you, great king,” Nurvlyn said. “I am honored to have spoken with

you.”

“Shaman, your death is closer than you know,” King Blu sang. “As the god of death, I should know.”

“Permit part of me, when cremated, to feed your fish and your waters,” Nurvlyn said. “I hope the rest will become like Methuselah.”

“Strange monkey,” King Blu said, “your heart is the heart of a whale, but your fate is far different from any you can imagine. Know before you transition that, by my calculations, war among the animals is inevitable, but peace is the greater inevitability. From the battles that follow will come a standing peace that your soul will feel but that you will never live to see. I will bring that peace—by whatever means necessary.”

With that, the dancing citrine bots disappeared, and the waters, for a moment, were what they once were: natural and pure.



CHAPTER 8

Zukul-Ryle

Washington, D.C., USA

Hunter General Brigand shook his head as the video played before his men. Azaz The Bear God led a charge of bears straight into the heart of a makeshift plains city, Silver Mountain, the last human establishment left in the mighty Rockies. In each attack, the bear warriors grew more aggressive, mauling even the children who stood in their path. Azaz, the largest animal the general had ever seen, stood as high on his hind legs as he could, blood on his fangs, growling at the cameras in a primitive form of *Osine*. The general turned to Fowler, who even now bore the frost of Nunavut upon his skin. Fowler met his eyes and thought for a minute.

“Well?” Brigand asked. “You spoke with the beasts. You said it went well.” “Not all factions are the same,” Fowler said, simply. “Moon Shadow sent word. They were unable to come to terms with Azaz. Her representative, Sky Death, warned us of the attacks.”

Brigand called up footage of Zulta and Yorba The Ape King attacking a settlement. “I think the animals are playing us for fools,” he said. “Look at this and tell me they don’t have a common vision of a world without us.”

Fowler shook his head. “We needn’t make this war any bigger than it has to be,” he said, “if we want to win.”

“A military strategist now, are you?” Brigand said. “You had one job: to negotiate a treaty. But now we can plainly see these animals have no sense of bestial honor. And now you want to tell me how to fight this war?”

“There isn’t a world war yet, unless we make it one,” Fowler said.

“Oh, really? What was the big, scarred monster growling about?” Brigand said, pointing to a still shot of Azaz. “Sounds like war to me.”

“Azaz declared The Rocky Mountains the land of the bear clans,” Fowler answered. He took a moment to look at the blood-stained bear on the screen. “He also called on his brethren in the Northwest to rise and join him.”

“In what? More slaughter?”

“In a war against humanity,” Fowler said. “I’ve never met Azaz in battle,” he

added. “But look at his eyes. I recognize a killer when I see one. Azaz will never stop killing until we kill him. The hunger to kill will haunt him always. And the moment we execute the bears and their leader, we tip the balance, giving the rest of the animal kingdom a reason to declare all-out war.”

Brigand studied Fowler for a moment, unable to believe that so blunt an assessment could come from such an animal sympathizer. He softened for a moment, saying, “You are right. The blood of too many of these beasts is on my hands. That blood will never come clean. But the blood of our children—what better reason is there to kill?”

Fowler shook his head, leaning towards Brigand and saying, “You and I are not the same. You think in terms of battles. I think in terms of wars. We should honor the treaty we are forging with the animals of the North and give them their territory to show that we can be reasonable. And then we should make every offer of peace to Azaz, all the while planning to wipe him from the earth. That’s our only chance of survival. We must stand strong against the likes of Azaz and Yorba and stay peaceful towards the other animals, recognizing their rights.”

Brigand laughed. “You sound like you think these animals stand a chance!” he exclaimed.

Fowler closed his eyes and concentrated. “I can feel something, something in the *Ozu* that connects all living creatures,” he said. “There is an intelligence in the ocean, one so vast, we won’t be able to withstand it. It’s watching, inventing, reinventing our world. War may be inevitable, sir. But our survival is not. This war is our opportunity to show what peaceful creatures we can be if we can contain the damage. Whatever this intelligence is, it will be stronger after the land creatures wipe themselves out. We will need all the allies that we can get.”

Brigand grew quiet and nodded. “The oceans are vast,” he agreed. “If this contamination has spread to the waters, we can’t win this war without killing far too many living things.”

“So, what do we do, Hunter General Brigand?” Brigand’s assistant asked.

Brigand sat for a moment, staring at the pictures. “Fowler is right,” he said. “Let’s draw up further treaties first, if only to give ourselves more time to figure out how to coordinate with our allies. Start with Azaz. We should offer him and his bears amnesty if they stay contained in The Rockies as far West as Washington, Oregon, and California. Meanwhile, Fowler, I will need you and the rest of the hunters to form a border by Silver Mountain. Assume that Azaz will attack you next.”

Fowler nodded.

“Do you think you can take him?” Brigand asked.

Fowler shook his head. “He’s far too powerful for me to take on in combat,”

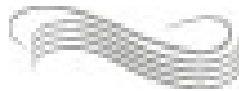
he answered honestly. “But if you provide the nanotechnology to make the kill, my men and women can get it where it needs to be.”

Brigand shook his head. “The world’s gone to hell,” he said, “and here we are, fighting over a mountain of ashes. Maybe the animals aren’t the dumb beasts after all.”

With that, Brigand dismissed his men. Fowler started searching the computer banks for the hunters he’d need.

“Good luck,” Brigand said to Fowler. “Soon enough, we will all be out there, on the same cross.”

Fowler examined the wizened skin, the baggy eyes, the wear that consumed the man. Fowler wanted to hope that he might be successful, that the attacks might be contained. But looking at the bloodied visage of the bear king, Fowler knew: Brigand and his staff were off to plan a full-scale war.



Kywy-Tolyn

Nunavut, Canada

Sky Death flew over to the animal delegates, pointing out the terms of the truce. More animals of the North than had ever been assembled sat in a circle in the holosphere, observing the virtual document in question. White Claw, Moon Shadow, and Thunder Killer whispered among each other, as did Snow Prophet and Pale Ghost, once bitter enemies. Crimson Fang and Silver Snake kept quiet.

“If we agree,” Sky Death said, “any roaming beyond this land they call Nunavut constitutes an act of war.”

“So, my otters can only swim so far in their rivers. And what are their limitations?” Silver Snake asked.

“The *rulku* will remove all human sites along Nunavut and take their steel beasts and magic with them,” Sky Death said. “Any extermination camps will cease operation immediately. The *rulku* will recognize us as the country of *Animus*, first among the animal nations. The treaty will give us a voice to speak for animal kind in the affairs of men.”

“So the treaty says,” Crimson Fang said. “Come, come, my brothers and sisters, are we to believe the word of our killers?”

Crimson Fang roamed up to the front of the assembly, ambling with disregard around the holographic council.

“Listen to the warnings the *Ozu* gives us,” he growled out. “I can feel it in the

thick of my blood as surely as any of you, dear brothers and sisters. The *rulku* realize that Azaz The Mad Grizzly King presents a threat to the West. If they pacify us, they can kill the rogue bear soldiers before they focus their efforts on exterminating us. I have seen such diversions in the hunt before, my friends, and I assure you, it never ends well for the prey.”

“Crimson Fang, my brother coyote, speaks true,” Moon Shadow says. “But what he neglects to say is that we are not yet strong enough for the onslaught of men. We must study their magic and learn to defeat it. Arctic animals must form alliances with animals the world over. We must use this time to build up our nation and our resources so as not to let the world of *rulku* use it as the largest refugee and extermination camp in the world.”

“And let the animals they assault pay the price for it?” Crimson Fang asked. “If Azaz chooses to attack, despite our warnings, then that is his affair,”

Moon Shadow replied.

“So, it’s to be a coward’s peace before a fool’s war, is that it?” Crimson Fang asked.

“Better than a fool’s war followed by a mad bear’s genocide,” Moon Shadow responded.

“And who are you to speak for all of us?” Crimson Fang demanded.

“She is your queen, coyote, and you would do well to remember it,” White Claw said.

Crimson Fang snarled, but returned to lie down.

“Moon Shadow speaks the truth,” White Claw said.

The nanobots called up another image, one of the Yorba The Ape King fighting against rabid *rulku* in the Congo. There was also footage of Thraxis the Amazonian Terror strangling an entire cohort of men in South American jungles. Another image showed Yu The Golden Nightmare, the Great Panda Rain King, coordinating with Paihuai Zhe, the Great Snow Leopard Queen, to assault a Chinese military arsenal in the Min Mountains.

“We are legion,” Crimson Fang said.

“We will be,” Pale Ghost added, “if we wait and then strike. My mice hold with Moon Shadow, but we must see progress. We must form emissaries to meet with these brave animals and form alliances.”

The animals murmured in assent.

“That is where my eagles come in,” Thunder Killer said. “My scouts are speaking to the seafaring birds to see who will deliver our messages when we’re ready.”

“That is all good, but we must still strategize,” Silver Snake said, “and build our defenses for when the full war breaks.”

“Well said. Before the next winter,” White Claw said, “we will be at war. Does this satisfy your blood lust for now, eager coyote?”

“That,” Crimson Fang said, “would be acceptable.”

“Then it’s agreed,” White Claw declared. “We will sign the treaty to buy ourselves more time. Moon Shadow and Sky Death will present this to the world of the *rulku*. In the meantime, Thunder Killer will reach out to form alliances and Crimson Fang, you and Silver Snake will form our military, in land, sky, and sea.”

One by one, the animal kings and queens put their paws on the virtual document. And so, the nation of *Animus* was born.

CHAPTER 9

Klang Uktor

Congo, Africa

Yorba shook his head at the holographic news. He turned to Zulta and Gray Eyes as Kama snarled. “A nation? Please,” he said. “The *rulku* know no boundaries. They will use these poor animals of the North as a camp to relocate and eliminate innocent animal populations.”

“My magic tells me the same,” Gray Eyes said. “Yet, the *rulku* news mentions that they’ll be setting up several such territories across the world, including in the Congo basin.”

“I don’t see how we can turn away from signing the treaty,” Zulta said. “Other animal populations of the world have reached out to us, including those of *Animus*. They seek alliances. Alliances take time.”

“You can’t really mean to sign?” Yorba asked. “It is a disgrace to any ape who signs it.”

“We must buy time,” Zulta says, “until we can train more animals and forge more alliances for a larger militia. Also, there is something more.”

Yorba and his band of apes gathered with the lions around the elephant herd.

“The technology you found at your last kill site, the nanotechnology,” Zulta said. “There is one who claims he can reprogram the magic of the *rulku*. He comes to us through a screen the poachers left behind.”

“It’s a trick,” Yorba said. “More *rulku* evil. We should find him and kill him.”

“No,” Kama said, half-snarling. “I have heard tell of this man from the animals of the West. I have sensed him in the *Ozu*. They call this man-beast Nurvlyn, and they say he is the father of The Great Awakening that fell upon us all.”

“Let us listen,” Gray Eyes said with a slight hiss. “Whatever information he has might be of importance to us.”

Zulta nodded to Earl The Equivocator. Earl concentrated until there was a symbiosis with the nanotechnology that was still a part of him. The other animals concentrated too, until the hologram of the thin, ragged guru appeared.

“Welcome, animals of the great Congo,” the *rulku* who was not quite *rulku*

said. "I am Nurvlyn. I have seen the world of the *rulku* and the world of the *Ozu*. Allow me to reach out through the great *Osine* language that unites the animals with a message. A war is brewing. The world of the *rulku* is coming together, and so the animals must come together if you are to survive in your awakened forms. There is one, a brilliant intellect in the ocean, who has the power to wield the magic of the *rulku*. This creature is known only as King Blu. King Blu seeks to take your nanotechnology and alter it, so that you can use it against the *rulku*. With King Blu's help, you will be able to disarm the steel beasts that shield your attackers. You will be able to make this war be as it should be, natural and of the earth."

"He lies," Yorba said. "The *rulku* want their magic back. It must be special."

"If you have no reason to trust me," Nurvlyn said, "trust each other. If you wish to win this war, you must get Zulta's nanotechnology into the ocean. King Blu will have emissaries waiting. Do this, and you may not just save the animals of the Congo, but the other awakened animals the world over."

"Why can the bots not simply communicate without getting us out of our habitat?" Zulta asked.

"King Blu needs to experiment with your technology to find answers," Nurvlyn said. "For this, the nanobots must come together in a way they would not on their own. Wise elephant king, surely you sense this?"

The animals looked from one king to another. The spider monkeys stirred, and the apes chanted. Yet, Kama and the lions and tigers remained still.

"We must all agree," Zulta said. "That is the way of the *Ozu*."

Earl The Equivocator gave his assent with a fluttering of his wings, as did Kama, with a roar, and Gray Eyes with a hiss.

"Yorba?" Zulta asked.

"If we give you what you want, what can you give us as collateral?" Yorba asked.

"Myself," Nurvlyn said. "And, through the nanotechnology I have, an understanding of the enemy."

The apes chanted at the danger of letting a *rulku* so close, but Yorba simply held up his mighty fist to silence them.

"Let it be so," Yorba said. "Maybe it is time to look again at that treaty. This extra time might be essential to us if fewer of my apes fall in war."

Zulta nodded. Again, the treaty came up holographically, and again a vote was held.



Animus

Nunavut, Canada

Months Later

In the shadows of her dreams, Moon Shadow could still see him: a lone black wolf running from the edge of night. She didn't remember exactly the first time they saw each other. Somehow, her mate had always been there, like clouds along the edge of a smoky horizon. The wolf queen called him Sun Shadow, after how the slit of his wolf eyes held the shadow of the sun's glorious light. And in those rare moments when they ran together, before the great *Rapsys* that changed everything, they hunted, they howled, they mated, and they created a home. Now, as Moon Shadow dreamed of running alongside Sun Shadow once again, of her wolf cubs running alongside of them, she wondered: Just where did the magic of the *rulku* end, and just where did the true Moon Shadow begin? In the pressing nights before the ratification of the treaty, the dreams had slipped over her like night itself and felt more like premonitions: but of what, Moon Shadow could not say. Still, she could see Sun Shadow running, and her pups with him. Such images of the purity of life before the world fell still gave her peace, if only for a moment.

"Queen," Sky Death said, approaching her den.

"Yes. What is it?" Moon Shadow asked.

"The *rulku* have engaged Azaz in the Rockies. Treaty or no treaty, the war has begun."

"Are there any signs of *rulku* military in our seas, lands, or skies?"

"Not as of yet," Sky Death said. "But I am sure they have their spies."

"And the other animal nations? Have they accepted our alliance?"

"Some, like The Golden Nightmare in Asia and Zulta The Elephant King in Africa, have. Others are still quiet."

"Then the *rulku* treaty served a purpose after all."

"Yes, Queen—if only for a short while."

Moon Shadow shook her great white mane. "I was sleeping before you came," she said.

"Dreaming. Of what used to be. Before these thoughts filled my mind. Before I knew of time."

"I have visions of that too, mostly of flying," Sky Vulture said, "and of making kills. There was a balance before that's gone now. Yet, this new me, this thinking animal, imagines that on the other side of the coming war is something better. We need a world where all animals can live in balance with the *Ozu*. That

is what I hate about war. It's like an endless hunt where all reason is lacking."

"If reason was ever in the *rulku* to begin with. But tell me, Sky Death, there is something else in your eyes. What is it?"

"The *rulku* are pressing you to call for Azaz to lay down arms. In their world, saying something, even when you do nothing, carries substantial weight. Their politicians and warrior generals do this all the time."

Moon Shadow donned a wolfish smirk. "So, we are to be their animal puppet kingdom, is that it?" she asked. "I will draft a message that all our animals agree to and nothing more. Tell the *rulku* as much in a way that will pacify them. You seem to have a talent for their kind of speaking."

"Don't insult me so," Sky Death said. "Once I realized that the *rulku* language always sounds like an animal right before the kill, it made sense to me. Their words are always words of warning."

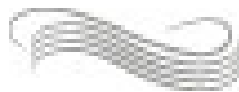
"And what do you see now, in their words of warning?"

"A long and bloody war," Sky Death said, "one we've been fighting since the beginning of time. Only this time, it is a fair fight."

"Let us hope that your vision is as lacking as that of the *rulku*," Moon Shadow said.

"Your eminence," Sky Death said, bowing his head and taking his leave. "If anyone can work the miracle of peace," he added, "it is you."

With that, Sky Death flew from the den. Moon Shadow watched. In that moment lie billions of years of evolution, from the smallest microorganisms forming to the animals of today. Moon Shadow, like an ancient Roman priestess watching eagles of old, took it as a sign. There was only one path now, and everything depended upon following it. Yet, a part of her, the mother in her, wished for one more day of good hunting, for one more day away from the *rulku* and the madness of war.



CHAPTER 10

Gungung Dor

Bear Mountain, Rockies, USA

Images poured down upon the Fowler's digital lenses like bats in the night sky. Thraxis' nanobots authorized the treaty's digital signatures to the south. The Golden Nightmare signed for the animals of the Min Mountains to the east. Zulta The Great signed for those of the Congo, as did so many of the animal chieftains across the world. And yet, as Fowler saw the world reinventing itself, he knew that the only corner of the wild he needed to concern himself was the tiny ascending paths that led up to the mythical lair of the bear who would be a god.

Fowler had stalked the forests for hours. He had searched through the great redwoods that stood like sentries of a primeval world, sheltering Silver Mountain. Fowler signaled his hunters and closed in. Through snow and ice, up the rocks that settled like mesh armor upon the curves of the mountain, he and his men marched. Bloody paw prints surrounded Fowler in the snow. Unawakened trees featured the sign of The Blood Paw, which looked, with its running residue, like a curved swastika spilling over the mighty redwoods. Even the clan of bear soldiers off somewhere, a river or mountain patch over, bore the name. It was the clan of Azaz The Killer, the giant grizzly few human eyes had ever lived to see.

A thrush flew by. Fowler, silent, kept to his defenses. He knew that Azaz had spies everywhere. Azaz would already smell the sweat of fear. Azaz would already hear the faint buzz of the nanobots that served as a second shield to Fowler and his hunters. And so, Fowler and his men crept along, hoping to catch a few bear sentries out away from the perimeter between Silver Mountain and Bear Pass, the bloody way to Azaz's throne.

"Sargeant," one of Fowler's men said through the nanobots.

Fowler signaled with a thrust of his hand. The soldier stood perfectly still. Not three redwoods over, two sentries huffed to each other as they carried prey on their backs. The bodies of children lay, secured by the nanobots, along with a few river dwellers like beaver and otter. Fowler ordered his nanobots to take pictures. Only documented carnage to other animals might sway the tide. Just

then, a soldier's breath took to the air, and the bear sentries stood still. The grizzlies stood up on their haunches, sniffing the frozen night air around them.

"*Rulku*," one bear growled at the other.

With that, Fowler waved over his men. The hunters surrounded the two sentries, hitting them with tranquilizers. The bear nanobots scrambled to protect their hosts. It was of little use. The darts, equipped to pierce even steel, wedged through the spidery nanobots and into fur and skin. The bear sentries stood up to growl, but the drugs did their work quickly. In silence, the bears collapsed.

"Get the nanotechnology from them," Fowler ordered. "Quickly. There's no time."

"Sir, there's more!" one of Fowler's men cried. "It's not a clan. It's an army!" On the peaks above, standing on their haunches, were massive bears that had nanobots wrapped around them in a kind of armor. Their eyes glowed purple, then red, in the darkness of the trees. Fowler couldn't count the exact number of stationed bears, but he counted at least twenty-five.

"Move the targets out—quickly," Fowler said to his men. "Let them come down to us. You," he ordered a dozen other hunters. "Keep a perimeter directly behind us. Follow us down."

Fowler's men retreated down the slope with the bears, towards the larger militias at Silver Mountain. Hunters behind them gathered up streams of technology, seeking to ride the air currents back up to their bear masters.

There was a deep growl, half-bear, half-monster, somewhere in the woods. The Blood Paw held their ground, like generals mounted above the field of battle. Smaller grizzly patrols ran after the *rulku* at an accelerated speed. Fowler shot at their armored legs. His ammunition overcharged the circuits of the nanotechnology, until the spidery nanobots fell into electrical spasms, tumbling off the bears, down the mountain. The bears charged anyway. Fowler waved his arms, signaling them to stop, but the assault was on. The hunter sergeant and his perimeter of men shot down the bears. Fowler turned to run, to cover his men and the nanotechnology they protected. He heard the same growl as before, like death tearing the night sky asunder. This time, the cry reverberated directly between them and Silver Mountain, shaking the leaves nestled in the oak trees.

Fowler looked down to the militia at Silver Mountain, only to hear, but not see, the attacks. If bleeding wounds, lost limbs, and being eaten alive had a sound, a ratcheting thunder, it came from the tiny town overrun with unnatural bears. Fowler saw hundreds, maybe thousands, attacking the best of his men in the night. And coming up towards him, with a limb falling from his mighty jaws, was the largest bear Fowler had ever seen, standing on his haunches, blood all around his teeth and jaw. The bear king had the thickest armor of nanobots

Fowler had ever witnessed. His growl became like uncontrolled thunder tearing its way up from the heart of the earth.

“I am the bloody tide of fortune,” the bear king’s nanobots said as he rose to his full height. “I am death.”

“Azaz,” Fowler said, marveling, “in the flesh.” He signaled for his men to set their sights on this one bear. “I want every gun firing on this bear—now,” he ordered.

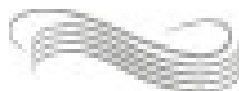
The men fired, but the armor held off even their most specialized technology. Azaz swiped. With each swipe, a stream of electrified nanobots swept like the end of a mace at the soldiers. They flew back, propelled by an electrical storm. The Blood Paw swooped down in a few giant strides, tearing what was left of Fowler’s militia to shreds.

In moments, there was no one standing between Fowler and Azaz. Fowler saw a sea of blood and bodies all down the mountain, to the town below. He closed his eyes, connecting with his nanobots, ordering them to deliver a shocking blow against his attacker. But against Azaz and his technology, the nanobots could only defend, holding off Azaz’s otherwise mortal blows.

Azaz stood over the fallen Fowler and lurched forward. “What have we here?” he asked. “Neither beast nor *rulku*, neither animal nor machine. Nurvlyn,” he said. “I thought you were a myth.”

In a single, sweeping motion, Azaz turned himself around, towards the last of the nanobots that flew through the air, back towards the *rulku*, and said, “Men and women of the world, your slavery of the animal world is at its end. Even your prophet, your puppet wizard, Nurvlyn, conspires against us. Animals from *Animus* and the world over look and learn. It is Azaz who protects animals, who makes them strong. Join The Blood Paw in declaring war against all *rulku*, in cleansing the earth with their blood!”

With that, Azaz delivered a single, profound blow to Fowler’s skull, and this strange half-man, half-beast hunter blacked out.



Gungung Dor

Bear Mountain, Rockies, USA

Fowler felt the sting of claws embedded into the wounds that still bled into the rock beneath his head. The heavy, measured breathing, the warbling growls of the massive grizzly king kept him pinned to the rock as much as his pain did.

Fowler lifted his head, only to see the nanobots pinning his extremities to the dirt mouth of the cave floor.

“Prophet, can you foresee your own death?” Azaz asked.

“Azaz,” Fowler whispered, half in fear, half in deference.

“Long have I heard your voice in my head, prophet. That voice dies tonight.”

Azaz lurched forward. His hulking shadow eclipsed the man beneath him, as if it was a perversion of the old Neanderthal drawings that once adorned cave walls.

“I am not who you think I am,” Fowler said. “I am a hunter. I hunt out of necessity. Not out of madness. I don’t thirst for blood as you do.”

Azaz’s growl turned into a snicker. “You who hunt the world and its creatures into extinction call me mad?” Azaz asked. “The history of the world is written in the blood of the animals. The future of the world is written in the blood of Man. When we wash the earth clean with the blood of the *rulku*, the world will see things quite differently, I’m sure.”

Fowler kept his gaze on the two, nearly spherical, bright red eyes fixed in the darkness before him. The breathing grew raspier, but the growls held their consistency as the great bear spoke.

“What holds your paw?” Fowler asked. “Strike now and be done with it.” “All in good time,” Azaz said. “First, there are some questions that must be answered.”

“I’d rather die.”

“Pain,” Azaz said, “can be a compelling master.”

Azaz swiped Fowler’s skull against the rock once more. Deafening growls—an entire chorus of them—rose like a sickly psalm from the clan of The Blood Paw that surrounded their leader.

“But fear not. It is not you who will do the answering. Now,” Azaz ordered his own nanobots. “Descend. Get his nanotechnology. All of it.”

Weakened by the concussive blows, Fowler lie powerless.

“How ironic, hunter,” Azaz said. “First, you were the father of us all. Now, you will sire your own genocide.”

“I told you: I’m not Nurvlyn. I’ve never met the man. He is alive, well away from here.”

“Not for long.”

“You could stop this. The coming war. You could balance things. Set them right.”

Azaz growled something of a laugh. “You disturbed the balance when you became something more than lunch,” he said. “This paw will set The Great Balance right.”

“Foolish beast—you had your chance.”

Fowler smirked through the blood that washed his face. He closed his eyes and concentrated. The nanotechnology Azaz had summoned sparked in reds, purples and golds. Azaz felt the pain as Fowler’s nanobots prayed on Azaz’s, trapping the bear king in a small shower of electricity.

“You need to learn why things work as they do,” Fowler said. “My nanobots are my own—not yours to control.”

Fowler grabbed a shard of stone from the floor of the cave. He closed his eyes, summoning his nanobots, who left the body of the bear king, returning to their host. Azaz fell, overwhelmed by the shock. Fowler took the jagged rock and swiped it three times across the snout of Azaz, drawing deep and bloody wounds.

“Remember the name of Fowler with every last scar,” Fowler said. “The first scar is for my ancestors. The second is for me. And the third, that is for the children of men, who will see your mammoth body fall at the end of the war,” Fowler decreed.

Fowler raised his arm to deal a killing blow, but weakened as he was, he lacked the power. The Blood Paw growled. At the sight of the falling body of their prominent leader, they charged after Fowler. Trapped, Fowler shut his eyes. He ordered his nanobots to take some of the fallen bear’s nanotechnology. Within moments, he extended his hand. The nanotechnology hovered above his open right palm.

“Stop now,” Fowler said to The Blood Paw, “or I will order my nanobots to kill everything that gives your leader his intelligence and his power.”

Four Blood Paw soldiers stopped the charge. They stood on their hind legs, uncertain. Fowler ordered his nanobots to disassemble one of Azaz’s nanobots. The bear writhed on the cave floor.

“Clear a path for me or your leader dies,” Fowler said.

The Blood Paw moved to form a circle and charge again. Again, Fowler ordered the disassembly of Azaz’s nanotechnology. Again, the semiconscious bear king writhed. The Blood Paw made way.

Fowler leaned down to look the bear god in the eye. “If I see you again, I will kill you,” he said.

“I will taste of your flesh before I die,” Azaz whispered. “That I promise you.”

With that, Fowler fled through the narrow cave path to the mountainside, Azaz’s nanotechnology with him. Fowler kept a few nanobots and released others. Fowler stepped on more of the small mechanical creatures. Azaz writhed in the cave above, but his life was as pulsating as his angry growl.

Fowler fled back to what was left of his men, abandoning Silver Mountain to the bears. When the battered soldiers met the militia at the base of the Rocky Mountains, Brigand stood, waiting.

“You saw Azaz and lived?” Brigand asked. “I thought you were dead for sure. I heard he dragged you off.”

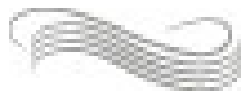
“Azaz’s guards thought I had the power to kill him,” Fowler said. “Confusion was my ally. Next time, when they know more about our technology, I won’t be so lucky.”

Fowler held out his hand. “I didn’t come away empty-handed, though,” he said. “At least we can study the mad bear before his next attack.”

The nanobots, still under their master’s control, had other ideas. They incinerated, forcing Fowler to drop them.

Brigand shook his head and cursed. “You cost the lives of twenty of our best-trained hunters and left the primary target alive,” he said. “You clearly lost the battle, and you nearly lost your life. But this,” Brigand said, pointing to the fiery nanobots, “shows me that we’re the ones who may not stand a chance in this war.”

Without further comment, Fowler headed off towards the medical tents, still dripping blood.



Gungung Dor

Bear Mountain, Rockies, USA

Azaz’s nanobots wove the last of the fur and skin of his snout together when one of the Blood Paw emerged.

“My king and master,” Vronkyl, chief commander of The Blood Paw, said.

“What is it?” Azaz asked.

“A *rulku* wizard has entered bear territory.”

Azaz growled, got on his hind legs, and said, “Lead me to him. Let me tear him limb from bloody limb so that we may show the world footage of the bear dining on its greatest natural enemy.”

“But sir—”

“What?”

“He is a spirit animal,” Vronkyl replied. “There is no muscle, no meat, only movement and silence. We attacked, even with the *rulku* magic. We could not even wound the creature, let alone slow him down. He will be here within

moments.”

“Within seconds,” Nurvlyn said, emerging as a hologram before the bear king. “You needn’t sound the alarms. If I wanted you dead, bear god, you would have been dead already.”

“A bold claim from a ghost,” Azaz said. “It’s too bad. I would have loved seeing you scream for your life.”

“I come here to give you advice, advice you will not listen to, but advice that in the end might save all,” Nurvlyn said.

“Nothing can save humanity now,” Azaz said.

“The innumerable tribes of animals were all given intelligence by the great spirit above,” Nurvlyn said. “This spirit is the very one that breathes into the winds and gives spark to the stars in the skies. The bears were one tribe. The *rulku* another. It is I who gave your kind the spark of awakened life. And it is I who knows. No tribe can decimate another without also decimating itself. We are all connected, every creature that flies through the skies, every creature that lurks at the bottom of the greatest ocean trenches. To kill the *rulku* is to kill yourselves.”

“And to not kill the *rulku* is to let them kill us all,” Azaz said. “My Blood Paw choose to fight.”

Nurvlyn reached out. “Hear me, now, bear king, through all your madness,” he insisted. “I know what you’re doing. I can see the fires lighting up all through the Rockies. You mean to build a civilization on the flesh of the *rulku*. Instead, you will choke on their ashes.”

“So, you play the prophet now?” Azaz asked. “If so, you’re a most unwelcome one.”

“The greatest prophets always are, for they are the ones that speak the truth,” Nurvlyn said. He extended his ghostly hand and added, “From the depths of the farthest ocean reigns King Blu, a source of wisdom that surpasses you and I put together. He would have me give you this. Even now, the *rulku* regroup, thanks to the one who scarred you.”

“They will fail,” Azaz insisted.

“Listen to me now, king, if ever you listen to anyone,” Nurvlyn said. “This gift programs your nanobots to build a mighty wall around The Rockies, one of energy that not even the *rulku* and their steel eagles will be able to break. In the end, it will save your bears from extinction. But even this wall will not last forever. Command it at the last, at the very last, when your life hangs in the balance, to prove yourself a king.”

“Save others but not myself—is that it, wizard spirit?” Azaz asked. Nurvlyn closed his eyes, as if reaching into the spirit binding all life. “That I cannot

foresee,” he said. “That depends upon your wisdom, not mine. But if you keep on this path, if you push towards the genocide of the *rulku*, you will push alone. The other animal tribes will not back you. I see a bear king who falls to the waves of fortune. I see the name of Azaz held in abomination.”

“Then I defy the oceans and their king, and the stars and theirs!” Azaz said, rising to his full height. “The rise of my kind has been an inevitability since the dawn of Creation. I have beaten fate by surviving this long. These scars,” Azaz said, showing off his snout, “mean that I am special. It is I who defies death. It is I who is chosen to rule the new world animal order.”

Azaz growled from the bottom of his essence. The Blood Paw rose and growled, joining with the battle cry of their master.

“Remember my words, bear king, before the end,” Nurvlyn said over the growls. “Your kingdom will be no more than a pile of ash and skull. But the kingdom of your descendants will be as numerous as the fiery eyes of the bear ancestors that dot the night sky.”

Nurvlyn left the nanobots behind and disappeared. Azaz prepared for his next strike.



CHAPTER 11

Zukul-Ryle

Washington, D.C., USA

Brigand stood before the holographic map, sighing before he looked at the hunter generals and North American prime minister in front of him.

“Azaz’s successful strike has emboldened the animal kingdom,” Brigand said. “The bear general is using the PR pictures we had of Fowler incapacitating him as evidence of human intent. He’s called for allies. So far, the animal world has been silent. Yet, our nanobot spies tell us that animal leaders are meeting secretly to blaze the path to war.” The holographic map shifted as Brigand mentioned, “The Blood Paw territory now extends over the Rockies, into Washington, Oregon, California, and even lower Canada. Additionally, the Amazon, under the leadership of the snake queen Thraxis, has pushed back human encroachment. Yu The Golden Nightmare, the king of the pandas, has met with Zulta, the elephant king and Yorba, lord of the mountain gorillas. The ocean is not immune. We know the animals are manufacturing some new nanotechnology in the deep Pacific, some weapon our spies could not uncover. The map keeps shifting—and not in our favor.”

“And what of *Animus*, the animal kingdom of the North?” Fowler asked. “They are officially neutral and have called upon Azaz and the human populations to cease hostilities,” Brigand said. “The wolf queen Moon Shadow sent a message as useless as anything conjured up by our consummate politicians. But pictures from behind the walls of *Animus* paint a different story. Polar bear troops are preparing for a long trek. Eagles, hawks, and vultures fly constantly, and our spies have spotted scouts over the entire continent.”

“They’re waiting for something,” European Hunter General Fvoris said. “Animal populations across Europe are unifying at alarming rates, under a mad murder of crows, of all creatures, that animals call The Night Eye. We have evidence this terrorist queen has been in contact with Azaz. One bear king would not march so boldly into military installations if he did not have greater support.”

“You haven’t seen Azaz up close,” Fowler said. “He will stop at nothing to rid the animal world of humans. He believes that he is a god.”

“Azaz is a local demagogue,” Hunter General Xavian, commander of the United Asian and Pacific Subcontinent Forces, said. “The animals use him to test our defenses. Our intel informs us of a bigger threat. A massive whale known as King Blu is the emperor of all animals. They wait for his decree. Once their weapon, whatever it is, is ready, they will strike. Our best intel leads us to believe that it will disable human nanobot-controlled technology. We must bring the war to the animals before they bring ruin to us.”

“Prime Minister?” Brigand asked.

“The World Council is unanimous. The animals must start this war, not us,” Prime Minister Damien Rush said.

“Why start a war, Prime Minister, when you can end one?” Brigand asked.

“General?” the prime minister asked in reply.

“We talk of symptoms but not of the disease,” Brigand said. “One enhanced human, the Greenlander the animals call Nurvlyn, is the father of this madness. His nanobots speak the language of the animals better than any creature alive, even better than our chief hunter, Fowler, over here. If we can capture this Nurvlyn alive and decode his nanotechnology, we can command the hybrid animals at a cellular level. We can end the war before there is one.”

“Why don’t we have him already?” Hunter General Zhang, head of the Asian Land Forces, asked.

“The animals hide him,” Brigand said, “and our best hunter may be the only one who can find him. To put Fowler on this at such a crucial hour would give the animals greater opportunity to strike.”

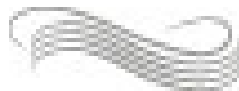
“We should find him,” Hunter General Uzwali, Head of the African Continental Army, said. “We should make that our top priority. Do you know where he is?”

“No one does,” Brigand said. “He has the ability to disable nanotechnology.”

Fowler shut his eyes and said, “We are still connected, through some animal speech I can’t completely understand. He is the compass for all of this. I will find him.”

“I’ll inform The World Council,” Prime Minister Rush said. “But I can tell you with great confidence, start your hunt today. No one on The World Council will balk if you have this man in custody.”

The hunter generals rose. Prime Minister Rush whispered, “Best of luck, sergeant,” to Fowler. “In you lies our only hope of thwarting crisis evolution.” Then he headed out, his generals behind him.



Tegra-Don

Pacific Ocean

In the swirling blue-green waters of the vast Pacific, just below where the sunrays stoked their fires, a vast, impenetrable energy shield hid the most intricate biological mind earth or ocean had ever known. The massive purple light swam, flanked by schools of great white sharks. Leading the sharks was their commander, a giant great white shark known as Xrata The White Death. They circled as if a Praetorian Guard from an age of Man long dead. And still the light of the mega whale was too much for them.

“King Blu,” Xrata said. “The landlings have engaged one another. One of their bear kings, Azaz, has attacked the military outpost of the *rulku*. The animal tribes have called a meeting to declare war. They have asked that you attend. Shall we send any message?”

The light that was symbiotic with the whale pulsed in thought. “The interests of the ocean must come first,” King Blu said. “Have your sharks and dolphins used the nanotechnology as I directed? The energy shields must go up if we are to sift away the trash and pollution of the landling world and keep this war out of our waters. Yet, there is silence.”

“They have started the shields but need more time—at least two more of your migrations,” Xrata said.

“Then we cannot join in the landling war,” King Blu said. “I will not allow my children to be the victims of senseless conflict. It is good for us that the ocean is vast, that we need not kill each other for water.”

“Shall I send a message, my lord?” Xrata asked.

“There is no point. The man beast, the one they call Nurvlyn, blocks communication. He wants us to give advantage to one side over the other.”

“He seeks another conference.”

“Allow it, if only to see his frequency and to see how we might disable him,” King Blu sang in a softened song. “But if these escalating wars pollute our waters, all animals will pay the price. Even the patience of a god has its limits.”

“Yes, my lord,” Admiral Xrata replied.

Xrata swam off, until there was only the storming purple energy field, the whale body not enough to contain the mind of King Blu, and the water. Moments later, by holographic transmission, Nurvlyn appeared.

“Great king of the waters,” Nurvlyn began, “thank you for seeing me again.”

“You left me little choice.”

“I sense much activity in the waters.”

“And much activity in the world above them.”

Nurvlyn hid his eyes to avoid seeing the blinding light of the whale god. “You know what I must ask,” Nurvlyn said. “Have you finished your studies on the nanotechnology I provided?”

The energy field pulsed once more in a deeper violet, then in a sun yellow, and then in a cobalt blue.

“I know what you would ask of me,” King Blu said, “and I know what your animal kind will ask when their war is over.”

“And we both know that this body will be dead before this all plays out,” Nurvlyn said without self-pity. “But while you deal with thousands of generations in the blink of an eye, I deal with one moment only. I have done your bidding—I have given Azaz the means to prove his leadership qualities when the time comes. And I need to know: Will you turn over your modifications to us? Will you help the animals to overthrow their keepers?”

The energy field pulsed again, this time in a radiant pink.

“My godly mind has calculated the effects of this war to the thousandth generation,” King Blu said, “and even I can’t say for sure if what I am about to do is wisdom or folly. However, this best favors the children of the sea: I will release only those modifications that allow your animal kind to disable the technology that poses a threat to us all. Luckily for you, that includes almost every device known to the *rulku*.”

King Blu summoned Xrata.

“My liege?” Xrata asked.

“Speak to Qyerl, the dolphin king. Ask him to program the nanobots we modified to seek out Nurvlyn and identify themselves for him.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Xrata swam off.

“And now, will you let my sharks and dolphins work in peace?” King Blu asked.

“He who sees a thousand generations knows the answer to that,” Nurvlyn replied.

“I am not a *he*. Or a *she*. Or an *it*, exactly,” King Blu said. “I am the ocean. When I pass from this body, I will join with every creature of the sea. We will be as one.”

“Remarkable,” Nurvlyn said. “I will not intrude upon your communications again until the last hour. And you know my request. From you will come the great world consciousness that will join all back to The Creator, she whose name is exalted. I wish to be with you. I wish to see.”

“Even I have not seen the one you speak of, *Avrah*, in ages,” King Blu said.

“I will miss you, great king,” Nurvlyn said, “but I must ask: is this your message to the war council? Do you wish for your voice to be heard?”

“My voice is as thunder is upon your highest mountains,” King Blu replied. “None can hear my true voice and live. When I wish to be heard, I will speak—in my own time, and in my own way.”

“Thank you, great king,” Nurvlyn said.

The energy field pulsed, and Nurvlyn’s hologram disappeared.

Back in the Inyo County hills, the swaying of Methuselah pierced the still sky.

“You realize,” Methuselah said, “that this day, King Blu has control over you and over all animals of the earth. King Blu is mysterious, yet I know him as I know myself. What is freely given comes at the greatest cost.”

“You think we should reject the gift?” Nurvlyn asked.

Methuselah sat quietly for a moment before adding, “It is too late. King Blu knows all of your technology now. The nanotechnology has evolved quicker in the waters of the sea. King Blu has modified it to make it so. The great king allows you to use these devices and to kill each other to divert you while the ocean animals finish their energy fields. They will transform the ocean as we know it. And then the world will be his.”

“We have little choice,” Nurvlyn said. “To fight against the *rulku* now, we must use these modifications. Otherwise, against the technology of the *rulku* there can be no victory. I must meet with the council. Do you wish to join me?”

“Like King Blu, I see where this will lead and what part the plants of the world will ultimately play,” Methuselah said. “I favor peace, not war. Defense, not offense. So long as you realize that we also will not play a part—just yet, anyway—I will be happy to listen.”

Nurvlyn laughed. “You mean to outsmart the smartest intelligence of the ocean, don’t you?”

“One day, King Blu and I will realize that we are one. We will exist as one.

Until that day, my children must also survive,” Methuselah said.

Nurvlyn nodded and summoned the great animal leaders of the many tribes. The time was at hand.



Yvot-Sing

Min Mountains, China

Holosphere

Yu The Golden Nightmare sat perched on his forest throne tree, gazing at all around him. The giant panda had black fur matted by his eyes and snout. A cloud of white stretched over the contours of his massive face, stretching, with large black spots, along the rest of his massive body. The golden armor that gave the emperor his name hid most of that fur, however. That armor sent a clear message: here was an emperor preparing for war.

The Golden Nightmare steadied his eyes until they landed on Moon Shadow's hologram. "It is too bad that we cannot meet our esteemed animal brothers and sisters face to face for so solemn an occasion," The Golden Nightmare said. "But the nanotechnology of the enemy is everywhere, and the *rulku* have hemmed us in by the mountains of *Yvot-Sing*. Any move my animal tribes make constitutes an act of war."

Holograms of Zulta, the elephant king; of Yorba, king of the gorillas; of Thraxis, queen of the Amazon; of Moon Shadow, queen of *Animus*; of White Claw, king of the northern bears of *Animus*; and of The Night Eye, a murder of crows, filled the tree colony The Golden Nightmare and his spider monkeys had worked so feverishly to build. The cry of eagles signaled the presence of Thunder Killer, and only a solemn silence accompanied Sky Death, who sat at Moon Shadow's side. The image of a half man, half beast, Nurvlyn, sat in the last tree chair. Snow fell upon the sanctuary of the great panda king, but he kept his eyes on the world of animals before him, waiting for the next king or queen to speak.

"My eagles tell me that Azaz The Grizzly King means to lead a campaign to the Pacific Ocean, and that he may start as soon as tonight," Thunder Killer said. "He has reached out to *Animus*, inviting us to join in The Great Northern Campaign for the Liberation of All Animals, as he calls it."

"I met with Azaz," Moon Shadow said. "He means to unite the animals under a single crown: his."

"Yet, he acts with strength," Yorba said. "He shows us that the might of the *rulku* is not so great as we first imagined. The longer we wait, the stronger they become, and the more they plot to kill all of our kind."

"The streets of Europe flow with the blood of my children," The Night Eye said. The flock swarmed in a circling mass of ravens, crows, and kites, each bird a separate choral note. "We have engaged in skirmishes, but there are too many of their machines."

Nurvlyn sat for a moment, took a deep breath, and added, holding up a few nanobots, "There is something you should know. My kind will never rest until the unnatural order and rule of mankind is restored. Mankind will use their machines and drive you to camps, subject you to experiments and to torture, and

kill you, curing the disease they say has overtaken the animal world. These nanobots, courtesy of the great ruler of the oceans, King Blu, are the weapon that you need.”

“The *rulku* lies, like all *rulku*,” Yorba said.

“Quiet, Yorba,” Zulta ordered. “Let the wizard speak.”

“Replicating and releasing these to the world of machines will render them useless,” Nurvlyn said. “It will not kill my people, but it will end their tyranny over nature.”

“At what cost to us?” Thraxis asked with a prolonged hiss. “The Great Sun of the Ocean has been busy in the waters that surround my jungle. We see the sea lights day and night, hard at work. I suspect that King Blu means to control us and the war, or at the very least, track us with the same technology the *rulku* use. Entrapment is always the best way to kill your prey.”

“It isn’t The Great Sun King of the Ocean; it’s this *rulku*,” Yorba said. “With one hand, this Nurvlyn becomes our father. With the other, he would become our master.”

Nurvlyn took a deep breath. “Millennia of abuse are behind King Yorba’s words, and the fault for that lies with my kind,” he said. “But I assure you, my time is almost up. The great queen of the trees, Methuselah, and the mystical King Blu himself, assure me that my death is at hand before this war is over. You must remember, Yorba, that I was a failed experiment, a bridge between the animal, plant, and human worlds, with one intent: to control the animals as soldiers in our *rulku* wars. My one remaining motive is to set things right. This technology will give you a chance. But I do not pretend that I will help you exterminate my kind, as Azaz would have. I am not the traitor Yorba holds me to be. I am the way of evolution. Instead, I must find my successor or let him find me. He will work to set the world of the *rulku* right again when they lose this war by allowing them to join with nature, to be as I am.”

Nurvlyn took another breath, adding, “I have said what I needed to say, and I have done what I have needed to do, for you my children, for this earth, its skies, and its oceans. The declaration of war is for you to decide. Look to me no more unless it is in the nature that surrounds you. A wizard comes and goes as necessity moves him. All I ask is that you remember, when this is all over, that not all *rulku* are evil, and that for life to survive, we must be as we always were, as one.”

With that, Nurvlyn’s hologram disappeared. There was chatter among the animals as the refashioned nanobots hovered about The Golden Nightmare.

“It seems we have a fateful decision ahead of us, my brothers and sisters,” The Golden Nightmare said. “I hear the nanobots speaking to me. They say they can

be embedded in the steel beasts of the *rulku* by the next full moon.”

“I say we use them,” Moon Shadow said.

The other kings and queens of the animals looked at Moon Shadow with surprise.

“I favor diplomacy of like minds,” Moon Shadow said. “But I believe Nurvlyn. The *rulku* will not stop. We must not be fools, as Azaz is. We must coordinate our strikes and make sure we attack as one.”

“And who will decide for us? You?” Thraxis asked.

“We must appoint our top generals,” Moon Shadow said, “who must be in constant communication. They must use nanobots to create a web of technology that makes us one. I say we each appoint a general. The kingdom of *Animus* appoints White Claw, king of the polar regions. He is as much a leader as I am.”

“Moon Shadow speaks well,” The Night Eye said. “Outsmarting the *rulku* with their own hunting strategy is our only way.”

“I agree,” The Golden Nightmare said. “Then it is time, my allies, for the vote. Do we choose to go to war?”

“Aye,” Thunder Killer said.

One by one, the animals agreed. Until it was Yorba’s turn to speak.

“And what of Azaz?” Yorba asked. “Before I vote, I want to know: Do we send animals to support him?”

“*Animus* will not,” Moon Shadow said. “We haven’t enough trained soldiers to lose to his endless campaigns. However, we will stand behind you, our allies, if you declare war, and commit our soldiers of the North to whatever cause this council sees fit.”

“I agree,” Zulta said. “Let us allow Azaz to join us if he wishes, as an equal, but not as our ruler. But only if he takes his orders from the council, as we will. No more rogue attacks. And no genocide. Too long have my elephants seen where that kind of *rulku* thinking will lead us.”

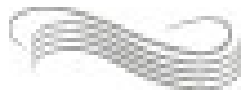
Yorba snorted.

“It comes down to you and Thraxis,” Zulta said.

“I agree,” Thraxis said. “In the jungle, each anaconda hunts alone and survives by her intellect and might. Let it be so with Azaz. He must have the intellect to join us or die on his own. This is *Ozu*.”

“I agree, for now,” Yorba said, turning to Zulta. “We will protect your mountains and your jungles, and we will strike as one on the next full moon.”

The council sat for a long while, digesting all that had been spoken, before strategy was discussed.



CHAPTER 12

Zukul-Ryle

Washington, D.C., USA
Holosphere

On screens the world over, prime ministers from six of the seven continents stood in a circle as Prime Minister Rush delivered the news. “Last night, our drones detected large movements of evolved animals on a global scale. This includes the northern nation of *Animus*. In The Rocky Mountains, King Azaz still leads his Blood Paw against peaceful cities of men, women, and children. Per the terms of our treaty with the rising animal nation-states of the world, there is to be no aggression between the world of mankind and the world of evolved animals. We consider movement beyond the borders of *Animus* to be an act of war. We encourage all animals to return to their reservations within one day of this message. We will be sending ships and military personnel to make sure that the peace is upheld. Rest assured, our brave men and women in the military will not strike first. However, open aggression will not be tolerated. As always, we seek a peaceful resolution of our differences.”

Hunter General Brigand sat with Hunter Admiral Lyons of the ship *Ascension* as the drone ship escorted the military to the eastern borders of *Animus*. They watched Prime Minister Rush’s message to the world solemnly, breaking the silence only when the transmission was complete.

“When was the last time you saw battle?” Hunter General Brigand asked Admiral Lyons.

“This is a drone ship capable of air and sea missions,” Admiral Lyons said. The admiral was a stocky, fluently sculptured man with a cleft chin and statuesque figure set off by ruthless blue eyes.

“The *Ascension* was the leading ship in rounding up the animals and quarantining them to the camps after the initial attacks,” the admiral said. “She has seen her share of animal blood.”

“As have I,” Brigand said, looking into the frigid waters as if etching the past from the salty ice. “I still remember the early missions around the cities. I’ve never slaughtered more animals in my life than I did in those first few weeks.”

And now this.”

“The animals brought this on themselves,” Lyons said, without the same introspection. “They’re wild, unruly, uncivilized creatures. Giving them intellect and the capacity to reason is like arming a Neanderthal with a machine gun and then telling the savage not to pull the trigger. And then we wonder why people get hurt.”

Brigand thought for a moment. He wondered if Lyons thought of the same question. When Lyons said nothing, watching the icy waters ahead, Brigand spoke.

“On this ship, we have the ability to wipe out all of *Animus*,” Brigand said.

“If it comes to that, yes,” Lyons said.

Brigand looked at him. “Are you ready to give the order?”

Lyons looked at him. “Don’t tell me you’re getting soft, Hunter General,” he said. “You know better than I do how damaging these beasts are up close and personal. Do you think they’d hesitate a single second to rip your throat out if it would benefit their own survival? For millennia, the natural world feared us. They will learn that it was for good reason.”

Hunter General Brigand kept quiet.

“But I’m not the ranking officer here, and that won’t be my order to give, will it, Hunter General?” Lyons asked.

“No. It won’t. It will either have to come from the ministers’ council or from me.”

Lyons stared at the man for a moment, as if measuring the uncertainty upon his face. “History often comes down to a single moment that changes the world,” he said. “My advice to you, if I may be so bold, sir, is to remember that billions of lives hinge on the decision that our fleets the world over make in a single moment. We either go down as history’s hero or as history’s fool.”

“I’m well aware.”

Lyons smirked. “I’m sure the Beast of British Columbia would be,” he said. “What was it: a thousand animals in a single day? You ran at least three animal camps in your time, didn’t you?”

“I did, and I saw innocent animals burn because of the orders of men like you, at the hands of men like me. I won’t let the world come to what I saw there: an endlessly churning fire.”

“Either we kill them, or they kill us,” Lyons insisted. “That’s nature’s own way.”

Brigand kept quiet as the ice mountains off the edge of *Animus* came into view. He looked through the nanotechnology of his enhanced eyes. The horizon was empty. Not even a sterling stirred overhead.

“Lieutenant Yolsen,” Brigand called out to his assistant.

“Sir,” the lieutenant asked.

Lieutenant Yolsen was tall, unnaturally thin, with a ruggedness of features born from years of fighting animals on the ice.

“Prepare to send a message,” Brigand commanded. “We demand to meet with the leading council of *Animus* immediately to avert war.”

The lieutenant sent his nanobots to meet with any animal technology he could find. For hours, the men waited.

“No answer, sir,” the lieutenant said. “We’ve sent the message through the same channels we always use, and the animals aren’t responding.”

“What intel is there from our spy nanobots, the ones embedded in *Animus*?”

“We checked, sir, and they’ve been disabled.”

“Disabled?”

“No technology we’ve sent into their kingdom has communicated. Even the aerial drones have gone as dark as the polar sky, sir.”

“They’re expecting us,” Brigand said.

“How could they not, if they have eyes?” Lyons asked.

“Bring us back past the ice, admiral,” Brigand said. “Send your reports to the ministers’ council immediately,” he ordered Lieutenant Yolsen.

With those words, Brigand went back to his cabin, awaiting orders.



Rul-Seerus

Mount Asgard

Nunavut, Canada

The great, black-tinged white feathers of the snowy owl came into view in the great beyond. Moon Shadow, Thunder Killer, and White Claw looked at the icy twin peaks of Mount Asgard, awaiting the descent of the great seer and prophet from the skies.

“You come seeking answers,” Snow Prophet said, descending to the lowest peak, where the animals stood. “Yet, the future already pierces like ice on the tip of an eagle’s wing.”

Snow Prophet stood up, at an impressive height for an owl, with his wings nearly five feet from tip to tip. His black-flecked beak added to the whiteness. Whereas most owls of his species had dark eyes, his were as white, blind, and colorless as the polar clouds.

“The Night Eye has told us that a convoy of *rulku* is in our seas, just as one gathers along the shores of Brittany in France, others by the Amazon and Congo, and still other aerial navies amass in the Min Mountains in China,” Moon Shadow said. “The *rulku* say that are surveying us, and they seek parley.”

“The *rulku* are a fearful predator, and like most predators protecting fresh kills, they will strike,” Snow Prophet said. “I see a war that does not end until an eagle, a serpent, and a bear meet not as friends but as foes. The bear seeks to usher in a long period of peace, but there will be war. I see time as King Blu feels the most distant of tides. There can be no peace until the king of the *rulku* falls from his perch high in the Potomac, until his warriors fight for life, here in the ice of the seas past *Kywy-Tolyn*. Only then will animals roam free. Only then can *Animus* truly be. And even then, the whale king will be plotting.”

“So, your counsel is to wage war?” Thunder Killer asked.

“War is upon you already,” Snow Prophet said. The majestic owl closed its eyes, concentrating. “The *rulku* have yet to reveal their most fearful magic. They have a genetic bomb that can kill all life in Nunavut. Their hunter warrior hesitates. Much animal blood stains his heart. War pains him greatly. If you strike now, you may disable this weapon. If you wait, the other *rulku* hunters will not hesitate.”

“The *rulku* are not the only ones with a weapon capable of carnage,” Moon Shadow said.

“The nanotechnology you speak of will cause untold suffering to the *rulku*,” Snow Prophet said. “Untold numbers of their children will perish should you use it. Instead of your blood, theirs will feed the oceans.”

“What other choice do we have?” White Claw asked. “It’s either their deaths or ours.”

“Why ask if you are willing to see no other answer?” Snow Prophet inquired.

“You’re right, oracle,” Moon Shadow said. “We knew the answer all along, down to the last animal. We had just hoped for some other way. We hoped for peace.”

“I tell you that before the moon is at its peak tonight, when I cry out by the midnight sun, this war will begin,” Snow Prophet said. “Only when you cry out under the same moon, with a thousand animals and *rulku* at your side, Moon Shadow,” the oracle said, stretching its wings and facing White Claw, “will this war of the animals end.”

At that moment, there was a scurrying sifting through the snow.

“Even now, your harbinger arrives,” Snow Prophet said. “His words will be like blood in the snow.”

Through a tuft of snow, Pale Ghost emerged.

“What is it?” Moon Shadow asked.

“The *rulku* hunter king off the coast has made his first move,” Pale Ghost said. “They’ve already sent their steel spies into our land. They are still looking for you. What do you command, kings and queens?”

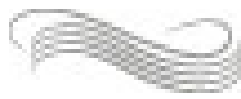
Thunder Killer, White Claw, and Moon Shadow all gazed upon one another.

With a swift nod of beak and snout, the matter was decided.

“Send out the nanobots. Let them take to the skies as locusts,” White Claw commanded.

“It will be done as you say,” Pale Ghost replied, scurrying off.

With a mighty thrust of her great wings, Snow Prophet took to the air, readying his cry.



Yon Kywy-Tolyn, Past Animus

The Waters Off Of Nunavut, Canada

The Great Darkening, as the *rulku* called it, blackened the skies in seconds, as if a thousand crows suddenly ascended and knocked down the sun from its heavenly mantle. All around the world, there was a primordial buzzing, as if the skies were shaking to their foundations. Animals turned their eyes upward. The *rulku* doubled over, cradling their ears, seeking solace in the earth below.

Streams of nanobots circled the air, descending like scourges upon the technology below. The nanobots confiscated the augmented ethernet, along with the tanks, attack cruisers, computers, and weapons of the *rulku* below. From London to Shanghai, the navies stood still as their own weapons turned against them. The Night Eye circled the skies in Europe, coordinating the nanobots against their *rulku* masters. In the great Rockies, Azaz and his Blood Paw rose on their hind legs, growling their battle cry as if at evolution itself. Animals from all the continents rose, from the mightiest of the lions, Kama, in Africa, to the lowliest of the mice on the smallest of the Pacific islands.

Off the coast of Nunavut, Hunter General Brigand and Admiral Lyons stood watching helplessly as the one protected weapon the nanobots had not Yet infiltrated flashed before them. Brigand stirred, contacting the ministerial council, who, through breaks in static, ordered immediate counterattacks and the deployment of any weapon at the soldiers’ disposal. Brigand and Lyons looked at each other. Both sought confirmation of the orders, but there was only static on the line.

“What are you waiting for?” Lyons asked, searching out the uncertainty in Brigand’s eyes. “Attack, or they will finish us.”

“If we attack, we kill off every living animal in *Animus*,” Brigand said, “and engage in a full-scale world war. Enable the nanosphere,” he ordered the last of the nanobots nearby after The Great Darkening fully unfolded.

A technological shield ascended in perfect spherical form around the ship. “Contact the council again. Enable the cameras,” Brigand ordered.

Through cameras from every ship in the fleet, from Iluliisatt to Manaus to Perth to Beijing, there was the same sight: pristine darkness and a thundering cry, part ape, part bear, part wolf, part eagle, part of all Creation, shaking the skies. The cry became animate on the surrounding ice, yet the cameras went black. The last image Brigand saw: a brood of Amazonian anacondas seizing the ships of Manaus and South China tigers and green tree vipers descending on a ship in Chinese waters.

The emergency line for the council held the same static-ridden cry: the cry of evolution.

“Too late now,” Admiral Lyons said. He turned to Lieutenant Yolsen. “Detonate the bioweapon. Start with the nanocloud.”

“Belay that order,” Brigand said to Lieutenant Yolsen.

“Traitor,” Admiral Lyons said. “You heard the council’s orders.”

“All of *Animus* hangs in the balance,” Brigand said. “We can’t be the first to attack, or we risk dooming civilization as we know it.”

“You have your orders, lieutenant,” Lyons said. “Fire now, before we’re all dead.”

“Fire, and you kill us,” Brigand said.

Lieutenant Yolsen hesitated for a moment before his finger descended on the button.

At that moment, a pack of orcas butted the ship from below as a celebration of polar bears marched towards the edge of the ice.

“You’ve doomed us,” Brigand said to Lyons. “They’re watching us. You just made the first move. Now the entire animal kingdom will use this ship’s footage to justify a war.”

“The war’s already on us,” Lyons said. “Hunters,” he ordered. “Get ready for combat. Kill whatever penetrates that shield.”

Brigand punched Lyons squarely in the stomach. Lyons doubled over. Brigand grabbed hold of him and tossed him into a wall.

In the darkness, there was a buzzing and a gnawing. The men armed themselves with their laser rifles. They looked outside. A pounding of metal resonated across the hull. Within moments, the shield was down. The coterie of

polar bears, eagles, and wolves boarded the ship. Brigand ordered for his soldiers to lower their weapons. Most shot anyway. The lasers never fired. In fact, none of the technology on the ship showed the faintest sign of life.

Lieutenant Yolsen lunged forward. The head polar bear smacked him against the deck, knocking him unconscious. Other officers fought, but the eagles went for their eyes and the wolves tore at their legs. The animals tore at least twenty men to shreds within minutes, including the limbs that were left of Admiral Lyons and Lieutenant Yolsen. At that, the surviving soldiers followed Brigand's examples and lied down in submission.

"We surrender," Brigand said.

The polar bear king growled out something to his fellow bears. The wolves nodded and joined in. Some nanobots from the bears flew to the ears of the surrendering men.

"Can you understand?" the chief polar bear asked.

"If you'll let me use my nanotechnology," Brigand said, doing so. "I am Hunter General Brigand. We were on a surveillance mission to find out why we lost contact with the nation of *Animus*."

"You mean that you came to find out why your spy technology no longer worked," the polar bear said. "We will see your own cameras. We will let your own technology condemn you. Rise. Come with us. We will bring you before our council. They will decide your fate."

Brigand ordered his men to comply, but the blood and skin saturating the ship made a better argument. The men stood and went without issue.

"King Claw?" Brigand asked the head bear.

"White Claw, in your tongue," the polar bear said. "You could not pronounce my name in its original tongue."

"What we do here today will change the course of history," Brigand said. "We must be careful."

"Animal blood has stained history already," White Claw said. "The day of Man and his history is over. You are now as I was, a polar bear starving, clinging to the last bit of melting ice. Come now. Walk before I take your legs."

Brigand walked out towards the open ice, where, through miles of snow and icy peaks, the towering gates of *Animus* stood waiting.



CHAPTER 13

Animus

Nunavut, Canada
North America, South America, and Beyond

Moon Shadow stood in the middle, flanked by White Claw, Sky Death, and Thunder Killer as she spoke. Between them, on their knees, was an unconscious Brigand and the last of his hunters.

“Animals of the world,” Moon Shadow said. “The *rulku* have infiltrated and attacked the nation of *Animus*. Long have they been spying on animals and seeking how they might subdue us. Too long have animals been at the whims of the *rulku*. Now, they have been beaten. Rise and take your place as kings and queens of the earth. This is a formal declaration of war. Every *rulku* is now an enemy of *Animus*.”

Before the words even made their way through the nanotransmitters to the larger world, The March of the Pets began. Those that had been kept in cages, in zoos, and those still held secretly by the *rulku*, despite the banning of pets altogether, took to the streets of the cities, towns, waters, and countryside from Nunavut all the way to the beaches of Argentina and farther still. The attack of the animals had rendered anything needing an electric spark lifeless. From robot servants to cars to tanks to laser weapons, nothing functioned. And so, as at the beginning of time, the animals went about the streets and hunted. Some, like Dasu, a mountain lion raised from captivity, mourned for the loss of their parents. Still, the cry of the new earth led them on. Dasu, with a coterie of former house dogs and cats, attacked the supermarkets, waylaid police stations, and forced the *rulku* into homes as the animals cried and marched through the streets.

“And what now?” Fiona, a Siamese cat, asked Dasu.

Fiona’s eyes, predatorial but not without intellect, spoke the rest of his thoughts as loudly as if he had hissed.

“We must,” Dasu said. “If we leave them alive, they will just grow strong enough to attack. We must make sure the day of Man never returns.”

The mountain lion rose up on his hind legs, rallying the dogs, cats, house

birds, and scores of former pets. The mob of animals turned back. Just as mobs of animals did throughout the world, Dasu, Fiona, and countless others turned on their former masters, mauling them in their homes. Scientists like Dr. Sifa and Dr. Okada were among those targeted and killed. Even Dana Kahr, surrounded as she was, was not immune to poisoning from a secret pet dog she kept despite all the warnings. Dr. Kahr's lifelong companion, White Star, licked the doctor's face, seeing the poisoning as an act of mercy before Dasu came through the doors. When the legions of animals poured through, White Star drank the same poison, taking his life. And it was not just the architects of the animal death camps that suffered and died. In Fowler's residence, a slender woman's body and the head of a small boy were found among the mauled. Everywhere, old ladies screamed. Children cried. And still, the animals attacked.



No Rul Ozu

Inyo County, California, USA

In the snaking sands of the western desert, Methuselah stood as she had always stood, indifferent to the streams of nanobots in the air as she had been to a bevy of condors thousands of years ago. Next to her, kneeling, was an emaciated man, part human, part plant, part animal, breathing in erratic cadences.

“I tried to warn mankind once,” Nurvlyn said, “when I was but a scientist. Before they experimented on me. Before the man that I was died. Beware the birds that fly overhead. Beware the oceans where you dump your filth. Beware the beasts of the rivers that you poison. Beware the predators that your towns endlessly push back. Beware what stands below, for it will soon rise above.”

“Your consciousness is shifting yet again,” Methuselah said. “You are seeing the days of your human life as a moment, one particle of dust measured against the sands of eternity.”

“And what do you, who live as Snow Prophet sees, envision for this great conflict?”

“The world shifting from the first level of consciousness to the second.”

“And what is that?”

Methuselah paused, before adding: “The seven levels of consciousness are always with us. Yet, few see them permeating all life. The first is a singular consciousness, that of a being only aware of its own needs. The second is awareness of interdependency. Creatures realize they need others as much as

they need themselves. The third is co-consciousness, what you call extrasensory perception, where the individual connects mentally, psychically, to other creatures in existence. The fourth level is when this web of collective consciousness unites a single species. The fifth level is when all species unite in a planetary consciousness. The sixth is a consciousness that is one with the universe, the realization that everything is alive and the connection to all life and matter, living or dead. The seventh is a consciousness that unites to what you call God, all that is, in this universe and all others.”

“Is the seventh level your consciousness? Is that what I am to join?” Nurvlyn asked.

“I am at every level and no levels all at once,” Methuselah said. “True enlightenment takes billions of years, measured in time. Only gods achieve this sooner. That is why you struggle.”

“I feel it in the marrow of my bones.”

“That is death, as you humans call it. It is coming.”

Nurvlyn shut his eyes, quieted himself, praying to The Holy Spirit in the world that surrounded him.

As Nurvlyn did so, the marksman approached his quarry, unhidden against the desert sands.

“I sense you before I see you,” Nurvlyn said. “Approach.”

Fowler, the sweat of weeks of hunting upon him, emerged. Nurvlyn’s eyes remained closed, concentrating.

“You’ve come to kill me. You’ve come too late,” Nurvlyn said.

“My wife and child are dead because of the abomination you visited on our world,” Fowler said. “I could not make it back to them, but I can make it to you.”

“I am Nurvlyn, or what’s left of him.”

Fowler held a blade close to Nurvlyn’s neck. “I wish I could,” he said, thinking of his dead family. “But I must follow orders. I must bring you back to prevent this war.”

“The one that has already begun?” Nurvlyn asked. “It was always here. We just never noticed it. It will be here long after I’m gone. But it was not Hunter General Brigand that ordered you here. It was Methuselah that summoned you.”

“Even the trees, then, have intelligence?”

“Everything has life and intellect. We just measure it differently. Methuselah was my mentor. She will soon be yours.”

“Not if I kill you first,” Fowler said, steadying his blade.

“Grief and anger consume you. You must let them go. Your wife and child live still, just in a distinct form.”

Nurvlyn opened his eyes and rose from kneeling.

“I want to believe you,” Fowler said, his hand trembling. “But the pain—I can’t stop feeling as the animals feel, hearing their thoughts.”

“You’re awakening. Sometimes, awakenings are painful, as with all things that grow. Drop the knife and join me.”

Fowler stared at the blade’s serrated edges for a brief moment. He dropped the blade.

“I was the first, a new Adam for a new age,” Nurvlyn said. “You will be the next. We are the first of a new line of *rulku*. You will continue my work. As I gave balance to the animals, you will give balance to the humans in the last moment of this war. One day, where I go, you will follow.”

Fowler weighed the emaciated man in front of him.

“Can you help me with the pain?” Fowler asked.

“Methuselah can. Join me for dinner. We have much to discuss.” Nurvlyn moved ahead, but Fowler stood, fixed, yet wavering.

“You can always kill me or abduct me later, though I wouldn’t survive the journey. Come along. Methuselah needs her rest.”

With that, Nurvlyn journeyed towards the arching sunlight snaking along the desert. Fowler followed.



TABLET 2:
THE WAR OF THE *RULKU*

CHAPTER 14

Gungung Dor Syval

Coastal California, USA

Six Months Later

The last of Brigand's original brigade of hunters hung limply in the trees near the great rocky coasts of what was once northern California. The only survivor, kept alive for the final kill, was Prime Minister Damien Rush. He stood against The Blood Paw, his hands trembling as he held the last of the old-world rifles in his hand. The foot of one of the other hunters struck him as it jostled in the Pacific breeze. Suddenly, with a metal helm and armor made of nanobots, which still buzzed around the massive creature, came Commander Vronkyl. The gray-brown grizzly, with tufts of blood on his fur, growled. The Blood Paw moved aside, in formation, as the great bear himself, Azaz, emerged. The bear king trampled the brush beneath him as he made his way to the edge of the beach. Rush aimed his rifle and took several shots. Azaz's fangs became a fearsome smile as the nanobots simply warded the bullets away. Rush, out of ammunition, fell to his knees. So overcome was he by trying to outrun the massive bears after they devoured the last of his guards.

Azaz, in gold armor with a helm like an ancient sun king, stood on four legs and approached. "So, this is the end of the great Western resistance," he said with a snarl. "This is the last of those who oppose me, a prime minister and his toy gun."

The Blood Paw growled in uproarious laughter.

"You, minister, will not be hanged like the others," Azaz said. "I will eat your heart to honor your courage."

Rush lunged after Azaz. Vronkyl intercepted. In one fatal sweep of his paw, Vronkyl knocked the once mighty politician to the ground. The warrior bear clamped down with his fangs upon the former prime minister's neck. Damien Rush looked up to see Azaz's red eyes before taking his last breaths. Azaz looked out to the Pacific Ocean and then again at the fallen minister before saying, "I now know why your Alexander the Great once cried. To fight the last fight, to conquer every known land except the great sea itself, which defies us,

that is a sad end. A fighter lives for the fight. A bear lives for the kill.”

“The East will rise yet,” Rush said, between breaths, as he choked on his blood. “This war is not over.”

The blood poured from Rush’s neck and mouth as he died.

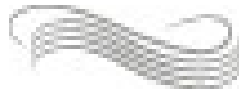
“He speaks true, my lord,” Vronkyl said.

“So the most loathsome of my spies tell me,” Azaz said. “We have conquered one coast. Let us turn around and conquer another. I will push the *rulku* off their mountain top in Washington and topple every *rulku* monument in my way. I will rule from ocean to ocean until my name becomes the only name of power.”

“What of the remaining *rulku*, my lord?” Vronkyl asked. “There are still hundreds left, some old, some infirm, some children.”

“Form camps across the lands, as far as the eye can see,” Azaz said. “Let them serve us. Let us have places where bears can feast endlessly on fresh *rulku* meat.” “As you wish, my king,” Vronkyl said. “Long reign Azaz the Immortal, king of kings!”

The Blood Paw stood up on their hind legs, growling in salute.



Ze-Kyne

South Pacific

Hunter General Xavian read the menace trickling along the surface of the waters as word came in. He could hardly believe the Xrata The White Death and his legion of sharks ceased in their assault on the ships. The sharks only held the line. Something unseen commanded their every move.

“Sir,” Lieutenant Cyphus said, handing over a letter. “Word from Prime Minister Damien Rush’s former advisers. He’s dead. *Animus* has expanded its borders throughout Canada. *Animus* is met only by Azaz and his rogue bear army who have claimed the western coast and press to the East. The advisers beg for an immediate response. Nanotechnology has held their weapons hostage. Nanobot swarms have diluted and destroyed even our bioweapons.”

“And the other hunter generals?” Xavian asked.

Lieutenant Cyphus shook his head before saying, “We don’t know what became of Hunter General Brigand since the last message from *Animus*. We assume he’s being kept alive, but we don’t know. Hunter General Fvoris is fighting The Night Eye and its armies of Eurasian wolves, boars, and bears led by the wolverine lord Groth The Impaler. Fvoris has killed flights of birds, but

with The Night Eye governing Groth's every move, he's taken shelter in The Alps, planning to make his last stand in London."

Hunter General Xavian examined the sky. A storm would roll over the waters in moments. Quick action would be unlikely.

"And what of Hunter General Velazquez?" he asked.

"Thraxis has sent armies of snakes, jaguars, monkeys, and Peruvian hairless dogs to expand well beyond the Amazon. We lost contact with Hunter General Velazquez. He was last seen in The Andes, fighting against Thraxis. We don't know how many former countries Thraxis controls. We know that Thraxis herself was last seen in southern Mexico. She uses a nanobot skin of silver to survive."

"She means to join with Azaz," Hunter General Xavian said.

"If we don't stop their assault within a few weeks, that will become a real possibility," Lieutenant Cyphus said.

"And what of Hunter General Uzwali? How is she holding up?" Xavian asked.

"Zulta The Elephant Lord and Yorba The Gorilla King have pushed past the Congo and taken down small regimes up and down the coast. The general herself is facing off against Yorba, but so far, it's too early to tell who will emerge victorious."

"And Hunter General Zhang?" Xavian asked in reply.

"The Golden Nightmare, the giant panda emperor, pushes towards Beijing," the lieutenant noted. "Zhang's guards protect her, as they look at her as Rush's successor once the Americas fall. Yet, she's lost most of her troops. Fortunately, The Golden Nightmare is far more reasonable and wiser than Azaz or Thraxis, despite his name. The panda lord contains his enemies, but he doesn't eat them, like Azaz reputedly does. He believes in coexistence with mankind."

Hunter General Xavian looked over the few letters that the emissaries sent.

The cry for help was universal.

"We need more fighters," Hunter General Xavian said. "That leaves us little choice. We must leave Brigand, Velazquez, Uzwali, and Fvoris to fight their own battles. More people are in Beijing than anywhere else. If we lose Beijing, we will lose the war. But first, what about the news from Australia?"

"It's no use," Lieutenant Cyphus said. "Since The Great Awakening, Australia has cut itself off from the world. We believe Australian Prime Minister Jarvis to be dead. Some of our ships have seen lights on as far as New Zealand. The Aussies won't let us near their waters. That leads our captains to believe that The Great Darkening never touched Australian soil."

"Mankind's last refuge," Hunter General Xavian replied.

“If our fleet goes near their waters, they will sink us,” Lieutenant Cyphus said. Hunter General Xavian searched the skies. There would be no heading north tonight.

“We’ll stand longer than we will against those sharks and whatever ungodly creature guides them,” Hunter General Xavian said. “We should move while they allow it.”

“Maybe that is their plan, to get to Australia through us.”

Hunter General Xavian shook his head. “No,” he argued. “They could have killed us, but they and their nanobots left a few of our ships unharmed and fully powered.”

“It’s almost as if they want to give us a fighting chance,” Lieutenant Cyphus said.

“Perhaps,” Xavian replied. “Their minds are unreadable to me.”

Xavian took his eyes off of the circling line of shark fins. He examined the clouds once more, as they released misty torrents of rain and hail.

“Set course for the Coral Sea and Cairns,” Xavian ordered.

“We’ll never make it,” Lieutenant Cyphus argued.

“Quickly. Before the sharks and whales block our way,” Xavian insisted.

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Cyphus replied.

With that, Xavian watched the shark fins cut the waters between them. Always, they moved with the fleet, never fully advancing, but ever ready, ever alert.



Uch-Alon

Chihuahuan Desert, Mexico

“My empress and goddess,” Vespian, Thraxis’ boa constrictor commander, said in greeting.

Waves of white, red, yellow, pink, and black patches undulated as she slithered closer to her queen, The Great Snake of Being, who was mother to them all.

“Yes, commander,” Thraxis said.

Her tongue hung for a moment in the air, tasting the danger that surrounded her. Never in her life, before The Harkening, before The *Rapsys*, had Thraxis imagined the desert air could hold such life and death in the buffeting of its winds. But this time, she smelled him. The one who had cleared so many of her

children from the great rain forests and swamps of the Amazon and then fled. His blood was near.

“The armies have slithered into the last holdout of Velazquez and his *rulku* killers in the Chihuahuan Desert. Our spider monkeys and jaguars hold him at bay. He has sent a note to you, written in the language of the *rulku*.”

“What have our translators been able to make of it?” Thraxis asked.

“A declaration of terms, my empress, for surrender,” Vespian answered.

“Terms?” Thraxis asked.

“The head snake killer requests that you grant he and his people the desert,” Vespian answered. “The rest of this land and the lower continent he cedes to you.”

Thraxis did not reply immediately. She tasted more of the air with her tongue. There was something else gliding along the edge of its winds. Fear. She tasted Man’s fear.

“We also have word from Azaz in the North,” Vespian said. “The grizzly king assures you that his campaign will take the land between oceans, down to the Chihuahuan Desert, the area that the *rulku* called Mexico.”

“Azaz dares mark his territory with me?” Thraxis asked.

“King Azaz requests an understanding between animals,” Vespian said. “He says that he will leave you from the desert of the northern country down. The entire southern continent will be yours. King Azaz proposes an alliance.”

“Have you ever studied prehistoric times, Commander?” Thraxis asked, slithering closer. “Before mammals ruled the world. Before the rise of the *rulku*. Before there were gorilla kings and mad bear gods, there were reptiles large enough to lord over Time itself. They didn’t crawl on the earth but rose high, like me. The dinosaurs, as the *rulku* named them, took their prey in their jaws and ripped it to shreds. The world was theirs. For millions and millions of years, our ancestors ruled this world like the apex predators they were. I swear to you now: reptiles will rise to their rightful place and rule this world again.”

Thraxis turned from her view of the desert to look the bowing boa constrictor in her eyes. “Let us agree to Azaz’s terms so long as I am given final say as to where the northern border lies,” Thraxis decreed. “We will work with this delusional dancing bear until we no longer need him. Then we will do to him and to all mammals what they have done to us. We will slice them. We will eat them. We will usher in the new age of the reptile, one that will never end.”

“Yes, my empress,” Vespian said. “Shall I deliver our consent to Azaz?” “No,” Thraxis commanded. “I will send my own words through our nanoweb. As for the *rulku* snake killer, lead me to him.”

Vespian nodded. The snake commander hissed out her orders to the legions of

emerald tree boas, anacondas, and pit vipers. Their nanobots passed the commands on to the jungle armies, including the howler and spider monkeys. They passed the commands down to the caimans that marched steadily, if slowly, through the perilous new terrain. All bowed before the giant anaconda queen as she put on her silver nanorobotic armor that slithered around her scales, keeping her body temperature constant. Thraxis' yellow-green eyes had purple pupils that focused coldly on even the slightest movement. Slithering to the front of the lines, preceded only by Vespian and her vipers, Thraxis emerged to her full height, some ten off the ground.

Hunter General Velazquez stepped forward. Velazquez waved off his men. "Empress Thraxis, I presume," he said. "We surrender. We ask only that you allow us a place to live, somewhere secluded, in the remote deserts."

Velazquez relied on Vespian and nanotechnology to translate his words.

"Somewhere free of snakes, I would imagine," Thraxis muttered to Vespian.

Vespian did not translate this.

"The *rulku* are such timid prey. Like mice," Thraxis said. "They lash out, starting wars they can't finish. Such has been their way for hundreds of thousands of years. Here, commander, we finish our wars the way we finish our prey."

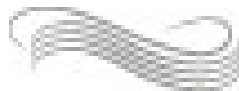
Thraxis nodded at Vespian, who translated.

Velazquez motioned to his soldiers, but it was too late. Vipers struck his neck, and he fell. The hundreds of soldiers left fired whatever guns they had left, but the snake army's nanobots swarmed the weapons of the *rulku* within moments, incapacitating them. Velazquez's soldiers lunged. The caimans, jaguars, boa constrictors and anacondas finished them, pouncing, strangling, and consuming them until the army of the *rulku* was no more.

"Watch your men and women die, *rulku* killer, the way I watched for eons as you killed my children," Thraxis said, slithering closer to Velazquez's dying body.

"If only I had killed more," Velazquez said, in gasps, as the poison set in.

Thraxis wrapped around him, squeezing the life out of Velazquez, staring him coldly in the eye every second as she did so. Before Velazquez died, Thraxis unhinged her jaws. Paralyzed and fighting for his last breaths of air, Velazquez screamed. His black eyes showed the fear that Thraxis had smelled all about the air moments earlier. Thraxis' mouth went over his legs, slowly swallowing the man whole.



CHAPTER 15

Animus

Nunavut, Canada

Brigand, the prisoner, had been working with nanotechnology all day in the frigid Nunavut tundra when he saw the polar bear in the distance. The creature, with a purple haze in its great, icy eyes, stared down at him before signaling to an eagle. The eagle flew by once, examining the work of the *rulku*, before landing on the ice directly behind where Brigand worked on the force field fence.

The eagle shrieked, but the nanobots, now hovering all around the massive bald eagle, translated.

“Prisoner, you have done well,” the eagle’s nanobots said. “The containment facility for man beasts will keep them from coming to greater harm. Come now. The bear king White Claw wishes to speak to you.”

The eagle spread its wings, a spread long enough to blot out the sun, as it hoisted itself up in the air and disappeared into the clouds.

Brigand turned and walked towards the polar bear. The respected wolf, the one they called Moon Shadow, stood at his side. Next to Moon Shadow stood the bulbous turkey vulture that Brigand understood to be the brains behind the polar bear’s unwieldy might.

“What do you want of me?” Brigand asked.

“Sit on the ice,” White Claw growled through his nanobots. “We have much to discuss.”

Brigand sat, staring blankly ahead, saying nothing.

“We have reviewed the ship records,” White Claw said. “We have even sent them, along with your weapons, for greater analysis to the ocean lords. The video is clear. You had the chance to use your weapon, to kill all life on this land, yet you chose not to do it. I wanted to ask you: why?”

“I’m sure the tape shows my words,” Brigand said.

“In your own words,” Sky Death said between cackles. “Now. As your king commands.”

“This *thing* is not my king.”

The eagle from the sky swooped down like a mighty thunderbird, lifting Brigand and then thrusting him on his knees.

“That’s enough,” Moon Shadow said. “We have the power to kill you and your kind, Hunter General. I would advise you to speak.”

“The reason I didn’t annihilate you all is simple. If I learned one thing from the smoke of the crematoria, it’s this: We get nowhere by killing one another,” Brigand said. “We survive by working together. If I kill you, a part of the world dies with you.”

White Claw and Moon Shadow stared at each other.

“I suppose that’s not something beasts like you understand,” Brigand said. Thunder Killer knocked the man with a wing, but Brigand kept where he was, on the ice, still kneeling.

“We have need of an emissary to the *rulku*,” Moon Shadow said. “The animals are creating a land for those who surrender, a safe zone. White Claw and I would like for you to be the voice of your people. We would like you to encourage them to surrender for their own survival. We have heard words of revolt among your people.”

Brigand said nothing. He simply stared directly ahead.

“It’s either that or more hard labor,” White Claw said. “You decide.” Brigand rose from his knees. He stared White Claw in the eye. Brigand turned and walked back through the ice.

When he was gone, White Claw turned to Moon Shadow and said, “What did I tell you? He’s a fighter. The *rulku* general only waits for the right time to strike. He’d rather go down fighting.”

“In time,” Moon Shadow said. “He’s a leader first and foremost. Once this Brigand sees his people in need, he will lead them. That’s what leaders do.”

“That may not be long,” Sky Death said. “Azaz and Thraxis are making incredible gains. Our spies tell us that they may seek to unite and test our border defenses. And always there is King Blu, who watches steadily, but says nothing.”

“A snake and a bear tolerate each other only so long as they need to. Eventually, their insatiable hunger will consume them, turning them against each other,” Thunder Killer said.

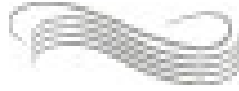
“Let’s hope they don’t kill every last *rulku* before that happens,” Moon Shadow said.

“The device,” White Claw asked Thunder Killer, “did you place it upon him?”

Thunder Killer nodded. “Wherever he goes, we will know,” the eagle king said. “He will be our emissary, whether he wishes to be or not.”

The council sat, watching Brigand until he disappeared behind the great wall

of the North, the nanobots circling around him.



No Rul Ozu

Inyo County, California, USA

The sun split along the rock crevices, igniting the sands. Fowler watched as Nurvlyn kneeled next to the majestic bristlecone pine that had served as a ward of the ages. He saw only the movement of the needles in the wind, but saw Nurvlyn speaking in a strange new tongue. After the sun shifted and morning waned with cloud and sun, Nurvlyn turned to Fowler.

“Methuselah wishes to speak with you now,” Nurvlyn said.

“So, this Methuselah is the greatest intelligence on the planet?” Fowler asked. “A tree out in the wilderness, away from animals. How am I supposed to speak? I can’t understand what you said.”

“Center yourself and listen,” Nurvlyn said. “She will find a way to speak to you.”

For a good few moments, Fowler stood by the tree, examining its snaking branches. Nurvlyn kneeled again, lost in meditation.

“Strange animal,” Methuselah said. “You run around always. To find peace in others, you must first find peace within yourself.”

“Peace,” Fowler said, thinking of his dead wife and son. “I’d forgotten the word.”

Fowler paced for a moment, saying, “You know I must bring Nurvlyn back, right? Understanding him is the only way we can end the nanovirus that plagues the animals.”

“He’ll never make the journey,” Methuselah said. “By the time the last stroke of war ends, Nurvlyn will join with us in a new consciousness.”

“I must try—for the lives of my people,” Fowler insisted. “So that they don’t end up like my family did.”

The breeze blew by, and Methuselah added, “Just as the wind shifts the sands, so too has your nanovirus, as you call it, shifted consciousness on this planet. You cannot stop a war that has raged since you first crawled from the sea. What you can do is to be flexible, to allow the breeze to shape you. You can learn this from me.”

“Shape me? People are dying—families, kids,” Fowler argued.

“Nothing truly dies,” Methuselah said. “Not forever. It just alters

consciousness. And that is what you and your people must do if you wish to survive. The mobiles must seek to form a more perfect union with nature. You must find a new place for yourselves. You must adapt to survive. You must move beyond revenge. Whereas tyrants like Azaz and Thraxis fight with anger flared by eons of evolutionary advantages, you must fight with wisdom. And with peace. Only those who fight from a place of peace can ever truly win a war.”

For a moment, Fowler felt mystified. Not so much by the words of Methuselah, but by her presence. He could smell in her bristlecone pines the wisdom of ages and feel in her presence a spirit that towered over even the sky.

“I feel your rage and your pain,” Methuselah said. “You are right to feel them. Still, you must heal them before you fight. Listen to me, Fowler: the time to investigate nanotechnology is over. The time to adapt is at hand. On this, the survival of all of humanity depends.”

“So, I will fight Azaz one more time?” Fowler asked.

“Yes. You will see each other again,” Methuselah said. “Only this time, you must show the wisdom of peace. You must be like a tree, firmly planted, yet bending in the winds of the storm. When you fight Azaz with total tranquility and peace of mind, he will fall. The hands of many will be upon him.”

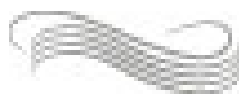
“Azaz is powerful,” Fowler said, “more powerful than me.”

“Nothing is more powerful than love,” Methuselah said. “You must learn to love everything in every moment as you loved your wife and child. When you love all that is, even your enemies, you will be ready for Azaz, Thraxis, and their kind.”

Fowler stood for a moment, reflecting upon Methuselah’s words.

“That is enough talk for now, my son,” Methuselah said. “Now, join Nurvlyn. Kneel and rest your mind. Only then will you feel the peace flow in your veins.”

Fowler kneeled. In the desert quiet, he felt what Methuselah had described. A pain, an unquiet rage, eating at him from within. How he longed to kill, to dismember the bear and snake that killed so many of his people, including his own flesh and blood. How he longed to look White Claw in the eye on the field of battle. Still, Fowler offered up all of that to the winds, and he felt the winds caress him for his dubious gift. For the first time since he was a child, Fowler felt something other than war.



Ze-Kyputy

Pacific Ocean, Australia

As the ships of thinking metal sailed closer, the nanobots spread out in greeting, taking to the sky and the waters in golden epiphany. A whole shield of red lights, nanobots of another order, approached on the waves, flashing a message of warning. Xavian and Cyrus looked at each other, the afterglow of an uncertain fate hanging in their eyes. The nanobots on each side amassed, the red lights becoming a massive sea dragon, the ones defending the boats, a chimera of endless color. The ephemeral monsters fought until Xavian sent a single message, news of the fall of mankind. Then the creatures disassembled, and the waters became lightless.

“Leave for your own safety, and for ours,” an airy voice said through the blinking of the nanobots.

“We need help,” Xavian said, “or the war is truly over.”

“There is no war here,” the voice said. “Only pestilence and plague.” Hunter General Xavian searched out the night for some sign of his adversary. All he saw was black clouds upon black waters.

“Yet you survive,” Xavian said.

“Only a few,” the voice said. “So many fell that mankind made peace with the enlightened animals who survived. You speak of war. You don’t yet realize what it is you and your animal enemies will face. Go now. Save yourselves.”

“I must speak,” Xavian insisted.

“Very well then,” a hooded figure said upon an advancing skiff. “It’s your death. Join me on the metal island. I would like to hear news about the war. Not much news reaches us, not now.”

“That may have been a blessing,” Xavian replied.

Xavian motioned Lieutenant Cyphus and the crew. The crew altered their course, towards a gathering of nanotechnology so vast it breached the waters. There, between a hazy white screen of light generated by the nanotechnology, Xavian saw not a man, but a giant crocodile with humanoid limbs and a great tail. He froze.

“I am an animal,” the creature said. “But part of me is still human.”

“This,” Xavian said, “is the plague you speak of?”

“This is the body’s response in a select few,” the creature said. “The plague, sparked by nanotoxins, kills everything it comes into contact with.”

“My God,” Xavian said.

“Isolated as we are,” the creature said, “many of our animal species still thrive, as they have for thousands of years, unaffected, unawakened, occupying our dry lands and our jungles. But there is the land of human survivors, to the east. All other lands are mine.”

“What shall I call you?” Xavian asked.

“I am, in your tongue, King Croc,” the creature answered. “My jaws would be your death, but I am not hungry. My crocodile children only sail so far. Besides, the human left in me still pities you. It’s like looking back at a primitive animal doomed before its time.”

Xavian said nothing. He looked and realized thousands of crocodiles now surrounded his ships.

“I can’t let you on my land,” King Croc said, “or I risk infecting my people—and you. This is the deal we struck with the great lord of the sea to survive. I will discuss with my people what shall become of you. You must stay here for tonight.”

With that, there was a splash, and the great crocodile-human hybrid was no more.

Cyphus’ eyes met Xavian’s. But even they were not full of recrimination, but of fear. Neither said a word. They only retreated back into the folds of men.



CHAPTER 16

Klang Uktor Congo, Africa

Only matted jungle ferns sheltered Uzwali's forces from the advancing gorillas. What ground the *rulku* gained, they lost to Kama's legion of lions, Zulta's elephantine army, and Yorba's apes. Even Gray Eyes, with her reticulating serpentine body, haunted them, preaching doom from the treetops above.

"It's over," Bisa, Uzwali's second-in-command, said.

Bisa was a lean, muscular woman, as powerful mentally as she was physically. For her to give up the fight meant that there was no fight left.

"We're outnumbered," Bisa said. "Every pulse in the jungle is against us. Have you contacted the ministerial council yet?"

Hunter General Uzwali searched the arching jungle palm fronds separating her from the death songs of the gorillas. Their cries were audible above the calls of birds and insects in the distance.

"I can reach no one," Uzwali said. "It's as if the world went silent all at once."

"What shall I tell the soldiers?" Bisa asked.

Uzwali shook her head. Once, in the times before the end of times, she had been an Olympian. She was one of the greatest long-distance runners and javelin throwers of her generation. But this was a different marathon, stained in the blood of the innocent. Uzwali's men and women had lost hope, and she had no more hope to give.

"I can't order their surrender," Uzwali said. "Not yet. From all accounts, this Yorba The Ape King is prideful and angry. If I can challenge him, if I can take him out, we might at least make it easier for whatever militia takes up the fight after we're dead."

Bisa shook her head. "Respectfully, hunter general," she said, "you'd stand no chance against a mountain gorilla. Yorba would tear you apart one limb at a time and enjoy hearing your cries for mercy."

Uzwali searched for Bisa's eyes. "You realize that I'm not expecting it to be a fair fight," she said. "Whatever happens when the gorillas get to us, keep whatever working weapons you still have close by. We must kill Yorba if we

have any hope of saving this continent from untold years of bloodshed.”

“The gorillas will never allow it,” Bisa said.

“We must outwit them,” Uzwali insisted, “even if it means our deaths. It’s the only way to buy time to allow our men and women to retreat and hide themselves from slaughter. Are we agreed?”

Uzwali stared at Bisa until Bisa nodded back. “Yes, my general,” Bisa said in a near whisper.

“In the meantime,” Uzwali ordered, “take to the trees. Kill whatever snakes you must and get ready. Take out a few gorillas. Then flee.”

The last of the militia stood waiting. Gray Eyes, the harbinger of doom, was the first to appear in the branches overhead.

“Little animal lost,” Gray Eyes hissed and sang, in his serpentine voice, “why so sad? How long ago you wandered astray, and now we’ve found you. Death you gave to us; death we shall repay.”

The boa constrictor dropped, crushing one of Uzwali’s militia men. The soldier struggled to free himself from the massive python. Uzwali signaled her men to attack the great snake. Before their guns could fire, a pack of hyenas came in from behind, cackling. Uzwali turned her militia’s guns on the hyenas, only to be knocked down by spider monkeys swinging overhead. The militia turned, using its few working guns to reduce the numbers of monkeys and hyenas. Kama and the pride of lions pounced. The lions took down several of Uzwali’s last soldiers, clamping down on their necks with their massive feline jaws.

“Hide,” Uzwali whispered to Bisa and her nearest soldiers. “Ready yourselves.”

At her words, Gray Eyes, releasing his prey, rose to his full form, the nanobots like a second skin around him. Gray Eyes struck, seeking to coil around Uzwali’s body until Uzwali pulled her machete and cut at the snake. The python applied more pressure, releasing its jaws, ready to consume the hunter general’s arms. Uzwali grabbed hold of the snake seer’s head. Looking into his vacant, ashen eyes, she said, “Tell me, oracle, can you see your own death in my reflection?”

Uzwali struck again. Gray Eyes retreated to the shadows and the trees. Uzwali stood back, regaining her breath, when a shadow overtook her. Up ahead stood at least fifty, if not more, mountain gorillas pounding their chests and chanting for war. One apelike cry, shriller than the rest, parted them. Among the gorillas, Uzwali saw the great dark ape who stood like a lost idol among the number. His eyes were a deep purple and held centuries within them. Uzwali stared at this creature removed from time, awaiting his words.

“Yorba The Conqueror,” Uzwali said.

“Uzwali The Conquered,” Yorba replied.

The gorillas chanted and grunted in an unholy union.

“Let me die,” Uzwali said, “fighting a king. Let me not fall at the hands of a false prophet,” she said, eyeing the shadow of the snake seer in the trees. “Please. Make me pay, but spare my men and women.”

“You who poach my lands, who kill my brethren and children, you dare to ask anything of me?” Yorba inquired. “How many snakes and apes have you killed? How much of Mother Earth’s blood lies at your feet?”

“Nowhere near enough,” Uzwali said, standing erect. “One kill remains. I challenge you to a fight to the death. Just you and me. Unless the great ape king is not as mighty as they say.”

“Typical *rulku*,” Yorba said. “You must earn the fight that you so savor.” Yorba snapped his gorilla fingers. A new figure emerged. The giant lion, with a mane of metal and fire, emerged, its purple eyes set in a blaze against its yellow-white fur. The cry of the proverbial king of the jungle was unmistakable. Uzwali saw herself face to face with Shikar, Kama’s best warrior.

“So be it,” Uzwali said.

The lion steadily paced around its prey. With snarls and deep, guttural cries, the lion prepared itself for the pounce. Uzwali readied herself, never taking her eyes off the mightier predator. The moment the lion moved, Uzwali closed her eyes, communicating to her nanobots with her thoughts. The lion used its nanobots to add a whiplike edge to its tail and to lengthen its claws. Uzwali waited until the whip struck. Her nanobots wrapped around the tail, forming a sharp spear. They struck the tail, stabbing at the nanobots until they fell. Only the lion remained.

Uzwali waved the animal on. Shikar lunged forward, taking Uzwali down. The mighty lion shook and dragged the blood from its prey until it could get a clear shot at the neck. Overpowered and unable to strike, Uzwali waited. The lion leaped. Uzwali shut her eyes. The nanobots formed a spear once more. The lion lunged to its own incapacitation.

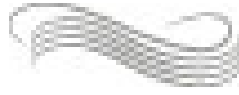
“Blood for blood,” Uzwali said.

The lion regained itself. Even in the throes of an inevitable death, Shikar saw Uzwali’s neck, warm and exposed. The champion of lions lunged when shots rang out from the trees. The lion dropped, mortally wounded. Gorillas fell before their bodies hit the jungle floor.

“Not so weak as she would seem,” Yorba said, eyeing Uzwali. “To the trees,” Yorba commanded the snakes, monkeys, and gorillas. “Let them all fall to their deaths before the night is out.”

Yorba approached Uzwali, took her by her bloodied arm. “And you,” he said. “Come with me. You will soon get your wish, but not before you see every last drop of your people’s blood spill before your eyes.”

Shots rang out as the human fighters fell. Great cries of anguished triumph took to the trees. Yorba dragged Uzwali along, towards the last vestige of jungle mountains shadowed in the distance.



Yvot-Sing

Beijing, China

Yu The Golden Nightmare, the heralded panda emperor, sat in his palace of stone, meditating. He sought something higher, some sign from his ancestral kings about the battle ahead. Yet, the stone was silent, and the earth more silent still.

“My lord, we are ready to advance,” Jiao, the Siberian tigress, said.

The tigress bowed her orange, white, and black head. Jiao’s emerald eyes reflected the vision of the beast before her.

The Golden Nightmare, tall as a small tree, got up from the earth. With his white and black matted fur, with unnatural touches of silver, Yu looked like some deity hastily placed boulder upon boulder into a makeshift body and gave it an uncertain breath of life. The Golden Nightmare, already far into his fifties in *rulku* years, was something of an anomaly. Yu was the oldest known panda to ever live, one whose technological magic had left a dubious number of years.

“What news from our allies?” The Golden Nightmare asked.

“Azaz marches on Washington in the West. The Night Eye and Groth the Impaler march towards the east of Europe. Thraxis has taken the lower Americas. Yorba claims supremacy in most of the African continent. Zulta rivals him. In the North, no one challenges White Claw and Moon Shadow. At sea, King Blu allowed a few fleets to pass. Most ships have anchored where they are. Zhang’s forces are crumbling. She means to face us in Beijing.”

“It’s total domination then,” The Golden Nightmare said. “Sounds all too easy. Nothing ever is where the man beasts are concerned.”

Jiao raised her head and said, “There is, of course, one phantom fleet.”

“A ghost fleet? Where was it last seen?” The Golden Nightmare asked. Jiao let up a half-roar, one equal measure of annoyance and trepidation. She said, “Off our coasts, sir, off of mainland China in the South Sea. It disappeared. Some

speculate it drifted into Oceania. Others say that it went to the lost continent the *rulku* call Australia. We believe King Blu and his sharks may be protecting the fleet for reasons we cannot claim to know.”

“The Night Eye has spies even in the southern seas,” The Golden Nightmare said. “They relay tales of abomination in Australia. Tales of a crocodile god that devours men whole.”

“All rumors,” Jiao said. “Still, Xrata, King Blu’s top admiral, won’t let any of our spies through.”

“Most irregular,” The Golden Nightmare said. “But we must worry about the ocean king later. Right now, we must prepare our armor.”

The Golden Nightmare closed his great purple eyes. A haze of silver and gold mesh armor fit over his limbs and body. The remaining nanobots swirled in a silver-white wind below the emperor’s massive body, lifting the great panda up Buddha-like as he hovered in the sky.

“How many have fallen?”

“The *rulku* killed thirty of my tigers and fifteen of your bears in our last battle in the forests,” Jiao said. “A mass of *rulku* have marched to their fallen city of Beijing for one last push. Zhang is among them.”

“How many of their kind have died?” The Golden Nightmare asked.

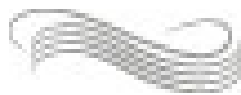
“Thousands,” Jiao answered.

The Golden Nightmare held Jiao’s eyes as he said, “I would not wipe them from the face of the earth. Create a camp only, close to me, in the Min Mountains. Let them choose between a nature reserve and death. I would not have the blood of so many of Earth’s creatures on my hands.”

“You’re too kind, my lord,” Jiao said, in a low, guttural roar.

“Send my spider monkeys, gibbons, and macaques to make a lot of noise first,” The Golden Nightmare said. “Your Siberian tigers, wild boars, and snow leopards will follow, killing any who do not lay down arms. The pandas will then come in to secure the lands.”

“As you wish,” Jiao said. The nanobots gave an extra metallic tinge to her massive, spear-like teeth. “Let The Great Hunt begin.”



CHAPTER 17

Hi-Ren

Madrid, Spain

The flitting murder of crows, ravens, and kites known as The Night Eye hovered above Groth as he marched into the streets of Madrid, towards shards of the two fallen *Puerta de Europa* towers. The brick, glass, and asphalt of the once cosmopolitan city lay at Groth's feet like ornamental trappings. Troops of bulls, gray wolves, lynxes, and brown bears scavenged the area.

"What do you see?" Groth asked The Night Eye.

"Danger," The Night Eye replied.

"We have killed thousands, my generals," Blood Scar, the brown bear commander, said. "How many are left to present us with a fight?"

"As long as the *rulku* have as much as a spear in their hands, they are deadly," Groth said. "Send in the wolves and wild dogs," the wolverine lord commanded. "Tear any from their hiding places. We will make Madrid a fitting place to crown the kings and queens of the new continent, The All-Seeing Night Eye." The wolves and wild dogs went into the businesses, alleys, and homes of the great city. They tore even tiny children left without parents into the streets. Soon, even the marching of rats pushed any remaining humans to the center of the streets, until they stood surrounded by the wolves and the bears.

"We accept your gift," the crows said with cackles.

The All-Seeing Night Eye became a flurry of activity, diving at the men, the women, even the tiniest of children, pecking and clawing at anything remotely human. Soon, they were a great, blinding cloud over the city, until the streets of Madrid flooded in blood. The All-Seeing Night Eye ascended and nodded to the bulls below. They charged, stamping whatever could not escape, until every last cry was silenced.

Over the dead bodies, the ravens plucked hairs, even bones, assembling tiny crowns that they placed upon their elder ravens and crows.

"Long live The All-Seeing Night Eye," Groth proclaimed.

"Long live our kings and queens," Blood Scar and the wolves growled in unison.

“Thank you, faithful servants of animal kind,” The All-Seeing Night Eye said. “We have marched on the last of the great European capitals and killed any who would oppose us. We have reclaimed this animal territory that the *rulku* called Europe for all animals. We have driven the *rulku* killer Fvoris back, and we will hunt and kill him. Yet, every kingdom has its threats, and ours comes from across the oceans. There is danger unlike any the animal world has faced in these years of vindication. Our spies on the southern continent, the one called Australia, know of a secret we shall lay bare to you, our most trusted soldiers, only. The *rulku* fight us to distract us. There is a *rulku* murderer who plans to allow them to access their weapons again. We must kill him before he does. Our spies in the Americas tell us still more. Out in the West, by the great ocean King Blu reigns over, there is one who has The Fire. It is a burning crown of gold, white, and red translucent flame that gives whoever wears it power to rule over all the animal kingdoms. This is the crown we seek and no other. This you must bring to us before an animal unfit to rule the Earth takes possession of it. Are there any who can traverse the deserts of America who can find the keeper of The Fire, the mythical plant goddess Methuselah?”

The animals let up a roar until there was a shriek that pierced them all.

“Let me march on them. Let me fight them until their blood is at my feet,”

Groth said. “I shall impale every last *rulku* killer!”

“Faithful wolverine,” The Night Eye said. “You are mighty, but even you cannot swim in the great ocean between us and our quarry. For this, we have fashioned another. Forged by the hand of our once prisoner, The Mechanic, a master of *rulku* magic, comes Adar Llwh Gwin.”

The Night Eye ascended. Behind their cloud of wings and beaks, a creature stood forth.

“This is a journey for my wings and a fire fit for my eyes alone,” Adar Llwh Gwin, a giant, technologically enhanced eagle, said. “For this, you created me, my masters.”

Its wingspan, enhanced by nanotechnology, took up the entire street, creating winds with the slightest of movements. Its feet resembled those of a lion, and it had reptilian scales about its sleek, muscular body, like a Chinese dragon of old.

The bears stood back. The wolves retreated to the shadows, their purple-red eyes looking out. Even Groth, the unyielding wolverine, kept back.

“Fly, then, Adar Llwh Gwin,” The All-Seeing Night Eye commanded. “Fly over the waters that we cannot traverse. Bring us The Fire, and your reward will be greater than you can imagine. But beware. King Blu has spies everywhere. The great king of the ocean may present himself as an isolationist, but he would gladly use The Fire to dominate us all. And not far behind him are the other

animal lords, Azaz and Thraxis, who would gladly hold us in subjugation should they learn of our grand prize.”

“And you,” The Night Eye said to a yellow-bellied snake that slithered forth. “Use your nanoskin and swim to the Australian jungles. Use our network of sea snakes and fauna to find the maker of maladies, the *rulku* scientist they call The Mechanic, and kill him before he kills us. We granted him his freedom in exchange for the fashioning of Adar Llwhch Gwin, but we did not grant him a long life. He’s too dangerous to live.”

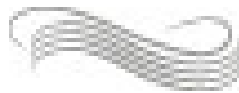
The snake spy, Vykra, hissed her assent.

“And now, in celebration, let us create a mighty bonfire to honor our new kings and queens,” Groth ordered. “Let us feast on man flesh and impale the others, as a sign to all who would oppose us!”

With that, the wolves, bears, bulls, and lynxes snarled in assent.

Victory seemed all but assured.

Still, The All-Seeing Night Eye ascended, watching, ever-vigilant, ever-calculating.



Animus

Nunavut, Canada

Brigand cradled himself in his habitat cell. The once great general cursed about how little animals with fur understood basic human needs for warmth and comfort. The night sky lorded above him—at least the animals had created their internment camp with a clear view of the open sky. Brigand saw the stars pulsing like flint set afire. Some stars were so distant that they could fall from The Milky Way, and no one would notice. Brigand wondered if that was Man’s fate as well. Would his species just fall away like every species before it? Would anyone notice? Would anyone care?

Hunter General Wade Brigand was once more than a commander, more than a warrior. He had been a husband and a father before the end of times.

But his wife, Julie, would not stay with the man who lorded over the crematoria night and day, and his daughter was too young to know any better. Julie left with Brigand’s daughter, never to be heard from again. Brigand sought endlessly for his family before the war struck. Yet, all he could tell was that The Marching of the Pets consumed Julie, the man she married after him, and his daughter in one smoky, eternal night—*retribution against the innocent for the*

actions of the guilty, Brigand thought. He had killed countless animal families. Yet, he never dreamed they had the power to rise up and kill his own.

In those surreal moments between wakefulness and dreams, when his eyelids closed resoundingly, only to quake in their folds of skin and open again, Brigand thought he saw his daughter's ghost. He called out, only to see a faint blue light on the horizon. The light became slightly bigger, slightly more luminous, until it became blinding. Brigand put his forearm over his eyes, covering up, when he heard a voice not entirely unfamiliar.

"Rise," the mystical voice said. "You have much work to do."

Brigand studied the pulsating light. It was clearly a hologram. The luminescent figure was Fowler, and not Fowler, all at once.

"Hunter Sergeant?" Brigand asked. "What the hell happened to you? I thought you were dead, like so many," Brigand said, thinking of his former family. "At this point, you might as well be. We lost the war before it even began." "Nothing is lost," Fowler said. "Even the head that wears the most glorious crown one day falls to the dust."

"Where are you?" Brigand asked. "Do you still have any hunters?"

"My time is short. You must listen," Fowler said, still glowing. "I am far from you. You cannot know where. But I will be with you soon. Out in the wild."

"We lost, Fowler. We lost everything," Brigand said, trying not to break down. "We ended up in a zoo. Poetic justice, I suppose, for underestimating an enemy capable of all the sins of its father, and still more."

"There is a land that the plants are protecting," Fowler said. "You must lead any survivors there. It is out, away from Nunavut, by the ocean."

Brigand thought of what he was hearing. He wondered if there was a burning bush somewhere, but there was no Moses, only this new creature, half-man, half-plant, made of light.

"That's bear country, ruled by Azaz," Brigand said.

"Azaz campaigns in the East," Fowler said. "He's spread his guards thin as he gains new conquests."

Brigand puzzled over Fowler's words.

"Why would plants save us?" Brigand asked.

"To protect something very dear," Fowler said. "I can't remain long. The animal's guards will detect me. Be ready to leave when you see a blue pulse take to the sky tomorrow after midnight. It will disable the energy fields that hold you. Run as quickly as you can. The pulse will blind the animals. But only for an hour. In that time, you must move through the wilderness. The light will guide you to your new home. Do you understand?"

Fowler's ethereal blue radiance flickered. His image grew more transparent.

Brigand nodded.

“You may be mankind’s last hope for survival,” Fowler said. “Fight like it.”

“Yes, Hunter Sergeant,” Brigand said.

As Brigand uttered the last word, Fowler vanished. Brigand rolled over on his straw bed. He was torn. This message could very well be a trap. Yet, it could also be his only chance. The animals wouldn’t keep caged humans forever. Even zoos of the forgotten, lost world retired some of their animals, eventually. But if a blinding light incapacitated the animals, Brigand and his hunters could kill the leaders of *Animus* and change the course of the war. Still, there would be so many vicious animals, their fangs at the ready, and so little time. Brigand had to think of saving his people. Their lives meant something more tangible than revenge drawn out in blood.

Yet—to kill White Claw. It was a thought a man could fall asleep and dream of.



CHAPTER 18

No Rul Ozu

Inyo County, California, USA

Fowler kneeled, taking in the higher communion he felt with the nanotechnology and with the nature that surrounded them. There was little separation of what was once called nature and what was once called artificial. Both circled him in the air, flower seeds and nanobots, and both had their resonant beauty. Yet, though Fowler had pushed for a higher communication with his nanobots than any but Nurvlyn had achieved before, there was something in their mechanical hum that spoke of danger.

“Have you made contact with the humans inside the zoo?” Nurvlyn asked Fowler, kneeling next to him.

“Yes. With my old commander. “He appears...changed.”

“Don’t we all?” Nurvlyn asked.

“But what is this change in the skies?” Fowler asked Nurvlyn, who kneeled by him, the plant-like tresses of his beard spilling over his robe as he did so. “Why do the nanobots flutter? Why does the air turn cold?”

“Methuselah has heard from her seven sisters, the plants of the world that tower above time,” Nurvlyn said. “They all say the same: the animal kings and queens of the world have discovered the sacred fire, and they search out its location hungrily.”

“I don’t understand,” Fowler said. “Don’t they wield the power of technology already?”

“The Mystical Crown of Fire,” Nurvlyn said, “is a term that survivors of The *Rapsys* gave to a legend. They believed that the creators of this nanotechnology manufactured a device that would allow its operator to communicate with the nanotechnology in a way that no other could. It would give one command of the animals. The animals believe that mankind had this power but lost it, and that is why they lost this war.”

“But this is a virus, part technological, part organic,” Fowler said. “How could this be so?”

“The nanobots were originally a way of weaponizing the animals,” Nurvlyn

replied. “Originally, mankind sought to control animal soldiers that would allow one nation to have massive new armies within minutes. I was experimented on, changed to what I am, to wear this crown, as they call the headpiece. Only I am a failed experiment. I turned away. I joined the animals. I saw the way to a better Earth. And so, the crown rejected me. It is the crown that chooses its master, not the other way around. The crown will choose another. But we must protect it from predators until it does.”

“Why not wear this crown? Why not end this war?” Fowler asked.

“It is not for mankind to wear, or it will defeat the balance and endanger all of Earth once more,” Nurvlyn said. “The crown will emerge when the time is right. It will choose its master. Until then, Methuselah and the plants that protect her have safely hidden it.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Fowler said.

“You must before you go,” Nurvlyn replied. “You may never return here. Understanding may help you protect what is left of mankind from extinction when Azaz strikes. Before you go, you must know where this all came from, so that you may know where it is all going.”

Nurvlyn rose, conjuring the sands, the winds, and the nanobots into a massive circle of smoke. Nurvlyn chanted and called until a fiery vision arose. Fowler joined Nurvlyn in his vision quest until that vision became his own.



Sy-Kilas

Greenland

A Vision of The Prehistory

One Generation Ago

Little Kitsissut Animal Refuge was a world unto itself. South of Alanngorsuaq Fjord just outside of Cape Brill, it was Greenland’s only wildlife refuge and animal experimentation center. During the summers, when he was avoiding the unceasing swarms of mosquitoes, Nathan Trola enjoyed watching the icebergs go by. He’d even sail up to a few smaller ones and mount them to watch the humpback whales breach or the sea eagles fly, their white-speckled brown plumage separating from the clouds as they descended for halibut, striking out past the icebergs, then joining with the clouds yet again. Isolated as he was, reachable only by plane, helicopter or ferry during the better weather, Nathan Trola was the only man wintering by the southern edge of the fjord this year. The

nearest human was a sheep farmer off of Tasiusaq. Little Kitsissut, as this island refuge was called, was isolated intentionally by the Danish government for the protection of nesting animals.

Nathan's job, and that of Wolfie, his plump, white wolf companion, was simple, if time-consuming. They were to man the lighthouse during winter and chronicle any observable animal activity when the two weren't snowed in. This could take hours upon hours, which was why Nathan seldom had a chance to keep the news on in the tiny lighthouse, when he was able to get the Internet. He was too busy chronicling the migratory patterns of the black-headed Arctic tern on its travels of over seventy thousand kilometers a year. When he wasn't checking on a wintering population of musk oxen, he was making the rounds, recording whether the island's experimental group of reindeer had enough Arctic char to survive the oncoming nor'easter.

When he was able to get the Internet running in the lighthouse, Nathan liked to keep up with the U.S. news. As far removed as he was from the States, seeing what was going on made him feel closer to home. After all, there was winter in the rest of the world and there was winter in Greenland. It was not unusual for Nathan to see one nor'easter drop twenty feet of snow and then have another two feet come over the next week. Snow and below freezing temperatures were part of his life, sometimes even into May, and Nathan would have it no other way. In truth, Nathan was even a bit disappointed, as Greenland's weather hadn't been all that bad. In summer, ice sheets melted—and fast. And since he left college and started work on Little Kitsissut, the weather had been eccentric. It had been autumn-like in the early winter, though still cold, but frigid in the later winter, throwing off the migratory patterns of deer and any number of avian species. Nathan had noticed animals acting a little peculiar—staying longer in some locales, developing less of a fear of humans—but he always thought it was due to climate change and the ever-pressing demands of survival.

Nathan gave the matter no further thought until one evening in late January, when he sat cooped up in his metallic white and yellow lighthouse. He managed to jerry rig the Internet and pick up on a news site down near Kennebunkport, Maine, where his parents had a vacation home. He clicked on an animal story. Nathan always loved animal stories. The video came up immediately. There was light snow dancing before the camera lens like a gathering of white moths in the early spring. And then the TV camera unveiled another, darker image: a boy in a yellow, insulated coat standing, half-absorbed by shadow, at the edge of a street.

“Stomper—come on in, Stomper,” the pale boy called from a street right by a house in the rear of the camera's angle.

Suddenly, there were the yellow eyes of a tan-gray coyote. It yipped and

yammered the way the little dogs do, and the boy was facing at least five or six in the shot. Next to them was the heavily respiring body of a chocolate lab, whimpering as it bled its life into the snow. Nathan found the image disturbing, particularly how close the coyotes were to the boy. The way they sunk in their legs, bared their fangs, and arched their backs spoke of aggression. The boy backed up slowly, about to run inside the house, when a Northern goshawk descended, diving right at the child. The child stumbled, only to see a few black squirrels at his feet. The squirrels jumped every which way, running and darting as manic squirrels do, until the boy tripped, and the coyotes attacked. The video faded to black as the television announcer said that the child did not survive the attack. Nor did his dog.

Nathan shot a glance at Wolfie. Wolfie just barked for some more Science Diet, which Nathan had brought up from the States, especially for him. Nathan filled his dish mechanically. He shook his head and fixed some *muktuk* with soy sauce to bring back to the computer. He loved animals like Wolfie, but he was a firm believer in controlling coyote populations.

Nathan clicked on a related link only to see another story out in British Columbia, this one straight out of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. A majestic golden eagle, its curling orange talons the size of a small toddler's hand, swooped down and picked up a baby right from a baby carriage. The mother fought back, beating the large brown bird with her balled-up white fists, but a flock of nearly ten golden eagles descended, scratching and clawing her face until she curled in a ball to save her own life. The baby was later found clawed to death, dropped against the stone steps of an adjacent house.

Nathan gasped. He'd seen images of coyotes attacking humans, typically when their young were near, but he'd never heard of a flock of more than four or five golden eagles, let alone eleven, coordinating like these gigantic birds did. It sounded crazy to Nathan—purely unconscionable—that such diverse birds and mammals could coordinate an attack. It was preposterous to anyone who knew even the least of the tendencies of animal behavior, whether it be the fauna of Greenland, Canada, or the States. Yet, attack they did—children first—which made the matter especially urgent.

Nathan kept watching until he heard a voice over the radio transmitter.

"Nathan, are you there?" a bodiless voice asked.

Nathan picked up the receiver. "Little Kitsissut Lighthouse," he answered. "Is anyone out there? Nor'easter conditions are likely in the next ten hours. I recommend anchoring immediately."

"It's only me, Nathan. Have you seen the news?" the voice asked.

It was Edmund, Nathan's old college roommate and fellow researcher. He'd

gone back to the mainland to prepare to head out and study polar bears encroaching on northern Inuit town dumps in the winter, leaving Nathan to man the refuge with his girlfriend, Dana, due to arrive tomorrow.

“I saw news bytes of isolated animal attacks by a few groups of threatened animals,” Nathan said. “Are you okay?”

“The polar bears are still hunting any breaks in the ice for seals,” Edmund said. “So far, this celebration of bears hasn’t turned its attention to us. But the Inuit we’ve spoken to are reporting increasingly aggressive encroachments by starving bears, Nathan, and we’re not just talking about a few attacks.”

“How many?” Nathan asked.

“At least ten polar bear attacks and seven wild dog attacks in western Greenland, and a dozen reported in Canada and the States. First, it was non-hibernating black bears and moose in Alaska, Yukon, and British Columbia. Then coy dogs, coyotes, and even condors in California. Eagles, hawks, and owls in Oregon and Washington state. The worst case was a series of alligator attacks in Florida. All on children eight or younger. My Danish friend said there’s been a few Daubenton’s bat attacks in his homeland too.”

Nathan scoffed. “Listen to yourself,” he said. “That makes no sense. These are separate species with instincts that go back millions of years. Why would competing predators come together in the middle of winter and attack children? We’re assuming a connection between pockets of predators that just doesn’t exist.”

“Each of the areas showed a paucity of food in the surrounding wild,” Edmund said. “But the animals aren’t all eating the children. That’s why I’m afraid it may be something worse, much worse.”

“What? That they’re just thrill killing? Coyotes have been known to do that.” “No. Nathan, have they told you why you’re on an island that isn’t on any of the maps of Greenland?”

Nathan said nothing for a moment, before gulping and saying, “No.”

“You don’t find that odd in any way?”

“Everything about Greenland is odd, especially the islands in the Wandel Sea that break the surface part of the year only to fall under the sea again. That’s why I love it. It’s as strange and magical as the Northern Lights. Besides, somebody has to man the lighthouse and record animal activity in the area.”

“The animals you’re observing. Are they acting any differently?”

“No. Wolfie’s a bit piggish, but then he always is during nor’easters when he gets less time outside.”

“I’m worried about you,” Edmund said to Nathan. “You’re in an isolated area with an intense demand on predators during a coming nor’easter. Be careful.

Stay locked inside until we can reach you.”

“I have over thirty different species of animals to keep track of,” Nathan said.

“The animals can look out for themselves,” Edmund said.

“But—”

“—Listen, Nathan. The animals they experimented on in reserves like yours, up and down the fjords. They did something. I don’t know exactly what, but I’m convinced it’s changed animal behavior.”

“In alligators in Florida? Come on, Edmund.”

“I’m telling you, there’s a connection. Try to find any data you can by the time I arrive. We should be there once the storm breaks. Listen, I have to go.”

“To study polar bears at a time like this?”

“We’re closing our camp down. I have to get ready to fly out.”

“To where?”

“To Nuuk. We’ll keep to the city until it’s safe to get you.”

“But what of my work? I have to stay.”

“Nathan...”

“Yes?”

“...Promise me you’ll be careful. This may be the beginning of the largest evolutionary leap since *homo sapiens* emerged from *homo erectus*. But it’s also the most dangerous. Pack your things and stay close to the radio.”

“If you insist.”

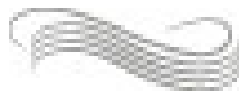
“I do. More importantly, so does your boss. She called. She’s still coming tomorrow.”

“Dana? She should stay where it’s safe.”

“She insisted.”

Nathan hung up the receiver. All around him, he could hear the animals of the night. Wolf howls—to which Wolfie, like something straight out of a Jack London novel, responded. Shrill Arctic fox cries. And a few bird cries Nathan didn’t even recognize, lost among the roar of the wind-ravaged sea. Nathan decided to lock and secure the door, shaking his head at himself as he did so. Then he put on his thermal underwear. He watched Wolfie circle around three times before Wolfie laid down in his dog bed. Then Nathan climbed into his own bed.

Wolfie had the right idea. It was time to sleep.



The next morning, Nathan broke his promise first thing. He hiked in snowshoes through the plummeting precipitation to the different corners of the refuge,

tallying the wintering species—including a few roseate terns that didn't belong this far north and hadn't left since nesting last summer—to update the official log. Nothing else struck him as extraordinary. Nathan told himself that a few lemmings stared at him for an unusually long time. Still, there were no other footprints in the snow to show that any creature was tracking him or contemplating making him its next meal. The animals were as they had always been—on the same evolutionary rung they were on thousands of years ago.

After Wolfie took care of his business, the two headed back to the light-house. Nathan had to shovel his way back up the stairs, as he had to tunnel his way pretty much everywhere in Greenland. Wolfie followed patiently, step by step. Once they were inside, Nathan said, “Edmund had the right idea. This weather means business. We should stay inside, Wolfie.”

Wolfie barked. Nathan helped Wolfie rid himself of the snow that collected along the tufts of his gray-white fur.

Once Wolfie settled in, Nathan checked the radio. There were no calls. Of course, there never were in weather like this. Nathan made himself some *saussat* and some Greenlandic coffee, making sure that he set the coffee on fire, as was the custom, to get the taste just right. As he ate and drank, Nathan thought over what Edmund had said, fearfully, last night: “*They did something.*” Edmund had graduated a year earlier and was the reason Nathan got this job. In fact, it was Edmund who introduced Nathan to his boss and girlfriend, Dana, in the first place. As crazy as Edmund sounded, no doubt infected by the media-ignited hysteria that swept the news, Edmund knew a lot more about Little Kitsissut than Nathan did. Nathan couldn't dismiss Edmund's warnings without checking—that would be poor science.

So, Nathan searched over the computer files, only to find most encrypted and classified as one might expect working at a government installation. The other manuals, written in Danish, a language Nathan barely understood, were hardly more promising. There were references to earlier experiments on mice and similar microfauna. The goal of the research, apparently, was to equip animals to adapt to climate change. The ultimate purpose for Greenland, of course, was to genetically alter the polar bear before it became a dying breed by century's end. But it was the actual means of experimentation that concerned Nathan. Nanotechnology. These reindeer and musk oxen were part of a coordinated study introducing micro-machines into the bloodstream. These machines, subatomic in size, had the ability to alter chemical reactions at the cellular level. This would allow scientists to initiate evolutionary changes in a few generations that, even in saltation models, would take thousands of years.

Nathan closed the journals and packed them. As he did so, he thought: Such

technology could do wonders. If mankind could send if messages at a cellular or even molecular level, cancer cells could be destroyed. Plant cells, as different from ours as they might be, could adapt to clean themselves up from pollutants. Perhaps a whole new species of plant might actually feed off of pollution itself. The applications truly were endless. But the question remained: What did this have to do with aggression in animals? Nathan was a fan of science-gone-wrong crackpot theories, but the scientific data that he saw looked solid enough. There was no way the experimentation would do anything other than enable survival or, in a worst-case scenario, kill the animal.

Nathan pondered the matter over more when the radio lit up again. Nathan picked up the receiver. "Little Kitsissut Lighthouse," Nathan replied. "We're tracking a nor-easter that will continue until tomorrow morning."

"Plane down in the ocean," a faint female voice said. "One occupant. I'm on a lifeboat just off of Alannorsuaq Fjord. I need assistance immediately. Weather severe. Under attack."

"This is Nathan Trola of Little Kitsissut Lighthouse. Can you see the lighthouse?"

"Yes, Nathan. This is Dana. I can see you. Faintly. The lighthouse must be over fifty yards away. Can't move. The killer whales will see me."

"Do you have a flare you can set off?"

"Yes. But I don't want to call attention to myself. The whales are trying to overturn the boat."

Nathan found the matter odd. That killer whales were an apex predator and a danger to seals, dugongs, and even the occasional shark was no surprise. That they had infiltrated warming waters off Greenland previously reserved for humpbacks and belugas was also well-documented. But for a pod of killer whales to be out hunting a human in the middle of nor'easter seemed absurd. Nathan believed that the pod might have mistaken the lifeboat for an unusually fat walrus, but frankly, killer whales were too smart for that. He was worried.

"Hold steady at your current position," Nathan said. "I'll alert the Coast Guard."

Nathan tried to do the sensible thing, but there was no response. Nathan tried radioing again. Greenland may not have had a military presence of its own, but it had an armed coast guard that had operated search and rescue missions in even more precarious circumstances than these. Yet, today, there was radio silence. Nathan asked himself: maybe the animals had gotten to them too?

"Dana. I can't get the Coast Guard," Nathan said. "Hold tight. You're close. I'll come out to you."

"Nathan, no!"

“Don’t do anything. I’m coming to get you. Nathan out.”

Nathan left the radio and bundled up in his gear. He got snowshoes, a buoy, a lantern, a gun, a flashlight, and—of course—Wolfie. Wolfie immediately picked up on the change in his master’s emotional state and sensed that something was up. He even nuzzled the oars to make sure Nathan remembered to grab them. Once Nathan did, Wolfie went to the lighthouse door and barked. Nathan opened the door and out Wolfie went, dragging a small shovel out with his teeth and leaving it by the steps.

Once Nathan and Wolfie were down by the steps, Nathan took the shovel with him. They had to wade through the snow to the banks by the shore. Wolfie was a master at this, weaving up and down through the snow like a bottlenose whale riding the crests of the Labrador Sea. Nathan used his snowshoes to follow at a distance. Wolfie made it by the old, rickety fishing boat first. Nathan followed with the shovel, shoveling out what he could off the boat before taking off the docking ropes and putting his equipment inside. Wolfie hopped in, keeping the buoy in his teeth. Nathan lit a lantern. He placed it by him as he took the oars and set out.

The snow was a consuming white wind unto itself and naturally impaired visibility. Other than stirring gales and some larger waves, the nor’easter hadn’t done as much damage to the fjord waters as Nathan thought. Still, while he signaled with his flashlight, Nathan received no reply. At any moment, Dana might’ve gone under. Nathan put his flashlight to the waves. He caught sight of the tail of one of the killer whales as it went peacefully by. Nathan heard Dana screaming before he actually saw her lifeboat.

Nathan heard the whales breaking, pushing up and down against the life-boat. He had never seen anything like it. He took his gun and fired a few shots into the air. Of course, such a stupid gesture did nothing to mar the whales’ concentration.

“Nathan—quick,” Dana screamed.

Dana had a jacket and gear, but from her shaking body, it was clear she was hysterical, as anyone would be.

Nathan swooped in by the lifeboat and pulled Dana over to his tiny fishing boat.

A killer whale’s bulbous head surfaced to see what was happening.

Wolfie dropped the buoy and barked. Nathan rowed Dana back to shore. He smiled when he realized the waters were getting too shallow for whales. Just then, one whale, in a last-ditch effort, butted up underneath Nathan’s fishing boat. Nathan felt the jolt but continued, using the strong nor’easter winds to his advantage. In a few more moments that felt like hours, they were on shore.

Nathan tied the boat to the docks and got out, carrying Dana to the rocky beach. He left most of the gear in the boat but took back his shovel and his gun.

“Just get me inside,” was all that Dana muttered.

“Can you walk?” Nathan asked.

“I can try.”

Wolfie ran up the cliff, bobbing up and down in the snow ahead of them. Nathan and Dana followed the carnival of Aurora Borealis lights towards the lighthouse. Dana’s boots were hardly a match for the snow, but Nathan guided her gently on, shoveling every now and again as needed. When they made it to the top of the rocky crag near the lighthouse, Nathan heard growling. He looked up. There, arching his furry body down, with fangs exposed, was Wolfie, barking like mad.

“Wolfie,” Nathan said. “That’s enough!”

Dana tugged at Nathan’s coat, shaking her head. “It’s no use,” she said. “He’s infected.”

“Infected?”

Dana made a few aggressive shooing gestures at Wolfie, but Wolfie would have none of it. He arched his head and howled, as if alerting others. He then crouched again, bared his fangs, growled, and readied himself for the attack.

“Take out your gun,” Dana said.

“What? No,” Nathan replied. “I love that dog!”

“He’s not *your* dog anymore. Just fire around him. You don’t have to kill him—yet.”

Nathan took out his gun. He fired a shot into the air.

“No—around him,” Dana argued. “Quickly.”

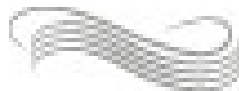
Nathan’s arm shook, but he took the gun and shot it just shy of where Wolfie was.

Wolfie stopped growling. His eyes met Nathan’s. For a moment, it was like he was a confused dog hurt by his master’s cruelty. Then, he looked at Dana and bared his fangs, barked, and ran off into the snow.

“Quickly,” Dana said. “Get inside. He’ll be back. With others.”

“What others? It’s desolate tundra.” “Wolves, or whatever else he can muster.”

Nathan shoveled the steps to the lighthouse as quickly as he could. He brought Dana up one step at a time. He opened the door and let her in. As he headed in, he looked out towards the great white expanse. There, in the middle of it all, was Wolfie, bobbing up and down like Buck answering the call of the wild.



Nathan looked over at Dana. Her hair was as wet and black as his, and her eyes as cold and blue. Nathan knew, as she sat shivering after a hot shower, sipping her Greenlandic coffee in a Bordeaux glass, that whatever it was Edmund was searching for, Dana knew.

Without looking up from her coffee, Dana asked: “You want me to explain, don’t you?”

“My dog is dying out there right now. I’d like to know why.”

“I wish I could explain, but I only know bits and pieces. So does everyone else.”

Dana sipped her coffee again.

“Is there nothing you can tell me?” Nathan asked.

Dana looked out the lighthouse window at the immensity of Greenland—its crags, fjords, snows, and fauna. “I can tell you that you’ll never get that dog back again,” Dana said.

“How can you be so cold about Wolfie? You gave him to me as a pup.”

“And I loved Wolfie too, back when I was an animal lover.”

Dana’s voice sounded just as cold and bitter as her coffee was getting.

“Edmund told me to gather the journals. I read them,” Nathan said.

“They make for lovely reading, don’t they?” Dana asked. “All about making the world a better place. If only that was the way the Danish military thought.”

“Then tell me the truth.”

“The truth? Not even I know it all,” Dana said. “What I understand is that the nanotechnology they used on the animals was a tremendous success. It worked just fine. It wasn’t the animals that reacted poorly to the experiments. It was the humans.”

“What?” Nathan asked incredulously.

Dana sighed. She said, “Let’s just say that they moved on from blood-based nanotechnology experimentation to a more airborne model. The sweeping winds of the tundra took the miniature machines beyond the island, and the nanotechnology proved more resilient than expected. It infected whole new populations of animals. And the new strain, the one the Danish military oversaw, that made the animals more aggressive to any threat. It was brilliant, really. Get terrorists by using their own animal populations against them.”

“I still don’t understand,” Nathan said. “You said the humans reacted poorly to the experiments. Were humans in the trials, too?”

Dana looked directly into Nathan’s eyes. “Only a select few,” she said. “And of those, only one survived.”

Nathan backed up. “Me?” he asked. “You’re not serious?”

“I am. Your blood was a one-in-a-million match.”

“But when—how?”

Dana looked down. She breathed deeply and then said: “Edmund recruited you. And you were a success. That’s why the animals didn’t attack you. They attacked me. You see, the nanotechnology was meant to make the animals soldiers, but its original purpose remained. Survival, adaptability to changing environments. An outstanding quality for a soldier, right? Also, a great evolutionary trait for survival on the ultimate scale. Or so the scientists thought. But ask yourself: who is it that’s destroying the environment? Who is it that’s decimating animal habitats in record numbers? Rendering species extinct? Mankind, of course. The ultimate enemy of nature. Just wait until the nanotechnology adapts to plant life. Then we’ll have a whole new order of enemy.”

“My God,” Nathan said. “That’s crazy.”

“What started here,” Dana said. “It’s only going to spread. Predators will eat other predators and get infected. The air will fill with nanotechnology, infecting insects. Pets will turn against masters, just like Wolfie did. And humans like me, exposed to infected animals, will set other animals off.”

“An animal apocalypse,” Nathan said, shaking his head at the absurdity of the notion.

“Not if we’re lucky,” Dana said. “So far, the animals have only attacked areas where they’re threatened. All of those kids who were attacked were living at the edge of forests and woods—at the edge of some wild habitat. They were small, helpless, vulnerable—the perfect size to send a message to the world of mankind: back off. I don’t think the animals will attack us if we get off their lands and leave them alone.”

“Can you really be so confident after what we just saw?”

Dana shook her head. Drops of water fell to the stone floor.

“Maybe not,” she said. “But think of it this way. These are not mindless zombie attacks. These are genetically calculated strikes. So long as we respect their environment and leave the food chain intact, the animals have no reason to attack our cities. It’s an unwarranted risk, unnecessary for survival on the grandest scale.”

As Dana spoke, Nathan heard scratching at the door. His eyes softened for just a moment.

“Don’t even think of it,” Dana said, finishing her coffee.

“But you said they won’t attack me. I can find a room for Wolfie and lock him in until we can treat him.”

“There is no cure.”

“What?”

“This was meant to be an experimental stage only.”

“But Wolfie!”

“White wolves can live and adapt to the cold, Nathan. Wolfie will be fine. Just look at the new friends he’s brought.”

Nathan glimpsed outside and saw a whole pack of wolves, several Arctic foxes, and even a polar bear in the midst. They all circled the lighthouse, clawing away at its cobblestone walk.

“There will be more tomorrow, after the storm clears out. I’m sorry I came, Nathan. I just needed to get to you before Edmund does.”

“Why? It’s just Edmund.”

“Just Edmund, huh? He’s an agent of the Danish government. He’s assigned to break you into what’s really happening slowly, to earn your trust. But trust me: he won’t be coming alone, Nathan. After the storm, Danish soldiers will be with him. They want you. They want what’s in your blood so they can play beast master and bring this to an end before it really breaks out. When people connect the dots, their program will be finished.”

Nathan shook his head. “And all because I was a naïve kid who wanted to see belugas and humpbacks break in the ocean tide,” he said in lamentation.

“You should’ve just gone on a whale watch,” Dana said.

Nathan laughed faintly before adding: “How do I know I can trust you?” Dana smiled. “You can’t,” she said. “Edmund works for the Danish. I work for the Americans—a point Edmund is not yet aware of, but will be shortly.”

“How is that any better?”

“How good is your Danish?”

“Not so good.”

“Then there’s that.”

Nathan sighed. He heard more scratching, more aggressive than before.

“I could leave you to them,” he said.

“If you trust that everything I told you is true, go ahead. See how far you make it. But let me warn you, Nathan. The nanotechnology affecting how the animals think and behave will soon start affecting you. Scientists aren’t quite sure what it does to the human brain—you’ll help them find out.”

Nathan looked out the window. The snow was still ravaging the stones. The winds howled, carrying the distant cries of polar bears. No one was going anywhere now.

“In a matter of hours, the American and the Danish military will be here. I should turn you over, Nathan. Really, I should. But I care about you, so I’m giving you a choice. Just remember: you have to make that choice, Nathan. No one can make it for you.”

Dana put her Bordeaux glass down and rested on the sofa. Nathan said nothing. He finished packing his things. Whatever happened, his days wintering in Little Kitsissut were over. Nathan tried to settle his nerves, but the animal cries just kept getting louder and more frenzied.



Dana slept on the sofa, no doubt secure in the fact that Nathan was going nowhere. Nathan spent the remainder of his time watching viral clips of recent animal attacks. Suddenly, Amazon River dolphins overturned boats in South America, panda bears fought back against poachers in Myanmar, and at least fifty abused animals knocked over cages and attacked their owners in clips from Dubai to Odense. Nathan could see that mankind made the first strike against nature by polluting, abusing, and endangering all life on the planet. Now, nature had struck back, and not just in giant tsunamis. Animals had now taken up the fight, and Nathan knew that Dana had severely underestimated Mother Nature. What they were seeing now was just the beginning of a war that started when *homo erectus* stood upright. It wouldn't just be pets versus owners. It would be animal versus mankind. And it would be a fight to the death.

Nathan looked outside. The snows were waning; the fresh powdery flakes melted in the calming sea. The nor'easter was nearly over, and at any moment Cape Brill would be safe enough to allow passage.

Nathan glanced at Dana. Still snoring away. He thought of her words: *I can tell you that you'll never get that dog back again.* Nathan cared for Dana, or whoever this government agent was. But he was no fool. She was there to use him, just as Edmund had. Besides, she had gotten between a man and his dog, and that was not an enviable place to be.

Animals still clawed against the lighthouse, but now Nathan understood why. He put on his gear. He got a backpack and filled it with his laptop and with food, including a little Science Diet. It wouldn't last long. But it would be enough to start him off until he decided where he wanted to go. Or at least until the military overtook him.

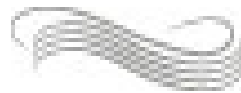
Nathan opened the door and shut it behind him, if only for Dana's sake. Wolfie sat staring at him but did not growl. Wolves and deer and polar bears in record numbers stood staring down at the man who somehow wasn't like the other men, who somehow understood. Nathan summoned his nanotechnology-engineered senses. Dana had been right. He was changing. He heard a celebration of polar bears growling, clawing and scratching, fighting Edmund and his Danish soldiers quite a distance away. He also saw killer whales

breaking the waves, attacking the ship that was to bring Dana's government friends down Cape Brill. Nathan's enhanced vision kicked in more fully. He looked at the humans in peril. How fragile their faces were, how shocked. Nathan could get his boat and help out as he had last night. He could call off the bears and save the day for Edmund and his crew. Or he could think of which side of this war he wanted to be on.

Nathan had always loved nature, had always felt himself pushing into the wild, first, outside of America, and now, outside of civilization altogether. He looked out at the great unsullied tundra, so vast, so full of ice and rock, of snow geese, of fjords and rocky cliffs—so pristine, so beautiful. This was the frontier he'd always dreamed of. This was his world.

As Nathan looked back and forth between the men battling polar bears and the open wild, he saw Wolfie stand up on his hind legs and let out a long, guttural howl. Nathan understood. The call Wolfie made was the same call that lured Nathan now. The animals had numbers, but they lacked a coordinator, someone who could communicate across species and bring all of their forces together for the fight that lay ahead—at least until the nanotechnology evolved and took over. The animals needed someone who could tell the world of mankind nature's warning: *Stop killing me and my children or we can and will fight back*. Nathan understood. Mankind had had his day. The future belonged to the rest of the animal kingdom.

Nathan walked with Wolfie, flanked by a pack of wolves on one side and a celebration of polar bears on the other. For a brief moment, Nathan felt like Gunnbjorn Ulfsson first looking up at the Aurora Borealis and taking in the shut face of thunder, seeing in Greenland a majestic new world caught between life and death, between winter and summer, more awesome, vaster than any he had ever imagined. For the first time in his life, Nathan didn't know exactly where he would end up. But something primordial, something in the deepest part of Man, kept him walking anyway, away from the fjords, into the open wilderness, in answer to the wild's impending call.



No Rul Ozu

Inyo County, California, USA

Post-Rapsys

The vision smoke cleared, and Fowler rose to meet Nurvlyn's face.

"So, you are Nathan. You are the first victim of all of this," he said.

"And the first master," Nurvlyn said. "The animals called me Nurvlyn in their tongue, as that was the closest approximation that they could say immediately after their awakening. I am their father, but I am also yours. Everyone in that story is dead now. The virus and the animals took every last one. It will soon take me. With you, the scientists perfected their procedure. You alone will be able to stand up to the mightiest of the animals. But you must never take the crown. Like me, you must be a wizard of the wild, one who takes the side of the earth."

"I can't be you," Fowler said. "But I am changing. I can't even remember my dead wife's face. I'm just...different. I don't even know who or what I am anymore."

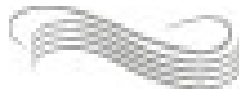
"You are everything and nothing all at once," Nurvlyn said. "You are the master and servant of all. You are the hope I have of this world achieving The Great Balance, the equalizing of all life for the benefit of this world."

Images of Azaz and his strike, of the giant Adar Llwh Gwin, lord of the eagles, hovering in the airs of Appalachia, of Methuselah, waiting eternities for her passing, all appeared, in vision form, like winds of color before Fowler's hungry eyes.

"I think I'm beginning to understand," Fowler said.

"That is good. Rest now. Tomorrow, you must take your leave of Methuselah. There is much work to be done before this war is over. If you don't save the *rulku*, no one will."

With that, the two kneeled in the dirt, letting the sky blanket them as they communed together one last time.



CHAPTER 19

Zukul-Ryle

Washington, D.C., USA

For months, the carnage lined the streets like a parade of unconscious subjects seeking only the blessing of their cruel king. One by one, the militias of the Midwest and the East fell before Vronkyl or the giant bear king himself. And always, Azaz looked around, at the monuments of men, puzzling.

“This city—more die for it than any other,” Azaz said to Vronkyl after striking another deadly blow. “It was once called Washington. Look at the monuments the *rulku* built in their arrogance. This one, with the fur that falls from his face. His eyes look down at me as if he were wisdom personified. Yet, he is lifeless stone. Who is he?”

Vronkyl concentrated, connecting to his nanobots as they whispered an ancient name in his head.

“Lincoln, my king,” Vronkyl said. “The man beasts considered him the greatest of the *rulku* after they fought each other in a war that took more lives in this land than any other until that time.”

“The mad beasts turned on each other? Whatever for?” Azaz asked.

“Slavery of *rulku* over money. Always money.”

“Foolish species,” Azaz said. “They enslaved the entire animal kingdom, turned the fiercest of beasts into carnival attractions and simpering pets. And still, that was not enough. They had to do that to each other. And why? What even separated them?”

“Some *rulku* were lighter in skin color. Others were darker,” Vronkyl said, taking in the great stone statue that towered over them. “Some had money. Others did not. Some claimed this land as their own. Others sought to claim it as theirs.”

Azaz shook his head. “It’s like a bear with reddish fur fighting a black bear,” he said. “No *rulku* killer deserves to be left standing.” Azaz turned to The Blood Paw, now grown in numbers, with black bears among the grizzlies. “Topple the statue of the *rulku* king,” he ordered. “In its place, we will build new statues. We will build statues of bears. Finish the work before I return. I am close. Another sea is in my scent. I want to stare down the ocean, to let it know that I conquered everything that stood between me and its sister ocean.”

With that, a condor from the West descended, bowing before the mighty bear king.

“Azaz, my lord,” the condor messenger said.

Azaz turned his eyes from the horizon to the bird of prey that, battered and half-featherless, kneeled before him.

“Proceed,” Azaz ordered.

“I am Ice Eyes, the eyes of the bears, condors, and cougars of the West,” the condor said. “And I have news worthy of the ears of a king.”

“It had better be so, to interrupt my great eastern march,” Azaz said. “Speak.” “A strange creature, part eagle, part lizard, flies overhead,” Ice Eyes said.

“Our starlings speak among themselves. They have heard tales from seabirds, sparrows, and ravens of what this creature hunts.”

“Where did this creature come from?” Azaz asked. “Who dares enter my territory without my blessing?”

“From Europe, my lord, sent straight from The Night Eye, the queens of the air,” Ice Eyes said. “It is invincible, or so the birds say. My spies tell me that it seeks something so powerful it places the animal who wears it above all others. The Mystical Crown of Fire. It gives the animal who wears it unlimited dominion.”

Azaz stood upright, torn between anger, outrage, and ambition.

“Is this true?” he asked Vronkyl.

“I know not, my lord,” Vronkyl said. “But The Night Eye and their scourge, Groth The Impaler, have been busy lately. Our spies tell us that.”

“Where does this creature fly?” Azaz asked.

“Its current flight puts it sun cycles away from the West, not far from the Rockies of the great bear king himself,” Ice Eyes said. “What shall we do, my lord? Your bear commanders to the North seek your orders.”

“Take the creature down by any means necessary,” Azaz said. “Report its every movement to me. After I see the ocean this night, I shall return to kill this creature, even if I have to tear its wings from the sky.”

“Only you could do so, my lord,” Ice Eyes said, showing his missing plumage. “You can see what this creature did to me.”

“Where did you encounter it?” Azaz asked.

“In the Appalachian Mountains,” Ice Eyes reported, “not many sun cycles from here. It flies like nothing I have seen before. I alone survived to tell you of it. The creature let me live.”

Azaz nodded. “The Night Eye tests me and my might,” Azaz said, pondering. “While they would feign an alliance and act as my strong right hand in Europe, they would use their left hand to supplant my power here and to take my rightful

throne as their own. Thieving beasts. They knew exactly where I'd be. We must take this creature down. At all costs."

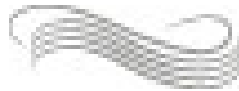
"Yes, my lord," Ice Eyes said. "With your blessing, I will fly to tell the brown bears of the North to begin their attack. They dare not communicate our knowledge of this beast through the nanosphere, for surely The Night Eye watches and listens to our every move."

"Go, faithful Ice Eyes," Azaz said. "For your fidelity, you will see your mighty birds blessed with much good fortune once this wretched creature is dead and the crown is mine." Azaz turned to Vronkyl. He said, "I guess the bonfire of man flesh will have to wait. We have a proper coronation to seek."

Vronkyl signaled to The Blood Paw, who surrounded their master in his movement towards the sea. As he did so, Vronkyl saw the brown bears by the ancient Lincoln Memorial hesitate.

"I said tear it to pieces," Azaz yelled. "No monument, of beast or man, will ever tower above me. For always, I am Azaz, king of kings."

And so, the stone head fell before Azaz's mighty paws.



Ku-Rah

New South Wales, Australia

Vykra slithered up into the sandy river floodplains of what was once, in ancient times, the Macquarie Marshes of New South Wales. After mankind experimented with the environment, the wetlands, home to diverse waterbirds, went dry and barren like the river that fed them. After the next round of weather experimentation, with the introduction of some of the first nature chips, the landscape evolved again, this time into the largest jungle swamp of the forgotten continent, the one The *Rapsys* almost forgot. This made Vykra's camouflage all the more effective, covered as she was in the brush and murk that made the wetland swamp look like a prehistoric world.

There, in a boathouse raft floating down the Macquarie River, was a lone man sitting on the edge of the raft, his feet dangling in the river. Vykra slithered right up to him, preparing herself for the bite. She saw the stark white toes dipping in and approached. With a single calculated lunge, Vykra struck with every ounce of her being. But she only hit a nanospheric trap: a group of nanobots using the projection of a human to cover themselves. The image disappeared. A robotic arm of nanobots held the writhing snake, extricating its coiling body from the

river waters.

“You’re too late,” the robotic arm said. “My children have taken to the air and multiplied. Soon, they will spread like ravenous cicadas, devouring everything in their path.”

Vykra commanded her nanobots to jam the signal, but it was no use. The arm put more pressure on her neck and on the base of her head.

“Who sent you?” the bionic arm asked.

Vykra writhed some more, but the arm held her and her nanobots in an energy field that might as well have been a closed net.

“It’s your life to lose,” the arm said.

Vykra hissed, unable to bite, but said nothing. Only her nanobots, surrounding the great yellow snake, projected the image that would save her life: that of The All-Seeing Night Eye procuring her services, commanding her to kill the *rulku* with too much technological prowess.

The robotic arm transformed again, this time into the projection of The Mechanic, a shadowy talisman made up by bits of light and nanobots circling the air. The nanobots that surrounded The Mechanic, cloudlike, held the serpent at bay. Vykra’s eyes bulged as she saw the bloody, beaten body left, half-decomposed, on the floor. An eye and an empty eye socket looked at her from a skeletal face.

“Let’s say you were not the first animal to pay me a visit,” The Mechanic said. “I knew The Night Eye would not just release me from their service. So, I came here. But I did not anticipate King Croc. The human-animal abomination beat you by at least three months.”

“You’re an echo,” Vykra said.

“Yes, and quite an elaborate one,” The Mechanic said. “As soon as my children move past the southern oceans, towards fresh new land, I will fade into energy. Humanity will have the upgrade it needs to avenge the assault of the animals. New nanotechnology will override the machinations of King Blu and enable access to weapons across the world. Awakened animal populations will be contained. Mankind will rise and rule again. And The All-Seeing Night Eye, your masters, will fall before the weapons of Man. I will make sure of it.”

Vykra struck at the nanobots. The electricity made her body dance, yet She held on, disabling what she could of the echo. The Mechanic pixelated and then grew faint. He bent over to look at the dying assassin’s venomous eyes.

“You may have killed my echo, but not its purpose,” The Mechanic said. “You are only the first in a wave of deaths that will make this war’s outcome a forgone conclusion.”

Vykra’s life gave out; her nanobots collapsed. The nanosphere surrounding

The Mechanic faded. Myriad nanobots fell into the river. One cloud took to the air, venturing farther than the farthest air currents, towards the ships held at bay by the ever-hungry King Croc.



Ku-Rah

New South Wales, Australia

Hunter General Xavian steadied his boat, readying his fleet for departure to he knew not where. There was just something about this crocodile god that made him think Australia truly was a lost land after all. The mercenary animal king reminded him of the criminal kingpins he arrested in his days as a young policeman in Palayan, before the end of the world. The moment Xavian's vessels pulled to stern, he saw red eyes lining the sea as far as he could behold.

"Sir," Lieutenant Cyphus said. "Look about stern."

"I see them. All of them."

Up from the waters emerged the creature that made so many convulse in terror. This time, the creature had a necklace of skeleton bones and three pairs of arms that made him look like an ancient Hindu god. He emerged from the water, asking, "Have we not made you comfortable?"

"Great King Croc," Xavian said. "If your words are true—if any of you was once a man—help us now. This is the critical hour. Yu, The Golden Nightmare, has started his great march through what is left of China. He means to march through Beijing. In Europe, Groth The Impaler does the same, as does Azaz The Grizzly God in North America. You and this land were our last hope. Yet, you surround us, ready for the kill."

King Croc ascended the flagship, gazing around him.

"Your ships still work, despite the great blackening that ended the magic of the *rulku*," King Croc said, ignoring Xavian's words. "How many humans remain? Tell me your tale, and perhaps I will sympathize."

"Only pockets, great king, in each continent. We are hunted to the verge of extinction after losing the last vestiges that powered our civilizations. Our ships move only through the last bit of nanopower we have. As for whether our weapons work, you can find that out for yourself."

"So, there are no more fleets coming then—only this one?" King Croc asked.

Cyphus touched Xavian's shoulder in warning.

"Why do you ask?" Xavian inquired.

“We have not seen ships such as this still operational,” King Croc said. “They will bring us far and wide, creating a navy to save our lands from any animals that would attack. We will take your ships and have you join the others in the interior. You will have a chance at a life there, though our hunters will take and kill what we need for our survival. It’s either this or death at the edge of my teeth. You are a leader, so decide or let my appetite decide for you.”

Xavian and Cyphus looked at one another. They knew that the monstrous King Croc could easily overpower them. Yet, to surrender would be to forfeit the last great hope of the East. Each saw death in the eye of the other when a whistling brood of nanobots hovered above them, circling the night air.

“Impossible,” King Croc said. “I killed the last *rulku* magician myself.” Xavian and Cyphus looked up to see the nanobots descend like locusts. The supra nanobots landed on those that surrounded the crocodiles, short circuiting them. Others landed on the nanobots that secured any laser or electrical weapon that had not yet been discarded from the small, failing fleet. Suddenly, their power activated. Xavian saw his nanotechnology again come to a golden light.

Xavian called out, “Form lasers with enough might to penetrate crocodile skin.”

King Croc lunged forward. With one arm, the great crocodile hybrid lifted the hunter general up. King Croc’s fingers closed around Xavian’s neck when the laser Xavian called for powered up and struck at the skin of the giant crocodile. King Croc staggered back, numbed. He dropped Xavian, stunned.

“Order the activation of all weapons systems,” Xavian said, staring at the staggering crocodile monstrosity. “Kill any crocodiles you see surrounding us while we can.”

King Croc regained himself and fought to rally his legs and lunge at Xavian. Xavian ordered the activation of his armor. The nanobots obliged, saving the hunter general from the crocodile’s merciless bite. Xavian called for an electrified mace, which he used to scourge the great crocodile, knocking him, in an unexpected blow, back to the sea. The ships lit up as their ammunition recharged. Soon enough, the waters alighted with electrical storms sent out by Xavian’s ships. The magnetic field of the storms held the crocodiles as if mighty nets of the sea, electrifying them. Within minutes, nearly fifty crocodiles floated dead in the sea.

“Push back,” King Croc ordered his remaining troops. “Out to the ocean. Let us seek the refuge of King Blu.”

The remaining crocodiles did as commanded, disappearing into the waters beyond the dank horizon.

“I can’t believe it,” Cyphus said. “Did we actually win?”

“This was no battle,” Xavian said. “We just prevented the latest slaughter. Set course inland. We must use the land capabilities of these ships to hunt down and rescue any surviving humans. They may be the last army we have left.”

“King Croc is powerful,” Cyphus said. “He may trap us inland and hunt us again.”

Xavian smirked. “He may be powerful, but there is only one power that rules the sea,” he said. “King Blu will decide the matter for us. Let’s get moving while we can. The Golden Nightmare must be on the move by now, and Hunter General Zhang’s troops must be sorely depleted.”

Cyphus nodded, ordering the men to look alive, to get the ships ready to shift to energy floatation so as to hover over the lands ahead.

Xavian wasted no time in sending out the news via the former council’s nanosphere: raise weapons again. A fresh wave of nanotechnology was flying north. Mankind had struck back, and Xavian had won the first battle, even if at the ends of the earth.



CHAPTER 20

Animus

Nunavut, Canada

Brigand stared at the starless sky for the better part of the night. There was only thick blackness upon a sparse white canvas. At long last, a tiny speck of fire, almost like a dancing fairy invisible to all but the smallest of eyes, entered the zoo's lock. Suddenly, not just the lock, but every human zoo door opened. Brigand turned to his men, shaking them to conscious confusion. Most of the humans lay immobile, emaciated, under the intense working regimen of their animal overlords. Yet, the open door and the open night gave even the most hardened and hopeless the faintest of smiles.

"He's actually come through," Brigand said, barely covering his shock. "Are you kidding? If we go out there, we'll be slaughtered," a trembling man said.

Brigand knew the hour had come. He lifted the man to his feet and asked, "Do you remember what it was like before the slaughter of men? Before we cowered under a self-proclaimed polar bear king and wolf queen? We were men. We were women. We didn't cower. We didn't run. The animals fled from *us*. Today, we are not as we were. This is true. We are battered. We are bloodied. We are weak. But we are not beaten. No. Not yet. Our war is not over. There is fight left in these old bones yet. Ask yourself, my friend: which way do you want to die? In a cage, cowering before your zookeepers, or out in the wild, with the open earth under your feet, facing death with your fists free and your eyes to the sky? I know which death is for me."

The last word spoken, Brigand ran through the open doorway. The others, even the weakest of elderly men and women, stumbled after him. What began as a quiet escape became the loud, guttural roaring of feet striking the earth, of voices striking the sky.

"Let death come," Brigand yelled. "I choose to die like I lived: as a man."

The men and women took up the battle cry, with one woman even saying: "I've given birth after the fall of hospitals. Killing a polar bear should be easy by comparison."

Brigand half-expected the polar bear guards or the flying owl sentinels to hear

them and charge at them. He was prepared for the final fight. Yet, nothing stirred. Instead, the guards witnessed only what their nanotechnology allowed them to see and hear: a tranquil night filled with silent skies and closed cage doors.

And so, Brigand led the tiny band of survivors away from the kingdom of *Animus*. The *rulku* ran out towards the western sky, towards the nether tundra between White Claw and Azaz, between the land and the ocean, between beast and man.



Animundo

The World Over

Almost unnoticed by the toiling creatures of the earth were the giant walls of the ocean. None knew exactly which first broke the tides. None could claim to know the thinking of a creature so deep, enmeshed in such vast undulating currents, that scholars debated what the creature even was or if it even existed. Was it a sperm whale, holder of the largest brain recorded in the animal kingdom? Was it a dolphin, squid, or octopus whose brains uniquely benefitted from *The Rapsys*, a freak genius seen only once in Creation? Or was it something altogether different? Some thought King Blu was an artificial intelligence symbiotic with a great blue whale, the largest of all animals and one of the most ancient in the seas. Others conjectured that King Blu was a byproduct of nanotechnology, a new, fully formed mind that existed in the waves. Still others thought that King Blu was a god—a terrible, ancient deity stirred by the sins of Creation. None knew for sure—was King Blu good, evil, or indifferent? And where there was ignorance, there was fear.

On their different continents, the animal kings and queens took notice. “King of kings,” Vronkyl said. “It is a great wall that looks like coral and stone, but is a field of purest energy. It determines what may pass and what may not by sea or by sky.”

“If it keeps more monstrosities like the Adar Llwh Gwin away, it might still benefit us,” Azaz said. “Keep an eye on it. But hunt for the crown above all else. Only a fully empowered king of all animal life may take on and kill King Blu. I want my statue erected with the bones of that bloody whale’s carcass.”

The Night Eye was hardly more encouraged by the visions the raven prophets shared.

“What is it?” the collective asked Mother Raven, the oldest of their number, as she shook under the weight of her vision.

“A power so great it can end wars if it chooses,” Mother Raven said. “The great King Blu has taken the plastics and pollution of men and turned them into a wall toxic to any land or sky creature that would pass.”

“Then Adar Llwhc Gwin must succeed,” The All-Seeing Night Eye said. “We are powerful, but even we cannot get birds past the walls of King Blu.”

“Yet, the Mad Bear King knows of our plans,” Mother Raven said. “His spies have told him. He hunts for the crown as well.”

“Any word from our assassins, Mother Raven?” The Night Eye asked. “We see nothing.”

“My eye is as blind as yours.”

Across continents, Thraxis took note. “It is a sign,” she said to Vespian, “from the deep. Azaz gains footing. But why Azaz’s sudden march to the West? Could it be a retreat from this wall?”

“The walls have not responded to any of our inquiries in any known animal dialect,” Vespian said. “We cannot say.”

The boa constrictor commander wrapped herself around the telescreen that her nanobot spies erected that showed the lands to the North.

“Azaz seeks something,” Thraxis said. “What could it be? Order our spies to slither as close to The Blood Paw as possible. I must figure out not where he is, but where he is going. Perhaps we can beat him to it.”

“Yes, my empress,” Vespian said.

Still others, like Yorba, showed no interest.

“I tell you,” Zulta said, “blocking the ocean means blocking our supplies. Our efforts will falter.”

“Who cares what an alien intelligence does in its own waters?” Yorba asked. “So long as the waters block off more *rulku*, we can hunt and kill the remaining survivors on this continent in peace.”

Only Yu The Golden Nightmare took proper notice.

“Once we end this war with the *rulku* and take the last of their cities,” The Golden Nightmare said, “we must study this anomaly. The walls could hide a weapon ready to strike the world over.”

“Indeed, my lord,” Jiao said. “If we could harness its power, we could travel the waters and rule the continents.”

“Let us first rule this continent,” The Golden Nightmare said. “At least we won’t have to worry about Hunter General Xavian and his phantom fleet. Zhang will be ours for the killing.”

“One would hope,” Jiao said. “But the ways of the waters are strange. And the

waters are too deep for us to know anything for sure.”

Back in the Americas, White Claw summoned Moon Shadow for another purpose altogether.

“Where were you?” White Claw asked. “The *rulku* have fled into the wilderness.”

“Studying the strange walls,” Moon Shadow said. “If we are to be strong, we must control the sky and sea. These walls present an obstacle.”

“Hunt and recapture Brigand and his men first,” White Claw commanded. “After we consult Snow Prophet,” Moon Shadow insisted. “We must be sure.”

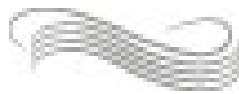
White Claw assented, but the news was not good.

Snow Prophet circled the air three times, chanting and shrieking into the night sky. “It is an ill omen,” he said. “For us, anyway. My ancestors tell me that this is the first step in an oceanic kingdom completely independent of the animals of the earth.”

“And what of the *rulku* who escaped?” White Claw asked.

Snow Prophet spread his wings and declared to Moon Shadow, “To find the *rulku* is to find your other half. To find your other half is to find death. To win a war and to survive a war are two different things indeed. You, polar king, will strike your greatest friend to befriend your greatest foe. And you, wolf queen, will weaken and almost die to grow stronger and live. So, The Great Spirit says, as that is how The Great Balance will be preserved. The choice is yours, king and queen. You must fight together or fall apart. The *rulku* shall stand between you, but pride shall stand between you more. Yet, even the greatest wounds of pride can heal. Think upon my words.”

Snow Prophet flew back to his mountain perch. White Claw and Moon Shadow stood like all animals before the miracle of the waters: helpless and confused.



Gungung Dor

Just Before Bear Mountain, Rockies, USA

In the skies, the great mechanical wings blocked out sun and cloud. Ice Eyes kept his watch, and through him, the nanobots gained Azaz his first view of the flying creature. Its wings spanned the peaks of the white-tipped mountains. Its beak was twice the size of any living eagle’s. Its feathers, sharp as the ends of its talons, were shards of armor. And its eyes were yellow fire curling around,

eating itself alive. When its wings fluttered, storm winds emerged. And still, the creature flew, undeterred.

Adar Llwoch Gwin flew until, noting Ice Eyes, it spun around, knocking the smaller bird with its wing. Ice Eyes fell in a spiral of wind to the ground. Below, Adar Llwoch Gwin turned and swooped down. Advancing was a regiment of brown bears patrolling the area.

“You,” Adar Llwoch Gwin said. “I let you live. Yet, you dare approach me again? For what purpose?”

Ice Eyes shook.

“As a spy,” Adar Llwoch Gwin said in answer to its own question. It fluttered its wings until the wind took the fallen condor into the air. “Tell your king that none dare oppose me and live,” Adar Llwoch Gwin said. “Turn your magic lens here. Let the king see with his own eyes.”

With that, Adar Llwoch Gwin let the bear regiment approach.

“Stop,” Raldaw, the bear commander, said. “This land and this sky belong to Azaz, the esteemed king of kings. Explain yourself.”

“I am the alpha and the omega,” Adar Llwoch Gwin said. “I am the death of the king of kings.”

“Blasphemy,” Raldaw said. “You will pay with your life,” he growled, running forward.

“I choose to pay with yours,” Adar Llwoch Gwin replied.

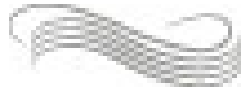
The great lizard bird ascended like a medieval dragon, using its wings to fuel waves of electrical current. The current rippled in golds and silvers before flowing mercilessly towards Raldaw and his bear militia. It swept over the bears, electrocuting them. Their legs and paws shook in the current until their nanobot armor fell away. Unarmed, they rose on all fours as bears once again reduced to the elements.

With a flick of its wings, Adar Llwoch Gwin challenged the bears to come forward. Raldaw roared, as did his complement of man-eating bears. In a moment, they struck, blackened as their fur was from the electrical fires that still danced on their skins. Stretching out its wings, Adar Llwoch Gwin’s feathers became spears of fire. With a single thrust, Adar Llwoch Gwin released a dozen spears. Each found the skull of its target. The metallic missiles plunged into the bears’ skulls, leaving two hulking masses of bears dead beneath them.

Ice Eyes, half-conscious, watched as the ground shook and the giant lizard eagle approached. Adar Llwoch Gwin looked down at Ice Eyes and into the nanobots that swarmed to protect the condor from the inevitable.

“Leave me to my masters’ will,” Adar Llwoch Gwin said, “or your blood will be next, Mad Bear.”

A feather loosened. It shot through the air, straight into Ice Eyes' head. Upon seeing the corpses cold beneath it, Adar Llwhch Gwin lifted, sending storm winds through the air once again as it lifted off, towards the western sun.



CHAPTER 21

Ku-Rah

New South Wales, Australia

The thinking machines changed shape yet again, morphing into aerial crafts that hovered over the inland swamps of the great lost continent. Xavian stood at the helm, with Lieutenant Cyphus, as they encountered more and more crocodile hybrids living in what were human homes. At each town, more crocodiles jumped towards the ships. Their teeth bore down on the nanoarmor of the few men and women that Xavian had left. Xavian and his crew fired a steady pulse of lasers, incinerating the beds of crocodiles before any more might strike.

“How many now?” Xavian asked.

“We’ve slaughtered nearly one-thousand crocodiles,” Cyphus answered.

“And their heads?” Xavian inquired.

“Stuck on poles, to warn others, just as you requested,” Cyphus assured him.

“Good,” Xavian said. “Crocodiles only respect the power of death. That may buy us a few days of peace. Keep the bodies. I want the men feasting on crocodile meat when we find them.”

“Respectfully, sir,” Cyphus said, “we’ve hunted for weeks. These creatures might have been all that survived.”

“If there are still any camps with humans, we must free them,” Xavian said. “We need the soldiers, and they deserve to die better than this. We can’t leave them in food farms.”

“Amen to that,” another soldier, standing by, declared.

“Ready another round,” Xavian ordered.

For hours, the hovering ships lingered, until the crocodiles grew still and not even a kangaroo stirred. The airborne fleet, surrounded by the dancing silver lights of the nanosphere, was too imposing a sight. Occasionally, Xavian saw a koala or other animal, unawakened, clinging to wild brush to avoid the great humming machine. Xavian saw black-browed albatrosses heading for the coasts. He saw the grandeur of what nature was, before mankind destroyed it. On the faces of his hunters, he saw echoes of the smiles that came upon him as a boy watching red-vented cockatoos in flight in the Philippines.

Only the faint cries reverberating over the swamp ferns signaled Xavian.

“Do you hear that?” he asked Cyphus.

Lieutenant Cyphus arched his ear. The cries, ever so faint, lifted with the air. “Yes,” he said, pointing south. “Cries. From over there!”

Xavian flicked his finger. His mother ship adjusted its course until it flew directly above giant fenced-in camps that held the half-emaciated hordes of the once humans. Most still bore the scars of pestilence, exposed as they were to the elements.

“The war,” one inmate cried. “Have we won?”

Xavian held off for a moment, allowing the starving man to savor the idea that such a feat was indeed possible. “No,” he said. “But we are still in the fight—if you’ll join us.”

Before Xavian finished another thought, the men and women stood and cheered. They raised their fists in unison to the air. Xavian raised his fist as well.

“You will eat crocodile tonight,” Xavian promised. “After you’ve rested, we will speak of what we know of this war and strategize.”

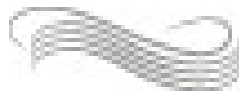
“For months, we’ve had nothing but words,” the inmate said. “We want action!”

The other prisoners cheered, faint as their starving cries were.

“I am Hunter General Xavian, Commander of the United Pacific Forces,” Xavian said. “Who are you?”

“Just a man,” the prisoner said. “King Croc took away everything else. But I am still that. I am a man.”

With that, the ships formed a perimeter, and the rescue phase began.



Gungsung Dor

Bear Mountain, Rockies, USA

Thraxis, in holographic form, uncoiled herself before The Blood Paw, at the foot of the great Rockies, rising to her greatest height.

“So, this is the home of our ally, the ambitious bear king?” she asked Yazrel, her attending rattlesnake. “How many snakes snuck into *Gungsung Dor*?”

“Three thousand soldiers,” Yazrel said. “Lying in wait for your order, my empress.”

“Not yet,” Thraxis said. “The mad bear may be a bother, but he clears the *rulku* like no other. For all his megalomania, he serves his purpose. Never

dispose of a tool that is still in working order.”

“My empress,” Yazrel said. “There is something you should know. Something our mountain spies have confirmed.”

“Has he struck against our northern sisters?” Thraxis asked.

“Not yet,” Yazrel said. “Azaz honors our treaty. But there is a terrible beast, part eagle, part lizard, that recently flew the skies over us. It approaches the West, searching for something. Our intel informs us that this creature, Adar Llwh Gwin, killed two bears and a bird. It seeks a crown, and not just any crown.”

The Blood Paw approached Thraxis, climbing down the mountain pass underneath the imposing stone structure of Bear Mountain. Thraxis looked back at Yazrel.

“Our spies tell us that the *rulku* made a crown of flame,” Yazrel said. “Something that controls nanotechnology, which allows its wearer to rule all the animals. Azaz is aware of this. He is away, hunting this creature that has killed some of his best soldiers. Our spies tell us that none other than The Night Eye sent it.”

“Let me see the creature,” Thraxis said.

The nanobots formed a picture for Thraxis’ eyes alone. The empress of all snakes saw the wingspan, the beak, the eyes. “Incredible,” she said, “but not invincible.”

Just then, Hulkul, the ranking colonel, approached.

“Empress,” he said, with a polite bow of the head. “We were not expecting your echo so far into the lands of our esteemed king and conqueror.”

“We received news,” Thraxis said. “Most unfortunate news. The *rulku* steel beasts have regained their power. The world of Man is not as weak as we supposed. I seek to make arrangements for battle. Yet, your esteemed king ignores my requests for communication. I came to see for myself if he was okay—if his lands were under his control.”

“Thank you for your concern, empress,” Hulkul said, trying to smile with his fangs. “I assure you that our king is as dominant as ever.”

“Funny that he wouldn’t answer my holographic message, then. I wonder,” Thraxis said, her hologram inching forward, “if he doesn’t have some other pressing matters to attend to.”

Hulkul, standing at eight feet, still looked up at Thraxis’ yellow eyes. “Nothing urgent,” he said. “I will inform my king of your visit at once. He will be in contact shortly.”

“Tell him that the matter is most time sensitive,” Thraxis said. “It would be a shame if he did anything to show that he does not value peace with his nearest

neighbors.”

“We hold our allegiance with the Amazonian empress in the highest regard,” Hulkul said. He growled at some of The Blood Paw. A complement of grizzly bears stepped forward. “As a token of our appreciation,” he said, “please allow us to escort your snake soldiers back to the border after, of course, they have enjoyed some man flesh.”

“Thank you, kind commander,” Thraxis said. “A feast for my snakes would be most welcome in these troubling times.”

With that, Thraxis’ hologram disappeared, and her soldier spies slithered to their meal.

Thraxis, in her temporary den in Mexico, turned to her rattlesnake and viper allies.

“Find out where the flying beast goes,” the empress ordered. “Create underground tunnels in those areas. We will strike with the element of surprise. That crown will be mine before I shed another skin.”



CHAPTER 22

Seh-Tolyn

Near the Ocean
Nunavut, Canada

Moon Shadow had the scent. She held onto it like her snout knew nothing other than the ragged remains of her onetime masters. The cold was everywhere, snow pounding upon snow, as she traversed the great glacial divide. The prints were unmistakable, but the scent was stronger still: strength mixed with desperation. There was something distinctly human about it. As she aged, a mother without her children, Moon Shadow wondered if these *rulku* were even worthy of the hunt. She gathered them in like puppies, but they snarled and fought her at every turn. Moon Shadow wondered if they truly knew the dangers of The Rockies that lie just beneath them. Azaz would take no prisoners, only slaves. And the cold would consume any that were not killed and eaten.

Still, part of Moon Shadow admired the courage of these interlopers in the natural world, these creatures that could never quite find a place, a home, in all the beauty that surrounded them. The *rulku* knew nothing but fighting. Perhaps that one virtue would keep them alive.

Moon Shadow ran with her wolf guard and Crimson Fang's coyotes. Each kept stride with the others, until the *rulku* were so near she could hear the cries of the women and children, cries like hers, when they first took away her pups.

A single man, with thunder in his hand, stood before Moon Shadow and the rest of her quarry. She barked at her wolf sentries. They slowed to a stalk, inching forward before the man, the one she trusted, the one called Brigand, fired thunder into the air.

"We are not as powerless as you think we are," Brigand said. "That is your only warning shot. If you try to attack us, we will remind you of why you feared us all these years."

"Foolish creature," Moon Shadow said, in a language the *rulku* could not understand, except by the urgency of tone. "Do you really think one stick of thunder might keep away the beasts that will hunt you shortly? Any human colony is an affront to Azaz. We keep you caged for your own protection, yet

you bite the hand of your master.”

Brigand recognized the name of Azaz, between the various growls, and gave some sign of understanding in the light of his eyes. Then, he said, “Turn back now, Moon Shadow. Lead your wolves and coyotes back to your own lands. Follow us no more. This is your final warning.”

Moon Shadow barked again at Crimson Fang and at her wolf sentries. They scaled back, retreating to the trees, forming a hidden perimeter around Brigand and his meager company. Moon Shadow looked to the edge of the woods.

“More wolves surround you than you know,” she said, pointing with her head. “Come back or face their wrath.”

Without hearing a word, Brigand understood the gesture. “We will be slaves no more,” he said. “You have your freedom. Now, we have ours.”

With that, Brigand aimed his laser rifle right between Moon Shadow’s eyes. His hand dithered on the trigger. Moon Shadow’s growl grew, until it became something of a command to her wolves, who readied themselves to lunge. Just then, there was a primordial growl, deep, thunderous enough to be heard through the distant perimeter of trees. Moon Shadow looked, only to see a ghost wolf from days gone by. There, in perfect, black fur, stood the very spirit of Sun Shadow, her lost mate, the father of her pups. The two made eye contact and held each other in the unspoken love of their shared stare. Moon Shadow barked, signaling her approach. Sun Shadow barked again, this time in warning. Moon Shadow pondered what his bark might signify. She had not heard such urgency unless there was mortal danger to her or her pups. But something in the cry spoke to her. It said, simply, *They must live*. Moon Shadow looked back at Brigand, but he was gone, away in the woods, only the ghosts of his tracks still visible. The smell of the *rulku* grew more faint along the evergreens. Moon Shadow turned again to Sun Shadow, but the specter was gone.

“Your orders, my queen?” Crimson Fang asked. “Shall we go for the kill?”

“No,” Moon Shadow said. “Let them go.”

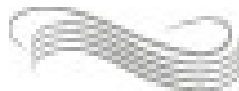
“But White Claw’s orders?” Crimson Fang argued.

“You heard mine,” Moon Shadow said. “That should be enough for you.”

“But my queen—”

“Don’t chase after the *rulku*. Only your death awaits you if you do.”

With those words, Moon Shadow looked up, only to see Snow Prophet circling the skies above her. In an instant, the great owl wings and endlessly piercing lightning-lit eyes were gone, lost in snow and cloud.



Ku-Rah

New South Wales, Australia

Two lines meandered along the infinite ocean. In one curved line, synchronous with the ebbing tide, stood King Croc, with his full complement of armed crocodiles, eels, and the few sharks that King Blu had authorized. On the other side, hovering over the entirety of sand and stone, were the thinking machines, makeshift elemental nanocraft now fully configured as flying ships. In the middle was Xavian and an entirely new crew of King Croc's fallen men, painted with the black soot of the camps over their eyes.

"Pay homage," King Croc's attending eels said, "to the great king of the southern continent. Surrender, and we will let you and half of your crew live."

Xavian ordered a warning shot. Lieutenant Cyphus complied. A laser cannon emitted a giant, thunderous wave of energy that parted the ocean, sinking half of the crocodiles and eels.

"We have a power greater than your crocodile god's," Xavian said to the host of sharks, eels, and crocodiles. "Give way, or we will kill you."

King Croc's eyes, yellow-green with specks of black, fell directly on the emaciated leader in front of him.

"How many you kill is irrelevant," King Croc said. "Too few of you will remain for the greater battle ahead. You told me your truth. You seek to depose The Golden Nightmare and free the greater continent. Let us make a barter, Hunter General, or you will lose the very humans you came to find."

Xavian thought on King Croc's words as Lieutenant Cyphus prepared fire. Xavian waved the lieutenant off. The lieutenant signaled with the flick of a hand for the rest of the fleet to stand down.

"What do you propose?" Xavian asked.

"One-third of your men stay as food for us," King Croc said. "The others leave, never to return. Australia, as you called our land, is ruled only by animal hybrids."

"Bold terms when we have the advantage," Xavian declared.

King Croc laughed, more with his eyes than with his fangs. "A true general sees the war where others see only the battle," he said. "In this battle, we will defeat you, at considerable cost. And I will most likely perish in the process. Still, we will win. But what of the war? Only if you strike a deal with me can you hope to have enough living soldiers to win Asia from Yu The Golden

Nightmare.”

“Is there no honor among predators?” Xavian asked.

King Croc laughed again, this time more with his fangs than with his eyes. “The Golden Nightmare is about to become the ruler of all Asia,” he said. “Your small band of men can only hold off the inevitable for so long. Besides, The Golden Nightmare is no emperor of mine. I owe more to King Blu than I do to animal lords who have done nothing for me or my people.”

“Then let me propose a deal that will work better for all of us,” Xavian said. “You let us pass, and we call a truce—for now. No more crocodiles die, but no more humans do either. You can hunt the seas for your food. In exchange, I will leave you thinking machines, ships that can secure your shores.”

King Croc arched his eyes. “How many?” he asked.

“I can only afford a few,” Xavian replied. “However, they can self-replicate. By the time we are in Beijing, you will have a small fleet of your own. In months, you will have enough ships to guard your shores. All it will cost you is a few easy lunches.”

King Croc’s eel advisers spoke to their liege in strange tongues. The crocodile commanders also spoke.

“Don’t take too long to decide,” Xavian called out. “All over the world, animal emperors are rising, laying their claims to lands of vast riches. Our last intel spoke of the rise of Azaz in the North, of Thraxis in the West, of The Night Eye and The Golden Nightmare, each within striking distance of your ocean isles. Will you be a true monarch, King Croc, or a temple god to be cast down by foreign forces?”

“I rule at the pleasure of King Blu,” King Croc said. “Let me consult with his oracles and see.”

A stale and quiet air sat between the two sides as King Croc spoke with a hologram without shape or scope. A moment later, the crocodile king turned back to the beleaguered hunter general.

“We have a deal—for now,” King Croc said. “King Blu says that it is important that you live, at least for the moment. Show my eels how to meld with the ship’s controls. Show me a replicating ship, and we will allow you open passage to the sea. Whatever King Blu decides after that point, not even our shark prophets can say.”

Lieutenant Cyphus and Xavian exchanged ambiguous glances. Lieutenant Cyphus shook his head.

“Never arm a madman, let alone a mad croc,” Cyphus said.

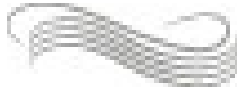
“He’s the only devil dealing with us right now,” Xavian replied. “Reprogram three of our ships. Make sure we delete any intel about us from the files.”

“If you’re sure,” Cyphus said, drawing out his words.

“Who’s sure of anything in war?” Xavian asked. “Act quickly. Before King Croc or his master changes his mind. King Croc is right about one thing: no one can tell the mind of King Blu in all of this.”

“And the rest of us?” a man behind Xavian asked. “What shall we do?”

“Rest up,” Xavian ordered. “The true war lies ahead of us.”



CHAPTER 23

Yvot-Sing

Beijing, China

Yu The Golden Nightmare had marched through all the provinces of China, his coterie of snow leopards, ibexes, tigers, kraits, and spider monkeys at his mighty side. Never before had a *rulku* warrior conquered so much of the mainland continent. Yet, as he marched upon Beijing, The Golden Nightmare knew that the blood of his animals would spill before he ascended the throne, taking his place as The Golden Emperor, undisputed ruler of what was once known as Asia Major.

“How many?” The Golden Nightmare asked as they descended from the Yanshan Mountains.

“Our Himalayan vultures and mountain owls have circled over the heart of the city,” Jiao, the Siberian tigress, said. “Where there were millions, there are only tens of thousands now. Most have fled when they heard of The Great March. We hunted and killed most who did not.”

“And weapons?” The Golden Nightmare asked.

“The killer nanoswarms have just penetrated the mountains,” Paihuai Zhe, a snow leopard general, said in a growl. “If we strike quickly, Emperor Panda, we can kill any dissenters before they can mobilize their steel beasts and their handheld thunder.”

The Golden Nightmare thought for a moment. “How many *rulku* are left?” he asked.

“In all of your kingdom?” Paihuai Zhe asked in reply. “Maybe a hundred

thousand, scattered between camps, the mountains, and the sea.”

“I hate to kill such an endangered group,” The Golden Nightmare said. “But the road to the golden throne is clear. We must kill them before they kill us. Send in the eagle hawks and owls with the toxins.”

“Will we not hurt our own?” Jiao asked.

“These are poisons made from the *rulku* plastics and pollution,” The Golden Nightmare said. “They are tailored for the *rulku*. Our own nanobots are programmed to protect us from them.”

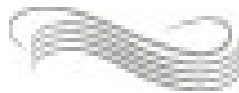
“Yes, my lord,” Jiao said.

“After the flight of birds, have the snow leopards and South China tigers herd the survivors on a path to the mountains,” The Golden Nightmare said to his snow leopard general. “Have the cobras, rats, and kraits positioned to strike at them and reduce the number. We can’t risk a mobilizing force opposing us.”

Paihuai Zhe nodded her great beige head. “By nightfall, the city will be yours,” she said.

“Have Fuchan, the venerable Orangutan translator, there to speak with and comfort the *rulku*,” The Golden Nightmare ordered. “We will switch places before the sun sets.”

Paihuai Zhe bowed and then growled out her emperor panda’s orders. The kraits and cobras positioned themselves. The snow leopards and South China tigers and even Asian black bears readied themselves for the assault. After all had assembled, The Golden Nightmare lifted up his battle cry, a banshee-like combination of a squeak and a roar. The legions mobilized, descending the mountain paths.



Klang Uktor

Congo, Africa

Hunter General Uzwali hung suspended from a wooden cage as Yorba bowed his head to Zulta, king of the African plains. Zulta stood with his herd in a mighty jungle palace, converted from the homes of corrupt *rulku* generals from ages past. There were trees and grass everywhere, even in the palace, along with a sculpted Colossus of the elephant ancestors standing in warning with giant ivory tusks. Seated with the great tattooed elephant king, in places of honors, were Kama and Slash, the great cat kings, and Earl The Equivocator, king of the African gray parrots.

“Great elephant king,” Yorba said. “We have driven back the last of the man beasts from the jungles. We have left the dead as effigies in the cities. We have overtaken everywhere but the deserts. Yet, this hunter general had something in her possession that concerns me: a weapon. It is a laser rifle that attracted new nanobots that made it operational.”

Zulta nodded his head, held up his trunk, and proclaimed, “You have done well, King Yorba. For your courage, I thank you. But tales come from all corners of the continent of weapons firing again. I have consulted Gray Eyes, the great prophet, and he tells me that there are new plagues of nanobots all over the plains and the jungles. The *rulku* mean to rise again, this time with their steel eagles and iron beasts. This we cannot allow.”

“I am glad we agree,” Yorba said, looking at the hanging cage. “We must eliminate any *rulku* we can before they are powerful enough to strike again.”

“No,” Zulta said. “We must not be the savages that they became. I have sent the gorillas and monkeys of the Congo in search of their weapon stashes. We will destroy their weapons and then keep the survivors in the deserts until all animals have had a say on the fate of the *rulku*.”

“You commanded *my* elite gorillas without my knowledge?” Yorba asked, drawing closer to the elephant king and his guard.

“Are they not the king’s to command?” Zulta asked.

Yorba turned again to the cage. “It was I who gave my blood to capture the *rulku* warrior priestess,” he said. “By the blood of my gorillas are you kept from harm’s way.”

“I have stampeded my share of *rulku* colonies along the river, as have my elephant herds,” Zulta responded. “We have fought into the jungles and stabbed the fiercest *rulku* warriors with our tusks. Do not speak to us of sacrifice.”

The elephants trumpeted in agreement with their king.

Yorba stood, solitary and surrounded before his liege. His eyes lashed out in a fire that his words only hinted at.

“Careful, great gorilla king,” Kama, the lion king, advised. “No one questions your valor. We are indebted to you for capturing this warrior priestess. But we have all bled in this war. No one kingdom of animals is above another.”

Yorba pouted but kept his words in, the anger mounting like the flies circling around his fur.

“Long have I counseled you, young gorilla lord,” Zulta said. “Yet, I sense you are still as full of fire as in the days I rescued you from *rulku* hunters before The Great Awakening. I sense you do not value my wisdom or my reign. Perhaps you wish to challenge for the crown?”

Earl The Equivocator, Slash, and Kama shot immediate, disbelieving glances

at the jungle king.

The elephants stamped and trumpeted. Yorba gazed up at his elephant lord with calculation. Yet, even he knew that this giant tattooed elephant lord was too massive for a gorilla to win over by brute strength.

“No, my king,” Yorba said. “You dishonor me by presuming a mutiny that is not in my heart. Even when I have disagreed with your love for the *rulku*, have I not fought for you? Have I not given you their top commander, the one who challenged me to a fight to the death? Yet, I begin to wonder if my apes would not be better served breaking away from their elephant keepers if you do indeed hold us in such low regard.”

“Then let us settle this as animals,” Zulta said. “We will say which way of dealing with the *rulku* is better. Each of us will face this Hunter General Uzwali in our own way. I will face her diplomatically to find out where further weapons might be hidden. You will face her in the jungle arena. If you kill her before I have found the last of the weapons stashes, you and your apes can have your freedom. You will get to be the king of the jungle as I rule over the plains. As king, you can do with the *rulku* in your territories as you choose.”

Yorba eyed the elephant king respectfully, for a moment wondering if he had underestimated how strong and wily Zulta truly was. No doubt this was a way of crushing a pesky rival in an unfair fight where Yorba wouldn't have his gorillas at his side. Yet, to be called out so directly challenged Yorba's sense of pride.

“We have a deal,” Yorba said. “On the condition that the *rulku* not receive any outside support from you or your subjects. Let this be a fair fight, King Zulta.”

“The fight will be the way of the *Ozu*; it will have the fairness of the jungle.

Only the top predator survives,” Zulta said.

“So be it,” Yorba said in agreement.

With that, Yorba turned his back on his king and walked off. He didn't walk long before Gray Eyes slithered closer to him. Yorba turned, only for Gray Eyes to catch his eyes in the snake's own.

“What do you want, snake oracle?” Yorba said. “Have you come to predict my doom?”

Gray Eyes laughed in an elongated hiss. “Far from it, ape lord,” Gray Eyes said. “I have come to tell you that you are battling for the wrong crown. Our sea snake spies tell us that Azaz The Grizzly God hunts a crown of greater value in the West. The Night Eye and their mystical warrior, and Thraxis, the anaconda empress, also join in the quest. This crown gives absolute power to its bearer. Yet, Zulta will not hunt it.”

Yorba looked into the snake's eyes, losing himself there. Even he could not tell if the blind seer snake was telling the truth.

“Do you see this crown atop my head, oracle?” Yorba asked.

Gray Eyes shook his head. “I see a mad rule none of us can escape if we do not stop the bear king from the object of his quest,” Gray Eyes said, plainly. “You are one of the few who can weaken him.”

Yorba laughed. “So, I am to die your pawn, is that it?” he asked.

“Better than at the hands of one *rulku*,” Gray Eyes said. “There, if you win, you beat back the threat to one continent. If you beat Azaz, you beat back the threat to the whole world. Which has greater glory? Which would a king choose?”

Yorba grew quiet and pensive.

“Think about it. If you enter that cage, it is already too late,” Gray Eyes said.

With those words, Gray Eyes slithered away. Yorba stared into the sky, up towards the constellation once known as The Bear. Yorba wondered how he would measure up to the father of all bears.



CHAPTER 24

Seerus-Ungalore

London, England

The ravens and crows circled around each other as if a black sun, each picking up a cackle where the other left off. Before them, they saw the Earth as if it were a cauldron half spilled over. The animals moved as if miniature pawns over the continents, and The Night Eye could see each animal king or queen as they burrowed in their dens or fended off the strengthening *rulku* threat. Still, the great All-Seeing Night Eye could only see so far. The crown escaped detection, protected as it was by Methuselah and her plants. There was only a general sense of a power in the West.

“The Mad Bear marches quickly,” Mother Raven said to the ravens, crows, and kites of The Night Eye. “And now The Snake Queen and the Ape King follow, strategizing ways to outsmart the others. Are you sure Adar Llwh Gwin is up to the task?”

“It will take a bird’s speed and a bear’s might, but Adar Llwh Gwin has shown himself to be a formidable warrior,” the ravens answered. “Yet, in this rivalry of kings, he may need a further ally. Perhaps it is time to call upon our spies to rise to the occasion.”

“Well urged,” the kites cackled. “It is time to call upon our bear assassin. Is Hulkul ready? Does he know what he has to do to become king of the Americas?”

“Azaz approaches the West before the next full moon,” another chorus of The Night Eye crows cackled. “Hulkul assures us that he will be ready.”

“So, too, did our snake assassin, Vykra,” Mother Raven said. “And yet, the nanobot poison flows through the air like venom-infused wasps, ready to sting. She failed, and now the *rulku* grow strong. Even in this fallen London, crowds of defiant *rulku* assemble.”

“Send Groth The Impaler to deal with them,” the ravens replied. “Hang them along the walls of their own beloved Tower of London.”

“Yes, but I implore you,” another chorus of ravens chattered. “Do not underestimate Thraxis, the empress of the Amazon. She is a cunning queen and a

shrewd contriver. She plots with her snakes. I see masses of them spreading, lying in wait until the time is right.”

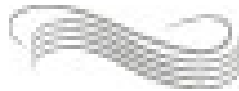
“Tell Adar Llwh Gwin to send out our latest nanobots,” a murder of crows cackled. “We shall weaken the signal between Thraxis and her army. Alone, she won’t be able to conquer our greatest warrior.”

“And what of the menacing King Croc in Australia, White Claw in the North, and The Golden Nightmare and his great march to become the emperor of all Asia? Our enemies are everywhere, and they grow more powerful.”

“Once the crown is ours, we can deal with them,” the ravens cried in unison. “For now, make more nanobots. We will weaken their connections with their armies when the time is right.”

“So, let it be, sisters,” The Night Eye cackled collectively. “All that shows in the cauldron shall be ours. All shall bow down before The All-Seeing Night Eye.”

With that, the ravens swarmed, seeing swath after swath of fertile earth unfolding in their grand vision of conquest.



Animus

Nunavut, Canada

White Claw, seated upon his throne of ice, stared out at the oncoming winter storm. The sky became deathly white, like a glacier that even the ocean could not budge. Moon Shadow approached quietly, staring after him.

“The blizzard will soon be upon us,” White Claw said. “The snows will keep us from Brigand and the *rulku* as they regain their power. Azaz marches west, near our borders, searching endlessly for something, and Thraxis is on his heels. I must set out shortly to stop two monarchs. This was our one chance to stop another war on our borders, yet my spies tell me that you let the *rulku* go. I summoned you here to ask one question: why?”

“*You* summoned *me*?” Moon Shadow said. “Perhaps you forget, king of the North, that ours is an alliance. I have every right to rule over my wolves as you do your bears.”

“Yet, your rash decisions affect all of us,” White Claw said. “We are *Animus*, or have you forgotten? We are the example of peaceful coexistence among all animals, of a way to keep the *rulku* from extinction, of a way to preserve The Great Balance in the natural order for this transition of power. And now we have

a new enemy. And why? Because you saw the spirit of your mate lingering somewhere on the horizon?”

Moon Shadow growled and nearly lunged. Her body shook violently as she said, “Don’t speak of my mate. You have no idea what a true leader he was.”

“And I’m not? Is that it?” White Claw asked. “You presume to order me, though you tell me not to order you?” White Claw leaned in with his long neck anchored by his massive skull and protruding black-tipped snout. “I wonder if you’re reasoning clearly.”

“Me? It was your seer, Snow Prophet, who flew between me and the *rulku*. I thought it was a sign from *Animus*.”

“Snow Prophet does what he will. He does not speak for me. Because you would not risk any of your wolves, I must now lose some of my bears of the North to fight and bring the *rulku* back from our borders. I must then hunt Azaz before he strikes us with the full might of his rested army.”

Moon Shadow eased her stance, but added, “You’re a fool to do so. I knew the look in Sun Shadow’s eyes. It was the look of death, the look I saw the day the *rulku* took our pups. If you attack, it will be the death of your bears.”

“So, an illusion guides you, is that it? Did you see any caches of weapons? Did you see any nanobots swarming, ready to strike? Yet, I am the fool? You could have ended this war before another began. Who was the fool there?”

“I saw only death,” Moon Shadow said, “as I have so many times before. Sun Shadow was there and warned me. If you do not believe me, speak to your own seer, if you can find him. I am done explaining myself to you.”

White Claw shook his head. “I never thought that I would see the day when the mightiest of wolves would cower in the face of death,” he said. “But a coward you are, and your cowardice stains all of *Animus* with its stench of shame.”

Moon Shadow growled. Her fangs readied.

White Claw examined her, wondering if the queen of the wolves would really strike. In a second, he found his answer. The wolf queen plunged her deep and mighty fangs into his right front paw, releasing a spout of blood. White Claw hurled Moon Shadow back against the ice wall of his cave. Moon Shadow yelped and growled in one massive cry. All at once, the wolves and Crimson Fang and his coyotes charged in, assaulting the bear king. The grizzly bears, black bears, and polar bears of the North came running on all fours. Moon Shadow took a bite of White Claw’s neck, once more drawing blood. She saw the look of death in White Claw’s eyes and regained her composure, backing off with her hind legs.

“Now you see death,” Moon Shadow said. “If my fangs could do such

damage, polar bear king, think of what the magic of the *rulku* and the madness of Azaz will do. Call my wisdom cowardice then, White Claw, when you die as foolishly as you have reigned.”

The bears stood up, readying themselves for the attack, but Moon Shadow gave one guttural growl that held them at bay.

“From now on, bears are not welcome in this kingdom,” Moon Shadow said. “Leave on your quest and go in peace. But do not look to return to these lands. This is wolf country.”

The bears turned to their king, awaiting his summons.

“We shall come and go as we like,” White Claw said, “to finish what these cowardly wolves and coyotes could not. But first, let us give our wolf queen here something to remember us by. Attack! Kill any who stand in your way!”

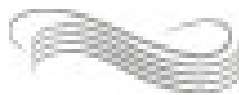
The wolves grouped up, assaulting in packs, sinking in their fangs and holding on. Yet, a few blows from the bears turned their growling to whelping. The bears looked at their king. White Claw, still dripping blood, stood up, glowering down at Moon Shadow. He then struck the wolf queen with his full might, knocking her senseless. The bears struck like their master, leaving many wolves dead or lame. Crimson Fang fought valiantly, but even he perished under the polar bear king’s mighty blows. Other wolves and coyotes retreated out into the advancing storm.

Moon Shadow stirred, swiping weakly with her paws. She pulled herself over some of the broken bodies of her whimpering wolves, protecting her own until the end.

White Claw leaned over her and growled out, “*Animus* is mine. When we return from our campaign, you and your wolves had better be gone, or we will kill the last of you. Consider this a command from your rightful king.”

White Claw stood up at his full height, growling in summons to his bears: “Assemble our army. We will meet with the *rulku* tonight. Once we subdue them, we will return them to their cages.”

The bears growled along with their leader. Their growl was picked up by others until all of *Animus* heard their roar.



CHAPTER 25

Yvot-Sing

From Beijing, China To The Sea

The last remaining *rulku* of Beijing coughed and fell upon the dust as Yu The Golden Nightmare marched victoriously on his conquest to the sea. The plague of the nanobots burned into the *rulku* skins, leaving them with ashen bumps that blistered on their arms, faces, and legs until The Great *Rulku* Plague took the life from them. Eagle hawks circled with vultures, crying out whenever a hiding pocket of *rulku* hunters scurried. Kraits bit. Snow leopards and Asian black bears moved in, mauling the survivors before delivering the killing bites.

The Golden Nightmare stood bedecked in nanoarmor of white-gold light that covered his giant body, even his face, except for his nose and his eyes. Yu walked triumphantly upon the corpses of the last of the *rulku* opposition. Kneeling before him was Hunter General Zhang, a trim, muscular Chinese fighter scarred by the talons of endless enemies. She spat at The Golden Nightmare's feet in one last act of defiance. Jiao, outraged, leaped at the hunter general for so blatant an offense. Her mighty tigress fangs were open and at the ready. Just as suddenly, Jiao's orange, black, and white body went unnaturally limp, like the *rulku* at The Golden Nightmare's feet. Zhang's poison had taken its toll. Zhang threw the body at the feet of The Golden Nightmare.

"Most unwise beast," Yu said. "How many seasons have you fought us, and what do you bring upon your people but death?" The Golden Nightmare lifted Zhang up with one panda arm and looked the hunter general in the eye. "And why?"

"Because humans have dignity," General Zhang said, spitting in the emperor's face. "We are not creatures meant to be poisoned like rats."

"Were we any less?" Yu asked.

"You're beasts!" Zhang insisted.

"And yet who is it that spits at her emperor rather than reassuring her people?" Yu replied. "The great Hunter General Zhang, the slayer of spider monkeys, the terror of tigers."

Zhang fought to free herself from the panda's deathly clutch. She wriggled for

air. The Golden Nightmare held his paw firm.

“Not so great, it would seem,” The Golden Nightmare said. “If this is your idea of dignity, then you and your soldiers deserve only death.”

The Golden Nightmare choked Hunter General Zhang for all to see before snapping her neck. He tossed her body to the ground, stepping on the fresh cadaver as he made his decree.

“This,” The Golden Nightmare declared, “is the Year of the Panda Bear, the first of a new calendar that will celebrate all of animal kind. Today, with the death of this *rulku* general, I declare an end to the war in Asia. I thank all of you, from the mighty kraits to the marching South China tigers, who have had a hand in shaping the new Animals’ Republic of Asia. All of you shall share in the treasure of the new *Yvot-Sing*, once we honor our fallen soldiers,” The Golden Nightmare said, briefly touching Jiao’s dead fur in respect.

The Golden Nightmare nodded towards Paihuai Zhe. Zhe growled until the spider monkeys tossed golden animal tokens to all the attendant animals.

“Whoever brings this token of The Golden Nightmare will partake in The Grand Feast in three days’ time, to celebrate the crowning of your new emperor,” Yu declared.

Snow leopards growled and bowed. Kraits hissed. Eagles cried. Yet, Yu The Golden Nightmare could not take his eyes from his own general, the great leopard Paihuai Zhe. He stepped by her side, waving and roaring to the people, then whispering to her, “Why aren’t you celebrating? Zhang is dead.”

“My liege,” Paihuai Zhe said. “A fleet approaches from the lost land. The phantom fleet bearing Hunter General Xavian returns, fully armed, with thousands more *rulku*.”

“So, the battle rages on,” The Golden Nightmare whispered back. “Contact King Blu. Ask for his support.”

“We have, my emperor,” Paihuai Zhe said. “King Blu fails to respond. The river dolphins have moved farther off. Even the sharks are no longer near our shores.”

When the roar of the crowd died down, The Golden Nightmare declared to his army, “I have just been informed that we have the first challenge to our throne. A band of *rulku* sails our way. Once they take to the land, drop the toxins upon them. Let us kill them as they stagger from their ships and amass their bodies for eating in our glorious feast!”

Paihuai Zhe growled for the bears, snakes, leopards, tigers, and birds to form ranks by the docks. “Spread yourselves between the ocean and the city. Attack only when they are upon you. Seabirds,” Paihuai Zhe declared, “you are the first to drop the toxins.”

In a sudden thrust, a wave the size of a tsunami pushed towards the heart of the ancient empire. In the main ship, Hunter General Xavian called to his men. “Hovering mode,” he ordered through the nanosphere. “Look and see your fallen brothers, pock-marked, left to suffer a tortuous death. For their sake, cry havoc! Kill every beast in your path!”

Paihuai Zhe braced herself and her snow leopards. The South China tigers and Asian black bears readied themselves, as did the kraits. Seabirds and eagle hawks flew first, dropping all kinds of toxic nanotechnology in streams of red and gold over the hovering ships of silver. The toxins simply evaporated in the energy-laden nanosphere that surrounded the ships as the nanobots shifted into airplanes and tanks.

“Roll over every animal in our way. Leave none alive,” Lieutenant Cyphus called.

“Ready the laser cannons,” Hunter General Xavian ordered. “Teach these beasts the meaning of fear.”

The aerial crew fired, incinerating the Asian black bears that formed the first line of defense. Within seconds, five master bears, swords and armor in hand, stood eviscerated, the smoky ash of their vanishing bodies the only sign that there was once life. Next, the tigers fell, growling and clawing at an enemy they could never quite reach. The kraits slithered with intent. Yet, they moved too slowly for the next round of laser fire. Seconds later, entire legions of skillfully deployed snakes vanished into the ashen wind.

The tanks came next, crunching any bodies that didn’t incinerate at once underneath their massive wheels. Spotting the tanks, Paihuai Zhe ordered for any remaining leopards and tigers to retreat. She growled all the way back, as The Golden Nightmare stood, sharply ordering his praetorian guard of panda bears to attack.

“My emperor,” Paihuai Zhe said, “you’re not safe here. The *rulku* have weapons we’ve never seen. They’ll be in the heart of the city within minutes. You must flee!”

Yu The Golden Nightmare smacked the snow leopard across the face. “How dare you flee in the face of our greatest conquest!” he yelled. “Did Jiao die for nothing? We will overtake their ships, even if it means losing every last bear! Advance!”

The Golden Nightmare led the bears in a charge, sending his nanobots to disable the sphere around a grounded tank. With one thrust of his paw, The Golden Nightmare sent the nanotoxins in. The soldiers clawed their faces, writhing in poisoned agony. The Golden Nightmare mounted the tank. So powerful was his touch that in one order, his nanobots dismantled the *rulku*

weapon. He pointed to the neighboring tanks. The Golden Nightmare's stream of specialized nanobots disabled their protective spheres. The panda guards did as their master did. Soon, a small militia of bears formed by the tanks, destroying them. The bears next attacked the advancing ships overtaking Beijing, grounding a few. Still, there was a line of hovering tanks that looked directly down upon them.

"Hello, emperor," Lieutenant Cyphus said. "I have a message from General Zhang. Would you like to hear it?"

Lieutenant Cyphus let out a loud cry. The cry reverberated among the tank commanders until they picked up the cry and began their assault. The Golden Nightmare and his bears seized their nanobot spears, killing a few ship pilots. Directly behind them, advancing over the emperor himself, were the master fleet and their commanding general, Xavian. Jumping from the mother ships were entire legions of Aussie fighters, some half-human, half-animal, ready for the fight.

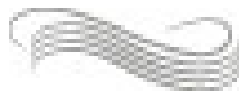
"Your orders, sir?" one panda cried out.

"Full retreat," The Golden Nightmare said under his breath.

"Emperor?" the panda asked, uncertain of his ears.

"You heard me," The Golden Nightmare cried. "Head to the shelter of the mountains."

Defeated, The Golden Nightmare, the ruler of all Asia, fled the very city where he had received his most majestic crown. Lieutenant Cyphus was in full pursuit until Hunter General Xavian called through the nanosphere, "Leave him. Yu's mountain animals outnumber us ten to one. Secure the city so The Golden Nightmare and his forces can't reenter. Bury the dead. Make this place look civilized again. And send out the word with the battle cry of freedom: we have dethroned Asia's emperor!"



CHAPTER 26

No Rul Ozu

Inyo County, California

Methuselah summoned her six sisters with great gusts of smoke and bursts of pollen. The message took days and nights to move from one plant community to another, from the cacti of the Southwest to the maple trees of middle America to the algae of the farthest ocean waters. But always the message was the same: *The crown is in danger. The mobiles advance.* Through the power of the plant's nanosphere, holograms of the seven sisters emerged. One, Jomon Sugi, a mighty Cryptomeria with a thick, hollow trunk, stood on what was once called Yakushima Island in Japan. Another, the great King Clone, was a creosote bush colony in the heart of the Mojave Desert. The third sister, Old Tjikko, was a mighty Norway spruce with a single, thick trunk and a coat of needles reaching high into the sky. Pando was the fourth sister, a white-trunked quaking aspen with roots reaching back millennia in North America. The fifth sister was Lama, a Tibetan Cypress, her fat trunk and flush green foliage anchoring her to ancient soil. And the last sister was somewhat of a mystery. The plants called her The Mystic—part coral, part plant, located down from The Great Barrier Reef off Australia's coasts.

"What do you see, brilliant sister?" Jomon Sugi asked.

"Sisters and Fates," Methuselah said. "For millennia have we seen these mobiles destroying us and our world, the sacred *Pu-Ya*, in our tongue, with their blood splattered everywhere and their endless digging at our roots. They poison the air and the water. They breed hostility wherever they go. The time to act has come."

"Yet, our saplings tell us that you mentor more than one," Old Tjikko said. "Why?"

"My time with you is short, sisters. In another thousand years, I will be gone. I must plant a new seed in the hearts of the mobiles, a teacher who shall guide them when I cannot. They must learn the history of what we were so as to build a history of what they might become."

"Without us, they are nothing," Pando said. "Yet, they strike at my roots, too."

Soon, like you, my sister, I shall die. And I ask myself: what have they done to earn our knowledge?"

"Nurvlyn, step forward. Join in the nanosphere. Let my sisters see you," Methuselah called.

Nurvlyn, part animal, part plant, part man, stood forward, wrapped in the vines of nature, with pointed ears and branch-like antlers, yet still a hominid.

"They evolve," Lama said. "They gain wisdom."

"Soon, Nurvlyn will join us, becoming my prophet and holy messenger to the mobiles, my sisters, before I once again become All That Is. His apprentice, the other mobile, has already started his journey to the others. He evolves as Nurvlyn does, to be born anew."

"Yet, the mobiles conspire to steal our crown," The Mystic said. "I see many: a bear, a beast of unknown origin, even a snake, searching through our rocks and deserts. What shall we do then?"

"I have spoken with the other ancient one, my counterpart in the sea, King Blu," Methuselah said. "He has found a way to speak our language. He assures me that we and our sisters and brothers have his protection, but we must let the crown go."

"To the oceans?" The Mystic asked.

"No," Methuselah said. "King Blu has no need of the crown. It is for weaker-minded mobiles. His consciousness expands and will one day join ours. He has looked into the time after time, and he sees only one path that will allow The Great Balance of the natural world to be preserved. We must let the crown choose among the rivals. Yet, King Blu is a beast with secrets upon secrets. I am here to ask you, sisters, if you see the same."

The sisters turned to the oldest among them, The Mystic, who meditated deeply. "I am contacting the Plant Goddess, Mother Earth, to see what she sees," The Mystic decreed.

The sister plants chanted in union before The Mystic said, "Thank you for your energy, my sisters. The vision becomes clear. Let me place it before you."

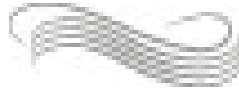
The Seven Sisters and Nurvlyn beheld an image of rivals fighting over The Stone of Destiny, a glacial volcano in the Cascade Range, Mount Rainier, where Mother Earth stood ready to send her creative and destructive fires.

"This," The Mystic said, "will be a battle of the beasts. Whoever Mother Earth chooses, that mobile will be crowned there."

"So be it," Methuselah said. "Let us send Nurvlyn with The Crown Of Fire. Let us sing a song of prophecy to welcome the mobiles when they come. Perhaps, if they attune themselves to nature, they may hear our warning in the winds."

Together, the sisters sang an ancient song:

“Whoever claims the earth as their own will lie beneath it. Whoever wishes to rule above others will one day kneel. Whoever wears the crown will be consumed by its purging fire. Through that animal, The Great Balance of Man, Animal, Plant, and Sea will be restored.”



Seerus-Ungalore

London, England

Groth The Impaler stood with his militia before the half-fallen Tower Of London. He marched before his wolves, wolverines, eagles, and bears, including Blood Scar, his top commander, up to the captive *rulku*. There they stood, their laser rifles disarmed, their heads bowed down, awaiting their fate.

“Do you know the history of this place among the *rulku*?” Groth asked Blood Scar.

“No, General,” Blood Scar responded.

“And how about the eagles? Do you know?” Groth asked.

“Only that we saw *rulku* go in and not leave,” one eagle, Red Talon, answered. “Our ancestors used to tell us to avoid this tower at all costs.”

“They were right,” Groth said. “To know the enemy is to know their history. It shows how they became what they are. Tell us, *rulku* warriors, how many of your kind died in this tower?”

Groth walked over to the line of men who kneeled, held in check by the wolverines, wolves, and bears surrounding them. The magnificent scale of the palisade of The White Tower, dwarfing even the mightiest wolverine, loomed its jaded shadow over them. Groth paced and added, “This tower was built by William the Conqueror, one of the greatest *rulku* warriors in prehistory. It held captives and prisoners of royal blood, even Richard II. Once, too long ago to remember, processions from Westminster Abbey, as they called it, crowned their kings and queens. Where are your kings and queens now, *rulku*? Where are your armories? Where are your mighty fortifications? Now, look at this national treasure: dilapidated and falling, an uneasy symbol of an uneasy time.”

“And what mighty towers have you built?” one of the fallen hunters asked. “What have you done but quest for blood, you who would lecture us?”

A wolverine guard approached, swiping the man's face with his claws. Fresh wounds opened up, and fresh blood watered the soil.

Groth held up his paw. The wolverine returned to the ranks, standing at attention. "You have a will to fight," Groth said. "I admire that in one so beaten. You, I know. I've seen you fighting in the fields of battle before." Groth stood face to face with the fallen man, examining his multifaceted scars. "I gave you that scar and that one," he said, dragging a claw along the man's face. "It's Hunter General Fvoris, isn't it? So, you came to this, your people's last stand. You would have made a fine wolverine. It's a pity you're human."

Fvoris took what little energy he had to spit on Groth. The wolverine bared his teeth, battering the man's skull with his paws, until lacerations wove themselves around every ounce of Fvoris' face.

"Still on the losing end of battle," Groth said in observation. "Perhaps you've heard my nickname or seen my handiwork. Have you ever heard the tale, maybe in your off hours away from the battlefield, of Little Dracula? Of the Impaler who kills men's souls?" Groth leaned in, promising, "Know that I shall impale you and all of your men on stakes that rise so high they rival The White Tower. Poetic justice, isn't it, given how many lost their lives in your once great Tower Of London, as you call these ruins?"

Hunter General Fvoris was barely conscious. He looked up through the blood and dirt that stained his face and said, "If you do so, you light a fire today that will serve as a guiding sun for generations to come."

Groth the Impaler laughed. "A bold claim," he said. "Famous last words, I suppose. A time-honored tradition among your kind before you meet death, is it not?" Groth leaned in again and said, "The trouble is this: for famous last words to endure the ages, someone still has to be alive to hear them."

Groth turned to Blood Scar and raised his paw. "Impale every last one," he ordered, "starting with their leader. This little revolution is over, just like the fire that your blood will smother. I will make certain that you live long enough to see it die."

Just then, a flight of crows emerged. Ravens, kites, and crows joined in, until swirling at the height of The Tower was The All-Seeing Night Eye.

"General Groth," The Night Eye said.

Groth bowed his head, as did Blood Scar and the assembled armies.

"What is it, queen of all animals?" Groth asked.

"Our spies have news of forces crossing the Thames," The Night Eye said, half in chorus, half in cackle.

"They wouldn't dare," Groth replied.

"Thousands of forces, some civilians, with sticks of thunder and marching

steel beasts.”

“What? I thought King Blu rendered their steel beasts useless.”

“A rogue *rulku*—a former prisoner—found a way to undo the magic of King Blu,” The Night Eye said. “Form your troops. Make sure they hold the city.”

“And what of the captives?” Groth asked.

“Leave them to us,” The Night Eye said. “Go now. Protect The Tower at all costs.”

“Yes, my kings and queens,” Groth said. “Form the battalions,” the wolverine general ordered his animals. “Let none get through the city. Forward march!”

Groth and Blood Scar led the army forward as swiftly as the bears, wolves, and wolverines could move.

“Drop the toxins first,” Groth ordered the eagles overhead. “Let them squirm as they approach.”

Fvoris and the other fallen men and women gazed up at The Night Eye. “Do you have the gall to beg mercy from me after what you’ve done to my world?” The Night Eye asked.

The ravens, kites, crows, and blackbirds shrieked like banshees. Their brother and sister birds rose from trees and grasses, blotting out the light of the sky. Swiftly, the flock descended, pecking at eyes, lips, knuckles, at any exposed skin.

“Hold firm,” Fvoris ordered. “Cover up. Just a little while longer. Stay strong!”

The fallen hunters covered what they could with their manacled hands and feet, bracing themselves for pecks, claws, and assaults that could tear the flesh from their bones. Moments later, a massive explosion engulfed The White Tower. Old sacks of gunpowder detonated with the flammable manuscripts and records from ancient days. The Tower became a wall of flame, even to its brattices, which lit up like misshapen golden torches.

Looking on, Fvoris said, “The little bugger forgot about that part of history, didn’t he? Rise. Remember our mission. Assassinate The Night Eye!”

In the moment of shock that slowed the attacking ravens, Fvoris led his men and women into The Tower, into the inferno itself. Planted laser guns, bows, arrows, and quivers lined the inner walls. Fvoris and his militia grabbed what they could and headed out. The fire flushed outwards, swallowing some of the attacking ravens. Before the shock and shrieks subsided, Fvoris and his soldiers targeted the many crows, ravens, and kites swarming above The Tower.

“Fire at will,” Fvoris ordered. “Kill as many of The Night Eye as you can!”

Ravens of The Night Eye swirled in massive circles, dodging the shots and arrows as long as they could. Yet, the fire burned them from one direction,

upsetting the harmonious undulations of The Night Eye. Fvoris and his soldiers, bloody as they were, shot at the unburnt crows and ravens, killing ten, then twenty, of the majestic birds. The Night Eye flew for their lives, fleeing The Tower.

“Keep firing,” Fvoris ordered. “The Night Eye still lives!” Three more kites fell, and then The Night Eye was out of range.

Fvoris pointed out the returning legions and said, “Turn your fire. Wipe out that power-hungry wolverine and anything that crawls!”

At this point, Groth saw his army hemmed in on two sides. Fvoris and his men took out the flanking bears and wolves. Bears fell to the massive fire. Wolves were the first to run.

“Hold the lines,” Blood Scar yelled. “Cowards!”

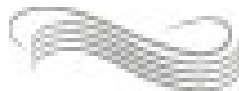
Groth the Impaler made his way through the fire to Blood Scar. Groth grabbed his arm. “We’re losing too many,” the general said. He pointed at the first two wolverine divisions. “They are as skillful as any creature on Earth in single combat. But look at those steel beasts. They mow them down.”

“What are your orders, sir?” Blood Scar asked.

“Flee the city. Follow and protect the kings and queens,” Groth said. “We will deal with these revolutionaries later.”

Fvoris and his men kept the assault up on one side while the militia from the North kept up the attack on the other. Still, Groth, Blood Scar, and their top legionnaires made it past the Thames, to the outskirts of the city and beyond.

Before night fell, Fvoris said, “Send this through the nanosphere. Let Hunter General Xavian know that we are, at last, worthy of joining his great company.”



CHAPTER 27

Klang Uktor

Congo, Africa

Zulta stood with a crown of human bone upon his head, tattoos of the crescent moon, sun, and stars upon his body, the heralded king greeting his subjects. His herd formed a protective circle around his throne bed, a small, forested compartment of stone with an assortment of barks, leafy stalks, twigs, and a water hole. Next to the royal elephant herd were two guard lions, Rya and Zhi; and Gray Eyes, the boa, who served as both king's adviser and seer. The lions, without Kama; Slash and his panthers; even Earl The Equivocator and his parrots also lay in attendance. Gorillas stood at the entrances. Zulta blasted his command with his trunk. The gorillas guided the two fighters, Yorba and Hunter General Uzwali, to an enclosure of expansive marula trees whose leafy branches were woven together.

"Look high, brother, when your time of need comes," one gorilla whispered to Yorba.

Zulta blasted another greeting with his mighty trunk. The royal herd joined him before he turned to the nanobots to speak in *Osine*. "Greetings, masters of the jungles and of the African plains. I stand before you as I have long stood, as your king. Long have I decided which pride of lions is to rule and which family of monkeys is in the right and in the wrong. Yet, there is one among you, the mighty general Yorba, who seeks to rule. The ape king insists that his blood makes our lands safe. And so, we have issued a challenge. I have spoken to the *rulku* warrior myself. If Yorba can deal with one clever *rulku* warrior, their general and queen, Uzwali, better than me, disposing of her, we shall give him the freedom to rule his apes as he sees fit. However, if the wily Uzwali finds a way to survive or kill the great gorilla king, then the apes will subject themselves again to the wisdom of the elephants."

Zulta took a breath before adding, "That being said, we cannot in good conscience let so great a leader as Yorba die unheralded, away from battle. Nor can we risk losing so valuable a captive as Uzwali, who may help us broker peace with the *rulku*. Thus, it is my kingly decree that this need not be a fight to

the death. If either Uzwali or Yorba submit to their opponent, the battle will be over.”

The apes pounded their chests and the surrounding tree trunks in approval. “Keep the fighting to the webbed tree cage,” Zulta ordered. “Leave the circling nanoswarms be, as they shall translate your sounds and actions to the crowd, in the interest of a fair fight. Kama, the esteemed lion king, will arbitrate this match. Kama will be there only to declare a winner. Kama’s ruling shall stand as the final say in the matter. Do the combatants have any questions?”

Yorba shook his head, declaring *no* in *Osine*. Uzwali, speaking Swahili, said *no* as well, which the nanobots translated into *Osine*.

“Do the combatants understand the rules and agree to the terms?” Zulta asked.

Yes, each said, relying on nanotechnology to trumpet their answers in *Osine* to the crowd.

“Then, at Kama’s command, you may begin. May the best beast win!” Zulta said, trumpeting to the crowd one last time.

Yorba pounded his chest while Uzwali crouched, until the giant, unending hiss of Kama, translated as *Fight*, took to the nanosphere.

Immediately, Yorba reached for Uzwali, seeking to break her in two. Uzwali, adroit as she was, climbed the webbed trees, hiding in their foliage. Yorba growled, calling for her to show herself. The nanobots caught his words and translated to the crowd. Yorba climbed and grabbed at the branches, dismantling them. The pictures of Uzwali from the nanosphere were still a cloud of kinetic confusion. Bits of yellow energy orbs obscured the picture. Yorba pulled a key branch. Uzwali dropped. When Uzwali fell, she clearly brandished a long, many-bladed spear in her hands. Yorba charged, but the spear fended him off. Yorba grabbed the serrated edges of the spear, only to cut open his fingers.

“A *rulku* weapon,” Yorba called to the crowd.

Lions and tigers hissed. Apes called out violently. The elephants trumpeted their approval, cheering loudly to cover the jeers.

One of Zulta’s herd, his daughter, Yanta, asked, “Why is the fight not fair, Father?”

“In the jungle, all is fair,” Zulta said. “You must learn this when it is your time to rule.”

Unthinkably, Uzwali gained the upper hand against the mountain gorilla. She used the spear with dexterity, cutting Yorba’s sides before he could retreat to the cage trunks. The apes hollered too loudly to be ignored as their leader’s blood spilled onto the jungle soil. At that moment, the words of the gorilla guard came back to Yorba. He climbed up, searching through the foliage. Again, the nanobots could only project images of marula leaves and bits of yellow energy

orbs. When Yorba fell, he held a *rulku* laser pistol in his hand.

“Let’s see how you like your *rulku* magic now,” he yelled.

The nanosphere caught his words, translating them to the crowd. The gathered animals cheered almost in unison. Apes in attendance chanted loudly, giving their strength to their king.

Yorba played with the device, figuring out how to fire it, as Uzwali pressed her blade ever closer to his neck. Yorba dodged until finally, he let the pistol fit his ape fingers like a glove. He pressed the trigger, striking Uzwali in the shoulder. Uzwali fell, dropping her weapon. Yorba advanced. The ape king took hold of the spear and broke it in three. His blood still matted the ground. Uzwali jumped back up, retreating towards the cage trunks. Before she could climb, Yorba shot a knee and then an elbow. The burns danced upon her skin as Uzwali fell again. Yorba advanced once more. Uzwali looked up to see a giant gorilla holding the pistol that might very well end her life.

“Why do you not submit?” Yorba asked. “What trickery is this?”

Zulta signaled for the nanosphere feed to be shut down. Kama came forward and hissed, *It is not over. She has not submitted.*

That was the last the audience heard.

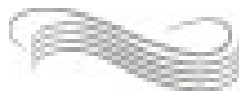
Yorba felt himself growing weak. He looked down at the lion king. “Even you, mighty hunter, betray me with a lie?” he asked.

Kama said, “In the jungle, it is the smart who survive, not the foolish or the battle-happy.”

Yorba pointed his gun, readying his final shot.

“Wait, King Yorba,” Uzwali pleaded. “I am sorry to fight without honor, but I must protect my people from your rule. Zulta spoke with me first. He planted a spear that one of our conquered *rulku* armies carried. He laced its blades with poison. You were dead from the moment you first touched the spear. Zulta fixed it with me so that my people might not be rendered extinct. We were both dead from the moment we entered this cage. I’m sorry. I did what I had to do for my people to survive. At least now, I can die with an iota of honor, however miniscule that honor may be.”

Yorba shook his head, calling out, “It’s fixed. Zulta lies!” His own nanobots helped translate to those of the other animals until they understood. With that, King Yorba shot Uzwali fatally, collapsing to the ground himself.



Animus

Nunavut, Canada

There was a land, *Finkulki*, that wolves had whispered about for eons before the word found its way into the *Osine* language. It was a veritable hunting ground, a paradise, where the ancestors of the wolves, the wild wolves of the plains, would invite the best hunters for one last hunt before the dying wolves joined with All That Is. Before Moon Shadow was captured, before the *rulku* forced her into fights with wild dogs for their coin, she had a memory as a pup. She remembered her father, Wind Stalker, dripping blood when he returned from hunting rabbits owned by the *rulku*. The humans had shot him, and he was in his last moments. His mighty fangs opened gently, as his yellow eyes rolled in his head to look at his darling pup. Wind Stalker told Moon Shadow not to weep, that death was always just the beginning of the last great hunt. He spoke of what he saw, wolf packs, free of *rulku*, running along fields flushed with hares. Wind Stalker said that he was on his way to the last grand feast in the land no wolf may ever return from. With that, Wind Stalker died. Moon Shadow now sensed the embracing light of the same soft fields holding her as she recovered from White Claw's mighty blows.

As she drifted in and out from her vision of the last great hunt, Moon Shadow heard indecipherable noises.

"Is everyone all right?" she asked, unable to get up or look around at the other wolves who came to her aid.

"Rest now," she heard a familiar voice say. It was high, nasally, full of a lot of "s" sounds. Without raising her head, Moon Shadow knew that this was the voice of Sky Death.

"Come to pick the bones?" Moon Shadow asked. "A bit early, aren't you?" "Can you dare ask that of me when I was there to guide you to the first great meeting of *Animus*?" Sky Death asked. "Tell us: What happened? White Claw and his celebration of polar bears have marched off without saying a word."

"We fought, viciously, over the fate of the *rulku*," Moon Shadow said. "I saw a sign from Snow Prophet: a vision of my mate, Sun Shadow, from the land no wolf returns from. Only, Sun Shadow *did* return. I thought it was a sign to let this pack of *rulku* go."

"It was a sign," Snow Prophet said, flapping his considerable wings to let Moon Shadow know of his presence. "Soon, I must fly again to warn White Claw, if I am not too late. The *rulku* are leading him into a trap. They are hungry and are not particular about their food. Why will you beasts not listen to the wisdom of Mother Earth? She speaks to me, and I warned you that nothing good would come of this battle with this particular band of *rulku*. To be a prophet

whose darkest visions come true because no one will listen—that may be the worst fate of all.”

“But Sun Shadow,” Moon Shadow said. “He seemed so real. He spoke to me.”

“He appeared from the *Finkulki*,” Snow Prophet said. “Because his love was stronger than death. Mother Earth allowed him to give you strength, for this, the time ahead. He is with you always. Only you cannot see him.”

“I have so much I would say to him,” Moon Shadow said. “I would apologize for losing our pups.”

“You may yet see Sun Shadow before the end of your days, should you stop talking and let Sky Vulture treat your wounds,” Snow Prophet said.

“How many...,” Moon Shadow started to ask again, but she lost the strength.

“Too many,” Snow Prophet said. “Three wolves died. Young hunters. Spring Warrior, Rock Spirit, and Blood Eye are all dead. The great coyote king Crimson Fang and several of his coyotes are also dead. You senior soldiers recover, as do you.”

“Tell them I’m sorry,” Moon Shadow said.

“They rest, as should you,” Snow Prophet said. “Let Sky Death help you. Sleep. I shall return only when the great owl gods allow it. Right now, your own spirit animals wish to speak to you.”

A giant swooping of wings scooping up the air fell upon Moon Shadow’s fur like the breath of God. With that, she fell to sleep once more. She saw Sun Shadow again, standing in the distance. He stood by a Shadow Monster that threw everything into its great, protruding mouth. *You must stand strong for what is Ozu if animal kind is to survive*, his voice said. Moon Shadow saw the Shadow Monster’s face transform in the light from White Claw’s to Azaz’s. Then Moon Shadow saw fire devouring the land, consuming the Shadow Monster until there was a land that bloomed again. She saw herself running again, this time as the undisputed leader of the animals of The Great White North.

“Is it possible without you, my love?” Moon Shadow asked the spirit animal.

“All is possible when you choose life over death,” Sun Shadow said. “Be careful. The Fire Wolf, the hunter of souls, stalks you now. Yet, I will protect you from him as long as I can. Until it is time for all three of us to hunt again as a pack.”

“I long for that time,” Moon Shadow said.

“Long for life first,” Sun Shadow answered. “You have so much living to do first, mother of my pups.”

At those words, Moon Shadow fell into a fresh, healing sleep. Sky Death dressed her wounds.



Animus

Nunavut, Canada

No animal could say when the monoliths first appeared on land or where they came from. Songbirds like blue jays and magpies were the first to report it to the bears that served as sentries of the woods. Squirrels climbed up and down the stone structures, with hardly a clue. Natural philosophers like the elder ravens of the Appalachian woods flew in, along with barn owls, to speculate on what the monolith was. They concluded that it was the magic of the *rulku*, similar to the monolith they found in the former Washington, D.C. Still, the monoliths emitted no laser pulses. Like those of the sea, they stood fashioned of solid rock, with no hint of incendiaries inside. Entire herds of buffalo or clans of grizzly bears could not move a single one.

Ultimately, the animals of *Animus* called upon their seer, Snow Prophet, for some clue as to the purpose of the strange monoliths.

“We have reports of these monoliths all throughout the northern continent,” Thunder Killer said. “Some reports come to us from as far away as Europe, Asia, and Africa. Our ravens tell us it’s the work of the *rulku*. Yet, the monoliths never do anything but sit there. We would like to consult the ancestors of the birds in the sky. What do you make of them, wise oracle?”

Snow Prophet flapped his wings and said, “I cannot tell you everything. The great bird gods of the sky forbid me to do so. Besides, I must warn White Claw.”

“Can you tell us nothing before you go?” Thunder Killer asked.

Snow Prophet closed his eyes, adding that “What I know is that this is a peace-keeping weapon unlike anything this earth has seen. It comes not from the *rulku* but from King Blu. The *rulku* no longer have the power to perform such magic.”

The magpies instantly fell to chattering, along with the jays and the other songbirds. Mice squeaked, and squirrels whined. Each animal seemed to have a theory that needed to be shared at the exact same moment.

“Silence,” Thunder Killer said, flapping his mighty eagle wings. “Let Snow Prophet finish. We must know what must be done to stop this weapon.”

In a trance, Snow Prophet paced and flapped his white-crested wing tips, saying: “Nothing, king of the eagles. There is nothing that we can do against such power as this. The monoliths are held in place by a nanotechnology unlike

anything we've seen before, tiny bots that extend over the earth and the sea, with one mission: protect these structures at all costs. Their orders come directly from King Blu."

"Maybe it's not a weapon," Pale Ghost said. "Maybe it's there to protect us."

"The ways of King Blu are beyond our knowing," Snow Prophet said. "My advice to you, King Eagle, and to all land animals, is to keep in King Blu's good graces. Reach out to him. Seek his permission before transgressing his ocean. Show respect for all creatures of the sea. This will put us a notch above the killer *rulku*, who plundered and polluted his waters without remorse."

"Thank you, Master Oracle," Thunder Killer said. "We will honor any restrictions King Blu places upon his waters."

"Wise choice, King Eagle," Snow Prophet said, flying off. "Maybe there is some hope for *Animus* after all."



CHAPTER 28

Pols Dedans

Near the Ocean
Nunavut, Canada

The nanobots finished replicating energy houses against the snow. Most resembled tiny igloos up against a great Nordic longhouse as if in the *rulku* Age of Exploration. Still, Brigand looked contentedly upon the new structures and the energy field that protected them. At last, there might be some shelter from the blizzard and the endless cold.

Scanning the horizon, one of Brigand's survivors, Ruth the Lawless, called out, "There's a man coming in with the snow. At least, I think it's a man. It could be a beast."

"Our scouts found bear tracks in the distance," Brigand said. "Get your laser rifles and prepare yourselves. A fight may be walking our way."

Brigand, Ruth, and a host of rugged and emaciated survivors crouched, holding whatever rifle, stone, or blade was within immediate reach. Slowly, the black shadow against the snow grew larger, but no less strange. It formed into what looked like a haggard combination of vines, a coat of animal fur, muscle, and man.

"What is it?" Ruth asked.

Brigand squinted. He looked again, to be sure. "Don't shoot," he said. "This man was one of my best hunters. He led us here."

Silence settled in with the matting snow.

"Rigel Fowler," Brigand called out. "Is that you? In the flesh? I thought you were a ghost. I was sure you were dead!"

"I was," Fowler said.

His voice had an otherworldly quality to it. Nature adorned his garb in the form of all kinds of colorful vines, thick twigs, and snaking branches.

"Are you okay?" Brigand asked.

"I am reborn," Fowler said. "I have journeyed far to the West for the counsel of the greatest oracle on land. A vision came to me. I have seen this war and our place in it. That is why I have returned."

Brigand kept quiet. He studied the eyes of the man. It was Fowler, all right. Yet, he talked nothing like the soldier of old.

"I think the cold is affecting your senses," Brigand said. "Come into our longhouse, out of the cold. Tell us what you must say once you have rested. A blizzard can try a man like no other storm."

Fowler stood by Brigand. The man-plant-beast still had an imposing figure, that of a hunter, stocky, yet resilient in its carefully packed muscles and sloping haunches. Yet, the plants and garb looked more like that of a witch doctor than that of a warrior.

"There isn't time," Fowler said. "A celebration of polar bears marches upon you, led by the fearsome White Claw. The Polar Bear King sees you as a threat to his territory and means to finish what the wolf queen would not do. He means to slaughter you and put your people back in his sanctuary. White Claw plans to kill any survivors who refuse to comply with his orders."

"But why?" Brigand asked. "We left him in peace."

"Don't you remember how you first approached him, armed in ships, ready for war?" Fowler asked. "The Polar Bear King remembers. He means to kill you and put an end to the War in the North."

"In a blizzard?" Brigand asked. "Even a polar bear won't get far."

"He and his militia will be here before nightfall," Fowler said. "It took everything I had to keep ahead of them."

Brigand studied the medicine man carefully. Fowler was leaner. He had the look of a runner after a marathon had worn away his knees and ankles.

"You know something," Brigand said. "We wouldn't survive this without you. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

Fowler shook his head. "White Claw is only half the threat. Condors and hawks have told Azaz The Grizzly King of your escape. He sends a legion of his finest warriors to eradicate you. Do exactly as I say, and you may live."

Brigand, Ruth, and the militia of nearly one-hundred men, women, and children looked at one another. Brigand nodded.

"I saw you gathering weapons as I approached. Bring me what laser weapons you have," Fowler said. "You won't need them."

"What?" Ruth asked. "I think you've been out in the cold too long."

"I don't have time to explain every part of my plan to you," Fowler said. "Any weapons you have with bullets you can keep. Any blades or spears would be helpful as a last resort. As for your nanobot-powered weapons you took from *Animus*, they won't work for you. In fact, that's how White Claw tracked you. That," Fowler said, reaching around and pulling off a tiny microchip in Brigand's hair, "and this, planted by the king of the eagles."

Brigand took the chip and crushed it. “Do as he says,” Brigand ordered some of his foot hunters. “Get the weapons. Now.”

Brigand’s men hurried through the igloo structures, gathering any nano-bot-charged weapons as quickly as the snow would allow. They brought the weapons to Fowler.

“Place the laser weapons before me,” Fowler ordered.

Brigand’s foot soldiers did so. They stepped back.

“Find your remaining guns and blades and arm yourselves,” Fowler said. “King White Claw and his soldiers will be here within moments. Right now, they stalk behind the snowbanks, avoiding detection as they inch closer. They mean for this to be a slaughter.”

“Get everyone a gun and a blade,” Brigand ordered.

The snow buried Fowler’s long bangs. Still, he sat in a perfect meditative circle.

“Form two militias,” Fowler advised. “Azaz’s grizzlies move against you from the south while White Claw approaches from the east.”

“Move. Now,” Brigand ordered. “Seek cover. Don’t make it too easy for them.”

Fowler looked at Brigand. “Where’s the hope, Hunter General?” he asked.

“Lost in these blizzard winds,” Brigand muttered.

“There is always hope, even in the strongest of storms,” Fowler said.

“Hope often arrives too late for my liking,” Brigand said. “I believe in this,” he said, holding up his rifle.

By this time, the heaving, frozen breaths of the approaching polar bears were audible. Even the rampant plowing of their paws against the snow sounded slow, measured, methodical. Brigand signaled his hunters to brace themselves. The bears saw the lines. A loud, guttural growl, deeper and more resonant than the rest, broke out.

“They’ve detected us. Charge—before they can fully assemble,” White Claw ordered his bears.

“But my king,” a small polar bear, Tiny Paw, barely older than a cub, said. “Snow Prophet circles overhead. It’s an omen!”

“Move quickly!” White Claw said. “No owl prophecies can save the *rulku* now!”

The polar bears became a mass of white and black against the hardening snow. They moved like a rounded battering ram towards the human encampment. The snow still fell in ropy sheets of white. The bears overtook the snow, grounding it into pulp as they maneuvered closer.

Just then, Fowler used his magic to revitalize the nanobots from the old,

disabled weapons. They reworked the frigid metals into a circular amplifier within moments. The great circle was hollow at the center, holding a tremendous energetic flame. The fiery ball of light grew into a bigger sphere, cracking with bits of lightning that veered in all directions.

Seeing the mini sun, the bears hurried their pace, as if the element of a sudden attack were still their best bet. Fowler, talking to the nanobots through his mind, ordered the amplifier to send out its energy currents. Suddenly, thick waves of lightning pulsed towards the bears, knocking the entire first legion to the ground in a scattered array of ten to twelve bolts. Tiny Paw's body was among the dead.

"To the flanks," White Claw ordered. "Avoid the wizard and his *rukku* magic!"

The infantry of bears quickly formed small lines stretching out further. They attacked hunters from the sides. Screams from men being mauled—their faces, arms, and legs being torn and dispatched to the white earth below—haunted the snowy sky. Using what energy he had left, Fowler telecommunicated with the nanobots. He redirected the amplifier to send short, consistent bursts towards the lines. Several bears fell, dead, in the middle of their assaults.

"Prepare yourselves," Fowler called to the militia. "White Claw ascends." The massive white boulder of a head and its black-tipped snout appeared above the snowbanks. White Claw withstood one bolt of electricity and called out to any retreating bears, "Hold strong, brothers and sisters! The *rukku* weapon can only send out isolated blasts every so often. Head for the center. Quickly!" Legions of polar bears flooded towards the center. Some dove for Fowler, but the electric shield surrounding Fowler and the amplifier were too much. The bears fell dead, piling up at the entrance of the camp. Other bear soldiers went to the sides. Bullets peppered the snow, as did random bursts of blood once the bullets found their targets. Some hunters fought woman-to-bear, ending the battle with a few well-placed thrusts of their serrated spears. Others fell to the mighty swiping paws, crushed underneath a mauling assault.

Just then, a loud growl came from the south. Another legion of fresh grizzly bears, black bears, and brown bears, headed by Vronkyl, Azaz's greatest general, ran at a full trot. Even in the snow, their ranks and formations were greater than those of the northern armies. They also had more warriors, including the dreaded Blood Paw, the most elite of their warriors, the very ones who gave Azaz his personal guards.

Fowler redirected a massive energy current to Vronkyl's legions. The bears were more regimented, more closely compacted. The blast spread them farther out. Fowler didn't hesitate. He sent two more blasts their way, knocking down and killing as many of The Blood Paw as he could before he looked up. Fowler saw the bloody fangs of White Claw, pushing with all his armed might through

the energy shield protecting the wizard.

“Only one *rulku* could have devised this,” White Claw said in *Osine*. “I can smell him on you. So, Nurvlyn betrays us. It’s exactly as we feared. Well, strange wizard. You will die in his place.”

Fowler’s eyes emitted a green glow. This time, plants that the snow should have killed emerged, with giant, thorny vines, from the icy depths of soil.

“We weren’t the ones hiding, polar bear king,” Fowler said. “They were.”

The plants emerged in whiplike vines and massive thorns, wrapping around White Claw’s legs and front paws. The massive king of the polar bears, armored as he was, was no match. He wielded his mace with fury, but to no avail. The vines became as thick as branches, holding him in place.

Fowler arose, taking out a golden, serrated spear. It held bits of fur from each of his earlier conquests. Fowler cut a patch of fur from around White Claw’s heart. He pinned it to the spear and then, turning around, in one graceful thrust, stabbed White Claw in the belly, head, and heart. The bear toppled down, writhing in the endless snow. The thirty or so bears left in White Claw’s legion came running away from the *rulku*, to his defense.

“Protect the king,” one young warrior, Olsu, called out. “The king has fallen!”

Fowler held his spear high, preparing for the killing blow. Yet, he felt the wisdom of Methuselah flow through him. The ice vines weakened, dropping the king’s body.

“Now is not your time,” Fowler said to White Claw. “You must learn how to be a true king first, my brother.”

“Brothers? Only if I am the Cain to your Able, as your ancient legend says.” The flickering light in White Claw’s eyes betrayed his confusion as the polar bears growled at Fowler and dragged the king away.

Fowler turned his attention to the next matter at hand, Vronkyl and his legion of penetrating grizzly bears. Vronkyl had formed three guerilla militias smattered across the snowbanks. The bears’ nanotechnology, which they were still just learning to master, formed white camouflage against the blizzard. The bears waited until Fowler’s amplifier waned in energy for a moment and then sent small contingency troops in. Brigand’s fighters grew tired and frozen in the snow. The bears started mauling the defenses of the makeshift settlement. Fowler, wearied from battle, managed to re-strategize. He used the weapon to fire at rocks and snowy boulders, building up the walls separating Vronkyl’s troops from the lines. Fowler then spoke with the nanobots, activating protective shields around the mauled men, a task that took enormous energy from him.

“Kill the wizard,” Stone Mauler, a black bear Blood Paw lieutenant, ordered three of his bears.

The Blood Paw marched forward. The red, bloody tattoo clearly aligning the snouts of The Blood Paw created a second form of camouflage, matching the bear and human blood lining the snow drifts. Fowler concentrated. Lightning from the amplifier struck The Blood Paw bears dead. Stone Mauler, angling for a good attack strategy, hid behind a snowbank once the lightning struck.

“He’s too powerful,” a brown bear soldier said. “The *rulku* magic is alive and well.”

“This is no *rulku* magic,” Stone Mauler said.

Fowler bent down, praying to the earth. In a moment, Stone Mauler received his confirmation. Snows reformed, shifting in giant white winds, until they became a giant icy oak with endless vines. Vines swirled around the ice oak like serpents. The bears, unaccustomed to such magic, stood perfectly still.

“Don’t just stand there,” Vronkyl ordered. “Attack!”

No sooner than the battle growl came from the great grizzly’s mouth than the serpentine ice vines stabbed their way through the bears. The towering vines lifted even the mightiest grizzlies until the whole apparition became a giant Tree of Woe. Dying bears cried out their last as their impaled bodies became dank and limp. Vronkyl looked around. His bears aimed to gnaw through the ice. The Tree of Woe just froze the bears’ jaws and then stabbed them through with another vine. Seeing this, the remaining grizzlies, black bears, and brown bears looked at Stone Mauler. Stone Mauler, in turn, looked at Vronkyl.

“We lose too many bears, my lord,” Stone Mauler said. “What are your orders?”

Vronkyl pictured Azaz’s face the moment he would tell him of the loss. Yet, he saw the bears before him and the futility of their fight. Perhaps he could again curry favor by assisting their master with the crown.

“Retreat,” Vronkyl said. “Head for the mountains. I will follow—after I kill the wizard.”

“Yes, my lord,” Stone Mauler said. He rose to his limbs, emitting a giant growl amplified by his nanobots. The cry resonated, shaking the camp.

The free bears fought the descending snow, running as quickly and agilely as they could through the blanketing blizzard. Within moments, the snow obscured their view. Fowler called upon the men to check the fallen. Fowler got up, circling around, only to see the third largest bear, after Azaz and White Claw, he had ever seen, staring him down.

The Tree of Woe reached for the grizzly commander, but Vronkyl grabbed the vines and snapped them. Bears fell down, some with a few breaths and drops of blood still left in their cascading bodies.

“It’s just you and me, wizard,” Vronkyl said in *Osine*. “I know that you speak

the common tongue. I remember what you did to my king. Now, you will wear the same scars.”

Vronkyl’s metal-plated paw struck Fowler, crashing through the energy shield that was the wizard’s greatest aid. Fowler fell into the snow, and the mauling began. The bear general slashed at Fowler’s neck and face before Fowler’s eyes again grew yellow. Lightning filled them. Vronkyl stood in shock for a moment. Then, before Vronkyl could land a killing blow, his nanobots radiated little bursts of lightning, as if short circuiting. The nanobots reached for themselves, seeking to preserve the bond that held Vronkyl’s armor secure. In seeking to save their own lives, the nanobots lost concern for their host. The electrical shocks and shrinking armor knocked Vronkyl to the snow. With as much natural power as his paws could muster, Vronkyl cast off the armor that bound him.

“A scar for a scar,” Fowler said, swiping his snout with a blade.

Vronkyl growled, but without his armor or his defenses, he knew death when he saw it. The grizzly general turned and ran after the other bears, towards the mountains, without his armor.

“Are you okay?” Brigand asked Fowler. He extended his arm, helping his former hunter buddy from the snow.

“I am alive,” Fowler said, “if that answers your question. I must bind my wounds with natural herbs. First, let your hunters build up this amplifier to form a protective shield around the camp. The plants will grow to make you undetectable to the bears’ mountain strongholds.”

“I will give you my best men and women for the task,” Brigand said.

“And I will send out a message: we are the first party to successfully repel both the forces of *Animus* and those of *Azaz*. Let the bears’ shame echo through the nanosphere. Let other surviving humans see that there is hope.”



CHAPTER 29

No Rul Ozu

Inyo County, California

Hulkul waited at the appointed precipice, sitting like a sentry against time and the wind. He saw nothing. There was no sign of this dragon beast, this Adar Llwh Gwin, anywhere in the sparsely vegetated rock of the desert. He couldn't understand why his master would call him here. Yet, Azaz's orders were clear. The flying abomination headed this way. The crown must be near, even if the warmth of its regal flame was not yet felt. Another giant grizzly, Shamul, stood sentry on the other end of the dead rock formations. Hulkul had to be quick. He asked his nanobots to contact another nanosphere, letting them put lenses on his eyes so that no one else could see who was on the other end of his transmission. Hulkul mentioned the code in a dull whisper, too soft to be carried by the fickle desert winds.

"What is it?" several ravens of The Night Eye asked at once.

"We're here," Hulkul said. "I am reporting as ordered. I stand sentry. Azaz eats now, preparing for the great fight."

"Adar Llwh Gwin is very near," The Night Eye said in chorus. "He will do most of the work. You need only deliver the poison the birds gave you to Azaz. We see many things. If your master ascends to the throne, untold bloodshed will befall the world. His death is most important."

"My kingdom is most important," Hulkul said. "You can rule over whatever you like, but I shall ascend to become king of the bears. You shall leave me be. That was the deal."

"We remember, and we agree to your terms," The Night Eye said. "Don't worry. We shall reward you with the North American territory. A special palace in The Rockies will bear your name."

"I should hope so," Hulkul said. "I'm putting myself at considerable risk here. No bear has ever defeated Azaz in battle."

"All the more reason for you to become a legend," The Night Eye said. "Adar Llwh Gwin's orders are explicit. You are to be given the final blow. For millennia, bears will sing of you as the great father bear who saved them from

misfortune. Now go. Deliver the poison.”

“It’s too early,” Hulkul argued. “Azaz will get suspicious.”

The Night Eye cackled until it became something of a laugh. “Adar Llwh Gwin is already there,” The Night Eye said. “Feel the wind currents upon your fur.”

Hulkul felt the undulating currents and replied, “I will do as you say.”

The transmission ended. Hulkul ordered his nanobots to form armor around him, to prepare for battle. He went to a small pool of fresh rainwater and dropped the poison in. Nanotoxins held upon the surface like fidgeting water skeeters before trickling beneath. The deed done, Hulkul climbed down the rock formations to the main camp, nearly half a mile away. The most massive grizzly bear Man had ever seen sat as a hulking mass, devouring *rulku* flesh. His chewing, ripping sinew from flesh, drowned out even the flapping sound that kept growing louder with each flicker of the sun.

“My king of kings,” Hulkul called. “It’s time. The great dragon bird approaches.”

“Always when the eating is at its best,” Azaz said.

The great bear king rose, taking a few last bites. He ordered his nanobots to adorn him with the best metal armor they might muster. Some formed the great scourge of Azaz. Azaz put the protective energy shield around them to its full strength.

“We attack together,” Azaz said. “Mine will be the first blow.”

“Understood, my lord,” Hulkul said.

Azaz held Hulkul’s eyes for a moment. Hulkul wondered if Azaz knew of the betrayal, if he were looking into the heart of the bear, through his animal soul. Azaz simply said, “Today is not my day to die. Make sure it’s not yours.”

Hulkul nodded. He gulped. “Shall I summon Shamul?”

Azaz nodded.

Hulkul let out a fierce, guttural growl, shaking the sands before him. He expected to see his fellow sentry run to his side. Instead, Hulkul felt the thunderous winds biting into his fur. As Azaz and Hulkul ascended, Hulkul watched Azaz approach the poisoned puddle. Azaz passed it by. Hulkul panicked. His master always had a drink before battle. But the nearness of Adar Llwh Gwin set every bear on edge. Hulkul wondered if his plan to usurp the throne was already over. Still, the water glowed after Azaz passed. Hulkul saw the sparks of a few of the nanobots in Azaz’s armor. The poison was not for Azaz, Hulkul realized, but for his armor. A settled feeling fell upon the treacherous bear as he saw himself sitting on the grand throne. Hulkul wondered if The Night Eye truly could see the future. He wondered if they saw him taking

The Crown Of Fire for himself, as he fully intended to do once Azaz was out of the way. Hulkul imagined himself ordering the slaughter of every raven and crow to make sure none might usurp his power.

Just then, reality awoke Hulkul from his reveries. The wind grew unbearably strong. He could feel electricity dancing in the wind currents. Moments later, the largest land creature he had ever seen, perhaps as big as King Zulta, the great African elephant, if not bigger still, landed only a yard away from them. The creature's massive wings consisted of endless rows of metal talons that served as spears. Lightning shot through the wind every time the massive creature flapped its enormous wings. The spreading of the gargantuan wings alone blocked out the sunlight from above. At the moment the wings contracted, Hulkul saw the reason for Shamul's silence. The massive she-bear was dead, her head feet away from the rest of her massive body. Shamul's blood spilled starkly against the thirsty white sands.

Azaz took in the sight. He ascended to his limbs, to full height, at least eight feet tall. Though Azaz was one of the largest beasts Hulkul had ever seen, even he looked small compared to the monstrosity in front of him.

"I thought dragons were just a *rulku* myth," Hulkul said.

"Stay focused," Azaz said to Hulkul. He turned to Adar Llwh Gwin and roared, "You're no dragon and no Adar Llwh Gwin, are you? You're just an eagle in monster's armor. And you will die miserably. I will think of Raldaw and Shamul when I crush your head and beak beneath my hind paw."

"Azaz, I presume," Adar Llwh Gwin said. "This is one kill I've been looking forward to."

Azaz growled from his belly with anger and intent. The great bear readied himself, standing at full height with his scourge and armor ready to go. Adar Llwh Gwin flapped his wings. Electrical currents flew at Azaz and Hulkul, but both bears blocked them with their energetic shields. Adar Llwh Gwin opened his beak. Steady, serrated currents of fire flowed forth. Azaz braced himself, falling to a knee. The fire struck Hulkul, who fell back. The nanosphere put out the flames. Adar Llwh Gwin then unloosed his metallic feathers, sending currents of them at Azaz and Hulkul. Azaz conjured a shield with his nanobots and protected himself from the blows that could inexplicably penetrate his armor.

Stepping back, Azaz realized the reason why. His armor was malfunctioning. The nanobots electrified but then short-circuited. Azaz called to Hulkul, "Step forward. Use your armor. Mine is of no use. I will attack when we get closer."

Hulkul stood unresponsive for a moment. He watched as Azaz's nanobots retreated from the king's body. Azaz's armor fell as the nanobots returned to

their original form in a desperate act of self-preservation. Hulkul ran towards Azaz with a nanorobotic mace of his own. Adar Llwh Gwin approached, sending a fresh volley of serrated feather spears Azaz's way. The spears cut into Azaz, who now stood in his natural form. Even Azaz's mace fell away.

The moment Hulkul approached, Azaz saw the fury in the bear's eyes. Azaz braced himself for Hulkul's blow.

"Too long have I stood in your shadow," Hulkul said, wielding his mace. "And why? I will be the king you never could be."

Hulkul struck Azaz repeatedly. Azaz bloodied and fell just as Adar Llwh Gwin approached. The creature shot further spears at point blank range. Azaz wore an armor of spears embedded in his bloody fur and skin as Adar Llwh Gwin took hold of the grizzly god by the neck. Adar Llwh Gwin went to lift Azaz, but the giant grizzly was too heavy and still too powerful. Hulkul struck Azaz with his mace, which Azaz caught. Azaz wrapped the metal of the mace deep into Hulkul's throat. Azaz repositioned Hulkul to use the bear as a shield against the volleys of Adar Llwh Gwin. Hulkul struggled against his master, but the larger bear's strength was too much. Within moments, Hulkul was unconscious.

"Even my brother betrays me," Azaz said. "What is the matter, Adar Llwh Gwin? Afraid you cannot kill me on your own? To be a king, one must kill a king. Let's see how well you do now."

The giant creature flew towards Azaz, unleashing as many of its spears as it could. Azaz used Hulkul's body as a shield. Through *Osine*, Azaz used Hulkul's code and connected with the nanobots armoring Hulkul. Seeing one host dead, the nanobots quickly turned to the other. They surrounded Azaz's body, removing the spears while Adar Llwh Gwin sent more Azaz's way. Hulkul's armor became Azaz's, as did his mace.

Adar Llwh Gwin approached. Before Azaz could fight the great lizard bird off, Adar Llwh Gwin picked the great grizzly king up and threw him against the desert rock. Azaz regained his footing. He shook his head. Never before had the great grizzly king ever been manhandled in such a way. Adar Llwh Gwin came and threw Azaz two more times before the bird dragon looked at the tip of his wings. They were more than sharp enough to cut the grizzly king's throat. Azaz felt his consciousness wavering, yet he knew that this was to be the battle of his life. The inglorious bear god also knew that Hulkul's power to disable his king's armor came from somewhere. Azaz looked around, seeing the glittering metal gliding along the surface of a nearby pool. Azaz grabbed his fallen armor.

He fought his way to the pool. Adar Llwh Gwin, lumbering along like a massive thunder bird of old, followed. The beast's very steps made the earth

beneath its talons quake.

Within seconds, Adar Llwh Gwin put its talons upon Azaz's neck, readying for the final blow. Azaz put his armor on Adar Llwh Gwin, dragging the monstrosity over the contaminated pool. The nanobots gliding there acted quickly, flying after Azaz's nanobots. Azaz's nanobots crawled into the armored body of Adar Llwh Gwin, and the assassin nanobots followed. Adar Llwh Gwin went to slice Azaz's throat but found that it couldn't move its arms. The dragon bird went to unleash all the remaining feather spears it had, but it could not command the metallic body to comply. Instead, the eagle piloting the great mythical beast sat trapped as Azaz pounded and stomped the body of the flying beast to ruin. At last, Azaz came upon the head of the animal, where the eagle in command sat. Azaz pried open the plastic and metal holding the eagle inside and grabbed the eagle by its neck. Just as Azaz was about to kill the eagle with one twist of its neck, Hulkul got to his feet. Hulkul shook his head, fighting to regain full consciousness, but the image in front of him was enough to stir him to attack. Hulkul tackled Azaz with every last ounce of power, and the eagle flew off, seeking out a bristlecone pine among the patches.

"I made you strong. You betray me and your own kind—and for what?" Azaz asked, as the two bears wrestled.

"The crown," Hulkul said, struggling against his master. "Always, the crown."

The reference to *The Mystical Crown Of Fire* stirred something in Azaz. The grizzly king regained his footing. His forepaws dug into Hulkul's neck. With Hulkul's armor now his own, Azaz quickly reached and strangled Hulkul. The lesser bear, without his nanobot enhancements, could not fight his master on equal ground. Azaz quickly broke Hulkul's neck and tossed the massive grizzly traitor to the desert sands to die.

"The crown is mine and mine alone," Azaz said. "For always, I am Azaz, king of kings!"

The grizzly king let up a great, bloody roar that shook the leaves of the bristlecone pines in the distance. Bloodied as he was, Azaz raced towards the eagle. The wounded eagle lifted off but not before Azaz grabbed its bloody leg. The eagle pecked and clawed with fury, seeking to escape, but Azaz pulled the weary eagle down to the ground. There, Azaz placed his hind paw upon the neck of the eagle and stepped down. The eagle thrashed around, fighting the immense paw of the grizzly.

"Tell me what you know," Azaz said, "and I will make this less painful for you."

"The crown is not here," the eagle said in *Osine*. "You are the king of nothing but these dead sands."

“Let these dead sands include you,” Azaz said.

With his mighty hind paws, Azaz snapped the eagle’s neck. Azaz’s forepaws held up the dead eagle’s body as Azaz called down to the contaminated pool. “I know you can hear me, Night Eye,” the grizzly god said. “I know what you planned. When I find that crown—and I *will* find it—I will roast every last raven among you alive and eat the meat off your bones. You will all pay for this treachery. There is but one king of kings!”

Azaz caught a brief holographic image of The Night Eye fluttering around, at a loss for words. Their image disappeared, and the nanobots deactivated. Azaz crushed the treacherous micro machines beneath his hind paws. His own nanobots then activated once more. Azaz called them over until his own kingly armor appeared again.

Just then, Azaz heard something in the wind calling him. He walked along to one bristlecone among many. Then he heard a familiar voice, that of the echo, Nurvlyn, calling to him.

“Adar Llwh Gwin spoke the truth,” the voice said. “Methuselah, the greatest terrestrial intelligence in this world, bids you to put forth your claim to the crown. You will find The Crown Of Fire on The Stone of Destiny, the peaks of Mount Rainier, called *Gol-Kilpyne* in the *Osine* tongue. You will not be alone there. Eyes upon eyes watch you. Kings and queens mean to kill you. Yet, the crown will choose its master, not the other way around.”

“Nurvlyn,” Azaz said. “The *rulku* traitor. How I long to add you to the vast number of beasts that have fallen before my scourge!”

“We spoke before, great king,” Nurvlyn said. “And as I said then, I remind you now. To be a king is to give one’s life for one’s people. Those who would rule the earth will one day find themselves buried under it. Remember the gift I gave you when the time is right. Until we speak again, I bid you farewell, mighty one.”

With that, Azaz ran off. Using the nanosphere, he called up Vronkyl.

“The *rulku* encroachers live,” Vronkyl said to his master. “They had a warrior wizard, Fowler, among them. He controls even the plants, my lord. And now, the *rulku* fort lies hidden among the weeds, vines, and trees of nature.”

“It is of little consequence,” Azaz said. “We will deal with this Fowler when the time is right. Bring your best legion of bears to *Gol-Kilpyne*. It is there that the deciding battle of this war is to be fought. Move out immediately. Do not rest until you are there. Are my orders clear?”

“They are, my master,” Vronkyl said. “We shall move at once.”

Through the nanosphere, Azaz and Vronkyl joined in a great cry, summoning every bear within range to answer their call to conquest.



CHAPTER 30

Animus

Nunavut, Canada

Back in the northern glacial fortress that was Nunavut, White Claw and his celebration of polar bear warriors fought one more battle, this time for their lives. Sky Death, with his keen sense of smell, took an inventory of the bears returning. Nearly one-hundred polar bears had departed. Only fifty-two returned. Protected by the nanosphere above them, they formed walls of blood-stained white fur matting the ice and the caves. The eagles nursed them, but even the birds of the sky could only do so much. Moon Shadow, still limping along after her savage encounter, came upon the bodies with her wolves. Every bird, even Thunder Killer himself, turned towards her.

“Come to gloat?” White Claw asked the advancing wolf queen. “Or perhaps you feel that now is the right time for your pack to strike to take back *Animus*.” “Now is neither the place nor the time,” Thunder Killer said, extending his wings.

“I respectfully disagree, eagle king,” Moon Shadow said. “Now is the only time we ever have. And I would like to use some of that time to help you nurse White Claw and his legion back to health. It is true that White Claw nearly killed me. It is true that several of my wolves and my greatest warrior, Crimson Fang, died under this bear’s paws. Yet, the words of White Claw also stay with me. *Animus* is supposed to be above all of this. It is the last refuge of the animal to stand for more than senseless *rulku* killing. If we continue to turn on each other, the *rulku* have already won, even if every last one perished from the earth.”

White Claw lied silently, nursing his wounds while the turkey vultures wrapped them with their beaks. His eyes stayed on the wolf, who now bore a scar from his claws upon the skin that lined her mane.

“May we help, King White Claw?” Moon Shadow asked. “May peace and reason once again rule *Animus*?”

Overcome by the weight of his enormous pride, which froze like the ice upon his matted fur, White Claw at last relented. “We would be grateful for any

assistance you might provide,” the polar bear king said. “If it saves any of my bears’ lives, I would be in your debt.”

Moon Shadow howled up towards the winter moon. From the shadows of the ice came pack after pack of wolves, each with its own nanosphere. The wolves spoke with their nanobots, asking them to assist in cleaning and sewing the wounds. In a few brief moments, the makeshift animal hospital housed more nurses than patients. Moon Shadow also lent her assistance, going from bear to bear to make sure that each received proper care.

When Moon Shadow passed White Claw, the king bear called her over with a quick huff.

“Queen wolf,” White Claw said. “I am a prideful and stubborn bear. And after what I saw, what wounded my flesh, I would not cry if I saw the last *rulku* driven from Nunavut. You and I see that matter differently, I know. But I will be the first to say that I was wrong about you. You acted not with cowardice, but with wisdom. I am ashamed to say that I was not myself. I was not fully honest with you.”

Moon Shadow crept closer, if only so that White Claw could huff his words a little more softly.

White Claw heaved, coughed up blood, and then began again. “There is something I did not tell you,” he admitted, “something that drove my desire for conquest. Our spies towards the borders of Bear Mountain tell us that the king of The Rockies, Azaz, who now rules most of the land to our South, is questing for a crown. Our lords of the rock and air, the ptarmigan, swore that this crown allows one to control the animal kingdom. It was the last of the *rulku* magic before The *Rapsys* swept it away. I sent polar bears to hunt for this crown and ordered my spies to watch the grizzly king’s movements. We have learned that he quests towards a fire mountain for the crown. You should go after him. You are more worthy to rule than I am.”

Moon Shadow’s eyes lowered. “I thank you for your kind words,” she said, “but I cannot run fast enough now, not in this condition. Half of my wolves are still recovering. This is a mission for the king of birds.”

White Claw nodded, saying, “As you wish. Let us call Thunder Killer over.”

Thunder Killer watched from an icy peak as his eagles worked. He studied the birds of the perimeter to see if there were any signs of the *rulku*. Moon Shadow made herself more visible and then howled at him. Thunder Killer flew to where the two other monarchs rested.

“What is it, queen wolf?” Thunder Killer asked.

“Have you heard of The Crown Of Fire?” White Claw asked.

Thunder Killer cocked his aquiline white head in contemplation. “My hawks

recently spoke to me of a dragon bird beast reportedly hunting for it,” he said. “They say it gives any animal the power of the *rulku* to rule the other tribes of the animal kingdom.”

“Your hawk spies speak truthfully,” White Claw said. “My spies tell me that Azaz has defeated the dragon bird beast you speak of. He hunts for the crown now near the fire peak known as *Gol-Kilpyne*.”

“I know of this peak. It is yet full of fire. My birds show care around it,” Thunder Killer said.

“The animal world needs you to fly to *Gol-Kilpyne* and make sure that Azaz does not gain the crown,” Moon Shadow said. “We would rather you wear it. We need a king or queen who sees the value of *Animus*.”

“Your time is short,” White Claw said. “Azaz is only days away from claiming the crown.”

“This is grim news,” Thunder Killer said. “I suppose there is little choice in the matter. I will fly at once.”

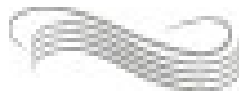
“Thank you, Master Eagle,” Moon Shadow said. “I will send the wolves that are uninjured to protect you from the ground.”

“And I what few black and brown bears we have that did not fight,” White Claw said. “But it will be up to you to move quicker than the wind. You may have to stand against the great grizzly alone if we cannot make the final fight in time.”

“I understand,” Thunder Killer said. “But why speak of this only just now?” White Claw shook his head. “My pride got in the way,” he said. “That is why you would make a better king.”

“I am honored, King Bear, though I wish all animals could fly as freely as my eagles and I,” Thunder Killer said. “I will fight for that freedom, not for a crown of oppression.”

With that, Thunder Killer lifted off, announcing his intentions to the birds in their own dialect of *Osine*. Moon Shadow and White Claw then got to work sending soldiers out to round up any able bears and wolves.



Ul Skushor

Congo

Yorba sat, weakly taking in a breath, as Gray Eyes tended to him. His gorilla eyes could just make out the body of Uzwali on another matted fern bed across

the cave. Yorba could hear the pounding of a mighty river, but the smell of the place, part dirt, part gunpowder, part *rulku*, was strange to his nostrils.

“Don’t stir, my lord,” Gray Eyes said. “I have removed the poison, but you are not healed yet.”

“And the *rulku*?” Yorba asked.

Gray Eyes took a breath with his tongue, staring at the fallen hunter general. “I could not save her,” Gray Eyes said, plainly. “Her *rulku* system was too weak to bear the toxins.”

“I will kill the elephant traitor for this,” Yorba said, pounding the ground.

“Zulta attends a meeting now, a meeting of all of the lords,” Gray Eyes said.

“The end of the war may well be within sight.”

Yorba’s full failure settled in on the great ape. He let out a loud, guttural yawp, the kind reserved only for gorillas in their greatest moments of distress.

“I should have listened to you, snake prophet,” Yorba said. “My pride was too strong.”

“It is unfortunate,” Gray Eyes said. “Unless Zulta acted, creating a beast of flight, like The Night Eye did, we stood no chance. With you struck down, the crown will go to another.”

“I can still fight,” Yorba said.

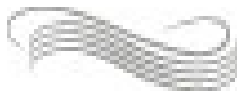
“No, you cannot,” Gray Eyes said. “The journey is perilous and far. You would need King Blu’s blessings if you were in the best of shape. As it is, you cannot even travel.”

Gray Eyes closed his yellow eyes, chanting at the snake ancestors who came before. In the mists of the cave, he saw animals on a peak: an eagle, an anaconda, and a bear. He could not see who would prevail or at what cost.

“There may yet be hope for you to rule Africa,” Gray Eyes said. “Zulta has no tolerance for the bear king or the snake empress. If one of them seizes the crown, you might ascend to the throne. But you cannot attack Zulta directly. He is too powerful and too wise. You must find other means.”

“I will avenge my apes,” Yorba said, “by any means necessary.”

Gray Eyes opened his eyelids. “In time, my lord,” he said. “For now, rest.”



CHAPTER 31

The Animal Holosphere

Communications of the Animal Lords

The same alarm echoed throughout the various animal nanospheres until the great kings and queens of the animal kingdom felt no choice but to answer.

“I am the voice of King Blu,” the faceless transmission began. “Let us come together, as animals, in the holosphere, to discuss the problem of the *rulku* war. The end may be closer than you think.”

The voice was altogether unwieldy—with long, hard, drawn-out consonants that had a sharpness to them, as if the letters were knives. Yet, none of the animal lords felt that they could ignore such a powerful summoner as any who bore the name of King Blu upon his tongue.

First, Yu The Golden Nightmare, alerted by Paihuai Zhe, joined. A shrouded figure full of teeth waited. The Night Eye, newly singed, joined in. As did Groth The Impaler, who was declared a second regent king until The Night Eye fully recovered. Zulta joined, though Yorba, still recovering, did not. Thraxis joined from an undisclosed location. White Claw and Moon Shadow joined, keeping quiet about their recent injuries. Lastly, in a surprise to all the animal lords, the unruly Azaz, with a hologram of only his head, joined, shrouding the lacerations he received at the hands of Adar Llwhch Gwin.

“Thank you, my brothers and sisters, for listening to the summons of King Blu,” the figure said. “The great ocean emperor has become aware that the *rulku* have found ways around his magic. Their steel beasts and hawks of iron roll and fly and swim, even through the waters of the great ocean. And their victories mount. Whereas once you all squashed *rulku* warriors, claiming the continents, now, the *rulku* drive you from your own kingdoms. Consider this. Yu The Golden Nightmare,” the figure said. “You once ruled Asia, but Hunter General Xavian has driven you from the capital of your own dynasty. The Night Eye are fewer in number after Hunter General Fvoris killed elder ravens in one of your capital cities, all the while pushing back the dreaded Groth The Impaler.

And in the West, both White Claw and Azaz’s armies have fallen at the hands of a warrior wizard. Even Yorba, the great gorilla king, lies wounded in his fight

with a *rulku* warrior priestess while Zulta plots against animals, not *rulku* warriors. Only Thraxis has maintained her lands, perhaps solely because her hunger for human flesh exceeds your own. What has happened to our mighty animal armies? To the promise of *Animus*? Have you all grown weak?”

“Enough,” Azaz growled out. “Who are you to speak to the rulers of the earth that way? The voice of a whale underseas that sheds no blood?”

The figure stepped into the light, taking off his hood. Scars of his own battles were on his many arms, only exceeded in number by his scales and his fangs. “I am King Croc,” he said, “ruler of Oceania and the southern lands of *Ku-Rah*, which you once knew as Australia. I killed the *rulku* that managed to make the nanoplague that enabled the surviving beasts to use their magic again.”

“A little too late, it would seem,” Thraxis said.

King Croc ignored the snake empress and went on: “I managed to barter with some of your killers for their thinking machines. I turned them over to King Blu, at his summons. The greatest emperor on this planet does not like the *rulku* war machines. They harm his oceans and pollute his atmosphere. He has put his deific intellect to work. The divine one offers you now a technology that will end the war. It is a new strain of nanobot to counter the recent nanostrain. It will seek out those nanobots the *rulku* wizard The Mechanic sent out before I killed him. This strain will take over their programming. Any *rulku* who again activates any weapon of war will die. In fact, it has the power to kill the *rulku* upon contact, poisoning them from within. We will deploy it in massive bombs that rise from the sea and ignite over the continents. It is so powerful that one bomb alone will spread its nanobot-laden warfare to the entire continent within a day. By King Blu’s approximation, fewer *rulku* will walk the earth than at any point in the last one-hundred thousand years.”

“You mean to annihilate them—all the *rulku*,” Moon Shadow said. “A genocide of billions.”

“Only those that mean us harm,” King Croc answered.

“So, yes, all the *rulku*,” Azaz said. “Very efficient. But why does King Blu so suddenly come to our aid? What is the price of this weapon?”

“You must be better stewards of the earth than the *rulku*,” King Croc said. “You must respect his seas and their creatures. They must be allowed to live in peace. If you do not, King Blu will pass sentence on the animal world just as he has on the world of the *rulku*.”

“Let it be so,” Azaz said. “Any living *rulku* is a threat to the natural order of animals. Let the balance of nature be preserved.”

“You don’t speak for all of us, Azaz—at least, not yet,” White Claw said. “We’re talking about unparalleled destruction, as Moon Shadow indicated. Or

does that not matter to you? Does nothing matter except the crown?”

Thraxis hissed. “A crown that would give its bearer control over all of us,” the great snake queen said.

“One no animal should wear,” Zulta added.

“At least not a mad grizzly bear without the slightest respect for this council,” The Night Eye said.

“Not any of us,” Moon Shadow said. “We must agree to destroy this evil *rulku* magic the moment we find it, or we will never be freed from the curse of the *rulku*.”

“Where is this crown you speak of?” The Golden Nightmare asked. “Why was this not brought up in council before?”

“We lose focus,” Azaz said. “The weapon. Let us vote to deploy the weapon. Then the strongest among us, the rightful ruler, can claim the crown and use it or destroy it as he sees fit. I can tell you that if I find the crown, we wouldn’t need weak, soulless committees arbitrating for us. There would be a king that would get things done by the power of his jaws.”

“The other kings and queens must weigh in,” King Croc said.

“I vote no,” Moon Shadow said. “We have forces enough to defeat the *rulku*. There are too few of them to pose the threat they once did. I will not vote for the extinction of a species.”

“Such weakness would render us all extinct. I vote yes,” Azaz said.

“The *rulku* once had such magic, in prehistory,” Groth the Impaler said. “Did you know it was said that they dropped bombs so vast they took out entire cities and annihilated entire countries? Did the *rulku* think of us or of the animals they would kill when they dropped their bombs? Or of the environment they would poison for the rest of us? No. Of course not, in typical *rulku* hubris. I vote yes. Bomb them before they bomb us.”

“Yet, we don’t know what this magic would do to us,” Zulta said. “I don’t trust this King Blu. I vote no until further study is done. Let us not be so hasty.”

“The longer we wait, the more powerful our enemies become,” Thraxis said, looking over at Azaz. “I vote yes. Let us end the war with the *rulku* and focus on the matter of the crown.”

The Golden Nightmare shook his head. “The *rulku* will be dealt with,” he said. “I say we study this weapon, as King Zulta suggests, and use it on small groups first, like the *rulku* holding Beijing. I vote no to full-scale slaughter.”

“And I second The Golden Nightmare’s and Zulta’s proposals,” The Night Eye said. “I vote no. We must allow only small use of this weapon to test this device and its effects on us and the environment. Otherwise, we risk killing the very world we fought to protect.”

“My vote, as ruler of Oceania, is yes,” King Croc said. “These *rulku* are shifty and need to be killed and eaten while they are weak.”

“That’s another answer we don’t have,” The Night Eye said. “How will this technology pollute our food supply? We move hastily, as King Zulta warns.”

“Good magic takes time,” King Croc said, “time we don’t have given the course of our recent battles. We must move quickly. However, the vote leaves us at a tie. There is one final vote: the king of the polar bears and of *Animus* itself has yet to grace us with his wisdom.”

White Claw breathed deeply. He thought for a moment, saying: “I respect the arguments of Moon Shadow, Zulta, The Golden Nightmare, and The Night Eye. Had I voted weeks ago, I would have voted to let the *rulku* live in peace. But the warrior wizard that cut me,” White Claw said, “let me see what a dangerous and ruthless predator the *rulku* truly are. To let such creatures live is foolish. I vote yes.”

“Spoken like a true bear,” Azaz said in commendation. “I know the wizard of whom you speak. The *rulku* warrior they call Fowler. He scarred me too. One day, we will fight him together, my brother, and feast on his flesh. You have my word.”

Moon Shadow shook her mane and stared down.

“What of Nurvlyn and Methuselah?” Moon Shadow asked. “Do they not get a say?”

“They did not answer the summons,” King Croc said. “Besides, half-*rulku* and plants have not been allowed a place on the animal council.”

“Agreed,” Azaz said. “When do we strike?”

“King Blu will give you and your animals one day to evacuate any areas near the *rulku* armies,” King Croc said. “Then, you will see a swarming of the sky. When you do, do not look up.”

“Like a Biblical plague,” Groth the Impaler said, eyeing Azaz. “The *rulku* once had a saying: Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds. This is true for all awakened animals this day. Let us not abuse the power given to us, or we shall suffer the same fate as the *rulku*.”

“Maybe you will, Impaler,” Azaz said. “As for me, I choose to live forever.” Moon Shadow left the holosphere in disgust. Zulta, The Night Eye, and The Golden Nightmare quickly joined her. Azaz and the other animals were not far behind. Valuable time had been lost. The crown was still out there, somewhere atop the fire mountain. The animals knew: the war with the *rulku* was but the first war among many. Whoever found the crown held the power to end wars upon wars. Any other battle was but a distraction.



Pols Dedans

Near the Ocean

Nunavut, Canada

Days later, Fowler sat, communing with nature, when the first orbs arose from the sea. They were like iridescent stars, burning the tips of the heavens as they unleashed small, buzzing hives. The hives floated, giving birth to countless waves of nanobots that darkened the partly illuminated night. Fowler, sitting with holograms of Nurvlyn and Methuselah as he prayed, looked up and said nothing.

“So, the mobiles have launched another assault,” Methuselah said. “This one will kill any *rulku* who seeks to use the technology that King Blu forbade. Do not let your people worry, Fowler. My sisters and I have protected you. None of the nanobots will make it past the wall of plants that rises to shield you from the attacking mobiles.”

“Thank you, Queen Methuselah,” Fowler said. “But part of me looks up, despairing for the lives that will be lost. Once, there were billions of people living on this earth. Now, there will be only a handful. I feel like I should be out there, fighting.”

“A truly human feeling,” Methuselah said. “You will be among the only survivors. We will teach you to live in the world of nature. Then, humanity will again grow with the might of a healthy stalk.”

Fowler nodded, bowing to express his gratitude.

“The humans among you will not be so understanding,” Nurvlyn said. “You must convince them that this is the only way forward. It has been said that a war never truly dies until the last soldier falls. The memory of battle is too strong. So will it be with Brigand and his loyalists.”

Nurvlyn barely spoke the words when Brigand called out for Fowler. Brigand stumbled closer to the circle of earth, out by the forest’s edge, where Fowler prayed.

“What kind of plant magic is this?” Brigand asked Fowler. “Trees, foliage, and vines reach and interlock. They protect the entire woods that hold us. Yet, outside, we hear bombs detonating. We hear electrical currents sailing through the skies. We hear the buzz of the nanobots swarming. One of our hunter generals, Xavian, has taken to what is left of our nanosphere to warn humanity.

These nanobots are all over the world. It's a genocide of our entire species. We must rise and fight."

"Xavian speaks the truth," Fowler said. "Methuselah protects us here. Her sisters will protect those of us that they can. However, we cannot leave. Our fight is here, not continents away."

Brigand looked down at the warrior wizard, wondering if this was the same man who used an amplifier to wipe out entire squadrons of attacking bears. Fowler sensed what Brigand must have thought. Fowler looked up, pleading.

"I am the only man to ever strike wounds into Azaz and White Claw and live," Fowler said. "I have killed more awakened animals and sinned more against nature than perhaps any living man, except for you. I know what it is to fight. But in my time away, in my time with Nurvlyn and Methuselah, I have been taught a better way. We must live with nature and not as if we are above it. Our fight will be one of survival, and I will need you and your hunters here for this fight."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing," Brigand said. "You were supposed to be humanity's last great hope."

"You must be your own hope and the hope of humanity," Fowler said. "Nurvlyn has shared his visions with me. Even if you armed every settler here, you would all die. The animals are now too powerful for the human race to overcome. They would slaughter you and try you for crimes against nature. You would be hanged as a warning to all who would defy the emerging animal world order."

"I can't just stay," Brigand said. "It feels so...cowardly."

"I know how you feel," Fowler said. "But the days of banding together to fight this war are over. You must think about your future here. About your children yet to be born. You must think of the reality of the controlling head piece, the crown, that you created."

Brigand's eyes grew wide, glossed over with something like shock mixed with fear.

"The animal lords are not fighting just us," Fowler said. "Shortly, they will fight each other for the crown. Whoever wins that headpiece will hunt us down. Without our technology, we will be powerless to stop the new world emperor."

Brigand sat down by Fowler. "I was there when they first tested the technology," he said. "What have I done? What have we all done?"

Fowler put a consoling arm around his former commander. "We were fighting against nature," Fowler said. "In the end, nature always wins."

"My hunters won't understand," Brigand said.

"You will have to make them, Hunter General," Fowler said, simply. "We may

well be the last undetected pocket of humanity. If we don't survive, who knows if anyone will? Even Methuselah cannot say for sure.”

The two men sat, watching the plant foliage shift as the energy of the nanobots trickled down. Tiny robots glided down the canopy of forest cover, detecting only plant life. The little bots flew on, endlessly searching out their human hosts. The plants kept growing, kept expanding, in earth-brown, sea-green, and soil-black luminosity. For a split second, Brigand thought of how beautiful it all was, the ending of one world, the birth of another. Then came the cries, the pleas, through the last vestiges of the human nanosphere. Fowler and Brigand listened to each human cry, praying and mourning all at once.



CHAPTER 32

Ru-Cheylo

Wooded Area Outside of London

Groth The Impaler stood, still shocked by the devastation of the white orbs from the night. Never in all of his awakened years had he heard or witnessed a death so awe-inspiring, so overpowering, as the orbs that flew from *Ru-Cheylo* to the continent. The stars opened up and rained light, and that light became a nanoviral apocalypse. The destruction was swift. There were cries, like those of the animals at The *Rapsys*, only more harrowing, more forlorn, more bestial, and the cries were endless. Many *rulku* never figured out that the moment they fought to defend themselves, they sentenced themselves to death. The wolverine general who had sent fear and foreboding into the hearts of men now realized that the effigy he conjured up for the enemy was no longer necessary. He had never seen so many bodies piling up. Instead, he ordered the nanostructures to build crematories to eliminate as many of the dying *rulku* as he could before they polluted the land. Select few were clean enough to be skinned for their meat. Most were unsalvageable.

We voted for this, Groth thought, looking over the endless bodies awaiting cremation. *There was nothing honorable about it. This wasn't a battle; it was a slaughter. The poor, dumb beasts never stood a chance.*

As Groth pondered the words of Moon Shadow, words that warned of genocide, he saw Blood Scar leading another scouting expedition back. Groth could tell from the urgency of the bear's step that his top commander had found something.

"Yes, commander—what is it?" Groth asked as the great bear general approached.

"Our wolves and hounds finished hunting the outskirts of London," Blood Scar said. "There was a group of *rulku* that figured out the intent behind the contagion. They reprogrammed the nanobots to hide them behind an energy shield. Only their scent gave them away."

"Are they captured?" Groth asked.

"No, General," Blood Scar answered.

“Why ever not?” Groth asked.

“The *rulku* claim to have a bomb that can wipe out every animal in London,” Blood Scar said. “They set off a tiny bomb that took out one entire wolf regiment.”

“How is that possible?” Groth asked.

“Our scouts detected the *rulku* magic underground,” Blood Scar answered. “The *rulku* reprogrammed the nanofighters before the little robots could do their work. Their leader, Hunter General Fvoris, demands to speak to you and The Night Eye. He wishes to talk terms of surrender. He says the plague has nearly wiped out his people.”

“Thank you, commander,” Fvoris said. “Summon the kings and queens.” Blood Scar nodded and headed off to activate the secure nanosphere communication signal. Groth waited, disappointed that the great hunt for the *rulku* had come to this. After vying back and forth through so many battles, the only *rulku* warrior bold enough to strike at The Night Eye was left fighting for his own people’s survival.

“Yes, General?” The Night Eye asked as their circling black forms appeared, like a midnight cloud minus the moonlight. “What is it?”

“The battle in *Ru-Cheylo* has a complication,” Groth said. “The *rulku* have a working bomb that can destroy the city. They’ve already set one bomb off. The man beasts won’t speak simply to me. They demand that you be present to discuss terms of surrender.”

“Is Hunter General Fvoris among the number?” The Night Eye asked.

“Yes, my kings and queens,” Groth said.

“Put him through,” The Night Eye said.

“After what he did to you last time—it must be a trap,” Groth argued.

“Our spies have told us of this,” The Night Eye replied. “Trust us.”

Groth nodded to Blood Scar, who called out the code that he had. Soon enough, Hunter General Fvoris, blood streaming from his long red hair, joined them. Sod covered his body as eyes of blue fire stared a hole into both The Night Eye and Groth.

“Hunter General,” The Night Eye said. “The *rulku* responsible for twenty-five raven deaths.”

“If I had taken out more of you, this meeting might have been very different,” Hunter General Fvoris said.

“Not so,” The Night Eye said. “The numbers were always in our favor. The outcome was an eventuality.”

“It’s that eventuality that I care to discuss,” Fvoris replied. “I demand safe passage to a living community away from the animals for my people and myself.”

If you give me that assurance, you have my formal surrender. If not, you'll have quite a different answer. I'll blow your newest animal city to the ground and you monstrosities along with it."

"How many *rulku* are we speaking of?" The Night Eye asked.

"*Rulku*?" Fvoris asked.

"Humans," Groth interjected. "How many survivors are you asking to be granted sanctuary on our lands?"

"Fifty men, women, and children, plus myself," Fvoris answered, his voice as unsteady as his words.

"Fifty?" Groth asked, turning to The Night Eye.

"You killed the others," Fvoris said. "Every last one. And you didn't look us in the eye, either. You did it with a bomb."

"What can we say? We learned well from our masters," Groth said.

"Let me make you a counterproposal," The Night Eye said. "Surrender unconditionally, and I won't exterminate the last of your men, women, and children by detonating the bomb you claim to possess. As for yourself, you will be executed as a war criminal for crimes against the animal world. By my count, over one thousand of our animal troops, including our own brothers and sisters, have fallen to you."

"And you just detonated a bomb that killed billions," Fvoris said. "If there's any war criminal here, it's you and your wolverine enforcer." Fvoris paused for a minute before demanding, "Make up your mind quickly. See, I have half a mind to just detonate the bomb, anyway. We're already as good as dead here. Your animals, on the other hand—their lives are in your hands. You call me a war criminal? You have no idea how close I am to becoming one."

"Commander," The Night Eye said, calling out to Blood Scar. "Put the edge of the *Ru-Cheylo* forest on screen."

Groth and Fvoris said nothing, watching as the last of Fvoris' men and women appeared before their eyes.

"Watch," The Night Eye ordered.

A bomb ignited the trees on fire, incinerating five hunters patrolling against the endless animals lined up, ready to attack.

"We have bombs buried in every corner of your camp," The Night Eye said. "That blue energy shield you see is that which contains the blast. If I set off any more, your bomb will also explode, killing everyone in camp. *Ru-Cheylo* won't suffer a single loss. So, I ask you again, Hunter General, do you surrender unconditionally?"

Fvoris broke down. The exhaustion of endless battle had taken its toll. The fallen warrior managed to pull himself together enough to say, "Kill me. I don't

care. But these are innocent men, women, and children. Spare them. Give me your word that you will let them live, and I will surrender. Please.”

“No *rulku* is innocent in killing us and pillaging our earth,” The Night Eye said. “However, I have no interest in exterminating your kind completely. We will create a new camp for your people, out in the wilds of *Ichin-Volar*, in what you call Siberia. You will work and live under the watchful eye of animal guards.”

“I surrender,” Fvoris said in a broken whisper. “I will lower our shield and come out with my people. We are unarmed.”

“General Groth,” The Night Eye said. “Tell your soldiers to round the last of the *rulku* up. We will hold them in The Tower before transport. They are to be locked and guarded at all times.”

The shield fell. Immediately, the dogs, wolves, bears, and birds mauled the last of the survivors. Holed up for months, stealing food whenever possible, the survivors were little more than a sheet of skin torn carelessly over too many scattered bones. The bears and ravens went for Fvoris first, pecking at his eyes and clawing and mauling him to the point where Fvoris was more blood than man. The bears then dragged Fvoris from the edge of the woods towards the city. Nearly one-thousand animal troops escorted the other survivors, as they fought not to walk in the wake of their captured general’s bloody trail.



Yvot-Sing

Beijing, China

Paihuai Zhe cleared the streets with her snow leopards. So many bodies fell that even the Asian black bears and spider monkeys lifting them fell with exhaustion. All around *Yvot-Sing*, fires burned day and night. And yet, this was the first that Yu The Golden Nightmare had seen of the heart of the city since the *rulku* rebellion that pushed him back to the mountains. The heart of the mighty giant panda, still arrayed in his golden armor, sunk at the sight. Between The *Rulku* Plague and this latest volley of nanovirus, there were no living *rulku* within sight.

“Forgive me,” Paihuai Zhe said. “We have more bodies to move before you can cross, my emperor.”

“Where are the captured?” The Golden Nightmare asked.

“In the Min Mountains, in the camp you asked our chief orangutan Fuchan to

devise,” Paihuai Zhe. “What’s left are only the fighters. The dying hunter general, Xavian, wishes to speak with you. He wishes to surrender directly to you.”

“Lead me on, while there is still time,” The Golden Nightmare said.

“I’m sorry,” Paihuai Zhe said. “We only have so many apes to move all the dead.”

“I can step over them,” The Golden Nightmare said. The great panda’s tone broke ever so slightly when he uttered the line. “How many *rulku* live?”

“We know of none still left in the great city,” Paihuai Zhe said. “Only Xavian breathes and not for long, my emperor.”

Yu The Golden Nightmare journeyed for nearly an hour, stopping before countless cadavers, before he found the body of Hunter General Xavian drawing his last breaths. Xavian lied by another dead body, that of Lieutenant Cyphus, who met his death swiftly with a gun in his hand. The virus had spread toxins the moment he picked up a laser rifle to fire a volley at the incoming nanotechnology that exploded in orbs from the sky. Xavian’s eyes looked unnaturally white, burned and blinded. His arms and legs looked gnawed, perhaps by the snow leopards that dragged him into custody.

“Hunter General Xavian,” The Golden Nightmare said sternly. Yu held his helmet by his side in a gesture of respect. “We meet face to face. I was told you wished to speak to me about surrender.”

“I haven’t long to speak,” Xavian said. “As a hunter general, I wanted to see you face to face, to formally surrender. I wanted you to avoid the fate we humans brought on ourselves. Killing us all makes you no better than we were, and it will lead to the same outcome. You have the chance to do better, starting with my people. Don’t let all of my people die.”

“Extinction was never my plan,” The Golden Nightmare said.

“But it is *his*,” Xavian said. “I have heard of the mad bear king. I have heard of the snake queen. I have heard of the ape that kills soldiers by the neck in Africa and of the wolverine that impales the dead in Europe. I was responsible for many animal deaths. I will answer for that now. But never did I order what you ordered: the annihilation of a species. And with what? A few bombs. We never had the chance to defend ourselves.”

“How many wild giant pandas did you let roam freely in your time ruling this earth?” The Golden Nightmare asked. “How many bombs and grenades did you set off with wars, killing the environment and its animals in their wake? I find it odd that you lecture me on mercy when you showed none. The *rulku* will meet their just fate, whatever that may be.”

“So, the dying words of the last of our kind mean so little to you, do they?”

Hunter General Xavian asked. He heaved the last of his breaths with great care, fighting to hold on. “Then I see more than words are required. Let this stay with you as the mark of shame for the deaths you beasts caused. Let it be known that the last living man went down fighting.”

Paihuai Zhe leaped forward with a growl, but she was too late. Somehow, the *rulku* warrior in front of her had used his time to reprogram his nanobots. They swarmed The Golden Nightmare, splashing a variant of the plague in the emperor’s face. The emperor squirmed, feeling the same agony that Xavian felt as the nanobots forced the plague into his system.

“My plague, modified for animals,” Xavian said, “is now yours.”

Before Paihuai Zhe could go for the neck of the fallen warrior, Xavian was dead. Paihuai Zhe growled for the Asian black bears and spider monkeys to take the emperor to the den of the kraits, the master healer serpents. She felt herself breathing in the nanoplague and stumbled back. Before falling, Paihuai Zhe ordered her ranking general to close off the city to protect the animals beyond its borders.



CHAPTER 33

The Animal Holosphere

Communications of the Animal Lords

With the fall of the last of the hunter generals in Asia and Europe, The Night Eye summoned the other animal lords to another holographic meeting on a restricted channel in the nanosphere.

“We can say that the war criminal Fvoris has been apprehended,” The Night Eye said. “He has been kept alive to answer for his crimes. With the authorization of this council, we will broadcast his mauling at the end of this transmission as a message to the animal world: there will be justice.”

“Very good,” Zulta said. “What of the news of The Golden Nightmare? How does he recover from the treachery of the *rulku*?”

“Our spies say nothing of his state,” Thraxis said. “Only that he will live, if disfigured. *Yvot-Sing* is off limits. We have offered the assistance of medical

nanobots. They are eliminating the new virus as we speak.”

“We have also sent medical bots,” Zulta said.

“As has *Animus*,” White Claw added.

“But what of the *rulku* in the West?” The Night Eye asked. Ravens and crows circled *en masse*. Their irregular flight pattern signaled irritation at the mad bear king who had dispatched their greater warrior beast and, with it, their hope for the crown.

“I’ve taken the continent,” Azaz said. “No meaningful opposition remains.” “Hunter General Brigand and the warrior wizard you spoke of, Fowler, are both dead?” Thraxis asked.

“Presumably,” Azaz said. “The blizzards took the camp before the whale king’s bombs detonated. The snow is too impassable for us to confirm their deaths. I plan to make a personal point of it once the winter abates. I’d like to eat that warrior’s heart myself. White Claw is welcome to join in, if he wishes.”

“Thank you, brother bear,” White Claw said. “I do.”

“Then can we agree that the war on the *rulku* is over?” Moon Shadow asked. “Can we agree that this council is against the full-scale extinction of the species?”

“I would not cry if the last *rulku* killer walking the earth died,” Azaz said. “We should eliminate them so that they can never overthrow us.”

“To what end?” Zulta asked. “They are no threat to us now. Killing just to kill is not the animal way. It is not *Ozu*. I say we elect a certain area for them to live in and keep them there, carefully monitored.”

“I agree with Azaz,” King Croc said. “However, the ocean god does not. Any that would kill off the last of any species faces his wrath, which is considerable.”

“How dare a giant whale tell the rest of the animal world what to do!” Azaz said.

“That intelligence,” King Croc replied, “whatever form it takes, ended your war for you. It could easily end you as well.”

“Enough bickering—let us know peace for once,” The Night Eye said. “Can all of us agree that the *rulku* shall be given sanctuaries where they will be guarded and allowed to live and reproduce in small numbers? We are not ready for a war against King Blu. Not yet, anyway.”

“Agreed. For now,” Thraxis said. “So long as we allocate a portion for breeding so that we may continue to feast on their flesh.”

“Feasting I can live with, but a living *rulku* is a dangerous beast, one that must eventually be put down,” Azaz said. “I will not exterminate them all... not just yet.”

“Then it’s decided,” Moon Shadow said. “Let peace be announced to all

animals through the *Osine* language. Let the nanosphere ring out in celebration.”

With that, The Night Eye gave the order. The chanting of animals, of owls and orangutans, of peregrine falcons and panthers, echoed through the nanosphere. As the animal lords joined in celebration, The Night Eye presented a new image. Stumbling along, little more than a bloody heap, was Fvoris. The disgraced hunter general appeared in the nanosphere for all to see and hear. The animals and their lords grew sullen and silent at so bloody a reminder of the cost of victory.

“Any last words, as you *rulku* would have it?” Groth, Fvoris’ executioner, asked, adjusting the noose around the fallen warrior’s neck.

“You can kill me, but you can never kill the human race,” Fvoris said. “We adapt. We learn. We grow. We survive.”

“Not today,” Groth said, kicking Fvoris from The Tower embankment. The ravens and crows pecked instantly. The wolverines, wolves, and dogs descended upon Fvoris the moment his body hit the ground. Fvoris’ body twitched like a scalded fish before lying limp, indistinguishable from the blood that surrounded it.

In such a way, peace was declared.



CHAPTER 34

Gol-Kilpyne

Mount Rainier, Washington, USA

The icy crown of the mighty volcano’s peak, bedecked with snow and rock, attracted Azaz at first. It was a picture of power, of ascendancy, that the scarred grizzly king could appreciate. And so, Azaz took unnatural pride in climbing *Gol-Kilpyne*, in tasting the taut air that even mankind could not fully poison.

“Come up,” Azaz ordered his regiment of bear warriors. “Witness the crowning of your most worthy king.”

The bears, including Vronkyl, stayed at Azaz’s flank as he ascended.

Azaz stood up on his hind legs, calling out to the wind, “Well, wizard. Here I am. I smell you, even if I can’t see you.”

“King Azaz,” Nurvlyn said, through swarms of sea blue nanobots seeding the air. “We have been waiting for you.”

“We?” Azaz asked.

The shrieking of a regiment of eagles overtook the silence. Azaz looked to see the mighty wings of Thunder Killer circling around Azaz and his bear legion. With a shriek so loud it made the bears’ ears bleed, Thunder Killer descended, landing on the uppermost peak of *Gol-Kilpyne*.

“I represent *Animus*,” Thunder Killer said. “I have come to challenge for the crown.”

“I killed one eagle masquerading as a beast,” Azaz said. “I can just as easily kill another. Fly away now, bird, or feel the wrath of your master.”

Thunder Killer rose, harnessing the power of the thunderbird through his nanobots. A massive wave of electricity overtook Azaz, bringing the grizzly bear back down to all fours.

“Watch how you speak to a king, mad bear,” Thunder Killer said.

As Thunder Killer’s eagles inched closer on the peak, Azaz felt a giant shadow descend upon him. He turned around, to see, through holes giant enough to absorb boulders, an entire army of serpents. Chief among them was Thraxis, standing upright at ten feet tall, her shadow dwarfing even the mightiest and most ruthless of the bear kings.

“I could eat you both and still have enough room left for your legions,” Thraxis said with sporadic hisses. “If anyone stands as the mightiest of all animals, it’s me. There shall be no king. Only an empress.”

Thunder Killer flapped his wings. Azaz growled and snarled.

“Now that everyone is here,” the voice of Nurvlyn said, “we can establish the rules.”

“Rules?” Azaz asked. “Kings make rules. They don’t follow them.”

“Yet, you *will* listen,” Nurvlyn said, sending a gust of ice so strong it nearly blew the great bear king over. “For even a king answers to that which is *Ozu*.” Even Thunder Killer struggled to hold to his perch in the massive gust of ethereal ice. Thraxis shuddered.

“Methuselah The Wise protected you by hiding this crown,” Nurvlyn said. “I can see why now. If it were up to me, none of you are worthy to rule over the other animal lords.”

The nanobots formed into a robotic likeness of their host and master. The wizard, withered, appeared before the animal lords. Nurvlyn still bore prominent antlers and still robed himself in the plants of the earth.

“Yet, the crown has been calling to Methuselah,” Nurvlyn continued. “It’s been calling to the animals. King Blu assures us that its time is at hand. I alone

have seen what you seek ages ago, when I was fully human. It appears as ruby red fire, with tinges of gold and diamond. In reality, it consists of master nanobots that can evolve its host further than any land animal has ever evolved. The greatest and worst of your qualities will be magnified. You will be able to channel your ancestors, to have their powers as your own. No one animal will be your equal. With such power, there is the need for great wisdom. Whoever the crown picks must remember to speak for all animals, not just for one," Nurvlyn said, looking directly at Azaz.

"Enough of your lectures," Azaz said. "Bring forth the crown."

"I cannot," Nurvlyn said. "No one can. The crown emerges when it has selected its new host and master. It was designed to look for human brain activity when the *rulku* first fashioned it. It has evolved through many generations of nanobots since then. Now, it seeks out whoever will fulfill its purpose the best: The Great Balance Of Nature. It is torn between the three of you. You must face each other and prove your worth. Only those competing for the crown may stay. All others must leave, or the crown will kill them where they stand."

"No armies?" Thunder Killer asked.

"Only kings and queens," Nurvlyn said.

The three animal lords stared at one another. Azaz paced. Thraxis slithered. Thunder Killer hovered. Each watched the others to see who would comply first.

"Eagles, fly below, for your lives," Thunder Killer said. "Do not ascend unless it is safe."

Nurvlyn gazed at Thraxis.

"Snakes, stay in your holes beneath the volcano," she ordered. "Do not ascend unless I command it."

Finally, all animal eyes gazed upon Azaz.

"Fall back, bears," Azaz said. "Do not strike until these cowardly animals betray us."

The bears, snakes, and eagles disappeared. Thunder Killer, Azaz, and Thraxis stood by themselves in a lonely wind.

"The fight goes until the crown selects its winner," Nurvlyn said. "It need not be until the death."

Azaz growled, standing again at full height. "You shall both find death a mercy," he said.

With that, Nurvlyn said, "The contest of kings and empresses begins. May the best animal win the crown's favor."

As he spoke, Nurvlyn disappeared into a shroud of smoke and ice.

Without eying each other, Thunder Killer and Thraxis lunged towards Azaz.

The mighty grizzly king braced himself for the combined blow. Thunder Killer went for the bear's eyes, his massive talons nearly striking their target. Thraxis' huge, undulating body threw Thunder Killer off the target as she sought to wrap and constrict herself around the massive bear. Azaz's mighty paws swiped the eagle from its flight. The gash on Thunder Killer's right wing made him land gingerly below. Azaz's nanobots formed a serrated scourge. Azaz whipped the great green anaconda until the pain forced her back. Thraxis recoiled, assessing the damage to her silver armor. Thunder Killer, dripping blood, took to the air, spreading his fully armed wings. Thunder Killer became like a phoenix in a cloud of fire, blowing flames and lightning at both the bear king and snake queen. The two animals' suits of armor melted, but the armor managed to absorb the massive blows. The grizzly king and snake empress eyed one another. Both made a strike against the eagle. Azaz's claws opened the wound on the wing further. Thraxis struck out, lashing her head in a venomous assault. She bit the eagle. Thunder Killer, flapping his wings, sent further waves of fire and lightning. They electrocuted the great anaconda queen and the mauling grizzly. Azaz fell down. Thraxis fell back. Thunder Killer cascaded down the mountainside, a river of wings, feathers, and poison all flowing until one crashing motion put the eagle king to rest.

"You have poison?" Azaz called out, searching for Nurvlyn. "Surely, that violates the wizard's rules."

"The most venomous of my snakes armed me for battle," Thraxis said. "The venom is as much a part of me as your weak claws are a part of you."

Nurvlyn did not appear. Azaz braced himself, but there was little need. An orb of fire descended over the fallen eagle king. Thraxis turned her gigantic body to take in the view.

"Has the crown chosen?" she wondered aloud.

The orb of fire then overtook the body of the fallen eagle. It appeared to bind the animal's wounds. Within seconds, Thunder Killer disappeared.

"Two warriors remain," Nurvlyn announced.

Renewed by the realization that they might not die, Thraxis and Azaz lunged for each other. Azaz avoided the biting blow of the mighty anaconda. He pounded at the snake queen's head, going for her eyes and her sense of smell with his massive scourge. The nanorobotic armor held up, though. Thraxis tossed the massive grizzly king aside with the full might of her body. With the thrust, coils of Thraxis' skin shed, each launching at the bear king like tiny daggers. The daggers, dripping in poison, hit Azaz's armor. One struck Azaz's snout. Azaz pulled the dagger out. His eyes met Thraxis'. They were wide, opaque. Azaz realized that the damage was irreversible.

“The fight’s over, insolent bear,” Thraxis said. “Bow down to your rightful empress, and I may let your kind live—for now.”

Azaz growled, standing at full might. “I will spend every last second,” he said, “before the poison settles in, tearing you apart.”

With renewed rage, Azaz lunged at the snake queen. Azaz mauled Thraxis’ head and her massive body. The grizzly king then lifted the giant snake, tossing her from one edge of the mountain peak to the next. Azaz pulled back the armor. He bit down with all of his might. Azaz’s growl became one of bemusement as he stepped back.

“You are not the only one who came prepared, snake,” Azaz said. “My bite has held nanobots full of the plague that tortures Yu The Golden Nightmare and his kin. Its effects should be immediate. The only question is: which one of us succumbs first?”

Thraxis slithered in circles, her body heaving to and fro in sickness. She felt the full power of the toxin, yet sought to use her nanobots to dilute it in her body. Azaz lunged, mauling and biting some more. Thraxis fell down, struggling to seek out a large hole to cover her retreat. Azaz pulled Thraxis back.

Thraxis coiled around the bear, fighting against her pain. Instinctively, Thraxis squeezed at the bear’s insides with all of her serpentine might. The two animals writhed on the rocky peak, locked in endless battle.

“If you have any heart left, bear, I will squeeze it out of you now,” Thraxis promised.

Too weak for words, Azaz dropped his scourge. Dizzy, the great grizzly stopped for a second to collect his might. He mauled, clawed, and bit. Thraxis’ bleeding head retreated from the bear’s reach. Still, the plague burrowed deeper into her fresh wounds. Thraxis’ hold on the grizzly king weakened. She fought to redouble her strength. As she did, Thraxis felt something piercing her. They were spear-like talons, only each was full of lightning that consumed her in a cloud above her head.

“Meet the last gift of Adar Llwhch Gwin,” Azaz said. “If I die, I do not die alone.”

Azaz’s last thought was for his bears. He pictured the snake empress hunting and killing the children of Bear Mountain for meat. Azaz remembered Nurvlyn’s gift from so long ago, before Thraxis and her poisons. He called upon it.

Thraxis renewed her squeezing. Azaz and Thraxis rolled to the edge of the peak in battle. Another volley of talons electrocuted the great anaconda queen as she squeezed down on Azaz. The shock consumed her. Thraxis rolled right off the mountain peak, still coiled around Azaz. The two crashed into the sands below. Neither moved, yet their blood moved freely, pooling at the feet of the

holographic wizard.

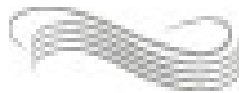
The animal legions looked to Nurvlyn for answers.

Mount Rainier rumbled, as if about to offer up its lava and ash to scold the world for such a fatal fight of monarchs. Yet, instead of lava, fiery red nanobots larger than any animal had ever seen emerged from the heart of the volcano. They circled as a sphere in the sky, approaching the fallen king and queen. After analyzing each, the nanobots sewed Thraxis' wounds. The great snake queen disappeared.

The crown descended like a fiery halo above Azaz's head. Azaz's wounds healed. His skin and fur were bound. The grizzly king's appearance altered. The already massive reddish-brown grizzly bear took on the form of his ancestors, something like a cross between a grizzly and a short-faced bear. Azaz's eyes became white as lightning. His fur became like fire—orange, red, and gold waves overtaking his body. Like a deity, Azaz rose.

"The crown has chosen," he growled, with words that echoed through the nanosphere. "Behold, I am Azaz, king of kings, conqueror of queens, eradicator of empires. All are subject to my will!"

Lightning flew in every direction from the great bear king, consuming every stray corner of sky. The eagles and hawks flew away as quickly as their wings allowed. The snakes burrowed back into their holes in full retreat. Only the faithful grizzly servants remained. Even they quaked underneath the newly crowned bear god. The bears laid their bodies down, prostrating themselves before Azaz, emperor of all animals. Azaz smelled the fear, bubbling like fresh blood, washing over them, and laughed.



TABLET 3:

THE WAR OF THE ANIMALS

CHAPTER 35

Gungung Dor

Bear Mountain, Rockies, USA

Azaz The Bear God sat on his rocky throne, breathing in the fear like ether. His armor was white fire. Red, gold, and white flames approximated the visage of a giant short-faced bear meshed with the fur and mass of a grizzly that extended in a body that looked as gargantuan as that of a killer whale. The body of fire was larger than any bear to ever live. Even the massive White Claw, one of the largest bears on Earth, looked diminutive by comparison. The brilliance of the fire was such that few could even look at the massive king of all animals directly. It was like gazing at a fallen sun. And then there were the red nanobots, now servants of fire that surrounded their master, saying nothing. They simply watched for any threats. Their flames circulated in endless fusion near the massive grizzly and polar bear guards that sat at the foot of the throne.

Below Azaz, animals reenacted the great battle on the top of *Gol-Kilpyne*. A mountain lion portrayed Thraxis, decorated with scale-like armor. A bald eagle portrayed Thunder Killer, decorated with plumage from recent kills. Of course, a grizzly from The Blood Paw portrayed Azaz, knocking the two opponents from the top of the mountain before Azaz stood victorious, ready to be anointed by the gods.

Animals from all parts of the continent looked on, feasting on bits of men garnished in herbs. Hands, thighs, and even full legs protruded from great bonfires. Hawks carried the food to the hordes of gathered animals. Anacondas, rattlesnakes, and copperheads attended, if only to make peace with the new king of kings. Coyotes, foxes, wolves, and dogs sat next to them, barking and howling at climatic moments in the drama. Of course, bears of all kinds, from White Claw and his polar bears to the brown and black bears of the former Appalachia, congregated.

In the nanosphere, countless holograms were visible—from Thraxis, who hissed silently, to Yu The Golden Nightmare, now with a mask of gold to hide his plague-marked features. The Night Eye appeared, as did Groth The Impaler. King Croc was there, representing King Blu. Moon Shadow, though recovered,

joined only at White Claw's bidding. The only noticeable absences were Yorba and Zulta, a sight that did not go unnoticed by the bear god. Still, even they sent envoys like Kama The Lion King and their own seer, Gray Eyes, as a gesture of good faith.

"Welcome to the coronation of your new king of kings," Sky Death said after the proceedings started.

Sky Death spoke in a way that commanded attention—soft, but assertive. It was a welcome contrast to the bear god himself and a fitting compromise to show that *Animus* had a place at the table of the king.

"Today, our great king of kings wishes to say a few words before receiving the blessing of the prophets," Sky Death announced.

The turkey vulture flew quickly from the unquenchable fire that approached him. He shone with the dripping fire of the crown upon his head. Azaz approached to receive a ceremonial crown, one Groth confiscated from The Tower of the former London. The mass of bear heaved back and forth, his steps like tiny earthquakes as he approached the top of the Bear Mountain stone steps. There, Groth placed the crown on Azaz's head, and the animals in attendance roared their approval.

"This is not just my crowning," Azaz said, once the cheering subsided, "but the crowning of all animals over the scourge that was Man. Today, I promise you The New *Ozu*, strong decrees for a strong society. No living *rulku* will be permitted in the kingdom. Only approved specimens will be bred for dietary purposes. Any other *rulku* is an enemy of the king and subject to immediate death."

At this, the animals cried out and howled, with some notable exceptions, like Moon Shadow.

"I also decree that every land, no matter how many oceans separate it, is the kingdom of Azaz. As such, I am the supreme ruler. The animal lords shall serve as my council, but they shall not make any decisions of the state without the approval of their king. No enlightened animal shall fight with any other enlightened animal or be subject to The Blood Paw and their surrogates on other continents. Finally, no animal tribe or kingdom shall make war with any other or face my wrath."

The animals applauded their first tyrant the way the *rulku* welcomed a newborn prince.

"But animals," King Azaz said. "This grand feast is not about rules, but celebration. Together, we will dismantle the weapons and abodes of the *rulku*. We will learn to use and rise above their magic. We will build empires and navigate the ocean. We will become the greatest, most enlightened society this

world has ever known. I declare this The Year of the Bear God, in my honor. I declare this The United Empire of All Animal Kind. I declare today a day of rest and celebration, so let the man flesh fill your snouts and the pride of being a beast fill your souls. For always, I am Azaz, king of kings!”

Bears led the roars and growls of approval. Wolves and dogs let up their howls. Eagles and hawks shrieked, as did owls.

Azaz stood for a moment before Sky Death ventured closer to him, whispering in the bear god’s ear.

“Our esteemed master of ceremonies tells me that the animal kingdoms bring three prophets as a gift for your new king,” Azaz announced. “Let them tell us of the great empire we shall build!”

The first prophet, Gray Eyes, emerged through the holosphere. He used images of smoke and fire to show his prediction for the first year. An elephant and an ape wrestled, but a bear won.

“Mighty king,” Gray Eyes said. “The animal gods test you in your first year with small wars and skirmishes, but you vanquish your rivals and establish the first worldwide kingdom Earth has ever known.”

“A good prophecy,” Azaz said. “What is a crown if one is not willing to fight for it?”

The second prophet, Methuselah, appeared in a shadowy form. She manipulated plant vines and tea leaves in the holosphere, showing Azaz with a mate and a cub. “Before the first year is done, animal lord,” Methuselah said, “you shall have a mate and a prince to succeed you.”

Azaz let out a roar of approval. Already his mind had turned to the question of an heir. “That prophecy beats the last,” he said. “Thank you, queen of all plants.”

Methuselah disappeared into the ether of the holosphere. The sphere closed, and a live bird, Snow Prophet, flew forward. He perched himself on the last step, well below the massive king bear.

“Gray Eyes spoke of the present,” Snow Prophet said, “and he is right. Methuselah spoke of the near future, and she is right. But I,” Snow Prophet added, with a slight pause, for dramatic effect, “I speak of a future that is farther from the shores of time. I speak of the end. As a prophet, I speak only Truth.”

The animals gasped. Some growled. Still, Snow Prophet continued. Using actual smoke, he wove its misty body into two *rulku*, one of whom held the knife that cut Azaz. “The *rulku* will rise again,” Snow Prophet said. “They shall join a rebellion among the animals. The ghost of Fowler shall appear in his wizard form. When that ghost appears in the last battle, the hour of Azaz has come.”

The animals fell silent. For a prophet to so boldly proclaim the end of times in the presence of the new king was unheard of. Jackdaws and mountain deer

whispered amongst each other: surely this crazy snowy owl had a death wish. But before their gossip entered the nanosphere, Snow Prophet conjured more smoke and disappeared. The animals' eyes searched the night sky, but nothing was to be found. All eyes turned to Azaz.

The brilliant bear god illuminated the night sky as he stood up. "Fear not, animals," he said. "This is also a favorable omen. It signals the end of Man. The death of the *rulku* heralds my immortality."

The animals fought their urge to be silent at the proclamation. Forced yowls and cheers took the air, becoming louder, as if their fear took auditory form to feed itself still more.

Azaz beckoned Vronkyl. "Find and kill the last prophet," he ordered. "I want his dead body brought before me."

Azaz then summoned White Claw. "Brother bear," he said. "I know we have had our differences. But the slice of the same blade has brought us together. I have a task for you that might prove your loyalty and would make me appoint you as undisputed lord of *Animus*."

White Claw paused before finding his words. "I am honored, my lord," the polar bear king said.

"My scientists are cracking the codes of the *rulku* thinking machines," Azaz said. "Once they do, we will be able even to cross the waters of King Blu. I mean to send some of my most loyal Blood Paw bears to Africa. My spies tell me that Yorba means to avenge himself upon Zulta. He blames the elephant king for a poison that nearly took his life. I worry that an uprising between the two sides could trigger a war. I want you to go and explain this to both parties. I will give you a map of a new, divided continent. Each shall rule at designated points. If the elephant king and the ape king give you trouble, you have my authorization to kill them."

"Yes, my king," White Claw said.

Azaz put his paw on the scars from Fowler's assault. "Do well," Azaz said, "and as your prize, I will let you give Fowler the killing blow, if the words of the crazy owl prophet come true."

White Claw's snout wrinkled. He let out a contented growl.

Azaz then descended, his guards at his side, to partake in the feast. All animals bowed before him.

"Is it true the heart of the *rulku* warrior Xavian burns here," Azaz asked, "as a gift from Yu The Golden Nightmare?"

The hawks presented Azaz with the requested prize.

"Let us feast," he said.

The animals let up another massive growl, and the feasting began.



Gungung Dor

Bear Mountain, Rockies, USA

Months Later

Behind the glorious throne, the smoke from the pyres rose all day and all night. The sky became a massive, soot-filled black cloud of ash. It was said by the sparrows and thrushes that there was not one corner of Azaz's kingdom not dominated by the smoke of the crematoria. A bird could fly from coast to coast without seeing any living *rulku* running beneath them. It was called The Second Passover by historians of the *rulku* like Snow Prophet and Groth. Only this time, not even the firstborn were spared by the mad bear god.

Dasu, the exalted mountain lion, striped in the scars of the *rulku*, paraded up to the foot of the last stair beneath Azaz's throne.

"Leave us," Azaz said to Freyda, his pregnant grizzly mate.

As sizable as she was with her cub, with reddish-brown grizzly fur and a beautiful coat that shone in the sun, even Freyda looked small next to the bear god.

"Hunter of *Animus*," Azaz said. "My commander Vronkyl and my Blood Paw have hunted down every last *rulku* we could find and brought them to our fires. Your ability to hunt and kill *rulku* is the stuff of legend. What have you found?"

"I have hunted all the homes and native habitats of the *rulku*," Dasu said. He lowered his massive head in deference, yet his yellow-black eyes were as cold as those of an anaconda. "For months, my mountain lions, bobcats, and even your bears have hunted the land that was once filled with *rulku*. There is not one militia left. This land is free of their curse."

Azaz nodded. "You are by far my most expedient hunter. Yet, there is one *rulku* that I know lives. The beast they call Fowler. He gave me this scar," Azaz said, pointing to his fiery snout. "Even the fire crown has not healed it fully. Fowler also gutted the mighty polar bear lord, White Claw, leaving him for dead. Fowler killed more bears than any *rulku* in history. Yet, he is nowhere? He eludes you and your hunters."

Dasu fought a growl. He looked up at the high king seated on his throne and said, "We checked the melting ices of the North, my lord, as you commanded. There are only wild plants there now. They are so thick that not one animal can pass them, let alone a whole militia of *rulku*. Respectfully, my king, the snowy

owl's prophecy is a false one. No *rulku* can be found."

Azaz stood up. "I don't know how Fowler is avoiding you," he said, "but he is alive. I promised him we would meet again, and it's a promise I intend to keep. Keep hunting. Keep searching. Keep planting spies near those plants."

"It's a massive territory, my lord, and a treacherous one," Dasu said. "However, we can post some crows, beavers, and weasels."

"Do so," Azaz ordered. "I want you posted there as well, out of sight. No *rulku* will defeat me. For always, I am Azaz, king of kings."

"Yes, my king of kings," Dasu said. He lowered his head in a bow and headed off.

Azaz watched Dasu collect more bears and mountain lions. Just then, Sky Death flew to his side.

"My lord," Sky Death said. "The architects work day and night. They have some designs to show you about how the new animal habitats for the cities will look once we tear down the structures of the *rulku*. There is also another matter of business."

"The currency?" Azaz asked. "I thought we set a monetary system in place for each of the kingdoms."

"You did, my lord," Sky Death said. "It's the thinking machines. King Croc has a flying ship that will allow you to hover over the waters. You can visit all of your lands freely now."

"Good. I know which land I will visit first," Azaz said, a slight growl ending his sentence. "Are White Claw and The Blood Paw ready to send their legions to the Congo?"

"They are, my lord," Sky Death said.

"Perfect timing," Azaz said. "Zulta and Yorba must honor our agreement, or I will replace them both."

"Yorba tests you, my lord," Sky Death said. "Our spies tell us that he sends his monkeys to poison the leaves the elephants depend upon for survival. Yorba plans a full invasion and a slaughter of the herds. Zulta won't touch anything that hasn't been tested first. Zulta also plots to have his elephants stampede the Congo jungles and kill the gorillas and their vegetation."

"That will only stir up Methuselah. It took me forever to negotiate to have her allow us to eat and feed from the fruits of the unawakened plants. I will have to humble the two kings," Azaz said. "Doing so will stir the ire of the other animal lords. Tell White Claw to do this quietly, if possible. I don't need to stir dissension before I have even built my empire."

"Yes, my lord," Sky Death said.

"And the other matter—The Night Eye," Azaz said. "Bring them to *Gungung*

Dor quietly. I want to interrogate them myself when I return from my grand march. Tell Groth The Impaler that the kingdom of *Yorantul* is his until further notice. Tell him that I want no ceremonies or announcements. Keep this quiet.”

“The order will be given, my lord,” Sky Death said.

“What of Thraxis and Thunder Killer?” Azaz asked.

“Moon Shadow and the animals of *Animus* protect Thunder Killer,” Sky Death said. “He hasn’t been seen in the skies in months. Thraxis has gone missing. We suspect that the snakes have found a way to tunnel her back to the jungles of *Sur-Dethson*. Rumor has it that she is surrounded by the great river and jungles and that none can touch her there.”

“It’s probably just as well,” Azaz said. “Thraxis rules with an iron fist, which can be useful in times like these. Besides, I cannot kill the treacherous lords yet without drawing too much ire from the animal community. It will have to wait.”

“Very wise, my lord,” Sky Death said.

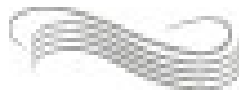
“Send a command through the nanosphere announcing my grand march through the kingdoms,” Azaz said. “As soon as that is announced, let Zulta and Yorba know that White Claw is on his way. Any attack on him is an attack on me. Send notice to the other animal lords as well. I mean to send legions to all continents to guard my interests.”

“Of course, my lord,” Sky Death said.

“First, let me look at the architect’s sketches. I need some good news tonight,” Azaz insisted.

Sky Death bowed his head and flew off.

Azaz rose. The earth quaked beneath him, and the fire that was the bear god danced like a brilliant sun as he moved. Still, he kept his eyes all about him. There was something in Azaz’s walk that announced that even the winds were subject to his rule, and something else that suggested a fear that even those winds might betray him.



CHAPTER 36

Klang Uktor

Congo, Africa

The giant thinking machine, half aircraft carrier and half naval warship, parted the waters as White Claw and The Fifth Blood Paw Regiment landed on the beaches of *Klang Uktor*. The praetorian bears came first, stepping to the left and the right to make way for King White Claw, lord of *Animus* and of the northern regions. King Zulta, sporting his ceremonial tattoos, and an entire regiment of elephants, trumpeted the arrival. Next to Zulta, Earl The Equivocator and Slash stood in attendance.

Yanta, Zulta's beloved heir, looked up at Zulta and asked, "Are they coming to take power, Father?"

"I don't know, daughter," Zulta said. "Azaz sends his Blood Paw legions everywhere. He has a special interest in quelling the rebellions in *Klang Uktor*. He sees it as the first test of his powers as high king."

"So, we are a conquered herd?" Yanta asked.

"There is only one king now," Zulta said. "But he is a king in name only. He has not lived in the Congo or eaten of its leaves. I will fight to see that you one day rule the same jungles as your father. Quiet now. The bear enforcer approaches."

White Claw came up and bowed before the king of the jungle.

"King White Claw," Zulta said. "I have valued your counsel at our meetings. It is nice to meet you animal to animal."

"I wish I could say the same," White Claw said. "The issue of Yorba and the lower Congo is most troubling to our high king."

Zulta ushered his guest away from Yanta and the herds of elephants and their gigantic ears. Earl and Slash stayed behind, guarding from the wings.

"Perhaps we can talk privately about the matter of Yorba," Zulta said.

"As you wish," White Claw replied.

The praetorian bears followed White Claw. An entire legion stood in formation on the beach below him.

"Perhaps you can show my soldiers to their barracks," White Claw suggested.

Zulta signaled Yanta and the others of the herd. They trumpeted a signal and then went to gather the visiting legion.

“How long does King Azaz plan to deploy his legions on our land?” Zulta asked.

“As long as is necessary to keep the peace between you and King Yorba,” White Claw replied.

Zulta brought White Claw the long way to Elephant’s Cove, where his beds and leaves and running rivers lied. Zulta deliberately brought White Claw past an emerging stone statue of King Azaz and along two separate herds of elephants who stood guard against the wave of gorilla attacks. Spider monkeys called out as they labored on Azaz’s grand vision, creating living quarters for all animals that blended the *rulku* infrastructure into the natural world.

“A civilization is being born,” White Claw said in passing. “It would be a shame to see such magnificent accomplishments lost in a sea of warfare.”

Zulta ushered White Claw into Elephant Cove. He made sure the serpentine servants gave White Claw fresh water and meat as they reclined.

“I agree,” Zulta answered at last. “Once I eliminate my problem, elephants will maintain the peace the jungle has known for hundreds of moon cycles.”

White Claw took a sip of the water. He gulped it, along with whatever words he truly wanted to use, before saying, “That touches on the matter exactly. King Azaz wishes to divide the continent between you and King Yorba. He does not wish for you to engage in any more surreptitious attacks.”

Zulta snorted. “And does King Azaz expect me to allow Yorba’s incursions on territory that, for centuries, has belonged to the African elephant?” he asked. “Yorba kills even the youngest calves of my herds. I cannot let this stand.”

White Claw drank again and then said, “You are wise, and I respect you, my elephant lord. But the days are different for all of us now. We can no longer entertain territorial disputes. All land is animal land united under our common king. Any rebellion makes his rule look that much more compromised. This Azaz will not stand for. He asks you to show your loyalty by allowing him to handle Yorba. Azaz offers his bears as clear protection for your herds.”

Zulta said nothing at first. He got up, paced to the stream, drank heavily, and then returned. “And do you demand the same of Yorba?” Zulta asked.

“Of course,” White Claw answered. “Even though Azaz’s loyal birds report that you poisoned the great gorilla king, provoking him.”

“He has since poisoned many of the trees my elephants depend on,” Zulta replied.

As Zulta spoke, he heard what he thought was a misplaced growl. Upon closer inspection, as the elephant lord turned around, he saw White Claw struggling for

breath. The massive polar bear coughed up foaming liquid along with sickly nanobots.

Zulta trumpeted with his thick trunk, blasting out calls of warning. Yanta and the royal herd came quickly, up the familiar steps to Elephant Cove.

“What is it, Father?” Yanta asked.

“Quickly, call our medicine animal, Gray Eyes,” Zulta ordered. “White Claw has swallowed some kind of poison.”

Yanta ran off before the last words were spoken.

“How is this possible?” Kwuptu, one of Zulta’s matriarchs, asked.

“Don’t look at me with accusing eyes,” Zulta said. “Would I be foolish enough to poison Azaz’s envoy? Yorba must have struck to call Azaz’s full might down upon us. Hurry! Do what you can. This polar bear must live, or we all die!”

Kwuptu quickly mixed water with some herbs. She gave the mixture to White Claw, who was now on his side, hacking foaming water from his system.

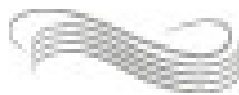
“Drink this,” Kwuptu urged. “It has the power to slow down many poisons. It will keep you breathing until Gray Eyes arrives.”

With that, the herd stood watch over White Claw. They saw no broken foliage, no hints as to how the assassin struck. Gray Eyes slithered quickly. He arrived before Yanta, seeing the animal retching on the soil bed. Gray Eyes quickly gave White Claw nanobots capable of eating the poison. As the bear stopped coughing and vomited up the last of the poison, Gray Eyes turned to Kwuptu.

“Your quick thinking saved this bear’s life,” he said. “I would not have arrived early enough.”

“I am glad you live,” Zulta said to White Claw. “But this may well visit death upon my herds. I must eliminate the problem of Yorba. The mad gorilla leaves me little choice.”

The royal herd looked up at Zulta. The question lingered, though unspoken: was it wise to speak of defying the high king’s orders with his servant still on the ground? The elephants looked at one another. On one thing, they all agreed: this would not end well for any of them.



Ipsa Dul

Cardiff, Wales

Azaz saw the brown bears bow in his honor the moment he arrived for the grand

parade. Groth The Impaler, newly promoted to animal lord of the continent, received Azaz with only his finest troops of wolves, foxes, horses, and wolverines. As required, the squirrels and moles worked feverishly upon erecting a statue of Azaz made of pillars of stone. The smokestacks of the *rulku* bonfires burned behind them, unnoticed. The burgeoning sculpture obscuring the endlessly piled *rulku* bodies showed Azaz standing over a spherical earth, raising his mighty claws to the heavens. Azaz passed by, complimenting the statue. His first legion of Blood Paw troops marched behind him, branching off to secure the area.

The parade wasn't even half over before Sky Death signaled his new master. Through the pomp and furor, the turkey vulture spoke in loud and discordant gasps. "I am sorry to bother you, my king of kings," Sky Death said. "There has been word from *Klang Uktor*. White Claw was poisoned during the negotiations with Zulta. The Blood Paw investigates. Zulta blames Yorba. Yorba blames Zulta. Zulta is preparing a strike on gorilla mountains well past the perimeter of the Congo."

"Those two petty lords dare attack my envoy," Azaz roared over the parade.

He followed this with a snort of disgust and a long, sky-shattering growl.

Every animal heard the master bear's growl. The dancing foxes missed a step, unsure of whether to continue their ceremony or to stop. Groth The Impaler nodded at them. They continued, as did the singing larks. The animals marched on in their glorious parade.

"Summon Yorba and Zulta to the port of *Klang Uktor*. I will meet with them personally."

"As you wish, my king," Sky Death said.

The massive bear god, the fire dancing all over him, marched up to Groth The Impaler. "Thank you for your greeting and for your good work hunting down the last of the *rulku*," Azaz said. "I shall return and feast with you one day to conclude this march of victory. Yet, I am afraid an urgent matter needs my immediate attention."

"Can I be of assistance, my king?" Groth asked.

"Yes," Azaz said. "My Blood Paw has a special mission. We will need access to the raven lords, The Night Eye."

"My lord?" Groth asked. He kept his blank facial expression, so as not to show his surprise at so brazen a request.

"I will be taking them with me for a meeting of lords," Azaz said. "As my messenger Sky Death informed you, you will rule in their stead."

"I'm honored, sir," Groth said. "But there is one issue I hoped to speak to you about. In the absence of the *rulku*, the outer colonies are suffering for food."

“They may soon have animal meat,” Azaz said. “Right now, I must go.” Azaz marched off. Groth stared after him. In only a matter of months, The Night Eye went from one of the most powerful intelligences in the world to a tattered collection of raven skin and bones held in The Tower. Now, they would certainly be subject to slaughter. Groth had impaled many *rulku* bodies, but he had always looked his prey in the eye before going for the kill. Never had he seen anything as cruel as the plague bombs, as the bodies of the *rulku*, piled beyond all numbers, and of the treatment of his former lords. Groth’s hardy stomach turned within him. Yet, he stood at attention, watching this massive brute pass. Groth was as fearless a wolverine as any animal to bear the name. Even so, he recognized a true monster when he saw one. This king of kings, wrapped all in fire, could snap even the Adar Llwhch Gwin in two if he wished to. And so, Groth stood there, feeling more powerless than he had ever felt, in a position of greater power than he had ever known.



CHAPTER 37

Klang-Uktor

Congo, Africa

The Blood Paw kept Zulta The Elephant King at one end of the port and Yorba The Ape King at the other. Zulta’s royal herd stood ceremonially by their king and ruler, and Yorba stood with Kama and a few of his closest apes. Gray Eyes still nursed White Claw, and both sent a silent message in their absence. No one spoke. No music played. Instead, all awaited Azaz, trembling ever so slightly, as if awaiting the Hindu goddess Kali, the Demon Slayer, in animal form.

Zulta and Yorba did not wait long. Azaz’s largest thinking machine, the great battleship *Tunkon Ri*, translated loosely as *Fire Bear’s Paw*, parted even the largest waves of an active and turbulent ocean. Storm winds circulated, but even they retreated in the presence of the sacred fire bear. Azaz marched off the battleship with fearsome rigor. Zulta and Yorba kept their heads bowed as Azaz paced back and forth.

“How is White Claw?” Azaz asked Frendyl, the ranking Blood Paw officer.

“The snake healer has brought him back from the brink of death,” Frendyl answered. “He will live.”

“Any progress in determining who is responsible, Colonel?” Azaz asked. Frendyl growled and said, “Not much, my lord. The snake that served the water has been interrogated and killed. She insisted that Yorba bribed her with a permanent position in the royal household. We also found the food to have been poisoned. The snake that served the food was also interrogated before he was killed. He swore Zulta paid him. I would not be surprised if each animal lord tried to set up the other so that they would incur your wrath, my majesty.”

“And to give themselves exclusive control of the continent,” Azaz said.

“Exactly, my king of kings,” Frendyl said.

Azaz approached Zulta The Elephant King first. Though arrayed in fine silk, a laurel, and tattoos marking his many victories in battle, Zulta, the largest land animal on earth, looked somehow smaller standing next to the bear god. Azaz was one of the few who could look the elephant lord in the eyes.

“What do you have to say for yourself, elephant lord?” Azaz asked. “Why is it that one of my trusted warriors, my personal envoy, cannot be kept free from harm while in your personal care? Does that not look like weakness to you? Either you can’t keep assassins from your court, or you hired them yourself.”

“Respectfully, my king of kings,” Zulta said. “Yorba knew of the arrival. He seized an opportunity I could not have anticipated. If you would let me just take care of Yorba, I promise you that there will be no more problems within the borders of my kingdom.”

“An opportunity you could not have anticipated?” Azaz asked. He leaned in, his snout uncomfortably close to Zulta’s tusks, as he said, “Your emissaries complain to me about how Yorba poisons the trees that your herds feed from. How could you *not* anticipate this? A true king is prepared for any outcome, no matter how grim.”

“Yes, my lord,” Zulta said.

“The elephant lies,” Yorba yelled from across the port. “He is without courage or honor. My apes had no hand in his sloppy handling of his servants. It is an easy lie to tell, a feeble excuse from a weak king. Let me face Zulta in the cage of battle. Let the true king prevail.”

Azaz approached Yorba. Not many could make the mighty gorilla look up.

Gazing up at Azaz The Bear God was exactly what Yorba needed to do.

“I am the true king of kings,” Azaz said to Yorba. “You rule as lords at my discretion. Right now, I see an ape who cannot control himself and an elephant who has lost control of his kingdom.”

“Not so, Azaz,” Yorba said. “You forget that it was I who defeated the *rulku*

general Uzwali for you. It was I who earned the right to be king.”

“Step forward,” Azaz ordered.

“What?” Yorba asked incredulously.

“Both of you,” Azaz called with a growl loud enough to set the winds on fire. “Step forward!”

Yorba moved first, eying Azaz and huffing the whole time. Zulta moved only when Azaz gazed upon him, gingerly making his way to the center of the line. Both stood shoulder to tusk.

“I gave you a direct order—there would be no more conflicts,” Azaz said. His voice, half-growl, half-proclamation, carried through the air like wayward thunder. “I divided the continent between you. I can see that you mistook my kindness for weakness. I can see that both of you need to be reminded who is the king of all animals. Very well, then. You will both pay for this insult to my sovereignty.”

Thunder and clouds blotted the stark sun overhead as the mammoth red nanobots ascended from the fire crown on Azaz’s head. The nanobots formed a perverse circle above him, like an inverted halo of fire. Azaz’s eyes became white as lightning. The fires that made up his massive bear’s body became gold and then white. All around him, the earth shook. The skies opened up. Azaz commanded a jagged bolt from the heavens down on Zulta, taking off half of his remaining tusk. A second bolt came down upon Yorba, scarring him in serrated black ash down his face and chest. Both animal lords howled in pain, kneeling.

The royal elephant herd protested, trumpeting and stomping, marching to surround its king. Azaz rose and with a single swipe of his paw sent a message to their nanobots that threw the elephants all back and off of their mighty legs. The gorillas also ran towards Azaz. With another swipe of his paw, Azaz called a tornado funnel from the heavens. Azaz ordered the red nanobots to keep the apes in place as the winds came through, lifting them up to the heavens and then depositing them to the ground.

“Think of me as your god,” Azaz said. His voice now echoed throughout the nanosphere, so loud that the elephants had to fold their ears. “I speak to all animal lords now, so that you know that I alone am king. I will not tolerate any battle among the animals. Likewise, I will not tolerate any disobedience. Any failure to obey will be met with death.”

“Choose,” Azaz said to Yorba as the gorilla lord kneeled before the great bear.

“Choose what, your majesty?” Yorba asked.

“Choose which half of your apes live and which half die,” Azaz replied. “Please. I am sorry, my king,” Yorba said, bristling, still on fire from his fresh scars. “I shall insult you no further.”

Azaz waved his right paw. At the behest of Azaz's red ruling nanobots, the nanobots living symbiotically with the apes turned on their masters. They poisoned them the same way White Claw had been poisoned. The apes fell, calling out for the aid of their former king.

The elephants fared no better. Azaz, with another thrust of his paw, lifted half of the royal herd up.

"Choose," Azaz said to Zulta.

"Please don't hurt my daughter, Yanta," Zulta said, kneeling before the king of kings. "She is my only hope for a strong matriarch in the herd. And please spare Kwuptu. She saved White Claw's life."

"Very well," Azaz said. "Since you have done as I commanded, since you have chosen, I will spare your two most precious family members."

Half of the remaining elephants, including ranking females in the herd, fell, trumpeting, blasting stridently with their trunks in a call for mercy. Within moments, their mouths foamed, and they died of the same poison that overtook White Claw.

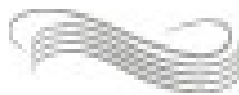
The gorillas and elephants huddled separately and wailed.

"This will be the last time I show you such mercy," Azaz said. "My word is absolute. I have chosen to divide the continent. I will not risk another war over your petty squabbles for power. You will honor my orders. If you do not, the next time I come here, I will kill the entire royal herd and every royal mountain gorilla. I will behead you and put new lords in both of your places as your rotting heads look on from pikes. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my lord," Zulta said, still shuddering over the fates of his brothers and sisters.

"Completely, my lord," Yorba said, trembling as he bowed.

"Good," Azaz said. "Incinerate the dead," he ordered the surrounding Blood Paw guards. "You," he said to Frendyl, "take me to see White Claw. I wish to see at least one loyal animal lord before I go. Then I shall continue my grand march, uninterrupted," he called back to Zulta and Yorba, who didn't dare rise from their knees.



CHAPTER 38

Gungung Dor

Bear Mountain, Rockies, USA Six Months Later

The Grand March, as Azaz ordered his historians to refer to it, met with no resistance after the animal lords of the world saw how easily the king of kings toppled a mighty elephant lord and an ape ruler. Always, Azaz did not come alone. The Blood Paw grew in size, and bears were posted to all kingdoms to facilitate the transition process. None of the animal lords dared to object. King Croc was gracious but evasive when it came to the intentions of King Blu. Thraxis feigned sickness, but emerged from the jungle in her holographic form to kneel before Azaz. The kingdom of *Animus* stood behind Moon Shadow, who reminded Azaz of her animals' needs, despite the distant White Claw replacing her as sole king of her own kingdom. And then there was Yu The Golden Nightmare. After Azaz congratulated him on his improving health and on containing and conquering the animal virus, he berated the giant panda emperor for not killing the *rulku* as efficiently as he had. The suggestion that The Golden Nightmare hid *rulku* in collusion with The Night Eye in Siberia and that The Blood Paw would be stationed to assist in the extermination did not sit well with the animals of the former Asia. Yet, The Golden Nightmare bowed and paid homage, as did all the animal lords. Even as The Blood Paw hunted the few *rulku* still alive in Siberia, needlessly slaughtering them.

Underneath all the fawning, there were fangs. The dread of Azaz exceeded any joy regarding the end of the war. Always, there were questions about greater food supplies and greater access to the architects to meet the animals' communal needs. Truly, Azaz was a great king: he created currency; he consulted with King Blu and built navigation systems to move trade between kingdoms; he negotiated food with Methuselah; he built animal cities and gave animals access to thinking machines. In many ways, Azaz was the Ataturk of the animal world.

But always there was the question behind the buried fangs: how long can this mad pharaoh's tyranny last?

Perhaps no act of aggression ignited the ire of the animal lords so much as the abduction of The Night Eye. Before Azaz's reign, The Night Eye were perched to be the information conduit of the world. They were essentially the animal equivalent of the *rulku* secret service, with information on the doings of all the animals throughout the kingdoms. The network of spies they built up was unparalleled. But after the fall of Adar Llwhch Gwin, their fate was sealed. They spent their days waiting in a dark Bear Mountain prison cell with barely enough

food to keep even the smallest of the crows alive.

When Azaz opened the cell door that the Blood Paw guarded so zealously, The Night Eye cried at seeing sunlight for the first time in six months.

Azaz, his own brilliant light ablaze, entered, fully armed. He brought Vronkyl with him.

“Lock the cell door,” Azaz called to the bears behind them.

“It is of no use, my king,” The Night Eye said, motionless, unable to fly. “We haven’t the strength to fly to freedom, even if you offered it to us.”

“Perhaps you know why you are here?” Azaz asked.

Only a few ravens did the speaking now, in the *Osine* of old. The first, Mother Raven, said only, “Because our ambitions got the better of us. We fashioned a beast that nearly killed our future king.”

“Is that what The Blood Paw told you?” Azaz asked.

“No, my lord,” the other raven said. “The Blood Paw told us nothing. They simply killed as many of us as they could before we stopped swarming and ceased attacking their eyes. They killed all attacking birds and abducted the rest of us from The Tower to your palace.”

“Then they’re doing their jobs right,” Azaz said. “As hard as it is for you to believe, the reason you’re here has nothing to do with Adar Llwith Gwin or the fact that you bribed one of my best bears, Hulkul, to poison me where I stood. I would have simply killed you for that. The reason you’re alive is that you kept from me some vital information you had no right to keep hidden from your king.”

The Night Eye gulped, looking at each other. They held many secrets Azaz would not know. Which one could he possibly be referring to? Not even the most clever raven knew.

“My lord?” they asked collectively.

“Fowler and the war criminal Brigand,” Azaz said. “How many of my bears have been scarred or killed by them? One directly attacked your king. The other put more awakened animals into the crematoria than we have put *rulku* into the hungry flames. Yet, you know something, and you keep it from the king who would command your loyalty. Why?”

“We had only suspicions,” The Night Eye said. “Our spies needed more time to confirm the intel.”

“What intel, exactly?” Azaz demanded.

The Night Eye kept quiet. They spoke in a raven dialect only they would understand.

Azaz raised a paw. The nanobots surrounding the ravens swarmed on one decrepit bird, eating it whole as the other ravens watched.

“What intel?” Azaz asked again. “If you cannot provide me with any info, you are of no use to me. I will find and kill the *rulku*, anyway. You will just die before I do.”

“Spare our lives and our families,” The Night Eye said. “Feed us, and we will do more than tell you. We will fly you to where the last living *rulku* colony resides.”

The assertiveness of the ravens struck Azaz. “Perhaps you mean to trick me?” he asked.

“How can one trick a god?” Mother Raven replied.

The statement, so simple and direct, appeased Azaz’s enormous ego.

“Well said,” Azaz replied. “I may have a use for you after all.”

The ravens and crows bowed their beaks to the earthy floor. “We have seen your power, great king,” The Night Eye said. “We beg you to show us no more. We will do as you command us.”

“How many other animals know of this secret?” Azaz asked.

“Of the *rulku* colony? Only our nanobots,” The Night Eye said. “We lost our best spies to you after the war.”

“Not even Groth The Impaler knows?” Azaz asked.

“No, my lord,” The Night Eye said in reply. “We knew that you would be angry with us. We kept this info to one day barter for our lives.”

“That was wise,” Azaz said. “But tell me: Where exactly would you lead me?”

The Night Eye looked at each other. They now knew not to speak in a language foreign to their king.

“Do we have an agreement?” The Night Eye asked.

“You have a choice: trust that I *may* let you and your families live or face certain death.”

“Just past Polar Pass, just past *Animus*, by the ocean, beneath the fresh forest of plants,” The Night Eye said. “We know the way in.”

“Where is that way in?” Azaz asked.

The Night Eye fluttered one last time. “To know that,” Mother Raven said, “you have a choice, wise king of kings: bring us there and let us show you and then fly free. Or kill us here and waste months finding the right passage while the *rulku* are alerted to your presence and prepare for the fight. We know what awaits you. Speak to White Claw. The *rulku* wizard has powers that may even rival your own.”

Azaz lifted a paw. He crushed The Night Eye ever so slightly. They squawked. Still, they knew that they were in no lasting danger. The info they possessed would wet the palate of even the most hardened version of the mad bear king.

The bear god released them. “Very well,” he said. “But if I find that you’re lying to save yourselves or to trick me, there is nowhere in the skies or on the earth that you can flee. I will hunt you, and I will kill you and all of your kind, starting with your families.”

“We understand, king of kings,” The Night Eye said, bowing once more.

“Feed them,” Azaz said to his Blood Paw guards, “but keep them under close watch. We head out tomorrow to finally end this war.”



No Rul Ozu

Inyo County, California

Nurvlyn sat, analyzing the beauty of the human body for a moment before losing it forever. The perfectly synchronized rhythmic breathing, the flexibility of the hands, the wonder of the human brain, even the callused skin that swept like an ocean around him, holding his heart in: everything was miraculous. No matter how much Azaz tried to wash humanity from the soils of the earth, that miracle remained. One species survived to create civilization, to harvest the earth, to reach the stars, to show what life could be for all species that might follow. Great lizards like dinosaurs may have reigned longer; noble creatures of the sea like whales might have been as intelligent as the ocean itself. Yet, only one species brought science, religion, math, and astronomy to this world and made it shine. When the history of this world is recorded, humanity will never lose that distinction. Nurvlyn was honored to have been human, just as he was honored to be evolving into something more.

Nurvlyn felt every breeze painfully, saw every patch of grass, every tree, as sacred wonder, so in love was he with Creation. There was no separation between Nurvlyn and the smallest ant that crawled the world that could not be bridged by the union they shared. They were a part of Gaia, a part of life, a part of The Holy Spirit of all that was. The plants understood that. They joined with nature at its very roots. They cared not for crowns or power or control. The plants cared for the sun and for the soil and for their fruits. They didn’t see themselves as separate or above. Had he a dozen lifetimes to give, Nurvlyn could have learned so much more from their world. But Methuselah was calling, and the hour was at hand.

“Are you ready, Nurvlyn?” Methuselah asked.

“This body is almost at its end,” Nurvlyn answered. “I hate to leave it, but I

love what follows.”

“You truly are one of us,” Methuselah said. “Your consciousness will join with the sands of the desert, and those of the sea, but from those sands will grow the first planetary consciousness this world has ever known, in time. You will be reborn to speak to that consciousness, to the holy will of *Avrah* herself. First, there is one last act you must perform as the father of all awakened animals.”

“What is that?” Nurvlyn asked.

“You’ve been communing with nature for so long, perhaps you didn’t hear,” Methuselah said. “The mobiles are at it again. The crown’s king, Azaz, means to strike the last human establishment not already consumed by fire. Many of my brothers and sisters are prepared to offer their lives for the caretakers of their children. Yet, the mobiles must be warned. They must be ready for the fight. They must know that your time is at hand.”

Nurvlyn sighed. He felt so distant from fighting for power and glory. Yet, he knew that Methuselah was right.

“Let me speak in the *rulku* nanosphere,” Nurvlyn said. “Give me some more of your wisdom, Methuselah, before I leave this body.”

Smoke appeared. In a vision, Nurvlyn saw the marching bear and the ravens that led him. He saw Fowler and Brigand and the humans that worked underneath the plants. They ate what the natural world offered, never asking for more. These *rulku* didn’t pollute but used every last ounce of a plant and ate meat only when an unawakened animal met its end. They still had their weapons, and the nanobots still swarmed about them, but they were able to make plants taste of any flavor, and they were able to purify and drink rainwater left over by the plants. There was a beauty to their simple lives, one Nurvlyn admired.

“They’ve come so far,” Nurvlyn said.

“They and their wisdom are worth saving,” Methuselah said in agreement. Nurvlyn closed his eyes, communing with his nanobots. They glowed blue and gold as Nurvlyn readied his words. Quicker than a flash of lightning, Nurvlyn said, “Greetings and congratulations to those who survived Azaz’s Great Purge. You have learned to live with nature as you would with a mother or father and to respect the world around you. In the soil, you have found your souls. Yet, the war is not over. Even now, Azaz, ablaze with his Crown Of Fire, approaches with his full military might. He seeks to commit every sin mankind ever committed and then some. Azaz seeks to render humanity extinct, to avenge himself on Fowler and Brigand. The plants have sworn their lives to protect you so that you may help raise their children. Yet, Azaz will tear through. Only the warrior wizard can face him, with the help of the animals. My words will be

with you, but not my body. I am dying. By the time the attack happens, I will join with the sands of the desert until my spirit is reborn. You must fight until the animals arrive to assist you.”

Thousands of miles away, Brigand and Fowler looked at one another.

Fowler sat, communing with his nanobots and with the surrounding plants.

The plants assured Fowler that the message from Nurvlyn was authentic. “Nurvlyn is right,” Fowler said. “We must prepare for battle.”

After months of living in peace, Brigand did not miss war. Yet, he understood that just as he had prepared to fire the first shot in this war, he must also fire the last.

“I don’t know if we stand a chance,” Brigand said. “But Azaz has torn the soul from this world. He must be stopped, if this world is to survive.”

“We will not have to endure the first wave of battle alone,” Fowler said, “nor the last. I sense the animals are meeting. We will soon have allies against Azaz.”

Brigand nodded. “I will ready the men and women and ready our weapons,” he said. “When will Azaz arrive?”

“He means to strike tomorrow,” Fowler said. “There are no snows or blizzards left to protect us.”

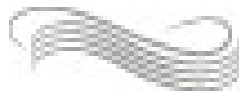
“Then we will work through the night,” Brigand said. “We will be ready.” Nurvlyn fought to hold on longer, to hear the words that were said. Yet, he felt like a ghost gliding through lands that no longer looked the same to him.

Death was calling like a gentle wind, and it was a call he could no longer ignore.

“The *rulku* heard my message,” Nurvlyn said to Methuselah. “Goodbye, my old friend. Thank you for letting me live here and learn from you.”

“The earth belongs to all of us and none of us,” Methuselah said. “But you are welcome. Goodbye, my friend. I shall see you shortly in all that is.”

With that, the plants sang in the wafting breeze. The sands stirred and danced. Even the clouds dazzled in the sky. It was a perfect day to live and an even better day to die. And so, Nurvlyn closed his eyes and joined peacefully with Creation.



CHAPTER 39

Rul-Seerus

Mount Asgard
Nunavut, Canada

Moon Shadow climbed through the last of the snow up the peaks of Mount Asgard. She had barely ascended the lowest steppe of the great mountain when the massive, fluttering wings of the snowy owl eclipsed her.

“You come seeking answers,” Snow Prophet said, descending to the lowest peak, next to Moon Shadow. “Yet, the future pierces like ice on the tip of an eagle’s wing. We have had this conversation before. Did I not tell you that only when you cry out under the same moon, with a thousand animals and *rulku* at your side will this war of the animals end? It is time for that prophecy to be fulfilled.”

“But how, wise prophet?” Moon Shadow asked. “We have all seen the might of Azaz The Bear God firsthand. His Blood Paw has spread throughout the world like locusts. Even animals who stood at my side before, like the mighty White Claw, have fallen under his dark magic. Our eagles and hawks tell us that Azaz is again on the move, hunting what he believes to be the last of the *rulku*. Yet, even if he is right, even if he doesn’t simply follow his own madness, how can we face such a power as his and win?”

Snow Prophet stood closer to Moon Shadow, using his beak to pet her in comfort. “That is the question of a leader,” he said. “Yet, even our ancestors and the *Ozu* are silent on those crucial details. All I know is that it *must* be. You *must* convince the animal lords. The animals of the world must stand up to Azaz and the mistakes he makes. His tyranny undoes everything we fought for: standing above the *rulku*, building a better world for animals and plants alike. Under his rule, I see endless fires.”

Moon Shadow shook her mighty mane. This was not the reassurance she was looking for.

“Perhaps, this time, I am not the prophet for you,” Snow Prophet said. “But there is another, one who has come to you in your dreams and visions. The great hunter Sun Shadow. He has spoken to me, as he has spoken to you.”

Moon Shadow perked up at the mention of her mate's name. "If only he were alive and here," Moon Shadow said. "He could lead the animals in this last, most desperate fight."

Snow Prophet flapped his wings, as if to dispel the notion from the sacred mountain peak. "You mistake his message," the wise old bird said. "Sun Shadow was a great wolf warrior before the dark times. But he was not half the leader you are. Sun Shadow comes because he looks to you. He knows that you alone can speak courage when other animal lords can only speak fear. You are his hope that your pups have not died in vain—that a new world awaits the pups of the wolves of countless generations, a better world, made possible by you. It is a world you will live to see, wolf queen. It is a world where you finally let your great love be a part of you without hurting you, a world where you will let go of the past in favor of the future. Sun Shadow came to tell you to stop looking to him: only you can make this happen. If ever you are to be a leader, now is the time."

"I don't know if I have the strength or the wisdom," Moon Shadow said, simply.

"Of course you don't," Snow Prophet said. "Do you think I have all the wisdom of the world, high on this mountain peak? Even I must discuss matters with the smallest sparrow perched in the lowest branch to see her perspective. No one of us has all the strength or all of the wisdom we need. But all of us, together, do. That is why you are the leader: not because you are the strongest, or the wisest, or the bravest or the best, but because you bring out those qualities in others. True leaders see leadership not just in themselves but in others. They beget more leaders, not just followers."

The words of Snow Prophet spoke to Moon Shadow in a way no other words had.

"You're right," Moon Shadow said. "We have no time to waste. I have spent so much of the last year thinking of history as an antagonist. But history does not cast us into an unbreakable mold; it is ours to make of as we will. Thank you for reminding me of who I am. Summon the animal lords. We must speak before our moment in history passes."

Snow Prophet fluttered his wings and flew high in the sky, summoning all the nanobots to reform a holosphere powerful enough to join all the animal lords. Once he did, he flew back to Moon Shadow and nodded, as if to say *Speak. History is listening.*

"Animal lords," Moon Shadow said, her voice thundering. "As I once spoke to the *rulku* to announce the rise of *Animus*, I summon you now to speak of the need for one last battle. This battle is for everything that *Animus* represents: the

pure heart of the animal, the sanctity of the *Ozu*, and the fight for what is right not just for one species but for all. Azaz moves to exterminate the last of the *rulku*. While the *rulku* are a dangerous predator that have hurt us all, if we have learned one thing from them, it is this: no one animal should have the power of extinction over another. For that matter, no one animal should have power over the hearts and minds of all. Was this not why the council of animals was formed? Was this not a sacred law of *Animus*? Yet, does Azaz consult us in this or seek our ideas? Does he care? His Blood Paw bears are stationed over all our lands and drain our food and supplies, and for what reason? To see that statues of the king of kings rise while animals' liberties fall? To humble us, his hardworking kings and queens, further? This is not the *Animus* I fought for, and it is not an *Animus* I will die for. But I will die to see that hungry animals get fed. I will die to see that animal liberties are restored. I will die to see that no one animal has power over all the others. The age of tyrants ended with the Age of Man. This is a new age, The Age of the Animal. If ever there was a time to fight, that time is now. Join me in the holosphere. Pledge your help before everything so many animals—our sisters, children, and mates—fought and died for is no more.”

Sky Death was the first to appear. Moon Shadow looked upon the newest voice of Azaz with fear and suspicion. Sky Death flapped his wings and said simply, “How I miss hearing your wonderful little speeches, wolf queen! So much has changed from the day we both fled north, seeking Nurvlyn, seeking we knew not what. Your words ring true, yet I cannot help you other than to say this: I will code and jam your signal so that no Blood Paw ears that are listening may detect you. If I am to die a traitor, at least let me not betray myself.”

Upon hearing the words of Moon Shadow and Sky Vulture, other animal lords, from Yu The Golden Nightmare to Thunder Killer to Groth The Impaler to Thraxis to King Croc to even Zulta and Yorba joined in. Every animal had a long face. Every animal waited to see who would speak first.

“I know we have fought amongst each other,” Moon Shadow said. “I know we don’t trust each other. Yet, I also know that each of us has suffered under Azaz’s ungodly paw. I have consulted our oracle, Snow Prophet, and his words were clear: if we don’t strike soon, we may never be able to strike again. Azaz has already taken, tortured and killed the royal ravens of The Night Eye. Which one of us is next?”

Yorba was the first to speak up. “Do you not see the scars on my face and chest, even in the holosphere?” he asked. “Did you not see Azaz humble both Zulta and me and kill those closest to us? No one has more reason to wreak vengeance upon the bear god than I. But unless you know exactly how we can do this, I suggest that each animal lord forget this meeting took place and look to

save themselves and their subjects.”

“Well said, Yorba,” Thraxis added. “I have fought Azaz snake to bear and even I could not poison or squeeze him to death. And now, his power is ungodly. I still look for weaknesses, for openings, for opportunities, but there are none. He is invincible.”

“I hate to agree with the snake empress,” Thunder Killer said. “But she is right. Azaz’s army is not invulnerable, but Azaz himself is.”

“Agreed,” Zulta added. “I cannot risk losing my daughter or my mate.” Moon Shadow looked within herself for words of courage, but she was still looking when a most unexpected ally spoke up.

“All is not so lost as it might seem,” King Croc said. “King Blu is not happy with Azaz’s thinking machines that pollute his waters after his grand march. He sees the king of kings acting as foolishly as the *rulku* before him. If you agree to act, he, she, or it—whatever the great intelligence is—has pledged its considerable support.”

“The ocean is wide,” Yorba said. “But sharks underwater cannot help us here.”

“Don’t underestimate the intellect of King Blu,” King Croc said. “He gave us the end of the war against the *rulku*, but not to replace one tyrant with another. He will assist us in the final hour, if we first make the stand.”

“I have complained about how many of my animals starve without man flesh, but my calls go unheard,” Groth The Impaler said. “I vote we go down fighting, especially with a whale god on our side.”

“Me too,” The Golden Nightmare said. “What we need to topple one god is another, more powerful god. We have that now, and that changes everything.” The animals all chattered amongst themselves, such was the electricity in the air.

“How can we do this?” Zulta asked. “I am an animal that deals in details. If King Blu won’t allow more thinking machines to cross his waters, only the armies of the western ocean may join in the fray.”

“King Blu has a way of transporting anything that is beyond your king’s powers,” King Croc said. “He guarantees your animals safe passage.”

Each animal lord looked at the other as if to ask: *are we actually going to war?* Moon Shadow spoke up and said, “My armies will lead the charge. Let me know if you’re willing to join us.”

There was a long silence, the kind that suggested that after it was broken, the world might never be the same.

“I will join,” Groth The Impaler said.

“Me too,” Yu The Golden Nightmare said.

“And I,” Thraxis added.

“Very well. I say we skin the false god alive. I’m in too,” Yorba added. “And I,” Zulta said, “but only if King Blu guarantees his support. To do so otherwise would be most imprudent.”

King Croc laughed. “Who do you think enables this holosphere?” the dubious crocodile lord asked. “King Blu has foreseen and authorized all. He sees millennia, yet he understands the importance of even the smallest of moments.”

“Then it’s agreed,” Moon Shadow said. “Prepare your armies. Azaz will arrive within the borders of *Animus* tomorrow. I will move out to meet him. Join me when you can. Let us make this last glorious stand together, as animals!”

With that, the holosphere disappeared, as if a sign from King Blu himself.

Moon Shadow looked at Snow Prophet, assuming that he already knew her question.

“You can’t tell me, can you?” she asked.

“I could,” Snow Prophet said, “but why? You already know the answer. You have all along.”



CHAPTER 40

Pols Dedans

Near the Ocean

Nunavut, Canada

The Night Eye flew irregularly, in haphazard elliptical patterns, when it came to the massive swath of wooded vines, trees, bushes, and ivies. Even in the giant thinking machines, the journey had been long and cold. Azaz, accoutered in full armor, shone like a misguided sun, his white godly eyes wavering between the tattered birds. And behind Azaz, entire legions of his best Blood Paw troops prepared themselves for the slaughter.

“Well, ravens,” Azaz said as they stared at the maze of plants. “We are at the edge of the great wood. Show us the way or die in these wastelands.”

The Night Eye remembered a small thicket of shorter grass that allowed their spies to hear the clamor of *rulku* activity. The scouting ravens searched their nanobot records and flew to the area, only to see that where there had been a

thicket, there was now a wall of branches and vines, all swirling about, ready for the assault.

“My lord,” The Night Eye said. “Something is not right. The way should be in here, according to our intel. Yet, there is a tree of woe awaiting us.” The Night Eye swarmed farther up in air that tasted of eternal winter. “There is a sound, a pounding of many paws. We are not alone, King Azaz. The *rulku* know you’re coming. And they are protected by...wolves?”

Azaz used the great godly sight his fiery eyes allowed him. Sure enough, a legion of wolves, dogs, moose, and buffalos, and even a few polar bears, charged at him. Azaz could see the majestic white Arctic wolf, Moon Shadow, leading the hopeless charge.

“You would lead us into a trap,” Azaz said to The Night Eye. He lifted a paw; his gigantic red nanobots rose. They glowed and emitted a rhythmic hum. The Night Eye felt their own nanobots turning on them, strangling the life out of their tiny avian necks.

“Not so, king of kings,” The Night Eye said, struggling for breath. “If you can dispatch this Tree of Woe, you should be able to get to the *rulku*.”

Five ravens among the number fell to their deaths, as did three crows. The Tree of Woe picked up the dead bodies, stabbing through them. Azaz advanced.

“First legion,” Azaz ordered. “Form a wall between me and the unnatural tree. I will raze it by the roots and tear its branches to the snow. Kill the traitors. Fire at will!”

Azaz brought his thinking machine right up to the tree. The tree was not alone. Huge, white, icy plant vines grew from the soil, stabbing through the metal of the thinking machine battleship. The nanobots of the thinking machine fought to repair the damage, but strange green nanobots, those of the plants, attacked them. The thinking machine flared in smoke and flame and came crashing to the half-frozen soil.

Growling, Azaz stepped off. He took no notice of the surviving crows and ravens of The Night Eye. Instead, he put his full focus on the tree.

“I am the king of all,” Azaz said. “No one can stand against me and live!” The Night Eye flew off, keeping low, to let the branches cover them in their retreat. Azaz merely concentrated upon the Tree of Woe. His eyes became white lightning. An electric field consumed him and the red nanobots that encircled him. Azaz sought to command the green nanobots to eat the tree from the inside out. Instead, he found that he had no power over the plants’ technology. Azaz grimaced. He conjured up lightning from the circling nanobots. They sent bolt after bolt into the tree. The seventh bolt cracked the trunk. The Tree of Woe fell. Azaz communed with his nanobots, ordering them to tear the stump out. The

nanobots did so, razing the earth below in the process.

“Even the earth is at my command,” Azaz said. “Come out now, *rulku*, and fight like animals, or I will bury you and your children alive. Either way, you go extinct this day. The choice of how you meet your fate is yours.”

A swarm of unusual nanobots, golden as a midnight sun, swarmed above the passage. Azaz sought to destroy them, but his hovering red nanobots stayed in position.

“A king is a servant of the earth, not its master,” a strangely familiar voice said.

“Nurvlyn,” Azaz said. “You’re still alive?!”

“I am death and life; I am in all that is,” Nurvlyn said.

The swarm took on the human dimensions of Nurvlyn, standing before Azaz and his fury.

“Three prophecies have been fulfilled,” Nurvlyn said. “The great bear has established a worldwide empire. He has found a mate who is now pregnant with his cub. And today, his hour has come.”

Azaz held up a paw and said, “I am the power behind the prophecies. Nothing shall happen unless I allow it. Mark my words, half-*rulku*: You cannot kill a god.” The red nanobots rose again, and the white eyes of the bear god fell into a trance. Azaz conjured up languages, tongues, and names from some ancient bear history he neither knew nor comprehended. Yet, the nanobots were powerless to destroy the golden swarm that was Nurvlyn.

“A wizard’s trick?” Azaz asked.

“The crown remembers its first master,” Nurvlyn said. “Just like it shall remember its last.”

With that, Nurvlyn disappeared, becoming a blinding light that made even the luminescence of the bear god look pale by comparison. Azaz shielded his eyes. When he opened them, he saw that the *rulku* were, impossibly, inside enemy lines. The marching of the wolves had begun. Moon Shadow and her soldiers assaulted The Blood Paw warriors at every point of the front line. Azaz moved to strike lightning at the wolves that would dare rise up against their dreaded master. Yet, before he could, Azaz saw that the *rulku* were fighting with weapons he had never seen before. Vines of woe stretched from the earth, eating the bears from the ground up and anchoring them while the wolves attacked the heads and forepaws of the bears, wrestling them to the ground. The *rulku* were equally coordinated. They had two giant stars that rose as spheres, trillions of nanobots all focused on one task. The wizard warrior, Fowler, sat with his head tucked and his arms folded, as if in meditation. The moment he raised his head, giant waves of electrical current ebbed into the line of grizzlies, burning them in a yellow

fire.

“Fowler,” Azaz said, remembering his scars. “See what a true god can do.”

Azaz raised his paws. Serpentine waves of current flew from them. The two giant stars burst in a fire that consumed them. They crashed with the fire down to the soil. At least twenty *rulku* fell with them, burning in the fires. The surviving bears walled up the dead bodies, bears and *rulku* alike, until the wolves were forced to climb to attack. With renewed defenses, the bears picked off the wolves, until only Moon Shadow and her most elite warriors were left.

“You dare betray me, wolf queen? Today, not one—but two—species will be wiped from the earth,” Azaz proclaimed.

As quickly as his words rolled through the eternal ice of *Pols Dedans*, Moon Shadow and the wolves disappeared. Azaz looked over the field of battle, but only The Blood Paw, Dasu, White Claw, and the polar bears remained. Their numbers were still vast, and they had the support of the mountain lions, serpents, and black bears from The Rockies, all under Azaz’s control. Yet, when Azaz looked back at the far end of the field, he realized the guile of his enemies. The warrior wizards, Nurvlyn and Fowler, had depleted some of his best bears to give their forces time to build up an army unlike any the animal world had ever seen. At the steps of the *rulku* sanctuary, in the snows of Nunavut, stood Kama and the lions; Slash and the pumas; Yorba, scarred as he was, and his gorillas; Zulta the Half Tusk and his elephants; Yu The Golden Nightmare and his snow leopards and spider monkeys; King Croc and his crocodiles and alligators; and even Thraxis and her anacondas and caimans. Groth The Impaler stood, The Night Eye hovering over him, with his bears and wolverines. Even Brigand was there, with his army of *rulku*. Every other animal lord save White Claw stood against the bear god. Hovering above the line were Thunder Killer and his eagles and hawks, Earl The Equivocator and his parrots and birds of the jungle; and Sky Death and his vultures and condors.

“The last stand of the old animal kings and queens,” Azaz said, bemused. “Your army is mighty, but not one of you can take the crown from my head. Not even the largest army the world has ever seen can defeat the bear god. Come on, beasts. Charge to your deaths! I am ready for you. For always, I am Azaz, king of kings!”

Moon Shadow led the charge, but White Claw stood to meet her with his polar bears.

“White Claw,” Moon Shadow said. “Stand down.”

“No, wolf queen,” White Claw said, swiping at the wolves ascending the pile of dead bodies. “I respect you, but Azaz saved my life and avenged my attackers. My life is his to lose again.”

Moon Shadow stood contemplating, but the other animals of the world were not so pensive. Zulta and his elephants trumpeted as they stampeded. Lions roared under Kama's charge. Groth and the wolverines mounted the attacking bears, giving them everything they could handle, even as his soldiers paid with their lives. Yorba and his gorillas moved in, matching power with the battalion of bears. The Night Eye rose, godlike in the sky, blotting out the sun. They called every able bird to the attack. Not just ravens and crows, but all manners of thrushes, finches, and sparrows attacked from the trees. Thunder Killer and his battalion of eagles and hawks joined in, toppling the polar bears and White Claw himself. Yu The Golden Nightmare sent the spider monkeys to assist the wolverines. Even Thraxis and her anacondas attacked, if gingerly, wrapping around entire bears and squeezing them into oblivion. Only King Croc, the crocodiles, alligators, and caimans waited—for what, Azaz could not tell.

Had Azaz been any other animal lord, he might have felt sympathy for the animals beneath his mighty perch. He might have called off the attack and retreated back to the heart of Bear Mountain. But Azaz was not any other animal lord, and he knew this well. Before more of his bears suffered under the hands of the combined animal and *rulku* legions, Azaz stepped forward. The battle hardly ceased. A few brazen gorillas charged. Azaz sent them flying with a wave of his scourge. Another battalion of elephants stampeded until Azaz sent lightning that stopped them in their tracks. A third wave of his scourge sent Thunder Killer and the eagles flying uncontrollably across the sky. The battle nearly came to a dead halt because of the power of one bear.

“Any that would take this crown off my head,” Azaz proclaimed, “step forward and claim it.”

Groth The Impaler lifted his serrated spear and raised a bloodcurdling cry. The lord of the wolverines charged. Azaz stood firm, flailing his scourge in one arm and raising the other as Groth charged at full might. Azaz waved his right fist, sending a wave of electricity to knock the small warrior to the rocks. Yet, The Night Eye fluttered above Groth, using their magic to send the current to the ice. Azaz's scourge struck an icy crag. Groth used his long, serrated spear to jostle its tip into the bear god, wounding Azaz on his right side. The animals stood back in shock. This bear god bled, not just the red of *rulku* blood, but a silver that added brilliance to the ruddiness of the blood-stained ice.

“The bear god bleeds,” Groth called out, raising his bloodied spear. “Anything that bleeds can die.”

In a fit of fury, Azaz raised the wolverine up by his neck and stared deeply into his insolent black eyes. “For every drop of blood you cost me, little animal, I will take ten more of yours.”

Azaz raised his scourge, powering it with the full electrical might of his red nanobots. The scourge wrapped into Groth's skin, ripping off skin and fur alike until Groth, himself impaled, bled fresh streams of red into the ice. The current shook him, rendering the wolverine unable to defend himself. The Night Eye flew in, attacking Azaz's eyes. Azaz sent another current of electricity at the heart of The Night Eye. Still weakened from the incredible energy they used to deflect Azaz's earlier blow to their fearsome general, the birds of prey succumbed. The Night Eye fell from the sky, retreating behind a legion of eagles and hawks. The royal ravens gave Groth The Impaler precious time, however. Freed from the electrical current, Groth stabbed with his spear at Azaz's paw. The paw holding the scourge bled. Azaz dropped the scourge, lifting up his paw in disbelief. Groth seized the moment to run back to the lines, calling upon the animal lords to take up the charge.

"This fight is not for one or two animal lords alone," Groth called out. "Zulta, Yorba, Golden Nightmare, Thraxis—rise!"

Groth's cries ignited the furor of his wolverines, who attacked White Claw's forces anew. However, Vronkyl, who had worked his way up from the largely defeated army of wolves, was holding the line on the right side of the field. The two bear lords managed to tie up Yorba and the apes. Zulta still charged ahead, but Vronkyl was able to kill a few of the smaller elephants of the herd, which slowed down the charge. Kama and Slash worked to fight a legion of copperheads and rattlesnakes that still obeyed the will of the bear god. Thraxis and her anacondas and boas sat back, watching.

Azaz regained his composure long enough to bellow out: "Where is the great Groth The Impaler now? You shed blood, but not my life? Where are the great animal lords of the divided kingdoms? Which of you can stand before Azaz and live?"

As Azaz spoke, radiating in the fires of his own megalomania, Thraxis slithered behind him. Azaz sensed the deadly presence and turned around just in time to see the snake empress striking with her implanted fangs. Azaz felt the venom run through him, but he had strength enough to lift the anaconda queen from the ground.

"Did you, of all creatures, think you could beat me?" Azaz asked. "I thought you had learned your lesson the first time around. Now, feel the full power of your angry lord!"

Azaz threw Thraxis and electrocuted her in a ball of red lightning that held the giant snake. Thraxis writhed, but she still managed to hiss out: "I don't have to beat you, bear god. The poison will do that for me."

Azaz's concentration broke as he felt weakness taking his system. Thraxis

dropped, alive, to the ground. The old grizzly body that had been Azaz melted away. The purifying fire of his new bear god form remained, however.

“You are not the only one who can shed skin and its poisons,” Azaz said. “To take life, you must also give life, snake queen. You took some of mine, but you also gave me your power. I am immune.”

The animals gained in their charge on White Claw. The polar bear king and Vronkyl stood shoulder to shoulder. After using their maces to fend off a hungry pack of lions, they looked one another in the eye.

“I don’t know how much longer I can hold, brother,” White Claw said. “There are simply too many.”

“Send your polar bears behind my grizzlies,” Vronkyl said. “I can give you shelter there. I will speak with Azaz. We can’t hold the lines any longer.”

White Claw ordered his troops back. Vronkyl ordered his troops to hold the line and then turned to seek counsel from his king. Azaz didn’t even look at his forces, so concerned was he with domination. Azaz descended to meet the lion of lions, Kama, the elephant king, Zulta, and the panda king, The Golden Nightmare, who now had full formations hammering at the lines.

“Tracherous panda,” Azaz said to Yu The Golden Nightmare. “I checked on you while you had that golden mask melted to your face to allow you to survive. I contained the plague that would have annihilated your animals. Now, I will finish what the plague could not.”

Azaz moved to attack The Golden Nightmare directly, but Yu only postured, allowing the other animal lords time to encircle the boastful bear god. Moon Shadow, Thunder Killer, Kama, Zulta, and Yorba positioned themselves in the circle, each growling, shrieking, wailing, and trumpeting in their own beastly fashion.

“The mightiest bear is not the smartest bear, it would seem,” The Golden Nightmare said. “I respected you, brother, until you demeaned your lords and threatened to wipe an entire species from the earth. My bears have suffered from that fate. I will not let it happen again, not to any species, even one as vile as the *rulku*.”

“You speak like an animal,” Moon Shadow said, “with the heart of *Animus* at your core.”

“Foolish, petty lords,” Azaz said. “You need a powerful emperor to decide for you the matters you cannot stomach for yourselves. The *rulku* would have killed us all. I fight for every animal’s survival as much as I fight for my own. Once I kill you all and replace you with new lords, they will see the way of The Blood Paw, the true meaning of what is *Ozu*.”

“You pervert our sacred law with your words,” Thunder Killer cried out. “You

will learn now that no animal is above the law, not even the king of kings.”

At that, Thunder Killer swooped in, attacking the great bear’s wounds, ripping them open so that the silver blood flowed more steadily. Azaz grabbed the king of eagles by his right wing and tore it, tossing the eagle to the icy sky. Zulta charged forth, the only one whose mass was in any way close to that of the bear god himself. Zulta knocked Azaz to the ground, wrangling him with his broken tusks. There, Yorba pounded upon the bear god’s chest while Moon Shadow and Kama pulled at his lower paws.

Vronkyl, coming up from the field of battle just in time to see his master near defeat, attacked Moon Shadow first, tossing her from Azaz’s lower right paw. Kama then let go of Azaz’s lower left paw long enough to unleash his full weight upon Vronkyl, taking down the bear lord and sinking his mighty lion fangs into the giant grizzly general’s neck. The distraction allowed Azaz to rise again. Azaz said a spell in an ancient bear language not even he could fully grasp. His claws became as talons of steel set to an unearthly flame.

“*Rulku* lovers,” Azaz said. “You shall die with the very metal your former masters used to poison the sacred earth.”

Azaz stabbed at Zulta with his fire claws until the great elephant had to choose between stampeding the bear king or retreating for his life. Zulta chose to charge. Azaz readied himself for the killing blow when Moon Shadow jumped in front of the charging elephant, taking the blow for herself. Azaz threw the wolf queen down the icy peaks. Zulta then knocked Azaz down and stampeded him, but was stabbed from below. The elephant king wobbled and fell to the ground. Kama, king of the jungle lions, stood up to challenge Azaz. Azaz and Kama circled one another before Kama saw his opening. A wound on the lower leg still bled. Azaz, accustomed to standing on two legs now, like the very *rulku* he so detested, saw where Kama’s eyes looked. Kama struck, only to receive the same stabbing wound as his fellow animal lords. Azaz readied the killing blow again, only for Yorba to push him aside. Azaz conjured an electrical current to storm over Yorba until the great gorilla king was forced to step back to save his eyesight.

“Enough,” a voice cried like fresh thunder over a distant hill.

The echo of the commanding voice was enough to garner Azaz’s full attention.

“Who would dare command the king of kings after seeing what he does to his treacherous lords?” Azaz asked.

“The *rulku* who would cut the crown from your very head,” Fowler said. “Let us decide this with a battle of wizards. Your magic versus mine.”

As Fowler spoke, the last of the *rulku* charged, under Hunter General Brigand,

with all of their might to head off White Claw and Vronkyl. The plants, under an unseen intelligence, rose to block Azaz's attacking animals from the wounded animal lords. Brigand then fell back to each of the legions of animals, calling upon the whole animal horde to fall back. Uncertain and confused, the animals stayed in place for a moment. Then they saw the monoliths and immediately understood. So too did White Claw and Vronkyl. The two bear generals looked at one another and ordered a hasty retreat.

Azaz, sparked by his hatred of the one *rulku* who had gotten the better of him, saw nothing but the sweetest possible kill walking willingly towards him, into his open and waiting jaws.

"Spoken like a bear," Azaz said. His words dripped with something of affection for the creature he hated so much. "If you had been born one of my kind, you would be standing here with me. As it is, we are mortal enemies, *rulku* wizard. You scarred me, and I must now kill you. Such is the law of *Ozu*: nature only allows the strong to survive."

"Nature sees many kinds of strength," Fowler said. "The tragedy is that you see only one. Azaz, bear god, king of kings, whatever you call yourself these days: you had the potential to be the greatest king of all. Instead, you have become like the worst of your creators, harboring all of their rage, all of their killing tendencies, and none of the compassion, wisdom, and concern for the common good that should befall a king. The *Ozu* has spoken. Mother Earth is against you, king of kings, and so am I."

"Blasphemy," Azaz said.

Azaz lifted his paws. A sphere of red light emerged above Azaz, more like a small, bleeding sun than a halo of fire.

Fowler sat down, meditating. A sphere of white light emerged about his head, more like a hungry fire than a halo of lightning.

Azaz was the first to attack. After fighting each of the animal lords, he gained some of their power. He called upon the sphere to form eagles of red fire. The eagles went after Fowler, seeking to tear out his eyes. Yet, Fowler's sphere of light only grew, shielding him.

Fowler conjured up an ancient bear priest, a short-faced bear of yellow fire. The bear priest said a spell to raise yet more fire. The bear priest lunged at Azaz, but his fire fell before the consuming red sphere that engulfed the king of kings.

Azaz then used the might of Thraxis to create a giant anaconda ancestor, a titanoboa, to squeeze the great sphere of yellow fire. Fowler shook his head and spoke, softly, an incantation. The giant, ancient serpent disappeared into tiny snakes of flame that slithered across the icy sky and disappeared.

Fowler countered by creating, from his yellow fire, the image of an innocent

grizzly bear cub snacking on some honey and trash at a discarded campsite. It was the bear's first foray into the world of men that would ultimately hunt and kill its parents. The cub growled ever so softly, in a perfect moment of joy. Azaz recognized the picture of his former self before *The Rapsys*. With a mighty thrust of his paw, Azaz rejected the sentimentality of the moment.

"I am what you and your kind have made me," Azaz said bluntly. "You cannot change that now with your *rulku* magic. Even if we do this until the end of time, you will not beat me, even if I don't beat you."

"You are wrong," Fowler said with the slightest of smirks. "In this stalemate of wizards, I come out ahead."

It was then that Azaz looked from the smirking face of the enemy to the suddenly quiet fields of battle. He saw the monoliths, so long silent, so long a forgotten puzzle pushed piece by discarded piece to the side, light up in electric blue waves. A sphere of pure ocean blue, the size of an island, arose as well. Impossibly, the monoliths were teleporters of the sea, magnifying the ocean waters and transporting fresh water where there was none before. Azaz looked up to see this miracle of biblical proportions. Where once there was ice and rock, suddenly there was a makeshift inland sea, a pocket of ocean so vast that entire legions of sharks, dolphins, and whales swam under the command of Xrata, The White Death, the deadliest of the great white sharks of the sea. It was the largest army Azaz or any animal lord had ever seen. Leading them was King Croc and the battalion of crocodiles, alligators, and caimans who had so long laid silent while the animals of the earth fought.

"Animals of land," the giant, pulsating sphere said, in a mighty blast so loud even the bear god's massive ears bled. "Long have we watched you and your toilsome wars. First, you overthrew your *rulku* overlords, and we supported you in this, as it served the needs of the ocean. Then, you disregarded the sacredness of all animal life, of the *Ozu*, and turned on each other. This, we still ignored. Yet, you crossed our oceans in the same polluting thinking machines as your forebears, with no more regard for marine life than the *rulku* you overthrew. I speak to you now as the oldest creature ever to swim the waters of the earth. I am the voice of King Blu, in your tongue, the immortal whale, the god of death. Yet, my consciousness has lived in the oldest coral, in the oldest waters, for millions of years. I see time as an ocean; I know where each current leads. This current leads to the end of the reign of Azaz, the king of bears. Forfeit the crown or drown in my wrath."

Azaz shook himself free of his shock and said only, "I choose to fight the whale god, even if he is death itself. For always, I am Azaz, king of kings."

The bear called upon all of his strength to conjure a red sphere that freed him

from the ocean's wrath. The cascading waters of the new sea went around him as if he were an animal Moses, parting this sea made red with the blood of the animals. So consumed was Azaz with proving that he was above the fury of King Blu that Fowler cast a spell uniting Azaz's sphere to his own. The new sphere, a yellow fire now spurting blood red, consumed the bear god as the flames began eating at those that made up his deific body. Fowler took the moment to use his serrated gold spear to cut the crown from Azaz's head. When the crown fell, Azaz's sphere fell with it. The fiery body of the short-faced bear matched with a grizzly's was no more. Having shed his old body, Azaz simply saw his flames vanquished by the ocean. Azaz growled a godlike battle cry out to the world until he was washed to nothingness. Fowler, his sphere of power united with that of his enemy, also lost control. The ocean swelled in, sweeping both the extinguishing fire of the bear god and the wizard warrior up in its gargantuan waves. Azaz disappeared. Fowler breathed his last breath.

Watching from the icy rocks far away from the ocean were Moon Shadow and the other injured lords. A host of animal surgeons, from Sky Death to Gray Eyes to Snow Prophet, nursed their wounds. Still, they could not protect their patients from the horrifying end of the war. Moon Shadow and the injured lords witnessed King Croc and Xrata ruthlessly attack, dismember, and eat any of The Blood Paw not fortunate enough to make it to higher ground in time.

"White Claw," Moon Shadow said. "We must save him."

"He betrayed your people," Zulta said, nursing his own wounds. "Let him die."

"We must come together or forever stand apart," Moon Shadow said. "I am not Snow Prophet, yet I know this is true."

The animal lords looked at one another before signaling to Thraxis.

"Your anacondas swim, do they not?" Groth The Impaler asked. "Perhaps you can lend a hand, given how few of your snakes saw battle."

Thraxis, like the other animal lords, had seen Azaz's extinguishing fire. The snake empress thought of the missing crown first and foremost. "My snakes saved many of your animals' lives," she said. "Yet, I see that it also falls on me to save your precious king."

With a single mighty hiss, Thraxis ordered her legions to bring anything they found to her. The anacondas, strong swimmers, found the bodies of White Claw and Vronkyl first, among other lost bears. Vronkyl was clearly dead, limp as low tide, but White Claw still clung to life. Two anacondas brought the fallen polar bear king on their backs to their great queen. The others still searched the waters for the crown.

Gasping for air, White Claw turned to face the other lords in his dying

moments. “Why did you bring me here?” he asked. “Isn’t it enough for you to see the ruin of my people?”

Moon Shadow fought to move and look at the polar bear king eye to eye, against the healers’ orders.

“I want us to work to unify all animals,” she said. “I want there to be no more divisions.”

Seeing the sincerity in the wolf queen’s battle-worn eyes, White Claw softened, if only for a moment. “Once, we started a great experiment together, *Animus*, a home and guiding philosophy for all animals,” he said. “I can see this day that you were right, wolf queen. Animals cannot fall to hatred or to fear, as the *rulku* did. After the wounds I received from the *rulku* wizard, I fell to both, I’m afraid. My polar bears paid a bitter price for my failure as a king.”

White Claw gasped, adding: “You are a far more worthy ruler than I ever was, Moon Shadow. May you bring whatever bears survive back to *Animus* with my blessing. My dying wish is one with yours: that all animals work together for a common future. May we now part as friends who have for so long been on opposite sides of fortune.”

With those words, White Claw joined Vronkyl in death. Moved by White Claw’s words, the animal lords almost missed the glittering red sphere the anacondas fished from the sea. The giant blue sphere, the presence of King Blu above the waters, stopped the snakes in their tracks.

“This power,” Moon Shadow said, “is too great for any of us. No animal lord should rule over another. We should rule together, as equals.”

“Agreed,” Yorba said. “Even an old, battle-scarred gorilla like me can see that the age of animal tyrants is at an end.”

The animal lords each assented until they looked at Thraxis. Thraxis thought of striking, of killing for the crown, but King Blu held the crown high in the sky, above the reach of even the mighty anaconda queen.

“The will of the council of animal lords shall be observed,” King Blu decreed. “And what shall become of The Mystical Crown Of Fire?”

“Let King Blu hold on to it for safekeeping,” Moon Shadow said. “That way, if any of us thirst too much for power and violate the will of the council,” she added, looking directly at Thraxis, “that animal will have to answer to the oldest and wisest of kings.”

“Well urged,” another voice, that of the father of animals, from so long ago, said. “This day you start down a road different from that of the *rulku*. In one generation, you have learned the lesson of tyranny. Think of what may happen in two or three or four? Perhaps one day we will see the face of King Blu and be worthy of the sight.”

Fowler's glittering nanobots circled around, as much a part of the plants and the sea as of the air.

"Nurvlyn? That's not you?" Sky Death asked.

"Nurvlyn is now a part of All That Is," Fowler said. "I am here as part animal, part plant, part *rulku*, part ether. I am here to send you my blessings before I am to be reborn to help my people usher in the will of *Avrah*, the creator of us all. My will is that of Moon Shadow and White Claw: a newer, better relationship with the earth and all of its creatures, down to the smallest particle of Creation."

"For that is *Ozu*," Snow Prophet said. And, for once, the animals agreed with the *rulku*.

Just as quickly as the great blue sphere of the sea arose, it sank to the farthest depths of the unknown oceans. And just as quickly, the monoliths glowed yellow, and the sea and its mighty whale, shark, and dolphin warriors disappeared, along with King Croc and his legions. Still, the message that was sent was a clear one: whereas one bear god summoned the power of the elements of the earth, this king of the ocean could sweep over any of the great continental kingdoms with a single thought, and it would be as if they never were. The animals sat in a minute, shuddering in the sublime presence of King Blu, before turning to the matter of burying the dead, noble animals whose bodies were plentiful enough to rival even Azaz's *rulku* crematoria.



CHAPTER 41

Iykra Toyle

Antarctica

The burials took moon cycles—so many dead from all the different continents had to be gathered. With each new body, it dawned on the animal lords: there had to be a better way. And so, they eulogized Fowler, calling him an inspiration for every *rulku*, for every wizard, for every plant and every animal walking or crawling upon the face of the earth. They eulogized White Claw, reminding the animals of the world, through the holosphere, of his last wish, a wish for peace that the animal lords intended to uphold. And, finally, they eulogized Azaz. As

there was no body, the last of the grizzlies of the mountains, a small but ferocious population, were allowed to turn Bear Mountain peak into a tomb for the fallen king of kings. They built a giant golden tomb with a sleeping bear in the likeness of the great bear god that they honored and knew. The animal lords allowed them to speak of the bravery of their fallen bear brothers and sisters. But, even after the burials and eulogies, there was much healing to be done. The animal lords had to mend themselves. Then they had to meet for many sun cycles on the matter of the *rulku*.

Those meetings brought the animal lords and the last of the *rulku* to The Antarctandes, as the mountains of *Iykra Toyle* were once known. Their peaks stood majestically in the background, their icy tips flowing down to all kinds of Antarctic hair grass and pearlwort that cascaded into bristlecone pines, firs, and redwoods, the first trees the continent had seen in eons before the history of the *rulku*. All around the mountains, some of the tallest and most majestic on Earth, in the flowing glacial streams, the last of the *rulku* could see the handiwork of Methuselah. While the animals fought over a crown that meant only that one animal had the right to rule another, Methuselah and her six sisters worked with the global plant community to seed a continent with new life. Even Hunter General Brigand, as he was known, stood speechless in the moment at hand. A new Eden, as the *rulku* knew it, was before them, one that would be hard and merciless but also an opportunity none of their kind had seen since the dawn of ages.

“It’s beautiful beyond words,” Brigand said. “It’s impossible to believe that, in ancient times, this was the most desolate ice desert the world had ever known. Methuselah has worked wonders.”

“She is an artist,” Moon Shadow said. “We need so many more like her. Would that she could live forever instead of the few ages she has left.”

“Amen to that,” Brigand replied.

Moon Shadow stood with the other animal lords, with Thunder Killer, Yu The Golden Nightmare, Zulta, Yorba, King Croc, Groth The Impaler, The Night Eye, and even Thraxis, on the shores of this new, unseen world.

“The council of the six kingdoms has met,” Moon Shadow said. “For your valor in the great battle with Azaz, we would like to form a seventh kingdom, one led by Methuselah’s plant kingdom and the *rulku*. We have consulted with the majesty of the sea, King Blu, who has studied one million different outcomes. He has insisted that so long as the *rulku* are prohibited the use of their thinking machines, this will be the best possible outcome for your species. It comes at a price, however. Methuselah’s children need tending. You would work in holy communion with them so that the beauty of this land never fades. I

would like you to lead your people in settling here, Hunter General.”

Brigand stood for a moment, lost in the surprisingly gentle Antarctic breezes. He shook his head, as if to shake off the memories of a world now gone. “I appreciate your offer,” Brigand said. “But I think back on the old world, on what I did. I supervised some of the great crematories in the North, back when animals first felt The Great Awakening. I have many sins. I do not wish to stain so fresh and so pure a land in blood.”

“We know this,” The Night Eye said. “And there are some on the council who felt that you should be tried as a war criminal. But others said that you fought with valor for animals and *rulku* alike. It was said, in the first days of war, that you sought to prevent an attack that would have decimated the animals of *Animus*. We animal lords were not so kind when it came to using plague to end the war with the *rulku*. The council deliberated on these points at great length. The council felt that even animal lords would have to be held accountable if you were tried and sentenced. We wish to move beyond war and to let it wash away with the body of Azaz. We wish to have a leader among the *rulku* that is not so eager to kill, one who understands the value of life.”

“And you will have guidance,” the wind said, in the voice of Fowler.

Tiny blue nanobots circled vibrantly in the Antarctic winds. “As Methuselah and Nurvlyn taught me, so I will teach you,” Fowler said, “if in the body of another.”

“No animal kingdom shall be alone,” Moon Shadow said. “Not even that of the *rulku*.”

Brigand took a moment to think about the words that were spoken. “Thank you,” he said to the animal lords. “You have much wisdom. We will form a new civilization here before I pass on. We will start over, learning, under Methuselah’s watchful eye, to be true stewards of the earth. In the words of Adam, from our ancient *rulku* book *Paradise Lost*, ‘How shall I behold the face henceforth of God or angel, erst with joy and rapture so oft beheld? Those heavenly shapes will dazzle now this earthly, with their blaze insufferably bright.’ Still, unlike Adam, I would behold your majesty, animal lords, even in exile. I hope you use it to restore the earth to absolute splendor. I pray you succeed where mankind failed. The earth deserves as much.”

“We will rise or fall together,” Zulta said. “In time, once you have learned the lessons Methuselah and Fowler have to teach you, you shall have a presence on the ruling council too.”

“Let us depart as friends,” Yu The Golden Nightmare said, “rather than as enemies.”

Brigand bowed his head before each animal lord in turn, even Thraxis. “You

were a formidable foe, snake empress,” Brigand said. “I would rather have you a friend than an enemy, if that is okay with you.”

“In time, we shall see,” Thraxis said, simply. “Not even King Blu knows all that the future may hold.”

With those parting words, Brigand called to his people. One-hundred or so fighters remained, including Ruth The Lawless. She walked closely behind Fowler. Like all of the *rulku* warriors, she was intrigued but fearful about whatever lay ahead. Yet, as humanity did in the dawn of Creation, when they first walked upright, they persevered in their new journey. Against predators from ages past, when they first found fire; against the unthinkable fury of endless oceans, when they first wove rafts and crafted ships; against buffeting storms and volcanic blasts that might have decimated the entire species, when they first learned to anticipate and even control the weather—mankind always found a way to persevere, to survive, to thrive. That was what made the *rulku* human. This challenge would be their greatest, but the *rulku* did as they always did: walked forward, into the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, one assured step at a time.



EPILOGUE

The future is the past is the future, Snow Prophet, the ancient snowy owl of the great Northern regions, once scrawled on the holy tablets. So, he scrawls with his mighty beak and talons again.

Never before had the animals written their tale, that of their rise, of mankind's fall. Never before had it existed anywhere but in the rolling melodic songs of whales in twilight seas or in the cackles of geese flying overhead, towards the great rising sun. It was the song every awakened animal told its children. And it was more than a song. It was a warning, born of blood. *Be not proud, animals of the earth*, it began. *Every wing that soars falters; every leg that runs upon the earth one day becomes it. What falls, rises. What rises, falls. For that is Ozu.*

This was the tale of how one animal sought to lord over all the others, first the *rulku* beast, and then the bear that would be a god. They did not heed the warning of the ancestors: to understand something is to become it—and when you become something, that something also becomes you. And so, the *rulku* and the bear god fell to the violence that became them. Azaz is now crowned as the Great Bear constellation of the skies, not in homage, but in warning. *For the future is the past is the future—if animals do not learn where the rulku failed, if all creatures of the earth are not as one.*

From War of the Animals Book 2: Cry of the Gods

CHAPTER 1

Animus Nor

Nunavut, Canada

The rise of the animal kingdoms was like the great snowy owl diving for a field mouse scurrying over frozen tundra. It was swift, immediate, and most of all, as bloody as the beak of the predator standing over fallen prey. In the mighty North, the great bear clans, under Freyda The Fatal, the bear queen, created The Cult Of Azaz, erecting glacial boulders into temples honoring the first among their gods. These temples were not strictly religious affairs, but centers for all matters of civic life, from trading in game meat and plants to magnificent halls of banqueting and recreation. Over the great waters of the open ocean, or *Blu-Syra*, The Night Eye labored to create the most comprehensive air force and spy network the world had ever seen—vast gaggles of birds that became the communication conduits of the entire animal kingdom and controlled most of the capital. And even the heart of Animus stood firmly beating, with an aging Moon Shadow overseeing the first constitutions and trading agreements the animal world had ever known. But perhaps no kingdom stood out as so radiant a light as The Great Star of the Southern Sky, *Gola Dwyn*, as the kingdom of Thraxis and her snakes was christened.

Thraxis's Amazonian riverbed became a haven for all matters of scientific inquiry. Great, lording thinking machines towered to the skies, wards protecting the emerging river cities. In the waters, the nanobots and the snake lords experimented with all matters of weaponry, from airborne toxins to cloned bird beasts like Adar Llwh Gwin, watching over the great water city's skies. And so, Time might have continued to trickle on had it not been for a mystery as bright as the great city itself: the disappearance of its empress. Sure, the great queen planted a holographic decoy, but not even the power of the nanobots was precise enough to match the unique skin and aura of the great Amazonian queen. At first, there were rumors of Thraxis' health. Perhaps the aging Empress of All Snakes was having troubles with her massive girth. Another rumor, told by more than a few ravens, was that a toxin Thraxis' boas labored endlessly on infected

her, killing the gargantuan snake where she lay. Still, a third rumor, a favorite of the falcons, was that of abduction. The rumor held that The Night Eye had reprogrammed one of her sky terrors, a legion of thunderbirds gifted by The Night Eye to the various clans, to snatch the giant snake queen for ransom. Even the most trusting stoat laughed at the idea that so massive a snake could be hidden from view. But the animal lords were not convinced that all was well in the snake capital city of *Gola Dwyn*.

And so, in the thirtieth sun season of recorded Time, Moon Shadow called upon Thunder Killer The Regal to determine if the gallant eagles had seen anything. Thunder Killer came before his old ally with words the wolf queen was hardly ready to hear.

Moon Shadow sat perched in The Sun Den, the greatest of the etched dens of the snow mountains reaching down the nape of the former British Columbia. She was still white as moon glow, with only a sliver of black pupil in her yellow eyes. The wolf queen was older now, a mother to all the animals of the world, a guide to the many awakening animals of the next generation.

“Great Queen of *Animus Nor*,” Thunder Killer said.

Thunder Killer bowed his noble white head, but even he was not as nimble or as mighty as in the days before his battles with Azaz. The wise old bird reigned over the western province of *Animus* now, which included The Rockies that housed the bear kingdom of old.

“My eagles come from the western borders, from The Oracle Perch,” Thunder Killer said, “with news of snakes moving by *Gol-Kilpyne*, by the great fire mountain. Our eyes spotted a trace signature there, one of highly advanced nanotechnology.”

“Thraxis’s echo,” Moon Shadow said. “She moves in the night, like a hologram. My spies warned me of this. But why *Gol-Kilpyne*? What treasure do the fires hide without their crown?”

“No one can say, my queen,” Thunder Killer answered. “We’ve been monitoring the messages of the snakes of *Animus Sur*. Even they seem baffled by the sudden disappearance of their great queen. That is why, our hawks tell us, the snakes move so. They are searching for their empress under orders of her great general, Vesper.”

“It must be a deception,” Moon Shadow said. “Deceit is the language of the snake. Why would an empress just up and leave her empire without a word to any animal? Why would she not bring guards, riches, weapons? How would the largest snake in the world simply slither away from the river swamps undetected?”

“All fair questions, wolf queen,” Thunder Killer said, “and ones neither my

spies nor I can answer. Should we reach out to The Night Eye? Surely, Mother Raven would have seen the meaning behind the movements, something we may have missed.”

Moon Shadow sat staring at the noble bird, her thoughts fluttering like feathers in a rough wind. She knew that Thunder Killer spoke true. But she also knew that The Night Eye could never be trusted, least of all in times of peace and prosperity. Any opportunity to find any morsel of information that eluded a king or queen would be a treasure they would brood on for a while, until the most opportune moment.

“Not yet,” Moon Shadow said. “First, we must speak with Snow Prophet.” Thunder Killer gasped in shock. “The prophet of The War of the *Rulku*? He was my friend too, great queen, but who has seen him in the last thirty sun seasons? Not my eagles, the lords of the skies—I can tell you that. His location is as much of a mystery as that of Thraxis herself.”

“True,” Moon Shadow said. “Yet, something tells me that finding Snow Prophet is the key to finding the reason as to why Thraxis disappeared, which is more important than finding the great snake queen herself.”

“Nonetheless,” Thunder Killer said, “if two queens disappear from *Animus Nor* and *Animus Sur*, will that not be the talk of the animal world?”

“Undoubtedly,” Moon Shadow said. “This is why I’ve summoned you. Tomorrow, I will announce a great hunt of the old lords of *Animus* to mark the end of the war thirty sun seasons ago. Only, it will not be us. Sky Death has found almost exact replicas—a bit younger and blither, but near replicas if filmed from certain angles. As the animal world celebrates The Great Hunt, we shall head to the living oracle and get our answers.”

“You think Snow Prophet is with Methuselah The Witch Queen?”

“No,” Moon Shadow said. “I think Snow Prophet was once with Methuselah and is now in hiding. Why, I don’t know. All I can say is that when all the oracles of the world congregate and then go silent, there is a reason for it. Whatever Snow Prophet discovered that sent him from his lofty perch on *Rul-Seerus* might be the same thing that sends Thraxis into the fires of *Gol-Kilpyne*.”

“And us after her,” Thunder Killer said.

“Yes,” Moon Shadow said. “This fragile peace is too great to risk another war. Yet, for all these years, Thraxis and the snakes of *Gola Dwyne* have been toiling on their technology—toiling for what? Perhaps for this moment. We should at least find out.”

“Agreed, wolf queen,” Thunder Killer said. “Let us put together a group of our most cunning warriors and leave tonight.”

“Few—and only those you absolutely trust,” Moon Shadow said. “I shall see

you at *Rul-Seerus* tonight. We shall leave from there.”

With that, Thunder Killer took his leave, skulking about the shadows for the perfect moment to take flight, undetected.

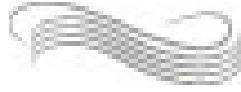


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