

Palulukan: The Bringer of Fear

by K9Lupus

The local Na'vi referred to the creature as the Palulukan, the Dry Mouth Bringer of Fear. Among the colonists it held the more imposing moniker of thanator. Here in the lab, however, it was neither; instead it was regarded by its scientific designation—*Celeri timor*, the Rapid Fear. Dr. James Branfort, lead scientist and taxonomist among the original pioneering crew sent to Pandora, was unwavering in his naming of the beast after watching the enormous creature hunt for the first time hidden within the lush rainforest of this then newly discovered, pristine, paradise-world. He proclaimed a person would only have enough time to experience a sudden deluge of panic; no luxury of self-mourning would be afforded if one were to be so unlucky as to be selected as its prey.

Among many of the Na'vi, the thanator held a divine, venerated position. They were ancient teachers of necessary unity and trust among the members of their clans to survive unexpected setbacks which could emerge from any direction in life's journey. The Na'vi's most sacred clan festivities invoked primal celebration of the creature's keystone position within the food web. The Anurai people went so far as to conduct elaborate rituals amid stone totems symbolizing their ascribed kinship to the beasts. I had the privilege of witnessing one such event only a few months ago. The swirling roil of their flowing bodies, like a bared and wild, azure heartbeat, shifted in pulse and time with the pounding of enormous drums partly hidden by the long, wavering shadows of firelight. The Anurai people, covered in streaks of pigment gathered of the soil and plants beneath their feet thus reaffirmed their reverence towards the dark hunters, their ancient brothers and sisters, in humbling recognition of the living embodiment of the will of Eywa, their omnipresent god stretched far across every ounce of living flesh and swaying, verdant branch.

The thanator, while awe-inspiring and complete in its terrifying persona, also bore a hidden fragility to its existence beneath its armored exterior. Successful mating was seldom among the species even in the best of conditions due to the truly enormous territorial ranges of the solitary predators alongside the natural, disproportionate slant of males competing for mating rights among few mature females. The passing of Specimen #1218 by the hands of Colonel Quaritch a decade ago during The Great Conflict had dealt the species a devastating blow which was still rippling effects to this day in the native population. The female thanator had been closely monitored by Pandoran researchers; several video recordings of her life sent back to Earth to fuel fundraising efforts for further colonial expansion.

It was only after the events of The Great Conflict had concluded and a proper investigation undergone that it was discovered much of those funds had been redirected toward the militaristic pursuits of the RDA Security Operations Division. While we could not remedy the actions of the past, we could look ahead to the future to preserve the species by whatever means necessary.

That's where I came in.

My name is Rene Silvanus, official title Pandoran Xenozoological Genetic Preservationist Intern, unofficial title—Lab Lackey. I carried all of the luxuries, tribulations, and back-handed compliments such a position afforded to me. While for now it was my duty to record the data of more established

and distinguished senior scientists, I knew my big break was on the horizon.

A little over a month had already passed since I began working at the Eastern BioCel facility, one of the premier research facilities on Pandora. I specialized in biodiversity preservation and cultivation through a genetics lens, selected from a promising group of researchers on Earth to make the long space flight to the fabled den of humanity's future. Through understanding the local flora and fauna, we aimed to best determine means of agriculture which would sustain the greatest number of colonists for the least amount of impact on the environment. Looks good for the shareholders back on Earth.

However, the menial tasks of grabbing reagents, delegating messages, and managing inventory was not the empowering grandeur I had envisioned. All of it was beginning to wear on me. I wanted more from this place. I wanted more from myself. And I would be given that chance on one regular-seeming afternoon. If I had known I was so close to the proposal which would change my life forever, I would have done more to prepare. That's what I told myself anyway. Truth is life hits you when you least expect it.

The Anurai were absolutely right about that much.

One afternoon, I was returning from my scheduled break, the fizzy crackle of a soda can, a treasured commodity so far from home, echoing through the hallway, when I overheard the muffled wisps of a conversation nearby. I caught sight of Dr. Helga Ingris through a thick glass window, her aged brow furrowed into a spotty mountain range. She was chatting with one of the other senior thanator project managers; he was a strange man dressed in a suit far too formal and out of place for the lawlessness of this alien world who had only briefly visited once before in my short tenure here.

Dr. Ingris's eyes widened, and she shouted at the man before her in a way quite unlike her typical calm demeanor with the other researchers. Her words were unintelligible imaginings, and I pressed myself closer to the glass. They rushed into stark clarity, and with abject horror I realized I had activated the pressure sensor releasing the door.

“You don't understand. It's not ready yet, and we are looking into other alternatives. I'm sure your people could understand that. We just need time. I'd rather find a way for us to further our goal without potentially losing someone along the way.” Dr. Ingris pleaded with the well-dressed man.

Her eyes glanced in my direction—twin pools of rich, earthy soil framed by wisps of graying hair. She wore a bewildered expression, a mix of anger cloaked with pain, as if I were the last person in the whole world who should have stumbled into that moment with them.

“If we don't do this now, then we're going to lose them all Helga. And if we lose them, you think the bigwigs are going to keep the money flowing this way? Even with what we know we can only go so far. We have the means...Hey, excuse me? Focus over here please,” the man said before followed the elderly woman's gaze to the unexpected guest behind him. Beneath the weight of their collective gaze the spit in my throat immediately dried up.

“Uh...hello,” I managed to get out as a faint quiver rolled through my knees.

“You see what I mean Helga? Speak of the devil.”

The man in the formal suit closed the distance between us with precise steps, not an ounce of energy wasted in the pursuit of his intended goal. His hand lay on the door frame; further entry into the lab was barred. I had the dreaded sense I was a kid back at the schoolyard on Earth and needed to hand over my lunch money.

“Listen, Rene was it?” the man inquired, quickly flashing back to Dr. Ingris behind him before returning his assessing, robotic gaze back to me.

“Yes, that's correct sir,” I answered, looking up into his champagne-infused eyes.

“Coltane. Pleasure to meet you”—I didn't even get time to fully open my lips before he continued—
“Listen, I have a special proposition for you if you were open to it.”

“Um, what did you have in mind?”

“We want to present this idea clearly. No misunderstandings. As you know, sometimes to save what's most important to us we must do hard things, and there is be a role you can play to help save something important to all of us.”

“A role? What do you mean?”

“The thanators Rene...the reason why you came here. We need someone who can find them for us so we can broaden the scope of our research, and you know all too well how elusive they can be.”

I gave him a cursory nod, wondering where he was going with all of this.

“This facility as you know is unlike anywhere else on Pandora. We not only have the capacity to understand these incredible species only found here, but we have the ability to identify and improve on the faults which may otherwise hinder them in their natural environments. I was speaking with Dr. Ingris here about a unique means of bringing live data back from the field. As scientists we often find ourselves separated from our work for the sake of gathering objective data. You know how it is.”

My brow furrowed, the soda can in my hand shaking what remaining fizz still lingered in its half-empty contents. I seriously doubted this man had been anywhere near a facility like this outside of business, or even knew the difference between a graduated cylinder and a Florence flask. He continued, unfazed.

“Rene, If we truly want to have the best chance of recovering this species then it would serve us well to not separate ourselves from our subjects.” He paused here, testing the air for my shared resonance to the vision laid bare on the tip of his tongue. I would even go as far as to say the best way to find a thanator may be to BECOME one.”

The gears of my mind spun over and over in the slick mud Coltane's statement had elicited. *Become one? We've only tested minor alterations to physical structures to aid in potential injury rehabilitation. Unless a viable analog was developed and applied to...* My eyes widened, the full impact of realization striking me senseless by how bold and flagrant the man's proposal was.

“The genometric recombination project?” I hazarded.

The edges of his lips curled into a satisfied smile.

“See, I knew you were a sharp one. You'd be the first subject to undergo such a procedure Rene. A real honor. You've studied the sensory data, have field experience—you're perfect. Bringing your mind to the body of one of the beasts would be the most valuable contribution you could ever make to propel this research forward. You'd be a pioneer, a savior for the species which means so much to everyone here.”

How Coltane managed to weave his way through every possible means of raising me to a pedestal astounded me.

“I...I'm flattered you think so well of my work, but the GMR Project is unstable at best,” I countered, not wanting to entertain the suspicion that Coltane may actually be onto something. Our other projects, while revealing a potential positive outcome for the future, did little to assuage the current fears of any further decline. Proper population mapping and territorial range data would be pivotal wherever the research headed from here.

“That's actually not true Rene.” Dr. Ingris finally stepped forward, adjusted the frames of her wire-thin glasses with the pad of her thumb and looked at me with the weight of an escaped convict on the run finally ready to come clean.

“We have the capacity to carry out the procedure as Mr. Aberford wishes. Based on our most recent trials, a successful single-subject transition would last for the lesser part of a year. No known major hazards we're aware of at this time, but it's not the kind of thing we can just communicate to Central for approval. We need a trial run. Rene, you've seen the numbers coming in. It doesn't look good no matter how we slice it or doll it up. Any edge we can get now would pay dividends for our future efforts.”

While Coltane's prodding jabs meant little to me, I had grown up reading and idolizing Dr. Ingris's papers and studies back on Earth. She had been my strongest inspiration to pursue this line of work; to stand before her now, open and vulnerable at the end of her rope—how could I ever say no? If for nothing else I would do this to make the time ahead easier on her for all she had given me and everyone else here in her life's work.

“Ok. I have to know though; what's your plan if we follow through with this and I'm stuck, or I don't remember who I was before the change or anything I learned during that time. If that happens, wouldn't that make this venture worthless?”

Coltane was about to bark out another remark when his shoulder was eased back by Dr. Ingris.

“If that happened, it would be an unfortunate result none of us would be proud of. Truth is there would remain that slim possibility in this process. It's not a guaranteed ride Rene. I was going to find a better opportunity to talk to you about this, but sometimes those choices of timing are pulled away without our consent,” she said with ice aimed at Coltane.

“However, the choice is yours now. What will it be? We all may be light-years away from Earth, but you have the prospect of traveling further than any man or woman has gone before.”

Silence filled the lab that all at once felt too stifling for me even though only two sets of eyes, one smug and one hopeful were focused on me.

"I'll do it, but not for you, and not for myself. It's for them out there," I stated, looking out of the far window into the vast jungles partially obscured by concrete walls.

And I knew as I regarded Coltane for the last time before he politely bowed and excused himself from the room that the smile on his face showed there was little difference in his mind between where the motivation came from—as long as the job got done. It would be the same outcome after all.

Within the week one of the other senior thanator project managers approached me. Today I would begin initial preparations for the serum which would flip my humanity head over heels. I was led into one of the secure containment chambers—initially intended for live sampling and monitoring of captured thanators—now hastily modified with a sleeping cot, walled off bathroom, and other odds and ends to be more hospitable to its unanticipated human occupant. My gaze tracked to the series of cameras discretely hidden in the upper portion of the unpainted, concrete walls where I imagined all of the other researchers were tightly clustered around the monitoring room to witness the start of this bold experiment. All I had with me were the clothes on my back along with a few books to occupy my time. I was assured I wouldn't need anything else.

I sat down on the cot, and the man with the nitrogen-cooled transport case sat in front of me, his face grim.

"This first dose will be the primer to ensure you're receptive to the main transfusion. You'll be monitored over the next two days while the serum does its thing. Afterward, the main solution will be injected. It's my duty to inform you that during this process you may experience none or any combination of the following side effects, including those which may not have been previously documented: increased heart rate, excessive body heat, feelings of fatigue"—the list went on and on, what wavering confidence I had in my colleagues to safely get me through this process in one piece quickly diminishing away—"jaundice of the skin or mild constipation."

"Would you like some water?" I asked.

"No thanks. I'm good." He managed a crack of a smile.

"I just want to be sure; when this is complete, I'll still be me right? At least inside?"

"Our models predict less than a fraction of a percent chance of symptoms consistent with Identity Erosion from the procedure. You'll be fine if you're lucky, and even if you're not...you won't be bothered by it." He opened the transport case then, revealing a single syringe containing an amber-violet fluid cushioned within extensive padding.

I steadied my arm, and the antiseptic wipe which followed was cool across my skin. There would be no turning back now. My fist unclenched; the nervous throb of my heart in my throat remained. The injection went in smooth—painless. Then it was done. My life path was now irrevocably altered by my own will.

"Cheers to the new life mate. Hope whatever you find out there is better than what's in here."

To my relief, I only suffered from the first two alongside the last named potential symptoms the project manager had outlined, and after my two day monitoring period I was given the green light to move forward with the primary injection. Simulations had projected that the protein agonist would take approximately two to three weeks to complete my transformation. However, each of the seventeen days of my transformation into the dark hunter of the Pandoran jungles felt like a lifetime of its own.

The first few days were relatively straightforward outside of managing my ceaseless anticipation. I kept myself busy with the books I had brought and became incredibly adept at tossing a crumpled pair of torn pages into the waste bin from varying distances and angles. Anything and everything to keep myself somewhat relaxed was fair game. The previous symptoms from the primer dose had returned with a vengeance, and I could feel the inflamed undercurrent roiling the first vestiges of transformative change into being all across my body. It was difficult to sleep at night between my constantly active state and not wanting to lose any further time of what remained for me, but come nightfall, exhaustion superseded all other desires and I drifted into the strange world of my dreams, as chaotic as the rest of me was.

On the third night, I laid there in the uneven, sunken cot of the observation room, a grand display played through the expanse of my thoughts. Colors and shapes reverberated and shifted the walls of the room I was in. It was a mental spectacle. For a fleeting moment I worried I had become delusional, then I didn't care at all. Patterns of shard-like shapes trickled down from the ceiling and melded their way into the ground below. The reinforced glass windows gave way, and I leapt through them effortlessly to the outside. Soft grass and hardened dirt rose to match each agile stride which followed. Faster and faster I went until I was folded into the void of the world, welcomed and released back into the early morning twilight of my room which still bore the tang of my tasted freedom from my otherworldly jaunt.

I woke with a start. To say I felt like I was hit by a truck would have been an understatement—try a goddamn comet. All of my muscles ached and throbbed as if I had run a marathon with every single one of them. I groaned, forcing myself up out of bed enough to realize the cot bore a deeper curve beneath my weight. The night had brought with it a sudden hastening and compounding of the fledgling changes from before. My lanky, twig-like forearms were now veritable trunks of solid muscle, my fingers tipped with the dark, curved edges of forming claws. My shoulders ached worst of all, but moving my arms in any direction only strained the clinging fabric of my shirt tighter across my back.

I gathered myself, willed my legs beneath me, and managed to stand just barely with a brief stagger. I aimed my gaze to the restroom, then directed the rest of me to follow. A quiet, punctuated clack peppered each heavy step across the floor, deepening the nervous pit held in my gut all the while. I flicked the light on with a drag of my hand and stood before the mirror a distorted mess of a man; the neat trimmings of my dark hair given way to a sleek, burnished cap of fur-like strands erupting through toughened patches of leathery skin. The tensed muscles of my forearms above the sink carried an added, hidden strength that drew caution as my hands pressed around the porcelain edges of the sink. The metallic scent of iron filled the air, but I didn't pull away from it. Instead it was an alluring perfume, and I was drawn deeper—curiously so, and I sniffed strongly only to gaze down to watch the trickle of blood like an assembly line of lazy raindrops fall free from the puffed out edges of my lips, dotting the sink's interior in an uneven, splashed mosaic.

Widened, curved daggers better suited to the rip and tear of a personally hunted meal were already filling out my gumline in my bestial teething. It was the sight of those fledgling fangs that finally pulled me stumbling back into the observation chamber to barely escape the imagined images which followed of them snuffing out the flame of a helpless life. I sat on the bed, distraught and uncertain, and after a brief struggle, I gave up my feeble attempts to force my shoes over the swollen ends of my misshapen feet to start my day and cast them aside to the emptiness beneath my sleeping cot.

I growled, a sound already approaching unerring proximity to those of some recordings I had listened to in the course of my research, and pounded my fist into my pillow. A faint twitch rippled through the vestigial secondary limbs forming beneath my rib cage and tightened a stitch in my sides which briefly shortened my breath. I had thought the process of my change would be a beautiful one with all the flowing elegance I had attributed to the great apex predator of Pandora. I couldn't have been more wrong. Instead it was transpiring with all the unyielding, ravenous drive of Nature itself, and she did not need to look beautiful for anyone to get her job done.

As my transformation progressed, the others kept their distance from me. I didn't blame them. I was belong to humankind anymore, at least not wholly; my body now occupied a space of an unseen and uncertain otherworldly quality which dredged up ancient and veritably unused instincts of fear-tinged awe in the people who had previously been my comrades and companions. Outside of meal deliveries and gathering biometric data, I was left to my own devices which provided far too much time to intimately catalog and explore the overwhelming swath of changes.

The teal buttons of my torn and discarded shirt, scattered across the floor like a nonsensical constellation, were the only remnants of my clothes that hadn't made it into the trash bin. Without any covering over my body I appeared little more than a strange, sickly beast of my own making. I had since dragged the mattress off the cot into a corner of the room to avoid the dangling limbs of my now three meter long—only half grown—body from falling asleep during the night.

My senses had sharpened, keen like the mighty fangs held heavy in my maw. The newly sprouted sensory quills baring pale red and yellow splashes of color which faded into the dark stalks erupting from my neck teased about the rear of the skull as I moved my heft around the containment room. Trying to control them was kin to trying to invoke my will on the writhing mass of Medusa's snakes. Strangest of all were the twin set of opercula carved into narrow slits on either side of my neck that rippled quietly with each deep intake of air into my enlarged lungs.

Beyond the physical distortions, I feebly tried to first ignore, then scabble back to the drifting vestiges of my humanity slipping away. Speech came less clearly to me now, my words punctuated with rumbling tones and growls in my throat or accented with the haunting scrape of my curved claws which caused my visitors pause. No new symptoms had emerged throughout the transformation, and the ones I had felt at the beginning I had already acclimated myself to. They were pleased by that and jotted down many notes in my company. None stayed long. Only Dr. Ingris, with her always sad eyes reached out to touch me of her own accord, and I let her—because that need for connection outside myself was still human for now.

Several more days passed, and in that stretch of time no visitor came. The whole facility was oddly quiet; the muffled shuffling of researchers nearby pricking my attuned ears to attention an absent memory. I had scared them off I reasoned.

During my last feeding, a feeling, a compulsion severe and unyielding, had seized me as I looked at the bloody hunk of scarcely cooked meat set on its tray. My growing body was ravenous, and so without a moment's thought, I lunged forward to secure my sustenance, and in doing so, the brandished length of my thin, armored tail cracked like a whip beside me against the concrete wall, splintering gray flakes to the ground only an arm's length away from the attending researcher's chest. He scooted away as I devoured my meal, and it was only from looking toward the fist-sized indentation in the wall as I scented my surroundings for more food that guilt, only briefly, gave me pause at what almost had been.

I had avoided looking at myself in the mirror for some time now. I knew enough about what was taking place without the haunting images it instilled in me each time I gazed upon it. My face stared blankly, expressionless; a distorted visage lost between the primal and my former existence. Pale skin had exchanged itself for a cloak of all-consuming, burnished darkness. The extra set of limbs sprouted at my upper torso tensed at random intervals, nearly ready to churn beneath me in an unending trek through the foliage I dreamed about outside the facility. I could coordinate all six of them now in a remarkably predatory gait, and I paced around my changing enclosure, each step a stab against the self-imposed routing of my humanity by walking on the ground like the beast I was becoming.

It was not my unsettled dreams, but the pounding blare of red and amber danced across my vision with screeching alarms that roused me from my sleep in a panic. The shuffling sound of feet had returned, but this time harried and uncoordinated. I looked to the door, and to my amazement it was open. Only a single figure stood at its entrance, her gaze pointed forward, but her legs turned and ready to bolt at a moment's notice if she was mistaken.

“Rene,” Dr. Ingris called with an urgency-laced, soft tone. I walked over to her, my imposing, dark form towering over her. I could the scent the fear clinging to her skin and her clothes. Still, she reached out with a touch as gentle as her voice and rested it upon the strong edge of my jaw.

“Rene...” she called again, and as the unwavering wild gems of my eyes met hers, she knew I was still there.

“Rene, listen. There isn't much time. You have to get out of here. Coltane set this all up. The conversion project wasn't intended for conservation, at least not beyond us it seems. They wanted to make more like you to help secure skirmishes on Pandora with limited personnel. You were a proof of concept, and they want to take their prize before anything goes wrong. No loose ends. The simulations they supplied us were faulty. There's no path to revert the process. I'm so sorry,” she ended before collapsing against me in a tight embrace. I kept her there with me, even with the alarms howling. I let it all sink in. No way back. This would be the last touch of humanity I would receive and be able to give in kind.

I pressed the massive expanse of my forehead to hers, and licked her graying hair once. It was the closest to “*thank you*” which I could still readily communicate. She understood, then let go and left my path clear before me, the trudge of footsteps getting louder and louder.

“Go. I'll find a way to make this right. I promise.”

I nodded, slow and sure. Through her research she had already brought miracles to be for the people of Earth and the colonists here. Her work had led to the previous impossibility of me which stood before her. One more wouldn't be so tough to manage.

I squeezed my way through the door, and once free twisted myself into the empty hallway. I rose my front body and two front legs, standing on my four back limbs as my quills unfurled from their armored casing within the thickened, armor-like plates at the back of my neck. They shimmered in time with my sweeping gaze. In their microscopic quivers, I could detect the faintest vibrations lingering in the air around me. I fell forward to the ground, all six legs scrabbling across the smooth floor beneath me as I ran into the fast spiral of dancing lights beyond.

Less danger that way, but not by much.

I plowed through the complex like an escaped zoo animal. Documents flung out in every direction from knocked over offices as I hurled my body forward with reckless disregard. I traveled the corridors as a dark terror, a forgotten aspect of the night trepidation made all the more terrifying in my presence outside my realm. I was strong like this, but alone. Cornered, I wouldn't stand a chance against the squadron deployed for my capture.

“There he is! Hold the line boys!” one of the militia-men shouted to his squadmates, tranquilizer guns at the ready before the trio soon leapt to the side to avoid the barreling of my body through the barricaded doorway with little thought and even less effort. A flurry of tranquilizers launched in my direction. A pinprick sank into the upper portion of my haunch, then a lameness quickly enveloped my rearmost leg. My strides grew uncoordinated and lazy. I was nearly there to freedom, and I refused to be stopped by a mere tool.

My heart raced, and with it a surge of newfound strength coursed through me. I roared, a mighty, reverberating crash through the complex's hall as the rate of transformative change spiked in response to the soldier's transgression against me and dissolved what remained of the sedative in my blood. I tossed my head back and forth, then resumed my single-minded intent toward the armor bay.

The steel gate leading out of the facility was closed; a line of armed guards stretched end to end with their weapons pointed toward me. Chief among them was the man with the smug smile who had orchestrated all of this, his hand high in the air ready to give the order. Coltane's soldiers were poised and ready, their sight lasers dancing across my darkened skin.

My body acted before my mind could refuse, and with a powerful twist of my hind legs I pivoted towards one of the parked cargo vehicles as the bullets ran free. My eyes frantically scanned for something—anything—that could aid in my escape, and that was when I noticed the play of the sun's light across the rounded edge of the glass ceiling.

I dashed from my hiding place, and trusted that the armor plating of my new body would hold to sustain my gambit. In the barrage of gunfire, I closed the gap between myself and Coltane, and tossed him to the ground with a swipe of my clawed hand, his gun clattering to the side before covering him entirely with the rest of me. The bullets stopped.

My jaw was only a breath away from closing around his skull, and ending him as he had ended my old life. My jaw quivered, a line of drool landing at his chest. In his eyes he was ready to die, but I was not ready to become a killer. I would hold onto that much.

In an instant, I rolled him away like a discarded play-thing, and scurried up the stacks of cargo to reach higher. The thunder of gunfire surrounded me again, but stopped as I braced down, shut my eyes, and rocketed through the glass ceiling windows. Propelled by my momentum, I landed hard on my side on the facility roof. A rich band of pure, orange dusk-light at the horizon washed over me as Polyphemus's central star basked me in its affirming glory, warm and steady.

However, exposure to the miasma of the Pandoran atmosphere seared my lungs and curdled the blood in my arteries. My limbs scraped at the metal beneath me, desperately searching for any pocket of breathable air. My muscles quaked as a score of building toxins threatened to bring me to a final sleep. Then, as if my suffering had been deemed finally enough by an invisible, guiding hand, the vice relaxed across my body and I breathed my first true unaided breath, reborn to this new world.

Like the Na'vi and the thanator of which I now bore physical kinship to, I had developed wicrow, specialized organs required to extract greater amounts of oxygen from the atmosphere. By utilizing the carbon dioxide and water metabolic byproducts naturally built up within my body I could inherently produce methane and oxygen. At rest, this same exhaled methane could be converted back into carbon dioxide and water to sustain me during times of drought or extended periods without water. The creatures of this planet were intimately connected to the shared thread of life Eywa represented, and now I had finally taken my proper place in that shared process as well.

A dusting of sparkles flecked with crimson splashes loosened themselves from my skin as I shook myself and eyed the edge of the rainforest—the starting line of my freedom.

I quickly leapt from the roof, the muffled sounds of the soldiers below reorganizing themselves just beneath me as I landed on another parked cruiser, then hurled myself forward towards the gate in a mindless sprint. In seconds, my front-most legs caught the stone edge, and with a mighty heave I dragged myself over the final barrier.

The sprint across the field to the rainforest was unlike anything I had ever experienced before in my whole life. My entire body churned with the force of my intention, and my six-legged galloped came swift in a smooth stride across dirt until the softness of overgrown ferns and jungle vines welcomed me in their verdant embrace.

I kept running and running until I was absolutely certain that the lights at my back and the sounds of the vehicles had ceased in their pursuit—at least for now—as I navigated this environment far more easily than they could ever hope to with their metallic constructs.

I finally came to stop at a waterfall which offered what I needed most for my battered and bruised body, a safe place to recover and rest. Lowering my head to the water to drink, my eyes fell upon my fully transformed features. I studied myself in the entirety this moment of peace afforded me from the broad-skulled strength of my head, down through my lean, athletic build to the curling tip of my tail. Not just the outside had changed though; there was a new, glowing conviction within that hadn't been there before.

I drank my fill, then lay beside the water's edge. Further beyond the silhouetted trees, Polyphemus, the great gas-giant planet of which Pandora, its moon, was a host rose to signal the claiming dominion of night over the rainforest. Despite the pervading darkness, I found I could still see, my new eyes extracting every last ounce of lingering light from the faded skies to navigate my way.

However, their full strength would not be needed. All around me the jungle flora came alive with spots and patterns, ghosts and galaxies of blue-green light, their bioluminescence stretching far beyond what I could see, dazzling the waterfall in an ethereal glow. They reminded me of the many lights littering the cityscape from which I had first grown up as a boy, but these lights were pure and untouched, alive and in flux.

I recalled the band of orange light at the top of facility as I drew my first breaths of wild freedom. *Aurantiaco* that phenomenon was called. The Na'Vi used those distinguishing stretches of pure-dusk light in colored marks on their body to signal with other clans their home territories and professions as they changed in coloration in accordance to elevation when viewed. From that I would forge my new name – Auran.

Here, I could feel the running pulse of the land, the fiery heartbeat of an untamed world. How little I had known of the true nature of things in my little metal box. Adorned with my ever-present midnight cloak I would step silently into the overgrowth, and vanish until needed to help care for the cradled wound of this world. The rainforest floor beckoned to me, and I would answer with willing grace.