

# THE SHUT FACE OF THUNDER

by Jonathan Decoteau

## EXCERPT

(The War of The Animals series asks: What if animals rose up against humanity's pollution of the environment and destruction of their habitats? What if it was a fair fight? This excerpt is from the seventh chapter and introduces Azaz, king of the grizzly bears, the antagonist of the book.)

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.