

CHAPTER 21--FATE OF THE POLAR BEAR

It was good to be active again. All the talking had made Amanda a little cold. The narwhals swam off and the sun moved farther below the horizon. Lars signaled that they should setup the tent while there was still light.

They quickly finished. She retreated into the tent as Lars secured and tended to the dogs a little longer. He joined her inside the tent as darkness descended upon them. They boiled some tea and dined on some leftover seal meat and biscuits.

Amanda had only one thought on her mind, to learn more about the fate of the polar bear. “What about the polar bear? Have people hunted it for any of its parts like the narwhal and the bowhead?”

Lars explained how polar bear skins were traded before. The written records showed that the skins reached as far as Egypt, but the biggest prize was catching a live polar bear. There was even a story of an Icelander who brought a live polar bear to the Holy Roman Emperor in 1054 and was then made a bishop.

Amanda was comforted by the fact that there were 20,000 to 25,000 polar bears worldwide, including 2,000 to 2,500 in this area. Until she heard how many there might have been before.

The number had probably varied due to the extent of ice ages and hunting by man in recent times. When the ice age was at its greatest extent, and hunting was minimal, there probably would have been more. The best estimate Lars had was a reference to the population of other bears in the world. The brown bear population was about 200,000, with more than half of that in Russia, and the rest mostly in Alaska and Canada. Black bears estimates ranged from 200,000 to 600,000 in North America, a decline from an estimated two million.

Amanda imagined a world filled with bears. A world where bear and man lived harmoniously. Rather than give warnings, there would be instructions, on how to attract and befriend your local bear.

All this talk of hunting led Amanda to ask Lars a more pointed question about how he viewed these animals. "Have you ever killed a narwhal or polar bear?"

"I have killed several narwhal. It has been quite a few years since I last killed one, not good for business. Red narwhal meat is good for the dogs though. The skin and blubber can be made into a chewy delicacy called muktuk. In season, you might find some in town. Historically it has been an important source of vitamin C. I have never killed a polar bear, but I have been with some Inuit a couple of times when they did."

Amanda pressed on unflinchingly. "What did you do with the bear?"

"We ate the meat and skinned it. You may have seen some of the Inuit in Qaanaaq

wearing polar bear pants.”

She remembered it now, but had chosen to not think about it. Now that she was out in the wilderness, it didn't seem as uncomfortable to acknowledge the reality. “I was wondering about that. What does it taste like?”

”It tastes a little like pork. Tastier than seal by most accounts. Polar bear liver is very poisonous due to its high vitamin A content though.”

The description was blunt. It was no different than describing the taste of a morning slab of bacon or a Mexican taco with carnitas. “Are polar bears endangered?”

“No, but they are classified as lower risk to vulnerable on the IUCN Red List. Do you know what that is?”

“No.”

“It is a list which tracks endangered and near endangered animals. This classification means their numbers are stable, but continued health is conservation dependent. If we aren't careful, their numbers could go the way of the rhinoceros.”

“But they're still hunted in Greenland, no?”

“Yes. While several countries have outright bans, I think they are also hunted in Eastern Russia and Canada. In the case of Greenland, hunting is limited to native Inuit, and there are limits on how many they can kill legally each year. It isn't allowed in the reserves. The last numbers I saw were about 1,000 killed worldwide every year, but I don't think the focus should be on hunting right now.”

“One thousand? That sounds like a lot considering the population. Why do you say that

hunting shouldn't be the focus?"

"The biggest threat isn't hunting. "

"It's not? What is then?"

"Do you remember how I mentioned that I didn't expect to see narwhal up here so early?"

"I remember."

"The reason I think they are here is related to the bigger threat to polar bears, warming temperatures."

Amanda knew she had heard something about this earlier, but the stress of travel and all the new sensory experiences were making it hard for her to remember just exactly where. "That sounds so familiar."

Lars helped her out. "Polar bears depend on sea ice to hunt for seals. The length of season and extent of sea ice is changing at an incredible rate."

"So polar bears can't hunt as long?"

"It's been documented that many populations are losing weight year over year."

The weight loss comment jogged Amanda's memory. "I remember now! I spoke with a scientist who drills ice cores while waiting for my flight from Copenhagen. He mentioned the weight loss too. He didn't quite downplay hunting as you have. We weren't talking about polar bears specifically. This is insightful to hear it from you, someone closer to the situation. "

"Not only is the sea ice season getting shorter and the extent declining, but the ice that is here, is thinner – dramatically thinner. A few years ago I visited some friends at the Danish Polar

Center in Denmark. They showed me some historical charts. When compared to present day satellite images, the charts only confirmed what we, meaning people on the ground here, already know.”

Amanda waited patiently for him to finish.

“It has gotten more difficult since I first arrived. The ice is not as thick, and it melts sooner. You are lucky that we are able to dogsledge so late in the season. Perhaps in a few years around this time it will not be possible to dogsledge this far south.”

“It’s that bad?”

“When you flew over here in the helicopter, did you see a large body of open water?”

“The North Water polynya?”

“That’s the one.”

“What about it?”

“In the past during this time of year, late March, the polynya was only open further north. I remember when the polynya was just west of Dundas in May. Not so anymore. The polynya is spreading further south earlier in the season. More leads have appeared. While there has always been a lead along Melville Bay, the network is growing. Normally, the Davis Strait becomes ice free in June, it is happening sooner.

“Does this have anything to do with us almost getting stuck on a drifting piece of ice?”

“Yes.”

“Is all this because of global warming?”

“I have never liked that word, it is so loaded. Amanda, I am only a tour guide and

scientist, not a politician. The vast majority of Inuit, even less so. Our world, at least the world that the Inuit have known for hundreds, if not thousands of years, is changing. It is changing in a lifetime. Perhaps you can learn the stories from this lonely part of the world and share them with your friends.”

She noticed Lars use of the word ‘our.’ He had come to identify himself intimately with the Inuit, despite his Danish ancestry. “I can try,” she answered. “What other changes have you seen first hand?”

“Birds are staying longer before flying south due to longer summer like temperatures. I’ve noticed some bird species that I’ve never seen here before. Inuit hunters here are falling through previously solid sea ice. I know we are not alone in Greenland, Canadian Inuit are seeing robins for the first time. In Scandinavia, birch trees are moving northward into previously icy areas used for reindeer herding. Scientists monitoring Svalbard recently have said that they have found seas free of ice further north than for 250 years at one monitoring point.”

“How come this doesn’t get reported in the media more often?”

“The information is out there. I think the problem is finding it. I fault the popular media. It gets me angry. Let’s not discuss it.”

Amanda had hit a sore spot.

Silence pervaded the tent, even as light from the lantern signaled a mood of talk rather than sleep. It was as if they had known each other for a long time and were comfortable with silence. The remote outdoors had a way of bonding people faster.

There was another threat to polar bears as a resulting of a warming Arctic. It was the

opening up of the fabled Northwest Passage, the passage that was supposed to be a faster way to Asia. Many had failed due to the impassable ice, but about fifty ships more or less, mostly ice breakers, had made the crossing. Many more had failed or died trying. The first time it was crossed was in the early 1900s, by the famous Arctic explorer, Roald Amundsen. It wasn't crossed again for forty years.

Lars noted how this situation would soon change. That in the next fifty years, ten years by some accounts, it was expected that the passage would be ice free completely during the summer. Many more transits were likely. In other months, ships might be able to get through with a few icebreaker escorts. He explained how currently, large sections, not the entirety, were ice free in a small window from August to late October.

This 'new' passage would permit container ships, cruise ships, and oil tankers to transit from Asia to Europe more quickly by not having to go through the Panama Canal. This saved ships at least 4,000 miles and potential canal fees. Some ships, notably large oil tankers, might benefit even more as they are too big for the Panama Canal. Those ended up going around the dangerous tip of South America.”

It wasn't just idle talk either. Even the Canadian and US governments had produced forecasts for when this would be possible. To be fair, some thought it would be more dangerous if ice that is currently plugged up in some areas is allowed to float into the passage. It was being called the Panama Canal of the North.

While at first Amanda thought this might be a good thing, she soon learned of its implications. How all change had winners and losers. Winners would include the people who

took advantage of this to lower their costs or the developers of the infrastructure. Energy companies stood to gain from large deposits of natural gas. The country of Panama might be a loser. If development proceeded in the fragile Arctic environment to support any transits, whether it be Inuit or large corporations – polar bears would be losers too.

“The polar bear?” Amanda repeated while looking over at her furry friend from childhood.

“Think oil spills, industrial pollution, hunters, settlements, and more human contact among other ills.”

She pursed her lips.

“The definition of winning and losing changes too as the things that people value change, as with the unicorn story I told you earlier, change is inevitable.”

The simplicity of the Arctic helped to clarify Amanda’s thoughts. She began to wonder about her own values of winning and losing and what they meant for the world at large, and her own existence.

What influenced what she truly desired? Out here, there were no billboards. There were no magazines to thumb through or glance at in a grocery aisle. There was no materialistic competition to keep up with. No fashion trends to follow. No must have gadgets. No fancy cars to impress. There was no television advertising to consume. The noise of the modern world was trumpeted by nature. She felt more alive than ever before.

“Live free or die,” she mumbled.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, nothing. Go on.”

“There’s no free lunch, I think you say in America. If we collectively ask ourselves, what is worth giving up, and what isn’t, instead of blindly accepting it, maybe that will lead people to true happiness.”

While a live polar bear continued to elude them, this trip in Greenland wasn’t turning out to be what she thought, it was turning out to be even better.

“You said you haven’t killed a polar bear before, right?”

He nodded his head affirmatively.

“Yet, you’ve killed a narwhal. Why is that?”

“I guess it comes down to the ‘eating dilemma of animals,’ as I like to call it.”

“What do you mean?”

“What is acceptable and what is not to eat.”

“I never thought about that before.”

“The first test I think of is – how similar is an animal to us?”

Comparative genomics as Lars would explain was the study of how similar humans are genetically to other species. He explained to her how there were many numerous and arcane ways of making comparisons, but that generally speaking, of the known genes sequenced, the following percentages would be about right: daffodil flowers – 35%, fruit flies - 55%, chickens – 60%, rats, mice, dogs, cats, cows, pigs – 85% to 90% and finally apes and monkeys – 96% similarity. These percentages fell into broad groups of plants, insects, birds, and mammals, with fish perhaps similar to the chicken.

“What I find interesting is that what is considered strange in one culture, is acceptable and normal in another. Italians eat horse meat, Koreans and Chinese eat dog, Indians don’t eat cows, and people in West and Central Africa eat monkeys and other bush meat.”

Amanda pondered her own adventurous eating habits. While she reacted with mild surprise at these revelations, she wondered how her friends back home might look at her after eating seal and walrus meat.

“What is the strangest thing you have ever eaten before coming here?”

“A friend once made me drink snake wine at a Japanese restaurant. I think of raw fish, sushi as being a bit exotic. Some of my friends eat it so much, they don’t think so. Other than that, I’ve never given it much thought.”

“How did the snake wine taste?”

“Creepy. I think my nerves overpowered my taste buds. I mostly tasted the rice wine. I’d probably have to try it again.”

“Do you have a favorite kind of sushi?”

“I like the salmon and tuna the most.”

“There’s an interesting story about tuna in sushi, would you like to hear it?”

She nodded her head enthusiastically. Lars began to share the story of the bluefin tuna.

In many fashion, he impressed her with the raw statistics of bluefin tuna and how they could grow larger than 6 feet and weigh up to 1,100 pounds, with the record being 1,500 pounds. That they could swim up to fifty miles per hour and live for up to forty years. And perhaps most interesting of all, they liked to travel.

“Travel?” Amanda questioned.

“One tagged tuna was recorded to have traveled nearly 8,000 miles in a year. Many swim several thousand miles each year at a minimum. They migrate all over the Atlantic and breed in the Gulf of Mexico and Mediterranean.

“8,000 miles?”

“Of the 20,000 different fish species known about, they are among the two dozen that are warm blooded.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means they have some ability to regulate their body temperature, which would be a useful quality up here. That feature allows them to travel all over the world, like us.”

Amanda felt chilly for a moment. She had tried not to think about the cold very much, instead, focusing on the scenery, daily activities, and their engaging conversations.

“What other fish have this ability?”

“Mackeral shark and billfishes – marlins and swordfish, also. Some other sharks have it too, great whites included.”

“Are there sharks in the Arctic?”

“Less than 10 of the 465 known species have been spotted. The most intriguing one is the Greenland Shark, which can grow to twenty feet, one of the largest.”

“Might we see one?”

“I doubt it, they live very deep.”

Amanda’s momentary delusion came back to reality.

“Bluefin tuna go deep too. They stay down around 1,000 feet, but can go to over 3,000 feet to eat. They live in near freezing water to very warm waters. What’s even more astounding about this fish, is what people pay for it.”

“Pay for it?”

“Some bluefin tuna have been sold for more than \$100,000 US Dollars in Japan.”

“\$100,000 dollars? People pay that much just for a fish?” she responded, somewhat flabbergasted. She wondered why and how Lars kept so many of these minute details straight in his mind. He was like a sports junkie who could reel off the most obscure statistics, or an automobile nerd who knew all about torque and horsepower.

“Demand for tuna as sushi in Japan has caused bluefin tuna populations to become dangerously low around the world.”

She was too flabbergasted at the dollar amount to recognize the significance of Lars last statement, but she paid attention when he revealed the most interesting one.

“There is one more interesting thing about bluefin tuna.”

“What’s that?” Amanda had been starting to lose interest in all of these mundane animal facts despite her veil of interest.

“It breathes only by moving water through its gills and will die if it stops swimming.”

“What’s that again?”

“The bluefin tuna breathes by moving water through its gills. It will die if it stops swimming.”

“It will die if it stops swimming?”

“Yes, one record battle had a bluefin fighting for its life for sixty two hours!”

Then it suddenly hit her, a revelation. Perhaps it was the only fact that Amanda wanted to remember, maybe it was just coincidence. With every passing day she had begun to feel more and more alive, more free. Now, she knew why. She realized that whether it was at work, staring at her computer, at home, watching television, or a movie at the theatre, she was always sitting down. She was seldom moving and lethargic. Even when going to different places, she didn't move much, physically move that is. When she drove her car, she may have gone somewhere, but her body wasn't in motion.

It was all an illusion of movement. While one may mentally go somewhere – in the city, on television, or in a movie, one's body hadn't gone through the motions. Most of her movement was walking in a parking lot, in a grocery store, or a shopping mall. All dull places mostly – except for a few of her favorite stores. Lest she go to a health club to run on a treadmill, the effect was the reverse. She might run, but the scenery was constant, most likely a television. Like the bluefin, she was dying, if not physically, then certainly mentally and spiritually.

She felt alive because she was traveling, on the move. Physically on the move with stimulus both in mind and motion. By bicycle or her own two legged power. She had walked and run alongside the sledge quite a bit the past few days exploring new places. She had hiked in Ilulissat. Much of modern life in contrast, at least as she knew it, was an illusion, a really bad illusion. It reminded her of the zoo.