

ANIMALIAN UNIVERSE

Trail of the Missing Hare



Alyx Vankov

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Preface

This is the opening volume of the Animalian Universe cycle, the first book within the broader Six-Universe Cluster series. Each universe contains a dedicated cycle of books following the lives of its heroes. All universes are interconnected parts of a multiverse.

Readers may begin their journey with the first book of any world cycle. There are six universes in total. The choice of this number is revealed in the plot. As the stories evolve, the paths of the characters from different universes will converge.

The protagonists begin their journey as children. Then, the cycle of books follows their development into adulthood. The series at large explores world-building and societal themes that will be interesting to both younger readers and adults.

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To stay in touch and find out more about the series, visit:

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Chapter 1: What Are We Going to Become?

The sun illuminated the young wolf's dark-gray fur, contouring his ears and shoulders from behind, making the tips of his fur glow with a yellowish tone. He wore a dark brown T-shirt and long black shorts with multiple pockets.

The wolf was holding and slowly rotating a small spindle-like toy, exploring the features of the device with his fingers. While fusion engines propel spaceships within the Solar System, on Earth, a small spindle-like toy, resembling such an engine, is a popular toy of young foxes.

"You know, guys, I wish to be an engineer," said Wulf, following a pause in the conversation.

The three children were sitting in a circle on the grass in the backyard of Mr. and Mrs. Foxigen's house. Each was eight years old; each belonged to an anthropomorphic species. They were a wolf, a fox, and a cat.

It was a warm, sunny day, the last of several remaining days of summer. The bright green grass and soil were dry, making them comfortable to sit on. The grass tops became translucent, illuminated by the sunlight, which was turning orange as sunset approached. The whole place felt quiet, though not entirely, as it was situated in a suburb far from the thrumming city center.

Gatto, a hazel-colored cat with dark stripes, just yawned, stretching his paws with a soft crackling sound; at first, he did not react to Wulf's words. His stripes were partially covered by a small

yellow vest featuring a drawing of an atomic model with electrons orbiting a nucleus.

“Well, I want to be a security officer,” Lisa, a fox, suddenly replied after a five-second pause. She immediately grabbed her bushy rufous tail with both paws as if she wanted to hug it. Her bright-blue denim overalls were expressing a striking contrast with the reddish fur of the tail and paws and accenting her dark-blue eyes.

“I do not know why you are talking like that,” Gatto finally said, slowly glancing at the two other kids while opening and closing his eyes. “You only start unified school next week. Why talk about college now?”

“Gatto, that is important!” Lisa yelled, shifting her eyes between Gatto and Wulf and holding them on each for a second, as if she wanted a confirmation of what she just stated.

“Did you just decide to be a security guard right now, when you heard Wulf?” asked Gatto.

“No, I have thought about that for a long time.”

Lisa had been thinking about joining the security forces since she was five years old. At times, she dreamed of chasing unknown adversaries on the planet EverGreen, or even in mysterious worlds she fantasized would be discovered in the future. She did not know why she had decided that; perhaps it was cartoons where security officers were portrayed as heroes, or conversations with Wulf, whose father is a security officer. Anyway, only now did she tell her friends, following Wulf’s example.

A bright blue dragonfly suddenly sat on Wulf’s ear. He shook his ear, and the creature buzzed away, continuing its flight.

“That will be tough for you both, guys,” Gatto sighed. “I just want to study physics and maybe other sciences. Quite ordinary. In our world, almost all cats are doctors or scientists, foxes are workers and engineers, and wolves are security and admin staff. Everyone knows that.”

“We can do that. We are not the first engineer wolf and guard fox,” replied Wulf, continuing to rotate the spindle-like toy and

pressing its cubic indentations. The toy sometimes produced a barely noticeable buzzing and shone a small 3D light resembling the thrust of a spaceship engine.

“Yes, yes, I know that.”

“Indeed,” added Lisa. She had already dropped her tail and propped herself up on one elbow in the grass.

“Do your parents know, Lisa?” asked Wulf.

“Yes, I told them recently.”

“What did they say?”

“Nothing, really.”

“How come? Completely nothing?” Wulf glanced at Lisa with a wondering and attentive gaze.

“Well, they whispered among themselves and spoke, ‘Oh, oh.’ Then they told me that they would accept whatever I wish. But I know by their faces they hope I will change my mind later.”

“Mine are yet to know,” Wulf muttered in a quiet, mysterious tone, staring at the empty space in the middle of the three sitting kids. He put the engine toy, which belonged to Lisa, on the grass.

“Do not worry,” Lisa tried to convince him.

“Meow, yes, no worries.” Gatto laid back on the grass, placed both paws beneath his head, and put on sunglasses. The sun started to hide behind the bluish ceramic fence covered by sparse climbing stems with blobs of fading flowers.

“Wulf, your dad is here,” Mrs. Foxigen called to him, leaning out from the open window. Denim overalls similar to Lisa’s in color, but with many pockets, spectacularly emphasized the Foxigens’ appearance.

“Bye, guys, I have to go,” announced Wulf, rising from the ground.

“Good luck,” replied Lisa.

“Have a good day!” Gatto meowed to the departing Wulf.

Wulf’s father serves as a regular Level 3 security officer. This is not a really high rank because the lowest is Level 1. However, it is normal among wolves; only a few receive promotions over their entire careers to become leaders of wolf units. The wolf’s summer

Chapter 2: Unforeseen Events

On this usual morning, Blackwolf arrived at the security department office in the city of NeoStar.

NeoStar is a large megalopolis that occupies the same area as New York in our human world. However, almost all its buildings are skyscrapers made of lightweight yet exceptionally strong materials engineered by foxes. They shine with their glassy and whitish-metallic surfaces. Multi-level highways connect the skyscrapers and the spaceport.

Far above the industrial smog, high-altitude spaceports of animalian Earth launch silvery-white passenger and cargo spaceships whose fusion engines make interplanetary travel easy. The main destinations of these ships are the Moon and the two closest planets: EverGreen, which is a habitable version of Venus, and IcyRock, which is a version of Mars in the animalian Solar System. Spaceships depart almost every day, and space travel is known to everyone from an early age. Animals have not yet mastered interstellar travel, though.

The population of the suburbs and NeoStar City itself is roughly eight million citizens. Animals who work in the city typically commute every day using hyper-speed vehicles. So did Blackwolf. Few live in the center of the city.

In this city, the atmosphere is so polluted in some places, especially at the lowest levels of the streets, that there is not enough oxygen to breathe. So, animals typically wear breathing masks on their muzzles if they are not in sealed, isolated compartments with a reliable air supply. These masks utilize sophisticated membranes

that can filter out gases and tiny particles, and are also capable, to a certain extent, of increasing the oxygen fraction if it is too low in the air, or decreasing it if it is too high. Therefore, Blackwolf pulled a heavy armored mask with two valves and a central communication port over his muzzle when he exited the car.

The office building of the department is shiny gray with numerous thin vertical rectangular elevations on its facade. The entrance is a large sliding glass door where wolves and other animals are almost continuously entering and exiting.

In the office, Blackwolf had only paperwork to do today. He needed to prepare a seasonal report, as the end of the eighth month — the last month of summer — was approaching.

“Hi, Black, what’s up for today?” asked the bear guard. He was sitting in the entrance cabin, wearing a blue uniform and a cap pinned with a dark, sleek badge.

“Hi, Ted, just red tape.”

Bears typically serve with wolves. They often become leading guards or wardens in office roles; some even go into politics and become members of governing boards. However, in this world, the selection of those members is entirely different from what the reader may know about human society.

The wolf went to his desk, which was piled with stacks of papers and located in the partitioned open-space hall, and turned on the computer, which consisted of a CRT display and a separate thick mechanical keyboard, both encased in thick milky-white plastic. These seemingly old-fashioned computers are typical for animalian offices. *Well, I need to go to detention to question the hare,* Blackwolf thought. *My report can wait for a couple of hours.*

Suddenly, an alarm siren went off, howling, and red lights started blinking in the corridors. A voice from the speakers began to repeat the announcement: “All wolves immediately report to their armories. Security breach emergency.”

Wolves who were in the desk hall, including Blackwolf, left their places and headed to the armories. Blackwolf ran to the upper floor where his armory was located.

“Move, move!” shouted the bear near the armory. “Full equipment! Get oxygen masks!”

Without a single word, the wolves put on their gray tactical suits for low air pressure, pulled on masks, and slid ammunition cartridges into specialized pockets. They checked out their high-energy rifles and telescopic spears; their small pistols were already with them. The clunk of metal and the smell of slightly burned rubber filled the air. Some wolves tested their spears, ensuring they extended from their folded state to a full fighting length and back again.



The equipping took roughly five minutes. Then, the wolves ran to the building’s roof, where the leading wolf of the district was standing in sunglasses and similar full equipment for low-pressure conditions. He announced the mission:

“We have a reptilian invasion in our Moon dome, in the hydroponic gardens sector. You depart immediately to help our Moon forces; they have insufficient animals.”

Reptilians sometimes appear in this world out of nowhere, and none of them have ever been captured. The best scientists search

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