

# The Last One

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The proper subject of the novel is universal human experience.

Oft-repeated homily

*Dedication*

*For Toby the cat, who isn't going to read this.*

*(All bets are off if Toby has kids.)*

# 1

Call it a marsh. In the future. When things aren't quite the way they are now. So that none of our words fit anything as they're going to be then. *Marsh*, for example. *Duck*. *Firn*. Not to mention *love*, *hate*—even *diplomacy*. A small group of ducks are floating in the brown water of a marsh, near some firns. Nearly enough, this is the scene as it's going to be. "Talking about my generation," one of the ducks is saying. *Gerkk* is its name. *Snerking* as much scorn up through its beak as it can, Gerdd says back, "Generation *really* isn't a word that applies to things that *subdivide*." They've been talking about one-celled creatures, bacteria, and about whether they like music or not.

Then all the ducks go silent. Because they hear something nearby. "Look," Qartt *shispers*, even though one of its eyes is closed and half of its brain is asleep, "hiding over there. *It's a human*. So *disgusting*." "A real *human*, are you sure?" Ccuqq says low, bobbing its head slightly into the air, and sniffing. But the ducks all realize that Qartt actually knows what humans smell like. Even when he's half asleep. Not many other animals do these days. "So gross," Kwaqq *shispers* now, "should we try to kill it?" "They *did* invent the computer," Gerkk says. "Yeah," Qflacc says, "but they also invented the *fork*." Qflacc is right about that, and the rest of the ducks are taken aback for a moment. Thinking about the evil invention of the *fork* as they paddle about in tiny circles in the water.

These animals are far more dangerous than they look. Because prey animals aren't the way they used to be: Easy pickings for predators is what they once were. But things are different now. Take ducks for example. In a *group*, they are perfectly capable of *beaking* even a moderately competent wolf to death. Ccuqq filmed the whole thing once, continuously, the wolf actually *screaming* at its tormenters as it died, "you *need* me to kill you." Ducks everywhere watch *his film* regularly. On *Snut.t*, a popular website. "Can you believe what that *thing* said?" one duck always intones gravely, while all the others nod knowingly. *Some things are just evil*. It's almost a ritual among ducks to point this out. Older ducks shaking their wise heads at the way the world is now.

Ducks like Mozart, by the way, even though he was a human. Because Mozart is great to listen to when your head's under water. That's not true of Wagner. Or Lady Gaga. Lady Gaga is just so horrible under water.

Ducks are very complicated animals. Like every animal is in the future.

After they drug the human, he doesn't remember anything. Because ducks have all the best drugs. They even have amnesiacs, which they think are a lot of fun to administer to other

animals. So the human doesn't remember anything until he wakes up much later. Being watched by rabbits. *Rabbit*. That's another word that doesn't quite fit the things in the future. *Descendants of rabbits* is a little better. But not perfect. Because there's quite a bit of human in those rabbits, there's quite a bit of human in lots of animals now. Animals didn't used to have human in them, or not that much. But most of *those* animals are long extinct, except for some of the smaller ones, the rodent-sized ones, the insects.

Extinction. You can explain a lot about the future just by listing everything that's gone extinct.

## 2

When the human first opens his eyes, he doesn't actually see what's in front of him. Because it takes him a moment to focus his eyes, to *really see* the odd bunny faces staring at him. (Ducks have the best drugs.) He's looking at tiny cute faces that are weirdly behind bars, six small buck-toothed ones that are staring open-mouthed at him. Bunny-faces. He blinks, and the frightened faces all start back, their ears popping up into the air in unison. He sits up, shaking his head, trying to clear it, and this causes an uproar—a sea of shrieking and screaming rabbits. He can see now that it isn't the faces that are behind bars, it's him. He's been passed out on a cracked and old cement slab long enough for his body to be achy. He sees a bowl with dirty water in it that's nearby, just within his reach, and next to it what look like some mossy tacos on a plate. Maybe they've been honestly trying to figure out what to feed him. His head hurts, and not just from the sounds bombarding his ears.

The baby-bunnies have backed away from his cage, they're huddling up against their parents, that's what he's guessing the bigger rabbits are. Some of them are disdainfully pointing at him, and saying things to one another. Others, all from a safe distance, are yelling at him and glaring outraged as if he's just been caught eating one of them. It's only then that he takes in that there's another cage next to his. He doesn't take in what's in there, not at first, because of this hangover blurring his vision, making him bend his head down from the pain. Even the dim daylight, what there is of it, hurts his eyes. Hangover—there's no better word for how he feels now.

It's a wolf, in the next cage. A really large wolf, a lot larger than him. Even worse, it's standing fully upright on its thickly-muscled back legs, its big aggressive face looking right at him, its body massive and frightening. Some things threaten everything else around them just by existing. "Time to wake up," the big monster wolf-thing is saying—its gravel purr carrying easily over the sea of high-pitched screaming rabbits, "surely you don't want to sleep through *this*."

The wolf-thing is speaking directly to him, he realizes. Because, as soon as it catches his eye, it gestures meaningfully at the rabbits outside the cage.

The rabbits are in a furious turmoil. They're enraged, hopping up and down twisting their weird elongated bodies about as they point at him and at the wolf-thing, yelling and shrieking. He can't distinguish the words, or not many of them. Not because he can't understand rabbits, he usually does, but because there's so many of them and they're shrieking their words so fast, so furious, and so hysterically. And because their high-pitched voices are hurting his ears. He thinks he catches the word "creepy," he's sure he hears the words "murderer," "scumbag," "thing," "kill them now." And then, over the screaming rabbits: "They think we're conspiring together, you know, planning something because we're both so *evil*, and that's what evil things *do*." Maybe the wolf-thing monster is laughing at this, maybe that's what the sound is that's coming out of its big mouth now, maybe that's why its mouth is opened so wide that he can see all its large teeth. He can't tell over the noise.

One of the rabbits has stepped forward, a big momma-rabbit he's guessing, although he really has no idea. Most animals strike him as sexless, they always have, with features that are kind of indistinguishable from the others of their type. This is because, although they don't wear clothes, their fur or feathers cover up their genitals, or anyway, cover them up most of the time. These animals are still human *this* way: their private parts are covered. Once upon a time it was only humans that had *private* parts. Other animals only had *public* parts, except for the parts that were hidden under their skin. This was an important difference between humans and other animals. Not any more.

Sometimes he *can* tell that an animal is a female, or a male, or he thinks he can. Because the females are a little softer in their features, a little smaller in size—some of them. Not this big rabbit, though. If she's female, she's a big female. She's certainly a brave one, whatever she really is, standing right outside his cage, only inches from him, glaring right into his eyes, daring him to do something about it. For some reason he feels like he's about to get the dressing-down that he fully deserves, and he stands up, wobbly and ashamed, readying himself to take it like a man.

Later he'll wonder what made him think such a thing, what on earth he could have been reminded of. His shaky standing-up movements ignite another uproar among the rabbits, the baby-bunnies visibly shivering and screaming their cries into their parent's bodies, the parents simultaneously soothing their younglings while yelling at him and waving their fists. The fat momma-rabbit in front of his cage has opened her eyes wide, in horror. She's gaping at him as if she can't *believe* what she's seeing. Somehow it all feels way off, way out of proportion to whatever he's done. *Ever*. And that's when he realizes he doesn't have any clothes on, and that

he's missing his toolpack too. He won't survive without that toolpack. Scissors. His sparker. What's he going to do without his scissors and his sparker? Or that soap?

He's young and tall. Barely over thirty, or maybe not quite thirty yet. He's healthy looking and fairly buff. Because this is a world you have to be active in. (If you're going to live as long as he has.) He would have been described as "ruggedly handsome" in an earlier time, in our time for example. It would have been said that he's got "chiselled good looks, a square jaw, a down-to-earth but sensitive face with just the right amount of beard." He would have been described as the totally normal guy from next door who happens to have those Hollywood looks, the built guy who's still so modest, even a little shy, that both you and your sister want to marry him. He'd certainly be popular with the girls if there were any girls left.

But he knows this isn't what he looks like to anyone else in *this* world, this isn't what anyone else sees when they look at him. For example, the wolf-thing who'd let off a sarcastic low whistle when he'd stood up, he's sure that wolf-thing can't see a whole person when it looks at him. Instead it sees the pattern of how his muscles are wrapped around his bones, it sees the drapery of his flesh, all his vulnerable spots, all his "tear-points," the ways he can be chewed easily into pieces. All the wolf sees, really, is his under-the-skin anatomy, how he comes apart or can be made to come apart. Where all the snapped-together joints are. He's not pretty, he's not ugly. To the wolf-thing, to the monster. It's just plain facts about where he's soft and where he's not. A butcher, in our time and place, doesn't really see a cow should one happen by. What a butcher sees are *things* moving together in a beautiful harmony for a little while, a choreographed balleting of undetached cow-parts performing Unity, dancing together just like an *entity*. Wolves see what butchers see: Undetached parts temporarily hanging out together, each one marked with a *tasting grade*: B plus, A minus, C. Or better: Yum, Yum plus, Yuck plus, Yuck minus.

What do the rabbits see? Well, he doesn't expect what happens next. He doesn't expect it when the momma-rabbit rears her head back and spits furiously at him. "Ugh," he hears the wolf say, clearly. And then everything is *drowned out* by screaming rabbits. He's staring down, dumbly, at what's hit him, at what looks like a large blob of green snot, one that's slowly drooling down his chest, revoltingly speckled with semi-digested orange bits, so viscous and thick with vegetable matter that it could pass for vomit. She does it again as there's a rush at the cage. The rabbits, all the rabbits, are now spitting at him. He backs away, but the cage is too small, and he just squats and covers his eyes, more to protect them than to avert them from the sight of colorful flying saliva, the soft and runny food-bits. It doesn't hurt, this spitting at him that goes on and on and on. But the shrieking, that does hurt somehow, he can feel the noise vibrating inside his head. He crouches more, instinctively making himself a smaller target close to the ground, his head tucked into his chest, his arms wrapped around his face and head.

He thinks that he'd like it if he could protect his hair from getting wet, and then he thinks how silly that thought is. Something large and soft hits him now, some sort of rotting vegetable he guesses. He doesn't look up. There's no reason to do that, there isn't anything he needs to see. And deep inside of him this is what he feels, unaccountably. Shame and embarrassment.

### 3

Back when he was still a child, a small child, his mother would read to him out of a book. He would lean against her warm and safe body, his arms reaching partly around her waist, his face pressed against her, both of them under a light sheet and sitting upright. She'd turn the pages of the book one-by-one, speaking.

Once upon a time, she'd tell him, there were *real animals* on Earth And we wisely ruled over all of them. Because we were the ones who'd given them their names. God still existed back then, she would tell him, God who created everything, and who loved us the most because we were made in his image, because we were just like him. Then she'd talk about the terrible days after we first disobeyed God. When the animals first stood up. And talked back.

Those aren't *real* animals, she would whisper to him while the giant cats strolled through their village like they were farmers and like the village was their farm. She'd explain to him that the mice humans ate were the *real* animals. That's why they were easy to catch, that's why they couldn't talk. And that the insects were real too. *These* are real, she'd tell him, holding out a handful of the worms that she'd collected, or pointing down at the ants crawling in circles in the dirt. It was only after he was older that he realized that his mother wasn't reading to him out of the one book that they owned, that she was actually making up a story while she turned the pages, while she was pretending to read. Because she couldn't read, because no one could read. So that she had no idea what was even in the book that she held in her hands as she read to him. *She was making up a story.* So that maybe she didn't know what was true and what wasn't true. Maybe *no one* did.

It could be that it was the stories she had told him that made everything always look so wrong to him, seem so constantly *off*. Or maybe it was the folk-biology module that he had been born with, that every human was born with, one that contains innate concepts of animal-types: bear, cat, dog, scorpion, snake. Little images imprinted from birth, genetically, in every human being of what kind of animals to expect there to be in the world. None of which exist any longer.

In the future, most big animals can change shape, but they're usually kind of *halfway* most of the time. Like the rabbits with their long lank bodies, standing upright on those bent-elbow shaped legs that they kind of hop along on. Or the ducks, their weird yellow-puckered wing-arms with little peculiar webbed hands at the ends of them. With *claws*. Everything in the world seems weird, grotesque, sort of ugly all the time. To him.

Those *ducks*—the way they *look*. Almost like stunted deformed people wearing green feathered masks, fake beaks and feathery skullcaps. "It's been a Hollowed Ween for centuries," that's a saying about how weird things are now, a saying from his childhood. Among humans. But stare at a duck long enough and that impression doesn't hold together: *that they're humans in disguise*. Because their faces are pinched in (no cheekbones, no chin), and their necks are too thin and wobbly. And it's worse, when you fully take them in: how their eyes are wrongly placed at the sides of their small heads so that they look at you silly and cross-eyed if they try to stare directly at you over their beaks.

And when a duck unexpectedly twists its little green head one hundred and eighty degrees, and preens the feathers on its back with its fake-looking beak, it looks horribly horribly impossible. Like a warped and broken-necked human, like a zombie continuing to move his head in a horror movie.

Of course, *this human* has never seen a horror movie. He just lives in this world instead.

"It's not a zoo that we're being kept in," the monster wolf-thing has told him, "in case that's what you were thinking." It's night now, there's no one near the cages anymore, in particular no rabbits. It's just the two of them having a friendly face-to-face without witnesses. A wolf-thing that keeps complaining about how bad the food has been, about how hungry it is, a wolf-thing that keeps pacing around in its cage, making the ground shake. With only flimsy bars keeping them apart. "I like looking at *you*, though," the wolf-thing says at one point. A big cartoon smile, showing a lot of white teeth. And after complaining to him that he smells too much like rotting vegetables, can't he do something about that? Wolves don't usually talk much but this one won't shut up, saying all these things that it apparently thinks are entertaining and witty.

It's been a very long day. Being spit at by rabbits. Then by deer. Which was a *particularly* rancid experience. Then by some things that he didn't even recognize, but maybe were a kind of sloth. And those llamas. Who were especially vicious about it, the way they hissed at him. Each kind of animal got its own special time with him. (No one seems to have paid any attention to the wolf-thing.) He barely raised his head the whole time, barely looked at the animals that were doing this to him.



Animals don't like each other very much. Even when they don't eat one another. Even when they don't compete with one another for the food they eat or the territories they live in. Animals are always complaining that other animals smell weird. It's a universal complaint, maybe the only universal complaint that's left, maybe the only thing that all animals still agree about. So they're going to want to take turns spitting at him, they're not going to want to do it *together*.

"You're the 9-11," the wolf-thing tells him, using a saying that everyone knows but that no one can explain anymore. "You're the flashpoint. An icon. *The* icon. You are the guys that started it all. Ancestor-worship. And hatred too. It all comes with the territory. Being famous, I mean. As a type of thing." *Famous as a type of thing*. "Um," the human says back cautiously. No ducks, he realizes. Ducks didn't take their turn spitting at him. Even though the ducks must be running the show, he thinks. Since they were the ones who took him down—he remembers that clearly.

He's mostly dry now, but still sticky and uncomfortable. He thinks he remembers the wolf telling him earlier in the day that it takes a long time for duck-drugs to wear off, maybe as long as a week. The way he feels now, that must be right. He can't keep any of his thoughts in place, he can't shake his head clear. He tries pacing around the cage, his bare feet making sticky-sounds against the warmish cement. It's not so bad now that most of the green-goo pools have dried up. But he's too tired, and he squats down again.

"Here's how it's going to go down," he hears the wolf-thing say as he's squatting, looking down at the cement his feet are touching. "I'm going to escape. So either you're coming with me or you're staying in your cage. That's your choice. I'm sure I don't have to explain to you how big a deal revenge is for prey animals, how much they get off on it. I'm pretty sure you'd prefer taking your chances with me rather than being the day's entertainment for them. Because they're not done having fun with you, I'm pretty sure about that too. Me they're just going to execute cleanly. But you, they think you're to blame for *a lot*."

This little speech follows the wolf-thing telling him again how *fucking* hungry it is. This is scary to hear, of course, because wolves can eat pretty much *anything*, and pretty much do eat anything under the right circumstances. This human has dealt with wolves before, he's had to kill wolves in the past to stop them from killing him. You really don't want to be on the same side of a set of cage bars with a wolf. And that's probably why the ducks, or whoever did this, put them in cages side by side together. So that watching the wolf salivate would keep reminding him that maybe he doesn't want to escape, that maybe, as homes go these days, a cage is a pretty good place to be.

Amnesiacs are somewhat spotty in their effects, even a bit unpredictable. When the human comes to, apparently some days later, he remembers certain things right away. Some of it was definitely real, that's what he decides before he even opens his eyes, and some of it he probably dreamed up or half-dreamed up. Because of the drugs. He squint-eyes his environment slyly, and he realizes he's lying outside in daylight. Near some rocks. And next to him is a half-full waterbottle that he doesn't remember drinking from. His legs aren't roped together, neither are his arms. That's a very positive sign. Unless whatever left him here never expected him to regain consciousness again. A little further away from where he's been lying is a large burlap-colored bag with something in it. The bag is knotted at the top, and it has a number of very small holes deliberately embroidered into it.

He recognizes the make of the bag. It's designed for carrying small prey. And for keeping it small. If something in a tied bag tries to change shape, it'll be crushed because the fabric won't flex, it won't expand. It's also impossible to tear through the fabric with claws, or even with sharp tools, it's a very cleverly-made fabric. He's seen wild cats carrying bags like this, usually with something in them that's still alive. Cats *love* traveling with fresh living food in a bag, especially the loner cats. So that they'll have something to play with before meals. That's one of the ways *cats* avoid being lonely. Sometimes they'll keep a small prey animal they've caught in a bag for months, or that's how it seems, eating the other things that they catch in the meantime. Wolves won't do that sort of thing, they think it's cruel. So he's puzzled why a wolf would have a bag like this.

He once tracked a loner cat for a month before he was finally in a position to kill it. This was years ago, when this was what he was doing, when this was *all* that he was doing. Hunting down loner cats, one by one. Killing them, one by one. For revenge.

"cc&%@^#qq," the bag says suddenly. At the same time the bag seems to violently change shape from inside out, first ballooning out from its sides, and then lengthening at the top. Like something has just realized it's in a stomach, like something is trying to get out of the bag using its fists. There's just a duck in there, he realizes that from the sounds, a duck-in-a-bag. And that makes him laugh. After all, he doesn't feel all that warmly towards ducks at the moment.

"Hey," what's in the bag calls out, "who's out there? I *heard you*, motherfucker. Let me out before I hurt you really bad!" If the wolf did what it should have done, it would have chopped those nasty hands off the duck before it stuck the thing in the bag. Because duck-hands are where the poisons are. Wolves don't do stuff like like that, though—chopping the hands off of

prey—they're just not that cruel. Wolves are kind of *simple*, actually. At least when it comes to cruelty. So there's no way he's going to let that thing out of the bag.

He ignores the quacking bag, he ignores the way it's taking turns, first muttering threats and then begging for mercy and then finally trying to bond with him emotionally, to make friends with him in a hurry. He also doesn't rush to get up either, to try to figure out where he is, or to frantically escape. All in good time: those with patience are the ones who get to live, that's his philosophy. If he needs to, he can pretend he's still asleep or comatose, or whatever he was until a few moments ago. That's helped more than once in the past.

It's all disjointed and vague, what he remembers. He's going to have to try to reconstruct the narrative of his immediate past when he has a chance. The animals all spitting at him—it's not hard to guess why *that's* an accurate and clear memory, why he's still feeling the needle-sharp humiliation. Even though he was really stoned when it happened. He also remembers conversations with the wolf-thing, or at least he remembers snatches of an exchange. But after that, he's not sure what's real and what isn't.

He wonders if this is a real memory. It must have been since he's no longer in a cage: the wolf-thing's face right up against his face, its wolf-breath fresh-stinking of flesh, the big toothy mouth saying, "With me or against me?" And behind the wolf he sees the twisted and torn metal of the cages. He must have agreed because he's here now. He just doesn't remember what happened in a continuous episode.

This must have been a dream, or a nightmare. They're in some sort of nursery, a duck-nursery he's guessing. There are rows of rounded heaps of straw or dried grasses or something—nests, they must be nests—and the wolf is moving rapidly from one to the next, snatching up things and swallowing them. Ducklings, he realizes, it's snatching up baby-ducklings. And the wolf is gulping them down so rapidly that they don't have time to awaken, or to even cry out.

This has to be a dream. Or a nightmare. The wolf swallowing down dozens of hand-sized ducklings, rapidly pawing them up into its gaping mouth with both of its arms. And him in the dream, him trying to pull the wolf away from the nestlings, he's reaching up to the top of its gigantic shoulders from behind. Pulling the monster backwards and away from the nests, using all his strength in order to stop the slaughter of innocent children. (That *alone* shows it couldn't have really happened. *He's trying to stop a wolf in mid-meal?* Only in his *dreams*.) The wolf is actually staggering back a step or two because of him, dark blood spraying everywhere into the air because this wolf is *not* a neat eater. The monster turning, and roaring in his face, "you *stupid fuck*, get out of my way, I need *energy* to *escape*." And weirdly, the way it often is in dreams, the emotions he feels are inappropriate to the events. He feels the same humiliation, the same embarrassment that he felt when the rabbits were spitting on him. *He doesn't belong*

*here*. The wolf is shoving him back with one powerful muscled arm while still grabbing up screaming baby ducks with the other, efficiently fisting them into its bloody mouth, gulping them down whole. First the ducklings are silent and then they're screaming? So of course it's a dream.

Now they're moving. Or rather, he's being dragged along by the bounding wolf. Then he's being carried along—his eyes momentarily open and staring at the black sky. Apparently strapped to the back of the wolf with ropes as it leaps up high into the air. Is *that* possible? He wonders about this, tries to work out the scale of it, whether the wolf is big enough and strong enough for it to run and jump quickly with him roped to its back, if it's possible for it to leap straight up into the sky the way he remembers it doing. Why would a *wolf* even *want* to do such a thing with him on its back?

And this, this *had* to be a dream. A woman, he dreamed about a woman. He hasn't *seen* a woman since his teenager years, but he dreams about them all the time. Always has, as long as he can remember. This dream is different, though. Because he was asleep in the dream. And this woman, her wild curls splendoring blackly around her head like a demon's aura, like darkened ivy that's winding profusely down over her back and sides, she's approaching his sleeping body on all fours, she's creeping up on him the scary way that an animal does, the way that *he* does when he's stalking something, when he's planning to kill it. He remembers her big eyes, her large dramatic features. This, he thinks, this was a nightmare too.

"cc&%@^#qq," the bag says suddenly, making him jump, and he thinks grimly: You nasty little creep, there's no way I'm letting you out.

The woman in his dream, she's naked—no, she's wearing fur.

He's just not sure. But then she's walking around his sleeping body, looking down at him like she's trying to decide something. And he remembers that she leans down, sniffs him, licks the top of his head while he keeps sleeping. She sniffs at him again, moving her face back and forth in his hair, and then she backs off, disappears. Now he remembers the wolf towering over him. This isn't a dream, he thinks, this bit really happened. The wolf is saying to him, sarcastically: "I'm not going to eat you in your sleep. That just wouldn't satisfy my prey instinct, that itch that we all have to properly hunt down whatever we eat before we kill it. So relax." That's what he thinks he remembers.

This is what he thinks next, about rabbits. That they aren't lonely. And that ducks aren't lonely either. Except when the wolf singles one of them out and hunts it down. In that last moment of panic, when the wolf is just about to reach it, it knows *it's* going to die alone. Because everyone else has escaped. And, at least at that moment, that prey animal feels what *he* feels all the time: *It's just me, there's no one else to share this with me, no one to keep me company as I die.*

Wolves too, he thinks, they always travel in packs, in families. Everything these days has families, belongs to tribes. Everything *else* has others like themselves nearby, to keep them company.

So where are the other wolves? That's what he thinks next. This wolf is probably going home, taking him with it as a prize. *Look everyone, look at what I've brought home for dinner. You don't find one of these every day.* Okay, he thinks, that's it: time to get going. I'd be stupid to wait around. All he needed was the right thought to get him up, up and away, and now here it is: *Don't want to be dogfood.* He stands up and the duck-in-a-bag hears him.

## 5

This is when the duck-in-a-bag freaks out. It presses its face into the fabric of the bag so that one of the holes has become an eye socket, the bag cycloptically looking up at him. "Hey, where are you *going*?" it screams with hysterical false cheer. "Hey wait up, good *buddy*, don't leave *me* behind. Let's make a deal. Because if I'm lunch, you're *certainly* going to be dinner. We meals, we have to stick together. Otherwise we're *toast*. Hey come on, man, ducks make great *pets* because they're sweet and *understanding*. They always *have*. Don't you need a soft pet to pet? You need someone like me for those cold nights that everyone knows are *coming* back some day."

There were seasons once. The duck seems to know that.

"Ducks are total assholes," the man replies. "Hey come on, don't be like that, *bitter* and all," the duck pleads, "I get it. You're kind of irritated about what happened back there a couple of days ago. The cage thing. The spit thing. The other animals having a little fun at your *expense* thing. Not *our* idea. We would have just charged you a *fine*. Really. Fines are *civilized*. Every civilization has fines, that how you *know* you're in a civilization, because you're constantly being fined. Fines are what bribes *become* after they've been tamed by the law. Look, you've got to keep some perspective because it's really a jungle out there. There are *wolves* howling at the door, haven't you heard? We've got to *coagulate* *now* before it's too late and we're just a lot of scar tissue laying around all over the place."

"Hey *listen*," says the duck who just won't shut up, "it was a *misunderstanding*, one of those between species *border* incidents, because you were trespassing, after all. Only *predators* usually trespass, so naturally we're thinking creepy *duck-hunters*." "Trespassing," the human says, "Were there big colored lines that I overlooked?" "Of course there were," the duck shrieks

back, and somewhat hysterically, “where are your eyes, *buddy*? Do they only *look* like they’re in your head, are they just some *jewelry* you wear on your face to look pretty? Do you shut them off *improperly* when you shouldn’t? Like when you’re awake and walking around *illegally* on other people’s *property*?”

The human stands there thinking. He’s never talked much to animals. (He hasn’t talked much to *anything* in recent years.) But this isn’t the first time something like this has come up: an animal claiming that something is right in front of his face when there’s clearly nothing there. Animals, it seems to him, are always *seeing things*. And it isn’t always craziness or trash-talk, the way that ninety percent of what comes out of a duck’s mouth is. Words that sound made up like *door* like *jewelry* like *fines*. Because sometimes animals seem to know things that he doesn’t know, and that he can’t even see how they *could* know. Sometimes it really has seemed to him that animals, some animals anyway, have telepathy. Especially the tribe animals. It seems they can read each others’ minds, even the minds of the ones in different tribes. *In different tribes that are miles away from one another.*

Animals, he admits it, especially the prey animals, they just seem to know a lot of stuff really quickly, they seem able to share information in ways that just seem impossible. Because word of mouth can’t possibly travel as fast as it seems to travel with them. (They’d have to spend all their waking time *whispering* things into one another’s *ears*.)

“Hey *listen*,” the duck who *still* won’t shut up, says, “I’ve got a lot of friends, a lot of friends who are looking for me. People in very high places. They’ll pay you *plenty* to get me back. All under the table. If we can find one, I mean. That fucking wolf crushed my GPS but ducks are *very resourceful*, believe you me.”

The human has no idea what a GPS is, or even a table. But he knows enough to know that no one would waste any time kidnapping a *duck*. Anything that would want to capture a duck would just want to *eat* the duck. (Especially because ducks aren’t the sorts of things you want to keep alive in a bag for a later meal—not even loner cats do that.)

And this is true too, although the human doesn’t know enough about ducks to know this. Ducks have really short memories for pain and grief. This one’s friends have long given up on it. This one’s friends have already mourned the presumed dead duck, wished it well in its journey to the next world, and have now forgotten about it completely. All prey animals move away really quickly from catastrophic events like death and dying. Loyalty and bravery don’t make much sense in prey animals. A really good memory *of any sort* doesn’t make that much sense in prey animals, that’s what Troy thinks.

The duck doesn’t know what a GPS is, any more than the human does. Because ducks hear things and quickly repeat them, changing the wording around a little to make the remarks

sound fresh to their friends. Some ducks, sometimes, know what they're talking about. Occasionally. But usually only for a sentence or two.

Ducks have a joke. One duck says to another duck: "No one *remembers* the Alamo." The second duck says, "What's that mean?" The first duck shrugs an I-don't-know-gesture, and then both of them laugh the way that ducks laugh. (You have to be a duck, probably, to appreciate why this would be funny. It's certainly crucial to the joke that ducks don't know what an Alamo is.)

Wolves have a joke too, by the way. (Wolves have a lot of jokes, actually.) Question: *What do ducks do at a funeral?* Answer: *They bury the body, of course.* You probably have to be a wolf to find this funny. You probably have to know a lot about wolves to even understand why they would *think* this was funny. It has to do with the general impression, among wolves, that ducks almost never die from natural causes, that ducks largely die because of wolves or from other predators.

*Amazingly*, the human has found his toolpack and some clothes. He wonders why a wolf would take this shit along with him. It's not like wolves to hoard.

*Some clothes* is misleading. Like *all* our phrases when applied to the future. The human wears, normally, something that resembles a slightly amplified jockstrap. That's *all* he wears, that's his clothes. It never gets cold in the future. Not anywhere on Earth does it ever do that anymore. Not what we mean by cold, anyway. His clothes are easy to clean on those rare occasions when he gets the chance. His clothes are easy to make, if he needs new ones. Which he sometimes does.

"I'm *begging* you with all my heart and gold," the bag says, eyeing him mournfully, "you've got to let me out, or at least you've got to take me with you. By the way, my name's Qflacc. I'm *really* pleased to meet you, you're clearly a very cool and capable guy, a really live *human*, and not a *mummy* or a relic-finger or a piece of an ear or something. You're the first I've ever met, a really live *total human*, authentic and everything. I completely tip my hat to you, my illustrious ancestor. You're one of the great ones that we all look up to, *especially* when we wear hats. We worship the *history* you've created, all the garden paths you've walked down—collectively speaking of course. Ducks everywhere salute you for what you are and for what you've become. We have mixed feelings about the fork, of course. But that's how it works with the great ones. You know, big *achievements* and all."

"Shut up," the human says. One other thing he knows about ducks is that they really can't talk more or less sensibly to anything other than other ducks. Because they're in panic-mode when anything else is around that they're trying to talk to, even other prey animals. So they essentially just babble, spin the shit out of their feathery little asses while they figure out how to get close enough to you to stab you with those evil hands. There's no reason for ducks to be

alive, he thinks, they're really vile creatures. Creepy things, ones that make you doubt the existence of God. Along with, he thinks, nearly everything else that's wandering around these days. God certainly didn't make any of *these* animals, he thinks, that's for sure.

Nevertheless, entirely against his better judgment, he decides to take the duck with him. Not let it out of the bag of course, that would be insane, but at least try to get it out of the way of the wolf, or whatever it is that he's running from. *Troy*, he tells himself, *you're going to regret this later, you know you are*. Because he already knows he's not going to eat the duck. He's had too much of a conversation with it to be able to eat it. He hates that about himself, a kind of misguided sentimentality because, after all, it's not as if the duck is harboring anything remotely positive by way of an emotion towards *him*. The thing will try to poison him the first chance it gets. No matter what they talk about in the meantime, and even if the duck understands that he's just trying to set it free, to let it go its own way. It won't be able to help itself because he's larger than it is. That's just how ducks react to anything that's larger than they are. Automatically. Just like little fucking robots.

Troy doesn't really know what a robot is, by the way. *Just like little fucking robots* is a saying he's heard. From other humans.

What Troy doesn't get is that it's constant panic and fear that the duck is feeling. That all ducks feel if anything bigger than they are is nearby. And that this is how ducks manifest their panic and fear, this is how ducks *emote*: by talking a lot of shit. Other ducks get it, of course. Ducks often soothe one another by doing the same thing, by talking a lot of nonsense to one another. "Sweet nothings," it's called. (It's a big part of what goes on during duck-lovemaking.) Other species, of course, don't get it at all. Wolves for example. And if one of them should get it, it only gets it *intellectually*. Wolves can't empathize with a duck when they hear the things it says. Not the way that another duck can. That's why it's easy for a wolf to kill a duck that's quabbering at it, that's why a wolf finds a duck's quabbering irritating enough to kill a duck *even if the wolf isn't hungry*. You could call it a cultural divide. Between wolves and ducks. Or between ducks and everything else.

What it *really is*, of course, is a result of an evolutionary arms-race, the constant development of genetically-endowed strategies and counter-strategies between prey and predators. Because it's really hard to eat something if you feel sorry for it, if you involuntarily sympathize with it. It just is.



Troy doesn't recognize where he is. When he actually takes a good look around him, gripping the babbling bag tightly at the very top. The grayish sunlight, at least *that's* familiar, it's familiar how it settles down over the landscape like a reluctant aura, almost too tired and too old to be bright. And the clouds, large and bulging, that are always covering up the blue of the sky, and reaching down here and there all the way to the ground, breaking mistily into wisps and waverings of scattered white. This cloud-sky is everywhere in the future. But the actual terrain that's exposed under the mistings, what he sees all around him in every direction, looks like a desert. He sees patches of warm light-browns and dark-yellows, and only an occasional spot of blinding-white. There are sand dunes undulating in and out of shadows of their own making as far as his eye can see. And small, roughly circular holes that edible things are almost certainly hiding in. He thinks he sees rodent faces popping in and out of the ground in the distance, gazing in his direction. (He hopes they're not talking animals.) Hardy scruffs clumped here and there in groups, and squat barely-green bushes too. Brown spheroid brush, no longer rooted to earth, rocking back and forth in the faint breezes like broken caved-in and collapsing Buckyballs. Tumbleweed. Most places are deserts these days, that's what he's heard. And the one thing he knows about deserts is that they don't have much water, at least on the surface where someone like him can get at it. This thought makes him retrace his steps, get the waterbottle.

He was often told about the dry places while he was growing up, but he's never seen one before. He lived as a child in a human village with rivers and ponds nearby. And many trees. Because this is the terrain trooper cats like. A garden, that's what it was called. (That's what the *cats* called it, humans never used that word.) He also knows that wolves can travel really fast if they want to, when they're well-fed and motivated. And he really has no idea how many days it's been. So he has no idea where he is now or how he's supposed to get back. He just chooses a direction, decides to go in a straight line away from here. That's the safest thing to do. The duck, too, must be looking around through a hole in the bag because it says, with infinite sadness, "A day without water is like an ocean without moss."

The human mostly jogs, stopping occasionally only to scoop up insect-snacks, pop little beetle-things into his mouth. The point is to get to some water somehow, although this looks like unending desert to him. If he can wash himself, that's what he thinks, the soap in his toolpack will disguise his scent. Otherwise, they aren't going to get far at all before the wolves catch up with him.

Because wolves travel in packs. If one of them is trying to hunt him down, he thinks, a group of them are trying to hunt him down.

Troy's hands are starting to ache as he jogs, shifting the duckbag from hand to hand, holding it gingerly. Meanwhile the duck that won't shut up keeps free-associating about friendship and Aristotle, and how they could have fun adventures together like Beavis and Butthead if he'd

only let it out of the bag. At the same time, ducknails quickly emerge from one or another hole in the bag, the stupid thing stabbing at him even though that makes no sense at all since it still won't be able to get out of the bag. So he doesn't dare sling the quattering bag across his shoulder to rest his hands because the dumb duck won't be able to resist trying again to puncture him, while at the same time professing its eternal love. "We totally *worship* the ground you humans walk on, we always have," it's already told him that more than once. "Let me out and I'll prove it, I'll make you so happy that you chose to marry only me." Even if it knows this isn't the smartest thing for it to do, it's going to stab him if it gets the chance. This was so idiotic, he realizes (and not for the first time), taking the duck with him. *Especially since he didn't intend to eat it.*

At one point he's actually trying to calmly explain to the duck why it really wasn't *rational* for him to take it along with him. What's wrong with me? he thinks, here I am jogging through a desert trying to *reason* with a duck in a bag. *Just because it uses words I think I can talk to it?* I'm out of my mind here, I must still be drugged.

The duck makes a kind of snorting sound while it talks, what seems like a bit of oral punctuation that it sometimes inserts between its words. If the snorts mean something, Troy doesn't get it. He soon realizes he hates the sound, though, that he feels a stab of irritation every time it happens. Somehow, he doesn't know how, it sounds condescending. (Ducks call it *snerking*, that's what the sound is. Something that ducks do automatically.)

"We need to pull over at a rest stop," the duck-in-a-bag tells him suddenly, interrupting its own nonstop quackery about stamp collecting, whatever *that* is, "we've got to change the oil, and get some *gas*. And I need to pee." The human stops, stands there, puts the bagged duck down. "Come on," it says next, "this is *inhuman*, don't you think? We should never forget or forgive foie gras. Or nuremberg." "Look," Troy says, "there are holes in the bag. So use one of *them*." "Hey," the duck says, sounding totally indignant and outraged, "We ducks are kind of modest. We're famous for that."

Troy remembers the cage. "Yeah yeah, famous for that," he says, "so now I'm turning my back to you." Which he does. "You only have a couple of minutes, so hurry up." He hears the splatter start almost immediately. "You know," the duck says, while peeing out of a little hole and sounding reasonable, "this really isn't going to work out. In the long run, if you know what I mean. Sooner or later we're going to have to face *number 2*." "I'm not letting you out of that bag," the human says grimly, "you really can't be trusted." "My word is as good as gold," the duck retorts. Neither of them, of course, knows what gold is or why being as good as it is would count for anything. This was really really stupid, taking the duck with him, Troy thinks. Because it really *can't* be trusted. And because he doesn't like hurting things he's had a conversation with. Even a conversation like this.

It dawns on him only slowly, he should have thought of it earlier. That this terrain isn't only alien to him, it's alien to the duck too. Even if he managed to untie the knot and let the duck out without being stabbed as a result, it wouldn't be able survive on its own. Not necessarily because of predators but because there's nothing around here for a duck to eat. Ducks don't do well in desert environments. If only ducks knew how to fly, he thinks.

He sets up a short resting spot, much later in the day. By assembling some rocks together as a kind of hearth, and leaving the bag behind while he gathers brush. It takes an hour or more, but he also hunts down several rodents. Prairie dogs is what they seem to be, but distinctly greenish in color. They don't seem particularly good at evading him, oddly, or even trying to. They only sort of look up at him dumbly and blink a lot as he brings a rock down on their heads. At least they don't yell nonsense at you while you kill them, he thinks. Like a duck would. He feels, nevertheless, that somehow this is a bad sign. And he's right.

The important thing, he keeps telling himself, is never to panic. To always calculate your odds, and to act accordingly. That's what he thinks, that's what he always thinks. Some might worry about starting a fire, some might worry that a fire would be easily detected by wolves. But that's only fear talking, not brains. Because if wolves really are tracking him, then starting a fire doesn't matter one way or the other because the wolves will smell him out anyway. From miles and miles away. And brushfires probably happen around here all the time, especially when the sun comes out.

## Z

When he returns to his rock hearth, an exuberance of brush in his arms and six dead prairie dogs slung across his shoulders, the wolf is sitting there on a rock waiting for him, its bulky muscular legs incongruously crossed like a flirtitious woman's. Troy assumes it's the same wolf even though he really can't tell wolves apart. And, interestingly, the duck is quiet now, the unmoving bag half a foot from the wolf's feet. Perhaps wolves have that effect on *all* other animals, even on ducks.

Troy saw the wolf waiting for him from some distance away, but of course there was no point in trying to run. So he continues to walk towards the waiting wolf with calm even movements.

Troy thinks: whatever you do, don't exhibit any fear, don't even *sweat* fear. When a wolf senses fear, its prey instinct kicks in automatically and it'll kill you before it even realizes what it's done. Even if that's not what it wanted to do. So Troy calmly walks past the sitting wolf, *almost*

as if the wolf isn't there. He's thinking hard about a pond he used to sit by when he was a child, he's visualizing that pond with everything he's got. Troy sets the brush down in his impromptu hearth, and starts organizing it. "You're *totally* fucked," the bag says suddenly, "I *warned* you, but do you *listen* to me? I might as well be talking to myself here in the dark. If you aren't *going* to take my advice, why do you pay me the big bucks?" The wolf leisurely stretches its foot out, and then kicks the bag viciously. "I told you to shut up," the wolf says.

The human, squatting only a foot or two from the wolf that's gazing at him, keeps organizing the brush as if he's calm. He's hoping the wolf doesn't make any other surprising movements because he's sure he'll flinch. "What are you planning to do now?" the wolf asks, "what's with all the plant shit?" The human thinks to himself, *nice pond, cool pond. Blue water.* "I'm making a fire," he says, not looking up, continuing to dawdle at his task. "For what?" the wolf asks, "what do you need a fire for?"

After a moment, Troy says, "I don't eat things raw like you do." Troy is trying hard to keep tones of scorn or sarcasm out of his voice. Any emotion at all, really. Because that wouldn't help at all. He briefly looks up at the wolf, and into its unpleasant gray-yellow eyes. He hopes all his movements and gestures are natural, that he's acting like it's anyone's eyes he's looking into, as if it's anyone he's having a conversation with. About how beautiful the landscape around here is, for example. And then his eyes slide innocently back to his task. Lighting up the brush. Using the sparker from his toolpack. While hoping that the timing of his movements isn't off, that his hands aren't shaking. Because wolves are sharp about timing and about seeing something that's off like hands that shake even a little bit. "I cook what I eat first," Troy says, still thinking: *blue water, blue water, blue water, blue water.* As a fire starts up almost immediately. Because the brush is so dry.

The wolf says, "I heard about cooking from the cloud. I always thought it was too disgusting to be true. Cooking. But here you are being just as disgusting as it was predicted that you'd be." "Um," the human says, thinking, *oh great, wolves talk to clouds about cooking. Animals really are crazy.* He hears the duck rustle in the bag. *Just keep your mindless mouth shut,* he thinks. "Okay," the wolf says, "I think I get it. You're going to cook the duck." "cc\$%#@C&qq," the bag responds. "I think I told you to shut up," the wolf says back, kicking the bag harder. "cc%\$@qq," the bag expostulates briefly, and then goes silent again.

"No," Troy says, "I am *not* going to cook the duck. No, I am *not* going to eat the duck." He thinks: Why am I using *that* tone of voice, why am I saying *these* things? He thinks: what's wrong with me? I *have* eaten duck. Many times. Why am I taking the high road with a wolf all of a sudden? What am I trying to prove here?

He can tell the wolf is irritated by his tone of voice. Even though it's just quietly looking at him. This was a mistake. "I'm going to cook these prairie dogs I just caught," Troy says, keeping his voice flat and factual. The wolf doesn't stop looking at him. Maybe the expression on its face is wonder, maybe it's sarcasm. "I'm beginning to think you don't know what you're doing," it says finally, "I'm beginning to wonder: *how come you're still alive?*"

*The hell with this*, Troy thinks.

"Look," he says, "I don't know where the fuck you've dumped me, I'm not familiar with this environment, okay? But I've managed pretty well so far." Amazingly, the wolf doesn't leap up, roar at him, and then swallow him whole. "So," the wolf says simply, uncrossing its big legs and crossing them the other way, "what's with the duck in a bag?" "Qflacc's my name," the bag says, and the wolf kicks it.

"*You* put him in the bag," Troy says, "I'm sure as hell not taking him out." The wolf nods at this. "So why didn't you leave the duck behind?" it asks next. "I don't know what I was thinking," the human says, "I guess I was trying save him from you." And the human thinks, this isn't right, something is really wrong here. This conversation I'm having with a wolf, it's just not stopping. *Since when do wolves do this? Wolves don't play with their food the way cats do.*

The wolf says, "I wasn't going to eat him. I would have done that already." The bag says: "Shouldn't we be talking about a good *movie* instead? Or about a nice walk in the park with George? Wouldn't either of those topics be in *better* taste than recipes for duck *I'orange?*" "Shut the fuck up," the wolf says, kicking the bag really hard this time, so hard that Troy jumps a little, he can't help himself. The wolf sharply turns in his direction, alerted. Hoo boy, the human thinks, sudden movements, a sure turn-on for the prey instinct. Nice slow even movements. *Blue pond, cool water.* Troy calmly goes about stringing the prairie dogs onto the stick he prepared for this, the wolf watching him intently.

"I brought the duck *for you*," the wolf says, "for you to *eat*." Shit, Troy thinks, what the hell is going on here? And now he turns to look at the wolf. "Look," he says firmly. "I am *not* eating the duck. For one thing, the duck is alive." "Talley hoe hoe," the bag says, "one easy smooth one for the cool duck. A big fat zero for the big bad wolf."

Perhaps not the wisest thing to say to the big bad wolf when you're stuck in a bag next to it. Because something snaps in the wolf, apparently. It lifts the bag up, the duck quackering protests, and then it smashes the bag down on a rock, hard and fast, the battering sound inside the bag just like that of crunching wood and breaking eggs. Troy jumps, he can't help himself. "Now the duck is dead, okay?" the wolf says. Eat *me* you fuck, Troy thinks. "No," he says aloud, not looking up at the wolf, "I don't care what you do. I'm not eating *that*, okay? Not now, not

ever.” And he thinks, now I’ve done it, now I’m committing *suicide*. He waits calmly and quietly for death. He even almost closes his eyes.

“Fine.” That’s all the wolf says. It stands up suddenly and Troy flinches at the motion. He can’t help himself. And then he glances up at the wolf. But the wolf is just looking at him, apparently with scorn. “Stop doing that,” it says finally, “those quick coward-winces that you do all the time. It’s kind of disgusting to watch.” It stares at Troy for a moment more, Troy looking back straight into its eyes, not daring to shift his gaze, and then it says, “Anyhow, I’ve got someone else who’ll eat duck. And with a little *gratitude* for once.”

“By the way,” the wolf adds, leaning down so that its big face is close to Troy’s face, almost leering at him while gesturing towards the dead prairie dogs, “that isn’t going to work, this cooking thing that you’re trying to do with those disgusting rodents. Why do you think they were so easy to catch? Because no one *wants* to eat them.”

“Anything that’s easy to catch,” this is the last thing the wolf says to Troy, “you don’t want it. Believe me.” And then, it turns and bounds away. Preternaturally fast.

The wolf is right. Because once Troy has calmed down, he holds the prairie-dogs-on-a-stick over the fire. And after a moment or two, they start to plume black and noxious, smoke accompanied by sizzling and popping, a dripping waxily of their flesh into the fire, not acting like anything that he’s ever cooked before—even the *fur* melting together and drooling down into the flames in thin rubbery strands that ignite suddenly, little red baby licks traveling back up in small happy bursts. Troy wouldn’t have used this word because he doesn’t know it, but the cooking prairie dogs smell exactly like plastic. Exactly like melting and burning plastic. Which, close enough, is what they are.

## 8

Once upon a time, about 2.4 billion years ago, anaerobic organisms flourished everywhere. For the atmosphere was oxygen-free then. It was also filled with the methane waste *of* those anaerobic organisms. Cyanobacteria, however, waste-produced *oxygen* by photosynthesis, and this may have induced the Great Oxygenation Event. The earth newly colored as a result (not just shades of orange, because oxygen rusts a lot more than just iron). And the ground beneath giving birth to rhodonite, turquoise, rubies. Thousands of other minerals too, ones that wouldn’t have existed without the free oxygen that was now circulating in the atmosphere.

This fresh new circulating oxygen soon exterminated most of the anaerobic creatures that had been there before. It may have also caused the Huronian glaciation by oxidizing methane into carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide doesn't retain warmth as well as methane does.

The Great Oxygenation Event may have occurred over possibly as little as 2,000 years. Cyanobacteria—all by themselves—may have altered their environment irrevocably and permanently by introducing an artificial product of their own making, oxygen, into the atmosphere. Atmospheric oxygen, in turn, allowed new kinds of creatures that wouldn't have existed otherwise. Because a breakthrough in metabolic evolution became possible (the free energy available to living organisms increased enormously because of oxygen). For example, mitochondria evolved because of the Great Oxygenation Event. Mammals too. Humans.

If this is right, the Great Oxygenation Event is only one of the many times that the waste-products of one kind of creature changed everything irrevocably for everything else that came after it. From then on (each time this happened), the previously nonexistent products became part of the ecological landscape and became essential to what was still alive. Bacteria, of course, always get there first. (Because they mutate so fast, because they're so clever that way.) And only after them, the more sluggish eukaryotes. Digesting artificial plastics, for example, creating new plastic-based waste-products as a result. Small plastispheres emerged (groups of interconnected organisms to which various artificial plastics are essential), and slowly these plastispheres expanded to include larger organisms. Both through the food chain, and in other ways.

Big creatures (like us) all have microbiomes. Microbiomes are various systems of microbes that colonize parts of our own bodies (our guts, our skins, our vaginas) and that symbiotically make it possible for us to digest food, to repel hostile bacteria, and to reproduce. And so in no time at all (evolutionarily speaking), organisms, both big and little, come to not only digest various plastics and plastic waste, but to utilize them (and metabolize them) in all sorts of innovative ways that wouldn't have happened if humans hadn't invented nylon stockings.

Life is miraculous that way. What doesn't kill it just makes it a little bit weirder.

## 9

It's nearly night now. And in the future, night is really really black. It's black in a way that we in the present haven't ever yet seen night to be. Once upon a time, a previous time (the present time), night had its own sky, and night's sky was always embroidered with light. Not anymore.

Occasionally, in the future, night splits open a seam and casts momentary moonlights onto unprepared ground. Occasionally, in the future, night provides here and there glows and glimmerings of stars. Sometimes a cloud that's on fire floats overhead, its ash drifting down until it finally smoulders out or drifts beyond sight. Mostly the sky just stays black, a total black that offers no hope of being anything other than black.

Troy hasn't done anything for hours but sit on a rock resting his head in his hands. Not since he pulled the prairie dogs off the fire in a rage, and tossed them away with all of his strength. In our day and age, we would have described him as *depressed*. We might have even recommended a *therapist* to him. But *depressed* isn't how Troy would describe himself. He'd say that he has no idea *what to do* now. Because he thinks he's going to starve. Because there's no way for him to escape, there's nowhere for him to go. And because, for some reason that he can't fathom, he's involved in a power struggle with a wolf. Of all things. A wolf that's acting like no other wolf he's ever dealt with. He's clearly out of his depth, that's another way we have of sometimes putting things. It's a way that Troy would have used and understood. If he'd ever heard the expression.

Here's a different saying that everyone in the future does know: *You can only go forward for a while*. He's heard *this* saying more than once, but he's never *felt it* before. Not like he does now. Like there's no way out, like there's no escape from where he is, that's just how it feels. Like there's only one path to go down now, with its dead-end clearly in sight. Many times in the past he's thought: *You're in a tough one now, kid*. Or he's thought: *Troy, you're definitely in trouble*. But he would always immediately think afterwards: *you've been in worse spots than this. You'll figure a way out, you always have*. He's not thinking this now. Too much is different around him, too much in the world has changed into new things that he's never dealt with before. He's never been in a desert. He's never not known how to catch things he can eat. He's never been in a place without anywhere to hide. He's never dealt with a predator that he couldn't stalk from behind, sneak up on and *kill*.

The fire he started hours before is slowly dying down, it's become almost completely dark around him, and he's not even putting into the fire the extra brush he's gathered, he's not even thinking about what he should try to hunt down, to cook. What would be the point?

Instead, he imagines a fish, motionless in a pond like the ponds where he grew up, its fins flickering at its sides as it swims without moving through the water. The fish is waiting, he thinks, for a cat's paw to sweep down from the heavens, to scoop the fish up to its death. Because what's going on in this pond is pretty pointless. And him too, waiting to die now. That's how it feels to him.



Something walks out of the black darkness towards him and his fire. Not a bounding wolf, but something else that moves very slowly, step by step, just as if it has real feet rather than paws. He doesn't leap up as soon as he hears the noise of this moving something. That's what he would have done if he were feeling normal, if he had still felt it was possible to survive this moment. Now he just looks up. And watches whatever it is that's approaching him.

It's the woman from his dream. Unmistakably. So it wasn't a dream, or not all of it was, anyway. She walks quite slowly towards him, like she's afraid of alarming him, like she's giving him extra time to react, extra time for him to acclimate to her existence. Which is appropriate under the circumstances. "I'm a human," she calls out. That's the first thing she calls out. While she's still some distance away.

Maybe she's right, that's what he thinks after she calls out to him, maybe she's not lying about being a human. He's just not sure. Because he realizes that she's big, bigger than any woman he's ever seen before, bigger than all the women he remembers from his village. And because it's gotten dark, he can't quite see her features, even when she reaches the circle of flickering light. He can't quite *make sense* of her, he can't quite make out what she's wearing, what her clothes are, exactly. Hair is what her clothes seem to be, tightly curled black hair that's close-fitted nearly over her entire body. Her own hair.

She has a clumsy way of carrying herself, or so it seems to him. A sort of indelicate lurching from side to side that she does as she walks towards him. Broad heavy movements that she makes with her arms. When she gestures.

She's carrying something in her hands. "I've brought you food," she tells him. She squats down besides him and shows him what she has. Several prairie dogs, their heads knotted together with a rope around their necks. He doesn't say the natural things. Like: *Who the hell are you? Where did you come from? Why would you know that I need food?*

He says instead: "I tried cooking those already. There's something wrong with them."

"Not these." She has a heavy accent, he realizes, a way of making sounds with her mouth that's quite different from the people he grew up with, that's quite different from the way he speaks. She sounds, actually, a little like a *wolf*, especially because of the growl in her voice at the beginnings of some of her words. He realizes this with a shock.

Animals can change shape in the future. Not into just anything they want, but into one endstate like a particular kind of animal, and into another endstate as something else that's more or less human. Each type of animal has its own continuum of shapes that it can take between these two endstates: something that's more or less human and something else that's quite other than

human. Something more like a rabbit, say. Or a wolf. Some animals can change more dramatically than others can, some can look more human than others can.

But they always look only more or less human. Always more or less human because what they look like is never entirely right. The humans that animals become are always too thin in certain parts of their bodies, especially if their other endstate is a bird. Or else their legs and ankles are too thick or they don't really have shoulders or their arms are sort of squat and misshapen. Because they're really pigs or cows or something else. And often they have hooves that are only outwardly shaped like human feet instead of real feet. Or they'll have angular toes that round into claws at their tips. Or their elbows and knees will bend the wrong ways. Or there will be too much hair or feathers in places. Or something else. And in their animal forms they don't look like animals either, not the animals we're familiar with, not those still alive in our day and age. Of course, Troy has never seen the animals we're familiar with. Those animals died out long before he was born.

This woman, he realizes again, has an awful lot of extra hair. It's curly and dark and close to her skin, and almost everywhere on her body except for her neck and face, and the palms of her hands. She's got enough hair, he realizes, that she probably isn't wearing any clothes at all. For some reason he isn't repulsed by how she looks. This isn't something he realizes for a while, but it's because her hair looks to him like a kind of clothing, as furs that she's *wearing*, instead of it seeming as it really is, as he knows it really to be: hair that's growing directly out of her own skin. Regardless of what you know, it's how things look to you that matters. Or even what you *say to yourself* that they look like.

"Are you alright?" she asks. Because he hasn't spoken in a while. He's been looking down at the prairie dogs and thinking. He asks finally, "where did these come from?" "Hamoch caught them." "Hamoch?" "The wolf," she replies, "the wolf that saved you from the rabbits." He almost wants to laugh. *The wolf that saved him from the rabbits*. It sounds ridiculous, of course.

And now he asks, "and who are you?" "Yoolia," she tells him. Her name explains nothing, naturally. But he didn't really want to ask her what her name was. He doesn't realize this, because he's never felt this before, but he's experiencing shyness. For the first time in his life. Shyness *isn't* fear, not really. It will be quite a while before he realizes this.

She says softly, "and what's your name?" "Troy." And then he adds: "Yoolia is a weird name." "So is Troy." She's reacting defensively.

"No," he says, "Troy isn't a weird name, not at all. It's originally the name of a city. A city that no longer exists." She doesn't say to him, "what's a city?" like he half expected her to. Because he doesn't know what a city is either. Instead, she says, "I don't think Yoolia means anything at all. It's just a nice sound that the wolves gave me as a gift. Because they had to call me

something, and they weren't going to use any of the names they already had. The ones that already belonged to other wolves. It's probably just a sound. Most of the names that wolves have are just sounds that don't mean anything at all."

## 10

Troy doesn't explain to Yooolia why he leaves one of the prairie dogs aside, why he doesn't cook all of them. Because if this works, if these things really can be cooked and eaten, he wants to see if he can distinguish them from the prairie dogs he'd caught himself earlier in the day. So while the other animals are cooking normally over the fire he's resuscitated, he examines it, he cuts it open with his knife, and tries to memorize the pattern of the animal's whole shape as he moves its dead limbs around, and looks into its face and head. He wishes he could see its color, but there isn't enough light.

The woman, Yooolia, watches him intently. She's never seen a knife before. A knife is what the animals, all the animals, call external technology. There is very little external technology left in the future. So the knife reminds her of a claw, especially because of the way its blade curves. It reminds her of a claw without the animal's paw still attached. Which makes her uncomfortable.

They've been talking a little. Yooolia and Troy. About her childhood. Because Troy has wondered aloud where she came from, why she knows wolves, and why they haven't eaten her yet. (He's asked her this last item with a little sidelong grin.) Yooolia explains that she didn't know her parents, that she doesn't know if she was already an orphan when the wolves found her or if they had killed her parents first and then decided that she was too cute to eat. It's not the sort of thing wolves talk about, and "I try hard not to think about it." This is what she tells him, the firelight flickering over her strange features in a way that makes them completely unreadable. "The wolves have been good to me," she adds, "they're all I've ever known." Troy idly wonders aloud if her parents were even human. Certainly it's reasonable to wonder if they were *both* human, anyway. Given the way she looks. He's pretty sure he's never seen a human that looks the way she does.

He doesn't say all this to her because he doesn't want to hurt her feelings. "Not everything that looks human has human parents," is what he does tell her. "I wasn't sure about myself either for a while," he adds. That's a lie. So that he doesn't insult her. He's never doubted his own humanity.

“Humans can’t change shape, none of them can.” That’s her response after he’s asked how she can be so sure she’s human. “And I can’t change my shape either.” She’s right about that, that humans can’t change shape. At least he’s never known any humans that could do that. When he was a small child, he would pretend that he had the power to change shape, he would pretend that he could change into the shapes of things that were hard to find. Or that were large and brave and could defend themselves.

Troy wonders if she’s ever afraid when she’s among the wolves. Especially with the one she calls Hamoch. Because he seems especially fierce. “Wolves aren’t like that,” she says, “they don’t kill you *for food* if they know you.” And then she’s silent. Because she knows that there are other reasons for wolves to kill someone, even someone they know and like. Even someone they’ve loved. *If they have to*. But she doesn’t say anything else about this and he doesn’t press her even though he can see that something is really bothering her.

He’s eating one of the prairie dogs, and it’s really really good. He hasn’t had anything that’s tasted this good in a very long time. “Are you hungry?” he asks her, “Would you like some?” “No, I’ve eaten already,” she says. And now a momentary disgust shadows across her face. Because he’s been provoked by what he thinks he’s seen, he asks her, “Duck? Did you eat duck for dinner?” “Yes,” she says, “I did.” He deliberately pauses a moment, chewing slowly, and then, “Ate it raw, did you?” She laughs, maybe this is the first time he’s heard her laugh, maybe that’s why it sounds uncomfortable and a little strange. “No, silly,” she says after she stops laughing, “I cooked it first.” Silence, and then something he thinks is weird: “I cooked it with rosemary, garlic and white wine.”

He’s thinking, *rosemary? What the hell is rosemary? What the fuck is garlic? What’s white wine?* And then, because he can’t stop himself, he says, “what the hell is rosemary?” His question takes her by surprise. She doesn’t respond right away, she just sits there, staring out into the black, her features still inscrutable and hard to see. He waits. And then, almost as if she’s reciting something from memory, or perhaps as if she’s repeating something she’s hearing while she speaks: “it’s an evergreen aromatic shrub—*Rosmarinus officinalis*—of the mint family, native to southern Europe. The narrow leaves are used as a culinary herb, in perfumery, and as an emblem of remembrance.”

Troy doesn’t know how he’s supposed to respond to this. Because he’s not sure what just happened. And because he doesn’t know what perfumery is, or an emblem of remembrance, or Europe, southern or otherwise. He doesn’t know what mint is. He’s never heard these words. So he changes the subject. He tells her that he watched the wolf, that he watched *Hamoch* kill the duck that she ate for dinner. And that he found it really disturbing.

"You've never killed anything?" she asks, and now she's looking straight into his face as she speaks. He explains to her that, of course, he kills things all the time, that he hunts things too. That he's even hunted down ducks and eaten them. Not often, but often enough. This was different, because he knew the duck, because he'd talked to the duck quite a bit. And because the duck was trapped in a bag when the wolf killed it. Somehow that isn't fair. Troy doesn't quite know what it is that's disturbed him. He's guessing, he's hoping that putting it into words will make it clear to himself, and maybe he's even aware of this. He realizes again that he can't really see Yooolia's expression in the dim and flicker around them, and so he's not sure how well she's reacting. He's worried, suddenly, that maybe this isn't the best subject for them to be discussing over dinner. On a first date. That's the phrase that's popped incongruously into his head.

"You can't know a duck," Yooolia says, "you can't be friends with a duck. Not you, not anyone. Ducks are sociopaths."

Troy doesn't know what to make of this response either. Ducks aren't sociopaths, ducks are just *ducks*. "I don't think that's the point, not really," he says after a little while, after an uncomfortable silence. "It's that it was kind of distasteful, what the wolf did. What *Hamoch* did." He realizes that he's kind of poking at her deliberately by using the wolf's name. "And it wasn't the first time. I'm pretty sure I saw him eating a lot of ducklings in a nursery. I'm pretty sure I saw that a few days ago. Innocent baby ducklings."

"I was there too," Yooolia tells him, "in the duck-nursery." "You were there? I don't remember you being there," Troy says. "Wolves eat ducks. Wolves eat a lot of things," that's what Yooolia says next, her words growling out in a rush, "this is what they do. It doesn't matter if what they're eating are ducklings or if they're full-grown. It doesn't matter if what the wolves eat talk to them first or if they don't. Why would any of these things matter? Predators and prey, that's the situation. Wolves are born wolves and ducks are born ducks, okay? It's silly to set up rules the way you do. *Oh, I'm not going to kill a duck and eat it, not if we've discussed the weather first.*"

Yooolia is very angry now, Troy can see that. "Okay," he says, trying to deflect. "It's not okay," Yooolia replies. "I was there, and I saw what happened. You were poisoned by a duck *a second time.*" Now she stands up, and that's a little intimidating. "*That duck* poisoned you" she adds, "the one you were carrying in a bag." "Qflacc," Troy says. He can see that he's infuriated Yooolia even more without intending to. By using the duck's name. "That's why you were so woozy and disoriented, that's why it was so hard dealing with you until you finally passed out, that's why you were passed out for so long." Troy doesn't remember her dealing with him at all—except in his dream.

She can't stop herself, her voice is rising in its pitch and loudness, she's working herself up into a rage. What *power* that voice has, he realizes, all this *emotion* it's carrying. "The *duck* ambushed you. Just outside the nursery." "Oh," is all Troy says now. "And yes," her voice is almost a full-throated yell now, "the wolf was eating *baby* ducklings. Because they're easier to eat that way, because they're soft, because they can be swallowed whole, because they're *tastier*. And because it's healthy to eat them too, when they're that young." Troy looks at her. "Because they haven't been alive that long, because they haven't eaten that much yet. The longer something is alive the worse things it's got in it."

Troy isn't sure what to do now, how much he should try to confront this so-called woman, set her straight on reality. Because it's clear she's not seeing the situation objectively at all, that she's mindlessly taking the wolf side of things. The word *pet* comes into his mind. She's a damn pet who's going hysterical because she feels like her owner's been attacked, that's what he decides. And maybe this explains the wolf's actions too, everything that's been going on that makes no sense at all. That monster is trying to make Troy into a pet too, he's trying to *tame* Troy. This thought pisses Troy off.

He's never heard of animals having other animals as pets. Except for humans, this was something he's heard that humans used to do. Back when animals couldn't talk. Farming humans, that's one thing, the way that cats do. It's nasty, that's what he thinks next, but it makes sense in a way. Because it's all about *food*. Pets is something else entirely. Pets make no sense at all, pets is just creepy. Pets is a kind of degradation.

Yoolia is crying, that's what he realizes suddenly. She's actually *crying*, those are the sounds that she's making now. "They put Hamoch in a *cage*, those ducks that you love," that's what she says, Troy barely able to make out her words. She turns, and runs away into the black night. Just like that. Before he has a chance to do anything at all. Almost immediately he can't hear her footsteps anymore, he can't hear where she's gone. And his hearing is extremely good, he knows that about himself. His hearing is better than a cat's. Even a loner cat's. Much much better.

Troy thinks this later, as he falls asleep by the already dozing fire, one that's peacefully snorting up sparks into the black: *Of course* they put Hamoch in a cage. He *eats* ducks. What would *you* do with a wolf if you were a duck? What would *you* do, *whatever* you were, if you were face to face with something that ate *you*? This isn't an excuse, this isn't a defence of *ducks*, Troy thinks next, it's just the way it is.

It's morning yet again. Standing in the gloamish light above him is the same wolf. He assumes, anyway, that it's the same wolf, since he really can't tell wolves apart. "You were nasty last night," the wolf tells him. Pretty much as soon as Troy opens his eyes and focuses them on the fierce wolf-face staring down at him close from above. "What's your problem, anyway?" the wolf adds, "Is it that you've been on your own for so long that you've forgotten how to talk decently to other human beings?"

It's certainly the case that he's forgotten how to have conversations like this with accusatory wolves the first thing in the morning. If he ever knew. "She's never been among humans," he says to the big wolf-face above him, perhaps more rudely than he'd have managed if he were a little more awake, "so maybe she's the one who doesn't know how to talk to other humans."

Troy realizes almost immediately that this is kind of a silly response. And maybe a dangerous one too, given the situation he's in anyway, given what happened to the duck yesterday after *it* got a little too flippant. The wolf-head moves out of his field of vision, and Troy sits up, the wolf having backed away a couple of steps. It's apparently trying to make him feel a little more comfortable by giving him some space. The morning, on the other hand, that's closing in and around Troy is bleak and gray the way that nearly every morning he's ever experienced has been. He looks towards the dead fire and realizes what breakfast is going to be: cold desiccated prairie dog. A rare treat.

Troy stands up, and takes careful slow movements towards the dead campfire, the wolf watching him intently. As he squats down next to the prairie dog, and fingers it, the wolf says suddenly, "*please* don't tell me you're going to eat *that*." "Not a good idea?" Troy asks. "It's not even fresh anymore," the wolf replies, "You've got to be kidding."

He's completely awake now. A wolf's head staring you down the first thing in the morning can have that effect, even if it takes a moment to kick in. He thinks: A wolf that has a human as a pet is a whole different ball game. That's a saying among humans, *a whole different ball game*, it's one of those things that they used to repeat to one another regularly. Troy says: "You have a human as a friend." Troy has chosen the word *friend* because it's neutral and because it doesn't convey what he's really thinking. Meanwhile he's picked up the dried-out prairie dog and started gnawing on it. Regardless of what the wolf thinks, he's not skipping available protein when there's some around. "Doesn't Yoolia do things like this?" he asks cautiously, simultaneously chewing. "Nope," the wolf responds. "She likes her food fresh. Like normal people do." Troy doesn't quite like the sound of this. Maybe that's why he takes a chance saying what he says next.

"She looks kind of funny. Yoolia." And the wolf reacts badly to this—he can tell even though he's not directly looking at the wolf, even though he's innocently staring out into the morning mist as he squats next to the charred brush. Because it's not natural to watch a wolf all the time, even out of the corner of your eye. Not if you're trying to pretend that you're not scared. Troy picks his next words very carefully. "Don't get me wrong," and now he's just deliberately lying, "she's very attractive. *Quite* attractive. But I'm not sure she's as human as she claims to be." "She's human alright," the wolf says after a moment, "I'd know if she weren't." Troy wonders, *why would a wolf lie about this?* Because that's the feeling he has, the feeling that he can't shake. That the wolf-creature is lying to him. Wolves don't usually lie. Why would they need to? That's a *duck*-thing.

Troy is having trouble keeping up his end of this conversation. So he just stops trying, and silently chews the rubbery-cold meat, his jaw aching slightly from the unusual exercise. The meat still tastes a lot better than anything else he's had in a long time, it's kind of tangy in a way that he can't place. "So here's how it's going to go down," the wolf says finally. "I want you walking in *that* direction," and the wolf points in a particular direction as it says that. Troy looks where the wolf is pointing, and he sees that it looks the same that way that it does in every other direction. "Why that way? In particular, I mean?" "Because that way there are things I can catch that you can eat," is the response. "I can catch things to eat on my own," Troy says. "No you can't."

Troy looks at the wolf. He's surprised that the wolf has continued to keep its distance. There's definitely something he's not getting about this whole thing. "You can try hunting on your own if you want to," the wolf adds, "but you won't succeed." Troy doesn't say anything. And then the wolf is gone.

For the most part, over the course of the day, Troy does what the wolf has asked him to do. Walk steadily in the particular direction that the wolf has pointed out. Occasionally the sun shows itself, brightening up the monotonous landscape for a scant moment, and making things hot. Very occasionally. Most of the time he has to sense where behind the thick clouds the sun is located. To orient himself. This is something that he's known how to do for a very long time. Or perhaps there's something else in him that enables him to recognize directions, some other way he has of recognizing what the right direction to go in is. He's never asked himself how he does it. The abilities you're born with you just accept as who you are. As what you are.

He tries hunting too, but it's as hopeless as the wolf suggested it would be. Lying around on just about any available rock are the greenish prairie dogs he caught yesterday. The ones that don't react as he approaches them, not even if he deliberately makes a lot of noise, stamping his feet and yelling. The more lively things, of course, dart into their holes quickly, or even seem to instantaneously vanish when he gets too close. Just like the illusions of water do—evaporating



into nothingness as he approaches them. This happens even if he tiptoes through the sand towards them as slowly as he can. He soon realizes that all the animals he might want to eat move far too quickly for him to catch, that the only thing he might succeed at is waiting quietly in front of a hole for hours until something finally pops its curious head out. Fishing for prairie dogs, that might work because he's not incapable of this, he's certainly got the patience. But he has no sense what these animals can detect and what they can be fooled by, whether they would be able to detect that he was waiting near one of their entrances.

One of their entrances because he's pretty sure these holes are openings into systems of burrows—how systematic they are, he has no idea, but he suspects there's more than one way in and out. Maybe there are whole villages of underground rodents just below him. And with running water, underground rivers. They move fast, these sleek animals, but not as fast as a wolf. So he's dependent on *Hamoch*, at least for the time being. If he wants to live. That's how you keep a pet, that's what he thinks next: you put it in a place where it's totally dependent on you for its food.

It's only towards evening that Troy realizes that he wants Yoolia to come back again, it's only then that he even thinks of her. As he's making a fire. As he's realizing how hungry he is.

And now she's sitting by the fire with him the way he'd hoped.

It's taken some patience on his part to get past the day before. Because there's no "hello again," no "nice to see you," or anything like that. She starts off by asking him if he's got any *dietary restrictions* that Hamoch should know about. While he prepares each evening's *menu*. "Huh?" Troy says. "No duck," she says, "right? And is there *anything else* that Hamoch should *keep in mind* while he's getting you something to eat? Maybe how the things are supposed to get *killed*? Does the animal have to be hung upside down for a few hours first, to drain out its blood? Does it have to be given last rites? Extreme unction? A will?" She sounds sarcastic, like this is personal, but Troy is more bewildered than anything else by all these new words that she's using, words he's never heard before. *Last rites, extreme unction. A will. Menu.*

She's brought meat, though. And even more important, she's brought a new waterbottle as well. One that's filled. Someone is thinking of everything.

Troy has decided to be very careful with her this second time around. "I want you to understand how grateful I am," that's what he says. I certainly know how to grovel when I have to, that's what he thinks as he looks over the meat she's brought, wondering what it is this time. It's a non-descript slab that's been sliced out of someone, so it could be just about *anything*. "It's not duckflesh," she says suddenly, and he hears her irritation. Troy just nods, still trying to be conciliatory. "We humans," she tells Troy next, "we're kind of helpless." But she doesn't *sound* like she's describing something she thinks *they* have in common. Well, *you* might

be helpless, he thinks. And then his anger is immediately replaced by pity. For her, for the defensive wolf's pet. Who can blame her?

This is how it seems, at least at the moment. That neither of them *like* each other that much. But they're both lonely. And loneliness does a lot to bring people together, to enable them to get past their differences. Loneliness is very helpful that way.

## 12

They're talking to one another next to the fire like they did the night before. After he's eaten, and after she's watched him eat. It's bonding, and it works even if you belong to different species. Because as you talk, and as you glance back and forth at one another in the flickering light, something primitive goes to work, something that's in the ancestry of both of you comes out. The playful red shadows soften the aliens that are living within you, the fire brings out the remote similarities that maybe you still share with one another.

He's talking about his childhood with her now, it's his turn. "We lived in a village," he says, "that's where I grew up," and he decides to be honest with her about what kind of village it was: "It was tended by cats. They called it a garden." "A meat-farm," she says, "a gourmet meat-farm. Organic. Free range. Because cats are very picky about their food." "Yeah, I guess," Troy says, not quite getting everything she's telling him. "We'd disappear once in a while. Off to the clinic, was what *that* was called. It wasn't hard to figure out what was really going on. Since no one ever came back."

"Clean-killing after hunting something down," she responds, "it's just more *ethical*. It's quick and it isn't complicated. A little panic and then it's all over. Better for everyone involved." Troy agrees with this, but somehow the way she automatically says these things, the automatic way she takes the side of the animals she's utterly dependent on bothers him. He wants to challenge her again, he wants to pick another fight with her, he wants to make her *think*. He resists these impulses.

"You escaped," she says now. "The people I loved disappeared one day. So I left, I hid in the forests, I wandered far away from the village where I grew up, and then I started hunting down cats. Loner cats. For fun. Not for food obviously." He looks at her to see how she's going to react. She just asks, "Revenge?" He shrugs at the honest question. He thought so once, but now he's not so sure. "The village is gone now," that's what he says next. "I don't know what happened. But when I went back after a couple of years, it was all rubble and remains. Maybe

they ate everyone, closed down the shop.” “Maybe,” Yoolia says. And then she adds, “I’ve never seen a human before. A real one, I mean. So I didn’t know that there were any left. That there were any of *us* left. No one knew. I’ve seen pictures, of course. Of other humans.”

He’s thinking *pictures* like the ones that were in the book his mother had. Those are the only pictures he’s ever seen. But that’s not what she means by pictures. He doesn’t know that he has no idea what she means by pictures. She means images in her head. That are projected there by the cloud.

“Your father?” she asks. “He disappeared early,” Troy says. “This is hard for me to understand,” she says, “we’re so different this way. Your family and mine. My father was *everything* to me. He was everything to all of us.” “Your father?” “My adopted father,” Yoolia says. And after a pause, she says, in a low voice, “I didn’t know my real father. I told you that.”

There are many things Troy doesn’t tell Yoolia either, things he’d be uncomfortable telling *anyone*. He doesn’t tell her that he was pretty much the only male left in the village. That when he’d reached a certain age, probably around thirteen, he was it except for a couple of really old guys who’d tell him stories that didn’t really make sense, who’d pass on sayings to him and give him advice. Who gave him what they called “some culture.”

It was a large village he’d grown up in, with the hut-homes not clumped close together, but scattered about over a fairly large area, surrounded and penetrated by forest. He doesn’t tell Yoolia that he’d been with a lot of women, going from hut-house to hut-house, a different one each night, or even a different one later on in the same night. That he didn’t care what it really meant, what was really going on, that all the attention he was getting from different women was fun. It was more than fun, it was the only way things had ever been for him. He was a stud animal, *today’s* stud animal. That was something one of the women had yelled at him during a fight they were having. Because she was jealous or angry, or because he was losing interest in her. Because he wanted to leave now, the way he usually did when someone became pregnant. Or maybe she’d yelled that at him because she couldn’t believe that he was that out of touch with reality, that he didn’t realize what was actually going on. It was true, of course, what she’d said. It was something he hadn’t thought that much about, that was true too.

If you’re still alive in a world like this, then there’s a lot you’ve done that you don’t want to think about too closely, there’s a lot that you’ve allowed to happen without thinking too much about it. In order to get on with your life. You may have fantasized, when you were young, that you’d always stay clear-headed about right and wrong, that you’d never do something as loathsome as *that*, that of course you’d off yourself first before doing something as horrible as *that*.

So he doesn't tell this to Yooolia either. How one day it all changed for him. Because there was one woman that he actually loved now. Even after they had their quintuplets, he cared about them too, in a way that he'd never cared about anyone before. That he was thinking about a family, *their* family, for the first time. He was still sleeping around, of course, going from hut-house to hut-house, but he kept going back to *their* hut-house every few days. And maybe that's why it happened, why one day they all disappeared. His entire family, the ones that he cared about. The cats just shrugging their heads like they have no idea what happened. Blaming the foxes. Like there'd be foxes around in a place with big cats.

He doesn't think about their names. Thinking about their names is dangerous. It hurts more than anything else to remember their names.

Humans had disappeared before of course. Humans were always disappearing, that was a fact of life. Even his other *children* had disappeared before, other children of the women he'd been with, and he hadn't thought about that. Not really. Because he'd always moved on first. The village was that large, numbering about a hundred. Households. Why this time was different he could never be sure about. Maybe because he really cared for someone else for the first time. Or maybe because he was older, smarter, and no longer the adolescent moron that he'd been for so long. What he *was* sure about was that he couldn't tell Yooolia any of this, that he couldn't tell *anyone* about this, not that there'd ever been anyone to tell anything to before. He wasn't going to tell Yooolia how this was what he'd thought about each time he'd killed a cat. Their names. That instead of feeling triumphant or delighted whenever he'd finally killed a cat, he'd feel worse instead. Because he'd remember what he'd been, something he blamed on the cats. And he felt like a coward because the cats he'd hunted down weren't the cats who had run the farm. That's why he returned to the village one day. To go after *that* cat troop. Which would have been suicide. But the village was gone.

Even this changed one day. Suddenly he didn't have it in him any more. That drive to hunt down and kill loner cats. One by one. It was several months ago that this last change had happened in him, maybe it was as much as a year. He's just not sure. Ever since, he'd been wandering kind of lost and aimless through the forests. Without a goal, without any reason to go on. This is something he does tell Yooolia, that he'd lost his drive to kill cats, that he wasn't sure what to do with himself any more, that he didn't even see the point of *surviving* any longer. She doesn't say anything, the fire casting flickering dark shadows, her face inscrutable.

After a while, after a short silence, he asks Yooolia about Hamoch, about what Hamoch wants with him, about what Hamoch is up to. "Wolves are fascinated with humans," Yooolia tells him, and this is the truth. "Is that why Hamoch ...?" And he doesn't finish his sentence, because he doesn't know how to finish it: *keeps us as pets?* He doesn't want to say that, but no other words come to mind. "No," she says, and he wonders what she thinks he's actually asked her.

"It's because we're all descended from humans. Every animal is. And because humans did it all first. Everything." That's what she tells him.

The woman tells him this too, after he asks her where the rest of the wolfpack is, because he *knows* that wolves travel in packs: That Hamoch is in exile, that he's alone too, that if his tribe finds him they'll kill him. There are other things that Yoolia isn't telling Troy, a lot of things. They aren't lying to one another, not entirely. Or maybe they are. Because one of the things Yoolia lets Troy think is that the reason Hamoch is in exile has something to do with her, that he was protecting her from the other wolves in his tribe. And this isn't true at all. At least it's not true in the way that Troy thinks it is, the way she knows he's thinking about what she's told him.

This happens too. Troy asks, "How come I never see you in the daylight?" "I'm nervous," Yoolia replies, "because of what you said to Hamoch." Troy tries to remember what he said to the wolf earlier in the day. He shouldn't have said anything at all, of course. "You shouldn't trust everything Hamoch tells you," Troy says, and somehow this is the wrong thing for him to say, he can tell because of the sudden way she darts a look at him. Or maybe it's because he's reached out for her hand at the same time he's speaking to her. And she flinches it away suddenly, involuntarily. As if she doesn't want him touching her. Ever. "I'm sorry," he says.

She doesn't say any of the things that she's thinking now. That there are already too many lies between them, that she's afraid to let him see her in the daylight because she's afraid that he'll think she's ugly, that he'll think she's not human, and that she'll see how he feels in his eyes, in his face. And because she can't predict what she'll do if she sees this, if it makes her angry. "Trust me," Troy tells her. Just like that. Even though she hasn't said a thing. But she decides to leave anyway. To leap up suddenly and disappear the way she'd done the night before.

## 13

He awakens, and sitting up quietly, he sees by the fire what he first thinks is a wolf-pup facing away from him. It seems to be sitting on its haunches, looking down at the dead fire, and it's sort of cute, the way it's sitting there, even though it's surely slightly bigger than he is. Then he realizes that it's Yoolia he's seeing from behind. Christ, he thinks, she *really does* look like a young wolf, especially because her furry ears seem to be sticking up on the top of her head like she's listening for something.

He readies himself to smile the right way when she turns around, when she finally realizes he's awake. "Hi there," she says, when that happens, and she's smiling back. "I've had breakfast," she adds. Okay, Troy thinks, not the most normal thing to say first thing in the morning. "Hamoch was here," that's the next thing she says, "and he wants us to go that way." She's standing now, and she's pointing in the same direction the wolf pointed in yesterday. He realizes with a shock that she's got a really nice figure. Underneath that hair. So maybe she isn't a wolf. Because wolves don't have nice figures—not from a human's point of view, anyway. They're *wolves*. 36-26-36, pops into his head, a number-phrase that the old guys in his village often used to describe an attractive woman. For some reason *those* particular numbers stood for a good figure.

Her face that he's seeing clearly for the first time in the gray daylight. *She's beautiful*, he thinks, and he thinks next: No, that's kind of an exaggeration because her features are so dramatic—maybe she'd be beautiful if her mouth wasn't so big. Loud, her features are really loud. It's a big face that she's got. He deliberately keeps any complexity in his reactions to her out of his own face and eyes, he keeps smiling. Simply.

"What?" she says. Because he's been looking at her. And not saying anything. "You look nice," he says. Kind of humanish, he thinks, although not really.

Her face turns serious. "Hamoch smelled something in the air," she says, "when he was here earlier." Troy doesn't quite get what she means, but he stands up quickly. "Do you ...?" he asks. "I can't smell anything," she says, "not like he can." Troy picks up the waterbottle, opens it, drinks a little, and then wets his nostrils. He sniffs the air, turning in the direction of the breeze as he does so, and he thinks he smells *cat*, of all things. If that's right, the cat can't smell them, because of the way the wind is blowing, but there are other ways cats track their prey. By smelling the ground. He thinks about washing his feet, but then he thinks of Yoolia and that they've got no place to hide out here in any case. "We've got to go," he tells Yoolia, even though he knows it's hopeless to run.

Cats come in different sizes. If this one is big enough, then even Hamoch won't be able to help them. Wherever he's gone. Because a wolf is no match for a big cat.

They don't get far before they *hear* the cat approaching. It only took twenty minutes for it to reach them. Even less. "God," Troy thinks, and he realizes he's talking aloud to himself, "it's not even bothering to *stalk* us, it's *that* confident." Within moments, it's there. Troy has turned around, Yoolia behind him, and it's already charging in the air towards them, its big claws outstretched, and now neither of them has any choice. The cat can't change direction once it's leaped, and he has to take it on before it lands. His knife is in his hand, and he jumps up to meet the thing mid-air.

And then the impossible happens. The cat is distracted by something because it's trying to change its direction, its orientation, in mid-jump, it's focused on something that's *behind* Troy. It's turned its head *away* from him, trying at the same time to twist its body in a different direction, and this moment is all he needs to stab the cat suddenly in its face (into an eye), and maneuver away from its flailing claws immediately afterwards by shoving himself off the side of its head, hitting the ground and rolling away. One shot is all he had, but it's enough. He's out of its blinded range, the animal screaming in agony, crashing into the ground headfirst, then holding its almost-human paws to its punctured left eye, blood spitting down its face, and bubbling over the sand. It collapses into spasms on the ground, dying, because he's stabbed it deep into its eye socket and into its brain. Only as its spasms start to soften in intensity does Troy dare turn away from it, in order to see Yooolia standing there motionless, still behind him. He'd think she's frozen with fear. Except that doesn't seem to describe her expression. He stands up, looking at her, inhaling deep breaths rapidly, his lungs almost painful from the effort. She smiles back at him.

Later, when they both walk over to the dead cat, and look down at it, they see that, like many cats, its body is tattooed. Now that it's dead, the images continue to flicker and shift over its body. They tell, repeatedly, monotonous stories of panicked fleeing prey: small birds tweeting and taking flight, small furry rodents scampering across the landscape of the cat's arms, even miniature stampeding cattle kicking up dust. Over and over again, these are the stories that the tattoos enact. Loner cats stretch out their paws in the evening, lick themselves and watch images of frightened animals moving up and down their arms, their heads bobbing and jerking for hours as they watch their own tattoos. Cats love watching stuff like this. It's what cats do to avoid being lonely, it's one of the things cats do.

"That is so weird," Yooolia says, watching the pictures move up and down over the cat's body, and then slowly vanish into the tawny background of the cat's color. She's never seen a big cat this close up, that's what she tells Troy next. Because wolves are careful, usually, not to intrude into cat territory. "But Hamoch did intrude," Troy says. Because Troy knows that *he* was deep in cat territory when the ducks got to him. "Hamoch was in a *cage*," Yooolia says angrily. There are things here that don't make sense, that Troy isn't thinking about carefully enough, that he knows he isn't thinking about the way he should be.

But everything has changed now, he sees that. Because Yooolia takes his hand in hers, and squeezes it so that he can feel the tips of her sharp fingernails digging slightly into his hand. "Ouch," he says, jokingly, and she laughs without letting go of his hand.

It's a lie, somehow, all that's just happened, and what's happening now. Between them. At least that's how Troy feels, that he's a fraud and that Yooolia doesn't realize he's a fraud. Because never once in his whole life has he ever *dared* to confront a loner cat the way he's just

done. Taking it down by intercepting it in mid-air and stabbing it full in the face. Because he's always known that he'd never survive a direct attack on a big cat. Instead, he employed tricks, like always being downwind of the creatures, like disguising his own scent with plant resins or burnt wood or his trusty soap. And *always* sneaking up on them right after they've consumed a big kill, exactly when they are at their most sluggish and reptilian. Stabbing them suddenly from behind, and in a way that kills the animal instantly, so that it doesn't even yell out, so that it has no idea even how it's dying or what's killing it. This is something that he's always thought, for some reason, is a very good idea. That whatever he kills have no image in its mind of what's killed it, no image of *him*.

He doesn't tell Yoolia any of this, he allows her to think he's hunted down cats this way before. Not by saying so, but simply by letting her draw the natural conclusion from what she's just seen and from what he's told her earlier. That he was hunting cats for years. So she can think that this is the usual thing when he takes on a big cat. But he knows something strange has happened, a kind of miracle. That the only reason he's still alive is that the animal saw something or thought it saw something that distracted it, so that it wasn't focused on him any longer.

Yoolia is lying to herself as well, although Troy doesn't know this. Because she's making Troy out in her mind as an alpha male. And she knows better than that. Because Troy is a human, a human that was probably bred to be *eaten*.

This human, this is something Yoolia doesn't want to think about, this human may only be alive for exactly the same reason that certain goldfish are still alive, for the same reason that certain goldfish aren't extinct. Because cats think they're cute. And fun to eat.

## 14

The deer network gets wind of it first. (Because it usually does, because deer are the only things left that are like journalists.) What deer think they've learned is that a *wolf* has taken up with a *human*. That these two *things* have actually become *intimate* with one another, that's the exciting and salacious rumor that's now making the rounds, that's the story that's now circulating wildly and rapidly among avid deer. On *meerdeer.c* first, and then on other sites. That a wolf and a human are actually *fucking*, that they've actually become a *couple*. And very soon this rumor isn't being passed around to just *deer*.



There are pictures *too*. And films. Supposedly of the two of them doing things. Together. Like holding hands, for example. While romantically strolling by sand dunes, a momentary sunset in the background. (In the future, all sunsets are momentary.) A wolf and a human are leaning their heads sweetly together in an extended kiss the way people used to do it. In postcards. A really *big* wolf, in full and gigantic wolf-form, and a relatively *little* human. This is what deer, everywhere, are seeing. And not just deer.

These pictures, these films, they're all fakes of course, they aren't *real* pictures and films. Like most pictures and films in the future. Because there are no cameras anymore, there are just eyes to record events, and brains to try to remember them. And no eyes have actually seen the two of them together except for the cat's eyes. Just before it died. But loner cats almost never share information. Not even with other loner cats. Loner cats don't have a network. Even trooper cats don't have that much of a network. Compared to, anyway, prey animals, or compared to wolves or boars.

Almost as newsworthy is the mere fact that a *human* has been sighted, that a human is still alive, that humans *aren't* extinct yet. They're not extinct, anyway, if there's still one left. And it's equally salacious and exciting to know that this human has killed a big cat. Apparently with its small naked fists. Which is supposed to be impossible.

In the future, animals have networks. And like the animals themselves, these networks are descendants of the original network that humans once had. What we, in the present, call the web.

Where's the hardware for these animal webs? Because a web can't grow in sheer air, after all. Webs need to be instantiated in something real, in something physical: it can't be smoke and mirrors *all* the way down. There used to be computers, like there are in the present, but these are long gone. There are still satellites spinning around, up in the sky behind the clouds, but none of them work any longer. Instead, the animal networks are rooted in animal-brains. Because, nearly enough, that's all the hardware that's left in the future, that's all that's left that's still complex enough to generate something like a web, something like a collective memory. What the animals call a collective unconscious.

Animal networks are specialized to the kinds of animals that use them, to the kinds of animal-brains that house them.

Deer networks have become a little unusual recently because some of the deer have become a little unusual recently. It's a mutation in deer, so that now, sometimes, some deer can plant information on other animal webs. Without being detected. And now, sometimes, some deer can get information from other animal webs. Without being detected. Not often, and not always. Deer, some deer, have become the sneaks of the future.

And because of this mutation, some deer have come to specialize in viruses. In electronic viruses. Only just recently.

A mutation in a kind of animal can change the balance of power. Drastically. The way the discovery of fire did long ago. So that a kind of ape could suddenly cook its food. Which tripled the number of calories that kind of ape got from food, which made it possible for that ape to evolve a much larger brain. Because large brains consume an inordinate number of calories. Which were now, for the first time, available to that kind of ape.

So that now, suddenly, wolf-tribes sometimes fail to find deer where they should be. Because the information a tribe thinks it has is suddenly sometimes unreliable. When it never was before. And sometimes, a wolf-tribe suddenly finds itself in the wrong territory. In another wolf-tribe's territory, for example, where it shouldn't be, and where it never intended to be. Which leads to a war and to a lot of dead wolves. Or worse, a wolf-tribe finds itself in a big cat's territory. *That* leads to a lot of dead wolves and some dead cats too. These are some of the bad things that are starting to happen to wolves. And to boars too. But not to big cats, not directly to big cats, anyway. Because big cats don't have enough of a net of their own. That they rely on.

This rumor about the human and the wolf hooking up doesn't just circulate on the deer network. It soon appears on the wolf network too. Then the boars learn about it. Ducks and rabbits. And as this rumor spreads out over the wolf web, a certain tribe of wolves becomes very embarrassed. Because that tribe knows exactly which wolf is being talked about, and wolf-tribes don't like being embarrassed. Not even by a wolf that's no longer part of their tribe, not even by rumors that might not be true about a wolf that's no longer part of their tribe. Wolves are supposed to kill themselves first, rather than allow anything as embarrassing as *this* to happen. Sometimes, remaining alive is *just* cowardly, that's what wolves think. And if a wolf is still alive when it shouldn't be, other wolves try to hunt it down and kill it. Because that's the right thing to do.

Something else, something even stranger, is happening too.

Certain deer are starting to form a *plan*, certain deer have gotten an *idea*. Because of these rumors of a wolf teaming up with a human. What it *means* that something like that has happened.

Some deer have always had aspirations, *rogue deer* in particular. Rogue deer are called rogue deer not by deer, but by other animals, by predator animals in particular. Because rogue deer are far more aggressive than deer usually are. Rogue deer want deer to be the way that humans once were, the way they *think* that humans once were. Masters of the total *universe*. Rogue deer want to exterminate all *their* monster-predators the way they believe that humans first did, thousands of years ago. They want every doe to feel safe, they want their baby fawns

to grow up fearfree, happy, and able to travel wherever they please, to have whatever they want whenever they want it. Rogue deer desire, in fact, there to be satisfied and contented deer *everywhere* on earth the way that humans were once satisfied and contented and *everywhere* on earth. And some of them think they know how to manage this now.

What is the first thing that humans did, when they were finally in control? Rogue deer ask one another this question. What the humans did: they killed or tamed all their predators, of course. Killed them outright, or caged them in zoos and fishtanks, stuffed their dead bodies full of crap and put them up in *exhibits*, in what they called *museums*. They wore the body-parts of their predator-enemies as clothes and jewelry while they *partied*, they fucked each other on their predator's *skins*. And humans bonsaied the big cats into tiny soft mewling toys, without any teeth or claws, they bred the wolves into tiny brightly-colored dogtoys that they'd walk around on leashes or that they tickled helpless on their laps. Because they thought it was cute and fun to do things like this to their former predators. This is what some deer fantasize about doing to *their* predator-enemies. Making them into miniature toys. Doing that to the few ones that are still left, anyway, after the deer have *massacred* the majority of them.

*As bad as a pig*. That's a saying among deer. Because, of course, boars have a choice, boars don't *have to* eat meat, boars don't have to *murder* something innocent each evening in order to have a good meal. Boars are *omnivores*, biologically speaking. And *as bad as a pig* is a saying among deer because calling a boar a *pig* is being deliberately offensive. Which is okay to do to a boar. To a *pig*. Because pigs have *chosen* to be evil.

Wolves and cats, though, are different, they're just monsters, they're just *animals*. Because they're creepy murder-addicts. (*Murder-addict* is a term deer apply to things that can't stop themselves from killing other persons, *murder-addicts* are soul-less creatures without *free will*.) And because wolves and cats don't have a choice about being the monsters that they are, you aren't morally outraged by wolves and cats the way you're morally outraged by *pigs*. You just try to kill them all off, you just try to exterminate the worst of the worst. If and whenever you can.

To deer, to *all* the prey animals really, the most disgusting thing to imagine is some creature *eating* some other creature's body raw. Right after murdering it. Most deer watch horror films on *der.d.d*, and these films always have roughly the same plot, they always have roughly the same standard set-up. A full moon in a cloudless sky dotted with stars (an alien sky that no deer has ever seen), a small innocent animal like a duck or a rabbit suddenly changing uncontrollably and against its will into an evil wolf, large and black and *carnivorous*, its bloodied mouth stretched wide showing hideous vampire fangs that no actual wolf has. And all this happening in a graveyard filled with marble tombstones, toothlike and white, jutting out of brown earth.

While innocent deer (unluckily in the wrong time and the wrong place) run and leap, screaming and dying, numerous wolf-monsters pouncing on them. Out of nearby open graves.

No animal has ever seen a graveyard either, by the way. Because there are no graveyards in the future, because there are no graves, open or closed. Not as such.

Something is changing in this world. Because some rogue deer are actually talking to some ducks. Specific deer are making plans with particular ducks. Because these ducks are managing to talk back to the deer. Sensibly, without freaking out, without babbling mindlessly. Despite the fact that deer are so much bigger than ducks. And despite the fact that the deer are scared to death of anything, including ducks. These few animals, they're making *deals* with one another. Some deer and some ducks.

Things are changing in this world as a result of that. Just by a little, anyway.

## 15

In the distance it's dawn finally starting up, blue and white mists funneling skywards (like peaceful tamed tornados) into dark clouds that are apparently backlit red, down near the horizon, backlit by the scattered rays of a sun that's invisible, that's somewhere far away and forever beyond it all. Hot orange-red slowly purpling into cool sky-blue. "So beautiful," Troy says, gesturing towards the rapidly mutating sky with his free hand, "and sometimes it happens just like it's happening now. Beauty appearing in the sky, almost by accident, appearing up there almost like it's unintended."

Yoolia nods, not really listening to what Troy is saying. She turns her face to his, her big pawish hand resting lightly on his other arm, the back of her hand clothed in its neatly-curved black hair, her fingers ending in long tapered nails that are almost too pointed to be human. "Okay," she says, "we can do it one more time. If you want to."

It's been about two minutes since the last time. Maybe less. And that wasn't the first time either. Not by a lot. Because this has been more or less going on all night. Troy turns to look back at her, letting a puzzled expression appear on his face. (He's still being careful with her, he's still censoring his gestures, what his face expresses.) What she's just said sounds just a little strange to him. She explains: "It's what I've heard. About the humans. About us." "What have you heard?" he asks. She takes a breath, and then grips his arm a little tighter. Because she's nervous. And insecure. "I've heard that humans used to do it all the time, that they thought about it all the time, that it's pretty much all that they ever thought about." "That's

what we were supposed to be like? The humans? that's what we're supposed to be like now?" "The men," she says. Like it's an afterthought, "this was supposed to be true of the human males." "The human males," Troy echoes.

She looks at him, not saying anything. What Yooolia doesn't tell Troy, because she doesn't have the nerve, is that wolves are pretty convinced that humans were really dirty and disgusting creatures, that they were the kind of animal that would have pretty much slept with *anything*. Especially the males. Some wolves think that's why the humans went extinct. But everyone in the future has their own theory about why humans went extinct. And these theories are all different.

"Do you want to do it again?" Troy asks her finally. "I do if you do," she says. "No really, you can tell me the truth. Especially about this." "Well," she says, "I'd rather just cuddle here with you for a while. And look at that sky change."

So that's what they do. As the light grows and spreads.

When Troy falls awake later, he's been dreaming about something nice, but he's already forgotten what it was. He sits up and looks around. Yooolia's gone, but it must have been recently. Because the fire is freshly lit, she must have used his sparker herself, and now there's fresh uncooked meat waiting for him. And new water.

While he makes himself breakfast, he thinks about things. "Where's Hamoch?" that's what he'd asked Yooolia the night before. Even though it was clear she wasn't interested in *talking* to him. Not just then, anyway. "He's still around," she'd told him, "he's still watching over us like he always does. He's chaperoning us, making sure that nothing bad happens." And Troy looked at her, because this didn't explain very much, especially the unfamiliar word *chaperoning*. And because the wolf hadn't showed up when the cat attacked them. Not then and not after. "Well," Yooolia says next, "you insulted him by refusing his food. It's a big deal if a wolf does something like that. Offers someone food. There's a lot of respect on the line." "Respect," Troy says, "over a piece of meat? No, over the duck, right? This is still about the duck, isn't it? And so I guess I'm not really getting this."

Yooolia makes it clear that she doesn't want to talk anymore. Which, he discovers, he doesn't want to either. Because it's been a very long time, and because when she presses her body against his, she feels much more familiar to him than he expected her to. Not immediately, because he has to get used to her skin, how it hides beneath her fur—how he has to stroke his way to it slowly, down into her hair to her hot skin. And how she's shuddering just a little as his hands move over her, how it's like something is brimming over in a forest, hidden in the dark, when he penetrates her, a resisting itch and tug, and then suddenly a creamy sliding in while they kiss, wet and luscious and sweet, a rich exquisite friction.

And Yooolia too. The strange smell of the earth's mist like an aura all around him as he crushes her to him, a strength in his body, in his arms, that she cannot believe is there because his strangely naked silky skin feels kitten-soft at the same time. Her skin, too, it comes alive when he touches her, making her so vulnerable to him, but thank god her hair is like a protective covering, or else he'd see how her skin has changed color, he'd see how good he feels to her, what her blood is doing inside. She has to close her eyes as she holds him tightly against herself, saying "Troy" over and over again like she's scared, really really scared, and because there's a softness between them that she's never felt before, not with anyone ever, and that she wants to keep feeling even as it frightens her. And it's so strange, how when he whispers into her ear, she can't hear the words clearly because of the ocean-roaring in her head, and yet it happens, the blaze at last, over and over again, while she feels his strong body against hers, while she rubs her hands up and down over his strangely smooth skin. And as she imagines, over and over again, her eyes tightly closed, his sudden athletic leap high into the air, her back arching because the pleasure is so intense, because she's visualizing this, over and over again: Troy stabbing the monstrous cat in the face with his strange detached claw.

After that first time, while he dozed for a few minutes, inevitably it seemed, apparently exhausted by what they'd done, she kept touching her mouth with her fingers, because her lips kept tingling as if he'd done something permanent to them. And he had. She'd kissed the alien, and she could still smell him on her own face, and on her fingers, the salt and grime of his sweat, and something else too, something she had never smelled before in her life. But that she needed now. Because it calmed her.

## 16

Now they're walking in a new direction. Because Yooolia has told him they should, because Hamoch has been having trouble finding water for them, but there's water and food if they go this other way instead. And for another reason too, because something is following them. "Another cat?" Troy asks. "No, it's deer that are following us. A *lot* of deer. An army of deer." "That's weird," Troy says, "what would an army of deer want with us?" "That's puzzling Hamoch too," Yooolia says, "what an army of deer would want with *you*. Because it's you they're after, all these deer."

"I *really* don't get it," Troy says, "deer don't *track* things, deer don't track other animals. Deer *flee* from other animals. Deer run for their lives. Like all the time." He hasn't interacted that much with deer, except when that crowd of them took their turn spitting at him. And even

those deer were scared shitless—he could see that despite those strange repulsive heads they have, ones that make it hard to read their expressions. First they’d spit at him and then they’d immediately jump back a little, like he was going to do something, like he *could* do something. From within a cage. Everyone knows this about deer, that they’re cowards. Which is totally reasonable under the circumstances. You don’t have much choice about being a coward when you’re deer, you’re *designed* to be cowardly, you’re *designed* to panic, to run from things. Even rabbits aren’t as scared of things as much as deer are. Anyway, that’s what he’s heard.

Yoolia doesn’t say anything else about this. Taking his hand instead, she tells him a saying that’s popular among wolves, that was popular in her tribe anyway. “Deer are sheep.” “Deer are *what?*” he asks, because he’s never heard of sheep. “It’s a saying.” “I get *that*,” he replies, just a little irritated at these words she keeps using, ones he doesn’t know, “but what are sheep? It’s *sheep* I’ve never heard of.” “They’re a kind of animal that’s extinct because no one wanted to be sheep.” This doesn’t help Troy at all. *No one wanted to be sheep, that’s why sheep went extinct?* What on earth could this mean? Like people have a choice in being what they are? Since when?

Yoolia has an image in her head of what sheep were supposed to look like, sort of giant fluffy cottonballs awkwardly balanced on scrawny legs, and with big watery stupid sheep-eyes dumbly staring at you, but she doesn’t tell Troy that. Instead she explains that wolves have a lot of myths about sheep. “A lot of myths about creatures that don’t exist,” Troy says skeptically. “I guess,” Yoolia replies. They’re holding hands, walking, as she tells him one of the stories, how a group of wolves once disguised themselves as sheep in order to fool other animals. “In order to be able to kill them,” she tells Troy, “you know, for food. Without having to work too hard at it.” Troy nods. “And then the wolves couldn’t drop their disguises. Because the sheepskins were stuck to them now. Permanently.” Troy nods again, wondering why sheepskins would get stuck to anyone. And then Yoolia tells him that the story ends with the wolves killing themselves. Because they were so ashamed of what they had become. “And *that’s* why sheep are extinct,” Yoolia says, “in the myth, I mean. Because they were all actually wolves who committed suicide.” Troy doesn’t think much of this story, but he doesn’t say anything about that to Yoolia. “They were called Trojans,” Yoolia adds. “Who?” Troy asks. “The wolves, the wolves who disguised themselves as sheep. The ones who died.” He nods yet again, even though he doesn’t see why it’s important for these mythical wolves to have a name.

Troy can actually *smell* water in the air. After about an hour. They’ve been arguing in the meantime. About food, of course. Because, somehow, food always turns into a sore point between them. This time, they’ve been arguing about *soup*. Yoolia finds the idea of *soup* really really disgusting. “Don’t get me wrong,” she says, like that’s some sort of apology for what she’s going to say next, “but isn’t *soup* a little like boiling leftover garbage? Isn’t it just like dropping

all sorts of old stuff that's gone bad into hot water? And what could be the point of that?" "Never thought of it that way," Troy says, trying very hard to be very polite about this. Certainly he never thought of his *mother's* soup that way. But it's true: you didn't really know what was in the soup when you were finally *eating* it, when the soup had been boiling long enough to eat. Days, for example.

And then they see something they both think is very odd. A heavy circular piece of metal, about two feet in diameter, lying flat and isolated in the sand. "What's that?" Troy says, standing still suddenly, not approaching it any closer, almost expecting it to leap up and attack them somehow. Yooolia looks up into the sky like she's listening for something. When Troy tries to move forward, she grips his arm hard. "Shhhh," she says, even though he hasn't said anything. And then: "It's a manhole cover."

"It's a what?" And again, like a couple of days before, Yooolia says words like she's reciting them, or like she's repeating something the same time she's hearing it. "A manhole cover is a removable plate forming the lid over the opening of a manhole, to prevent anyone from falling in and to keep unauthorized persons out."

This doesn't help *at all*. "I don't get it," Troy says. "*Men* live underneath that? They live in manholes?" Yooolia stares fixedly up at the sky like she's entranced. "What's an unauthorized person?" he asks her next, shaking her shoulders a little. Yooolia gives out a little gasp, and then focuses on his eyes like she's just come back from somewhere very far away. "That's all I've got," she says, and she smiles. "Well, it isn't very much help. Do these things *bite*, that's what I need to know." She stares at him, uncomprehendingly. "It looks like some kind of trap to me," Troy now says, keeping it simple, to bring her back to Earth, "so maybe we should just walk around it, avoid it altogether, not get any closer to it." She nods agreement, and then she says, "Sewers. Manhole covers have a lot to do with sewers." "Whatever *those* are," Troy says. Yooolia doesn't say anything because she doesn't know what a sewer is either. Once they're past it, she looks back at the manhole cover, and then again a few steps later. It never does anything.

"This I can explain," Yooolia tells Troy, after he notices aloud that the land around them is changing, that the ground is less sandy, that it's darker, the feel of dampness making the dirt cooler to his feet, reminding him of the floors of the forests he once lived in. "We're approaching an irvine," she explains. "An irvine?" Troy says. "An artificial landscape that a kind of animal has created. Like those forests you grew up in, like that cat farm. Those forests were cat irvines." "Cats made the forests I grew up in, is that what you're claiming?" Troy asks, "cats invented them?" "Not exactly, at least I don't think so. Maybe people are claiming that the cat's *ancestors* did it. Because cats aren't smart enough anymore to invent a forest, nothing's smart



enough anymore to do that." *Everything once belonged to someone else.* That's a saying among wolves.

"God," Troy says, "what about God? Wasn't it God who originally made the forests *and* the cats?" "I don't think so, I don't think there's anything's left around here that God originally made." And Yooolia doesn't add that she doesn't believe in God. Because, why get into a fight over that? They've got enough problems already.

They've reached something that looks amazing. "This is a beaverpark," Yooolia says, "or maybe a wetterpark—that's what some wolves call it. An oasis. That's another word I've heard." It seems to be a river, its water slow-flowing, bubbling and occasionally turbuloid, it widens temporarily in its middle to surround an elonged structure of mud and stones, criss-crossings of branches and twigs and leaves. Moss and grasses ring the river, fronds too. Clumps of reeds. Red and golden fishcrowds scattering about through the clear-running water like clouds dispersing. Belching frogs leaping and splashing. And there are some trees that look like willows hanging themselves over the water. A small bird or two.

When Troy follows the river's path away from the beaverdam with his eyes, first in one direction and then in the other, he sees at one end the river rising suddenly out of the ground like a miracle, and disappearing as miraculously at the other. And desert sand, as far as the eye can see, in the surroundings everywhere beyond the beaverpark.

The beaverdam looks like something *built* on a natural bit of landscape: the river already there, and the beaverdam an artifact in the middle of it. The wooden parts of the beaverdam look like they've been chewed into appropriate shapes, and hand-mudded into place, the leaves and rocks look like *gathered* leaves and rocks, the mud looks just like *mud* that beavers have scooped up from the riverbed and used as cement.

This isn't true, even though neither Troy nor Yooolia know this, because neither of them know very much about beaverdams. The *beaverdam* is a single kind of thing, it's a biotechd *mushroom*, that's what it really is, a plant that beavers know how to grow and that eventually dies on its surface into what looks like the remains of mud and stones, and the criss-crossings of branches and twigs, into something that looks exactly like a beaver's dam. Or that would have looked like a beaver's dam if there were any real beaver's dams left for it to resemble. And the manhole covers, there are more of those out in the desert beyond the dam. Because they are the beaverdam's *roots*, surfacing here and there to absorb daylight and heat, and direct sunlight, too. During those flash-moments when the sky opens up, when the clouds part for a second, when bright yellow light shines down on earth.

A lot of things, in the future, that look like structures, that would have looked to us like *artifacts*, are actually organic now, are actually plant-organisms of one sort or another. Like the

apparent clock-faces often growing knottedly into the trunks of trees in the forests where Troy grew up. Or those poisonous vases that sometimes grow out of the ground. Those aren't *real* vases, those aren't *real* clocks, those are organisms *originally* biotech'd into existence by humans, they were originally *designed* to take the shapes and functions of artifacts, they were once *designed* to grow metal parts, plasterboard and plastic insides. Or whatever. And now, because so much time has passed, they're not the same as they once were. Nothing is same, not really, not any longer. Because evolution is relentless that way.

The beavers living here played *something* of a role in the creation of the beaverdam, of course, they didn't just plant a *mushroom* and watch it grow. Because rivers don't naturally flow above ground and so the beavers diverted an underground river, to make it flow overground for a few yards. The river itself is only thing that's actually artificial here, that it's coming out of the ground at all.

Yoolia stares down into the clear pondwater in front of her, a group of fish nearby, unmoving, just below the surface. Suddenly she darts a dark-haired hand rapidly at them, and snatches up a small wriggling one, pops it into her mouth and swallows it without chewing. Troy stares at her. "Sorry," she says, "that's the sort of thing a wolf would do. I guess I've kind of picked up some of their eating habits." She sounds slightly apologetic.

## 17

And now Troy does something that unnerves Yoolia. He unties his toolbox from his waist, drops it by the water's edge, and then pulls out of his clothes. Yoolia momentarily thinks he wants to do it again with her—she can't believe how *insatiable* he is—but she realizes this can't be right because he's squatted down over his toolbox, pulling something out of it that she doesn't get. A large piece of soap.

"What are you going to do?" she asks. "Something I've been dying to do for days and days and days," he says, almost joyously. "I'm going to take a *bath*. I'm finally going to wash all this *shit* off of me."

Humans don't lick or preen themselves. They *can't*. They don't have fur or feathers with the normal self-cleansing mechanisms that a fur or a good set of feathers have, humans don't produce a saliva with natural detergents and antibiotics in it the way other animals do. So their naked skin isn't just naked, it's vulnerable too, it's helpless against the elements. That's why humans all smell so strongly, that's why they all get dirty so easily, that's why they always look

scuffed up and grimy if they aren't bathing regularly or even if they are. Yooolia has to think for a moment before she remembers what a bath is, or why humans need to take them so often. Meanwhile Troy has waded out a little into the marshwater, scattering the fish away outwards from him in wriggling waves of golds and reds. He's already creating a lather with the soap, rubbing bubbles all over his body. This looks so weird to Yooolia.

A squeaky beaverish voice hisses at him out of a nearby clump of tall reeds. "You stupid fuck, don't put that crap in our clean water." Yooolia drops to her fours, and growls, letting her voice end in a moderately-ominous roar. A furious scuttering responds behind the brushes as something runs for its life. She turns her head to smile at Troy, still all bubbled up in the water but staring at her. "Good imitation, right? I've been practicing for a while." What have I gotten myself into? Troy thinks.

Troy explains that the trick of bathing is that the soap disguises his scent for a little while. So that when they leave the beaver oasis whatever is following them won't be able to tell what direction they've gone in, it won't be able to track them from anywhere near the beaver oasis. Especially if they make good time before they start to stink again. He's trying to convince Yooolia to bathe with him, which she really doesn't want to do at all. At least not at first.

Soon, she's there in the water, splashing around and play-fighting with him. He's surprised that she's decided to wade in so quickly, that it only took a moment, and then he's surprised that her fur doesn't get long and stringy and funny-looking from the water—that it keeps its shape, curled and tight against her beautiful body. But the soap lathers up bubbles all over her and she's transformed into another creature, a streaky-white and shining bubble monster, something she thinks is very funny. She's swimming around the water now, splashing out her bubbles, floating on her back and growl-laughing. Troy watches her from the bank. It's cute, how much fun she's having.

They're making love in the marsh grasses, their bodies half in the water that's lapping partially up their legs, her purr graveling low as she comes. They bathe again. They make love again. They bathe again.

So it's pretty late when they decide to get going. Troy has washed his clothing, and put it on wet, he's filled the water bottle from a place in the marshes that isn't soapy. Yooolia is looking down at her reflection in the water, she thinks her fur is neat and trim-looking and she likes it, she's patting her head, pushing the hair here and there into place. "I am so groomed now," she says, and then she looks up at Troy and smiles. "I could get used to this," she tells him.

It's only much later when Troy explains to Yooolia how it is he actually *makes* soap. From a dead animal's fat. Using certain minerals he sometimes finds. And by cooking the dead animal's fat over a fire in a make-shift pot, stirring it regularly. A *family recipe* is what Troy calls it.

Yoolia stares at the soap later, while Troy is sleeping. She turns the stone-shaped object over and over again in her hand in front of the fire, wondering at it, sort of horrified that it's made the way that Troy has told her it's made. Not because making soap uses a dead animal, that's not what horrifies her, but because of the unnatural things that Troy *does* to a dead animal's flesh to make soap. Like he's some sort of vulture, that's how she's thinking about him now. And the result looks so innocent, this *thing* hides its origins *so well*. Soap, she thinks, it's so *dishonest*. That's what she was rubbing all over her body, that's what she was letting Troy rub all over her body. Some dead animal's *fat*.

So she's wondering what she's gotten herself into. As she thinks about the strange things Troy owns: the soap, the sparker, the strangely detached claw. She's wondering if it's too late to get out of this, to go off on her own again. She's feeling weird about him now, the way she did when she first saw him, and maybe she's feeling guilty too. Because she had so much fun with that *soap* when she shouldn't have.

Yoolia has her back to the fire, her arms are wrapped around her bent legs which are pushed up against her breasts, and she's worrying her lower lip between her teeth as she thinks about this over and over again, about what it means, her and Troy and the soap. And then she remembers kissing Troy because of how she's been softly biting her lower lip, she's reminded how much she needs *that* now, how much she needs *him*. What is she going to *do*? Look at me, she thinks suddenly, and she laughs a little. I'm sitting by a *fire*. How much sense does *that* make?

Angry beavers had been watching everything. Back at the oasis. And only when the pair finally left, late in the afternoon, did the disgusted beavers all finally emerge from the deep underground where they'd been hiding, only then did they start to obsessively clean up the disgusting mess, the *leftovers*, all the crap that was now floating in their water.

Beavers mumble to themselves constantly, and these were all mumbling the same things, repetitious remarks about how revolting what they'd just seen was. "What *were* those things?" one mumbles pretty loudly. Loudly enough for the other beavers to stop what they're doing just for a moment, and sniff the air anxiously. "Why did they have to do that disgusting shit over and over again *here*? In *our* water?" That's what another one mumbles to itself.

"This is going to take weeks to clean up," a third beaver mumbles, even louder than the first two did. Then it sigh-moans to itself, sad and forlorn. *Weeks*. That's a term beavers use for an indeterminately long series of days. And if beavers are relaxing, without a lot to do, they talk about being *struck dead* in a month of Sundays. A month of Sundays is *not* a good thing to be struck dead in. Because you should always be working hard. Every day. To prepare for the next bad thing that's coming along. Because bad things always do, sooner or later.

The beavers had been watching them go at it all afternoon. Although it was only one pair of beaver eyes that were actually looking out at them from between the reeds. The other beavers, hiding deep underground, were experiencing the event over the beaverweb (shuddering at what they were looking at, shuddering at how these creatures were *fouling* their water). And because everything that pair of beaver eyes saw was posted on the beavernet, it soon appeared on other nets as well. First on deer sites, and then elsewhere. *Privacy*. You'd think there'd be more privacy in the future.

Porn. Some of what the beaver saw is turned into porn. Eventually that happens. The porn shows up on certain deer sites first. Because porn is the sort of thing humans used to do, that's what some deer think. So they want to do it too. And then the porn appears on other sites. It's a sort of porn. Because many prey animals are asking, naturally, what *are* those things waving back and forth constantly, that are blocking our view so much of the time? Because some animals, most animals really, have never been in a beaverpark, so they've never seen *reeds* being blown back and forth by breezes. And some of the other animals are asking, what *is* that thing that the human is fucking? Because they've never seen a wolf. In its human form, anyway. That's because wolves don't hunt their prey in their humanish forms. They wouldn't catch anything if they did.

Humans are famous, though, even though almost no animal has ever seen a *real* human. Because images of humans are everywhere, on *every* web. So all the animals recognize the human, they all recognize that the human *is* a human.

## 18

It's the next day. Yooolia and Troy are standing on a *road*, staring down at it. Things are a little tense between them. It's not the road that's making them tense, it's not that neither of them has ever seen a road, although that's a *little* disturbing. It's something else. Maybe that there was no breakfast this morning. Because Hamoch didn't come by while Troy was asleep, because Yooolia has told Troy that Hamoch couldn't find anything for them to eat. Or maybe it's because Yooolia is still thinking about the soap, about what it might mean. She can't get *soap* out of her mind. Or perhaps it's because a really evil thought has occurred to Troy, one that he can't get out of *his* mind, one that he woke up with. That Hamoch is trying to *breed* them, him and Yooolia. He feels this anxious trapped sensation, even though there's nothing to see in any direction except for sand and clouds and mist. Maybe that's enough to make someone feel

trapped—just sand and clouds and mist wherever you look. But maybe it's this *thought* he keeps having, the one that won't leave his mind.

They've been arguing testily over the road that goes on for miles and miles in both directions. What it is. *Who made this?* That's what Troy wants to know. Yooolia doesn't understand his question, why the road had to have been *made*. Why couldn't it just be something that's there? Yooolia lives in a world where there are many things that are just there, because they were there in an earlier time. She naturally accepts that a lot of things just are, without anyone being able to explain why they are. And, of course, things like this road might just *grow* in different places, they might just be a kind of *weed*, she knows that too.

But she's wrong, because this road isn't an organism, it's not some kind of plant like the beaverdam was. And it's not a relic from an earlier time either. It's a real construction, something relatively new. It hasn't been made from the ground up, purely from scratch, of course. Because nothing in the future is made *that* way, not anymore. Rather, it's been nicely assembled out of debris and remains—out of chunks of buildings, out of jagged slabs of older road, out of pieces of crumbling wall. Out of whatever the builders could find that would do. There are even some real cobblestones here and there. And some relatively intact pieces of asphalt and pebbled cement, all of it laid out nice and orderly in the sand so that it's easy to walk on, even with bare feet, even with soft paws or with sensitive duck-feet. The point of this road is that it's something that animals will find *tempting* to walk on. That's what it's been *designed* to do.

All new roads, incidently, lead to the same place. To the same *kind* of place. In the future. Because only one kind of animal still builds roads. So it doesn't matter which direction Yooolia and Troy choose to walk in. On *this* road.

Yooolia has just finished explaining to Troy what a *road* is. In that weird monotone she uses, going into a kind of trance, looking up into the sky and speaking her words slowly and evenly. "I hate it when you do that, it's so weird," Troy says to Yooolia, not holding back this time because he's kind of pissed. But Troy gets what she's said, what a road is. Because he already knows what a *path* is. A road, she's told him, is a big path, it's a *paved* path. He doesn't know what it is for something to be paved, but that doesn't matter.

They've been arguing about whether they should walk down this *road* or continue the other way, trudging on through the endless sand. That's what Yooolia wants to do, just keep going the same way. Troy wants to walk *on* the road instead. And to prove his point, he's scraped his foot along a part of the road, and then knelt down and sniffed. "It's not retaining our odors as well as the sand's been doing. Whatever's after us can still try to track us by sniffing air, but that's going to be a lot harder." Yooolia still resists. She *thinks* she remembers something about

roads, she *thinks* she's heard that they're treacherous, that they often lead somewhere bad, that they're a kind of trap. A tourist trap. But she doesn't say *tourist trap* aloud because Troy will only ask her what a tourist is. And she doesn't know the answer to that, what kind of animal a *tourist* is. The questions he keeps asking, questions it doesn't make any *sense* to ask. Because no one knows answers anymore.

Troy doesn't see how a *road* could possibly be dangerous. He explains to Yoolia how stalking an animal works, about what kinds of terrains an animal can and can't be trapped in. Because he's an expert on this, he tells her, having done it all his life. Yoolia isn't paying much attention, she seems bored actually, looking around and sniffing the air instead. It's because Hamoch has been feeding her all her life, that's what Troy decides, so she just doesn't get how hard it is to feed yourself, she's never had to do it. She's a *pet*, and she's out of touch with reality just the way pets are.

They start down the road when she finally agrees. "Just for a while," she tells him, and she sounds annoyed, "just until Hamoch weighs in. Because maybe he'll tell us there's nothing interesting in this direction. No food for example." Troy just nods. He thinks that it's about time they started doing things on their own. Going down this road is a first step.

When they come upon a large brown rectangular object jutting out of the sand next to the road, Troy stops suspiciously. He grips Yoolia's arm to stop her from moving forward, and she almost shakes her arm free from his hand. "What's that?" he says urgently. Yoolia goes into her trance again. He waits, irritated, and then she says: "A door." "A what?" he asks. She responds: "It's a way of stopping egress." Troy shakes his head. Because this makes no sense *at all*. Then she adds: "It's a movable structure that's used to close off an entrance typically consisting of a panel that swings on hinges or that slides or rotates." She points to a knob-shaped piece of metal that's sticking out of the door. "That's a doorknob," she says, and she has no idea what *doorknob* means. Or what it *does*.

But this definition helps Troy a little, actually. Because although there were no doors where Troy grew up, and although he's never heard the word *egress*, he does know what an entrance is. So he gets the idea, even without knowing what hinges are. "What's it doing here," he asks, "where there aren't any entrances around?" Yoolia shakes her head because she doesn't know the answer. They move closer to the door and see a sign on it with a nice design and nice colors. It reads:

PICTURESQUE RUINS

EVERYTHING HERE IS FREE

There is an arrow pointing in the direction of the road that they've already been going in. And another arrow pointing in the opposite direction. Neither of them can read the sign, of course. (No one can read in the future.) They don't even realize that a sign is something you *can* read. Troy has seen a book, and he's seen someone pretending to read out of it, but he's never seen a sign and so he doesn't know that a sign is the same thing as a book, that they can both be read.

"There's nothing obvious to be scared of," Troy says, after they stare at the sign on the door for a while. "So we might as well keep going." And they do.

## 19

Troy and Yoolia are surrounded by ruined *buildings*. Neither of them has ever seen real buildings, of course, although Yoolia has seen lots of images of them. And on the tops of the broken walls of these buildings, here and there, are *nests*, although neither Yoolia nor Troy realize this is what those brightly-colored things are, the small ribbons of fabric that flutter out from and around them when the air occasionally moves. They keep walking, Troy constantly looking around for something living, for something that might be dangerous. Or for something that they can catch and eat.

When they step over some rubble, it's into the remains of a courtyard that they've entered, half-standing walls and collapsed arches. They step down old ruined stone stairs, both of them moving very slowly, carefully placing their feet, because neither of them has ever walked on steps before. Yoolia is nervous, tight-wired and tense, because she's afraid of going into a place where there's only one way out, but as they walk in and through holes in semi-crumbled walls, she sees that there are still many ways to escape: through remains of arches, on and over disorganized mountains of large broken stone bricks. If they need to, there's ways out, lots of them.

On the ground, all around them, are small artifacts: plastic, ceramic, metal, mostly broken or twisted. Figures of animals and humans and artifacts. So many of them that they have to walk carefully not to stumble. And they hear sounds too: bird chirps, growls, words. Both of them freeze, look, and listen. "The sounds," Yoolia says at last, "they're just repeating themselves over and over again." Troy nods, he's realized the same thing. "What is this place?" he asks. "I don't know," Yoolia responds, "I've lost contact again." Troy stares at her now, and she



realizes she's said more than she wanted to say. "I hear things," she says finally, "it's a gift from the wolves." Troy just keeps looking at her, not comprehending. "Not all the time," she adds, "especially lately. It's from the clouds above, where information is kept. Words and images in my head if I want them, if I invite them into my mind. It's something that wolves can do, and that I can do too. Sometimes. But not now, not here. When I try now, it's all just static, it's all just white noise. Here, I mean. Where we are now."

*Static. White noise.* Words and phrases that Troy doesn't know. "Birds collect things," Yooolia says after a moment, "for their nests. Maybe birds used to live here. I can't smell anything, can you? I don't think there's been anything living here for a while."

Troy nods agreement. He walks a little further, stepping over some neatly piled bricks, and he sees additional gatherings of artifacts. "Look at this," he calls back to Yooolia. The things he's looking at now have been organized according to their colors, blues closest to him, spreading into purples further out, reds after that, then yellows, and greens. He's seen their color-organization at a glance, but he recognizes hardly anything.

We would, if we were there. We'd recognize a lot. We'd recognize circuit boards, doll parts, umbrellas, tires and fenders, headlights, pieces of furniture, old stoves and refrigerators, high-end bathroom fixtures, wires and pipes, armchair insides, advertising, crusty batteries, shirts, remains of e-readers, coffee machines, broken espresso cups. And toys, countless toys. Small cars, boats, bicycles, wheelchairs. Canes. *Products*. These are all products. And among them are many other things that we *wouldn't* recognize. Because they haven't been invented yet.

The plastic ones, the plastic parts of these things, they're half-digested by bacteria and moss, the porcelain—metal and glass items—are better preserved. And there are thousands of glass bottles too. All intact, and in all colors, both transparent and opaque. All different shapes too. No labels on the bottles except for the occasional ones etched directly into the glass. Bottles stand out to Troy because he knows what they are, "You wouldn't think there were so many bottles in the world," he says, marveling.

And in and among the debris is something else that Troy recognizes. Books. There are books lying about.

"These are books," he says authoritatively, kneeling down and opening one flat against the ground. Yooolia has no interest in any of the debris around them. "I want to keep on walking," she tells him. "These are important," Troy responds, looking up and gesturing at the book he's opened. "I guess," she says, "but I should scope things out a bit more." "I don't think there's anyone here," Troy says. Yooolia realizes he means: Go ahead and walk around, it's safe for you to do that. I give you permission. She nods and walks away. So that he doesn't see how much he's annoyed her.

This isn't about checking the place out to make sure it's safe, this isn't that the book Troy is looking through is important. This is that they need to be away from one another. At least for a little while. And whether or not it's dangerous.

Troy thumbs through the picture book he's found. It's pictures of *animals*, photographs of animals. Troy is transfixed. Because these animals look real to him, even though he's never seen anything even close to these animals in his life. He can't read the captions or the text, the descriptions of rhinoceros, lions, wild boars, skunks, wild cats, and wolves. *Photographs* of them in their original environments. Polar bears, for example, surrounded by white stuff that he's never seen but that looks sort of like bright-white sand. And a group of wolves against a mountain range, a backgrounded moon high in a night sky that he's never seen either. Even the trees, the trees that he recognizes to be trees. They don't look the same as the trees he grew up around. Not even a little bit. Neither do the animals—none of these animals look like any animals he's ever seen.

But somehow, even though he's never seen these animals or these landscapes or these trees, they look familiar to him, they look right, they look like things that *should* exist. And as he turns the pages, his emotions rapid-shift: longing, fear, delight, joy. And behind it all, feelings of loss, feelings of loss for things he's never had, things that he's never even known existed, things he's never even imagined. And now there is water running out of his eyes, a lot of it. For the first time in years, in many many years.

When he looks up, he sees something he doesn't remember noticing when they first came here. But it must have been there all along because otherwise he would have sensed movements. It's a brightly-colored poster of a *rabbit*, a rabbit that looks more human than any rabbit he's ever seen, more human than any *animal* he's ever seen. It's wearing a lowcut red evening dress, and it's showing an unbelievable amount of *cleavage* above an amazing hourglass figure. It has long beautiful eyelashes, expressive oval eyes, and it's gazing straight into *his* eyes with a sultry expression. He's never seen a sultry expression before, not in his whole life, not one as seductive as this one. He's never seen an evening dress either, never experienced what an evening dress can do for a body—even a body with a rabbit's head on it.

The rabbit is actually *sexy*, it's incredibly, exaggeratedly, *female*. Cartoonedly female with unreal and perfect curves. He stands up, moves a little closer towards the poster, then closer still, and that's when the ground that's covered in artifacts gives way beneath him, plunging him into a deep hole.

(Actual rabbits, by the way, don't have much cleavage. At least the ones in this future don't.)

It's a trap, that's what this whole place is. What else could it be? It's a *vulture* trap, because it's vulture nests that, here and there, top the ruined walls. And all this stuff, all these *things* that are

everywhere under foot, it's what vltures collect. Over generations and generations. Not because vltures think their prey will be attracted by these things, vltures don't collect artifacts for predatory reasons. Vltures collect these things only because they love collecting old things, just about any old thing. Vltures are fascinated by everything that humans have made. Especially if it's bright and colorful and intricate. Or because it's fun to pick up the way that tools are fun to pick up. (Even if you don't know how to use them.) This collecting thing vltures do, it's purely disinterested, it's purely, obsessively, *aesthetic*.

Once upon a time vltures waited until something was pretty much *dead* before they descended to their meal, before they started to eat it. Not any longer. Now they *prepare* their food first. After something falls into a vlture hole, vltures gas it into a coma. Vltures, this is probably the right way to put it, have a *fermentation* culture. So the gas doesn't just *immobilize* prey, it starts to *tenderize* the meat, it starts the important process of *digestion*, it contains enzymes that break down muscle and fat, and that spice it up too. So the prey gets soft *and* tasty.

Tumeric. There's a lot of tumeric involved in the process.

It can take *years* for someone to finally die in a vlture hole, it can take years for *what's left* of someone to finally die in a vlture hole. Floating in and out of consciousness in a vlture hole. For years and years. It's not a good way to die. Even in this world.

## 20

Rusty is momentarily in front of Yoolia, as big as he is in real life. And almost immediately, before he has a chance to *smile* the way he always does when he sees her, he flattens and flickers out. "Rusty," she shouts, and her voice says all this: I thought you were *dead*, I've missed you *so much*. I've been in so much pain for so long, mourning you. And then, for a moment, her fear is that he *is* dead, and that she only saw him because she's just seeing things the way some people do when they go crazy, and not because he's alive and he's finally reached her through the cloud. "Rusty," she calls out again.

And then she hears his voice in her head, so she knows that he's real. It's low, his voice, almost incomprehensible, and it's saying to her, *Open your eyes for me. So I can figure out*. And she can't hear the rest of what he's said because his voice has disappeared into white noise. She does what he asks anyway, opens her mind to him as much as she can, and she gazes all around, at the ruins of buildings, at the crumbled arches, at the colorful debris that's scattered

everywhere, at the nests topping some of the partially intact walls. And she whispers aloud, frantically, as she's looking around, "Are you still there? Please still be there."

His voice comes through again, low enough that she thinks she could be imagining it, except for what he's saying to her, because it comes as a surprise: *It's a vulture trap, you're in a vulture trap, you're in a museum, that's why it's so hard for me to reach you. You've got to get out of there. Right now.*

It makes sense, of course it does. How could she have been so slow? *That's* what all this is, that's what she realizes. She calls out, almost to herself, "Troy. I've got to get Troy." And Rusty's voice, in her head, is saying, *troy? what's a troy?* She's leaping up, transforming at the same time, letting Rusty see everything she sees, not closing him out. He's almost yelling in her head, *not that way, that's not the way to get out of here, where the fuck are you going?*

Troy has landed on his feet, he's like a cat that way. From learning how to fall out of trees when he had to, twisting his body during his fall. And as colorful debris falls into the hole from above, all around him, he can see that outside the hole, up in the air, giant birds are circling in and out of the thickening mist and clouds. His knife is in his hand automatically, even though he realizes almost at the same time that it won't do him any good, that these birds aren't going to get close enough for him to kill them.

Two or three have landed, he's not sure how many, really. They're looking into the hole at him, three heads for sure, bobbing over the edge of the hole, gazing at him. Checking him out before they gas him. Because he's heard that's what happens next, and he feels a sickening sensation in his stomach. Anticipation.

Then the wolf's roar, the birds taking flight, their wings opening gigantically, one going straight up into the air directly over the hole when a streaking monstrosity, wolf-shaped, intercepts it mid-air, taking it down at an angle and then out of his sight. He hears the vultures screeching, the wolf roaring, but sees nothing.

The wolf lands in the hole next to him, and it grabs him with one of its big arms. "Don't inhale, don't breathe," it's saying, loud and close, and then they're airborne again, so fast that everything blurs around him as they move, the monster leaping both of them out of the hole in one jump.

In the air now, at the height of their trajectory, Troy sees like a frozen snapshot a dozen vultures flapwheeling in from the low cloud-mists towards them. Maybe deliberately, maybe because it can't see through the mists, one of the vultures almost collides with them, the wolf's muscular arm raking its claws against the bird's face, snapping its head back and killing it instantly. The

animal drops away, spiral-spinning down, its still-open wings slowing its fall, gracelessly fluttering.

Hamoch, for Troy presumes it must be Hamoch, lets Troy go, not gently at all, several feet from above the ground, the thudding of the dead vulture nearby, and now having landed, the wolf roars up at the sky, at the vultures circling in towards them. A couple of them are emitting black gas, but too far away to do any good.

The wolf is enraged, Troy can see that. It grabs Troy again, and leaps up so fast that everything around Troy blurs again, just for a moment. And now they've landed. Troy tries to call out to the wolf he's clinging to, "Yoolia, don't forget Yoolia." That's when he realizes what an idiot he's been, that of course he knew all along, that he had to have known all along. It was way too obvious for him not to know.

A leap. Another leap. Troy has become nauseous. They've landed near the outside of the vulture trap, at an outer ring of crumbled wall parts, and Troy realizes they should just keep going, just get as totally far away from this place as they can, but the wolf can't seem to control itself, be rational about this. Instead, it paces around in a rage, and then heaves up a large stone statuette, one that's almost Troy's size, smashes it against a rubbed wall. It picks up more objects and flings them hard against the rocks. Now it lifts one of the rocks, then thrusts it down on some bottles, crashing them into flying shards. Troy watches the wolf, marveling. Because the animal is clearly in some kind of frenzy, it's having some kind of temper tantrum—that's just what it looks like.

A vulture lands. Which stops the wolf short. They square off, the vulture opening and closing its giant wings, the wolf standing up to its full height. "Why are you destroying things?" the vulture says, its voice piercing and extremely painful to hear, "why are you destroying valuable things?" The wolf doesn't say anything, it keeps rocking back and forth aggressively, side to side, facing the vulture, snorting a little.

A second vulture has landed next to the first. These birds are big, as big as the wolf. Which can't be good. Now a third one lands. And a fourth. All talking at once about their things, about how destructive the wolf is, about how inappropriate how *juvenile* it is to destroy old valuables. While opening and closing their wings. This really can't be good. Their odor is hitting Troy along with their screeching voices, making him sick. "Yoolia," he calls out. Just the wolf's name.

The wolf hears Troy, he can tell because it visibly flinches at the sound of his voice, at the name he's called out. And then the wolf takes a step back towards Troy, still facing away from him, still facing the vultures that are opening and closing their wings together. Threateningly. A fifth and sixth vulture land now. All screeching at once about their old valuables, all apparently

working themselves up into rages. Because some of their *things* have been damaged by the wolf.

One steps forward a little, still opening and closing its gigantic wings, almost flapping them now. Troy realizes the wolf is deciding whether or not to attack it. Which would be *insane*. Since a seventh vlture has landed. Troy hits on a trick, almost without thinking about it. He pulls out his sparker, and waves it at the vltures, making it flash. To distract them. Because the sparker is an interesting *thing*, and the sparks are interesting too. This works: all their heads turn at once towards him, distracted by the *artifact* in his hand. But what's he supposed to do now?

The wolf decides that for him. It turns, almost too rapidly to see, and bounds towards him as he simultaneously sees the vltures opening their wings, taking flight, the wolf grabbing him and bounding up into the air, one arm around him while he's still facing in the direction of the vltures, all wheeling up above them and into the sky.

The wolf doesn't stop this time, it keeps taking leap after leap after leap, he can hear how winded it's become, the way it's rasping its breathing. The vltures are further and further away with each leap, some already turning back because vltures won't travel very far from their traps. And Troy is sickened from the constant motion, the lurching changes in acceleration, the smell and sound of the vltures he's still overwhelmed from. So he's finally vomiting over the wolf's arm and into the air behind them as they rush leapingly out and into the safe desert.

## 21

"You fucking *lied* to me, for *days* you've been lying to me," that's what Troy says to Yoolia. After he's called the wolf her real name again, right after they've landed for the last time. He does it deliberately, using her name, and not nicely. He does it after he's watched her change—something he's never seen in his life, an animal change like that. And after she's collapsed onto the sand, onto her knees, saying that she feels sick, god so sick, that she must be faint from hunger, or maybe it's from their *smell*—it was torture, what those creatures smelled and sounded like. This isn't the right time, surely it's not, but he can't help himself, saying what he says, accusing her furiously. Because it's not his fault that he didn't realize it sooner, *what she is*. She was tricking him the whole time.

(Yoolia the *wolf-thing*, he thinks.)

He says this too, something which really isn't that important to him, something that *can't* be that important—that's what he thinks later: "*You're* the one who murdered the duck. *You're* the one who murdered Qflacc."

Yoolia stands up, her face working against his, full of black anger. "I've murdered for *you*," she shouts. He stares back at her. And she doesn't stop: "So many things I never thought I'd do, that I never thought I'd be capable of doing, things too disgusting for me to even ever imagine doing. Fucking *you*." She virtually spits that last sentence out. They stare at one another, standing apart. Wondering how they're supposed to go on from there, after something like that's been said.

"I deserve to die for what I've been doing. Lying about who I am is nothing compared to *those* things." Troy is taken aback, silenced.

And now she's not even talking to *him*, he realizes that. "I should have realized that something was wrong, that something was just *twisted*, when I started getting all these strange urges," her voice is bizarrely calm all of sudden, almost empty of emotion. "Strange urges," Troy echoes, thinking she means something sexual. "To hunt things down. To kill them. And then bring them back to *you*. Getting the warm fuzzies fantasizing about *feeding you* the things I've killed." Um," Troy says. Because he wasn't really expecting *this*. "Do you really think I'd have *anything* to do with a *catbag* if it wasn't for you? Those things are so disgusting." "Okay," Troy says. The thought comes into his head that this wolf is weirdly uptight. About *all* sorts of things.

Both of them are confused now, by what she's said, even though they're still facing off, still officially in a fight. Troy wants to stay angry, to feel self-righteously betrayed by this thing having *lied* to him, to rage furiously at the terrible things she's *done*, at everything she's been deliberately hiding from him. To trick him into sleeping with her, with a wolf, with an *animal*. And she wants to rage back at him too, fight him with her words, with her claws, because she won't feel shame, she won't loathe herself anymore. Because she doesn't deserve *him* ever talking to her like that. After all she's done.

It's *alien*, what she's said to him. And it's confusing her too, what's come out of her mouth just now. Maybe because their emotions are too simple and direct to handle anything like *this*, maybe because *this* isn't something that emotions were designed to handle. Or maybe it's because she's exhausted, maybe it's because she's about to faint. Her voice has trailed off, it's wandered into silence. She was readying herself for fury, for a rushing into rage, but the feelings are gone.

Neither of them says anything for a few minutes, they don't even look at one another, they stare down at the sand in front of them instead. Where there's nothing much to look at. She says, to herself really: "*Hamoch* isn't even a *name*." She's confessing everything she thinks she's

done that's wrong. Not for him but for herself, she's condemning herself. "It doesn't even *sound* like a name. I needed something in a hurry so that's what I came up with. I'm such a criminal, any wolf would have seen through it immediately. Any wolf would have just been disgusted by my trying something like that."

She means: It's *his* fault that he believed her. No sensible *wolf* would have, she wouldn't even have been *tempted* to do something like that if he were a normal wolf instead of *the thing that he is*. Then she slumps down into the sand again, onto her knees, crying to herself. Because this is all so horrible, so creepy, so strange. What loneliness can drive you to. And because she's thinking about the soap again, that's what's come into her head.

Yoolia has been crying for a while. Troy has been holding her, she's been letting Troy hold her, because only after a while does she let him touch her, it's only after a while that she doesn't push him away, that she doesn't lash out at him with her sharp hands, that she doesn't shriek at him to stay the fuck away from her.

He's been telling her, over and over, as he keeps stroking her, that it's alright, that he didn't mean anything he's said. (But, of course, he's hardly said much at all.) He's been telling her that he loves her, that he really does. (And maybe it's true, maybe he does love her.) He's been telling her that what they've done is good and natural and right. (But what's *good*? what's *natural*? what's *right*? Whatever can these words mean now?)

He tells her that they're in this together, the two of them, that there's certainly nothing for them to be ashamed of. Them being together, them being a couple. That she's special, that it's not true what people say about humans, that they'd sleep with anything at all, that it isn't true about him. (Because this is something else she'd sobbed out: that he doesn't think she's cute, that he doesn't think that she's beautiful, that he doesn't think she's special. Because he's human and that's just what *they're* like, insincere and indiscriminating.

And she's saying, when she catches her breath a little, that she keeps trying to figure out what it was that could have drawn her in. Because it had to be something strange, because otherwise *this* makes no sense. And she says, "Maybe it was when the rabbits were spitting at you— maybe it was that early. Because somehow you kept your dignity, you didn't lose it, become enraged, you just pulled into yourself and *waited*. Patiently. Because it was going to end eventually, and you weren't participating, you were just waiting it out. That took *such* self-control."

He thinks: *That's* when you fell in love with me? While you were watching rabbits *spit* at me? He thinks: Self-control? Patience? Like any of that was involved. He thinks: This thing between us, it isn't based on anything *real*. How could it be? Right from the beginning it's been based on misunderstandings, on misreadings. This is just impossible, this thing they're doing. And he's



thinking all this while he strokes her hair, while he pets her, while he's telling her it's alright, that he loves her, that they can get through this, because look at everything they've gotten through already.

Sometimes you make love to one another not because of lust or because you really want to. Sometimes you make love to one another just to *demonstrate* to each other that everything is alright, that everything is still the same. You *make* love *ex nihilo*, and you don't really make anything else when you're making love that way. And after this, they're lying side by side, on their backs, looking up into the cloud-sky where there's nothing much to see. Troy asks suddenly, "what's it like? When you change shape." "I don't understand what you're asking," Yoolia says back. She takes his hand again. Because it scares her, or it makes her angry. When he asks questions the way he does.

Troy says: "I mean, are you the same person? When you're in wolf-form?" "Why wouldn't I be the same person? Who *else* would I be?" "I don't know," and his voice trails off. But he decides to press it, giving her hand a squeeze first to indicate he means no harm. "I mean you don't seem to have the same personalities, you now and you when you're in a wolf form. I mean you really seem to be different people. And I'm wondering which one is the *real* you." She props her head up on her other hand, her elbow sinking into the sand, and she looks at him sideways. She sort of smirks at him, the way the wolf smirked at him. "I really think you've got it wrong. It's no different than a *mood*. Really. I have more energy when I'm a wolf and I notice different things. I'm kind of more wired, more *hungry*. But it's still me, it's still totally me." Troy tries again: "You're more aggressive when you're a wolf, a lot more aggressive. And sarcastic." "I don't know," she replies, "I never noticed anything like that. I just do whatever I feel like doing. I say whatever I feel like saying. However I'm shaped."

Troy doesn't believe her. He thinks: if her body changes that much, so does her mind. *Of course it does*. She just doesn't realize how different she is when she's a wolf, that's what Troy decides, that she's really two people not one. And that this is probably true about *all* the animals that can change.

"All that shit about rosemary," Troy says now, but he's smiling at her. "*Cooking* the duck, that's what you claimed. That first night. What *was* all that?"

And Yoolia talks about how she was researching humans on the cloud. For hours and hours. Looking for anything she could find. So she could *talk* to him, make sense to him. Fake *human* successfully. They're both laughing about this now. She doesn't say: I did it because I needed a friend so desperately, because I've been so lonely. She doesn't say: I *wasn't* thinking about *this*, about going *here*, about *sex with you*, I really wasn't. Getting into something as nuts as that.

She says, “How many sheep does it take to elect a king?” “Yes?” Troy says. “That’s the joke,” Yoolia tells him, “Posing the question to begin with.” “I don’t get it,” Troy says, I don’t get why that’s funny.” “I know,” Yoolia tells him, “that’s the point.” Troy looks at her. “That’s why I was on the cloud every night. After I met you. Trying to find things out about you guys. As much as possible.”

And then she stands up, because she thinks she hears something. “God I’m so woozy,” she says, almost stumbling, and then she sniffs the breeze and she listens, her ears popping up just a little. She’s at it a long time, wrinkling her nose in different directions, and frowning. Then: “They’re coming. They’re coming now. Deer. A *lot* of deer.”

## 22

They’re running as fast as they can, the deer coming after them. Not galloping exactly, because sand doesn’t make galloping a real possibility for any animal—but the deer are moving towards them fast enough, anyway, by a kind of repeated jumping. That everything does in the future if it travels in deserts. And because deer feet were once biotech’d to travel rapidly over sand when they needed to. Or maybe they just evolved that way. That could have happened too.

There really *are* a lot of deer, all fanning out towards them now, humanish from the waist up, except for their heads, horseish from the waist down. And several are leaping together in *pairs*, each pair carrying something between them. They’re a little too far away for Troy to recognize what those things are, what they’re carrying.

Yoolia hears Troy panting as he runs besides her, complaining at the same time, wasting his breath—that’s what Yoolia thinks, “This is just ridiculous, what keeps happening to us. I thought I’d heard that deserts were supposed to be *empty*.” And he yells this too, a moment later: “*Change* into a *wolf* why the fuck don’t you?” She hasn’t any breath left to talk back to him, she’s barely got enough to keep going. So she doesn’t explain that changing shape takes energy, that it takes enormous energy, and that she’ll just faint dead away if she tries something like that now. That she should have just stayed in wolf-form after they escaped from the vltures, but she didn’t. Because of *him*.

As they run, Rusty is back. *I can’t see what you’re seeing*, he’s yelling loud in her head. So she opens her mind up to him, and now he sees: A crowd of centaurs fanning out all around them, several of them leaping in pairs, each pair holding a *duck* between them—the duck’s arms and

claws extended straight out like the duck is some sort of weapon that they're holding. *Okay*, Rusty says in her head, *that's just totally weird*.

Because they look silly and dangerous at the same time. The deer that are carrying the ducks. It looks silly to Yooolia too because she's never seen anything like this before, because to wolves, anything that prey animals do that looks out of the ordinary they just *experience* as the animal panicking, it just *looks* to them like fear is making the animals act unusual. Even when they *realize* it's clearly nothing like that, it still *looks* that way to wolves, the way that these deer carrying ducks looks like panic and fear to Yooolia even though she *understands* that it's nothing like that, that it's something that's actually dangerous. If she wasn't smart enough to keep running, she'd just stand there *laughing* at them.

The deer are nearly upon them, two centaurs especially, their duck close enough to *hear*: "Come to poppa, sweet babycakes, I've got something that's going to feel *sooooo* good," that's what the duck is saying. Over and over again. And it's making smacking noises *too*.

In Yooolia's head, Rusty is saying, *just hang on a little longer, kid, just stay ahead of them for a few minutes more. I've got help coming, I really do. They're only a couple of minutes away*. And Yooolia is thinking: What can he be talking about? Help? What kind of help?

It happens quickly. Because Yooolia has realized too late that the centaurs are intent on taking *Troy* down, they're not interested in her. She's changed direction, trying to intercept a pair of centaurs even though she's hardly in the right *form* to stop them, they're leaning their duck down towards the ground a little, so that its claws reach *Troy* and tear his shoulder open, so that his body interrupts his thought, screams pain into his head. And as he stumblefalls into the sand he recognizes that the deer are going to trample all over him. *Right now*.

But they don't. He's not sure what happens, it blurs together: sound, light, odor, pain, all smashed incoherently, chaotically mixed up—even time's passing strange now, or maybe it's frozen, he can't tell, he doesn't even think to try, perhaps he's being picked up, perhaps he's being carried, perhaps he's *floating*, maybe he's been trussed up, he's not conscious long enough recognize anything, he hasn't enough blood left even to open his eyes, that's what he's able to think at one point,

and the next thing he remembers, he's been laid out on the ground somewhere. Yooolia is there, maybe he's dreaming again, or hallucinating, because she's on all fours above him, and she's licking his shoulder, he can *feel* her tongue probing deep into his wound, the pain excruciating, shooting up and down his arm in spasms, and something is holding him down, a lot of hands materializing out of the air, preventing him from pulling away from her hungry mouth pressed against his shoulder, preventing him from punching her away, that's what it seems like: she's drinking his blood straight out of his wound, that's what he's thinking, that the

wolf is hungry and that it's decided it might as well drink up the rest of his blood since he's going to die anyway. From this pain.

That's his last thought for a while, that *animals* are very practical when it comes to death and dying. That it's totally reasonable, it really is, to be that practical. Because it's just stupid to be sentimental about a dead body, even to be sentimental about a body that's not dead yet, that's only dying.

## 23

It's weeks later, and Troy has realized how much time has passed. He's been convalescing. Among *wolves*, among a lot of wolves. He hasn't been paying that much attention to them, to his situation. Because the later he gives the impression that he's regained presence of mind, the later he has to deal with this possibly bad new situation. But he's actually been alert for a much shorter time than he thinks he has.

And now, when he opens his eyes and sits up, he feels a tenderness in his shoulder that makes him immediately put his other hand to it. Bandages, it's wrapped in bandages. He's impressed because bandages of any kind are rare in the future. He looks down at them, pressing them a little with his hand and he thinks they've probably been made from something else, from some sort of fabric, maybe from the torn remains of a catbag. He grimaces at the thought that his naked flesh is being intimate with a catbag.

He sees Rusty. Who is squatting down next to him, looking at him. He doesn't know it's *Rusty* because he's never met Rusty, because Yoolia hasn't told him about Rusty, because she hasn't ever mentioned his name. So what he sees is a big wolf squatting next to him, where he's been lying, looking into his face curiously. What's weird is that this wolf looks *friendly*—even though it's in full wolf-form. Somehow its face is just a little puppy-like—somehow it's just *nice* when this wolf smiles at you. Its smile doesn't look cruel, and yet even Yoolia looks cruel, or at least she looks sarcastic. When she's in full wolf-form, and when she's smiling at you with all those big teeth. But this guy, even though he's got big teeth too, even though he's got that big wolf-mouth that all the wolves have, you just *like* him somehow. And his fur is atypically reddish, really reddish for wolf-fur. Troy notices that too.

You'd like this wolf even though he's got this really *intelligent* face that would be looking at you, that would be smiling at you. Intelligent smiling predators aren't usually much fun to look at

since you get the impression that you're probably not going to escape if you're this close to the face of an intelligent smiling predator. And you're usually right.

"Hi," he says, "I'm Rusty." Troy looks at him. "We've met a number of times before but you haven't really been conscious during those occasions." "Okay," Troy says. That sounds reasonable, even though Troy really can't tell wolves apart. Or he couldn't up to now, anyway. Because he's convinced he hasn't seen *this wolf* before. That this is a wolf-face that he'd *retain* if he'd ever seen it.

"I'm Yoolia's brother," the wolf tells him next, "so we're family, you and me. Sort of, I mean."

Troy doesn't know what to do with this, so he drops it quickly. "I don't remember much," he says, "I don't remember anything that happened after the duck took me down." He remembers Yoolia *feeding on* him, he's pretty sure he remembers that. But maybe that's not the sort of thing he should bring up to her *brother*, even if he suggests in the same breath that it must have been a dream he was having, a nightmare. "Yeah," Rusty says, "that was close, really close. You were almost gone. Maybe you *were* gone. From all the poison in your blood." And Rusty shakes his head. "If not for Yoolia."

"It's a new thing," Rusty says next. "This lock-and-load duck thing." "Lock-and-load duck thing," Troy echoes, because he has no idea what these words mean, except that they obviously refer to what the deer are doing with ducks now. "Four dead wolves, that's *news* that's been spreading fast over the webs, you better believe it. Four dead wolves killed by deer. That were carrying *ducks*." And Rusty laughs.

Troy thinks, he doesn't know why, that he can ask this wolf *questions*, that this wolf is *into* being asked questions, that this wolf thinks questions are really *cool*. "I don't get it," Troy says. "Webs. What the hell are webs?" Rusty looks at him. "You guys *invented* the web, the original web," he says after a moment. "Well that's just great," Troy replies, "I can't tell you how proud I am that *we guys* invented the web, and I'll brag about it a lot. As soon as I find out what the fuck it is."

Rusty *laughs* again. Which almost makes Troy *cringe*. Because he's realized that he was challenging a *wolf* by the way he was talking, that he was being really aggressive. Which makes laughter dangerous, if a wolf responds back that way. Because it's probably going to attack in the next second. Except that he can tell this isn't true with *this wolf*, that *this wolf* is just openly laughing because he thinks what Troy said was really *funny*.

Yoolia comes over, squats down next to Rusty. Which looks so weird. Because Yoolia is in human form, and Rusty isn't, but they're supposed to be brother and sister. And Troy becomes aware that there's a background too, that there are a lot of other animals—wolves—nearby,

moving around. That they're not alone, him, Rusty and Yooolia. He can also tell that something's changed. Because Yooolia just nods at him with a tight smile. "Hello lover," she says, soft and low. He feels a sort of unfamiliar panic, because the way she's said what she's just said, so cool and distant, makes him feel that something's changed, that she doesn't love him anymore. That's what he's thinking.

Rusty, meanwhile, hasn't stopped talking. "Yooolia," he's saying *enthusiastically*, "your boyfriend here doesn't know what the webs are, did you know that?" "Yes," Yooolia says, and she's looking up at the sky. "He can't hear the clouds. I don't understand why he's survived this long." Rusty looks sharply at her, smiling. "Those aren't the *same* clouds," he says, "as the *cloud*." Yooolia is clearly stung. "I *know* that," she says defensively. Rusty's laughing, almost giggling: "that's why you're always looking up in the sky, right?" "Drop it," Yooolia says ominously.

What she says next she whispers, almost furiously, "*this* is why they wanted to kill you, *this* is why I had to run away, *this* is why you had to run away. Because you're like *this*. Things haven't changed with them, no matter what you think, they just haven't. You have to stop being like this. For good."

Rusty sighs, shakes his head and turns to Troy, "So this is how it works," he says.

## 24

Wolves set up *camp* when they stay in a place for a little while. Otherwise, they travel in tight group-tribes of thirty wolves or so, all running along extremely fast, all leaping up close together into the air for fun when they're well-fed and energetic. Wolves call it *hopscotching*. (It's a pretty frightening thing for prey animals to see, even at a distance, a crowd of wolves doing *that*. Prey animals call it *berserking*.)

But when wolves are *camping*, they spread themselves out in space to give each other some room. They mark out individual territories, indicating the borders with their possessions, with their ropes for example. Or they'll use urine to mark boundaries instead, if they have to, if they don't own very much.

The borders between territories in a wolf camp are somewhat permeable, and a wolf's status is indicated by where that wolf can go in a wolf camp, which territories it can wander into at will. The alpha wolf, and the alpha wolf's companions, they can go anywhere, into any wolf's territory. Otherwise the wolf has to be invited in by the higher-order wolf.

If you're an omega, especially an omega male, you'll spend most of your time wandering outside the wolf territories altogether, or you'll stay huddled in one spot somewhere on the outer rim of the wolf camp. Waiting for someone to give you permission to go somewhere further in. Shivering. Because you're so lonely.

Rusty's an alpha now. That's something that's just changed. From him being a hunted outcast, from him being a hunted outcast *for years*, to him being the alpha wolf of this tribe, his original tribe. Because the other wolves, especially Jasck the former alpha, have learned he can *hear* deer on the wolfweb and that he knows when information on the wolfweb are plants by deer. And knowing that has become crucial to surviving. Jasck did it all formally, in front of the other wolves like he's supposed to. Offering his neck to Rusty. Who was supposed to bite it a little—not hard but definitively. Rusty just laughed, punched Jasck in the arm, and said “Come on, we grew up together. I'm not going to *bite* you.” Which wasn't exactly what he was supposed to do. Jasck was so confused by Rusty's response that he offered Rusty his throat *again*. A second time. Which *he* wasn't supposed to do. Rusty just laughed harder.

So although Jasck has officially passed the leadership of the tribe off to Rusty, some of the wolves have their doubts. Which is never a good thing, wolves having their doubts about their hierarchy.

Yoolia is one of Rusty's alpha companions, she's *officially* an alpha companion because she's Rusty's sister. Whether the other wolves like it or not. A lot of them *don't* like it because Troy has alpha status too, and they *really* don't like Troy. They find him kind of repulsive, the way he looks, the things he does, the things he has, that he's living in the center of *their* camp. And the things they've seen, the things they think they've seen on the wolfweb, him and Yoolia, that's *especially* repulsive, that's *especially disgusting*.

The reality is that the wolves can't do much about any of this, not at the moment anyway. Because Jasck *has* passed the leadership on to Rusty and they understand—most of them do—why Jasck did that. That their survival depends on it. Most of them understand this.

So Rusty, Yoolia and Troy have a little bit of territory to themselves, a bit of privacy. Not that the nearby wolves, the wolves in the adjoining territories, aren't listening to everything they can overhear. Because, after all, alpha territory is always in the center of a wolf camp. That makes sense geometrically, that all the other territories fan out circularly from the alpha center. More or less in descending order.

Anyway, Rusty makes it easy. To listen to him, to overhear him. Because he just can't *shut up*, because he just talks and talks and talks. Compulsively. He asks questions too. Constantly. To anyone, to anything, and about *anything*. But *wolves* aren't like that, the normal ones, that's what Troy has already realized. That, somehow, Rusty isn't a *normal* wolf, that Rusty is missing

something, a bit of social intelligence maybe, so that he never gets it, he never gets that what he's saying is sometimes the wrong thing to say, that he's crossing lines with his mouth that he's not supposed to cross.

Like when he says to Troy, with Yooolia sitting *right there*, "this is so exciting. A human, a real human. So what's it like to be a real human?" And without waiting for Troy to answer, he turns to Yooolia, and he says, "Come on, tell me, what's it like to fuck a real human?" Troy *can't believe* Rusty has just asked that. All Yooolia says, staring straight ahead, almost in a whisper, is: "*That, exactly that*, is why we're going to die, all three of us. Because there's just something *wrong* with you." No other wolf ever overhears *her*. Unless she wants them to. She knows exactly how loud to speak or not to speak when she's in a wolf camp. She's always known how to do that.

Troy realizes that Rusty reminds him of a *duck*. Just for a second. Because his words float free of boundaries, of *appropriateness considerations* just like duck chatter does. But when you look into Rusty's open curious face, his *innocent* open curious face, you realize that Rusty's not asking about their sex life because he's vulgar or stupid or crass or because he'll vicariously get off on it, but only because he really wants to know. About *everything*. He's violating boundaries just like a duck does, and you want to kill him, just the way you'd want to kill a duck, but not because it's a jumble of annoying mindless words that are coming out of his mouth, words that he doesn't understand.

Rusty actually *knows* what he's talking about, that's what Troy decides, and Troy's never seen anyone like this before in his life. Rusty's probably getting a lot wrong, that's what Troy thinks next, because everyone is getting stuff wrong, that's his general view about this: only God knows what's *really* going on. But it's clear that this wolf is really smart, and something else occurs to Troy about him too. That he's really *open* to stuff if he can learn from it, that's how Troy wants to put it. That this is another way to think about Rusty crossing boundaries all the time with his mouth, that he doesn't have *prejudices* either. And then Troy thinks next: he's *got* to have prejudices. I've been sleeping with his *sister*, and I'm not a wolf. Why don't I sense something weird coming from him, especially after a question like that?

"Yooolia and I," Troy says finally, "we don't talk about this stuff because it's something that belongs just to the two of us." He realizes he's said something true, something that's true about him, anyway. He hopes Yooolia feels the same way, but he's not sure. She hasn't reacted to what he's said, except to sigh a little. "Yeah that makes sense," Rusty says, "I hadn't thought about that."

"I had to flee," Rusty is telling Troy later, "otherwise my best friend Jasck would have had to *kill* me. Because he'd become the alpha, and he had responsibilities now. I get all that, I really do.



You'll meet him later, he's a pretty cool guy. Smooth, if you know what I mean." Troy stares at Rusty, then looks at Yooolia who quickly looks away when he catches her eye: he sees that she's frowning. "I don't *blame* him," Rusty says. "That's just the way it was, the way it was supposed to be. What annoys me is that Yooolia had to flee too. Because of what they would have done to her otherwise. Because she's my sister." "It *annoys* you," Yooolia says. He turns to her, puts a big friendly wolfish paw on her shoulder, "I think she's more bitter about what happened than I am."

Yooolia pushes his arm off her shoulder, stands up, stretches, and then sits again. "That's not it, it's just that I'm paying attention to what's really going on here and you're kind of being an idiot like you always are." Yeah," Rusty replies, apparently not taking in how *sharply* Yooolia is responding to him, "they're having a lot of trouble handling this." "Handling what?" Troy asks after a moment. Because Yooolia doesn't say anything. "That I'm the alpha because of this deer thing, but that I don't want to *run* things. Jasck offered me his throat. Twice. *Oh come on*, I told him, *we grew up together. I'm just not going to munch on you. No matter how tasty you look.* That was a joke," Yooolia rolls her eyes and sighs again as Rusty adds, "once upon a time Jasck got my jokes. Before he became the alpha, before he got so serious about everything. Stopped seeing how totally funny everything really is."

Rusty says: "It's totally confusing them—some of them just want to kill us because they think it'll make life simple for them again, the way life used to be. Like *that's* going to solve anything."

Troy looks from one wolf to the other. He realizes he's got to learn what's really going on here. Fast. And that he's going to have to work hard at it. Because Rusty is more interested in talking to him about *him*, about *humans*. And Yooolia isn't interested in talking about *anything*. At the moment, anyway.

Rusty is telling Troy what humans did to the Neanderthals. Who were other humans, apparently, and that it's a heavy karmic burden, "what you guys did to the Neanderthals. Exterminating them." And he says this too, his eyes are shining because he's delighted with the sheer *interestingness* of what he's saying. "There are people out there trying to *collect you*. I'm not sure those vltures you guys met were going to eat you, they probably would have just mummified you, or most of you. They would have realized that you were a keeper. A lot of vlture cults have mummies."

"It wasn't that way when there were more of you. Somehow, suddenly, because it looks like you're the last one, you've become valuable. Everyone wants to collect you. Or eat you in a last ceremonial dinner." Troy looks at him. "I'm talking about vltures, not wolves," Rusty adds after a moment, realizing what's bothering Troy. Even so, Troy feels Rusty's being distasteful again. Without realizing it. "You guys made some great music," he says next, "although most of it is

pitched a little low.” Troy doesn’t know what music is, he has no idea how they’ve even gotten on to this subject. Rusty adds, “Being a human has to be so weird. You sort of get blamed for everything. Or worshipped. I know about people who try to follow everything humans ever did on the web.”

That gives Troy a chance to ask Rusty about the web. And about clouds. Which turn out to be the same things. A kind of mental landscape that animals can tap into, where information is stored. “We take it for granted, we animals,” Rusty explains to Troy. “We don’t think about what it is or how it works. We talk about “*the duckweb*” or “*the wolfweb*” or “*the cloud*” and we think it has a lot of information that sometimes we can reach and sometimes we can’t. But it’s really much more fragmented, it’s all stuff that’s stored in a lot of animals’ brains, but not consciously, not in a way that the animal thinks the information belongs to him or her, the way the information you remember learning you feel is *your* knowledge, that it belongs to *you*. And the webs operate much more on a tribal basis, because each animal’s brain can only broadcast information so far, even when it uses *other* brains as way stations. But this isn’t how we experience the web, how wolves experience the wolfweb for example. As something we make, as something that our *brains* make. Instead we experience it as a lot of linked places, sites that are just out there and that have names. It feels like there are paths to and from these sites, ones that we use to travel to them. Mentally, I mean. Even *together* we can do this.”

“I don’t think I understand,” Yoolia says, and Troy is glad she’s finally spoken up. Because he has no idea what Rusty’s been talking about either. He wants to take her hand, but she’s deliberately sitting too far away from him for this. He shifts a little, tries to move closer to her, but not as if he’s doing it deliberately. She shifts too, a moment later, as if she’s not doing it deliberately either, keeping the same distance from him.

## 25

They’re about to take a *walk*. Yoolia and Troy. All around the wolfcamp. Yoolia is stressing a few things to Troy. That he’s to rest his arm in hers like *this*. “No funny business,” she says, “no intimate gestures. Just something respectful. Towards me.” “Ok,” Troy says. “Just nod, when you’re being spoken to,” Yoolia says now, “keep a serious expression on your face. Say hello. Look in each one’s eyes. Whatever shape they’re in.” “Ok,” Troy says. He doesn’t tell her: I know all this, I’ve got this already. Because at least she’s talking to him now, at least she’s touching him. “Just say you’re glad to meet them. Try to retain their faces, distinguish them from one another if you can. Because they have different personalities. And it matters a lot.”

Troy is surprised because he's never told Yooolia he has trouble distinguishing animals from one another. Wolves in particular.

Yooolia is having Troy practice *shaking hands* with her. Which has to be the weirdest thing he's ever been asked to do. "It's a *ritual*," Yooolia explains. Which doesn't help at all. "It's just something you do, ok?" She sounds exasperated. "You *have* to do it. Whenever you meet someone new. Another wolf. And you only do it when you've never met them before." "Ok," Troy says. "That's why we're going to go through the whole camp now. So you can meet everyone at once, shake everyone's hand, and not have to worry about ever doing it again." "Ok," Troy says. And now she's gripping his hand, showing him how. "Like this," she's saying, "firmly." "Ok," Troy says. "Up and down, looking into the wolf's eyes the way I'm looking into your eyes." "Ok," Troy says "No funny business in your face." "No funny business in my face?" "Keep it straight. Keep it simple."

Troy sighs. He knows how to keep his face emotionless in front of a wolf. But this no funny *business* in his face? Whatever *that* means.

"Are you up to this?" Yooolia asks him. After she's kept him practicing, shaking hands, her hand gripping his hand, telling him how to grip her hand back, not *squeezing* it, but taking *control* of it, saying "like this, like this. Now you do it." Clasp and unclasp their hands. Over and over again. Because you can't just take a wolf's hand or its paw in any old way. It has to be done right, your hand moving in steadily towards its hand. With confidence and power. Because you're an alpha companion. For at least a half hour they've been doing this.

"I think I'm ready," Troy says. After she's asked him if he's up to it. "I mean," Yooolia says, "do you feel okay? do you feel *strong* enough? recovered enough?" Troy nods.

It's not so bad, when they're doing it, walking around the camp. Meeting the wolves. Some of whom are in full wolf form, and many of whom aren't. Troy thinks: she's crazy if she expects me to remember all these faces, I won't even remember the human-looking ones. Because there are too many and he's interacting with each one way too briefly.

It's daylight and there are wolves *everywhere*, just sitting or standing around in their individual territories. Some talking to one another, some alone in different territories, only yards away from one another, that's how small these territories are. So everyone can pretty much see what everyone else is doing, they can see that Troy and Yooolia are walking through the territories, introducing Troy to all the wolves. They're all watching. Because nothing much else is going on.

"Good," Yooolia says low and soft into Troy's ear, once in a while. After he shakes hands with a wolf. In full wolf form, its big paw gripping Troy's hand *hard*. Troy gripping its paw back just as

*hard*. Just the way Yoolia has taught him to. Looking straight up into the wolf's eyes. Without flinching even a little bit. Smiling exactly the way she's trained him to smile.

When they return to their territory, Jasck is there, talking to Rusty, both of them in full wolf form, Jasck clearly a lot bigger than Rusty, most of the wolves when they're in wolf form are a lot bigger than Rusty, that's what Troy has realized. The word "runt" comes into his mind. Yoolia has stopped Troy from moving any nearer so they're not quite close enough to hear what the two wolves are saying to each other. "Do what I do," Yoolia whispers to Troy, "bend your head towards the ground, but keep watching Rusty and Jasck, just the way I am. That's allowed, just the way I'm doing it."

Jasck and Rusty are both standing. They move towards each other a little, and move back, both talking, both gesticulating. At one point Jasck shoves Rusty a little with his hand, a small gesture. Rusty seems to ignore the gesture, he just keeps talking. "See that?" Yoolia says quietly into Troy's ear, "Jasck can't help himself, he's just challenged Rusty publicly, he keeps challenging Rusty publicly. Even though he knows he shouldn't, even though he knows it's bad for the tribe if he does that, if they see him doing that. But it's automatic to challenge Rusty, somehow he *invites* it. Everyone does it, I challenge Rusty, *you've* challenged Rusty. And Rusty never pushes back the way he's supposed to, he never puts Jasck in his place, he never puts *anyone* in their place. It's not that Rusty's subservient, it's that he's just not paying *attention* where and when he should be paying attention." And Yoolia looks at Troy, into his eyes. "We can't stay here," she says, "we just *can't*." She's right, of course. Although it's entirely unclear where they're supposed to *go*.

It's twilighting all around now. Yoolia and Rusty are off somewhere, for the moment, and Troy is resting comfortably against some rocks in the alpha territory, vaguely aware of the wolves in their own territories that circularly surround the one he's in. He's not paying any attention to them.

Then a wolf is nearby, one that he's surely met this afternoon, but that he doesn't remember meeting. The wolf is in human form, that humanish form that Troy now recognizes to be typical for a wolf. A humanish body that's fur-covered the way Yoolia's body is, but with a nearly hairless human-looking face. The wolf is carrying something, and it's adopted what Troy recognizes to be a subservient posture, it's asking permission to enter the alpha territory, to engage with him. And Troy waves him in.

"Who are you again?" Troy asks, which maybe isn't quite the right thing to say. "Just a guy you met," the wolf replies. Uh oh, Troy thinks. Not a friendly response, not even a little bit. The wolf is wrinkling its snoutish nose a little. Deliberately. To let Troy know he doesn't think much of him, that he thinks he *smells* something. Troy realizes this too.

When the wolf reaches him, he throws something down. “Fresh deermeat,” the animal tells Troy. A lot goes through Troy’s mind. *Very* quickly. That this is a challenge, that’s his first thought, that the wolf has approached him in human-form, because in this way he can show Troy he’s bigger and more muscular than Troy is. Even in human form.

*The meat.* It’s complicated, because the meat’s raw and the wolf probably knows he can’t chew it, that humans haven’t the right kind of teeth to chew raw deer muscle—but still it’s been *offered* to him. That respect thing that Yoolia told him about. So it’s a set-up, that’s what Troy realizes, so that the wolf can get enraged when Troy turns it down, when he refuses to eat it, even if he *explains* that he can’t eat it. There’s no way out of this, this wolf is setting him up for a confrontation. That’s what Troy thinks next.

He just has to eat it raw, to meet the challenge the wolf is raising, but he realizes there’s no way that he can *chew* the muscle on that deer haunch. It will look *silly* if he even tries to. So Troy stands up slowly, the wolf backing off slightly (which isn’t a good thing either, especially because the wolf’s ears have flattened against his head), and he moves, deliberately and carefully, to his toolpack.

The wolf says, digging into the sand with one of its pawy feet, “you were supposed to be catfood, did I get that right?” Troy thinks: I can’t win a fight with this animal, but this is probably a bluff. I can’t show fear, more than that, I’ve got to be aggressive in return. So he takes out his knife and fingers it idly. “You’ve got a point, saying this to me?” looking down at his knife, flicking his finger against the blade as if the wolf in front of him is insignificant. It’s the wolf’s move now. He can see that the wolf is reacting a little to the knife, and that’s a *good thing*, that the wolf is reacting to the knife, that the wolf is trying to *hide* that it’s reacting to the knife.

Yoolia is there, walking into the alpha territory, with *brush* in her arms. “*Honey*,” she calls out to Troy, a little loudly he thinks, “let’s make a fire.” *Honey?* he thinks, she’s never called me that, not ever. Then she turns to the wolf, smiling: “Staying for dinner, are you?” Troy realizes her remark is loaded—that she’s challenging the wolf, that she’s indicating that the wolf is *here*, in alpha territory. “Troy gave me permission,” the wolf says, looking down submissively, but aggressively using Troy’s *name* at the same time. Yoolia ignores the wolf’s response, arranging the brush on the ground the way she’s seen Troy do it, the two men standing there silently. And now *she* takes the sparker out of Troy’s pack, and as she’s walking back towards the brush, as she’s walking much closer to where the wolf is standing than Troy thinks she has to, she sparks the sparker nonchalantly. With one hand. In the wolf’s direction.

It winces away from the sparks, just a little. Troy sees that, and the wolf sees that Troy sees that.

There's a fire going now. In the alpha territory. The wolf is gone now, the one who had been challenging Troy. He had leaned in close to Yoolia, while she was squatting by the brush again, lighting it, maybe to prove that he wasn't scared, maybe to make up for the wincing. And he said to her, low and insistent, "'Oh come on baby, I've seen you and him going at it on the web. You think I can't do you better than that?'" Yoolia turned her face to his, smiling her tight smile, saying, "change the subject, won't you? Before I have to kill you." The wolf just laughed, but then he left. Quickly, actually. That was the important thing.

Troy didn't catch this exchange, it was too soft, it went by too fast, and he was a little too far away. "What was that about?" he asks now, walking over to her. "He was just threatening us," Yoolia tells him back, smiling that unnerving smile he's been seeing on her face, every now and then, ever since he's awakened. Yoolia adds, almost to herself, "I've known him all my life. He's always been an asshole. Like a lot of people."

Yoolia is thinking: the men are always going to think she's a target, they always will. Because they're bigger than Troy. Bigger than Rusty. It's just natural for them to do that, to try to sleep with an opponent's mate, to try to take him down that way. Maybe to even rape her, if they think they can get away with it. If they think they can win the war that would cause.

She says: "Did you notice something odd about Rusty's name?" "I guess," Troy says, thinking that this must be some sort of trick question. Because why is *he* going to notice something odd about a *wolf's* name? "The rest of us have names like mine," she tells him. "Tranger, Jasck, Lillia. But *Rusty's* not a name, not really, it's a description. Can't you tell that it sounds kind of silly?" "I guess." "He won't even change that stupid name, even though his status has changed, even though it's not a real name, even though it's just an insulting *nickname*. Wolves can't be led by someone named *Rusty*, it's just not possible." And she says this again, "we have to leave. You and me."

Later. Rusty is sitting with Yoolia and Troy. By the fire. "Do you ever get used to this?" Rusty has just asked Yoolia. Yoolia tells him that no, she's not gotten used to this, that she's never going to get used to this. And she says to Troy, "Can you *smell* that?" Troy nods even though he's not sure he can smell anything unusual, anything beyond *wolf*. "Yeah," Rusty says. "They're all reacting, they're all tense." Yoolia says to Troy, "it's because you're here. And because we cooked that deermeat, they could smell it cooking, and because you *ate* it. I can *smell* their disgust." Rusty cuts in, "They think all your objects are repulsive and fascinating at the same

time. They wouldn't admit it, maybe they don't even realize it, but your objects frighten them too."

"My objects," Troy says. "This shit," Rusty says, and now he's gesturing towards Troy's toolpack. "The soap especially, some of them know what soap is. And the way you make that shit freaks everyone out." Rusty laughs. "It's on the wolfweb now, how soap is *made*. Rubbing *dead body fat* all over yourself to make yourself *clean*. It just doesn't *look good* to wolves." Troy darts a quick look at Yooolia who isn't looking back at him, who's deliberately not meeting his glance, he thinks. Then he turns back to Rusty who doesn't seem to be reacting to any of this at all. Troy doesn't understand why *he'd* be so different from the others, but it's clear that soap isn't freaking *Rusty* out.

Troy feels defensive: "You guys have objects too," he says, "These bandages on my shoulder. And ropes, you have ropes. I've seen your stuff." "Yeah," Rusty says, "but *those* aren't objects." Troy says: "What do you mean those aren't *objects*. They sure as hell *are* objects." Troy worries that he's gone too far, especially because of the way Yooolia is suddenly looking at him, not smiling at all, her face inscrutable again. But Rusty just breaks into a big toothy smile. "I *love* this guy," he says to Yooolia, who doesn't react to *Rusty* either, and then he's talking to Troy again: "You're right of course. What wolves have *are* objects. Just like your objects, I guess. But *wolves* don't see them as objects. Your shit, though, it reminds them of vlture crap, that's *exactly* what it reminds them of." Troy is taken aback by this: "Vlture crap," is all he says. "Of course the vltures stole all that crap from you guys," Rusty adds, "Originally, I mean." And now Troy is even more surprised.

Rusty has noticed Troy's surprise: "Pretty much no animal makes things anymore. It's all internal, it's *in* us, what we can do. Like what Yooolia did to save you." "I don't want to talk about this, I don't want anyone talking about this," Yooolia says, but Rusty is compulsively running his mouth again, he can't stop himself: "She was spitting and drooling into your wound. I hate to be so graphic about it, but it was the only way to save you. If anything was going to." "Shut up, just shut up," Yooolia says. And Rusty does. For a moment.

He says: "I've studied what you guys used to call *medicine*. It was all external, all these things you'd made. I'm not sure how it happened, but everything's internal now, with all the animals, if it can be done at all. So Yooolia," and Yooolia tries to interrupt him again, "so Yooolia has all these chemicals in her saliva, we all do, and that's how she was trying to heal you. It's dangerous, because she could have been poisoned too, maybe it wouldn't have worked," and now Yooolia has stood up, almost enraged. "I *don't want* to talk about this, didn't you hear me?" she yells. They hear the wolves outside the alpha territory all reacting, everyone shifting and moving. "Ok, ok," Rusty says.

"This fire," Rusty says. "Yeah," Yooolia responds, cutting him off. "I'm using it," she tells Troy, "to intimidate the other wolves," and now her voice is low again. "There's a downside because usually there's real privacy at night in a wolf camp. Even though everyone's nearby it's dark, really dark. But we're sitting by a fire. So if a wolf can bring itself to look our way it can see everything that's going on." "Most of them can't look at a fire, not for long," Rusty says. "Yeah, but Jasck can look," Yooolia responds, "I *know* Jasck can look."

"Okay," Rusty says, and now his voice is low. For once. "I've made a deal with Jasck. We're leaving. Just like you want us to. Troy and Yooolia look at him. "Not far," Rusty says. "I don't get it," Yooolia says. Rusty stretches out a paw, scratches his leg. "We're trying something new," he says, "me and Jasck. He's reassuming leadership of the tribe, but we're going to stay in contact with one another. Mentally. I think he can pull it off, me and him. Because we grew up together."

So they're moving on again. Yooolia and Troy. Rusty too. Officially. Tomorrow. After they do the leadership ritual again, Jasck and Rusty. The *right way*. Rusty laughing as he says "the *right way*."

Later. After Rusty curls up, falls asleep, and Yooolia is dozing too (and even the fire has died down to barely embers), Troy lies down next to Yooolia, tries to wrap his arms around her from behind. She snarls suddenly, literally *snarls* at him, then pushes him away *hard*. "Things have changed, ok?" she tells him. "How?" he asks, "why?" "I don't want to talk about it," she says, "just leave me the fuck alone for a while." Then her face seems to soften a little, although her words really don't: "Don't you dare touch me while we're in this *camp*, just don't touch me at all. Unless I tell you to."

## 27

They're standing next to a building, an *intact* building made entirely of stone. Rusty, Troy and Yooolia. It's only been about a week since they've left the wolf camp, but they've been traveling *fast*, Rusty and Yooolia taking turns *carrying* Troy. Sometimes he's on Rusty's back or on Yooolia's back, Troy almost *riding* the wolf, his arms wrapped around its neck. Sometimes he's strapped to Yooolia or Rusty with ropes so that his weight is distributed, not concentrated in one place. It's hard for wolves to carry something as big and heavy as Troy for long distances, but they've been managing it pretty well.



Each evening they've been sitting around a fire. "Practicing," Rusty calls it. Troy can see now how uncomfortable wolves find fire, at least when they're in wolf-form. That even Yoolia has been covering up her discomfort, hiding her reactions. Up until now. That she's also being pointed about some other things that have clearly been bothering her for a while, saying to him, "Honey? I'm going out to kill something for dinner. I'll be back with the dead body *soon*." Then she'll add: "Sweetheart? will you need to know what it is I've *murdered*? before you chop it up into *bite-size* pieces and *cook* it?" Troy just shrugs, choosing not to confront her, to just let her remarks pass. *This is who I am so deal with it*, he gets it, what she's telling him in so many words. Maybe among some other things that she's also telling him, things that he *isn't* getting. Because he's past this, he really is. And he wonders why she's not past it too.

Rusty says, more than once, commiserating with Troy, "she's working through a lot of shit right now. Because this isn't exactly the life she was planning to have. You've just got to give her a little time. She's mad at me too, maybe even more than she's mad at you. And when she gets mad, it's tricky because it just sort of simmers constantly underneath her surface, bursting up like a volcano once in a while. I know, I've lived with it all my life." Troy shrugs again. Because what else is he supposed to do? He idly wonders what a volcano is. Then he remembers that he's talking to *Rusty*. So he asks, and Rusty tells him. Volcanos are *weird*, Troy thinks later. You wouldn't have thought there were things like volcanos in the world. Without being told about them first.

Rusty and Yoolia have been practicing each evening *hiking* on the *cloud*. Which is really boring for Troy. Because all it looks like to him is that the two of them—for hours—are standing around or walking in tight circles around one another, gesturing into the air, their eyes looking this way and that way at pretty much *nothing at all*. They keep talking to each other about whatever it is they're supposedly looking at and Troy can't decide if it's that they *really are* somewhere else, although their bodies are still moving here in front of him, or if what's going on is that they're seeing things together, *hallucinating in unison*. He's just not sure how to think about what they're doing.

What's clear is that Yoolia is finding the experience really really frustrating. Whatever it is they're supposed to be doing is something she's not very good at. Rusty keeps telling her that she's too loud, even though as far as Troy can see, she's not being loud at all, her voice is normal, even subdued, and that's true about her gestures and movements too, that they're not particularly dramatic, not particularly *big*. Sometimes she'll just be standing there, her arms at her sides, staring at nothing at all, not even moving, and Rusty will say suddenly, "God that's way too loud, look at what you've just done, now everyone can see you."

"You've got to sneak around up here," Rusty says to Yoolia. "You're too large all the time, that's why I found you, that's why I was able to see you. Even in the vulture trap." He says this

too: “Invisibility up here turns on what you *do*, on what you allow yourself to see, on *how* you approach the information.”

Somehow, whatever it is they’re doing for hours, it’s really fatiguing for her, it’s really exhausting. It’s tiring for Rusty too, but not as much—he’s clearly a natural at whatever *it* is. Afterwards, they’ll both sit by the fire, too tired to react, even when a small ball of flame suddenly rises and bursts, chattering its sparks into the air. Rusty talks to Troy, asks him questions. *Philosophizes* a little. That’s what Rusty calls what he’s talking about. Philosophy.

“So look,” Rusty says to Troy at one point, “what’s it like to be human?” Troy says: “I don’t really understand what you’re asking me, how I’m supposed to answer that question.” Rusty says: “Consider the self-image of humans—in literature or in philosophy.” Troy says: “Um, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Literature? Philosophy? Self-images?”

And Rusty explains to Troy that there’s a lot of human debris on the web. “The problem is, you can’t tell what’s real and what isn’t.” “What’s the *real* debris?” Troy asks, “as opposed to the *fake* debris, is *that* what you mean?” Troy is making fun of Rusty a little, but Rusty doesn’t get it. “Yeah,” Rusty says. “I don’t understand,” Troy responds. “That’s ok,” Yoolia says, apparently to neither one of them in particular, “Rusty’s used to having no one understand what he’s talking about. *That* won’t stop him.”

She’s right, because Rusty doesn’t stop. Talking. About the self-image of humans, that it was being reasonable, being *rational*, that it was being able to plan, being able to decide. That this was supposed to be what it was to be *human*. And that humans were supposed to be *special* because they were supposedly *the only ones* in the animal kingdom who knew the difference between right and wrong. Yoolia rolls her eyes when Rusty says this. “*Animals*, mere animals, on the other hand, they were nonrational. So it was okay if a wolf ate a deer, if a wolf took the deer down in a hunt, if it *murdered* the deer. Or if a cat tortured its prey for an hour or so. *That* wasn’t immoral. That was *animals* just being *animals*. But now make the deer and the wolf and the cat as smart as humans, so they can plan too, so they can argue with one another, so they can talk and reason. *Now* is it still not immoral for the wolf to eat deer or for the cat to hunt and torture its prey, or has everything changed?”

Yoolia rolls her eyes again, and says: “I can’t *believe* you think we’re supposed to say something in response to this.” Because she’s thinking, what’s Rusty suggesting? that predators should stop eating and starve to death? that prey should just altruistically *donate* their bodies to predators so that the predators have something to eat? Not for the first time she’s thinking that Rusty is just bringing up things that are totally *useless*, things that there’s no point in thinking about.

Troy has no idea what he's supposed to say. "This is philosophy?" he asks finally. Because this is all he can think up to ask Rusty.

The stone building they're standing in front of is surrounded by what Rusty has told them is a *farm*. We would have called what Rusty is gesturing at *chicken pens* and *vegetable gardens*. With small fences around them. And the chicken pens contain, nearly enough, real chickens. Chickens that can't talk, chickens that aren't smart, chickens with really small heads. These chickens are similar (nearly enough) to the chickens that we in the present know about (and eat). Even though they don't have any feathers.

Poultry, they're still called poultry in the future. Even by ducks. And it's ducks who take care of "the poultry" that's here, the poultry that Troy and Yoolia and Rusty are looking at. They even kill the animals, and sometimes prepare them, although they don't eat chicken themselves. Ducks are mostly vegans. In the future, anyway.

"This is the Ivory Tower," Rusty says proudly, gesturing towards the building, "and this is where the Chimera lives. In the cellar somewhere." Yoolia and Troy have no idea what he's talking about because he's never told either of them about the Chimera or the Ivory Tower. Or that this was where he was taking them.

Rusty thinks it's fun to surprise people, he thinks it's cute to watch their expressions when they've been caught out. It's another reason why wolves often wanted to kill him. Because they *hate* surprises and he never got it. That wolves find surprises *threatening*.

## 28

Yoolia is saying, "This *building* is intact." And she's clearly suspicious. "Why is this building still intact?"

Yoolia's been suspicious for a while, she's been very uncomfortable for a while. Because a road started up suddenly earlier in the day, a piece of road out in the desert, and Rusty surprised both of them by boldly walking onto it without any fear. While saying, "Come on, what are you waiting for, why are you holding back?" But that *Rusty* isn't afraid of something doesn't prove anything about whether that something is dangerous. Yoolia knows this.

"This building," Yoolia says again. And Rusty doesn't reassure her when he says, "It just is. Some places are still intact. By accident. Which is really cool, don't you think?"

*Really cool*, that's *not* what Yoolia's thinking, she's thinking: *fucking vulture trap*. Because that's the last place she saw where relics like this were intact. "I've been here before," Rusty tells her. "No vultures at all, not a single one." Rusty explains to Yoolia that he's *lived* in this building for over a year, that *that's* where he was for so long. And that the building is safe because the deer can't see it, they can't locate it. On their web. And, anyway, because they would be afraid to go into it if they did find it, that all animals are afraid to go into it. That it was in this building that he learned how to travel on the web the way he can now, it's where he learned all the things that he's been trying to teach her. From the chimera. And that he's got *colleagues* in the building, other intelligent animals that are studying various things. Sociology. History. Geology. Technobiology. He calls the building a *university*, a *thinktank*. He explains that they'll be safe there.

The two wolves keep arguing, because Yoolia is furious that Rusty has held so much back from her, that he's been dragging them along without telling them *anything*. Troy meanwhile is having an *aha* reaction. Because the building has a door in it, he recognizes that it's a door, and now he thinks he's finally gotten the idea, the point of *doors*. That they open and close into *buildings*. And although Troy hasn't ever seen a closed structure like a building or a house with a door in it, he did grow up among humans who lived in structures with straw roofs and reed-walls. Who often fantasized about living in structures that had solid walls, places where they'd be *safe*. But what he realizes now is that structures like that would have needed *doors* to *really* be safe.

By the door are two ducks. They're just standing there, watching *them*, Yoolia and Troy. And Rusty, who nods to them, the ducks nodding back at the same time. That's when Yoolia notices the ducks.

"What the fuck are *those* doing here?" she says. "Buildings," Rusty says, "like I told you, any animal needs to be drugged if it's going to be in a building and not freak out. Because the shadows and lighting are all wrong inside buildings, because the light has sources from holes in the walls instead of apparently coming from everywhere in the sky. And because there are these depth illusions that you experience because you haven't grown up inside a building. Which causes a kind of constant subpersonal panic if you're not appropriately drugged."

"Subpersonal panic," Rusty says, "it's something you really don't want to experience a lot of."

This is going way too fast for Yoolia. "We're supposed to go in *there*?" This is all she's gotten from what Rusty's said to her. That he thinks they're supposed to go into a place where they can be *trapped* so easily. "You've got to be kidding," she says, even though Rusty has told her he's *lived there* for over a year. And she's not getting what he means by subpersonal panic or freaking out. She might not want to go into a strange place, she might be cautious about it, but

she's not going to *freak out* over it. No one would do that. "You don't understand," Rusty is saying to her.

Troy decides to let them argue it out, he walks over to where the door is. Because *he's* decided that doors are cool. And the first thing he notices is that the ducks aren't reacting as he approaches them. Not at all like *ducks*. They're just sort of staring at him a little and then they're looking down, pecking at something near their feet. Calmly. This isn't normal behavior for ducks at all. Troy deliberately stands right next to them. But they still don't react. One of them twists its head gently one hundred and eighty degrees to preen its backfeathers. It's always weird to see *that*, but where's the duck panic, the *famous* duck panic?

Troy tries his hand at a little *smalltalk* with one of the ducks: "You don't talk that much," he says to the duck closest to him, "for a duck, I mean." "I'm drugged," the duck explains laconically, "so's Qlaccker over here." (*pause*) "That's why there are two of us." (*pause*) "So we can prong each other regularly." (*pause*) "It's hard to do that to yourself." (*pause*) "It's so much less satisfying than masturbation." "Um, okay," Troy says, trying to cut short a conversation that's already veered, even with a *drugged* duck, in a totally weird direction.

It's his fault, starting a conversation with a *duck*, because of course the duck doesn't stop. "So," it says, looking up and grinning at him cross-eyed. (But ducks always look like they're grinning cross-eyed, even when they're not—because of those weird beaks on their faces) "how's it feel to be the *last one*? Kind of a heavy *responsibility*, I'd think." Now the other one is twisting its head a hundred and eighty degrees, nibbling its backfeathers, while Troy is thinking: no wonder people like to eat ducks. Because at least a dead duck is a quiet duck. And they taste good too.

"Look," Rusty is saying to Yooolia, the two of them by the door, Yooolia taking quick and aggressive glances at the ducks who seem totally unperturbed by her, "it looks easy, you just open the door like this. And you step in like that." He's disappeared into the shadow of the entrance of the building, the door swinging on its own into the open air. He steps out a moment later. "See? It's actually totally safe. But you're not going to be able to pull this off without these duck drugs. Believe me." One of the ducks winks at the other duck. Troy sees this, that the ducks are getting off on them.

It's turned into some sort of sibling challenge-thing. Between Rusty and Yooolia.

"Step into this thing just like you did?" Yooolia says, a little too loudly, "easy as cake." (No one knows what cake is, it's just a saying.) And now she steps through the doorway, but seconds later she's *jumped* back outside again, she's breathing rapidly and shallowly, trying to suppress her panic. "Boy that's weird," Yooolia says, after a couple of minutes, "how I'm reacting." "What's in there?" Troy asks her, trying to ignore the giggling ducks. He's glad that Yooolia is ignoring them too. "Nothing much," she responds to Troy after taking a couple more breaths,

“nothing much at all. Some walls. With holes in them. A ceiling, a high ceiling. It’s a hallway, I guess.”

She knows all these words, and she knows, more or less, what these words stand for. From the wolfweb, from pictures. But she’s never been in a building *for real*. Troy doesn’t know these words. So he steps into the entrance. Seconds later he’s outside too, breathing rapidly and shallowly, *hyperventilating*, bending over, his hands on his knees, trying to calm himself, to relax, to return to normal. “You’re right,” he says to Yooolia between gasps, “this is really weird. There’s nothing scary in there. Why are we reacting this way?”

The ducks look totally bored now, they’ve stopped giggling. Either they’ve seen this a hundred times before, or they’re too drugged to react to anything they’re seeing, at least for very long.

“I told you,” Rusty says. “It’s because the space is foreign, it’s because of how the light is coming in, it’s that the walls are up close to you. So it’s setting off all sorts of subpersonal panic reactions. You’re not going to be able to get in there without the duck drugs. I mean it.”

“This makes no sense,” Yooolia says. “It’s not like I haven’t seen a *wall*. Up close. It’s not like I haven’t seen light doing funny things. In a forest, through trees. I can go into foreign places, I may not trust them I may keep watching everything around me, but I don’t panic, I don’t feel like this. I’ve *never* felt like this. This is weird, something is going on, something is in there doing this to us.” “No,” Rusty says, “it’s buildings, only buildings. Animals can’t go into buildings. I’m telling you. You’ve never been in a building, right? I mean, one that’s intact with a roof, that’s enclosed, right? If you’d ever tried to do that before, you would have felt just like this.”

Yooolia nods, but Troy can tell that she’s just nodding to stop the argument, to stop Rusty talking about this, and not because she believes him. “I don’t take drugs *voluntarily*,” Yooolia says next, looking at the ducks, “so that’s out.” “Me neither,” Troy adds, thrilled that they *agree*. Rusty shrugs. And then Yooolia asks, “how does it work? The drugs.” Rusty starts to talk about blood circulation. “No, no,” Yooolia says, interrupting him, “does the duck just walk up to me and poke me in the thigh or something?”

The ducks are miming what Yooolia has just suggested, one *swaggering* up to the other and then bending down officiously to mock stab it in the thigh, the other one quacking an *Ouch*. “No,” Rusty says, “you’d kill the duck in an instant, you couldn’t stop yourself. It’d be automatic.” The two ducks now place their hands on their faces and rock back and forth in mock horror, their beaked mouths opening and closing in faked shock. “You’ve got to turn around and get it from behind. You should probably bend over too.” Yooolia just *stares* at Rusty. Because this, well, this is just *outrageous*.

One of the ducks says: “This is going to hurt me a lot more than it’s going to hurt you.” Which *annoys* Yoolia, the suggestion that she’s scared of pain. When it’s perfectly obvious that the issue is that Rusty is suggesting that she *bend over* and let a duck stab her in the *ass*. And besides, why would it be so bad if she killed a *duck*?

## 29

It’s been a couple of hours. The ducks have been taking turns taking naps—*both* sides of their brains out cold. That’s how boring they find all this. Troy and Yoolia have been trying, over and over again, to go through the entrance and stay in the building for more than a couple of seconds. They take deep breaths and rush in quickly. Even together, holding hands: “Ready, set, *go*.” It doesn’t work. Each time they’re inside they look at one another, scream, and run back out. Then they look at one another again and break into hysterical laughter and giggling. “This is so weird, this reaction we’re having. I’ve never had this reaction to *anything*.” Troy gasps this out between laughs, trying to catch his breath, tears in his eyes. There are tears in Yoolia’s eyes too. From laughter.

After a while, Troy is able to stay in the building a few minutes. Then longer. By closing his eyes first, and imagining that he’s at home. Then opening his eyes and keeping his eyes intently on the entrance, or on the holes in the walls. Where the light is coming from. It’s by reminding him of home, of where he grew up, that Troy is able to stay in the building. “Where do we go now?” he calls out, finally. Because, as far as he can tell, there’s nowhere particularly to go in the building.

That Troy is in there, that he’s staying in there, is apparently making Yoolia *competitive*. She comes through the entrance suddenly, Rusty and the two ducks behind her. “Nothing to see in here, nothing to be afraid of,” she says. They all stand still for a moment, watching Yoolia. Because she’s holding her breath, she’s keeping her eyes tightly closed to stop herself from screaming. Or lashing out at someone.

“Ok,” she says, in a strangely calm voice, “quick before I kill someone. Plunge the damn duck into my backside.” One of the ducks almost says something before Rusty stops it, covers its beak with his hand, holds its mouth shut. “Hot *jiggity jig*,” that’s what it was about to say. “And what about you?” the other duck says to Troy, “Do I get to probe your butt too?” “I’ll pass,” Troy says. He thinks the duck looks disappointed, but with the kind of faces these things have, it’s hard to tell.

They're going up a flight of narrow stone steps, Rusty the last in line behind the ducks, talking about how *interesting* it is that different ducks have different drugs, even within the same species of duck, and that they have some awareness of the *molecular contours* of the drugs in their systems, a *phenomenological awareness* of the chemicals they can inject into other animals. Which is so cool. And how, to some extent, they can change the effects of the drugs that they can inject into other animals by how they *feel* about the actual molecules in their poison glands, by what the molecules *feel like* to them. Or that's how it *seems* to them, anyway, because they can't be really feeling the *molecules*, not directly they can't. *Biofeedback*, *biotech biofeedback*. These are some of the words and phrases he uses. Along with *molecule*.

No one is listening to him, not even the ducks. The ducks are intently watching Yoolia instead, obviously expecting something to happen. Yoolia is going up the stairs first, giggling to herself, Troy right behind her.

Something *does* happen, something the ducks were waiting for, when Troy and Yoolia reach the top of the stairs, where the stairs curve narrowly into the entrance to a second story hallway, the gray clouds of light pushing in through the evenly spaced holes in the walls up there. That's when Yoolia pushes Troy up against the wall, her eyelids slitty, almost closed, and she's whispering into his ear: "Let's fuck *now*." "What's the matter with you?" Troy says. "I swear," Yoolia responds, "you're bigger and meatier than you were before. Since you woke up, since you've healed, I'm sure of it, I've been noticing it for a while, it's so hot. More hair on your chest." She's nuzzling him, licking his chest, looking up at him, her eyes laughing as she does it. "Stop it," Troy says, trying to push her away, embarrassed because he sees the ducks watching them from the stairs, he can hear them chortling to one another. "Oh don't mind us," one of the ducks says, "this is one of the side effects that we *really* get off on." He hears Rusty, still on the stairs behind the ducks, interrupting himself, saying, "what's going on up there, why'd we stop moving?" "Now, let's do it *now*," Yoolia says urgently, she's pressed herself against Troy, moving her face up against his face. And Troy can't help seeing the two ducks behind her in the stairwell doing a high five with each other at the same time. Worse, he's *responding* to her, right in front of everyone, he can feel it happening.

"Hey, *stop that*," a loud voice calls out from down the hall, a voice that resonates against the narrow walls of the building, echoing loudly. Loud enough to stop Yoolia, loud enough that the both of them immediately turn around to see that a large and stout boar is now standing in front of them. A loud voice that carries, an intimidating boar's voice, not a squeal, not at all. The boar is focused on the ducks, bellowing at them: "What are you two doing *in the building*?" And the ducks are already backing down the stairs, then scampering past Rusty, almost flying, while Rusty is mellowly saying to the boar as he pushes past the fleeing ducks, "Hi Oinnnenk."



Oinnenk, so called, has small intelligent eyes that are placed high on his head, some distance from his long snout that ends in quite visible, almost horse-like nostrils. His face is covered with gray hair, white sprinkled throughout it, the fine long hairs all sloping upwards towards the top of his head. He's got two tufted ears, one above each eye, and they're far enough up to be recognized as ears and not eyebrows. They strangely work as eyebrows nevertheless, contributing a professorial look to his face—not that anyone in the future will recognize a professorial look. We'd be struck, if we were still around to see it, by Oinnenk's face, and by the glasses he's wearing, small round glasses with metal rims. He doesn't need glasses, of course. And nobody in the future, nearly enough, knows anymore what glasses are for. If the glasses make anyone in the future think of anything, they make them think of vltures. Because vltures often wear glasses too. For the fun of it. Hats and vests as well.

This boar is also wearing some clothes. Which is really unusual. And sandals. Each of its backhooves is split and a remnant of a big toe is indented into each one that a sandal-strap hooks neatly around. The boar is wearing shorts with suspenders gripping its almost nonexistent shoulders. Although Troy has never seen either sandals or shorts with suspenders in his life, it doesn't look right to him. It doesn't merely look foreign, it looks *wrong*. At least the fur on the wolves is *their* fur. There's something totally natural about wolves, that's what he's thinking.

Yoolia has her arms around Troy's neck, she's nibbling his neck. At the same time that Oinnenk is saying, "Hail Human, I'm glad to make your acquaintance at long last." "Um," Troy says. Because now Yoolia is laughing low into his ear, and reaching down under his body strap with one of her hands. Although it's what Oinnenk has just said, the *way* that he's said it, that's making her laugh.

"Stop it," Troy says, slapping Yoolia hand away. Yoolia shifts her position so she's standing next to Troy, her arm around his waist while resting her head on his shoulder, looking at the boar sideways, giggling at him. "Interesting," the boar says, looking from one to the other. Then he turns to Rusty, saying, "You'd better take them to their room so that this has some time to wear off." Rusty gestures at them to follow him, and Troy pulls Yoolia along, behind Rusty and Oinnenk who have started talking to one another.

"It's so surprising," Rusty says to Oinnenk, Troy listening to them despite what Yoolia is doing to one of his ears, "the way she's being affected by the duck-drugs—it's like there's another *person* in there." Troy is struck by the fact that Rusty is talking this way about his *sister*, kind of distant, like she could be anyone.

"I think the ducks are having a little fun, or maybe it's because it's the first time," Oinnenk responds, "it's hard to tell when the side-effects are necessary and when they're not, when the

ducks are just playing around with us. I've seen boars nuzzling ducks, slobbering to them about how they *love* those ducks, as if even a duck could love something as nasty as a *duck*. I'd never eat *you*, the boar sighing longingly into the duck's ear, its words completely slurred. It's really disturbing to watch, it's kind of sick, but it only lasts an hour or two, even less." Rusty says: "Love potion number nine."

The boar nods like it's gotten what Rusty has just said. This boar knows as much as Rusty does, maybe even more. But it bluffs a lot anyway, it often pretends to understand one saying or another that Rusty has plucked off the web, that he's found buried somewhere or other, a saying that *no one* gets anymore.

The hallway they're going down, here is what we would think if we were still around to see it: that the whole thing is a wreck—even a dangerous wreck. The stone steps, many of them broken and crumbling, with cracks and holes in them that you can look down through, to see the gray light that's coming through more holes and cracks in the walls below, almost like various crisscrossing searchlights that dust is dancing in. Some of the holes used to be windows, but others are missing or broken cinderblocks, bricks or stone pieces. Tangled colorful nests of wires hanging down from the ceilings. Exposed pipes, some of them pretty thick, jut bently into the hallways and end abruptly in the open air twisted into fragments. The animals sidestep all of this without reacting much to it. (After all, they have no idea, not really, what the insides of a building are supposed to look like.) The stone floors buckle here and there, or break entirely into patches of gray and bluish crumble. And the rooms along the hallways, many of them are without doors, or without doors that fully close, or they have doors that are only half there. There are crumbling tiles, dust and chips everywhere, half detached, rocking back and forth from air currents. Everything is loose now.

Nevertheless, some of the doors are intact, and they've reached one that Rusty pulls open. "Here's your room," he says. Troy is surprised when he and Yoolia push into it, that it's called a *room*. Because it's pretty small, actually, its walls are *horizons* that are right in your face. Rusty closes the door behind them, Oinnenk saying that he'll see them later.

Yoolia says, "now we're trapped, now there's only one way out of here." Her arms are around Troy's neck again, her beautiful face inches from his. She giggles. Because she's totally drugged. "Now," she says, "right now." And Troy can't wait either. Even though he's *not* drugged, not even a little bit.

It's been several hours. A pretty much uninterrupted several hours. Although at one point, someone *knocks* at the door, Yooolia pushing Troy off of her immediately. She's at the door—Troy is amazed at how fast she's moved—growling, even though she's still in Yooolia-form, not a wolf. "It's ok," a voice says on the other side, Rusty's voice. "Go the fuck away," she says, "we're in the middle of something." And she's back with Troy. Just like that. He knew they could move fast, wolves. But he hadn't realized they could move *that* fast even in human form. Just for a second, before Yooolia distracts him, he thinks of the wolf back at the wolfcamp, the one who was challenging him. How he wouldn't have had a chance. If it had come to that.

Later. They're resting for a moment, just a moment. "Oinnnenk," Troy says, "male or female?" "No idea," Yooolia says. "And the ducks," Troy says next, "a couple? both males? both females?" "No idea," Yooolia says. Then her face is up close to his. Preternaturally fast. "And wolves?" she says, her lips inches from his, "can you tell with them?" "Easy as cake," Troy says. Right on cue. Like he's telling the truth. Whatever *cake* is. Yooolia laughs, not entirely nicely—that's what he thinks.

Later. Yooolia is saying to Troy, "you get to be the pet now. Like this, we're going to do it like this." As she's twisting his body the way she wants him to be, Troy realizes that she thinks she's being kinky somehow. In her head, anyway.

And now. Troy is sitting against one of the walls, next to a hole in that wall where a window once was, and he's watching Yooolia pace. The drugs are wearing off a little he thinks, because she's looking around at the walls, maybe nervously, like she feels trapped by there being walls so near.

Yooolia's talking. A lot. Troy has the feeling that she wants to tell him something, that she's working up to it. Slowly. "I used to protect Rusty—all our lives I did that until I couldn't anymore, until we had to flee." Yooolia keeps pacing back and forth, looking towards Troy as she speaks, and then up and around her at the walls and the ceiling. He nods whenever his eyes meet her eyes. "And now he's protecting me, sort of. It's weird." "You fled together?" Troy asks. "Yes, and then Rusty disappeared on me. For a long time, for at least a year. Because they wanted him more than me, I guess. So he thought if we split up they'd track him and not me. Which turned out right. It was stupid but that's what he did. Without asking me what I wanted. And I couldn't find him. I didn't even know how to *try*. And then of course I didn't know if he was still alive. Because if they were *tracking* him, why would he survive? And now I find out that he was here nearly the whole time. Having a good *time*."

And later she's saying this to Troy: "I *always* wanted to be normal." She paces around silently for a couple of moments, her movements a little clumsy, not as sly and quick as they usually are. Probably because she's drugged. Her words are slurred too, just a little. Troy doesn't

interrupt her, he doesn't say anything. Because he still feels that something is coming, that she hasn't told him yet what she wants to tell him. "What am I saying?" she says suddenly, "*I am normal, I'm a totally normal wolf. But Rusty, there was always Rusty. And now you.*"

She laughs. Probably because she's drugged. She says: "This must be what it's like to be Rusty. Finding everything funny, finding everything hilarious, thinking nothing is serious, not really. Maybe that's how I can understand Rusty, what the hell's going on in his head when he says the things he's always saying. That he's *drugged* all the time." Troy thinks: it's not that Rusty finds everything *funny*, it's that Yoolia can't believe he takes what he's saying *seriously*. And then he realizes that the ducks didn't prong *Rusty*, that he doesn't remember the ducks ever pronging *Rusty*.

Troy doesn't quite understand how they've gotten to what she talking about *now*, about them being depicted on the web—that she was so *ashamed* when she found out. Troy doesn't get what she means by that phrase, *being depicted on the web*. So she gets kind of graphic, almost crude—talking about what they were doing at the beaverdam, the *camera-angles*, whatever camera-angles are, and what it looks like when animals watch it later on the web. That *all* the animals were seeing *that*, had been seeing *them*, looking at them, *zooming in on the good parts*. Over and over again, some of those animals. Because the fucking *deer* had been spreading the film all over the place. Making them *famous*. And Troy is dumbstruck when he starts to realize what she means.

"I don't care now," she tells him, "I don't care anymore. Because none of this matters." And Troy thinks that's what she was going to tell him, how she's gotten past this web thing. Until she says something else, just like that, out of nowhere, glancing into his eyes for a moment: "I'm pregnant."

*Of course* she's pregnant. Because Troy was *designed* to make females pregnant, certain females, anyway, certain human females. That's what *always* happened back at the catfarm, that's what was *supposed* to happen. And pretty quickly, actually. "I didn't know that was possible," that's all Troy can think of to say, "between you and me, I mean." He doesn't explain why he thinks this. Because it's sort of obvious.

He asks: "Would you have told me? That you were pregnant? If you weren't drugged?" "Eventually," Yoolia says, "maybe I would have." She paces a little. "Maybe not," she says now, "maybe I would have just left, gone off on my own. I was thinking about doing that too. All the time. Because this is too much, all of this. I guess I don't know what I would have done, what I was going to do."

They don't talk any more about this because they're interrupted by Rusty knocking at the door again.

"There's a problem," Rusty tells them, "or maybe it's not a problem, maybe it's just an issue." Troy and Yooolia are looking at him, and not at the duck that came into the room with him. Yooolia doesn't want to look at the duck because thinking about ducks makes her a little sick to her stomach. "It's you," Rusty says to Troy, "it's that you're not on any drugs." "So what?" Troy says, "I'm not screaming my head off and running out of here, am I? So what's the big deal? what's the *issue*?"

Rusty explains that there's more than one point to the drugs, that all the animals in the thinktank tolerate each other only because they're taking special drugs to enable it. "They'd murder one another otherwise," Rusty explains, "over little things. Like the sound of a duck licking its own feet." "Hey," the duck says. "Sorry," Rusty replies, "it's just an example." And Troy can't help asking, since it's come up already, the word: "What's a thinktank?"

"So," Rusty tells Troy, after he's explained what a thinktank is, after he's explained to Yooolia that the building isn't called a *city*, that it's called a *university*, that it's a totally different word. Not *univercity*. And that university and thinktank are slang for Ivory Tower. "Some of the animals are worried because you're not drugged. Because everyone's heard about the cat murder." "The what?" Troy says, and now he looks at Yooolia who shrugs at him.

"It's all over the webs," Rusty tells Troy, "how you allegedly took down a loner cat. Which is supposed to be impossible, you know?" "Um," Troy says. Because he's reminded that there was something funny about that event. That the cat was distracted by something. And now he has a thought about this, a new thought. He looks at Yooolia quickly. But she just smiles back at him. Innocently.

Troy and Yooolia are both sitting with their backs against a wall in the room. Looking up at Rusty, and directly at the duck that's with him. Yooolia is holding hands with Troy again. He can't tell if it's because she's told him she's pregnant or if it's because of the drugs. He thinks that it would be nice if things happened one at a time once in a while. So that he'd be able to tell what was causing what.

"Come on," Troy finally says to Rusty, "let's be honest about this. Do I really strike you as *aggressive*? Me? And anyway, what about you? You're not on *any* drugs, right?" And Yooolia realizes, as Troy says that, that he's right. So she's staring at Rusty *too*.

"I'm different," Rusty says. "in a lot of ways. It's hard to explain. But everyone knows it, everyone can *see* it." "I'm *different* too," Troy says, "in case you didn't notice." And then something else comes out of Troy's mouth, something he regrets immediately, "Yooolia," he says, "Yooolia can't be on the duckdrugs anymore. Because maybe it'll affect the babies."

Yoolia is standing up, screaming at Troy, really screaming—for the first time she’s scaring him even though she’s in *Yoolia-form*: “Did I ask you to tell *him*?” she’s yelling, “Did I?” Then she’s saying, to herself really, although it’s still loud, her voice, loud enough to *hurt* his ears: “I’m trapped, I’m trapped in a *building* with *these* people.” And she goes silent.

After a moment, Rusty says, “Oh wow. Congratulations. I guess. Because like what are they going to be? The children. Do either of you have any idea?” “Don’t start,” Yoolia says to her brother—she’s *warning* him—and Troy is staring at him too, not believing what Rusty’s saying. “No, no,” Rusty says next, because he’s having trouble controlling his mouth again, he’s having trouble stopping himself from saying *something*, “I’m sure it’ll be fine, finer than fine. Totally fine.” Yoolia rolls her eyes, she’d smile now at Rusty’s verbal fumbling, but she refuses to because no one here *deserves* a smile.

“It kind of changes things, I guess,” Rusty says next, and Yoolia darts an angry look at him that he responds to: “Or maybe not, maybe it doesn’t change anything. Okay it doesn’t change a thing, I’m sure of that too.” She rolls her eyes again, and walks away from the both of them. She’s staring out of one of the holes in the wall, yearning to escape from this place, from them, from everything, from her own body. Wishing she could *fly* the way some animals can. Why is it only the *nasty* animals can fly?

Rusty says now: “Where was I before we got started on this topic?” And Troy is staring at him again.

## 31

So now Troy is talking to the boar, to Oinnenk, in another room. In Oinnenk’s *office*. He’s being *interviewed*. Troy sighs when he hears the boar use these words. *Enough with these words that I don’t understand*, Troy thinks, why can’t anyone speak *plainly*?

Oinnenk has been asking him what he thinks of *animals*. And Troy has been claiming he doesn’t understand this question, that doesn’t what he’ll think of a particular animal depend on that *particular animal*? Humans, Oinnenk has been telling Troy, back when they still existed they were kind of prejudiced towards other animals. Thought they were *superior* to everyone else, and now Oinnenk turns his snout *up* in a peculiar way that Troy doesn’t get, but that he realizes that he’s *supposed* to get. Troy tells Oinnenk that he finds it *kind of* annoying to be talked about this way, right to his face, as if he’s *extinct*.

And Oinnnenk is explaining to him that he *is* extinct, as far as they know, that it takes just *one* to be extinct, doesn't he realize that? (The boar laughs when it says this. As if it has made a joke). And that the catfarm—"it was famous, did you know?"—was the last place where humans could be found "because no one else really eats human anymore, did you know that? Not even hyenas eat human anymore. Not even jackals. And hyenas and jackals will eat just about *anything*." "Um," Troy says, because he's decided that this is sort of a deliberately-insulting line of thought. And because there are still vltures, the boar has apparently forgotten about vltures.

Now the boar is explaining that because of some episode that they don't understand, the remaining humans were put down by the cats. So that he really *is* the only one left and that's as good a definition of extinction as anything is.

"The Anthropocene Age," the boar says. "Don't take this the wrong way, but the Anthropocene Age, it's just over. It's been over for a while. Along with the Age of Reason, by the way." "How can I take these things the wrong way?" Troy says, "I don't even know what they *mean*."

Oinnnenk doesn't explain to Troy what his words mean. Part of the reason is that *Oinnnenk* isn't totally sure what his words mean either, not all of them. But part of the reason is that Oinnnenk is trying to get under Troy's skin. This is something Troy more or less realizes, not explicitly, but because he can feel that Oinnnenk keeps challenging him in different ways—not directly the way an animal would that was out to kill you or drive you away, but subtly. What Troy doesn't realize is that Oinnnenk is bragging too. At the same time. About how much he knows. And perhaps even Oinnnenk doesn't realize this because it's become so automatic for Oinnnenk to brag about what he knows. So Oinnnenk is confusing Troy a little. Because Troy doesn't feel Oinnnenk's remarks are adding up the right way, because he's not getting the boar.

"There was a lot of breeding going on in that farm," Oinnnenk tells Troy now. "I wouldn't know anything about that," Troy responds. And then Troy says, pointing at the glasses, "What are those? what do they do?" "It's a professional thing," the boar responds, instinctively slipping off its glasses, rubbing them against its fur, then putting the glasses back on again. Troy can't make sense of this *gesture*, what the boar has just done with its glasses. "And that," Troy says, pointing at the only piece of furniture in the room, one that's in a corner. He's never seen furniture before, except at the vlture trap. And he didn't know what he was looking at when he was there. He doesn't know what he's looking at now either.

"That's a *chair*," the boar says. Which doesn't help Troy at all because Troy doesn't know the word.

"We think—but we're not sure," this is what the boar says next, "that there was a period when they were culling all the smart ones." Troy looks at him. "All the smart humans," the boar adds.

“Who?” Troy says, “who was doing this?” “Cats, we think. On catfarms. Not the cats that are around now, but other cats. Their ancestors. That they were breeding humans to be docile and a little dumb.”

“So you see, even the cats in that farm you grew up in. Acting as if it’s all business. A *meat* farm. But that’s never true when it comes to humans, it’s never that simple. It’s rage, honor, the love of ancestors. It’s always complicated. How we feel about you.”

Troy makes a guess. Because he doesn’t think the boar’s remark about cats having complicated feelings about humans fits together very well with the boar’s remark about cats breeding humans to be docile and dumb. He thinks he should say what he says next, that perhaps this is what everything is all about, all these questions: “You’re worried about how I’m going to react to all this *attention* from all of you. Because I’m a human, the last human.” The beast nods, a little surprised. Because it wasn’t expecting this response. Troy shrugs, “I’ve been doing this all my life, maneuvering around *animals*. All my life I’ve had to dodge things because, generally, I’m not as strong as you guys.” Troy thinks, this will *work*, saying *this* next, that it will reassure the boar: “The cat I killed. That was an accident, how I killed it. The animal was distracted by something when it was charging me. So I’m not responsible for what happened, something else is. I don’t really deserve any credit for killing that cat.”

Yoolia is talking to Rusty. In another room, in the original room that Rusty took them to. Finally she’s doing this. “I *love* him,” she is saying to her brother, “but he’s kind of *useless*, haven’t you noticed?” “I don’t really think about people that way,” Rusty says, “especially when they belong to a different species.” “What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Yoolia snaps. “Well, people kind of are in a different ethical framework when they belong to a different species,” Rusty explains, “and you have to think yourself into that ethical framework before you can make any judgments about them, it takes an awful lot of work.” “I’m not seeing why this *matters*,” Yoolia says, and she sounds tired: “why can’t you be *helpful* once in a while? Why can’t you really *listen* to what the other person is saying once in a while?”

“I *can* be helpful,” Rusty says, “I *can* listen. Really. *Try me*.”

Yoolia doubts this is true, but she’s desperate, she wants to talk to *someone* and she feels she can’t talk to Troy. Not about this, not about *him*.

“I’ve got urges,” she says now, “really *deep* urges,” and she wonders if it’s the drugs that are making her so talkative about stuff she’s never talked to *anyone* about, that she’s never *wanted* to talk to anyone about. “I want something,” she adds, “I want it really really bad, but I don’t know *what it is* that I want. It’s like I want to nest or something, that’s what it feels like. But *nesting* is weird, that’s what *birds* do. And birds are *nasty*. Or maybe I want to build some sort of structure to house our many children in. I’m imagining vines, that I’m tending vines. *Vines*.”



She shakes her head in amazement at herself. “What the hell are vines for? I have no idea why anyone would tend *vines*. So this is just nuts, what I’m fantasizing about. Because I’m a *wolf*.”

Rusty nods. Because he’s listening. And that’s what people do when they’re listening. He knows this.

“I want to start a family,” she tells Rusty now, “with Troy.” “Wolves don’t have families, exactly,” Rusty says, “It’s *deer* that have families. Wolves only have *tribes*.” “I know all this,” Yoolia is shaking her head angrily, “but *we’re* not wolves, ok? it’s just me and *Troy*. *We’re* not *wolves*.” “Right,” Rusty says, “*you’re* not wolves. So I don’t know what the rules are when it comes to the *two of you*. Neither do the *two of you*. Neither does anyone else. Because there are no rules when it comes to people like the *two of you*. Okay?”

Yoolia says: “This is what I’m fantasizing about. That I *marry* Troy. That people are throwing *rice* at us. During our *wedding*.” Rusty jumps up. “Yoolia,” he says, “listen to me. This is just a lot of junk that you’ve found on the web, it’s just a bunch of images that don’t mean anything anymore, that maybe have never meant anything because it was all just made up by some people playing around on the web. It doesn’t make any sense to *us*, what you’re saying. There are no weddings any longer, there is no rice. Rice doesn’t exist. What’s happening to you—between you and Troy—that’s real, that’s important. But this stuff that you’ve been getting off the web isn’t real and thinking about it isn’t going to help you and Troy.”

Yoolia looks up at Rusty, and there are tears in her eyes. Rusty thinks: *it’s because of the drugs*, because he’s never seen his sister cry, not ever, not even when they were first running away, not even when she was a child. But he also thinks: *this is real, she’s really feeling this*. “I don’t know what we’re *supposed* to do,” Yoolia is saying to Rusty, “please tell me what we’re *supposed* to do.” Rusty doesn’t say anything because he doesn’t know what he can say that would help. *Oh wow, this is so interesting*—that wouldn’t help, he realizes, it would just make her mad if he said that.

But then he has a thought he thinks he can share with her. “Here’s something,” he tells Yoolia, “here’s what’s really going on.” She looks at him. “It’s your brain,” he tells her next, “your brain is trying to find a model that will fit you and Troy.” “My brain?” “Yes, it’s pulling up stuff, anything that it can find on the web because it realizes that none of the old rules apply. So it’s going through all the options it can dig up, looking for something that might work. For you and Troy.” And then Rusty says this: “It’s not that you’re *fantasizing*, that’s not what’s really going on, it’s that your brain is trying to be creative. It’s trying to pull something new from the outer limits, something that you can *use*.” “I guess,” Yoolia says. “That’s a nice theory,” she adds after a moment, “maybe I should just believe that.”

We'd say that Yooolia was trying to think outside the box. But they don't talk much about boxes in the future.

The boar is talking to Troy about the chair. Because it thinks that Troy has passed all the tests "with flying colors," that he won't need to be drugged by ducks. The boar is all smiles now (which is really weird to see, given the face that's on this animal). It's saying to Troy, "I'm so glad you're on board with us, I have such hopes for the future." "Yes," Troy is saying, "the future, I'm glad to be *on board* too, and I also have *hopes*." Because the human thinks that if he echoes enough of the boar's words back, the animal won't realize what he really thinks about this, the boar will think they're agreeing on everything. It's shaking Troy's hand, it's congratulating him. Troy is glad that Yooolia spent so much time teaching him to shake hands. Because this is apparently a widespread practice among animals—knowing how to do it is turning out useful. Handy.

"*This* is for you," the boar says next, gesturing at the chair that Troy doesn't understand the point of, "we brought it in honor of you, as an *award* that you'd get if you passed the test." The boar sounds *proud* for some reason. "What is it?" Troy asks again. Because Troy thinks it would be nice if he understood the point of something he was being *awarded*. And now the boar finally says something informative, after the boar mentions again that it's a chair, and that he—Troy—has been awarded a chair at their *institute*: "You're supposed to *sit* in it," the boar explains to Troy. "At the banquet conference we're having for you, at the banquet conference that we're having in *honor* of you. Two days from now. We hope you'll accept our invitation to come." And Troy is saying, almost at the same time, while he's looking at the chair, "*Sit in it? sit in it how?*"

## 32

They're outside now, Troy and Yooolia, because Troy has started a fire, because he's trying to cook a *chicken*, because he's really hungry. "They're kind of greenish, these chickens," he says to Yooolia, "they look a little like those prairie dogs I caught. Do you think I can eat them?" "They're pretty disgusting," Yooolia says, "but you can eat them. I've eaten three already," and then she bursts out with: "I can't believe this is all there is to eat around here," darting her eyes inadvertantly towards a duck. "Hey what are *you* looking at?" the duck immediately says, aggressively puffing itself up at her. Which is really weird for a duck, but the ducks are really weird around here, that's what both Yooolia and Troy have realized. Troy touches Yooolia's

shoulder *lightly*. "Here's an idea," he says to her, "let's not go there, let's not get into some kind of contest with a duck. Let's just let it drop." And Yooolia agrees.

Because, anyway, they're surrounded by ducks. Who seem to find what Troy is doing fascinating. The fire, the way he's cooking a *chicken*, that's what they're all watching, as they chatter to one another, as some of them imitate his gestures and movements. "What's a banquet conference?" Troy asks Yooolia. "It's kind of a big meal," she tells him, "the banquet part, anyway. Why are you asking me that?" "Because that's what we're been invited to. Two days from now. By the boar." Yooolia nods. "What's the point of a banquet conference?" Troy asks her next. "I don't know," Yooolia responds. Then she asks: "Who's going to be there?" "All the boar's colleagues," Troy tells her, "whatever colleagues are. Everyone from around here I guess." "You should be asking Rusty questions like these," Yooolia says to Troy after a moment, "don't bother asking me these questions anymore. Why am I going to know the answers to any of these questions?"

The ducks lose interest after Troy takes the cooked chicken off the fire and starts eating it. That's when they stop imitating him, that's when they wander away. "God those things are creepy," Yooolia says, looking at the crowd of them now pecking around a pool of greenish goo. Troy nods, still chewing. And then Yooolia looks at Troy while saying something that's been on her mind, something she feels she can say now because they have a little privacy. "We have to leave," she tells Troy, "this place isn't right for us." He responds with: "I just realized something about you."

"Can you not talk while you're chewing that stuff?" Yooolia interrupts him, "it's really disgusting to watch. Maybe if you tried closing your mouth while you're chewing it?" "I can't just gulp down a whole chicken the way you can, a barely dead whole chicken, a still *twitching* barely dead whole chicken," Troy says angrily, "and I can't burp a cute little burp right afterwards, covering my mouth delicately with my big paw, going *oh excuse me, honey*."

They sit in silence a moment. Yooolia says, to calm the energy between them: "What were you going to say? before I interrupted you?" Troy realizes she's apologizing by admitting that she interrupted him. *These drugs*, he thinks, *they're pretty good*. And then he feels bad because of what he's thought, because now he's thinking about the children, about how the children might be permanently affected by the drugs she's on.

"It was about you," he says, "that you're incredibly restless, that you always want to leave wherever you're at. That you never want to *stay* anywhere." "That's not true," she responds, "you're kind of being unfair to me. Because nowhere we've ever been to has been *right*, that's all. Everywhere we go is *wrong*. For *us*, I mean. Why would you want to stay in a place that's wrong for us?"

Troy has a weird thought. That Yooolia actually has the same values that he does. Deep down inside the two of them are actually *alike* in this way. Except that he knows this is all hopeless and she doesn't, that's what he thinks next. That she kind of reminds him of his mother because of her silly optimism. Which is more than a bit weird, that *Yooolia* reminds him of his mother.

*Can't think too much about this*, that's his next thought, *thinking this way just isn't that healthy*. Troy says: "this chicken is making me a little woozy. Did eating those chickens make *you* a little woozy?" Yooolia says: "I think all the food is drugged too, we're probably *tasting it* in these disgusting chickens." After a moment, she adds: "It would make sense that they'd drug all the food. Because no one is coming around saying to me that I have to take it in the ass again. And surely the effects of these drugs don't last forever."

Yooolia is right. And whatever's in the chicken, whatever the ducks have put in the chicken isn't affected by cooking. Because Troy realizes that all he wants to do now is go back up to the room. With Yooolia. While he can still control himself. And he realizes that's all that Yooolia wants to do too.

Later. A day later. Troy has been practicing sitting in the chair. Which is cracking Yooolia up. "You're *squatting* in it," she says, "the way a *duck* squats." "Is this wrong?" he asks, "I really don't get how we're supposed to do this." "You don't get how *you're* supposed to do it," Yooolia says, "because you're the human they're all *honoring*. I don't have to do *anything*, I just get to watch." She wiggles her ears a little because she's laughing at him. "You're not being very helpful," Troy complains.

"I've seen pictures," she says next, "you have to let your legs dangle down off this platform, from the knees, off the edge." "My legs aren't going to *dangle*," Troy says, "they're too long to *dangle*." "Like this," Yooolia is saying at the same time, "your feet on the floor. Like that." And Yooolia is knealing in front of him and the chair, moving his feet into the right positions. "It's going to cut off the circulation in my legs," Troy complains, "this sitting business, this can't be right." "It's the way humans looked in everything I've ever seen," Yooolia tells him, "in all the films and pictures." "How long am I supposed to do this?" Troy asks. "For hours and hours, the way humans used to." "Hours and hours? No one could do this for hours and hours. Sit like this? I'm beginning to think you shouldn't believe everything you find on your web."

"That's right," Rusty is telling Troy later, "authenticity is a really big problem. On all the webs. It's really hard to know what you can trust. You kind of have to use comparison methods—see what fits together with what. What's consistent with what and what isn't. That's what the people at this university are doing all the time. Trying to make it all fit together. How the world is now."

Rusty has been telling Troy about the chimera too. That if anyone can answer his questions, the chimera can. And Troy is asking: “what’s a chimera?” He means by this: *what kind of animal is a chimera?* Rusty gets what he’s asking. “It’s sort of a *combination* of animals,” Rusty responds, “all mixed up together.” “Yes?” Troy says. “The chimera’s been really interested in you for a while,” Rusty says now, “but it’s in the wrong cycle at the moment, it’s sleeping or whatever it is that chimeras do that’s like sleep so you have to wait a few days before you can see it.” “But what’s going to happen when I see the chimera?” Troy asks. “Chimeras are wise,” Rusty says, “they know a lot. Because they travel on all the webs. Nearly enough they do.” “Like deer.” “Not like deer,” Rusty responds. “Because deer are sneaks, deer don’t belong where they go, deer don’t fit in. And deer often don’t understand what they find on other webs. Chimeras are more like *designers*, no one can see a chimera unless the chimera wants to be seen. On the web, I’m talking about when chimeras are on the web. That’s why deer don’t know about this place. Because chimeras can firewall anything they want, anyone they want.”

Troy gives up asking any more questions. Because he doesn’t know where to begin, because nothing Rusty is saying, nearly enough, is making any sense to him. Because *new words* keep coming up.

“The deer,” Rusty says next, “the deer want to kill the chimera. I’ve seen them planning it. Because they know about the chimera now, and they apparently know what the chimera does. Which is new, that deer know this.” Troy thinks: this business about chimeras. It all sounds a little too much like *magic*.

Rusty says this too: “I keep asking Yoolia to go with you. When you see the chimera in a couple of days. Because the chimera wants to see both of you. Together. Because you’re *both* special, it’s not just you, being the last human, it’s Yoolia too. Because she’s pregnant now. She just gets mad at me whenever I bring it up, she just keeps telling me that she’s a *normal wolf*, why would a chimera want to see a *normal wolf*? Normal? she’s not normal. She’s never been *normal*. I would know.”

Rusty asks Troy: “Could you maybe talk to her? Maybe she’ll listen to you.” Troy just laughs. Because Rusty should know better than to suggest something like that, that *he* should try to push Yoolia into something she’s not interested in doing. Because that’s just not how their relationship *works*. You don’t push the wolf around that you’re sleeping with. It’s just not a very smart thing to do.

*The banquet conference begins.* Everyone is sitting on the floor. Or pacing around in small circles, the way that the ducks are. Except for Troy who is *sitting* on the chair.

It's making him really uncomfortable because he's standing out, towering above all the other animals. And because the other animals keep *looking* at him, some of them making faces that he doesn't get, that he doesn't understand. Whether those are smiles or something else entirely. Yoolia is sitting on the ground next to him, her arm resting on his thigh. Most of the time she's doing this. Which is comforting, maybe it's because of her arm that he's not squirming as much in the chair as he would be otherwise. But it's helping only a little. Rusty is sitting on his other side. Which is also comforting, it's a little comforting, anyway.

Troy didn't eat before the banquet conference. Because he thought he wasn't supposed to. Which Yoolia thought was funny and *dumb*. She deliberately ate several of those disgusting chickens just before the start of the banquet conference because she didn't "trust these animals—who knows what they're going to come up with?"

She was right, she was smart about this. Because in front of each animal is a *plate* and a *fork*. But there's no food anywhere. "In honor of *you*," the boar says, gesturing at the plates and forks. Troy has never seen a plate or a fork before. So he has no idea how plates or forks honor anyone or why plates and forks, in particular, would honor *him*. "Thanks," he says cautiously. He's pretty sure that Oinnenk is the boar that's just said this. Not because he recognizes Oinnenk, but because he recognizes what Oinnenk is wearing. There are a couple of other boars at the banquet conference besides Oinnenk, one of them isn't wearing anything at all, and the other is wearing shorts and suspenders too, but also something else on its upper body that Troy uses to distinguish it from Oinnenk. Their voices are distinctive, he realizes that after a while, and Oinnenk's voice is the deepest, it carries the most authority. Just because of the way it *reverberates* when the animal speaks. Somehow the voice that boar has makes the creature sound *deep*, makes the creature sound *profound*.

Troy holds up the fork, and asks: "What's this?" "It's a fork," he's told by Oinnenk. And now all the ducks in the room are *giggling*, all of them are holding up their forks for some damn reason, going to one another, "it's a *fork*." And Troy notices the duck-snort periodically coming out of nowhere, not having anything to do with anything as far as he can tell—that condescending sound that he hates. *Snerking*. He can tell it's irritating the other animals as well. He has two thoughts at that moment, first that he's not that much of an alien after all, and second, that he's really seeing the point of the drugs, which, ironically, *ducks* administer.

Troy has a third thought. "There's no food, right? There isn't going to be any food at this banquet conference," he says to Oinnenk. "It's too risky," the boar replies, "so we've all eaten already, however each of us does it." Oinnenk leans towards Troy, whispering conspiratorially,

but its voice carrying so well, reverberating so much that *everyone* is hearing what it's saying to him. "We tried dinners, real dinners I mean, with *food*, we tried to find things that everyone might agree to eat, that wouldn't offend anyone. Multicultural foods like worms and ants. But it didn't work. Because it turns out most of us don't like worms and ants."

A couple of the ducks are making smacking sounds: apparently *they* like worms and ants, anyway. Then one of the ducks says, "if someone eats a duck, he's not eating every duck, *qua* duck. He's only eating a *particular* duck. To get angry at this is to identify oneself with *every* duck, and that's a primitive response. Outrage over an animal's eating patterns is *primitive*." "Oh *that* again," a fox complains, rolling its eyes. Troy realizes that Yooolia's rolling-eye gesture seems universal. Among animals.

"Well *I* haven't eaten," Troy says, because he decides that if *he's* being honored and all, maybe he ought to point this out. One of the ducks bursts out with false hysterical cheer, "Well, don't eat *me*." Somehow, the duck has just made a joke that's in *very* bad taste, Troy can see this, that even if a *duck* (a prey animal) makes this joke it's in bad taste. The other ducks are shushing the duck that made the bad joke, and one is actually pronging it in the backside with a claw, readministering a drug to it. Troy looks away. This is all turning out to be a little weird, he thinks. But what else should he have expected?

There are about twenty animals in the room, it's a large room they're all sitting about in, spaced out evenly in it. Several boars, four ducks, some large foxes, a hyena, a relatively small cat, a couple of coyotes. Something that's probably a carnivorous elephant. (It's not taking up as much space as you'd normally expect it to, but you can tell it's an elephant anyway because of the trunk on its face, and you can tell that it's probably carnivorous because of its long shapely teeth.) And there are bears, *three* bears. Each one is wearing what looks like a long ribbon that's tied into a knot around its neck, and the ends of which are dangling down its chest. What's more notable are the animals that are missing, the *kinds* of animals that are missing. There are no deer, no rabbits, no beavers. No large cats. No vultures. There are no other prey animals except for the ducks. And there are no other birds either.

The animals are engaging in some sort of greeting ritual. Each one stands up, states its *name*, its *affiliation*, its area of *expertise*, and then it says, turning towards Troy in the chair, "Hail Human," and sometimes, "so glad to see that you've survived the Anthropocene Age." Which gets a laugh each time the animal says it. "You're the 9-11," one of the animals says that too. Troy responds, after a while, with "call me Troy, just call me Troy." The first time he says this, it gets a laugh too, but only the first time. He repeats the remark a couple more times, as the animals keep saying "Hail Human"—he's not trying to make another joke, he's just trying to indicate that he's *serious* about them using his *name*. Finally he just gives up. Even Yooolia snorts in laughter each time someone says, "Hail Human, so glad you've survived the

Anthropocene Age,” but he realizes that she’s laughing *at* them. Wolves are kind of cruel, at least they are when they find something funny.

Except for Rusty. Rusty is genuinely *decent*, Troy has decided.

Oinnnenk is welcoming everyone to this *session*, “the theme of which, as you know, is the legacy of *The Human*.” The boar introduces the “keynote speaker,” someone “who needs no introduction”—one of the three bears. She’s famous for her work on *The Human*, Oinnnenk tells the audience and Troy wonders, if this is true, why it had to be pointed out by the boar, why it even had to be *mentioned*. The animals do something extremely strange and a little disturbing after Oinnnenk stops speaking: they start slapping each of their open hands or paws or whatever against the other, making loud *clapping noises*. Troy is unnerved, looking at Rusty for help, Rusty just nods to Troy, gesturing that he should do the same thing. Which he does eventually. It hurts his hands a little, he notices, to bang them together this way. Making loud noises, he thinks, this is never a good thing to do. This is always a *dangerous* thing to do.

Troy’s not really getting the point of making these noises at all, but the bear clearly likes hearing them, she’s sort of smiling in a shy way. Which is also really weird to watch: An animal that big looking down at her hairy feet, smiling towards the ground shyly. These animals aren’t normal, Troy realizes, they’re not even normal for *animals*. Which are already strange to begin with. Troy shifts in his seat uncomfortably, and Yoolia squeezes his thigh slightly. To let him know that she’s there, that she understands, perhaps to let him know that she *sympathizes*. But how can *she* sympathize? She’s one of *them*.

## 34

The bear starts out her “talk” by mentioning something called *The Museum of Things*. This is apparently a former vulture hoard that the bears, or some of the bears anyway, have been studying recently. They’ve become interested in *the car*, an artifact that they found in that hoard. And now she introduces another bear, who talks a little about all the things they’ve recently learned about *the car*. Troy can’t stay focused because he understands nothing except that, apparently, cars moved while humans sat in them. All this *sitting* that humans apparently did.

Troy is too self-conscious to shake his head to himself about all this so-called sitting because the speaker-bear keeps looking at him. As if this is relevant somehow to *him*. Apparently they seem to think that *he* invented the car. Troy realizes that the animals don’t *really* think this, but that’s



how they're acting, all the animals that keep turning around to look and smile at him while the speaker is talking about *the car*.

This was an illustration of something else, an illustration that enables the famous bear to explain what *history* is to her audience. History, she's telling everyone now, needs all the sciences. In order to try to understand what happened, how *we* got to where we are *now*. And then she gives another illustration, she talks about how the *satellites* gradually winked out, went dead one by one, that this was what happened to all the external technology of the humans. Why their webs, the human webs, got scattered and went entirely internal.

She talks about the *web wars*—which were attempts to destroy or distort the *content* on different webs. Because of what were called *copyrights*. And *trademarks*. That were a kind of mark of possession. “Legally.” And how this makes it hard for contemporary historians to discover what really happened, how the past actually unfolded. “We do know this,” she says, that “humans, they planned to conquer the stars, and instead they just went extinct.” Many of the animals are turning around, gazing at him with sympathy now—that’s how it looks anyway. Somehow *this* leads to the bear mentioning that “we know that humans started creating their own customized pets, often using their own genetic material because they thought it was cute to do that.”

“That’s how *revolutions* always start,” the bear says, “because someone or something thinks something would be cute to do, and so they try doing it. Without realizing what the consequences of their actions are going to be. Once the *fad* takes off.” Some of the animals are turning around, and glaring at Troy. Yoolia squeezes his thigh again, *I’m here, I’ll protect you against these bastards if they try anything*, he thinks that’s what her hand is communicating to him.

The bear *hypothesizes* that the old *conundrum* about whether we are all descended from humans or instead descended from various other different animals is “framed badly.” That a lot of emotion is just misplaced when some animals identify more with their “supposed” animal-ancestors, and hate humans as a result, because they blame humans for making the other animals extinct. Their opponents are no better off, she points out condescendingly, by identifying themselves *with* humans. “These irrational attitudes are ones that can change as you get older, they can just reverse for no particular reason. Which shows how off-kilter the whole debate really is.”

Because, she explains, the facts indicate that there was definitely a “free for all” exchange of genetic material, that because so much was *biotech*ed for so long there are all sorts of *design elements* scattered everywhere in “all of us.” This gives her an opportunity to deny another “common misperception” that somehow the *design elements* in an animal’s makeup can be

distinguished from the *natural elements* in that animal's makeup. "In fact, we're not sure where the human design-elements leave off and nature begins, not even with respect to the sky. Clouds, for example. It's not crazy to think that even clouds have been somewhat biotech-ed." Apparently, once upon a time, clouds couldn't catch on fire. She points that out.

The tension that Troy has sensed building up steadily in the room, towards him in particular, finally dissipates when the bear mentions "by-the-by" that deer are currently trying to build *cities* for themselves. Everyone thinks this is extremely funny, everyone starts to laugh. For some reason. Even Rusty. Not Yoolia, because Yoolia, Troy realizes, hasn't really been listening for a while, she's drifted off, she's clearly thinking about something else.

Troy also realizes that this *paper* the bear has been giving hasn't been something that she's just explaining to them. What she's been saying is too organized for that, he thinks. She sort of stares off periodically the way that Yoolia does—and Rusty—when they're on the web. So she hasn't memorized what she's been saying, she's been channeling her thoughts off of her web, a bearweb (that's what he guesses) as if a voice is speaking to her or as if she's been seeing something in front of her. And now Troy is less impressed with these animals, he realizes they're not as *smart* as he initially thought they were. Because they're constantly relying on sources of information, sometimes unreliable sources of information, that he hasn't any access to. He's known this for a while, but now it's really hitting him—what an advantage it is. While sitting in this room listening to these animals.

The talk is over. The animals are all banging their hands together again, making those clapping noises. Then they're raising their hands, not both of them, just one hand each. Which apparently is another ritual. You raise one of your hands, the speaker chooses to recognize you, and you talk, you *comment* on what the speaker has said. Troy feels he's starting to get the hang of these rituals. At least a little bit.

Rusty stands up first. He's explaining that it's not *obvious* why all the external technology disappeared so thoroughly, that surely the explanation is extremely complicated, that there have to have been a lot of *factors* that were involved, but here's a possibility, here's one possible *factor*, that external technology needs *social* organization, that it needs the coordination of a *lot* of creatures. It needs a "division of labor," and now a lot of animals are nodding in agreement, "one that goes way beyond anything we have any more in the present." That's what's gone missing in our world. "For the most part I mean." And Rusty adds: "You only go forward for a while." Apparently that's a common saying among many different kinds of animals. Because, Troy notices, they're all nodding at this too. Rusty mentions the idea of a *bottleneck*—a metaphor that Troy gets after a moment: only one way out. "Their external technology had reached such complexity and had become so unified in its infrastructure that any shift away from collective behavior, due to the induced speciation of humans into other

creatures—into us—because of the biotechnology revolution, would have caused a rapid deflationary *spiral* in their collective behavior. In *our* collective behavior.” That’s how Rusty ends his little speech.

Now Oinnenk has stood up, and he’s talking about “Boar’s law.” Which confuses Troy, because he keeps listening for something that’s relevant to *boars* and he never hears anything. Apparently the ducks think it’s funny that it’s called “Boar’s law,” he thinks he hears one of the ducks saying that Oinnenk named it that for no good reason, but he’s not sure because the boar’s powerful voice is drowning them out. The boar is saying that the more specialized you are, the more dependent you are on externalities. And the more dependent you are on externalities, the more likely you are to go extinct. For some reason, this remark leads to a lot of tittering laughter around the room, laughter that the boar clearly *expected*. Troy feels he’s totally lost, except for the knowledge that the boar is talking about humans—about why *they* went extinct.

Oinnenk is saying that it’s true that it’s “extremely hard” to recognize design elements in an animal, “but an excellent example, probably, is that we all speak the same language.” The boar explains that humans didn’t speak a single language, apparently. He mentions the Tower of Babel. So that’s *definitely* proof of a design element, “as good an indicator of a design element as we’re ever likely to see, a design element that’s clearly in the brains of *all* animals. Because, otherwise, why wouldn’t language mutate very much more than it does these days?”

The bear is smiling, saying, “that’s a very good example, that’s an excellent example. I’ll have to think about it some more.” Then the small cat suggests that another design element is the fear of buildings that most animals have. But this doesn’t seem to go over so well with the audience. Other animals are disagreeing, the coyotes especially. For some reason the coyotes are really adamant about this *not* being a design element.

A fox is speaking. With a kind of soft elegance and authority, using small gestures that Troy finds himself drawn to watching. The fox is talking about *fitness landscapes*. And it’s using the human shoulder as an example. That the human shoulder couldn’t *scale up* beyond a certain size. So that humans were restricted in how large they could grow, they couldn’t become that big. Because of problems with *torque*. Now the fox is explaining that *bioteching* was a technique of jumping from one *fitness locale* in a fitness landscape to another, that fitness-locale-jumping is probably a good definition of bioteching, “a sort of leaping from mountain to mountain.” Somehow this image is supposed to help get the fox’s point across, but it doesn’t help Troy. “This is a game-changer,” the fox says, “at least for a while it was. Because stasis always seems to set in eventually, because every type of animal eventually reaches its local maximum.” Because eventually, “as the historians have pointed out”—the speaker-bear is

nodding as the fox says this—“the new biotechs didn’t seem to allow any more locale-jumping. That’s what we think.”

“Or maybe it’s because once the external technology was gone, the new biotech genetic basis operated solely under the impress of selection forces and genetic drift, just like the natural genetic elements in an animal already do,” the carnivorous elephant intones, “because the collective sociology that Professor Rusty mentioned earlier was surely gone by this point in time.” And Rusty is nodding at this.

*Professor Rusty?* Troy is wondering what “Professor” means.

The bear is smiling again, saying that these are really good questions, that these are all *excellent* questions. Although Troy hasn’t heard any *questions*. Not the kinds of questions he asks, anyway. And now all of the animals are slapping their hands together again.

## 35

A *cat* has shown up. Suddenly. It’s pushed its way into the room, a *large* loner cat. Which is a game-changer. Because *everyone* is reacting, moving away, giving the large animal as much room as they can. Even the carnivorous elephant is doing this. Troy realizes with a shock that unlike the other animals the cat is still in *cat form*. Then he remembers that loner cats don’t change shape, most of them don’t anyway. So they always look threatening. The cat sits down and nevertheless it’s still towering over almost everyone, its presence is hulking a large shadow over the room.

“What?” the loner cat says after a moment, its head slowly tilting towards the ducks who are all clearly unnerved—the first time that Troy has seen *these ducks* unnerved by anything. “What the fuck’s *your* problem?” the cat adds, “*I’m* drugged just like the rest of you are.” Troy realizes this is true, because its movements are extremely sloppy. For a cat. “I just love all you guys,” the cat says now, “it’s probably because of all these drugs in me.” Somehow, the way the cat has said this makes it sound extremely nasty, especially after it adds that there’s clearly an “appetite suppressant” involved.

Everyone is *bristling*, that’s how Troy would put it. Some of the animals are even changing in shape a little, getting larger. But stealthily, that’s how it seems—like they don’t want to draw attention to themselves. And no one is saying anything. “Well,” the cat says, “what were we talking about before I showed up?” Still, no one says anything. “I’m beginning to think you guys

are *hostile* towards me,” the cat adds to the silence after a moment, languidly stretching out a paw and looking over one of its own tattoos at the same time. It’s hard for a cat to stay focused on anything for very long—unless its prey instinct kicks in.

“We’re not hostile,” Oinnnenk says, “not exactly,” and Troy is relieved that the boar has stood up, that it’s confronting the cat. He’s relieved, anyway, that the boar is *saying* something. “It’s that, although cougars can talk, they’re never very interested in anything anyone else has to say. After all, what other things say is just not that exciting to you, is it? And that even includes other cougars, right?”

A duck coughs out: “It’s because cougars don’t have friends that it’s alright to kill a cougar. Ducks make great buddies, that’s why it’s wrong to kill a duck.” The duck is immediately shushed by *several* of its buddies who are pronging it at the same time. No one says anything else while the cat lazily and smirkingly side-glances the ducks. “My sincerest apologies,” the boar adds after a moment. Troy is thinking, *that, that’s* what ducks are actually like. The cat is bringing out the real personalities of the ducks. Even through the drugs *they’re* on.

The cat is looking at Troy now. “I know about you,” it says after a moment. Yooolia is tensing up, her clawed hand digging just slightly, but painfully, into his thigh. “You’re kind of famous,” the cat murmurs, almost to itself, “because even *cats* know about you.” Troy nods, thinking: blue water, *blue* water, blue *pool* of water. He notices that the cat has been slurring its words, and that its gestures are relaxed and *slow*. That means it *really is* drugged, that’s what he realizes. Maybe the situation isn’t as dangerous as it looks.

“You know,” the cat says, “everyone seems to think cats are ignorant, but it’s just not true. I can quote human as well as anyone who’s here. How about this famous saying? *The lions said to the hares, where are your claws and teeth? when in the council of the beasts the latter began haranguing and claiming equality for all.*” The cat looks around at everyone. “I have as much of a right to be here as anyone else,” it says now, “a degree isn’t everything. In some circles a degree isn’t *anything*.”

“No one’s disputing that,” Oinnnenk is saying, but the cat interrupts the boar, looking back at Troy again. “What the hell is that *thing* that you’re perched on?” When the cat grins, everyone bursts out laughing, including Troy. It’s just tension, Troy realizes, this laughter.

“It’s a chair,” the boar says. The cat disdains a quick look at the boar, and then its eyes are back on Troy again. This chair is really stupid, Troy is thinking, because it’s making me into an obvious target, I’m goonishly standing out from the crowd. But he doesn’t see what he can do to change the situation *now*. Without attracting even more attention to himself, without betraying by his movements that he’s nervous about being on the chair. Which would be even worse.

"I just don't *get* the animosity," the cat says, and now its voice is low and purry and *mean*, "especially from *you*. Because you wouldn't be *alive* except for cats, you wouldn't even *exist*, you wouldn't have been born. Because what would have been the point? You've had a good life, all things considered, a really good life from what *I've* heard." Troy almost thinks the cat is winking at him except he knows that cat facial-muscles don't work that way, that cats *can't* wink. "And you would have gone on having a good time too, if you hadn't escaped. So it was a kind of deal that the trooper cats were making with you. A small tax for the good life you were having. Because something like you sure as hell wouldn't survive one minute outside a catfarm, unless you managed to hook up with a wolf who was willing to *feed* you regularly. In return, apparently, for a little *rough trade*."

Yoolia has stood up, which is just what Troy feared would happen, he represses an urge to try to pull her down again. *If she changes*, he's thinking. "You know," she says, weaving back and forth slightly, her words slurred too, "I think I'm going to have to kill you." "No one's killing anyone," the boar is saying now, its voice, amazingly, drowning everything out—*thank God for that voice* Troy is thinking—"we're all too drugged up to even try." And then the boar pauses a moment. Dramatically. Because that's the way it likes to speak: it likes to give its words a chance to have an impact on its audience. Which is a tactical blunder in *this* situation.

Because the cat is speaking again, calmly, looking straight at Yoolia. "I understand why you'd like to kill me, I'd like to kill you *too*—but what's with all the high *moral tone*? that's what I'm not getting here. I didn't make me what I am, any more than you made you. I have to eat too, after all, just like you do. And you're what I eat, *all of you*. In principle, anyway. It's nothing personal, of course. Why would it be?"

The ducks are rioting. One is squaacking, freaking out, its piercing voice cutting even through Oinnenk's voice: "This is criminal, what we're doing. Pandering to these *monsters*. Are we blind?" The other ducks are hissing and waving their claws up at the cat's face, the cat arching up and back, still on all-fours, its tail waving *violently*. Blinking in a druggy way, almost as if it's considering charging the ducks. Then, with a "fuck this" sneer on its face, it turns clumsily and bounds wobbily from the room, almost smashing its shoulder into the side of the doorway.

Nevertheless, the ducks have entirely lost their equilibrium, they're shrieking and hissing at the other animals near them, the hyena apparently working itself into a rage too, readying itself to attack anyone who gets near it. "Get out of the building," Oinnenk roars, "all of you," and the boar moves towards the crowd of ducks that back away from him, even the hyena is flinching. What the boar has just said has worked, the duck-hysteria is subsiding a little. They're still hissing and spitting half-heartedly, but they're going towards the door.

Everyone is gone. Except for Troy and Yooolia, Oinnnenk and Rusty. The animals had rushed out in small groups of their own kinds—those that could—the individual loners clearly paranoid about everyone else, but each animal, anyway, keeping its distance from all the others as the creatures moved towards the exit. None of them were looking at Troy, except for the small cat, Troy is sure the small cat was smiling a little. Like, somehow, what had happened had something to do with *it*, like somehow what had happened was something *it* could be proud of.

Oinnnenk is talking loudly now, the boar is gesturing grandly as if it's addressing the whole empty room, but it's apparently only talking to Troy. Who has gotten off of the chair and moved away from it. He's decided he doesn't like chairs, he's decided that he *hates* chairs. Yooolia is standing by him, she's stroking his arm, trying to calm *him* down.

"Humans—some humans—thought that rationality trumped everything," that's what Oinnnenk is saying. "No matter what you were like in other respects, if you could reason, if you could talk together, you could make agreements, you could find mutual interests, you could make *contracts* with one another that you would keep, that it would be in all of your interests to keep. *Social contracts*." The boar takes a deep breath and then goes on: "You could create a society which pooled your *mutual interests*, which enabled the common good." The boar is shaking its heavy bristly head slowly. "You have to respect some creatures for the delusions they had."

Troy says, a bit of anger in his voice, "I'm not sure any of this has anything to do with me. You guys keep talking at me as if it does." The boar shrugs, and then it starts in on amateur intellectuals, "autodidacts with freaky out-to-lunch ideas, like that cat." Troy is thinking: you're full of shit, you really are. Because this isn't what any of this is about, none of it. You're acting like this was some kind of *debate* you had with the cat, a debate that it *lost*. And now he's thinking: Yooolia's right, we can't stay here.

"What do *you* think about what happened?" the boar asks Rusty. All of a sudden. As if it needs reassurance from someone it respects. Rusty says something that surprises all of them, that no one expected *him* to say. "How'd the cat know?" that's what Rusty asks, "how'd that cat get in here?"

"These talks are open to the public," Oinnnenk says, "anyone who's heard about them can come if they want to. Anyone who's willing to be drugged, I mean." "Yeah," Rusty says, "but how'd a *cat* hear about this? That was a loner cat that we were dealing with. Loner cats don't have webs. Who on earth could that cat have been talking to?"

"Cats had names once, the loner cats," this is what Rusty says next, "but most of them don't bother with names anymore. That's kind of important, don't you think?"

They're going to see the chimera. Troy, actually. He's walking down steps, narrow stone steps, an apparently endless series of them that are spiraling deep down under the building, to what seems to be several stories below the surface of the ground. He can smell moisture, a lot of it. And he's pretty much in total darkness.

Two boars are guiding him, one on each side of him, each one holding an arm. Because Troy can't see a thing. There are a couple of ducks ahead of them on the stairs arguing with one another about *extinction*, about what the word means, about what's implied by the *definition* of the word *extinction*. "Can an *individual* be extinct?" one duck asks the other. "Nah," the second one says, "only *species* get to be extinct." "What about *tribes*?" the first duck asks the other, "can tribes go extinct?" Ducks are just stupid, Troy has decided.

The boars are being very careful with Troy. "Step down here," one is saying to him while both of them grip his arms so that each time he misses his footing they catch him. "How do you see in here?" Troy asks. "Glowing rocks," one of the boars says, "there are glowing rocks all along the walls. We can see everything by their light, pretty much everything." The other boar says: "The chimera warned us that you'd be blind as a bat." "Um," Troy says. And he hears one of the ducks *shispering* to the other duck that, "bats can see just fine. They always could."

Yoolia isn't with him. Because she's refused to see the chimera. "Fuck that," she finally says to Rusty. When he brings up the topic yet again. She does it to shut him up, to make it clear that the discussion is closed, that she really doesn't want to hear about this *again*. She's been pressing Troy to leave. With her. Right away. "Fuck the chimera," she tells Troy too, "because all that'll happen is that the chimera will tell you that it knows a whole bunch of things like everyone else around here thinks they do." She says this too: "That duck was right, we don't belong here. It isn't natural to live the way these animals are living. All together like this. Everyone eating *chicken*."

Troy is thinking that he doesn't remember any duck saying anything like that. Yoolia tells him: "I want our children growing up in a natural environment, not in a weird place like this." And Troy thinks: What's *natural*? what can she possibly mean by using that strange word? Troy says to her: "That's what I want too. That's exactly what I want. Everything totally natural for our children." Because this is the right way to respond to a wolf when she's talking this way.



She says the same things to Rusty, that she wants to leave, that she wants to go somewhere that's normal and natural. For the sake of her children. Rusty gets angry at her, he says that if she wants a world in which her children are *natural*, that she's just going to have to build that world *herself*. Because it doesn't exist anywhere around here, because she's having the children of an *extinct being*. And how natural is that supposed to be? He yells at her that once you reject all the lifestyle choices that are out there, there aren't any left. He shouts that she and Troy can't be Adam and Eve all over again. Not when there are a lot of other people around to run interference.

Rusty is scared, that's what Troy thinks, it's not just that Yooolia said "fuck the chimera," and Rusty took it personally. Because he's never seen Rusty angry, he's never seen Rusty shout at anyone. It's clear that Rusty doesn't want Yooolia and him going off on their own again. That he doesn't think they can survive on their own, that he doesn't think there's anywhere for them to go.

"There's a lot of world left out there that we can explore together," Yooolia says to Troy later, "because we haven't seen much of the world yet." Troy says: "It's true, but why do you think it's going to be any different anywhere else? Have you heard something about the rest of the world that I haven't heard?" Yooolia doesn't respond to this. Because she doesn't want to, because she just doesn't want to hear it. Not from either of them.

"My job is to wake up the chimera," one of the boars is saying to Troy. It's apparently whining about its sad lot in life. "It's not a great job because chimeras never feel good whenever they're awake. It's never good to know too much, apparently." "Um," Troy says, trying to sympathize.

The other boar warns Troy that they've reached the bottom of the stairs, "right here, step carefully, the ground's a little broken up." Troy stumbles anyway. He thinks he sees a gentle glow in the distance. "You're on your own," the animal says now. Troy sees shadowy figures around him, ones that are holding back. "Just keep walking in that direction and you'll reach the edge of a pool," he's told, "you'll be able to see things when you get there." "And?" "And the chimera is *there*," the boar says impatiently, "in the *pool*." Troy realizes that the boar can see his puzzled expression because it adds, "where would *you* keep a chimera?" He can tell by the chortling around him that the boar has made a joke.

A webbed and clammy hand slaps him familiarly on the backside, shoving him a little. He hears a duck squaak, in their typically insincere way, "Lots of luck, *buddy*."

Now Troy is kneeling by what looks like a gigantic pool of brackish water with cemented banks. He's staring into the face of what must be a giant reptile, one with dozens of eyes on its face, several of which are focused unnervingly right on him, a forked tongue that keeps flickering in

and out of its mouth, long fangs that show each time it opens its mouth. Troy thinks he can hear something in his head, something like *chatter*. And then he's not hearing anything at all.

"You're not hearing me," the serpent says suddenly, a strangely quiet voice coming out of that large dangerous mouth, a strangely calm and reassuring voice. "I'm hearing you fine," Troy replies.

Most of the animal is submerged. He's estimated that it's gigantic from the massive head that's reared up in front of him and from that part of serpent's body that's arisen out of the water along with its head. He's trying to think of the animal as like a snake, as all neck, but it's too big and thick for that. Then he's trying to think of the animal's head as directly attached to its body, as if it doesn't have a neck, but that's not working for him either.

"I meant before," the chimera says, "when I tried to get into your head." "No," Troy says, "I thought I heard something, but I didn't." "You don't have a web," the chimera says, and the animal isn't asking a question, "you don't even have something I can turn on." "I don't know what a web is," Troy says, "not really."

The chimera changes the topic: "You've been disappointed," it says, "By what you've seen here. By the other animals." Troy is struck by how much he wants to believe everything this animal is saying to him, by how much he has to resist in his head to disagree. *There's something strange going on here*, he thinks, *it's that thing's voice*. "I wouldn't say that exactly," Troy responds now, trying to be diplomatic but independent at the same time. "You think the animals here are superficial," the chimera says next, "you think they're not in touch with *reality*."

Ok, Troy thinks. Fine. I can do it this way if you want: it's easier to resist someone if you oppose them *aloud*. "These animals," Troy says, "they all know a lot of *words*. They don't actually know what anything is, what's really going on. And sometimes—this is what I think—they don't even know what the words they're using *mean*. It's because nothing actually belongs to them, everything they know about they've found lying around the way that vltures collect shit. All these animals are as bad as ducks. Except for Rusty. Maybe Rusty is different. But I'm not even sure about *that*."

The chimera says, and Troy finds his voice so soothing, so convincing, so authoritative: "Do you think humans were different back when there were some? They weren't. Most humans didn't know anything, everything most of them knew or owned or had they'd gotten from someone else. Only very few humans were thinking on their own, and those humans knew very little. The same as the animals today. The only difference is that humans were a lot more connected to one another than animals are now."

Troy is resisting all of this, he's thinking: Yeahyeahyeah, I've heard about all of this already. *Division of labor*, or something. *Collective behavior*, or whatever. What Rusty was talking about. He probably got it all from this *thing*. "Humans, the way humans were once upon a time," Troy says, "that doesn't have anything to do with me, it really doesn't. I keep trying to explain that to all of you."

The reptile says: "You're lying. You think of yourself as a human *all the time*, as the last human, and you think of everyone else you see as an *animal*. That's why you're not committed to Yoolia. Emotionally. That's why you're not committed to your children, that's why you're not even thinking of them as *your* children."

"You keep hoping to meet a real human some day, another last one, a beautiful woman who's like all the many women at the catfarm you grew up at. Women who were *designed* for you to find ravishing. That's what you imagine each time you close your eyes, each time you're with Yoolia, each time you're kissing her. One of *them* is what's in your head. You tell yourself it's a fantasy because they're all gone forever, and you try not to think about it, but you'd desert Yoolia without remorse if you met a human female. Because Yoolia is just an animal to you, that's all she is. You're an opportunist, that's what you've always been. That's why you're still alive. If you were a *good person* you'd be dead by now. *Long dead*."

"Wow, you're really creepy when you finally get going," Troy says, and he momentarily considers walking away. Even though it's dark everywhere around him and he doesn't know if he *could* get back. But he doesn't have to listen to *this*. "None of this is true," he says instead, deciding to challenge the animal, "and it's kind of nasty for you to say this to me."

Troy has been unnerved. Because this animal is speaking with such authority, because its voice is so *persuading*, and because it knows so much. But it's gotten this wrong, totally wrong. *That* means it takes chances, it makes guesses. Despite what it knows. Because the truth, Troy tells himself, is that he never thinks about the women at the catfarm. Because it hurts too much to think about them, about what he's lost.

He's not committed to Yoolia? Whatever could this *mean*? Commitment is about having choices. And so is being opportunistic. *Neither* of these words fits someone without options. Troy thinks about how he's just come down the stone steps, about how he was in total darkness, surrounded by animals he couldn't see. Who *smelled*. That's what it was like, things gripping him out of the dark, things that smell and make noise. And he almost says aloud: That's been my whole life since I've left the catfarm. Where exactly does choice come into a situation like this?

"Our *children*," Troy says instead, "I don't know how that's even possible. Between us, between a human and a wolf. It just makes no sense at all. Explain that and maybe I'll be impressed with

you.” The serpent snorts—it sounds a little like a duck Troy thinks—and it says: “*You*. You think you’re human. And what’s true is that you’re somewhat human, but you’re mostly contraption. Like everyone else around today. You haven’t the *pedigree* you think you have.” Troy doesn’t say anything.

### 37

“Cats like to hunt,” the chimera is saying. “That’s what you guys were bred for. Everyone on the catfarm. Not just to taste good but to give hungry cats a nice hearty challenge during the last hunt-down. A bit of nasty fun: a brisk workout before dinner. Because cats like their fresh-killed meat chock-full of adrenaline, because fearful meat is *tender*, because it tastes really *good*. And that’s why you have so many of the skills you have, that’s why those skills were so easy for you to acquire. Because you were bred to have them, maybe you were even biotech-ed to have them. No one knows for sure.”

“Biology is always tricky, it’s always hard to predict,” the serpent says, “that’s because sometimes a set of inherited traits spikes in unexpected ways and the resulting animal stands out, its genes enabling it to do something its designers didn’t see coming. Like you being just a little too clever. Or independent or something. But in a lot of ways you’re just standard-issue catfood. And you know this, somewhere deep in your mind you must know this. Because every time you fathered children, back at the farm, you always had five, right? Almost immediately she’d get pregnant, remember that? You used to be proud of your virility, I *know* you remember *that*. But it was just a sign that you’d been *customized*.”

“Customized by cats?” Troy asks. “By someone,” the chimera replies. “Because that kind of thing doesn’t happen by accident.”

“We know the atmosphere is different now,” the chimera says, “very different from when humans existed. We know the temperatures are different. Much much hotter than it used to be. We know that everything is so different that humans wouldn’t survive today, the original humans, the original animals. They’d suffocate in our air, they’d die from our heat, they’d poison themselves on anyone they ate. We know that everyone today is much more efficient than animals used to be. They digest faster, they digest almost *everything* they eat, and they excrete almost nothing. Comparatively speaking. They use less energy to move than animals used to, they produce less heat. Many animals, in fact, absorb heat from the air around them, some of them even absorb the *light* that hits them, and make energy from it. Animals couldn’t do these things once.” And now *all* the chimera’s eyes are looking straight at Troy. “You like to

tell yourself that you're not getting what animals are saying to you. To isolate yourself from them, to make yourself feel special, different, unique. *The last one*. But just because you don't get a word or two doesn't mean you don't get the *drift*. You're getting this just *fine*. You know *exactly* what I'm saying."

"There's ceramic composites in you," the reptile says next, "and 3D additive manufacturing too, *organic* 3D additive manufacturing. Not to mention sponge-like polymers that are soaked in liquid electrolytes. Just like everyone else around here, incidently—me included. These apparently weren't in animals once. You have an extremely adaptable bio-engineered microbiome. Which is kind of neat when you think about it. Because there's something that used to be called *illness* but not anymore, not really." And Troy is protesting in his head that he has no idea what the chimera is talking about, he's protesting in his head that he's not an artifact that someone else made, he's saying over and over again in his head that no one *made* him. "No one made me," he says aloud. The one thing he says aloud.

"Didn't say anyone did," the chimera responds, "but what's crucial for *you* to realize is that although you're a last something or other, you're not the last human, you're nothing like that. Because the last human closed its eyes and died out long before you born, maybe thousands of years before. We really don't know."

The chimera says: "You're designed optimally for reproductive success. With pretty much *anything* that shows up in the ballpark. You and the wolf, you're not as far apart as you think you are." And Troy is thinking: What the hell is a *ballpark*? is it another word for *ball game*? while the chimera is saying: "Your body is adaptable, far more than you want to realize. You *are* bigger than you were before your injury. After you healed. And that's because *you* are more like a wolf since your body got access to Yoolia's genetic material. It's totally opportunistic, your body. Just like *you* are."

And Troy is yelling at the reptile: "You're not getting it. I don't understand you, I really don't. I don't know what genetic material is. Or illness. Or being designed optimally. Or standard issue. Or ballparks. Or ceramic composites. Stop pretending that I understand what you're saying." And in his head he's thinking: I'm human, I'm totally human. All of us were. We were the last ones. This thing doesn't know what it's talking about, it's just guessing again.

"If everyone is an artifact then no one is alive," Troy says now. Because he's just thought of this. "Of course they're *alive*," the serpent says, and with scorn, "never said they weren't."

And now it sighs. Before rearing up and lightning-lunging at Troy, too rapidly for him to react, stabbing him in the chest with its fangs, the momentum of that giant face banging against Troy, violently throwing him to the ground. Then its face rises back up into the air above Troy, Troy

pressing his hands to the throbbing anguish in his chest. "Sorry about that," the serpent says, "I just got impatient. You wouldn't stop fighting me."

Time has passed. Maybe a lot of time. Troy thinks he has been somewhere, but he doesn't remember anything more. There is a voice in Troy's head now, speaking to him while his eyes are still closed. The chimera's voice. "Deer are coming," that voice is saying. "Soon." Troy thinks: What did you do to me? "I don't know," the voice says, "it depends on your clever body more than it depends on me, it depends on what your clever body does with what I've given it. Like with Yoolia." Troy thinks: I'm not going to die? "Of course not," the voice says, "open your eyes and stand up. Stop being so silly." And Troy does. Shakily.

He's standing up, looking at his chest where the small wound is, the one that hurt so much. He's feeling the skin around the tiny punctures because there's barely anything there. "That's one advantage of fangs," the voice says, the one in Troy's head. "And of having a body like yours. Because once upon a time there was scar tissue. But you've never heard of scars, right? That's because scars are extinct too." And Troy is thinking: Why would it be significant that I've never heard of scars?

"Go back," the voice says next, "you have things to do." "I can't see my way back," Troy says. "You can now," the voice in his head says, "just like you can hear me in your head. It's a symbolic thing: You were blind before, when you were coming to see me. But now you'll be able to see your way back up the stairs. It's just a way of convincing you that the new things you're seeing are real and are things you should take seriously. Even though none of them *are* real. Technically, I mean."

Troy speaks aloud to the reptile that's still in front of him. Deliberately using his voice: "It's you, it's really you. Talking to me. In my head." "Yep," the voice in his head says, "yep," the reptile says aloud a moment later, echoing what Troy has just heard in his head. "You expected to be able to do this," Troy says. "Not exactly," the voice responds, and the reptile does too, a few seconds later. "I was hoping that this would happen, just like I'm hoping you pick up on the webs next. But who knows? maybe you'll just grow scales all over your body and develop a taste for bathing in marshwater. Who can say with creatures like you? Anyway, let's get going, ok? Since I can talk to you in your head, you don't have to hang around *here* anymore."

But Troy asks another question aloud. First. Before he moves off. "The catfarm," he says, "why'd they shut down the catfarm? Where I grew up." And the voice in his head says, "Because the rooster had left town, of course." Troy doesn't know what a rooster is, he's only heard of chickens, but he realizes he knows what the reptile is getting at anyway. Just like the reptile expected.

Rusty and Troy and Yoolia are staring out through a space in the wall where a window once was. From their room. Through the mist and smoke that the atmosphere mostly is in the future. It lifts from the ground, thins out here and there, and everywhere there are deer. *Everywhere*. Because deer have discovered armies, because deer have discovered war. Or rediscovered these things anyway, learned that this is what humans did once. And so deer have decided they can do it too. Rusty has just finished saying that he didn't know that there were that many deer *alive* in the world. That this is pretty frightening.

Rusty adds: "There are a couple of cougers down there too. See? Over there, and over there too. That's unbelievable. And look. Ducks, a lot of ducks. We already knew about the ducks, but cougers? Maybe the loner cat we saw yesterday is down there too, maybe it was some kind of *spy*. I can't tell these animals apart enough to be sure. Things are changing faster than anyone ever expected."

"Satellites," Troy says suddenly, "they've activated a satellite. The deer. That's how they found the building, that's how they found us." "Eh?" Rusty says, turning sharply and looking at Troy. Yoolia is staring at him too. "In my head," Troy says, "I can hear the chimera's voice in my head. This is what *it* said." And Troy adds: "What's a satellite?" Which makes Rusty laugh. "It's a kind of tracking device. In the sky," he says to Troy. Which doesn't help at all.

Yoolia points towards the sea of deer. "What are they doing down there? What are they wearing? She's pointing at some deer that are dressed in peculiar-looking black cloths.

If we were there—in the future—we would have thought that they looked like men on horseback, ones wearing black robes and hoods for a ceremonial ritual of some sort. That's what they would have looked like to us. At least from a certain distance.

"I think they're *executing* the chickens," Rusty says after a while, staring hard through the mists, "because they think the chickens are *traitors*." "The *chickens* are traitors?" Yoolia says, "*those* chickens are traitors? the ones that can barely think?" And now she's shaking her head. "Deer," she says now, "deer are just *bonkers*."

Rusty says: "They're executioners, that's what those cats are." Because now they're watching the deer in the robes watch the cougers kill, dismember, and then eat the chickens. One of the cougers is bored or not hungry, it's disdainfully kicking around a small chickenhead with its foot. Some of the deer are averting their eyes, but the ones in the robes aren't. Rusty says: "it's a nice job for cougers, a kind of deal they've apparently made with the deer." "Then they're

torturers too, those cats,” Yoolia says, “because cats love it when they get to torture something before they eat it.” Rusty nods, saying, “first ducks, and now cats.”

“They’ll be in the building. Soon,” Troy says, echoing the voice in his head. “That’s what the chimera is telling me. And the rest of the animals are hiding in rooms. Which won’t help them at all. The chimera can’t communicate with any of you because the deer are swarming all over the webs around here.” Troy adds: “For some reason the chimera can talk to me. Without the deer noticing. This is me talking, not the chimera. Don’t trust the ducks. That’s the chimera talking again.”

Rusty says: “What do we do now?”

Before Troy has a chance to respond, to repeat to Rusty what the chimera has in mind, Yoolia has taken his hand and she’s saying: “Before it’s too late, I need to tell you this. That I wanted to grow old together with you. With all our children around us. With our grandchildren too.” Troy says: “Everything keeps happening so quickly that I haven’t had a chance to think. About anything.” And the way Yoolia looks at him, he realizes he’s said the wrong thing to her.

## 39

Troy isn’t on Earth anymore. That’s how it seems to him: that he’s up in the sky above it all, that he’s become clouds or air or something, that he’s mist or smoke, that he no longer has a body. *Stay invisible, that’s your most important power*, the chimera had told him. Repeatedly. Before it died. And he’s done it—become invisible the way that haze is invisible, the way that clouds are invisible. So that whatever clouds really are, we can only see them as *clouds*. Even when we *know* they’re *not*.

Anyone who sees Troy now, even if what they see looks rather Troyish, they’ll think he’s just some of the neighborhood *weather*, they won’t realize what they’re really looking at. Camouflage. That’s a word that Troy didn’t know before the chimera told him what it meant. Just before the chimera died.

Because Troy felt the chimera die, he knew exactly when it happened. Everything around him suddenly black, the glowing rock-lights by which he’d been guiding blind Yoolia and Rusty through the tunnel, they winked out, the augmented-reality app *shut down*, whatever the hell that was. He was holding both their hands tight, trying to reassure them at the same time, saying: “this way, we’re almost there.” Underneath the building, underneath the Ivory Tower. Following the instructions the chimera kept playing over and over loud in his head.



Yoolia had stayed furious with him. Despite the danger they were clearly in, a danger that would have distracted anyone else but *her*. (Fearlessness is a *vice*, it just is.) Yoolia pulling her hand away even though she couldn't see anything, shoving at him whenever he got too close, Rusty saying, "what's wrong with you two? do you really have to get into a fight *now*?" Yoolia sulkily moving in a different direction—audibly banging into a tunnel wall. After that she let him hold her hand again, to guide her, but then she dug her nails deep into his palm so that he yelped in pain, Rusty saying, "what's happening? are you alright? are we being attacked?"

They were escaping. For a little while, anyway. And then they were surrounded by animals after it went dark. Deer probably, because he could hear their hoofs beating the ground. Ducks for sure. Because he went unconscious when something stabbed him twice from below. While still hearing Yoolia and Rusty roaring like wolves. Pointlessly. Because they were in the dark and it doesn't matter how large or dangerous you sound if you can't see your enemy but they can see you.

And now Troy is floating above it all. Wherever it is that he *really* is. He doesn't want to know yet, where he really is. *So this is what it's like*, he's thinking. *The web, the clouds. Whatever they call it.*

He wonders: *why don't I think this is an hallucination?* Because, after all, it *could be*. He thinks: *why did I trust the chimera?* Because of its *voice*, that's why, because it controls other animals with that voice, especially when it's beaming that voice straight into someone's head. Because, regardless of what it sounds like, the chimera was just an animal with motivations and interests, just like any other animal. It was just a big snake sitting in a lot of muddy water, fantasizing about how important it was. Playing games with any head it got into. Power, Troy is thinking now, it's all about power. Like a game the chimera was playing, like the other animals were its toys. Or its avatars. Moving them around in a little world that it was controlling. And then: *It's a fight, I got in the middle of a fight between the chimera and some deer that were invading the chimera's little world.* A fight that Troy had no stake in, a fight over something that didn't have anything to do with him.

He's thinking: the animals all thought I was human, the ones at the banquet conference, the ones at the thinktank. Which was run by the chimera. Or something like that. The chimera didn't think I was human. So the chimera was either lying to me or it was lying to *all* the other animals. For some reason. So none of this makes sense.

Troy thinks: *Whenever I get a chance to slow down, to think about things, none of it makes any sense.* But of course, whenever he slows down, thinks about things, he's been poisoned by a duck or wounded by deer. Or he's hallucinating and totally out of his mind like he is now. Which probably doesn't put him in the best position to think clearly about anything.

If the chimera knew deer were coming, then the chimera knew *why* they were coming. Because Rusty knew that. So was the chimera trying to save itself? How? And why did Rusty want to bring him and Yoolia to the university to begin with? Was it because the chimera already knew about Troy, because it already knew that he was different, that he *wasn't* human?

But then, why let all the animals think he *was* human, if he's not? What possible reason would the chimera have for deluding the other animals about this, what motivation would the chimera have for lying to *him* about not being human if he was? Troy thinks: Could this just be an honest difference of opinion? *That* makes him laugh—somehow he's laughing inside, even without a body. And he thinks: the chimera let the animals think I was human because it's better for *me*, because it's *power* if other animals think you're human. He argues with this thought: it's not power, it's just attention, it's just a lot of furry wildheads turning around to gape at you. Being *noticed* by other animals, that's *never* a good thing.

What did the chimera *want* with him, anyway, why did the chimera want to change *him*? And these thoughts respond: the chimera intended to make a sort of descendent of itself, it had developed abnormal parenting urges. *Or* it wanted to mentor someone new, someone different from the other animals. Maybe it was bored and needed a new thrill at the end of its life.

Are these words that I know now? *Avatar? Mentor?* That's what Troy asks himself next.

*And, anyway, how does the chimera know what it knows?* Rusty described the chimera as a combination of animals, it was supposed to have access to *all* the webs. But that's not enough to enable it to get everything right. Because nobody gets *everything* right. Except God.

Why trust the webs, anyway? And anyway, if he's on a web now, if that's what this is, it doesn't seem very useful. Why is floating around above it all particularly informative? How are you supposed to *learn* anything this way?

It's like a landscape. What he's seeing from above. Or like multiple landscapes clumsily patched together by something that doesn't know what it's doing. And Troy is looking down on everything there is, that's how it feels. Perhaps this is how God sees things. Troy hasn't thought about God for a very long time. Which strikes him as interesting.

If some of us were still around in the future, if we could experience what Troy is going through, it would remind us (just a little) of looking down from an airplane or a rocket. Except without the airplanes or the rockets. Troy can't be reminded of this because he hasn't these concepts. He thinks instead that this must be how things look to vltures. While they're peacefully coasting on lazy air-currents, contented and meditative, while they're digesting someone they've recently eaten. Or maybe this is how things look to satellites, whatever those are. Or to a

leaping wolf. For a moment, anyway, at the height of the wolf's arc through the sky. During the pausetime, just before the wolf starts to fall to Earth.

Satellites. This is something that the chimera told him about before it died. That the deer located the university by activating a satellite, maybe for the first time in a thousand years. This is a bad thing, whatever a satellite is. Because it's another advantage that deer have over everyone else.

Deer want to be the next humans, that's what the chimera told him. *You* have to stop them. Because it's tragic to be human, even the next human. And it's even more tragic to be alive on Earth while humans are alive on Earth too.

The dinosaurs, the chimera said to Troy—in Troy's head—they had it really good. For millions and millions and millions of years. Not like the rhinos. Or the tigers. Not like the *original* rhinos and tigers.

This stuff about dinosaurs having it so good for millions and millions and millions of years is what the chimera was saying to Troy. Interrupting its own instructions about where to go in the tunnel. While he was trying to escape with Rusty and Yoolia, while Yoolia was growling at him and shoving him *hard*. That chimera, once it got started, it just couldn't shut itself up. *Dinosaurs*. Who needed to hear about dinosaurs *now*?

Troy still doesn't really understand what the chimera meant, what dinosaurs even are, he just knows that deer are dangerous now. He doesn't understand what the chimera expects *him* to do about this, what the chimera thought he *could* do about this.

Troy has realized that he isn't at all like ordinary mist, he's different. He's like mist that moves under its own power—he's like that unusual mist that can make choices. So he starts to move closer to Earth.

When something pointed and sharp pokes at him and he has to open his eyes.

## 40

It's a deer. Poking at him through the cage bars. With a stick. A really big deer. And Troy realizes that he can smell this deer, that he can smell rotting vegetable, an ugly reek blowing at him from the thing's mouth or thick-oozing out of its sweat. Troy opens his eyes, sits up rapidly, and

then stands. It's not like he's waking himself up, that's not the sensation. It's more like he's changing *realities*, orienting himself to a different *world*.

He's in a cage again, but much smaller than the first one—it's a cage that can be carried, he realizes. It seems customized to *nearly* fit him, to allow him to sleep uncomfortably on the ground, but only if he curls up a bit, bends his legs or twists his back. And he can stand *almost* fully-straight because the ceiling of the cage is placed just high enough to make him crouch slightly all the time. He's to *physically* remain aware that he's trapped, that's how this thing seems designed. Or maybe it doesn't reveal planning at all, maybe they're just making do with a piece of junk they found someplace or other. Or stole from a vulture hoard. Since animals don't really make things.

He looks around and out through the bars. The light is dim, night is coming on, twilight is already everywhere. The deer in front of him is wearing something on its head, *crown* is the word, a gold crown. And above the crown, but part of it, an intricate branching of white bone. *Antlers*. A word Troy doesn't know. Not yet, anyway. It's wearing robes too, purple cloths draped over its shoulders with stitched red patterns of different animal-shapes—that's what it looks like the designs are—falling cleatedly to just below its broad horse-haunches. Deer are *six-limbed*, four strong horse legs and two nearly-human arms. They're quite powerful animals when you get past their famous cowardice. What's striking Troy, for the first time it seems, isn't that deer have six limbs, it's the *contrast* between deer and other animals. It's that deer are different from other animals in this way, that they're different from humans too, whatever *they* think.

This is what Troy is also thinking. *Costume*. That the deer is wearing a costume. For a *performance* that the deer is giving.

Deer don't really change shape, not anymore they don't. They're like cats that way, but unlike cats because they apparently think they're human enough already. *Neo-humans*, they think they're the new *neo-humans*. That phrase has popped uninvited into Troy's head the way new words unveil suddenly in his mind now. Words and phrases he's sure he's never heard but that he can use correctly anyhow. Even though he doesn't understand them. Because you don't understand words or phrases you've never heard, you just don't if you're *normal*. There's no chimera, not anymore, and yet this keeps happening to him anyway. Like with *antlers*, that he suddenly knows that word, he knows that's what the deer is wearing on its head, that once upon a time deer grew *antlers* on their heads *naturally*. Some of them did, anyway.

Its face, the deer's face, it isn't human. It's a lot less human, anyway, than a wolf's face. When the wolf is in human form. Deerfaces seem weirdly designed to be mostly snout, the other features an afterthought. So that its long face is pulled out in the direction of wherever it's

looking at, the face front-ending in a pair of big inflated nostrils and a tiny mouth on the snout's underside. The deer's upper body is quite humanish though, a human trunk, a human chest and human shoulders. Or so it seems. Troy isn't totally sure because of the robes the deer is draped in. The other deer in the distance, their upper bodies look humanish too, naked upper bodies, no robes. Humans sitting on four-footed animals of some sort and wearing these weird animal-head masks. In the dusk they look like this. From a distance when there isn't much light.

The deer's face is really ugly, up close anyway—Troy keeps coming back to that repulsive face, he can't stop *studying* it, *trying to figure it out*: why would anyone want to design a face this way? Narrow and long, big quick-darting close-together eyes, almost almond shaped. Not human-looking at all, not attractive either. Entirely covered in short brown hair, the whole weird face, with two long floppish ears on the top of its small snouthead, ones that are pointing straight up at the moment, and opening wide in his direction. Ears almost as long as the rest of its head. Not like a wolf's face, when the wolf is in human form. Wolves in human form look kind of cute. By comparison to this thing, anyway.

The other deer are quite far away from the cage. Some of them are trotting around, some of them are standing stiff, their floppy ears poking straight up in the air like they're listening for something. Sniffing at the air too. And structures in the distance, Troy can barely see them, they look like tattered sheets strung up on poles. Tents maybe. The other deer are out of earshot, or maybe they just seem to be. It's hard to tell with animals when they're *really* out of earshot. Because everyone's senses are so different. There's no friendly wolf in an adjoining cage like the first time. Which strikes Troy as a very bad thing. He's thinking about Yoolia and Rusty. About what's happened to them.

"Humans did things like this," the deer says suddenly. And it pauses long enough for Troy to say, "Like what?" "Making cages for one another," the animal responds, "cages too small to stand in and too small to sit in. Eternally squatting for years. The prisoner. So that the caged human's body became distorted, permanently warped. So that when these humans were finally freed, after a dozen years or so, they had to scuttle along the ground like crabs for the rest of their lives, their legs permanently bent, their backs permanently crooked." The deer pauses again, maybe it's smiling at Troy. Troy can't tell what its face is *really* doing, what the shape that tiny mouth is taking now means to convey to him, whether the skin that's now crinkling around those peculiar giant eyes is communicating laughter or something else. He doesn't respond. His cage, anyway, isn't like *that*. Not yet, anyway. "Cute," the deer adds finally, "it's cute, it's clever and it's mean. I like it. There's a lot to admire in creatures that can think up things like that."

We didn't *all* think up things like that, Troy says. Quietly in his head.

"You guys tamed the other animals," the deer says now, "just like us with the cougars. And the ducks." *Ah hell, Troy thinks to himself, me and my big mouth. Because of all the Yoolia that's in me now.*

"It's not the same thing," Troy says softly to the deer. Deliberately. To make it twist its ears further in his direction, lean in a little, move closer to the cage. So that it can hear what he's saying: "Animals weren't smart then," Troy almost whispers. And as Troy wonders if he really knows this or if it's just more of his mother's mythology, he hears himself adding, "you can't ever tame a smart animal, not really. It'll wait awhile, and then get you from behind. Where someone like you is the most edible." Troy is thinking: *it's hard for me to be scared of deer, that's why I'm talking this way. Because I'd never do this with a wolf or a cat. Not even with a boar.* Not from inside a cage he wouldn't.

"We haven't decided what to do with you," the deer says after a moment. Troy thinks he's shaken the deer with what he's said, but he's not sure because he can't read that face. "Except for your trial, of course," the deer adds. "Don't make us do you in prematurely." And Troy realizes *we* doesn't mean *we deer*, *us* doesn't mean *us deer*, they just mean *that* deer, the deer in front of him. Mr. Kingdeer. Troy wants to laugh, but he keeps his face pokered. I really *am* more wolf than I used to be, he thinks, because this temptation to laugh in someone's face is new. That's more dangerous than anything, laughing at someone who actually *is* dangerous. Only a wolf can afford to be tempted that way, and not even a wolf. Sometimes.

Something strange happens as the deer keeps talking to him. About how "we" are conflicted about whether to punish you for running with the wolves, with those monster-predators *when you know better. Because you're a human.* About whether we should generously pardon you because you were involuntarily abducted. And because, now that we've freed you, you want to join our cause, you want to be our *pet*. Because you're so grateful for our mercy.

Here's the strange thing: A changing image, a film really, flashing before Troy's eyes, an hallucinatory flicker that flash-removes what's in front of him. Toggling back and forth: one reality and then the second. It's him standing there, that's what he flashingly sees. Instead of the silly deer, it's himself staring at *himself*. Like in a mirror, except not reversed. This is what we'd think if we were there. But Troy doesn't think of mirror images. Because he's seen a reflection of himself only once or twice in his entire life. It changes your view of things when there are mirrors everywhere.

What he's seeing. Intermittently: A caged Troy looking straight into his eyes. What he's feeling: Mouth-watering fear, fear that makes you drool if you let it. That's what's inside of him, *but it's not his*. The Troy watching him shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the other, exactly in time with how *he's* doing it. The Troy he's watching, the one watching him, is bending his body just a

little so that he can stretch his neck straight. Because the cage is too small. This Troy is doing just what *he's* doing, moving in immediate congruence with him.

This Troy is distorted, and so is his world. The colors are all different there. It's like looking through glass that changes color—that's what we'd think if we were there in the future, if we were experiencing what Troy is experiencing. Something else is distorted too: somehow Troy's lower body is too thin, below his waist it looks like something is missing, like *a lot* is missing. And the Troy's face, it seems too wide too flat, weirdly roundish somehow, it's peculiar-looking, ugly and repulsive. Somehow it's all forefronted mouth and big teeth and gigantic lips, somehow those features are standing out from the rest of his receded face *without anything looking any different*.

Him made weird. Visibly and invisibly. This is the moving image flicking in and out of his vision, first the kingdeer then the repulsive Troy, back and forth, over and over. Along with that grinding claustrophobic fear flickering present and absent in Troy's mind at the same time, a mind-obliterating fear that Troy has never experienced before. Strange new colors, the ineffable sensation that somehow everything in the other Troy's world is nauseatingly disproportionate, too wide, too long, too big. *Everything is off-kilter, everything is all twisted up*.

Troy thinks: I'm flicker-seeing flicker-feeling things that the deer *looking at me* is seeing and feeling. And this means, Troy doesn't understand why he knows this, that the kingdeer is projecting its experience onto the deerweb. For everyone else to see and hear and feel too. The other deer, anyway. That Troy is somehow picking stuff up from the deerweb without any of them realizing that he's doing this. At the moment, anyway.

Troy feels something new, something he's sure he's never felt before in his life. Pity. For the deer in front of him. That it has to feel this way all the time.

Pity. And nausea. Together they're making Troy sick, together they're making him bend over and almost retch, the deer in front of him asking, "Are you alright?" Troy saying in response exactly what he knows this animal needs to hear, this animal that's panicked sick with fear of him. "I'm kind of in awe of what I'm seeing," Troy tells the deer. And he feels a glow start to grow. Inside of the other animal.

Troy has realized what the rotting vegetable odor is, what he's smelling in the animal's sweat. It's fear. From the animal's stomach, from the animal's viscera. And he thinks: How could the chimera *not* manipulate other animals? Troy is finally *wise*, he finally knows what it's like inside someone else's head. It's dizzying, nauseating, it's warped, it's wrong, it's weird, it makes you sick. If we were there, *in Troy's head*, we'd think: the geometry of this world is making me carsick, seasick, airsick. *The world I'm in is making me vomit*.

Troy thinks: Maybe not all of this is being projected onto the deerweb, maybe this deer isn't showing off *everything* it's feeling to the other deer on the web. Maybe he's penetrated the deer's inner firewall. This thought strikes Troy as odd, as possibly a thought that's not his.

Troy can't read deer-faces, he can't see their emotions by how their faces move. The deer standing in front of him doesn't look frightened at all, that's what Troy is thinking now. But maybe this was true with every animal—but he never knew it because he couldn't do what he can do now.

Troy manages to ask, through his nausea, through his vicarious panic and fright: "The people I care about, the wolves I was with when I was captured, where are they?" He says this to see if it triggers images and feelings in the deer's head. And what he seems to see now is a film of an *execution*, flicker-images of a pair of trussed wolves being murdered by cougars. Deer standing around in robes to make it official.

Troy is taken aback. Because this is a memory, or something like a memory. That he's seeing in the deer's mind.

The deer says, and Troy *feels* its elation: "It's really too bad you're showing concern for the creatures who abducted and raped you." "That's the story you're telling about me?" Troy asks, still bent over, still looking at the ground, still flicker-flashing nausea. "That's the story your attorney is telling about you," the deer responds, "it'll go over well with the masses, it'll help popularize my forthcoming pardon." "The masses," Troy says. "My subjects," Mr. Kingdeer responds. *Tyranny*, Troy thinks, and he knows he's using this word for the first time. Deer have discovered tyranny. Deer, he thinks, using a wolf proverb, deer are just *sheep*.

The images. Troy tries to *recognize* the wolves in what he's flicker-seeing. But they don't look like *Yoolia and Rusty*. Troy is bad at distinguishing wolves, especially when they're in wolf-form, but these two he's sure he'd recognize. He's *not* sure if the images in the deer's head are *supposed to be* Yoolia and Rusty, maybe the deer is thinking about other wolves that it's executed recently, maybe it's thinking about its future plans for Yoolia and Rusty. But they *could be* Rusty and Yoolia, it *could be* that he doesn't recognize them because *the deer* sees wolves in such a distorted way. "You executed them?" Troy asks finally.

"Wolves," the deer says. And then after a moment: "you can't tame wolves. No one can." That's an evasion, Troy thinks, that's not an answer, and he decides it's a reason to think they're still alive. Until the deer adds: "It had to die, that famous one. Your mate. Because it was pregnant, because it was going to make more of those monsters if we didn't kill it first." Troy starts to sob. Inside. Where the deer can't see it.



In his head, he hears words. *Headlines* deer call them, because they're in everyone's *heads*: images and phrases that travel really fast on the deerweb, short terse ones: *A rabid mad dog in life but a cowering rat in her last brutal moments. It's time to mourn all her victims.* It's typical deer rhetoric. It's only now that Troy sobs aloud. Because he can't control himself any longer.

## 41

They leave him alone. For several days. While he lays curled up, motionless on the cage floor. And it's only after several days, it's only after food has arrived, that Troy realizes how completely *ravenous* he's become. He can barely wait for the two deer to finish pushing a small *bucket* through the cage bars.

They seem thrilled to be doing this, one of them audibly saying to the other how cool it is to be feeding a human *breakfast*.

It's apparently a *soup*, warm and greenish, thick and viscous, clearly made from vegetables of some kind, soft rounded pieces of plantflesh in it, red and blue stringy bits he doesn't recognize. Suspended and unmoving in sweet-and-sour goop. At first Troy isn't paying attention to what he's swallowing, he's not even aware of its taste. He's faint and dizzy and obsessive with hunger and thirst, he bends his head into the bucket, gulps down the thick pseudo-liquid as fast as he can.

He looks up only after a while. There's one deer near the cage now, watching him eat. He stares at its chest, trying to figure out what he's seeing. He realizes the deer is female, that it's a *doe*, that those are breasts she's wearing on her upper body, exposed breasts. It's because they're shaped funny, it's because they're so angular and longish, that's why he didn't recognize what they were at first. Troy is surprised that her upper body is entirely hairless and white, except for her furry snoutface. That's unusual, he thinks, for a deer anyway. She must be some kind of mutation. But now that he knows *those* are actual breasts he's distracted by them, he's become distracted because they're exposed and available to look at. He takes a breath, his hunger and thirst only now starting to fade away. He says, "What?"

"Whenever we talk, whatever we talk about," the doe responds, "it's private, it's just between you and me. Attorney-client confidentiality. So you can confide in me, you can be entirely confident in me." She adds: "I understand that you're a primitive, but I also understand that it's not your fault, that you were brought up a prisoner in a catbox. And that after you escaped you

were trapped by wolves. That you've always lived among depraved murderers—ones that brutally eat other animals alive."

She says: "We're assuming on your behalf that humans are intrinsically civilized, we're assuming on your behalf that you understand what I'm telling you, that you understand the distinction between right and wrong. I'm assuming you *cook* because that way you distance yourself from the act of murder. Even if this is something you don't realize yet."

Troy thinks: *Catbox*. That must be what deer call catfarms. Maybe because deer have farms themselves, maybe because they don't want their farms associated with something *cats* do.

She says: "I'm making a legal point. That you have a presumptive right that you can rely on in court, that you have a presumptive right that I can rely on to defend you. Because you're *human*." Troy looks directly into the eyes in her snoutface, trying to make sense of the movements that face is making. She says: "You *do* understand what I'm saying to you, right? Please say something to me to indicate that you understand."

Troy nods. Then he says, trying to be pointed about it: "You guys have me in a cage." "It's for your own good," she tells him, "it's because it's going to be very hard for you to become civilized. Perhaps it's beyond you. But it's only by learning to be civilized that you can be set free. That's why I'm here to help you, it's part of my *job* to evaluate whether this is possible, it's part of my *job* to make notes on your progress."

She says: "Our society is complicated, not like it is with wolves, certainly not like it is with cats. It will take years for you to begin to understand us, years before you begin to appreciate the benefits of living among us. I want to start you on that process of understanding. To the extent that you can."

There is no flicker-seeing now. It's just ordinary reality, it's just him and her, him behind bars with a bucket of soup on his lap that he's been slurping out of. And she's standing outside of his cage, shifting back and forth on her big horse-legs, talking earnestly, her large and distracting angular breasts sticking out towards him, quivering slightly as she moves back and forth. That repulsive snoutface making expressions that he can't read, those inscrutable eyes crinkling and uncrinkling without meaning anything to him. Troy thinks: No flicker-seeing means she's telling the truth, that she's not projecting anything onto the deerweb. *That* means she's telling the truth about their conversation just being between the two of them. And then he has a new thought that sickens him.

Deer don't cook. No animal cooks. Soup isn't possible without cooking, soup is an *intrinsically* cooked thing. Troy doesn't feel well all of a sudden, Troy feels kind of nauseous. "This," he says, "this stuff I just ate. How was it made?"

"I made it myself," she tells him. "You made it. How?" Troy asks.

The doe takes a breath, and the lurch in Troy's stomach tells him he knows why she's hesitating. She says: "We know you can't digest most plants, even though humans are technically omnivores, even though they're officially omnivores. But *omnivore* is a misdescription of what humans are really capable of, what they can really digest."

She looks at him. "And?" Troy says, "So?" But he already knows what's coming, he can tell from the retching sensation he's suppressing. "A lot of love went into that soup," she tells him. "You guys chewed shit up to make this," Troy says, interrupting her. Because he can't stand the delay any longer, "you guys spit up into this. It's saliva, this goo, that's what it is, that's what it mostly is." "Mine," she says, "it's mostly my saliva. And a little of my stomach acid too." Troy audibly represses a gag, his esophagus spasming.

"It's one of our normal intimacy behaviors," she tells him, "one of our most important ones. It's how we get to know one another, it's how we let one another know we *want* to be intimate. It's a lot like kissing except that it happens between people who want to be friends too, not just lovers. It's our way of saying: I really care about you, I'm your friend, I love you. This is how we show our feelings, by feeding our friends plants that we've masticated, by digesting food for one another. You can't be insincere with someone after you've chewed a meal together. Personal bonding, personal intimacy, it's genuine when people let this happen between them."

Of course Troy feels like retching, of course he can't stop gagging. The doe sees this, despite his trying to suppress his reactions, despite the fact that he hasn't actually thrown up. And he thinks, as he keeps repressing the gagging and belching: of course they've killed Rusty and Yoolia. Because what would deer do with captive wolves, what would they *feed* them?

"I feel for you," the doe tells him now, "because civilization is never easy for outsiders, surely it's nearly impossible for anyone brought up among murdering monsters. You're going to have to be brave, braver than you've ever been in your life."

*Brave.* That's rich coming from a deer.

Troy has been laying on the ground of his cage. On his back, his knees slightly bent. He's been deliberately breathing in and out slowly. Deep slow breaths, thinking: blue water, nice pond, **nice water**. To distract himself. So that he doesn't think about what he's eaten, so that he doesn't *actually* vomit. Because *this soup* is apparently all there's going to be. Until he escapes. Or until he starves to death. Troy is thinking that he *hates* deer. That this alone is sufficient for hating them, this deliberate humiliation. That he'll never have any problem again. Killing a deer and eating it. While it's still alive even, while it's watching him out of those big ugly crinkly eyes.

Eating *her*, for example. And this rage is helping Troy just a little, it's helping to stop him from throwing up. It's helping him *not* to think about Yoolia.

Revenge. Revenge for Yoolia. And Rusty. He's not thinking about that, he's refusing to think about that.

Instead Troy remembers being spit at, he remembers that deer took their turn spitting at him too. That deer were *there*. And so that's what spittle *really* means to animals, it isn't love and sweetness, it isn't this crap she's been feeding him about loving intimacy, about civilization. It's nasty, what deer are doing, what she's deliberately done to him. They're being creepy this way because they hate him. He thinks: it's fear, they fear him. All the time. They can't help it, *that's* what's going on. Resentment. Because of that constant fear.

Troy has never killed a deer in his life. Because there were no deer at the catfarm, or in the terrain around it. But he'll change that now. If he ever gets a chance. That's how he feels at the moment.

The doe is still talking to him, she's still trying to gain his confidence. "I've watched everything I could about you," she's telling him, "On the deerweb. So I feel I understand you better than anyone else, maybe even better than yourself." *Oh Christ*, Troy is thinking, this is so *deluded*. But he can't talk back, he can't shout at her to go away. He's sure he'll vomit if he does, if he even tries to sit up. That's how he feels now.

"You have no web," she says next, "I'm just verifying this. It's important, an important part of your defense, the extent of your isolation, the extent of your ignorance, the extent of your vulnerability." Troy manages to nod his head. "You're a rock star," she says now, "I hope you know this." Troy nods again.

*Rock star*. This is one of those words that deer use. To mean that someone is famous. It's from a children's myth: That once upon a time there were burning rocks that lived in the sky. And that these burning rocks were famous because anyone on earth, wherever they were, would see them whenever they looked up.

"This is one of the reasons we'll be able to get you off, avoid the death penalty," the doe is telling Troy. "Because deer everywhere are fascinated with you, because wherever you are and whatever you're doing, you create fame without realizing it. Which is so appealing to deer, how modest you are about your visibility, how *innocent* you are about your fame. That deer everywhere want to *watch* you."

She *doesn't* say: deer are obsessed with being famous, they're obsessed with anyone they think is famous. She doesn't say: I fought to be the one to represent you, I chewed my way up the

legal hierarchy to be the only one *allowed* to represent you. She doesn't say: Even though you disgust me more than anything I've ever seen in my life, even though I was there too, spitting at you. That time when I saw you in a cage where you belonged. She doesn't say: I want to represent you at your trial because I'll become famous if I do, because everyone will know who I am. Forever.

She's already becoming famous, and she knows it. Because word is spreading that she's the one who's *feeding* Troy.

She doesn't say this to Troy because she'd never try to explain something this sophisticated to a murdering primitive, she could never be that honest with a *creature*. But she also doesn't explain it because she doesn't realize how ambitious she is. Maybe because she was born with a hairless torso, maybe that's why. Or maybe it's not her mutation at all, maybe it's that all deer are ambitious for fame. Deer are very complex. Like all the animals in the future.

The doe is thinking about what she's seen on the web, the *rape* at the beaverdam. Maybe it's not *technically* rape, according to the letter of the law, but surely it occurred under duress. You can tell by the strange expressions the human was making. That he was trapped by something that was imposing its will on him. How could he not be confused about his experience, a primitive like him, just like a child would be if an adult was doing the same thing to *it*. Like some deer are, when they commit suicide, wandering out in the wilderness on their own and throwing themselves in front of the first predator that comes along. Surely it's not at all the way it appears to be: even if someone *thinks* they're doing something voluntary. She knows that some deer don't agree with her, maybe a lot of them. About the human. That some deer are cynical about humans, maybe about themselves too, because they describe humans as the *opportunistic species*.

The doe knows how complicated psychology can be, any animal's psychology. She also knows how to *study* what's on the web—so few deer do, so many deer just believe everything they see. She knows that you have to be careful if you want to distinguish what's real from what isn't, what's been *doctored* from what hasn't. In order to understand what an animal's expression *really* means when you see it on the web, even if it isn't what it looks like.

She really does expect the human's trial to go well, she really does think he won't be executed. Because she's perfect for him, no one could defend a human better. And because she knows the kingdeer already has big plans for him, that he's already partial to forgiving the human. Because humans make great *advertising copy*.

It's sad, really. Because he won't ever be set free. No way. Civilization has its limits.

It's been about two months. Deer have been coming around to his cage in small groups. Most of them only gaping for a moment or two, making shocked high-pitched barking noises, then running away. Because they're too shy to talk to him, because they're too scared. Troy always senses overwhelming fear whenever deer are nearby, he's sure deer don't realize how scared they always are, how they're always projecting their fear onto the deerweb whenever they project anything at all. Because fear is what they naturally feel *all the time*. Deer probably don't even notice it in other deer, because it's so normal for them, even the aggressive deer.

Troy senses fear everywhere, except in his defense attorney. Not because she's different, he's sure of that, but because when she's near him, she's deliberately not projecting anything at all onto the web. Attorney-client confidentiality. She's very professional that way.

Despite their fear, there are deer around his cage, day and night. Either guarding him or gawking at him or both. They do it together, clumped in small groups. Troy has never seen a deer alone by his cage, except for his defense attorney. And the kingdeer that first time.

They're always licking at one another, these deer in groups. It's a behavioral tic they exhibit whenever they're nervous, it's probably how they calm one another: *I love you, my friend. Don't worry about that monster, I'm here to protect you*, and only afterwards the afterthought: *anyhow, it's trapped in a cage*. They're constantly slobbering on one another, Troy thinks to himself, every chance they get. All this has come not to matter: he can just close his eyes and be elsewhere. Where they can't see him.

He sometimes hears actual conversation in the real world: One deer solicitously whisper-barking into another deer's big ear, licking the side of its snoutface at the same time: "Will they be able to help him?" The other one apparently shaking its head sadly: *Murder-addiction, it's so hard to cure*.

Some rabbits too, and when one of them tries to spit at him, deer hustle the snarling thing away from the cage. Quickly. Troy thinks that's interesting, that deer have changed their minds about this, or that these deer have, anyway. No spitting at the caged human allowed. Because that wouldn't be *civilized*. There are also ducks. Later. They're clearly imitating the rabbit, not really spitting at *Troy* but trying to mime rabbit-rage, trying to get it *right*, trying out *snarls* on one another and on him. It's hard for a duck to *snarl* because a snarl is a low rippled noise—if it's done *right*. And it's hard to compose a low rippled noise out of sharp staccatoed *quacks*. It takes a lot of *practice*.

The nearby deer are backing away a little, because of the weird sounds. Even though it all looks pretty silly.

Troy wonders about that first time, about whether it was the ducks that caged him or whether it was some other kind of animal. Because now he's wondering if ducks are really capable of that kind of organization. Ducks took him down for sure, he knows that. And what happened afterwards, what he thinks happened afterwards: A duck nest or something. That the wolf had invaded, that he thinks was near the cages, although he's not really sure. Ducks hadn't taken a turn spitting at him. He remembers that well.

Animals are pretty mysterious. What they're actually like when they're among themselves. Troy is having trouble believing that animals were once human, that *all of us* were once one kind of animal.

The wolf he met when he was in a cage that first time, it talked sarcastically about how the rabbits thought the wolf (and him, Troy) were pure evil, that they were *conspiring* together. And then he thinks, keeping the sadness away: *that was Yoolia* telling me this, that was Yoolia being totally wolfish. He's surprised at this, that he had to think—like it was an insight or something—that *Yoolia* was that wolf. And then there was that cat at the banquet conference saying how it didn't get all the moral outrage, that it didn't get why everyone was taking it's being a *cat* so personally. We're all hypocrites, Troy thinks, every last one of us.

Mr. Kingdeer has visited him *several times*. To have a personal chat or two with him. In public, surrounded by other listening-in deer, the bossdeer lecturing Troy grandly on all the different things he has to atone for. "You have to atone for clothes," that's what he's telling Troy today. "For clothes," Troy says. "For *inventing* clothes," the deer explains. "For *inventing* clothes," Troy echoes, "me in particular?" "You in general," the bossdeer responds, "because punishment isn't only for what you've done in particular, but for what you've done in general too. It's sort of a ethnic thing, if you get my meaning, a kind of collective responsibility that you've inherited."

"Of course I get your meaning," Troy lies, "of course I see the problem." Because he ought to respond *somehow*, because he shouldn't look sulky or ungrateful. In public, anyway. And, besides, why not say something positive and supportive? Since he's in a cage and the animal he's talking to isn't. Since the animal is clearly showing off to the other animals listening in on their conversation. These guys obviously take this kind of thing very seriously.

Mr. Kingdeer nods, maybe appreciatively. "Clothes," its little mouth says, "it's an awful lot to atone for." And Troy thinks: What am I supposed to do with this? Aren't those clothes this thing is wearing? And some of these other things too? But, of course, maybe what the deer is wearing *aren't* clothes. By definition or something. Those ducks back at the university weren't stupid, he thinks now. Definitions really are *everything*. Because everything new in this world is

just a bad copy of something else that's old and gone, because the only way these animals have to make things seem new is by giving them all new names.

Other days, the kingdeer talks at him about the new day that's dawning, about the dark shadow of predator oppression that's finally being lifted from his beloved earth, how all the evils are finally vanishing. Presumably this is because all the evils are other animals, that's what's being eliminated, or that's what's going to be eliminated soon. Just the way the humans did it so long ago. To all the animals around *them*. The glorious extinction times. "Um," Troy says.

Cleere, too, has been back. His attorney. Several times. And each time that she's showed up, it's been with food. That Semme and Devve push through the cage in the same small bucket, the same two deer who are always so thrilled to be feeding him the same breakfast, the same green goo that they bring him *every day*. One of them says, maybe it's Semme, maybe it's Devve, "we're in such awe of you." And then the young deer, totally overcome with shyness, is giggling uncontrollably. Cleere obviously disapproves, she's stamping one of her feet imperiously, telling the two deer to hurry up and *back off*.

*That bucket.* The first couple of times Troy couldn't bring himself to go near that bucket, he started to gag just looking at it, just thinking about it. "You can do it, sweetie" Cleere kept saying to him, "it won't hurt you. It's good for you, it's just some delicious warmed-up vegetables." Cooing these words to him out of her tiny mouth like he's a pet or simple-minded. Or maybe that's just the way deer talk when they're friending someone. Troy is eventually eating regularly. Without gagging. Without gagging that much, anyway.

They've been talking "politics." Cleere tells him: "We deer are like the ancient Romans." She explains that the ancient Romans were an early kind of human. Troy nods like this is information he's just been told. "But without a central city, without what they called *Rome*. Because our cities are better, because our cities move *with* us as we network with one another, just like those ancient Romans used to network, by talking to one another constantly, by licking each other over breakfast, by tightening up our intimacy one-by-one, individual-by-individual. All across the deer universe, endless chains of kissing deer. Which is so beautiful to contemplate."

Cleere says to Troy: "We're not all alike, we deer. The way that wolves are all alike. Or cats. Each deer is special, each deer is unique, each deer is valuable in itself. Each deer is an end in itself, never a means to something else." "Um," Troy responds. Cleere is trying to teach Troy the value of *life*, the value of each special individual life. Civilization 101. "Billions and billions of people," the doe says, "it was glorious. There were celebrations *and fireworks* all over Earth when the seven-billionth human baby was born." "Most of the earth is ruined now," Troy responds, "that's what I've heard, that most of Earth is dead now. Rocks and sand. Nothing



living in most places, food deserts nearly everywhere.” Troy is careful to say this is what he’s *heard*, and not that it’s what he’s *discovered*. On the web. “That’s not true,” Cleere responds, “I would know.”

But Cleere doesn’t know. Or she’s lying. And Troy knows she’s wrong or she’s lying. Because Troy has been on the web, he’s been traveling around on it, learning geography, learning to read geography off of what he actually sees up there. So he’s pretty sure he knows what most of the Earth looks like now.

Cleere has mentioned *cats*, so Troy tries something else: “Cougers eat meat, cougers *kill other animals*.” “An eye for an eye,” Cleere tells him, “a tooth for a tooth.” Troy is taken aback. Because he *knows* that saying, he knows where it’s *from*. And he wonders if Cleere believes in God, if deer believe in God. “Cougers are licensed professionals,” Cleere says next, “they’re part of the judicial system so they kill only where and when they’re authorized to do so. Executing condemned criminals guilty of only the most heinous crimes, that’s the cougar’s *job*. Cougers who belong to our society, civilized cougers, don’t kill any other time. Because it’s the *law*.”

“What happens when a cougar is hungry and there are no criminals around for it to eat?” Troy asks innocently. Not as if he’s trying to score a debating point against her, but as if the thought has just idly occurred to him while he’s been sitting in a cage with nothing much to do. “There are always criminals to eat,” Cleere tells him, her snoutface making an odd expression that he can’t read, “that’s one of the things you learn when you become a lawyer. That there will always be plenty of guilty people around for cougers to eat.”

Cleere doesn’t talk about population, about over-population, that this, perhaps, is a way of keeping a population down: *building the presence of predators right into the structure of a society*. She’s not thinking about it *that way*. Probably no deer is thinking about it *that way*. That there isn’t as much food in the future as there used to be.

Troy asks about the kingdeer. About whether he’s above the law or below it, about whether he makes law or if he just carries out laws that other deer have *legislated*. “Is there a separation of powers?” Troy asks. The deer’s eyes get wide and uncrinkled. “That is a very sophisticated question,” she says, “that means you’re making a lot of progress.” Troy thinks: Maybe, but you haven’t answered my question, and all Cleere tells him, when he asks again, is that he’s not a tyrant, that he believes in the due process of law. Troy thinks: you’ve haven’t even told me his name. *His Majesty, His Importance, His Highness*, those aren’t *names*.

Deer come by, once in a while, with buckets of water. To clean the cage. They apologize, these deer. They’re very polite, these cleaning deer, they carefully splash the cage floor, wash out whatever’s accumulated there. While Troy pulls himself up and off the ground slightly, an inch

or so, while he crouches himself up, as best he can, near the top of the low cage. For a minute or two.

## 43

Emma and Olivia, Mason and Liam. Among others. Rusty is talking to a small group of wolves that are sitting around him.

Jacob and Sophia have started going out, so they're holding hands, they're tickling each other's palms with their claws, trying to listen to Rusty at the same time. They turn face-to-face often, smiling when their eyes meet, even giggling a little. Because they can't help themselves. They're embarrassed when they catch Rusty's eye, they look up at him *sheepishly*, but he just flashes them a reassuring smile while he keeps talking.

Isabella, Ava, Madison and Ethan are listening intently to Rusty too, their arms curved neatly around their knees, they're working hard to grasp what he's saying, they're working hard to make sense of it. Even though it sounds totally weird, completely unbelievable. And Aiden and Noah are also there, they're honestly trying to pay attention, they really are. (But some wolves are almost as distractable as cats.) Every so often Aiden punches Noah in the arm out of boredom, Noah yelling *stop it you asshole*, then they're both *sheepishly* apologizing to Rusty. At the same time.

Michael is sitting quietly off by himself a little, listening to Rusty, trying to look like he knows all of this already.

These are omega wolves from different tribes that Rusty has lured away over the last few weeks. (Jacob and Sophia have only just met, but it really seems love at first sight between them.) This isn't so much a new tribe that Rusty has been trying to create, it's more like a new *cult*. The cult of Troy. Or something like that. Rusty isn't ever going to call it the cult of Troy. Neither is anyone else who is alive at this moment in the future. *The cult of Troy*. That's the sort of name historians give to things after everyone else who was actually there and doing something has died out. And can't complain.

They're all young wolves that are sitting around Rusty. Except for Michael, who has a lot of gray. They're all wolves that are far more sensitive to the web than other wolves are—that's why Rusty was able to contact them so easily. And they're wolves who were unhappy with the tribes they were in. (Omega wolves are *usually* unhappy—they're omega wolves, after all.)

These omega wolves, though, they're willing to take chances, they're willing to try something drastic. Which isn't typical for wolves, especially for cowardly omega wolves who are always a little *runtish*, and anyway have been bullied stupid their entire lives. But these omega wolves are obviously different. Because they're practice-sitting around a *campfire*, that's what they're doing right now, Rusty and these wolves.

They're atypical in a lot of other ways too, these wolves: they're way too friendly, all of them, challenging each other sort of, but not *really*. Because they play around as if they're still pups. They don't really get social hierarchy either, not the way a normal wolf *should*. So they're kind of missing a certain dimension of *social intelligence*—that's even true of the girlwolves who are here. These wolves wouldn't have survived, maybe. If they had stayed in their original tribes.

They even think it's really cool to be led by someone named *Rusty*.

Rusty has been explaining the facts of life to everyone. And some history too. About the first *university*. Ava is saying in her breathy way that the first university sounds like a lot of *fun*, that she'd love to start a first university *too* one of these days. Boars are important, Isabella is adding, it's clear you can't have a good first university without a *boar* or two. And the chimeras, Rusty is telling the wolves how the chimeras used to police the webs, keep them clean and organized and well-designed. And about the chimera that he used to work for, about the horrible way it died. And how things are changing now because of the overpopulation of deer, how things are changing with the whole world, really, because there are so many deer. The old ways, they aren't working anymore. Because of *Troy the human*. And because all the action is on the *web* now. More than ever before. So that what happens in the *real world* just isn't that important.

Rusty is talking about his tribe, his old tribe, he's using them as an illustration. "I can't help them," Rusty says coldly to all the bright eager faces around him, "so they're just going to go extinct. Eventually. Soon, really soon. Change or die. That's the rule, that's always been the rule."

Rusty tells them the story of how Troy the human *killed a loner cat*, and how that changed *everything* for the first time. Rusty knows that he's spinning a total myth, that it's a Rubicon-story he's making up, about how *Troy the human* made the fateful world-shaking decision to protect a wolf he didn't even know.

*The tragic love story of Troy and Yoolia*. About how they loved one another so much and so deeply despite everything and everyone being against them. The wolves listening to Troy already know about Yoolia and Troy, Yoolia and Troy and their doomed love affair are famous. Some of these wolves have even seen *that film*, the notorious beaverdam film, some of

them have even seen the unedited version where Yooolia is actually lathered *in soap*. But Rusty's version of the story carries extra authority, it's that much more exciting because *he* was Yooolia's *brother*. That's what's so amazing to all *these* wolves, that Yooolia's *brother* is actually in front of them *right now*, telling them the love story of *Yooolia and Troy*. Because *he* was there, because he knew them way back when.

It's working: Rusty sees how Jacob and Sophia are exchanging knowing glances, how they're saying to each other soundlessly: This won't ever happen *to us*, we won't let it. And the other wolves too, they're all thinking that they won't let those *deer* ever do such an evil thing again.

Of course, Rusty doesn't know for sure that Yooolia is dead. He hasn't found any traces of her on the web. Or in the world. And although he hasn't found any traces of Troy *in the world* either, he's found plenty of Troy *on the web*. Troy has clearly been doing a lot on the web, Rusty is sure about that.

Emma and Olivia. Mason and Liam. Jacob and Sophia. And the other wolves too. They're all nodding at what Rusty is saying. Because they're young and young animals always think changes are easier to implement than older animals do, they always think change is easier than it actually is. *You just do it, that's all*, that's what young animals always think. Until they're not young anymore. Like Michael who's cynical about it all, who doesn't believe even half of what Rusty is telling them but who's going along with it anyway. Because he hasn't anything else to do in life. Not really.

Here is what Rusty hears, all of a sudden:

*I don't understand what I'm doing or how I'm doing it. Sometimes I control what happens in my dreams. I gesture at my sparker, I turn it into something else. A tree with red-gold leaves. Deliberately. Like magic. Or if I don't like the illumination in the world I'm dreaming up, I change that. Put two suns up in the sky. Make one of them blue, and the other one red. So that everything casts both red and blue shadows. Part the clouds so the suns can be seen clearly.*

*It was only after I decided to treat the web as a dream that I discovered I could do nearly anything I wanted on it. Deer are everywhere on the web, they're on every web. That's what I realized first. That they're the little unicorns that you see everywhere, that's what they look like, that's what deer—most deer—want to look like. So tiny, some of them, that I couldn't see them at first, I couldn't see how they were hiding everywhere in the landscape, their little eyes projecting everything to the other deer on the deerweb, on all the webs. Deer are viruses. That's what they've become, that's what they wanted to be.*

*I didn't decide to be dew. I woke up on the web and I was dew. All of a sudden I was transparent dew pressed against grass, pressed against soil, suspended like a cloud around anything I chose*

*to surround. I was everywhere the way that dew is. And I could see everything, the way that dew would if dew were eyes. Only in dreams are things like this. Except that I wasn't dreaming. I was on the web.*

*I'm still dew. So I drip down from the sky, so I coat a deer's face, I turn opaque, I blacken the deer's eyes, the deer's nose and mouth, I enclose it in darkness so that the deer is blind to the web. I don't know how I'm doing any of this. Because it's all just metaphors, it's all just imagery. Like magic or something, like I can just wave my hands and turn deer blind at will.*

*This web, it's deeper in everyone than I thought it was—it's deeper in deer, anyway. Because deer aren't seeing just what's out there, maybe no one is seeing just what's out there except the loner cats and me. The web, what's coming in from the deerweb, it augments deer-senses, it changes what they experience. They see borders that aren't in the world, colors that the world hasn't had for centuries, they see landmarks that aren't in the worldscape around them. Sometimes they see snow, and snow doesn't exist anymore. And the snow that they see, that doesn't exist anymore, it's always beautiful.*

*They can smell and taste other animals approaching in space and time, as if from the sky or the air, they can smell and taste and hear other animals even earlier than a loner cat can. Because loner cats smell and taste and hear only what's real, only what's within the range of their senses. Even that awful goop that deer eat, it doesn't taste that way if you're a deer on the deerweb. It tastes heavenly, it tastes amazing. And you can smell the deerlove oozing from all their food. Their fear too. But only if you're attached to their web, engulfed by it. The way all deer are.*

*I know all this now. That the world deer see and feel and touch, it's just better nicer more beautiful more colorful richer to the senses than the world itself, than the world would be if deer didn't have a web to look at it through. Deer themselves, deer look beautiful to other deer. Elegant. Sexy. Stunning. Every last one of those twisted ugly neurotic animals. On their web, through their web. And other animals, they all look hideous to deer. On their web. Every other animal. We have no idea the horrible things deer see when they look at us. Unless we're me.*

*And me, I can do this too. I can change what's on their web, I can change it a little, anyway. I can change what deer see and feel and hear. In some ways.*

*And you. I found you because I could smell the threads you're always leaving in the ground that you're always leaving in the air, a trail that you make everywhere on the web, wherever you go. I followed all your threads back to you.*

*None of this makes any sense. What are these threads? How can I smell them if I have no nose, no body, if I'm dew? And then the question Rusty dreads hearing from Troy: Where's Yoolia?*

Rusty talks back to the voice in his head: "This is what the web actually is," he says. He's stood up, and he's gesturing to nothing in front of him. Liam, who was sitting closest to Rusty, has shuffled away a little, moved closer to the other wolves. "Whoa," he's saying, pointing at Rusty, "he's finally lost it." Ava is saying at the same time: "Um, Rusty? who are you talking to?" Rusty sees Ava for a moment, and he waves his paw at the young wolf to *just shut up please*, because he's concentrating, he's in touch with *Troy the human*. "Oh boy," Liam is saying to Ava, trying to flirt with her at the same time, "he's *really* kind of totally lost it, don't you think?" "Geniuses, they're always just strange," Madison is saying to no one in particular. She often does that, strikes a pose and declaims aloud. Whether anyone is listening.

Rusty, meanwhile, is trying to set Troy straight about the web, and at the same time avoid his question about Yooolia. "You have powers," Rusty is telling Troy now, trying to explain things, "but not all the time. That's what it's like up here in the clouds. Sometimes you can fly and sometimes you can't. Sometimes you can melt yourself into the landscape, reshape it the way you want to. And sometimes you can't. It all depends on what kind of information is around you, who it belongs to, and what you're able to do with it."

"He can't see us anymore, he can't hear us anymore either," that's what Liam says, because Rusty, pacing blindly, has just tripped over Liam's leg, and he hasn't reacted to Liam's yelp. Olivia says: "The web isn't ever like that for me." Emma enthusiastically interrupts her: "Sometimes things appear in front of me, like Rusty did that first time I met him," and the other wolves are nodding, "but most of the time I just hear stuff." Mason is repeating something he thinks he heard Rusty say once: "You've got to train yourself for a while, for *years* probably. Before you can get to the higher stages on the web." "I don't know if it's a good idea," Noah says, "I'd get awfully nervous if I couldn't see what was around me. Even for a second, I mean." "Do you think we're ever going to meet Troy?" Sophia asks.

"That's what all this is," Rusty is telling Troy, and he gestures at the lush landscape around the two of them, the thick texture of colored plants everywhere, the differently-shaped insects, many of them cubical, butterfly-leaping from intricate leaf to intricate leaf, the six-legged frogs wallowing on their bellies in the grass like cows, even the red- and yellow-streaked air that's thicker than water and pungently perfumed. "It looks and feels real," Rusty tells Troy, "except of course it's like nothing real that anyone has ever seen. This is how information is packaged in animal brains, it's different kinds of information—that's all that's ever really going on here. So that everything you see is virtual, nothing anyone ever sees here is real. You have to remember that it isn't real, how this all looks to you. It's just information that's been brain-packaged as fantasies."

Rusty and Troy are fish, their clear delicate fins rippling through the bluish jello-world that they're now in. "I've always wanted to be a fish," Troy says, "because this is so soothing, this is

so peaceful.” “Um,” Rusty says, because being a fish isn’t really doing that much for him. They’re both transparent, they both look like the fruity cloud forests they’re moving through. “This is you doing this,” Rusty says, “it’s not me because I can’t do stuff like this, I never could.” “I know that already,” Troy responds, “even though most of the time it doesn’t feel like I’m in control.” Rusty nods his little fishhead agreeably. And Troy asks him again, “Yoolia, where’s Yoolia? Did you find her yet?” *Oh shit*, Rusty is thinking. *Yet? He’s asking me, yet?* Because Rusty is thinking: if Yoolia had even gone on the web just *once*, he would have noticed right away. Because that was always the problem with Yoolia, how big she was on the web. If you were in range of her, anyway—that she was so hard not to notice when she was on the web. Except when she was near a vulture hoard, of course.

Rusty isn’t quite remembering this correctly. He’d had a lot of trouble finding Yoolia that first time. When they’d first gotten separated. Because it had taken him *years* to locate her.

## 44

Troy has come back to reality. Suddenly. Because a big paw has just slapped him on the head. *Hard*. He sits up, panicked, and backs away from the large cougar face that’s smiling in at him. Reaching into the cage a little with its paw. “Remember me?” it says cheerily. “I do now,” Troy responds, thinking that in the future he’d better sleep towards the back of the cage. Away from the bars. Keep his body parts where someone can’t reach in and swipe at them. If he can manage it, in this small cage.

Troy gives the animal a nice friendly smile, he says: “Haven’t seen you for a while. How have you been?” “Life’s been good,” the cougar says back. Right on cue it seems. “I’ve been eating really well lately, a nice healthy diet, a lot of variety. Some fresh boar, a bit of wolf, the occasional chicken. Come to think of it, there were *two* wolves recently. *Damned* tasty.”

That’s just like a loner cat. No small talk, not if it can avoid it. Because if a loner cat intends to insinuate that it’s recently eaten two of your good friends, well then, it’s just going to get right to it. Loner cats play with you right away. If that’s what they want to do.

So now this one is going on a bit about that tasty big-mouthed boar. And about what a fat lot of good its shiny vocabulary was doing for it once the cat got its paws on the animal. How *that boar* squealed towards the end. Mindlessly. Even shitting on itself a bit. (Which was pretty annoying.) This was after the cat had been playing around with it for only a little while, not that long, the cat is suggesting. “You wouldn’t think that something with *such* a deep voice would be

capable of *such* high-pitched ear-piercing squeals,” the cat adds, sitting on its haunches and holding its paws almost to its ears to demonstrate the pain it was feeling from the screeching boar-noises. But kind of meditatively. As if it’s really putting some thought into this topic.

“Oinnnenk, wasn’t Oinnnenk that guy’s name?” the cat asks next. It glances slyly at Troy to gauge his reaction. While it’s explaining that it likes it when it can put a *name* on its food. *Nice touch*, Troy thinks, *drop something into your performance that you know you both know. Gives your boasts that authentic feel.*

Regardless of the truth, the boar had obviously gotten under the cat’s skin back at the banquet conference. *Good for it*, Troy is thinking, and he’s also thinking this gives *him* some tools to fight back. Because this animal is so *proud* of itself. Now the cat is walking back and forth on all fours in front of the bars of Troy’s cage, looking pretty gigantic, its tail brisking. Turning its head so that it’s always staring in at Troy. Smiling a lot. Troy notices that there are no deer nearby, that they’re off by the tents, not even glancing in the direction of his cage as far as he can tell. Big cats may be an important part of this mighty fine *civilization* that deer are starting up, but this doesn’t mean that these animals are going to get that close to one another any time soon. And Troy thinks, all of sudden, *ducks*. That there aren’t even ducks nearby. He wonders if these animals are all drugged regularly, so that they can stand being even this near to one another. But this cat doesn’t seem to be drugged, not the way it was back at the banquet conference.

“It sounds really personal,” Troy says now, “this thing between you and the boar you claim you ate. It wouldn’t just be another meal for you, it would clearly be payback. And I understand completely, I sympathize. Because that boar made you look silly, because everyone was laughing at you. Inside in their heads, of course, where you couldn’t see it. On their webs, where you can’t go.”

“I’m totally looking forward to you getting executed,” the cat says back. After a moment, after pacing back and forth in silence, jerking its tail around sharply. “You know, for all your *crimes*.” It laughs. “I don’t think that’s the way this is going to go,” Troy responds. “You know,” the cat interrupts him, “none of these animals are as smart as they think they are. They’re all kind of stupid, actually, they’re all kind of *deluded*. Because they’re always seeing things that aren’t there. In case you haven’t noticed.” And the cat adds: “They’re not running things around here as much as they think they are.” The cat looks at Troy, and Troy looks skeptical. Deliberately. He wants the cat to see that he’s looking skeptical *deliberately*. To elicit more from the animal, to poke at it. He’s not scared at all, that’s what he’s realized.

The upside of being inside a cage.

“Take this cage,” the cat says next, almost as if it can read *minds*. Troy is taken aback by the change of subject, he hopes it doesn’t show. “Believe me,” the cat adds, “I can get in there with



you whenever I want to. I know exactly how your new home has been put together. So if things don't go my way at that showtrial I'll induce some omissions in the prisoner-list. That's a promise I'll keep."

Now the cat arches up, leans its big front paws against the top of the cage. So that it blocks out nearly all the light, so that the cage tips back slightly, throwing Troy off-balance: he's trapped inside that tiny space and *feels it*. "Think about it," the cat growls into the cage, breathing deliberately into Troy's airspace, the human crunched down on his knees, feeling everything around him vibrate, "normally we're all *loner* cats. Except for those short-lived romantic moments every couple of years or so. But now *crowds* of us are hanging around deer camps. After all, we're the animals with *teeth*—so they need us." A *purring* laugh: "Duck claws only take you so far." And now the cat gestures into the air with one of its paws incongruously, the cage shaking from the cat's movements. "That means groups of us cougers are together for the first time, that we get to talk to one another even if we're initially reluctant about it. *And we're not so bad, we kind of like one another, sort of anyway*—that's what we've all been discovering." The cat *winks* at Troy now, it really does. Which amazes him because cats can't wink. Or they couldn't anyway. Once upon a time.

"Hey," the cat says next, and now it's walking away, the cage rocking back and forth because the cat has let it fall back into its original position, "I heard that you really like the meals they serve you in here. Is that right?" And Troy calls out, "the wolves you ate. What were *their* names?" The cat pauses a moment, shaking its head, smiling to itself, letting Troy see that it's smiling to itself. Then it turns around. "Yoolia," it says. "And Rusty." After another pause: "In that order."

*So the cat's a liar*. Because why throw out the name of a second wolf that it *didn't* eat if it had actually eaten Yoolia, and could brag about that? But this is just Troy guessing hopelessly. Because he's thinking he would have surely located her by now. If she was alive. And Rusty, Rusty *avoided* his question. So that can't be a good thing.

Troy imagines himself as a motionless fish in a pond, a fish waiting for a cat's paw to kill it. Because something in him has just given up. Suddenly. Maybe because of everything that's happened to him in the last couple of months, or maybe just because of what's happened to him in the last few minutes. Even though he knows *for sure* that the cat was lying about eating Rusty, even though Rusty only avoided his question about Yoolia. It doesn't matter. Because, sometimes, there's this moment when hope goes. Something in Troy has decided it's finished with the world he's in. He doesn't want to be here anymore. And there's never any reason for hope after that. Because we don't get to change our *worlds*.

Cats are very good at what they do, they really are.

Rusty has found Troy again. On the web. Troy, Rusty has realized, is that blunt-nosed leopard-lizard ghost that's bent over a *table*, its head entirely vanished into a book. And all around this *library*, sitting at other low tables, bubbled images darting around their horned heads, are reclining unicorns with closed eyes. Thousands of them in every direction Rusty looks, table after table after table of them. A library without walls. Two suns in the sky, one blue and one red. And changing landscapes, stretched weird on the rounds of bubbles, convexed faces of deer, cougars, ducks, and other animals. It's as if those spiral-ridged horns poking out of their foreheads are antennas that are sending bubble-distorted sphere-shapes of the real world into the minds of the deer those unicorns actually are.

The web has never looked like this before, never in Rusty's whole life. Not even when the chimera was guiding him. Because he never penetrated the deerweb this deeply. And here he is, in part of it anyway. And no deer senses him. Because of Troy, he's sure it's because of Troy.

Deer, surely, aren't imagining *their web* as a library filled with sleeping unicorns. Maybe they're angelically flying through a meadow, maybe they're delicate winged unicorns the size of hummingbirds. Because it all depends on the animals, on the ways those animals fantasize the information the web feeds them, the particular sites that the animals are at, how those sites have been configured.

And Troy, it must be that for him that all the webs melt together somehow. Like they're all in the same place. Even within a particular animalweb, it's not distinct sites for him like it is for animals. Somehow Troy is conceiving all the webs in some other way entirely.

Maybe that's why Troy can do what the chimera used to do, get inside any animal's head and make that animal see a part of the web the way the chimera saw that part of the web. Or differently, anyway, than the animal would have seen it otherwise. Not through a website the way deer do—but directly into your head the way the chimera would do it. And just as Troy is doing now to Rusty, showing him how *this* looks to Troy. Maybe this is what's happening. Because Rusty couldn't ever be sure what the chimera was actually experiencing, no matter how much it showed him. This has to be true about Troy as well.

Rusty drifts over to the lizard that he knows is Troy, watches it a moment, its head vanishing into the book just like into a puddle. "I'm reading," Troy's voice says in his head. Suddenly. *Reading*. Rusty has heard that word before, reading is something humans did once upon a time. "Not the way human did it," Troy's voice replies, "I don't understand how humans used to read. They made squiggles on surfaces turn into sounds. Somehow." Rusty nods, even though there's no point. Because Troy the lizard isn't looking at him, and anyone who is looking at him can't sense him. Luckily.

“Not one of you *animals* understands what the past really was, what humans *achieved*.” Troy’s voice says this now. Inside Rusty’s head. And Troy’s voice is *dead*, Rusty is shocked by the empty sound—there is no longer a reason for *anything*, that’s what this sound *means*. Rusty has never felt emotions in Troy before. Not like this. Troy says: “No animal knows how many *things* humans once created, the whole worlds of *things* that they invented, that they traded with one another, that they hoarded and worshipped and played with, even their children. Once upon a time, humans had an *economy*, once upon a time, they had thousands of forms of *money*, once upon a time, they covered the natural world with all their bought and sold objects. *Their possessions*. Objects that had never existed before there were humans to create them, objects that will never exist again. And it’s all here in your *memories*. What humans once were, what *they* achieved.”

Troy says: “All of *you*, you’re just leftovers, you’re just broken *devices*, discarded *toys*. Barely human, every last one of you, you’re all just some forgotten *junk* that humans made themselves into before they died out, you’re all just some forgotten *artifacts* with a little human DNA here and there, *things* that are slowly winding down, slowing to a stop as all your *batteries* go dead. Now that all the *real* humans are gone.” Rusty doesn’t realize that Troy isn’t just talking about other animals, that he’s talking about himself *too*, he’s wondering about the *things* they had back at the catfarm, his mother’s book, his *tools*, if these were real artifacts made by humans or if they were all imitations that *animals* made later. Like him. Because he’s learned that *books* were made of paper and he’s seen what books made of paper are supposed to feel like. And so now he knows that he’s never seen a book made out of *paper*. Not his mother’s book and not the books at the vulture trap.

Rusty has seen vulture hoards, more than once, and he actually knows some history, he’s studied *something* of what humans are supposed to have created. And Troy’s dead voice is scornful: “You have no idea even what *buildings* really looked like, you have no clue how *vast* cities once were. You can’t *imagine* it, it would overwhelm you, it would dwarf you, everything that humans did. If you were there, if you could actually see it.”

Troy’s voice: “Deer think they’re making cities? They have no idea what they’re trying to imitate with the crumbled tatters they’re finding here and there, stringing onto sticks, and proudly calling a *city*.”

Troy’s voice: “Vultures collect things? But almost everything that *humans* used to collect is gone, except for fragments and splinters, here and there, that’s all that’s left for the vultures.”

Troy’s voice: “Deer think they’ve got laws, courts, a civilization? A couple of fine phrases that they’ve memorized, a couple of neat uniforms that they strut around in, someone they call *Your Highness*, that’s all that’s left.”

Troy's voice: "And *you* with your university. None of you have any idea what a *culture* even is. Because it's all gone. Pretty much there's nothing left of what there was. Except for some inscrutable memories deep in your stupid minds. Where none of you ever go except for ducks who never understand what they see."

Rusty is thinking: Troy mustn't believe what he thinks he knows, this ghostpast mustn't block out his *future*. Because no one is sure about *any* of this, whether *any of it* is true. What's in the minds of animals, even in the minds of chimeras. Because minds change everything they touch. That's why it's so frustrating to be a professor of history. These days, anyway.

"You can never be the same," Troy's voice says, "not after you learn what humans have already done. Things that none of *us* can ever do again." And Rusty realizes he has to get Troy out of the past, he has to make him stop thinking about what humans once were. Because he has never heard this sadness in Troy's voice before. The way the chimera sometimes sounded: exhausted and dead. That after humans, that after the *glory* of humans, there's no longer a point to anything else even bothering to *live*. Rusty thinks: Troy is in mourning. For a world he was never in, for a world that may never have existed. Rusty thinks: Perhaps that's what *humans* did, perhaps that's why *they* went extinct. Once they knew *for sure* that they'd lost it all forever, what they'd destroyed.

Rusty says: "You're here with me now. On the web. So you can't be that far away. At most a day or two at wolfspeed. At most. We just have to figure out the direction. Because our range on the web never extends that far. Not even the chimera's did." Troy is listening to him, he hopes. Even though Troy doesn't respond, even though the unmoving blunt-nosed leopard-lizard ghost still has its missing head deep in a book. And all around them sleeping unicorns dream of nonexistent worlds.

"I'm in a cage again," Troy's voice says, "in a deercamp somewhere. Maybe a hundred deer, no more than that. Cougars too, maybe ten in all. No families, no fawns at this camp. A clutch of ducks. An occasional rabbit." The empty voice adds: "I'm starving to death. Slowly. Because I want to."

At a certain point it all comes together for you. What everything really means. Everything that's happened to you, everything that's gone on before. And what's left for your future. That's when it ends for you, that's when you realize there's only going to be the present from now on. This can happen to anyone: when your present moment goes eternal. From now on.

Rusty isn't giving up. Rusty is explaining to the headless lizard the plan that's occurred to him. All he hopes is that Troy goes along with it, that he's willing to help. Troy doesn't have to *care*, not yet he doesn't. There'll be time for him caring about things later. If the plan works.

“So we’re invisible now?” Aiden is saying, jumping up and down impatiently, unable to control his energy, “Troy the human made us all invisible?” “Not exactly,” Rusty the wolf is trying to explain to him. Aiden isn’t really listening, he’s fake-sneaking up on Noah, going: “You can’t see me, you can’t see me,” Noah turning around sharply, annoyed, swatting at Aiden, saying, “Fuck off you total asshole.”

Rusty has sketched some squiggles in the sand, he’s trying to explain to the wolves what they’re supposed to do. To find Troy the human. How they’re to fan out in these different directions, zigzagging this way and that. “This is how we cover the entire area around us in an expanding circle, and eventually we’ll find the deercamp. Wherever it is.” Ethan repeats Rusty’s words, because he likes the idea: “An expanding circle.”

“And so we’re invisible to the deer we run into?” Aiden says again. “No,” Rusty responds, “you’re only invisible to their web, they can’t detect you using their web. Because of Troy the human. But if you move out of Troy’s range he won’t be able to hide you anymore. And you’ll feel the difference, Troy’s voice saying *good bye*, and then a kind of buzzing. Like insects. If you hear *that* you’ve got to move back the way you came. Fast. Before a deer picks up on you.” Rusty pauses a moment before saying: “Anyhow deer will still be able to see you or smell you naturally. Outside their web, I mean. If you get close enough to them for them to pick you up with their naked senses.”

“I’m not really getting this inside and outside the web thing, this naked senses thing,” Emma says. Rusty nods. “Just do what I say,” he tells her. And now he’s explaining to all the wolves what a deercamp looks like. What tents look like. Because none of these wolves have ever seen deercamps or tents. Not even Michael.

Rusty has paired the wolves into *search teams*, except for some of the wolves that he insists have to go out on their own. Aiden and Noah aren’t in a team, they’re supposed to separate, even though they’re complaining a lot about this, about how unfair it is. Especially since Jacob and Sophia get to be their own search team, Aiden sulkily growling, “they’ll probably just go off somewhere and *fuck* all afternoon while the rest of us are working hard looking for *humans*,” Jacob moving aggressively towards him, saying, “you can’t talk about me and Sophia that way, not if you want to live,” Michael rolling his eyes because it’s just a bunch of runty omega wolves trying to show how *big* they all are.

Of course, it's Jacob and Sophia who find *Yoolia*, and they probably wouldn't have if they'd each been on their own. Because Jacob doesn't try to show off when he's alone.

They didn't realize it, but they had gotten very close to a vulture trap. Near a *mountain* that they had been approaching for a while, Jacob saying, "is *that* a mountain? I've never seen a mountain before. In the flesh, anyway." And now that they've bounded close enough to clearly see it despite the mist and fog, Jacob is saying, "Oh wow," gripping Sophia's hand tight. Because he's only seen mountains on the web. Before now. *Sort of* seen them on the web. Since he's not very good at getting *images* off of the web.

"It's really big," he's saying to Sophia, looking up, "I didn't realize that mountains were actually *big*, I thought they just looked that way because of all the clouds that are always in the way." And he adds: "Nothing looks the same as what's real, have you noticed that?" Mistlings, trickster weather, the smoke of dragons, cloud loneliness, sly scumblings. These are phrases Jacob remembers. From a fairy tale he once knew in his childhood. About mountains and the mists that always surround them.

They've reached the base of the mountain, and now Jacob starts to climb, pulling Sophia along by her hand. Because it's there and he has the energy, because he's heard that humans used to climb mountains all the time. For *sport*, he tells Sophia.

Sophia is saying, "I don't think we're supposed to go this way." Because she's realized that her grip on the web has gone fuzzy, something Jacob isn't paying attention to. She didn't hear Troy say goodbye the way that Rusty said they would: instead it just all suddenly went white noise. Neither wolf knows this about vultures, that vultures do this to all the webs. That it's one of the ways they lure animals into their traps, by messing with the animal's orientation, by sending them subliminal suggestions embedded in the white noise: *Go this way, you'll like what you find*. And then, sometimes, even before the animal gets into the trap, if it's something easy to deal with (not a wolf!) they'll pick it off from above. Before the animal even knows what's happened.

And now, part way up the mountain, Sophia and Jacob see decomposing bodies, some half-eaten prey. Carcasses. Remains. Both of them immediately freeze motionless, looking around, sniffing the air suspiciously, then Sophia realizes these are wolf-kills. By the way the things have been torn open, by what's been eaten in them and what hasn't. Jacob audibly relaxes, sighing his relief. Because he's not ready yet to take on a cat or a boar. Or anything bigger than a small rabbit, really. Jacob's a pacifist. Pretty much.

It's when the two of them reach the half-hidden mouth of a cave, leaping over piles of rock, that Jacob feels he has to show off again, prove that he's brave by going into the cave. (Maybe because he's uncomfortable about having sighed so loudly, Sophia saying to him right after he

did that: “You’re so *cute* sometimes.”) Someone warns them, a wolf’s voice from inside the cave. To get away before she kills them. And Sophia recognizes *Yoolia’s voice*. Because she’s watched and listened to Yoolia hundreds of times on the web. While Jacob was looking at so-called mountains.

Yoolia is bewildered. By these two runty wolves who know her name and who are obviously so *thrilled* to finally meet her. Animals that she’s never seen before in her life, who are jumping up and down with real joy, they’re obviously sincere in that young-wolf sort of way, saying to each other, “I can’t believe it, *we’ve found her*. *We’ve found Yoolia*, we really have.” And now Sophia is gushing: “I’ve wanted to meet you for so long. We all totally worship you, you’re our *role model*.” Yoolia can’t help herself, she’s staring down at Sophia’s *shaved legs*, asking herself, *what the hell is wrong with this wolf? Why did she do this to herself?* Sophia notices that Yoolia is looking at her legs, she’s saying, “we’re all doing that now, all the women. My generation, I mean. They’re cool, right?” Yoolia is nodding. Because otherwise she’ll just burst out laughing. At how awful those naked legs look. Stubble. Yoolia has never seen stubble on *legs* before.

Then the two wolves are telling Yoolia all the things that Rusty has been saying about her. And Troy. *Troy is still alive too*, they’re saying to Yoolia, they’re telling Yoolia about how Troy is trapped in a cage in some deercamp, but that they’re searching for him *systematically*, and that when they find him, they’re going to *liberate* him. “That so?” Yoolia responds. The two wolves aren’t noticing her coolish response because they’re introducing themselves to her, telling her who they are. And Yoolia is thinking: *What’s with these names? These aren’t names that wolves have*. So she asks, because Yoolia isn’t particularly diplomatic unless she thinks the situation is dangerous.

“We’ve all got new names,” Jacob is explaining, “because we’re starting over again.” “These are human names we’ve got now,” Sophia says. Yoolia nods without saying anything, because she’s wondering how they know for sure that these are human names. Because she’s heard that humans are all named after cities. Then they’re telling her all the things that Rusty has been saying. About the world, about Troy, about her, and she only says: “That so? That’s what Rusty’s said? That’s very interesting.”

Sophia is asking, “Is it going to be soon?” Yoolia says “maybe,” and she’s smiling for the first time, “very soon.” “Ooooooh,” Sophia is saying, now she’s *hugging* Yoolia (which Yoolia thinks is *very weird*), saying “I’m just so proud of you. Our first cubs,” and Yoolia is thinking: *Our first cubs? What has Rusty been telling these idiots?*

So it’s not hard to imagine how surprised the two young wolves are when Yoolia says that no, she’s not going back with them, that she’s staying here in this cave, that it’s pretty nice here

because a lot of bewildered food wanders by on a regular basis, confused morsels are always showing up practically at the mouth of the cave sometimes, and don't forget to tell Rusty and Troy hello from her. And, by the way, maybe they should go now. Because they're kind of noisy and she needs to rest.

The wolf-couple is going down the mountain, Jacob saying, "*that* was a little weird, you think?" Sophia saying, "hormones, it must be hormones. Because she's totally pregnant." And as soon as they're back on the web, a little distance between them and the mountain, they're telling Rusty (and Troy who's overhearing it) the good news, that they've *found Yooolia*, that she's safe, she's alive.

Troy, though, is distracted. Because Aiden is the lucky one who's found the deercamp. Troy is yelling at him—in Aiden's head—to get the fuck away before someone picks up on him. Because Aiden has decided to *save Troy*, to single-handedly *carry* the cage back to Rusty. *Wait for me you mean fuck, don't hog all the glory for yourself*, that's the message Aiden is getting from Noah. Over the wolfweb. Troy is telling these wolves to get *off* the *damn* wolfweb, because deer can detect them, maybe pick up the messages they're sending to one another. Troy is thinking: I can't *hide* these stupid animals.

And then Troy does something he didn't realize he could do, that he doesn't quite realize he's doing. Because it feels—on the web—like he's spinning darklight or something like that out of his dewish body. He cuts *all* the wolves off from the wolfweb. For a while, long enough for the bewildered wolves to wander back to where Rusty is. Before the unicorns can wake up, the ones *on the wolfweb*. Troy has learned to grow murk on the web. Or he's learned that he already knows how to do this. Firewalling is what Rusty called it.

Because Rusty explains to Troy later that this must be how he and Yooolia escaped. All of a sudden, that's what happened in the tunnels, *no one* could see anything. This black light that was darkening everything on the webs, this white noise that was drowning every sound out. On all the webs. So that the deer stampeded in panic, in the tunnel. Because they couldn't see anything or they saw something that wasn't there, something that *spooked* them." "I'm not getting it," Troy says. "It had to be you," Rusty replies, "because it couldn't have been me." And Troy says: "I was out cold, so it couldn't have been me either." "Some of you was out cold," Rusty says, "and some of you obviously wasn't." Whatever *that* means.



Rusty is furious, he's really pissed off. He's shouting: "This is a one-off event, this thing with Troy and the deer. Because they're going to figure it out really soon, that Troy's been on their web, that he's been messing around with them, they'll figure out *exactly* what he's capable of just like they did with the chimera. That's how arms-races work, everyone catches up with everyone else. Eventually. So this is just a lucky grace period that we have to make the most of, this is just a short *opportunity* that we don't have time to throw away by being *stupid*." The young wolves listening to him feel bad because they can tell how angry Rusty is. They don't really get what he's talking about, *arms-races*, Troy being on the deerweb, *graceperiods*. But they look up to Rusty, most of them do, they *admire* Rusty, so they don't like it when he's angry with them. Aiden feels especially guilty when Rusty says to him: "Let's see how heroic you'll be the next time. When you're inside the stomach of a cougar."

And so, for a little while, for the next week or so, they're doing exactly what Rusty has asked them to do. Practicing moving in a *group*, bounding along this way and that, prancing up and down, *in formation*. That's what Rusty's called it, that's what he's asked them to do. Choreography. A kind of *dance* that he's showed them. And this is somehow supposed to fool the deer when they see it, when the wolves approach the camp *prancing up and down this way*, that somehow the deer are going to see the wolves who are dancing in formation as something else entirely. As a pattern of chimera slithering towards them. *Partially up in the sky above*. Because of Troy this illusion is supposed to happen. Accompanied by *unforeseen sonics*. Whatever those are, exactly.

Michael is only going along with this because he has nothing else to do. He thinks it all sounds pretty silly, pretty unlikely, he's not as limber as the other wolves, his ankles keep aching, his pawpads feel tender, especially in the evenings. And Aiden's guilt fades quickly after a couple of days or so, he's saying constantly, to Noah mostly, that he feels stupid doing this, *can't we stop? After all, who the fuck dances?* He gets hopscotching, all the wolves get *that*. But this isn't hopscotching, it's too *precise*. The other wolves still feel chastened and respectful, and so they insist that they all keep practicing the way Rusty has told them to. Especially the girl-wolves. Who also think it's kind of fun.

Rusty isn't there today. He's gone off to the mountain, to find Yoolia, to convince her to come back, to join their new tribe. But he gets another idea first, when he realizes that she's been living near a vlture trap, he decides to try to make a deal with them first. So he's talking to some vltures. On their web, on the vlture web. Where they look like smiling sparrows fluffily dressed up in yellow downy chick-fur, those vltures he's talking to. Because even vltures like to think of themselves as cute. So many animals—so many *nasty* animals—want to think of themselves as sweet and small, innocent and soft. That's the kind of image they project of

themselves: their fantasy-self image. Delicately drinking nectar out of flowers or something, their gossamer wings vibrating, that's how they picture themselves. Kind of weird.

It's no coincidence that when Yooolia is out hunting around the same time, she realizes the vlture buzz has suddenly gone dead, that all around her, on the web anyway, there is this immediate total *quiet*. So she ventures onto the web, cautiously, just for a moment, to see what's going on, and Troy is there. In her head. Suddenly.

*You get out of my head*, she says right away, *I'm mad at you*. It's because of something he said that Yooolia refuses to repeat and that Troy doesn't even remember. How *could* you say that to me? she keeps saying. Before she starts crying. And Troy surrounds her because he's got nothing left in the world but her, she's waving her hands about, saying aloud, "*you get out of my head now, you bastard.*"

Troy won't leave. Troy is whispering mist, tickling her ears, making her furious. *There's no reason for me to live without you*, this mist is saying to her. And the mist is saying this too: *I love you so much*. "Get out of my head, get out of my mind," big Yooolia booms over the wolfweb, everything there is *shaking* now, and Troy sees unicorns in the distances rousing themselves, stirring out of sleep, their ears starting to stretch like yellowing taffy. Towards them. *Shhhh*, Troy the mist whispers in her ears, *because unicorns are looking up, looking around, unicorns are starting to listen, the microscopic unicorns that are everywhere are waking up*. And now Troy becomes opaque, embraces Yooolia within the cloud of himself, surrounds her with his smell, his being. (*How is he doing that? How did he know that his smell would affect her this way?*) Rocking back and forth with her. Over and over again. While she cries, silently now. Because Troy the mist is absorbing all her sound, because of the ocean-roaring his whispering is creating in her head. She's saying, *and you said it in front of Rusty. That terrible thing*. And Troy is whispering all around her, as if it's the landscape that's weeping his words, *I love you I'm sorry I love you I'm sorry I love you I'm sorry*. Over and over and over.

## 47

It happens at dusk. Days later. When illusions are at their strongest. There are headlines first, suddenly, in the minds of all the deer: *A chimera is on the horizon. A chimera is coming to get all of you. To take revenge on murdering deer*.

Chimeras were once called dragons. Apparently. That's what *they* wanted to be called by the rest of the animals, that's how they wanted to be seen by everyone else. Long ago, once upon a

time. And still, but deepdown in the animal-mind, they're depicted as having wings, as flying in the sky. And as spitting fire. Troy doesn't remember wings on the chimera he saw back at the university, he doesn't remember any fire. It was just a big snake sitting in an artificial swamp.

The wolves approach, doing their choreographed wolf-dance, spreading in and out, back and forth, prancing up and down (as if they're part of a pair of flapping wings, some of them). Just the way Rusty has taught them to, coordinating their motions as they've been practicing for weeks. They have to be sighted on the web first, by enhanced deer-senses. So that the deer panic, stampede. Before anyone else sees or notices anything. So that the deer panic sweeps everyone along in a crowd, takes everyone with them.

Because if cougers detect the wolves first, it'll all be over, the cougers will just sense some runty wolves dancing back and forth in a way that looks crazy—you won't fool cougers with an illusion like this. They'll *smell* what's really out there.

Troy had warned Rusty: "Once they've run a certain distance from the cage, the deer I mean, I won't be able to do it anymore. If they look back, the wolves will look like *wolves*. Because like you said these webs are more local than anyone realizes." And Rusty is thinking, sadly: *Leadership, it's all about lying to everyone else for their own good*. Because he hasn't told Troy the *full* plan. Or anyone else. That this is when the *vltures* are going to show up, just the way they're showing up now. Because the deer have all stampeded quite a distance away, deserting everything in the camp in their panic, leaving their makeshift tents behind, the confused cougers running off with them, the ducks waddling as fast as they can too. Because other animals, they're just *sheep*.

And now flying vltures are blurring the web around and above the panicked deer, the birds diving in pairs into the crowd of screaming deer, clawing up centaurs, and carrying them away. The cougers too, they're turning on the deer, they're taking them down like prey.

Because the cougers can't help themselves. Because it *maddens* cougers to see fleeing and panicked and screaming deer, to see deer *behaving* the way prey always does if you happen to be chasing it. So that it's just *automatic* for the cougers, their *prey modules* have taken over in their brains, their prey modules are making them chase panicked screaming deer, leap onto their backs, tear the animals open with their claws. And then start to *eat* the dying deer collapsing under them, right there on the spot.

Noah and Aiden break rank, of course. So that, first, the chimera's tail looks flutterly, scattered, *pixilated*, and then the illusion splinters entirely into a small group of small wolves who are surrounding Troy's cage, who are already trying to drag the cage away. A bunch of wolves who are high-fiving one another, jumping up and down, because *they're just so cool*, Noah and

Aiden fighting over who gets to be the hero, who gets to *carry* Troy's cage. Even though neither of them is strong enough to do it alone.

A deer steps out suddenly, out of nowhere it seems, confronting the wolves. A doe. Cleere. Barking angrily at the astonished wolves. The cage is sideways, because Noah and Aiden are having trouble moving it. Troy has been thrown sideways along with the cage, but he can see that Cleere telling the wolves to back off, to leave the human alone. She's going on and on about you *monsters*, how you *wolf-thing monsters* can't stop civilization, that you *murder-addicts* have no right to *hurt a human*. The wolves are totally *confused*, they're actually backing off. Because deer aren't supposed to act like *this*. It must be that she wasn't on the web so she didn't see the chimera, that's what Troy is thinking, but he's not sure that's possible, that it explains what she's *doing here*. Troy is about to yell out, to tell her to run, to go away, to get lost. Because this is *ridiculous*.

It can't end well. Because heavy Yoolia is there now. In pregnant wolf-form. Bigger than the rest of the wolves, pushing past the crowd of them. She's saying to the doe, she's clearly enraged, "what the fuck do *you* think you're doing?" Just before she attacks, so fast that Troy barely sees it happen, Yoolia leaping at the doe, the doe rearing back in fright, trying to defend herself by kicking out her big legs, her front hooves, but it's futile because that only arouses Yoolia's prey instinct, the wolf is already on her, tearing her throat open, bringing her down. Near Troy's cage, that's where the deer-body crashes with the wolf on top of her, right next to where Troy is, trapped behind bars. So that he sees the deer's eyes looking over at him, staring out at him from her furry snouthead as she lays dying, as Yoolia is starting to *eat* her, to wolfishly tear her flesh off from her body. Troy thinks, crazily, that Cleere's big strange eyes are saying to him, just before they blink out, go unconscious: *I was trying to make you human again. And you betrayed me*. Maybe this is what hell is, Troy thinks, being able to understand what your prey feels as it dies in front of you. Hearing its little voice in your mind, hearing it speak to you as you kill it.

He doesn't believe it, this can't be what just happened. Deer just aren't that *brave*. Or stupid.

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*Psssst, folks*. Now the cat is letting itself be noticed, that it's approached *this close*, it's finally drawing attention to itself. (Cats can be quite silent when they want to be.) "I knew it was you all along," it's saying, directing its soft words to Troy, but in a purr that *carries*, "I knew all along that you were up to something."

The growling wolves are *posturing*, arching themselves to look as large as possible, they're trying to ring around the cat, to stop it from getting any closer to the caged Troy. Bloody Yoolia—who actually *is* large—is rising up from the torn-open Cleere-carcass in front of Troy's cage, readying herself for a fight to the death, Rusty is moving diagonally towards the animal and Yoolia too, already thinking about how he might *negotiate* with this thing, stop an unpleasant *escalation* that no one here is going to win, not even the cat.

"Modern belligerence," the cat is saying now, and it looks to Rusty almost as if it intends to be talking to *him*, "it's so hard for the old folks like us to keep up." This is *not* the cat commiserating, because cats don't commiserate, they don't know how, they don't *want* to. "You pulled this off somehow," the cat says, focusing again on the sideways Troy in the cage, and it sounds *angry* now, maybe for the first time. It's still moving closer, it's still approaching, large and ominous, walking softly nevertheless. Despite the growling wolves. Something is going to happen any second, that's what Rusty fears. Unless the cat stops moving towards them, unless *it* backs off.

Because the other wolves have circled the cat, and surely it realizes that even if it kills some of them, it won't survive, but only now does the cat mock-widen its eyes, as if it's just *noticed* the wolves all around it, and it says: "so who *are* all these *little guys*? Have we *met* before? You guys are *so* cute." (Jacob winces.) Rusty is standing besides Yoolia now, he's got a firm hand on her shoulder, he's holding her back, and she tries to angrily shrug his hand off of her, but he doesn't allow it. Because he knows somehow that this cat isn't going to attack. Not this time, anyway. Maybe because there are too many little guys for it to handle all at once.

And it's true, the cat *is* backing off finally, it's going, "Okay, maybe not today. I get it. Because it would be kind of embarrassing to kill you guys, it would be like squashing insects. But maybe you'll see me again tomorrow, maybe I'll come back with some of my *own* little friends." As it backs off very slowly, watching them, watching Troy while it smiles. Like it's clearly won this round. Before it turns and bounds off. And the wolves keep waiting, they wait until they can't see the cat anymore, until they can't even see its dust. Before they start *cheering*. Because *look at this*, they've driven off their first *cat*.

*Later.* Rusty is explaining to a young wolf, to Ava, that the way deer are always slopping over one another, that it's probably them coordinating their *microbiomes*, that *that's* why they're so *promiscuous* with all that licking they do. Because they're probably using their saliva to *calibrate* their tamed *microbes*. "This sort of thing is never what it looks like," Rusty tells Ava, who's making a major *ick-face* at him while she's crossing her naked legs flirtitiously. "Kissing for example," Rusty says, "it's got to be something similar, maybe it's exactly the same sort of thing."

Rusty keeps surprising Troy: even now when Troy knows so much more than he used to, he's surprised how Rusty still comes up with stuff like *this*. And Troy can't figure it out, why all these girl-wolves look the way they do, their legs *shaved*. Later he realizes that the rest of their hair is groomed too, and much much later he realizes that their hair is groomed the way Yoolia had groomed her hair back at the beaverdam, in all these tight little shiny ringlets, that *that's* probably where they got the idea from. When he asks Rusty about it, how they're doing it, Rusty tells him that he thinks it's rabbit-oil or something. That they actually use fire the way Troy does to cook the rabbit oil or prep it or something. Soap too, some of them even make soap. And Troy doesn't want to hear anything more about this. "It's a little hard to get used to," Rusty adds, thinking *that's* what Troy is reacting to, "what all the girls here look like. And by the time I do get used to it, I'm sure they'll be doing something else, something that I'll find even harder to look at." "Um," Troy says. From within his cage. Because of course this is *all* pretty hard to look at. From *his* point of view, anyway.

Noah and Aiden have set Troy's cage sideways again, and they're jumping up and down on top of it, trying to break it open with their stamping feet. Troy is inside, on his hands and knees, looking annoyed as the cage rocks back and forth from their pounding. Noah loses interest only after a few minutes of this, and he tries to get Aiden into a headlock instead, Aiden shouting at him, "I'll fuck you up, I mean it, get off of me," and Rusty is saying now, pulling the two wolves off the cage, setting it upright again, that he doesn't see how the deer got Troy in there in the first place, "because I don't see a lock anywhere, there doesn't seem to be a way of opening this thing that I can find."

"Can't you just break me out of this?" Troy asks, and he directs his next remark to Yoolia. Because now she's standing there too, her mouth flaking dried blood: "like you did the last time?" "No," Yoolia says, and she slaps the side of the cage *hard*, "this one was made really really well. *You* could have broken out of the last cage you were in. You just didn't realize it, you never even *tried*. But that won't work with *this* cage."

Troy is thinking, can't you at least *try* to keep the scorn out of your voice? He says instead: "If you could have escaped whenever you wanted to, why did you stay in the cage so long that first time?" And Yoolia tells him, impulsively: "Because I saw you sleeping there when I woke up. In the other cage."

This isn't the whole story, of course. Because she wasn't going to break out as soon as she saw she could in any case, because she had to plan it, escape only when it was clear that she'd be able to get away *entirely*, that there was no one nearby who would be able to stop her. Because they surely wouldn't let her try escaping *twice*.

Even so, she's just admitted something to Troy for the first time. And she's admitted it for the first time to herself too.

So she says to Troy, because she's feeling mean again, because she's said something sweet to him *even though he doesn't deserve it yet*: "How are you planning to take a bath in there?" Troy thinks: She's not done being mad at me.

And now, because only the three of them are by the cage, Rusty and Yooolia, and Troy *in* the cage actually, all of them watching Noah trying to get Aiden into another headlock, Aiden saying again, "I'll fuck you up, I mean it, get off of me," Troy is saying, "They're young," Yooolia is saying, "some of them are, but they're all small—even that older one, Michael, is runtish," Rusty is saying, "fewer calories, it's better," Yooolia is saying, "easier for cats to gulp them down in one go, that's how it looks *to me*."

Troy says to Rusty, because he's thinking about that duck so long ago that Yooolia killed, because he's trying *not* to think about Cleere, about her torn-open and chewed-up body still there, still near his cage: "Those are horrible deaths you set up deliberately. Using the vltures. Those are horrible deaths *for anyone*." Yooolia is staring at *Troy*, that he's talking this way, while Rusty says, "you don't get to make a deal here. Because we need as much time as we can get, because *those* deer were going to figure it out soon, they were going to figure *you* out. Now they won't, not *those* deer, anyway." And at this moment Troy *hates* Rusty. For the first time.

Yooolia is saying, "I've decided I won't have the father of my children kept in a cage all of their lives. It's a really bad role model." And then she says furiously to Rusty, "don't *laugh* at me." Because that's what he's doing, he's laughing *out loud* at what she's just said. Moments later she's saying to Troy, after coolly appraising him, after looking him up and down—after Rusty has walked away—but maybe she's just teasing him: "I think we're going to have to leave you in there for good. Because you're looking kind of deerish, kind of soft and plump and edible. Now that I've had a chance to take a good look at you. What have these creepy things been feeding you all these months?" Troy is thinking, God, she's even *moodier* than she used to be. Who would have thought that was *possible*? Because he can tell that she's looking around at all the wolves, the new *tribe* that Rusty's set up for them, and he can hear what she's thinking, that this is ridiculous, all these *small* wolves, all these *runts*. That she and Troy *can't stay here*. Even though he's in a cage.

Now *three* of these wolves are hoisting Troy's cage up, readying themselves to carry it off, Rusty saying, "Somewhere in the world there's a can opener for this cage. We're sure to find it, don't worry. *We've got resources*. Even if we have to raid a vlture-hoard." While Troy squats low in the cage so that he doesn't keep losing his balance. The wolves are nodding at what Rusty's just

said, because these wolves think they'll *like* raiding vlture-hoards, it sounds like fun, because they've heard that's where stuff like *detached claws* and other external technology can be found. All the girl-wolves want *razors*, that's what they're called. So they don't have to use their own claws anymore. To shave their legs.

"Which way do we go?" Ava is asking this. Rusty points: "This direction looks pretty good, doesn't it?" He's looking at Yooolia, and she shrugs. So that's the direction they go in. While Rusty is telling everyone, "We can't *win* against the deer. Ultimately. You've got to keep this in mind. Because *demographics* is always everything. But we can *survive*. Maybe." While Yooolia is thinking, *he's wrong, this isn't going to work, this really isn't. No way, not with all these little guys around us we'll have to protect*. While Ava is asking Rusty, "what's *demographics*? You haven't told us what demographics are." Because she's decided she can do this, she's decided that Rusty is going to let her get away with things, he's going to let her take some liberties. If she wants to.