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Where the Animals Hide

The woods hide more than what meets the eye. Fall whispers through the air as golden and red trees are singing a chorus from their native tongue harmonized by the seemingly joyful birds. The sparrows, jays, warblers, wrens, and nightingales sing melodies about the halcyon days from their childhood that melt into the tranquility of the present. The noise is so beautiful a young man walks to the edge of the woodland, just to listen. He swears he hears laughter in some distant place. Almost coincidentally, the trees give up their chanting, and the songbirds quiet. A solemn hush falls over the land like a heavy blanket suffocating the air underneath. In a moment, what used to stream with life is eerily still. The youthful man, for one instant, feels like the only person on earth- cursed to his loneliness. This faint idea, on top of the silent woods, instills fear, which forces him to bolt home to the safety of his kin. Mere human- falling victim to the strategy of birds? Of course, the birds wanted him to leave! If they hadn't promoted anxiety amongst the threat, surely he would find the source of audible laughter, the place where the animals hide.

Deep in the forest, where the brook trickles and the breeze ruffles the undergrowth, there is a magnificent Ulmus tree that is perhaps thousands of years old. Under this ancient tree is hidden a victorian door no larger than the size of a toddler. If knocked on twice, the hatch will creak open to a grey fox with a scar on his face to greet welcomed visitors. A short journey down three small steps reveals a splendid sight: a den comparable to a small bedroom hides a humble bar accompanied by wooden stools and tables for four. Shelves of books tower to the ceiling,

requiring a ladder to reach the top. Upon further investigation, these libraries contain some of the most influential books known to being: Fitzgerald, Twain, Bradbury, and Austen all decorate the old shelves along with the compositions born from the forest that no man writes. The smell of vintage leather and freshly baked tea cakes smells so welcoming and familiar. The creaking of antique floorboards, soft discussion, and slowly turned pages gives the space a lively hush as Boston Ferns and English Ivy cascade off of the shelves from valuable porcelain pots. Discrete windows peeking through the great tree's roots let golden sunlight stream into the place, revealing a variety of "wild" creatures entertaining themselves with pastimes of culture. This. This is where the animals hide.

A squirrel serves maple-beer to a badger having a rough day as a hare and raccoon debate politics at a nearby table. Sitting by himself at the bar, an adolescent marten excitedly writes down his idea for a new story to publish- it will be about wild humans uncharacteristically being civilized in an urban utopia only for it to be torn down by the antics of critters. As a rite to the forest, the rabbits and the foxes and the moles and the mice and the squirrels all take refuge in the place where the animals hide. The aureate fall light illuminates the peacefully crowded safe-house with an impossibly serene ambiance. Juniper tea and maple-beer are sipped from gleaming glass mugs while intriguing conversations are held and classic novels are read. The heavenly songbirds overhead grace the air with their vocals; singing intertwining melodies of folk-tales. Everything is perfect. Then the birds stop singing.

The warning- someone, something is outside. In one swift motion, every inhabitant looks up from each book. Conversations that had just filled the room have been prematurely concluded, leaving an anticipatory silence. Surely, the birds would start singing again, like they

always have. It would be only a matter of seconds, right? The birds did not begin singing. The silence is terrible- until there isn't any.

Three long and drawn out scratches at the wooden door break the quietude. In an instant, every set of eyes in the establishment turns to look at the frozen grey fox, the doorkeeper. He dares not move out of sheer fear. Three more petrifying scratches finalize the feeling of impending doom. The younglings of all species shake. Mothers wrap their arms around their offspring in a useless attempt to hush them, for trying to contain their child's inclination to wail proves to be a difficult task. The grey fox carefully turns his head to the door. The unlatched lock glints in the golden light. He slowly reaches over- *click*.

A barrage of beast calls tears apart the air making it hard to breathe. The birds scream in terror as the creature outside deafens the miserable animals. The indescribable noise has the creatures frozen in place, for the only escape is straight towards the creature's clenches. It is a wolf, no- a domestic dog with a collar and an owner and a dish and a kennel, a blundering disgrace to nature. In response to the barking, a thundering of steps that shook the whole tree comes from above. The crunch of dead leaves groan in agony as monstrous boots stammer over. Again, all goes quiet. A silence even worse than before follows. Each creature refuses to move even a muscle during the thirty seconds impending. Tensions lift as nothing seems to happen. Has the hostility decided to leave? Are we safe? All false hopes, of course.

The birds simultaneously scream once more- a split-second caveat. A nanosecond later, a large, synthetically crafted boot breaks the door down with ease. A century-old symbol of social and cultural development destroyed, like an intricately assembled sandcastle lies smashed on the beach by some ignorant child. There is no time to mourn, though, for the snarly dog plunges his oversized head through the remains of the door. Everything is still as the grey fox looks at the

cluster of animals he calls family with nothing but terror in every pair of eyes. He knows what needs to be done, even though it goes directly against his morals.

The silver fox shows his razor-sharp teeth to the boorish beast calling for a duel, the same occasion to give him his renowned scar. The fox's teeth shine menacingly in the golden light, each tooth like a sharpened dagger ready to be utilized. The abused beast's empty eyes light up to the idea of a battle against a nervous chew toy that isn't even half its size. In a blur, the unsuspecting hound is howling in pain as the night sky itself attaches to its neck. The crowd watches in horror as the line between life and imminent demise struggle to stay on top. This display of feral discord undeniably shows the end of a peaceful period's dynasty. The guests grimly know that it is not the time for novels or juniper tea. -It is not the time for conversation and manners. -It is not even time to be civilized. All that there is time for are untamed instincts buried deep in each animal.

The rabbits and hares are the first to go. Their surprisingly powerful legs skip the steps altogether and bolt through the petite doorway in every direction, trying to avoid the human chasing them. Then the squirrels take to the trees, whispering in uncertainty. In hordes separated by breed, every animal flees for their very lives. The rabbits and the foxes and the moles and the mice and the squirrels no longer take refuge in their haven. The place where the animals hide, stripped of its vacancy, is but a memory now, for the creatures are family no more. The lamb will no longer lie with the lion. All that is of the den is a fatigued fox struggling to win an uneven match. The quarrel has switched sides as the rampant hound's grip tightens unforgivingly around the doorkeeper's narrow neck. Breathing, which used to be so easy, becomes a task. What happened to the good old times by the babbling creek when he felt never-ending as long as the golden sunlight warmed his fur? Or how about the times all the animals would lightheartedly

play hide-and-seek in the forest's undergrowth? They pretended to hunt predatorily like their ancestors. Where did all the time even go? Everything used to be so easy. Now there is no fathomable way of leaving victoriously from this fight. The fox's vision blurs as life is being stolen right from them. As his last living act, a single tear runs down his scar, accepting that he is out of time. His longing body lies cold and still in the golden light, a sacrifice for a disbanded family. There is no more time for civilization and joy in the forest; there is only time for survival. To survive, measures must be taken- measures of life and death.

So no-

There will be no reading of novels,

or fascinating conversations,

or sipping of juniper tea,

or family,

or song,

or civilization of the matter-

In the place where the animals used to hide.

THE END