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889 sheep

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Farmer has 889 sheep under his control. Once upon a time, he had 1,000, but somehow he lost 111 of them. Whether they ran away, were taken, or the wolf got them, the remaining sheep will never know. Sometimes the low-ranking sheep of the flock whisper amongst themselves that someone will be next, but the last of the missing 111 sheep disappeared so long ago that it seems unlikely anyone will ever go or be taken anymore.

The sheep would love the colors of the world if only they could see them. Farmer's 889 sheep are practically sightless; they see only in black and white, and blurry shapes at best. Objectively, they are very near blindness, but they do not know that. Not one of them wonders why that is, and not one of them yearns for an alternative, as they are not even aware that one exists.

Farmer is not very careful in naming his sheep, and never has been. When he first acquired his original 1,000, each was given a number. When the disappearances happened–always a random sheep from the flock, and never counting down evenly from 1,000–he never replaced the missing number. There are large, uneven, inconsistent gaps in his flock of 889. The sheep are simple creatures, and assume he prefers it that way.

It's a sunny, cloudless day. A light wind rustles the flock's fleeces. 31 lived the same life as the others, all the way up until now. He has awoken to a brand new world, one where all of a sudden he sees in perfect color and clarity. The hills and the sky are alive. He sees clouds and birds and little things–little bundles of color–that he never knew to be flowers. He heard of them, and he's smelled them, but never has he been quite able to see them.

31's awakening began when he was trampled by the flock. In a panic, the hundreds of sheep had swarmed and ran, and poor 31 somehow ended up underfoot, perhaps because he was smaller, or weaker, or slower to respond to the threat. At first, when he finally emerged from the shoddy ground, he thought he had died, and that these were the sorts of unheard-of things one sees immediately after death. Now, staring slack-jawed at the wide open world around him, he is not sure what to do about it.

"The sky," he finally says out loud, the first words he has dared to utter following his supposed death. "I see the sky. I see clouds and the sky."

"So can we, friend," growls a sheep to his right, almost snapping him out of his reverie. "We all do. It's all around us." It's true that the sky is like a sheep's most reliable friend. From the day of their birth and onwards, every sheep has always been able to look directly up and see the gray blankness of the sky. It is so plain and ordinary, so grotesquely unimportant, that the grown-up

sheep don't even bother staring into its nothingness. 31 certainly hadn't.

"It's everywhere now more than ever," 31 says in wonder, mostly to himself. He cannot contain his smile, even though he knows none of the others are able to see it.

12/1

The day is bright, the sky a warm ocean blue. Canaries and sparrows flutter by. In the past while, 31 has almost lived a double life. He has even discovered how to account for time, and convert the passing of days into weeks.

Sheep have begun disappearing again.

"There is a wolf among our numbers!" declares old 5 on an afternoon as sunny and cheerful as ever. A gasp runs through the crowd. A wolf? Impossible. Under Farmer's watch? It can't be.

"Recently," 5 continues, the audience's enthrallment adding fuel to his fire, "our fellow friends, brothers, parents and partners have begun to vanish. And!" Here he stamps his hoof, stirring up dust from the sheeps' unkept pasture. With his old age, 31 is expecting 5 to give out and splinter apart long before the wolf ever finds him. "And we let them go!" 5 exclaims. "In doing so, we sealed the fate of the wolf's next victim. But no longer shall we!" He coughs a dry, explosive cough. It really is a miracle that he's still standing. An uncertain, faint cry of approval rises up from the onlookers.

"31, what will we do?" asks 30 imploringly. 30 is 31's sister, and she has been by his side for as long as he can remember. She is his only relic of their missing mother. "I'm certain the wolf took Miss 80."

Miss 80, the pair's mother, has been gone since autumn. Now, in the depths of winter, her return seems unlikely. 31 brushed it off at first. Losing track of someone in a crowd of 889 is not uncommon, and so he had initially been confident that she would turn up. Somewhere in his heart, he holds hope that she is still lost in the crowd, far away and on the other side of the grassy hill, but still there.

31 fears the wolf, as any sheep who values his life might, and has decided that surely his gift of sight was given to him for a reason (a blindly optimistic sort of attitude towards things that is shared by all of the 889 sheep) and so perhaps he will be able to see, with all of the colors and shadows and intricacies that he has under his control, a wolf. He will stay up tonight, climb up to the highest bump in the hill he can find, and keep watch. He wonders if Farmer knows about the wolf, and why hasn't he done anything about it. Farmer fixes everything; Farmer is the sheeps' protector.

"Let's stay close to the herd," he answers 30, "so that we can have strength in numbers. The wolf, wherever it is, can't get all of us at once." This he believes.

At night, most sheep are already sleeping, save for a few restless elders. 31 is awake as well. He is watching the night, but it's difficult for him, because he has no practice watching his surroundings. Every shadow, every fluttering leaf, even his own fellow flock mates, he does not process at first, and then when he does, he startles as if he is being confronted by the wolf itself. Keeping watch is hard for someone who has always been watched over.

In the end, 31 sees nothing worthwhile. In the morning, when the golden sun rises and casts its rays over the humble little hill of sheep, he is unrested and rather cranky. But he knows that he must continue about his day, eating and meandering like a sitting duck, or however the saying goes.

30 asks him at breakfast why he wasn't in the shed at night. He tells her that he wanted only to feel the wind on his fleece and the stars beaming at him from the sky. It's easier than explaining why he thinks he could ever catch the wolf.

And then she asked what stars were, and he sadly replied that they were nothing, and never mind. It's not unheard of for a sheep to know the concept of stars, without ever having truly seen them, but since they are practically nonexistent in the sheeps' world, most sheep find that there is not much use in remembering an idea that does not affect them.

12/10

According to 31's internal clock, it has been approximately three weeks since his awakening.

He has begun to notice that not all sheep have the same fleece, and some in fact sport exotically colored fleeces beyond his imagination. He is one of them, but never noticed that before, and actually does not remember ever having done anything in particular to make himself appear that way. 31 brushes it aside as another one of Farmer's decisions.

Most likely, Farmer colored some of the sheep to signify their importance in the flock. How lucky is 31, to be special both in Farmer's eyes and his own? To be colorful and see it, too? The colors are pretty impressive, like nothing he's ever seen before. Hues of magenta and teal and red and…

30 is missing, and no matter how hard he tries to distract himself, he cannot stop himself from still thinking about her.

30 disappeared four days ago, making her the most recent of the wolf's victims.

The flock is still reeling.

Suspicions have grown and tensions are rising. Not one of the 889–wait, there are less sheep now, there are less than 888– is safe, and they all know it. Everyone is determined to see the wolf found, eradicated, thrown into the fire. The sheep are suspicious of one another. Anyone can be a wolf.

Yet farm life goes on regardless. The dogs howl and whine at night, and in the morning Farmer gives the sheep their feed. He gives the ones that come close enough an affectionate tug on the ear, right where their number tags are. His hairy gray face looms over the pen, his tall ears practically sticking out of his head. It is this grizzled old face that 31 sees tense and squint, reaching a wrinkly hand over the fence line to place hay in 113's trough, except 113's feed is not a normal yellow like 31 has recognized hay to be.

31's struggles to push through the crowd were futile. From afar, cut off from 113 by a swarm of wooly bodies, he cries out a last warning. That, too, falls on deaf ears.

12/11

On the fifth morning since 30's disappearance, 31 is declared to be the wolf. His colorful coat, a shade of lovely golden-yellow to his eyes, is suspiciously gray to the others. They

conclude that he must have been the wolf, and it is no wonder that 30 disappeared, because in her lifetime, he was the only one close to her.

"There is a wolf…" he tries to protest, ".. but it's not me." They don't fully believe him. 5 determines that he must be closely monitored. Despite his solemn situation, 31 almost laughs. Watched? By a bunch of blind old sheep? As if.

The sheep are remarkably good at knowing where he is at all times, despite hardly being able to see. He wonders how they do it. Smell? Sound? It's been so long since he was one of them, he almost feels like a different species entirely, living among them and observing them as an outsider.

At night, he settles on the same high hill he first tried to watch the wolf from. 30 is not nearby. He is still getting used to a life without her. Alone, his thoughts run in circles.

Why would the sheep ever accuse him of being the wolf? They are so suspicious, so hyper-aware, that things that were previously fine are no longer. 31 figures that everyone must look like a wolf to them, if they only see in shades of gray. It must be tiring. He has been thinking of mustering up the courage to tell them of his unique ability, but doing so now would only confirm their worst fears. He stays silent and stares at the crooked bend in the fence off in the distance.

12/15

31 discovered the Exit accidentally, really. How was he to know that along the fence that encloses the sheep, there exists a little gap where the wires are fraying? 31 doesn't know when it got there, or even how it got there. He told 76 about it, but 76 scoffed at him instead. Said there's no such thing as an Exit, and 31 must be crazy to think otherwise.

"Only a wolf would think like that," 76 concluded darkly, and turned away. 31 did not know what to say to that, and so he looked again at the bend in the fence instead of speaking.

During the day 31 walks by the Exit. He thinks he can fit in between the coils of broken wire. Tonight, he will try.

The moon hangs high in the sky, so radiant that it absorbs all other lights in the sky around it. The grassy plains shimmer and sway in the nighttime breeze. 31 sees a big old hunk of metal–Farmer's truck, probably–stationary just a little ways beyond the fence. As he watches, a swift little cat-shaped shadow darts past. His guards are far away. The stars are twinkling. It is time.

31 is initially wary of the broken fence's sharp edges, but he pushes his head through anyway. *Whatever I see out there*, he thinks to himself, *is no worse than my fate here*. He keeps struggling through the gap, even though he feels sharp edges hooking into his fleece and tearing off tufts. The wind grows stronger.

When he finally tumbles out the other side, 31 does not believe it at first. He is reminded of his first awakening, where it at first appeared too good to be true. The sleepy, sheepy hill behind him is still as quiet as ever. Bits of yellow fur rush by his vision, carried by the wind.

31 is now free,
in a world
he knows nothing about.