

HYBRID

Robert Reed's ninth novel, *Marrow*, should be in the stores by the time you read this issue. His new story for us re-examines the age-old theme of lycanthropy from an interesting perspective. It doesn't have anything to do with this story, but Bob also notes that he has a Siberian husky he can barely handle.

I'm interested in owning one or more hybrids. What's my first step?

WELKS READS VIRTUALLY everything available on the subject. He starts with the popular how-to guides, including Collins's seminal *Possessing the Wild*, then moves to the uneven, self-published works like *Misunderstood* and *Souls Better Than Our Own*. A national advocacy group offers him the names and phone numbers of a dozen members within a hundred-mile radius. Ten agree to speak with him. Three of them agree to let Welks see their facilities. Two of them are an older couple happy to show off their hybrids to the curious man, their pride obvious and their love heartfelt. "Like no other pet or friend," says the wife. "They're our children," her husband declares, nonchalantly scratching the tip of his nose with the remnants of his right hand. When Welks inquires about the hand, the man makes the vague admission, "Mistakes get made." Then he conspicuously says nothing else about the matter.

The other tour is quick and unsettling. A tall and handsome woman perhaps five years older than Welks silently leads him to her enclosure. Its double gates hang open. The interior is choked with weeds. At the center is a small, durable cottage that has been obviously abandoned. Because it seems like a reasonable question, Welks asks, "Why?" The single word causes the poor woman to glance at the ground, some buried pain beginning to surface. She wears no ring. Was a child involved? Or a lost husband? Welks can't recall any local tragedies, and he's certain that he would remember. Every incident always get too much play on the news. But whatever happened here, he won't hear about it from this woman. She hugs herself and shakes her head, then suddenly looks up, not quite staring at Welks, telling him flat-out:

"My only advice is that you decide how you're going to put your animal down. If it comes to that. You need to ask yourself, 'When will I do it, and how will I do it?' Then you make preparations. Keep more than one option. Are you listening Mr. Welks?"

"Always," he says.

"More than one option," she repeats. Then she leans forward, and in a whisper, she adds, "Keep your plans secret. From you-know-who. You-know-who."

What goes into a hybrid-worthy enclosure?

Welks lives ten miles outside the city limits. His large, comfortable home stands hidden inside acres of tangled woods and overgrown pasture. Eight different contractors show enough interest to drive out and meet with him. But most local firms don't have experience with this kind of project. Each makes the point of mentioning his liability insurance. "Why court disaster?" is the general tone.

Welks considers doing the job himself. Many people do just that. But he isn't a natural handyman, and his resources are considerable, since his parents left him with a fat inheritance. The answer, he decides, is to hire someone from out-of-state. Alaska and Montana offer the widest selection. Eventually he signs with a small firm based in Helena. Its young owners are smiling, gregarious twin brothers who happen to own their own hybrids. When they first meet Welks, they make a point of flipping open their wallets, showing off photographs of their best friends. That's exactly how they refer to their pets. "They're my best buddies in the world," says one brother, then the other. Smiling children and pretty wives go unmentioned, each of the brothers talking at length about the creatures nestled in the adjoining pockets, each trying to tell the most endearing stories and make the most impressive boasts.

The enclosure requires several weeks of good weather and a platoon of workers. Three acres are partly cleared, particularly near the future fence. A prefabricated cottage is assembled on site, water and power supplied through buried lines. Security cameras are set in high places, and armored. The fence itself is woven steel set on a deep concrete collar. Both fence and collar wear rugged sensors that will detect any breaks. The fence seems ridiculously tall, and it's crowned not only with razor-wire but also a protruding wire that will be charged with electricity. A back-up generator is mandatory. Local codes and common sense demand every reasonable precaution. And the cottage has some embellishments that, while not dictated by law, are recommended by most texts as well as the Helena twins.

When the work is nearly done, the brothers start asking:

"When are you getting yours?"

Welks shrugs, mentioning that there are very few licensed in-state suppliers. "I'm on everyone's waiting list," he mentions. Then he gestures at the empty cottage, saying, "Next year, hopefully. Probably."

The twins exchange little looks.

"The thing is," says the left twin. "We've got some babies for sale. In fact, that little girl I showed you had a litter of three a year ago last January."

The infants are nearly old enough to leave their mother, Welks realizes.

"Christ knows," says the twin, "we've got plenty of people interested in them. But you're never sure about some folks, much less their facilities. And we know you. We know you, and we know you've got the best enclosure around "

"Three puppies?"

"One's spoken for," says his brother.

"But I've got a boy and girl waiting for homes," says the first twin. "You can have either after New Years. At a reasonable price."

"How reasonable?"

The amount is substantial, and bearable.

Smelling success, the first twin asks, "What's your preference, sir? A boy or girl?"

"The girl," he blurts. Females are usually smaller, and they tend to be more tractable. At least that's what the literature promises.

But Welks' enthusiasm triggers an odd reaction. The brothers laugh and give each other little winks. Then the second brother pats their client on the shoulder, in an overly fond way, and something about his broad grin and the clucking of his tongue leave Welks feeling cold and uneasy, and a little sick to his stomach.

Where did hybrids originally come from?

There's no definite answer. Fossils are scarce, and written accounts are nonexistent. But most evolutionary biologists believe that the species, more likely than not, is an extremely rare example of sweeping transgenic hybridization.

In plants, such events are relatively common.

Different species of plants can cross, producing viable seed. A new species arises in one generation. And because flowering plants are often self-pollinating, a lone specimen can survive, and if it finds an environment to its liking, it can quickly prosper.

But mammals aren't equally blessed. The elaborate blending of wolf and human traits is unique, and precious, and it leaves behind a stubborn tangle of mysteries. The best guess is that four or five thousand years ago, probably somewhere in southeastern Europe, infectious bacteria mistakenly absorbed large pieces of a wolf's genome. The bacteria infected a human woman, and despite long odds, the foreign genes were implanted inside her viable eggs. At least two hybridized children were born. There had to be a brother and a sister, each holding a different stew of confused genes. And someone -- human or wolf -- had to care for the odd children, and love them, until they were old enough to love one another.

Where do I find pet-quality hybrids?

The enclosure is finished in mid-September. Despite misgivings, Welks signs a promissory note to purchase the young bitch on her second birthday. The brothers resist temptation: No more sly winks, no fond pats on the back. Perhaps they sense that they've overstayed their welcome. Hopefully they realize that their client isn't the sort of pervert they took him to be.

At first, thinking about the ways in which his life is about to change, Welks feels a delicious, almost giddy excitement.

But then it's early November, the skies have turned to steel, and his excitement fades into frustration and impatience, and every flavor of doubt.

He isn't ready for this huge responsibility.

Obviously.

The tiniest mistake can lead to disaster. A hand might be lost, for instance. Or worse, his hybrid might escape confinement and hurt an innocent person, and of course she would have to be destroyed immediately.

And it would be his fault. His.

That's exactly what Welks is thinking one morning as he eats breakfast in his kitchen. Between eggs and his second cup of coffee, he happens to glance out the glass door, noticing something moving down by the newly built enclosure. An animal, he realizes. A mutt dog, he tells himself. But then the dog rises up on its long hind legs, standing against the outer gate, a humanness invading its hairy black body.

In the dim gray of the autumn dawn, the hybrid looks tiny.

Looks sad.

Welks thinks of his security cameras. One of them is in the perfect position, and he watches on the kitchen television, staring at the narrow black face and the bright blue-white eyes. Forefeet more like stubby hands than animal paws hold onto the gate. A tight steel bracelet clings to the right wrist. The remnants of handcuffs, maybe. An expression reminiscent of a smile forms on the long mouth, and something that might be a word spills across the candy-colored tongue and between the curling white canines.

"Hello?" she might be calling out.

Most hybrids can speak, in some limited fashion. And years of study and careful observation tell him that

she is most definitely a she.

"Hello?" she repeats.

The poor creature is praying that some brother or sister of hers lives inside the enclosure. She's a runaway, and lonely. Obviously. Pity Washes over Welks, and he takes a deep breath, stands and opens the sliding door, stepping out onto the porch, trying his best not to make any sound.

The hybrid never looks back at him.

One moment, she's standing at the gate, calling to phantoms. And then she's suddenly down on all fours, streaking toward the nearest woods, desperate to make herself into the smallest target imaginable.

How did hybrids acquire their sorry reputation?

Most people look at them one of two ways: Hybrids are odd wolves that can stand on their hind legs, or they are sad human beings with severely deformed faces and bodies and decidedly simple minds.

Both images are a little true, and inadequate.

According to biologists, what's important is that they are neither species, and from the moment the first ones were born, hybrids have been a poor substitute for wolves and for men. Yes, they are strong. And by human standards, fast. But they don't run as efficiently as wolves, nor do they have the same bone-shearing jaw strength or the keen sense of smell. And despite a brain far larger than any canine's, the wisest hybrid is little better than a six-year-old human equipped with stubby fingers and difficult thumbs. Tools have to be simple and sturdy to be of any use. The most advanced and prosperous wild population -- several thousand "wolffolk" who used to live in the high Carpathians -- made their own stone implements when they couldn't steal knives and pikes from their human neighbors.

History is thick with conflict between humans and their odd offspring. The truth is that without either parent's full talents, the hybrids had little choice but to live in humankind's shadow, stealing their livestock and raiding their food caches to stave off famine. Hungry peasants armed with spears could do little. But muskets and muzzle-loading rifles changed that ancient balance. The wild populations began to retreat, and shrink, and by the mid-1800s, it looked as if the hybrids would follow the dodo into extinction.

But Europe's new nation-states were on the rise, each with a standing army demanding bodies, and a restless citizenry that had to be kept under heel.

The last wild hybrids were snared and caged, and their puppies were taken to be raised by human handlers. Properly conditioned, those half-tame hybrids were strong and fearless soldiers, and horribly cruel, and the best of them were utterly loyal to their foster parents. Tsarist Russia strangled more than one rebellion with their hybrid brigades. The Communists condemned the practice, then used the animals as guards throughout the Gulag. During both World Wars, Germany earned worldwide condemnation for arming thousands of hybrids with specially-designed guns and gas bombs, then throwing them against enemy lines. While the Americans preferred small, cohesive packs -- using them against the Japanese, and later, in secret operations, against the Viet Cong.

Public outcries helped end that horror, and the changing nature of war did the rest.

The most violent hybrids were euthanized, while the docile ones have been bred by a growing, increasingly sophisticated array of hobbyists and business people.

Today, hybrid is the only polite, accepted name for the species.

"Wolffolk" and "werewolves" and other derogatory labels have been left in the ugly, unconscionable past.

Hybrids are an honor to own, and a grave responsibility.

Possessing even one of the wondrous creatures is an endless challenge that appeals to remarkable people with resources and commitment and ample reserves of understanding and patience.

What do I feed my hybrid?

After consulting his library, Welks thaws a package of chicken hindquarters and hangs the raw meat from a low branch, then retreats to his house and watches, off and on, until the sun sets.

During the night, the chicken parts are yanked down and carried away.

He repeats the gesture that next morning, imagining the hybrid watching him as he carefully adjusts the greasy string. Then he washes his hands and drives into the city. His favorite pet store won't sell hybrids because of legal concerns, but they carry a full line of hybrid foods and harnesses and toys. A few clerks actually seemed well-versed in the subject. Welks doesn't mention what he has seen, but he has to ask, "Have any of the local hybrids turned up missing?"

The clerk is a thin young woman who smells of cigarettes. With a mixture of horror and amusement, she says, "God, I hope not!"

Then she asks, "Why? Did you see one running looser?"

"No, no. No." He lifts a fifty-pound sack of hybrid chow, easing it into the cart. "I just wondered if you'd heard anything."

"If you lose yours," she reminds him, "you've got to report it to the sheriff and Animal Control. Immediately!"

"I don't even own one."

She gives the sack a suspicious glance.

"I'm just getting ready," he explains. "For when I do."

The woman concentrates, then shakes her head. "I haven't heard anything about any missing hybrids. No."

"Good," says Welks.

But that's not really what he wants to ask.

"Who wouldn't report an escape?" he presses. "Any guesses?"

She shrugs, then states the obvious.

"Someone who has them illegally, I suppose. Without the proper enclosures, or the proper papers."

Welks thinks of the handcuff on the poor animal's wrist.

He nods and sighs, and says nothing.

"Anything else?" the clerk inquires.

At the end of the aisle is a cardboard display. Special VHS tapes are meant for a special audience. Welks takes one of each, then pays with cash.

"So when do you get yours?" the woman asks, her expression more than curious.

"Soon," Welks admits. "Soon."

Then he drives home to find the chicken missing again. Fresh paw prints mark the soft dust. Adrenalin makes his heart race. Carefully, slowly, he looks around the yard and the empty enclosure. Then he fills a steel dish with the fat-rich chow -- each nugget shaped like a mouse or a mole -- and he leaves it just inside the open gates before finally slipping into his empty house.

How do I train my hybrid?

Experts agree; there's no way to "train" the species. The only worthy goal is to win their trust and develop a common language of words and gestures that both of you can understand, without too much confusion.

The enclosure's little cottage has a single room.

Its floor is soft clean earth where the resident can dig as deeply as she wants. Some hybrids sleep underground, in wolf-like burrows. Others make their beds aboveground, using newspapers and linen and dried leaves. Boredom is a significant problem, particularly for hybrids kept alone. That's why a television is bolted into one of the walls. A special model, it has two large screens, outside as well as inside. Both the television and attached VCR are heavily padded and simple to use. As night falls, Welks slips in one of the new tapes, then turns up the volume and retreats, leaving the gates open behind him. The tape is three hours of images that any hybrid will find irresistible -- bounding deer and mountain vistas and cold rivers sliding over towering granite cliffs.

The tape runs to the end, then rewinds and starts again.

Welks can hear the running water from his bedroom. Soothed, he falls into a dreamless dark sleep. Then he wakes in the pre-dawn gloom, realizing in slow steps that he can't hear the television any longer. Excited, he dresses in his bright orange shock suit -- a reasonable precaution at this stage -- and hurries across the yard, closing and locking both of the gates behind him.

The dish of hard chow has been kicked aside, uneaten.

Welks walks with authority toward the cottage. He belongs here. His pace and posture signal that simple, affirmative message. He belongs here, and he's in total control. A person can't keep hybrids unless he can eventually become the undisputed alpha male, and this is the best way to begin that long process.

With his shock suit fully charged, he steps into the cottage.

The television is playing, but the volume has been turned down, and a different tape has been inserted.

Not one of his tapes, Welks realizes.

He doesn't see deer or waterfalls, but instead the familiar blackish muzzle and cold blue eyes. The hybrid stares at the camera. At Welks. A man's voice, thick and excited, says, "Get her!" Says, "Go on now, get her!"

The camera pans back.

The hybrid is standing upright, some kind of heavy manacle around one ankle. She bends forward,

waiting. A dog appears -- some kind of Doberman-mix -- sprinting across the concrete floor of a large garage. At the last instant, it leaps at the hybrid, and she neatly swats the dog on the head, with both fists, driving it back down to the floor.

Perhaps a dozen men are cheering. Hollering. Applauding.

"Go!" the first voice screams. "Don't you stop now!"

The dog leaps again, and this time the hybrid pins it against the steel wall, and with her mouth, she neatly and efficiently eviscerates the helpless animal, leaving it dead and scattered at her feet. The camera pulls in close now.

Through the spattered gore, blue eyes stare at Welks.

Then the cheers fall away, and the man holding the camera says, "Good girl," with pride and affection in his voice. "Good, good, good."

How can I catch my hybrid, if she happens to get free?

For her own sake, Welks needs to catch her inside the enclosure. And he needs an irresistible bait. He decides on the thick, musty scent of a male hybrid. In mid-morning, when she's most probably asleep, he slips into the cottage and opens a stoppered bottle, then closes the door and waits. Loneliness can be a greater motivation than food, he reasons. By late afternoon, his shock suit feels warm and heavy, and the last of his candy bars are gone. But he continues waiting, his own loneliness helping him ignore his hunger.

Dusk turns to night, coaxing the hybrid out of the woods.

Crouching low, peering through a small nightscope, Welks spies her athletic figure gently trotting along the tall steel fence. Now and again, her muzzle lifts, testing the chilling air. How can she resist? Pausing before the gates, she rears her head back and moans softly. Welks recognizes the longing in her voice and her body. He aches for her. But this is for her own good, he reminds himself, turning on a boombox, and the taped howl of an anguished male carries up through the darkness.

Instantly, she starts to run.

With a half-leap, she passes through the gates, charging across the open ground, answering the fake howl with her own miserable one.

Welks fingers a remote control.

Ana waits.

Suddenly, without warning, she turns and runs back up the hill.

It takes a moment for Welks to accept what he's seeing. He feels startled. Baffled. And a little angry. Before he can think it through, his finger has pressed the red button, and he has given himself away, both of the tall gates pulling shut with a high-pitched whine.

She's down on all fours, driving hard with her long hind legs, the stubby half-tail kept flat and her entire body fighting to remain as aerodynamic as possible.

Welks believes that she can't reach the gates in time.

But she does. Easily.

He jerks open the cottage door, then stumbles outside as the gates lock automatically. His kitchen lights have been left on -- better to make it look as if he's inside the house -- and against their warm glow, he sees the silhouette of the hybrid standing on the wrong side of things. A wild fear builds with every step. Not an emotional person by nature, he starts to sob and curse under his gasping breath...and despite the fact that he's absolutely safe inside this elaborate enclosure... But what is she doing?

The question trickles into his consciousness, accompanied by a remarkable sense of helplessness.

The hybrid isn't just standing outside the gate. No, her clumsy hands are manipulating something. Is it a rope? No, he hears the musical clink of steel links. She has a length of heavy chain, and she's wrapping it through the gate and fence and back again, then she joins the ends with a second something.

A scrap piece of metal, apparently.

It takes all of her strength to bend it. But she finishes the job before Welks finally chugs his way up to her. Gasping, dripping inside the heavy shock suit, he must look weak and ridiculous. As far from the alpha male as possible. But he's lost all of his dignity and his composure, screaming at her, telling her, "You aren't. Smart enough! You aren't!"

But obviously, she is.

He presses the release code into the control, and the both gates unlock and begin to open. But the outer gate is held shut by the chain, and the bent piece of steel, tied into the simplest knot, resists the motor's pressure.

The hybrid stands back from the gate, watching him.

Welks has read volumes about the body language of hybrids, and he's studied them on tapes and in the zoo. What her body says is, "I am in control." It tells him, "I've beaten you, silly man." He doesn't need any study to tell him that much. Then she turns without the smallest concern, showing her strong back to him, the stubby tail flicking at the sky as she calmly strolls away.

Again, Welks screams.

No words this time. Just rage, pure and animal. And utterly useless.

Suppose she has the advantage. What should I do then?

He has options.

The easiest trick would be triggering the main alarm. He can do it with his remote control or his own hand. But that would bring the authorities, which isn't what he wants. People would see her tracks. They would know about her. And on top of everything, it would be a terrible embarrassment -- a public catastrophe to be avoided at all cost.

Reaching through the armored straps, he struggles to unfasten the chain. Somehow. And for the first two or three hours, Welks enjoys enough success to keep working at the problem. With sticks and his boot laces, he finally manages to grab hold of the twisted rebar, and with his fingers numb and bleeding, it seems as if he's jerked and prodded the old metal enough that he can see a gap forming.

Then she appears again, coming out of the woods, dragging the long limp carcass of a young deer by its antlers.

She doesn't threaten him, or even seem to notice what he's doing. Instead, she drops her prize and calmly

steps up to the back of his house, picking up a dead geranium and its clay pot, throwing both of them through the sliding glass door.

He drops the chain, and he watches.

The animal is standing inside his kitchen. In the deliberative fashion of a child, she opens drawers until she finds something of interest. Then she steps outside again, jumping slightly when the heat pump kicks on, the chilled outside air flooding into the warm and bright air inside. He says, "Jesus."

She holds a carving knife in both hands. She needs two hands to manipulate it, but she obviously has done this kind of work before. With a little grunt, she cuts through the skin, slicing to the white bone. Then she slices again, following the grain of the muscle, carving off a strip of fur and venison as long as her forearm. Then she drops the knife and wraps the prize into a ball, and looking at Welks for the first time, she flings it over the razor wire.

In a sloppy little voice, she says something.

"Eat," it sounds like. Although he can't be sure.

He glances at the dirty venison, then looks back at her. And quietly, with awe and anger, he tells her, "No."

He promises her, "I'm not that hungry."

She springs toward the gate.

And dropping the knife, she stops just short of it.

Gazing through the straps, she says nothing. She doesn't even watch him, staring instead at a point somewhere behind his wide eyes.

In a soft voice, Welks admits, "I saw you. I saw you kill that dog." Nothing.

"They were bad men," he says. "You had to do it. You didn't have a choice."

She repeats one of his words.

"Koice," it sounds like.

Welks tries to smile, explaining, "Those men made you do it. They made you. If you hadn't killed the dog, it would have killed you. I understand. You had no choice."

Hybrids and human language has always been a subject of much debate. The best guess is that some hybrids understand abstractions, and a few of them, having the most human-like mouths, can carry on a passable if somewhat simple conversation.

"You had no choice," he repeats.

She shakes her head, her expression suddenly angry.

"Koice," she says. Then, "Koice always." And she lifts both of her hands, two stubby thumbs pointing at the sky.

He watches, spellbound.

"Koice. I live."

One thumb rises higher.

"Koice. I die."

The other thumb follows it up.

"I koice live," she tells him. And dropping the death thumb, she smiles at Welks in a faintly human fashion, and up on her two hind legs, she calmly trots back into the woods.

How smart can she be?

Welks is exhausted, and frustrated, and in ways he couldn't have imagined, enthralled. For lack of anything better, he retreats into the cottage and lies down on the soft earth floor, warm enough inside his shock suit to eventually drift off to sleep. Then it's just after seven in the morning, and he wakes abruptly, struggling to his feet and looking up at the house, discovering that both gates are standing open again.

Besides her tracks and the dead deer, there's no trace of the hybrid. Welks finds the kitchen knife where she dropped it, and he searches every room in the house, just to be certain that he's alone. Then he tapes heavy plastic over the shattered door and calls a glass shop that will do home repairs, and even though he's practically shaking from hunger, he drags the stiff deer carcass back into the woods, uses a heavy broom to obscure her tracks, and with the gates open, he strings bike chains through them and fastens them with padlocks, making it virtually impossible to catch anyone inside the enclosure.

The hybrid comes again after dark.

The ground floor lights are out. Welks sits at the breakfast table, waiting. A shadow appears on the back porch, abruptly and without sound, weightless and full of an eerie grace. She hesitates in front of the repaired door, then using both hands, picks up the same potted geranium.

Quietly, with a tight nervous voice, Welks says, "The door's not locked. Go on. Pull it open."

Confused, she stares at the new glass and latch.

He forces himself to stand, showing her first that his hands are empty, then pulling the door open while she watches.

"See?" he asks.

Then he shuts the door again and steps back.

"You do it," he tells her.

She considers the flower pot, then sets it down. And with both hands, she opens the door and steps into the darkened kitchen.

"Now shut it again," he tells her.

She stands an inch or two more than five feet high, rocking slowly back and forth, one little foot and then the other absorbing her weight. Her face is obscured by darkness. But hybrids have excellent night vision, Welks knows. She can see his eyes and mouth, using them to read his mood.

"If you come into my house," he tells her, "shut the door behind you."

Nothing happens.

"Please," he adds.

She turns her back to him and pulls the door shut.

Welks returns to the table, sits and says, "If you don't like hybrid chow, I can feed you something else. What do you want?"

She takes a step, then pauses. Waits.

"You seem to like chicken," he mentions. "Do you want chicken?"

"Oo," she says.

No?

She sets her arm on the tabletop. The broken handcuff is too tight for her wrist. Her hand has to be in pain, or at the very least, numbed. And the area around the cuff looks tender to the touch and badly swollen.

"This won't be easy," he warns. "I'll have to use a saw. A very loud machine. And the blade's going to make you bleed. Do you understand me?"

"Utt!" she urges him.

"I don't want to hurt you," he tells her.

"Utt!"

He rises to his feet, compassion and fear coming in alternating waves.

She stares at his face.

Once more, he asks, "Do you understand me?"

"Eep oor kosed. Kosed!" And to prove what she knows, she opens the door and shuts it again, chanting, "Kosed, kosed, kosed "

How can I earn her trust?

If she has a name, she doesn't choose to share it.

Welks removes the cuff and bandages the wounds. Then he takes her on a tour of his house, showing her every room, every closet, letting her sniff door handles and the dusty corners. When she finally selects her bed, he says nothing. They're on the third floor, in the retrofitted attic where he keeps a big-screen television. She climbs onto the plush sofa and stares at him until she's certain that he won't argue with her. Then she calmly and efficiently shreds the middle cushion with her teeth, removing mouthfuls of pale foam and piling them against the armrest, then covering the mess with a wool blanket from a downstairs closet, tucking in the edges before she lies down on top of the mess.

More than anything, what surprises Welks is how quickly he accepts this destruction. His favorite sofa is destroyed, and it couldn't matter less.

Satisfied, she leaps up again, running downstairs and out the kitchen door.

She brings her possessions inside plastic grocery sacks. There are favorite cow bones and a talisman made from rawhide and a human doll that has been partially eviscerated. Plus there's a long piece of firewood around which shaggy black upholstery has been tied, two blue tacks stuck into the upholstery, creating eyes. It's a doll, Welks realizes. A hybrid doll. And she made it with her own hands.

An intoxicating new order quickly replaces the old.

Welks's life isn't what the books promised, and it is like nothing that he has ever tried to imagine.

The hybrid always slips out of the house after midnight, then creeps back in before dawn. When she isn't asleep, she shadows Welks. Without actually watching him, she seems to know everything that he's doing or is about to do. Every meal must be shared. Eggs and meat and cheese have to be divided into two portions. But she never begs. Not in any overt, demeaning way, she won't. She just perches on the chair across from him, and stares, and after a while the very stupid human finally realizes what she wants.

She learns to use the toilet when she's indoors, though she never remembers to actually flush it.

A little more every day, Welks better understands her narrow voice.

They grow halfway adept at telling each other stories about their days and nights. If Welks drives into the city, he has to describe the trip. And she tells him about the sights and smells in the woods, and how many deer she chased for fun, and how many stupid rabbits were too slow to escape her.

Just once, she brings home a big farm cat.

Welks explains that he doesn't approve. And burying the body in the cold ground, he adds, "Someone might miss this animal. Someone might come looking for it."

Cats are dirty, she declares in her own defense. "Girty, inky, girty kat!"

But she doesn't bring home her trophies anymore.

A late November snow forces her to stay inside. Both make the decision, and it's a smart one. Hybrid tracks are obvious, looking like a clawed human running up on her toes. One person noticing one careless footprint could bring disaster.

She quickly gets bored doing nothing but sleeping and eating and watching television.

On television, she prefers the various cartoon networks. The smart-talking bunny makes her laugh. And whenever the coyote pursues the road runner, she screams, "Fass, lass!" and races around the sofa, arms reaching for imaginary birds. And when the inevitable failure occurs, she cries, "Dupid dog!" and shakes her fist at the exploding screen. Welks has never laughed so hard.

He can't remember any moment when he felt half as happy as he does now.

Then it's mid-December, early in the morning, and a man suddenly appears in the backyard. A stocky fellow, he walks through the snow, heading toward the enclosure. The kitchen blinds are wide open. Welks glances at her, and she looks out, then silently jumps off the chair and hurries upstairs. Then he opens the sliding door, shouting out at the stranger, "Can I help you.?"

The stranger stops, slowly turns and looks up at Welks.

For a long moment, neither man speaks.

Then Welks repeats his question, and the stranger makes a decision.

He marches up to the house to say, "Hello, sir," with a forced friendliness.

"I'm here from Animal Control." And he flashes his ID.

Welks feels as if he's falling.

Like the coyote plunging off a tall butte, he drops and drops.

But his voice is dry and calm when he asks, "What do you want here?"

"You aren't using your pen there, are you?"

"Does it look like I am?" Then Welks takes a breath and forces himself to sound helpful. "No," he admits, "I'm not using the enclosure. Yet."

The man has a simple, determined face. He regards Welks with suspicion, then asks, "Have you seen any hybrids running loose?"

Something about the voice is familiar.

Is wrong.

Welks says, "No," and then remembers where he's heard the voice before. It was on the videotape that she brought with her. It was the voice telling her, "Good girl," after the dog had been killed. Again, louder this time, Welks says, "No."

Something in his voice causes the man to squint and step closer. And forcing a smile, he says, "If you have seen any hybrids, you should tell me."

"I haven't," he manages.

"You're sure?"

Welks wants to look at the ID again. Because it has to be a forgery, and that isn't the only crime this man has committed.

But most of all, he wants this man to go away.

So he manages a little breath, then says, "If I see a hybrid, I'll shoot it first. Then I'll call you. What did you say your name was?" The stranger growls, "Smith."

And with that, he turns and marches back around the house and up the driveway to where his pickup truck waits for him, watched all the way by a set of blue eyes peering through the little attic windows.

How can I trust myself?

It's night again, and she creeps downstairs.

Welks is awake, thinking about the day. About his life, and everything else. He hears her light footfalls moving on the stairs, and he realizes that she's trying to be silent about whatever she's doing, which isn't like her.

Somewhere downstairs, a door opens.

Closes.

Welks rises and pulls on trousers, then follows. What if she's gone? And what if she doesn't return again? Steeling himself against disaster, he steps into the kitchen and hesitates for a moment, then hears a sound. An odd sound, low and pained, that he follows into the living room, flipping on the main light as he rounds the corner.

She's down on his good Persian rug, on her knees, both hands thrust between her legs and her tail held high. The musky stink of a male hybrid makes the air close and heavy. The unstoppered bottle is set on the floor in front of her. Working both hands, she snorts and gives a low moan as she turns, looking up at him without the tiniest shame, turning just enough that he can see her four black nipples, fat and aroused, rising through her glossy black fur.

Welks backs away. Instantly.

Then he flips off the light and says, "Sorry," to both of them, and he returns to his room, closing his door and lying on top of the sheets, still wearing his trousers, wrestling with his urgent, incredible thoughts. In the morning, before breakfast, he calls Montana.

He wakes up one of the twin brothers; he doesn't know which one, nor does he care. He explains that he doesn't want the female anymore, but is her brother still available? Then to circumvent tantrums or questions, Welks adds, "For your trouble, I'll pay you twice our agreed upon fee. In cash."

A stunned silence.

"I guess that'll be fine," the brother finally admits.

Welks can't decide what the hybrid makes of the conversation, if anything. He hangs up and returns her gaze. Then he cooks eggs for both of them, and she looks through the blinds now and again. But the stranger isn't going to return, it seems. After breakfast, she uses the downstairs toilet before trotting upstairs to nap, and Welks flushes the toilet and waits for the sound of the cartoon explosions filtering down through the house. Then he finds another old phone number and punches it in and hangs up before the first ring. Feeling foolish, he opens the blinds, looking out at the very expensive, utterly useless enclosure. Then he dials again, calling that handsome woman who never explained her tragedy. She seems to be the same as he, he tells himself: Alone in life, with an emptiness whose gates have been left open.