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TEA AND HAMSTERS

Mrs. Masterson's cat was subject to the occasional disappearance, but this time the old lady was pretty sure her new neighbor had eaten him.

She had mixed feelings on the matter. On the plus side, Tabitha was getting old and running up vet's bills. Like her husband Wally, Tabitha had outlived her usefulness. There comes a time of life when a woman needs to be alone, free from the constant irritation of men and cats underfoot, demanding food. Nature provides for that time, by ensuring that women live longer than men and cats. Yes, it would be good to have the cottage to herself again.

But on the minus side, it was intolerable that anyone should play fast and loose with her devoted companion of sixteen years. It was proof that the misfit next door could never become an acceptable member of human society. No matter what that pathetic do-gooder Anna Tyler said.

Mrs. Masterson was in a foul temper that morning due to a visiphone call she'd received during breakfast. Her husband Wally, far from dying, had had his application for parole turned down. He'd sat there blubbering onscreen, begging her to make a personal appeal to the Governor. Well, she wasn't going to. The law must take its course and Wally must pay the price for being caught out.

Wally was a weakling, always would be; and a diabetic to boot. A Space Admiral's daughter herself, she'd been deceived by his mustache, upright bearing and barking speech into thinking he was a man worthy of her mettle. Only later had she discovered that the mustache concealed a disfiguring birthmark, the bearing was due to a corrective tress, and as for the barking. . . . Well, sometimes she'd suspected he was a reject from genetic engineering, particularly when he responded to stress with a hangdog expression, a whimper and a shot of insulin.

She shuffled to the window, pausing only to turn the framed photo of Wally face to the wall. It did little for her standing in Foss Creek, having a husband jailed for embezzlement. Embezzlement! Of all the niggling, measly little crimes, reminiscent of nineteenth-century clerks on high stools fiddling the books with quills! Assault with a deadly weapon would have been better; at least it had some panache. And he'd had the nerve to say he did it for her, to buy her a place in the city.

Outside, rain dripped from bare branches. At the foot of the steep bank, the tidal inlet rippled gray and uninviting the pleasure boats shrouded in wet tarpaulins. February in loss Creek.

And that was another crime to lay at Wally's door. Why had he insisted they retire to this little tourist village, this moldering relic of days gone by?

What was so good about rain and wind and dropouts making like old-time farmers?

What was wrong with the clean domed cities of Earth that reminded her so much of her childhood at Sol Station 2?

Mrs. Masterson stared grimly at the cottage beyond the trees. Something was moving there. She seized her binoculars.

It was that creature, walking stark naked in the rain!

This was too much. She snatched up the visiphone and called Anna Tyler.

"Stay right where you are," she snarled. "I'm coming over. This time your scaly friend has gone too far!"

"This used to be a nice village," snapped Mrs. Masterson, conveniently forgetting her views on Foss Creek. "Friendly law-abiding folk, good community spirit, and now what? Pets disappearing, rampant nudity in broad daylight and God knows what going on under cover of darkness!"

Anna sighed. This dreadful old woman had been a problem ever since she'd moved Loo into Foss Creek. God knows, she'd chosen this backwater because of the low population density, but one Mrs. Masterson was worse than a city block full of bigots.

"Let me deal with your points one by one," she said tiredly. "First, Tabitha has simply taken off for a few days like cats do. For all you know, she may be back home at this very moment. Second, there's a big difference between Loo nude and a human nude, as well you know. And third, under cover of darkness Loo simply follows the dictates of his religion, just like some people go to church on Sunday."

Logic was not the best way to appeal to the old lady, however. "Be that as it may, I want that goddamned creature out of there!"

"That's very negative thinking. Do you mind if I make a suggestion? Why not show a bit of good neighborliness? Give him a taste of the human way of life."

"Invite that alien in for a sherry, you mean? Good God, woman!"

"Loo is not an alien, Mrs. Masterson. The word alien has negative connotations that give entirely the wrong impression of Dengal physical characteristics and culture. Loo is an environmentally challenged person."

"Person? He's a goddamned reptile! How can you call a reptile a person?"

"All intelligent beings are persons, as you should know. You spent most of your years off Earth, I believe?"

"Certainly I did. And if there's one thing it taught me, it's that aliens are slimy bastards. My father did not die for nothing, I assure you! And what's a grown woman like you doing keeping hamsters, anyway? Reverting to childhood?"

Ignoring the hamster question, Anna pointed out, "Your father was killed by

the  
Choth. Loo is a member of the Dengal race."

"My father died in the line of duty, protecting Earth from such as this Loo, and no amount of hair-splitting can change that! And now we're supposed to welcome them with open arms, by God! You have a lot to learn about human nature, young woman!"

"I believe humans are generally kind and sympathetic people, whatever the evidence to the contrary," said Anna acidly, beginning to lose patience. "Loo and his people have not come to Earth as invaders, they've come as refugees. And yes, we should welcome them. Good grief, Mrs. Masterson, only one shipload of them survived! They've been through hell, their home planet is destroyed, and you want to turn them away~."

"Yes!" shouted the old lady. "Kick them back into space where they belong! And I tell you something else, young woman. I'm reporting you to my fellow Council members for harboring rodents, filthy things."

"You're talking about my hamsters?"

"Get rid of them, woman." A note of rough sympathy crept into the old lady's voice. "Find a good man and have children. Pets are no substitute; never have been, never will be. Believe me, I should know."

Anna didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or simply scream.

"Loo, I have to ask you this. You needn't answer if you don't want to. Did you eat Mrs. Mastersoh's Tabitha?"

"Tabitha?"

"It's a cat. A small feline."

Loo's puzzled expression cleared. Anna was getting good at reading his face, just as he was improving his imitation of human expressions. "I've eaten no cat," he said confidently. "She is accusing me of eating her cat?"

"That, and walking naked in the rain."

Loo scratched thoughtfully. A small cloud of scales drifted to the carpet. "I could have taken a shower instead. My skin dries out so fast in your climate. The rain seemed a good opportunity. But walking in the rain is frowned upon, on Earth?"

"Walking naked in the rain. No, forget the rain, it's a red herring. Walking naked where you can be seen. Think, Loo! How often have you seen humans naked?"

It was tricky, explaining human behavior to an environmentally challenged person. "By human, I mean anyone of an age capable of reproduction. By naked, I mean so that the reproductive organs are clearly visible."

"I see them all the time, on the 3-V."

"No, Loo. Those are what we call dirty shows. They don't count. I mean how

often

have you see naked humans in socially acceptable --" No, that wouldn't work either. "Forget that. Anyway, take it from me, Loo, people don't like to see you naked. You want to fit in, don't you? Then keep your clothes on in public, for Pete's sake. And don't scratch like that. Scratching in public is frowned upon, too. Chimps scratch. You want humans to think of you as a person, don't you?"

"It's my dearest. . .wish."

His speech had become slow. Anna watched his eyelids droop. Loo was going torpid. It often happened during daylight hours; a penalty of his religion. Soon

his breathing became deep and regular and quiet, apart from that loud and bubbly

sniff at the end of each inhalation; a defense mechanism against poisonous gases

on his home planet. It was a pity, but there was little that could be done about

the sniff. Normally the only person to hear it would be another Dengal~ but there might be times when Loo would unavoidably go torpid in human company. Maybe they should practice for such occasions. Maybe some kind of hypnotism might work; she'd heard it sometimes cured snoring.

It was going to be hard work, fitting Loo into human society.

"Tabitha? Tabbytabbytabby?"

It was no use. The goddamned cat wasn't coming back. Odd how one could miss such

a perverse creature. Odd how she occasionally missed Wally too, against her better judgment. Mrs. Masterson sighed, shuffled toward the kitchen to brew herself a cup of coffee, then remembered the afternoon meeting. YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED to welcome our new friend LOO All the village hall on Friday, February 17 at 2:00 p.m. Learn about worlds beyond the solar system! Hear about alternative customs and religions from Loo, our own real-life environmentally challenged person! Sorry, no pets. Refreshments

Yes, refreshments would consist of a big urn of coffee and homemade cookies; a chance to pig out at someone else's expense.

The meeting was also a chance to get some uncomfortable facts out into the open.

Mrs. Masterson, enjoyed baring uncomfortable facts almost as much as Loo enjoyed

baring his body to the rain. She glanced at her watch. One thirty-seven. Maybe she'd leave right away, to be sure of a seat in the front row.

She shuffled out to the covered way beside the cottage, and caught sight of her

other neighbor, Megan Jenkins, in her garden. Megan was a good woman; a tractable woman who could easily be made to see sense. Megan would be a useful ally at the meeting.

But Megan was not interested. "Really, Rachel, I'm much happier not knowing about these things."

"Nonsense, woman! Here we have this monster living on our very doorstep and you

have no wish to explore his weaknesses? You must come and swell the numbers of the dissenters. I insist!"

Megan eyed Mrs. Masterson's buggy unhappily, sighed and accepted the inevitable.

"Please drive slowly, then. You know how nervous I am."

Mrs. Masterson snorted and took a plastic object of repulsive aspect from the glove compartment.

Megan uttered a little scream. "Oh, my God. What's that.?"

"That, my good woman, is an artificial finger. It is a reproduction of my husband's right forefinger." She pressed the starter pad with it, the motor hummed into life and the buggy lifted from the ground. "The starter accepts his fingerprint, you see."

"Why not just press the pad yourself?"

The old lady scowled. "My husband has an irrational prejudice against my driving. He would not allow the pad to be programmed for me. I suppose he thinks he's being masterful, but actually his attitude is intolerably high-handed, and I fail to see the relevance of my prior driving record."

"But now he's, uh, away, he's had to concede?"

"Concede, nothing! I outwitted the fool. He's never been a man for planning ahead. One day he ran out of insulin and slipped into a diabetic coma. While waiting for the ambulette I seized the opportunity to take a cast of his finger." Her good humor restored by the memory, she chuckled. "I can still see his face when I arrived in the buggy to collect him from hospital!"

Her cottage was one of three at the end of the lane which, at that point, degenerated into an overgrown trail leading to an ancient coastguard station. The lane, overhung with huge old trees, clung to the steep hillside above the inlet for about a mile before winding into the village. The drive was fraught with the possibility of plummeting into icy waters. The ground-effect buggy was quite unstable, so Mrs. Masterson usually drove with the guide wheels permanently down. She'd complained to the manufacturers often enough, but to no effect. Once they'd made the sale, they'd lost interest, the crooks.

Today the drive was uneventful and she parked outside the village hall in good time. A handful of people were already gathered around the coffee urn.

"Rachel!" One of the Council members, Elsie Stammers, greeted her excitedly. "Isn't this fun! To think that little old Foss Creek has been chosen as a home for this visitor from outer space!"

Mrs. Masterson eyed them sourly. The fools, all agog. The kind of people who'd lay out the red carpet if a 3-V star dropped by. City people were more sophisticated. God, how she wished someone would buy that cottage of hers!

"I'm reserving my judgment," she said.

"Always the wet blanket," grunted Carl Steffen, the hobby farmer, turning back

to the coffee urn.

Mrs. Masterson felt her anger build. "You don't have this strange creature living next door," she snapped.

He wheeled round. "I have fifty head of sheep and believe me, there's nothing so strange as sheep. The weird way they look at you, the stink, the suicidal tendencies. Sheep are congenitally insane. I hardly think one lizard living next door can compare. And I hear it's intelligent, too. Personally I'd be glad of the chance of sensible conversation, after nothing but baa, baa, baa all day long!"

"It's your choice to associate with such creatures." Mrs. Masterson drew herself a coffee, loaded a plate with cookies and made for the front row. Wally had never liked the Steffen man; occasionally Wally had shown good sense. Wally had, in fact, been quite terse with Steffen once or twice.

She slipped into a reverie -- a frequent event these days -- remembering the time Wally had refused to allow Steffen to drive his shampooed and beribboned sheep past the cottage door on the way to a village show, forcing him to detour across the muddy hillside. And rightly so. Good for Wally~ but for him they'd have been knee-deep in sheep-dung .... She started, opening her eyes. Things were happening. The meeting must have commenced a few minutes ago.

The reptile Loo sat next to Anna Tyler on the platform, his scaly tail emerging disgustingly from somewhere in his pants and resting coiled on the floor beneath his chair. He was dressed in a suit complete with shirt and tie. Mrs. Masterson snorted. He looked ridiculous. She glanced around at her neighbors, but they seemed to have accepted this grotesque sight.

Loo was speaking. "Thank you, Anna, and thank you all for being here, you wonderful people. Anna told me I might expect a warm welcome, and believe me Foss Creek is no less than Paradise after the rigors of space and the horrors of the quarantine --"

The Tyler woman cut him short. "Yes, no less than two hundred of Loo's people remain in conditions of comfortable isolation, awaiting the moment when they can take their place as productive members of society. Loo here might be described as an envoy, sent among us to study our ways --"

"Why us?" shouted Mrs. Masterson.

"It would be unfair to drop him in at the deep end, as it were. In the gentle surroundings of Foss Creek he can gradually --"

"Why does he need to study our ways? How do we know he won't use it against us?"

"Really, Mrs. Masterson, you must allow us to make our presentation. There will

be time enough for quaestiones at the end. Loo's ways are not altogether the same as ours. It is the desire of his people that they fit into our society, so they need to learn our ways. Obviously. Okay?"

"How are his ways different from ours?"

"The word different has negative implications, Mrs. Masterson. The Dengal culture runs parallel to ours, though removed. We seek to bring about the merging of twin cultures by making concessions on both sides."

"What concessions are you suggesting we make?"

"The same as we would make for any culture. We accommodate the Dengals into the melting pot of society. We respect their religious beliefs."

Mrs. Masterson was pleased to hear an alert murmuring from the audience, the kind of sound a single person might express by the word "aha!" People were beginning to think, and that was good. They needed facts, not platitudes. "Now we're getting somewhere!" she shouted. "What's so weird about the Dengals' religion, specifically?"

The creature Loo, who had been shifting about impatiently and scratching a great deal, said, "Let me explain, Anna."

"Please do, Loo."

A huge grin almost decapitated Loo as he reared up to address his audience. Mrs. Masterson began to regret having chosen the front row. Loo at close quarters and dressed in an outsize business suit looked much bigger and more bizarre than when seen naked through binoculars. "Let me explain, you wonderful people," he began. His voice seemed to emanate from a dank pit, which was not surprising since Dengal vocal chords are situated in the esophagus rather than the windpipe, speech being a kind of controlled belch. This, in turn, is because Dengals are born with external gills; lungs do not develop until the adult phase.

Loo continued, maintaining his jovial smile, "I have studied various human religions without finding many similarities to ours. You see, we believe in the life force, or dang. We need no gods, with the dang to sustain us. The dang lies within us all, a precious gift and a limited one. There is no dang on a barren planet like Venus. And now, terribly, there is no dang on my home world Deng. We must not waste the dang." He sighed and bubbled, and abruptly assumed a pathetic expression.

All this seemed harmless enough. If the Dengals wanted to believe in this dang let them go ahead, people were thinking. Loo's pathetic look moved the audience to sympathy. "How can we help preserve the dang?" someone called anxiously.

"We do not believe in killing. Killing destroys the dang."

This was reassuring too, and the audience visibly relaxed. Frustrated by the pendulum's swing, Mrs. Masterson shouted, "But we understand the Dengals are carnivores!"

"That is so," agreed Loo.

"How can you be carnivores without killing?"

Loo's low forehead wrinkled in puzzlement; another learned behavior. "It's quite within the understanding of wonderful people like you. We consume our food before it has lost the dang."

Now the audience sat up. "You eat live animals?" There were isolated shouts of dismay. "How can you do that, for God's sake?"

"We just pop them down," explained Loo. "We absorb their dang as they disintegrate in our first stomach under the effects of powerful acids. We digest what we need for nourishment, then we disgorge the pelts and bones. Rabbits, voles, that kind of thing. I've found young rabbits particularly acceptable since my arrival. It's good for agriculture too, keeping down the pests. Oh, I think we Dengals are going to fit in very well."

"It's outrageous!" roared Mrs. Masterson, amid mutterings of concern from elsewhere. "I knew right away you'd eaten my Tabitha!"

But Loo had been briefed for that. "We do not eat felines. Felines have an unacceptable gamey flavor."

"How do you know, you monster?"

"It is written."

"And what about drink? I suppose you suck blood, eh?"

"Actually," said Loo placidly, "I have conceived a liking for tea. The question of dang does not arise, with tea."

"Ladies and gentleman, please!" Anna Tyler was on her feet, waving her hands. "Is this the way to welcome our guest? Earth is renowned for its tolerance in matters of religion! Are you going to let a little thing like this upset you? Shame on you all! Put yourself in Loo's position. Don't you think there are aspects of human culture that alarm him? The heedless slaughter, the butchering!"

"The roasting," murmured Loo. "It's the searing of flesh that appalls me. And the grinding of hamburger. But I will come to terms with it, for the sake of my people."

"You hear that?" cried Anna. "There's tolerance for you!"

By now the audience was calming down and a few people were looking ashamed of their outburst. "So many things to learn," said Loo, as a hush fell. "So many lives depending on it. I hope I am worthy of the trust my people have placed in me, and the trust of one in particular, who is very dear to me." At this, the more susceptible members of the audience began to sniffle into tissues. "Her

name is Soo," said Loo.

"Pathetic remnants of a great civilization," said Anna Tyler. "Who are we to judge them?"

"What exactly happened to their world?" asked Mrs. Masterson nastily, but there was a chorus of shushes and she fell silent, mouth set in a grim line.

An hour later the last question was answered and Anna called the meeting closed.

"You all know where I live," she said. "You are welcome at any time, And I'm sure you're welcome at Loo's cottage too. We'll be staying in Foss Creek until May, when I shall make my report to Earth Immigration on Loo's integration into your community."

Loo said, "The success of my integration means a great deal to me, and to my people. Anna's report will recommend whether my people will be released from quarantine to become Earth citizens, or . . . "His voice trailed away. His expression became sad.

"How did it go?" he asked Anna a few minutes later as they climbed into her buggy.

"A good enough start." She regarded him thoughtfully. "Let's go to my place. We can discuss it over supper."

"Tea and hamsters?" asked Loo hopefully.

"Tea and hamsters it shall be, Loo."

Most people might think that a creature like Loo would be better off maintaining a low profile during his probationary period, but they would be wrong. At least, so thought Anna Tyler the sociologist.

"There must be no mystery, Loo," she told him a few days after the meeting in the village hall, as they sat comfortably in his living room. "Nothing to encourage speculation. You must be seen walking openly about the village, joining in community activities as much as possible. I understand they have an active gardening club here. It's not enough to be merely acceptable to people. The tragedy of the environmentally challenged person is that he or she must rise above the common rock of humanity in order to attain the norm."

"That doesn't make sense," said Loo.

"I've never quite understood it either, but rest assured it's current theory. To be accepted as a person you must be more than a person. You must become popular, possibly even a leader. The Council elections take place in March. Perhaps we should put your name forward."

"I think that's going a bit far."

"I'm merely suggesting alternative scenarios." The image of excavator-mouthed

and dang-loving Loo kissing babies had rung alarm bells. "But perhaps you're right." She sighed. "It would have been nice, though, to provide some opposition

to that awful Masterson woman. She gets voted into office because people are frightened of her. You'd think her husband's criminal record would count against

her, but somehow she's able to use that as a weapon, too." She pondered the situation. "You know, it is rather like an election. We're involved in a popularity contest. I'm campaigning for you, and it's the opinion of the community that'll count in the end." She favored him with a piercing look. "Are

you sure we told them everything at the meeting? There are no funny little Dengal quirks we don't know about?"

"You know everything," said Loo gravely, popping down a hamster.

"Then we have nothing to worry about." She walked over to the window. A cottage could be seen through the leafless trees. "Let Mrs. Masterson do her worst," she declaimed in ringing tones. "We're squeaky clean!"

Mrs. Masterson, meanwhile, had also been considering alternative scenarios. "What we need, Megan," she told her elderly neighbor, "is a workable scheme. So

far my only workable scheme is to take my twelve-bore over there and let that reptile have both barrels right up his cloaca!"

Megan Jenkins blanched. "But that would be murder, Rachel!"

"I'm not sure they've altered the statute book to encompass Dengals yet. Be that as it may, there is a drawback -- I have no wish to create a martyr. There are strong forces in the village supporting the alien, and I think you know which forces I mean!"

"B-bleeding heart liberals?" quavered Megan, all too familiar with her neighbor's views.

"Precisely. So what we need is covert action. We cannot kill this alien, therefore we must discredit him."

"But . . . He seems, somehow, a good kind of person."

"So the further he will fall. Now, let us think. As my father used to say, wherein lie the enemy's weaknesses? By God, I wish my father were around today.

He'd give short shrift to this wretched alien!"

"But I understood the aliens gave short shrift to him, Rachel."

"Different aliens." She eyed her friend coldly. "Do I detect a defeatist attitude in you? It wouldn't be the first time, believe me." Her gaze traveled involuntarily to the silver photo frame turned face to the wall. "Wally is a tricky little fellow in many ways. He'd have found a way to play on that reptile's weaknesses just as he used to play on mine."

"You have weaknesses, Rachel?" asked Megan innocently.

"Precious few, I assure you. But this alien is a different kettle of fish. I

watched people's faces at the meeting, and they're not too happy about his eating habits. Religious practices my eye! The ruthless devil likes to feel things wriggling as they go down!"

"Ugh."

"My point exactly. I was talking to that clod Steffen this morning, God knows why, and he's tickled pink with the way the reptile's keeping the vermin under control. Apparently he roams the fields at night, gulping down rabbits by the score and sleeping it off by day." Mrs. Masterson paused as an intriguing train of thought occurred. "He's a big creature. What happens when the vermin are all gone? What does he eat then?"

"Anna Tyler feeds him hamsters."

"Just as a treat, as you or I might eat chocolates. Hamsters could never become a permanent diet for an animal that size. He needs bigger game." She smiled wolfishly. "It's a disturbing thought, don't you think?"

"If you say so, Rachel."

"Make sure you lock your doors and windows at night, my dear. Foss Creek isn't what it was. If people aren't aware of this already, they should be alerted!"

Ten minutes later she was regarding the haggard features of Wally on the visiphone. God, what a foul hole that penitentiary was! The phones were in the open area, and behind Wally she could see men sitting around listlessly, blank-faced. What a difference from Sol Station 2! There were no prisons on Sol Station 2. There was no room for such luxuries. Criminal tendencies were surgically corrected and the crooks resumed their place in society within days, cured and happy people. In fact you could always tell an ex-crook by his jolly nature. But there were no happy faces in this Earthside penitentiary. She could almost feel sorry for Wally, against her better judgment.

Wally leaned forward. "Here's what you do," he whispered.

The disappearance, one week later, of one of Carl Steffen's prize sheep caused a sensation in Foss Creek.

"Obviously there are rustlers about," said Anna Tyler. A handful of villagers had gathered under the awning of the general store, discussing the news. "City folk jealous of the rural life-style. Or possibly youthful city pranksters with nothing better to do."

"I beg to differ," said Mrs. Masterson. "City folk are contented with their lot, and young punks are well catered for. Ask yourselves: have we seen any strangers around recently? In early March, in this weather? City people know when they're well off -- you won't catch them outside their domes. My belief is, we must look

closer to home for the miscreant."

"Prime stock," shouted Steffen. "By Jesus, if I catch the devil who did this I'll flog him to within an inch of his life!"

"Or her," said Anna Tyler.

Megan Jenkins turned pale. "Why do you say her? Rustling is a man's crime, surely?"

"I was simply removing the sexist connotation from Carl's remark. Force of habit, I suppose. I had no intention of pointing any finger."

"It certainly sounded like an accusation." Megan's lips were trembling. "Why don't you come right out with it? If you suspect me, say so! I can't stand all this uncertainty!"

"For pity's sake shut up, Megan," snarled Mrs. Masterson. "Everybody's looking at you." She faced the curious onlookers. "When I said we must look closer to home, I meant we must look for someone in this village who has something to gain by such a crime. Some being," she clarified her meaning, "whether environmentally unchallenged or not!"

"Men do rustle," whimpered Megan Jenkins. "Women shoplift. It's a disease, the psychiatrist told me. I've never had the slightest desire to steal sheep. Never!" She fixed a watery stare on Mrs. Masterson.

But the group's attention had focussed on Loo, who'd been standing outside the awning, happy to get drenched by the slanting rain.

"If you're implying Loo ate Carl's sheep you're more stupid than you look, Mrs. Masterson," snapped Anna. "A whole sheep at one sitting? Get real, please."

But Steffen was eyeing the alien closely. "It may not have been at one sitting. It could have been taken home and consumed at leisure. I don't count the sheep every day, it depresses me. I drive them out in the morning, I round them up at night. Sometimes I find a sheep drowned on the beach, or hanged in the fork of a tree, or disemboweled by barbed wire; that's sheep for you. But I can account for them all, and I can assure you one of my sheep has been stolen!"

Loo sensed the tide turning against him. "I venerate the dang," he said. "I cannot kill. Now look at my mouth, you wonderful people." He smiled broadly. "Is there any way I could swallow a sheep whole?"

Mrs. Masterson rummaged among her shopping, took a danish pastry from bag and handed it to Tommy Steffen, Carl Steffen's ten-year-old son. He took it cautiously, shot the old lady a look of deep suspicion, but slowly began to eat.

Meanwhile people were scrutinizing Loo's smile and nodding reluctantly. Huge though his mouth was by human standards, it could not have accommodated a sheep.

Anna said, "I think that clears Loo. Now, what were you saying, Megan?"

As Megan went into a convincing imitation of a frightened rabbit, Mrs. Masterson snapped, "Nobody said anything about swallowing a sheep whole. You don't have to swallow it whole to preserve the dang. There are many parts of a sheep inessential to life in the short term."

"I don't quite follow you," said Anna.

Mrs. Masterson swung round and pointed a dramatic finger. "I have just organized a practical demonstration. I draw your attention to young Tommy and his danish pastry. You will note the center of the pastry contains a quantity of strawberry icily -- the essential part, let us say. And what is Tommy doing? He is eating around the perimeter of the pastry, leaving the jelly until last." She smiled triumphantly. "You may draw your own conclusions."

As a practical demonstration, it failed to convince. When the laughter had subsided, Anna, wiping her eyes, said, "So you think Loo eats around the edge of a sheep and pops the heart down last? Perhaps we can persuade Carl to lend us a sheep for a full-scale re-enactment of the crime."

But Mrs. Masterson was already climbing into her buggy. "Doesn't it occur to you people -- this story of preserving the dang could be intended to lull us into a false sense of security? That this creature has his own reasons for wanting us to believe anything above rabbit-size is safe from his mammoth appetite? Come, Megan, unless you want to walk home. We're wasting our time with these dolts. We have more important things to do."

The more important things related to the disposal of the sheep presently housed in a small garage beside Megan's cottage. "I can't think how you ever got me into this, Rachel," Megan said despairingly as they stood outside, listening to the bleating.

"You have no buggy, therefore your garage was empty."

"No, I mean all of this!" Megan waved her arms, encompassing the garage, the cottage, the tidal inlet and, glimpsed through the trees, the hillside on which the remnants of Steffen's flock grazed. "The rustling! Creeping around at night, sneaking into that barn and then," she shuddered, "the screaming. That awful screaming across the dark fields."

"That was just a rabbit being eaten by Loo. I told you so at the time."

"Maybe it was, but I haven't had a wink of sleep since. I'll have to go for treatment again. And now this." Her gestures narrowed down, embracing only the bleating garage. "What on earth are we going to do with it?"

"We simply hold it until Loo is thoroughly discredited, then smuggle it back into the flock."

"But nobody believed Loo ate it!" wailed Megan. "The whole thing's been a ghastly fiasco!"

"That is the current viewpoint, admittedly. But if there's one thing my father taught me, it's how to turn defeat into victory."

"But in the end he was defeated!"

"Well, naturally he died before he could teach me the lessons of that particular defeat, you fool, and I like to think I'm a better woman for it. The point is, we have the sheep and Loo lives two doors away. Surely we can turn that to advantage?"

"How?"

"Suppose someone were to find. . . evidence of sheep right there in his house."

"But there is no evidence of sheep in his house. The only evidence of sheep is in my garage and I want it out of there!"

"Just suppose," Mrs. Masterson's voice dropped to an impressive whisper, "we were to plant such evidence."

"But that would be dishonest!"

"I prefer to use the word felicitous. And it is no more felicitous than our little foray last night. Events have been set in motion. There's no turning back now."

"Yes, there is! We can sneak it back into the flock right now, this minute, while everyone's in the village!"

Mrs. Masterson snorted. "And where does that get us? That reptile gets a clean bill of health, and next thing you know a whole pack of aliens descend on the village with the Government's blessing." She seized her friend by the wrist. "Listen to me, you fool. Have you any idea how many young those creatures can produce at one sitting?"

"N-no."

"Well, think of turtles on a beach. And while you're thinking I'll bring my twelve-bore, I've heard enough of this bleating. How much room do you have in your deep-freeze?"

"Rachel!"

But her friend had gone.

The time was ripe. The Council had responded to Loo's invitation to visit him the following morning. And earlier that evening -- thought Mrs. Masterson cynically -- the alien and the treacherous Tyler woman had most likely been through his cottage planting eloquently commonplace items all over the place. Language videos. Tapes of the works of the most respected human writers. Beethoven. A couple of Picasso reproductions on the walls. And all traces of anything strange would have been removed, particularly if it had been previously

disgorged.

So a surprise must be prepared for her gullible colleagues on the Council. And what better time to prepare it than at dead of night, while the reptile was stalking the countryside eating God's little creatures?

Mrs. Masterson shuffled through the darkness, a bulging plastic garbage bag over the shoulder. She shuffled alone. Her fellow-conspirator had quit, her stomach having rebelled during the process of gutting and skinning the sheep.

"This is no job for yellow-bellies," Mrs. Masterson had snapped. "For God's sake go and lie down, woman. But don't get any funny ideas about notifying the police. Remember, it's your deep-freeze the carcass will be in. I shall deny all knowledge, of course."

The allen's back door was not locked. Clearly he lacked the capacity for forethought -- further proof of his unsuitability for human society. Mrs. Masterson pushed the door open. The layout of this cottage was similar to her own. Where was the best place to plant the sheepskin? Nowhere too obvious, otherwise the reptile would find it before his visitors arrived. Neither could it be too obscure, otherwise it would be difficult to fake the discovery during the Council's visit.

It would have to be somewhere in the living room; maybe under the chesterfield. Yes, that would be fine. She could visualize the scene. "That's funny," she'd say during a lull in the conversation. "There's something by your foot, Charles." And Charles, or maybe Elsie or Wayne, would reach down and pull it out. "What the hell is this?" they would say. And their accusing stares would swing toward the alien. "It looks like the disgorged skin of a sheep!" they would cry.

Smiling to herself at the simplicity of it all, Mrs. Masterson pushed open the living room door and immediately found she was not alone in the house.

The alien sat with his back to her, watching a large visiphone screen. The only illumination came from the screen itself, but it was enough to show the relaxed form of Tabitha asleep in the alien's lap. Mrs. Masterson's flash of fury at the faithlessness of her feline subsided as her attention was caught by the scene on the visiphone.

There was another alien onscreen, very similar in appearance to Loo, although its scales had a pinkish hue and it was wearing a dress. If the effect of a business suit on Loo had been incongruous, the sight of this apparently female alien in a dress was utterly ridiculous. And clearly the alien knew it too. She stood in a dejected attitude, arms drooping at an odd angle from her shoulders. And now Mrs. Masterson noticed other aliens in the picture too, all dressed in human clothes, sitting around in attitudes of hopelessness, some even lying on the bare concrete floor. The scene stirred a chord in her memory. It also stirred an unaccustomed emotion she barely recognized.

The female alien was talking human speech. "It'll work out, Loo. It's got to work out. We're doing our best here, but it's difficult. They're watching us all the time, bringing groups through to stare at us, taping everything we do and say, then analyzing it and interviewing us about it. We can't be ourselves for a moment, in case we do or say something that blows our case."

"I know what you mean, Soo," said Loo. "The Council are visiting me tomorrow, but really it's more of an inspection and I'm pretty sure they'll find something wrong. At least Mrs. Masterson will. Anna and I have spent most of the day humanizing the place, as if it isn't human enough already. Oh, Soo, how I miss the caves at the lake!"

"At least Anna is on our side."

Loo uttered a bubbling sigh. "Only because she sees us as aliens. To her, we're just a crusade. Mrs. Masterson is against us for the same reason. In both cases the reason is wrong, isn't it?"

"It would be wrong on Deng. But then, we were the only intelligent species on Deng. How would we have reacted if a group of humans had shown up? Pretty much the same as the humans are reacting now, I think. Try to understand them, Loo. Make allowances."

"You haven't been living them. They're very different from us, Soo. I'm thinking we'd all be better off recognizing it."

"They'd lock us away here forever!"

"Well, we're never going to fit in the way I'm trying to now. We can't go on pretending to be human. It just won't work."

There was a long silence while the two aliens regarded each other. Eventually Soo said quietly, "Do whatever you must. And trust in the dang."

"I will.

Love you, Soo." "Love you."

The screen went blank. The room was dark. Mrs. Masterson stood motionless for a long time. A tiny crack of light issued from the drapes; probably moonlight. The clouds must have cleared at last. She could make out Loo's blunt silhouette as he sat there as unmoving as she.

"Damn this!" she said suddenly, and tapped the door. "Loo! Are you at home?"

The room sprang into light. Loo's head swiveled toward her, eyes wide. "Mrs. Masterson!"

"I just dropped by to see if. . . . Megan Jenkins said she'd caught sight of. . . . Oh, I see you have her here. Tabitha, thank heavens!"

Loo's hand caressed the cat. A rattling purr resulted. "She came to my door this evening. She was tired and rather muddy. I fed her and cleaned her up. She's been good company."

Mrs. Masterson said hesitantly, "It can get lonely, being by oneself."

"It can. Uh, can I offer you a glass of anything?" Loo began to stand, blinked rapidly a few times, snatched a rug from the floor beside his chair and wrapped it around his torso. "I'm sorry. I forgot for a moment. I find it more comfortable when I'm alone You understand? If you'll excuse me I'll put some clothes on."

Tabitha, startled by the rapid movement, fled past Mrs. Masterson into the night. She threw the plastic bag after her and entered the living room. "Clothes?" she said. "I'd be insulted if you got dressed on my account. Please stay just as you are."

He stared at her. "If you like."

She sat down. "I'll take a dry sherry, if you have such a thing. Now, it seems to me it's high time we got to know each other better -- we have more in common than I'd realized. Tell me all about this Soo of yours."

The month of May. Warmer weather was returning to Foss Creek. The sun struggled through the canopy of new leaves and cast a glow over a wooden sundeck overlooking the inlet. Two women sat there; one youngish, bespectacled and rather pale, dressed in flowing hand-printed cottons; the other elderly and wearing severely cut tweeds. Both were watching the cottage next door.

"What do you think they're doing, Rachel?" asked Anna Tyler.

Mrs. Masterson handed her a cup of tea and uttered a bark of laughter. "It's not what they're doing that interests me. It's how they do it."

"It's thanks to you that they have a Chance to do it at all, whatever it is."

"Nonsense, girl. I simply made my views clear and the Council followed like sheep." She colored slightly on the last word. "They always do. Really, we don't need a Council at all, with me in charge. A beffevolent dictatorship would get things done around here!"

"Well, thanks anyway. It was your recommendation that swung it with Earth Immigration. They saw your point. The Dengals are being allowed to live their own lives, however and wherever they want. Really, once we accept them as being different from us, the only real problem is this wretched dang business. It does tend to revolt people."

"They'll get used to it."

Anna hesitated. "I owe Loo an apology. I made matters more difficult for him than they need have been."

"Don't apologize!" cried the old lady. "It's the hallmark of the weakling. I've never apologized in my life, I'm happy to say!"

"Look!" said Anna. "There they are!"

The back door of the cottage opened. Loo and Soo emerged, unclothed and scaly, and descended the steps to the rocky beach.

"Are they going for a swim?" Mrs. Masterson speculated. "Funny kind of thing to be doing, in the circumstances."

The aliens threw themselves into the water, rolled over a few times, then disappeared. The women watched as first one, then the other surfaced, gulped air and submerged again. "They seem to be enjoying it," said Anna.

"I never saw Loo swim before."

"I didn't encourage it. It wouldn't have been altogether acceptable, a naked alien wallowing about the inlet in the middle of winter. It would certainly have prejudiced their chances with your Council." Anna watched them worriedly. "I still think we should suggest-- tactfully, of course-- that humans might find the sight . . . bizarre . . . ."

"And I think Dengals should do what the hell they like. If people can't take it, well, they shouldn't look. I'll wager that's the cause of Loo's skin problems. Too many clothes and not enough good honest salt water."

"Dengals are not marine creatures," said Anna. "But I suppose they need the occasional dip. They lived in caves around a chain of lakes. Nevertheless their culture is at least as highly developed as our own," she added defiantly.

"I dare say, but look at them now. That looks pretty basic to me."

The Dengals lay in the shallows, embracing closely. Little ripples spread across the flat water as their bodies vibrated. There was something oddly familiar about the sight.

Anna said slowly, "Coupling in the water? And the young have external gills. Do you know, Rachel, I don't believe they're reptiles after all. They're amphibians!"

A curious explosive sound caused the birds to rise from the trees. It was Mrs. Masterson laughing. "Amphibians! By God, you're right! So much for your tactful suggestion. It's going to be pretty difficult to keep amphibians away from the water!"

The happy couple emerged from the inlet and began to climb the steps, hand in hand. Loo glanced up and saw the humans watching. "Rachel!" he called. "There's all kinds of swimming things in the water here. Is it all right for us to eat

them?"

A few centuries previously, one stout Cortez and his companions were reputed to have looked at each other with a wild surmise, on first sighting the Pacific Ocean. The surmise of stout Cortez and his fellow Spaniards, however, paled into lethargy when compared to the surmise with which Anna Tyler and Rachel Masterson gazed at each other that May afternoon.

"Good grief!" Anna whispered, "It never occurred to me they might eat live fish!"

"The dang is still the dang, however it may be packaged. Simplicity itself, my dear Anna. A quick dip, a bellyful of mackerel. No more prowling the fields at night, no more offense to the weak stomachs among us. After all, who in hell really cares what the Dengals are doing when they're swimming about under the water?"

"What fools we've been!"

"Speak for yourself, woman." Mrs. Masterson leaned over the sundeck rail. "Eat what you like, by all means!" she shouted. "But first, why don't you two kids come up here for a bite with us?"

"Tea and hamsters?" called Loo eagerly.

"I've got some in specially for you," said Mrs. Masterson.