

## Eat Me

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Prospecting is an old Earth custom for looking for hidden wealth or treasure.

Hardly surprising that it would be carried on when we finally went to the stars. It's cheaper to sell a man a plot of land and tell him to dig it than bring in expensive machinery on the off-chance that something might be there.

'Course, all that changes if some valuable mineral is there. You're instantly rich and they buy back the mineral rights. If there's nothing there and the land is arable, you can always become a farmer.

A no-loss situation, providing you wanna be a farmer. Don't think I'll be a farmer yet. Found some veins of cinnabar. Won't mean much to cityfolk by that name. If I said mercury your eyes should light up. The stuff that's still used in thermometers and fluid links.

Not used in teeth fillings so much any more, but still a valuable find. Worth it's weight in gold. Better'n silver. On Earth, the history books say that silver can often be found near mercury. Thirty light years from Earth on a planet with a tolerable oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere could mean events repeating themselves.

Think I'll put in bids for land plots around my own before anyone else figures it out. Might just get lucky again. All I've got to do is deliver my samples for confirmation and accept a pro-rotta payment. Be able to turn in this old truck for a better pair of wheels.

Better equipment. Wine, women and song are all right for a while but when you live out on the land for so long, you start missing watching the stars over night. Making more money is also a strong incentive, 'specially at the price of the good life and a wealthy retirement. Aw shit! What's going on here.

Scuffing and duffing. Spot the dust pile. Even this far off the beaten track, there's always some poor sap being mugged. I braked hard so they get due warning. Local inhabs. Better do something for public relations or us so-called invading humans will be blamed for this as well. Jumping down from my truck, it don't take long to get the picture.

Three of them beating some runt on the ground. Lanky bastards loaded with hair. Don't appear to be armed, so no need for the gun. 'C'mon, ease off. This ain't a fair fight.'

Start with words to see if they understand humlang. They ignore me. I reach for one of the muggers, but he moves out of range. They ain't deaf. All three of them speak in that whispery spitty language they use and I ain't mastered.

At least they stopped beating on that little guy, whatever he is. Not sure I like the way, they're circling... That's the way I last remember it anyway. Woke up seconds later with my face in the dirt. Musta clipped my legs from behind. Must have thought I'm as hardy as they are and expected me to get up after them.

Lucky me. Lucky for the runt, too. He's still on the ground. Aw shit! They took me truck. I got up and watched the dust trail heading towards town. Might not speak humlang but they knew how to shift the truck out of gear. Forty kilometres.

Gonna be a bloody long walk. 'Do I thank the honourable human for my rescue now or later?' a voice asked. Pull my heart out and gimme me a transplant. The runt was speaking humlang. 'Do I thank the honourable human for my rescue now or later?' a voice asked again, 'My life is my debt.' 'Yeah? That a

fact?'

I got up and dusted myself off. 'An' who might you be?' I knew that already. Saw a picture in a book once. Seen a few at a distance. Called a Simakian. Looks like a large purple and green furball 'bout the size of a small football. Squat legs and arms used to keep it stable when not moving.

Uses those legs to get started and moves like a ball. Somewhere in all that fur, there would be a pair of eyes watching me. What else did it say? Oh yeah, it's not fur. Some sort of vegetable matter. Weird alien physios! Neither them or the Larkies, them hairy critters who stole my truck, are brilliant sentients.

No technology. Live off the land. They gave mineral rights willingly for additional agriculture land. Some of the metals are poisonous and it's turning desert land to arable. Best terms we ever had on a new planet. The ecologists are still sorting out who the dominate species is.

Both Simakians and Larkies made separate similar agreements independently for the same reasons. Both reasonably intelligent. We've got recorded instances of Larkies eating Simakians but it doesn't seem to worry the furballs much. Well, a little. They don't like being mugged by groups of Larkies.

Sounds crazy, as we've seen the odd Larkie eating a Simakian. Not my worry. I'm no ecologist. Let some field-worker gimme the answers when they figure it out. No skin off my nose. Won't make much difference when it's known. 'Do you always get lost in thought after a question?' the Simakian asked. 'I am of the Colour. You humans place greater importance on names than the Colour.

For your comfort, I will baptise myself Dalla...or would Trala be more suitable?' Someone's been letting these creatures loose on our textbooks again. Which lousy preacher showed them a bible? Baptise shit! 'Dalla's fine. I'm Hunt. Wade Hunt. Take your pick which name you call me.' Two eyes poked out of the furball and blinked.

'Don't you like your given name? Would you like me to choose another one?' 'Huh? Put that by me again.' 'You said I could pick your name. I can call you...' 'Wade or Hunt. I ain't that fussy.' 'Wade or Hunt. Your names are as odd to us as our lack of them is to you. We adjust to the situation.'

The Simie voice became deep and sagely as if I'd given some personal secret that only it and I could share. Don't ask me which orifice it came from. I'm not even sure if they can even crap. Knew I shoulda given only one of my names.

Just as they don't distinguish by names, they find it harder the fact we've got two and don't split 'em apart. 'Would you do me the honour of allowing me to accompany you to your town?' 'Why would you want to do that? As far as I know, you Simies...Colour don't need towns.'

'But I am in your debt. Your town is at least forty of those kilometres you say are distant from here. You will need some protection.' 'You protect? You're the one being mugged.' 'That's not important. I know this land. Can help with your route.' 'Yeah! I guess he had a point there. Not much in the way of visible landmarks. Even the dirt track was growing over.

All I had was what I was wearing. Not even a canteen. Things could get a bit nasty. Local company was better than nothing. 'Do you sing?' 'I can learn...' 'Don't bother. If you can lead me somewhere I can get some water, food or something close to it on the way, I'll accept the company.'

The Simakian's eyes protruded from its fur again. 'You need nourishment? Water and food?' 'Forty kilometres is going to be a long trek without it. Other humans don't use this route that often. Won't make half way without it.' 'The solution is obvious. Eat me.' 'Huh!?!' 'I am assured that my body is good to eat and acceptable to human metabolism...'

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The furball rolled up beside me. How it could speak and do that without loosing breath was beyond me. 'Tell me, Wade or Hunt, why did you run like that? My suggestion was valid and practical. My body is composed of the right constituents for your metabolism. There is also sufficient water to prevent your dehydration. It is a viable solution. I offer life.'

I stopped and looked down at the Simie. The eyes didn't appear from the fur. Probably didn't want to waste time pulling them in again, if I started running. 'Doesn't that defeat the object? I mean, eating you for my survival. Those scavenging Larkies would have eaten you as well. I didn't save you to become my own dinner. All you're doing is swapping one predator for another. I needn't have stopped to rescue you. Coulda left you to be eaten by them.' 'Yes, but they would have broken me up. I prefer to be eaten whole. By one individual. I have nominated you.'

I walked on this time. Running was tiring out here. The Simie rolled along beside me. 'Humans place very odd values on survival. If I was dead and you were hungry, you would eat me, wouldn't you?' I paused to ponder. 'Maybe. What you planning? Some ritual suicide so I eat your body?' 'That would be difficult', Dalla agreed. 'I prefer to be eaten alive. That is the accepted custom. Wait...Let me catch you up...

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The Vrian sun would be up several hours before it tucked itself below the horizon for the night. Planetary analysis said this was their summer. Longer daylight hours than Earth. Fortunately, not as hot as it could be. Hot enough, though, without any sunblock or hat. What was apparent was that forty kilometres was great as the truck drives, but impractical if I wanted to find water or food along the way.

By my estimate, I was only about a third of the way to the town. If I ever get out of this, I swear I ain't gonna forget to always carry some sort of emergency rations in my pocket. I was beginning to think the Simie was looking awfully good to eat.

I also daydreamed of eating taco sauce and ice cream together. Wonder how long before those sorta hallucinations become fixations? I know what you're going to say. How can an outdoor type prospector fall apart after only 15 kilometres.

Sure I live with the stars as my ceiling, but I also have a fully stocked larder and freezer. Could do with a couple cans about now. Still no sign of a watering hole. 'I am rather delicious, Wade or Hunt.' 'Y'what?' 'I said there is nothing about my body that will poison you. I have a high water content. The fibres of my body are high protein. I have a good selection of minerals, including the salt, chloride of sodium.

None of those metals you search for but don't eat. You will find me rather nourishing.' I sat down. No shade but the pins could do with a rest. Get my second wind before I go on again. Don't think the sun's moved more than a couple degrees. 'Lemme ask you something, Dalla. 'Pose I dropped dead out here. Would you eat me for your own survival?' 'Of course not, I...' 'That's the reason why I can't eat you', I tried explainin'. 'It's not civilised to eat someone...thing you're acquainted with. Walked with.'

There has to be a way to put it across to this Simie in a language that it can understand. 'As I was trying to say', Dalla continued, 'I wouldn't need to eat you. I don't have to eat for several more weeks. The Colour are better equipped than you humans.' 'Probably the reason you never had a need to develop supplementary technology. Look, 'pose I was dead and you were hungry, would you eat my body then?' Dalla's two eyes poked out of its furball body. 'We don't tell you humans this. We're edible to you, but your body contains too much calcium and iron for us.

It makes us sick. Lose too much body fluid. Decide to eat me, Wade or Hunt.' 'You'd probably tell me

how much you're enjoying it as I eat you?'

'I would be honoured to...'

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Must be about half the distance now. Drier than a drought. No blisters. Lips dry. It's more like desiccation than dehydration. A short route to looking like a mummy without bandages.

Pulled out one of the plants. Took some effort. It wasn't so much because it was anchored, just a very long root. It also meant it would be some dig trying to find water. Getting more important to find water than food. Probably a whole underground reservoir.

Take as much energy to dig down as it would take to get to town, even if I had the right equipment. Searched my pockets for anything useful. Not even a mirror to signal with. My ciggies and lighter were still in the truck. I was thinking of finally giving them up.

Chose a good place to start. You don't really get out prepared for a long walk when you break up a mugging, do ya? 'I had heard humans were obstinate, Wade or Hunt, but this first hand experience is as distressing me. Please eat me. It'll make you so much better. You're going to have to eat soon. It's way past your time of meals. You drink far more than you eat. My body will provide you with both...' 'Look, Dalla. Do you know how far it is to the town from here? I'm sure I can get there without eating you. Do you understand how we measure distance? I'd have thought I'd have spotted a tower in the distance by now.' 'The kilometre? I can convert. We based it on our body lengths.

The town is thirty-five to the sun's left.' 'Thirty-five? You sure. That means I've only gone five from where I started. How'd that happen?' 'Every time I suggested eating me, you walk in a different direction.

As you were less than communicative, I assumed you knew where you were going.' 'Thirty five kilometres. Shit! I'm in serious trouble here. 'All right, Dalla. Gimme a direct bearing. The direction I've got to walk to get to the town.' 'Are you sure you wouldn't want to eat me first?'

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'You don't look well, Wade or Hunt. I thought humans preferred to use their legs to walk? I saw some humans use this technique in water once. Aren't you supposed to spin your arms over your head?'

My eyesight was getting blurry. Took a lot more spit to wet my lips 'fore I could reply. 'Could do with some of that water right now.' 'Then I insist you eat me. Are you so desperate to die, Wade or Hunt?' 'Not any more. How far do I have to crawl now?'

'Another twenty kilometres.' 'I'm never gonna make it. Comes a time to forget principles. Desperation and survival. 'Look. Eating you. Will it hurt you? I wouldn't wanna hurt you.

'Part from being a pain about wanting me to eat you, you've been my only companion...friend.' 'The Colour aren't made the same as humans. I will talk as you eat me. Reassure you, I'm in no pain. To feed you is my honour.' I reached out and the Simie rolled into my hands, ready for the first bite. Didn't know quite what to expect. Dalla certainly didn't taste like meat. Least, not anything like cow or lamb. More like some sorta mushy green stuff. Better not tell any veggies. Wouldn't give them anything left to eat.

'That doesn't hurt, Dalla? Don't think I'd be that comfortable with half my guts eaten.' 'Eat, Wade or Hunt. See how quickly you get your strength back.'

Dalla was right 'bout that. I was sitting up for my next mouthful. Standing for my last. Whatever was in

Dalla's body was certainly...nourishing. Made only one meal though. What was going to happen when I got hungr... 'Shit! Sorry, Dalla, wherever you are. I never said goodbye.'

'That's all right, Wade or Hunt. I'm still alive. Give me a few days to adjust and then I'll start reproducing. My children will be happy they've got such a healthy body they can share.' Gulp! 'Would you like me to learn how to sing now? We have plenty of time.'

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