

Elena Voron

In a vet clinic

There were lots of them. A lilac wolf from the Sheeba, a Miranda poisonous hedgehog, three charming Yaroslavian foxes, a laughing raccoon from the Dominica... And – oh my! – two pheasants from the Earth. Also there were some water snakes in a transparent can too small for them; they kept putting out their horned heads, looking at us hungrily, as if anticipating easy prey. In the middle of the hall a cage holding a bulky mottled pangolin from the Victoria was placed. The pangolin was asleep, coiled into a ball, and I hoped to God it would not wake up and spit. Saliva of such reptiles can make a man bleary.

Also there were numerous creatures unknown to me. Probably, they had been brought from some very far away worlds. Furry, scaly, feathery things kept still, not yelling or trying to huff others.

Their owners felt comfortable round the hall. I was still dubious about how to call them. Lapdoggers? Lapdoggians? Just for a joke, we had named their planet the Lapdog, having witnessed the aborigines' passion for pets. Lapdoggians are massive, twice my height, of bronzy colour, with skin folds used as clothes. They have powerful paws and dumb-looking muzzles. Yes, muzzles these are, not faces. A

Lapdoggian's head is quite similar to that of a dino.

Bronzy Lapdoggians were seated on the floor, with their upper bodies leaning against the walls. These were made of white stone; the floor was of stone, too, and quite warm. The arched ceiling was high, with small narrow windows. Through them I could see the clear sky; the sun was shining. Dino heads were swaying sleepily, heavy eyelids going down. Lapdoggians are never in a hurry. Or rather their females never are.

All of those present were pirate grandmothers – or pirate mothers-in-law, I could not be sure. They had brought to the vet clinic pets captured by their sons, grandsons or sons-in-law who sneaked about the galaxy. A pirate spaceship from the Lapdog is uncatchable and horrifying. There will be a tip-and-run attack, after which the spacecraft will disappear. The planet itself had been impossible to discover for a few years. Our exploration party was

