

Cants

Cants are... well, the name is a portmanteau of 'cat' and 'ant,' and it's pretty accurate. They are furry, tailed pseudo-mammals (the 'cat' part) with six legs and iridescent, protuberant compound eyes (the 'ant' part). Cants are about the size of a bulldog, but can be sometimes a bit smaller. They first appeared in the wilds of the Amazon river basin and the backwoods of Siberia, but have been spreading through the rest of the planet over the last few years, usually as pets. Cants tend to be mixed insectivores/vegetarians: they prefer wetlands, but can adapt to any climate that has reliable water. There was a desultory attempt to keep cants out of the general public's clutches by various governments, but it didn't work: just enough people had already adopted a stray to make it awkward to take them *all* away from their new owners.

Genetically speaking, cants are... well, they have DNA. They recognizably have a common ancestor with (we might as well say it) Earthly life. But they simply do not belong to any past or present species that terrestrial scientists are aware of. There's nothing supernatural or unnatural about them; there's no real mystery about the

cant life cycle or its physiology. What's mysterious is how the species *got* here.

One line of argument - the one that is tacitly accepted by the scientific community, although more than a few researchers decline to officially endorse it - is that cants are the galactic equivalent of a pet that got lost during a car trip. The species itself is definitely domesticated: cants easily bond with humans (and, interestingly, other domestic animals and pets), do not act aggressively, easily housetrain, and have what looks to be a genetically-engineered limited breeding cycle. They're useless as guard animals and don't hunt pests, which means that they're not going to replace dogs or cats any time soon; but it's surprisingly easy to integrate a cant into a household that has a dog, cat, or bird.

Today cants are increasingly popular pets: they're about as smart as dogs, but aren't quite as trainable when it comes to performing tricks. Also, humans are simply not allergic to cants, which makes them a viable pet alternative to people who can't live with dogs or cats. There are already a few breeding clubs in existence, but generally most cants are either found strays, or first-generation breeds. Generally, people get over the

bizarre eyes and extra legs; it generally comes across as 'pleasantly bizarre' rather than 'bug-eyed monster.'

But there's still the nagging question: how did cants get here? And if they were left here by aliens, well: was that deliberate? And whether or not it was or wasn't, well: are the aliens coming *back*?

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