

## SHEEP IN WOLVES' CLOTHING

By C.S. Malerich

Cyd Sheep called an emergency assembly of the flock at the Big Rock. Unlike a lot of flocks, the Confederation of Lambda did not have a human shepherd to look out for them—well, they had had one once, but he was rather dumb and had drowned in a river he shouldn't have been trying to cross anyway. For awhile, the sheep had been close to panic without someone to tell them what to do, but then Cyd had taken over—not the Cyd of our story, but the Great Cyd, a few generations back. Our Cyd was the Great Cyd's great-great-grandson, but he hadn't gotten the job just through family connections. The Confederation of Lambda was a democracy. That didn't mean they were smart.

The facts of the crime were simple. Conchita Sheep was missing. The only clues were a tuft of wool on some thistles and a few paw prints, dried in the mud. Cyd could barely keep the assembly under control.

"Conchita Sheep's been eaten!" screamed one panicky voice.

The suspects were Rudy and Gina Wolf-Sheep, adopted children of Emma Sheep. Because the Confederation of Lambda was a democracy, and because Cyd was the leader and a free thinker, citizens were sometimes allowed to do unconventional things like adopting abandoned wolf cubs.

"Tar and feather them!" yelled Tom Sheep, a crusty old ram who thought that that bleeding heart liberal's leadership had really let things get to seed.

"We can't do that," Cyd yelled back. "We don't have any tar or feathers. Furthermore we don't have any evidence that Conchita's been eaten, and even if she has, there's no conclusive evidence that the wolves did it."

"Who else would eat a sheep?" asked Tom. There were shouts of agreement from the flock.

"They wouldn't! They're gentle as lambs! They wouldn't hurt a fly!" Emma protested desperately. "They wouldn't turn against Conchita, or any one of you. We're all part of the same family here."

"They *are* part of the flock," Cyd reminded Tom and the others, who were rapidly becoming an angry mob, "and we owe them a fair trial."

"Well, where are they if they're part of the flock?" Tom demanded, stomping his cloven feet. "Shouldn't they be here? They're probably polishing off Conchita right now!" There were outraged screams, and then the anguished sobs of Conchita's immediate relatives. Cyd tried vainly to comfort them, then he turned gravely to Emma.

"We do have to accept the facts. Paw prints *were* discovered near the tuft of Conchita's wool, and Rudy and Gina do happen to be missing at the moment—"

"That's not proof of anything! You know how they like to scamper off, Cyd. You've known them since they were cubs."

Cyd gave a conflicted "Baaa," finally announcing that they had best form a search party and comb the area, which is what he would have done in the first place if Tom and the others had not started all that nonsense about murder and guilt. If Conchita was found, then all would well. If Rudy and Gina were found, they could be questioned. But standing around arguing wasn't getting them anywhere. Emma, sick with worry, was the first to volunteer for the search party, but Cyd gently suggested it might be best she wait in the meadow with the flock. Tom volunteered next, promising to bring in the dirty-no-good-carnivores for a proper sheep equivalent to lynching. Cyd didn't challenge Tom outright, but he did reply that he would be leading the search party himself. With a few more volunteers—Conchita's brothers, a few of Tom's cronies, and an eager, helpful youth just out of lambhood—the party was complete. Cyd's deputy Felix was left in charge with strict instructions to move the flock to the lowlands and keep a tight fist on strays, just in case Conchita had fallen to predators.

It had been close to dusk when the assembly had formed, and now night was rapidly falling, but the moon was full and the sky clear, promising plenty of light to search by. The eight-sheep search party set off, calling, "Rudy! Gina! Conchita!" every few steps. They had left the meadows behind and had entered the dense woods of the highlands before making any discovery. Rudy and Gina were not found

so much as they did the finding. Cyd had led the search party into a moon-soaked clearing, nervous in the darkness of the woods in spite of himself.

"Cyd! Tom! Ramón! What are you all doing so far from the flock?" Rudy asked, bounding into the clearing followed closely by his sister.

"We might ask you the same question," Tom said coldly.

"We caught the scent of some coyotes around here," Gina volunteered, her tail wagging eagerly.

"They were heading down toward the meadows, but we chased them away," Rudy jumped in quickly, his jowls opened in a wide, eager smile.

"Oh, is that all? Just chasing some coyotes, were you?" Tom asked, circling the pair of wolf pups suspiciously.

"Yes," answered Rudy, surprised and confused that the others did not seem pleased. Normally they got an affectionate nuzzle at least for that sort of accomplishment.

"Is something wrong?" asked Gina, bewildered as her brother.

"Conchita is missing," Cyd said soberly.

"Again?" asked Gina.

"Did you try leaving her alone and hoping she'll come home?" Rudy inquired.

Cyd opened his mouth to respond, but Tom interrupted, gnashing his molars together nastily.

"She didn't come home, but you already know that, don't you?"

The pups looked at each other. Rudy ventured a guess.

"Right...otherwise, why would you all be out here looking for her?"

"Quit the innocent act," snapped Tom. "We know you ate her! You wolves are all the same—vicious, blood-thirsty canines!"

Rudy and Gina abruptly stopped wagging their tails and lost their smiles.

"We wouldn't eat Conchita," said Gina, her eyes huge.

"Ramón, Julio, you don't think that, do you?" Rudy appealed to Conchita's brothers.

"How dare you even speak to them after what you did!" snapped Tom, startling Rudy so badly he jumped back behind his sister, whimpering. "Think you're tough, do you? Because you can get the best of one lost sheep? Well, the flock united can deal with a couple of rabid wolves! We'll run you right out of these hills!"

Gina, trembling, looked to Cyd. "Cyd, we're not out of the flock, are we?"

"No one's out of the flock," Cyd replied firmly. "We don't know what happened to Conchita, but I intend to find out. Now let's all head back to the lowlands to sort this out."

There were mutters of agreement, most angrily on Tom's part, but soon the mixed group of wolves and sheep were on their way back through the forest. As they came to the densest part of the thicket, wherein no moonlight penetrated, Tom piped up.

"I'm not going in there. It's impossible to see, and I want to keep my eyes on those wolves. What if they try to run off, or worse?"

"Rudy and Gina aren't going to try anything," answered Cyd. "Are you?"

The wolves solemnly shook their heads. Without waiting for further comment, Cyd led the group into the thicket. The darkness covered all and, because sheep basically sound all the same and Rudy and Gina had lived so long with them as to pick up the accent, there was no way to tell one another apart. Tom was unhappy, not knowing how close the wolves might be to him, but the one thing a sheep fears more than a wolf is separation from the flock.

It wasn't long after that the sounds of coyote howling met their ears. Their uneasiness grew with the volume of the howls, until one of the sheep cried out.

"Everyone stay calm!" yelled a voice in reply. "We'll be back to the flock soon."

"Are you sure?" bleated another voice.

"Where are we?" asked a third, more distant.

"Where are *you*?"

"Are we all here?"

"I don't know, I can't see to count heads."

"Those wolves—what if they dragged someone off?"

"We didn't drag anyone off! We're still here!"

"Quiet everyone, I'll call roll."

"One of them could have stayed while the other dragged someone off! They'll answer for whoever they've got!"

"Look, we're just going to have to trust each other. Those coyotes sound like they're getting closer, and we've got to get back to the flock. Now everyone be silent while I call roll."

The sheep quieted down and listened for their names. There was a soft chorus of "here"s and a few "present"s.

"All right. Since no one appears to be missing, we're going to assume that no one has been dragged off and eaten. We'll make a chain; everyone grab hold the tail of the sheep in front of you." There was some shuffling and trampled hooves, but soon everyone had quieted down. No one answered in the negative when Cyd called back to see if anyone was disconnected from the chain, and they continued through the thicket, most trembling a bit. The howls were loud and quite close now, and no one was entirely sure just whom they were hanging onto, and whether that sheep was hanging onto anyone at all. But it *sounded* like everyone was together and moving in the same direction, and without fail, the search party plus Rudy and Gina made it through the woods. The flock was waiting for them in the lower meadow, packed tightly together for security amidst the echoing calls of the coyotes.

"You found them!" Emma cried to Cyd as she saw Rudy and Gina. The whole of the search party was covered in burrs and leaves and looking rather disheveled.

"Did they eat Conchita?" Felix asked.

"They're not very clever murderers if they did," replied Cyd. "They had a perfect chance to escape, or even kill another one of us, but they didn't."

Just then, a commotion at the far end of the meadow interrupted. Ramón and Julio were shouting with joy. Conchita Sheep had come home, wagging her tail behind her. Her family enveloped her in a wave of excitement.

"Conchita!" yelled Rudy. "Conchita's back!"

"Does that mean we're in the clear?" Gina asked Cyd.

"I certainly does," said Cyd, baaing happily. "In fact, I think we all owe you two an apology. Just because you're wolves doesn't mean you aren't sheep at heart. You proved that back in the woods. Right, Tom?"

Tom grumbled, but he couldn't justify his belief that all wolves were cold-blooded killers in light of recent developments, even in his own ignorant, narrow mind. "I guess I was being a spiciest."

"Now where have you been?" Cyd asked Conchita sternly. "We thought you'd been eaten."

Conchita shrugged sheepishly. "I'm sorry. I wandered after a butterfly and lost my way. I didn't mean to be a problem." At which everyone, including Tom, laughed.

Which only goes to show that sometimes you need to go into the dark to see the light.