Table Manners

For a few seconds I waver between turning right to head home or to cross the street to go to the restaurant. I look down at my guest. His snout is still angled skyward, glossy wet nose twitching frenetically as he drinks in the aroma of wood smoke. He starts licking his chops as saliva begins to drip from the corners of his black lips.

After a moment's hesitation, I march forward toward the curb cut. My intent now clear, the little asteroid miner begins excitedly prancing forward, thumping his sinewy tail on the pavement. This is definitely not normal yinrih body language. Is he mimicking canine behavior to compensate for his inability to communicate in English? He mentioned other great apes earlier, perhaps he took the initiative to do more research into Terran fauna before his trip here.

I give him a stern look. “I'd quit wagging your tail if I were you. If you don't want other humans to pet you like a dog you should stop acting like one.” He says something that gets drowned out by Tejano music blaring from a passing truck, but seems to heed my admonition, hastily curling his tail around the bag on his back.

I fix my gaze ahead, reaching over to press the button for the crosswalk. My guest blows the curb and enters the intersection at the worst possible time. The light for the cross street is a solid green, and an SUV has already passed the middle of the road on a collision course with the little sophont.

“Woah!” I lunge forward and grab his tail, pulling him out of harm's way. His bag falls off his back and into the gutter, mere inches from the passing vehicle, which speeds by close enough to rustle his whiskers.

It takes some time for him to register what just happened. For a split second his cynoid face flashes with another unreadable emotion, I figure he's less than thrilled I pulled him by the tail. Then he lookes to his right at the swiftly receding vehicle that nearly painted the asphalt with his innards. His expression melts and he presses the top of his head against my knee. This, it turns out, is a gesture of deep gratitude, though it's usually done against the side or chest of the receiver, which human bipedalism renders difficult.

I pluck his bag from the gutter and hand it to him. “Sorry, dude, I guess pedestrian safety isn't something they went over back home.” I point at the crosswalk sign. “See that signal over there?” He gives me an affirmative upward tilt of his muzzle. “When you see the red hand, that means 'don't walk.' When it changes to the picture of a human, that means it's safe to cross. Got it?” He nods in human fashion.

The light cycle has restarted, so we wait a minute or two for our turn to come up again. I spam the button a few more times. “Sometimes you gotta make extra sure it knows you want to cross,” I explain in response to his incredulous look. The signal turns and he looks up at me. “Follow me, and don't run.”

I successfully shepherd the alien across the intersection without making the evening news, and we arrive at the door of Good Ol' Boys' Smokehouse. Upon entering the vestibule, I'm met with an unfamiliar sight. I've been here before, but not since I was a freshman. They definatly didn't have this water feature here last time. It's a wide, shallow basin, no more than a few inches deep. A grate lines either side of the pool, and I can tell by the agitation of the water that it's being vigorously circulated.

My guest doesn't miss a beat. He rolls onto his back and casts off the socks and mittens with relish, then flexes his now freed digits in relief. He passes his now discalced paws under a dispenser sitting at perfect monkey fox height, which deposits a beige powder onto his upturned palms. I watch astonished as he wades into the water. The powder dissolves, blossoming into a soapy slick across the surface, which quickly flows into the intake drain at one side of the pool. He submerges each paw, then draws it out and gives it a dainty shake. He repeats this cleansing ritual a few times, then exits the pool onto a coarse floor mat. He wipes his paws, palms and wrists alike, spreading his digits to remove any remaining dirt from between his paw pads and under his claws.

Bewildered, I glance around and am somewhat taken aback to see another monkey fox. The tawny-furred female is wearing an appropriately sized baseball cap which I recognize as part of the normal employee uniform, with holes to accommodate her upright ears. She notices my confusion at the pool.

“Howdy!” She's made some modifications to her own synth, affecting a surprisingly convincing Texan accent. She's even managed to inject a bit of emotion. She notices that her conspecific is incommunicado and launches into her own well-trodden introduction. “A bit confused, are ya? That's a washing pool. We yinrih need those to keep the place clean. Our hands are also our feet, ya know.”

I'm obviously still perplexed at her presence in this very human establishment. “Oh, my name's Crystal, well, my human name, anyway. I've seen a lot of other yinrih coming in here lately. Some sort of exchange program at the college, right? Well, I'm here from Moonlitter. Know where that is?” My blank stare tells her that I do not. “Well, it's a big planet just outside the Inner Belt, that's where all these exchange volunteers are coming from. Anyway, we have this thing back home. It's like, you know how some places make pups join the military for a few years when they get old enough? I know they do that at some places here on Earth. Anyway, Moonlitter does a similar thing, but they make you work a customer service job, you know, waitress, cashier, that sort of thing. Force you to face the public so you'll treat 'em nice when your older because you were in their paws yourself. Gives you some humility. Anyway, This place here started taking conscripts from Moonlitter, and I jumped at the chance. If I've gotta be a wage slave, might as well serve my time somewhere new and exotic.”

I'd hardly call the middle of literal nowhere Texas “new and exotic” myself, but I suppose anywhere that's twenty five light years from home would be by default.

By now my guest has finished drying his paws and has returned to my side. The hostess notices her fellow monkey fox and greets him with a chuff. He responds in kind and they exchange a few yips and growls of Commonthroat, then she looks up at me again. “Anyhow, better do what I get

paid for. Table for two? One human and one yinrih?”

I nod, but Crystal holds up a paw. “Oops, almost forgot,” she says, motioning down at my sneakers with her muzzle. “Those gotta go.” I follow her gaze to a shelf full of shoes just inside the entrance door. “You can keep the socks on,” she adds.

I hesitate momentarily. “Remember, hygiene.” My guest has re-equipped his keyer and is making grasping motions with a free paw. “I know, it's a hassle. Why do you think so many of us live in microgravity?” I remove my shoes and place them on the shelf, silently thanking my past self for putting on matching socks this morning. I look at the two quadrupeds and heave a sigh of resignation.

“Hay, I get it,” Crystal says. “A lot of humans are as uncomfortable not wearing shoes as we are wearing them.”

“It's OK,” I say, “This is why we're having this exchange program in the first place, right? It's all a learning experience.” Crystal summons a human waitress, who grabs a pair of menus and leads us inside.

I recognize our server. We had a few classes together our first few semesters. She's a student at the much larger and better-funded veterinary school. I know through the grape vine that she's the daughter of the owner. She recognizes me, too.

“Hey, don't I know you?” she says as we weave our way around tables, chairs, and other furnishings not designed for the human form. “You're a Linguistics major, right?”

“Yes,” I respond, gawking at the renovations made since First Contact. The tables are lower to the ground, and yinrih perches are scattered among the chairs. The cafeteria counter and large menu display are gone. “Didn't this place used to be a cafeteria?” I ask.

“We got rid of all the self service stuff,” she explains. “Quadrupeds who haven't set foot on a planet's surface their entire lives aren't exactly adept at balancing a tray full of food. Crystal's good enough at it, but she didn't grow up in zero-G. She sometimes covers my shift when I have to study. Puts the serving tray on her back and picks up the plates with her tail. It's really cute.”

“Don't take this the wrong way, but from what I know of your dad, he's the last person I'd expect to bend over backwards like this to attract alien customers,” I say, glancing up at the large Gadston flag hanging proudly on the wall.

“Are you kidding, the Spacers are his kind of people!” she exclaims. “He seriously wants to move to the Spacer Confederacy when he retires. Besides, do you know how much Spacers are willing to pay for real meat?”

She motions for us to sit. And it’s only now that I notice the flag’s “Don’t tread on me” motto is written in Commonthroat.

“What are y’all looking to drink?” she asks as I awkwardly slide my legs under the table and my guest hops up onto the perch, his front end floating over the tabletop.

He looks at the menu. “I didn’t think you’d serve steadtree fruit juice. I’ll have one of those.”

“Make that two,” I add.

“Fermented or fresh?” she asks.

“Make it fresh for me,” says my guest. I nod to concur.

“So,” I begin after the waitress leaves, “What’s this about ‘real’ meat?”

“Orbital colonies aren’t exactly agricultural bread baskets,” my guest explains. “We can subsist on produce grown via hydroponics, and what passes for meat is just fungus grown in a lab and gussied up to approximate the texture of the real thing. We call it ‘leasemeat’. What we can’t make we have to trade for, and real meat is the kind of thing you eat on special occasions. And this cow flesh,” he stops to lick his chops again, “it’s something else, especially smoked. Spacers will pay a day’s wage for just a plate of the stuff back home.”

“Wait, we’re exporting food to Focus now?”

“Yup,” he says, “Wayfarers’ Haven has a mass router dedicated to food imports from Earth.”

The waitress has returned. She sets a glass before me and two bowls in front of my guest. My glass and one of his bowls are filled with what I can only describe as pure liquid blue. It’s like someone found a way to liquify the screen you see when you turn on a TV with no HDMI cable plugged in. It’s so saturated that even in the dim ambiance it hurts my eyes to look at. Floating atop the surface of the liquid is a violet sheen, roiling like the iridescent interference pattern of a soap bubble.

“Don’t worry.” The waitress notices my misgivings. “The FDA just approved that stuff for human consumption… I think. You ready to order?” She asks.

“Give me a few minutes,” says my guest, licking his lips again. “It all looks delicious.”

“Take your time,” she says and walks off.

Looking for an excuse not to imbibe the blue drink, I look at the other bowl given to my guest. It’s filled with water, and a rough hand towel is folded next to it. He dips his paws in the bowl and dries them on the towel. “Hygiene again,” he says, repeating the grasping gesture.

“Is it like this everywhere you go? With those pools, I mean,” I ask.

“Nope, just restaurants and healer’s offices, anywhere health is an issue. Everywhere else you just have that rough floor mat to get the dirt off at the door, but washing pools are also in restrooms. They’re our version of the sink. But yeah, I agree that it’s a huge pain, constantly cleaning your paws. All the more reason why I’m a Spacer.”

He dips his head and noisily laps up some juice from the bowl lying on the tabletop. I suppose monkey fox table manners are all about minimizing contact between paw and food. “Go on,” he urges, “try it.”

I lift the glass to my lips and take a tentative sip. It’s thick and mildly sweet… at first. After about half a second I nearly drop the glass in shock as my face spasms like I’m having a stroke. The most sour flavor I’ve ever tasted assaults my tongue. It’s like an entire bag of Warheads concentrated into a single drop of liquid azure.

“So?” my guest prompts, his whiskers twitching with interest.

“It’s… delicious!” I take a swig and my face contorts in ways I didn’t think possible. Then I chug the rest of the glass and tap the bottom to get every last drop of this divine nectar to trickle onto my tongue. My face aches but I don’t care. Satisfied, I set the glass back down.

“Just wait until you try the fermented stuff,” says my guest, eyes wide and lips loose in an expression of vicarious pleasure.

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