

The Angel and the Ape

Fr. Shaheen took a drag of his cigarette as he stared up at the night sky. A few stars were just bright enough to shine through the gray haze cast by the street lights in town.

Just at the edge of the trailer's porch light sat an old foundation where a sizeable rectory once stood. It had been far too large for a single resident, so he had it torn down and was now living in a much more modest mobile home. At one point a youth center was planned to take its place, but the number of heads devoid of gray hairs that could be found in the pews of Our Lady of the Cedars could be counted on both hands.

Rare was the night where the priest couldn't be found puffing away in front of his trailer. Restful nights were few and far between. Maybe his smoking habit was to blame. His new housemate did comment frequently on his snoring, loud enough to be heard from the other end of the house.

That new housemate was awkwardly lying on the bench across from him, a haphazard jumble of limbs. He was covered wet nose to prehensile tail in black and white fur. He broke the silence with a cough. "Why you cleric breathe that smoke stick?" came a tinny robotic voice from somewhere in the tangle of legs. "That smoke make cough. Smell bad bad." While the little quadruped's English was improving by the day. The intonation was off, with stressed syllables appearing everywhere but where they should.

"We all have our vices," sighed Fr. Shaheen. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"You cleric friend, ask ask."

"Why'd Iris insist on you staying with me?"

After a long pause, "She iris think you human maybe follow Light more good than us yinrih. Maybe again you cleric make me friend believe."

"I think Dr. Staples has been giving you guys the wrong idea about humanity."

"He doctor show us how strong human, how fast human. Show us beautiful arts. Show us human help other and not think self."

"Yeah, that's what we aspire to be," grunted Fr. Shaheen as he rose to his feet.

"Where you cleric go?" asked the creature as he oozed down from the bench and planted his hexadactyl paws on the wooden porch.

"Come on. We're going to get more cancer sticks." The priest walked to a dust-caked pickup truck parked next to the trailer. After a deep bowing stretch the alien trotted behind him.

"Turn off that synthesizer," said the priest as he turned the ignition. "I need to work on my Commonthroat comprehension."

The alien complied, slipping the small chording keyer from his wrist and placing it in a pocketed band around his right foreleg. His real voice came in quiet melodic whines and growls, as though a dog were trying to speak Mandarin in its sleep. The priest had to strain to discern the subtle shifts in volume that were just as meaningful as the underlying sound.

"When are you going to give me a human name?" the alien grunted.

"Eh? Don't you have a perfectly good Commonthroat name? ring...light, isn't it? So like moonlight, but from a ring around your home planet?"

"Yeah, but I want a name humans can pronounce."

"What's wrong with translating your name as is?"

"This planet doesn't have a ring, and none of you humans have been on a planet that does. I feel like the name falls flat. I want my name to mean something to those around me, not just to the five other yinrih who are with me."

After a long pause, "Back there before we left, you said you didn't believe anymore."

The alien hesitated, then tilted his muzzle up, a rough equivalent to an affirmative nod. "I was a devout pup. I went to liturgies daily, poured over hagiographies, could quote scripture as easy as breathing. Faith helped me back then. I was...am--?" The next few words were lost on the priest.

"Maybe rephrase that last part, Those are some new words for me."

"Well... I'm not sure if you humans experience this, but some of us have something wrong in our brains, a condition that keeps us from feeling happy. I have that condition."

"Depression," said the priest. "We've got that over here alright. I struggle with depression, too. A lot of humans do. My faith keeps me afloat. Sounds like it helped you, too. But what happened?"

"I always needed something solid I could stand on, something tangible that vindicated my faith. Through my puppyhood I thought I had that something, but I turned out to be wrong."

"What was that something?"

"Persistence," said the alien. "For a hundred thousand years the Bright Way persisted. It survived threats from without and from within. It managed to survive so long despite the often profound stupidity of its leaders. I thought only a divine mandate could keep such a mess from foundering."

"And...?"

?It was a lot of little things. I noticed other Wayfarers could be just as rude and hateful as anyone else, and that made me wonder if the Bright Way is no better than any other group of people, is it really special? Surely the organization that claims to be the bastion of truth and virtue should be BETTER, right? Not just not any worse.

?But the tipping point was when the High Hearthkeeper tried to shutter the missionaries, the whole purpose for the Bright Way's existence, you know? 'Go, dearest little ones, spread your light to the stars, and ye shall become brighter yourselves.' That's the Great Commandment. That's our most sacred precept, that we're not alone in the universe, that we should seek out the Light's other creatures among the stars. So what? We're just going to abandon it now? Than what are we? What is our reason for being?

?That's when it hit me. If our own leader doesn't care, why should I??

"You sacrificed a lot. It took you 250 years to get here, and it'll be at least that long before you see others of your kind again. If you think this mission from God, this Great Commandment, of yours is just a fairy tale, than why bother?"

?As for me,? said the alien, ?I'm not a very gregarious person. The other missionaries with me, they're all I've got. If I didn't go with them I'd likely never see them again.?

"But still... dropping everything knowing you may never return, that's a heavy choice to make, friends or not."

?Well, you can blame Iris for twisting my ear. She said if I were right, and this is all nonsense, I will have lost nothing by coming with them. It's not like we age while in suspension, and it wasn't like I was pulling up roots by leaving home. But if the Bright Way is right, I will have gained everything by obeying the Great Commandment, so--? He quickly flicked his ears back in a cynoid shrug.

The priest was beaming.

?You're showing your teeth. Is something wrong??

"Pascal!" the priest proclaimed. "That's your human name!"

?I don't follow.?

"Blaise Pascal, he lived 400 years ago. Most people today know him as a scientist, I'm pretty sure there's a unit of measure named after him, but he also talked a lot about faith. Pascal's wager. What Iris told you. We call that Pascal's wager. Lose nothing or gain everything."

Pascal looked out the window as the pickup pulled into a sprawling parking lot. At its center was an equally sprawling monolithic building.

?So why'd you bring me here, other than to get more of your foul-smelling smoking sticks??

"I told you what Dr. Staples showed you was what we humans want to be. That's all well and good, but you also need to know what we are." The priest got out of the pickup and Pascal followed.

"You're definitely going to need that synthesizer."

Pascal positioned the keyer in his left forepaw, then looked up at the large illuminated sign above the entrance and attempted to sound out the letters.

"W A L M A R T"

"Hey," the greeter stepped in front of the pair. "No shirt, no shoes, no service," he said pointing down at Pascal.

"But--" Fr. Shaheen protested.

"--Nah, just kidding, go on in. I've been wanting to say that ever since you little guys landed."

The two entered the store proper. "It'll just be a minute, My cigs are right over there--" Fr. Shaheen gestured toward one of the checkout lanes. A line of shoppers, at least 20 deep, snaked around the surrounding displays.

He swore in Arabic under his breath. "OK, it'll be longer than a few minutes."

"Short-staffed tonight," said the shopper at the end of the line. "Let me guess, Cigarettes? That's what everyone else is here for."

He glanced down at Pascal. "First time at Wally World?"

Pascal bobbed his head up and down in an exaggerated nod.

"He needs to see the other side of humanity," said Fr. Shaheen. "Those ivory tower folks at the college are showing them Olympic athletes and firefighters and renaissance masterpieces, and I want to give them the whole picture."

"Hoo boy you're in for something alright," the shopper chuckled. "Hey between you and me, if you wanna blow up the Earth after this I won't even blame you."

As they talked, a large woman in a scooter rolled up to the end of the line. "Aww!" she cooed between breaths of exertion. "So cute." She reached down and scratched Pascal behind the ears. "Whosagoodboyyesyouare!"

?I'm a person and I have personal space!? Pascal barked, ducking out of her reach.

The shopper glared at the woman. "Seriously, lady? You been living under a rock the last two months? What makes you think that's OK?"

"He's got fur, ain't he? And four legs and a wet nose. If God didn't want us to pet 'em then why'd He make 'em fuzzy?"

"You must be from Austin," said the shopper. "I thought we chased all you weirdos away weeks ago."

The pair's argument gradually increased in volume. The woman rose from her scooter and began gesticulating. Fr. Shaheen stepped between them. "Let's be charitable--"

"Cram it, fish eater!" the woman snapped.

Pascal slipped down an aisle and out of sight, anxious to avoid the melee that was surely brewing.

He stared up at the shelves and scented the air as he walked. Away from his human host everything seemed intimidatingly tall. Suddenly he felt something wet under his right front paw. He looked down at the yellow puddle underfoot and sniffed, the unmistakable odor of human excreta.

An elderly human was waddling around the corner, more of the same odor wafting off of him. "Better clean that up, sonny," he said to a passing employee.

"Clean what up?" A adolescent male voice approached from the other direction. The lad came into view and looked down at the puddle. His face flashed with frustration and then to embarrassment when he noticed Pascal's paw marinading in the mess.

"I heard over the walkie that one of you guys was here." he sighed, pulling a wad of sanitizer wipes from a cleaning cart behind him. "So, ready to nuke us from orbit yet?" he handed the wipes to Pascal. "It's the only way to be sure."

Pascal shook his head as he wrung the towelettes between his forepaws, wiping under his claws and between the pads on his palms.

"No?" The boy said as he mopped up the puddle. "You will be when you get out of here."

"I'll take those," he put the spent wipes in a trash bin on the cart. "All good?"

Pascal jerked his foreleg forward and gave an unpracticed thumbs-up along with an awkward affirmative bob of the head.

"Cool," the lad said. "Name's Jeff, by the way."

"Pascal," he synthesized, patting himself on the belly in greeting.

"Pleased to meet you," Jeff said, copying the gesture. "I'm gonna say sorry on behalf of my entire species for all this." He waved an arm vaguely indicating their surroundings. "Walmart's one heck of an anthropology lesson."

Pascal flicked an ear in goodbye and turned to walk back to the front of the store. He heard more Arabic oaths in the direction of the tills, and judging by the clamor more nicotine-deprived humans had joined the fracas. He did a 180 and trotted past Jeff finishing up his cleaning.

"Wise choice," Jeff said as Pascal turned the corner and headed deeper into the bowels of the store.

He continued walking, nose to the ground making sure not to step in any more surprises, until he heard two more humans approaching.

"Honey, why did you grab so many cans of beans?"

"It's those damn monkey foxes, Dave. I'm tellin' you they're fixin' to invade. And when they do, we'll be prepared."

"With beans?" her husband sighed. "There's only six of them. They don't mean any harm. One of them's even been coming to the radio club meetings. He's been trying to teach some of us a word or two of their language."

"It's all an act, Dave." The couple emerged from around the corner.

"There's one now!" the woman shrieked. Startled, Pascal jumped backward, knocking a few items off the shelf behind him with his tail. After gathering himself, he looked up at the woman, gawking at her spray-on tan and bottle blonde hair.

"I didn't know humans could be orange," he muttered.

"What was that? Speak up, space coyote!"

Pascal reached into his wallet and pulled out his keyer, but the woman snatched it out of his paw.

"Ha! You're not brain-washing anyone tonight!" She hurled the keyer to the ground. Pascal dove after it just as the woman brought her foot down, intending to smash the keyer but catching Pascal's paw instead.

Pain shot up his foreleg. He stifled a bark and looked up at the male human as he massaged his paw, determined for this inter-species interaction to end peacefully. "Your friend smell familiar. From radio club?"

"You got me," Dave smiled.

"Don't talk to the enemy!" his wife said, moving between him and Pascal.

Dave began tugging at her arm. "I'm so sorry," he said with a frown. "She's on some new meds; we're working on the dosage."

"ARE YOU CALLING ME CRAZY?!" the woman yelled, her eyes darting around wildly. "I'M THE ONLY ONE WHO'S NOT CRAZY AROUND HERE!"

"I'm so sorry," Dave repeated, steering her down the aisle and out of sight.

Pascal cocked an ear toward the tills again. The din had only gotten louder. He limped around for a few minutes until he caught the unmistakable smell of sugars and lipids on the air.

"Ma'am, this is a bakery, but not a BAKERY bakery." Another young human, female this time, was being accosted by an older woman. "If you want a premade sheet cake, we got premade sheet cakes. You want me to put 'Happy Birthday' on it? I'd be more than happy to, but we can't bake a cake in the shape of a Stanley cup."

"The Customer is always right!" snapped the woman.

"in matters of taste," the girl muttered under her breath.

"What was that?!"

"I said 'Is there anything else I can help you with?'"

"No! You've just lost yourself a customer."

"oh no..." the girl whispered sarcastically.

The woman spun around, nearly tripping over Pascal's tail, stabbing it with a stiletto in the process.

He yelped in pain but the woman stormed off without looking back. His cry caught the attention of the girl behind the counter. She leaned over to peer down at Pascal. "You OK?"

"Honestly I've been better," he grunted, probing with a padded finger at the maroon stain spreading over the white pelage of his tail.

"This tail fine," he said via the keyer. "Not much this blood. Hurt worse before."

He stood there for a moment, nursing his tail in silence as the girl looked on.

At last he curled his tail tight against his back and put his paws up on the sneeze guard. "You friend sell what?"

"Cakes and cookies," she said.

"Those C A K E S and those C O O K I E S what?" He drew out the unfamiliar words.

"They're food, you eat them. You want to try a sample?"

"Not want," he wagged his head from side to side. "Might kill me yinrih. maybe that human food this yinrih poison."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," she said.

Pascal peeked over the counter. "No chair? What way you friend sit? All day that boss make stand you friend?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "They say it makes us look lazy if we sit. Such is the life of a wage slave. But I guess that's not a thing where you guys are from, huh?"

"We yinrih have," said Pascal. "some place we yinrih go buy this thing or that thing. Some place eat some food. When pup at that place me yinrih work, bring those food, take away those dirty bowl."

"You were a waiter!" The girl said.

"Me W A I T E R," Pascal nodded. He had set his HUD specs on his muzzle and was hastily skimming a poorly organized English lexicon for words he couldn't recall, occasionally jotting down new ones as the conversation unfolded.

"Where we come from, this place call--" he grunted the word in Outlander before finding the correct English translation. "Litter of moons. It call because planet big made of gas, have many moons, they follow planet like pups follow dam."

"That's sweet," said the girl.

"anyway," Pascal continued, "at moonlitter, it part of E D U C A T I O N of pups, they make pup work at store or at R E S T A U R A N T. They say it make pup E M P A T H I Z E with those worker in C U S T O M E R S E R V I C E when grow up."

"Ah, so it's part of your schooling, then? They make you hold down a job?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Teach F I N A N C I A L L I T E R A C Y too."

"I wonder what alien Karens are like," the girl said half to herself.

"K A R E N?" Pascal queried.

"That--" she pointed at the wound on Pascal's tail. "--that woman who stepped on your tail, that was a classic Karen."

"Yes yes," he bobbed his head. "Those we have."

"We call them..." here he paused while digging through the lexicon. "...It hard to say. "My language Outlander have thing English not have. English say 'you' for everyone, but Outlander have different 'you' for different people."

He uttered a few melodic grunts and whines. "That mean, 'you' but only for you sire or dam or litter mate. It called--" he rummaged for an obtuse grammatical term. "--it called F A M I L I A L form."

More growling, "and that mean 'you' but for friend only, That is A M I C A B L E form."

A chuff and some whining, "and that mean 'you' for everyone else. And that called T R A N S A C T I O N A L form."

Recognition dawned on the girl's face. "Ah! English doesn't do that but Spanish does. You say 'T' for friends and family but 'Usted' for everyone else."

Pascal flicked an ear in acknowledgement. "yes yes. Like that. When you talk to customer or when customer talk to you, It proper use transactional form. When you worker talk other worker use transactional too, maybe amicable if good good friend. But you never never use familial form at work. It considered V U L G A R."

"That bad?"

"Yes yes." Pascal geckered in amusement. "When foreigner learn Outlander they make this mistake much. Sunshine does this all the time. You see her, yes yes? Other missionary, no fur and big ears, she is from other part of Focus, planet called Hearthsider. When Hearthsider learn Outlander, they think familial form mean 'I like you, you like my family, so I call you by that'. But that not right. Well, that not only meaning. Yes it mean 'I think you like family' but it also mean 'I expect you TREAT ME like family. So obey like pup obey sire or dam, or give special treatment like between litter mates. When customer use that form, it make them sound E N T I T L E D. Like you owe them respect, like they are one of your sires or your dams.

"Anyway, These Karens, they like to use familial 'you' to workers, So we have a word, it means 'one who uses familial pronoun'. Long in English but much shorter in Outlander. So I put 'Karen' in our lexicon."

The girl smiled.

"You show your teeth. That is good, yes?"

"Oh yeah, sorry," she said. "Humans show our teeth when we're happy."

"Like this?" Pascal slid his lips back, flashing his fangs.

The girl laughed. "Yeah. You know, I didn't realize how much like us you guys were. We have all these stories about aliens, some want to kill us, some want to loot our planet, sometimes we kill them. Sometimes they're so different from us that we can't even communicate. But it rarely ends well when we meet. But here we are, two veterans of the customer service trenches trading war stories. It makes the universe feel a little less lonely."

Pascal cocked an ear toward the front of the store. "The argument has stopped. I go back."

"Nice meeting you I'm Lupe, And your name?"

"Pascal," He said, rearing up on his hind feet and patting his belly.

"Bye, Pascal, Oh, and your English is great, I think you got better just while we were talking."

"Thank you. I talk more, I get better." He started off toward the front of the store.

"Got my cigs!" Fr. Shaheen, sporting a black eye and fat lip, held the carton of carcinogens aloft like a video game protagonist after acquiring a new item. A few of the other patrons were being hauled off by cops. "The bishop's gonna have some questions for me in the morning. I'm sure this'll end up in a few YouTube videos at least."

"So," he said as they walked back to the pickup, a lit cigarette already between his lips. "You've seen Man the angel and Man the ape, what do you think about us now?"

Pascal took stock of his injuries, his smashed paw and lacerated tail, then slid back his lips and looked up at the priest.

"You're showing your teeth. Is something wrong?" Fr. Shaheen asked.

?No, not at all. I know you can't smell our pheromones, so I thought imitating you're teeth-bearing gesture would let you know I'm happy.?

?I see now that humans can be violent, greedy, disgusting animals.?

"And that makes you happy?"

?Because yinrih are also violent, greedy, disgusting animals. You think these claws are just for climbing trees? I'm not as naive as you think, and neither are the other missionaries. We didn't set out to find perfect creatures to admire on a pedestal. We want others who can walk down the hard road of life together with us. We want friends, and that's what we found.?

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