

A HIGHER LEVEL OF MISUNDERSTANDING  
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Interspecies diplomats may have to take "When in Rome..." a bit beyond what they're used to....

Roger stopped at the snack synth for a Hypercoffee and a candy bar before making his way toward a table at the far end of the lounge. There Duncan Frye, Commissioner of the Angloterran Trade Embassy, sat staring morosely out the window onto the jumble of architectural styles of Free Trade City. A file folder lay open in front of him.

"How did we blow it?" he said as Roger pulled up a chair. "We had everything arranged: premier conference room, sterling silver commemorative pens, personalized notebooks, contracts bound in leather binders, translations in English, Nriln, and Delvan. What more could we have done?"

Roger shook his head.

"I don't understand the Nriln," said Duncan, gazing down at the hand-written notes in the folder. "They said the meeting was unsuitable. But what the hell was unsuitable about it?"

"I almost think it was a translator problem," said Roger.

"Translator problem?" Duncan rubbed a hand across his forehead. "They storm off with all their noses in the air. Some translator problem. I had to virtually beg them for another negotiating session."

Roger looked down at his hands, acutely aware of his inexperience; he was barely out of grad school. As the recently appointed cultural liaison, he was the only one at the embassy who'd attempted to study the Nriln; one of the many planetary cultures promoting their interests in the free-trade zone of planet Delva. And Roger felt he should have an answer. "Maybe it's the food," he said, softly. "Maybe we're supposed to eat together at these meetings."

"Maybe," said Duncan. "We'll see today, won't we?"

Roger hunted for signs of sarcasm in his boss's voice, but knew it was hopeless; the man was a diplomat, skilled at hiding his feelings.

Duncan smiled, broadly but without mirth. "All right. We have another chance. When the Nriln negotiators arrive for lunch, we will treat them like royalty. This time, perfection." He looked Roger up and down. "For God's sake, straighten your tie."

Just then, the door to the lounge flew open and a heavy-set man lurched in. He looked quickly around and then glowered at the snack synthesizer.

"Who's that?" said Roger, leaning in toward Duncan. "I thought I knew everybody in the embassy."

"Maurice." Duncan spoke in a whisper. "A chef on loan from the Francoterran Consulate."

"Does this mean the food's going to improve around here?"

"Probably not." Duncan closed his file folder. "I'd asked for him to come and oversee the menu for our Nriln luncheon."

"A French chef preparing Nriln cuisine? I wouldn't have thought that..."

The chef looked their way. There was murder in his eyes.

"I changed my mind," said Duncan. "We've had the luncheon catered."

"Good." Roger started to unwrap his Zingchocolate bar. "I know what the Nriln eat."

"Uh oh," said Duncan. "He's coming our way. Set your translator to French."

"But he's not wearing a translator."

"Doesn't need one," said Duncan. "He speaks good English. He just doesn't usually choose to."

Duncan and Roger barely had time to put on their translators before Maurice stomped up to the table.

"I have been cruelly insulted," said Maurice, his anger apparent, even through the synthesized voice of the translator. "I, a blue string chef and a student

of the book. It is unconscionable."

"I don't really know what—" said Duncan.

"You don't know? Ha." Maurice raised an arm to the ceiling. "You have an official luncheon for Nriln diplomats, and you ... you..." Maurice wrinkled his face as if he'd caught a whiff of something vile. "...you have it catered." He shook his head. "Catered!" He slapped a hand to his chest as if he were taking an oath. "I, Maurice, a blue string authority on the book and acclaimed as the finest Terran chef on Delva. Catered. How could you? An unforgivable affront."

"Maurice. My dear Maurice." Duncan rose and clasped the chef's other hand. Roger suppressed a smile. His boss was smooth.

"I wouldn't dream of offending you," said Duncan. "And I insisted that we not misuse your highly educated palate by asking you to prepare a meal for aliens. What an abuse of your talent that would be."

Maurice visibly softened. "Yes. You are correct. It would be an abuse."

"So, to spare you, we called the Panstellar Specialty Food Boutique. What else could we do?"

Maurice harrumphed.

"You are justifiably famous for your exquisite pastries," said Duncan. "And I beg you to prepare some for the luncheon. Even if their palates cannot appreciate it, the Nriln cannot fail to be impressed with the artistry of your creations."

Maurice nodded, apparently mollified. But then he pointed a finger at Roger.

"You!"

"Me?" squeaked Roger, suddenly pulled into the fray.

"You drink slop!" Maurice pointed to the coffee cup and then over at the snack synthesizer. "From that!"

"It's not bad, actually." As soon as the words were out, Roger realized he'd said the wrong thing.

"Not bad!" Maurice steadied himself by leaning on the table. Then he drew himself to his full height. "You have the refinement of a slug." He threw a glance at the ceiling. "Hypercoffee. InfiniTea. Fabricake. Rocket Chips. What kind of names are those? That's not cuisine. That's not even food."

Roger felt compelled to rise to the defense of the synth: a device that combined molecules by shape to create flavor, embedding them in a solid matrix for snacks or in water for beverages.

"It's food to me," said Roger. "You should try it. You might learn something."

"Learn something? Me? You insolent toad. I'm a chef, not a flavor chemist."

Roger, taking pleasure in baiting the man, nibbled at the Hypercoffee cup.

"Tasty. The cup's edible as well. Reduces trash, you know."

Maurice's mouth dropped open.

"And it's fat free." Roger took a bite of his candy bar. "And this Zingchocolate's really good."

"Barbarian," Maurice shouted. He turned and strode toward the door. "Why do I even talk to these Angloterrans?" He threw up his hands. "Not even worth the lively wit of the staircase."

"Barbarian?" Roger watched the man go. "If the chef knew the Nriln's taste in food, he'd die of shock." He furrowed his brow. "But what was that stuff about the wit of a staircase?"

"An untranslatable Gallic concept, I suppose," said Duncan. "An idiom, maybe. I don't know." He took the translator from his ear and slipped it into his jacket pocket. "Funny," he said. "Until I got this French-capable translator, I'd no idea how rude the chef really was."

Roger took his translator from his ear and stared at it. "Maybe it's just the translator that's rude." He rolled the little device over in his hand. "Or maybe it's not rudeness at all. He might just be acting the way a French chef should in his culture. And..." Roger bit his lower lip. "And maybe that's what's going on with the Nriln. Maybe we're doing something they consider rude."

"Any ideas?"

Roger shook his head, but his eyes were on the snack synth; Maurice had just favored it with an obscene gesture. "'Blue string' clearly meant 'Cordon Bleu'," said Roger, as he watched the chef charge out of the lounge, "but 'a student of the book'? Was that a religious reference?"

"Religious?" Duncan chuckled. "Not exactly. Cuisine Galactica: A Compendium of Recipes and Antidotes. A must-have for cross-species chefs."

"Then he could have prepared the dinner."

"Maybe. But I wasn't prepared to take the chance." Duncan stroked his forehead. "Everything has to be perfect."

"Perfect." Roger toyed with the translator. "You know," he said. "If this thing gave me so much trouble just with French, I wonder what I'm missing with Nriln." He juggled the little device. "I almost wish these new translators didn't work so smoothly. It makes us think we understand what they're saying." Duncan gave a snort of a laugh. "You do remember that the old ones couldn't tell the semantic difference between olive oil, corn oil, and baby oil?"

"Yeah," said Roger. "The Nriln thought we were monsters." He dropped the translator into his shirt pocket. "But I guess what I'm saying is that I'm not all that worried about understanding their words, but rather about understanding them."

"What's the difference?"

"They're a different species. You might expect them to think about things very differently than we do."

"I doubt it," said Duncan. "There's only one universe. And I've found that sentient species are very similar and comprehensible—aside from petty, linguistic misunderstandings, of course."

"Misunderstandings." Roger laughed. "Yeah. They thought we ate our gods and when we ran out, we made do with wine and cookies. And then when they discovered we ate other mammals, they were shocked. 'We Nriln don't eat our own taxonomic order,' they said. And then..." Roger stopped; Duncan looked far from amused.

"I'd hoped," said Duncan, evenly, "that as Cultural Liaison, you'd have been able to prevent those misunderstandings."

Roger stifled a twinge of anger. "Well, here on Delva," he said, "there are very few Nriln with whom to liaise. I'm sorry that you—"

"No. It's not you, Roger. Nothing personal." Duncan waved him quiet. "But I've never really found much value in having cultural liaison officers. By the time they're good enough to help, they generally put in for transfer and go off to study some other culture."

Roger lowered his head and silently catalogued how his cultural knowledge of the Nriln had helped the trade embassy. Yes, he'd discovered the Nriln had no single word for intelligence, didn't even have a single concept covering life. He had indeed found that the Nriln were painfully polite and offended easily, but he'd discovered that too late. Had he not, maybe they'd have avoided the current morass.

A movement outside the window caught Roger's attention. Two Nriln, eyestalks flitting in excitement, were just getting out of a landglider. They carried thin, black cases.

"I think our musicians are here," said Roger, pointing through the glass.

Duncan leaned over and peered out. "Kind of short for Nriln, aren't they? They can't be much over five feet tall."

"Teenagers," said Roger, "the Nriln equivalent."

"What?" Duncan plopped heavily back into his chair. "You hired a kid band to play at a critical embassy luncheon?"

"They were the only Nriln musicians I could find. And they said they'd done it before."

"Teenagers." Duncan shook his head slowly. "God, what next?" He grabbed his file folder and stood. "I'd better go and check on the preparations." He glanced at his Wristocrat-400. "Our guests should be here in about an hour." Roger took a parting swallow of his Hypercoffee, carefully avoiding the side of the cup that had a bite taken out of it, and then followed Duncan to the

door. "You know," he said, trying to show off his Nriln cultural knowledge, "the premier Nriln delicacy is an animal—well, actually more of a vegetable. But some people think it's sentient—the Nriln don't have a word for sentience. It looks like a carrot with legs." Duncan walked faster, and Roger hurried to catch up. "And the vegetable makes sounds. The Delvans think it recites poetry, but the Nriln just think it's nonsense words, and you know how the Nriln hate nonsense words." Duncan trotted down the stairs to the private dining room with Roger close behind. "But geez. An intelligent carrot. It sort of boggles the mind."

At the foot of the stairs, Duncan swiveled sharply around. "Enough, Roger. Stop."

Roger grabbed the banister to keep from colliding with his boss. "Sorry." "All right, then." Duncan turned and continued walking.

In the dining room, Duncan went to examine the table settings while Roger padded over and greeted the two musicians.

"Play your best," said Roger after an exchange of pleasantries.

"Why?" said one of the young Nriln, the taller one. "Is this a funeral?"

Roger cocked his head, wondering if he was having a translator problem. "You can play well, can't you?"

"Of course we can."

"Does a lorbit chew colors?" said the other Nriln, humming tones coming from his four noses.

Roger knew the tones were the equivalent of a laugh, but had no idea what the words signified. "So, you're telling me, 'yes'?"

"Certainly. That's what I said."

"Good." Roger smiled. Must be slang. There's no way a translator can keep up with slang—especially kid slang. He looked over the two young Nriln; they looked very much alike. "Are you brothers?" he asked.

"Not yet," said the Shorter Nriln.

Again, Roger doubted his translator. "Right. Carry on," he said, turning and heading over to where Duncan was tweaking the floral table arrangement—a potted collection of Terran and Nriln flora.

"What was all that about?" said Duncan. "And what's a lorbit?"

"An animal of some sort," said Roger. "I think it changes color like a chameleon. As for the rest, I didn't understand it at all."

"I wouldn't expect to understand Nriln kids." Duncan shrugged. "I can't understand my own son most of the time." He smiled. "An English-to-English translator might help."

"English to English." Roger shifted his gaze to the Nriln musicians. "English to lovely English," he said under his breath.

"Are you all right?" said Duncan.

"Yes!" Roger exclaimed, not as an answer to his boss but as an affirmation to himself. He tapped his forehead. "I've got an idea. Maybe we can overcome these misunderstanding problems."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I'm going to try to borrow one of the kids' translators for an hour. Then I'll feed the output of his into mine." Roger glanced at his Wristocrat.

"I should just have time."

"I don't get it."

"I'll speak into the English-Nriln translator, then use mine to go from Nriln to English. I should get out pretty much the same meaning that I speak in. If I don't, then there's a meaning problem."

"Cute," said Duncan. "But..." He swiveled around. One of the Nriln was nibbling at the floral setting. "Hey," Duncan called out. "That's not for eating. It might even be poisonous to you."

"No," said the Nriln, moving back from the table. "I've studied the book. It's food, sort of."

"Well, leave it alone until after the luncheon."

Roger walked up. "I've a little proposition for you," he said to the Nriln, "concerning your translator."

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In a workshop at the rear of the embassy, Roger laid out his two translators on a table. Using duct tape and a sheet of paper, he made a tube and used it to channel the output of the English-to-Nriln translator into the input of the Nriln-to-English unit. Leaning over the table, with his ear near his translator's output, he tried his idea.

"My aunt's pen is on the table," he said into the Nriln's translator.

In the quiet workshop, he had no difficulty hearing the output. "The pen of my aunt chooses the table for place."

"Very interesting," said Roger aloud. "Very interesting," said his translator. Roger laughed, then shook his head. He knew he had to be more methodical. "The sky is blue," he said.

"The sky has blueness," said the translator.

"The book is mine." "The book belongs to me."

"The book is old." "The book has oldness."

"The Nriln is here." "The Nriln chooses here for place."

"That Nriln is dead." "That Nriln chooses inertness."

Roger smiled. He'd already learned something: The Nriln have different words for "is" depending whether it means equality or location, and the Nriln seem to regard death as a location.

But the more pressing issue was why the Nriln had all but broken off negotiations despite a perfect negotiating session.

"Perfect," said Roger.

"Unwilling to be improved upon," said the translator.

"What?"

"Interrogative."

Roger wrinkled his nose in confusion. Perfection almost seemed rude to the Nriln. Maybe he was on to something. "Rude," he said.

"Effing unwilling to be improved."

Roger slapped the table. "Eureka!"

"You smell," said the translator.

"What?" "Interrogative."

Roger laughed. "This is ridiculous."

"This has ridiculousness."

Shaking his head, Roger stood upright and stretched his back. Then he retrieved his translator and snapped it back over his ear. He'd learned what he'd needed.

There came a knock.

Opening the door, Roger saw one of the Nriln musicians.

"Norzhen wonders if you are finished with his translator," said the Nriln.

"The luncheon's due to start soon."

"Yes," said Roger. "Just finished with it." He shepherded the young Nriln into the workshop. Roger freed the translator from the duct tape and handed it over. "You can help me with something, though."

The Nriln looked at him with crossed eyestalks. Roger knew this was a sign of puzzlement.

"Tell me," said Roger, "Why is it rude for things to be perfect at a meeting?"

The Nriln stiffened. "We don't talk about that."

"About what? Being perfect?"

"No. The other thing."

"What?" said Roger, "you mean manners?"

Again, the Nriln stiffened. "I can't talk about that. If my parents heard, they'd be shocked."

"Really?"

"Yeah." The Nriln crossed its eyestalks again. "Wouldn't yours be?"

"Well"—Roger didn't want the Nriln to think him badly raised—"I never talked to my parents about it."

"Yeah. A good thing you didn't."

Roger shrugged. "All right. Then tell me. What's wrong with a perfect meeting?"

"Well. If you make it too good, people will think you believe you're better than them."

"What?"

"Unless you're dead, of course." The Nriln emitted a flurry of nose-tones. "A funeral can be perfect since an inert Nriln wouldn't think he's better than anyone."

"And it's rude to talk about being rude?"

The Nriln fidgeted. "I've got to take Norzhen's translator back to him."

"Okay. I understand," said Roger. "Sorry for the profanity." He led the Nriln to the door. "I'd better get back as well."

As they left the workshop, Roger said, "This is a very important meeting, so I guess I should ask you and what's his name, Norzhen, to play badly. Is that right?"

"Yeah."

"Will you guys do that?"

"Does a lorbit chew colors?"

"Does that mean, you will?" said Roger. "But especially out of a desire to be polite?"

"That's a vulgar way of putting it," said the Nriln, "but yeah, that's about right."

"And the phrase 'chew colors' means 'blend in'?"

"Yeah."

They walked together toward the dining room. As they passed by a window overlooking the front of the embassy, the Nriln pointed. "Hey. They're here. I should get back to Norzhen."

"Yikes!" Roger froze for an instant, his eyes locked on the two Nriln negotiators almost at the front door. Then he set out at full run for the dining room. As he ran, he unstraightened his tie.

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Roger burst through the door to the dining room, where he saw Duncan fussing with the place settings.

"Stop," Roger called out breathlessly. "It's got to be sloppy."

"What?" said Duncan, looking up.

Roger rushed to the table. He scooped the sterling silver pens into his pocket, messed up the place settings, pushed a few of the bound contracts onto the floor and knocked over a chair.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Roger didn't take the time to reply. He unarranged the table floral setting and was just in the process of unstraightening a wall-hanging, when Duncan tackled him.

Norzhen, eye stalks quivering, pushed himself back against a wall.

The door opened and the other musician rushed in. Like a periscope, his eyestalks scanned the room. "Flaming lorbits!" he cried out, running over to join Norzhen.

Duncan turned to look. But this gave Roger the opportunity to break free.

Duncan lunged at him, pinning his arms to his side. Losing his balance, Roger fell to the carpeted floor. Duncan fell on top of him.

Just then the door opened, and, Magzh and Vorzhnelvar, the two Nriln trade negotiators, walked in.

"Oh, dear," said Magzh. "Are we interrupting something?"

"What?" Duncan scrambled erect. "No. Of course not. Not at all. It's just..."

He shot out a hand and hauled Roger to his feet. "It's just ... I do apologize, but I'm afraid my colleague has suddenly come down with ... with a slight case of insanity." He propelled Roger toward the door and looked over his shoulder at the Nriln. "Nothing serious. We just need to ... need to get his pills. Please make yourselves comfortable." He pushed Roger ahead of him through the door. "I'll be right back," Duncan called out as the door slammed behind him.

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Duncan shoved Roger against a wall. "Are you out of your alleged mind?"

"Let me explain," said Roger. "Disorder is good. And—"

"You have completely lost it."

"Will you listen?"

"Shut up!"

"But—"

"Not a word," said Duncan, "unless you'd like to be transferred to, say, Trelgva, and spend the rest of your career dodging ammonia storms. Is that what you want?"

Roger shook his head.

"Okay then," said Duncan. "This is probably a lost cause, damn it. But we're going back in. I'll apologize profusely. And you will do and say nothing. Understood?"

Roger nodded.

"All right, let's go," said Duncan. "And for God's sake, smile."

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"I am so dreadfully sorry," said Duncan when they'd returned to the dining room. "My young colleague is much improved." He and Roger sat facing the Nriln. "I know how important the format of a meeting is to you." Duncan spread his hands. "But, under the circumstances, I do hope you won't let this little matter adversely affect the matter of our contract."

"No. Not at all," said Magzh. "These things happen. Don't concern yourself about it at all."

"Don't give it another thought," said Vorzhnelvar. "No apology necessary." As directed, Roger smiled. He could hardly do otherwise as he contemplated Duncan's obvious confusion; at the previous meeting with the Nriln, every little imperfection had been roundly criticized. The Nriln had each looked down their four noses at every speck of dust, and they'd left the meeting with an air of opera singers who had inadvertently intruded upon a yodeling competition.

"That's ... That's very good of you," said Duncan. He turned to the musicians. "Play for our guests, please."

The musicians struck up, and even though the sounds were alien, Roger could tell that the young Nriln were playing badly indeed. And by Duncan's face, he could see his boss knew it as well.

"Oh my god," said Duncan in a whisper.

Vorznelvar looked first at the floral arrangement and then at the musicians. He pulled a flower from the vase. "You do know," he said, "that this species is an illegal drug among our people, yes?"

"Oh my god," said Duncan, again. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Magzh slapped the table and Duncan started. Roger though, could see that Magzh was, in his way, smiling.

"We have decided," said Magzh, "that there is no reason to delay." Duncan visibly stiffened. "We will sign the contracts, now."

Duncan's eyes widened. "You will?" He shot an uncomprehending glance at Roger. Roger, for his part, returned a Cheshire cat smile.

"Well, this is wonderful," said Duncan. "I don't know how to thank you. Maybe ... Yes, I guess we should drink the vazh now—before our lunch." He tapped his Wristocrat, held it to his mouth, and asked for the drinks to be brought in. It would be synth-vazh from Panstellar, which to the Nriln tastes like their ceremonial drink and to humans tastes like melted chocolate ice cream laced with brandy. But more importantly, it is toxic to neither species.

Moments later, Maurice sauntered through the door. He held high a tray bedecked with pastries and also with four tiny glasses of a milky liquid. Roger, inhaling the sweet, heady aroma of fresh baked goods, began to warm toward the chef. If the pastries tasted even half as good as they smelled ... Roger felt his mouth water.

As Maurice sauntered toward the table, Magzh made a whistling sound.

A carrot-like creature crawled from the floral arrangement and, while making a similar whistling noise, walked on three rootlike legs across the table to Magzh.

Maurice visibly blanched and froze to the spot, mouth agape. Magzh grabbed the carrot-thing, ripped off a leg, and ate it. With a sharp gasp, Maurice dropped the tray.

The crash of glasses against the metal tray seemed to bring the chef out of his shock. He knelt, slid some of the pastries back onto their plates, collected the fallen glasses, and tried to sop up the vazh with a linen napkin, all the while apologizing abjectly and fighting off the rugbot that had rolled in from its enclosure to vacuum up the mess.

Duncan apologized as well, but once more, the Nriln were magnanimous. Roger contemplated the scene. Even with the knowledge that his pastry lust would go unsatisfied, he chuckled under his breath. But Nriln apparently have good hearing and his amusement drew the attention of Vorzhnelvar. The human and Nriln exchanged glances for a moment, and Roger saw humor in those alien eyes. And suddenly, even with their eyestalks, six-fingered hands, and four noses, the Nriln no longer seemed alien.

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After the Nriln had left the embassy, Duncan leaned back against a wall and took a few heavy breaths. "What happened?" he said, his eyes wide. Despite feeling he'd been treated shabbily by his boss, Roger described his new understanding of the Nriln without rancor or recrimination; after all, if the Nriln could be magnanimous, so could he.

Duncan gazed out the window for a few moments. Then he let out a breath through pursed lips and returned his gaze to Roger. "Maybe I've been wrong," he said. "Maybe having a cultural liaison attached to the mission isn't all that bad an idea."

Roger smiled, for, cultural specialist that he was, he understood he'd just been paid a high compliment.

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