

Columbia State 10: Workplace Etiquette:

By: IndigoRho

"Zeke, buddy. I really don't think I'm asking much of ya." Travis, a stoat, had cornered his fellow waiter in the backroom.

"I...I don't know how to get that sort of info about diners, I really don't." The otter, despite being considerably larger than Travis, was cowering, too afraid to simply walk away.

Travis put on his best fake smile, talking softly. "It's easy, Zeke. All you need to do is chat a bit whenever you drop by the table, or hover around when you walk past them," he answered. "I don't need much, maybe a car description or a bus route. You could even just read the name off their check when they pay."

"We could get in a lot of trouble Travis. Vicente would fire us if he found out, or worse!" Zeke said.

"Vicente won't find out!" Travis growled. "I haven't had a good hunt in weeks, and I've got a craving for something with feathers. That blue jay out there would ease my hunger perfectly."

"But..."

"If I don't get a fresh meal soon, I might decide to settle for otter instead!" Travis glared coldly at his coworker, before smiling again. "How about this, you get me some usable info on the bird, and I'll buy you the biggest meal you've ever eaten. You can even pick the place."

Zeke didn't know what to do. If he refused, Travis might eat him. If he accepted, his boss Vicente might very well do the same. The fate of the blue jay in the other room didn't really cross his mind. Overwhelmed, Zeke reluctantly nodded his head.

"Good." Travis said. "Now go back out there and get to work."

"And what are you two lazy fools chit chatting about!" The unmistakable booming voice caused the pair to freeze, the color draining from their faces.

Travis quickly spun around to face his boss, Vicente, the owner and head chef of the restaurant. The rather large bull could be intimidating in a good mood, and the fire in his eyes didn't bode well for the pair. For a fraction of a second Travis considered making a run for it, just sprinting down the hall and never looking back, but he knew the idea was suicidal. Vicente had the only escape route thoroughly blocked with his wide belly. If he were lucky, his boss hadn't been there long.

"We...we were just talking about the game last night, Zeke was real bent out of shape about it! S...sorry for slacking off, sir!" Travis lied, sweating.

Vicente didn't budge. "Zeke doesn't give a shit about sports, the only things he ever yammers on about are movies and food!" The bull took a distressing step forwards. "And what did the blue jay eating at *my* restaurant have to do with that conversation."

Lying was pointless, Vicente had obviously overheard them. Travis desperately attempted to salvage the situation. "Nothing! I mean, I, uh, I thought he looked familiar, like someone I went to high school with! I was too nervous to talk to him myself, so I was asking Zeke to find out more about him so I could figure out if I was right or not!"

"You worthless, shortsighted idiots!" Vicente roared. "How *dare* you endanger this restaurant's reputation, the reputation I've spent a decade building from the bottom up! Our clients come here knowing they can enjoy, in peace, some of the best food in the entire city! They don't have to worry about being on the menu, we're not a damn buffet!"

Travis had actually backed up besides Zeke during the onslaught, trembling in fear with the otter. "I.I..." He couldn't think straight.

"I'm not finished!" Every one of Vicente's words caused Travis and Zeke's ears to flinch. "This establishment is *not* a racket for cowardly predators too pathetic to hunt a real meal! You do that on your time, not mine! I should eat both of you on the spot for even considering eating a paying customer!"

As far as Travis was concerned, all hope was lost. He had never personally seen Vicente eat anyone, but the vets in the restaurant loved to talk about an incident a few years back in which the chef had flown into a rage and eaten a particularly disrespectful waiter. They also joked about a number of close calls since. This was it, any moment now Vicente was going to gobble them both up, and Travis would be spend his last waking moments trapped in a dark stomach, squished against Zeke. He couldn't handle the stress.

"Please don't eat me!" Travis begged, voice cracking. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I swear I'll never do anything this stupid again! I'll even quit, just don't eat me!"

Zeke was too terrified to even beg, though he was beginning to whimper.

Vicente glared at the two groveling waiters, deep in thought. A cruel idea suddenly came to mind, and the bull smiled ominously. "I'm feeling merciful, so I'll give you two options. Option one: I eat both of you and start looking for new, smarter waiters." Travis and Zeke didn't seem to care much for their first choice. "Or option two: Travis, you'll spend the rest of Zeke's shift in his stomach."

"But...but, those choices are the exact same for me!" Travis complained.

"Oh no, they're very, very different." Vicente insisted. "You might actually survive the night if you end up in *his* stomach."

"That fat-ass will just digest me right away!"

Vicente's grin continued to unnerve the pair. "Don't worry, I've thought about that. If Zeke ends up digesting you tonight, then I'll just eat him in return. Completely fair. Oh, and to give you a fighting chance, I'll even let Zeke take something to stall the digestion process."

Realistically, Travis didn't have a choice. He would have to let Zeke swallow him, and just hope he could survive the next few hours. "I...I choose option two," he said, defeated.

"First smart thing you've said all day," Vicente replied. "Alright. Travis, strip out of your uniform, and Zeke, unbutton yours."

"Why?" Travis asked, as if he had a say in the matter.

"Because I'm not paying for new uniforms!" Vicente ended the discussion.

Travis quickly began disrobing, unwilling to test his boss' patience any further. He neatly piled the lost clothing, reduced to nothing more than his boxer-briefs. Meanwhile, Zeke had opened up his white dress shirt, exposing his large furry belly. The shirt had been fairly strained to begin with, and would never have survived the otter's upcoming meal.

"Good," Vicente said. "Now Travis, be a good boy and feed yourself to Zeke. And no struggling!"

Travis nervously approached Zeke, and reluctantly held out his arms to be devoured. Zeke had never eaten anyone before, but didn't want to anger Vicente further. He gingerly grabbed Travis' paws and opened his mouth wide, slipping them in. The taste of sweat and fur nearly made him gag right away, but he forced himself to ignore it as best he could, swallowing more and more of Travis' arms. Travis, in turn, had to resist every urge to free himself from the otter's maw before it was too late. He was slightly comforted by the fact that Zeke didn't appear to be enjoying the situation either. Now swallowed up to his elbows, the stoat had to willingly lower his own head into the widening mouth of another.

Vicente watched the agonizingly slow procedure with increasing irritation. Too much time was being wasted on this. "Time to speed things up. Zeke, just open your mouth as wide as you can and try to keep up!"

The chef grabbed a hold of Travis' legs and lifted the stoat into the air. Zeke's eyes bulged as gravity sped up Travis' descent. Travis had no idea what was happening anymore, and simply tried his hardest to not move a muscle. The journey down the esophagus was one of the most frightening things he'd ever experienced. He couldn't see a thing, but felt the warm, saliva covered walls pulling him further and further in. His instincts screamed danger and death, ordering him to fight, to escape, to live. Travis himself had sent a handful of furs on this journey, always with smug superiority rather than

remorse. Unfortunately, he chose not to reflect on those past actions, instead wondering hopelessly why he had deserved such a punishment.

Upon finally entering the stomach, Travis gasped for air, and immediately regretted it. Zeke's stomach reeked of partially digested food, which Travis was forced into as the rest of his body gradually entered the fleshy prison. Outside, Vicente happily watched the last of the stoat beginning to disappear from sight. He was also pleased to see Zeke's obvious displeasure with the ordeal. Afterall, this *was* supposed to be a punishment for both of them.

"Hey Vicente, a couple new groups just arrived and their orders are fairly big, we're gonna need..." A fairly overweight puma in a chef's uniform was walking down the hallway, but stopped in his tracks upon seeing what was beyond Vicente.

"Go get the orders started, Riley. I won't be much longer," Vicente said, without turning around.

Riley stared at Zeke's bloated, squirming belly, almost missing the otter finish swallowing a pair of feet. He didn't know what was going on, but he was far too afraid to ask any questions at the moment. "Y...yes sir. Sorry I interrupted!" The puma waddled away as fast as he could manage.

Zeke was exhausted, breathing heavily and struggling to maintain his balance. He couldn't believe how large he was. The otter had always been fat, but had never really felt heavy like this before. How did predator's always make this look so easy? He stumbled slightly as Travis shifted into a more comfortable position within his belly, but was able to recover.

Vicente took a step forwards, leaning down right in front of Zeke's gut. "No struggling while you're in there, either!" he yelled loud enough for Travis to actually hear. "I don't need you two disturbing the diners!"

Zeke somehow managed to compose himself, attempting to look as professional as possible with an exposed and distorted belly. From within he could just barely hear Travis shouting to get moving and swallow fresh air. With an adrenaline-fueled burst of energy Zeke began waddling down the hallway and past Vicente, who had a good laugh at his expense. Upon reaching the entrance to the main floor he hesitated, embarrassed to be seen in his condition by so many strangers. A friendly slew of curses from Travis reminded him of the alternative, though, and he pushed through the door. Zeke headed towards the table he'd been waiting last, the table that had caused his predicament. He tried—and failed miserably—to act as if nothing were wrong, gathering confused stares from diners and coworkers alike.

Arriving at the table, he politely made his presence known. "Everyone still doing alright today?" he asked with a wavering smile.

The two diners facing him, a tiger and rabbit, stared back, speechless. To them, it was obvious their waiter had eaten someone alive in the short time since they'd last seen him, but they couldn't fathom why. The llama and blue jay across from them, backs to Zeke, saw the odd look on their companion's faces, and turned to see for themselves. Both jumped a little, especially the llama, who was only a foot or so away from Zeke's belly. A long, awkward silence ensued, with everyone too uncomfortable to talk and barely able to maintain eye contact.

Eventually, the tiger managed to speak up. "We...we're good," he said, and the others nervously followed suit.

"Wonderful," Zeke replied in a noticeably distressed tone, before stifling a small burp that made all four diners cringe.

He moved on to his next table, where the experience was much of the same. Inevitably Zeke was able to walk back through the door into the kitchen, relieved to be momentarily free of the stares. He asked Travis how he was holding up, and got a fresh string of curses in response. At least it was better than silence.

"Good, you're still standing," Vicente's arrival startled Zeke. "Take one of these every hour or two, they'll make sure your stomach doesn't start breaking down anything important." He tossed a pill bottle to Zeke, who frantically caught it.

As Zeke greedily swallowed one of the digestion-inhibiting pills, the door swung open. Lilly, a panther waitress, walked through, carrying a plate still full of spaghetti. She hadn't noticed Zeke while he was out on the floor, and the sight of his swollen belly caught her by surprise. The plate slipped from her grasp, but she expertly rescued it after also noticing Vicente.

"Why's that coming back?" Vicente asked.

Lilly did her best to ignore Zeke. "Uh, something about the sauce being too watery."

Vicente scowled. "Too watery? Ridiculous! I swear, some people wouldn't know a proper sauce if it..." He quickly calmed himself down, and grinned again.

"Perhaps I should get a second opinion," Vicente said, turning towards Zeke. "Take a bite, please. A *large* one."

Zeke wasn't in any position to argue, though he still approached the plate with dread. He coiled a sizable bundle of spaghetti onto the barely used fork, and shoved the whole thing in his mouth, swallowing it after only a few nervous bites. The pleasant flavor was a welcome pallet cleanser, finally erasing the awful lingering aftertaste of Travis that had plagued his tongue, and a grin involuntarily crept across his face. His belly jiggled abruptly as Travis tried to figure out what had just fallen on his head.

"So?" Vicente asked, impatiently.

"It...it tasted delicious," Zeke replied, hoping the chef would be satisfied. "Nothing wrong at all."

"Excellent!" Vicente appeared pleased. Too pleased. "Well, it'd be a shame to let all that good food go to waste. Now finish the rest."

Zeke grimaced. "Sir?"

"Why the hesitation? Vicente sneered. "Earlier you were willing to send a random stranger down Travis' throat for a meal, now you're turning one down for free?"

"I...I..." Zeke didn't know what to say.

"Perhaps you misunderstand me." Vicente's glare was harsh enough to make Lilly anxious, too. "Eat the remainder of that spaghetti. Lick the plate clean."

Zeke didn't need to be told again. He began shoveling spaghetti into his mouth, swallowing a large portion of it whole in his frantic attempt to swiftly placate Vicente. Travis hadn't heard most of the conversation outside, and began cursing as a steady stream of wet pasta cascaded upon him unexpectedly. The stomach was too dark for Travis to see what he'd been pelted with, but the sauce's strong scent gave him a reasonable idea. To Zeke's surprise, he didn't feel any fuller afterward. He diligently lapped up every last drip of sauce from the empty plate, leaving it spotless. Vicente walked over to judge for himself, and nodded his head in satisfaction.

"Very good. I knew you'd appreciate a proper meal," Vicente said. "For the rest of your shift you'll eat everything that comes back, and I mean *everything*."

"Y...yes sir," Zeke replied, meekly.

"For your sake, let's hope Travis can keep his head above all the mush."

Vicente gave Zeke a hard slap on his belly, before turning back towards the kitchen. He couldn't believe how much time he was having to waste dealing with Travis and Zeke. At the very least, he knew Riley was trustworthy enough to handle the kitchen while he was away. When Vicente did return, he found the puma laboring over a pair of boiling pots, occasionally giving direction to the two other chefs with him.

"Thank you, all of you, for *actually* doing your damn jobs!" Vicente said in a mix of exasperation and gratitude. "Hopefully I won't have to break away too often tonight."

The other chefs gave a quick "yes Chef!" in response, continuing their work. Riley hesitantly decided to speak up, though. "Chef, are you really going to eat Travis and Zeke?"

Vicente snorted. "Hmph, that's entirely up to them. They've been given a chance to redeem themselves, and that's a lot more than they deserve considering what they were plotting, don't you

agree?"

Riley didn't necessarily see the situation that way. "Yes Chef!"

"I'll be content no matter the outcome, though I'd rather not deal with digesting those two idiots," Vicente grumbled. "The wife would make me sleep on the couch, she won't put up with that noise, not anymore."

Riley laughed unconvincingly.

"And if you care about their fates, then just keep up the good work," Vicente said. "I told Zeke he had to eat the come backs and leftovers, so every mistake will fill him just a little bit more."

The new detail of the punishment made Riley frown. He didn't want to play a role in a coworker being eaten, regardless of his low opinion of Travis. Leftovers were beyond his control, but he could work his hardest to make sure every plate he prepared met the diners' approval. Or at the very least never reached Zeke's stomach.

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The next four hours felt like an eternity to Zeke. He never got over the humiliation of his distended belly being exposed for all to see, the constant stares and giggling from diners. The absolute worst part, however, was all the leftover food. Every time he returned to the back, he'd find a new collection of plates waiting for him, beckoning him. Zeke didn't dare try to hide or toss their contents. He knew the minute he even considered it, Vicente would come storming around the corner and just swallow him on the spot. As the hours passed, his stomach slowly began to fill with the pungent mixture of abandoned food, much to Travis' disgust and dismay. Zeke's belly rounded out more and more each time he journeyed back into the dining area. Soon, individual diners were failing to notice Travis' outline, then entire tables. The couple at his final table of the night merely assumed he was well into digesting a particularly large prey, and even joked about how much bigger a uniform he'd need once the weight settled.

Laughing anxiously and gathering their checks, Zeke waddled sluggishly away, retreating to the back. Vicente was waiting for him, looking as stern as ever.

"Quite the feast you've managed to have tonight, Zeke," Vicente said. "I wouldn't believe Travis was stuck somewhere in that bloated belly of yours, if it weren't for the fact that I shoved him in there myself!"

Zeke didn't answer, just kept breathing heavily.

"Alright, time to see if the idiot managed to survive."

Vicente walked over to Zeke and roughly grabbed a hold of his gut, prodding it and feeling for movement. Zeke groaned from the treatment, but felt immensely relieved once Travis began pushing back ever so slightly. He was buried up to his neck in a slurry of partially chewed food. The smell was unbearable, and he was beginning to feel a weak stinging sensation all over his body. Travis had lost all track of time while imprisoned in Zeke's stomach, but hoped the aggressive poking meant the end was in sight. Vicente was just about to declare his success when the door swung open, and Lilly entered balancing a half dozen plates of barely touched desserts. The look of utter despair on Zeke's face was an incredible contrast to the pure delight on Vicente's.

Lilly had gradually become jaded to Zeke's belly as the night went on, and didn't give him much notice, instead focusing on Vicente. "Bunch of drunks had eyes bigger than their stomachs, somehow. Couldn't even convince them to take home the leftovers."

"Well Zeke, you know what to do," Vicente smiled.

Zeke stared at the desserts in horror, six enormous slices of cake oozing with frosting. Normally the sight would make his eyes water and his stomach growl. At the moment, they nearly made him gag.

"The longer you wait, Zeke, the likelier it is a new plate of leftovers will find its way here," Vicente taunted. "Now don't let Riley's handiwork go to waste."

Lilly set the plates down on a nearby counter, and Zeke got to work. He made no effort to eat cleanly or carefully, just grabbed large pawfuls of cake and shoved them into his mouth. Travis felt a new downpour of food and began to panic. Being digested alive was a horrible fate in of itself, but drowning in a food-filled stomach was even worse. Zeke felt the surge of struggles within his belly and knew they meant Travis was nearly gone. Tears welled in his eyes as he continued devouring cake, crumbs, and frosting, imagining each bit joining back together in his stomach to seal Travis' fate. He didn't care much for the stoat, but couldn't shake the realization that he'd spent the last few hours stuffing himself to the brink just to become another fur's dinner. By the time Zeke finished licking the last piece of chocolate from his finger he was sobbing quietly.

Again Vicente approached, and again the chef poked at the bloated belly of the otter. This time, though, he felt no movement in return. Despite his previous expressions of joy, Vicente looked rather aggravated. Following through with his threat was essential, but eating Zeke would be an incredible hassle. Oh well, life wasn't always easy. Vicente rested his hands on Zeke's shoulders and began leaning in, mouth open wide. Within inches of the otter's face, however, Vicente swore he could hear something, faintly. He delayed his consumption a moment, listening carefully. The noise was back, louder and steadier. Vicente grinned; Travis was still alive somehow, and screaming his lungs out, desperate to be noticed.

"You're incredibly lucky, otter!" Vicente laughed. "And so is my waistline!"

Zeke simply stood still, bewildered. He had been so convinced he was about to be eaten that he didn't know what to do with himself yet.

"Well, don't just stand around looking like an idiot!" Vicente snapped Zeke back to reality.

"There's a clinic a block north of here. If you waddle fast enough, you should be able to get there in time before Travis starts digesting. And Zeke, if he doesn't make it out, then don't bother coming back to work tomorrow."

Zeke didn't even linger long enough for a terrified goodbye, he simply rushed through the door as fast as he could manage. Vicente smiled, imagining just how long a shower Travis would need to remove the stench of partially digested food from his fur. The stoat shouldn't be causing problems any longer, if he even returned to work after being thrown up. As he returned to the kitchen, Vicente congratulated himself on resisting his own temptations, too. He couldn't deny that Zeke had looked rather...appetizing. Stuffed with a sampling of everything his restaurant had to offer, along with a troublesome employee...the taste would have been absolutely exquisite. Vicente didn't need that sort of habit anymore, though. After all, if he ate one employee, then he might be tempted to eat a second, then a third. He would just have to continue ignoring the little voice in the back of his mind pointing out how delicious some of the staff looked, especially the talented ones, like a certain overweight puma...