Immiscible

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Immiscible is a futuristic dystopian setting in the year 2037. It shows a future where Earth has been conquered a decade prior by the Bashien, a race of bipedal reptiliods that fled their destroyed system in cryostasis ark ships. James is a human living in the wake of the Xeno takeover, at odds with the system they installed desperately trying to find footing in the new world, but his passion leads him pining closer the invaders than he ever imagined.

1: Occultus

> *James*

Dew was brewing on the window of the train as I was jostled awake from my daydream by the intercom, announcing the impending arrival to sub district five of Atlanta. The car was sparsely populated, same as how I remembered it when entering, with the added sight of peacekeepers from the Stellar Union standing about four people to my left. I shifted my seating to place the squad in my vision, making an effort to watch from the corner of my eye as not to stare which I was easily able to verify in the officers' reflective visors. I counted three. Two humans and one bashien, because while the visors and outfits did their job in concealing individual identity, it wasn't hard to tell when skin or scales, respectively, were showing around the mask. I pondered about the peacekeepers for the remaining time it took the train to pull into the station before shuffling through the sliding doors and onto the platform.

My senses were immediately met with the smell of wet paint in the air. Tracing the perimeter of the room with my eyes I found the culprit: that being a human custodian moving a paint roller along the concrete wall. Leering to the side I could make out the scene depicted in the soon-to-be defaced graffiti of a velociraptor with a feathered mullet (likely added to better fit the image of a bashien) facing impending doom by a meteor. I silently scoffed to myself at the mural before making

my way to the exit amongst the crowd of humans and reptilian xenos alike, quickly punching my ID into the exit turnstile before exiting through the stairs.

I was greeted with the sight of the perpetual foggy overcast, forever enforced by mirrors orbiting the planet as my head made its way above ground level. Pulling to the side of buildings to be out of the way of foot traffic, I quickly slid my phone out of my pocket to punch in the address given to me by Georgia Housing Organization. Instantly the device highlighted a zigzagging path cutting though the city blocks with my soon-to-be home at the end. Satisfied with the directions I merged back into foot traffic in the direction of my address, speedily maneuvering through the dense packs of man and xeno.

A little after 0400, I found myself on the street of my building and began sweeping the signs out front for a 'Peach Ridge' as outlined on the paper, eventually finding it nuzzled behind a corner store on the other side of the road. Examining the building it became evident that it was a post liberation prefab with the abundance of bike racks out front of the building being a tell tale sign, cars falling out of the public fashion post-invasion. I walked through the twin glass doors into the foyer to find two people inside. A bald man in that appeared in his 70s sat in a red recliner against the wall by a coffee machine reading something on his phone, and behind the desk was a middle aged man whose face I couldn't quite make out with it behind the desks monitor. I walked up to the desk and greeted him to introduce myself.

"Good morning," I said despite the unchanging daylight outside.

"How may I help you sir?" the man responded deadpan, failing to peel his eyes from the screen.

I pulled the yellow paper from my pocket, "I was allocated housing from the Georgia Housing Organization in this building and I would like to claim my room, please."

The man now turned to face me now with his plastic name tag, 'Liam,' now visible, "Hand me your slip and ID please," Liam said in his same deadpan voice.

I dug through my wallet to fish out my state ID, and left both it and the paper on the counter for Liam to examine.

I watched Liam's grey brow furl as his hazel eyes darted across the card and the paper before he started punching information into the computer, "Alrighty Mr. James, your unit is 417. Here's your key and have a great morning," Liam said a bit more attentively, leaving both the key to my room and my ID on the counter before promptly reclining back in the chair to do busywork on the computer.

I said and waved thanks before making my way to the elevator, tapping my electronic key on the reader and pressing the button before waiting on the lift to only hear scoffing from Liam's desk.

"Hehe. Sorry buddy, elevators been out since Monday,"

I heard the old man in the recliner scoff at the remark.

"I emailed the GHO to come fix it but I haven't heard back from them yet. You are gonna have to take the stairs I'm afraid," Liam chortled from his chair.

I thanked Liam again making my way to the wood door that led to the staircase and tapped my key again to unlock the door before entering the concrete shaft and ascending the flights of stairs to the fourth floor.

I entered my floor and immediately felt warm air. A quick glance to the thermostat confirmed that the hallway had been set and locked to a crisp 80°F by the building manager, likely an attempt to shave down operation costs, no doubt. I moved my way down the laminated wooden floor, passing by the public kitchen and washing room on my way hunting for number 417, which I found behind the bend at the end of the hall. A tap of the key, and a happy chirp from the electronic lock, confirmed it was indeed my room. I walked through the entryway and tapped the lock again to lock myself in before immediately making my way to the thermostat, and set it to the lowest temperature the manager would allow at 70°F. The AC unit roared to life with dust being kicked up from the now moving air, a reminder I needed to purchase a stick vacuum in the coming future, but also a hopeful sign that I wouldn't be without utilities until maintenance could come around. A sweep of the 290 square foot flat and bathroom confirmed all utilities and furniture promised by the GHO were indeed present, and functional.

Satisfied I wouldn't have to quarrel on the phone with a dinosaur at the GHO for cool air, I threw my bag on the cot and plugged my craptop in the corner of the room to

charge before pulling out my phone. Moving into the city from the middle of bumfuck nowhere meant I had some prospects for dating people my age, instead of the derelict remains of society that remained in rural America. A fact I constantly reminded dad, promising him I'd find a girl once I was in the city. As instructed by my online compatriots I downloaded the dating app 'Entwine' off the app store before setting up my profile, taking a photo of myself cheezing in front of the dry wall of my apartment before typing some biography of how I was new to Atlanta, along the books I enjoyed reading. After a quick upload of my ID for verification, I was off to the races and browsed some potential suitors. With prejudice, I made sure to deny the names that sounded Bashienian, it would be convenient if i was allowed to just filter by species, or the visiobibliophobic dinos uploaded photos of themselves more often, but unfortunately either was a far fetched reality on this planet. The second I was done with that thought, 'Sarah' with the profile of a pristine white lily in a glass pot, came up next in the queue, seemingly just to punish my observation. Regardless, reading her bio it seemed she also enjoyed history and reading fantasy as much as I did, so I swiped my finger to the right, willing to take the risk of the girl turning out to be horizontally gifted.

Done with the dating app for now, I rotated to my phones privacy browser of choice and punched the onion address for 'Jurassic Chat' directly into the search bar, taking a swig from my water bottle before looking out the window to the Atlanta skyline while the page loaded. While often inconvenient, the eternal twilight and fog that smothered the planet did produce a mesmerizing effect with the buildings. My head snapped back to my phone to see the page had indeed loaded. It was an ironic twist that the supposedly more advanced species had struggled to police the internet, as they never actually invented a world wide web on Ross 128 b, thus lacked the generational knowledge to do so effectively. The discussion was the same as it has been for the last few days, centered around an mp4 titled 'Total Dino Death' featuring CCTV footage of some Latino beating a Bashienian peacekeeper with a crowbar while they screamed through their visor's voice modulator. It turned out the video was actually cut short, and that the peacekeeper managed to pull out her handheld laz before burning a hole in the man, something the trolls on the server were now pointing out to the dismay of the regulars. Ignoring the trolls as any responsible poster should, I shared with my friends that I had downloaded Entwine as recommended, as allegedly it was the least monitored of the dating apps at the moment.

After a quick banter on the internet, I pulled up my contacts to call my parents and to let them know that I had made it to my apartment and sat on the foot of my cot as the phone rang. Two rings later, my mom picked up and I put her on speaker so I didn't have to hold the phone to my head.

“Hello?” my mom said customarily, as if she didn't see my name calling her.

“Hey!” I said mirroring her, “I’m calling to let you guys know I made it to my flat as promised.”

“Oh thank goodness. I was worried that you'd lash out at some poor Bashien and get in trouble.”

My eyes rolled at my Moms plight. We talked about the Bashien all the time and despite her agreeing that they're a problem she likens me to some sort of skinhead caricature.

“Tom! Come here your sons on the phone!” I heard through the device, followed by the sound of my dad making his way to the phone.

“Hey, hows my baby boy doing?” I heard my dad coo through the microphone.

“Good, just got in and decided to call you guys,” I lied as if I hadn't spent the last 30 minutes dicking around on my phone.

“Well that’s great to hear! Everything in the apartment okay? Nothing's broken right? If you need I can Amazon you a fan if your air conditioner is broken.”

“No dad everything's great, only thing broken is the elevator. Lucky I didn't get a flat on the seventh floor right?” I said in a joking tone.

“Yea... You get yourself a girlfriend yet like you've been on about?” my dad said switching to match my tone.

“Dad I’ve been here for like an hour, I don’t see how I’m supposed to do that.”

“I'm just messing with you. If you need anything just call us okay?” he said in a more serious tone.

“Will do,” I said nodding my head like he could see me.

“Just watch out, and don’t get in trouble okay? I’ll make you regret it more than those Bashien ever could,” my mom threatened lovingly.

“I got it, I got it” I said reassuringly.

“Okay. Just make sure to call us got it?”

“Will do,”

“Alrighty, we love you James, good luck on getting that job mkay? We love you!”

We exchanged goodbyes over the phone before I hung up.

Before I was lulled into a bout of daydreaming, hunger began to pang in my stomach. Looking at the time, I confirmed I was running behind on my usual meal schedule, and it was a good idea to get some food before the 0600 meal rush came into effect. Instinctively, my fingers opened the GPS on my phone so I could find some comfort food in my area. I found a Wendy’s five blocks down that I wouldn't even need to cross the street for. Pinching my fingers, I zoomed out a bit more and found a Walmart across the main road I could use to pick up some food, a vacuum, and some supplies for my flat. If I bought a foldable cart the only issue would be getting it up the stairs, which I’m sure I could manage. Satisfied with my little plan, I put my phone in my pocket, and gathered my wallet and keys I left on the counter. I tapped the key on the door and was in the process of leaving when I felt a buzz in my pocket. Sliding the phone out to examine I saw I had a made a match on Entwine.

2: Investigare

> *Sarah*

I laid belly down on my bed, with my feet in the air, as the girl on my phone talked to me.

“Then apparently my bitch of a roommate drank all the beer in the fridge, and we were left without drinks for the Bulldogs game-”

I watched my friend attentively as she recollected her weekend to me over the face time. I always liked watching Zahif rant, she was always passionate when talking.

“She brought her boyfriend, for some reason, even though I just invited her. Is that a human thing? Doesn't matter, clearly-”

I was lucky to have met her in school. Honestly, without the Bashien and her friend group I probably would've ended up a recluse. I had always struggled to make new friends.

“-and now she’s blacklisted from Mike’s Place for throwing up on the bouncer. Anyway, how’d your weekend go?”

Quickly, I was pulled from my trance, now put on spotlight in front of my friend. The horrifying reality was I had spent the weekend reading *The Great Gatsby*, and on Pinterest try to copy any of the drawings I thought were cool or cute, not something I was keen on sharing with my socialite compadre. I rolled my bone pendant between my fingers in thought while I thought of a satisfactory response.

“Oh you know... Just running errands and stuff I had a busy weekend...” I said, failing to make eye contact.

“Damn that’s too bad. Sucks when life gets you like that y'know?” She said with earnesty.

“Yea that crap sucks...”

A wave of relief washed over me, as I hadn't been caught in my ruse.

“Anyways, check out this girl on Instagram. She uses those fake eyelashes humans use to make it look like she has them and low key-”

While Zahif was ranting again, I decided to pull up Entwine. I’ve had no luck so far in the love world, outside of the endless tide of bot accounts pestering me. I started my

quick routine of getting a few swipes in, planning to close the app before Zahif was done. However, after liking on some human boy's profile, it turns out I had a match.

"Oh my gosh! Zahif I got a match!" I said feet beginning to swing in the air.

"Wait really? Send his profile let me see,"

Hurriedly, I sent her a photo of the profile.

"Eh, he looks pretty good,"

I shot her an annoyed glare .

"I mean he's cute for human," Zahif corrected in an attempt to placate me.

I studied 'Jame's' profile, seemed like he's new to Atlanta, having moved into the city recently. Looking up the district, it looked like a good ten minute drive away. Reading a bit more I found he also liked books. Now armed with that information my tail began to slowly sway, slapping against my beds pink duvet, and my brain raced to simulate peachy visions of the future.

"Talk about gentrification. First girl's parents give her a human name after we liberated Earth and now she's dating one? Bitch your grandkids aren't gonna have scales at this rate," Zahif said in a teasing tone.

"It was so I could fit in better, and I'm not dating him yet! I haven't even messaged the guy," I corrected.

"Oh yea? Did you buy that big ass human SUV so you can 'fit in' too?"

"Bashienian cars are tiny! Human cars are nice and roomy. You know they're better too you're always asking for me to drive whenever we go out," I said defending the honor of my Chevy.

"You look like a toddler driving that thing. I'm sure James will appreciate the purchase anyway. It'll be useful when you're dropping your kids off at school!" she said with a toothy grin.

“Freaking shut up!” I said blood rushing under my scales, as I pressing my fingers to my, now closed, eyelids.

My attempt of silencing Zahif seemed to have only fueled her, as now she broke out into laughter.

“Alright, alright I’ll stop I’m sorry, hehe” she said, coming down from her laughing fit.

I paused for a moment.

“Well thanks for calling Zahif. I gotta go now, I hope you have a good day!” I said with the most cheery voice I could muster.

“Oh, yea. Don’t want keep the boyfriend waiting Sarah! Haha!”

And with a blip of the phone, Zahif disappeared from my screen.

I sighed and rolled over onto my back, now with the temple of my head laying on the side of the bed. I stared out of my window that I was now facing, and recollected the events that led up to my situation. I moved the phone in front of my face to see that I had indeed matched with the golden beige colored human. I groaned as I peeled my body off the bed, realizing I’d have to initiate conversation, and pulled myself out of the bedroom and into the kitchen so I could prep for the occasion.

I pulled a lime ceramic bowl from the cabinet before pouring myself some Goldfish. Setting that aside, I dove back into the cabinet and pulled out a glass cup that I poured some water into from the faucet. I finished off by pouring a flavor packet into the water and quickly stirring it with my finger. After sucking my pointer finger to get the juice off, I brought my collection to my living room, dropping it off on the end table next to the armchair. I curled my tail onto my lap and sat down, pulling the blanket I had set aside over to cover my lap. After lobbing a goldfish, and a few of his friends, into my maw I pulled up the app ready to message James. I stared at the screen, unsure of what would be the correct way to introduce myself for a while, before seeing that luckily the app had already done the work for me, suggesting a few GIFs for me that I could utilize. Scrolling for a little while, I found one of a character I recognized and tapped it before thinking twice, only for my blood to freeze when I saw that it had instantly sent itself to James instead of just attaching itself to the message.

“Crap,” I whispered to myself silently, due to sending the cringe inducing image.

Before long however, activity began on my phone, with an animated thought bubble forming on the left corner to signify that James was responding to my message. I stared at the device with anticipation, ready to converse with the human.

Hey!

My fingers quickly pecked a response into the keypad.

How are you? I saw that you just moved in recently hows that going?

I moved in today actually. I just set up and am heading out to eat rn.

The scales on my face scrunched up at that remark. Not even a day in and he’s on Entwine? I hope I'm not talking to some kind of ‘player’.

Oh that’s nice, I hope the move in was easy.

It was thanks for asking :) How about you? What are you up to?

Not much atm. I’m just chilling in the living room eating some Goldfish.

Goldfish is chill. What all hobbies you got? Anything you liek doing?

A toothy smirk formed on my face seeing Jame’s typo.

*like**

Shut up.

That got a quick scoff out of me.

To answer your question tho I’ve been reading, drawing and sometimes I like to crack open a video game.

Oh shit fr? Mind showing me something? Also what you been reading?

Language.

I was smiling from correcting James again, but I was hesitant to share my drawings with a stranger. However, I figured it'd be rude if I said no, so I attached a PNG of a squirrel I drew after it had manifested on the deck of my building while I was lounging.

Here's a squirrel I drew I know its probably bad :(

I watched the screen intently as I watched the dots in the thought bubble ripple.

What do you mean bad that's amazing! I could never make something like that.

My brain, comprehending the response, quickly pumped blood into my face, and the tip of my tail started slowly slapping the cushion. Seeing an opportunity, I decided to fish for another compliment.

Oh stop your just saying that.

I'm being for real that's gorgeous. I always wanted to get into drawing but I never got around to it.

I got another hit from that response, albeit not as much as before. Law of diminishing returns I suppose.

To answer your other question I've been reading The Great Gatsby this weekend I'm about 3/4ths the way thru.

I liked Gatsby, I remember reading that in school. Not a big fan of the movie tho.

Lucky. We never read Gatsby in school.

The Stellar Union has been trying to phase it out of the curriculum. They've been trying to slot in more Bashien text.

I loved the Union, but I always thought they could be a bit 'pushy' at times. It was important that as our species' societies merged, that our culture get represented,

but it was an unfortunate shame it had to come at the human's detriment. The choice to pull Gatsby however, I thought was stupid.

That's dumb, and that's part of our culture they cant just get rid of it!

Exactly! I'm glad I found someone that agrees.

I paused for a moment, and threw some more Goldfish in my mouth. I chased it down with some water and resumed typing.

Alright now your turn. What all you enjoy doing?

Well as you already know I enjoy reading, I too enjoy a good video game, and I'm also into sports betting.

A twinge of fear formed as I saw that James partook in gambling. I remember the half hearted remark my mom gave me of how she'd cut me if she ever found that I was gambling.

You know gambling isn't good for you right?

Ohnono, I'm just gambling points. Not real money.

I gave a quick breath of relief.

Good, never gamble. So what all games do you play?

Recently Ive been playing Frostpunk 3, game is hard as hell tho.

I too had played from the Frostpunk series, and built my little British civilization in the face of the winter. I hadn't played the third one, but I could recall the controversy when they retconned the series in the 3rd game to introduce Bashienian characters into the story. Detractors had claimed that 'it wasn't accurate' to the 19th century. In my opinion, an ice age manifesting in that short of a time wasn't accurate either, I didn't see the inherent problem.

Oh I love Frostpunk! Don't spoil me tho I'm waiting for it to go on sale.

Got it. Just know its ball bustingly hard.

I don't have balls.

You get my point.

Anything else you play?

I like chess.

I liked chess too. The human game always intrigued me. Being interested in it never made me any good at it however.

I always wanted to be good at chess.

I used to suck, still kinda do. The important thing is to try just not to blunder, already puts you above the competition.

My train of thought was interrupted as the familiar hum of a Union hovercraft flew overhead, likely being summoned somewhere to deploy a peacekeeper squad to some distant crime scene.

I'll have to take that into account.

We can play a game later if you want.

I'd love too! Just go easy on me please.

Of course, we can play later today. I'm going to the store rn.

That reminded me, I needed to pick up a cake for Zahif's friend later that day. I figured I should probably do that now. I continued texting back and forth with James as I snarfed down the rest of my snack and left my bowl, along with drink, in the sink. I was folding up my blanket when James asked me the next question.

What's your opinion on the Bashien?

3: Conventicius

> *James*

It turned out to have been a more eventful walk to Wendy's than I had anticipated. Not that I ran into trouble or anything, I made sure to stay clear of any peacekeepers in frankly an abundance of caution. No, it was my phone that made the trip eventful. That gamble I took with Sarah seemed to have paid off. While it was obviously too early to call, I don't even know what she looks like yet, it seems that we had indeed clicked. I suppose I could forgive a bit of a jelly belly.

Walking into the building, I checked the app to see my last message still sitting unanswered. Perhaps it was a bit early to spring that question onto Sarah. Despite being oppressed by the dinos, some humans lap up that inter-species collaboration shit the Union likes to pump out. They aren't shy with it either. Looking around the sparsely populated dining area, I saw an S.U flyer taped next to the door depicting a human and a bashien pointing parallel to one another in front of the backdrop of space. Likely some attempt to ship people off to the lunar mining colonies.

Done looking around, I checked my phone again (no response) and made my way to the register. On the way I noticed the register was being manned by an eggplant colored bashien staring forward blankly, not the sight I expected but whatever. With a quick glance of the menu, I decided I wasn't in the mood for experimentation, so I walked right to the counter to order my usual.

"Hello," I said looking down at her.

She was snapped out of a daze.

"Oh- Hello! Welcome to Wendy's, how may I help you sir?" she greeted with a modest amount of cheer.

"Yea I'd like a Dave's Double combo, hold the lettuce and tomato please," I instructed.

"Uh- Sorry can you say that one more time? I wasn't ready," she said while turning on the register's touchscreen.

Fucking dinos.

“I said, I would like a Dave’s Double combo, hold the lettuce and tomato, please,” I repeated with more emphasis.

“Okay... One second...”

She started punching my order into the register.

Now free from eye contact, I took a glance further down at her plastic name badge. It turned out the bahsien in front of me was named ‘Susie’, for some reason. That’s dumb, why would a bashien have a human name? Thinking about it, it was likely just the restaurant trying to better appeal humans. Made sense for a bashien cashier I suppose, I cant pronounce half those fuckers’ names. Still, if it were up to me I would've name the purple dinosaur ‘Barney’.

Suddenly I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. I was hoping it was Sarah, I had to make sure to check that when I sit down.

“That’ll be 12.99” Susie said, turning back to me.

I tapped my state card against the reader.

“Alrighty, take a number and I’ll bring you your food shortly. Would you like a receipt?”

I declined the offer for a receipt.

With my order now complete, I took my cup over to the fountain for a fill before hunting a table I found clean enough to eat at. Quickly, I found a table for two with a pair of bar stools and placed my drink, along with myself down. A quick look at the lock screen confirmed my suspicions, Sarah had indeed responded to me. I took a sip from my soda before opening the phone and making my way to the app. Without hesitation, I clicked her profile of that white flower and read her response.

That’s a tough one. I feel the Bashien Preservation Committee has made poor choices when it comes to integrating a new species of people, but the past cant be changed. I feel that as two species together we can be stronger.

That wasn't what I was hoping for, but it wasn't chastisement for xenophobia either. I could work with that, though I supposed I should lay off the pressure. After thinking a bit for a good pivot away from the danger zone, I replied.

That's a unique take, I've never heard that before. Any other interesting opinions?

If there's one thing I knew about people, it's everyone loves talking about their opinions. Just as that potential bomb was defused, I saw Susie bobbing her way over to me with my order.

"Here you are sir! I hope you have a great day!"

She gently placed the tray onto my table.

Seeing her being nice made me feel a bit bad regarding my previous thoughts about her.

"Oh. You too!" I said to her as she began to walk away.

Now done with the wait, I began to peel back the foil to reveal my prize underneath. My eyes confirmed that there was no lettuce, and no tomato, just as I had requested. I scooped up the sandwich and bit into it, expecting a nostalgic taste I had grown accustomed to. Except that wasn't what I got. It wasn't necessarily worse, I would say it tasted better if anything, it just wasn't what what I expected. If i had to guess, the franchise owner probably used a higher ratio of ground meat to mushroom filler in the patty paste.

Suddenly, my phone chimed to life from where I placed it on the table. I wiped my hands clean on the customary napkins and picked the device back up.

Lwk I always thought the Oscars were a bit boring.

I wasn't expecting anything all that hot but really?

I agree. Wasn't fun watching Gareth Edwards take home everything this year.

I was about half way done eating when I got my next response.

I like some of his earlier films. You ever watched The Creator?

This time I kept a reserved 'clean hand' that I wouldn't use to eat to peck a response into the keyboard.

I have actually. I personally thought teh plot was bland.

As soon as I fat fingered the send button, I noticed the typo. Quickly, I raced to type out a correction before Sarah could correct me.

*The**

Fuck.

Also, is that actually your actual opinion, or you just regurgitating what some video essay told you?

Damn she got me. I thought of typing a long winded response, before deciding to hide behind some humor.

Maybe.

That's okay. You should watch it some time :)

How are you gonna make me? By force?

If I have to.

I'd like to see you try.

Smiling, I decided now was a good time to get up and move, having finished my meal. I dumped whatever crumbs and grease were on the tray into the trash, and left my tray next to the bin before making my way back outside.

It appeared that since I went inside, a slight drizzle had begun to pick up. Not at all an unusual sight, but it induced fear in the umbrella-less such as myself. Seeing the omen, I figured it'd be a good idea to press on to the store in case rain decided to pick up. I hurriedly made my way out of the parking lot, weaving between the

occasional parked car, and onto the street. Looking down the road, I could see the sign signifying the Walmart about two blocks down, so I began to make my way.

Nothing happened as I walked down the street. Only occasionally did I receive a message from Sarah, which I would hunch over the phone to reply, stopping any of the drizzle from getting on my touch screen. However, as I ended the length of the first block, a human donning a Stellar Union peacekeeper outfit approached me.

I watched as he turned on his modulator with an affirmative chirp.

"Howdy. I'm afraid we're temporarily closing off this intersection to make an arrest. I request that you walk around the circumference to avoid interference," he said, voice scrambled, gesturing to his right.

I tried to make eye contact with the officer, but the reflective headpiece he donned made it difficult. I tried not to look at the raindrops on his mask.

"Oh I'm sorry officer. I'll make sure to go around," I said as innocently as possible.

The peacekeeper, satisfied with my response, waved bye to me before making his way back to the junction while garbling some code speak into his radio.

Approaching the intersection confirmed the warning, as I saw multiple peacekeepers sectioning off the piece of road with a handful of arrested in cuffs waiting alongside them. I made sure not to look like I was loitering as I slowly moved around the circumference, just as I had been instructed. I wanted to watch, but I also feared potentially provoking the ire of the Union's police force by having them think I was potentially trying to record them. Soon, the expected hum of a Union hovercraft began to fill the air, as the masked men dispersed from the center of the intersection to make room. It quickly descended from the fog, engine still roaring as it touched down, where the vehicle quickly opened a side door. Following routine, the officers loaded prisoners into the cabin with surgical speed, with a few of the squad members boarding with them while their replacements departed. Then as soon as it came, the machine began levitating again as it ascended into the sky. With their task done, the peacekeeping squad dispersed and the intersection resumed its normal activity.

I stopped to ponder what I had just witnessed, now that I was free from the eyes of the Union. It's likely that if the prisoners had to be transported to a station for processing, they were getting something more severe than the typical *counseling* that was prescribed to those that scrutinized the presence of the Bashien a bit too closely. Hopefully, that was just people that needed to be put away instead of proper victims.

I continued my walk as if nothing had occurred, making my way to the Walmart just in time as the drizzle began to pick up into full blown rain. Judging by the amount of bikes locked up out front, the store appeared to be moderately busy.

Going inside confirmed my suspicions, with humans and bashien alike perusing the isles searching for whatever goods they needed. I decided to grab a shopping cart from the entrance, and began making my way down the list I had crafted.

One thing I quickly noticed in the store, was the typical set of American flags hanging from the metal rafters had some company. Instead of just the star spangled banner, the flag of the Union along with the American flag dotted the ceiling, forming alternating rows running along the length of the store. Another discrepancy from back home. I suppose the cities changed more to match the proportionally higher population of dinos compared to the countryside.

Shopping was largely uneventful. The only thing of note was some bashien requested my assistance for reaching a box of hamburger helper on the top shelf. Can't really blame them I suppose, despite wanting to, I am a good head taller than most of them and the shelves aren't designed with their height in mind.

Having my cart full of goodies, I went to the checkout area and placed all my items (minus the foldable wagon) onto the the belt. While waiting, I slid my phone out of my pocket to respond to another message I got from Sarah while I was shopping. It was something about favorite cars, not knowing a lot on the subject I just said my favorite was the Mitsubishi Outlander, knowing the car from it being my father's choice of vehicle.

While waiting for the cashier to scan my items, my eyes began to wander to the front of the store. I was hoping to see that the rain had cleared when shopping, and judging by the brightness outside, it appeared it had. While I was pondering the weather however, a moody blue colored bashien with a yellow colored plumage

walked in. She appeared oblivious to the world around her, texting someone on her phone when she slipped on a puddle that had formed from the water tracked in from the rain. She would let out a high pitch yelp before landing squarely on her hip. After laying on the ground in pain for a few seconds, she got up and tried to walk away like nothing had occured.

That got a good wheeze out of me.

Soon it was my turn at the register. After paying and mashing 'no' in response to being asked to round up to support refugees from the Mexican annexation, I set up my wagon with my goods and left the store, headed for back home.

Today was eventful for me. I hope Sarah's doing well.

4: Prandium

> *Sarah*

I pulled into the parking lot and set the car into park with the slight push of my hand, before letting out a sigh due to the impending meeting. Looking at the time it appeared I arrived early, as I had planed. I slouched down into the leather seat, making sure to not agitate the boo-boo I got from falling a good week ago, before digging my phone out of the cup-holder. I saw James' contact in the notification list. Unfortunately, he'd have to wait right now. I didn't want to have my James time cut short. I dug into my messages to mentally remind myself why I was here.

Zahif decided that our group should all get lunch together today. I didn't mind one on one time with Zahif, but I thought her friends could be a bit much at times. Still, I had made excuses to be a no show again last weekend, and I didn't want to duck yet again.

I decided to resort to passing the few minutes I had by perusing social media as a wind down before I had to leave the comfort of my car. However, this was short lived, and quickly met with a loud bang on my side window.

"Tbaan allaena!" I screamed, jumping out of my scales.

Despite screaming in my mouther tongue, I didn't actually know what I just said meant. It was some curse words I had picked up from my parents.

I turned to see my windows assailant. It appeared to be Eahira, one of Zahif's friends, who was now sticking her tongue at me through the window.

I suppose they got here early.

I rolled down my window to speak to the sandy colored woman.

"Hey girl! How you doin?" she said, in an artificial valley-girl accent.

"I'm doing fine. I thought we weren't meeting until 1030?"

"Thats in 10 minutes Sarah. I know your a bit of a *homebody*, but you gotta hang out with us girl. I promise we aren't gonna bite," she said, shining a toothy smile at me.

I always hated the babying. Did they think I needed it?

"Yea, yea I got it, I'm coming," I conceded, stepping out of the car.

"Great! We saw you pull in through the window, and when you didn't come out Zahif sent me to 'coax you out'," she said, gesturing towards the restaurant's curtain-wall.

Looking at the restaurant's tinted glass confirmed this, as I saw my friend group sitting at a white clothed table.

Now having eye contact, Zahif waved at me. A gesture I made sure to return.

As we began walking towards the building, I began to hear Eahira start speaking again.

"Yeah, we were stoked when we heard you were coming this time, especially Zahif, group isn't complete without you y'know?" she chirped at me.

I felt a twinge of guilt in my stomach.

“Oh. I’m sorry. I thought you guys didn’t miss me all that much,”

“What? Of course not we love you Sarah,” she said, in what had to have been the most heart wrenching tone she could muster.

I was convinced, for a moment, but I chocked it up to the bashien being performative to ‘the weird girl’.

I gave Eahira an unconvinced glare.

“You sure?”

“Yes I’m sure. I said we don’t bite?”

I still wasn't convinced.

Stepping into the restaurant, I was met with a light balsamic smell mixed with old pine. From what I read on the website, this was supposed to be some sort of BBQ bar and grill. I was expecting the place to be a bit more, *sanded down,* but I suppose the aesthetic made sense for the food type. Another thing I quickly picked up on, going further in, was hanging smell of frying meats, a smell that caused some saliva to pool in my mouth. It was evident when the Bashien were first integrated that we had a taste for BBQ, and the American south had delivered, with it often being a newfound favorite among us American immigrants. The scan I made across the room to find our table reflected this, as a good half of the customers in here were bashien instead of humans. Not that my scan mattered anyway, as Eahira grabbed my and practically dragged me to the table.

We passing through a doorway that segregated part of the dining area, I then saw our table where Eahira proceeded to bellow out a prolonged ‘hey’ before rushing over to hug Mithli. After exchanging hi’s with the team, I made my way to sit down when Linda got up from her spot next to Zahif, and moved to a different spot at the table.

“Oh I’m sorry. I know you like sitting next to Zahif, I’ll move,” the human spoke.

Again with the babying.

“Oh no you really don’t have to-”

Before I was done speaking, she had already moved to the opposite side of the table.

“Thank you,” I said, conceding, before sitting next to Zahif.

I got lucky, as the conversation had quickly moved after I had sat down to Eahira’s brother, Mithli, who was talking about his, lack of success, in the love world. All went well, I was happy to nod along and pitch in every now and then to appear involved. This continued until our tables waiter showed up and started collecting drink orders. I was planning on ordering a lemonade, but Zahif ordered a beer for me before saying she’d pay for it. That wasn't the problem however, as soon as I took a single sip of my drink, Mithli had started pivoting the conversation.

“Yea. Shits been rough out there, haven’t gotten a date for a good month. Its gotten so bad I’ve considered maybe going for skins at this point,” the green bashien spoke, bobbing his head.

Comprehending that he was referring about dating humans, I now looked at Zahif who was now beaming.

I was already mentally groaning.

“Oh! You should ask Sarah about that! She’s been talking with a human boy!” she said excitedly.

Suddenly, the whole table turned their heads to face me.

“Ohhh, uhhh, yea I met this human on Entwine and I think he’s pretty nice,” I spoke sheepishly.

Suddenly, whole entire table erupted with questions. Mithli was asking me what he looked like, Eahira was asking if he was nice to me, and Linda was asking me for a name, as she pulled out her phone to look him up.

I was stammering in a futile attempt to give my brain enough time to respond. Luckily, Zahif had decided to step up for me, and ordered everyone to go ‘one at a time’. Now I had the opportunity to respond.

“Alright. First off, his name is James, he’s a lighter colored human I met about 4 days ago. He’s new to the area, and he likes the same stuff I do,” I explained.

“Oh wow! A human and a bashien! Just like the posters!” Mithli spoke.

“Can you pull up a photo of him?” Linda asked.

I opened Entwine, and tapped James profile to enlarge it on my phone. Before I was even done, Eahira had grabbed the phone from me and laid it out on the table like a slab of meat for everyone else to enjoy.

A blush began to crawl up my face as the table ate up the spectacle.

“Aw look at him!’ Linda cooed.

“Yea, you two look just about perfect for each other,” Mithli said in a snarky tone, before Eahira nipped him on the shoulder.

“I think he looks wonderful Sarah,” Eahira said.

My phone would eventually find its way into Zahif’s hands, where she decided to started reading our messages aloud.

My muscles clenched in fear, and my heart raced, as I was laid out in front of the audience.

“Lets see here... Damn you guys we’re up talking at 1800? Isn't that way past your schedule? Lets see what are you guys talking about here anyway~” Zahif said, clearly implying she was looking for something bad.

The rest of the table watched intently, I was putting on a faux smile and nodding while hiding that I was struggling to breathe.

“Bah. Its just a billion texts talking about *The Catcher in the Rye*. You two are made for each other,” she said, giving up in her hunt.

The peanut gallery found this amusing and started chuckling in agreement.

She finally slid the phone back to me, where I practically deflated with relief.

"What all are human guys like anyway? I'd ask Linda but she's too busy eating carpet," Zahif said, now questioning me.

Linda snapped her head at Zahif, bewildered at what she just heard.

"Well I don't have a ton of experience," I admitted.

"But, I like James. He's nice to me, he's sweet, he listens to me... Heck, yesterday I got him into drawing and we drew on a digital whiteboard. I'd say he's lovely," I explained to the group.

"Ha! Doesn't sound like any guy I know. He's a guy, Im sure he's lying to you," Linda retorted.

Everyone began to turn back to me, awaiting a response to defend my choice of partner. I struggled for a bit before pulling out the perfect retort.

"Not exactly helping the kitty puncher allegations Linda," I said with faux dismissiveness.

That got the whole table, minus Linda, to roar with laughter. Even causing some of the other patrons in the building to stare at us as we all were laughing while Linda tried to defend herself. I didn't know if it was just me, or the alcohol, but I started to open up to the group and lecturing them about my time with James while they watched me with amazement. As lunch went on and we got our food, I began even speaking out of my bum a bit, as I explained to them how the humans did in fact desire companionship with bashien, just as the Stellar Union had suggested. I was questioned, of course, with Eahira citing the human supremacist attack in Japan last month. I happily dismissed that fact by pulling up a text James sent where he said 'he was so grateful that he found me' which was met with awe from Eahira.

"I've seen a handful of human-bashien couples, but I never met one." I heard from Eahira.

"You should do a do a shoot with the Union. I'm sure they'd love to put you two on a billboard selling bonds or something," Mithli joked.

Eventually, the conversation changed away from my relationship with the human, but this time it felt different. I was actually part of the group this time instead of being the awkward third wheel tacked to the side. I felt like I actually wanted to be here.

Soon the our discorse dried up, as did our plates, and it was time to leave. I made sure to hug everyone and say goodbye before returning to my car. Importantly, however, we decided that we'd meet again at some pub near Mithli's place to watch the Bulldog's next away game.

With a smile on my face, I found myself back in my car just as I was a little over an hour ago, though now free of any expectations. I looked at my phone and realized in the process of showing him off to my friends that I had left James on read, poor James. Reading the message it appeared he asked me how my day was. I made sure to reply to him now having the opportunity.

It was good! Hung out with some friends over lunch. It was fun, but I always felt like they try and make fun of me by babying me whenever I'm around.

I quickly watched the typing indicator flare up.

Thats great :) What do you mean by babying though?

They're patronizing. They know I'm the book girl that likes to stay home instead of going out, so they treat me like I'm made of glass.

You sure they're just trying to help you?

I laid the phone on my console, and pondered James' words for a moment, briefly reliving the events that had unfolded in the last few hours.

Maybe your right James.

I stared at the screen for a little bit in thought before I realized I forgot to ask how James' day had gone.

Btw hows your day going?

Eh, its going fine. I'm trying to hype myself up for my visit to the employment bureau today. Also have you seen the new shit the Union declassified?

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