

Fitting In

Zok-Groblok-47 groaned as he rolled over in bed. The worst part of human culture by far, he thought, was the pillow. He had tried many, and they always failed to adequately comfort his hearing-organs. This was his second year on Earth.

"Ryan? You up?" A voice came faintly through his bedroom door.

Zok-Groblok-47 groaned again.

"Yep!"

He slipped on his human mask. He was lucky he had found this arrangement. As an anthropologist of sentient species, the hardest part of his job was always fitting into the subjects' culture to learn about it without arousing suspicion. Most other anthropologists that had been dispatched to Earth had been socially ostracized before finding a permanent arrangement, or had been captured by local governments. By a stroke of luck, Zok-Groblok-47 had stumbled across 3 roommates who had accepted the fact that he had no job, no official ID, and a suspicious backstory that included memory loss and only one set of clothes.

He walked into the living room.

"Good morning, Charles." Zok said with a smile.

Charles raised a hand. "Good morning to you as well, Ryan!"

Zok's roommates were a gold mine for the budding anthropologist. 3 humans to study in close promixity as well as an entire living space? Zorp-tastic.

A third roommate walked in and Zok took the opportunity to begin his usual poking and prodding into the humans' daily lives. "Good morning, Sarah. How was your evening ritual?"

Sarah was a man. The oddity of his name had never been addressed by any of the four roommates.

"It went well, Ryan. I cleaned my teeth and removed my clothing before laying in my bed."

"Very good."

Zok had learned that humans follow strict morning and evening rituals concerning sleep. As a dedicated anthropologist, he attempted to follow them for himself each day, and had recently begun to enjoy them immensely. He had no teeth to brush, but rubbed his beak-like appendage with the solution humans call toothpaste. The feeling of sleep-clothes was pleasant on his scaley and amphibious arms, and the experience of "sleep" itself brought him great joy. Zok's

species had no true need to sleep in the sense that humans mean; indeed, Zok had trouble even explaining the concept to his superiors. So, he spent most of his time in bed reflecting over the events of the previous day, which was a change of pace welcome after the daily challenge of pretending to be human. If only it weren't for the damn pillow.

The fourth roommate, James, entered the room. "Good morning, all. Boy, I am refreshed after that night of sleep I just had!"

The room expressed their assent.

"Well, it's time for me to travel to work!" Zok exclaimed. He didn't really have a job, of course. He spent the hours between 9:00am and 5:00pm observing humans around the city. His roommates, however, thought that he worked in trash collection.

James nodded in agreement. "And I as well. Farewell, roommates."

Zok and the three others happily left the apartment and went their separate ways. He would spend the day at the park, he thought. It was a good way to see how humans interacted with the other species of fauna on the planet. Upon his arrival, he settled into his normal perch on a bench near the center of the park. It was a spectacular day. Around him, the world bustled. Squirrels ran in pairs around still-damp grass, chittering, chasing each other, and generally making a ruckus. A line of bluebirds and whippoorwills mounted upon a bronze statue near the bench, the bluebirds using their plumage to try and entertain the whippoorwills occupied with scanning for abandoned food. Occasionally a dog and owner would stroll by, engulfed in their own world, unaware of the presence of the outsider. Lofty oak trees loomed over the scene, looking down upon the animals in wise contentment.

Zok spent much time there, recording data in his Universal Scribe Tool. The Universal Scribe Tool, or UST, was well-known by species biologists across the galaxy. It assimilated information collected by individual scientists and anthropologists and indexed it to a vast database containing biological data on every known species. The tool supported 98% of all alien forms of communication and documentation, and also contained a built-in real-time translator that allowed Zok to converse with humans. For an anthropologist, learning every language for every species one wants to study is a Herculean task, so the UST is a vital instrument for accurate data transcription. Today went well - he recorded over 20 new notes on human interaction with other species.

Another bench sat across the park from Zok's bench, facing the same direction. Normally it was empty, but today Zok saw the back of a head slowly turning left, to right, to left again, tracking the movement of other animals and other people on the other side of the park.

Wait a minute - was that Charles?

Zok looked closer in curiosity. It was certainly Charles. Zok was close enough to make out the signature hat that he always wore around the house. Why wasn't he at work? Charles worked

for a restaurant, and Zok knew he was normally busy at this time. Two different voices briefly debated in his head and scientific curiosity won out. He began walking over to Charles.

As Zok approached, Charles did a marvelous thing. Quickly, yet subtly, he removed his signature hat, and took something out from underneath it. Zok could barely believe his eye-nubs. Unbelievably, in his hand, Charles held a Universal Scribe Tool. Zok watched him quickly jot a note and shove the tool back under his hat.

Zok racked his brain. Humans were centuries behind the technological level required for introduction to the galactic federation. A human in contact with a UST is a level 4 breach of federal code. Should he intervene? No, it's just didn't make sense. Charles operated the machine with skill and dexterity resulting from years of experience. How could a human have come into possession of one? And why would they need to use it?

Zok felt a chill as his mind settled on the only possibility: Charles wasn't human. Zok approached slowly, with caution. "Charles?"

Charles jumped. "Ryan! What a pleasant surprise!"

"Likewise. Charles, what was it you were just holding?"

"Why, I'm not sure exactly what you mean." Charles shifted. "Why are you not attending your work responsibilities?"

"Charles, I believe that was a Universal Scribe Tool."

If Charles had looked startled before, he now looked as if he was going to be sick. "What?"

Zok doubled down. "A UST, Charles. I'm no fool."

Charles was reeling. "What? How could you know what that is?"

"I think you know, Charles. What federation sector are you from?"

A lengthy conversation ensued that probably should not have taken place in a public park. Zok discovered that Charles and him were anthropologists from adjacent sectors of galactic space. They each found Earth of interest for their own reasons, but were determined to record human behavior. After the initial suspicion faded, they both enjoyed conversing with a non-earthling, and eventually hatched a plan for how they can best analyze the living patterns of their other two roommates. Over the next week, they would both tail one of the other men and analyze the actions performed at a typical job. They would then collaborate and report their findings to each other. Energized, they returned.

I'm sure you can guess what happened next. Zok tailed James and Charles tailed Sarah. By the end of the first day, each alien had made an additional alien anthropologist friend. There was great mirth at the apartment when the two parties reconciled.

Sarah was laughing. "I picked the name before I understood that human naming-schemes were dependent on biological sex! How was I supposed to know?"

"What, was this your first planet? Amateur!" James smirked.

"I wish I'd known sooner. I can't imagine how many false data I've submitted to the database," Zok remarked. All four aliens laughed. Amidst the fun, Charles was leafing through a pile of mail on the table.

"Hey, you guys. What does 'eviction notice' mean?"