

"News bulletin: All nonhuman persons must report to the nearest facility for testing to establish whether or not they are a danger to the population. Those who do not comply will be considered fugitives and will be retrieved and detained. Nonhumans who pose little to no threat to the public will be released and monitored during a probationary period.

"This is insane," said a fair-skinned, freckled woman as she stared at a newspaper and tapped it with the back of her hand.

"Yeah, I didn't think they would take it this far, but I guess fear runs deep in the human race."

A young man stood in a small, apartment kitchen and sliced through salmon with a knife, but his eyes focused less on the fish and more on the older woman who sat at the table just outside of the room.

"I mean, one minute, they catch two random guys trying to rob a bank, and the next, the whole country—no, the whole world—is in mass hysteria. They're picking up anyone who doesn't look or act all human, left and right. I didn't even think that was legal," the woman said as she tossed the newspaper across the table and touched her temple with a hand.

"Besides some random people telling stories about supposedly hoaxed creatures in the woods or in dark alleys or wherever, no one's ever seen us and told anyone about it—at least not in recent centuries. They thought it was all superstition and fantasy, but those guys were caught on camera and seen by who knows how many people. Maybe the public doesn't all believe it, but the government sure does," the young man said, shaking his head as he placed the sliced fish to the side and put down the knife.

"I think it's just freaky how those people—the government guys in those armored vans—came out of nowhere. They just popped up and started pointing out people who aren't humans. I don't like it."

"Neither do I."

The young man pulled two square plates out from a cabinet and spooned rice from a rice cooker by the stove onto them. He placed the raw salmon neatly beside the small piles of rice, and afterwards, he walked into the dining area and set the plates down.

"Thank you."

The young man nodded and sat in a stool across from the woman, and his gray and black wings adjusted to the new position, opening slightly outwards, then closing again. The woman smiled and pulled her white sleeves back, and they both ate.

After a few minutes, a knock at the door interrupted their meal, and the two exchanged nervous glances. The woman rose and headed to the door, and the young man left the room, carrying his plate with him.

"Yes?" asked the woman, biting her lip and pulling back a long, orange strand of hair from her face as she pressed an ear against the closed door.

"It's Jasper. I have news," said a soft voice from just outside.

The woman hurriedly opened the door and waved in a short, brown-skinned person in a hoodie and baggy pants which covered their feet.

"It's okay, Bansou, it's just Jasper. You can come out," said the woman after she'd peeked outside and closed the door.

The young, winged man joined them in the living room and smiled to the guest as they removed their hood, revealing feathery ears and buzzed, black hair.

"It's been awhile," said Jasper as he took a seat on a stool and looked from one of his friends to the other.

"It has. What did you come here for? It's dangerous to be out," said Bansou, glancing once to the giant, bird feet which appeared from Jasper's pants as he crossed one leg over the other.

"Yeah, it is. My bro just got picked up, and I had to get out of the neighborhood, 'cause the cops were snoopin' around," Jasper said, shaking his head. "Those armored trucks were there, too. I saw some men with some crazy-big guns barge into a neighbor's house. I don't know her, personally, but my bro does. She's one of us."

"How did they even know about you guys? You've kept underground, just like the rest of us. How is that possible?" the woman said, shaking her head and rubbing her temples.

"No idea, Aisling," Jasper shrugged. "I think someone was caught and started runnin' their mouth, but the way those guys in the truck were actin'... I dunno, man. It's startin' to look like they've known about us all along and were just waitin' for the right moment to strike, y'know, right when people are freaked out."

The three quieted for a few minutes, and the woman regained her seat at the other end of the table. Bansou stood to the side, and ran a hand from his forehead, over dark, translucent scaling near his hairline, and through his short, dark hair.

"We need to get out of town," Jasper said, his brown eyes scanning the faces of his companions. "Hell, we need to get out of the country."

"A lot of people have been leaving, but I heard that the roads are full of cops and those guys in the vans, looking out for our people on the run," Aisling said, tugging at the collar of her blouse with a hand and poking at the fish on her plate with the other.

"This is ridiculous. We shouldn't have to run away from our homes. We're not criminals—not all of us, anyway. We've just been minding our own business," Bansou said, shaking his head and frowning.

"Yeah, well, now that humans know we 'monsters' are out here and are super real, they think that we're all gonna go crazy and attack people. They don't believe we just wanna live our lives, like anyone else."

"I hate that word," muttered Aisling, baring a tooth.

Bansou nodded and averted his eyes to the window where wind blew the trees harshly just outside. Aisling stopped fiddling with her plate and looked at her friends with her brows tightly knit together and a frown on her face.

"You two need to get out of here ASAP. It's not safe for anyone who doesn't look all human. I can get out easy; no one suspects a fox, but you two have to find another way," she said, grabbing Jasper's hand and clasping it between hers as she looked from one of them to the other. "Please."

"It's okay, Aisling. We'll get out. We don't want to end up wherever they're taking everyone else, either," said Bansou, exchanging a look and a nod with his bird-footed friend, who sat up straight to speak.

"It's gonna be tricky, but let's pack the necessities and meet here at midnight."

The others nodded and both Aisling and Jasper exited the apartment, leaving Bansou alone to prepare.