

BIG DREAMS
PMF 7 Chapter Two
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For most incoming freshmen, dormitory life is the first experience in living independently from family. The transition can be challenging, confusing, and sometimes stressful. This guide is meant to help you adjust to a pleasant and safe life away from home. You will find helpful hints, dos and don'ts, and Housing Department rules that must be maintained. The Department and your Resident Advisor are here to help. You're away from home, but you're not on your own!

—Fremantle University Freshman Dormitory Guide, 2281

Days Without Injury, Fire, or Alleged Potential Felonies: 0

—Posted on Floor 7 of Freshman Dormitory, June 2281

“Linear and nonlinear models in all three studies and the aggregate analysis by Liu and Chang (ref. 26C) agree on the long-term impact of proposed atmospheric adjustments on Delan. Lai Wa's terraforming proposal brings—”

“Hey Tanner, you got a minute?”

Tanner wanted to stay focused, but this was his own fault for leaving his door open. It was a habit he'd built to let his floor residents know he was available—one that he sometimes forgot to limit when he needed. He turned from the holographic text projected across the angled black slate on his desktop. “Yeah, what's—?” Then he blinked.

Siraj and Jason stood in Tanner's open doorway, both of them thin, casually dressed, eighteen years old, and bearing flat, irritated expressions. In both hands, Siraj held a glass tray of tomato sauce, pasta, cheese, and: “Are those gym shoes?” asked Tanner.

“Yes,” they answered together in a tone fitting their demeanor.

“And that's a lasagna.”

“Yes.”

It was a big tray. It had to be, in order to hold both shoes. “Are they real, or are they food sculpted to look—?”

“They’re real,” answered the pair. They got along, but they weren’t normally the synchronized and mirroring type of roommates.

Tanner stared. He frowned. “They don’t match.”

“One’s mine, one’s his,” said Jason.

Rapid footsteps thundered down the hallway junction behind Jason and Siraj. Lisa turned the corner with a yelp and a grin somewhere shy of actual fear, but stopped when she saw the traffic at Tanner’s door. Then she turned away and ran back down the hall only two paces ahead of a stream of glowing green ooze that fell against the wall and floor. Derek followed his failed shot with his crude projector in hand. Lisa yelped again and kept running.

“You’re cleaning that up,” Tanner warned over Jason and Siraj’s shoulders.

“Fine,” Derek called back.

“And this better not be a weird sex thing,” Tanner added.

“Whoa, hey,” Lisa objected.

“Yeah, don’t make it weird, Tanner,” said Derek.

“We wouldn’t know if you didn’t tell everyone,” Tanner fired back. His attention returned to Siraj and Jason’s pan as he muttered, “Fifty-fifty I wind up cleaning it myself.”

“You could *make* them...?” Jason’s suggestion died under Tanner’s skeptical glance. Their RA hadn’t had much luck in “making” anyone do or stop doing anything.

“It’s too early for lasagna,” said Tanner.

“We know. We found it on the kitchen thermal pad just now,” said Siraj.

Tanner gestured at the tray. “Dan, or Dan’s boyfriend?”

“We’re not sure,” said Siraj. “We kinda had a fight with both of them last night. It was Dan’s turn to cook dinner.”

“We don’t even care if he skips it,” said Jason. “Everyone’s got finals. We get it. But he said he would cook, and then he and Troy came back way after the cafeteria closed and the pub kitchen was slammed. And then they got pissy with us for saying anything.”

“Did Troy stay overnight ag—no. Never mind. I’m not asking.” Tanner didn’t want to *find* reasons to bust anyone. The things that happened in plain sight were enough. “Are the shoes a statement, or is this some poetic mystery thing?”

“He complains that we leave them by the door. Where shoes *go*,” Siraj asserted.

“What do you want me to do? Am I mediating again?”

“Yeah,” said Jason. “Could you?”

“We wanted you to see this so you’d know it’s not bullshit,” said Siraj.

“Alright. We’ll figure out a time. Do you have classes right now?”

“About to, yeah. Guess I’m wearing my sandals,” Jason grumbled.

“I’ve got time to clean this up,” said Siraj.

“Okay. Cool. We’ll talk about it.” A soft note of tragedy hit Tanner’s next thought. “It actually looks good.”

“It is good,” Siraj lamented. Jason and Tanner looked at him. “I only took a small bite. Our shoes didn’t contaminate the whole thing.”

“I’m not sure that’s how contamination works,” said Tanner. “Alright. Go to class. Talk later.”

The pair left his doorway. Tanner looked beyond them to the green splatter against the wall. That had to be some kind of lube. *Nope. Not cleaning it. Things to do.* He returned to his desk.

“Hydrological volume from 2277-2279 in the Perseus Basin back this up (ref. 31).” Tanner tapped the reference icon to bring up the charts again. They hadn’t changed since last he looked. He opened the underlying calculations anyway. *So much math*, he groaned inwardly. *Fucking hell, please tell me I got all the math right.*

“Tanner?”

His new visitor leaned against one side of his door frame with her long brown hair obscuring most of her face. Flowing black clothes pointed to a long night out dancing. So did her posture. “I got locked out again,” Bonnie complained. Blearily.

“How?” He got out of his seat.

“I don’t know,” Bonnie mumbled into the door frame. “I lost my holocom. Nobody answered when I knocked.”

“You could’ve come to get me,” said Tanner.

“I couldn’t find your door.”

Tanner looked at the big red “RA” on his door.

“Shut up. Don’t *look* so loudly.” Bonnie turned her forehead against the door frame. “I slept on a couch in the rec room.”

“Bonnie,” said Tanner, half sympathetic and half concerned.

“It’s fine. Rhea was on the other couch, too. She smoked something smelly and her roommates kicked her out.”

He winced. That was another problem for later... or not, in the grand perspective of Rhea's life. "Hold on." Tanner turned for the kitchenette wall beside his door, pulled a mug off the rack, and put it under the faucet. It filled in only seconds. He held it out to Bonnie. "Drink."

"What is it?"

"Water."

"Nnnnooo," she mumbled into the wall.

"Drink. You'll feel better. I'm not unlocking your door until you finish. Come on."

Tanner walked her back to her room. Thankfully, Bonnie shuffled with care and used both hands for the mug. As it happened, Tanner didn't need the security override on his holocom. A simple precautionary knock summoned one of Bonnie's roommates in Fremantle University sweats and a towel around her wet hair. He passed the wandering resident off to her and headed back to his room, trying to turn his mind back to river volumes, flow rates, and formulas he always worried he'd misremember.

"Psst! Hey, Tanner!" The whisper came from the dorm suite immediately across from his. Priya leaned out of the doorway with her brown hair pulled back from her pretty face and the skillful makeup that she rarely wore. The glittery silver strap over her shoulder confirmed she was at least fully dressed and this wasn't some awkward closet failure. Then Priya darted from her suite into his doorway with that dress hanging incorrectly—loosely, Tanner noticed.

And not very far past her hips. And mostly open in the back. And now standing inside his room. "Zip me up. Everyone's gone," Priya hissed.

"Do you have to be weird about it?" asked Tanner.

"I'm not worried how this looks. You're the RA. I'm trying to help *you* out here."

"Gosh, thanks." Tanner followed her in, but kept the door open. "You're awfully, um, shiny for a day of classes."

"It's my final in public speaking and media. We're supposed to dress formal. Do I look good?"

"Yeah," he admitted. She looked really good. He had no doubt she knew it, too, but most people liked to hear it from others. "You look... great." Tanner looked at her mostly bare back mainly to find the zipper for her dress. Instead, he got confirmation that Priya had great taste in underwear. *Not my business, but now I know*, he lamented silently. *I'm not blind*.

"What are you working on? Is that a final paper?" She nodded to his desktop.

“I turned it in last week. Supposed to discuss it today, after a guest lecture. Where’s—never mind, I’ve got it.” He found the zipper and brought it all the way up... to less than halfway up her back. Of course.

Then Priya nudged backward at the hips, bringing her butt against his groin. “You sure?” she asked over her shoulder. “You wanna try again anyway?”

“Priya,” Tanner sighed. He genuinely didn’t see this coming, but he processed it in a single heartbeat. “I can think of five reasons this wouldn’t be okay. One for each year of our age gap, turns out.”

“Age—? Oh my god,” she laughed, turning to face him. “Wasn’t your first girlfriend *sixty* while you were eighteen?”

“That was a fling that turned into a habit for a few months, and we both knew better all along.” He was also traumatized and lonely and Andrea questioned herself the whole time. “She let me down easy and it still sucked like a real breakup.”

“Aw. I’m just saying. We’re both adults. You’re the one who keeps saying so. I’m almost twenty. What’s a few years apart in college?”

He suspected those years meant more between himself and Priya than his gap with Andrea, but that would only look like a double-standard. Maybe it was. Priya had confidence and self-possession for days. She wouldn’t do this as a prank, nor out of emotional desperation or a rebound or any other pressure. That didn’t change the bottom line. “Like I said. Lots of reasons.”

“Is your long-distance girlfriend one of those reasons?” Priya asked, grinning. A small holo of Lynette hovered on one corner of his desk, radiant in an emerald dress. Under close-cut but stylish red hair and green eyes, she grinned at him, too.

“Y’know what? No. We’ve talked about that. It is long-distance. We’re serious, but explicitly good with fooling around. That part’s fine.”

“Oh.” Priya sank back a bit as if she’d been standing on her toes. Her grin faded to a half-frown.

“Wait, what do you mean, ‘Oh?’” Tanner frowned back.

“It’s not as much fun if I’m not tempting you away from another woman.”

“What the—?” Tanner rubbed his eyes. “My god, how is everyone on this floor so hungry for drama?”

“Not saying it wouldn’t be *any* fun, just... maybe not the achievement I expected.”

“Priya, are you hitting on me because you like me, or because you want the story for later?”

"I can do both." She got a grin out of his exasperation, but Priya wouldn't pull all this as a mere prank. "I'm not talking about anything *serious*. I'm nineteen."

"Christ. Y'know what? Fine. It's weird, but if you're serious, you wanna know the real obstacle? You'd have to move out of the dorm. Definitely this floor, probably the building."

"What? Why? We're all getting shuffled after the summer session, anyway."

"You're here through then, aren't you? Dating or fooling around with your RA sets up an obvious creepy power imbalance at any age. I'd have all kinds of leverage over you, and that's gross."

"Why can't *you* move out?"

"Because this is my job and because I have to keep everyone on this floor from burning the building down."

Priya opened her mouth to object, but no one could argue that last point. "Oh. Yeah."

"In another year, it wouldn't matter. Everyone gets shuffled into new dorms. The age thing would mean less, too."

"It's almost next year already. On the school calendar, anyway."

"Almost."

Her frown tilted to one side of her face. "You're not even a little tempted?"

"Tempted isn't how I'd put it."

"What is?"

Tanner folded his arms and found the words. "You remember the literal protest rallies against me? Most people avoided me. That stopped after Minos, but it's not like everything changed all at once. Do you remember the first meeting when I got the RA spot?"

"Yeah. Half the floor thought the school was punishing us," Priya scoffed.

"Three people walked out on the spot, and two more before the week was out," said Tanner. "That doesn't happen anymore. Things can get a little weird 'cause I'm the RA, but everyone's mostly normal with me. I feel like we're all friends." Tanner bit his lip. "And now I've got you hitting on me. I can't return that, but it means a *lot*."

"Aw. Now it feels too serious." Priya nodded to the holo of Lynette. "Is she seeing anyone else back home?"

"Not to my knowledge, no. We're both okay with it. Just hasn't happened. Neither of us have exactly tried."

She looked up and around as if mulling it over. “I don’t get rejected a lot. I’m not waiting around ‘til next year for you.”

“Good. Don’t. But... I don’t know what else to say here. I’m sorry, and thank you.”

Priya leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re a good guy.” Then she swept around him and left, crossing the hallway to return to her dorm suite.

Tanner watched her go. The realistic, responsible, and even the romantic-and-already-involved-with-someone sides of him all agreed this was a non-starter, but he wasn’t *not* tempted. In another year—hell, a few months, as Priya said—it might be less problematic and impractical. That was a nice fantasy, at least. Something else to discuss with Lynette, too.

Then he realized he had followed Priya into the hallway... where he wasn’t alone.

Rhea stood at the door to the rec room in an old, oversized t-shirt, Fremantle University sweats, and fuzzy wombat slippers, eating popcorn out of a bowl cradled in one arm. She also stared right at him until he made eye contact, and then walked up to him. Frowning.

Judging.

“Uh. Hey, Rhea,” he said.

She looked him up and down. “Priya? Seriously?”

“Hey, I didn’t—it—”

“Yeah, I know you didn’t. Dork.” She turned toward Priya’s suite, finding the door to the central living room still ajar. “Priya, you in here? Girl, you look *good*!”

Tanner went back to his own room. His eyes turned to the holo of Lynette, still grinning as she usually did. The picture didn’t track and turn with his movements, as some setups could; that was too weird for him. It did cycle through other shots of Lynette, though. The bikini shots only came up when the device recognized he was alone. She set that part up herself. The setup had other features, too.

“Holosuite. Quote six,” he said out loud.

The image turned to another of Lynette in the captain’s chair of her starship, feet up on a console while in port. It cut to a memorable moment in a recent letter. “It’s college, Tanner. Promise me you’ll get into some kind of trouble at least once. The fun kind.”

Tanner sighed. He had, in fact, promised.

The clock beside the holosuite demanded other things from him. He had places to be.

* * *

Alicia wouldn't make it to her duty station on time.

If she was honest, she knew that when the Union Fleet officer and the Diplomatic Service guys showed up at her door an hour before reveille. She put on her dress uniform anyway, but that pipe dream was out the window now. She'd have to apologize to her whole academy work detail... and she didn't think "security clearance" and "need to know" would make anyone happy. She didn't think they'd buy the "alien-enabled real-time security conference with Earth and Zheng He" story, either.

Proof of that explanation stood across the room from Alicia, two meters tall and full of swirling, consciously-muted colors from their head to their barely-separated legs and their wide, relaxed wings. Magenta stared back at Alicia with two dark eyes over a thin mouth they never used. Their other, much larger pair of eyes projected faintly magenta-toned holographic images from halfway across the Union.

"Target Bravo appears to be a Minoan dreadnought smaller than the Preserve, but showing some of the same behavior. It is skirting the borders of the Kingdom of Hashem on its way toward Minos." Union Defense Secretary Charles Ohanga produced several holographic images from projectors in his conference table, showing astrogation charts, an image of the asteroid-like object, and a list of Union vessels. "We intend to intercept here in the Zarqa system. Current forces include Fleet and Lai Wa assets with assistance ready from the Nyuyinaro. We hope to capture Bravo rather than destroy it, and no one is better at boarding actions than Archangel. Recognizing this is short notice, are you able to assist?"

The question wasn't for Alicia. As if the whole premise of the meeting wasn't wild enough, she sat right beside Admiral Freakin' Yeoh Herself—at a conference table, plain and rectangular in contrast to Ohanga's nicer arcing setup. Yeoh had only one aide at her side, too. Alicia didn't really count. If she was here for anyone, it was Magenta. They needed to talk about that.

"Does the designation of Bravo imply a Target Alpha?" asked Yeoh.

"Unfortunately, yes." Admiral Divya Khatri stood at the other side of Yeoh's table opposite Ohanga's group, also in magenta-tinted holographic form. The hulking, chitinous, pentagonal Krokinthian looming beside her did not sit, nor did the Nyuyinaro connecting their end of the discussion from Zheng He. "A NorthStar frigate detected a similar vessel on its way out of Newton

four days ago. They made a good attempt at surveillance, but Alpha launched into FTL and hasn't reappeared since. We think we have the drop on Bravo, given its location and trajectory. Planning details are contingent on who arrives at the rendezvous in time."

"And you do not want to pull many units from Zheng He or the other worlds facing Minos in case Amara detects their movements," Yeoh surmised.

"Yes. Archangel is near the border, but not a border world. Strategic depth makes a difference."

"I see." Yeoh didn't need to look at her own holo screens. "The cruiser *Los Angeles* and a few escorts can be there within thirty-four hours. They will bring a company of marines and boarding-ready Navy personnel. I'm confident the president will approve. Will that be enough assistance?"

"That is generous, thank you," said Khatri. "I don't recall *Los Angeles* from the battle at Minos. Would anyone else with experience against the Minoans be available?"

"The whole Navy has trained with Minos as our most likely adversary since they emerged. *Los Angeles* is as ready for them as anyone else." Yeoh paused with a thought. "*Valor* and *Joan of Arc* were involved in the seizure of the Preserve. I can send them with our contingent."

Divya nodded. Ohanga took the cue. "Excellent," he said. "That is most appreciated, Admiral. Please issue the orders as soon as you can."

"Of course." Yeoh's gaze turned slightly right to the source of the projections. "Magenta, could you mute me for a moment? Do you understand what that means?"

"Meiling, yes," Magenta answered through a speaker embedded in the conference table. "They see you, but you are silent to them."

"Magenta, thank you." If the use of her first name bothered her, she never showed it. Yeoh turned to the aide on her right. "Send them all a heads-up right now. *Valor*, *Joan of Arc*, and the battle group for *Los Angeles*. Let's give them all the time we can to get prepared."

"—apologize for detouring this meeting with operational matters," Ohanga said to the others at his table and beyond. Yeoh hadn't said anything about muting his side of things. "With the Nyuyinaro providing this chance at real-time communication across the Union, we couldn't pass up the opportunity. Nebula, Bolide, Magenta: thank you for all your help."

"Charles, you are welcome," said Nebula. The Nyuyinaro on the Solar System side of the meeting tended to darker hues with more pronounced whorls of light through their body than Magenta. The holocom translator took a lower, stronger, yet decidedly feminine tone for Nebula.

“Like the Krokinthians and the Yanra, we are ready to support humanity in actions against Amara and the People of Dust. This conversation is a good use of our abilities.”

“On that note, and if we’re returning to the bigger strategic discussion,” spoke up Christina Walters from the table in the Solar System, “we could help you much more if we could communicate this rapidly on an ongoing basis.” NorthStar’s CEO wore a dark grey business suit right on the edge between formality and style. Her short, curly brown hair and pert demeanor belied her predatory instincts. Nearly everyone here knew better, and she knew they knew it, but the smile and demeanor remained.

Alicia made a fist under the table. Her knuckles cracked.

“Nebula,” she continued, “our communications are limited by the speed of our faster-than-light ships and drones. Everyone else involved can communicate across space in real time—including the Minoans, using the Nyuyinaro they hold captive.”

“Christina, yes,” said Nebula. “The captivity and enslavement of our people pains us all. We wish to free them as soon as possible. That is why we come to humanity for assistance. That is why we plead for action against the Minoans.”

“We could take that action faster if we could communicate and coordinate faster.” Walters held out her hands to indicate the discussion between Ohanga, Yeoh, and Khatri. “If you, or maybe the Krokinthians or Yanra could show us how this works, we could assist you better.”

“Nebula, may I address this?” Another alien came forward in the group on Zheng He, nearly eclipsed by the Krokinthian until now. The Yanra had a mostly serpentine form, half a meter thick at his largest portions, with bulbous eyepods and four tentacles halfway along his trunk. Logol’s mouth didn’t move as he spoke; humans still didn’t fully understand how he vocalized, but he did, and in fluent English, too. “Ms. Walters, the Yanra have a mixed history in sharing our advancements with other species. The Krokinthians developed with wisdom and proved to be friends, while the Minoans used our gifts to become the danger we now face.”

“I would like to think our approach to this alliance shows we’re not like the Minoans, Logol,” said Walters. “We’re trying to resolve this conflict without the extremes of your earlier war with Minoans. None of us want that. Doesn’t that show a fundamental difference?”

“Humanity has inflicted genocidal horrors on itself throughout your history,” said Logol. “We are glad to see so many humans resolved against such a solution. That is not our only concern.”

“Ms. Walters,” Chairwoman Limanto began.

Walters didn't notice—or pretended so. “What are your other concerns? Could we discuss them?”

The Krokinthian beside Logol rumbled. Big eyes at each of their pentagonal corners and more on the main joints of their claws stared into the Nyuyinaro's projections. Like the Nyuyinaro, Horosh spoke through a holocom translator. “You do not seek war or destruction, Ms. Walters. You seek advantage. You seek gain.”

“How so?” asked Walters. Her brow knit curiously, or perhaps warily.

“Ms. Walters,” Logol said with greater patience than Horosh, “if we met your request, who would develop the technology? Would it be shared with all of your species, regardless of faction or cost?”

“Well, er—cost is always a factor,” Walters began. “*Nothing* happens regardless of cost.”

“Ms. Walters,” Limanto said, a notch louder and firmer than before, “I believe the concerns are more philosophical than economic. We came together to discuss the basics of an alliance and a path forward. We should focus on that first.”

“I concur,” spoke up Jean Michel, seated left of Walters. “Communications are important, but let's tend to one revolutionary change at a time. On that note, Admiral Khatri, Secretary Ohanga: do you expect to discover more alien captives on this Target Bravo?”

“The possibility is reasonable, yes,” said Admiral Khatri. “Why do you ask?”

“My military experience is limited to a single term before I went into business. I'm not questioning your plans. Mostly, I wonder if we should expect another influx of alien refugees. The government of Voltaire might appreciate advance notice.”

“Yes, how are the Runners faring?” Walters asked him. “Are they aliens if Voltaire was originally their world?”

“Friends, everyone, we might break from the discussion for now,” said Limanto. “The Bravo operation merited an interruption, but Admiral Yeoh and Magenta don't need to be here for the rest of this. Some of us might benefit from a moment to reset. Nebula, could we pause for fifteen minutes? We should let Admiral Yeoh and Magenta turn to their own matters. Thank you all.”

The images faded. Magenta, Yeoh, and her minimal entourage had an otherwise empty and relatively bare conference room to themselves. With the windows set to opaque, the seal of the Archangel Naval Academy served as the only decoration in sight. Yeoh hadn't come to the Academy for this meeting. Instead, the meeting came to her.

“Everyone, Nebula and Bolide have ended their songs from Earth and Zheng He,” said Magenta. “I no longer sing to them.”

“Magenta, thank you.” Yeoh sat back and rolled her shoulders. The aide to her right busily typed away at the holographic keyboard projected onto the table. Yeoh turned to her left instead. “Was that as enlightening for you as it was for me?”

“Ma’am?” Alicia blinked.

“Ms. Wong, I think we can dial back a step from the formality between admiral and academy cadet. The instinct is noted, but I don’t see how it’s helpful here. When I said, ‘At ease,’ I meant it.” She smiled. Kindly, even.

“Understood, ma—ah... yeah. Yes, ma’am.” Alicia exhaled and let her shoulders relax as much as they dared. “Sorry. I was all about the academy before Magenta showed up an hour ago. If you hadn’t been here for the graduation ceremony already, I’d be on a shuttle to see you on Raphael. Grad prep has had us in spit and polish formality for the last two weeks.”

“Alicia,” said Magenta, “did you not tell me spitting was vulgar? Is that not the opposite of formality?”

Both women snorted and smiled. “Ah. It’s another idiom. Sorry.” Unlike almost everyone else, Alicia didn’t need to specify whom she addressed for Magenta’s sake. Magenta could assume their inclusion with her. It was one more reason Alicia was here for this meeting far over her head.

“I’m curious about your impressions of that meeting,” said Yeoh. “What did you notice? What did you think?”

“Walters seemed pretty out of turn,” said Alicia. “That whole bit about sharing science and tech wasn’t hers to bring up, was it? She’d know that, but she did it anyway.”

“Yes. That was her way of elbowing Limanto to be more aggressive and use her leverage with the other species to our benefit.”

“Meiling,” said Magenta, “I do not understand why she and the others were included in the discussion. The Union exists to speak for humanity as a whole and Irawati is its chosen leader. Your discussion with Charles and Divya was a diversion from the meeting between Irawati and the other representatives. Why were other humans present and involved?”

“Magenta, Chairwoman Limanto has great authority, but that authority functions much better if everyone cooperates,” said Yeoh. “The others like Walters were present because Limanto may be committing their security fleets and resources to action. They have a legal duty to support the

Union, but that doesn't make them subordinates. Walters spoke up because she wants something out of this. They all do."

"Yes. That part seemed clear."

"And that's why the other species aren't quick to share, isn't it, Magenta?" asked Alicia.

"Yes," said Magenta. "Meiling, do you share those feelings?"

"Not exactly," said Yeoh. "The advancements your people could share would work wonders for us, but I see Logol and Horosh's point. The benefits would not be shared equally. It's the same with most of our leaps forward. Too often, a discovery or an advancement for all is concentrated in the hands of the few who care mainly about wealth and power. I don't blame any alien for wanting to avoid that.

"For now, I have work to do. Magenta, thank you for coming and connecting us. I think we may do everyone some good in this operation. If any of your people or others are held captive on that vessel, we'll do all we can to free them."

"Meiling, thank you," said Magenta. "Will you send Alicia with your forces?"

"That was not requested," said Yeoh. "Are you going?"

"No. If I offer, I will be accepted, but I was not asked."

"I have similar thoughts about Ms. Wong," Yeoh turned to her. "Your presence might be valuable in that operation, but your connection with Magenta may make your presence in Archangel equally valuable. It brings up a longer-term question for both of you."

"Ma'am?" asked Alicia.

"You've finished your first year," said Yeoh. "What's your work detail for graduation?"

"Parking control and ushering, ma'am."

"Hm." Yeoh smiled. "I was on trash detail."

"Ma'am? Wow. We don't even have that one anymore."

"I'm still not sure it was a detail before then, either. My first year did not go well."

"Y-yours?" That surprised her even more.

"Oh, it wasn't an academic issue, though that suffered as a result. No one had an excuse to throw me out." She watched Alicia with the cool serenity that made her an icon in the Navy and the media even apart from her rank. "I was too funny."

Alicia nearly held back a snort.

“Excellence in school and training is good, but I think we put too much stock in it,” said Yeoh. “We look at how someone performs as a teenager or a young adult and we expect their whole careers to follow. Your life has taken more than one dramatic turn in those same years.

“Your relationship with Magenta is a strategic asset to the whole Union, as well as Archangel’s ability to coordinate with Union efforts. I’m not sure another three years here at the academy is the best use of your time for anyone’s interest, including your own.”

* * *

“Hard-hitting question for the closer: what’s the best part of your job?”

Gentle laughter rippled through the lecture hall, along with the speaker at the lectern. The Q&A from the class had been rougher than expected with questions of ethics, Union oversight, and trends in the field. No one had been confrontational, but the last student to ask a question offered up a lighter off-ramp.

Dr. Selaisse’s smile brightened his strong, dark brown face. He was tall, fit, and thoughtful, humble yet confident and wise. The man had Tanner’s dream job. He seemed happy. Satisfied. At peace. In many ways, he was exactly who Tanner once wished to become when he grew up.

Tanner acknowledged his adulthood as a matter of fact, but he rarely felt all that grown up.

“Raking me over the coals here,” Selaisse chuckled. “The serious stuff has been good, though. Tell you what: I’ll give you the best and some of the worst to keep it honest. Maybe the bad first, so we can leave on a high note.

“Xenoecology and terraforming have their obvious drawbacks. You can’t bring the family on a first or even fourth exploratory expedition. Even in near-Earth environments, you’re often in a vac suit or at least wearing a breather whenever you’re outside. And they never talk about the gravity field generators. You can bring a thousand square meters to *near*-standard at the push of a button, but dialing it into a steady, even spread across all that space takes weeks or months. I’m not particularly sensitive to gravity, but the differences creep in physically and mentally.”

Tanner’s gut spoke up with memories of grav sickness and vertigo, soon echoed in his shoulders and his throat. He didn’t feel sick, felt no flashback or trigger, but all those parts of him sank. So did the smile he’d worn through most of Selaisse’s lecture. Somehow, despite all his interests and hyperfixations and personal experience, he’d never thought of this part.

How bad can that be? Tanner wondered—and not dismissively.

“The questions we discussed earlier are real, too,” Selaisse went on. “We change environments for our own needs—sometimes environments with native life, or things that seem close enough to our definition of life that maybe they should give us pause. Sometimes we can protect that life, and other times we trod upon it knowingly or unwittingly. Minos is a good example of all three.” Selaisse’s eyes flicked to the back of the lecture hall. Tanner hadn’t spoken during class, but the glance confirmed he’d been recognized. “We can set up all the guidelines we like, but exploration and settlement involve far more interests than we scientists can control.

“The best of the job is exactly what you’d imagine. Terraforming involves incredible challenges and discoveries. It can be like riddles in the stone, or the water, or substances we can’t quite label as either. I’ve seen breathtaking environments live and up close before humanity puts its mark upon them—and then I’ve opened up new homes for countless people. Any job has its tedium and disappointments, but every day on every project makes me a part of history. I never question the value of what I do.

“Believe it or not, that’s totally unrehearsed.” Selaisse smiled. “I thought of all that just now.”

“Alright, we’re running up against the clock.” Professor Tiwari stepped up from the front corner of the lecture hall to join Selaisse at the lectern. His rail-thin frame and clean-shaven face put him physically in his thirties, but his usual businesslike demeanor pointed to longevity treatments rather than true youth. “My office hours immediately after class are booked up, so I have extended them by another hour. That’s first come, first serve. With that, I’ll let you all go, and let’s thank Dr. Selaisse for coming.”

Like everyone else, Tanner applauded and rose from his seat, but he took a leisurely pace toward the exits. Many classmates had finals or places to be. Tanner had the first spot on Tiwari’s schedule. Several students chatted up Selaisse on their way out, blocking Tanner from that thought. His mind turned to the path to Tiwari’s office instead, and the nearest vending machines in case he wound up waiting. Then he heard his name.

“Tanner? Over here.” Tiwari motioned Tanner off to the side of the lectern and Selaisse’s small audience. The professor took another step back from the others to give himself and Tanner some space. “You’ve got my first appointment, but I don’t know that we need to go all the way to my office.”

“Sure.” Tanner didn’t know why they *wouldn’t* go to his office, either, but most of the class had cleared out already. “I thought we’d be going over my final analysis.”

“Yes. Normally I lean heavily on my assistants for that. It’s not much secret. At this level, teaching is almost an assembly line. I have a hundred and fifty students between my two intro sections. We’ve barely spoken outside of your questions in class. But I made a point of reading and grading your analysis myself. It’s excellent work. Your knowledge and your enthusiasm show. I have almost no notes to give.”

Tanner couldn’t miss the note of apology in Tiwari’s comments. It nudged his guard up. “Wow. That’s great to hear. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Again, with the size of these classes, I don’t have time to get to know everyone. I don’t even make the effort. This course fills requirements for all sorts of programs. My upper-level classes are a different matter. You enrolled in the three-hundred level course for next quarter. That’s mainly for ecology and xenoecology majors. You understand that, right?”

“Yeah. That’s my plan. I’m still knocking out some lower-division stuff, but I’ve met all the prerequisites for the course. Is there an issue?”

“Well. This is your major? You intend to work in the field?” asked Tiwari.

“Yes. I’ve always wanted to work in xenoecology. Dr. Selaisse basically told us about my dream job. It’s half the reason I went on the Minos expedition... and the Preserve thing, too,” he added, though quieter. Everyone naturally had a million questions about that. He didn’t want to open the floor to them by broaching the topic. “All that stuff applies to professional certifications.”

“Oh. Of course.” Tiwari faintly winced, keeping Tanner’s guard up. “This is why I wanted to catch you here rather than waiting. Dr. Selaisse is on a tight schedule, and—ah, Jordan? Could I pull you away?”

“Certainly.” Selaisse politely excused himself from the last two students to join Tiwari. He offered his hand in a gesture Tanner somehow didn’t expect. “Mr. Malone? It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’ve been following all the news about the Preserve.”

“I’m—thanks?” Tanner smiled, shaking his hand. “I never know what to say to that sort of thing. Especially from professors and such.”

“Students usually have a lower profile than teachers.” Selaisse smiled. “Speaking for a great many of my peers, we’d love to hear anything you have to say about it. Have you thought about a

journal article? You may not have a full study to present, but an experience like yours certainly qualifies for the space.”

“That *was* the plan,” Tanner answered slowly. “I even told Admiral Roberts that up front, more or less. Then it all happened and things got messy with the Union Fleet, and... I don’t know the tactful way to say this, but the Fleet and Assembly sent in all their own scientists while I was on my way out. I don’t know if I should jump out ahead of them or if that would be putting my foot in my mouth. Also, I’ve never written a journal article.”

“Don’t let that stop you. I’m sure a number of professors here would be happy to help. You don’t need a graduate degree to qualify for the space, and certainly not after an experience like yours. You did the work. It’s yours to own.”

“Thank you. That’s really nice of you to say,” said Tanner.

“I hate to steer this to a rockier subject,” said Tiwari, “but I wanted to tackle it while Dr. Selaisse is still here. Jordan, I told you my concerns, and Tanner has confirmed them. He’s looking for a career in exploration and xenoecology.”

“Ah. Yes,” said Selaisse.

That drop from Tanner’s gut to his neck and shoulders returned. “I’m sorry, is that bad?”

“Good and bad aren’t how I see it,” said Tiwari. “In your case, I think merely entering the field may be quite difficult. You show every talent for the science and academics, and you’ve demonstrated the practical qualities. It’s not a matter of ability. It’s... for lack of a better word, I think it’s politics. Image.”

“Tanner,” said Selaisse, “the exploratory community is smaller than it seems on the outside. Almost every planetary expedition is funded and supported by NorthStar and Lai Wa, either in full or in part. Splinters of CDC are usually involved, too. Their influence reaches deep into the Union institutions. Even the system governments who sponsor their own projects lean on the same companies. The scientists probably wouldn’t have issue with you. Most of the academic community supports what Archangel did in the Debtor’s War. The people with the money are another matter entirely. They pay close attention to who they send on these expeditions.”

Outwardly, Tanner held it together. He listened. He engaged. He’d faced bad news before.

The pit within him grew.

“Also, we touched on the ethical and security issues in class,” said Selaisse. “Even when there’s presumably nothing to hide, the managers and the sponsors can be jealous and paranoid.

Sometimes it turns out there is something to hide: worker safety, finances, future plans. We know the morals of the larger corporations. Tanner, you discovered your president committed terrible crimes and you exposed him for it at wild risk to yourself. The people in charge of these expeditionary projects would be terrified of you.”

“Fremantle University accepted some backlash in accepting you,” said Tiwali. “The faculty and administration kept it quiet, but there were real penalties. The prevailing sentiment saw it as a question of academic independence and honesty. You deserve the same chance anyone else gets. In that vein, I think academia might be a more welcoming environment, but perhaps not the exploratory field.”

Tanner swallowed. “Might.”

“Yes,” Tiwali replied soberly. “I can’t promise anything. No one can.”

“In another twenty years, the memories might fade,” said Selaisse. “Maybe sooner. That’s still a long time to wait for the world to change. Neither of us want to rain on anyone’s hopes. We’re...” Selaisse paused. “We’re not exactly good scientists if we’re not honest about the evidence.”

* * *

“Thanks for coming. We’ve gotta start with a confidentiality agreement. It’s a PR thing. With some of my clients, just having me meet you is enough to make a whole media story. Everything about this is legal. If I’m lying, you’re out of the agreement. That’s in clause three.”

Brady Hunt stayed in the doorway to the hotel suite as he spoke, offering two nearly paper-thin black slates bearing electronic text. The devices would collect biometrics as signatures for a step of formality beyond the usual light-capture of projected holo documents. It was one more punctuating note to Hunt’s image: early middle age, curly beard, a silk dress shirt, understated jewelry when fashion tended to little or none for men, and rounded, slightly heavyset features. Hunt surely had the wherewithal for cosmetic treatments. His body shape was a choice—in an image-conscious industry where that choice subtly said much.

Lynette didn’t raise her hand to accept the slate. Beside her, Veronica either caught on before taking hers or had the same instinct. With a frown and a furrowed brow, Lynette glanced past Hunt’s shoulders into his hotel suite. She saw a living room of nice furniture and an arcing window

overlooking a bright urban morning. Unfortunately, she didn't see useful reflections from the interior of the suite.

Tactical thoughts flashed through her mind. She was glad she and Veronica went with business casual slacks and practical shoes for this meeting rather than anything fancier.

Hunt noticed her hesitation, but seemed to misread it. "Is that acceptable, Captain Kelly? Do you prefer captain?"

"Sure. I'll give it a read." Her eyes didn't fall to the slate yet.

"Something else on your mind?"

"It's not exactly the hello I expected," said Lynette. "I try to be careful with first meetings and surprises. People have tried to kidnap me."

Veronica went from tactful apology to solidarity in two notes: "Ah—yeah." She looked up and down the hotel hallway. The floor was split between two large suites with emergency and staff doors at either end.

"Oh. I didn't know that." Hunt struck the correct reaction with raised eyebrows and the slightest flush of color to his face. He glanced between the two women. "I, er—I'm sorry. Normally it's my job to be the hard ass. I suppose leading with, 'Thanks for coming' doesn't quite do the job."

"I think it's fine." Veronica said it as if replying to Hunt, but the layers were obvious. She took one of the slates and gave it a look.

"Yeah. Sorry, Mr. Hunt," said Lynette. "Call it a clash of perspectives. I'd prefer to be more normal about a first meeting, too."

"In a way, this is reassuring, actually," said Hunt. "I'd rather see someone in your position stick to business instead of getting all starstruck."

Lynette flashed a thin smile. "I haven't seen any stars here yet. We looked you up before coming, but your confidentiality is rock solid."

"Hah. I'm glad to hear that."

"We're good. It's standard and short." Veronica didn't even have to scroll to the bottom for the signature tabs. She placed two fingers on the requisite circles and handed the slate back. With the task finished, Lynette did the same. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Hunt. How can we help you?"

"Please come in. Can I offer you anything? The breakfast spread is nice, and room service here is lightning fast. My line of work isn't shy about meeting over drinks."

“We’re good, thank you.” Lynette mindfully took in the suite’s living room as they entered, noting that both bedroom doors were wide open. A few scattered clothes and trinkets clearly belonged to Hunt rather than the suite, which marked a human touch that pointed away from a kidnapping plot.

“We’re not,” Veronica corrected with a grin. “The guava pastries here are incredible.”

“Aren’t they? A woman after my own heart. Please.” Hunt gestured to the table holding a spread of pastries, seeming a little more relaxed but not quite smiling yet. “I have to ask: who tried to kidnap you? I’m glad you’re alright.”

“We had a cargo handoff in a rough neighborhood,” said Lynette. “The other side recognized me and thought they’d get a good ransom out of NorthStar or someone. They weren’t bright.”

“How’d you deal with it? Or should I ask?” Hunt ventured.

“They got hurt and then they got arrested by local authorities. They didn’t get the cargo, either.”

“This is why we’d prefer passenger contracts with reputable clients over cargo jobs,” said Veronica. “One reason, at least.”

“We’re a new business and we like to stay busy,” said Lynette.

“Your endorsements are impressive.” Hunt settled into a seat, lounging a bit more than either woman but still polite enough. “Foreign Ministry, Khalifa Capital, a perfect Guild rating. The heroics at Minos and Assembly Station stand out. Not to be cliché, but thank you for all you did there.”

“Things happen,” said Lynette. “We try to do the right thing. In all honesty, we don’t aspire to do that sort of work. Virtually the whole crew are veterans, but we’re a charter yacht crew now. The Navy’s in the past.”

“Hah!” Hunt brightened up. “Friend, you don’t know how happy I am to hear that. I deal with bodyguards and security types all the time. Half of them make one or two terms in uniform into their whole personality. That said, the bridge between Navy and yacht crew is what got me interested. I heard about you from the Assembly Station news—particularly some gossip about taking Christina Walters home after that whole mess.”

Lynette watched him evenly. To her knowledge, Hunt’s accent didn’t place him in Archangel, but that was no sure thing. It didn’t necessarily matter, either. “We did.”

“An Archangel ship, crewed by Archangel Navy veterans. And you didn’t throw that bitch out the airlock.”

“The war is over and we had just been attacked by an alien enemy. It seemed diplomatic.”

Hunt laughed. “It speaks well of you, regardless of how any of us feel about her. And like I said, it’s a reason why I contacted you. If you and your crew can host the likes of her and all she must mean to you, I think that speaks volumes for your professionalism and discretion.

“Just to cover some other bases...” Hunt tapped the ring on his finger, bringing up a floating holo screen over his hand. “Meeting, *Phoenix*, stats,” he said, talking his way through the data menu. Pages flashed faster than Lynette or Veronica could read, particularly seated opposite him. The Guild listing for their starship was easy enough to recognize. “Sixty-nine meters, three decks, eleven crew, space for twelve passengers? Two individual suites, and the rest are double cabins? I like the interior holos.”

“All correct,” said Lynette.

“Everything is working currently? The hot tub caught my eye.”

“Seats six before you have to get really friendly,” said Veronica.

“And you’re armed and fit for combat. That’s not part of this job. The security stuff matters, but so does the comfort level. You keep guns on board? Are they showy? They’re not in the holos. Might make some people nervous.”

“The ship is well-armed,” said Lynette. “We don’t advertise it. We also carry small arms on board. They’re kept secured and out of sight. I haven’t so much as talked about them all week.”

“Good. Okay. Again, it matters, but I don’t like upsetting the client.”

“About that...?” Veronica prompted.

“Yeah. Sure. The client is Misty Hale.”

Both women stopped. Lynette wasn’t sure which of them said, “Oh.”

“Yeah,” said Hunt.

“There’s not, um, a second Misty Hale out there...?” asked Veronica.

“Oh, there’s about thirty full-grown adults with the name now. Can’t really do anything about that. It’s the price of being at the top of the charts for the last ten years.”

“I always assumed someone like her would have her own ship,” said Lynette.

“Nah. She’s got her assets, but she doesn’t have use for a ship of her own. Either she’s out with a whole tour or she charters a ship like this for personal travel. Normally.”

“Normally?” asked Lynette.

“Right now, Misty’s on the *Gemini Jewel*. Big luxury liner cruising through the Second Wave systems. Once they get to Arcadia, Misty releases her new album and performs it on the *Jewel*—and then she wants to jet out of there clean and quick. Straight off the liner, not waiting for a stop. I’ll come with you. We dock with the *Jewel*, wait through her show, and then whisk her off to Quilombo. That’s where the actual tour gets set up.”

“You’re—?” Lynette blinked, quickly thinking of star charts and rough math. “You’re her manager and you’re here while she’s doing a show on a liner light years away?”

“Confidentiality assured?” Hunt reminded, and then sighed and rolled his eyes. “This is where contracts, vacation plans, and relationships all collide. The show makes the cruise into sort of a working vacation. The current boyfriend is... a problem. Control issues, nosy, forgets which of them is the independent superstar. She decided how she wants to leave him and asked me to make the arrangements. Here we are.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t—?”

“Zed Pure,” Hunt answered before Lynette had to ask. “He’s big in the psychedelic techno-acid scene, but that’s the central systems. Hasn’t really taken off here. Iridescent vein implants, chrome contacts, extra abs. She’s still running the Girl Next Door image, so they’re a whole Beauty and Beast thing, but I swear to God, his real name is Gary. With the news delay across the Union, it’s not like I can expect anyone to keep up with who she’s dating.”

“Right,” said Lynette. *Time delay. That’s why people can’t keep up. Sure.*

“He’ll throw a fit and make a scene if he gets the chance. That’s drama and drama is publicity, but it’s not our first choice. We’d rather slip out clean. That means discretion and speed, and that’s you. I’ll get her with you, and then it’s me and Misty and a couple staffers. It’s not like she’s the prima donna type.” He paused with a frown and counted out on his fingers. “Personal assistant, two bodyguards, makeup and hair, wardrobe, masseur, chef, sushi chef. And me and her. That’s ten of us.”

“Sushi chef?” Veronica blinked again.

“Yeah. I know you’ve got your own guy and I’m sure he’s great, but it’s a whole thing when she travels.” He frowned again. “Between you and me, the bodyguards have been getting way too chummy with Zed and his guys. Misty may ditch them, too. Find out when we get there. Oh, is your ship and crew good with dogs?”

A small icon flashed within the holo screen, warning of a call. “Shit, I’ve gotta take this. Give me a minute?” Hunt walked toward the balcony, taking his holo screen along. “Theresa, how are you? Yeah, only here for another day...”

“This is nuts,” Veronica murmured quietly, “and I’m excited to be part of it.”

“You think we’re ready for this?”

“Of course, we’re ready. This is exactly why we bought a yacht instead of some cargo ship. We want this kind of business. Rich celebrities, Arcadia to Quilombo, nobody shooting at us? It sounds like a blast. Aren’t you interested?”

“Sure,” said Lynette. “Just doing math. Jesse will kill us if we don’t bring her on this one. And I didn’t know you were a Misty Hale fan.”

“Eh. I’m not *not* a fan. My guy is a bigger fan.”

“Yeah. Mine, too. And his parents are on Arcadia.”

“Hey, you offered him a spot on the ship,” said Veronica. “He’s the one who wanted to go to college like a sucker instead.”

Lynette knew Veronica didn’t mean anything by it. She laughed.

* * *

Tanner felt like the worst kind of sucker.

He sat on a long planter outside the ecology hall, flashing through floating screens from his holocom as the sun set. Students passed by in fewer and fewer numbers in the break between day and evening classes. Rays of sunshine split past the mammoth palm trees surrounding the campus, creating a panorama of bright light, purple skies, and silhouettes against the windows of the university’s Science Quarter.

He flashed through another screen.

The heading read, “Kepler Expeditions proudly partners with the government of Anambra, Union Assembly Studies, and Destiny, Incorporated.” He tapped the disclosure link, then the financials, and then the graphics. The pie chart alone said enough.

His stomach clenched. His breath shortened. He paged backward with quick strokes of his fingers to the next company on his list.

“Major funding for the Hyakutake Project comes from Lai Wa Enterprises.”

He paged back and took the next. Bold text in silver read, “What’s Next for the Aldrin Company,” followed by a dramatic fade-in of star charts and planets. Tanner recognized the advertising style from NorthStar’s New Dawn project instantly. He paged back.

“Cabral Company Drops Independence Hopes,” read a headline that came up in his search before the company’s own page. “Destiny, Inc. has purchased the largest stake in a new stock offering from—” Tanner cut off the voiceover.

He tried one more page, but didn’t even get to any text or details. The CEO of Pioneer Services appeared right at the company’s front page. Tanner recognized his face—and would never forget escorting him and his wife from NorthStar’s shareholder meeting to the nearby hotel under the guard of the Archangel Navy. His wife wept the whole way.

Students passed by. Most kept to themselves and their own concerns. A few chatted and laughed.

Tanner’s throat tightened. His brow had been knit for so long it hurt. The hollow sensation at his gut came from more than hunger, yet he didn’t assign a physical source or cause. He only *felt*.

In the last eight years, twelve large independent exploration companies had become seven, and none were truly independent. The state-run agencies from Anambra, Arcadia, and Qin Kai had all closed or shrunk. Universities cut back. NorthStar’s New Dawn development had contractors and adjacent services locked up for most of the next decade.

Tanner had seen the occasional headline or news piece, but he hadn’t closely followed. The Navy, the war, and then college and life all took priority. Companies still claimed independence despite what their financials said. System governments promised new projects and growth... before Hashem and the Debtor’s War, and then the crash of CDC, and now the threat from Minos.

The business had changed since he left high school. He looked occasionally at companies and future projects. He hadn’t followed the money until now.

How could you miss that? Tanner asked in silence, staring at the screen and the list of headlines and company pages. *Why didn’t you pay attention? How could you be so stupid?*

He felt hollow. Lost. Afraid.

It was how he felt on the night before the Test, and the night his mother died.

He felt that way while digging a pointless pit in the desert of Minos, when Nigel predicted exactly this moment. “Survey outfits are all corporate, or governments with corporate ties. They’re not gonna take you on. You’re *Tanner Malone*. Nobody wants that kind of baggage.”

Tanner stared at the screen as the sun dropped. His breath shook.

“Hey, Morales,” asked the memory of a dead shipmate, “you ever notice how book-smart people never ain’t got no common sense?”