

RAPID RESPONSE

PMF 7 Chapter Eight

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“Don’t you see? The answer is obvious! It’s here in front of us.” The professor swept his arms out in a wild gesture around his audience. He strode forward with purpose, trailing the ensemble of spacewreck survivors, but the holo projectors kept him in place at the center of the dim and quiet rec room.

“He’d better not say some corny shit about the power of friendship,” said Analu.

All twelve current residents of the seventh floor sat or reclined on couches, chairs, and a few pillows propped up on the floor around the holo suite. Most of them laughed, including Phoebe and Rhea. Arthur, Stray, and Tanner didn’t, but for different reasons. “I bared my soul in picking this movie,” Arthur said in feigned dismay.

Phoebe threw a handful of popcorn at him. “Nerd.”

Tanner only half watched. He sat slightly back from the rest with a holo screen floating over his lap, its brightness dimmed and one-way opacity settings on. Between classes and his well-known habits, nobody complained or goaded him to turn it off. He wasn’t the first person to sit in on movie night while distracted.

He had a lot of reading to do.

“Across Voltaire, governmental security services broadly fall under the Department of Safety and Justice,” read the page from Coldwater Public Defense Intelligence. Footnotes led to more articles on divisions and services. “While the department wields considerable nominal authority, the department’s agencies are historically staffed and funded at lower levels than most counterparts on peer worlds. The government of Voltaire professes a creed of liberty and public trust that makes such investment unnecessary. Critics counter that the government has surrendered most security duties to Voltaire’s largest corporations, which field private security agencies with greater resources and staffing than the government. The Department can deputize and claim authority over such agencies, but this authority has rarely been invoked.”

More footnotes and subheadings followed. Twelve different worldwide corporations fielded uniformed and plainclothes security groups, along with an inter-corporate “hybrid gendarmerie.”

God, how the fuck does that work? Tanner wondered. *Unless they're not under a shared command at all...* and then his eye came to Cavalier Services as Destiny's main contribution.

Again. Tanner had already seen Destiny's corporate military division on the list of militia services, and here they were serving as police, too. *Because nothing ever goes wrong when your military and your police are all the same people. Oh, and they're "liaising" with domestic intelligence,* he thought as his eye came across another footnote. *Which probably goes further than they're saying publicly. Christ.*

Though he'd have to check other sources, Tanner knew Coldwater's guides were reliable. His "minor" in pirate studies was ostensibly a custom focus as a minor in Interstellar Security, with the first basic courses already knocked out. *Suppose I could just collect minors forever,* he thought idly. *Hell, maybe I could work for Coldwater as a researcher? They need planetary survey expertise for... no. That's not what they'd want from me.* He returned his focus on the article—or tried.

"Professor, what do you mean?" asked the holographic Crewman Paul—young, handsome, and unnecessarily loud. He stepped forward to join the professor but stayed turned front to the audience as if they were both on stage in a play. "I don't understand!"

The professor was slow to answer—or perhaps just dramatic about it.

"Please tell me Paul trips out of an airlock soon," grumbled Tanner.

Phoebe mock gasped. "Not Top Ten Sexiest Leading Holo Actor Jameson Burlew!"

Curled up on the floor between Rhea and Phoebe, Stray lifted her head to sniff the air.

"We can beat the Imperial Guardsmen, but not when their *dead* get up and fight us all over again, and again and again," declared Crewman Paul. "It's impossible, but we've seen it with our own eyes! You're the only one with a clue of what's going on!"

"I'm willing to push him out," said Tanner. It got a few laughs.

Arthur paused the performance. "Okay, any other commentary? Does anyone need a bathroom break?"

"Aw, we're only teasing," said Phoebe.

"Yeah, I know, but you're about to miss the real exposition. I'm not complaining. I'm doing you all a favor by pausing."

"Are you?" Rhea asked dryly.

Tanner's eyes fell back to his article. He overlaid his notes about entry, security, and public surveillance. None of it used those actual words, of course, let alone names like Voltaire or the Runners. Even now, he wanted to keep his interest deniable. *Already thinking like I'm in a conspiracy*, he thought.

Not really a conspiracy if it's just me and Stray, though. I need a conspiracy. Get onto Voltaire, slip out of surveillance and tracking, get to this restricted continent, find the doohickey, blow it up or steal it and get away... and then don't get caught. Don't go to prison forever.

We need a conspiracy. We need help.

We need an intelligence service and an Archangel Navy covert ops team and a couple corvettes for extraction, but we're not getting any of that. His eyes settled on the inset picture of the capital city with its tall, gleaming buildings and orderly air and street traffic. Tanner had worked with two actual spies he would trust, but he had no way to contact Vanessa Rios or Gina—and didn't know how they'd feel if he asked. The Navy could pull this off, but asking for that help was contrary to the whole point.

Only one potential source of help came to mind. That didn't work, either. *I can't ask Lynette. She'd have to drag her whole crew into this. A couple of them would be on board, but the rest... even if they were okay with it, I couldn't put this on them.*

He glanced at Stray. *And we can't do this on our own. Fuck.*

I don't know what to do.

"The nebula explains everything." The professor turned dramatically—and thus, the holo suite wheeled Crewman Paul and the rest of the survivors around in the perspective of the audience to keep their attention on the speaker. Behind him, wispy, colorful clouds dotted by distant stars filled the cracked viewport.

Music and ambient noise dropped, signaling important exposition.

Chet softly snored.

"We're in the cradle of the stars. The workshop of creation. Nebulas beget stars, and stars beget all life—"

"What?" said Tanner. And Dan. And Lisa, and Siraj.

"—but we have brought life *into* the nebula—and then snuffed that life out in our petty battles. Why should the power of the nebula resort to eons of work in slow creation when it can simply reanimate the dead, and thereby achieve new life?"

The music returned, rising and swelling as the rest of the cast emoted horror and amazement. Analu frowned. “Wait.”

“Wait, what? It’s *Shadows of the Haunted Nebula*. This is right there in the title,” said Rhea.

Stray kept sniffing, but looked from one friend to the other and back to the holo. She asked, “Isn’t the audience supposed to stay quiet while watching a performance?”

“The rules change when it’s this bad,” said Rhea.

“This movie is hurting my brain,” said Tanner. It wasn’t entirely sarcastic. He had a headache.

“I know, right?” complained Robbie from one couch. “I’m getting a migraine.”

“Are you?” Stray shifted over to Robbie, sniffing again.

“The lighting effects aren’t *that* wild,” said Arthur.

“They’re not?” Phoebe winced.

“I dunno what your problem is,” Rhea said to no one and everyone. “I’m fine.”

“Nngh,” Tanner grumbled under swirling nebula visuals and flashing colors. His gut didn’t feel great, either, but he still carried the stress of Stray’s revelations. That would be with him for a while. Rhea had none of those problems. “You *would* be fine,” said Tanner.

Stray turned back to Rhea. She sniffed and stared. “She is not,” said Stray, “but she feels better than the rest of you.”

“It’s a *really* bad movie,” said Lisa. Half the rec room laughed again.

“No. It’s not that,” said Stray.

“It’s definitely that,” said Siraj.

Beside him, Chet let out a long, droning snore.

“Alright,” said the holographic Crewman Paul. He slammed his closed right fist into his open left hand. “No more games. Bullets and lasers aren’t good enough. We’ll have to destroy the bodies as we kill them—or kill them again.”

“You could’a done that when the first zombie—urp!” Robbie clamped a hand over his mouth and held back another internal burble. He closed his eyes, holding his dinner down. “Sorry.”

“You oh...kay?” Tanner asked blearily. It was hard to keep his eyes open. Chet snored away, and now so did Lisa. He couldn’t entirely blame them.

“That won’t be enough!” declared the professor. “We’re dealing with the spark of life on a fundamental level! Burn the bodies. Disintegrate them. It won’t matter. The power of the nebula will reincorporate their molecules and reform them all over again!”

“Oh, that’s...” Phoebe gave up on the words, but sourly threw a bigger handful of popcorn at the holo actors. Most of it fell far short of the mark. Some popcorn hit her own feet, but she didn’t notice. “Arthur, this movie sucks!”

“Mm shorry,” Arthur slurred. “Was a kid when...” He turned in his chair to face her, but had to catch himself before falling out.

Tanner frowned at his friends. He understood the sleeping; it was dark, and mostly quiet except for the bad movie and heckling. He didn’t understand the other discomforts, or complaints, or... something. *Dunno what to call it*, he thought. *Don’t know the words. Bad. Everyone’s weird. Everyone except Stray, who’s always weird. Head hurts.*

I don’t understand the problem.

He couldn’t keep his eyes open. *Maybe I’m just tired? It’s only movie night. I could sleep here.*

“Rhea, do you smell anything different?” asked Stray.

“Besides Analu’s sweat?” Rhea answered. She was more lucid than the rest, but not aware.

“Stop. ‘s not me,” said Analu.

On the left couch, Lisa turned her head to Robbie’s shoulder and snuggled in. His eyes closed. On the right couch, Siraj seemed out cold. Dan made a face and tapped at his head. “Stop,” he complained. “Warnings. Stop.”

“What warnings?” asked Stray.

“His brain implant,” said Rhea. “Probably being stupid.”

Stray looked around the room. She sniffed harder. “Rhea. The air is wrong.”

“So open a... um.” Rhea waved at nothing. “Air.”

“Butler. Stop the holo. Turn on the lights,” said Stray. The room brightened. Crewman Paul and his buddies froze in the middle of their gearing-up montage.

* * *

“Shit,” grunted Minh. “It’s not dropping like the rest. It knows something’s wrong.”

“What?” Callum turned from the audio interface and his struggle to eliminate interference from the holo movie and the vent system. He frowned at the holo video screen floating in the air. “It’ll drop. File says those things gotta breathe, too.”

“The file says they adapt,” said Minh.

“Yeah, but in five minutes? We talked about this. It’s—”

“Butler,” said the alien on their holo screen. “Stop the holo. Turn on the lights.” The image from the drone in the vent went nearly white.

“Shit,” said Minh.

“Hold on a sec. The drone will adjust,” said Callum. Already, they could make out blurred images in full color to match the earlier layout—with the brown and rounder form of the alien on the move. “Damn. You might be right. That thing isn’t going down.”

“It’s not our real target,” Minh thought out loud. His breath quickened and his fists clenched with new stress. “We’ve got the whole floor locked down and flooded. What’s it gonna do?”

* * *

Stray moved to the door. It opened at her approach, seals breaking and parting without any hiss or new movement to the air. She sniffed and found no difference on the other side... or down the hall. More of her friends snored. A couple hiccupped and groaned. Tanner turned uncomfortably in his chair.

Lights moved along the elevator shaft with passing traffic. Other lights moved outside. The rest of the world carried on while the floor grew silent and still. Air poured from the vents nearly without a sound.

Stray darted back into the rec room. Hind legs launched her two or three meters with every step, stuttered only by the sweep of her forelegs across the tile to keep her going. Flying into the rec room, Stray planted her front and then hind paws on the back of the couch right between Arthur and Jason, leaping over the rest of her herd.

She had her hind legs up just as she hit the window for a powerful kick. Transparent duraplastic built for coastal storms shuddered against her weight and force with a loud bang. Sealant broke. Mountings loosened, but held. Stray dropped to the floor.

“Stoop,” Rhea groaned. Others complained at the noise, too.

Stray hopped straight up from beneath the windowsill and kicked again with her back feet. The blow wrought more damage against everything that held the duraplastic firm. She landed, straightened, and leapt upward with another kick. And another.

“The hell, Stray?” asked Rhea.

Hind claws left scratches in the plastic. Minor cracks formed. The structure held. The moorings did not. Bracing herself against the couch, Stray leapt up and kicked again.

* * *

“Why’s the drone taking so long to adjust?” asked Minh.

“They built this place with all kinds of layered insulation.” Callum furiously tried holographic dimmers and dials to correct the drone feed. Already, they had the video back to normal, but the alien had gone out of view. “I had to reset the audio, it’s almost—”

Audio returned with a loud bang. Then a thump, and another bang. Dazed and listless bodies at the center of the rec room groaned with complaints and turned in place, but they heard another bang, and another—and then, as Callum panned the video, they saw Stray leap from under the windowsill with one final kick. The alien bashed the window free from its frame and nearly flew out into the night with it, but for the quick grip of those forelegs against the windowsill.

“Oh shit,” said Callum.

Coastal night air blew in on a coastal breeze through a window at least two meters wide. With a mighty tug, the alien pulled itself inside. Already the other residents stirred, breathing deep on instinct and reflex.

“Shit. Shit. *Fuck*,” Minh fumed. “We’re blown. We’re completely blown.”

“Okay, but we can still—” Callum stopped. He watched Malone sit halfway up and shake his head. Analu stretched and inhaled deeply. Nweke looked around as if she’d barely been fazed. “You’re right. We’ve gotta go.” He turned to the access panel, trying to think fast. “Nothing changes. Still looks like an accident.” Callum shut the panel and killed his holo screens. “No evidence. Let’s go.”

“Right. We—” Minh stopped and looked at Callum in horror. “The drone! We can’t leave the fucking drone!”

Callum blinked in wide-eyed surprise before it clicked. He tapped his holocom to bring the control screen back to life.

* * *

“Ugh. Oh wow.” Tanner lifted his head off the back of his chair and inhaled like he’d forgotten to breathe. His head still pounded, but the world made sense again. He also winced at the light—and the sudden chill. “Why’s it so...?” *No. Not cold*, he realized. *Windy*. Tanner turned toward the breeze and blinked wide-eyed at the latest damage to the seventh floor. “What the hell?”

“Tanner, something poisoned the air.” Stray came to him from the newly open-air window. She waved one paw upward at the adjacent wall. “It came from there. From the vent.”

He followed her gesture, and then looked around the room. Everything seemed fine except for the groggy and bleary expressions of everyone else waking up. Robbie had knocked over his drink. Lisa had drooled on herself. Dan tapped his holocom to conjure a screen with a red exclamation point. Tanner could read some of the text even if turned backwards. “Carbon monoxide?”

“Not just that,” said Dan. “Holy shit.”

“Damn, really?” Rhea asked. She sat upright, facing the window to breathe deeply. “Whoa. Yeah.”

“I smelled something wrong,” said Stray. “No one else noticed, but you all seemed confused at once. Then you all began to fall asleep.”

“We could’ve died.” Tanner stood, looking warily at the vent. “Is it still coming in?”

“Yes,” said Stray. “The air outside this room is tainted, too. I don’t know about the other floors.”

“The building has environmental sensors for this.” Arthur brought up a holo image that quickly split into several screens. One portion held text and numbers, another graphs, and another turned to a smaller split screen of cameras in common areas, mostly quiet and deserted at this hour. Someone passed through the ground floor lobby with shopping bags. Two residents worked out in the gym. No warnings flashed.

“You’ve gotta concentrate it to have a real effect.” Rhea moved to Chet, shaking him to wake him up. “Hey. You with us? Wake up, Chet. Don’t go back to sleep.”

“Nnnrrhh fine, what,” Chet complained.

“Stay awake. Everyone. Don’t go back to sleep until you’re really awake,” she told Chet and the others. Then her eyes came back to Arthur—who in turn looked to Analu, and then Phoebe. They came to quick conclusions. Others didn’t have the same context.

Two residents were ahead of all of them.

“Tanner,” said Stray, “before we spoke, I felt a hostile presence on a floor below us. Wen thought I might have sensed conflict with her residents, but that did not fit the sensation. She also said workers came for some problem on the fifth floor.”

“Facilities.” Tanner crossed to the kitchenette first, pulled a chef’s knife from the auto-sharpening block, moved toward the exit.

Stray followed. “The air in the hallway is poisoned, too.”

“Hold your breath for a second and keep the door open here. We’ll be fine,” said Rhea, falling in line behind them. She looked back to Lisa and the others. “Hey, keep Chet and Siraj awake. They’ll be fine, just don’t let them sleep.”

“Everyone stays here,” said Tanner. “This might be nothing. Let me go look.”

Only half the room took him up on that. Lisa and Dan stayed with Chet and Siraj, but Rhea stayed with Tanner and Stray—as did Analu, and Phoebe, and Arthur.

Tanner opened his mouth to object, but closed it again. The argument wasn’t worth the breath.

“Cameras in the commons and the elevators,” Analu warned.

“On it,” said Arthur, following after him with a holo screen open.

“You don’t take the elevators in a fight.” Tanner broke left in the hallway and pushed through a door someone had marked “Escape Pod Route.” The stairwell lacked the decorations and comfort of the dorm’s residence floors, but it granted a path clear of obstructions.

“Tanner, what if it’s not what we think?” asked Phoebe. “What if it’s really an accident?”

“That’s why I’m gonna talk first,” said Tanner. “And why you’re all staying back to let me handle it.”

He kept going. Stray stayed beside him. Analu looked back and gestured for Phoebe, Arthur, and Rhea to hold back a few steps. They followed his advice, but he didn’t hold to it himself.

Tanner stopped half a step before the door as he’d been trained. He listened, sniffed, and considered the handle and hinges before taking anything for granted. His next step covered the full width of the door rather than giving himself away with light and shadow through the tiny gap at the floor. Without a grenade or some distraction to throw in ahead of entry, Tanner turned the handle in near silence and moved in with quiet, sure steps.

The first hallway hummed with power transfers and the soft burble of plumbing. That covered his deeper entry, taking him toward a four-way intersection of the corridor and a sign pointing to the elevator at the other end.

Two men in the drab green jumpsuits of campus facilities rounded the intersection, going straight for the elevator in a purposeful stride. One wore goggles and carried a toolbox. The other kept his bald hair in a flat-top. They were both tall, fit, and broad-shouldered, with rugged and flexible clothes and good boots. To Tanner, the combination had become a warning flag.

Tanner forced his face and voice into something non-confrontational while he whipped the knife around his hip and out of view. “Oh, hi there,” he began. Flat-Top and Goggles whirled in surprise as Tanner smiled. “Hey, are you guys working on—?”

Stray charged. A single, powerful push from her hind legs flung her more than half the distance toward the strangers in the blink of an eye. She planted all four limbs for a second stride before flying at them, hind legs up and forward into Flat-Top’s chest. He flailed with her feet still on him as they crashed against the elevator doors.

Without missing a beat, Goggles yanked something metallic and L-shaped from his kit. He whirled and pointed it in the heartbeat Tanner needed to process and commit to Stray’s attack. Tanner was nearly in striking distance and had the sense to jerk left before the shot came.

It wasn’t enough. White light flashed from the stunner and caught Tanner along his right shoulder. Rapid, rippling pain tore through His muscles from arm to hip, robbing him of balance and control. He couldn’t swing or jab the knife, nor could he even stay on his feet. The guy was fast, too, nearly drilling Tanner with a second shot before some other danger pulled his attention and the stunner away from Tanner’s fall. He fired again.

This time, Goggles caught his target square in the chest, but that target didn’t seem to care. Analu plowed right over him with a raised elbow that drove Goggles head and shoulders first against the concrete wall.

Rolling onto his side, unable to move his right arm, Tanner grabbed at the stunner. The distraction let Analu pivot and attack once more. Analu drove that same elbow into Goggles’ side, pushing him back and making room for a follow-up with his opposite fist straight to the temple. Goggles reeled. The stunner fell.

At the other side of the fight, Flat-Top managed to shove Stray away. He got up fast, producing a small laser pistol from nowhere before he was off his knees. Stray was faster. She barely swept the weapon out of line with her front paws, buying herself half a second. She bought more time with a fierce snap of her jaws toward her enemy’s face. Primal fear got the better of Flat-Top as he yelped and backed away.

Goggles deflected Analu's next attack with skilled footwork and both arms up to redirect Analu away. Quick punches to the chest and jaw showed off mastery at some martial art or another. Analu weathered every blow without faltering, but the kick he suffered to his gut naturally pushed the combatants a little farther apart. Goggles tensed in an eyeblink-long wind-up for some serious blow.

In that same instant, still on the floor beneath Goggles and Analu, Tanner finally had the kitchen knife in his left hand. He swung hard and cut Goggles deeply just over the boot of his planted foot. Whatever attack Goggles planned for Analu never came. Instead, Goggles spun and kicked low to knock the blade from Tanner's hand.

The guy was good: fast, strong, focused, skilled. Tanner had fought men like him before, but never after a shot from a stunner. Worse, the guy knew when to change the game. He spun away from Tanner and Analu to rush the others all too close by in the hallway.

Arthur moved to block, but the mismatch was obvious from the start. His courage couldn't make up for the assassin's skill. Goggles swatted him out of the way with a swift and powerful punch—and then stopped as Rhea kicked him hard in his wounded ankle. Together, she and Phoebe shoved Goggles back into the uglier fight.

Analu stepped over Tanner with a low punch that drove Goggles against the wall. A second low punch followed, then two more with relentless speed. Goggles staggered, defense broken, but didn't yet fall—until Analu swept him up in a bear hug, lifted the man off his feet, and hurled him to the floor with an angry shout. Goggles landed hard with all four limbs flailing in shock before going limp on the tile.

"Aargh!" Flat-Top struggled with Stray against another wall, struggling to free his right wrist and his weapon from her jaws. He punched at her head with his free hand, too close to miss but doing little apparent good. Thankfully, the pistol didn't go off.

Growling, Tanner pushed off the floor and onto a trembling right leg. His left hand swept a new weapon off the floor. The lack of fire from Flat-Top's gun made sense to him with one more step. Flat-Top probably had an optical safety set to fire only on a positive target. Either the alien body confused the settings or Stray never gave him the chance.

"Stray. I've got it," said Tanner. "Let him go."

She growled, but complied. The instant her jaws relaxed, Flat-Top tore his wrist away.

"Alright," said Flat-Top, "let's—"

Tanner blasted him. The stunner's crackling white energy had nearly taken Tanner out of the fight, but he'd only suffered a hit to the shoulder, and probably a graze at that. Flat-Top took the same hit squarely in the chest. He collapsed instantly.

Silence followed. Tanner took nothing for granted, turning in place to check every angle and every ally. Stray seemed unhurt, though Tanner didn't know what injuries her fur might cover. Analu stood watch over Goggles, breathing a little heavy but not bleeding like the unconscious assassin on the floor. Past Analu, Arthur stretched his neck and gingerly touched his jaw. Rhea and Phoebe stood beside him without a mark on them. "We're okay?" Tanner huffed. He saw nods. He let out another breath. "We're okay."

"Probably should've brought more than a kitchen knife," said Rhea.

"Probably," Tanner conceded. "It's what I could grab fast."

"I thought you were gonna kill them. You're not...?" Rhea left the rest unspoken.

"No! Not if I don't have to. They're down. Jesus."

"Well, I don't know!" Rhea retorted. "People say one thing and do another all the time."

It was another point Tanner had to concede. He couldn't count how many times the Navy had shown him exactly that—or blown it himself. He turned back to Stray. "How did you know?"

"They meant us harm," she answered. "We know when predators draw near. It is more than scent or sound. It is in every sense." Stray tapped the floor beside Flat-Top. "These were predators in flight. They attacked, and failed, and wished to escape."

The statement turned him to the obvious next step. He should've gotten to it already. Tanner scanned the area and claimed all the fallen weapons. Arthur opened the strangers' tool kit while Phoebe called up the building's network screen on her holocom. Analu and Stray stood watch over the fallen. Tanner moved to continue, but with his hands full, he handed the knife off to the nearest available friend—and then made a double take. "Don't stab anyone," he told Rhea, and then handed Phoebe the stunner.

"Not my first thought," Rhea mumbled.

Hustling, Tanner found the magnetic tape in the tool kit, rolled each man over onto their bellies, and bound their hands behind their backs. He patted the prisoners down as his friends watched. The search produced only holocoms from each man, one on a ring and the other an earpiece and wrist combination.

“Tools, filter cartridges, and a crawler drone,” Arthur said of the tool kit. “Nothing weird, except the drone seems like an expensive sort for maintenance work.”

“Still no alerts for the building,” Phoebe reported.

“Huh. They’ve got sensor components in this kit, too. None of them labeled, no packaging,” said Arthur.

“Wanna bet those components came out of our system and they work just fine?” asked Analu.

“Okay. Okay, they’re down.” Tanner huffed. He stared at the fallen. “Think it through.”

Rhea waited through one beat of silence, then the next. “Tanner. Maybe with us?” she suggested.

“Right. Okay.” Tanner waved at the two slumped men. “They tried to poison us through the vents. They’re in disguise. They wanted an accident, not a fight. That means there’s no tactical team for backup. No bomb to erase evidence. They *wanted* evidence to point away from a hit. No threat, no backup... would they have a getaway ride?”

“Might have a van outside,” said Rhea. “It’d look pretty weird for another maintenance guy to sit there waiting for them, though. Especially on a Friday night.”

“Did they have anyone watching them?” Tanner asked. “Their holocoms are off, but did they fire off any messages before they decided to bail?”

Arthur brought up the opening menu screen for one holocom and then the other. Simple, standard icons and bland backgrounds showed nothing of interest. “Doesn’t look like it. Give me a minute.” He knelt at their prisoners to put fingers and eyeballs to security screens.

“Will that work?” asked Analu. “Some pieces can tell if the owner is unconscious or—”

The first holocom screen remained unchanged when Arthur put the device in contact with its owner. The second holocom’s screen blinked to new life. Icons and status windows appeared on the menu screen. Arthur smiled. “It’s always security versus convenience.”

“Stray, have you gotten any sketchy feelings about anyone else? Feel any now?” asked Rhea.

“No. None,” said Stray. “It is harder to sense danger inside buildings. Walls and doors block the warnings. I am used to more open surroundings. But I sense no other danger.”

“This piece is pretty light on tools and files, but I don’t see any messages,” said Arthur. “It’s only one of two. Still, I’d guess the other one is also clean. Any communication would be one more piece of incriminating evidence.”

“Are they who I think they are?” asked Phoebe. The question took Tanner a beat to process before he realized she was asking him specifically. She nodded to the two assassins. “Were they here for you, or for *us*?”

The question pulled Tanner out of tactical urgency. He already had the answers to most of those concerns. This was the next step. He looked at the hitmen, reconsidered those tactical answers... and frowned. “They came for us. Most of us.”

“But not me,” said Stray.

“No.”

“How do you know?” asked Phoebe.

“I don’t. Tanner is sure,” said Stray.

“These guys aren’t corporate or from some government.” Tanner waved at Goggles. “This guy has a protective weave under his coveralls, and they both had weapons. That’s ego and paranoia. Sloppy. Covert operation types wouldn’t bring any of that. They’d surrender to the constables and handle it with money and lawyers. That’s harder if they’re caught armed. The holocombs are a tell, too. Covert guys would have better security.

“The people who come after me don’t want collateral damage. They *really* wouldn’t want the blowback from killing an alien. If Stray was the target instead of me, they’d have done more homework on their method. Whoever sent these guys has money, and they want this to look like an accident, but they wanted all of us. Stray was just in the way, same as the others upstairs.”

“Oh god.” Phoebe winced. “Lisa and Robbie and... this could’ve killed everyone.”

“For no reason except us,” said Analu. “Although the guys we’re talking about may have seen Stray as a bonus.”

“Yeah. Maybe,” said Tanner.

“Why?” asked Stray. “I understand Tanner has enemies, but many of them would seem indifferent to me. Why would anyone harm the rest of you?”

The others exchanged quick glances. “We’ve gotta tell her,” said Phoebe.

“Oh, we’re gonna tell her,” said Rhea. “What are we gonna do about it? We’ve got the same problem as before. If we go to the constables, we’re screwed, too.”

“And if we pull the trigger on our threat, we’re also probably screwed,” said Arthur. “They’ve also had weeks to mitigate their vulnerabilities and cover their tracks.”

“They’re not gonna stop, either. They blew this, but they’ll try again,” said Analu.

“Yeah. Damn. I should’ve known better,” Tanner muttered. “I *did* know better.”

“Then why’d you stop with the holocom and the threat?” asked Rhea.

“Because the other option was murder. Do you know how sick I am of killing? You don’t know what that’s like. I don’t want you to know. *You* don’t want to know. And I didn’t want any of you *hiding bodies*. Do you get that? I don’t want you looking over your shoulders for the rest of your lives.”

“He was looking out for us,” Phoebe said quietly.

“I’m not playing parent,” Tanner told them. “It’s not an RA thing. I’m your friend, and I’m as lost and as ridiculous as you are. I’ve just been down one street you guys haven’t, and I’m telling you it fucking sucks. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“You wanted this to go away. It has not,” said Stray.

“Yeah.” Tanner stared at the unconscious hitmen. “I’m sorry. Fuck.”

“We all brought this on, except Stray,” said Analu. “What do we do about it?”

“The bosses don’t know yet,” Rhea thought out loud. “It’s only two guys, no traffic on their holocoms. They needed us all together. Gas wouldn’t take long, but they’d want to make sure.”

“And then get out of here and off campus clean without any communication to trace,” said Phoebe.

“Alibis, too. The bosses will have alibis,” said Rhea.

“They do.” Arthur flashed a screen of his own, showing mostly text in a lovely scripted font and a few small logos. “I’ve kept track of them. They’re hosting a dinner and salon at a restaurant near the waterfront. It’s for a council candidate. Local politics. The event would’ve started thirty minutes ago.”

Tanner stared at the invitation, feeling like an idiot. Feeling like an asshole. Angry, rushed, and ultimately doomed.

A paw touched his hand. “Tanner. You are not alone,” said Stray.

He blinked at her, and then his friends. The self-recrimination didn’t help. He dropped it.

“We’ve got two hours to bring down a mob family without killing anyone,” said Tanner. Then he looked down at the pair of hitmen. “Shit. And there’s this.”

“Nah, I worked that out already,” said Rhea. “The spaceport is on the way from here to the waterfront. That part won’t even be hard.”

“The spaceport?” asked Tanner.

“Yeah. Don’t tell me with all your crazy shit, you don’t know how to sneak off the planet.”

“Sure, but—” Tanner stopped. The next obvious complication got in the way. “What about the others upstairs? What do we tell them?”

“We tell them the obvious thing,” said Rhea. “Facilities fucked something up down here and we’re all going to Dean Tele’s house to bang on her door about it. With all the other shit going on, they’ll believe it. Don’t worry about them. Think about the bad guys. We need an angle.”

She wasn’t wrong. Tanner hadn’t even gotten to that point, but her question sparked a thought: “Hey, did any of you get the sense that dad and son don’t like each other very much?”