

NEED TO KNOW
PMF 7 Chapter Eight
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“We knew this would be tough. It’s why I kept counseling patience. You wanted to keep this off-campus, and I agree with that. They’re not making it easy on us.”

Nicholas looked only for a moment at the three-dimensional holo projection of the campus spread across the table. Most of the image obviously came from some public source. The red and blue arrows and the annotations in text were Pete’s work. Lachlan, Lou, and a couple others stood at the table, having worked with Pete on the matter, but Pete did the talking.

“You didn’t call a meeting and bring visuals to say you’re stumped,” said Nicholas. “This better be more than an update.”

“More of a pitch, really,” said Lachlan.

“First, I want to make the situation clear,” said Pete. “We’ve got all their class schedules, we’ve got some surveillance, and we have more sources than just Lou’s nephew now. They can’t know who they’re talking to, so we must be careful what we ask. We also breached the university’s systems, so we’ve got all the data those have to give.

“The targets leave campus occasionally, but none of it holds to a real schedule and it’s never the whole group. Malone hits a dojo a few times a week, but varies his sessions and routes. He’s clearly been trained to watch for surveillance. Analu is usually with other people, so that complicates things. Nweke goes out completely randomly, including when she’s got classes scheduled. Freeman almost never leaves campus at all.

“And then there’s the alien. She’s almost always got someone from the group with her when she’s outside the dormitory, and Dayton is with her most of the time, too. We’re pretty sure Dayton is actually Diplomatic Service like the media says, and not some undercover type. When the alien is outside the dorm, she’s usually with Dayton and one or more of our targets.

“We’re not seeing real security or bodyguards. A couple other diplomat types rotate in for a day here and there, maybe to give Dayton a break, but that’s it. And life is business as usual for the other floors on the dormitory. No change at all.

“The bottom line leaves us with few opportunities and none of them ideal given the separation. They made a group shopping trip once, without Freeman but including a couple other dorm residents. With the alien there, you can imagine how many eyes were on them at the time.”

“Yeah, I saw that on the fuckin’ news,” said Nicholas. “Like a cutesy feel-good story. ‘Watch the alien critter shop like a person.’ At least the media didn’t interview Malone or the rest.”

“They tried to talk to the others,” said Pete. “Malone opted out. So did most of the rest. Analu talked for a second, but it was simple positive spin with no details. He’s had media training for sports, and it shows that he’s careful. That’s another warning sign for us.

“On the bright side,” Pete continued, “we haven’t seen any sign of them following up on the stolen data. We’ve cut all the connections we—”

“Nah, forget that.” Nicholas cut him off with an irritated gesture. “I know all that. *I* cut most of those connections. That doesn’t fix the problem. It’s lost profit and lost leverage while these fuckin’ punks still have a gun pointed in our direction. And they’re kids. That gun could go off by accident. We’re not gonna hope it goes away on its own. You’ve got a pitch. Let’s hear it.”

Pete shared a pensive look with the rest of the little team. Lou grunted uncomfortably and looked away. Lachlan folded his arms and shrugged. With that, Pete tabbed the display to zoom in on the dormitory with blueprints from the university’s database. The holograms expanded the seventh floor out of proportion to the rest to show detailed floor plans, along with a list of residents complete with facial icons down one side of the projection.

“According to all our campus sources, this dorm and specifically this floor is a madhouse. They have parties, pranks, and stupid stunts. They’ve also had fires. Broken hospitality systems. Disabled security. Everything short of violence—until Malone moved in, and then they had that, too. But he stopped all the calls to campus safety. That’s *why* the school put him in that dorm. They wanted him to sit on all the little crazies. Thing is, nobody believes he stopped the nonsense. They all figure he just keeps it on their floor so nobody gets in trouble.

“We don’t *want* to make a move on campus, but it’s our only shot at everyone in the same place at the same time. With their rep, everyone will believe an accident.” Pete tapped the controls. Red lines traced out infrastructure paths within the walls and ceiling of the dormitory’s seventh floor.

Nicholas sat up. His face turned grave. He took in Lachlan and Lou’s uncomfortable postures with a careful eye. “That’s an accident?”

“It’s the sort of thing that happens when amateurs tamper with safety systems,” said Pete. “We need it to sneak up on them, so nobody knows they’re in trouble until it’s too late. And as you said, we need to get all of them. That probably means taking out more than our subjects.”

“Dad,” Lachlan began, “this will get more than a police investigation. I’m talking about people we can’t buy off. With the alien there, it’s gonna be Union agencies, and—”

“It’ll be credible,” said Pete.

“—and it’s Malone,” Lachlan resumed. “Others have tried.”

“The others have all gone right at him and he’s taken them by surprise,” said Pete. “We can slip in as regular building maintenance. He won’t ever see this coming. No contact needed. Even if he sees our people, he won’t recognize them.”

“You’re confident,” Nicholas observed. “You’ve done this before?”

Pete nodded.

“Jesus.” Nicholas stared at the holograms. “How many are we talking?”

“Fewer than usual, since it’s the summer session,” said Pete. “Fourteen, plus Dayton and the alien. One or two of the others might be out for the night.” He noted Lachlan’s discomfort and nodded in concession. “If the building safety systems kick in late, this might affect a few more on the adjacent floors.”

“Dad, this is too much,” said Lachlan. “We can get the ones who—”

“*You* started this! The whole mess came from you,” Nicholas interrupted.

“For money, yeah. And then I only tried to get our money back. I didn’t want this.”

“Well, we’ve *got* this. We need to deal with it. You’ve taken people out before. It’s part of the business.”

“Cutting losses is also part of doing business,” said Lachlan.

“That fucker threatened me. Got in my face, took my holocoms, and threatened me. All of us. We’re not letting this go. Don’t tell me you’ve gone soft all of a sudden. Or did Malone take all your guts along with my data?”

“It’s not that, Dad. It’s everything. All of it. Malone, the alien, the blowback, the collateral damage. It’s too much. I get taking out Malone, but the whole floor? Random college kids? Half of ‘em didn’t do shit to us.”

“How often do you think something like this gets done without any splash?” Nicholas waved at the holographic dormitory. “You think everybody Malone took out had a gun in their hand? It’s

always messy. Everyone we've ever hit had family or friends or someone relying on them." That gave Nicholas another thought. He gestured to Lou and the others. "Think about all the people on our payroll. We've got people relying on us, too."

Lachlan's frown turned even more skeptical, but he said nothing.

"Are we gonna have a problem, Lachlan?" Nicholas pressed.

"No," said Lachlan.

Nicholas turned back to Pete. "What do you need?"

As Pete opened up a new holo screen with lists of steps to take and gear to acquire, Lachlan's eyes drifted back to Lou. The older man shrugged. "They aren't *my* kids," said Lou.

* * *

"Technically, yes, we're poisoning ourselves." Rhea lounged mostly sideways with her feet on the table rather than stretching all the way out on the couch. It wasn't practical—she had the couch to herself—but then, her sideways tilt wasn't practical, either. "Let's call it what it is. We only do it a little bit, though. Only enough to be fun."

Stray sat on the floor beside Rhea's couch and table, easily within reach. Her snout came up to the table, where a bag of potato crisps and a wide bowl of water filled the space beside Rhea's bottle of beer. "But you said drugs affect your judgment?"

"They can, yeah. Depending on what kind of thing we're talking about. Some drugs are only about the body, but lots of them alter your mind for a little bit."

"The fun drugs, you said. Not the healing drugs."

"Right. Those are medicine, or meds for short. That's different," said Rhea.

"Medicines are drugs, but not all drugs are medicines."

"Yeah. You got it. I was afraid that would be confusing."

"So drugs are fun in little bits, but become poison if you take much more?"

"That's it, yeah. I can drink this beer and maybe I won't notice it. I can drink a few and be fine. But if I kept drinking it all the time, it would mess me up. You can die from drinking way too much. They even call that one alcohol poisoning. Other drugs are the same way. Some people are more sensitive than others, too. You've gotta be careful with it."

"If they affect your judgment, how do you know when you've had too much?"

“Pfffff, that’s what everybody says when they don’t want you to use anything at all.” Rhea grinned into another pull from her bottle. “If you’re smart, or if you’re careful, you can feel it getting too much. Sometimes that means it’s already too much and you’re gonna feel gross or get sick, but then you learn to stop before that. When you can’t stop, or you always want more, that’s addiction, and that’s bad.”

“And you are not addicted,” said Stray.

“Nah.”

“You know for certain, even if your mind is altered.”

“I’m careful, and I’ve studied, and I’ve even done math. Also, I’ve got a little thing on my holocom that tells me when I should stop.

“I don’t like the stuff that really messes you up, anyway. It’s all too rough. Or expensive. Some stuff can get you addicted fast even if you don’t really like it, and that’s real bad. That’s the other thing: if a drug is really dangerous, they make—sorry, the government might make it illegal. That usually just makes it more expensive and you get in trouble if they catch you with it. Doesn’t really stop anything. Might even make the problem worse. People been chasing that one around for centuries.”

“What are we talking about?” Arthur breezed into the rec room, passing the couch on his way to the kitchenette.

“Drugs,” answered Stray. “I asked Rhea about beer, and that turned to a larger subject.”

Arthur paused to glance around the room. It was only the three of them. He made a face. “As soon as Rebecca and Tanner aren’t around, you teach her about drugs?”

“No, not as soon as they’re gone.” Rhea threw a potato crisp at him. “Stray’s been here for weeks. We’ve hung out. She asked.”

“I have wanted to ask before, but I sensed you did not want to talk about it in front of others,” said Stray. “You have been altered many times, often with different scents. I was curious.”

Arthur snorted. Rhea threw him a glare, prompting more of a laugh from him. “No, you’re the one to ask,” he said. “You’re the expert.”

“Yes. Rhea is studying public health,” said Stray.

That stopped him. “Wait. Your major? How did I not know that?”

“I dunno, jackass, how did you not know that?” Rhea shot back.

Arthur raised his hands in surrender and apology.

“I don’t do the nasty stuff,” Rhea resumed for Stray. “I look stuff up, I watch the monitor on my holocom, and I use common sense. I don’t push it on anyone else, either. That’s an asshole move. I also don’t worry about the wet blankets.” She struck Arthur with another hurled crisp, this time without even looking.

Stray nuzzled forward at her bag to claim a few crisps for herself. She crunched and chewed while watching in silence. The others had learned enough of her body language to know she was amused—and didn’t want to interrupt the source of amusement.

“As long as I don’t have to hold your hair up while you’re sick again, it’s fine by me.” Arthur pulled a bottle of juice from the kitchenette. “And as long as you don’t destroy any more appliances. Or wander into my suite chasing ghosts.”

Stray perked up. “Drugs help you see ghosts?”

“Kinda,” Rhea grinned.

“No,” said Arthur.

Stray settled. “You are teasing me again.”

“Only a little. I’m sorry. Should I tease Arthur instead?”

“Yes,” said Stray.

“No,” said Arthur.

“When are you gonna ask Phoebe out?” asked Rhea.

Arthur blinked and frowned.

“Rhea, that is too far.” Then Stray swiftly turned back to Arthur and her snout shrank below the table. “I am sorry. I should not have said that, either.” Her head dipped further as Arthur reddened, with only her eyes now visible. “Or that. I am sorry, Arthur.”

“It—fine. It’s fine,” said Arthur. “It’s nothing. Rhea, please just leave it alone.” He walked out.

“Aw, Arthur, I didn’t mean anything... damn.” Rhea rolled her eyes. She tilted her bottle toward Stray. “That’s the affected judgment for you. Sometimes you say things you probably shouldn’t. Help me remember to apologize when I’m not altered?”

“Yes. I would like to talk to him now. Is that rude? I will be back.”

“Nah, I’ll be here. Tell him I’m sorry. Might not come out of my mouth right.”

Stray rolled sideways out of her spot and then cleared the open space to the door with a single hop. She loped after him in a gait that was casual for her but caught up easily before Arthur reached the door to his suite. “Arthur, can we speak?”

He looked back, still tense and frowning, but released some of that tension when he saw Stray was alone. “Sure. What is it?”

“I think it might be best if this was private. For you,” Stray added.

She’d never brought up the issue of privacy before. Not as anything more than a curiosity, at least, and never for herself. “Sure. The others are out, if you want to come in?” Arthur opened up the door to his suite and ushered her into the central living room. Life with three other college guys and rare visits left the space a bit cluttered, but not unsightly. He gestured to the space in front of their couch as he sat down. “What’s on your mind?”

“First, Rhea is sorry. She did not think she would hurt your feelings. She said the beer affected her judgment of what to say. Still, she believes you and Phoebe like to be together and you make each other happy. I see it, too. That is not why I am here.”

Arthur opened his mouth but closed it before speaking.

“We saw each other today at lunch. You passed without speaking to me. This has happened several times. When we are here, you are happy to talk to me. Outside the dorm, you avoid me. You seem anxious. You were anxious when I first came, too. More than the others. Why?”

This time when Arthur opened his mouth, it stayed open awkwardly. He searched for words. “It’s not personal—not about you, anyway. I’m nervous about all of this. About having you here. I like you, and I like having you here... but I worry about the attention that follows you.”

“The attention frightens you,” said Stray.

“Yes. I suppose it does.”

“You do not want to explain why.”

“Stray, you are my friend,” he said. “I am glad you’re my friend. But everyone is watching you, and if I’m there, they see me, too. Right? It’s not just eyes. It’s cameras. You have been in the media. That part is with your consent, but other pictures aren’t. Neither of us can control that. I don’t want to be on anyone’s camera. Does that make sense?”

“Oh. I understand. My people have this problem on Voltaire. Rebecca warned that we would be recorded often.” Stray watched him. “Your fear is different from ours. You are hiding. You are in danger.”

“Not if I’m ignored,” said Arthur. “That’s why I stay away from you. That’s the only reason. And I didn’t say anything because... well, you don’t exactly keep secrets.”

Stray’s head tilted downward. Her ears dropped and twitched at the sides of her head.

“Can you keep this one?” he asked. “Please don’t tell the others.”

“They would help. Rhea is clever. Tanner knows what it is like to be afraid.”

“I know. Both of them,” said Arthur. “I trust them, but the fewer people who know a secret, the better. That’s how a secret works. Okay?”

“Yes.” Stray tilted her head to one side. “This is why you are shy with Phoebe. You don’t want her to know.”

“She’d figure it out very fast, yes,” Arthur grumbled. “*I* haven’t figured out how to handle *that*. But I will. Give it time? Leave it to me, please.”

“I will. It is your concern. I will help if...” Stray stopped. Her head tilted again. She stared. “This is about both of us. You feel we are connected.”

Arthur rubbed his face and sighed. “Are you sure you aren’t telepathic?”

“I am sure. That idea has been explained to me. If I could hear your thoughts, I would not need to ask questions.”

“Yeah, but you can read lots more about how people feel than any of my people can,” he grumbled. “We share a couple things in common. I don’t want to talk about it. Maybe someday, but not yet. Is that okay?”

“Yes,” said Stray. “I would help you if you asked. So would the rest of the herd.”

“I know. They are helping. But it’s... sometimes it helps more to stand apart. Does that make sense?”

“Yes.” Stray tilted her ears back and twitched her nose in the Runners’ version of a smile. “It is how I got my name. I have done the same. I understand.” She put her paw on his hand. “You must also know when to join the herd again, and when to let the herd protect you. It is why we have a herd.”

* * *

The conversation sparked a familiar urge. Stray liked to roam and explore. Wherever the herd settled, she wanted to know more—about terrain and features, about sounds and scents, about threats nearby. Every herd scouted before settling. To Stray, they never scouted enough. Scouting was the best part.

Stray wanted to see and hear and sniff beyond the horizon.

Others were content with what they knew. They waited until the entire herd moved on. Frustrated, Stray learned to go out on her own—not for love of solitude, but out of curiosity. More than once, that curiosity brought benefit to the herd. She found better water, useful plants, cooler shade. On occasion, she found danger before it found the herd.

Stray's independence was less cause than effect. It satisfied her curiosity, so she grew used to it. To others of the herd, that independence became her defining characteristic, but Stray knew what came before it. She never lost either.

That mix of thoughts and memories rolled around in her mind and her gut as she left Arthur. He was part of the herd, and he was afraid... and, perhaps fortunately, Rebecca had finally taken a “day off,” as the humans called it. Before she left, she asked Stray not to leave the building without company, to which Stray agreed... but neither said anything about individual floors, or if “the building” included the patio and greenery around it.

An eager tension rolled from her jaws to her hips, bidding her to move. Maybe, Stray considered, she liked her independent streak.

The elevator arrived with no one to share it. She waved her paw in front of the control icon and went all the way to the ground floor. Her ears swept back and stiffened and her nose twitched in silent glee as she walked out into a mostly quiet and clear lobby. Signs and chairs and beanbags and the delivery-routing lift all sat in silence.

She caught the footsteps and scent well before the young woman rounded the corner from the entrance. Stray hesitated, but knew some encounter was inevitable. That was partly the point. She waited for the new arrival to come into view, carrying a bundle of cloth and a plastic case of tools for some project or another. The young woman blinked in surprise. “Oh, um. Hi.”

“Hello.” Stray shuffled out of her way and then rose on her haunches. She recalled Phoebe's phrasing from a similar moment. “Sorry if I'm in your way.”

“No, you're fine. Thank you.” The stranger hesitated, but kept walking.

As Stray had told Arthur, Runners were not telepaths, but emotions and connections could be as plain to Stray as the paint on the walls. The stranger projected a mix of warmth and curiosity, with questions that seemed obvious—*Are you alone? Is that allowed? Are you lost? Do you need help?*—but she asked none of them. Instead, Stray caught another impulse from the young woman, overpowering and wildly common among humans: the urge to not get involved.

She flashed another smile at Stray and disappeared around the next corner into the elevator.

Stray felt a similar conflict, but with more intent than impulse. She wanted to ask the woman her name. She wanted to know everyone in the building. The greater interest won out as Stray let the woman go and embraced her freedom of movement. The main doors to the building opened up for Stray as they did for anyone else, releasing her into the sunlight and open air.

Spacious greenery, scattered trees, and open pathways surrounded the ten-story dormitory. The nearest buildings on two angles stood on the other sides of big lawns. Scattered students walked the pathways. Some seemed absorbed in their own thoughts. More than a few made a double-take or even stared at the furry alien out on her own in front of the dormitory... but none approached her or called out.

Stray circled the building, sniffing and listening and looking. She took in the scents of flowers in a bed along one wall. She climbed up one of the nearby trees, though only to a few meters, just to get a feel for it. Everything felt safe and calm. Satisfied, she moved to the back of the dormitory, sniffing with interest at all the scents of the garage. Rhea told her the space was small for its type, holding only a couple of vehicles for the whole dormitory's use and a couple others belonging to students willing to pay for parking.

Though the scents were generally unpleasant, Stray found the whole space fascinating. Humans had perfectly good legs. They evolved to move, yet they relied heavily on vehicles to go farther, faster, and longer. Seeing the results, Stray couldn't entirely argue with that urge.

Doors inside the garage brought Stray back into the ground floor. By then, more students passed through the lobby, mostly returning from classes. This time, a few were not so shy.

"How's it going?" asked many, or with other words to the same effect.

She answered readily with, "It's going nicely," and adjusted to variation.

Other questions were slightly more pointed:

"Are you with anyone? Do you need something?"

"Should you be out on your own?"

"I'm fine," she answered to most. It wasn't so different from, "How's it going," especially in the way a non-answer could satisfy many. From most she encountered, Stray sensed the same mix of curiosity, kindness, and wariness. Her dorm neighbors meant well. They also had their own matters to attend. Asking felt like a responsibility or obligation to many, and they would help out this particular stranger, but even the friendly ones were happy to be unneeded.

A few who stopped to chat came to the question Stray felt unspoken from so many, from Voltaire to her classrooms: “Are more of your people coming?”

“None have asked so far,” Stray answered. “Maybe someday, but I doubt it will be many. We’ll see.” It was an honest enough answer.

Sticking close to the building gave her only two directions to wander, and she’d already seen the basement. While lightly welcomed by all, she had no clear invitation from the herds on the second or third floors. The fourth floor held common areas, like the gym, the community space, and the “black box” holography workshop for design and production work. Stray found the technology interesting, but the people interested her more. They showed more interest, too.

“Are people nice to you here?”

“Could I interview you for my psych class?”

“Are they being fair to your people on Voltaire?”

Stray didn’t know how to answer that last one. The truth seemed obvious to her, but humans had vastly different ideas about what should and shouldn’t be said out loud. Rebecca tried to teach her about that many times. “You never know how far your words will travel on their own, or how they’ll be changed,” Rebecca had said.

Stray and the rest of her people learned many things about humans right away. They learned from their first moments out of the stasis chambers. Warnings from Rebecca and others sometimes put it all into context... and sometimes only compounded the Runners’ frustration. But the Runners knew how to play along.

“It’s complicated,” Stray said to the questions about Voltaire. She’d heard the diplomats use that one often. It satisfied as a response, but not an answer. Stray didn’t like giving it, either. She also didn’t like the feelings it stoked within her. She didn’t like *not* talking about it.

Maybe it was time. Stray returned to the elevator, waved at the panel for her floor and her herd... and felt her muscles tense and her fur and ears stiffen. Against her natural reactions, Stray waved at the panel again to stop the elevator. She looked at the floors and redirected herself to the seventh. The sensation returned—stronger now that she wasn’t merely passing through, but also less jarring once it was sustained. Something was wrong here. Someone.

She’d been invited to the sixth floor. Wen’s floor. Stray emerged from the elevator with her eyes wide, ears stiff, nose sniffing. The layout was all the same as her own floor, with the same rooms and doors, but the decorations were all different. She found different colors, different signs. That

all made sense. Stray's sense of danger and threat made less sense. The hallways stood quiet. Sounds from the suites were muffled, but calm. Stray loped up and down the corridors, sniffing and listening, but she didn't find the threat.

In the same spot as Tanner's room upstairs, Stray found an open door with a simple paper sign taped to one side: "Not-Your-Mother Is: In." The last word sat on a separate paper, ready to be flipped. Sensing nothing new, Stray tapped the door chime.

"Butler, open," Wen called. She turned from her desk with some document in progress and brightened. "Oh, hi, Stray! It's nice to see you. Come in."

"Thank you. I am happy to see you, too." Stray shuffled inside, taking in the senior RA's room. She had more decorations and belongings than Tanner. More color. More life.

"What can I do for you? Are you on your own?" Wen's brow furrowed a bit as she noticed the last. She asked out of concern for Stray rather than for anything outside either of them. Stray could sense that much. Wen's care and warmth were sincere.

"Yes. I don't go far on my own. I know others will worry about me."

"Oh. Hah. They would, yeah. Is that different from your people? The herd thing?"

"Yes and no. I was known for wandering on my own. It's my name. That has come up more than once today. Maybe that's why I wanted to wander."

"Interesting. Well, it's fine to wander here, although this is sort of when everyone does their studying or goes out. No set schedule, just habit. It's pretty quiet right now."

"I noticed the silence and calm, but also something else. It is why I stopped here. I sensed..." Stray searched for the words again. She had pondered that since she stopped the elevator—not the *right* word, exactly, but what she wanted to tell Wen. They weren't the same thing. "Something felt wrong. Smelled wrong. Unhappy. Hostile. Threatening."

"Threatening? That's..." Wen frowned, considering it. She kept an open mind. Stray found that heartening. "I've got a couple residents in a blowup about some class project. It's harsh enough that I don't think it's really about the project, but they aren't bringing it to me. I don't think I'd call it threatening, though. You can smell hostility? In the elevator?"

"Not exactly. It's difficult to describe with the translator. You are surprised, but also not. Can you explain why not?"

"I guess I'm not," Wen stammered. Like many, she wasn't used to how Stray could 'read' her, as Rhea described it. "I hope this isn't insulting. People say some Terran animals can smell fear."

You aren't a Terran animal, but you seem like many, and your senses work differently from ours, so... maybe it's something like that? The more surprising part is being able to catch a scent while in the elevator, unless that scent lingered from someone passing through."

"I sensed more hostility than fear. Tension. Like someone wanted to bring harm. I felt the urge to hide or flee. Fear is the wrong word. So is scent... but it is like something in the air," said Stray, still looking for words.

"Oh! Wait. That makes sense. Some guys are working on the air system," said Wen. "They came by just a bit ago to check in, since I'm the lead RA. Bad readings in the system, I guess. Maybe you caught the scent of whatever's going on in the vents? They seemed kinda grouchy about starting a repair this late in the day. Maybe it was that."

"Maybe," said Stray. She doubted both possibilities, but this world was full of new scents and sensations. Wen knew the building better, and seemed unconcerned.

"I guess I'll keep an eye out, and you could keep your, um, nose up?" Wen smiled. "If it doesn't go away, let us know. But as far as I can tell, everything is fine."

"I will stay alert. Thank you, Wen. This is difficult to express to you."

"Language barriers are always a challenge, even with high technology. It can be frustrating. Just gotta be patient and work through it."

"Yes," said Stray. She liked Wen, but Wen did not understand. Stray could not explain it to her. Not yet. She couldn't explain several things to anyone... although with Rebecca gone, maybe now was her chance to try.

* * *

"A coyote asks to join your village. Will you accept?"

"Aw, Christ," Tanner sighed. The image that popped up over his animated forest village was not, in fact, a lone coyote. A cub dangled from her mouth—or at least he assumed the coyote's gender, given the context. Then he wondered how much he knew about coyotes. *They're predators and opportunists*, he considered, *and also adorable. Look at that cub. Is cub the right word?*

They're known to partner with other animals. They're also clever. Trickster figures in Native American cultures. Did the game designers take all that into account? Or are they just looking for predator antagonists?

Mom and cub stared forlornly at Tanner. They were awfully cute, and also sad... just like the bear he'd let into the village. That guy ate half the storehouse and the beavers couldn't do much about it, because the food was gone and he was a fucking bear.

"Tanner?" Stray stood at his open door. She looked first to Tanner in his chair with his feet up on his desk, and then to the holographic game images floating over his lap. "Is that from one of your classes?"

"This? No. This is a game on my holocom. I'm ahead on my class work and it'll be movie night too soon to start anything else. What's up?"

"What is the game?" Stray shuffled in closer, her eyes trained mostly on the images. "It is not like the others I have seen."

"It's, um. Not realistic," Tanner cautioned. "The game is about building a village, but the people are all animals. Terran animals, except intelligent. Sapient. The game has you manage resources, deal with dangers, and try to keep everyone happy."

"Human art often gives Terran animals sapience. Why?"

"Lots of reasons, I suppose. Maybe we were lonely for all that time before we met aliens. Maybe our animals are still more familiar. I kinda think animals are more likable than people a lot of the time. Animals don't do a lot of the terrible things humans do."

"I just spoke with Wen about my similarity to Terran animals." Stray's eyes still seemed mostly on the game images, but even after getting used to her, Tanner couldn't be sure. "It influences how many of your people view mine."

"Humans can be quick to take things at a surface level. Even when they know better, the habit and first impressions can be hard to shake. You already know that."

"Yes." Her attention didn't shift. "You wonder how it affected your judgment of us."

"Sure. I've come back to that a bunch. It's important to examine your biases."

"Has that changed anything for you?"

"No. Regardless of how you looked, the Minoans were horrible to your people. You deserved all the help I could give on the Preserve, and your people deserve humanity's help now. If your appearance works to your advantage, that's a good thing."

"Yes. Many humans feel we are cute. Adorable," said Stray. "Others have also seen us as animals. To them, that makes us lesser beings."

Tanner sighed. She hadn't said that before, but he wasn't surprised. "Yeah. I imagine."

“Some computer games recreate sports like rugby and soccer. I have seen many others where humans fight. They made me think of you. Do you play those games?”

“Only a couple,” said Tanner. “And only if they’re silly.”

“This game has little fighting. You like it for that reason.” Once again, she didn’t pretend that her insights were questions.

“Yeah.”

“You wish to avoid fighting.”

“Very much, yes,” said Tanner. “I don’t like hurting people.”

“You carry great sorrow for your past. Some guilt, but not much. More sorrow. And fear.”

Tanner closed his eyes. He meant to find words. Instead, right behind his eyelids, he saw *Saratoga* explode. A whole parade of up close and personal deaths lined up behind it. Tanner took a long breath and put them all on hold. The coyote and her cub waited for him when he opened his eyes again. So did Stray.

“I killed thousands of people,” said Tanner. “Mostly, there was no other choice. It was them or me, or maybe they’d have hurt someone else. I don’t feel a lot of guilt for that, but there’s some. The worst part is, most of them didn’t really decide to be there. They got there because of lies and pressure. You almost never get to fight the rich asshole who *caused* the whole fight. It sucks. My *fear* is that I’m not done. I’ll have to do it again. I don’t want to, but with the way my life has been... it seems inevitable.”

“Do you believe that is your fate?”

“Huh. A question instead of a statement.” He smiled a little. “I don’t believe in fate. I believe in cause and effect, and systems, and I believe some people never fucking learn. Like you’ve said, too many of the humans with the most power are the worst humans. Happens all the time.” He waved at the game. “I’m trying to live my life the way I want it, figure out what I want to do, but... sooner or later someone else is gonna try to drag me into another fight.”

“Ff-ff-ff,” said Stray—naturally, rather than through the translator. Her shoulders and forelegs twitched and withdrew. Tanner couldn’t infer much from her body language. Her motions and physiology didn’t conform to human patterns, no matter how many basics they shared in common, but she clearly had some reaction. The downward look away seemed natural, too. Then her holocom made a translation choice, perhaps on its own: “Oh.”

He waited, wondering if she had something to sort out in translation. Instead, she turned around to tug on the door with one paw, closing it for privacy. Then she turned back. Her big black eyes met his directly, without ambiguity this time.

“Tanner, I am so sorry,” said Stray.

“No, it’s okay. I’ve lived with this for a...” He stopped. His gut rumbled with an all too familiar unease while Stray stared. *Aw, hell*, Tanner thought. He sat up and turned in his chair to face Stray directly, banishing the game holos along the way. “What’s going on?”

“You keep many secrets. You don’t like them. Why?”

“Why do I keep them, or why don’t I like them?”

“Both.”

“I keep those secrets because they could hurt other people. I don’t like them because if it was only about me, I’d tell the world. Hell with it.”

“Is it safe to share secrets here?” she asked. “I trust you. I do not trust the rest of your world.”

“Fair.” Tanner reached under his desk to pop open the power outlet and pushed the kill switch he’d installed himself. Every hardwired device in his room went dead, including the lights and the butler systems. Natural light spilled in through the window. His personal holocom still had power, along with a few other devices. He also couldn’t account for surveillance from outside. For all of that, he had the pen-shaped muffler device in his desk drawer. Two clicks sent out countermeasure signals above and below human sensitivity.

“My holocom might be safer than yours,” he suggested.

Stray slipped the device from her left paw and turned it off. The holocom wasn’t built with her paws in mind, but she seemed practiced enough with it. Tanner put the device into a thick, signal-shielded sack he kept at his desk for just such a need. “If someone is spying through your holocom, this is as safe as I can make us without throwing it into the ocean,” said Tanner. He brought up the translator on his holocom and handed the device to her. “The problem with this sort of thing is you never really know if you’re safe. You can only do your best.”

“I understand,” said Stray. He had already set his holocom to match her chosen voice, if only as a ready backup in case hers broke. “Thank you.”

“What’s going on?”

“We have not...” Stray stopped. She tapped Tanner’s holocom, its menu screen still open from his activation code, and found the settings with more familiarity than her paws had with hardware. She turned the volume down carefully.

“We have not told humans everything,” said Stray. “When you and Alicia awakened us on the Preserve, you warned us of conflict among your people. Magenta and Glotho warned us, too. And then Alicia fought her fellow humans. We sensed how your people were like the Minoans, and how they are not. We were careful with the things we shared.”

“Okay. That was probably wise,” said Tanner.

“You do not know what we kept from you, or your people.”

“I’m sure my people kept a lot from yours. I don’t know what that would be, but I can imagine. It’s only fair. And you can’t trust every human.”

“No. We trust you. I trust our herd. I came to find you, but I trust the herd we now share, too.”

“Then you didn’t come here to go to school,” said Tanner.

“No. We needed to speak to you. We need someone we trust. If we ask for one of the other species, the Diplomatic Service would worry. They would watch.”

That feeling of dread that had knocked on the wall of Tanner’s gut now settled in like it had found the couch. Tanner took another breath. “Why did you need me? What haven’t you told all the other humans you’ve worked with?”

“We know how Amara killed the rest of our people,” said Stray. “The Minoans built a device that sent a scream through our minds across Voltaire. We could not move. We could only hurt and die. The scream left no mark upon the land. It hurt only us. We believe the device is still in the mountains on New Languedoc... and the rich asshole is looking for it, if he has not found it already.”

Tanner sat back in his desk chair. Questions lined up in his mind and in his throat, crowding together. The smug pit of dread in his stomach cracked open a beer and got unpleasantly comfortable.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“The Minoans used it on some of our herds and showed us after we were captured,” said Stray. “They showed us holos to frighten us into compliance and service. We knew the mountains. We saw and knew the slain. When we were awakened on the Preserve and the others told us of our world and its fate, we knew the Minoans had used the weapon across our world.”

“You haven’t told anyone?” he asked. “Not the Krokinthians or the Yanra on the Preserve?”

“No. We felt they were trustworthy, but they do not control our world. Secrecy is not in our culture. It is not in our nature. But the Minoans lied to us many times, and then we met your people. We learned. Mostly, it is a matter of saying less rather than more. Humans fill in the rest with their assumptions and imagination.”

“Yeah. Okay.” He couldn’t argue with that. “Why didn’t—?” Tanner began, but stopped. He stared at Stray while she stared back. She seemed patient. His crowded questions bumped together until a few of them answered one another. “You don’t want humans to know about this weapon because they might use it.”

“Yes. We don’t want anyone to have it. This weapon should not exist.”

“No, it shouldn’t,” said Tanner. Stray’s description of a scream reminded him of the trap his team had found in the airlock of the Preserve. To the humans, its wail and lights were unpleasant, but not truly harmful. The effect had been debilitating to Magenta. It might have even killed the Nyuyinaro if it had gone on long enough. Tanner wondered if this was the same sort of device, and if it could be adjusted to target different species, or if the Minoans simply hadn’t applied it to humans yet, or...

Stray sat up slightly on her haunches, but watched him in silence.

“It does exist,” Tanner said gently. “And if they had one—you think it was only one?—then the Minoans could make more. They might already have them.”

“Yes. Our world has been claimed by humans since we were taken. Humans hold other worlds between ours and Minos. Another attack would be more difficult, and it would be resisted.”

“That makes some sense.” The logic had obvious holes. Tanner had seen fleets drop out of FTL right over planets. Defensive depth could be irrelevant in many cases, and the Minoans had stealth and FTL tech the Union couldn’t match. But distance still mattered, and the Union knew Minos was a hostile threat. Voltaire would be defended.

“For all we know, the Minoans might be able to reactivate the one that’s already on Voltaire,” said Tanner.

“This is another of our fears,” said Stray.

That turned Tanner back to the other obvious issue: the Runners didn’t see the Minoans as their only threat. He couldn’t blame them. “The rich asshole is Jean Michel? Destiny?”

“Yes. He controls much of Voltaire,” said Stray.

“You’ve been here more than a month. You think Michel hasn’t found it already?”

“It is Minoan. It will be hidden well. We do not think he knows of the weapon itself, but he knows something. He hides much. And he is concerned about the area. I have heard nothing from my people to suggest he has found it yet, but he will eventually.”

“Okay. If he’s looking for it, or if he has it, then he’s tampering with alien technology. That’s illegal. It’s *very* illegal. Others have done it, and...” Tanner saw no shift in Stray’s posture. No change on her face. The shift happened in his own mind as he took those thoughts to their next steps. “And he’s doing it anyway, like the others have. Because he’s a rich asshole, and because some people never fucking learn.”

“We are animals to him,” said Stray. “He does not respect many of the humans of Voltaire, and we are less than humans to him.”

“If we can prove this to the Union authorities, they’ll have to take action, and...” again, Tanner stopped. “And that’s *if* they don’t already know, and if no one in the chain has already been bought. We can get around that, though. We just need to make a mess they can’t cover up. With the people you’ve got on your side, that should be easy.”

“That would only mean other humans would have the weapon,” said Stray.

Tanner stopped. That should’ve been obvious. It *was* obvious, he considered. He just hadn’t taken that next step in his thoughts yet, but it was right there. To him, the question of which humans held such a weapon mattered greatly. To the Runners, that probably made no difference... and maybe they were right. His shoulders sank. “Yeah.”

“This weapon should not exist,” said Stray.

“No, it shouldn’t,” Tanner agreed. “But it does. This has happened with humanity a lot. Once a bad idea becomes real technology, there’s no unmaking it. We only end it if it becomes ineffective, or there’s some other factor to make the bad idea pointless. With a weapon like this, the real way to defend against it is to study it, and then...” He paused. He saw the next inevitable step. “And then humans have an even better version of the thing that killed your people.”

“Yes,” said Stray.

He closed his eyes. He took long, steady breaths. She waited.

“Stray, you should understand... if Jean Michel is doing this, he’s breaking one of the most serious laws in the Union. Rich and powerful people get away with a lot of awful things, but this has real consequences even to the most powerful. I’ve seen it.”

“That has not stopped Michel,” said Stray.

“No, I know. The point is, now that I know, *I* could get in trouble for not telling anyone. And I could get in *real* trouble for interfering with this. I mean something like prison forever, if I live that long. A lot of people would love to see that happen to me.

“I also don’t work alone. Lots of people think I’ve pulled off all kinds of crazy stuff on my own, but really I had help almost every time. Sometimes a lot of help. Asking anyone to help means asking them to break the same laws and face the same consequences.”

Stray rose. “You will help?”

Tanner blinked. He hadn’t gotten through all the warnings, but once again, Stray saw right through him. “Well, yeah. We can’t let some asshole have a weapon like this, whether it’s Amara or Jean Michel. Of course, I’ll help.”

“Ff-ff-ff,” Stray twitched. This time the motion of her shoulders and hips put her farther back on her haunches. “Yes.”

“What is that reaction?” asked Tanner. “The ff-ff-ff. It doesn’t translate.”

“No,” said Stray. “It is guilt. Sorrow. Apology.” Her head twitched. Her dark eyes stared, but narrowed, almost like human eyes holding back tears. “You do not want to fight. You do not want to leave here. But you will help us.”

“Yeah.” Tanner held up a hand, mirroring the way she sometimes held up her paw to others. She met the motion with her touch. “Yeah, I will. But we have to figure this out carefully. We can’t do this alone, and I don’t know where to turn for help.”

* * *

“That’s Rhea Nweke, and that’s the jock. Analu something.” Callum panned left on the camera feed. Two more residents trickled into the rec room, churning up banter. He turned the volume down. “I forget those guys, but they’re part of the floor. Saw their faces on the roster.”

Minh looked over his shoulder partly out of curiosity and partly from necessity. The fifth floor wasn’t built for comfort, let alone living space. Building systems from sanitation and plumbing to power relays filled most of this level. Ensconced within central ventilation, Callum and Minh accepted narrow ducts, lower ceilings, and sparse interior lighting for full network access. Their

little crawler drone could navigate all the way into the rec room vent without having to cut through a single filter.

“Freeman’s out of the bathroom,” Minh observed. Another recent arrival left Nweke and Analu at the kitchenette to talk to him. “Who’s the blonde?”

“Phoebe something. Who cares?” Callum shrugged.

“The bigger the crowd, the messier this could get,” said Minh.

“Mess makes for camouflage. We’ve done it before,” said Callum.

“No, I mean it’s more shit that can go wrong.”

Callum frowned. “How often has that happened? It’s gas. They’ve all gotta breathe.”

Minh looked back to the open access panel. Their work was perfect, down to the same brand of cleanser cartridge used by campus facilities workers. Software tricks and a few clever lies would point any investigation right back to a couple actual campus workers. Every clue and cover-up trick would look like the workers trying to cover up careless mistake. The plan was solid... except for the nature of their targets. One target, in particular.

“We can’t make any mistakes,” said Minh. “They’ll bring out the fuckin’ Union Investigation Service for Malone’s ass.”

“Fremantle Constables gotta consent to that first. They’re covered,” said Callum.

“Which only means they’ll send in Directorate agents or some other spooks to do it in secret. Those guys might dig even deeper just to have something to show for it.”

“Are you saying you’ve got cold feet?” asked Callum.

“No. I’m saying we stay until we know it’s done and we’ve got it right.”