

ELEPHANTS
PMF 7 Chapter Seven
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Dad, Sharon,

I know my life is ridiculous, but you won't believe this one.

—Tanner Malone

Personal Correspondence, June 2280

Nicholas,

I talked to my nephew at the college. You won't believe this shit.

—Lou Edmonds

Personal Correspondence, June 2280

“I’m sorry to ask. I hope it isn’t rude, but... can you read?”

“I understand letters in English, and I am practicing,” said Stray. “I understand spoken English. When reading is confusing, your tools can translate writing into speech.”

“Yes, of course. Hrm.” Professor Philips paused first with an *I-hadn’t-thought-of-that* expression, only to tilt back into *but-I’m-still-not-satisfied*. Her careful neutrality faltered with a skeptical frown. “That’s not really reading, though.”

“It’s an accessibility tool. People use them all the time.” Tanner expected this sort of thing. He held his patience, even if it was annoying.

“I understand, but—”

“Oh shit,” gasped a student in the doorway. She wasn’t the first to stop in her tracks and point. “Is that... are they in our class?”

“Please take your seat,” said Phillips, shifting to a firmer but still patient tone. She swept a lock of hair over her shoulder as the student moved on, taking a seat with the rest of the two dozen wide-eyed onlookers in the classroom. “Essential Composition is mostly incoming freshmen,” Phillips noted. “With the summer session, practically everyone is coming straight from high school

graduation for an early start. Along with the subject, I have to teach many of my students *how to be* college students... which means handling some things like it's still high school," she muttered.

"We understand, Professor. That's why we are here," said Stray.

"Audio tools decide emphasis and tone in a text, rather than leaving that to the reader's interpretation," said Phillips. "Either you have a professional reader making those choices or the program follows a consensus. It still changes the experience. We try to get away from computer assistance here. It's often forbidden. Students need to learn the skills for themselves."

"We're not talking about the computer writing her papers for her," Tanner assured. "Tech assist isn't ideal, but people get by."

The professor's lips twitched again with another frown. "Will you be in class with us, Mr. Malone? Ms. Dayton? I assume you've already had composition."

"Only for the first session or two," Rebecca spoke up. "We'll be with her until we're sure this is comfortable. We also chose this section of Composition because Phoebe here lives on Stray's floor. We didn't want Stray to be alone."

"Hrm," Phillips murmured.

Standing behind Rebecca, Tanner, and Stray, Phoebe blushed. "I put this class off for other things. Got overwhelmed by all the choices. Sorry."

"No tech assistance in writing?" asked Phillips.

"She doesn't have the hands for writing like we do," said Rebecca. "That part will be speech-to-text, but it's a standard accommodation. As for coming up with her own work, that's not a problem. Runner culture is grounded in oral tradition. They're often as eloquent off the cuff as most people are when they write and revise."

"Hrm," Phillips repeated.

"I understand why you doubt that, Professor," said Stray. "I have said little in this conversation."

Chagrined, Tanner took the hint and glanced away. Rebecca caught on, too.

"I am here to learn. Will you teach me?" Stray asked.

All the professor's doubts and objections hit a wall. Tanner wondered if that wall was made of professional ideals or awkward self-awareness, but the result was the same. Phillips took a breath, squared her shoulders, and gave a crisp smile. "I'd be honored. Please take a seat."

They moved in as a group—or, Tanner thought, maybe as a herd. Phoebe took the lead this time, amiably picking a desk along the last row on the left where Stray would have space to settle beside

her. Comfier furniture like couches and big upholstered chairs worked fine for Runners, but smaller classroom desks didn't really fit. At a backward glance, Rebecca saw Phillips look on with concern. She waved it off. Stray had no problem crouching on the floor in the aisle. The others took open desks while the professor turned her attention to other students ahead of class.

"One down," Tanner said quietly.

"Down?" asked Stray. "Do you mean completed? Class has not yet begun."

"Yeah, but you're in. That was the only question. She won't take that back now."

"Were you worried she'd turn us away?" asked Rebecca.

"It's a bunch of new pressure all at once," said Tanner. "She's got an alien student and this means the Diplomatic Service is watching her teach. Can't blame her for being nervous."

"Tanner's used to people being unfair to him," said Phoebe.

"The professor is more nervous about Tanner's presence than mine or Rebecca's," said Stray.

He grimaced. "I'm kinda used to that."

"Oh, damn, wow," said the next student to walk into the classroom. He looked around until his eyes settled on the professor as an obvious authority figure. "Hey, is that the alien? Do we need extra shots for this class?"

* * *

Their second class took an entirely different turn.

Once more, they grabbed seats along the left of the class, with Stray taking the aisle—but this time in a two-hundred-seat lecture hall. Only half the seats were occupied, but that still left a hundred students constantly glancing their way before the professor came in at precisely the official start time.

"Hello, and thank you all for being here. I'm Professor Yang." Longevity treatments hid a couple decades from his mid-thirties appearance, but he carried himself with a youthful attitude and smile. "Let's make sure we're in the right place. This is The Modern Union. We've got an intro code in several subjects, since this is an interdisciplinary, blended social science course. Anyone lost? Am I lost?"

His audience gave up a few scattered chuckles. Nobody got up to leave. Professor Yang made the joke of his last question clear with a single tap at the holocom on his wrist. Projectors around

the room conjured a holographic star chart of the Union overhead, stretching out in three dimensions with soft labels in text for inhabited star systems and a few lines and shades in color for political boundaries.

Stray's whole body twitched at the sudden widespread special effects. Rebecca sat between her and Tanner, but they both noticed. "You okay?" she asked softly.

"Yes. Unexpected," said Stray.

"It's common technology, but this is a little dramatic," said Rebecca.

"Yes."

"We'll be talking about where we are and who we are," Yang went on. "We'll talk about history and how we got here, and we'll talk a lot about where '*where*' is. All the social sciences inform one another, but if we've got a focus, it's location. We'll talk about how the Union is interconnected despite light years between worlds, and how location drives events. And that's our other focus: current events, and what we've got going on in the here and now."

Tanner shifted in his seat. He wondered how much he would get out of this class, but it opened up many others as a prerequisite. He still wasn't sure which way to go for a new major. He also wanted at least one class with Stray, and this seemed like it would help her.

"I'm sure you've all noticed how the here and now is right here with us, here and now. I only got word in this morning's messages about our class roster. Stray," he said, eyes and smile rising directly her way, "welcome to Fremantle University and our class. We're delighted to have you here, and I look forward to learning from you as well."

Yang at his lectern was perhaps too far away to see Stray twitch. Most of the movement ran down her back and to her legs. She turned her head slightly toward Rebecca and Tanner.

"Thank you, Professor," Rebecca spoke up. "Stray is grateful to be here, but she'd like to carry on today like any other student."

"Of course," said Yang. "I also see we've got someone else here who's been involved in current events. Mr. Malone, welcome. I hope you'll share your experiences with us when relevant."

Tanner held back a wince and gave the simplest, subtlest wave of acknowledgment he could. A beat passed in silence, and then another before Tanner realized Yang waited for a reply. "I'm sure I'm not the only one here with personal connections," Tanner answered.

"Surely not," said Yang. "It's a big galaxy, and we've all got things to learn from one another. On that note, how many of us are from somewhere outside Fremantle?"

Hands went up. Yang carried on with this introductory monologue. Tanner sank slightly in his seat. He looked left to check on Stray again. Rebecca was turned her way, too, with one hand out to hold Stray's paw. The students in the row immediately behind theirs watched curiously rather than following Yang, and presumably the others right in front of their row listened, but Tanner risked it anyway: "Are you okay?"

Stray tilted her head. Her big eyes seemed to focus on Rebecca at first. Then she nodded. Rebecca leaned back toward Tanner, lowering her voice much more easily than Stray could turn down the volume of her holocom. "The Runners deal with this on Voltaire, too," she said quietly. "Lots of eyes and attention all at once, but all scattered. It's the difference between a herd and a crowd of strangers."

"I might know the feeling," he muttered.

* * *

"Do you get a lot of that? Back with Professor Yang?" Rebecca asked an hour later.

"I'm sorry?" Tanner looked up from his holocom—and then, habitually, his surroundings. Stray and Rebecca sat with him at a round, umbrella-shaded table in the student center plaza. Passersby sometimes slowed and made double-takes, while more than one student at nearby tables snuck in a picture or video recording. None had come up to talk yet, but thankfully everyone seemed to be in good spirits. Nobody shouted or made faces.

Tanner had gotten a little of that on his first days on campus. Maybe more than a little.

"The call-out thing," said Rebecca, though his mind had just caught up to her meaning. "Do you get picked out of a crowd like that all the time here?"

"Not exactly," said Tanner. "Not like that, no. I don't get recognized much in the rest of the world. My face doesn't mean a lot without context. Here on campus, it was a thing at first, so people spotted me more often. But most of my classes have been science stuff or basic prerequisites. All of my nonsense hasn't been relevant, or nobody cares, or both."

"It bothered you," said Stray.

"A little. I was ready for it until he called you out first. I'm sorry about that. It's why we tried to meet with him ahead of class."

“It was unpleasant, but I am not harmed.” This time, rather than sticking to ground level, Stray sat nearly eye to eye with the pair. One outdoor bench was too narrow for her, but two pushed together gave her a stable platform to sit on her haunches. “Will he ask us to speak much?”

“I don’t know, but I doubt it,” said Tanner. “In a seminar class, there’s more interaction and discussion. Yang is running a lecture. It should be mostly him talking, or sometimes guests.”

“I hope to tell more humans about my people and our situation on Voltaire,” said Stray. “It is one reason I came here. But I imagined classes as herds, and herds are easier to meet. I was wrong. Everyone is there separate. Alone. It is...” Stray chirped through a few options of her translator. “Chaos. No. Scary. No. Upsetting. Perhaps. Confusing. Closer.”

“Disconcerting?” offered Rebecca. Stray looked upward. “Disconcerting,” Rebecca repeated.

“Yes. That fits.” She chirped again with a stutter Tanner hadn’t heard before. “Disconcerting. A herd is made of many, with many different emotions, but the herd still shares. The many hold a sense of unity. I can guess how a herd might feel or what it might do. A crowd is not the same. It is many in one place, but not together.”

“That’s... wow.” Tanner pondered it. “I think I understand what you’re saying. I’ve only read a little about crowd psychology and crowd dynamics among humans. It’s complicated. I don’t blame you for feeling that way.”

“You are uncomfortable in a crowd,” said Stray.

“Sometimes. Lots of crowds, yes. I’ve seen how someone can get a crowd to cheer or get angry without anyone stopping to consider anyone’s motives or where it might go. That’s scary. People don’t always act the same in a crowd as they would on their own, because they feel the crowd watching. Even a crowd I agree with might do something crazy. And I’ve been in crowds that were angry at me specifically.”

“I read that students protested against you coming here at first,” said Rebecca.

“A few times, yeah.” Tanner pointed to a walkway intersection outside the plaza. “The last one was right over there. Caught me going into class. That was a big crowd.”

“You were frightened,” said Stray.

“Yeah,” Tanner huffed. “Yeah. I didn’t know if anyone would hurt me. Most of them only wanted to shout and make me feel bad, but the people who want me dead could have used that to hide. I’m trained to fight. I’ve hurt lots of people. I was afraid someone would hurt me, and I was

also afraid I would see a threat that wasn't real. I was afraid I'd hurt someone who didn't deserve it because I was scared. That's the simple way of putting it."

"That all changed after Minos?" asked Rebecca.

"I don't think the crisis changed it alone," said Tanner. "Nobody wanted a whole protest after Minos, but that didn't flip a switch on everyone. I think the bigger part was the students from that trip and then the dorm getting to know me and realizing I'm a person and not a propaganda figure. They told other people, and that spread. At least I like to think that's what happened."

"You think being seen as ordinary does you more good than people thinking you're a hero?" she asked.

Tanner let out a laugh. "It sure as hell feels a lot better."

"Hm," she thought.

"Hm?" he prompted.

Rebecca shrugged. "Other people in your position might have tried to capitalize on the visibility. I only know you from what I've seen and read, too. Like lots of people."

"And yesterday, and today," said Stray.

"Yes," Rebecca conceded. Her eyes stayed on Tanner. "You've had media training."

"A little," he said. "Dated an expert for a bit. Mostly I learned to shut up."

"That sort of thing teaches you to be careful with what you say," said Rebecca.

"Sure." He nodded slowly. "The military did that, too. Most of the real coaching came from therapy, actually."

"Your therapist taught you to shut up?"

"My therapists have pointed out that most people will have preconceived notions about me if they recognize me and that it's not all their fault. It sucks, but it's not all their fault."

"Hm."

"Both of you wish the other would say more," said Stray.

Rebecca raised an eyebrow. Tanner snorted out a laugh. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

"I'll let you know when I've found the right question," Rebecca answered.

Stray watched them both—Rebecca more than Tanner, it seemed. He thought he might be getting better at tracking the attention and focus of her big black eyes. "Tanner, you were uncomfortable when Professor Yang spoke to you in class. You do not feel the same talking to us. You are more open with us."

“I guess I am. I don’t know what Yang wants to ask me, and I don’t know how much of that is for a whole crowd of strangers. I don’t know how my answers will sit with them.”

“But you aren’t as worried about how we will feel,” said Stray.

“No.” Tanner noticed the tilt of Stray’s eyes, ears, and nose to her side. He wondered if she wanted to make the point more for Rebecca than herself.

“You’ve been pretty open about your experiences with Minos and the Preserve,” said Rebecca. “If he asks about the Debtor’s War, what will you say? To him and that whole class?”

“Depends on what he asks, I suppose. I’ve got less to tell than a lot of people think, professors included. I’ve met a bunch of the big names and I was there for some big moments, but most of the time, I was one more enlisted guy. I had cleaning details and bullshit jobs. I wasn’t in charge of anything. Nobody asked my opinion on the big decisions.”

“You made a few of those big decisions yourself. As one more enlisted guy,” said Rebecca.

“What does that mean?” asked Stray.

Tanner hesitated, both to find the words and more than half expecting Rebecca to answer for him first. Instead, she waited for him. “The military is sort of like a herd, for a purpose, right?” he began. “Probably the worst kind of herd. I’m simplifying a lot here. Anyway, the leaders of the herd are mostly called officers, and the followers are enlisted. I was never a leader, but a few times, I made decisions for the whole herd. Sometimes for many herds all at once. Lots of people don’t like the choices I made, and many are angry I ever made any choice at all because I wasn’t a leader.”

“You captured Amara, but you told your people to leave Minos,” said Stray.

“That’s one of those moments. I wasn’t enlisted anymore, but yes. It seemed like the only thing to do.”

“Why?” asked Stray.

“It stopped the killing. Also, Minos is their world—the Minoans, with or without Amara. Humans shouldn’t have been there. We didn’t know the Minoans were still alive, but once we did, that decided it for me. That, and I couldn’t have stopped her without dying with her. I didn’t want to do that.”

Rebecca glanced at Stray, who only listened in silence.

A young man in casual clothes approached with a tray of covered plates. “Hi, are you Rebecca, Stray, and Tanner? Seems, um, obvious?” He smiled.

“That’s us,” said Tanner.

“Wow. You’re Stray? I heard you’re here. It’s really neat to have you.”

“Thank you. What is your name?” asked Stray.

“I’m Adam. Thanks for asking. Did you order two large plates of chips? When we heard about you, we wondered if you could eat our food. Are Runners vegetarian?”

Stray sat up, ears twitching and snout tilted upward. She seemed happy to be with another friendly face. “We have always preferred plants, but we ate some other foods before our world changed. Now we are adapting to human plants. It is alright to ask,” she said as Adam winced with an obvious apology. “We have lost much, but I am not hurt by talking about it.”

“Oh good. Okay. Don’t want to be rude. Sorry. Here you go.”

“Thank you. Potatoes are much like a plant we once ate. French fries are delicious.”

“Great. That’s good to hear. And I’ve got cod fish and chips for Rebecca, and for Tanner, am I saying this right: polo asado?”

“It’s a Spanish double-l. Pollo asado.” His mother and grandmother’s accent came out as he accepted the plate. “I was really happy when you guys added this to the menu. You nailed it.”

A soft trilling noise drifted from Stray. Tanner glanced at her, but she said nothing. He noticed a smirk from Rebecca, too.

“Glad to know. I’m new. First day,” said Adam. “I probably shouldn’t keep you. If you need anything, ping us on your holocom. Thank you. Nice to meet you, Stray.”

“Your welcome means much to me. Thank you, Adam,” she replied.

Rebecca waited until the server was out of earshot. “How is it really?” She nodded to his plate when he raised an eyebrow. “Their pollo asado?”

“It’s fine. It—um.” Tanner stopped, thinking he might’ve heard that trill again. Rebecca’s smirk claimed more attention. She seemed skeptical. He shrugged. “They can’t really char it with their kitchen setup, but the marinade is right. I’m not an authenticity snob. It’s synthetic meat anyway.”

“Only curious.” Rebecca’s smirk turned to a smile.

“You are comfortable talking about your loss, too,” said Stray.

Tanner blinked. She kept making statements that most people posed as questions, but she wasn’t wrong. “Maybe not-uncomfortable is the way to put it, but yeah. I hold back because it can make other people uncomfortable. On my own, I’ll talk about my feelings all day long. It’s how I cope. I think it’s how I hit back at all the bad stuff.”

Rebecca chewed on a bite of fish, watching him thoughtfully. “Can I ask about the war, then?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Do you feel like it was worth it?”

Tanner stopped, fork in hand. He wondered if that was a challenge. She asked and showed no such sign, but she was a diplomat. She could present anything from sensitive neutrality to friendliness. He wondered how *she* felt about the war—behind the professional mask.

“Do you know about this? About the Debtor’s War?” Tanner asked Stray.

“Some,” she said. “I would like to hear more. You do not have to explain first to answer, if that is why you ask.”

Rebecca waited patiently.

“The Big Three attacked us. NorthStar invaded and occupied my planet. Once that happened, it was on, and there was nothing else to do but fight. *They* decided that. Before then...” Tanner shrugged. He didn’t raise his voice. He could talk about this, even if it hurt. “They were ripping us off. They ripped *everyone* off. We had to do something about it, and I was all for that, but I could feel how bad it might get. I felt like we could’ve been smarter about it. Maybe settled for less, but suffered less, too. I thought people on all sides saw ways to make money on the whole fight, so they were okay with the suffering. I still think so. A lot of people suffered and died with no say in any of it.

“NorthStar said I owed sixty-seven thousand, eight hundred seventy-nine credits. They were full of shit. I knew it and they knew it. I wanted to fight them on it. But was that money worth all that suffering, and everyone I lost, and all the blood on my hands? Not really. I’d pay all that to have all those people back, and get my friend Nathan out of the hospital, and not think about all the people I killed. We could’ve settled for less. It’s only money.”

Rebecca listened. Her expression didn’t crack—but now Tanner knew that was a mask. He didn’t know how she felt, but he was sure she hid those feelings. It didn’t make him angry, either. He felt a little bit better for giving an honest answer.

“I might not gonna say that to Professor Yang’s class. That wouldn’t be just about me and my feelings,” said Tanner. “But I’ll tell you two, face to face, since you asked.”

“I think I can appreciate that,” Rebecca said quietly. Stray only watched.

Tanner's eyes fell to his plate. He remembered turning to plainer, blander food at the roughest times in the war—when his failures or his bright ideas had gotten good people killed. That turned his thoughts toward others who died, too.

“That war brought you here, correct?” asked Stray. “You came here because of those events.”

“Yeah,” said Tanner.

“That brought you to Minos, and then to my people. Now we are awake, and home, and I am here with you. These are separate things. My people see paths, and steps, and sometimes we fall. We remember the fall as it is. We must also see where we are. I mourn for your loss. I am also glad I am here with you now.”

Tanner took a deep breath. It shook on the way out, but the next one didn't. “Thank you.” Then he looked at his plate again. One corner of his mouth cracked in a grin. “It wasn't worth the money I owed. But if I can't work in planetary surveys because I hurt those bastards, I can live with that. And if I'm stuck with mediocre pollo asado because of what I did about Casey and Aguirre and all their shit, I'm good with that, too.” Tanner carved off a bite and put it in his mouth. “I'm not an authenticity snob.”

* * *

“Ollie, talk to me. What have you got?” Nicholas asked over the holocom. The earpiece allowed Oliver to take the call without anyone overhearing.

“Mixed bag so far, boss. This is trickier than I hoped.” Oliver only had to keep his voice down and be mindful of passing students. He'd been lucky to find a table to himself with line of sight and a little space from his targets. “I'm watching right now. Let me show you.” He tapped the camera orb sitting on his backpack on the table and used a small holo screen to guide his feed. With a brief tilt, Oliver had a steady video stream of Malone's table for himself and his boss. “One of them must be carrying a privacy muffler. I tried my mic but I got nothing.”

“Shit. I've got Lachlan and Pete here with me,” said Nicholas. “Look at that. Thing looks like a fuckin' pet.”

“And it complicates everything,” Pete reminded him. “Ollie, keep playing it cool. Look away from them for now. We've got the picture here, so if you've got it on a screen of your own, you should blank it out before someone passes by and notices.”

“I’m good. Way ahead of you.” Oliver was not, in truth, but he cut the screen over his hand. Pete might be paranoid, but he also had more training and experience at this. Oliver wanted to make a good impression. He’d only been entrusted with this because he was the youngest viable candidate in the organization. “I passed closer to them a minute before calling you. Mal—” He stopped, remembering the admonishments against using names. “He was talking about his feelings or some shit. Didn’t sound important.”

“Where have they gone so far?” asked Pete. “Classes? Offices? Is it just them?”

“Classes, mostly,” said Oliver. “Campus safety hung around nearby at first, but they’re giving space like I am. So far they’ve been to two classes and now lunch. People are watching, but nobody’s freaked out. Honestly, I think that’s making my job easier.”

“Don’t take it for granted,” said Pete. “He’s survived more than one hit, so he must be more careful than he seems. The woman doesn’t strike me as a student, either. An alien is bound to have some kind of government babysitter.”

“God damn. Is that thing eating chips?” asked Lachlan.

“They didn’t have any visible new security when I passed by the dorm,” Oliver reported. “Not like I tried to go in, but the building didn’t look any tighter than the others around here.”

“That only means they’re playing it close to the chest,” said Nicholas.

“Maybe,” said Pete. “The Runners are supposed to be low-tech. Small numbers, all on Voltaire except this one. There’s nothing to gain or learn from them like the other aliens. This might all be feel-good visibility stuff. We should be careful, but here it is out in the open with only him and that woman to watch out. I want to know who she is, but this might be what it looks like.

“We can’t know from one day, though. They’re bound to be on guard. We need to let this settle.”

“The longer we wait, the more we’re at risk,” said Nicholas. “Waiting gives them time to shore up whatever security they’ve got, too.”

“It’s college kids,” Pete counseled. “Whoever’s running this alien show doesn’t want to disrupt or make a scene. We ruled out making a move on campus anyway, and whatever we do needs to look natural. If nothing happens, they’ll relax in a week or two, and by then we’ll see some patterns. Then we’ll know how to move.”

“Spotted another one from the files just now.” Oliver watched him cross into the plaza with a couple unfamiliar guys in tow. Analu was easy to identify, given his place on one of the school teams—and his build. “Jesus, this guy looks solid. Coming over to join them.”

“We see,” said Pete. “This helps. We need to build patterns for more than just these three.”

“Didn’t even have two of them to worry about before yesterday,” grumbled Nicholas. “Fuckin’ aliens and Union bullshit are the last things we need.”

* * *

“Stray, I am so happy to meet you, and I’m grateful to have you here.” She leaned a bit low and forward on instinct, but not so much as to make it a show. Her young, dark brown face bore a bright smile tempered by a sense of tact and self-awareness. If Tanner could count on one welcome without reluctance or awkwardness, it was here.

The Minos expedition had made Naomi Watkins a near-celebrity in xenoarchaeology before her PhD was official. Along with that came offers from dozens of universities and laboratories, some of them entirely unsolicited. Yet the Minos expedition had also created an opening in Fremantle University’s staff in her exact field—and the university was ready to meet her every request to take the job.

She didn’t expect another once-in-a-lifetime moment to come along so soon.

A broad, arcing screen for flat and holo projections dominated the wall behind the lectern, with text welcoming students to Introduction to Xenoarchaeology. Early arrivals trickled into the lecture hall. Most of them made double-takes at the group to one side of the entrance, just like in Stray’s earlier classes. Naomi anticipated it and had an instructional assistant usher the newcomers along into their seats while she handled this.

“Doctor Watkins, I am happy to meet you, too.” Already up on her haunches, Stray held out one paw. Behind her, Tanner made a quiet handshake motion to confirm the implication. Naomi met the hand-to-paw shake with delight. “Tanner told me you are a wonderful teacher.”

“Did he?” Naomi glanced up at him and blinked away something in her eyes—something that shimmered against the light. She sniffed. “That’s nice to hear. His experience in my ‘class’ got a little rough and scary for a bit.”

“None of that was your fault,” said Tanner. He even smiled.

Stray made a *tch-tch* noise and tilted her head upward to look back at him. “These are the same feelings you shared at lunch.”

“Oh?” asked Naomi.

“Yes. Regrets and also finding paths forward after a fall,” said Stray.

“Interesting,” said Naomi. “I’d ask more, but we’ve only got a moment before class. I hope to speak more with you later. We saved some aisle seats for you and Rebecca—and Analu, is it? You’re also joining us?”

“That’s right,” said Analu. “We wanted to make sure Stray was with someone she knew.”

“Good. Happy to have you. Stray, we’ll talk about Voltaire several times in this class. I want to handle that respectfully. Until our peoples met, we thought the Runners were all gone. Much of our material will speak of the Runners that way. It’s all out of ignorance, and it will take time to correct. I hope that doesn’t insult you or your people.”

“No, Dr. Watkins. We are saddened by what has happened to us, but talking about it does not create that sadness. I am eager to learn all your people know about our world. You have science and understanding we do not. That is why I wanted to take your class. We must seek out and recover all we can. I want to learn how.”

They chatted on. Analu stepped back as they discussed accommodation and schedule with Rebecca at Stray’s side. That put Analu closer to Tanner as he let out a breath. “Wow.”

“Yeah. You good?” asked Tanner.

“Sure. I’m fine. I wanted to do something to help, and this is better than taking Rocks for Jocks. Mostly I’m thinking about her. All of them.”

“You are helping. Right now.” Tanner caught the eyebrow from Analu and nodded to Stray. “She needs friends. A herd.”

“Yeah. Right.” Analu looked Tanner up and down. “*She* needs a herd.”