

FORTUNE
PMF 7 Chapter Four
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I should probably tell Wen and the other RAs. People expected new assignments. New rooms. New residents. Not everyone will hate this. Some might not care. Most will be pissed. I'm pissed... I think?

No, I'm stressed about my own stuff. And tired. And pissed.

Tanner barely lifted his eyes on his way out of the administration building. Architects on this side of campus blended lots of glass with white concrete arches and pillars. Sidewalks ran through big plots of clover and flower beds. At this hour and amid finals, the plazas were mostly deserted. The signs and holos that usually advertised activities and fun now quietly flashed upcoming deadlines and messages of congratulations. Bottlebrush and bay fig trees filled the space between buildings.

He paid little attention to it. This was another reason the attempts on his life didn't spin him into paranoia. A confrontation with an attacker was always a scare, but serious assassins had plenty of easier opportunities.

Stuck with a stupid schedule for the summer and classes I probably can't use. Interesting, maybe, but what's the point? I don't have the money to be here just for academic fulfillment. Limited income. Limited prospects. That's why I'm in the fucking dorms at twenty-three with a pack of chaos goblins... and now we're all stuck with each other.

I should probably tell Wen and the other RAs... aaand now my thoughts are cycling. Or spiraling. Great. I'm losing it and I'm exhausted. How the hell do I fix this? Any of this?

The familiar path back to the dorm left him on autopilot until he heard the crash of metal against concrete off to one side. A great round pot of blue and white bounced from the planter around the dorm's edge and into Tanner's path, trailing remnants of orange-red sauce and bits of vegetables. Tanner blinked. *Is that an actual Dutch oven?*

"I was cooking that!" shouted a familiar voice from above.

"I know, and it stinks!" retorted another.

Tanner winced. Those windows weren't even supposed to open. It wasn't the worst of his realizations. He knew exactly which floor it was without needing to count, and he knew exactly which dorm suite. *Siraj and Jason and Dan. Fuck.*

"You *cooked* our *shoes*?" came Siraj's angry voice.

Despair and stress rushed up from Tanner's gut to his shoulders. His wince tightened. A sharp breath escaped his throat. *God, I've gotta deal with this, too? I haven't felt this completely fucked since the war or the Test or—*

"You guys are the worst thing that's ever happened in my life!" Dan cried out.

Okay, no. Tanner's thoughts ran dry with Dan's emphatic declaration. He looked down at the mess trailing from the pot. Scents of cumin and garam masala hit his nose. *Was this butter chicken? Fuck, I'm hungry.*

The shouting continued, though less clearly as the parties withdrew from the window.

It's not the war. I'm not on St. Jude. I'm not trapped on an alien rock.

He scooped up the Dutch oven by a single handle and trundled onward to this next chore.

Scattered residents passing through the first floor snickered or rolled their eyes, but didn't speak up. Tanner had the elevator to himself for all seven floors. The path from there took him past the central rec room with its doors open and windows transparent. He didn't catch any movement inside until he heard the voice.

"Tanner?" Analu emerged with a steaming cup of noodles from the accelerator in his hand and a curious look on his face. "What's...?"

"Dan and the guys are fighting," Tanner croaked faintly. "I've gotta deal with it."

"Whoa. Hey. You alright?"

"I..." Tanner swallowed. "I got some shitty news yesterday and more today. I can't get into it right now. Not with their drama going on."

"Have you eaten anything? Slept?" Analu had a few centimeters and a couple dozen kilos on Tanner, but Tanner rarely noticed it. Something else occasionally closed the handful of important years between them. Something Tanner didn't recognize.

"Eh. I showered?" Tanner put forth. "It's fine. I've gotta take care of this."

"Nah-ah. Gimme. Here." Analu took the Dutch oven from Tanner and pushed the cup of noodles into his hands. "I've been on a team. I can handle their drama. Eat that and go to sleep."

Tanner stared down at the utterly delicious blend of cheap starches and chicken broth. He thought of his simple, quiet room. It was an offer he couldn't refuse. Leaving the oven and the task to Analu, Tanner shuffled away to his room.

Around the corner, he heard Analu bang on a door until it opened. "Hey, dumbasses. You're friends and the semester's over. You've got separation anxiety. Get the fuck over it."

Tanner was too tired for anything but a snort as his own door closed behind him.

In the suite, Analu set the sauce-splattered Dutch oven down on a coffee table and scowled at all three stunned residents. He pointed at Dan. "Your boyfriend's a jackass. He wouldn't put you into stupid conflicts where you're the only one who suffers if he actually cared about you. Your roommates take better care of you than he does." Then he pointed to Siraj and Jason. "You can't tell someone they're dating a jackass. They don't want to hear it, and then they stop listening to you about any other shit. You've just gotta let run through until they figure it out for themselves. And you're all freaked out about moving out at the end of the summer. Maybe think about how you can stay friends after that and get over it."

He left.

In his wake, Dan's lower lip pushed upward and trembled. "He's really a jackass?"

Siraj and Jason shared an awkward glance and then nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, man."

Analu followed the hallway arc around the central rec room from one suite to another. He tapped the intercom this time rather than banging on the door. A soft tone preceded the opening of the door, with Phoebe and Rhea looking up from the couch and their holosuite.

"Okay, you're right," said Analu. "Somethin's up with Tanner."

* * *

"Boot. Boot! What the fuck's wrong with you? Nobody said you could get in your rack!"

Tanner turned without rising, which wasn't at all how he reacted to a chewing out from anyone in the Navy. He wasn't slow out of defiance or indifference. He felt sluggish. Confused. Slow, in a way he'd pay for and regret. What was that noise behind Morales at the hatch to the non-rate berth?

Oh god, I'm here again, Tanner thought as context caught up with him. None of the intervening years made any difference. It made no sense and didn't need to. He was in his rack in *St. Jude's*

tiny six-person non-rate berth, zipped up in a vac suit and trying to stay horizontal as often as possible. His rack steadied his stomach and kept him out of view from the rest of the crew, right up until it didn't.

"Sorry, I thought I was done," Tanner mumbled, rolling out of his rack.

"You're not done until someone tells you you're done. You've still gotta scrub the deck in the galley." Something rattled and squeaked behind Morales and his muscles and handlebar mustache.

"The deck?" That could be a chore while on overnight watch in port, but the ship was clearly underway. Wasn't it? "What's that noise behind you?"

"It's not your problem. Get your ass—"

Bonk. "Ow! Oops!" The noise behind Morales turned to a clatter.

"Ah, shit. Sorry, sorry," said another voice.

"The hell?" Tanner murmured. The noise brought his thoughts past Morales, past the despair of *St. Jude* and the Navy to more basic problem-solving.

He got up out of bed. Again. His actual bed. "Oh. Right," he mumbled. "Stupid dream." He wondered if the dream came before the noise outside his door or if his brain backfilled the noise with the least welcome context possible. It was still weird that his dreams put him back on *St. Jude* instead of all the terror and horror of the war—though he supposed being on *St. Jude* implied the war was still ahead rather than behind.

That was all definitely behind him now. The room was dark, with only the ambient light of the campus at night reaching his window. His door was shut, and only a few steps from his bed. He wore gym shorts when he slept as a basic minimum for just this sort of problem in the dorms. Tanner swept a flower shirt from the dresser and got it halfway around his shoulders before he opened the door into the hallway.

The ordinary two-wheeled dolly was one of the floor's communal tools. Plenty of pre-space tech still had its uses. The contraption on the floor wasn't anything Tanner recognized: transparent carbon tubes around a solid metal housing, with insulated cables and several power hook-ups along its sides. He wondered if it could be a generator before he saw the small grey spheres like balls of dark concrete all around the hallway floor. That accounted for the clatter. Robbie and Lisa quickly picked them up, throwing them into an open box that had presumably held them before now.

"Are those fuel cells?" Tanner asked.

“Ah—yeah. Sorry,” Lisa winced after exactly the sort of pause that came from failing to come up with a good lie. “They’re solid state. It’s not dangerous.”

“Depending, sure.” Tanner had experience with overcoming their safe chemical state. “Is that an engine?”

“Yeah. It’s my final project for engineering. One of the cables slipped and caught under the wheel of the dolly. Someone’s using the lifter belt. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apol...” Tanner frowned as other details caught up to him, like the hour and the date and Robbie’s muscles. He was on the rugby team with Analu. Robbie had never mentioned any engineering classes, but he could move something like Lisa’s engine... past sunset. On a Friday. The last day of classes. “Lisa, did you steal this from the engineering building?”

“What? No. It’s mine. I built it. They charge us a materials fee. Maybe I was late in getting it out before they closed down for the semester break, but it’s fine. No harm done.”

Tanner doubted any materials fee covered *that*. He turned his frown on Robbie.

“Okay, the safety guy over there is on the team with me,” said Robbie. “He let us in. We didn’t break anything.” With a glance to make sure Lisa was looking away to gather more fuel cell orbs, Robbie mouthed silently, “She’s hot.”

That explained Robbie’s motives, and probably his campus safety buddy’s, too. Tanner returned his frown to Lisa. “What are you gonna do with it?”

“I dunno, maybe box it up and send it home,” said Lisa. “Engine failure is the second biggest reason people junk their hovercars, after accidents. I can’t even afford the used stuff on the market, but I can get a junker at a steal.” Tanner’s frown turned skeptical—and apparently offensive. “Hey, I got an A on this thing.”

“How are you building engines by hand? Aren’t you a freshman?” asked Tanner.

“I mean, yeah, but sometimes you can trick the registration protocols. I aced the class,” she reiterated with mild indignation.

“No, no, it’s... now I don’t know whether I’m annoyed or inspired.”

“I’m not gonna run this thing in my dorm room. Except maybe to test it,” Lisa added with a mumble.

“Test it for—?” Tanner began.

“Hey. What’s up?” Rhea trundled over to them in pajamas and fuzzy wombat slippers.

“Minor mechanical spill. And larceny, I guess,” said Tanner. “It’s Friday night and we’ve got a week off. How are you here instead of going out?”

“No rush. I’ve got all week. My fans can wait on me.” Rhea nudged his arm. “We’re doing movie night in the rec room. I came to get you. C’mon.”

“You did?” Tanner blinked.

“Yeah. Don’t act like it’s weird,” said Rhea, though it was. Tanner felt like a middling success at the “gatherings and activities” part of being an RA. The rec room got spontaneous use now and again, but anything more than that usually involved some initiative and planning on Tanner’s part... and a lot of nail-biting in hopes people would show up. Again, his record was mixed.

Now Rhea stared up at him with an invitation backed by collective pronouns and “came to get you.” He dared not say no. “Um. Lemme get dressed?”

“Why? It’s cozy night.” Rhea looked him up and down. “I know you grew up on the surface of a sun, but you can’t tell me you’re cold. We’ve got blankets anyway. C’mon. You two, too, obviously,” she added for Robbie and Lisa.

“Pff. Obviously,” Robbie joked.

“Maybe? Kinda hyperfocused right now,” said Lisa.

“Oh? Are you, um... you still want my help?” asked Robbie,

“Yeah, if you’re willing,” she said. Robbie brightened.

Tanner rolled his eyes away from their will-we-won’t-we and toward his door and the holocom on his—*No, wait. It’s on my wrist*, he realized. He’d grabbed it as he rose out of bed with the first stirring of noise and possible trouble. Rhea seemed to read all those thoughts as she waited expectantly. He paused again: *Shoes? Sandals, at least? If something happens, I don’t want to be barefoot, do I?*

Or maybe you could pull your whole fucking vac suit out of the closet, dumbass, Tanner pushed back at himself. *It’s movie night in the dorms. You’re as prepped as anyone needs to be.* He pulled the door shut and followed Rhea down the hallway.

“What are we watching?” Tanner asked. “Please tell me it’s not horror stuff.”

“You don’t like horror?” Rhea snorted.

“I don’t like to be scared, no. Wild, but true.”

“Nah, it’s good. We’re thinking light and funny. Still deciding. Also, we need food.”

“Oh. Hey, I can—” He paused again. RAs had a small budget for activities and gatherings, with money still left in the floor’s account. If “movie night” pulled in at least a handful of students, this might qualify. He wondered briefly if that was why Rhea fetched him.

“You don’t have to,” said Rhea. “If the dorm can cover delivery, cool, but we didn’t expect it.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Tanner let that concern drop. She sounded casually sincere. He believed her.

Then they came into the octagonal rec room and Tanner’s next suspicion. The dimmed lights, couches and plush chairs pushed together, and the assortment of spare blankets and stuffed animals brought from the dorm suites backed up Rhea’s “cozy night” premise, but so far, he saw only three attendees besides Rhea: Arthur, Analu, and Phoebe.

The three looked up at his arrival with entirely too much casual innocence. “Hi,” said Phoebe.

Tanner’s eyes narrowed. “Is this a conspiracy? Like, another conspiracy, or the same—?”

“No. Shut up. I just invited two other people,” said a still-believably indifferent Rhea. “Chet said he’d be here. The guys from the Drama Suite might come, too. We’ve got nothing secret to talk about. Sit down and order us some snacks.”

“Did you eat? Did you nap?” asked Analu.

“Yeah,” said Tanner... though it had only been Analu’s cup of noodles before his nap. That had to have been a good four hours ago.

The activities budget didn’t have much left, but it wasn’t empty. Besides that, he’d been careful with his savings ever since school began, with a couple lucky breaks along the way. The RA job had been a relief to his finances. If nothing else, the nonsense on the Preserve had left him with a short burst of adult money. He didn’t know what the future would bring, but for now, he was fine. Tanner sat on a couch and tapped his holocom to bring up the local delivery screen. “Fuck it, let’s get real food. If more people show, that’s fine.”

“Yes!” Rhea hissed, and then, “I mean, cool. That’s cool, too.”

“Hey.” Phoebe pushed a plush triceratops into his lap. “Cozy night. Everybody gets a friend. It’s not weird.”

Tanner stared down at the dinosaur. Thoughts of childhood and Mom and home rolled around in his gut, but he was *not* going to get sappy or sad just when the dormies invited him to a good time. He tucked the dinosaur into the crook of his arm. “It’s not weird. How did you know triceratops is my favorite?”

“It’s college. You’re not the only nerd,” said Phoebe.

* * *

Prince Remy stepped to the wooden rail of his starship and crossed his arms back and forth in two simple snaps. A glittering bridge of magical light extended from the gap in the rail at his feet to the sinister, skull-festooned, black hulk of the ancient Imperial Archive. Lightning flashed in the swirling clouds of the nebula all around them. Remy paused to look back over his golden epaulets at his companions. “I’m sorry, my friends. I must do this alone.”

Tanner asked quietly: “Why, though?”

“Shh!” Phoebe shoved his shoulder—but she grinned at his quip.

The holo projection spread two meters in diameter, filling most of space in front of the arc of couches and cozy chairs. Along with the conspirators, movie night had roped in the Drama Suite and a handful of other residents, making for a decent audience. Modern tech and tricks of light made sure everyone had a great angle.

As young Prince Remy strode forward, the perspective pulled back to emphasize depth and drama. His short white cape billowed, partly to remind the viewers of the rapier at his hip and the long dagger tucked at an angle along his lower back. Ahead of him, a big black skull opened its mouth like a door into darkness. He stepped through. Ominous music swelled.

On the rail with the rest, the aloof and cold Lady Sabrina suddenly called out, “Remy!”

He looked back.

“I’m pregnant!” Arthur quipped ahead of Sabrina’s next line.

The room burst into laughter. Tanner snorted, but stifled his reaction and glanced to Phoebe. Fortunately, she laughed, too. She also caught him looking and shook her head. “It’s fine,” she said under the cackles of her friends.

“Okay. Good.” Hesitation dialed back his laughs, but they escaped with more than one kind of relief. Phoebe was the first in the dorm to give him a real chance. She had handled her surprise pregnancy all on her own, but she’d needed to talk it out with someone first. That meant as much to Tanner as practically anything that had happened since he got to the university.

Yet Arthur *did* make a good crack.

“Okay, but who’s the daddy? Because it isn’t Remy,” said Rhea.

“Gotta be the dragon guy,” said Chet from the second row of plush furniture.

“*Gotta* be the dragon guy,” echoed Siraj.

“Wait, but he’s just another sailor,” said Analu. “Star-sailor. Whatever. Working class guy. She’d never slum like that.”

“Hey, we’ve all got our dirty kinks. Makes sense to me,” said Rhea.

“Does *anything* make sense in this movie?” asked Arthur.

“Okay, wait up.” Phoebe paused the holo as Remy ventured past a mosaic of skulls. “Are we watching this, or hate-watching now? We can watch something else.”

“You picked it,” said Rhea. “You’re not completely absorbed by *Star Sailor Wizard Academy*?”

“I was looking for something light and fun, not dumb,” said Phoebe. “The marketing made me think it was *supposed* to be silly, but this is all on accident. I’ve been hoodwinked.”

“You’re not alone. I voted for it,” said Arthur.

“Thank you,” said Phoebe.

“Alright, anyone object to something else? Tanner?” asked Rhea.

“Why are you asking me?” he wondered.

“You’re being quiet like you don’t want to tip the vote with your RA input or whatever. I promise we don’t give a fuck.”

“You’ve gotta be dying watching this,” said Analu. “You’ve worked on a ship.”

“Not a magical tall-mast spaceship. Sure, I see problems, but I don’t care. This is more...” Tanner frowned. “I’m more annoyed at the flouncy aristocrat shit than anything else. It’s not really winning my sympathy.”

“Ah, right, Tanner hates rich people,” Jason teased.

“I don’t! I have... okay, *a* rich friend. We grew up together. He’s back on Michael.” Tanner noticed everyone pause to listen to him rather than bantering on. It wasn’t what he expected or intended. “His name’s Nathan. Parents were loaded. He could’ve stayed out of the war, but he signed up anyway... and he was a real hero at the end, but that fucked him up bad. He’s still living in a hospital while they regrow his body bit by bit.”

“Damn. Sorry, man. Nathan?” asked Jason. “You still in touch?”

“We write every week or two. I feel bad that I don’t do more. We weren’t super close and we both had other friends, but we knew each other before the Navy.” Tanner shook his head. “His family had money, but they weren’t *gross* rich. I only hate when people are so rich it screws everyone else. There’s a dividing line, y’know? Anyway, yeah, it’s a dumb movie. I’m good.”

“Okay, what else is new?” asked Summer.

“Fun stuff,” Phoebe pushed. “Dumb is okay as long as it’s meant to be dumb.”

“*Origin Point?*” asked Chet. “That one about humans from the center of the galaxy?”

“Ugh, how many movies do that?” Rhea grumbled.

“Seen it. Doesn’t live up to the hype,” said Siraj. “What about *The Forbidden Night?*”

“I want to see that,” said Tanner, “but I’m not watching smut in a group, and definitely not with *this* group.”

“Big reveal: the RA watches smut when he’s alone,” said Jason.

“Damn right, I do,” Tanner snorted. “Fremantle makes good smut. Everyone goes away happy. The whole world needs more of that. Smut back home gets all hung up on being *artful* in ways that aren’t even sexy, and then it’s just weird.”

“All I’ve ever seen out of Archangel is the holonovelas. What else is good?” asked Rhea.

“Have you seen *Jubilee Jackpot?* It’s hilarious,” said Arthur.

“That’s... oh no,” Tanner groaned, but he smiled. Questioning glances prompted more. “It’s not a movie. It’s a game show series. They cast a dozen contestants to live the most wholesomely traditional Catholic life they can, but then they set everyone up with booze and unreasonably hot people and stress. Whoever ‘sins’ the least gets a chunk of debt paid off. It’s funny, but I don’t have it in my library. Doubt we get it here.”

“What about *Vector Nine?*” came another suggestion.

“Siraj, c’mon,” said Phoebe. “That’s a war movie.”

“Not a real war. It’s robots.”

“It’s okay,” said Tanner. “I’m sure it’s dumb, but I’ll be fine.”

“We want everyone to be more than just ‘fine,’ Tanner,” said Rhea. “There are other movies.”

“Seriously. I’m good. I might call out some bullshit. If it starts to bother me, I’ll say so.”

“You seemed pretty rough earlier,” said Analu. “What’s up? You said you didn’t sleep.”

Tanner sighed. With the movie stopped and everyone talking, this wouldn’t interrupt anything. He had a good portion of the floor residents here. “It’s two things. The first is all me. The second is all of us, actually.”

“What’s up with us?” asked Rhea.

“I should probably tell the other RAs first, but... hell with it. Dean Tele called me in earlier. They aren’t doing the regular annual housing reassignments for the autumn. Incoming freshmen

go into the east side dorms because they have the most openings. Everyone else stays where they are, barring dropouts and extenuating circumstances.”

“Whoa. For the next year, or for longer?” asked Phoebe.

“She talked about it like this is a long-term plan,” said Tanner.

“Not all the buildings are the same,” said Analu. “We’re supposed to move up with more space from year to year, aren’t we? I mean, they’re on wait lists, but they’re supposed to become available eventually.”

“The availability is more about attrition and budgets as students move on,” said Tanner. “People drop out, or move off-campus before they’re finished, or figure out another situation. Also, this is one of the newer buildings. If we have the same rate of attrition, the people who stay get more of their suite to themselves. That’s the plan, at least. It’s bound to piss people off. I think they expect that part, but I feel like they haven’t really thought it all through long-term. They *say* it’s about building community among students to carry beyond college.”

“It’s us, isn’t it?” asked Arthur. “They’re doing this so they don’t reshuffle *us* among the rest of the campus residents. They want all the problem children in one place.”

“I brought that up with the dean. She didn’t admit to any such thing,” said Tanner.

“Nobody knew about this before now?” asked Chet. “You said the other RAs don’t know yet. None of the residents know. This didn’t go through a vote or anything. Shouldn’t we protest or something?”

Tanner held up a hand like he was welcome to it. “I don’t know all the process stuff or the policy details, but the dean does. This is already in the budgets and support contracts. We can fight it if we want, but I think it’s a done deal for the next year at least.”

“Damn. How many people are dying to get away from their roommates?” wondered Rhea. More than one set of roommates pointedly looked away from one another.

“How many people want to keep theirs?” Phoebe shrugged. “This might be a mixed bag across campus. Keeping it a surprise without any input like this isn’t cool, but it’s not like everyone’s gonna hate it.”

Before she finished speaking, Tanner noticed Arthur sitting back in his sofa with his arms folded. He said nothing, but looked almost relieved.

“How do you feel about it, Tanner?” asked Analu. “You don’t sound like this was your real problem earlier. I thought you’d be happy to get rid of us.”

“No. Not at all. I figured all of you would be pissed, or most of you. Like Phoebe said, this is sketchy in principle. It hits everyone’s expectations. It’s fair to be pissed. But me, no. I’m happy to have you all here.”

“Tanner, we have legit disasters at least twice a week,” Chet said skeptically. “Actual fires and stuff, when we’re not having personal crises.”

“Or mad science,” Rhea muttered under her breath.

“Okay, fair,” Chet conceded. “You’re always busy trying to keep the place from imploding.”

“None of it’s malicious,” said Tanner. “Shit happens. We deal with it.”

“Tanner.” Rhea met and raised on Chet’s skepticism.

“Really. This is the first time I’ve...” Tanner hesitated, realizing what he was about to say. Realizing how true it was. He looked down at the fuzzy triceratops in his lap. Tanner liked the easy banter and laughs more than any movie. “This is the first place I’ve felt safe in forever.”

No one spoke. He glanced up. They all waited, listening. Not expectantly, or prying for secrets and info. Just listening.

“Here? With us?” asked Arthur.

“Emotionally safe, yeah,” said Tanner. “I mean, there’s my girlfriend, too, but that’s long distance and with all the romantic tension, right? For a while, I wondered when I’d fuck it up or she’d lose interest. Still feel like that sometimes.”

“That’s the girlfriend who came to get you on Minos, right?” Rhea asked. “The one who punched out Amara at the Assembly attack? You think she doesn’t know what she’s getting into with you?”

“Yeah, it’s silly, I know. And I don’t worry about that anymore. Much. No more than any other long-distance thing, I guess. Sometimes I worry I’m blowing the best thing to ever happen to me by being out here, but we’ve talked that out. It is what it is.

“Other than Lynette... Her crew is almost all vets. Two of them are about the only real friends I made after basic. The rest are nice enough, but it all still has the Navy hanging over it for me. Maybe that’s not fair. Maybe it’s all in my head. I didn’t feel like I was getting on with my life or that I’d found a place to be until this dorm and this floor. You guys are the first real safe and normal I’ve had since... God, maybe before the Navy. Maybe since Mom died. I was fifteen.

“Look, I’ve lived with assholes. I’ve lived with indifference, too, and that’s also shitty. Nobody here is trying to be tough or psych themselves up as the biggest bad ass. Nobody’s sniffing for the

weakest link so they can deflect any incoming shit on an easier target. Nobody bullies, nobody scapegoats. You all care about each other if someone's having a bad time. I've seen it. You don't only come to *me* with your problems. And when you do, I'm glad. I'm older than you all, but most of the time, I don't feel it. I'll take chaos goblins who actually care about each other over a bunch of toxic professionals any day."

Glances flicked around the room. "Did you just call us chaos goblins?" asked Siraj.

"Yes. Mostly in my head, or to my girlfriend. All the time. Tell me I'm wrong."

"We did just kind of admit it," muttered Analu.

"You saw I was feeling rough earlier and did something about it," Tanner told Analu. "Thank you for that. And you invited me here," he said to Rhea.

"This was Phoebe's idea, actually," said Arthur. "Shocker."

"I wanted to get people together anyway," said Phoebe. "End of the semester and all. But we wanted to make sure you were included."

"It means a lot," said Tanner. "A whole lot. Thank you."

"What was the other thing?" asked Arthur. "You said you had two on your mind. If you hadn't slept, the other came first, right?"

"Yeah." Tanner sighed. He didn't want to put this on the others, but he *did* just monologue about trust and opening up. They were listening. "My xenoecology professor and a visiting pro pulled me aside yesterday. Ever since high school, I've planned on going into survey and exploration. I'm set to start the first concentrated courses over the summer session. They told me I'm never gonna work in the field... and they're right. It's not about ability. It's who I am and what I've done."

"Whoa, that's harsh, isn't it?" asked Phoebe. "Obviously a couple places like NorthStar wouldn't have you, but you wouldn't want them anyway, right? That's not the whole field."

"No, the professor was trying to save me from a bigger crash after college," said Tanner. "The whole survey field is full of money from NorthStar and Lai Wa and other people I've pissed off. Or my name will pop up and offend someone, or I'll get blocked by insurance. I went through company after company last night. Universities and governments, too. A few might be longshots, but that's not enough to hang a career on, or a degree."

"I'm not freaking out over the opinions of two guys. I did the math. They're right. This whole dream is one of the things that got me through the Navy and the war. I fought and hung on for all

that time to get here and do this, and now it's just... done. My plan is shot. I don't have a backup. I don't know what to do with my life."