

SAFE
PMF 7 Chapter Six
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“So, what’s first? Should we do an icebreaker?” Phoebe suggested.

“Phoebe,” said Robbie.

“They help! Stray doesn’t know any of us except Tanner, sort of. And that seems one-sided. Not to be mean about that, but...” She held out her hands.

“No, that’s fair,” mumbled Tanner.

“Okay, but she just got here,” said Siraj. “You wanna jump straight to games?”

“Some of us have classes,” Lisa spoke up.

“Oh shit, you’re right,” remembered Chet. “This was gonna be a quick meeting. I’ve gotta go.”

“I think that might be our cue, too,” said Carlos. “If this is all a go, we’ve got other people to meet with. Rebecca, you’ve got this?”

“Sure. Thanks, everyone,” Rebecca told the other diplomatic aides. They departed with Carlos, leaving behind the few bags and cases they’d brought in with Stray. A handful of residents hurried out to get back on schedule, but others remained. Rebecca turned to Tanner with her first sign of tactful amusement. “Icebreakers? Is that what you normally do with a new resident?”

“We haven’t gotten any new residents since I came on,” said Tanner. “Only lost a few. Mostly on my first day, and then the end of the semester.” He shook his head. “Stray, do you need anything first? Are you—your people were okay with human food on the Preserve, but is that actually good for you? Do you like it?”

“We are adjusting,” said Stray. “Some Terran plants are edible for us without change, and other foods are fine if altered. We can eat and roam on Voltaire as we did before all the changes, but it is very different. We miss what we have lost.”

“Oof. I’m sure. I’m sorry,” said Tanner. “I don’t know what to offer.”

“Fries,” said Rebecca. “It turns out they love French fries. Chips, here, I guess. We brought a good supply of other things to get started, but so far potatoes are the real winner out of human prepared foods.”

“I am not hungry. Thank you.” Stray tilted her head, looking at the faces all around. “What is an icebreaker? This place feels too warm for ice. Is this an idiom?”

“Yeah,” said Phoebe. “Icebreakers are games you play with strangers to get to know them better. Mostly they’re full of questions about yourself, but some involve physical tasks. There’s no winner or loser. The goal is to learn about each other.”

“And they’re usually for jobs and classes rather than groups of friends,” said Analu. “Phoebe is taking classes in hospitality management, like hotels and stuff. It’s her thing.”

“Being friendly is my thing,” Phoebe replied. “Stray is a stranger. She’s not even—oh, wow, that’s a question. Do your people have games? Do you even know what I’m talking about?”

“We have games and contests, yes, but we are not as competitive as humans. Your people put much more importance on defeating one another. I would like to play games with you, but I do not need them to learn you. That will come naturally. Could we start with names?”

“Sure.” Tanner went around the room: “This is Rhea, Analu, Robbie, Dan...” The shape and orientation of her eyes made her sweeping look harder to follow than a human’s. Tanner thought she might have lingered briefly on Arthur at the end before returning her attention to him. “...and Phoebe.”

“Hi,” Phoebe said brightly.

“The welcome you have already shown me means much. Thank you all,” said Stray. “Tanner, you seem to have much on your mind. Would you prefer to start with practical matters?”

“I would, actually. Yeah. I guess we start here? You could room with—”

“Us,” said Phoebe. “Me and Rhea. You can room with us.”

“Whoa. Wait,” said Rhea. “Stray, do you need a room? What do you need?”

“And are human toilets good, or do you need to be in the woods, or...?” Analu grimaced under a spread of frowns and glares. “I’m just asking the obvious first thing! She’s an alien. I don’t want to be rude, but we don’t know.”

“Laughter,” said Stray—or, rather, her translator said it. Stray herself made a quick string of “shh” noises. “I think Rhea asked the same question without asking. We have learned about toilets and other human practices. They are not our way, but I can use them for the comfort of others. Do not worry about that.”

“And having your own space?” asked Tanner. “On the Preserve, the Runners all stuck together. You all slept together and moved around in groups.”

“Yes. This is a human home. I will adapt to some human practices. If I should have a space that is my own, I would be happy to share it with you, Phoebe, if you will have me. And Rhea?”

Phoebe gave Rhea the can-we-adopt-the-puppy look everyone knew was coming. Rhea shrugged. “Sure, I guess. Thought it’d be cool to have fewer roomies for the summer, but we’ll work it out. Can’t turn this down.”

“Rhea,” Tanner began.

“Nah, I mean that. We’re cool. Glad to have you. Um...” Rhea already had her hand up and flat. “Put your hand—yeah, that’s right,” she said with pride when Stray tapped paw to palm. “We’re good. We’ll take care of you.”

Phoebe choked down a squeal.

“That is only one of your first thoughts,” Stray said to Tanner. “You want to put my needs first, and I am grateful. But you seemed preoccupied by the question of classes? We share that question, correct?”

“Yeah, we do,” Tanner admitted. “It’s—um. How comfortable are you with the translator in your holocom? Your people seemed to pick up our language quickly, but how close is the holocom to what you want to say?”

“Close. It is not perfect, but close. I do not truly understand how this tool works, but I can correct it when it is wrong. I have become comfortable enough with some idioms to let the translator choose them.”

“Stray’s manner of speaking takes some getting used to, but she means what she says,” Rebecca put in.

“Hope you know sarcasm if you’re hanging out with Tanner,” said Analu.

“And profanity,” said Rhea. “And blasphemy. And—”

“Oh, that’s true,” Phoebe caught on. “Tanner is sarcastic a lot. Especially when he says bleak and defeated stuff. He doesn’t really mean it like that. He’s just grumbling.”

Tanner gave Phoebe a look.

“He is, and he is not,” said Stray. “Tanner was both sarcastic and blunt many times on the Preserve. We understood him better than many of the other humans did. I also understand you, Phoebe. I am grateful that you want to help.” She looked to Tanner. “If I understand the question of classes, I sense that I can help you while you help me?”

“Yeah. You can, actually. If they’ll open up my schedule for changes, that helps me a lot. We can figure out what will help us both once we talk to the counselor. That’s a person who helps a student choose classes. But we should probably move you in first—ugh, except yeah, the counselors are here now. Maybe we should get on that first. Sooner it’s fixed, the better. I don’t want to be selfish.”

“If it would ease your stress, I would like to do that,” said Stray. “Can we go now?”

“We should check ahead, but it sounds like Cornwall already sent notice.”

“I should be there for this,” said Rebecca.

“Hey, Tanner. You want me to come, too?” asked Analu.

“Nah, you don’t have...” Tanner reconsidered as he spoke. His thoughts turned to the walk across campus—with countless students and others along the way. Traffic would be thinner over the summer session, but not at all absent. Analu’s mere presence could help with that—and Analu knew it. “Actually, yeah. If you’ve got time.”

“For our new dormie? Hell yeah.” Analu put his hand out in an echo of Rhea’s gesture.

Stray met his gesture with her paw and a soft, stretched-out chirp. “Thank you, Analu. Tanner, I feel safer here, too.”

“Safer? Than where, the Preserve? I mean, yeah,” he huffed.

“No. This herd. You feel safer with this herd than the one before. The soldiers.”

“Aww! I make you feel safer than your big bad soldier buddies?” Analu flashed a broad smile.

Tanner blinked. He didn’t expect to be called out like this, but... “Yeah. You all do.”

* * *

“You’re not happy about this. I can tell,” said Phoebe. “What’s wrong?”

Arthur looked up from the couch and his holocom—having just sat down and activated it two seconds ago. Phoebe stood in the doorway he remembered closing *four* seconds before that. It had been a conscious act. “You just walk in here now?”

“You guys literally said I could come by anytime. *You* said that.”

Arthur sighed. She had him there. They’d all just been hanging out, but he’d said that.

“What’s up?” she asked again.

“Did I say anything? It’s not like I threw a tantrum.”

“No. You don’t do that. When you don’t like something, maybe you frown, but mostly you walk away and work out what to do about it instead of speaking up.”

“Maybe I don’t want to overreact,” said Arthur.

“Maybe. There’s more to it than that. You could’ve spoken up. Everyone would understand.”

“Would they?” Arthur replied, and immediately regretted it when Phoebe frowned back. He shook his head. “Look, you obviously want this. If I speak up, you push back, and so do the others. Then it’s a whole thing where I’m the bad guy and we still go ahead because I’m outvoted.”

“That’s not what’s going on here. Yeah, we’d have some back and forth, but we’d listen, too. Sure, we want to do this. We also know Tanner has all his security worries and it’s not like he’s wrong. If you’re not comfortable, we care.” That set off another thrust and parry of frowns. “We *do*.”

“She’s staying. It’s done. I’m not arguing. It’s fine.”

“Whether it’s done or not doesn’t change how you feel, does it?” asked Phoebe.

“No, but I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“It’s relevant because we care how you feel. I care.”

Arthur ran a hand through his hair. She wasn’t going to let this go.

She *did* care. They only hung out, watched movies, and played the occasional game, usually with other friends—and now shared the occasional vigilante conspiracy—but along with the casual friendship came Phoebe’s sincerity. Phoebe cared about everyone and everything... including Arthur. The stare of her green eyes as she swept her blonde hair over one shoulder and folded her arms in wait said so.

The part of Arthur that wanted to go unnoticed and forgotten staggered against the part of him that wanted someone to care.

“It’s the right thing to do,” said Arthur. “Unquestionably. We have to take her in. I want to help her, too. All of her people, if I could.”

“Right. That was our whole group project, right?” For all her seeming naivete, Phoebe was better about code words and not talking about shenanigans than others. “So...?”

“It’s a lot,” said Arthur. “It’s a huge change and a huge responsibility for everyone. It’ll be media and endless random attention and questions from other students, probably professors, too. It’s attention and distraction when I’m already busy with classes. We all are.”

“We’re not too busy to mess with jerks,” Phoebe pointed out. “Or fight dumb policies.”

“Yeah. True. Maybe those things have made me reconsider how many battles I can pick.” He saw her doubt and shrugged. “I don’t know what else to say. Bottom line, I want to help and we should take her in. I’m only thinking about what that means for the rest of us.”

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“We don’t have to go full-blown paranoia,” said Tanner. “The normal dorm security practice stuff is good enough. We just have to actually follow it. Everyone needs to actually use the building access systems. That’s the biggest part. No more disabling the ground floor locks and leaving the doors open. No guests without a dorm resident to vouch for them, and they can’t roam the floor. If that happens, we get a call. That sort of thing.

“You should also tell your floors we’re not worried about anything dangerous. We’re worried about people being annoying, and that affects all of us.”

Most of Tanner’s nine fellow resident advisors either listened without reaction or nodded in sage agreement. A couple seemed skeptical, including Wen—a grad student in her third year as an RA, and normally Tanner’s biggest supporter. She was the one to host the meeting in the second-floor rec room, even inviting a couple of her residents to observe for transparency’s sake. But while she let her doubts show, she wasn’t the first to speak them.

“Um... do I need to say it?” asked Maggie: an athlete, dark-haired, pretty, and level-headed.

Tanner held off a wince. He wanted to be better friends with Maggie. “Say what?”

“Someone came here to kill you and you threw him out your window. On the seventh floor.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Tanner exhaled. “Yeah, that happened.”

“We know that hap—Tanner, what did you think I was gonna say?”

“I don’t know. Something about not wanting an alien here.”

“Tanner! I haven’t met her. I don’t have a problem with her.”

“Sorry, I know.” He rubbed his face, finally showing some of the stress of his day. “I’m waiting for someone to have a problem with it. I didn’t think it’d be you.”

“Why would someone have a problem?” asked Wen.

“Because lots of people have problems with aliens. And if it’s not that, there’s still the fact that this is happening here because of me, and I’m used to people having problems with me.” Tanner grimaced and gestured to the window. “Mostly not the defenestrating kind.”

“Huh.” Maggie folded her arms. Tanner wondered if he’d blown whatever goodwill he had with her. “She’s not a problem. I’d like to meet her. I’m sure most of us would. But I feel like this is gonna be more of a thing than a little crowd control. She’s not getting bodyguards? Security?”

“Also, it’s the seventh floor,” said one of Wen’s residents. “I know I don’t need to spell out what that means.”

“Let me worry about that,” said Tanner. “Everyone on the seventh is cool about this. If the Diplomatic Service or Fleet Intelligence thought Stray needed bodyguards or tighter security, they’d send it. They want this to be as normal for her and for us as possible.”

“Now you sound skeptical,” said Wen.

“Do I?” Tanner hadn’t intended it. He glanced away, looking inward rather than to the window. “Mostly I’m trying to figure all of this out and I don’t want it to be a burden on everyone else. If I saw a threat, I’d do something about it. As far as I know, even the threats against me are cooling down. That’s another thing the Diplomatic Service would be careful about.”

“Do you trust them? You’ve said you don’t trust the Fleet,” said Wen.

Tanner frowned. He guessed he had dropped that one in conversation. “I trust all of *you*.”

“Aw,” said one RA. Another snorted.

“Pfff. Fine,” Maggie grumbled, holding back a grin—or at least, so Tanner hoped. “I’ll let my floor know. They’ll have a billion questions. I’m sending them all to you.”

The other attendees shared Maggie’s sentiment as the meeting broke up. Tanner watched the first few leave with a breath of relief and then remembered where he needed to be. He slipped through the dispersing crowd, pausing only for Wen on the way out. “Hey. Thanks for setting this up. I really appreciate it. One more thing I didn’t have time to manage today.”

“Sure.” Wen gave him a nudge. “You said when you came on that you didn’t feel like a leader.”

“I’m not. Oh god, is that what this is? No. I’m not leading. I’m just relaying info. People can do what they want.”

“Uh-huh. If you need any help or have problems with this, you let me know, okay? Dorm issues, campus stuff, whatever. You don’t have to handle this all on your own.”

“I—yeah.” Tanner stopped before his voice cracked. He didn’t expect that. Wen couldn’t know how that would hit him, but she meant what she said. “Thank you for everything. All the time. Seriously.”

“What, for helping you deal with your floor? Part of the job.”

“It’s more than that, obviously. I should get back up there, though. I’ll be around.” Tanner slipped out and grabbed the next elevator ride, thankful to find it unoccupied—and also thankful to feel less alone while he returned to his floor.

It had been a whole day of meetings and arrangements. He and Analu took Stray and Rebecca to counseling, then campus safety, then the administration building at the request of the deans so all the

upper mucky-mucks could gush over her unnecessarily. They showed the new arrivals paths and important points around campus.

Along the way, witnesses were unavoidable. He and Analu timed trips for thinner foot traffic, but some frequency of encounter was inevitable. Tanner lost count of, “What is that?” and, “Is that real?” asked anywhere from shouting distance to within violated personal space. The latter perpetrators got their clues and backed off quickly enough, at least. *Thank God for Analu*, thought Tanner.

Through it all, Rebecca did most of the talking—tactfully, discreetly, and diplomatically. She rarely said more than necessary. Stray was even quieter, mostly listening and sniffing and watching.

She watched Tanner a lot.

Despite most of a day together, Tanner hadn’t learned much more of Stray and her people than he already knew from the Preserve and from media reports. He didn’t know Rebecca any better than he had when they left the dorm together, apart from that persistent tact and discretion. That had to be a choice.

Apart from Analu’s help, Tanner felt like he was carrying this whole deal all on his own up until Wen’s offer—and the way she backed up that offer by arranging the meeting in the first place. The other RAs were all cool about this, too. More than cool, it seemed. He’d dreaded pushback and objection all day long and found no such thing when the time finally came.

You’re not in the Navy anymore, he told himself. *Hell, the college isn’t even what it was when you got here. People can be normal and nice. You’re not alone.*

Laughter drifted through the hallway as the door opened to the seventh floor. Tanner snorted. *You’ve got a herd.*

The noise brought him to the rec room, where he found nearly all of his floor’s residents. Dean Tele’s furniture was all gone now, reminding him of an aside from Wen before their meeting. That was one fiasco settled without his involvement or further stress—though the dorm policy fight still loomed. For the moment, Tanner was more interested in his neighbors and the flash of holographic bodies, scrawling text, and spotlights from the center of the room.

Zoomed-in holography followed Analu and Robbie on the rugby field. Tanner remembered the colors of Mabo University on the opposing side. He’d mainly gone to the game to support his residents. This specific play became familiar as Analu carried not only the ball but also a member of the opposing team who tried in vain to drag Analu down. The game was months ago, with Analu and Robbie both brought off the bench when more senior players were hurt.

“Aw, we don’t need this moment! I don’t gotta brag,” said Analu.

“Yeah, you do. Hush.” Robbie sat off to one side with a small screen open from his holocom, presumably directing the holosuite. He smiled broadly as his holographic avatar came to Analu’s aid and shoved away another of the opposition. Another brave player from Mabo dove in, only to literally bounce off Analu for his efforts. Analu kept going.

Others in the audience laughed, including Rebecca, sitting off to one side but close enough to be included. Her jacket was off and she held a drink. She finally seemed relaxed—*No*, thought Tanner. *She seemed relaxed before, or at least not high strung. Maybe that was a pose, and this is genuine?* He couldn’t entirely blame her on either score. Her job required her to project cool confidence, but chaperoning the first alien college student had to stress her out, too. Tanner followed Rebecca’s eyes to the subject of that stress near the center of the rec room.

“Yes! This is like our contests!” Stray sat upright on her haunches beside Analu. Her ears fell back against her head in a sign Tanner tentatively took as awe, or perhaps delight. “Can you give the ball to another in your herd?”

“You can only pass backwards or off to the side,” said Analu, equally delighted at her interest. “You can kick it forward or carry it, but throwing can’t go forward.”

“Kick? Yes, your ball would be easier to kick. We have a game like this called—*untranslated*,” her holocom interrupted with a notable shift in tone. The point came after a short, high-pitched double-chirp amid her string of soft grunts and growls. She noticed it instantly and drooped in posture by a few degrees. “I’m sorry. The translator does not know all of our words yet. I think a simple name would be... Stick Push?”

“Okay, I gotta know how to play Stick Push,” said Analu.

“Same. I figured your people would be more about racing,” said Robbie.

“We are. We race often, though not as herds. Stick Push is a contest between herds, or between the young within a single herd. It is a game for celebration, or when herds meet, or to work out grazing or passage.”

Still off to the side, Rebecca quickly tapped her holocom—a thin, sturdy black bracelet—and murmured a quick command. Her look of relaxed amusement had turned to something more attentive. Tanner guessed she had started recording. She wasn’t the only one with rising interest.

“Whoa, wait. Your people settle disputes with sports?” asked Analu. “Serious stuff?”

“Yes. It is not our only way, but it is appropriate to some disputes.”

“Territorial rights seem pretty important,” said Phoebe.

“Hold on. Game first,” said Robbie. “How do you play Stick Push?”

“The herds come to equal numbers,” Stray began. “Injured and sick are allowed to move aside, and then the smaller herd is allowed to decide who among the larger herd they must face.” The premise immediately set off wide eyes and looks of objection from her audience, but Stray carried on. “In Stick Push, we use a rod made of *untranslated*. It is like leather, but it comes from a plant like a cactus. We can peel it in layers and treat the *untranslated* for strength. For Stick Push, we roll it tightly into a rod that is held in the mouth. Then, like your game, each herd tries to bring the stick to one end of a field, or prevent the other herd from doing so. We are allowed to seize or steal the stick from the opposing herd as long as no one is harmed.”

“Wow. That’s not too different at all,” said Phoebe.

“Yeah, but the details are bound to be different,” said Analu. “Stray, why’d you use rods? Why not balls? Does this plant roll into a ball, too?”

“Yes. We had balls. But a rod in the mouth could be stripped away where a ball could not. That added challenge. The rod can only be taken by mouth. No paws allowed. The first herd to reach the line five times wins.”

“And you work out territory like this?” asked Arthur.

“For a time, yes. Herds rarely stay in one place for long, and often different herds share spaces. When sharing is not easy, this is a way to decide who uses a space first. The winning herd stands aside for the other herd.”

“Whoa, wait, Stray. The winners move aside? The winners *lose*?” asked Robbie.

“No. The winners win. They are the stronger herd.”

“But... okay so we’re talking about something like using a river or a pond, right? Why wouldn’t the winning side get to use it first? What have they won?”

“They are the stronger herd. They are healthier. Faster. They are already winning at the more important matter. They need the water less.”

Stunned looks flew across the room. Robbie had no idea what to do with that. Analu blinked and looked off into the distance. “Okay. My mind is blown,” said Phoebe.

“What?” Rhea shrugged beside the accelerator as it popped another bowl of popcorn. “Her people are nicer than ours. Wrap your head around that and the rest isn’t so weird.”

“Okay, but there’s nicer, and then there’s...” Analu stopped. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. Wow.”

Phoebe slumped a little. “That kinda hurts a little, actually.”

“No, Phoebe. I am sorry.” Stray came over to put her paws on Phoebe’s knees. “We are only sharing games. I do not mean harm.”

Phoebe laughed. “That’s kind of what I mean. We came on a random topic and it already shows how much nicer your people are than ours. Humans can be pretty winner-take-all.”

“Humans can be, yes. I don’t know if they are mostly that way, or if it is your nature.”

“Uh... you’re signed up for a history class, right? You’ll see it,” said Phoebe.

Stray tilted her head, considering it. She turned first to Tanner, then Rebecca, and back to Phoebe. “I have met many humans who only want to help. You wanted to be friends when you first saw me. Most in this room felt the same. I see it often. Even those who prefer distance do not wish harm or seek advantage. Some, yes. Not most.”

“Wait for it.” Arthur lingered over at the kitchenette near Rhea, but he didn’t seem to be cooking anything. “You’ll meet plenty of the other sort.”

Stray looked to Arthur, but said nothing.

“Tanner, how’d the meeting go?” asked Rebecca. She seemed to be first to notice him.

“Fine,” he replied. “All the RAs are on board. They’ve gotta talk to their residents, so it spreads out from here, but nobody saw a problem with this. I think it’ll be fine. Stray, they all want to meet you at some point.”

“That would be nice. I would like to meet others who live here. They are part of the larger herd.”

“Ehh,” Tanner noted doubtfully—in chorus with Analu, and Rhea, and others.

“You made that noise before about the same topic,” said Stray.

“Yes. And you keep dodging it,” said Rebecca.

“We figured you already had to know,” said Analu.

“Know what?” asked Stray.

The other residents all looked to Tanner. He sighed. “This floor is, um. Lively. I explained the extra furniture earlier? That’s not exactly out of character with this crowd. The floor has a rep. Sorry.”

Rebecca raised her eyebrows and tilted her chin low, urging him to elaborate. Stray was not so readable.

“We’ll get into it later. You’re gonna be here a while,” said Tanner. “Do you need any help getting settled? Either of you? We’ve been running around all day.”

“My bags are in my room. I unpack as I need.” Rebecca nodded to Stray. “On this assignment, I’ve spent a lot of nights in a sleeping bag under the stars with Stray’s people. They usually sleep outside.”

“I have few belongings, if that is what you mean,” said Stray. “I am more settled from talking and being with the herd. I like this. You are all welcoming. You feel like friends.”

“Aw!” said Phoebe. Often, at this point.

“We’re talking about another movie night tonight,” said Rhea. “Might not get around to an actual movie, but we’ll see.”

“Sure, why not? It’s—” Tanner stopped. Nearly every eye was on him, and he didn’t know why. Nobody needed his permission for anything; the rec room was open access and saw use all the time. Tanner didn’t expect people to party the night before class started, but that was his inner nerd talking. His floor didn’t have that mindset... and then it clicked. He frowned. “I blew the last of the RA budget on delivery last time, guys. There’s no more cash until summer session officially starts.”

Groans swept through the room. “Aw, we gotta get our own food?” asked Analu.

“Is this a problem?” asked Stray.

“They’re trying to mooch dinner off of me,” said Tanner. “They want to freeload... um. Wow. Do you know these idioms?”

“No,” said Stray, “but I sense the herd unifying to pressure you. They want you to provide food for the night?”

“Yes.” Rhea crouched beside Stray but turned her own newly innocent and pleading eyes on Tanner. “Because we’re all poor, hungry college students and Tanner has real money.”

“No, I don’t,” said Tanner.

“Tanner has *access* to adult money that isn’t his,” said Analu—also taking Stray’s side.

“I just said—Jesus, I’m not anyone’s parent here,” said Tanner.

“No. That’d be weird,” said Phoebe.

“Thank you,” said Tanner.

“But you *are* the oldest,” Phoebe went on with her own masterfully innocent plea, “and you *aren’t* paying room and board and you *could* just pass the bill onto the RA budget whenever they open it up again. The rest of us are *starving*, Tanner.”

“You’re all in the cafeteria system and we’ve got stuff right there in the kitchenette! We can cook. You all keep food in your own rooms, too. This isn’t my job.”

“Ugh. I thought you cared about us. About our new friend,” Rhea added, putting a hand on Stray’s shoulder.

“Stray, how do your people handle this?” asked Analu.

“The herd grazes together wherever we go,” said Stray. “Sometimes we hunt or scavenge. Mostly we eat the plants around us. Before the Minoans came, we cultivated some places for easier feeding. Now we are adapting to the world as humans have changed it.”

“Oh. Heavy topic. Sorry,” said Analu.

“It is fine,” said Stray. “Among my people, no one is responsible for feeding the rest of the herd. We move together and eat together. Some have a better sense of where to go and what to seek than others, but we still work as a herd. And you are now my herd.”

Stray shuffled forward to look directly up at Tanner, mimicking Rhea and Phoebe’s expressions. “Tanner, the herd is hungry. We look to you. We need you.”

Tanner stared back, completely at a loss—until he caught a snort from off to the side. For the first time, he saw Rebecca struggling not to laugh.

“You’re fucking with me,” he said to Stray, and then looked to the others. “She’s been here hours and the first thing you teach her is how to fuck with me.”

“Hey, she wants the college experience.” Rhea shrugged. “You’re the RA. It’s the job.”

Stray lifted one paw to Tanner’s belt at his hip. Her big black eyes seemed somehow bigger and sadder. She let out a tiny, pleading chirp.

“Fuck,” Tanner sighed. He opened up the delivery page on his holocom.

* * *

“Our world was much like yours,” Stray began. “We had plants and animals, and all relied upon water like they do on your world, but our plants drew more from the ground than the sun. We had grasses like your worlds, though taller and thicker. In dry times, the grasses bent and tangled to share water and support one another. When the winds came, the grasses broke and rolled together. They were like your tumbleweeds... although human scientists have told us those are very different. They looked the same. They rolled on the wind. Rebecca, can you show them?” she asked.

“Sure.” Rebecca came off the couch to put a projection bead from her holocom bracelet on the center table amid the delivery boxes and bottles. A dry plain appeared, windswept and dusty, with odd tumbleweeds blowing along the breeze. Rebecca threw an almost embarrassed grin. “One of the other diplomats heard this story and put together visuals. This is all virtual.” She got out of the way to let Stray continue.

“Before my people, in a great dry time, plants and animals withered and died. The grasses broke and tumbled and moved on. Hunters pounced on any prey they could find, because without the grasses, prey had nowhere to hide. One such prey were the bruncon—that is your people’s word for them,” Stray added at the strange word of her translator. “They were like the Runners, but smaller and

simpler. A herd of bruncon tried to hide among the tumbleweeds, but the tumbleweeds tumbled, and so the bruncon ran with them.

“They followed the tumbleweeds across the plains. They followed to the mountains, and then they found the streams. This is how the bruncon survived the dry times.

“The bruncon thought the tumbleweeds were wise for finding water, so they tried to learn the ways of the tumbleweeds. Naturally, plants cannot speak. They cannot teach. They only showed. From the tumbleweeds, the bruncon learned to stay together and to keep moving. But it was the effort at learning that truly changed the bruncon. They asked questions that other animals did not. They changed their ways and tried to learn more. This was the start of the Runners, and how we became a people.”

“That’s your creation myth, then? Oh, sorry,” Analu corrected quickly. “Guess I shouldn’t call it a myth. Probably rude if it’s what you believe.”

“None of us believe it.” Stray gave him that ears-back, nose tittering upward look that seemed equivalent to a smile. “This is one story we tell our children when they are young. We have others. This one is my favorite, but we all know it is only a story.”

“The Runners don’t really have a religion, or even much of an analogue,” said Rebecca. “Different herds have their traditions and moral codes, but we haven’t found a belief in supernatural beings or powers. Ritual practices like funerals and holidays are all pretty secular compared to human religion.”

“I am fascinated by these human beliefs,” said Stray. “I think what fascinates me is the need for them. To us, the world simply exists. We never had your science to understand nature, but we have no trouble believing it. Yet many of your people hold to these beliefs despite your science.”

“Your creation story has notes of evolution. Like you knew your people descended from other animals,” said Tanner.

“Yes. Why wouldn’t it be so?” asked Stray.

“A whole lot of humans wanted to believe we were created separately from the start,” said Tanner. “A few still do. I guess that demonstrates your other point. What makes that story your favorite?”

“I like the tumbleweeds,” said Stray. “I like to follow them and see where they lead. It is good to have a herd, but I always thought it was good to look beyond the herd, too. I like to learn from other things. It is in my name.”

“What about—?” Arthur stopped before he finished. Like Rebecca, he stayed on the periphery of the gathering in the rec room, but he’d been there all along, mostly listening. He seemed inclined to

drop his question until Stray kept watching. “What about the stars and the moons? Did you have questions about those? Where they came from, what it all means?”

“By the time my mother’s mother was born, the Nyuyinaro and the Krokinthians visited our world. They met only a few herds, but the stories spread to other herds all over our world. The visitors told us of many things, including the stars.”

“And everyone believed it?” asked Arthur.

“Yes. Why wouldn’t we?”

“Because... well, I guess we keep coming back to your culture being more honest than ours. No one’s trying to take advantage.”

“It is not no one, but it is rare,” said Stray. “Runners do not deceive one another as easily as humans. I think our cultures have grown differently because of that.”

Some sat back with that thought. For a moment, the rec room fell silent.

“Arthur,” said Stray. She snapped him from an uncomfortable stare into nowhere. “You seem like you want to ask me something?”

“Oh, it’s probably... maybe not the time for it,” he faltered.

“I wish to be part of this herd. That is harder for everyone if there are things you cannot ask.”

Rhea snorted. “*Some* of us have all kinds of shit we can’t talk about.”

“You can ask. I’m just not gonna tell you,” said Tanner.

“No, it’s not that,” said Arthur. “I don’t want to bring down the mood. Also, does being in the herd mean you have no privacy?”

“No. Is that why you do not ask?” Stray seemed to know that answer.

Frowning but now on the spot, Arthur ventured: “You talked about how your people began. What happened at the end? With the Minoans? The media says they wiped your people out, but we don’t have much detail.”

“Okay, that does bring down the mood,” murmured Analu.

“Sorry. She wanted to know,” said Arthur.

“It’s alright, Arthur,” said Stray. “My herd knew of the Minoans. They had visited before, like the others. They were different, because they looked for things to take, and later they began to take some of our people. I did not see this at the time. I have only heard of it through others.

“One night, Minoan vessels came from the skies to land around my herd. We were with many other herds, sharing tall grass on long, gentle hills with room for everyone. The Minoans told us we

would serve their leader. We did not understand, and we did not want to go. They attacked, stunning many of us and killing others.

“We ran, as a group, which was our way. It was how we survived predators. The Minoans knew we would do so, and they were ready for us. I believe some Runners escaped, but not most. I knew a ravine that might hide some, and so I tried to bring others with me. Then I saw another Runner injured and grabbed by a Regent. I went back to help him escape. The Regent was too strong and soon had help from others. Something struck me, and then I was held by a Regent.

“I saw much of my herd dead or unconscious. I heard cries of pain. I saw flashes of Minoan weapons and the fires they lit in the grass. I do not believe that was done to all of my people, and all of our herds, but... I did not see. The Minoans put me to sleep before they were finished with my herd. I woke up on the Preserve.”

Rhea closed her eyes. She wasn't the only one. “That's awful. I'm sorry,” said Tanner.

“That happened, and then you woke up?” Phoebe put a hand on Stray's shoulder. “So that was only a couple months ago for you?”

“Yes,” said Stray. “The long sleep created some distance, but it was sleep. Mostly. It is difficult to describe.”

“The Runners weren't connected across the planet like our people would be with technology,” said Rebecca. “Like Stray said, news traveled by word of mouth over time. The Krokinthians and Nyuyinaro don't know much detail, either. They discovered the Runners had been wiped out a year or two after it happened, and by then most of the remains had already decomposed significantly. The implications point to some weapon of mass destruction, but we don't know the manner or scale. We've found no craters, no virus or bacteria, no radiation, no environmental catastrophe that matches the time and scale. Nothing.”

Stray looked downward as Rebecca spoke, looking upward again only as she finished. The turn of her head brought her eyes to Phoebe—and to Tanner.

“Were the others on the Preserve part of your herd from that night?” he asked. “I got the impression it was a mix of herds.”

“Yes, in both ways,” said Stray. “Some of my herd survive. Others may be held elsewhere. We do not know. Most on the Preserve came from different herds, sometimes from very far away. Some of us do not know each other's lands at all. We did not speak the same way or share all the same customs. We have formed new herds together, but the bonds have taken more time than we are used to. The...

emotions...” She slowed as if thinking her words through on her own rather than enduring the trial and error common with translators. “The emotions are there. The details are harder.”

“Do you have family within a herd?” Phoebe’s emotions were usually close to the surface, but she kept her voice from cracking. “You mentioned your mother and grandmother.”

“Yes. I have eight siblings. Our father was old, and had died before that night. A brother and sister were on the Preserve, and are with the herd on Voltaire now. Some in my family had joined other herds. I do not know what happened to them. Two brothers were killed that night. I saw them... and I saw our mother’s mother dead. I do not know of my mother.”

Phoebe bit her lip. A tear fell from her eye. She didn’t ask, but the question was clear on her face. Even an alien could read it. Rather than answer, Stray shuffled forward into the hug Phoebe so clearly wanted to give.

Tanner didn’t know where to begin. He’d seen plenty of tragedy and loss, but he didn’t have the skills for anything on this scale—and didn’t assume anything he knew to say would land the same for an alien. His eyes turned to Rebecca, who looked on in respectful silence at the hug until she noticed Tanner’s stare. She merely nodded.

He still didn’t have a read on her, but she’d been dealing with the Runners and all their loss since their return to Voltaire. He’d gone back to his life on Fremantle. The thought didn’t overwhelm him with guilt; he *didn’t* have the skills for this, and he had a life to get back to. He’d made peace with that when he left the Preserve.

But he’d wanted to help the Runners somehow. Maybe now he could.

Stray leaned into Phoebe’s hug, but her eyes turned back to Tanner’s.