

CHANGE OF PLANS

PMF 7 Chapter Five

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“We understand some students did not expect this change. Unfortunately, service contracts and budgets are locked in. We ask students to keep feedback constructive and respectful as we work to help everyone with this adjustment to expectations.”

*—Message to Student Residents from Dean Tele
June 2281*

“We knew there’d be pushback, and obviously some people are capitalizing on that for petty school politics. Hang in there until the fall when the change sets in. They’ll probably get over it before then. We can’t turn around on this now. The contracts and budgets are no joke, and our credibility is on the line.”

*—Edward Cornwall, President of Fremantle University
Administration message (private), June 2281*

Monday morning came with more hope than plan. Tanner awoke to sunlight and singing birds from a half-open window and a room straightened up by nervous energy over the weekend. He tapped the holocom on his wrist out of habit, but bleary thoughts cleared before he got more than the assurance of an empty message list.

Don’t look at news yet. Doesn’t help to start the day with extra stress. Weather’s nice. It’s quiet. No new worries. The thought naturally brought him back to disgruntled dormies, his pointless class schedule, and his career prospects. “Fuck,” he muttered to his dorm room.

It is what it is. Maybe they’ll let you switch classes. You can suck up a wasted summer if they don’t. It’s fine. You’ve got time for the rest. Tanner breathed deeply and slowly, in through the nose, out through the mouth. He stretched in bed and again as he sat up.

Seven fifteen. You get to wake up like a normal person. Later than most, actually. Maybe take a lazy summer? When’s the last time you had any time off? His mind turned back to Madelyn’s

wedding and the week in Qin Kai. Sure, that turned into more like two days off before the Union Fleet hauled him into an alien crisis, but that was still time off, wasn't it? And before that...?

Phrases like “transit time,” “terminal leave,” and “limited liberty” crossed his mind with every thought between now and the end of high school. Even when Lynette visited him on Fremantle, Tanner still went to classes. “Fuck,” he muttered again. Tanner came to his window and looked across a quiet campus to the mammoth palm trees and the city in morning light. Beaches and ocean bordered the horizon on two sides. It was warm here. Pretty.

Fremantle was a vacation destination for many. Tanner got to live here, at least for now. This was a good place to do nothing for a while.

“Maybe.” Another deep breath. “Yeah, maybe.”

Nothing in his small pantry appealed to him. Tanner found a shirt and shorts and trundled into the hallway. Predictably, none of the dorm goblins accepted a class before nine unless it couldn't be avoided. He walked to the rec room in near silence, eyes low, absently mulling over his priorities for class changes for the thousandth time. He passed the leather couch, lush potted plants, bust of Socrates, the careful hand-painted recreation of Raphael's “School of Athens” in its frame leaning against the wall, and the rich oak desk by the other couch on his way to the kitchen corner.

Thankfully, the breakfast bars and yesterday's donuts weren't all gone. Tanner grabbed one of each along with a bottle of Citrus Fizz.

Halfway back to his room, that face in marble clicked in his mind. Tanner spun and returned to the rec room. He stared, wide-eyed and now fully awake, at the complete collection of furniture and decorations from Dean Tele's office.

“Aw, Christ in a fucking outhouse, you guys...”

* * *

“Can we get some more help up here to clear these boxes away? I have meetings.” It wasn't exactly true—Ed Cornwall had meetings all the time, sure, but none were scheduled before lunch today. He knew better than to let that be known at a time like this.

Boxes filled the hallway outside the university president's office, stacked from quartz tile floor to vaulted ceiling and from the windows to the walls.

A lone custodian worked alongside the staff receptionist and Dean Tele's secretary to clear a path. "Sorry, Ed. I've almost got your door clear," said the custodian. Esava, if Cornwall remembered him correctly. Cornwall told all the staff to use his first name. A little informality projected warmth and invited trust. Esava seemed to take that to heart, but he at least moved quickly to cut and collapse box after box. "They're all empty. It's just faster to break 'em down than move 'em aside. They build up, you see?"

"Yes. Yes, I see." Cornwall folded his arms uncomfortably. A passing thought urged him to join in the work, but he pushed that aside. He didn't have any sort of cutting tool. He had staff for this. Joining in might disrupt them. Someone might take a holo, too, and it was better if this whole moment was forgotten entirely. "Who was the first to find all this? Shouldn't someone have been in the building hours ago?"

"Oh, there was," said Anne, Tele's secretary. She, too, cut down and folded boxes, though not as quickly as Esava. She wore nicer clothes than his coveralls and presumably had less experience at this. "The path you see is almost an hour's work in progress. We had to get someone with a scanner from campus safety first."

"A scanner?" Cornwall rolled his eyes. "Anne, this is obviously just a protest prank. Nobody's going to bomb us over the housing plan."

"Bomb, no. Of course not. Glitter bomb, stink bomb, or critter bomb all seemed plausible."

"Oh. Hrm." He had to concede that sort of worry. "Critter bomb?"

"We've got a whole entomology lab," Anne reminded him. "Terran and xeno studies."

"I suppose so. I didn't think they were that mad. This is a lot of boxes."

"You're telling me. Like I said, this path is an hour of work. They filled this whole space right to the edges. Someone did *math*, Ed. This was serious."

"Someone. Mm-hm." Cornwall had suspicions on where that someone might reside—not just their dormitory building, but their specific floor.

"Had to be all overnight, too," came Esava's voice. He had disappeared around the corner in the tunnel he and Anne carved to Cornwall's door. Hollow thumps followed as another stack of boxes tumbled down. One bounced into view as if to attest to many more behind it.

Cornwall frowned, thinking of calls he should make. Campus safety already knew, though they weren't helping. That probably came to some silly concern about whose job this was and who could get caught up in the tedium. That sort of mindset annoyed the hell out of Cornwall. The staff

needed to work as a team—the whole staff, making up a whole team. His own secretary would be helping with this right now if she wasn't on vacation.

"I've got more guys coming," Esava continued. "They have rounds to make first. I'm almost at your door. Just give me a few more minutes?"

"Yes. Alright. I suppose I could..." Thoughts of pitching in faltered once more. Now it just seemed awkward. "I'll go grab some coffee. Thanks, everyone." Cornwall turned back toward the administration lobby, leaving the handful of newly annoyed staffers behind.

The tall and wide corridor returned to normal as soon as he turned the corner. The hall was almost deserted, given the early hour and the semester break. No one would know about the prank that stuffed the adjoining hall unless they kept walking. Even if that didn't happen, though, word would get around. The cleanup crew would talk, and the perpetrators obviously wouldn't forget. He'd need to address this somehow.

It was annoying, but harmless—or perhaps it was better to think of this as harmless but annoying. And disruptive. Those thoughts evoked the whole impetus for the housing issues in the first place. By rights, half of that floor could have been kicked out of student housing or expelled entirely, but actions like that were tracked and reported. Nobody liked a rise in disciplinary statistics. It didn't make the school look good among its peers.

Fremantle University already looked good when Cornwall took office only three years ago. Every metric gave him a chance to make FU better. It was dumb luck that his tenure coincided with this random spike in nonsense and immaturity, but the problem children were bound to grow up or drop out on their own. At least they were largely corralled into a single dorm, with the worst of the worst managed into a single floor. From there, it was only a matter of finding the right babysitter. Even if Cornwall hadn't personally found that babysitter, he could credit himself with his leadership over the team who did.

His thoughts returned to teamwork. Cornwall tapped his holocom and waited for the beep and the floating menu screen. "Message to leadership team," he began. Text appeared in the air in front of him. "Perhaps predictably, we're seeing pushback and protest on the new housing plan as we come back from the weekend. I want to remind everyone to hold firm. Be polite, let the students air out their grievances, and then put on a positive face without giving any room. We're not negotiating this. If we reverse on this, we'll wind up with countless other—"

“Excuse me, Mr. Cornwall?” The voice brought Cornwall’s attention back to his path before he reached the broad stairway. The woman before him struck him as young, but not a student—not dressed so professionally, nor with that perfect balance in tone between formal and friendly. The man at her side carried himself with much the same qualities, but he let her do the talking.

“Sorry to bother you. I’m Rebecca Dayton with the Union Diplomatic Service. This is Carlos Reyes with Union Fleet Internal Security.” They both held up brief holos of identification, muted in size and brightness for subtlety but no less official-looking.

“Ah—hello,” Cornwall faltered. He bit back a curse. The Minos incident and all its fallout were months in the past, but Union officials had another obvious reason for coming here, particularly from the Diplomatic Service and the Fleet. The last thing he needed now was for them to pull his most important babysitter away. Still, he cleared his throat and put on a professional face. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you have a moment to speak? It’s somewhat urgent.” Dayton hit another perfect balance, this time impressing gravity upon him without raising alarm. An onlooker would have no clue what they discussed. “We think you and Fremantle University as a whole could be of vital service to the Union. Unfortunately, this also has to be kept private, at least for the moment. That’s non-negotiable.”

“Of course, of course,” said Cornwall. “We can talk in my—ah—damn,” he muttered. So much for returning the good impression.

* * *

“We are *not* taking any shit from some fuckin’ college brats,” Nicholas declared. “We aren’t rolling over, we aren’t running away like they said, and we damn sure aren’t letting this go.”

His de facto council sat or stood in an arc around his desk. He’d paid handsomely for that desk of richly stained oak all the way from Earth, hand-carved and wired with a whole holo suite and environmental generator. He had also paid nicely for the art and classic-Earth furniture, and the rest of his oceanfront hill estate. He wasn’t about to let any of it go.

His son provoked that resolve by looking away and scraping a tooth with his fingernail.

“What?” Nicholas snapped at Lachlan. “What’s that look?”

“Nothing.” Lachlan knew when not to challenge—usually. “Just not how you sounded the night it happened, is all.”

“We had to do damage control that night. Half the guys there needed medical help. We needed to lock everything down. I wanted everyone focused on priorities. We’re talking now ‘cause we’ve got shit under control.” It was true enough, though Nicholas left out the arc of his own feelings on the matter. Three days allowed many things to heal, including ego... and perhaps nerve.

“We still don’t know how they hacked your holocombs,” said Pete. “Both of your holocombs. If they could do that, we’re lucky they didn’t take everyone’s.”

Nicholas didn’t need to discuss that failure of nerve, either. He’d been alone and outnumbered by that point. He didn’t need to justify his actions after everyone else’s failures. “It is what it is. Too late now for both of us. The point is, these little shits are a vulnerability to our whole operation, and we’re not allowing that.”

“Alright. Fine,” said Lachlan. “We’ve gotta get rid of Malone. That’s the first problem. We can get the rest, but we’d have to do it fast or they’ll disappear and it’ll be a fucking pain. Still gotta start with him. He ain’t superhuman, but he cut through a bunch of us all on his own. We need to be serious about this.”

“He had us mostly by surprise,” said Pete. “He snuck in and set the environment up in his favor. Take those advantages away and it’s a different story.”

“Didn’t he put all that together in about ten minutes?” asked George Ross. He sat off to the side from Lachlan, Pete, and the others as if to illustrate his separation from the family business. He dressed somewhat more casually, too. He wanted to look like he belonged somewhere else on his day off. “If I’m following this correctly, Malone didn’t know about you until you grabbed his friends. We still don’t know how he found you. Do you think you’re in a better position now that he knows you’re a problem?”

“We didn’t know he was our problem, either,” said Lachlan.

“Yeah, might’ve been good to do your homework before you jumped on his friends,” said Ross. “Maybe check up on what they’re about and call people who might know stuff.”

“George, that’s why you’re here now,” said Nicholas. “No more bickering. We can’t just leave this alone and hope it goes away. What’s the constabulary got on him?”

George let out a sigh and glanced around the room as if to remind everyone to keep their mouths shut. “He’s had four separate hits come after him that we know about officially, and one more that

isn't on our books. A couple of those hitmen got caught before they found him, and you know about his apartment blowing up. Some other guys tried to jump him at a shopping center and he got away, and then one other asshole made it all the way to his dorm. Malone put that guy out a seventh-floor window."

Silence hung before Lachlan said, "So they're all on the seventh floor?"

"Christ," said George. "Okay, first: *do not* go after him at that school. Don't go after *any* of them at the school. Malone's all tied up in that alien shit, which means people keep tabs on him. You don't want that biting you. And that brings up the other thing: the dorm hit happened before his second mess with the Minoans and their attack at the Union Assembly. Nobody's come after him since then. Not a whisper. Between all the failed hits and the whole shift in attention, I think most of the people who want his head feel like it isn't worth the trouble anymore. That, or nobody's taking the job. The track record here should tell you how rare serious professional hitters are, and they don't want this mess.

"Oh, and *I* don't want a mess at the college, either," George added. "That puts everyone up in a tizzy. It's more attention and more fallout, probably more than I can cover. Whatever you do, keep it outside the school, and keep me out of it."

"I thought you had more pull than that, George. If you're not gonna help us, what good are you?" asked Lachlan.

"I'm here, aren't I? Don't act like you own the whole constabulary. If you had someone with more pull, you'd have them here. I can try to make sure some of the right people are around and some of the wrong people aren't when you make a move, if I have enough lead time and if you keep it quiet. The louder you get, the less I can do. Anything serious on a campus is loud. It's that simple."

"Real good thoughts. You're a real help," Lachlan muttered.

"Hey, I don't know what info these kids stole," George snapped. "I assume it can't—"

"Stop. Bickering," said Nicholas. "We're all on the same side here."

"I assume it can't be good for me or my friends," George resumed with a calmer tone. "I want this resolved, too. The rest of this group stung you all on their own before Malone came along. You need to get all of them, either together or real damn close to it, and you need to make sure nobody goes looking."

“We *need* to recover the data they took and make sure no copies go anywhere after they’re dead,” said Nicholas. “I’d say let’s just give them all an accident if this was simpler. We’ve done it before. Malone threatened me with three or four different dead-man’s switches. Between him and the other punks, we can’t take that as a bluff. We need to grab them and wring all the answers out of them—all of them. And *then* give them an accident that covers up whatever we need to do for those answers.”

“Until we work that out, we need eyes on them,” said Pete. “We’ve already looked into their data security. It’s decent, especially for college kids. That makes sense for Malone, but the others are covered, too. We need a line on the inside, which is why you’re all here. Does anyone have any connections there?”

“I do.” Lou spoke up from the back of the room. He was a big guy with years of history with the family. Though typically quiet, he had plenty of physical confidence—enough to lean on the mantle in the boss’s office during a meeting. He kept that lean as eyes turned to him. “Sorry, I was waiting for the bickering to stop.”

“Wiseass—” Lachlan began.

“What do you know, Lou?” Nicholas asked over his son’s retort.

“My nephew goes to school there. Everyone’s on a break week between semesters right now. He doesn’t live in the dorms, but he says the school decided to keep everyone in the same rooms for next year and that’s got the kids all pissed off. Pranks and protests and all that shit.”

Nicholas looked to his advisors. “Does that help us?”

“It doesn’t hurt,” said Pete. “It probably gives them something else to think about while we work on this. Anything that keeps them distracted is good for us.”

* * *

“Of course, we’ll get caught,” said Analu. “Hell, I dunno how we can call it getting caught when we’re not trying to run or hide anything. That’s why all this shit is here.”

“Did you think about anyone else here who didn’t want to get involved?” Tanner gestured broadly to the residents of his floor, all of them assembled in the rec room—apart from Jian’s absence for a dental appointment, Audrey away with family for the week, and Sue already out

shopping. The latter absences at least relieved him briefly of their cheating boyfriend dispute. He wasn't sure if he preferred that problem to this.

For the first time, the rec room had seats for everyone without breaking out the collapsible chairs. The residents made a point of filling up Tele's couch and chairs first. They all stared back at him as if to ask for elaboration on his point.

Tanner folded his arms skeptically. "You didn't *all* take part in this."

"Nah, some people already had plans," said Rhea.

"I didn't feel great, actually." Heather made a face. "Something I ate."

"We had all the help we needed." Robbie sat right beside Lisa—holding hands. Tanner noticed, reminded himself it wasn't his business, and hoped they would be cool with however things turned out instead of another *she-dumped-all-my-stuff-in-Chet's-acid-vat* breakup like the matter of Sue's now ex-boyfriend.

As far as Tanner knew, Chet didn't have any more industrial acid. Then again, Tanner went to bed last night with a different memory of the rec room's furniture and layout.

"Okay, so everyone takes the heat for this?" asked Tanner. "Because it's not only about doing the crime. Everyone knows it happened. We're all sitting here with this." Tanner did not, in fact, sit, mainly out of stress and frustration. He didn't need to be on his feet to hold the floor. They were all friends. He liked that about his floor... but: "Everyone who knows about this and doesn't report could catch hell. Nobody wants to be a snitch. I don't. But that's the corner everyone else is stuck in."

"Nah, it's fine. You can report," said Siraj. "That's why we didn't include you."

Tanner scowled. "Thanks. That feels great, too."

"Seriously," said Rhea. "We didn't tell you anything because we didn't want to get you in trouble."

"You really thought I'd—?" Tanner stopped. He stared. He looked out the window to the sky. Not long ago and many light years away, he'd made exactly that same decision. "Okay. Relatable," he conceded. "I don't want to be the snitch, either. When do I ever pull that on you?"

"Couple times," mumbled Chet.

"Medical emergencies don't qualify as snitching, Chet! Not even when they're self-inflicted!"

"Tanner, it's fine," said Phoebe. "We know it's your job. We also know your situation with the student visa and everything. You can't screw around with that. We all talked about it."

He sighed and waved at the furniture again—prompting Dan to stop leaning on the bust of Socrates. “I don’t do any good for you by covering for you. Not when you handled it like this.”

“We know,” said Robbie.

“Wait, ‘like this?’ What’s that mean?” asked Arthur.

“Jesus, it’s not like you hurt anybody. You think I’ve never pranked anyone?” asked Tanner.

“No,” answered the chorus.

“...okay pranks aren’t my thing, but I’m going to get you all for that,” Tanner muttered.

“Dial it back,” said Rhea. “Tanner, we know. It’s part of the plan. Call ‘em. This isn’t a crime... okay, yeah, it’s a crime, but it’s not serious. It’s a statement.”

“Do you understand that I don’t *want* to call this in?” asked Tanner. “I don’t want to complain about you. I don’t want anyone complaining about you. I’m on your side about the residency shit. About everything. And I don’t want to sit through another administration bitch-fest.”

“Wait,” said Arthur—again. “Are you mad that we *didn’t* cover this up?”

Tanner’s frown shifted gears, but remained a frown.

The holocom on his wrist hummed. He tapped it to bring up a screen and winced at the displayed name. “Fucking Christ. Three guesses what this is about.”

“The university president calls you directly?” asked Phoebe, reading the floating text over his wrist.

“I guess he does now,” said Tanner. “Alright, you all expected this? Fine. Let me talk.” He put a finger to the holographic screen, opening voice only. “Hello?”

“Tanner, hello,” said Cornwall. “We need to talk. I hope this is a good time. Are you on campus at the moment?”

“Yeah. Having a family meeting with my floor right now.” Tanner watched them. They watched him back.

“Good. Excellent. Don’t go anywhere. We’re—ah, I’m coming over right now. Already halfway. See you soon.” Cornwall cut off the call.

Tanner lowered his wrist—and then looked around the room again. “This is Dean Tele’s furniture. Why is Cornwall the one calling me?”

“Maybe he’ll see his furniture on the sixth floor on his way up here,” said Robbie. Grinning.

That was Wen’s floor. Tanner wondered if she was having this same discussion right now, too, or—“Who else?”

“Huang and Thomas,” said Phoebe. “Their stuff is in a couple other dorms.”

“We got the student president’s office, too,” said Lisa. “They couldn’t get a policy change like this through in secret unless he sold us out. Or he wasn’t doing his job and didn’t notice, which is just as bad.”

“Gallagher’s office stuff is in Sunrise,” said Rhea. “We all figured they’re the angel dorm, so they’d probably get the least shit for it.”

“Gallag—you raided the head of campus safety?” asked Tanner.

“We moved his furniture without asking,” said Analu. “Kinda like they decided we’re all stuck in our dorms without asking any of us.”

“How the fuck did you get in there?”

“How do you think?” asked Arthur. “Most of the campus safety staff are students. The rest was us, actually. Someone we know told us all about bumper units.”

Tanner winced. Naturally, the one time they all listened to him was when he went off about how bumper units worked and the inaccuracies of portrayal in holovids. Then the rest of it caught up to him. “How many people were involved in this?”

“More than they’ll want to bust all at once,” said Rhea. “Especially when nobody’s trying to hide anything.”

“Now that you’re done, anyway. Jesus.” Tanner sat down on one of Dean Tele’s low bookshelves and stared off into space. The logistics and timing of this were astounding enough, given how quickly it came together. Yet what really stunned him was the secrecy. Somehow, all these college kids managed to shut up about this long enough to plan it and pull it off. “The Navy had to load everyone on starships and go quiet to manage this kind of info security. They’d turn on internal jammers. We’d all be under threat of court martial and someone would still try to call their mom or their girlfriend and say way too much. We had a shipwide alert for a missing inventory memo.”

“Oof. Tanner,” said Phoebe. “Did we trigger your PTSD again?”

“That’s not how PTSD works,” Tanner told her. Again. And then felt bad. “It’s nice that you care. Just don’t worry about it.” He took another breath. “Okay, is there a plan to talk with the administration? Someone to take that lead? You’re more likely to get somewhere that way than if this comes off as general anger.”

“Oh yeah,” said Rhea. “This is way bigger than us and this floor.”

“Fine. When Cornwall gets here, don’t everyone jump him with complaints or try to make this a group discussion unless he invites that, okay? It’s not easy to get a personal meeting with someone like him, so try to get something out of—” The chime of the elevator rang clearly through the open rec room door, traveling only a short, straight shot from the hallway. “Wow, already?”

The elevator doors opened. Cornwall walked off first. Tanner took a breath to brace himself.

The woman and man who followed Cornwall made Tanner wince: serious, well-groomed faces, trim and fit body shapes, blue-and-white themed business-casual-ish clothing but with enough fabric to hide things. He didn’t see a specific flag or tell, but he knew. He fucking knew. Dread tightened his stomach and quickened his pulse. “Oh, god damn it,” Tanner muttered. “I am not this fucking important.”

“What’s up?” asked Rhea.

Phoebe frowned—and stood up beside him. Partly in front of him, in fact. Analu and Robbie got to their feet with the same impulse. The sudden, silent line of defense left Tanner blinking with new surprise.

“Tanner? Ah—oh, right,” Cornwall realized. “You mentioned a meeting. Sorry, I blew right past that part. Pressing matters. Maybe we should talk privately?”

“These are the other residents? In a way, this is good, actually,” said the woman with Cornwall.

“How?” Tanner’s suspicions rose. Maybe she wanted witnesses for whatever this was?

She flashed him a pausing smile. “Sorry, moving quickly. Carlos?”

“Yeah. Yeah, we’re good.” With both hands low, Cornwall’s other companion tapped his holocom to close a dull screen that Tanner only noticed as it vanished. Carlos had set the intensity below ambient lighting and used Cornwall for cover. They were slick moves. “No worries. All clear.”

“Mr. Malone, I’m Rebecca Dayton, Union... Diplomatic Service,” she finished, noting that Tanner did not look her way.

Instead, Tanner looked “Carlos” up and down with a deep scowl. Maybe not all of his shirt buttons were merely buttons? Regardless, the holocom probably did all the work. It was thin, too. “You already scanned the space? With that?” Tanner asked.

“Um.” Chet shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Dan blanched. Arthur frowned. Considering her track record with contraband and substances, Rhea’s utter lack of reaction counted as a masterful poker face.

“Only for weapons. Due diligence. Sorry.” Carlos smiled. “Clocked me before I walked into the room, didn’t you? I’m not remotely worried about anyone here. Just don’t want to get yelled at later for not doing my job.”

“Weapons? I’m sorry?” Cornwall blinked.

“Uh huh.” Tanner folded his arms. His scowl deepened as he stared at Carlos. “Why the plainclothes approach?”

“Trying to avoid a fuss on campus.” Carlos conveyed easygoing respect with his tone and smile, or at least seemed to attempt it. “Hey. Listen. I know what went down with the Alpha Team, and I’m sorry. I’m not with them. What they did was fucked up and I’m glad you didn’t let it go.”

“I imagine every Fleet officer who meets with me is supposed to say that,” said Tanner.

“Yeah, well... *I* couldn’t get away with lying. Not on this assignment,” said Carlos.

“Mr. Malone?” Dayton’s smile was crisper this time, and flatter. “Again, I’m Rebecca Dayton, Union Diplomatic Service. Carlos is with Fleet Internal Security, working with the Service. I’m the lead on this meeting.” She held out her hand.

“Yeah. That makes sense.” Tanner accepted the handshake. The Diplomatic Service ran many of the interviews he’d endured after Minos and the Preserve. Mostly they wanted to get every bit of knowledge and interaction he’d had with aliens. He’d been entirely cooperative on that score... apart from the few things some aliens specifically asked him not to share. This couldn’t be about that. Not in front of the dormies and with the president of the university here. Those details made all of this weird. Very weird. Unless, again, they wanted witnesses while they hauled him away to some new stupid shit, but that would be strange, too. “What’s going on?”

“Mr. Malone, everyone,” Dayton began, and then paused. “Mr. Malone? Preferred?”

“Tanner’s fine,” he said.

“Good.” She carried on for the whole audience—not patronizing, not pushing authority, but with awareness that she did, in fact, speak to an audience. “You’re all aware of Tanner’s recent experience with the Minoan Preserve. That moment has turned into a number of complex situations for the Union. We’re here to ask for Tanner’s help, and in a way, all of your help.” She smiled as Tanner’s face shifted from dark suspicion to pensive listening. Her pause continued only for a check-in glance at Carlos. “We’re hoping you’ll accept a new resident student.”

“New?” Rhea’s eyes darted to Cornwall.

“Ah. Yeah. You have a couple openings at least for the summer session,” said Cornwall. “I checked ahead. We can figure out the rest later.”

“What’s this got to do with aliens and the government?” asked Arthur. “Unless...?”

Tanner had that thought, too. They all did, but Tanner was the only one to have met aliens—all the alien species humanity had encountered so far. Half of them had no use for human schools. Nyuyinaro were practically born with a graduate degree in astrophysics. The average Krokinthian kelp farmer knew more science and engineering than any professor on campus—and also wouldn’t fit in the hallways of the dorm, let alone the elevator. Some of the Minoan defectors from the Preserve might be a different story, but no one would risk integration yet. Not after the way the Minoans had crashed into humanity. “Who—?”

Once more, the elevator chime interrupted him. This time, the doors opened with two more guys who Tanner guessed might be more like Rebecca than Carlos... and, moving ahead of them at hip level, a new arrival with a round, brown-furred head and big black eyes that found Tanner’s instantly.

Tanner didn’t recognize the Runner. His time with them had been brief. They moved and spoke in groups. He hadn’t even learned to recognize age or sex among them. The reverse did not seem to be a problem, as the Runner came forward with a note of recognition in that dark-eyed stare, the perked-up ears, and that twitching black nose.

The Runner wore a necklace of long bones or perhaps stones. A green leather bandolier over their shoulders held a handful of pouches in varying sizes. Behind the Runner, both of the men carried low, full duffel bags, but Tanner hardly noticed.

“Oh my gosh,” Phoebe breathed beside him. It was exactly the reaction she was bound to have to the Runners’ furry appearance. Many people had that reaction.

Tanner would have had that reaction, too, if their first meeting hadn’t been so heavy with desperation layered over tragedy. “Yeah.” Those memories turned him to Rebecca. “Where are the rest? There’s only one?”

“Now that she’s here, I should let her speak for herself,” said Rebecca.

“Hello, Tanner,” said a feminine voice in tandem with the Runner’s soft grunts and growls. The Runner language looked and sounded much like a Terran animal chewing on nothing, but this one had a holocom translator somewhere. “I am Stray. We met on the Preserve.”

“Hi,” Tanner managed. “It’s nice to see you again. I’m sorry. I didn’t get many names.”

“Yes. You do not remember me,” said Stray.

Tanner winced. “No. I’m sorry.”

“Whoa. Tanner,” Analu grunted with disapproval.

“Damn,” Rhea echoed softly.

“Do not apologize,” said Stray. “I knew you would not remember. I was one among many. You are not used to my people, and you were overwhelmed. It is fine.”

“Not really,” muttered Rhea.

“It’s—still. I’m sorry, and it’s nice to see you again, Stray,” Tanner repeated. “How are you? How are your people?”

Stray continued her stare before answering, tilting her head slightly right. “You are aware. You have watched for us. You learned what you can. Is that through your media? Yes. We are... as you suspect,” she answered. “We have not been harmed, but our return is difficult.” Her stare finally broke. Wide-set, bulbous eyes allowed her to take in more from her sides without fully turning her head, but the shift in attention still showed. “This is your herd.”

“Yes, Stray,” Rebecca answered ahead of Tanner. “These people all share this floor of the building. They are his current herd.”

“Are you sure that means...?” Tanner mumbled, but stopped. Stray didn’t ask that as a question.

“We’ve unpacked a lot since you left the Preserve,” Rebecca murmured back to him.

“Should I introduce everyone?” Tanner felt entirely too aware of the full weight of his “herd” staring with mouths agape all around them.

“Yes. I would like that very much. Tanner, I am here to learn about humanity. May I stay here with you and join your herd?”

“Stay here?” Tanner stammered. The matter of herds and joining obviously held weight Tanner couldn’t fathom yet. His mind hooked onto the clearer matter first: “You mean... you want to go to college?”

“Yes,” said Stray.

“Obviously this might not look like standard enrollment,” said Rebecca. “Stray’s fluency with language isn’t an issue, particularly with translation aid. Cultural immersion alone would be valuable. And Mr. Cornwall confirmed for us that you have space here on your floor.”

“You want to live in the dorm?” Tanner asked Stray.

“Yeah.” Rhea made other connections a beat faster than Tanner. She scowled at Cornwall. “In our dorm?”

“Well, sure. You’ve got space and—oh.” Cornwall stopped. Gulp. Took in the rest of the students now staring at him instead of the alien. Inhaled deeply. “Now that we’re here, maybe the recent changes work out for the best? If Stray is used to being with a group or a, erm, herd, then maybe it’s better to join something established than shuffling in a whole new group?”

“Nah, nah, don’t try to turn this into a win for your stupid policy,” said Analu. “You didn’t see this coming and you’re still screwing everyone.”

“I’m sorry, wait,” said Rebecca. “What’s going on?”

“I sense great discontent from the herd,” said Stray.

“A bit, yeah,” said Tanner. “It’s housing policy stuff. There’s a dispute. Stray, are you here alone? You don’t have a herd? Every time I met a Runner on the Preserve, I met several. Sometimes lots.”

“None were ready to leave our world so soon,” she answered. “You are unused to our ways. I thought a full herd of my people might bring too much change. And I knew you had your own. I am used to going out alone. It is in my name.”

“Huh. Wow.”

“And you didn’t remember her? Wow,” muttered Analu.

“Do you know how much head trauma I had that week?” Tanner fumed. “I got run through with a fucking spear, too. I’m lucky I remembered *my* name.”

“I remember. We all remember.” Stray loped one step closer, staring up at him. She raised a paw to his hand and held it. “We remember how you cared. You were hurt. You did not want to be there. Yet you wanted to help us all. This would help, and you would stay with your herd.”

Something trembled in his throat. His answer was obvious, but it would’ve shaken coming out. He still had questions, too. So many questions. The next to come out wasn’t really the biggest on his mind: “What classes are you gonna take?”

“For starters,” Rebecca answered, “and again, partly for immersion, we thought she might join you in your classes, Tanner. You’re only finishing out your first year, correct? Still lots of ‘intro’ and fundamentals classes.”

Oh right. My other personal crisis, Tanner remembered with a frown. “Methods of Hydrology and Statistics for Environmental Studies.”

“Oh,” said Rebecca.

“Yeah. Summer session is short, so full time is only two or three classes.”

“Rebecca told me what to expect from classes,” said Stray. “Voltaire has universities. I have seen examples. I am eager to learn, but I believe I will learn more from living with a new herd than I will learn from professors.”

“Pff. Don’t tell the professors that,” said Rhea.

Tanner paused. The statement repeated in his head: *Voltaire has universities*. Stray could have gone there, been closer to her own herd... but instead she was here.

Watching him.

“Well, if Tanner’s program is a little too specialized, I’m sure we can come up with another plan,” said Cornwall.

Even preoccupied with aliens and government agents, the opportunity was too obvious for Tanner to miss. “Actually, I’m trying to change my summer schedule and my major. Counseling says everything is all locked up.”

“We can work that out,” said Cornwall. “It’s all bureaucracy, just like Stray’s placement and, ah, maybe credit. Let me handle that. I can get someone in counseling to see you right away. Both of you. This is obviously a worthwhile exception.”

“I do not wish to follow Tanner everywhere,” said Stray. “If others would allow me into their classes, too, I might learn much.”

Once again, eyes lit up all around the room. Tanner took Stray’s first comment as a relief, but the burden didn’t quite make it off his shoulders yet.

“Tanner, we’ve gotta,” said Phoebe, still right beside him. “You’ve gotta.”

“Give him a sec. He’s not gonna say no,” said Chet.

“Let’s not pressure. This is a lot to ask of anyone,” said Rebecca.

“Wait.” Stray kept staring with those big black eyes. “He’s thinking of you. His herd.”

“I’m—” Tanner looked to the other faces present, trying to push all his thoughts back onto a common track. Rebecca’s patient poise helped with that, but he got more progress from a look at Carlos. “Yeah. I am thinking about the herd. Guys, this is a big fuckin’ deal. We’re talking about an alien living with us. I know—I” He stopped himself before talking about the friend back home who got irregular visits from an alien. Despite all the revelations of past months, a few things were

still relatively uncommon knowledge. “I’ve worked with the people who handle that stuff. This would be security and surveillance, all the time. And media.”

“Actually, nah,” said Carlos. “Not really. We’re not that worried about the security stuff.”

“The Runners don’t bring the concerns of superior technology and diplomatic complications,” said Rebecca. “Also, no one really has anything against the Runners. There are some tensions on Voltaire, but that’s not here. It’s not like Fremantle is a hotbed for Sovereign Humanity or anti-alien sentiment.” She missed the flash of looks that comment sent between Arthur, Analu, and Rhea. “And even so, this is a college campus. Fremantle University has a reputation for being open-minded.”

“So, no security team? No debriefs? None of that?” asked Tanner.

“We’ll be in touch.” Carlos shrugged. “I’ll come around once in a while to check in and I’ll be in contact with campus safety. We might want to be a little tighter on keeping the doors locked. But she wants the college experience, right? That means life without a watchdog.”

Half of the “herd” either coughed or choked it down.

“I’ll be here,” said Rebecca. “That’s non-negotiable. The Diplomatic Service wants to provide plenty of room and genuine immersion, but we need to keep some eye on things. It’s still a far cry from a whole security team. Stray has a student visa much like yours, with all the same rights and freedoms. How she adjusts to that is up to her and how things play out, same as anyone else.”

“And you’re not worried about half the campus freaking out like she’s a celebrity?” asked Arthur. “An alien celebrity?”

“That hasn’t been such a problem on Voltaire,” said Rebecca. “And there’s less reason for tension here. Other alien species are bound to become part of our lives as time goes on. We have to make the adjustment somehow. If there are problems, we handle them.”

Arthur smothered most of his frown.

“We only met on the Preserve,” said Tanner. Amid all his many questions, he kept coming back to that. “We hardly know each other, Stray. You’re sure about this?”

“I know you as well as I need,” said Stray. “Also, I have Rebecca. She has been kind.”

Tanner glanced at her again. He supposed the diplomat *had* to be kind to manage their relationship this far. Stray seemed awfully sure of her read on people, too. And he did have his own feelings in all this.

It was a hell of a lot better than being dragged off-world and into another life-or-death fight.

“Okay. What do you need to live here? What kind of space? Food? Where do we begin?”

“Yeah, and like... is a normal bathroom good for you, or do you go in the woods, or...?” Analu frowned right back at everyone else frowning at him. “Look, someone’s gotta ask!”

“That’s under control,” Rebecca answered, smiling again. “Logistics like that aren’t a problem, or we wouldn’t be here. It’s fine. Does your question mean we’re ready to talk details?”

“We’re all good with this?” Tanner looked around the room. Of all the residents, only Arthur lacked obvious enthusiasm, but even he nodded his assent before looking away. Though curious, Tanner took him at his gesture. “Okay. What’s first?”

“I should probably get back to the office while you talk that out,” said Cornwall. “I’ve got my own side of this to manage. Thank you, everyone for giving Stray a warm welcome. Tanner, I’ll give counseling a call right now. I’m sure they’ll drop everything for this.” He turned, excused himself around Siraj and Dan, turned again to avoid the bust of Socrates, and headed for the elevator making exactly the call to counseling he promised.

The elevator doors were halfway closed when he made double-take at all the new and excessive furniture.