

STRATEGIC SHIFT

PMF 7 Chapter Three

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Lecture halls, classrooms, and laboratories are closed until summer session officially begins in eight days. Exceptions must be arranged through individual department channels. Counseling offices are closed to students except by appointment only.

Reminder: cafeterias, campus stores, and maintenance services are also on limited hours. If you are a dormitory resident and you need help, check with your resident advisor!

—Spring Semester End Notes

Fremantle University, June 2281

Tanner barely skimmed the notice from the university before waving his hand through the floating text to dismiss it. He had more immediate concerns.

“Oh no! A surprise superstorm has destroyed your dam and flooded the channel! Your granary and nursery are damaged! Your village is demoralized!” A sopping wet raccoon appeared under the text, his flannel shirt torn and his basket of nuts broken and spilled at his feet. Then the image shifted to a treetop view. Trouble areas stood out on the three-dimensional landscape of forests and streams.

Propped up against his pillows and headboard, Tanner’s shoulders didn’t drop like the anthropomorphic raccoon’s, but he felt the mood the critter projected. He tapped at floating icons of light to prioritize a work crew, directing them first to the dam. Wisely, he had invested in a second storehouse on the small bit of higher ground earlier in the game. Nobody would go hungry while the village concentrated on repairs. Tanner knew what to do about this: fix the dam, resolve the flooding, then repair the rest.

The game wouldn’t fix any of his real problems, but it didn’t make them worse. It offered the illusion of agency and some measure of control. At the moment, that held a lot of appeal.

Beavers in hardhats and tool belts converged on the wrecked dam. Their activity and the start of the new turn brightened the whole map—and provided most of the light in Tanner’s room.

A tiny reader on his fully-darkened window noted the presence of full daylight on the other side. He had a clock over his desk. The butler system dampened noise from outside his room to a comfortable minimum, but he had heard movement and voices outside over the last while. His last scheduled final was today in Chemistry for Life Sciences, but the test was optional for anyone with a current grade over 90%. Up until yesterday, he'd planned to take it anyway just for the challenge. That seemed pointless now.

Tanner continued his game. He knew what time it was. He also knew exactly how many weeks and months he could stay here until his money ran out, mostly determined by the cost of tuition to stay enrolled and maintain his visa. He knew the deadline for changing his course schedule for summer session (next week), and for declaring a change of major (end of summer session), and the other deadlines.

He didn't know what to do with any of those changes.

Tanner stopped counting roadblocks sometime before the sun came up. Like the night of the Test, he couldn't sleep, but today was none of those deadlines—despite *feeling* like they were all today. That feeling didn't dispel any of those dead ends.

"Your lookouts have spotted wolves on the prowl outside the village," warned the narrator in a foreboding tone. To illustrate, a black wolf with narrowed eyes and a cartoonishly sinister grin crept along the edge of the map. "What do you wish to do?" A string of icons appeared, each representing an option: confront, patrol, negotiate, hide. The game applied environmental events to all sides; if Tanner's village was hurt in the storm, so were the wolves. The robust combat system made for engaging fights, but he almost always took the peaceful options out of principle. *God, wouldn't that be nice?*

Muffled, unhappy voices preceded a knock at his door. "Tanner?"

"Shit," Tanner muttered, and then said clearer, "Butler, lift curtain." His visitor knocked again before he finished speaking. "I'm coming. One sec. Is anyone bleeding or burning?"

"No," answered Phoebe—he thought—underneath another voice: "Not *yet*."

Tanner sighed, but he got out of bed. The game vanished as he passed through the map. The lights gently rose, too, illuminating the rest of the space—and himself. That put a grimace on his face. He hadn't showered yet. He also hadn't eaten. None of that felt necessary while he was in bed. Tanner slept in boxer-briefs in case he needed to leap out of bed to fight a fire, a hitman, or a horde of mutated lab animals—two of which he'd already dealt with in the dorm. He still needed

a shirt and perhaps some real shorts before he answered the door. The open flower shirt hanging over his desk chair and the black gym shorts would have to do.

He'd been right about Phoebe. The other voice turned out to be Chet. Phoebe blinked at Tanner's appearance, but Chet launched right into it: "My bed's gone. Someone took my fucking bed."

"Um. You're sure?" asked Tanner.

"It's a bed! It's half the point of having a room! I can't really miss it. We don't have fold-outs."

The premise did not befuddle Tanner. Once he slowly shifted gears from his own woes to those of his floor, the thought of his residents sneaking an entire bed out of someone's room and off to God knows where seemed entirely plausible. "Did you look around for it?"

"Yeah, in my suite and the common areas. I can't go into anyone else's suites. You can."

"Nnhhrgh," Tanner mumbled. Resident advisors had authority to make room checks. They were even mandatory on a bimonthly basis according to the rulebook, which Tanner chose to forget. He resented barracks and bunk inspections when he was in the Navy and didn't like the premise of it any better as a civilian. Instead, he'd wound up in just about every room at one point or another on an emergency basis—none of which would've been prevented by room inspections.

"C'mon, you can resolve this fast instead of everyone letting me twist in the wind," said Chet.

"Why would someone take your bed?" asked Tanner.

"You think I know? This place is a fucking madhouse."

Tanner frowned. "You're the one who grew alien drug mushrooms in your refrigerator."

"That's not—I didn't do it to fuck with anyone! This is different."

"Are you involved in this?" Tanner asked Phoebe.

"No," she answered. He expected that. He didn't accurately read the concern on her face. "No, Cindy needs you to sign her out of her room, but she's dealing with her parents. I told her I'd come get you."

"Right. Okay." His attention returned to Chet. "Did you and Heather break up? No, wait. Chet, you didn't cheat on her, did you?"

"What? I—pff—No. I wouldn't cheat. We weren't really together. How would you know?"

"Chet, I live here. You said yourself it's a madhouse. Also, I didn't know the girl who was here the other night and I didn't see her leave."

"Okay, but we weren't together. Anyway, it can't be Heather. She's too small."

“We have a lifter belt in the utility closet. She’s not gonna put it in her own room and she’s not gonna put it where someone else gets blamed. Have you checked the roof or the emergency stairwell?”

Chet opened and closed his mouth. “Fuck.” He turned away and headed for the stairs. “Can you—?”

“Roof lock is still broken from the last time,” said Tanner. Theirs was the only dormitory roof on campus that was supposed to be locked all the time—entirely because of Tanner’s residents.

“Alright. Cindy?” Tanner asked Phoebe. She nodded, and he finally caught the look on her face. He kept his black hair cut short enough to need little more than a few passes with a brush, but he probably had impressive bed-head at the moment. “Sorry. Late morning. Guess I can do this before I get myself together.”

“It’s not technically morning anymore. Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he sighed, and then admitted to her frown, “No. Shitty stuff with classes. I didn’t sleep much. That’s all.”

Phoebe walked with him to Lisa’s suite. They paused at the hatch built into the wall for auto-deliveries. Viscous purple goop oozed from the edges around the hatch. Tanner sighed and waved at the goop. “Rhea? Yeah, don’t snitch. It’s Rhea. I’ll get to it.”

“You never let any of this get to you,” said Phoebe. “You never get mad at all our craziness. Never get upset. As long as nobody’s hurt or in danger, it’s no big deal.”

“Pretty much.” Tanner shuffled onward, barefoot and still a bit bleary.

Phoebe kept watching him with concern.

The suite to his left opened as a resident slipped out with the urgency of being late for a final. Tanner mumbled a greeting and glanced into the open door out of entirely unconscious curiosity.

“Shit.” Arthur sat up from the couch in the central living area of his suite and killed the spread of holo screens arcing around him. “Hey. What’s up?”

Tanner frowned. He’d have thought nothing of it if not for Arthur’s reaction. “Was that a bunch of Destiny logos?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me it’s something for a class.”

“It’s something for a class.”

“Arthur.”

“You told me what you wanted to hear,” Arthur protested.

“*Do not* scam a multistellar corporation,” said Tanner.

“I’m not,” said Arthur.

Tanner frowned again, but moved on. “Alright. Whatever. Is Cindy’s room open?”

“Yeah.” Phoebe opened their suite and poked her head inside to make sure Tanner wouldn’t walk into anything awkward, but then stayed in the doorway. “Tanner. You don’t get upset unless it’s something serious. What’s up?”

“I don’t want to get into it,” he said.

“Can I help?”

He stopped. His shoulders found more space to drop. She really meant well. “I don’t think anyone can help, Phoebe. I’m not saying it’s all over your head or anything, just... giving all the context is more talking than I want to do right now.” Tanner keyed up a screen from his holocom and browsed to the RA menu. “I’ll get this done in—”

A message notification appeared. “Tanner, do you have time to come by today? Sooner would be better, given it’s the end of the week and the semester. Thanks.” He knew the signature before his eyes came to it: Alofa Tele, Dean of Students.

“Fuck.” He waved the message off without responding and continued on into Cindy’s packed-up and cleaned dorm room. She had her bags and a couple boxes stacked neatly against one corner. Everything else was standard issue from the bed and mattress to the bare desk. Something about the sight made him wince again. As with the dean’s note, he continued on.

Phoebe stayed with him, watching and waiting. The checkout sweep took less than a minute. Tanner checked off boxes on the holographic form, sent it off to dorm management, and headed back to his room with a mumbled farewell to his companion. She walked halfway down the hall with him before she stopped and let him move on.

As he entered his room, Phoebe jabbed the door chime to her right. “Come in,” answered a voice from inside, conveyed on an intercom. The door opened on its own.

She found Arthur still on the couch. Without asking, she sat down at one end of the arc. “Something’s wrong with Tanner, and I don’t think it’s us.”

* * *

“Nonono, you’re not the problem here at all,” Rebecca assured.

“The problem starts with them, unfortunately,” said the property manager. Eduard Bertrand had a thin mustache to match his thin, well-dressed frame. His office was equally well-appointed, and thus he looked right at home—apart from the small thigh-high mob of big black eyes and fur packed all around himself, Rebecca, and one other unwanted guest.

Bertrand tapped a ring on his finger to conjure a floating holo image of an idyllic babbling brook. Manicured trees and hedges lined both sides of the water. The small pits and the piles of discarded plants and dirt along the water’s edge plainly didn’t fit the aesthetic.

“The Runners are supposed to be twenty kilometers away,” Bertrand continued. “The hedges and landscaping clearly mark the development boundary. Even if it stopped at the shores of the stream, the line was obvious. These, er, people came right up to the line and then past it.”

“And then we got the call,” said Bertrand’s other guest. Captain Walsh struck a clean image with his crew-cut blond hair, clean shave, and crisp grey fatigues. Rolled-up sleeves allowed him to show off his thick forearms. “It’s the only reason Cavalier Services is here.”

“Yes. Unfortunately.” Bertrand glanced to the night outside his office window. Two armed and armored military air transports sat in the middle of the luxury community’s main entrance. At this hour, there was little traffic to hinder, but their placement was an obvious problem.

Walsh’s grin took new life from Bertrand’s discomfort. “Only here to help.”

Stray sat up on her haunches, rising head and shoulders above the other Runners to make clear who was speaking. “We saw no humans when we arrived,” she said through the translator of her holocom. “It was well before sunrise. We found no tracks or other signs of human passage. We did not think we would trouble anyone. Also, Mr. Bertrand, thank you for addressing us as people. We can see you struggle with applying that idea to us.”

Walsh snorted. “Touchy about it.”

“Yes,” said Stray.

“Ah. Erm. Yes. Well,” Bertrand stammered. “‘People’ is more than a matter of appearance. Anyway, you were noticed, and it did trouble *my* people. Several residents wanted me to call the police. I told them we didn’t want that sort of additional disruption. Obviously, not all the residents paused to call me first.”

“We came out right away to make sure there’s no tension between, ah... *peoples*,” said Walsh. His grin persisted. “Same as you, Ms. Dayton.”

Rebecca saw no point in replying. Thankfully, all nine Runners staring at her took her cue and held their silence.

“Mr. Bertrand, said Rebecca, “we’re happy to apologize to the residents before or after we leave. There’s no harm done, right?”

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly. It’s more than a little late-night fuss.” Bertrand gestured to the holo image again. Naturally, he had several angles of the brook. “This will take a whole work crew to fix.”

“We would fill the pits when we finished,” said Stray. “The plants will spread over the bank again. We could fix the pits now if you want.”

“You have the run of the countryside over the hills. What were you even doing here?” he asked.

“We seek remains of our world before humans came,” said Stray. “The original fauna grew differently from yours. The roots split and produced more plants much like the seeds of Terran fauna, and sometimes they ran deep along rivers and streams. We hoped to find such roots beneath the changes your people made.”

“I—ah... really?” Bertrand blinked. “In our stream? After all this time?”

“This world had water and rivers before your people came.”

“It makes sense,” said Rebecca. “Your development advertises ‘natural living’ and the ‘original landscape.’ I downloaded the brochure on the way over,” she added with a smile one could call polite. “Anyway, if the stream is on the same path it had before all the terraforming, I can see their thinking.”

“I have residents worried you have altered or contaminated the stream,” said Bertrand. “We don’t know what kind of germs the Runners carry or how their waste might impact people or the environment.”

“That was all resolved on the Preserve before they were brought to Voltaire,” Rebecca reminded him. “The Runners have a stronger and more adaptable immune system than we do.”

“Mr. Bertrand, the water flows away from your people and their homes,” said Stray.

“The residents are still nervous,” said Bertrand.

“People are scared of the unknown, and that’s you, little guy,” said Walsh. “All of you. Humans don’t have the best history with aliens. Doesn’t matter if your people were here first long ago. To our people, you’re aliens, and that’s scary to some. That’s why my team came out. We wanted to get between you and any tension. It’s only for your protection, and the residents.”

“And I think that was obviously unnecessary,” said Bertrand. “There’s no need for a commando team here. I’m sympathetic to all your suffering and loss, but everyone’s nervous about you.”

“Mr. Bertrand, there’s no reason to be nervous,” Rebecca nearly scoffed. “The Runners are peaceful. All of them together wouldn’t fill a large stadium. They have Stone Age technology.”

“Not anymore,” said Walsh. “They’re talking through holocoms. They’ve traveled in starships. All those other aliens are far off into space. The Runners are right here, right now.” He gave a shrug. His smile was gone, but that same tone remained. “I can see why people might get edgy about the new neighbors. Especially when they don’t mind their boundaries.”

Again, Rebecca opted not to engage. She kept her attention on Bertrand and the Runners. “It won’t happen again, right? You didn’t find what you were looking for, did you, Stray?”

“No. But we could keep looking.” Stray turned her big eyes and twitching black nose surrounded by soft fur up toward their accuser. “Mr. Bertrand, anything we can find of our world before would mean much to us. We mean no harm.”

“I’m sure,” he replied. “My residents live here because it’s away from the bustle of the city. They want the peace and quiet. A whole alien dig in our streams is a huge request.” He folded his arms, looked away, and finally scratched his jaw uncomfortably. “I suppose I can bring it to the association leadership for a discussion and a vote. It will take some time.”

“We’d appreciate that, Mr. Bertrand. It would mean a lot,” said Rebecca.

“Fine. In the meantime, we have to repair what was done, and that means getting an estimate and a work crew out to do it. I don’t suppose the Diplomatic Service would volunteer to help?”

“We’ll cover the whole thing if that resolves any dispute. I’m sure we’ve got the budget for it. We have each other’s points of contact. I’ll get on this today. Are we settled?”

“I suppose we are, yes. Thank you. Ah, if you could... leave quietly?”

“Of course. Our airvans are right outside.”

“Mine, too,” said Walsh. The door opened automatically as he stepped up. He put out one hand to keep it open while he waited.

“We would prefer to walk back to the herd,” said Stray.

“Maybe halfway?” Rebecca suggested. She didn’t bite her lip—visibly, at least.

Stray dipped her snout in a note Rebecca wasn’t sure how to read yet. She chirped at the others without the benefit of translation. Fur twitched among the assembled faces, bringing her to an answer. “Yes.”

Rebecca led them out with a gracious farewell to Mr. Bertrand and only a polite goodbye for Walsh. The property management and facilities building sat at the mouth of the development, built to look much like all the upscale homes it serviced. Only a couple of artful, understated signs marked out any difference—and the rounded driveway with its parking spaces, the pair of Friesians, and the twenty armed “security troops” milling around them.

Walsh followed the Runners out, but stopped short when he reached his men. Rather than ordering them to load up, he lingered to watch the Runners leave.

A pair of large unmarked airvans occupied the lane inside the main entrance with staffers from the Diplomatic Service waiting. They opened the sliding side doors under the short, fat wings of the vehicles to invite their guests on board. Bench seats had been taken out and replaced with well-secured carpeting for a more comfortable grip. The Runners had little use for chairs.

Rebecca relayed instructions to the drivers to return to the “resettlement” site on her way into one van. She stuck close to Stray, opting to stand with her in the back of one airvan rather than sitting up front. Overhead handles were more than enough to compensate for the occasional wobble or shift that reached through the vehicle’s artificial gravity. The airvan lifted off smoothly, clearing the houses and treetops with graceful ease.

“I wish you had told me you were coming out here,” said Rebecca.

“Yes,” said Stray.

Rebecca sighed. Apparently Stray was in her “direct” mode. “Why didn’t you?”

“We believed it was harmless. You would have worried and tried to prevent us.” Stray looked up at her. “You are reluctant to say this outcome supports that view, but you feel it.”

“Okay. Fine. It’s true,” Rebecca admitted. “I don’t want to be rude or smug about it, but this does vindicate my view, even if that’s not what I’d have said. You’re bound to have friction with the average humans here. And now we’ve got people like Walsh and Cavalier, which is... not average.”

“Walsh spoke of protection, but he and his soldiers wanted to frighten us,” said Stray.

“Yeah,” Rebecca sighed. She saw no point in bullshitting that issue. The Runners would see right through it—and her. She didn’t owe Voltaire’s oligarchs any support on it, anyway. “That’s exactly what he wants and why Cavalier was brought in. They want to intimidate you, and they want humans to think they need protection. I’m trying to minimize that. It’s what all of us diplomats want.”

“We do not wish to ask permission for every action we take,” said Stray.

“We don’t want that, either. I don’t want that. I want to help. This is all a big change for everyone. I want to make that easier. The less friction we have, the easier things will be over time. There are lots of things our cultures don’t know about each other. This shows what that means. And hey, it’s not all bad. Mr. Bertrand will ask the residents if you can dig more.”

“He does not believe they will approve,” said Stray.

“Yeah, I got that impression, too. It’s still a good sign. It’s better than where that conversation started. That seems like a real concession to me.”

“Mr. Bertrand feels guilty in turning us away. He does not want to be cruel to adorable creatures with a sad story.” Not for the first time, the translator tone seemed too matter-of-fact for the words Stray said, but her furry expression seemed equally blunt and straightforward. “His employers are less sympathetic. They fear us. He cares more for their feelings than our plight. He does not want to be cruel. They don’t want to *appear* cruel, so they send him to face us.”

“Oof. Yes.” Once again, Rebecca couldn’t refute Stray’s insight. The other Runners in the airvan listened and nodded in agreement. They learned nodding from humans. “We’re going to run into a lot of that. It’s all too common in human society.”

“You care about us. You are kind. We know.”

“Of course, that’s why I’m...” Rebecca caught on and went straight from touched to concerned. “Listen, the Diplomatic Service and the Union leadership care, too. They want this to work. They want you to get resettled and thrive. They just aren’t in control here.”

“We understand,” said Stray. “Humanity is complicated. Diverse.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“We need more allies to help us through those complications. We need friends.”

“Yes, like Mr. Ber—oh. We’re back to this again.”

“Tanner is a friend. He wants to help us.”

“Okay, I’m sure that’s true, but Tanner Malone isn’t in the Diplomatic Service or the Union agencies or anything. You need people with influence and political pull. Malone has none of that. He has the *opposite* of that. A lot of people don’t like all the things he did. If he came here to speak for you, it would probably make things worse.”

“He said he would help us if we asked.”

“Yes, but I’m telling you I don’t think he can. This isn’t the kind of situation he can help. I think he knew that when he left the Preserve and went back to school.”

“You don’t like him,” said Stray.

“I don’t know him. It wouldn’t be fair to dislike someone I don’t really know.”

“You believe that is true, but you still feel this way.”

Rebecca sighed. “I think he’s complicated. Like a lot of humans. I don’t think he can help here.”

“You said he is in school? Is he not fully grown?”

“Oh, yes. School isn’t only for our children. Many adults continue going to school to learn more complicated things. I stayed in school for many of my first years as an adult. It’s how I got to be in the Diplomatic Service.”

“Complicated things? Like what?”

“All sorts of things. We call them universities because they study everything. That’s the idea, at least. Malone is at a very good university.”

Stray’s eyes narrowed. It meant she had an idea and wanted to focus on it. She looked back once at her herd and then again to Rebecca. “Could I go to this school?”

* * *

“First, congratulations on finishing your first year with us. I feel like we shouldn’t wait until graduation to credit students for the rigor of Fremantle University.” Everything about Dean Tele projected warmth, from her soothing tone to her deep bronze complexion and soft, broad smile. She kept holos of herself with students scattered between her office plants as if to reinforce that warmth. “Every semester and every year is its own accomplishment—especially with your extracurriculars, Tanner.”

“Ah... heh.” Tanner scratched his head. “Is that what we’re calling the crazy Minos stuff?”

“That wasn’t on my mind at all.” She raised her brow in surprise, but also in thought. “I suppose all of that would apply. It’s extra-ordinary, obviously. No, I meant keeping up with all your classes while also serving as an RA. That alone would be a challenge for any student.”

“Hey, on that note,” Tanner began. “Counseling isn’t taking calls or messages. I know they’re closed until the summer session starts, but they’re still here today, right? Do you know if I could slip in to see anyone?”

“I don’t think so. The end of the semester is always a crunch for them, and especially the last day. They have a lot to finalize. If they’re not returning messages, I assume they’re buried in work for other students, especially our graduates.”

Laughter filtered through the office window behind her. Legs in the air preceded the rest of some office worker being pushed on a cart by another. The passenger held two drinks with paper umbrellas. The pusher wore more beaded necklaces than Tanner had ever seen on a single person. He was pretty sure they both worked in the counseling office.

Tele didn’t look back. She didn’t even blink. “What’s on your mind? Is it urgent?”

“It’s, um, academic. I need to reconsider my major, and my summer session classes are part of that. They might not really help me.”

“What’s your major again?”

“Xenoecology with an emphasis on exploration and survey. I don’t know if my career prospects are all that good there.”

“Oh. *Oh*. Hrm. Yes,” she considered out loud, frowning for only the second or third time in Tanner’s experience. “I can see how that might be especially challenging for you. This hadn’t occurred to you before you started classes?”

“Not really,” he admitted. “Not until now. I figured maybe I should change my summer classes to apply to a broader degree range while I work things out.”

“I’m afraid that’s all locked up until the session starts. You can try for an appointment right at the first day, but naturally you’ll have competition from many other students. It happens at the start of every session. The line stretches down the hall.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Tanner muttered.

“I wish you luck. As it happens, I’m glad you’re thinking about the future. I wanted to talk with you about assignments for our resident advisors next year. I was very happy to see you decided to renew with the program for next year and beyond.”

“Absolutely. I like the job and the housing benefit is a huge financial relief.” Both statements were true to different extents. Straightforward salary or wages would violate Tanner’s student visa limitations, but RAs were “paid” in room and board. And he did, in fact, like the job despite all the stresses of his particular floor...

...which immediately set the wheels turning in his mind. He wondered what his pack of goblins had stolen or destroyed now. It couldn’t have been anything within the last couple hours—not

unless Tele had installed secret cameras on his floor, and the goblins probably would've caught them by now. It might be something off-campus. That thought made him gulp. Could Tele know about the other night and the mobsters? Or was it something Tanner didn't know about yet? Which was worse?

"Excellent, because we've decided to turn a new page in housing practices. We question the benefit of shuffling students from dorm to dorm with each year." Tele tapped her fingers from one side of her desk to the other as if to track students moving across an invisible campus. Then she drew an equally invisible, all-encompassing circle. "We think it's better to keep student residents together for their full undergraduate experience. This will build community and lifelong connections."

"You want to keep everyone together?"

"Apart from the natural churn of individual student circumstances, yes. Rather than turning everyone out at the end of summer session for reassignment in the fall, we're going to keep housing assignments as they are and re-designate each dormitory year accordingly. In the autumn, your freshman dorm will be a sophomore dorm, with most or all the same faces."

She smiled like that was a good thing. Tanner stared at the make-believe community on her desk. He could see where this was going. He didn't think his stomach could drop any farther than it had since yesterday, but it found a few more inches to stumble downward.

"So would I be moving into whatever is the new freshman dorm?" He already knew the answer.

"No. No, we think it would be best if you stayed with your current floor into the next year. And perhaps beyond."

Yup. There it is, he thought. His eyes rose to meet Tele's. "Resident Advisors are a freshman thing. It's to help people adjust to living away from home for the first time."

"That's the ideal... and the tactful way to put it. Sometimes it's a little more complicated than that. I know you have strong feelings about your residents being adults, but they—"

"They are adults," he said.

"Tanner, I don't think we need to revisit the meetings we've had about your floor, or all the meetings you've had with campus safety, or the university president. Your residents comprise a unique group in my time at the university. They've been better under your leadership. Incidents are down. Complaints are down. No one has been expelled or hospitalized since you came on. We'd like to keep a good thing going."

The conversation at least implied she didn't know about the kidnapping and the mobsters. Yet. That was good. "How are we going to justify a resident advisor for sophomores?"

"Oh, I don't think that will be particularly difficult. We tell them the truth: our hope is to build community and lifelong bonds, and you're a part of that. As any group ages together, the mentoring and management ease off and peer relationships build... or at least they should," Tele conceded in a mutter. "At worst, you can think of it as being more like a manager of a residence."

Now his stomach had nowhere to drop, but it could apparently take a kick or two. "You want me to be their landlord?"

"No. This is a major shift in housing policy and practice. There's obviously some kinks to work out in the long term, but we think this will benefit everyone."

Tanner looked her in the eye. "Is this something that's been in the works for a while, or did the university leadership come up with it specifically to keep my dorm residents together?"

"Well," Tele faltered. "We weren't *not* thinking of your floor..."

* * *

"That's about when I tactfully excused myself, went back to my room, dropped onto the bed, and screamed into a pillow." Rebecca stared at the half-empty glass of water on her side of Ambassador Kwahu's desk, wondering if she needed more. She wondered if it would help. She wondered if her boss would help, too.

"Hrm." Kwahu leaned back in his seat, steepling his fingers in front of his chin. Three holo screens separated them atop the desk, holding messages and reports. For a moment, she wondered if he was listening to her at all. Then: "Presumably, she knows how you feel about the idea."

"She's bound to. When do they *not* know how we feel?"

"We've seen limits to their intuition. They have a sense of how we feel, but not why. They can read group dynamics, but not always context." His eyes flicked up to Rebecca. "What did you tell her?"

"I said I'd bring it to you but I didn't think it would fly. All true, by the way."

"Hrm," Kwahu repeated. He stood from his desk and turned to the window. "Hospitality. Brighten the window, please. Full transparency."

Artificial shade lifted over the view of the hill's gentle roll downward slope, turning the scene sunny despite the grey clouds overhead. Hundreds of Runners dotted the field amid grass almost as tall as themselves, some in small clusters, others alone but no more than an easy shout or a stone's toss apart from more. Many chewed on the greenery like any number of Terran herd animals. Some slept. Others faced one another, either hunched low or sitting back and partly upright on their haunches, obviously chatting. One industrious fellow struck black rocks together, reminding Rebecca of school videos about the earliest humans and their stone tools. Only a few used floating screens of light from their holocomms. They seemed less interested in such technology than humans.

Maybe it's because they didn't grow up with it, thought Rebecca. That brought her back to a sad, ever-present observation: there were no children among the Runners. Not in this herd, nor the others. They showed family bonds and mated pairs—hell, they even had flings and break-ups not unlike humans, though that deep intuition seemed to reduce cheating and other complications. Yet the Preserve held no children, and the Runners had reported no pregnancies.

They adapted rapidly to terraformed air. Their metabolisms adapted slower to Terran plants, a process made easier with the help of some urgent and brilliant pharmaceutical engineering by Union Xenological Studies. The Runners shared some biological fundamentals with Terran life, making that help possible, but the adaptation was mostly their own native talent. It never stopped amazing Rebecca.

The Runners were kidnapped and held in stasis on an alien spacecraft. As soon as they were let loose, they adapted and fought back. They found their civilization wiped out and their planet changed, so they adapted. Presented with human technology and ways of life, the Runners preferred their own, but they adapted.

Despite all that, they did not feel safe enough to start having children again. They said so openly. Rebecca couldn't blame them. It was heartbreaking, but she understood. More than anything, she wanted to fix it.

"How do you feel about it?" asked Kwahu.

"Hm?" Rebecca blinked away her thoughts.

"Stray's proposal. How do you feel about it?"

"Which part? Going to school? I think that's a great idea. The more the Runners learn about us, the better-equipped they'll be to advocate for themselves and achieve real independence. That's

baked into our own history of colonialism. The parallels here are glaring.” She noted Kwahu’s snort and half-grin. Predictably, he appreciated that connection. “I don’t know about going straight into a university, let alone an upper-tier like Fremantle. I don’t know how the university would feel about it, either. But I see the start of a good thought here, apart from the *other* aspect.”

“Yes. Go on,” said Kwahu.

Rebecca sighed. “Malone isn’t a diplomat or an aid worker. I don’t see what good he does here. On the contrary, the minute he gets involved, the tension will go through the roof. Destiny and all the other oligarchs will freak out, and that means local government and media will follow, not to mention Cavalier and the local security services. They’re all in Destiny’s pocket. The Runners think he’s their friend, but even if he is, I think he would only make things worse.”

“Heh. I see your point, but that’s not why I ask.” Kwahu looked at her with a raised eyebrow. “*If* he’s their friend? You don’t think their intuition applies to him?”

“I don’t think we fully understand that intuition. We don’t know how open they are to bias.” She caught the irony in her words even before she saw Kwahu’s smirk. “Okay, maybe *I’m* being unfair to Malone, too, but I can approach him with an open mind. All the power players I mentioned won’t bother. They’ll only see a provocation—or an opportunity, which they’ll still *play* as a provocation. It’s the same result.”

“Now you’re showing some savvy. The other side of this isn’t dealing in good faith.”

“Begging your pardon, sir, I’ve known that from the start. Diplomacy isn’t served by saying that part out loud.”

“Not in public, but you can say it with me. You’re not a student or an intern anymore. You don’t have to impress the boss with your idealism or sincerity.” Kwahu nodded to the window. “We’ve got a few thousand clients who’d see right through that, anyway. I’ve already had to shuffle staff around on this mission because of it. The Runners know who to trust. That’s why I’m not worried about you having a disagreement with them. They know how you feel.” Still looking out the window, Kwahu folded his arms. “I think they know how Malone feels, too.”

“You saw all the holos of their meetings with him on the Preserve,” said Rebecca. “They said he doesn’t have a home. His personal situation hadn’t even come up, but they saw that—fairly or not, I don’t know—and they immediately identified with him. I’m not sure they’re being objective here. Look, I’ve got no problems with the things he did to help them or to fight the Minoans. Those were black and white situations. His history before that is a whole different issue.”

“Well, on the bright side, Stray has shifted from asking to bring him here,” said Kwahu. “She wants to go see him. That works in our favor in a number of ways.”

Rebecca blinked. “How, exactly?”

“First, you’re right: the power players here aren’t acting in good faith. They’re a wall. We need more pushback against them, and we can’t get that locally when the oligarchy controls the media and the messaging. Grassroots support will build too slowly. If we get the Runners out and about in the Union, though, we can generate pressure and support for them. I mean, look at them. You’ve got to be a heartless miser to turn them away. If we put them around a bunch of college kids, we’ll have the kind of pressure campaign the Diplomatic Service could never generate on its own.

“Apart from that, if I asked you to name the single most difficult person among the Runners, who would you select?” Kwahu smiled. “Stray is a good egg, but she’s not the most helpful in a negotiation. If we get her out of here for a while, the others might be easier to guide.”

Rebecca frowned, but she couldn’t fault him there. Runner group dynamics were difficult. They operated with enviable consensus, but that also meant taking pushback seriously—and Stray could push back a lot. “Okay, but that brings up the other crazy part: none of the others want to go. They don’t want to leave the herd, or the home they just got back to. I can’t blame any of them. It runs against everything we know about the Runners, but she’s ready to go on her own.”

“It’s right there in her name,” said Kwahu.

“Sure, but we can’t let her go alone.”

“No, not at all. No, we can’t.”

“Right, so it’s...” Rebecca stopped. “Wait. Hold on.”

“Of all my actual diplomats, who’s got the most recent experience with college life?”

Rebecca winced. She should’ve brought that pillow for the inevitable second round of screaming.