

This Thing of Ours

Matthew Jarpe

Furtive whispers preceded the Terran onto the bridge. Workerclass hardshells scuttled out of the way of the entourage. Thinkerclass grubs surrounded him in a phalanx as he strode through the new construction.

Eric Finn was a tall man, even among his own kind. His gray hair brushed the unfinished ceiling, his gray eyes swept over the circular room. He said nothing as he stood and absorbed everything he saw. His eyes took on a distant look, and as he moved to speak the grubs leaned in to catch his every word.

“Hunter green,” he said, sweeping his hand over the upper part of the walls. He moved his hand lower and grubs scuttled out of his way. “And plum.”

“Two colors, Mr. Finn?” The voice came through a translator from the lead Thinkerclass grub.

Finn stared down at the grub and barely hid his revulsion. “Of course. The dividing line is here.” He chopped his hand at the wall, at just the height where a Commandclass wingbearer’s thorax sprouted from its abdomen. “There will be a thin gold band separating the two colors.” He held his fingers about an inch apart and the grubs tapped furiously on their sketchpads. Finn surveyed the rest of the room. “The ceiling is also hunter green. Recessed lighting in a series of concentric circles.” He punched at the ceiling and a worker scuttled across the bare plastic to make marks where his hand hit. “Here, here, and here. Three rings. And one larger light in the center. What is this hideous thing?”

The grubs wriggled over to catch up to him and see what he was frowning at.
“That’s the command center, Mr. Finn. Essential equipment.”

“Put it somewhere else. It throws off the room.”

“But we always put the command center in the middle, Mr. Finn. It’s essential.”

Finn ignored the grub. “What is that?” He pointed to a cylindrical tank against the wall.

“Holographic projector, also essential.”

“Put that in the middle, and put this ugly thing against the wall. Finish them both in gold, but a brushed finish on the command center. We don’t want to draw the eye to it.”

“But ...”

Finn glared at the grub who had dared speak. “Do you want this to look good? Hmm?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Then do as I say.” He strode back to the door. “Persian rugs on the floor. I’ll buy them. You wouldn’t have the slightest idea. We’ll figure out the desks ...”

“Interface consoles, Mr. Finn,” the lead grub blurted out.

“Whatever. Don’t put them in until I see the walls.”

#

“Why the hell do they even listen to you, boss?” Nine started up the putter and ran through the undocking routine. “It’s their space ship, why do they ask a human to decorate it?”

“Because I act like I know what I’m talking about,” Finn said. “Think of it as a

scam, if that makes you more comfortable. Except that in the end these guys are happy with the transaction.”

“But Jerry tells me these guys see things at all different wavelengths than us,” Nine said as he ran the putter back to the station. “How is it they’re happy with the way it looks? And it ain’t like you’re even really a decorator.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Mr. Nine-fingers,” Finn said. “I’m a damn fine decorator. These places look really good when I’m finished. And as for why they’re happy? They get to tell everyone that a Terran decorated the ship for them, and they get to be smug about it. Or whatever passes for smugness in a race of insects. Everyone knows that Terrans make the best decorators, because everyone knows it. That’s how the Galaxy goes around, my friend.”

“I don’t know, boss. This isn’t how we did things back in the old country.”

“Different place, Nine. Different rules. How’d you make out?”

“Aaah,” Nine waved his hand and the putter veered to the left. He corrected its course with a lazy turn of his hand. “Nothing. The whole cargo is freezer units. Those kind you put a person in when you go to another star. You know.”

“More freezer units? How many?”

“I lost count at twelve million. Why bother? You told me we couldn’t steal them. Said there’s no place to fence them.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t matter. I’m just curious. What the hell are they doing with so many freezers?”

#

The Terran section of Vega Ring was one of the smaller neighborhoods on the station. Terrans had been part of the Conglomerate for fifty years, and it took a long time to buy real estate, even if you had something to offer. Terrans didn't have much. They were pretty good at piloting, but not great. They could do a bit of engineering, but there were a lot of species who could do it better. It seemed that the only thing Terrans could do better than anyone else was to pick out drapes. So the Terran shtetl became a design center.

Finn and Company was one of the most successful design firms on Vega Ring. A lot of species came to Vega to construct fleets because of the raw materials and the energy that poured of the blue-white star. The big accounts all sought out Finn for the finishing touches, and the company could pick and choose among contracts.

What these species did not know, what the Terran provost knew but couldn't let on, what every Terran knew but was afraid to speak of, was that Finn and Company was a front. They were not at Vega Ring to show carpet samples and color swatches to gelatinous trapezoids. They were there to extend the reach of the Earth's oldest organized crime family into the depths of space.

Finn and Nine got nods of respect as they made their way through the crowded streets of the Terran shtetl. The cops gave them the eye, but stayed out of their way. Nine was a big man, heavily scarred and frightening. Most of the scars were from a decompression accident on Luna when he was a young boy, but he didn't tell anyone that. He let them believe that he'd gotten them in combat, and that gave him stature. But not as much stature as walking next to Mr. Finn got him.

The front office of Finn and Company was filled, as always, with loitering young men. But this time the men were gathered around a newcomer. Finn looked the man over. He was from the old country, that much he could tell right away. The suit, the haircut, all screamed Earth. Nobody on Vega ring was wearing such a wide tie. Beyond that, Finn could tell he was prosperous and was used to being treated well. He knew what Jerry was going to say before he said it.

“Mr. Finn, this is Hans Van Leiden. He’s a friend of ours.”

Finn took the man’s hand. “The Dutchman?”

Hans nodded. “That’s what they used to call me, back on Earth. You heard of me, then?”

“Heard of you? You did the thing in Jersey City with the bazooka.” He slapped Bogs on the shoulder. “I told you all about this guy, didn’t I? Come back to the office, let me get you a drink.”

The Dutchman held up his attaché case. “No, let me get you a drink. Good stuff, from the old country.”

Finn gestured back to his office. “Hey, we got good stuff here, don’t we Jerry? Let’s get some glasses and do a taste test.” Finn took a seat in one armchair and left the other for Hans. He let Jerry and Nine and Bogs perch on the arms of the couch and lean in the door frame. To sit behind the desk would invite a power struggle and that, he didn’t need. Hans Van Leiden was here for a reason. It was a long trip from Earth, two years in the freezer. Not a friendly visit.

“Single malt scotch, Laphroig,” Hans said as he poured two glasses. Jerry helped himself and Nine and Bogs held back, aware as always of the pecking order. Finn brought the glass up to his nose and gasped.

“Smells like a campfire, hey Jerry?”

Jerry sniffed and grimaced. “If you say so, Finn. I’ve never smelled a campfire.”

Finn nodded at Jerry. “Jerry Tollman, he’s my capo. From Titan. Been in space all his life, right Jerry?”

Jerry nodded and sat on the couch, secure now in his position. Not an equal, but a trusted associate.

“Sounds like quite an operation you guys have got going here,” Hans said. That was a bad sign. Getting down to business with the first drink. Something was happening, and Finn didn’t feel ready for it.

“We’ll give you the full tour when you’ve gotten settled. We’ve got a lot of things going on.”

“Old man’s a little concerned, though.”

Jerry coughed around his drink. It could have been the scotch, it was strong stuff, but it wasn’t. You just didn’t bring up the old man like that. You danced around it. Something was happening.

“We’re in the black, double-digit growth, year on year,” Finn said, probably a little too fast. Too defensive. He forced himself to relax. “Lot of money flowing back to the old country.”

“Here’s the thing,” The Dutchman said, leaning forward and cupping his scotch glass in his two meaty palms. “You don’t seem to be doing anything illegal.”

Finn smiled and sipped his little private campfire in a glass. “The Conglomerate is a different place, Dutch. Different rules.” This felt like the lecture he’d just given Nine in the putter. “See, a lot of things you guys do in the old country, well, they’re just not crimes here on Vega Ring. The numbers racket is legal. There’s a lot of competition from the casinos. Drugs are legal, prostitution, even shylocking is legal except for the part about beating people up. And we all know that isn’t where the money is made, the beatings. That’s just a side benefit.” He laughed and his boys followed him. The Dutchman laughed too, which was a good sign.

“All right,” Hans said. “You can’t make book here, I get it. But the whole point of coming out here is so you can boost stuff from the aliens.”

Finn nodded. “And we do. We’re out there on those ships when they’re all finished. We get cargo and equipment and fuel. They have no idea what we’re taking away with us when we deliver our carpet and wood paneling.”

“It’s small stuff, though,” Hans said. “It barely shows up against your bottom line.”

“Can I help it if we’re making more money on the legitimate side of the business?” Finn asked. “That’s just the way it works sometimes. One door closes and another opens. You’ve just got to roll with it.”

“But it’s embarrassing,” Hans said. “Interior decorating. That’s just not what we do. It’s no business for a real man.”

Finn sat and stared at Hans, saying nothing. The silence drew out for a long time. There were not many men who could withstand that stare, that heavy silence. But the

Dutchman didn't squirm, he didn't babble to fill the uncomfortable pause. He stared back.

Finally, Finn turned to Jerry. "We're going to need some Persian carpet for the bug ship. I'm going with hunter green and plum, with gold highlights. The specs are in my file." The Dutchman was dismissed, as if he'd never existed.

#

"So boss," Bogs said as they walked over to the Provost's office, "this Van Leiden guy, he speaks for the old man?"

Finn looked out of the corner of his eye at his soldier. "Why you asking me this?"

Bogs shrugged. "He's been talking down at Rax." It was three days since the disastrous meeting with the Dutchman, him walking out and slamming the door like he'd been the one who was insulted. Since then Finn had seen him around, playing pool at Rax, talking to people in the street. Random people. He didn't know who to talk to, not yet.

"Let me tell you something about the old man, Bogs." Finn clapped his hand on the other man's shoulder. Bogs was short and solid, slow to anger, quick to laugh, and all business when the job called for someone to get hurt. "He's one of the last Sicilianos in the Family. Very conservative. When I got made, the old man fought against me and damned near started a war over it. Then when I brought in the black market gene mod farms and the money that went with it, he's all hugs and kisses on both cheeks and so forth. He doesn't like change, Bogs, but he does like the money."

Bogs nodded. "But what if the old man doesn't come around? What if he decides to start a war over this?"

“We can’t worry about that, Bogs. We can’t run the operation that way. We’ve got to react to the situation, think on our feet. Earth’s 26 light years away, they aren’t clued in to the way things are around here. Hell, it takes two years just to get a simple message across that gap. Instructions 2 years out of date are no good to us, here at Vega. Take the Provost we’re about to see. She doesn’t take orders from the old country. She runs her own show. Why should we be any different?”

Bogs nodded again, thoughtful. “That’s a bold position to take, Mr. Finn.”

“You may be called upon to take a bold position of your own in the near future, Mr. Bogs. You think about what I just said.”

They walked up to the reception desk of the Hall of Government, Terran Enclave, Vega Ring, and Finn placed his palms on the desk and leaned in. “Hiya, beautiful, what’s your name?”

The woman behind the desk, forties, mousy, high neck sweater and wrist braces, giggled like a schoolgirl. “Mr. Finn, it’s Marie. You know me.”

“Marie? Marie? You look fantastic, Marie. What did you do to your hair?”

Marie plucked at her dishwater blond locks. “Nothing yet. I was thinking about coloring it, though.”

Finn framed her face with thumbs and forefingers. “Don’t you dare. Don’t change a thing, Marie. You’re perfect.” He nodded at the Provost’s office. “She in?”

“She’s in,” Marie said, then lowered her voice. “She’s in one of her moods. Be careful.”

Finn thumped his chest. “You leave her to me. Bogs, you stay out here and keep Marie company. Tell her that joke you told me, the one about the priest, the rabbi, and

the Kleechie mathematician.” He walked around Marie’s desk and knocked on the Provost’s office.

“What?” came the answer from within. Finn opened the door, entered, and sat on the couch.

“We can’t work when the police stop our transports coming and going from the job site,” Finn said. “I want that to stop.”

Killu Torkka scowled when she saw Eric Finn in her office. She stood up from behind her desk, stalked past him, and shut the door. He followed her with his eyes as she crossed the room, traveling up and down, taking in the whole package twice.

“You want it to stop?” she said, standing over him and tapping her foot.

“Now. That’s a nice dress, Killu. I’m glad to see you took my advice. Pastel blue works for you. I knew you were a summer. Orange wasn’t doing you justice at all.”

“You’re stealing from the Kercach. And I didn’t take your advice, I had this dress.”

“That’s Krchiatch, from the back of the throat. Get some pleghm going there. And they have no concept of private property, so you can’t really steal from them. They don’t know what it means.”

“We do,” Killu said. “And we’re here to protect their interests. If they find out it could create a diplomatic incident that could harm Terra’s position in the Conglomerate.”

“I don’t care about that,” Finn said. He watched her cross the ocean of carpet that separated the couch from the desk. He stifled the urge to get up and move the couch closer. If he did that, he’d have to kitty corner the reading table, and the chairs would

have to go. A whole can of worms. “I’ve got a business to run. I want you to work with me.”

“Never,” Killu snarled.

“Not that. I know you don’t play dirty pool. I’ve got a lot of respect for that. But the other part of my business is growing fast. We’ve got the entire Krchiatch contract to work on. I can’t keep up. Every ship in their new fleet is to be individually engineered and decorated. I’m going to need help.”

“What are you asking me to do?” Her eyes narrowed, but her look of revulsion was gone.

“The transport that just came in, I need to thaw out some passengers and bring them to work here on Vega Ring.”

“More thugs for your army?”

“No, Killu, designers. I’ll let you have a look at their records. A couple with fashion experience, some painters, even a couple of industrial designers. Business is great right now. I’ve got to seize this opportunity and grow the company. We’ve got to petition for more space in the shtetl. We’re becoming a vital part of the economy of Vega Ring. Now’s the time to expand.”

Killu shook her head. “You’re really good at this design thing, Finn. The Krchiatch speak so highly of your work. And yet you steal from them behind their backs. Why? You could be so successful with Finn and Company if you’d just give up the other side of the business.”

Finn held out his hand, palm up, and brought his fingers together. “This thing of ours, Killu, it’s what I am. I can’t fight that. I can’t go against my nature. I’m good at

design? Maybe. But I'm also good at the other thing. And people count on me. If not me, somebody worse. And believe me, Killu, there are worse than me."

Killu shook her head, staring at the files arranged on her desktop. "I'll see what shuffling I can do. I really want your design business to flourish, Finn. I want it to work so well you'll forget about stealing. I don't know about this transport, though. The hub is at fifty-percent capacity for processing passengers. There was a flood or something. And then this new businessman, Hans Van Leiden, has just requested 50 of his associates get thawed out. We have to find lodging for these people. It's getting tight. But I'll see what I can do. Get me your list."

"Thanks, Killu. But about this other thing. I really have to get this resolved today. You're going to stop looking at our transports. Stop it, now."

"I won't stop it, Finn."

"I hate this part," Finn sighed. "Your chief of police is selling Krchiatch military secrets to the Ptang. The Krchaitch are going to find out about it."

"He is not," Killu said.

"It certainly appears that way. The evidence is on his home system, which has been regularly backed up into the Vega Ring central storage. He's going to be in big trouble."

"We were prepared for this kind of thing," Killu said. "My entire staff has diplomatic immunity. Joseph, and all of the Terran Enclave government, is prepared to make sacrifices to stop you. We're not backing down this time."

Finn dropped his head into his hand. "I wish you wouldn't make me do this. Did you see Bogs out there? I'm going to send him over to the University and find your

husband, and beat him within and inch of his life. You understand what that means? He's going to beat Thomas until he's almost dead, and then he's going to stop so Thomas will feel the result for as long as it takes to heal the damage. If he ever does."

Killu's ruddy face lost all of its color. She hurried to her desk and reached for her phone. "I'll have both of you arrested."

Finn took his phone out of his pocket and held it up. "He's already on his way. You're too late."

Killu stopped, her hand on the phone. "You're a monster." She sat in her chair, suddenly drained of energy. "All right, you win. We'll stop the searches."

Finn hit the speed dial button and held the phone up to his ear. "Bogs, we worked it out. You can go on home. ... Naw, I can get back by myself. Your little girl is sick. Suku needs your help. You go on home and I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks, buddy." He dropped the phone back into his pocket. "You shouldn't make me do that, Killu. It accomplishes nothing. I don't want to fight against you."

"Just get out of here," Killu spat. Finn stood up and let himself out with a fond farewell to Marie.

So, Van Leiden was bringing in 50 soldiers, and he couldn't tell Killu what she was about to allow. The code of silence prevented him from even hinting that the Dutchman was about to launch a war. Finn sighed and considered his options for the evening. Suddenly, the Terran Enclave seemed claustrophobic. His house up in the high rent section would be too quiet, his family too predictable. He had to see Loni tonight. He called his wife on the way and told her he had to work late again. He said goodnight to the kids, suited up, and went through the airlock onto the Boulevard.

#

About an equal number of Terrans lived inside and outside of the Enclave. The shtetl was home for families, conservative businesses, neighborhood hangouts. The Boulevard was where the young and hip did their thing. Vega Ring was a big structure, spinning in orbit around Vega's gas giant. The Boulevard ran all the way around the outer rim, connecting the various Enclaves. It was about thousand kilometers long and had about three fourths of Earth gravity. The whole thing was filled with argon to a decent pressure and kept just above the freezing temperature of water. The only thing humans needed to survive there were breathing masks. And here, almost everyone had to wear masks. The Boulevard was the great equalizer.

Finn stood on the street and found his eye drawn, as it always was, to the vast ceiling sweeping up to either side. It always made him feel like he was standing at the bottom of a deep valley. The walk in either direction looked like an uphill trek, but of course it wasn't. He walked over to the Human Condition, the bar where Loni worked.

Most of the Terrans lived clustered around the entrance to the shtetl. The bars around here were mostly Terran normal, and the patrons were almost all Terran. The few who weren't were Ptang and Loloft, the Terran's atmosphere buddies. As Finn left the airlock and folded his mask into his pocket he spotted the two slender Ptang right away. He let his eye rest on their forms and hit the activator stud in the roof of his mouth. Soon, a voice whispered their names in his left ear. He could never tell the Ptang apart. These two were clients of his, so he greeted them warmly.

"G'nith, Bidli, how are you guys? Slumming in the Terran bars, eh?"

G'nith turned two of his eyestalks to Finn and paused. He was probably checking his own pattern matcher to find out what Terran was throwing sound waves at him. "Finn/color swatches/designed our office. 'Slumming' is hard to translate. We are absorbing Terran culture. Possible trip to Earth in our future. Business takes us that way. Eager to see a well decorated planet."

Finn laughed. "It isn't all well decorated, I'm afraid. Parts of it are positively gauche. So, do you still like the office?"

"All of our friends are jealous," Bidli said. "We have created much status for ourselves."

"That's good, Bidli, but do you like it?"

"We always like status," Bidli said.

Finn caught sight of Loni in the back room and said goodbye to his clients. He leaned in the door frame for a minute, watching her work. She was doing a table dance for a couple of construction workers. They were starting to get a little rowdy, pretty drunk for five in the evening. One of them reached up to grab her g-string and the bouncer started moving over to put a stop to it.

Finn held up his hand. "I'll handle this one, Jorge." He caught Loni's eye as he walked up behind the two men. He dropped one hand on each of their shoulders. "You boys having a good time?" Loni stepped off of the table onto the chair, out of harms way, and retrieved her cut off T-shirt.

"Hey, back off, asshole," one of the guys said. He stood up and pulled back a fist. "We paid for her."

Finn winked at Loni. "I'll see you in back, sweetheart."

“Mr. Finn,” the other one said. The fist dissolved into a sweaty, floppy thing that fluttered against the first guy’s chest.

“Mr. Finn, I didn’t know it was you. It’s dark in here. I didn’t know.”

Finn smiled. “Relax, guys. I’m not going to do anything to you. Just remember, you pay to look, not to touch. Next time I won’t be here, and Jorge isn’t going to be as gentle as I am. He’s programmed in crippling martial arts. You treat these ladies with respect, understand?”

“Yes sir,” they both said, and stumbled off to the bar. Finn waved at Jorge and followed Loni into the back room.

The girls were always happy to see him. He said hi to the ones he knew, introduced himself to the new ones, and found out Loni had gone up to her apartment. He climbed the stairs and knocked on her door. The door flew open and Loni wrapped her arms around his neck. Their mouths came together and her tongue asked if it could come over to play with his. When they finally came up for air they had landed in the papazian chair that was too big for the room, and Finn’s shoes and tie were on the floor.

“Can you tell I missed you?” Loni asked. “You didn’t have to stop those guys. Let Jorge do it, it’s his job.”

“When Jorge does it, people get hurt. Big guys don’t let little guys push them around. Jorge has to make them bleed before they see things his way. When I talk to them, they’re just afraid they’re going to get hurt. It works better.”

“Too bad Jorge can’t do it your way.” Loni climbed over him to the edge of the big chair and danced into the kitchen.

“He’ll get a reputation sooner or later. Maybe I can teach him a thing or two.”

“Some guy was asking around the other night about you, wondering if people were afraid of you. He should have been there today.”

“What guy?” But Finn already knew the answer.

“I don’t know. Old country, black hair, lots of dough. You want to eat? I didn’t know you were coming by.”

“I had a rough day. We can order in.”

“I’ll make something. You sit. Tell me about your rough day, honey.”

Finn hauled himself out of the chair and sat on a barstool so he could see into the kitchen. “That guy who was asking about me is Hans Van Leiden. He’s an underboss, like me. Sottocapo. From the old country, like you say. He says he speaks for the old man, and he’s making some trouble.”

Loni stopped chopping and put down the knife. “What kind of trouble?”

“Ah, he wants to be the boss. And he’s got 50 thugs frozen on the transport he took in. He’s requested living space for them from the Provost. She has no idea who he is, and she’s probably going to let him bring them in. That’s going to be bad.”

“Do you have any way to stop those guys from getting thawed? Take care of them before they’re a problem?”

Finn scratched his chin. “We don’t have anybody onboard that transport we can trust. No legitimate business up in the hub, no way to get someone in.” Then he remembered something. “Hold on.” He pulled out his phone and dialed. “Jerry, you hear anything about a flood in the station hub? I heard there was some damage in the passenger processing facility. They’re going to need new carpet and stuff up there. Get that contract. ... Doesn’t matter, I want that contract. Whatever you have to do.” He

hung up and put the phone away. “Good idea. Easier to deal with the Dutchman when he doesn’t have an army of his own.”

“This guy can really speak for your boss 26 light years away?”

Finn shook his head. “The whole idea is ridiculous. We’re doing things our own way out here. We have to evolve or get swallowed by the Conglomerate. The Families are so conservative. It takes them decades to change direction. You know it used to be that you had to be a full blooded Sicilian to get made?”

“How long ago was that? You can’t find a full blooded anything any more.”

“I was one of the first non Sicilianos to get made. There were some real mutants at the top before they dropped that rule.”

Loni put a plate of stir fry in front of him and handed him a fork and a glass of wine. “Hey, are you going to kill those guys in the transport before they can thaw them out?”

Finn took a bite of his vegetables and shook some soy sauce over them. “That’d be the most efficient way to take care of the problem. Why, does that bother you?”

She came around the counter and sat next to Finn on the other bar stool. She’d put some blue sweat pants on at some point, not her best color. “I guess it shouldn’t. I mean, that’s the nature of the business we’re in, right?”

“Business Im in, sweetheart. Don’t start thinking of it as your job, too, just because I talk to you about it. You’re a dancer. Your business is to entertain men.”

Loni smiled. “Do you want to hear about the entertainment I have planned for you tonight?”

There was a knock on Finn's door. He used his brain implant to scope out who it was, then said "Come on in, Jerry. What's up?"

Jerry opened the door and sat in the easy chair across from the desk. "We got the construction contract for the hub damage. They're going to start work next week. I've got Bogs and a couple of the guys up there checking out the job. Should be fine."

"That's good, Jerry." He leaned back and put his feet up on the desk. "Anything else?" Jerry wasn't one to stop in with routine status reports. He came around to the business at hand eventually.

"That phone system we boosted from the Ptang office job, we can't fence it."

"Oh? Looked like Llinling make. Big demand for those."

"It is," Jerry said. "Only it isn't a phone system. I did a little poking around inside. It's a data storage device, a special one that they send with some of their long range starships. It's unique."

"Ah, well, they'll want it back, I suppose. I think we can sneak it back into the office. Go in to replace a defective wall panel or something and maybe find it dropped behind there. I'll figure something out. You think they're already looking for it?"

Jerry shrugged. "Could be, but I haven't heard anything. You know the Ptang. They keep things quiet. They like to scheme in the background rather than confront directly. They'd never come out and ask us. The Llinling, on the other hand, might want to find it. They never really sell anything, they sort of lease. They feel responsible for the stuff even after it's out of their hands."

"We can handle the Llinling. We have before. I'll see about getting the thing back into the office."

“One more thing, boss.”

“Yeah?”

“Like I said, I did some poking around in that data storage device, and, what I found, see, I think you ought to see this.” He pulled out a printout from his coat pocket and spread it on Finn’s desk. “This looks like a shipping schedule. These data storage devices are all synchronized in the Ptang home system and they use them to coordinate arrival times of starships at different systems. Every Ptang knows where every other Ptang is and when they’re due to arrive.”

Finn peered at the list. The departure and arrival systems were in some alphanumeric code translated from the Ptang language. The times were in Ptang designations that meant nothing to Finn. But there was one piece of information that was obvious on the schedule. “Whole lotta ships coming into this one system at the same time,” Finn said. “You got to wonder if that system has the facilities to handle that kind of a deluge. You thinking maybe we can use this information somehow?”

Jerry tapped the arrival code on the schedule. “That’s Sol. They’re going to Earth.”

Finn didn’t say anything for a while. He picked up the schedule and leaned back in his chair, pondering it. Finally, he dropped the paper on his desk and stood up. “That looks like an invasion, Jerry.”

“That’s what I was thinking, boss. The Ptang are schemers. This time it looks like they’re scheming against us.”

#

Gveta's was one of the more cosmopolitan restaurants on the Boulevard. They served Terrans, Ptang, and even a few Loloft. Finn shuddered at the many Ptang eyes that swiveled to watch him enter, Loni on his right arm. Now that he knew what they were up to, their interest in all things Terran took on a sinister feel. But he had made a date, and he intended to keep it.

Loni had let Finn dress her tonight, and she looked spectacular. Every Terran male in the place tracked her across the room. He had gone with a silk off the shoulder gown, slit up the front and back to show off her dancer's legs. It was a sea green that went perfectly with her olive complexion and deep brown hair. She wore only a string of pearls and no makeup. Her figure held up the silk folds admirably.

Their waiter was a Terran, one of the many people who had emigrated to the space colonies looking for adventure only to find themselves stuck in some menial job. He perked up when he recognized Finn, and soon a fleet of busboys was dispatched to load their table with delicacies.

As soon as they were alone, Loni put down her wineglass. "I heard that 35 people died in some kind of accident in the hub facilities today. Terrans. That's awful, isn't it?"

"A shame," Finn said. A shame they'd only gotten 35 of them. That meant the Dutchman had 15 soldiers to terrorize the Terran enclave with. One would have been too many. "I hope they fix the problem soon. I've got three qualified decorators scheduled to come out of cold storage this week."

"They came out here to work for you?"

"No. That would have been a trick. I can't plan my business 4 years in advance. I'm going to make them an offer once they wake up. If they refuse, they can go back on

ice until they get to the colony planet. But I don't think they will, not with my benefits package."

Loni went back to her shrimp scampi while Finn nervously eyed the group of Ptang sitting at a nearby table. Did they really think they could just take the Earth? Weren't there legal protections associated with membership in the Conglomerate? Could they get away with this?

He and Jerry had gone over all of the repercussions that afternoon. They both felt that they had to tell someone, but whom? Talking to the authorities would be breaking omerta, the code of silence. A message back to the old man would beat the Ptang ships by almost a year, but what could he do? They could at least warn him to get off of the planet, but what about the rest of humanity? What did the Ptang have in mind for the 3 billion humans still living on Earth?

Then Finn remembered the massive Krchaitch contract. Hundreds of ships being built in the shipyards of Vega Ring, each a unique construction like all Krchaitch works. And each one being filled with row after row of freezer units. Millions of them in each ship. Suddenly, he knew what they were for. They meant to evacuate the Earth, and use the planet for themselves.

Loni was waving her hand in front of his face. "Hello? You ready to order? Waiter want's to get this thing going."

"I can come back," the waiter said, backing away.

"No, no," Finn said. He looked again at the table of Ptang, at their lime-green skin and their tangle of spindly limbs and eye stalks. "Give me a plate of spinach linguini with marinara sauce."

The waiter snapped his data pad closed and backed away from the table. He ran into Hans Van Leiden, rebounded, and veered toward the kitchen.

The Dutchman stood over their table, his breather mask still hanging around his neck, pointing a finger at Finn and shaking all over. “You. You’re gonna pay.”

“Am I?” Finn did a security sweep of the restaurant with his implant. His men were in place and had a clear shot at Van Leiden. Van Leiden’s men were at the door and had a clear shot of the whole room. There was an autocop three blocks away. Finn forced himself to relax. Van Leiden wanted to take over his operation, not destroy it. For a new underboss to take over from a respected one, well, that had to be done with finesse. Van Leiden had not gotten into his position by being stupid, so he probably knew that. Killing Finn in a crowded restaurant wasn’t the way to his objective. He wanted Finn to quake in his shoes and undermine his position.

“Let me give you a little advice, Hans. I suggest you get your ass back in the freezer and wait for the next transport back to Earth. Try not to let me lay eyes on you. That’s the smart play for you.”

Van Leiden leaned in close. For a moment Finn thought he was moving in for the kiss of death, but fortunately he didn’t go in for that sort of theatrics. “You’re not going to have to worry about that, Finn. You’re going to be dead.” He straightened up and walked for the door.

Finn got the silent signals from his men. They were prepared to take out the Dutchman on Finn’s orders. Finn told them, just as silently, that it wasn’t necessary. Finn didn’t need to prove anything. If Van Leiden took the freezer, or if he simply

disappeared before he could hurt anybody, it would make no difference to Finn's position in the Terran enclave. He watched the Dutchman and his men leave the restaurant.

"Sorry about that," he told Loni.

"Are you kidding?" she said. "That was great. He threatened you and you just sat there. Mr. Stonewall. You're amazing Finn."

"That doesn't scare you, then?" The rest of the patrons in the place were starting to turn back to their food, aware that they were staring at the Man. Only the Ptang kept a few curious eyes trained on the scene.

"Do you think I came all the way out to Vega to be a stripper? Hell, no, Finn, I came out here for adventure. Then I find out when I get here that there isn't all that much adventure to be had. There aren't even any good jobs if you don't have an education. They didn't tell us that back on Earth. Being around you is my only chance for some action on this station."

"You don't think mingling with aliens is adventure?" Finn dug his fork into his newly arrived green pasta smothered in red sauce.

Loni glanced around the room. "No offense, if any of you can hear me or understand me, but once you've seen your first couple hundred aliens, it gets old."

#

"Sir, there's a Linling here to see you," Gail said over the intercom.

"Send it ..." Finn paused. "I'll be right out." No sense messing up the carpet in his office as well. He stepped out into the reception area to greet his visitor.

When Terrans first got to Vega Ring and were thrown in with the hundreds of species that made up the Conglomerate, they usually tried to attach some kind of animal

identities to the beings they saw around them. The Krchaitch were bugs, the Loloft were reptiles, and so on. But after a while they gave up. Most of the aliens didn't look like anything on Earth. Most of them barely looked like something that could be alive.

Even among the thousands of strange creatures of Vega Ring, the Linling were hard to look at. Finn searched the heaving blob in front of him for some kind of facial feature, something to lock in on, to speak to. But the mottled surface was impossible to find pattern in. Jerry said that the Linling were inward facing. All of their limbs and sensory organs were inside and the skin was nothing but a food absorption surface. What waited in the outer office was an undifferentiated bag of life.

Finn skipped the usual pleasantries. They would have been lost on the creature. "What can I do for you?" His implanted translator contacted the one in the Linling by infrared, then modulated some kind of chemical message the alien could understand.

"This entity has discovered that a data storage device of Linling make was stolen by Terran individuals in this office."

"Hmm," Finn said. "Which data storage device is this?"

"The one installed in the office of Bidli of the Ptang."

"Well, if it's installed there it isn't stolen is it? Brilliant. Mystery solved.

Thanks for dropping by."

"This entity has traced the unauthorized relocation of the device to these offices. This is a crime. This entity is prepared to bring this information to the Vega Ring authorities."

"Ah," Finn said. "But you haven't done so yet? Tell the authorities, I mean?"

“Not yet. It is necessary to complete all information gathering before doing so. The item was tampered with. This entity wishes to know what information was extracted, and with whom that information was shared.”

Finn looked over the top of the Linling at Jerry and Bogs, who had come in from the back offices. “And with whom have you shared your suspicions, if I may ask?”

“Until all pertinent data has been collected this entity will not share these suspicions with anyone. Please describe the tampering that was done to the data storage device, detailing the information that was extracted and the fate of that information.”

“Yes, of course. Just a moment, though. Are you telling me that nobody knows about these suspicions of yours but yourself?”

“All of the information regarding this case is stored within the enhanced memory capacity of this entity.”

“You’re not kidding me, are you?” Finn winked at Jerry and leaned over to jab Nine with an elbow.

“This entity is incapable of lying,” the Linling said. “Please describe the tampering that was done to the device in question.”

“Sure, no problem. Jerry, why don’t you transmit the file you showed me to this gentleman.”

Jerry pulled out his computer and called up the file. He beamed it to the alien over the IR link. “There you go, sir. That’s all the pertinent information I extracted from the data storage. I saw some other things, but they weren’t as interesting as this little item.”

“And with whom was this information shared?” the Linling asked.

“Just Mr. Finn, sir. I haven’t shown it to anyone else. Mr. Finn, you told anyone about this?”

“I’m still trying to figure it out myself, Mr. Tollman. Maybe this here fellow can enlighten us. You think?”

Jerry stroked his chin. “Well, maybe he can at that.”

Finn addressed the Linling. “We were wondering about that file we found. See, it looks to us like a whole lot of Ptang transports are en route to the Terran home system. We were trying to figure out why that might be. Any hints?”

“These shipping schedules are Ptang secrets,” the Linling said. “They are not to be shared with others.”

“Well, we already know about it, though,” Finn said. “We just want to know why they’re going there.”

“The Ptang own the Terran home system,” the creature said. “They are claiming their property.”

“Own it? How do they figure?”

“The are now in the process of purchasing the Terran system from the Conglomerate. They may dispose of the system and its planets as they see fit.”

“Is that right? And what about the Terrans who live there?”

“Those who wish to remain and labor for the Ptang are welcome to do so. Others will be shipped to the new Terran colony worlds, or held in storage until such time as their services are needed in the space stations.”

“Very interesting,” Finn said. “I’m enlightened. Jerry, anything you’d like to ask before we take leave of our guest?”

Jerry cleared his throat. “What gives the Conglomerate the right to sell the Terran home system to anyone?”

“It was a stipulation of joining the Conglomerate,” the Linling said. “Elevation of your technology to allow interstellar travel, the colony worlds suitable for habitat modulation: these were not given freely. The Terran homeworld was held in escrow until the Terrans paid off the debt. Unfortunately, the Terrans did not realize their economic potential until after the loan period had expired, and the Ptang purchased the system before they could pay off the loan. All of this information is freely available, if one knows where to look for it. A Linling document search device would make the task much easier.”

“He’s trying to sell us a system,” Nine said. “I don’t believe it.”

Finn shook his head. “Well, I’ve heard all I need to know. Nine, Bogs, take our guest out to the loading dock and whack him.”

The Linling squelched after Bogs, who beckoned toward the rear door. “The term ‘whack’ does not translate well. Please explain its meaning.”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Finn said, walking back into his office.

“I never took out one of these before,” Nine said, walking past him.

“First time for everything,” Finn answered.

Twenty minutes and about a hundred muffled gunshots later, Nine came back into the office, dripping ichor on the beige carpet. “We got an axe somewhere? We’re having a little problem with this one.”

#

Finn stared at the white ceiling in the dim room and saw colors. Loni lay beside him, radiating warmth and breathing slowly, asleep. Finn saw combinations that no one had tried, and decided what worked and what didn't. He saw textures and light, arrangements of furnishings and the often neglected poetry of empty space. In his mind he placed couches just where they belonged, and painted walls the perfect shade. He chose rugs that would tie everything together, and he asked himself why.

He had always known what looked good. He had always dressed well, had always known when a room was right and when it wasn't. But it wasn't until he emigrated to Vega Ring that he had found out how gifted he was. He had set up Finn and Company as a front. He had no intention of actually decorating alien offices and spacecraft. But he had to do something to give him an excuse to get his men in there to steal things, so he had pushed a few chairs around and had tossed around a few color swatches. And he had found his true calling.

The aliens didn't really know. A few of the oxygen breathers had decided that Terrans knew all about design and fashion and had started hiring them for decorating jobs. At best, Finn suspected that it was a joke. At worst, that it was the Conglomerate's way of keeping the Terrans down. But in any case the laugh was on the aliens, because they were paying a lot of money for people with no skills to do a job they really didn't understand.

But Eric Finn was the real thing, and he knew it. He often considered giving up his life of crime and becoming a full time decorator. He was considering it as he lay in bed next to his beautiful young girlfriend. He looked down at her, the sheet casually

draped over her naked body, her breasts rising and falling under the silk, one long and shapely leg tossed over his. Forget about it, he thought.

Then the sound of the front door slamming open came from the living room. Finn rolled off one side of the bed, and Loni woke up and immediately rolled off the other. She had good instincts. Finn groped for his weapon on the nightstand as his heads up display gave him the tactical intelligence.

Three men were in the apartment, heavily armed, moving right toward the bedroom. They came upon the first tripwire and jumped back as the forcefield scythed across the room. One of them returned to the door and set an electronic device against the security system panel.

“Window,” Finn hissed. Loni crawled across the floor and reached up to open it. It wasn’t really a window, of course. In most apartments it would have been a complete fake, just a viewscreen with a fan to simulate wind. The viewscreen showed the Boulevard, a live shot, with people of all descriptions strolling along the sidewalks and trolleys moving up and down the street. Loni had never let Finn decorate her apartment. She liked it the way it was. But she had let him make a few modifications, and the window was one of them. The viewscreen lifted up to reveal a little crawlspace.

The forcefield cut out and the men spread out to either side of the bedroom door. They had lost the element of surprise and were now being cautious. Their initial manipulation of the security system that had let them in without alarm had not been complete. They now knew that there were backups, and they suspected backups to the backups. They had no idea.

Finn picked up his weapon and headed for the closet. He turned to see Loni motioning him to follow her into the crawlspace. That would be the safest thing to do, but that wasn't what Finn had planned. He waved her to go on without him, and to her credit, she did. The viewscreen slid down to hide her escape.

Finn opened the hidden panel in the back of the closet just as the three men burst through the door, firing their lasers at the bed. When the smoke cleared, they realized their mistake and fanned out. The first one through the door headed for the open window, leaned out, and banged his head on the viewscreen. Old country. Did he think there were open windows looking out on the Boulevard? A second one threw open the closet door and prodded around Loni's clothes with the barrel of his gun. Nothing.

A noise from the living room, the apartment door slamming. The three men tensed. One motioned to another to check it out. He was gone for five seconds, and when he came back in his throat was cut. He collapsed on the bed.

The leader dropped to the floor and crawled out, his gun held before him. He scored the walls of the living room with his laser, rolling around to avoid whatever weapon Finn was using. Nothing.

The apartment door was open again. The leader slowly stood up, glanced into the kitchenette, then poked his gun, then his head, out the door.

Finn pushed the door from behind, slamming the man to the ground. The attacker turned to point his laser at Finn but the reactivated security system was too fast for him. As he pushed his gun past the threshold the forcefield took his hand off. In reaching up to cradle the stump he lost the other one. His screams weren't audible through the field.

The last man had the drop on Finn. From the bedroom door he sighted his laser on the naked back of the crime boss. Before he got a chance to fire a briefcase slammed down on his head. He dropped to his knees, rolled and looked up at Loni, getting a view of her naked body that would have cost him fifty bucks at the Human Condition. He raised his gun, but he still didn't get a chance to fire. Now that he was in the living room, the security system could see him. Nozzles in the ceiling opened up on him and in less than a second he was covered in fast setting glue.

Finn stepped over him and hugged Loni, who was hyperventilating and trying not to scream. "If this is too much adventure for you," he told her, "let me know. I'll stop coming around here."

#

Jerry lived on the very edge of the Terran enclave, in the nicer section but right up against the wall. His backyard was thick brambles and shrubs, then a solid metal surface. His house was the smallest one on his block. He lived alone. He walked home at the end of the day, when the sky above the enclave was darkening to reveal the familiar stars of home.

As he turned onto his street, he saw the danger only when it was too late to avoid it. Three men appeared out of the shadows in front of him, and three more behind. They were using some sophisticated electronic jamming devices, or he would have seen them.

They didn't waste words. They weren't here to send a message to Finn, at least not one that Jerry would take to him alive. All six men pulled out lasers and opened fire.

Jerry ducked and rolled to the side of the street, seeking cover. He had his own weapon out by the time he hit the ground. He'd dropped two of the men in front of him

by the time he'd finished his roll. He was firing poison darts with deadly accuracy, but there were still four men shooting at him.

As he downed one more man, the laser fire found him. His right leg was taken off, and his torso was carved open. He fell to the pavement, still.

"That's enough," one man said. "We got to leave something for his boss to see who it was." He pulled a paper out of his pocket. "We've got to have someplace to stuff this." He reached down to pry Jerry's mouth open.

Jerry reached up and grabbed his wrist, twisting until the arm pulled loose. The man screamed as Jerry tossed him aside. The other two men reached for their weapons again, but they were far too slow. Jerry stumbled a bit with one leg, but he snapped bones and pulverized organs in silent fury.

A calm settled over the street as the men bled into the gutter.

#

"A fucking android," Finn said. "My caporegiem, the man who's been my own right hand for fifty years, you're telling me you're a fucking android."

Jerry sat in the recliner in his living room, his severed leg propped against the coffee table, a drink in his hand. He had put on a houndstooth jacket to hold his guts in, but the blood soaked the fabric. He didn't seem to mind. "I know," Jerry said. "Many is the time I wished I could have told you, but I just wasn't programmed that way."

"How were you programmed? To rat me out?"

"Eventually," Jerry said. "Titan cops made me to keep an eye on you."

"I guess you're a made man in more than one sense of the word," Bogs said.

They all had a good laugh over that one.

“So you’ve been feeding them information on me this whole time?” Finn asked.

“No,” Jerry said. “The plan was I was supposed to be 100% loyal and rise up through the ranks. When they wanted to grab the top man, they’d give me the signal and I’d spill my guts.” He looked down at the bloody jacket. “Sorry, poor choice of words.”

“So when was that supposed to happen? Am I a big enough fish to go after? An underboss worth blowing your cover?”

Jerry shrugged. “I’ll never know. When you invited me to come with you to Vega Ring, they had no way to get me to stay. Whatever signal it takes to break my code of silence, its back at Titan.”

“You think the Provost knows the right signal?”

Jerry shook his head. “She’s not in the right chain of command. They’d never even tell her I exist. The fuzz are terrible at cooperating.”

Finn sighed. It was late. He’d come out here expecting to get rid of some bodies, one his trusted friend. And instead he was sitting in that friend’s living room, drinking brandy and feeling his whole world unfold underneath him. “So I need to decide here if you’re still my man.”

“I’m still 100% loyal,” Jerry said. “Until someone comes along with that signal, I’m the perfect soldier.”

Finn looked over at Bogs, who held up his hand in surrender. “Everybody’s got some kind of weakness, boss. At least with Jerry, you know what that is. You look at me and you don’t know what’s going to turn me against you. I don’t know. With Jerry, this one time, you know.”

Finn looked back at Jerry, then down at his severed leg. “So what the hell do we have to do to fix you up?”

#

“Let me get this straight,” Van Leiden said. “You want to declare a truce? You’ve killed 42 of my people and maimed another and you want to declare a truce?”

“Well,” Finn said, “to be fair, the last six were killed trying to whack Jerry.” Finn glanced back at his newly repaired capo. “And by the way, you might want to make a mental note not to try that again.”

Van Leiden shook his head. “I can’t believe this. You don’t got the stones to run this operation. The old man was right, you’re a weakling.”

That stopped Finn. “The old man said that, really?”

“He said as much. Said you didn’t want to do this thing of ours anymore. All you wanted to do was decorate apartments. I’ve been here a couple of weeks and I think I can report back that he was right. You guys don’t steal anything.”

Finn forced himself to remain calm. “That’s not important anymore, Dutch. This problem we’re facing is bigger than us. We need to stop fighting and take care of this.”

“What is this big problem you’ve been talking about?” They had met in a little pub in the Enclave. One man each. Van Leiden’s man was a silent hulking figure by the door. Jerry had joined them at the table. He took out his printout of the stolen data file.

“We got this from the Ptang. They’ve got over a hundred starships converging on Sol at the same time, about three years from now. Apparently they think they own the place, and they’re kicking us off.”

Van Leiden frowned down at the printout. “Those bastards. All right, assuming what you’re telling me is true, what can we do about it?”

Finn held up his hand and started ticking off fingers. “One, we could tell the Provost and she could warn Earth to get ready for the invasion.”

Van Leiden shook his head, his jowls flapping. “Omerta. You don’t talk to the Provost.”

“Not to mention it wouldn’t do any good. The Ptang have weapons nobody wants to mess with. A hundred ships all at once is too many even for Sol. Two, we warn the old man and let him figure something out.”

“That’s the one I like. Let’s do that.” Van Leiden got up and headed for the door.

“But I’ve got an even better idea,” Finn said.

“Basta. Enough with your ideas. I’m telling the old man. He can get himself out of harms way.”

“But what about the human race?” Jerry asked.

“Fuck the human race,” Van Leiden shot back. “All I care about is the Family.”

#

“Bidli, G’nith, nice to see you again.” Finn settled himself at the bar and nodded at the bartender. A glass of port appeared in front of him instantly. They knew him well at the Human Condition.

“Mr. Finn/ creator of status/ found our lost dataset,” Bidli answered. “We are pleased you could have a word with us on such short notice.”

“Hey, I like working for the Ptang. I don’t need an environment suit to survive inside your offices. What can I do for you?”

“One of our associates has dangerously threatened our position. He has obtained unexpected status. This troubles us.”

Finn nodded. “That does sound troublesome. How did this friend of yours get so much status all of a sudden? Successful business deal?”

“No,” G’nith said. “He has achieved a decorative coup. It seems one of your competitors has obtained a collection of Terran cultural artifacts. These artifacts are displayed prominently in our competitor’s inner offices. We have not yet seen these artifacts, but they are rumored to be exquisite, and genuine.”

“I had heard of some ancient Egyptian relics on the last transport,” Finn said. “But of course it’s illegal to remove cultural artifacts from the planet of origin, isn’t it?”

“Not precisely,” Bidli answered. “It is illegal to exchange these artifacts between species, but not for the species that owns the planet of origin to traffic in them. Rare pieces can be displayed in museums, but never bought or sold between species.”

“Yeah, I remember now. This is all so stronger species don’t loot the cultural history of the weaker ones. It makes sense. It also makes it difficult for poor planets to gain economically. Art is about all Earth has that anyone else wants.”

“Art and the artists who create it,” Bidli agreed. “But back to our status problem. We suspect that there are more cultural artifacts on this transport. It seems unlikely that anyone who is willing to break the law will do so on such a limited basis. We would like you to obtain some of these objects for our office.”

Finn scratched his chin. “Well, I don’t know, fellas. This is an illegal act you’re requesting, after all.”

“We will pay handsomely,” Bidli said. “And as for the legal issues, you have nothing to worry about. We can’t tell you the details, but in this particular circumstance you have nothing to fear.”

Finn pushed his empty port glass in such a way that the bartender knew he wanted another. “I’m not convinced.”

“We will be happy to send our business to your competitor, Mr. Finn. B’shan is happy with the work of Mr. Van Leiden. We would likely be as happy or more, considering what we can afford to pay.”

“Hey, that isn’t necessary,” Finn said. “I think we can work together. But I’m going to need a promise from you that you’ll step forward with those details if we get caught. I can’t afford trouble with the law, you understand?”

“I believe we can work something out,” Bidli said.

#

“Let me get this straight,” the Provost said, leaning forward at her desk. “You want me to arrest you?”

Finn held out his hands, wrists together. “Take me away, Killu. I’m a bad man. I’ve sold Terran cultural artifacts to the Ptang. It’s against Conglomerate law. I need to be made an example of.”

Killu gave Finn a narrow look. “What’s this about, Eric? What kind of scam are you running?”

“It isn’t a scam,” Finn said. “You can check the evidence.” Finn pointed at her desktop, where files were appearing. “I’ve provided everything you’ll need to prosecute

my case before the Vega Ring board of Provosts. You can lock me away for a long time. Just like you always wanted.”

“I’ve wanted to put you away for worse than this,” Killu said. “But what the hell? They got Al Capone for tax evasion.”

#

“G’nith, Bidli, can I have a word with you?” Jerry took a seat in the chairlike object in front of the sunken workstation in the Ptang inner office. Mr. Nine-fingers stood in the doorway behind him.

“Mr. Tollman/ works for Finn/ very knowledgeable,” G’nith said. “How may I ask did you gain entry to our inner offices? Security is the best our money can buy.”

Jerry smiled. “And we installed it, remember? So as not to ruin the décor. We’ve got a problem, gentlemen. My employer is standing trial for something he did on your behalf. You promised to help him out if that should ever happen, and you have refused to appear as material witnesses.”

“Now is not the right time to make that information public,” Bidli said. “We didn’t realize he’d be so stupid as to get caught right away. We will come forward in due time.”

Jerry shook his head sadly. “That’s not the right answer, Bidli.” He reached forward in his seat and picked up a priceless Ming vase. He dashed the flowers and water on the floor (and what possessed them to fill a Ming vase with water and plants?) and held it out. “Nine, get me one.”

Nine stepped down into the pit and came back to drop one eyestalk into the vase. He returned to his station by the door and crossed his arms. He hadn’t said a word. Bidli

was a paler shade of green, and G'nith was doing his best to comfort his wounded partner.

“I'm going to have quite a bouquet here before I leave, unless you gentlemen become more cooperative.”

G'nith pointed many spindly limbs in Jerry's direction. “This will accomplish nothing. You will be prosecuted for your brutality.”

“Two from G'nith, Nine.”

When he had his three eyestalks in the vase, Jerry put it back onto the stand. “Gentlemen, you can see how this is going to go. Even after you can't see at all, you're going to feel how it goes. But before we blind you completely, take a good look at me. You don't understand human facial expressions, so let me translate what you see into words. I'm not afraid of anything you think you can do to me. I'm willing to bet right now that you are very much afraid of me. We both know where this is going to end up. Let's cut the crap and finish this now.”

“You have your assurances,” G'nith said. “We will come forth immediately and exonerate your employer. Now leave and let us heal these wounds you've inflicted.”

Jerry laughed, and glanced back at Nine, who laughed as well. “That's good, G'nith. Your assurances. Your assurances didn't do Mr. Finn any good. Why should we accept them? No, I'm afraid we're going to need more than that.”

#

“I'm calling in your marker,” the Dutchman said, holding up the electronic chit. G'nith and Bidli stared at him with their remaining eyes. They had met in a Ptang bar,

near their offices. Van Leiden had not come alone. Six large Terrans were spread out through the bar, glaring down at the spindly Ptang and saying nothing.

“Our marker? But we gave that to Jerry Tollman.”

“So? It’s mine now, and I’m calling it in. Transfer the assets now.”

“But that marker is assurance that we’ll help Eric Finn with his prosecution,”

Bidli said. “We plan to come forward today in his defense.”

“Yeah, well I hate Eric Finn. He can rot in jail for all I care. Now give me my money.”

“But that marker represents a significant fraction of our business,” G’nith wailed. “We’ll be ruined.”

“That’s real interesting, Slim. Now give me my money. I’ve got a game of chance in which the resulting outcome is not in question. I’ve got a card game with Jerry Tollman tonight, and I’ve got a little surprise for them. The only variable is the amount of money I care to bet, and I intend to put everything I’ve got on that table. Capiche?”

“A game of chance against Jerry Tollman, you say? We have a strong desire to do financial harm to Jerry Tollman. Perhaps we can make some sort of arrangement.” Bidli and G’nith turned to one another and carried on a long conversation that was not translated. They turned back to Van Leiden. “We’ll provide the money we owe you and more, if you will do us a favor.”

#

“But... but you said the outcome of this game of chance was not in question!” Bidli was flushing a deep shade of forest green as his many limbs shook against one another. It had been a long night, and the Ptang were visibly wilting.

“Yeah, funny thing happened,” Van Leiden said. “You were there, you saw how it went down. You win a few, you lose a few.”

“But you showed us how you were going to cheat,” G’nith wailed. “It was a flawless plan.”

“No plan is completely flawless,” the Dutchman explained calmly. “It’s a shame about your assets. Hey, I lost a bundle myself. But you guys shouldn’t worry about this. I’ve got a plan that will get our money back.”

“We’ve had enough of your plans. We’re going to return to Finn’s men and offer to get him out of trouble. They have our marker back and then some. They’ll surely accept our help in return for our lost assets.”

“But I understand you guys didn’t want to release that information in the first place,” Van Leiden said. “I know of a way you can get your money back without having to speak up in court. You realize that Finn’s goombahs are breaking Terran law, don’t you? We just have to bring this whole mess to the Provost and we can throw the bunch of them in jail, get your money back, and nobody has to get wise to your little secret.”

G’nith turned to Bidli. “This plan does make a great deal of sense.”

#

“Thanks for waiting,” Finn said as the robot guard led Loni into the visiting room. A forcefield, clearly marked, prevented them from touching, but allowed them to see and hear each other clearly. Loni had been expecting prison fatigues, but Finn wore one of his better suits, the midnight blue with the thin dark red pinstripes. “Donna and the kids just left.”

“How are they holding up?” Loni asked. She was wearing a light yellow sundress and sandals. She had found some flowers to put in her dark brown hair.

“Ah, they expect this kind of thing. I’ve been lucky so far. But they know about the Family. Well, some of it, anyway. How are you?”

“I miss you. How are they treating you?”

Finn shrugged. “Not too bad. I never see anyone but the robots. The hardest thing is that I can’t rearrange the furniture in my room. It’s all stuck to the floor.”

“I’ve got a couple of messages for you. Jerry says the Ptang account is going super fantastic. That’s the exact phrase he used. He thinks they should be finished by the end of the week.”

“Tell him that’s fabulous, exact words. And tell him I left my spare keys in the desk.”

“You left your spare keys in the desk, right.”

“That’s not code for anything, I really did leave my keys in the desk.”

“Right. And he also passed along a message from Hans Van Leiden. He wanted me to tell you that the Ptang are a bunch of dumb shits, and they’re nothing but pussies. And he also wanted me to say that you’ve got some stones after all. Heck, I could have told him that.”

#

Killu Torkka accepted her Ptang guests graciously. She was in charge of the Enclave, not Terran foreign policy, but she had had her share of state dinners. The Ptang were among the more agreeable non-humans that inhabited Vega Ring. Terrans routinely came in contact with only four of five of the hundreds of species that shared the vast

space station. One reason was habitat conditions. The Ptang, the Loloft and Krchaitch breathed the same mix of gasses as the Terrans and enjoyed roughly the same room temperature. Another reason was that humans didn't have many common purposes with, for example, the slow talking, methane drinking Bod or the pent up electrical fury that was the Zott.

Killu was familiar with the Ptang, and her cranial implant supplied the names and social standing of her two guests. G'nith and Bidli were the most affluent businesspersons in the Ptang enclave. What she read in her heads up display, however, didn't seem to coincide with what she saw before her. The Ptang were a confident species, used to wielding power and buying and selling whatever they wanted. These two seemed cowed, dejected. She noticed a few recent injuries, still healing under transparent bandages.

"What brings you to the Terran Enclave?" she asked as they settled their many spindly limbs into the chairs as best they could.

"It embarrasses us to speak of it," Bidli started. "We fear we have been the victims of some kind of swindling on the part of a group of your tenants."

"One of your most prominent businessmen, Eric Finn, has brought us to financial ruin and grave bodily injury," G'nith went on.

"Tell me everything," Killu said. This time, she told herself, Finn would not get away with what he'd done. The two Ptang laid out all of the events of the past few days. They described everything from the first financial transaction to the disastrous card game that had wiped out the last of their assets. They named the men who had participated

where they could, and uploaded images from their brain-interface hardware where they could not. Killu's face grew more grim with each detail added to the story.

“Thank you, gentlemen. I will admit to you that I have known for a long time about the criminal activities of Eric Finn and his associates. Terran legal complications have prevented me from arresting him, but the story you've told me will help me put him away for good. It helps that he's already in prison for the crime of selling Terran cultural artifacts to you. However, I must tell you that in revealing this story, you have admitted culpability in that original crime. If it were up to me, I'd offer immunity in exchange for your testimony. However, it isn't my decision. We have to submit the request to the Council of Provosts and let them decide. In the meantime, I'm afraid it's my duty to inform you that you are under arrest.”

“We have a perfectly reasonable explanation for that,” G'nith said. “There is no need to arrest us. We were trying to keep this announcement a secret, but circumstances force us to come forward sooner than we'd like.”

“We did not violate the law when we bought those cultural artifacts. It is legal for the owners of a planet to traffic in artifacts from that planet. The Ptang are in the process of purchasing the Earth, where these objects originated.”

Killu stared at the creatures across her desk. “Purchasing the Earth?”

“The whole Sol system, actually. The transaction is nearly complete. We have a few more assets to transfer to the Conglomerate, and we have yet to physically occupy the property, but the transaction is far enough along that no crime has been committed. The grace period in the law even allows Mr. Finn to escape prosecution, although we still hope we can put him in prison for what he's done to us.”

“How can you purchase our planet?”

“I don’t believe that the Terrans fully appreciated the debt they were taking on when they joined the Conglomerate and made use of our technology. We simply took advantage of the situation. Apparently the Terrans never even realized that they had a finite amount of time to retire their debt.” The Ptang sounded positively gleeful at their own cleverness. Didn’t they realize that Killu was a Terran herself? Did they even care?

“We’re providing your computer with all of the pertinent legal documents, Ms. Torkka,” G’nith said. “We also have priority access to the main Linling processor array on Vega Ring. That should allow you to sort through the arguments much faster than if you had to go through Vega Ring authorities. In fact, my implant tells me that our claim has already been accepted. So, are we free to go?”

Killu looked down at her desktop, her fingertips brushing the appropriate icons numbly. “Your explanation seems to be checking out. You are exonerated of your crimes. Apparently, you are free to go.”

“Excellent. We will keep close watch on the prosecution of Eric Finn. We will provide any other assistance we can. We hope that you can recover our assets soon. We have important business transactions to complete.”

Killu nodded and said nothing as the Ptang picked their way out of their office. She looked back down at her desktop. Apparently, the accelerated legal review did not only work in favor of the Ptang. Vega Ring informed her that Eric Finn had been automatically released from prison as a result of the Ptang’s new information.

#

G'nith and Bidli stopped as they entered their office. They began backing out as soon as they saw Eric Finn and Jerry Tollman sitting uncomfortably in the Ptang chairs and studying the screens of the Ptang computers. They ran into Bogs and Nine, and scrambled forward into the room.

“Finn/ swindler/ ruined our lives, what are you doing out of prison?”

“G'nith, Bidli, good to see you guys. Thanks for coming forward with the truth. Vega Ring authorities sprung me right away.”

“But why are you in our offices? Don't you have someone else to steal from?”

“You forget that I own this business now. Jerry managed to get the legal transfer taken care of this morning. That gave us access to your accounting database. Just in time, too. We're trying to save this place from complete financial ruin.”

“But you brought that financial ruin on us yourselves. What are you doing to our database? Aren't you finished destroying our lives?”

“Gentlemen,” Finn said. “We can argue all day about who swindled whom, and who pulled out whose eyestalks. But we're all just businessmen, here. We're all just trying to make an honest buck. Now Jerry here has managed to find some significant ways to save money and liquidate some assets, isn't that right, Jerry?”

“Don't you know it,” Jerry said. “I found a huge payment on a property that you guys really don't need. We kicked back that purchase to the Conglomerate and got a full refund. Luckily, we were able to find a buyer pretty quickly.” He turned the screen around to show what he had done. G'nith and Bidli studied the figures and turned a pale shade of lime.

“But you’ve sold the Earth back to the Terrans. We were to make that final payment today.”

“You know,” Finn said, “I’m surprised they trusted you fellows with such a big responsibility. You even had the codes that would allow you to turn back all of the ships that were en route to Sol. Of course, we had to change those codes for security purposes, but we’ll make sure we keep those in a safe place. That was an awfully big ticket item, a whole system. Now you’ve got your money back and we’ve got a lot of capital with which to operate. I didn’t know you guys were such big shots. I’m impressed.”

“We’re not big shots anymore,” G’nith said. “You’ve destroyed the last of our status. Can we even hope that you’ll do us the dignity of killing us?”

“Oh, things will pick up for you again,” Finn said. “If you boys ever find yourselves in need of a job, we can always use carpet layers.”

#

“So how’s it feel to be the big hero who saves planet Earth from the aliens?”
Jerry asked.

Finn smiled. “It feels good. I guess I’m not such a parasite on society after all. But you know Jerry? Sometimes I think about retiring.”

“From the decorating business?” Jerry smiled.

“From the Family. I get tired of doing this thing of ours. Sometimes I think I’ll just stay with Donna, no girlfriends. Just decorate offices for a living, no more stealing, no more killing. Sometimes I think about just letting Van Leiden take over. Or you, if you think you can handle it.”

“I’m not boss material,” Jerry said. “You serious about that? You really want to leave all this?”

“I said I think about it. Sometimes I think about the opposite, raising my fist at the old man 26 light years away and saying ‘Screw you, I’m the boss here.’ I just go back and forth. I don’t know where I’m going to end up, Jerry.”

Nine stumbled into the doorway, his chartreuse blazer a smoldering ruin, a nasty burn taking up residence with all of his other facial scars. “It’s Van Leiden, boss. The truce is over.”

“OK,” Finn said. “You boys are duly authorized by the power vested in me to go out and whack that bastard. But be careful. The Dutchman doesn’t screw around. Jerry, you go with them. Call if you need me.”

“You staying with us a while longer, then?” Jerry said, standing up.

Finn leaned back, put his hands behind his head and his feet up on the desk. “It’s good to be the boss.”