

Titan Tick
By
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"I'm telling you Ross, it's hands down, the fastest way we're gonna put some coin in our pocket on this rock," said the plump, balding man to the tall, skinny guy who looked like a pipe cleaner.

"But Zed, I keep telling you it's fucking *illegal*," Ross replied, leaning in over his mug as brew sloshed over the edge onto the table, "I'm not going back to god damn Luna again."

"I know it's fuckin *i-lle-gal*! That's the whole point!" Zed replied in a strained whisper, "I thought from all your bitching the last two months hauling boxes you'd be fucking thrilled to make some real money! Also, if it's not too big a deal, would you mind keeping your fucking voice down? I don't want half of Titian hearing about this."

He looked around the drab cantina, hollowed out of Titan's bedrock. The neighboring tables were deserted, but there were a couple other patrons at the bar, a couple E.T.s and one human, and a few indiscernibles tucked away in the booths at the edges. E.T.s usually kept to themselves, and the human was out of hearing range. Zed didn't spot any obvious curious ears, and the crap music emanating from the bar muffled voices, but still, it paid to be careful. It could pay a whole lot.

Ross took a swig out of his mug, suds clung to his stubble, "Real fuckin' money entails real fucking risk, and like I said, I'm not getting pulled back in because you had a dumb idea."

Zed put his hands on the table and leaned way, arching his back. When he was staring at the ceiling he groaned, "Arrg! God you're hopeless!" It was just loud enough for Ross to hear. He leaned back in, slouching into his chair, "Look, just wait till Tomi gets here. He worked out all the specifics. He'll show you what I'm talking about."

"Hmph," snorted Ross, who was studying his empty mug. "You ever notice that these are real glass?" He held the mug up to the light, "None of that plastic shit that makes beer taste funny."

Zed raised an eyebrow before once again looking around the cantina, "Nah, man. I don't give a shit about the cups." He turned back to Ross, one hand tapping on the polyurethane table top, "Have you seen the waitress? I need a god damn beer."

The cantina's entrance, a safety airlock portal, hissed open on fast acting hydraulics and Zed's eyes snapped to the entrance, looking for Tomi. Ross turned and both he and Zed stared at the new comer. It wasn't Tomi.

"What the fuck is that?" Zed muttered to Ross after a minute.

"It's a tick," replied Ross after a second, "We got a couple of um working down in the dock. A group shipped in a couple weeks ago."

Zed studied the creature as its four segmented legs carried it across the room toward one of the booths near their table. Its mandibles gnashed against one another in pulses of three. Each pass emitted a sharp tick.

"Huh," Zed muttered again, "Ugly bastard. They called ticks cuz of that weird balloon head they got?"

"Nah, it's the sound they make," Ross responded as he turned back to his glass mug. "They tick, something about seeing in the dark."

As the gray skinned thing scabbled by, its clawed feet skittering on the smooth concrete floor, Zed could hear the low and rhythmic *tick* coming from the thing's head.

"What, like bats?" Zed asked, still staring at the creature as it reached the booth and pulled out what looked like a thermos. It settled over one of the chairs without touching it and began to slurp through a straw.

"Why?" he asked again after a minute, "Fucker's got like twelve eyes!"

"I think it's only seven, and I think their ears," corrected Ross.

"Huh," Zed muttered for the second time. He looked at Ross, "Hey, why you know so much about them?"

Ross shrugged, "Ramali down in loading won't shut up about them. His wife's a xeno-something or other."

Zed was quiet, staring at the glistening black ovals that dotted the Tick's head. They seemed to ripple as he watched. It was slurping from the thermos thing with a weird prehensile tube thing.

Ross continued to look through the transparent glass in his hand and after a minute changed the subject, "Ya know, I just saying earlier that real glass is classy. Hell, I'd even buy a set if it wasn't so damn expensive to ship crap up the well."

Zed broke away from the Tick's dark, hypnotic eyes, sensing a return to the discussion of money.

“You see, that’s what I’m talking about,” replied Zed who gestured at the glass in Ross’s hand, “If this thing me and Tomi thought up works out we could be set for a long, *long* time! Anything you wanted you could get. You even could ship your mother’s fat ass all the way from Des Moines out to Pluto Transit if you wanted.”

Ross gave Zed a cool stare, “Don’t you talk about my mother.”

Zed smirked and lifted his hands in a placating motion to show he was joking, then turned and yelled over his shoulder at the bar, “WHERE IS THE GOD DAMN WAITRESS! I NEED A FUCKING BEER!”

None of the other patrons looked up, lost in their own worlds. Neither did the Tick stop slurping, but a door did open at the far end of the room behind the counter. A young woman with brown hair stepped out from a back room and looked around.

Zed held up his hand, pointed down at their table and shouted, “Over here, Girly! Whatever’s on tap, and hurry up! I’ve been waiting forever!”

The brunette began to scowl, but then forced a smile and nodded.

Zed turned back to Ross just as the cantina’s safety doors hissed open for a second time and Tomi walked in. His dark hair and olive skin matched his overalls, stained and dotted with hydro-carbon mud.

“Tomi, over here!” Zed waved him over, then yelled over his shoulder again, “Hey Girly! Get my friend here a beer too! And hurry up! Christ you’re slow.”

The woman, who was filling a frothing pitcher let the scowl win, but nodded and added another mug to her tray. Her lips were pressed into a thin, pale line.

Tomi pulled out a chair and sat down next to Ross and across from Zed. He nodded a greeting to both of them, and then turned to Zed. “You tell him?” he asked.

Zed shook his head, “Nah, not really. Just bits and pieces, I figured you’d fill in the details.” Tomi sat forward in his chair, resting one arm on his knee, palm down. He looked at Ross, “What’s he told you?”

Ross was swirling the last drops in his mug around and around, “Nothing good, just something about money and it crossing management.”

“A shit ton of money,” interjected Zed quietly.

A light chuckle escaped Tomi and he said to Ross, "I figured Zed wouldn't get farther than that. Did he mention where the cash was coming from?"

Ross shook his head no. Tomi sighed.

"Ight, from the top then. You know the spacer families farther out? Out around Pluto Transit and the Kuiper belt?"

Ross nodded, "Sure, prospectors mining cheap volatiles. Mostly freelance operations, right?"

"Yeah, you know anything about life out there?"

"Not really, just that it's farther than I'd want to go."

Tomi smiled, "Yeah, me too. See, out—"

"Here you go, Boys!" interrupted the server as she set two beers in front of Zed and Tomi and refilled Ross's mug. She quickly turned away toward the bar.

"Hey!" snapped Zed, glaring at the young woman, "Leave the pitcher." He pointed at the table, staring at the waitress.

Startled by the venom in Zed's voice, she hesitated for an instant.

Zed's eyes rotated in their puffy sockets, crawling up and down the young brunette.

"Go on. Put the pitcher on the table, baby," he said, unblinking.

She forced a smile. "Sure thing, Hon," she answered, and walked back to the table.

She as she set down the pitcher, Zed's hand snapped out and slapped her ass.

Shocked, she leapt back from the table, her face contorted in anger.

"Don't you fucking touch me, asshole!" she spat, pointing a warning finger at Zed.

Zed threw back his head and laughed at the young woman. Ross chuckled and Tomi watched, annoyed at being interrupted.

"Come on, baby," Zed jeered, the gap in his teeth showing through a wide grin, "I'm just playing around."

She flipped him off and turned back to the bar. Still laughing Zed called out, "Aw, come on! Don't be like that baby!"

She didn't look back, but keep her middle finger held in the air as she hurried back to the bar. Zed turned back to the table, his mouth still stretched into a wide, mocking smile. Beyond Tomi, he saw the Tick again, all seven of its black eyes were pointing in his direction. He could just see his reflection in their dark surfaces. It had stopped slurping.

Zed's smile faded, "The fuck you want?"

"*Tick tick tick*," the Tick answered, and turned back to its slurry.

Tomi picked up where he left off, "Like I was saying, out there the mining families are damn near self-sufficient. They've got all the raw gases and compounds they need for basic survival. Water, oxygen, hydrogen for fuel, yada yada." He took a drink.

Ross nodded, "But?"

Tomi smirked, "But they lack anything that requires either heavy metals, they're pretty sparse out there, or serious manufacturing ability. Stuff like medicine or core plating ceramics. Really anything electronic that they can't solder together from old parts they have to buy."

"Where? From here?" asked Ross.

"Nah, it's way too expensive for them to fall this far back in system," answered Tomi, "There's a couple major trade hubs out there where they try to pick up anything they can't make themselves. It's pretty hit or miss though, not a lot of traffic past Transit."

"So what's it got to do with us? Zed was saying there was money here, on Titan."

"There is," said Tomi, "Or at least there will be, soon. See, it has to do with how orders are processed that far out." He drank the last from his mug and poured another from the pitcher. "You see, all the spacers out there have accounts with major banks back in system on either Mars or Earth. None of them have any physical cash out there because it's useless ninety-nine percent of the time. So when a spacer family buys anything from one of the trade posts, they write up a contract that contains all the serial numbers of ore pods the families have capped off and hand it to the trader. The contract gives the rights to the sale profits from those volatiles to whoever holds it. Makes 'um just about as good as money. They buy their supplies and ship off."

"Why do it that way? Why don't they just signal their bank?" asked Ross as he reached for the pitcher.

“Well, first off there’s a signal lag time of, what? Twelve, fourteen hours for a signal to bounce down and back up? And that’s only if you get priority on a transmitter powerful enough to reach the inner system *and* you get an immediate response. Plus, god knows who might pick up your bank transfer request across half a system. Not a tight beam in existence to keep it private over those distances. None of that appeals to the families much. There’s a long way between rocks and a day’s worth of acceleration could make the difference between breathing or not. It’s a hard life.”

Zed had been quietly hammering down several beers, and he was begging to get a bit rosy cheeked, “Tell him what ‘appens to the contracts.”

Tomi looked back at Ross, “The traders transfer a few to the haulers that bring out their product, but they usually tuck away a hefty profit. Eventually, they have enough to warrant hiring a courier to carry them back down to the banks on either of the Big Two. The couriers are really pieces of work, usually military surplus ships and equipment. Not people you want to fuck around with. They make the rounds, hitting up every trader depot before turning inward.”

“I’m still not seeing how this involves Titan, or us,” said Ross.

Tomi leaned in and talked a bit quieter, despite no one paying any attention to them, “Well, the couriers have a *long* way to go, and they’re usually running on fumes after hitting up the last station. All the families’ volatiles go down system in automated pods, barely any get dropped off at the depots, so the couriers have to stop at the first place with fuel to burn and air to breath and that’s right here on Titan.”

Ross leaned against his chair’s backrest, “So the money sits on a former warship here on Titan for a few hours? That’s not exactly an easy mark.”

Zed nudged Ross, muttering, “‘ses the good part.”

Tomi smiled again, wider than last time, “The courier doesn’t hold onto the contracts all the way down the well. It’s inefficient considering the distance they have to travel. So they sell the contracts to someone with really money, Titan Hydrocarbons.”

Ross’s eyes widened, “Management buys the contracts?”

“Yep,” answered Tomi with a smug grin, “They hold the contracts for a couple weeks until they can ship them down well on one of the big freighters and liquidate them with the banks. They figure Titan was one of the first outer system colonies. They think it’s built like a fortress in the rock, must be just as good as a bank, right? Except it’s not. It’s not even close. See, I’ve been out working exterior maintenance on this rock for close to fifteen years and I’ve learned a thing or two. They store the contracts in one of the payroll safes in the back of the main office, and I

just so happen to know that a concrete wall only four inches thick separates it from a barely used service shaft.”

“Huh,” said Ross after sitting for a minute, “and you have a plan? You’ve got it all worked out?”

Tomi nodded, “Yeah, but I don’t want to go into that here. We’ll go over it back at my place. I’ve got a work up of the whole thing.”

Zed had easily drained half the pitcher while the other two were talking. He wasn’t drunk. A life time as a miner and all that goes with it had giving him a high tolerance, but he was feeling loose. He looked back toward the bar where the young girl was talking with one of the other patrons.

“HEY GIRLY! BRING US ANOTHER DAMN PITCHER!” he yelled, slapping the table. Spittle flung from his mouth and flew the length of the room. It was visible splattering on the back wall. The brunette looked up, her face scrunched in anger. She showed Zed her middle finger, and turned back to the other patron.

“BRING ANOTHER GOD DAMN PITCHER OR I SWEAR TO GOD I’LL COME BACK THERE AND GET IT MYSELF!” Zed yelled again, his face reddening.

She sat back up, somehow making her eye roll visible from across the cantina, and waved an acknowledgement.

Zed turned back to Ross and Tomi. “You gotta keep after these people,” he said, “Especially girlies like that.”

Ross and Tomi ignored him beyond acknowledging the additional beer.

“You have any idea how much the contracts are worth?” asked Ross.

“Four-five million,” answered Tomi.

Ross’s jaw dropped and he stared at Tomi. “Four to five million credits, are you serious?” he asked, “What’s that in terrestrial currency? A couple hundred thousand, right?”

Tomi smiled like he was about to tell a joke, “Nah, it’s four to five million, USD.”

Ross’s jaw dropped a bit more as he was shocked into silence.

As Tomi chuckled at Ross’s reaction, Zed watched the waitress walk up with a new pitcher.

Again, his eyes crawled over her, but this time, there was a bit of hunger.

She saw it as she approached, and moved far to the side near Tomi, who for the most part was ignoring her and chatting with Ross. The table was small, however, and she was still within arm's reach of Zed as she set down the pitcher.

He grunted and reached forward toward the pitcher, but at the last instant, reached sideways and groped the waitress's breast as he flashed another one of his grins.

Much like the first time, she leapt backwards. Much like the first time, Zed laughed and sneered.

As the corners of his mouth began to upturn in the start of a grin, the woman's hand whipped out, savagely slapping the smile of his face. Zed was knocked sideways in his chair, but immediately recovered, turning back to the woman just as she upturned the full pitcher. The liquid contents cascaded down over Zed, drenching him in Amber brew as Ross and Tomi watched, dumbfounded. A few patrons at the bar cheered and raised their glasses in a toast to the young woman.

Zed jumped to his feet, knocking his chair back. It was more from reflex than a successful attempt to dodge. He was already soaked.

He stood for a second, his hands outstretched as he examined himself. His face twisted red in rage.

He looked up at the young girl. His eyes were wild.

"You stupid bitch," he growled and took a step forward.

Even standing straight she was six inches shorter than Zed, but she still stood her ground holding the empty pitcher defensively.

"Get the FUCK out!" she said, her voice forceful but with a quake at the edges. She raised the pitcher higher, threatening, and pointed toward the door.

Zed lunged forward. His hands reached out trying to find a grip on her wrists, but she stepped back, swinging the pitcher to keep him at a distance.

The initial cheers from the other side of the bar had sobered. Several people stood, making moves to come to the waitress's defense.

Tomi leapt to his feet, coming around the table toward his friend.

Zed stepped inside the waitresses swing and grabbed her arm and shoved her back into the bar counter. She held the pitcher in her out stretched arm, failing it around wildly, trying to keep it out of Zed's grasp and still get an angle to swing it at his head.

The other patrons were closing in now, except for the Tick that continued to slurp from it's thermos.

Zed grabbed the waitress by the elbow of her other arm and slammed it into the countertop, knocking the pitcher loose.

The waitress screamed, and the pitcher struck the floor, shattering into glittering shards.

The Tick took notice. It's slurping stopped, and its gray oval head turned toward the commotion at the bar top.

In an instant, it was across the bar. The floor seemed to scream as its skittering claws hurled it across the cantina. It weaved around Tomi and came to a stop behind Zed.

Zed had time to turn his head just enough to bring the black plates of the Tick's eyes into his peripheral vision as a clawed hand snapped out. In the blink of an eye, its six digit hand had wrapped around Zed's upper arm, lifting him away from the girl and throwing him in a long parabolic arc back toward the door.

Ross tilted his head back and watched as Zed sailed over his table, a look of confusion and terror plastered across his screaming face. Zed struck the stone floor and collapsed in a heap by the foot of the safety door.

The Tick positioned itself over the mess of glass left from the ruined pitcher between the waitress who had slipped to the floor and Tomi who was skidding to a stop.

"Tick tick tick," it echoed, focused on Tomi. Every repetition oscillated from high to low. Every tick sent a pulsing ripple through the tissue of its eyes.

Tomi's foot slipped as he back peddled, but he recovered, finding himself running back the way he came. He was terrified. He'd never seen anything move as fast as the Tick had. The thing covered fifty feet in under a second or two.

He slapped Ross on shoulder as he rocketed by towards Zed's crumpled, but stirring, form.

Ross, upon seeing Zed's overhead flight, had already stood and begun to run toward the exit. The two slowed only slightly to scoop Zed up off the floor before leaping through the cantina's exit. The sound of their pounding footsteps faded as they fled down the corridor outside.

Two of the other cantina's occupants had come and helped the waitress to her feet. She held the back of her head where she'd struck it on the bar top.

She pushed past one of her helpers to the Tick, who was eyeing the door where the three had fled

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"Hey," she said, her voice shaky, "Thanks for that. You're really fast, you know that?"

The Tick's gray oval head swiveled a bit too fast for comfort, the waitress swayed back away. The seven pulsing eye pads studied her for an instant, then turned away as the Tick squatted over the glass pile, its six digit claws picking up the individual slivers of glass and placing them in a small container, produced from around the Tick's waist.

"Oh,uh, you don't need to do that," she said, "Someone will, uh..."

The Tick was not listening. It ticked quietly, as it loaded the slivers in, one by one.

Detective Halard Frank sat and stared at the pile of paper work threatening to cascade off the edge of his desk. The few bare spots of the desk's brown, molded plastic top were scuffed from years of indifferent abuse. The color had even faded unevenly under the stacks of outgoing and incoming paper that had never quite emptied. They'd left spots of his desk shielded from the overhead light's soft artificial UV. He could see the dark, richer brown sometimes when he nudged the piles. They reminded him of his first day in the office, all those years ago. Back when both the furniture and he were new.

He sighed and leaned back. His slightly pudgy frame filled out his worn office chair.

His partner, Detective Aikane Kalua, looked up over his own stacks of paper crowding his desk on the opposite side of their shared, tiny office. He examined Halard's face for a second or two. The sigh wasn't really meant to draw his attention, but here in this cramped little space, it was unavoidable that he'd notice. Halard was bored.

"Hal, Mallory is literally going to shove your ass into a drum and ship you down well if you don't get some of this desk work tied up," Kalua said.

Halard looked up at his friend. The glazed over look in his eyes faded away.

"How the hell do you look so tan and I look whiter than a milk jug when we both sit under the same lamps day after day? The bulbs burned out on my side or what?"

Aikane pointed at the paper on Halard's desk, "You wanna ask stupid questions you can scrawl them onto the backs of those reports and ship them off to someone paid to read them. I don't need the headache."

Still talking, he turned back to computer and his own work of transcribing witness reports, "We've been putting this stuff off for nearly a week. If we keep pushing it, there really is going to be someone down here busting our asses about it. Now would you please work on getting some of this put away?"

Halard didn't respond, but he turned back to his desk. His lips scrunching up on one side of his face and a pen twirling in his right hand as it rested on the brown plastic.

The only the sound of Kalua's typing, resonating softly back and forth between the office's walls, filled the silence. Halard turned in his chair, looking out through the glass separator that divided their office from the main room of the Titan, 7th Precinct. Through the window Harold could see officers at their desks, whittling away at their own paper work. Two officers stood by the far water cooler, chatting. He even could see Captain Mallory's silhouette through the clouded glass divider of her office.

It was all business as usual.

Halard stood up reaching for his coat.

"I'm going to grab some coffee from Marko's. You want to come?"

Kalua stopped typing and looked up at Halard with something just short of a glare, "You've got to be kidding me."

"I'm just gonna pop down there for a cup of joe. I'll be back in fifteen," he said, draping the police issue overcoat over his uniform and moved toward the office door.

"Hal, we said we'll get this done today!"

"I'll be right back. Just gonna get some coffee," he answer, opening the door and stepping out. Kalua looked after him for a second, then looked down at his keyboard and sighed. After a second, he stood and grabbed his coat.

The two walked down the main corridor as it widen out into the Upper Boulevard. The space was nearly a kilometer long, though narrow areas concealing emergency pressure doors segmented the entire run of the room into segments.

A long line of elm trees sprang from fresh beds of moist soil bisecting the public space. They grew tall and spindly in the tenth of a gee. Around their bases were lovingly nurtured plants, tended by the station's inhabitants. Most were vegetables, a fresh specimen of which was a valuable commodity this far from a world with a hospitable sky. Every now and again, though, the two detectives passed garden beds where their tenders had deviated from the usual, planting wildflowers instead.

Halard and Kalua strode past open shops and dinners before arriving at one of the more visible alcoves. A bright neon sign flashed *Marko's* in pink and turquoise and the smell of roasting coffee beans, grown right out front of the shop, wafted out into the pedestrian sphere.

The interior made few concessions to the shops remote location in the solar system. Plush leather chairs, made from real animal, were positioned with delicate care around teak tables, darkened with age. They were all arranged in an inviting manner. Visually persuading potential customers in from the boulevard and encouraging them take a seat and rest before continuing on their journey. Whether they bought a coffee or not almost seemed like an afterthought.

"Detectives!" an older man called from behind the counter, "Welcome back! Your usual order?" Kalua and Halard waved a greeting as Halard approached the counter and Kalua wandered off to sink into one of the chairs. "Hey, Marko," said Halard, "Not this time. Just a couple orders to go, black."

Marko nodded gravely, "Busy today are you? Not dealing with anything an old shop owner should worry about, I hope?" Marko had turned away to the back counter, and began scooping beans into an antique hand grinder.

"Ha, nah. It's been pretty quiet lately," Halard sighed and his eyes adopted a glazed, distant look, "Just mulling over some paperwork."

"I see, I see," replied Marko as he turned the grinder's handle, a satisfying crunch emanating from the wooden box with each rotation. "It must be good to not be dealing with crime for a bit, a chance to relax."

"Oh, it's all crime," answered Halard, resting his arms on the counter, "Just sometimes dealing with it gets bureaucratic."

"Sure, sure," replied Marko. He reached for a coffee press with one hand and the fresh grounds with the other. With a slight mis-grip, Marko's fingers brushed the stainless steel cup and then sent it sliding across the counter and off the edge. The metal cup landed in a clatter, sending coffee grounds flying across the floor.

"Oops!" said Marko in surprise, then quickly turned to Halard, "Much apologies, these old fingers fail me sometimes."

Halard waved off the apology, "It's quite alright. Would you like me to get that?"

"Oh no, not at all. Benny will get it in a minute," answered Marko, who began to load the grinder with fresh grounds.

"Benny? You hire someone new?" asked Halard, looking back into the narrow shop.

Marko chuckled, "I suppose you could say that."

A door at the rear of the shop opened, and after a series of muffled ticks, out stepped one of the strangest E.T.'s Halard had seen.

The Tick hurried up to the front of the shop where the grounds laid scattered across the floor. With a plus of ticks preceding each lung forward, its four legs carried it across the tile floor. It came to a stop over the pile and quickly stooped. One of its hand claws brushed the grounds into a small bag it produced from a pouch tied to its simple vest.

"Never seen one of those before," muttered Halard as he cautiously examined the being. Marko smiled, "They're new here. Ship came in just a couple weeks ago."

"Who are they?" asked Halard.

Marko shrugged as he poured the grounds into the press, "I don't really know. They only make that ticking sound. He doesn't seem too keen on talking, otherwise. Though, a customer in here a day or two ago said they're refugees."

"Refugees?" replied Halard, surprised.

"Yeah, running from some war apparently. Sad stuff I'm told. Though, if I'm honest, it's been working out for me alright."

"Why's that? You don't seem like the type to take advantage of the misfortunate."

Marko let out a chuckle as he poured boiling water from an ancient, hand beaten copper kettle. Steam rose up toward the shops ceiling.

"Oh good heavens no. Benny settled down here all on his own. No coercion on my part."

Halard watched the Tick sweep up the last of the spilled grounds and then turn and head back to the rear room. It stopped along the way to pour the grounds into a trash receptacle.

"Thank you, Benny!" called Marko as the Tick passed through the rear door. It didn't acknowledge him.

"His name can't really be Benny, can it?" said Halard, turning back to Marko.

Marko turned away from the press, allowing the boiling water to soak into the grounds for a bit. "No, it's just a nickname I picked out. He didn't object. I had a nephew back on Earth named Benny," answered Marko as he leaned back against the counter, "At the time I thought it was funny, but now that I think about it, it might not be all that favorable to my nephew," he chuckled again.

Continuing, he said, "You see, Benny showed up here, maybe a couple days after their ship landed. He stood out in the boulevard and just stared at the sign out front. At first I thought he wanted to buy something, and I waved him in, but he just stood there. I mean just stock still for hours until I closed up the shop."

"Even after you brought down the shutters?" asked Halard.

"No, he left after I did that, just walked away down the hall. I didn't think much of it. E.T.'s can be strange sometimes. Anyway, the next day, about an hour after I opened he was back out there, only a little closer this time."

"That qualifies a loitering. You could have called the station," said Halard.

"Oh, he wasn't hurting anything, even when he got into the shop. He just picked a corner and stood there, a little farther back every day."

"This didn't concern you?" Halard asked, raising an eyebrow, "Seems to me your customers would find that a bit alarming."

"Well, the thing was that people figured I'd hired him," Marko said as he turned back to the press, "The second day I had some young kid in here picking up coffee for his office. He was in such a rush he spilled the whole order across my floor. Before I could move, Benny jumped right in and started cleaning it up. I told him not to worry about it, but he just ignored me. He ended up putting a nice shine to it too."

"Huh," said Halard. More words failed to follow for several seconds as the implications of the tick's behavior processed through his mind.

"This is something administration needs to hear about," he said after a minute, pulling out his holo to make a note, "It can't just be allowed to move into your shop. I mean, you've got fire code, volume utilization rights, a whole spiel of issues, really."

Marko nodded as he poured a stream of black coffee into a pair of plastic travel cups, "I actually already brought the subject up with the Station PM. He says to just let Benny stay where he wants for the time being."

Halard looked up in surprise. "Really?" he asked, then, "Wait, how do you have a direct line to the station PM?"

Marko shrugged and placed the two cups on the counter in front of Halard, "He likes my coffee."

Halard's surprise faded and he smiled, taking a sip from one of the cups. "Well there's something I'm inclined to believe. What did he say about Benny?"

Marko pulled out his own holo to ring up the drinks, "He said that a bad description of them is fiercely territorial."

Halard looked back at the rear door, "Are they dangerous?"

Marko shook his head, "No, like he said, it's a bad description. Could you authorize the charge, please?"

Halard swiped at a notification on his holo until a soft, affirmative ping sounded.

"He couldn't have just left it at that and told you to let it set up shop in the back of your, er, shop."

Marko leaned back against the counter and looked out the front of the recessed coffee bar into the Upper Boulevard. Halard followed his gaze, looking out into the pedestrian sphere. There were a few idle walkers, admiring the wild flowers. A ways off down the tunnel, a group of volunteer gardeners were planting what looked like squash. A young couple kissed and giggled under the elms.

He turned back to Halard after a bit, "He said that the best way to put it is that they love their homes like they would a family member. They'll nurture and protect it like a child for as long as they view it as 'theirs'."

"Huh," said Halard, he looked at Marko, "Did he say why?"

Marko shrugged, "He just shrugged and said 'E.T.s'. Though, he also mentioned it wouldn't be a problem, their ship is only cleared for another week. It's fine with me if Benny stays for that long. He's paying his keep."

Halard thought for a minute, sipping his coffee. Marko turned back to the counter and began rinsing out the press. A group of children ran passed the open store front, their shrill voices filling the room, then fading away as quickly as they had appeared.

“Well, if it’s only temporary then I guess I’ll let it slide right now, but if you have any problems, you call and let us know down at the station.”

Marko smiled in agreement and proffered a small wave in parting as Halard picked up the other coffee and walked over to where Kalua was sitting, swiping at his holo.

He looked up as Halard approached and rose to accept the coffee.

“Station just called, apparently someone roughed up a waitress down in the processing sectors and we’re the closest to the main lift.”

Halard nodded, “We tracking the perp down or just taking a statement?”

“Probably just the statement, sounds like they already took off,” he took a sip as they walked out into the boulevard, “So was that E.T. a new hire? Marko’s lucky to have someone that enthusiastic about cleaning floors.”

Halard’s thoughts of the creature’s tick came echoing back into his skull. He saw the urgency in the creature’s movements as it skittered across that shop. He could sense its unrelenting drive to correct the order of its perceived home. He wondered what would count as the disruption of that order.

“It wasn’t a new hire,” he took another sip of coffee as they walked under the elms, “It just has a deep, emotional connection with the state of Marko’s floor, apparently.”

Kalua clipped his holo on to his shoulder. Radio traffic from station security burst out of the speaker in static riddled whispers as the device reconfigured for beat work. He looked over at Halard, “Well that’s pretty strange then. You think management knows about it?”

“Yeah, they know, and maybe with a bit of luck, it’ll be left at that.”

Tomi’s apartment was tiny, like most on Titian. Square meters were at a premium when they represented heat and light or atmospheric gas volume and construction labor. The three men still managed to cram in, and Zed still managed to splay out, occupying just a few cubic centimeters more volume than seemed fair. Though, it was not quite enough for either Ross or Tomi to call him on it.

“You sure you don’t want it?” asked Ross for the third time.

“Yeah, for the third time. I don’t give a shit about the other glass, we can each have one. You took two and I’ve got mine right over there on the counter,” answered Tomi as he glanced over the piece of paper laid out over his tiny table between them. There wasn’t much on it, just a list of a few items, a ship registration tag, and a long distance contact number. Together they barely used half the page.

Tomi looked up at Zed, “Man, I’m getting a weird feeling about this. It seems too simple.”

A glare fired out of Zed’s eyes as they cracked open, and he struggled into a not quite slouched position. He gingerly held an ice pack to the bruised side of his head where he’d come down on the stone.

“Of course it’s simple. They’re idiots. Idiots do simple things,” he scowled and slouched back down into his previous position.

“Wouldn’t that make us idiots too? Since we’re doing a simple thing?” asked Ross as he spun the glass between his palms.

Zed’s eyes twitched over to Ross, “No, it wouldn’t, because idiots don’t end up with jack shit. That ain’t us. We’re gonna be rich, smartass.”

“So long as you can actually get your hands on a drill and bring it all the way up to administration,” interjected Tomi. “It’s a long ways from the mine and I’m still not sure how you’re gonna move it.”

Zed groaned and fell back onto the small fold out couch.

“I told you,” he said, “I’ve got it all figured out. You don’t need to worry about the drill.” He draped one of his arms across his eyes. He didn’t elaborate further.

Tomi’s features were like stone, except for the down turned edges of his mouth while he stared at Zed, who appeared to be both withdrawing from the conversation and falling asleep on Tomi’s couch.

He turned back to Ross, “So just to reiterate, this is the registration number of the ship you need to load the contracts onto once Zed hands them off too you. It’s a hydrocarbon hauled headed to Ceres. We’re all going to have to lay low and keep out of contact until the funds transfer and we can get out of here, so you’re going to need to send a message to my Ceres contact. That’s this number right here,” he tapped the contact code on the paper, “and let him know which container you put the contracts into.”

"You sure you're not going to need my help pulling them out of there?" asked Ross.

"For sure," answered Tomi, bobbing his head emphatically, "I'll I've got to do is cut some wires during my 'maintenance' to kill any surveillance and all Zed has to do," Tomi gestured at Zed's snoring body, "is drill through three inches of concrete, which he insists will take him two minutes, into the back of the safe."

Tomi sat back into his chair, "Like I said earlier, it's not a fortress, despite the apparent sturdy construction. If it all goes to plan, it should be simple. It's kinda odd no one's done it before." Ross tossed the glass mug from one hand to the other and through a grin said, "Maybe Zed's right, we see it because we're not idiots and we're gonna get rich."

Tomi laughed, "Yeah, maybe so." He looked over at the sleeping Zed, and then checked the time on his own holo.

"Alright, it's two hours to blue shift. So this is the last time we talk till the money is in the accounts, any final thoughts?"

Ross shook his head.

"Okay then," he said, standing, "If you see any reason to call it off, give me or Zed a call, otherwise, no contact."

Ross stood and held out his hand, "Good luck."

Tomi shook Ross's hand and nodded.

Ross left the apartment, still tossing the glass back and forth in slow, lazy arcs as he walked down the stone and metal tunnels. He had a short ways to go to his own apartment. It was only two pressure sections over. He barely noticed that the halls were empty as he was passed through the green shift resident block. Most were asleep for the upcoming blue shift. Probably only a handful of green shift residents were still awake anywhere on titian, out in a late red shift like Ross.

Soon he would be home, and he would sleep. All in preparation for the hand off and loading tomorrow of the most important cargo he'd of ever handled.

He started whistling as he walked. The walls were thick, and the doors strong and airtight by design. He knew he wouldn't bother anyone.

It was a triumphant little tune as it rose and fell, then rose again. He'd never learned the name of it, just picked it up from a fellow dock worker months back. He'd liked it from the moment

he'd heard it, so he sang it again and again as he walked. He didn't notice the pulse of ticking until he paused for a second to wet his lips.

He slowed and listened, sure he had imagined it.

Tick Tick Tick, sounded from behind him. He spun around.

At the end of the hall stood the Tick from the cantina. Its clawed hands, empty, rested against its sides in a passive manner. The rest of its body indicated anything up passivity. Its seven black acoustic pads vibrated softly in the shallow recesses nestled into the front of the Tick's gray head. Its four legs were poised, with their sharp tips resting on point, seemingly digging into the steel floor.

Its pads vibrated with every ticking pulse pushed out by its gnashing mandibles, absorbing the hallway's shape. Its doors, the hanging lights, the traction pattern stamped into the steel floor plates, and Ross, who stood, terrified at the far end of the hallway.

"Uh, hey?" he said.

He gulped before saying more. His throat had gone dry.

"About that back in the bar, my friend was just drunk and messing around," Ross stammered, "He didn't mean anything by it."

The Tick did nothing, except pause its ticking when he spoke.

A bead of sweat ran down his face, threatening to drip into Ross's eye. By impulse he moved to wipe it away.

Tickticktickticktick, exploded from the Tick and Ross froze, hand halfway to his face. The drop of sweat fell into his eye, stinging slightly.

Ross was only a few hundred feet from his door. He could see it out of the corner of his eye at the end at the end of the adjacent hall.

He felt himself tense. Then he was running.

His feet pounded on the steel flooring as he broke into a full sprint. Each step a thunderclap carrying him down the hall. He heard nothing but his own frantic breath.

Several seconds was all he needed to cover the distance to his apartment door. The half inch steel promised protection as he slapped his holo past the scanner. It pinged green and the door flew open.

He put his hand on threshold to pull himself inside. As he did so he glanced to his left, from where he'd come.

The Tick was there, its clawed hand extending even as its carapace rushed toward him. Ross screamed as the Tick collided with him, sending both flying into his darkened apartment.

The steel door slid shut with a hiss, leaving the corridor in silence.

Halard surveyed the dark cantina.

The steel threshold of the aged pressure door was worn down in the middle from decades of traffic. The warning stripes near the edge had been stripped away by the passage of bodies and time. It was about as far removed from the bright and airy Upper Boulevard as was possible on Titan Station.

The only thing of note was a full set of antique glassware, placed with pride above the counter. Pitchers, cups, everything, real luxury items.

"Hey, Alice, is that stuff from Earth?" Halard asked, pointing with his chin in the direction of the glasses.

The waitress looked up in surprise from Kalua's holo, which was assembling a sketch of her assailant from her description.

Alice glanced back at the display, and then back at Halard, "Yes, it's been here as long as the bar, I think. It's the only valuable thing about this whole place."

"And you said the guys who knocked you down also took a couple glasses?" asked Kalua as he uploaded the composite sketch.

"Mmmhmm," she agreed, "Though I don't think that was their plan or anything. They really booked it after that E.T. threw him across the room."

"Do you know the E.T.? Or were you able to identify the species?"

"No sir. It's been in here every day from the end of blue shift till we close for the past week or so, but it doesn't order anything. Just sits at a booth and ticks."

Halard raised an eyebrow, "Ticks?"

"Yeah," Alice responded, "It just... ticks... I don't really know a better way to describe it. It was doing it a lot after it cleaned up the glass pitcher."

"Hmmm," hummed Kalua as he skimmed over his notes, "And you say you have no idea why it cleaned up the pitcher and took it?"

"No sir," she said shaking her head.

Kalua reattached his holo to his shoulder, "Alright then, we'll run the information you gave us through Administration's records and see what we can find. If either they, or the E.T. show up again, call and let us know. We'll be down here in ten minutes."

She nodded and thanked the two detectives as they parted, passing through the aged pressure door.

"Odd, how things line up like that. You learn a new word, and suddenly you hear it everywhere," said Halard.

"You talking about the E.T.?" asked Kalua.

"Yeah. I'm seeing some serious reason for concern."

Kalua gave Halard an inquiring look so he continued.

"Marko said he heard that these tickers were described as quote 'fiercely territorial' and now one's throwing people across rooms? That screams problem to me."

"Maybe it was just defending someone in need," answered Kalua, "That fits with the whole good samaritan thing, cleaning up Marko's shop and the broken pitcher."

"Sure, but why follow the guys?"

"We don't know that it did."

Halard gave Kalua a skeptical look, "Come on. Where else would it have been going?"

Kalua shrugged, "I don't know, but you've been around long enough to know better than to discount alien sensibilities."

Halard opened his mouth to argue, but then closed it again. He didn't have a response. In the silence that followed as they walked back to the lift, he thought of running in the dark with the sound of ticking close behind.

Zed stood back and surveyed his handy work.

The vault wall lay in pieces spilling back into the maintenance corridor. The red 'X' Tomi had marked on the wall was still visible on several of the pieces despite the mounds of dust left from the drill, saw, and sledge hammer Zed had used to demolish the wall.

The contracts had been loaded into a duffel, their rectangular shapes stacked neatly. The hammer was Zed's, and was tucked into the bags straps. The saw and drill were worthless surplus, nothing tying the job to him, so he left them.

That's a fair hours work, Zed thought, grinning, as he hefted the duffel over his shoulder and stooped as he passed through the narrow opening in the wall.

The tunnel was long and dark. Not being subject to regular use, the power wasn't spared for built in lighting. Only the LED of Zed's holo, clipped to his vest, illuminated the narrow space. The tunnel climbed at a gentle grade, and Zed grunted with exertion. Even with the miniscule gravity of Titan, the sack of electronic certificates weighed more than he was really comfortable carrying. He was buoyed by the thought that Tomi and a cart were only a few hundred yards down the tunnel at a station wiring junction. There Tomi was ensuring that no alarms would be raised by Zed's demolition of a station wall. As soon as Zed reached him, they could load the loot into the cart for Zed's final trip down to the docks.

Still, it was heavy. Zed found himself bent almost ninety degrees forward as he walked, balancing the bag on his back as he trudged down the hallway, each step landing with a heavy *thunk*.

He'd settled into a rhythm as he traveled. Shifting back and forth with each step as it was brought down on the stone and steel of the tunnel's floor. His bent angled shining his light at his feet.

He'd moved to step before he really registered the change in texture of the floor. *Squelch*.

His boot sank into the red before he could halt his inertia.

"What the hell?" Zed breathed as he straightened.

His light played off the walls on the tunnel before settling on Tomi, slumped against the wall. The pool of red held him at its center. His face was pale, in contrast to his arms, crimson with his own blood as he held something back inside.

"Oh, holy hell! What the fuck happened!?" Zed yelled as he dropped the pack and moved to Tomi's side.

Tomi's face was crunched in a grimace of pain as his head rolled to look at Zed, "That ticking bastard. The one from the bar, he's here."

Zed's eyes widened as he leapt to his feet, shining his holo up and down the tunnel. The light only went a couple meters. Beyond that was only darkness.

Tomi's face relaxed a bit, the grimace replaced with a confused look. "It was weird," he said, "He tried to take my holo..." Tomi's hand felt up his shoulder, feeling for his holo and forgetting its duty of holding internals in place. He looked down and frowned. His holo was gone from its clip.

"But why?" Tomi whispered quietly as he slid sideways down the wall. His eyes darkened. Zed was frantically trying to lift the bag onto his back, paying no attention to Tomi when he heard the first tick.

He stood so quickly the pack nearly carried him over backwards, but he caught himself and shone his light down the corridor.

There, blocking his path, was the Tick. It was standing, as always, stock still except for its gnashing mandibles emitting constant ticks. Its clawed hands were red with Tomi's blood.

Zed's eyes snapped between Tomi on the floor, Tomi's blood on the Tick's hands, and the Tick itself, its black acoustic pads vibrating visible even in the dim light of Zed's holo. In an instant the situation clicked together.

"Ah, I fucking see how it is," spat Zed, "Those aren't fucking eyes, they're fucking ears! I bet you heard every damn word we said back in that piss hole of a bar!"

The Tick did nothing but tick, waiting.

"That's it isn't it, you figured you'd just step in and rip us off." Zed yelled, carefully slipping the sledgehammer from the packs straps.

The Tick did nothing but tick, waiting.

Zed dropped the pack and brandished the hammer, "Fucking fine, come and get it!"

The Tick did nothing but tick, waiting.

"COME ON!" Zed roared, his voice echoing up and down the tunnel. He held the hammer high. The Tick did nothing but tick, waiting.

Zed snorted and stepped forward. The Tick sprang.

The tick flew toward Zed, its claws outstretched, Ticks firing from its mandibles like bullets. Zed shifted his weight, bringing the hammer down in a wide arc at the tick's head.

The Tick side stepped effortlessly, raking its claw along Zed's arm, cutting through fabric, flesh and tendon down to the bone.

Zed dropped the hammer, screaming as he clutched at his arm.

The Tick vanished into the dark as Zed's holo to the floor.

"GAHHH!" Zed gasped, his right arm in shreds and totally useless, "I swear to god I'll kill you!" he yelled defiantly into the dark. He began to stand, struggling to his feet and took a few shambling steps toward his holo and the light.

The Tick lunged forward, snagging the holo from the floor. The light was quenched, leaving the tunnel in darkness.

Zed heard the ticking, then nothing.

Halard squatted next to the pair of corpses. One disemboweled the other with a series of nasty gashes to the arms and torsos.

"Yup, they're our guys. Processing sent up their profiles right before we got the call about the vault break in," said Kalua as he read the report on his Holo, "One Zackaria Hassan and a Tomi Cohen, couple assaults for Zackaria and a few juvenile petty thefts for Tomi."

Halard grunted, "Must have been idiots to get on our radar for an assault right before trying to rip off management."

Kalua shrugged, "Only smart criminals are good." He gestured to the bodies, "Still, I don't think they were dumb enough to fuck up this badly."

"They're almost doing alright compared to the guy who went to the trouble to ambush them and then forgot the cash," said Halard as he nudged the bloody duffle loaded with transferable mineral contracts.

"Well, considering that both their holos were stolen and their apartment's ransacked, I think it's safe to assume they were after something other than the money. Still, it's odd that they'd just leave it here, though. Seems like a hard opportunity to pass up," said Kaula.

Halard stood, having seen enough and headed back toward the vault.

“Alien sensibilities,” he said, shaking his head, “Alien sensibilities.”

Alice’s head still hurt as she bussed the table. She should have been at home, taking it easy, but she needed the hours.

The bar was relatively empty, which wasn’t a surprise this late into red shift. Even the pair of officers sent down by the detectives to keep an eye out for that E.T. had gone. She didn’t mind though, she’d be closing up the whole place soon anyway.

She came to the last table, which contained a pitcher and two glasses.

Odd, I don’t remember anyone sitting there tonight, she thought.

She’d just about to grab the handle of the pitcher when she noticed the weird glints coming from it.

Upon closer inspection, she saw the entire thing was fractured into hundreds of pieces, but painstakingly reassembled.

Alice turned back to the bar and counted the glassware on display. After the other day there should be only eight.

She counted nine.

Spooked, she turned back to the reassembled pitcher and two glasses for a moment, then shuddered and went to lock the pressure door. Near the threshold she thought she heard a sound come from the corridor, but when she looked, there was nothing.