More Than Three Things
by Troutwaxer

Summary

This story fits between chapters 2 and 3 of Steve White and Shirley Meier's "Exodus." A big question for me is why the Rim Federation didn't send a survey ship - series canon, right? - to greet the "new aliens?" So I imagined a cabinet meeting where everything went horribly wrong, resulting in the disastrous "Greeting Fleet" policy which started the war with the Arduans.

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Every tin can that was armed and could be called spaceworthy was part of what the media were calling "Greeting Fleet." There were a full dozen SMTS, fifteen DDs, a handful of antique battlecruisers and even the Orion CV that Showaath had been reporting on had been rushed back into space. A solid group of politicians were screaming that sending out a fleet armed to the teeth was hardly a gesture of goodwill and fellowship. One small faction was even promoting sending a single drone broadcasting, "We come in Peace," and other arrant nonsense in all the sentient languages currently known.

Thank God that people with more military sense quashed that idea, Sean thought. We've been fighting wars for hundreds of years and people want to go out to meet someone who could be a carnivore —wearing a steak suit with a sprig of parsley in the lapel.

- From Exodus by Steve White and Shirley Meier

It took a long time, at least an hour, but finally the high ministers of government, the Conservatives and Liberals, the hawks and the doves, all ran down from their bloviations and ran out of breath, each at the same moment.

This highly unusual silence was broken by the single cabinet member who hadn’t spoken once during the whole difficult meeting, “Excuse me,” he said mildly, “but could we all stop leading
with our weakest arguments?” His name was Nicholas Brandon Chao, and he was a little shorter than the average man, but his shoulders were wide and his arms thick with both muscle and fat. He had fair skin, which was unusual for a modern human, dark hair, and a very pugnacious chin. Had he been twenty centimeters taller, he could have played a heavy in one of the gangster HDs which were back in fashion. Due to his outspoken nature, his enemies called him “The Dread Minister of Culture,” which made him laugh. Even his friends described him with phrases like “You always know where you stand with Nick” and “Whatever you’re discussing, Nicholas would never allow himself to be caught without an opinion.”

At one point, before getting wholly caught up in fighting over how to handle the gigantic alien fleet approaching Bellophron, Christina Kim, the Foreign Minister, had found herself wondering whether Nicholas was a victim of the flu which was currently making the rounds. While everyone else had argued over whether the aliens were friendly, and how to make either warlike or peaceful overtures, the Dread Minister of Culture had sat at the far end of the table – his Ministry was the lowest ranked, below even the Ministry of Education – playing with a beat-up government-issue tablet.

“Weak arguments?” Christina shrieked, pointing an accusing finger at the Minister of War, “That man wants to send a gigantic war fleet to greet the aliens! It’s just an excuse to give the arms manufacturers even more money than they already-”

“You goddamn Liberals are just-”

The Dread Minister of Culture stood up, set his tablet down, and put both hands on the table. He took a deep breath and spoke sharply from the diaphragm, two short, loud words. “Shut. Up.” He had a very strong set of lungs and had clearly elected to husband his energies until everyone else was fatigued. The Minister of Education was in the worst shape. He’d argued so long and loudly for the “send out a drone broadcasting ‘we come in peace’ and everything will be fine” option that he could barely talk at all. Fortunately, the Minister of Culture’s full-volume “Shut up” wouldn’t have made the top-ten list of unkind things said during this meeting – most of the cabinet members had been arguing with both the volume and substance of network trolls... “I have had enough!” the Minister thundered, “If you shrieking ninnies don’t calm down and find a way to work together, I will go to the press regardless!”

“About what?” asked the Prime Minister mildly. Even though everyone already knew about the new aliens someone on the Prime Minister’s staff had suggested they classify the whole thing retroactively with an eye to asserting control over the rumor mill. In theory, if the Minister of Culture went to the press about this “classified” matter, he might face a jail term, but under the current circumstances going to the journalists would probably be interpreted as patriotic whistle-blowing rather than mere criminality. This, along with the legal silliness of classifying already public information meant that in realistic terms it would be very difficult to bring the Minister of Culture to heel if he chose to violate protocol.

“About the inability of this cabinet to come together and work with any unity at all in the face of an alien incursion. It won’t be a big deal right now, but if a war does start and we lose the first battle, it lays the groundwork for this government to fall at a very difficult time.” The “Dread Minister of Culture’s” presence in the Cabinet was the result of an election in which no party had received a majority, followed by the formation of a coalition government. Nicholas Chao represented the Libertarian Realists, a major party which was currently out of power due to a scandal. “I don’t think my party would regain control of Parliament if an election were called in the next few weeks, so we’d end up with Mulvaney. That wouldn’t bother me, but I know how you feel about the man.” Nicholas shrugged elaborately, then held up his tablet. “Anyway, I’ve been taking notes.”
“I see,” said the Prime Minister, “and exactly what do you want?” Unfortunately, the circumstances of a coalition government didn’t give the Prime Minister enough power to avoid listening to “The Dreadful’s” thoughts on the new aliens and what the Rim Federation should do about them. The sad thing was that the Prime Minister had liked everyone attending this meeting – at least he’d liked them before they’d joined his cabinet - but the good chemistry he’d hoped for simply hadn’t developed.

“What do I want?” asked the Dread Minister of Culture, “For starters, I’d like not to be disappointed. Everyone here in this meeting is doing business as usual despite the crisis, and I’d like to see something better from all of us. For example...” he turned to the Foreign Minister, a blond woman in her forties, “Christina, rather than argue from opinion, I looked at the numbers and did a little long division. Humans have fought with about 37 percent of the the aliens we’ve had First Contact with. As much as I hate to say it, we need the military right now, so if you’d come down from your perch and help us figure out a useful-

“Ooooooooh.” The Minister of War, Reginald Mbung-Brodstein, pronounced the word as a drawn-out musical note, “Now that new aliens are in sight, the Liberal has finally come around. Rather than join the argument, you took a few minutes to study history and discovered that you actually need us!” Libertarian Realists weren’t Liberal, exactly, but they were left of the Conservatives and typically agreed with the Liberal Party on practical issues of military funding, though their theoretical basis was markedly different.

“What I believe,” said Nicholas, “is that a long string of ugly “cabinet wars” turn the population cynical. Then when you need total effort for a real war of survival you don’t get one hundred percent from your citizens.” The Secretary of War rolled his eyes at this bit of middle-of-the-road thinking and his face twisted up in a sneer. The “Dread” Minister of Culture responded by once again living up to his nickname. He squared his shoulders and walked around the table until he stood toe-to-toe with Secretary of War, a burly ex-Marine who had won multiple medals in the All-Services Martial Arts Tournament and stood at least a head taller than Nicholas. The Minister of Culture had never won a martial arts medal, and his fighting skills were those of a tavern brawler rather than a martial artist, but he’d never lacked physical courage. “More to the point, Mr. Historian, I have three words for you.” Nicholas pushed himself even further into the Minister of War’s personal space, and said those words, which were of medium volume and carefully enunciated, complete with disdainful lip movements. “Theban. Peace. Fleet.”

The Minister of War’s eyes lit up as if an antimatter warhead had detonated inside his skull, and the expression on his face caused everyone in the room to stare at him in expectation of some violent, physical act. The Minister of War fought to get himself under control, then finally took a deep breath, held it, and let it out again. He loosened his tie, pulled his chair away from the table, and made a production of sitting down. “I suppose,” he said finally, steepling his fingers, “that you have a better idea?”

“I have a proposal,” said the Minister of Culture, walking back to his chair, “which I worked up while the rest of you were arguing. To be honest, it’s not fully fleshed out, and might be a little unrealistic, but perhaps all you Hawks and Doves can bring your enormous experience with war and diplomacy to the table and help me turn it into something worth implementing.” He sat down and turned to the Minister of War. “Let me suggest first of all that you get everything you can into the Bellophron system, but for the moment don’t let Admiral Remko move beyond that system.” The Minister of War raised a skeptical eyebrow and the Minister of Culture ignored it. “I see several priorities here. First, if Remko stays in Bellophron we might be able to get him a couple more ships, maybe even a couple more squadrons, than if he takes off for interstellar space, and we can certainly shuttle in large numbers of fighters that wouldn’t have to be based off carriers.” The Minister of War nodded fractionally and reassessed his opinion of the Minister of Culture, who
was suddenly less stupid about military matters than had seemed apparent during their earlier budget battles.

“Second,” continued the Minister of Culture, “We estimate that the aliens have been crossing interstellar space for around 1500 years. I suspect it’s been a very long time since they fought inside a solar system. Correct me if I’m wrong, but The Navy regularly practices fighting around planets, moons and asteroid belts, and of course the aliens can’t practice those things. So let’s think in terms of fighting where we have the greatest advantage. If Remko simply gets our forces to Bellophron he can run exercises and scout the -”

“Scout? Our maps of the Bellophron system were updated just-”

The Minister of Culture shook his head. “That’s not the issue. I’m more concerned with the possibility that our new aliens might already have scouts of their own in Bellophron than I am about your maps.”

“Oh!” said the Minister of War, suddenly alert, “that’s a very interesting thought.”

“Yeah,” said the Minister of Culture, “if I can imagine it -”

“So can the enemy.” It was one of the truisms of war that the enemy would do anything your side could imagine, plus more besides.

“And if we can make contact with a smaller ship,” said the Foreign Minister, “we can learn a lot and hopefully we don’t have to fight them!”

“So,” said the Secretary of War, “You want to get everything possible to Bellophron, scout for enemy presence, practice in-system tactics, and send in some survey assets?”

“Survey assets?” asked the Prime Minister? “Why do we need those? We’re not examining a new warp point.” The Prime Minister was a handsome man with great social skills, very likable and electable, but unfortunately not the brightest star in the sky. At least he knew his limitations and wasn’t afraid to ask questions.

“Because,” said the Minister of War, “Survey is trained for First Contact. They can teach English and learn the alien’s language.”

“I see,” said the Prime Minister. “But before we go on, two things. First, Nicholas, I think both bringing up the Theban Peace Fleet and the manner in which you did so was a little unfair to Reginald. I want you to apologize.” Beyond his great social skills, the Prime Minister was also very much a Conservative, and beholden to the same kinds of interests that had once forced some very unpleasant orders upon Admiral Li Chien-lu. He’d also been two years ahead of the Dread Minister of Culture at the rather exclusive boarding school where he’d been head boy his senior year, which meant that this was not the first time he’d presided over one of Nicholas Chao’s apologies. (In his autobiography the Prime Minister would later describe his schoolboy years as “the very happiest of all my life.”)

“That’s not necessary,” said the Minister of War, “and historically speaking the comparison wasn’t completely thoughtless.”

“Nonetheless,” said the Prime Minister, “I insist.” The Minister of War and the Minister of Culture shrugged at each other, tepid apologies were exchanged, hands were shaken, and in one case carefully wiped on someone’s trousers afterwards, though not until after both the hands and trousers concerned were again beneath the table.
“Second,” said the Prime Minister, “what is the ultimate purpose of all this? I do understand that we will hopefully have peaceful relations with the aliens, but what do we do next?”

“I’m getting there.” said the Minister of Culture. “Can we agree that the first thing we need is a plan for securing the Bellophron system?”

Nobody disagreed. The Minister of Culture fingered his tablet and a line of text appeared on the video wall facing the Prime Minister: “Protect the Bellophron System.”

“And where does the Foreign Ministry fit into your plans?” asked Christina, clearly anxious that her department might be left out of the process.

“Obviously we need to send an embassy to the aliens,” said the Minister of Culture, “and initially it needs to have more than one ministerial contact, just so they know we’re serious. Perhaps yourself, myself, and…” he smiled suddenly, “Petunia, I think.” Petunia Nava was the Minister of Commerce, a petit, dark-skinned, curly-haired economics whiz whose theory of information exchange over deep-space networks had revolutionized the finance industry and eventually brought the company she’d founded into the heights of Zephrain’s business community. Like the Prime Minister, she was also very conservative, so there would be a balance of political forces; one Liberal, one Conservative, and one middle-of-the-road type to keep everyone honest, at least in ideological terms.

“Okay…” said the Foreign Minister, clearly a little skeptical. She and the Minister of Commerce typically clashed on every policy imaginable, except for the financial issues, where they both agreed that aggressive negotiations aimed at maximizing the profits of Rim Federation multinationals were a major priority.

“We’ll also need a major intelligence presence for any meetings with the new aliens,” continued the Minister of Culture, still addressing the Foreign Minister, “though it needs to be more commercial and cultural than military for the kinds of negotiations I’m thinking about. Maybe the Foreign Ministry’s intelligence department can handle that. For the higher-level issues I can find Ph.Ds with sociological and anthropological experience who come from reliable universities. We’ll have to hire them on medium-term consulting contracts, but in career terms they’d pay us to join the team.” It was understood throughout the government that “reliable university” meant “neither extremely Conservative or nor extremely Liberal; people without an ax to grind,” and the Minister of Culture could be trusted to interpret that appropriately.

“Naturally,” Nicholas nodded towards the Minister of War, “military intelligence will continue to address their usual strategic concerns. I can lend both you and Christina as many mid-level cultural specialists as you might reasonably need.” In another day and age, the Ministry of Culture would have been in charge of putting on concerts of classical music or making sure the language didn’t get “polluted” with foreign words but given the sheer number of alien nations any polity might find itself doing business with, the issue of putting on concerts took a back seat to “understanding the deepest cultural motivations of humanity’s competition” and “making sure they understand how we think.” The first Minister of Culture had famously explained to a skeptical budget committee that the Ministry of Culture would be “the marketing department for the human race.”

Lastly, and I do apologize for this” - here Nicholas gave the Prime Minister a dirty look - “because I know it’s likely to be controversial, but I suspect that the new aliens may be fairly parochial and unsophisticated, so I think we need to round up some of our alien allies and bring them along with us, possibly with observer status of some kind, so the new aliens can see that we have friends and they can have friends too.”

“That’s not… I mean… no. Simply no!” gasped the Prime Minister. The rest of the ministers also
looked uncomfortable, and the source of this discomfort was plain to all: At the same time as there was enough suspicion of the new aliens to inspire the Cabinet to think very seriously about sending off a war fleet, there was also a subtle feeling that the new aliens “belonged” to the Rim Federation, at least in terms of who might trade with them first (and foremost) if the military issues could be settled.

The Minister of War and the Foreign Minister both spoke at the same time. “Absolutely not!”

“Let me put this delicately,” said the Dread Minister of Culture, who definitely understood the problem, “hypothetically, if we brought non-human observers, they would not have to be accredited diplomats.”

The Foreign Minister raised one eyebrow. “Wow. You didn’t actually say that, did you?”

The Minister of Commerce shook her head and laughed. “You were doing so well!”

The Minister of War had blood in his eyes, but as he opened his mouth to weigh in the Minister of Culture shouted, “Wait! Wait! Wait!” and made a few panicky “pushing away” gestures as if to shut off the torrent of scorn from his colleagues. “Do any of you understand why I want this so badly?”

“Honestly, I’m flabbergasted,” said the Prime Minister, “It’s just such a... how do I phrase this? Such an... unusual idea.”

“Let me explain myself more fully. Then I suggest that we table the issue for further thought. We don’t have to implement it immediately.”

“We all know that the new aliens are coming to us through deep space, possibly fleeing a supernova. They’ve probably never sent an expedition through a warp point, and thus never met another kind of intelligence. As a race which has never previously made First Contact they are quite possibly parochial and unsophisticated, maybe even xenophobic. They’ve got a good enough technology to keep multiple generation ships alive for 1500 years, we don’t know their military capabilities, and they’ll certainly want some real-estate. So how do we make sure they don’t start a war for the real-estate they want? We make sure they understand this isn’t an “us versus them” situation. Instead, we show them that they’re moving into a nice neighborhood, and all their new neighbors have been friends for a long time, and that contact between multiple, neighboring alien races is nice, normal and expected. If we bring them a galactic civilization rather than a single race they’re much less likely to pick a fight.”

“The carrot and the stick in one package.” The Minister of War laughed. “I like it and I hate it, all at the same time.”

“If we did this,” said the Foreign Minister dubiously, “the Orion, at least, would have to be an accredited diplomat. You’ve made a... um... ‘cogent’ argument, but I think you’re right about tabling the matter. Let me think about it.”

Christina Kim fingered her tablet and a second line appeared on the video wall facing the Prime Minister: “Send an Embassy to the New Aliens.”

“That’s Number Two,” said Petunia. Everyone knew that under the current Prime Minister it was the kiss of death for any policy to have more than three bullet-points, and the whole cabinet had made a very unofficial, off-the-record agreement that as much as they might fight over matters of policy, there would never be more than three bullet-points attached to any one agenda item (of which there were never to be more than three in any meeting) lest the Prime Minister suffer from
information overload and make a decision that might be – as the Minister of the Interior had so politely phrased it - “less complex than the situation it was intended to resolve.”

“Hold on, hold on,” said the Minister of War. “You do all understand that what you’re proposing is incredibly risky, right? This is why some of us would rather send a fleet.”

“Reginald,” said the Foreign Minister, her voice that of someone who’s very tired of a long-running argument, “this is what diplomats do.”

“But-”

“No ‘buts,’ Reginald,” the Foreign Minister continued, her voice very formal. “I find the idea that the diplomats and warriors aren’t working towards the same goals, for the same team, to be extremely disappointing. You’ll usually find it bandied about when someone with either a prejudiced agenda or a large investment in defense plus a complete lack of ethics gains influence over some large portion of the media. Furthermore, the idea that a diplomat can’t or shouldn’t risk their life for our nation is incredibly demeaning, and I don’t want to hear more about it.”

“Well said!” The Minister of Commerce looked at the Foreign Minister with new respect.

“I hope you’ll at least accept an escort,” said the Minister of War, “a couple supermonitors at least. And you’ll want some First Contact experts.”

Before the Foreign Minister could say anything unpleasant, the Minister of Culture spoke up. “The Ministry of Culture looks forward to working together with the Ministry of War to resolve the current crisis. I’m very sure the Foreign Minister and the Minister of Commerce feel the same way.”

The Minister of Commerce waved an airy hand. “We can work out the exact details later. What’s next?”

“Petunia,” said the Dread Minister of Culture, his expression that of a cat who has swallowed the world’s tastiest canary, “how would you like to make the biggest real-estate deal in history?”

Petunia understood instantly, and she smiled. The smile started big and got larger every second. Christina found herself thinking, “Nick’s getting laid tonight,” which was silly, because Nicholas and Petunia were both married to other people, but the thought lingered as Petunia looked around at the Prime Minister, plus the Ministers of War, the Interior, and Education, and saw that they didn’t get it.

“We have things the aliens want, right?” Petunia noted. “We have a few planets they might like to settle, and they have whatever incredible material and engineering tech allows their starships to last for 1500 years, plus some cultural processes that are probably pretty good, because they’ve apparently stayed civilized for 15 centuries, plus they would at least start out as a captive market, right?”

“We have colonization and terraforming experience they’ll need,” whispered the Minister of Education.

“Exactly,” said Petunia. “We have lots of experience settling new planets. If Nicholas is right about how parochial they are, they don’t have any such experience.” By now the smile was shark-like. “So we trade. They get some solar systems and we get their tech, plus maybe some used generation ships to examine. I can draw up-”

“But where will we get the solar systems?” asked the Stephen Millicent Robertson, Minister of the
Interior. Stephen’s brother was the major shareholder in one of the largest defense contractors in the Rim Federation, which also had trillion-dollar “sidelines” in colonization and terraforming. His brother was fairly cosmopolitan, but Stephen was a full-blown human chauvinist, so the Prime Minister had awarded him the Interior Ministry in the specific hope of avoiding problems with any non-human trading partners. While the Prime Minister wasn’t the sharpest tack in the box, his political instincts were very good, so the Minister of the Interior was usually given a pass on events like formal dinners with the Gormish Ambassador.

“I do recall,” continued the Minister of the Interior, “that Reginald briefed us on the latest surveys off Astria a couple weeks ago, and I know we haven’t formally opened those solar systems up for either settlement or resource extraction, but there’s a lot of money waiting to be invested there… my brother would not be happy.” Not to mention that the Minister of the Interior was, himself, very clearly unhappy.

“I can see the problem,” Petunia sighed. “Your brother’s holdings, not to mention some of the other multinationals, would see their bottom lines take a hit that might last…” she closed her eyes for a few seconds, “a hundred years at least.” Colonization and terraforming did not pay back quickly.

“So what?” argued the Minister of Culture. “We lock the aliens into a hundred-year mortgage, use the money to make the disappointed investors whole, and the terms of the contra... I mean the terms of the treaty guide them to “appropriate” companies for help in settling their new worlds.” He raised one eyebrow at the Minister of the Interior, as if inviting comment. “What do you think, Stephen?”

The Minister of the Interior looked coldly back at the Dread Minister of Culture. “Leaving aside the financial issues, why should we give these- these- these... migrants, these weird alien refugees - any of our planets?”

“Three alternatives,” croaked the Minister of Education. He tapped his tablet and the text on the video wall disappeared, then he typed furiously:

1.) War – We lose. We give up planets or even our nation, and don’t get paid for them.

2.) War – We win. The new aliens become landless refugees and a charge on the public purse.

3.) Peace – We sell the aliens new planets, get paid for them, and have a trading partner.

Which works better? Both ethically and practically?

“I don’t like it,” said the Minister of the the Interior, his voice full of contempt. “If the new aliens wish to have planets, let them fire up their primitive reaction drives and find them someplace else.”

“That’s enough, Stephen.” The Prime Minister waved at the video wall. “Put in those terms the moral and practical issues are obvious, and it’s definitely a better plan than we had before. Unfortunately, I don’t think we can manage it. We’d have to go into debt,” he explained sadly. “which means we’d need an act of Parliament, and I don’t think all of our parties together can muster the two thirds vote we’d need to override the Constitutional prohibitions against deficit spending.”

“Debt?! We don’t need to go into debt. We’d merely be guaranteeing a loan to the aliens,” said the Minister of Commerce innocently. “We’d simply set a very high value on their tech and take that as a down payment, then we’d issue currency against the assets. It’s perfectly legal and all we’d need is a majority, which we do currently have. We’d end up with a trading partner and probably a good-sized technical renaissance! Most of their payments would go straight to the-” she made
quote fingers and smiled at the Minister of the Interior, “‘injured parties’ who would not have to make any investments, hire employees, purchase machinery or do actual labor to receive their monies. I’d expect them to see a very nice profit, maybe even better than they’d see from actually doing the work.” The Minister of Commerce smiled and tapped at her own tablet. The Minister of Education’s text disappeared and the previous text returned. The video wall now read:

*Protect the Bellophron System*

*Send An Embassy to the New Aliens*

*Sell the Aliens Some Real-Estate*

“Does that work for everyone?” Petunia asked. “I think this is an excellent plan.”

“Astrographically, we’d have two sets of really cheap routes to foreign trading partners,” mused the Minister of War. “We already have a very cheap route to the Orions at Rehfrak, and we’d have a similarly cheap route through Bellophron to wherever we settle the new aliens. I don’t understand finance like Petunia, but I’ve dealt with logistics and I know how much it costs to ship a ton of material, so the nearby presence of two easily-reached markets sounds very desirable.”

“I dislike the entirety of this discussion, so let me suggest a revision,” the Minister of the Interior said coldly. He worked his tablet for a few seconds and a fourth bullet-point appeared on the video wall facing the Prime Minister. “Compensate the Injured Parties.”

“I know this is a little more complex than we normally deal with,” said the Minister of the Interior as everyone looked at him in horror, save for the Prime Minister, who was staring at the video wall with an expression of mild confusion, “but under the current, very difficult and complicated circumstances I think we can handle a to-do list with four items. We’ll ‘Protect the Bellophron System,’ we’ll ‘Send An Embassy to the New Aliens’ we’ll ‘Sell the Aliens Some Real-Estate,’ and we’ll ‘Compensate the Injured Parties.’ Does that work for everyone?

“Absolutely not” said the Prime Minister. “I’m afraid we’re getting much too complex. Reginald, as Commander in Chief I’m ordering you to have Remko take his fleet out to meet the aliens. Hopefully it will be a peaceful meeting.” The Dread Minister of Culture’s jaw dropped. The Foreign Minister stood up, her face an angry mask, and against all protocol left the room before the Prime Minister. Petunia Nava, denied her place in financial history, looked down into her own lap and pursed her lips.

“Sir!” the Minister of War all but spat the word. His face looked very grim.

“I think that’s the end of our agenda for today,” said the Prime Minister happily. The satisfied expression on his face told everyone that he imagined the problem was well and truly solved. “I’ll look forward to seeing you at our regular Cabinet meeting this Thursday. Meanwhile, I have a meeting with the Khanate’s Ambassador in the early afternoon and I’m looking forward to a relaxed noon meal with my wife.” The remaining Ministers stood up and the Prime Minister left the room, followed, before anyone could address his betrayal, by the Minister of the Interior, who looked like he might break into a run once he was through the door.

“Doesn’t this suck?” asked the Minister of Culture. No one answered.

The Minister of War slammed his tablet into his old-fashioned briefcase and left the room. The Minister of Education followed him out the door, his face a mask of disappointment.

The Minister of Commerce managed a wan smile and rose from her chair. She put one hand briefly
on the Minister of Culture’s shoulder. “It was nice to be on the same team for once,” she said, and
turned towards the exit.

“Yeah.” His eyes followed her as she put her tablet in her bag and headed towards the door.
“Petunia,” he said.

“Yes?”

“It would have worked, don’t you think? I mean, if Stephen hadn’t screwed things up.”

“It would definitely have worked, Nicholas.” She managed another wan smile. “I’m sure of it.”

“Thanks.” The Minister of Culture stayed behind for several minutes after the Minister of
Commerce left the room, staring dully at the video wall opposite the Prime Minister’s chair.
Finally he got up, poured himself a little water from the pitcher on the conference table, swallowed
some headache medicine, and left. The room lights, sensing that everyone was gone, turned
themselves off. The video wall logged its users out and went dark. A few minutes later a
Government House staffer came in, wiped down the table, rebooted the video wall and prepared
the room for a Parliamentary hearing on possible violations of an obscure agricultural policy.

Fin.

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