

THE RANBOEN CONTRACT

A science fiction novel by
John Anthony Curran

The Ranboen Contract

By John Anthony Curran

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Chapter One: Adjusted Priorities

Boris gripped his cloak's crimson hood and held it in place as he leapt over one of the market benches. He welcomed the shade it provided as much as the anonymity. The glare of Dimonah's afternoon sun was fierce, and every time it touched the scar above his right eye the old wound itched.

Overall, he'd have preferred to do without it. The planet's fashion was definitely practical — he felt cool even with his battered leather jacket on beneath it — but the garment restricted freedom of movement and access to his blaster. The inexplicable popularity of yellow was less of an annoyance, even though he was often forced to rely on each cloak's individual stains to tell the hooded figures apart.

Still, he had no choice in the matter. Just as he was stuck with red and green. He needed to be wearing those colors in a certain place, at a certain time.

The place was the market he steadily shouldered his way through. The rows of wooden stalls were cramped, leaving little room for the milling crowd. The time for

the meeting was drawing close, and Boris had no desire to be late.

He pulled out his terminal. The cigar-sized, durasteel device was outdated by Confederation standards, but he'd seen it attract jealous glances from some of the locals. He chose to keep the bulk of it hidden in his hand as he activated it. The display it projected into the air before him was common enough to be ignored. As he pressed his way through a particularly dense knot of people, he checked the local Network and found his ad still in place. It was a short message:

Come back, Dan. Everything has changed!

It was a code phrase, of course. Boris expected his contact was named anything but Dan. Still, Hass being Hass, he couldn't discount the possibility entirely. He'd known the tough old hacker to hide secrets in plain sight before. Annoyingly enough, it seemed to work.

He'd promised to send the man a message before each contact attempt, so he started a new message and dictated to his terminal as he pressed on through the dusty crowd.

"Hello Hass. I'm about to try meeting your contact again. Provided I make it in time that is..." A woman moved out in front of him wheeling a bicycle impressively overloaded with fish, and he only just managed to avoid running into her. The crowd then thickened again, and he was forced to slow down. "Maybe it'll be third time lucky. At least this week it isn't raining."

An aging female merchant leaned over and interrupted him by holding a fillet up to his face. "Snapper, sir? Lovely snapper! Only two credits..."

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“No,” He replied, pushing the fish aside. The smell lingered.

The enthusiastic woman continued waving it at him. “It’s truly good Sir! Surely you can see...”

Boris had already seen enough of the fish and the woman to know she wasn’t his contact. He scowled at her. “No. *Piss off.*”

The woman gave him an offended stare for a moment, then redirected her energies toward an unfortunate couple behind him. His terminal had recorded the entire exchange.

“I blame my language implant for that,” he grumbled. “Two thousand languages from every colonized world in the Cluster, and all it does for me here on Dimonah is accent my Standard and make me sound like a bloody local. And don’t you start going on again about why I’d be so much better off with combat implants as well! There’s no point being quick if it means being vulnerable to mindhacking.”

He could still smell the snapper. Trying his best to ignore it, he found an opening in the crowd and picked up his pace once more. “By the way, why did you have to pick the market on fish day? Stasis storage and refrigeration seem to be regarded as optional on this dirtball. Next time, I suggest a decent bar. Or perhaps a tropical beach.”

A new stench reached him, wafting with the wind from a stand up ahead full of zebra squid. He elected to take a detour to stay upwind. “I’d even prefer the vegetable market; rotting cabbage would be easier on the nose. I’ll send another message in an hour. Let’s hope your mystery man is still around, and decides to grace me with his presence.” He encrypted the message and sent it into the Network. Hass was in the nearby

Confed core systems; with the hyperspace comms system he'd get the message in around seven hours.

If only his contact could be as quick! Three weeks had passed since Boris arrived on Dimonah, and still no contact. Boris would keep trying of course. Hass was a good friend, and this was the first time he'd ever asked for his help. Besides, the cover job he'd landed as bodyguard to the local royal family delivered a reasonable income.

Boris finally reached the designated meeting place, a tall light pole among a collection of souvenir stands. The time readout on his terminal told him he was only a few seconds late. That seemed forgivable. He leaned against the pole to catch his breath and wait it out.

It's always the way, he thought. You knock yourself out to make an appointment, and then you have to wait. Maybe the contact wants me to suffer.

The stand of souvenir pictures next to him was a tourist trap, but at least it didn't involve fish. He flipped through some of the picturecards while he waited.

Many of them were aerial shots. He recognized one from his solo flight in, a high-altitude image of the vividly blue Great Eastern Ocean. The shot included both primary continents, the pristine grasslands and mountains of Gloume rising on the east, and the rocky plains of Chear sprawling on the west. The motives of the original colonists couldn't be more transparent. The mineral-rich plains of Chear were why they terraformed the world. He wondered what Hass saw in the planet, and concluded he must simply have a soft spot for the place of his birth.

He looked through more of the cards and found a picture of the capitol, Kalaanda. Whoever took the shot seemed to have gone out of their way to include

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as many of the mines around the city as they could. It was an unpleasant reminder of the dust Boris could taste in the air. Plumes from the open-cuts often drifted over the city, and the factories and slums were filthy with it. Only around the Palace and commercial district were the buildings at all clean.

Pictures of the royal Hoparin were next in the selection, so Boris turned away from the stand and watched the crowd instead. He saw royalty every day as part of his job.

The crowd wasn't quite as dense around the souvenir stands, and he could see more faces. He wondered why they were still happy to be ruled by a monarchy. It wasn't as if they were prospering.

He waited.

The sky slowly grew darker, and eventually the market lights flickered into life. He sighed, and checked the time on his terminal. He found he'd been there for a little over an hour, which seemed long enough. There was no sign of the mystery man. Maybe he'd have better luck next week.

Resigned, he started back toward the Palace. The crowd was thinning out and the market starting to close down, but he trudged all the way out and waited until he was a block away before he tapped his terminal back on for a follow-up message. This time, he didn't bother with a greeting.

"Nothing today man. Strike three. No luck, no contact." He took a deep breath, and instantly regretted it. He was downwind of the market, and caught the stench of aging squid. He scowled. "You know Hass, I'm starting to think this planet may hate me. I know I'm not fond of *it*."

He paused to step over a small hole in the sidewalk. Water from a broken underground pipe oozed from it. “The Palace itself isn’t so bad though.” He smirked. “Although the addition of a harem wouldn’t hurt, provided they served offworld bodyguards. I’ll be in touch.” He clipped the terminal back onto his belt, and strode on. His shift started in a few more hours, and it was likely going to be another long, dull night. But there was still time to check on his ship first.

Dimonah’s sun dominated the horizon as only a red giant could. While it did burn with less intensity than most, the immense star made up for it with sheer proximity to the planet. Boris watched the last of the massive red furnace sink slowly below the city horizon. The sky felt empty without the vast red disk.

The Palace roof was a great place to watch the sun set before a shift, if a little warm. Nineteen hours of daylight had heated the black stone, and he could feel the warmth through his boots. He’d been told the Palace was designed to release heat slowly, alleviating the cold of the night. That seemed wise. The nights were as long, and as cold as the days were hot. In the streets below, the neat lines of lisamore trees were already starting to protectively fold their dark green leaves. The end of another day in Kalaanda.

For a planetary capital, it was a quiet city. Boris already missed the noise and variety found in the more chaotic parts of the Confederation. On Dimonah, there was a calm that felt somehow ancient.

Despite the pollution, he saw a few stars starting to appear. He swirled the booze in his plastic cup, and tried to identify them. It seemed strange to be so close

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to the core of the Confederation, yet on such a backward world. But people were people, no matter what their technological level.

The thought made him turn and glance at Temae, sitting on the pale gray bench behind him. Her simple white Servant's uniform looked surprisingly good on her. It complemented her blonde hair and green eyes.

She actually seemed to like him, though for the life of him he couldn't figure out why. Maybe it was because he was an offworlder, and therefore a novelty.

Temae's gaze was locked on his well-worn starship, and its prominent twin cannons. The weapons were scarred and blackened, and even to Boris they seemed threatening. The ship itself sported a simple beauty of sorts, but the guns ruined the image.

"Is it so bad in the Confederation?" she asked, still looking at his ship.

Boris broke into a grin. "No way! For most people, life is as boring and peaceful as hell." He waved an arm vaguely at the gossamer of city lights sprawled about below them. "Much like here, really."

Temae turned to him, and smiled. "I am glad you are here to protect the Hoparin. The Colonel has wanted offworld help for a long time."

Boris sipped his drink. The spicy local booze was rather good. "I'm told Queen Dalamai wasn't so hot on the idea."

She nodded. "I think she only relented because the contract with Ranboen is due for renewal soon. It is better to be safe rather than sorry."

"That makes sense."

Temae looked up at him. "But still, I do not understand why you have chosen to be here. You are different to the other bodyguards. Do you wish to

protect the heirs, help preserve peace on our world?” Boris pressed his lips into a tight line, and remained silent as the breeze tugged at his battered leather jacket. “Or are you tired of your life flying in space?” Boris broke into laughter, and sat down beside her.

“Not by a long shot! Escorting ships on unsecured routes is kind of fun. Something different every day, you know? It’s just...” He paused, searching helplessly for a suitable excuse. Despite eleven years, the Palace still hadn’t forgotten Hass. “Ah hell, I don’t know,” he admitted, shrugging.

“You do not know? I think I may.” Temae let out a small giggle, and gently knuckled his gun arm. “Tough offworld mercenary, protector of Dimonah’s future, is a big softie.”

Boris grinned, and to his surprise felt himself starting to blush. “Hey, who said I wasn’t? There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Temae’s wrist terminal chimed, and the palace servant wasted no time getting to her feet. She bowed in apology. “I must go now. I am needed.” With a brief smile, she set off toward the door.

Boris sighed, and checked the time on his own terminal. He was due to start his shift. He jogged after Temae, and caught up with her back inside the palace. After the dim landing lights outside, the bright interior gas lamps seemed a little harsh. It took a lot of light to overcome the ebony stone.

“Mind if I tag along for a bit? I have to head downstairs myself.”

Temae moved to provide room for him by her side. In such a wide corridor it was hardly necessary, even with his broad frame. “Of course not. Why would I mind?”

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“Well, I am offworld scum, you know.”

Temae grinned as they entered the gleaming lift, and selected one of the lower palace levels. “You are not scum,” she said. The lift lurched slightly as it began to descend. “The Colonel chooses his people well.”

Boris frowned thoughtfully. “Yeah, he knows his stuff all right.” he paused, and shook his head in wonder. “It seems that Palace as a whole is pretty good at selecting people.”

Temae looked up at him, and blinked. “Do you mean me? Chosen as an infant for Palace staff?”

“Yeah, that still seems weird to me. Suddenly it’s goodbye parents, hello years of training and a lifetime serving the Hoparin. Don’t you ever wish you had a real family?”

She smiled, and shook her head as the lift slowed. “This *is* my family. I would not have it any other way.” The doors opened, and the servant stepped out. She paused outside, and turned to face him. “I would give my life for them, Boris. They are everything to me.”

He remained slouched against the wall inside, and found himself unable to take his eyes off her. “Damn, they mindhacked you but good. They did, didn’t they? Admit it,” he asked, grinning.

Temae broke into a laugh, and started walking away. “Don’t tell the Elite guards. They’d be in big trouble for missing it on the med-scans.” The closing doors hid her from view.

Boris blinked once at the sealed doors, and then selected a level. The elevator began to move. “You’re a lucky girl.” He added quietly.

The lift descended further into the Palace.

Boris strode along the broad corridor. Ahead, a lone figure stood by the gleaming red door of the heir's bedchambers.

Boris swore and broke into a jog.

The man standing there was Washington, his rostered partner for the shift. His moth-eaten beret and rounded face made his profile easily recognizable.

Boris slowed as he drew nearer, and tapped his terminal to quick the time. The display confirmed he was four minutes early.

Washington saw his expression and chuckled, a sound that rumbled forth from his bull-like neck. "Relax, Boris. Naktef and Kusa have knocked off for the day."

The statement brought Boris up short. "The Colonel said no rostered guards can leave until the next complement arrives in full."

Washington nodded, and cocked his head to the door behind him. "Tell him that. He's inside taking tonight's study session. He gave them leave to go when I turned up." Boris let out a deep breath. The Colonel was certainly capable of filling in for a single bodyguard.

A thought occurred to him, and he winced. "It's not another late night study session is it?"

Washington smiled. "Nah. The kids will be off to bed soon."

"Thank the gods for that." Boris gripped the gold-plated door handle and waited.

Washington spoke into the terminal he kept clipped by his shoulder. "Boris has arrived, sir." He looked up, and nudged him gently in the ribs. "You might gripe about it, but you get along with them well you know."

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Boris opened the door. “Careful. Next thing you know, you’ll be saying I’d make a good father!” he whispered. Washington’s laughter was cut off as the doors closed behind him.

Boris circled around the ornate privacy wall, and found the Colonel seated with the two heirs at the far end of an antique table. The two rosewood bedchamber doors adorning the left wall were still shut.

“You’re right on time, Boris. We’re just finishing up.” The Colonel returned to tidying away the dataslugs on the table, pausing to scratch his hooked nose. The man’s cropped, gray hair and military fatigues seemed oddly out-of-place in the luxurious chamber.

Crown Prince Alexander remained studiously silent as he finished neatly packing away his own terminal and dataslugs. His younger sister Jemma, on the other hand, grinned and energetically waved one purple-clad arm. Boris waved back, feeling somewhat silly.

The Colonel stood. “That’s all from me for a while, Highnesses. Tomorrow’s lesson concentrates on the Swarm War and its socio-economic impact on the Cluster. Viscount Xavier will be taking you through it.” Instead of the customary bow, he saluted the seated children.

Prince Alexander acknowledged the salute with a polite nod. “Thank you for the instruction, Colonel.”

“Thanks, Colonel!” said Princess Jem, already falling back into her habit of tapping her swinging feet against the table’s long privacy panel. She looked less than thrilled at the thought of instruction from the Viscount.

Boris took up position alongside the room’s only window, and allowed himself a small grin. He couldn’t blame Jem for preferring the Colonel’s tutorials to the

Viscount's meticulous, dry deliveries. But at least she was diplomatic about it.

He tapped his terminal, then gazed at Washington's name on the resulting display. The device noted his selection and the man's rounded face snapped into the air before him. "School's out, Washington."

The aging mercenary nodded once. "Roger that. The servants haven't arrived here yet."

"Goody!" Jem exclaimed. She pulled her terminal back toward her, and switched it to recreation mode with practiced ease. A cut-away apartment block appeared on the table in front of her. Two of the inhabitants began to argue almost instantly, prompting the Princess to instruct a third to intervene.

Alexander rested his jaw on his hands, and watched her with bemused interest. He looked tired.

The Colonel walked to the window, and touched a gray switch set into the sill. The transparent rockglass panel turned black. Deactivated, the pane looked like a recessed part of the masonry.

Washington's face appeared before each of them. "Bedtime gang, the cleanup crew is here."

Jem looked crestfallen, but shut down her terminal without complaint. "Rats."

Alexander climbed to his feet and went to his bedchamber, letting the rosewood door close behind him. Jem seemed more reluctant, and Boris helped her on her way by opening her door for her. "Sleep well, Jem."

She smiled and strode through. "Goodnight, Boris!"

Two servants entered. Boris recognized both but could only remember the name of the girl, Salia. She put the heirs to bed while her companion cleaned away the remains of the evening tea. He was one of those

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referred to as *outer* servants, part of the vast majority of the Palace staff who were forbidden close contact with the Hoparin. Boris watched them to ensure he stayed a respectable distance from the doors. He seemed to take a little longer than usual, but left without incident.

The Colonel stretched his arms. “Well. So long as I’m here, I think I’ll stay on for a few hours.” He smiled. “Feel free to catch some sleep if you can use it.”

Boris winced. “You noticed? I’m still not entirely used to 38 hour days.”

“You’ll get the hang of it.”

Boris smiled, but decided not to contradict his employer. Instead, he crossed to the single sofa, and sat down on it. He stopped short of lying down, he didn’t want to sleep for long.

As an afterthought, he switched his terminal into sentinel mode, and set it on the floor by his feet. It projected a display of the Palace sensors above it, a few feet in front of his face. It was a redundant measure, considering the Colonel’s implant, but he preferred not to rely too much on others.

He closed his eyes, intending to sleep no more than half an hour.

Boris woke in an instant. While most people wake slowly to a state of semi-consciousness, he was fully conscious within a heartbeat. Something was wrong, he knew it.

He rose to his feet, largely by reflex. His inner ear struggled to cope with the sudden change and he took a staggering step to keep his balance. He realized he

had drawn his blaster, and decided to keep it in his hand while he made sense of things.

He had been woken by a noise, he was certain of that. As he gazed around the room, he tried to remember what he had heard.

His terminal had been knocked over by his sudden rise. It was not sounding any alarms, but the display it still projected was full of noise and breakup. That suggested the link to the Palace network was intermittent. Not being actively jammed, but there was definitely some manner of interference.

The Colonel wasn't in the room, and Alexander's door was open.

Boris remembered the noise that roused him. It had been the Colonel's voice, shouting the same conclusion he was already reaching himself.

Bulletmissile!

Only tiny, aggressive sensors such as like those on a bulletmissile would create interference on old terminal like his. But a bulletmissile capable of evading the security systems and penetrating this far into the Palace was not the kind of thing available to the local populace. It get past the security screens it would need to be cloaked.

A cold knot began to form in his stomach.

Washington pounded on the outer door. "Is it inside? Colonel?!" From his yell, Boris concluded electronic communications were being affected too.

Now that he knew what to look for, he glanced around the room a second time. Bulletmissiles could be small enough to conceal in a pen, but they usually took time to maneuver into place before firing. He looked at the skirting, door frames, and air vents. There didn't seem to be anywhere it could have entered.

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“Unknown! Keep the door sealed,” he shouted.

“Roger, corridor secure.” Washington sounded tense.

The Colonel emerged with Alexander in tow. The teenager was still half asleep. “Boris, fetch Jemma.”

Boris vaulted over the table and flung open Jem’s bedchamber door. As he dashed to the figure lying in the oversized bed, he studied the room. Nothing seemed awry, and the silk hangings on her four-poster were all intact.

Jem was unhurt. The princess was oblivious to the mayhem, fast asleep with a small toy bear held tight against her. Boris threw one arm around her waist, and hoisted her onto his shoulder. By the time she began to wake he was already through the door and back in the main chamber.

The Colonel was pushing the antique table into the corner, with Alexander huddled against the wall behind it. The terror on the Prince’s face testified to the fact he was fully awake. Boris set the confused and increasingly alarmed Jem down next to her brother, and helped the Colonel seal the two between the walls and the table’s thick timbers. There was still a gap at the floor beneath the privacy panel, but it was better than leaving them fully exposed.

The sound of a metal striking metal rang out from Alexander’s bedchamber. The grille on the room’s air vent fell toward the floor, twisted out of shape.

Boris fired twice through the doorway before the grill reached the carpet. His blaster, set to full spread, hammered the stone walls and annihilated a writing lamp. He also hit a much smaller object, but didn’t realize until the Colonel fired a precise shot at something on the floor.

It was gray in color, with a shimmer to the surface as failing circuits struggled to make it look like part of the carpet. The Colonel's shot sent the missile clattering into the far corner. The interference on Boris' terminal was reduced.

Boris scowled. "Thermoptic camouflage."

"Washington! Get in here!" The heavy-set man burst in at a surprising speed. He took up position between Boris and the Colonel, their bodies creating an extra wall of protection around the heirs. "There's at least one more, camouflaged. Shoot on sight."

Boris wasn't optimistic. Their chances of actually seeing the damn thing were practically non-existent. But he watched for movement anyway, the sound of his own heartbeat pounding in his ears.

The Colonel's eyes narrowed. "Give us some smoke. We might see its wake."

None of them had smoke grenades handy. Washington pulled off his beret, revealing a fuller head of short-cropped hair than Boris had expected, and tossed the garment onto one of the room's wall-mounted gaslights.

It began to smolder.

Boris swallowed. This bulletmissile was a high end model. It might well notice the smoke and decide to go ahead and fire, maybe punching right through both guard and table to reach its target.

No, fear isn't useful. I have to think!

There were some factors in their favor. The stone prevented the weapon from tunneling around behind them. Both heirs were also relatively small targets.

From beneath the heavy table behind them, he heard the snuffle of a girl near tears. For one so young,

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the princess was showing surprisingly good self-control. Perhaps the presence of her older brother helped.

Boris relaxed his too-tight grip on his blaster, and tried to put the children from his mind.

Hass had assured him nothing like this would happen. The Hoparin were popular, the young Prince and Princess particularly so. A stint as bodyguard on Dimonah was supposed to be a low risk cover. Had more changed over the years than Hass suspected?

Washington, braced between Boris and the Colonel, broke the tense silence. "Where did two bulletmissiles come from on *this* ball of rock? That's expensive ordnance..." The veteran's awe-struck voice resounded sharply off the solid stone ceiling.

The Colonel responded swiftly, his deep voice crisp in the sweaty atmosphere of terror. "Mind that later, Washington. Stay alert." Despite living his entire life on Dimonah, their employer was proving himself to be no slouch. His chiseled features radiated intense concentration.

The bulletmissile would be forced to drop its thermoptic camouflage the instant it fired, to spend all its energy propelling the warhead. Boris expected it would be an explosive tipped cone, liberally dosed with nerve toxins and capable of punching through a good deal of matter to reach the children. The firing delay would almost certainly be too short to be of use. Their best chance of destroying the device was by locating it before it fired, by its wake. He glanced at the gas light burning Washington's hat, and found the smoke was thickening nicely.

It had taken long enough. The gaslights emitted infuriatingly little heat. The elaborate affair of black ceramic and gleaming brass seemed far too good at

being an efficient light source. Still, it seemed to be doing the job.

A gunshot sent a sudden jolt of adrenalin through him. The blast was from Washington's customized blaster, and it pounded a broad circle of stone dust from the far wall. Squinting through the ensuing haze, Boris searched hopefully for a damaged bulletmissile. He found none.

Washington scowled defensively. "I thought I saw it."

The Colonel nodded sharply. "You may have. Stay alert."

The cold knot of apprehension in his stomach refused to go away. The remaining bulletmissile seemed to have learned from the demise of its twin. Gripping his battered ex-military blaster, he carefully checked the setting with his thumb. It was on maximum spread.

The display above his terminal still sputtered with interference. The Colonel's implant was far too modern to be susceptible. He wondered if the static was the only thing that had alerted him.

Ribbons of smoke were spreading through the room. The missile was running out of maneuvering space, and it would be intelligent enough to know it. Eventually, it would just pick an angle and fire. Probably close to the floor, where it might have a clear shot.

In the corner of his vision somewhere on his left, Boris saw a thin tendril of smoke snap, the severed ends curling with the turmoil of a speeding object. Two guns spoke simultaneously.

Washington's blaster and his own pounded the wall, and set the smoke swirling. The ear-slamming thump of blaster fire mingled with the crack of metal striking

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rock. The battered and now visible bulletmissile caught another precise shot from the Colonel and then fell. It skipped across the carpet and came to rest in charred stillness. Boris glanced at his terminal, and found it projecting static-free clarity.

Washington let out a long-held breath. "Damn, that was a close." Boris followed his gaze to the missile. The fins were extended for firing. The sight made him feel ill.

Crouching over the buckled weapon, the Colonel gingerly prodded it with the tip of his gun and nodded in satisfaction. "All clear, your Highnesses," he announced.

Boris and Washington hauled the heavy table aside, allowing the two children to emerge. Princess Jem carefully wiped away evidence of a tear before standing. Alexander, with one reassuring hand still on his sister's shoulder, drew himself somewhat shakily to his full height.

"Is everyone all right?" The fourteen-year-old's voice was controlled, but Boris knew the boy well enough to see the experience had rattled him.

The Colonel nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"We're all fine, Royal Highness," Washington confirmed, bowing for added effect. Boris thought he looked a bit lost without his hat. The remains of it were still smoldering.

"Hell yes, it takes a more than *that* to get past people like us," he lied, smiling. The levity lit Jem's features with an uncertain grin, which in turn earned her a judicious nudge from her big brother. Her upbringing reasserted itself, and she managed to force the expression from her mouth if not her eyes.

Looking more confident, Prince Alexander turned expectantly to the Colonel.

The man spoke quickly. “Your Highness. Although this area now appears secure, we should move to the Autumn rooms. I shall organize an investigation once both you and the Princess are clear of the area.”

“Very well, Colonel. Please lead the way.”

Boris retrieved his terminal, and brushed off the fine black stone dust that had fallen onto it before accompanying the heirs out of the room. In the corridors outside half a dozen Elite guards, decked out in their customary dark blue armor, were waiting anxiously. Their commander saluted and stepped back, presumably receiving orders from the Colonel via his own implant. As the group shuffled past, the Elites closed neatly behind them and closed off the area.

Boris took position at the rear with Washington as the group moved deeper into the building. While they walked, Washington whispered quietly to him. “Hot damn, that got even *my* jaded blood pumping! Bet you weren’t expecting that, huh?”

“Hell no!” Boris whispered, wondering if they were really far enough behind for the heirs not to hear. “Who can get access to weapons like that here?”

“Someone managed to. Who is it do you think? The Redeemers?”

Boris hesitated. Some of Hass’ ideas didn’t seem so ridiculous now. “Your guess is as good as mine,” he grumbled. He had to be careful what he said. Gazing ahead, he scuffed at the rich carpet. “If it’s gone this far, the whole planet is up for grabs.”

“Hah. Again, you mean.”