

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 The cigar-sized, durasteel device was outdated by Confederation standards, but he'd seen it attract jealous glances from some of the locals.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

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seemed to have gone out of their way to include 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*."

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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. He certainly didn’t want to mention 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

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with his broad frame. “Of course not. Why would I mind?”

“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,

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and nudged him gently in the ribs. "You might gripe about it, but you get along with them well you know."

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

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put the heirs to bed while her companion cleaned away the remains of the evening tea. He was one of those 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. To 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

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the skirting, door frames, and air vents. There didn't seem to be anywhere it could have entered.

"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.

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

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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 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 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

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ahead, he scuffed at the rich carpet. “If it’s gone this far, the whole planet is up for grabs.”

“Hah. Again, you mean.”

Chapter Two: Our Benefactor

Boris drew a deep breath, and let it out slowly. He wasn't used to studying, and it was proving more tiring than he'd expected. He still had some time left before he needed to leave the Palace Library and make his appearance in the Audience chamber, but he decided to wrap up early.

There was a considerable spread of data slugs on the table's black leather surface. He gathered all but one together onto an ornate silver tray. Then he stood up, and poured them into a nearby returns hopper. There seemed no point in copying them to his terminal. He'd read enough already, and learned more than he'd wanted to know about the Bluebloods and the planet's political history.

The depressing thing was he really hadn't learned anything new. Hass had done an admirable job of summing up the basics before he'd even reached Dimonah.

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He returned to the table, and activated his terminal. Maybe after all that reading, maybe he'd see something new in the messages from Hass.

To: Boris
Signed Source: Hass
Subject: Dimonah Info
Encrypted

Dimonah is old by Terran standards, dating back to the early colonial era. But do not think of it as a typical colony.

Consider this: construction of the Great Palace started only seven years after settlement. That's a lot to bite off at such an early stage, and it shows the idealism the Hoparin Bluebloods inspired.

Dimonah is within the core of Terran space today, but back then it was a remote colony. The Hoparin were specifically engineered for leading isolated worlds. Intelligence was genetically enhanced, and purple blood was added as a flourish to set them apart. Some say this proves the Bluebloods have outlived their usefulness, and should step down from power. Crown Prince Alexander is due to take over soon, and he might choose to do just that. He's young, but Bluebloods have limited reigns. It's a law they take very seriously.

Princess Jem is the next in line after Alexander. Between them and their mother, they're the only Bluebloods left. The line is dying.

Boris sighed, and rubbed his eyes. Maybe Alexander was the only target, the killer probably wanted the

Princess to take over. But what if they wanted both heirs dead? There had been two weapons.

There are too many possibilities, he decided. What I should be worrying about is the possibility of another attack.

He picked up the one slug he'd kept, and snapped it onto his terminal. A 3D schematic of the Palace appeared in the air before him.

Despite three weeks, he still wasn't used to how big the Palace was. The Confederation had plenty of tall buildings, but the Palace had *breadth*. He flattened the 3D schematic to a less complicated 2D profile.

The building made more sense from the side. A six-pointed star, with one point buried in the ground. Much like two huge pyramids; one flat on the ground pointing skyward, and the other passing down through it and already burrowing into the soil. The whole thing was built from a variety of basalt that was surprisingly resilient to both impact and energy weapons.

He zoomed in for more detail. The panes were hardened rockglass, but over two hundred of them were designed to automatically open at certain times of the day. He made a mental note to check with the Colonel to ensure they were all covered by the defense fields.

He scrolled down to the palace energy plant, and grunted in surprise. It couldn't get much more secure that it already was. The building was built over a natural gas deposit, and tapped into it. There were enough safety systems to eliminate it as a threat.

He zoomed out to a full Palace schematic, and placed an overlay of air ducts onto the diagram. There were only fifty exterior vents, and all boasted reinforced filters. Information on the Ranboen wing was less

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detailed. Evidently, the Corporation didn't entirely trust the Elites with details of their own security arrangements.

That left the basements which, thanks to the mines in the surrounding plains, had fallen victim to a rising water table. Every sub-basement below the third was flooded with salt water. Boris noted that sensors had been placed to detect any disturbances.

The Library's oak doors opened, revealing Temae's slim form. Her eyes seemed to brighten when she saw him. She walked toward his table. "I hope I am not intruding. I thought you might like someone to accompany you to the Audience Chamber."

He smiled, and switched off his terminal. "I don't see how I could possibly refuse such a kind offer."

They left the Library together. In the light of the corridor, he wondered if there wasn't a light blush in her cheeks. He considered commenting, but stopped himself. For all he knew, accompanying someone to the Audience Chamber might be some kind of tradition, or maybe he'd managed to breach another of those royal protocols he had so much trouble with.

He let his palm brush the wall as they walked. The texture of the stone running beneath his hand brought his mind to more immediate matters. "Queen Dalamai probably wants to quiz me about the assassination attempt."

Temae looked at him with a raised eyebrow, and he realized she was taking in his attire. "Are you really going to meet her dressed like that?"

"These are the best clothes I've got."

"That is what you wear all the time."

"Like I said."

The servant shook her head, and permitted herself a grin. “Well, you are a trusted hire, so there are allowances. Perhaps I should not be so surprised.”

They left the corridor behind them and emerged into one of the more cavernous central chambers. An ornate archway dominated one broad wall, with hardwood doors running the entire three-story height. Temae led him toward the doors.

They were closing, and a clean-shaven man in an immaculate dark blue suit was walking away from them.

“Boris, have you met Governor Keban? He manages Ranboen operations on Dimonah.”

The man flashed a smile. “It’s good to see you again Boris. We met briefly after you arrived. I believe you’re one of the bodyguards that saved the Crown Prince and princess.” He offered his hand, and Boris shook it. His grip was firm.

“I remember. You were in something of a hurry at the time.”

Keban laughed. “Ah, I always seem to be in a hurry. There’s always a crisis somewhere, according to whoever it most affects. I’m impressed with how well you people did. Nobody so much as scratched! Most impressive.”

“Thank you Governor.”

“I’m afraid I must press on, I’m due in a meeting. As are you, I believe.”

As if on cue, the immense doors swung slowly open with surprising little noise. Boris could feel the sound more than hear it, a rumble through the floor beneath his boots.

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Keban left, walking briskly out of the chamber. Boris turned his attention to the chamber revealed beyond the opening doors.

The space made the vast doors look small.

Boris let out a whistle. He walked in, and realized Temae was staying behind. The doors began to close, and he thanked her with a smile and a brief wave.

The Audience Chamber's vaulted ceiling extended into darkness, giving an impression of unlimited height. Two rows of wide stone pedestals stretched out ahead of him. There were twelve in all, and they held the primary light source: roaring gas flames atop each tall pedestal. The Royal Throne ahead of him was illuminated by concealed lights, but the overall impression was of a vast space. There were walls beyond the carpeted path to a raised throne, but he could barely make them out in the darkness. From what he could see, they were covered in immense tapestries.

Boris made his way toward the throne. The gold and platinum fluting extended from the platform and up the wall, stretching beyond where he expected a ceiling. There was surprising little echo, which he put down to the tapestries and sonic privacy fields.

The Colonel was standing by the throne, a few steps down from the top so his head was below the level of the Queen's. As Boris drew closer, Queen Dalamai and her purple robes became easier to make out. A simple gold band circled her brow in place of the traditionally ornate crown, and the sharp gleam in her eyes more than made up for the lack of polished gems on her person.

He'd met her only twice before, and she still looked just as old as he remembered. Far too old to be the

mother of Alexander and Jem without the help of medical science.

Queen Dalamai waited for him to reach the foot of the carpeted steps. When she spoke, her voice was crisp and firm. "Boris. Palace bodyguard, and Confederation citizen."

"That's me. Ah, except for the bit about being a Confed citizen."

Dalamai raised one wrinkled brow, prompting him to wonder if he'd managed to breach protocol already. "You *are* from the Confederation?"

"Yes, but I've never actually been registered. My line of work is less complicated if I don't officially exist."

The Queen smiled. "I see. Boris of the Confederation then." She folded her hands in her lap. "During the recent assassination attempt, you and Washington both performed most admirably. The bonuses we have approved are well deserved." She paused a moment to let the Bonus sink in. That had probably been the Colonel's idea, he knew how to keep mercenaries loyal. "For saving the Prince and Princess, we also wish to express to you our most heartfelt thanks."

Boris found himself to be at a loss for words.

Was it his imagination, or did her eyes look rather more moist they had a moment ago? Finally, he managed to bow. As he straightened, he saw the Colonel give him a barely detectable nod of approval.

Queen Dalamai's expression lost some of its formality, and she leaned slightly forward. "There is another matter we have summoned you here to discuss. Like all of the Colonel's hires, you are not a native of Dimonah. As such, we wish to hear your own views

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concerning the assassination attempt. It is a situation we are not accustomed to dealing with, and an outside perspective may prove useful to us.”

Boris hesitated, collecting his thoughts. “Well, frankly it came as a surprise to all of us, especially in the form it took. If I’d thought an attack was likely, I would have reconsidered taking the job. You’re asking what suspicions I have?”

Dalamai nodded. “Yes indeed, and why you hold them. For example, so you suspect the Redeemers?”

Boris winced, he really didn’t know a lot about the Redeemers. Not as much as Hass, anyway. He drew a deep breath. “The bulletmissiles mean they must have strong Confed connections. But the missiles were used in a sloppy way. The attack came early in the shift, while the Colonel was still present... But of course the attackers may not have known that.” He paused. “I’d say it’s the work of a small, local group with offworld support. Maybe just hired grunts.”

“Who might be supporting them? Ranboen Corporation and Governor Keban are the only Confederation contacts most of our people have.”

“I doubt it would be Ranboen. An assassination would reflect poorly on their management of the planet, and that would affect share prices. Besides, at the end of the day Governor Keban has to answer to the Ranboen board. If I had to take a guess, I’d say a third party is organizing the whole thing to make Ranboen look bad. Maybe another large corporation is after the management contract.”

The Queen nodded slowly. “Thank you, Boris. We shall consider your words along with others, and shall not detain you from your duties further.”

The dismissal came as a welcome relief. Boris threw the Queen a jaunty salute, then turned and strode out of the Audience Chamber. He fancied he could feel her thoughtful gaze on his back as the doors automatically opened, and he left the chamber.

A frown furrowed Queen Dalamai's wrinkled brow. "He's certainly is not one for protocol. He's the pilot Jem has taken a liking to, isn't he?"

"Yes, your Majesty. It's his flippancy, I think. The Princess seems to find it refreshing."

Dalamai nodded, idly drumming her fingers on the throne's heavy armrests. "Flippant or not, he seems to have the same theory you do."

"So it seems. I was hoping Boris would offer a less daunting theory. He can be very bright. In truth Majesty, I'm surprised he took the job."

"Oh? You expressed no such surprise about the other three."

"They each have their reasons. Washington has been a mercenary for so long I think he's come to enjoy the danger. Naktef, on the other hand, has a sense of honor which simply won't allow her to ignore royalty in need. Most Calandians are like that. Their genome is about as close as humans have come to a hive species."

"What of Kusa?"

"Kusa didn't *want* the job as such, but he knows it's good for his career. He's young, and needs to establish credibility beyond simple battlefield experience."

The queen nodded, and rubbed her face. "And you feel sure none of them were involved."

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The Colonel nodded sharply. “Absolutely. I checked them all thoroughly before hiring them, they’re all honest professionals. Highly recommended, too.”

“But not the best.”

“They’re the best we can get, Majesty. But on a par with myself nonetheless. Most importantly, as offworlders they have no possible connection with the Redeemers.”

Queen Dalamai sighed, and clasped her hands together before her. “This was an unanticipated escalation. Are they up to the task, Colonel?”

The Colonel frowned. “I really don’t know, Majesty. If we are dealing with a group of Redeemers, I think we’ll be fine. But if there’s more to it, I’m afraid I cannot guarantee your safety.” He straightened. “I can say the Palace is as secure as we can make it. We must prevail. We have no other choice.”

Bekker ran through the underground corridor. The stained plascrete walls of the compound blurred by as his feet pounded the floor. As he approached a corner, he slowed and began to recover his breath.

Officially he was the second in command of the redeemer cell, answering only to the Commander himself. But only the two of them knew there was another, a benefactor they both had to kowtow to. The rank and file didn’t even know he existed.

Like most of the organization’s members, Bekker was forced to lead two lives. On this occasion, his day job had made him late. In public, he was a well-regarded floor manager in Kalaanda’s largest factory complex. In private, he worked to free Dimonah from its outdated dependence on royalty. He knew how to

keep those lives separate, and it was due to that caution that he was over ten minutes late for his meeting with the Commander.

An armed guard saluted as he approached. "Hello Major. Go right in, the Commander's expecting you."

"Thanks, Captain." He entered the Strategy Room.

The Commander spent so much time in the Strategy Room it had become his office in all but name. Unlike the rough corridors outside, the plascrete walls in the Strategy room had a coat of paint. Admittedly, how long ago the paint had been applied was a matter best left to historians. Much newer were the modern lights sitting between the old aluminum ceiling fittings, their flat surfaces shining brightly down on a heavy conference table strewn with papers and dataslugs. Currently, diagrams and schematics of the Great Palace dominated the collection.

The Commander was seated at a small, tidy desk set against the near wall, engrossed in the displays. Only the back of his cropped blonde hair was toward him, and he gave no sign he'd even heard the door open. But Bekker had long since learned not to judge the man by appearances.

The Commander spoke without turning. "Sit down, Major. Have a rest, you look tired." The voice was calm, yet every sound was spoken with precision. It was the kind of voice people found themselves obeying automatically.

"Thank you sir." Bekker replied, grateful for the rest. He set himself down on one of the less battered chairs, and peered at the Palace diagrams. He'd made the Commander wait, so it only seemed fair if he was made to wait too.

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Only a few minutes later, the Commander sat back from his work and idly ran one hand through his blonde locks. He then fixed his gaze on Bekker. His sky-blue eyes looked cold and predatory, an aspect that many found intimidating. Even Bekker still wasn't used to it.

“Major. Have you seen the news today?”

“Yes Sir. There wasn't as much as I'd hoped. A singular absence, one might say.”

He nodded. “It's for the worst possible reason. Our attempt on the heirs failed, they weren't even injured. The Palace has kept the whole thing under wraps.”

Bekker winced. “Do we know what went wrong, Sir?”

“No, I'm still waiting on all the details to come through. But at this stage, it appears the defenses around the heirs were underestimated.”

Bekker thought about this. “The offworld guards?”

“They certainly didn't help matters.” The Commander paused, and pushed a hand beneath his army surplus shirt to rub his neck. “As it happens, I've already received further orders from our Benefactor.”

Bekker blinked in surprise. “Already? That seems too soon...”

“Apparently he figures it's best to strike while the iron is hot.” He adopted a sour smirk. “And in a striking example of acting in the heat of the moment, he's put us in contact with an individual inside the Palace who shares our goal. We are to make use of this person as soon as possible.”

Bekker stared in surprise. “Really? How did they get past the screening procedures?”

“I didn't presume to ask. Interestingly, he indicated that there's another asset available beyond that.”

Apparently he has a very helpful source placed close to the Hoparin.”

“What kind of source?”

The Commander shrugged. “He’s not willing to release that information at this stage, even to us. Perhaps an agent, or a bug. Who knows?”

Bekker nodded slowly. “Well, I suppose we’re in no position to argue.”

“Indeed. We have prospered under his support. Therefore I want you to contact this person tonight. And be cautious about it, the Palace must remain ignorant of this attack until the last possible moment.”

“And what form will this attack use?”

The Commander’s expression hardened. “I’ve concluded that we need to use our bioarsenal. It means there will be collateral damage, but we must strike hard. I’ve spoken to our benefactor, and he agrees with my reasoning.”

Bekker nodded, and listened as the Commander started to flesh out his instructions in detail. As the extent of the plan became clear, he became awfully glad there was nobody dear to him in the Palace.

Princess Jem frowned. “I don’t understand. Why did the people in Seren say they wanted the disposal plant? There were crowds of them in the main street saying so.”

From his post by the red double doors, Boris watched the princess struggle with the facts. She clearly believed the Viscount was being honest, but the conflicting evidence clearly troubled the girl. The Crown Prince seemed to have a better grasp of the situation, and volunteered his own answer.

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“They were small crowds, Jem. The signs they used were all very similar too.”

“Quite right.” Xavier nodded, idly brushing his gray goatee with a black-gloved hand. “One can find people willing to chant whatever slogan one wishes, provided they are paid for their trouble. There were far greater protests in the city once the construction permit was granted. That’s when we saw the citizens’ true feelings on the matter. Sometimes, people will not speak until it is too late.” Jem nodded to indicate she understood, but she still appeared troubled.

“But then it couldn’t be stopped, Xavier.”

“That is unfortunately true. Perhaps those citizens will not be as easily duped the next time. It’s something we must all learn from.” Jem’s gaze drifted back to the display before them. Even in miniature, the incredible size of the excavation machines was clear. The waste storage vaults they gouged into Seren’s vast quartz cliffs were even more imposing.

“It was so pretty. If I’d lived there, I would have felt sad too.”

Xavier settled back in his chair.

Boris watched them from his post by the door. From what he could tell, Jem lacked her older brother’s natural grasp of politics, but made up for it to some extent with a strong sense of empathy.

The footage of the projected machines looped.

“It can be a beautiful place again,” Xavier mused. “Given enough time, and hard work.” He seemed to be speaking to himself as much as the children. It also looked like we was wrapping things up.

Boris grinned. “You know, if you depress the kids like that you may just stunt their growth.” Jem turned and looked at him in surprise. He’d been there for the

last hour, but the children had been too absorbed in their studies to notice when he'd started his shift.

"Boris! I didn't hear you come in." The princess chimed.

"Evening Jem, Alexander. Viscount." At least the lessons were following their usual pattern. The Colonel had altered the guard shifts, though Boris couldn't figure why. For tonight, it was Kusa who manned the post on the other side of the door behind him.

The Viscount shook his head with what he probably thought was tolerance, and climbed to his feet. The chair momentarily resisted him, the legs reluctant to leave their divots in the soft carpet. Their new tutorial room definitely hadn't been designed with desks and chairs in mind, but it would be some days yet until their usual quarters would be cleared for use.

"Boris. I was expecting you to start late tonight," the Viscount admitted. "Your audience with the Queen went well I hope?" Boris remained slouched against the wall, and shrugged.

"Well enough I think. Of course, we could have insulted each other a dozen times without me noticing. I think I'm improving on that protocol stuff though."

Xavier let that go without comment, and bowed to the children. "That's all for this evening, your Highnesses. There will be no school tomorrow, so enjoy the break."

Even Alexander grinned at that.

Boris had known about the general holiday, but it surprised him that Xavier hadn't given them a few hours of homework just to take their minds off the assassination attempt. Evidently, he felt they needed the rest.

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Xavier began to leave, but Boris stopped him at the door with a touch on the shoulder.

“How have they been?” He whispered. Xavier blinked, apparently somewhat surprised at the show of concern.

“They’re coping well. They spent time with her Majesty this morning, and that helped immensely.”

“Good.” Boris realized his hand was still on the Viscount’s shoulder, and removed it. He was about to open the door for the Viscount when Kusa buzzed him though his terminal.

“Temae’s here with more tea,” the young man declared. Boris glanced meaningfully at the children, and Jem raised her hand.

“I was thirsty,” she explained, a little over-eagerly. Boris got the distinct impression she was more interested in the company than the tea.

“Send her in, Kusa. The Viscount is on his way out.” The door’s lock clicked open.

“Goodnight all,” the Viscount said. He started through the doorway, and then paused. “Oh, I do believe the Colonel said he’ll be dropping by for the dawn shift.”

Boris nodded. The Colonel had been busy since the attack. This time it would be Washington and Naktef who benefited. If it weren’t for the Elites on the day shift, none of them would have time to sleep.

“Thanks.”

The Viscount nodded, and walked out into the antechamber. Kusa, from the other end of the small room, waited until the Viscount reached him before signaling Temae to go ahead. Her white uniform contrasted starkly against the Viscount’s jet black outfit.

She smiled at Boris as she passed, then set the tray before the waiting children. Boris sealed the door so Kusa could let the Viscount out into the corridor.

The imposing, leather-clad chairs meant that even with Jem on a cushion, the Prince and Princess had to struggle to keep their elbows above the tabletop as they ate and drank. The furniture was designed for electronic study, not for meals.

Boris sighed. It was hard to believe these two young children carried the hopes of a world.

Most of the palace maintenance staff knew Hendricks, or at least knew his face. Few of them would have questioned his presence in the lower levels. He was a gardener, and not entirely out-of-place in that section of the building. The Palace Elites were among those few, so he went to considerable pains to avoid them. The contents of the hessian bag he carried marked *lawn seed* were definitely incriminating.

It was therefore with a great deal of caution that he had made his way down the steps to the door of the Northwest Services Room.

He checked to make sure the stairwell below was clear, then pulled the crowbar from his belt. It was easy to see where the automatic lock was. A metal panel sat where a handle usually would, and it extended to cover the door jamb. He spent several minutes patiently working the bar back and forth with his muscular arms. Eventually, the metal cover bent open and exposed the rest of the jamb. He immediately crouched and squinted through the opening. The bolt keeping the door locked had the dull sheen of tempered durasteel. It was just as they said it would be.

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He hooked the crowbar back alongside his terminal, and dug deep inside the bag. From beneath an aromatic mixture of seed and manure, he produced a pair of loose gloves and a small canister with the letters *LIN* scrawled on it. He pulled on the gloves, gripped a small collar on the device, and positioned the nozzle as close to the opening as he could get it. Then he took a deep breath, and twisted the collar.

A thin stream of milky white sprayed onto the exposed metal. The sight was swiftly hidden by a thick mist, but Hendricks knew the liquid was hitting his target and kept the canister steady. Even when his wrists began to ache with cold and the metal creaked and popped, Hendricks forced himself to remain still. Wasting so much as a single drop could ruin everything.

By the time the canister was finished, a foot-wide circle of frost adorned the area. Setting the spent canister aside, he stepped back and kicked at the door. On his second kick, the bolt shattered. The door swung open, and he entered without hesitation.

The services room was smaller than he expected. The main console was no larger than a small dining table, fitted at an angle against the rear wall. The wing's manual gas cut-off valves were arranged in a straightforward manner on the right wall. He had no difficulty locating the sampling socket. He knelt by it, and retrieved the last items concealed in his bag: a hacksaw, a compact but very heavy gas cylinder, and a small, white plastic bag.

The bright green cylinder bore stenciled text, claiming it was fuel for gardening tools. That was a nice touch; but he knew it wouldn't have fooled the Elites. One end of the cylinder held a valve, from which ran a

short length of hose shielded by a metal mesh. He took the hose and fixed it firmly to the inlet socket.

The cylinder looked conspicuous on the floor, so he moved it behind a collection of pipes. After all, there was no point in making things too easy for the monarchists. Deciding it was as well hidden as possible, he gripped the cylinder's single valve and turned it until it would move no further. A glance at the gauge built into the valve confirmed it was steadily releasing gas. The pressurized mixture was mixing with the palace gas supply and moving into the wing.

He turned his attention to the plastic bag. Tearing it open, he found two putty-like strips and a capsule. Carefully, he peeled away the protective covers from the strips and mashed the two substances together into a single lump. There was barely enough to fill a child's fist, but it easily encircled the valve on the cylinder. The mixture was already starting to feel alarmingly hot, and he hurried to finish pushing it neatly into place.

With the putty in place, he activated his terminal. The device projected a status screen. A quick glance at the image confirmed none of the charges throughout the building had yet transmitted a panic signal. That meant they were almost certainly all undiscovered. He swallowed nervously as the plastic putty ignited to weld the gas valve permanently open. "Detonate," he commanded.

He didn't hear any explosions, but the terminal indicated success on all counts. The lifts and blast-doors concerned were all far away and the charges were small. He probably shouldn't have expected to hear anything. How in the world the explosives had been placed was beyond him, but as long as they succeeded

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in sealing off the Northwest Wing it didn't really matter.

He had done what had to be done. The Hoparin were holding Dimonah back as much today as they ever had, just as when they first turned their arrogant backs on the fledgling Confederation. The world had been going downhill ever since.

He steeled himself, picked up the hacksaw, and started cutting at the room's gas control valve as near to the base as he could manage. He worked diligently and as quickly as he could, despite the deadly pill waiting for him in the torn plastic bag.

Chapter Three: Green Flame

“They are royalty. It is my honor to serve them.” Naktef straightened as she said this, and appeared to grow even taller than her impressive seven feet.

Boris studied the alien woman. There wasn’t the slightest hint in her bearing that she was being at all sarcastic, and Calandians weren’t sufficiently different to Terrans for Boris to think he might be missing something. True, she *was* a good deal taller than your average Terran. She was also earless, bald, and her skin had a yellow hue that contrasted starkly with her dark red armor. But, compared to some of the other results of tinkering with the genome over the centuries, she was practically human.

Besides, despite the differences she was pretty good looking.

“That hasn’t stopped you accepting their pay packets though, has it?”

She smiled, displaying her perfect teeth. “Of course not. To live requires means.”

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Boris peered down the corridors stretching away from them. They were posted at a T-junction outside the heir's antechamber, where they could monitor both the broad door and the elevator facing them from the right. "What if you were rich? What then? Would you still be doing this, and want pay?"

She tilted her head to one side, and Boris got the impression this was the first time she had considered the matter. "A rich mercenary would seem to be an oxymoron. But yes, I believe I would."

Boris was preparing an appropriate comment when Naktef's gaze abruptly shifted to something down the corridor behind him. He turned about, drawing his blaster and throwing himself to the opposite side of the passage to give her a clear line of fire.

A figure was moving toward them. He kept his blaster leveled at the shape until it passed a gaslight and the face was well lit.

"Hello Kusa," he said, lowering the weapon.

The man grinned. "You're jumpy today, Boris."

Boris holstered his gun. "You're supposed to announce yourself as you approach."

The mercenary shrugged. "I wanted to see if I could sneak up on you. This carpet makes footsteps too quiet for my liking."

"It sure gives Temae trouble with the breakfast trolley."

"Go on, get out of here! It's half past, time for you to take over my patrol, you lucky man. Get some exercise."

Boris shook his head and grinned. "Hell, you make wandering the corridors for hours sound pleasant."

Kusa relaxed against the wall. “It’s a talent. You’re either born with it or you’re not. Now go, have some fun.”

“Okay, I’m going,” Boris said. He gave Kusa a salute so casual it was barely more than a flick of the wrist. “Have a nice rest here with Naktef while I’m gone.” He left, and headed down the same corridor Kusa had emerged from. To his surprise, he found he was looking forward to finally stretching his legs. Maybe all that positive talk was actually good for something.

His walking pace was naturally brisk, so he forced himself to pause frequently. As per the Colonel’s instructions, he also made frequent changes to his route. Predictability would make them vulnerable.

He was less than ten minutes into his patrol when he heard it.

The sound was a muffled clap, a noise much like a length of wood falling flat onto carpet. He drew his blaster from his low-slung holster, and squinted briefly in the direction of the sound. Then he carefully re-examined of his surroundings.

Nothing seemed out-of-place. If the noise was meant as a distraction, it was difficult to see what it was meant to distract him from noticing.

The sound seemed to have come from one of the side corridors behind him. He walked toward it cautiously, making the most of the soft carpet to silence his heavy boots. Reaching the corner, he crouched and glanced around.

The corridor was sealed by a blast-door. The heavy slab had made the noise he’d heard when it had slammed shut in its padded, airtight slot. But the red

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emergency light above it wasn't on, and his terminal had received no alert signals. Why had it shut? Had the door malfunctioned?

He examined the control panel by the door. The panel circuitry claimed the door as open.

He tapped his terminal. "Kusa, I've got a sealed blast door. The panel reports it as open." His terminal transmitted his location.

There was a pause before the young mercenary responded. "All sections show green."

Boris hit the button to open the door. It didn't respond.

He noticed an odd smell in the air. A tangy, almost fruit-like odor. It was familiar, but he couldn't place it. He began to jog back toward the others. "I'm heading back."

He cut the link to Kusa and was about to contact the Elites when the Colonel cut in. The message was from his implant, converted to spoken words with an electronic echo to them. "Full alert! Contact with Palace Security is down. Washington and I are enroute."

The Colonel would reach them soon. Their temporary barracks was only a few rooms away from the heirs.

Boris kept sprinting back. The Colonel hadn't told him to stay on patrol, and he felt he'd be more useful closer to the heirs.

As he ran, he reached another closed blast door. He also caught another whiff of the same scent he'd noticed before. This time he recognized it as the smell of spent micro-explosives. He hit the panel as he passed, and the door didn't respond.

He stabbed at his terminal. "Colonel, I think we've been boxed in. I've just passed two blast doors, and they've both been sabotaged."

Naktef's calm voice followed. "Sir. The elevator is not responding."

Boris felt a surge of cold adrenalin. Why trap them in the palace? Was it a trick to get the heirs out of their rooms for an attack?

The Colonel's synthetic voice was unhurried and calm. "Naktef, stay by the lift. Kusa, guard the door. Washington, help me wake their Highnesses."

Boris reached the final corridor. Kusa was there, standing by the door, Naktef was at the end of the corridor by the lift. Boris had arrived just in time to see Naktef's tall form fall to her knees and gurgle an agonized death.

Bright green light shone over her from the gas lamp by the lift behind her. Kusa gaped at the sight.

Boris thumbed his blaster to narrow spread, and touched his terminal. "Naktef is down." The terminal felt slippery from the sheen of sweat on his thumb.

"Kusa, recon. Boris, back him up."

Kusa obeyed instantly. He moved swiftly forward along the right wall, gun in hand. Boris followed along the left, the sight of his own blaster gliding smoothly over the doors and small alcoves ahead. Kusa did a good job of keeping out of his line of fire as he moved.

The young mercenary reached the twisted body, and peered down cautiously at it. Naktef appeared to have collapsed while moving away from the lift.

"Poisoned," Kusa whispered, grimacing in distaste. Boris scowled, possibilities tripping over each other in

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his mind. An armed intruder, or maybe an autonomous device armed with toxic flechettes...

Kusa edged closer to the elevator, and the green light. He then staggered back, rubbing at his face.

“Kusa!”

The man took one more back, let out an agonized rattle, and collapsed twitching to the floor. At almost the same instant, a second lamp flickered from yellow-white a pale green flame that precisely matched the color glowing by the lift.

Boris turned a full 180 degrees in an instant, and launched into a desperate sprint back toward the red antechamber doors.

“Nerve agent!” He yelled. “In the gas, it makes the lights burn green!” He glanced over his shoulder, and a third fitting sputtered into a lethal pale green, releasing invisible nerve toxin into the air over the dead guards.

Boris nearly collided with the Colonel and Washington as they emerged with the heirs in tow. The Colonel took two seconds to survey the approaching poison, time which Boris and Washington used to unfold their filtermasks and fit them to the Prince and Princess.

Boris kept his mouth fixed in a grim line as he fastened Alexander’s mask. The gas would kill almost as quickly through the skin, but maybe the masks would help reassure them. A worried glance from Washington confirmed the veteran was well aware of it too. As the masks sealed themselves against the heir’s skin, the Colonel herded them away from the lift and toward a stairwell around a hundred paces away.

The man pointed at the distant stairs. “Take them up and northwest. The gas will reach the wing’s outermost corner last of all.” He pulled on his combat

gloves and filtermask as he spoke. "Look for any chance to get outside, upwind for preference. Also look for any way to reach the central block, it might still be secure." The bedchamber doorway, now far behind them, took on a green hue as the poison continued to spread. Washington shook a drop of sweat from his lip, and glanced at the Colonel.

"You're not coming Sir?"

"I'm going downstairs to cut it off."

Washington's eyes widened. "Colonel, that gear is *not* rated for nerve agents."

"It's flooded. You'll have to swim two levels," Boris added. The Colonel merely nodded. The Palace wasn't the only building suffering from the high water table, most of the city's lower basements were underwater.

The group reached the stairwell, and the Colonel started down without hesitation. "Go!" he shouted. "The gas will only move faster." He vanished around the first turn, descending into whatever green hell waited for him below.

Boris wondered if the poison mightn't be lighter than air. But poison gas was generally heavy... he started upward. "Come on, let's move!" he urged. The children hurried up the steps.

"Are we going to die?" Jem asked, her trembling voice disconcertingly clear through the transparent mask.

Washington flashed her a grin. "Not today, princess. Not today!" The man glanced down the stairwell as they hurried up the steps.

"Boris, that's a vivid color. It could be MAT-30."

Boris winced as he ran. MAT-30 was nasty stuff, a military grade nerve agent. "Let's keep to clean air

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areas; zigzag up. Every two floors, we move along to the next stairwell. The wing is a big triangle; the closer a stairwell is to the corner, the fewer floors it cuts beneath us. Make sense?"

Washington nodded. "Good idea. It'll help."

"I don't get it," Alexander admitted, still shrugging off the last of his drowsiness.

"Tough," Boris concluded. His patience was running as short as his breath.

The group reached their first appointed change, and left the stairwell to sprint along a corridor wide enough to drive a truck through. Washington pointed out an elevator directly opposite the next stairwell.

"The lifts might be out, but I could winch the kids up the cable and exit through the roof vent." Boris hesitated, watching the lift with suspicion.

"What if there's an updraft?"

"The shaft may be clear anyway. There are fewer floors below us now."

The stairwell and lift drew closer, and Boris still felt uncertain. The Colonel told them to look for escape options, but the gas left no room for error.

They reached the stairs, and Washington went for the lift.

"Keep clear! I'll check it out." Boris grabbed a royal nightgown in each hand, and pulled the children into the stairwell like they were cats dragged by the scruff of their neck. For their part, the prince and princess seemed grateful simply for the chance to catch their breath.

Boris tightened his grip as Washington abandoned the unresponsive lift controls, and jammed his knife between the doors. The mercenary heaved at the

hardened ceramic blade, and the gleaming durasteel doors began to pry apart.

There was no sign of any green light, but Washington had the doors open no more than an inch before he staggered back, clawing at his eyes in silent agony.

Boris propelled the children up the stairwell with such strength that their feet barely touched the steps. Washington was already out of sight by the time his stiffening lungs managed a brief, hoarse scream.

Jem was shivering so badly that for a moment Boris thought the gas may already have reached her. Her exhausted feet stumbled in exhaustion. Pressing on, he stooped and hoisted her up onto one broad shoulder. Without breaking stride, he pounded onwards taking the stairs two at a time. His free hand partly carried and partly pushed a terrified Alexander ahead of him.

“Turn left! Now straight on to the next stairwell.” He shouted. His blood was thudding in his ears. Alexander, thankfully, still had enough wits left to both keep up and obey.

They were running out of building far too quickly, and Boris completely out of ideas.

The Colonel swam on, unable to see more than two feet through the murky brown water.

The compact light clipped to the shoulder of his uniform was throwing out plenty of light, but the water was too thick with murk and stringweed. The walls were coated with a layer of grime the same color as the water, and every time he brushed against a surface it shed thick clouds of sediment.

He was brushing against them quite a lot.

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His lungs were bursting for air, and his right arm trailed limp and useless at his side. He'd been swimming underwater for two long minutes, striving toward stairwell B7. The stairs would take him up to the Northwest Services Room, but more importantly they would also provide him with air again. He hoped like hell the air that waited for him wasn't contaminated. He simply couldn't afford any further exposure.

The darkness ahead seemed endless, and his lungs felt fit to burst.

He began to realize he wasn't going to make it. The last two underwater stretches had been bad enough, but this final stretch was lasting forever. He felt he was barely managing to make any progress at all with his arm the way it was. But even if it was hopeless, he was determined to keep trying.

His vision began to blur, and the pain in his chest grew worse. He began to feel faint.

Then the stairwell lurched into view in the murk. For a moment he didn't dare believe it. He powered his failing body onward with a surge of hope, and struck out toward the glistening promise of air above him.

The Colonel broke the surface and heaved in the precious air. Clawing his way out of the water and onto the stone steps, he struggled to breathe and cough at the same time. The colored lights flashing over everything began to fade.

The disorientation began to ease too. He took that as a good sign, it meant it wasn't entirely caused by the toxin. He might still be able to do what he had come there for. Lurching unsteadily to his feet, he stumbled up the steps and hauled himself up to the Services Room.

The door was already open. It had been forced, scored by a pry-bar and the bolt had snapped clean. Gripping his gun with his one usable hand, he steeled himself and looked inside.

The body was impossible to miss. Slumped by the main console, the corpse lay face down in a surprisingly large pool of saliva and mucus. He recognized the man as Hendricks. One of the senior gardeners. Evidently, he hadn't wanted to be questioned over his actions.

By the feet of the corpse was the wheel from the main gas valve. It had been cut clean.

The Colonel lurched toward the gas valves, and spotted the source of the toxin spreading through the palace. He stared at the gauge until it finally came into focus.

It was empty. The poison was already fully released. Clean gas from the mains was pushing the last of it through the pipes across the wing.

The Colonel sagged against the main console, avoiding the slippery pool by the corpse's head. He squinted at the control diagram spread across the wall, and searched for a way to stop the flow of gas.

Boris led the children around a corner, and into the final passageway of the last floor. There was no more building left, nowhere else to run.

The passageway ended with a forty-five degree angle, beyond which was a ramp that rose until it met the ceiling. That ceiling was a wide metal hatchway, painted black to match the stonework. A small panel mounted by the bottom of the ramp held the controls. Boris put the princess down and hit the switch.

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Nothing happened. The attackers had included the hatch in their sabotage plan.

Boris clenched his jaw, jammed his fingernails beneath the panel, and tore it from the wall. The wiring revealed behind it was more complicated than necessary for such simple controls, and he began to dig through it. Maybe it there was a way to short it out, and send power the two big hydraulic jacks directly.

The Prince and Princess slumped to the floor in exhaustion. Over their wheezing, he could hear distant gas torches sputter as they changed to lethal green.

The power contacts in the panel were all recessed, probably for safety. Boris eyed them cautiously. They were clearly designed to handle a lot of power, and he needed to quickly find out which ones were live. He elected to touch the contacts with the back of his fingers. If the power was on, his hand should convulse and break contact before the electric shock stopped his heart.

It least, in theory it should.

He took a breath, and touched the metal tabs one after another.

All five were dead.

“Damn it! No power.” he grimaced, and punched the mess of wires. A hidden component jabbed through the skin over his knuckles and reached bone. Boris bit back a colorful bout of swearing by choosing to suck at the cut. The salty taste soured his mood.

He gazed at the nearest gaslights. There was only one by the ramp itself. He turned to Alexander. “Give me your coat. Quickly.”

Alex didn’t hesitate. He shrugged off his gold-braided nightgown, and handed it to him. His pajamas

were royal purple, but without the luxurious gown he looked much like any other child.

Boris tore a thick strip of fabric, bundled it up, and jammed it into the gas torch. With so much cloth, the flame quickly went out.

The fitting sensed the flame had gone out, and began to click as it attempted to relight itself. After a time the clicking noise stopped. Boris took that as a sign the lamp had stopped the gas too.

He used the rest of the gown to do the same to the other nearby lamps. It wouldn't stop the poison already released from reaching them, but it might buy them more time.

If only he knew how to spend it. The only thing he could think of was to try forcing the hatch over the ramp, but it was massive. It was clearly designed to handle freight from ships parked on the roof above him.

He drew his blaster and fired two shots at the metal slab, and another at the leftmost hydraulic ram. The weapon succeeded only in blackening the slab and starting a brief fire on the surface of the ram. He winced. The Colonel had probably had the damn thing armored.

He glared at the twin hydraulic jacks, searching for a weakness. Each one was thicker than his leg. "The next time someone tells me a good system doesn't need manual backups," he muttered, "I swear I'll kill them then and there."

Alexander pointed at the gaslights. "If you need power, use the torches. They must have power, they're clicking."

That wasn't bad thinking for a kid.

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“They’re much lower voltage, different circuit. They might even be batteries charged by the heat.” The distant sputtering noise was getting closer. Boris gritted his teeth, and fired twice more at the infuriating hatch. His blaster shots added to the other recent scorching, but there was still no sign of a gap along the well-crafted edge.

He scowled at his gun. There was certainly power in the clip, but that would discharge all at once and fry the wiring before the jacks could activate. He re-holstered the weapon, and glanced at the children.

Jem’s filtermask was misting up from her tears, despite the insulation layer. He figured the manufacturers hadn’t expected the wearer to be a frightened young girl. She was holding together pretty well though. Alexander was remarkably well collected. Only his pale complexion betrayed how scared he was.

Green light flickered on at the end of the corridor. The toxin would soon be upon them.

Boris stormed up the ramp. “The hell with this. Either this bloody machine is going to break or I am!”

He lay on the ramp. With arms braced by his sides, he planted his boots in the scorch marks of his gunfire and pushed.

His corded muscles trembled from the effort. Sweat formed beads on his face which trickled down into his jet-black hair. Swollen veins throbbed beneath his skin. Every heartbeat hurt, but the hatch didn’t budge.

His legs felt like they were about to break, but he kept shoving.

A sharp crack rang out, and to his astonishment he realized it was the ramp starting to give way. Somewhere in the depths of the hydraulics, a solenoid had burst from the strain.

The metal slab was heavy and the hydraulic fluid resisted his efforts, but inch by agonizing inch he managed to push it open. Finally, he created a gap that seemed wide enough for the kids to wriggle through. A cool breeze blew over him from the night air outside, and he knew the sudden current would draw the toxin toward them.

“Go!” He gasped. The heirs scurried to obey, dashing up the gap. Legs trembling, he managed to open the hatch a little further. “Go into the wind! Don’t stop until you’re at the railing.”

The Prince and Princess crawled and wriggled their way into the gap. Boris held the cover in check with his failing muscles, watching their progress. Only when they finally scabbled clear of the lip did he allow himself to cry out in exhaustion and let go.

The hatch hissed slowly back down. Through the closing gap, he caught a glimpse of a distraught Jem looking back at him as Alex hurried her on. He was too exhausted to follow.

The cover crunched back into place.

Boris lay there, gasping for breath. He gazed at the dimly lit corridor. Most of the remaining torches were green. The poison had almost reached the ones he’d blocked up. He figured he had maybe a minute of life left.

“This job sucks,” he muttered. He drew his blaster, and checked the remaining charge. There was more than enough left to turn his head into red mist. That seemed preferable to the pain he’d seen the others suffer.

He gazed at the weapon. Weren’t you supposed to get a walk down memory lane when you were about to

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die? It wasn't happening for him. Maybe that was just as well. He wondered if Temae was one of the victims, her body lying crumpled in pain like the others...

The torches began to go out, one after the other. Small emergency lamps at the base of the lamps lit up to battle the darkness. The green light was replaced by blood red.

He was impressed. The Colonel had actually made it, for what little it mattered. The poison already in the air would still reach him very soon. The Colonel had bought him no more than a few extra seconds of life.

Boris looked down the barrel of his blaster, and hooked his thumb around the trigger. This nerve agent worked incredibly quickly, and he might not have time to fire when it reached him. But he was also in no hurry to die. There were billions of years for him to be dead. The time a man could spend being alive was so tiny and brief in comparison...

Solenoids rang out with a deafening clang, and the control panel dangling by its wires suddenly lit up. Boris very nearly blew his head off from sheer shock.

The Colonel had restored power to the hatch!

Boris stabbed the switch. The hydraulic jacks surged into life, and jets of hydraulic fluid squirted from the damaged rams.

The metal slab lifted.

Cold air from rushed over his face, promising an equally string draft of warm, poisonous air from the corridor behind him. Boris scrambled desperately up the ramp.

He hit the palace roof running, as if he'd been launched into the night by a cloud of death.

Chapter Four: Change Of Plan

Boris groaned. If this was a hangover, he'd definitely been drinking way too much. He opened his eyes, and found a blurry face hanging in the air before him, painfully bright with light. It was a girl, one he felt he should recognize. He struggled to remember her name, and where he was. Then his memory returned like a blow from a hammer, surging past the cocktail of drugs circulating through his system.

He was definitely still inside the Palace, in one of the numerous medical stations from the look of it. He remembered running and feeling a sudden pain in his right leg, but was all blank after that. He fumbled with numb hands, and found he still had something resembling legs down there. It was hard to tell.

Temae smiled. "The Doctor says you will be fine, you got only a very small dose." Temae brushed a lock of his hair aside. "The heirs are fine. The Colonel is alive too, though he will need time to recover."

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“How long was I out?” Boris was surprised to find his voice a dry croak, and swallowed with some difficulty.

“Only a few hours. The gas is gone, and dawn is still two hours away.”

A man in pale blue scrubs bent over him. “You’re very lucky Mister Boris. There’s minimal scarring to your nervous system, but don’t try any acrobatics for another day or two. Expect to be more sluggish than usual for a further month or two, then you’ll be right as rain.”

“I’m not a big fan of rain, but thanks Doc.” The white room didn’t feel as horribly bright as it had. His eyes seemed to be adjusting more slowly than usual. “How many were hurt?”

Temae’s smile faltered. “Viscount Xavier says there are eighty-five dead, but the search is not complete. The count includes eight citizens who were outside the palace grounds. The gas drifted.” She hesitated. “We are fortunate the attack was at night. During the day, the toll could have ten times as many. Maybe more.”

Boris closed his eyes. He didn’t ask about Washington, or Kusa and Naktef. He could remember their deaths only too vividly. “How are the kids doing?”

She hesitated. “I expect they’ll have nightmares for a while. They are with her Majesty, she wishes you to see her as soon as you are able.”

Boris winced, and moved to sit up. He found his right trouser leg had been cut open from ankle to hip. A patch of skin above his ankle looked badly sunburned.

“I did not mean now! Boris, you need to rest.”

The room swayed a little, and he climbed to his feet with some difficulty. His leg was numb, and refused to

work properly. Looking very worried, Temae put her arm about his waist to help steady him.

“Thanks. Can’t keep her royal whatsit waiting, you know.” he declared. She helped him limp past several other figures, all wearing uniforms. Two were utterly still and had their faces covered.

“Where is she?”

“Conference room A5. The Prince and Princess are recording affidavits.”

“What, already?”

“Viscount Xavier says it is best to get their accounts on record while the memories are fresh.” She hesitated. “He thinks talking about it might help.”

She didn’t look convinced. He wondered if the deaths had struck a nerve with her. She would have been around Jem’s age when the old King died. Maybe she’d been quizzed at the time in the same way.

They moved on in silence and took an elevator down. Eventually they reached four Elites guarding by a set of doors.

There was a pause while the nearest guard contacted those inside through his implant. From the way he was looking at Boris’ blaster, the man was probably asking if he should disarm him. The gas seemed to have frightened an awful lot of people.

The man stepped aside and the door opened. “You can both go right in.”

They entered a chamber that sported a massive U-shaped conference table, with terraced observation benches surrounding it. Queen Dalamai and Viscount Xavier were seated next to each other on the far side of the table. Another four Elites were stationed around the room, positioned so they could watch each other as

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well as the Queen. The Prince and Princess sat in two soundproof booths on the right, behind the curved benches. Projected images of police interviewers remotely assisting sat opposite each of them.

Xavier looked up as they approached. With Temae propping him up, he lurched to a halt by the table and managed a half-hearted salute.

Dalamai looked up from her terminal. "Please take a seat Boris. Your leg is not too painful I hope?"

"It can barely feel a thing, as it happens. But I'll sit on that bench rather than a chair if you don't mind." Dalamai nodded her quiescence, and Boris lowered himself to the padded surface. Despite Temae's help, he almost toppled over in the process. "The quack says this will clear up soon. A day or so."

Xavier looked relieved. "The assassin merely painted over the canister's original markings. A quick UV scan told us which antidote to use."

Boris frowned. "Curious oversight. That's hardly the work of a pro, but the charges on the blast doors certainly were. Do we have any leads on who did it and how they got access?" Queen Dalamai nodded grimly, and consulted her terminal.

"Mister Dwayne Hendricks was found with the gas cylinder. He had quite a talent for topiary. His security clearance was limited, so there may have been others involved." She paused, and rubbed her eyes. She looked exhausted. "His quarters are being checked, but it seems he left no evidence of his motivations."

She straightened. "Boris, a formal ceremony will be held to thank you and your fallen comrades. This is the second time you have saved our beloved children, and we... no, I thank you."

Xavier's head perked up at this. Temae too, blinked wide-eyed in surprise. Even Boris noticed the unusual use of *I* instead of the usual *we*. She was speaking to him not as a ruler, but as a person.

"They are all I have left. So very much depends on them." She looked at him with a smile on her lips. But gaslight glinted on the red rims of her eyes, and he realized she had been crying recently. "You are an angel," she said.

Boris hesitated, then bent his head forward in the best bow he could make.

Major Bekker shot to his feet as the Commander entered the strategy room. He'd heard the news reports, but the Commander was privy to channels he was not. He waited as the man silently removed his gloves, walking straight past him to his desk. The Commander's expression held no trace of the triumphant satisfaction he had been hoping for. Rather, the man seemed lost in thought.

"Did the heirs really survive, Sir?" he asked. His superior nodded glumly.

"Yes, they survived Major. We killed damn near everyone else in the area. Even the Colonel was injured, but the heirs came through without a bloody scratch." He dropped his gloves on his desk, and then calmly sat down.

Bekker relaxed a little. They had failed, but the Commander didn't seem too angry about it. He sat back down and waited. For some time, the Commander sat there in thought. Then he finally looked up at the Major.

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“You know, our benefactor is much more intelligent than I have given him credit for Major.”

“Sir?”

“Twice we have followed his instructions, and each time we have failed.” Bekker shifted uncomfortably.

“We did the best we could, Sir.”

“Indeed so, within the framework he imposed on us. He has recognized the cause of the difficulty, and has given us free rein with his total support. He has requested that we attempt to achieve a secondary goal, but we are free even to ignore even that.”

Bekker blinked in surprise as this development sank in. Now he could understand the Commander’s preoccupation. He swallowed. “I take it we shall no longer attempt covert actions, Sir.”

“Correct. That has never been our strength. That’s why I believe we should dispense with this pussyfooting and tackle the issue directly.”

Bekker replayed the statement in his head. “An overt military operation?” he felt simultaneously terrified and exhilarated.

“I want you to assemble our best men, Major. We need snipers, advanced demolition skills, preferably a good number of augmented personnel with field assault experience. I expect we’ll need a group of a half-dozen or so.”

“A strike team. Yes, that sounds about right.” Bekker began to feel he was back on familiar ground. “I can have a good team of loyal people ready within say, twenty hours. But getting them to the heirs won’t be possible without the right intel. We’ll need their location, bodyguard disposition, security network overrides...”

“The sources placed at our disposal will meet those requirements. But take your time assembling your men. We’ll give the palace time to relax before we strike.”

Bekker took a deep breath. For the first time in months, he felt optimistic about the future. “Yes, Sir! The men will enjoy the chance to make a real difference.” To his surprise, the Commander smiled.

“We shall succeed, Major. I guarantee it.”

Boris pulled at the dark red hood to keep the glare of the sun from his eyes. The market was much the same as last week, although fortunately there was less squid this time.

His limp was an unwelcome addition, although it was improving. He had discovered that carrying a simple bamboo cane helped. Not so much for walking, but for deflecting attention. Without it, people seemed to think he was drunk. With it, he was ignored as just another old man or cripple.

He spoke into his terminal as he made his way through the noisy crowd. He was closing on the meeting point, and needed to wrap up. “So in short, things are ugly. If this person doesn’t show up this week, they may not get another chance. I feel like I’m on borrowed time as it is.” He hesitated. “To be honest, I thought you were full of crap about the Hoparin being in danger. I was wrong. But I still don’t see why you’re so besotted with them.”

Ahead, he could see the light pole and poster stand. This week, scale models of the great Palace dominated the stand. It looked like they had bought them in bulk. “I’ll send an update afterward.”

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He sent the message, then limped the last few steps to the light pole and leaned gratefully against it. His leg tingled uncomfortable.

The selection of picturecards hadn't changed. Little wonder they were trying models.

"Hass?"

Boris turned toward the voice. She was a woman who looked to be in her early forties, wearing a red cloak much like his own. Her face was pale, and what he could see of her hair was graying blonde, cut square with her chin.

He remembered the words of the advert. "In spirit. He sent me to do an errand for him. You're Dan, I take it?"

A brief grin lit her features. "I haven't been called that in a long time. Call me June."

"Boris."

She glanced at his walking stick. "Can we walk? It would be better if we did."

He straightened, and followed by her side through the crowd. "You're a few weeks late."

"I apologize. The redeemers are extremely paranoid. It's been too dangerous to risk it until now."

He scowled. "Is it the Redeemers who have been trying to kill Alex and Jem?"

She glanced at him in surprise, and he knew his use of their first names had been a mistake. "You're one of the bodyguards, aren't you? I should have realized."

He scowled. "It's been a tough job lately."

June's gaze softened. "I'm sorry, but I can't answer your question. I really don't know for sure if redeemers are responsible or not."

"I thought you were a member?"

She nodded. “Like I said, they’re paranoid. I’ve been with them for seven years, since the King died. Hass knew from the start it wasn’t an accident. It’s been difficult to stay in contact with him since he left.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Four years. He spoke out too loudly against the continuation of privatized governance, you see. Pointed to the increasing exchange of human welfare for profit. There were protests, and they suddenly escalated into terrorism. He realized he was being set up, and managed to get out in time. He tried to continue his work from offworld, but... Well, you know how that turned out.”

Boris dodged a man carrying a chunk of what looked like a frozen block of fat. It probably was whale blubber; he’d heard they still farmed Minke in the eastern oceans. “So how deeply have you penetrated them?”

She sighed. “The organization works in isolated fragments.” She paused. “I was finally moved to an information management division this year. I gained access to some relays and shipping documents, but it took months to track the finances behind them. They all come from a central point, a single headquarters coordinating it all. All the money comes through it.”

They entered the market’s shellfish section. The stalls were dominated by freshwater crayfish, two-foot long creatures with jet black shells. Their serrated claws gleamed like kitchen knives.

Boris scowled. “It doesn’t sound like a typical terrorist organization. Someone must be funding it.”

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“The HQ is here in Kalaanda, I’m sure of it. I think I’ll be able to locate it eventually. Perhaps six, maybe seven months.”

He shook his head. “We don’t have six months. Hass says the assassins want the heirs dead by the end of Dalamai’s reign, and that’s only weeks away.”

June hesitated. “The end of the contract period. I understand. If I drop my cover, I may be able to penetrate some of the command network and still get out with the information. I can at least try. How can I contact you if I succeed?”

Boris stopped, and pulled out his terminal. He selected two items, and transmitted them to her own terminal. “That address will link you to my ship, which will relay to me one way or another. If that doesn’t work, use the second address. It’ll put you in contact with the Colonel. You can trust him. Tell him everything you find.”

“All right.” She glanced at her terminal, and confirmed the data had arrived. “It will take me a few days to prepare, so I better go and get started now. Is there anything else?”

He shook his head. “Try not to get caught.”

She smiled. “Of course. Good luck, offworlder.” She turned, and despite her red cloak managed to vanish very quickly into the crowd.

Boris limped his way out of the market. The Colonel wanted to see him before nightfall, and he couldn’t put it off any longer.

Boris groaned, and let his head loll forward until he could see the chair he was sitting on and the glossy floor beneath his feet. He’d expected it, but there had

been a slim hope it wouldn't happen. The Colonel watched his reaction impassively from his hospital bed.

"That's not the most common reaction to promotion, but in this case it's probably understandable." Boris reluctantly raised his head.

"Do I really have to be a *Captain*?" He rubbed his leg. The tingling had faded a little in the last hour. The walk seemed to have helped "I've never been a fan of the military."

"Someone has to take over command. There are few people left that we can trust. Quietly, I'm not even sure about the Viscount or Governor Keban."

"Colonel, there's no way in hell I can protect the kids on my own. The Palace isn't safe enough, and I have to sleep some time." The Colonel managed a wry grin.

"I agree fully."

This gave Boris pause. He squinted at the Colonel. The man was up to something. "You do?"

The Colonel's grin faded. "I want you to move the Prince and Princess out of the Palace. Act on your own to establish a safe-house, then move the heirs to it. Secrecy is our only hope. Keep them hidden! When the current contract expires and the handover occurs, Alexander can choose a winning bid regardless of where he is. The crowning is ceremonial, it can be done later. Once the contract is no longer in question, I believe the danger will pass." Boris hesitated, thinking the notion through.

"There might be unexpected needs, like medical care." The Colonel nodded.

"Yet another reason you'll need someone to help. I suggest Temae. You seem to get along well, and she's

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been faithfully tending the children for many years. She'll be able to run errands unrecognized."

Boris remained silent.

"Captain, this would constitute much more than the bodyguard duty you originally agreed to. It would of course attract an appropriate level of pay, but I can't force it upon you. If you have a better Idea, I'd love to hear it."

"Hah! What would you do if I quit?"

The Colonel didn't hesitate. "I leave primary guard duties to the third Elite squad, and join them myself as soon as I could. The Doctors say I'll have decent motor control in another week."

"Hmm. Have Ranboen offered to assist?"

"I wouldn't trust Ranboen security as far as I could throw their wing of the palace. They can suppress riots and protect secrets well enough, but they're useless for anything else. Keban did make an offer, yes. But if there are plants among our staff, there would be some in his as well. At least we know our own people."

"Yeah, I guess." Boris stood, and rubbed his eyes. "All right, I'll babysit the kids for you. I must be crazy."

"Choose your safe-house well Captain. Tell nobody where it is."

Boris raised his eyebrows. "Even Queen Dalamai?"

"Especially her Majesty. She's watched too closely. The less her body language can give away to observers, the better."

Boris nodded and stood up. Flexing his leg, he looked around the small room. "You did say the room has been scanned for bugs, didn't you?"

"Three times by different squads. I ran a basic check myself."

Boris sat back down, and slumped against the backrest. “Okay then. If I’m going to be hiding, you may need to... take a message from someone.”

The Colonel raised an eyebrow. “You’re expecting something in particular?”

Boris hesitated. “Just today I contacted a mole in the Redeemers. Codename of June. She’ll contact you if she can’t find me.”

The Colonel stared in surprise. “We’ve been trying to penetrate the Redeemers for years. She could be playing you.”

“That’s possible, though I have strong reasons to think otherwise. Don’t get your hopes up. She’s not high up in the organization.”

“Very well, I’ll be ready. Thank you.”

Boris started thinking about the heirs. Once he had a safehouse ready, he’d need a way of getting them to it. “Colonel. Didn’t you once mention that the Hoparin have a skycar with some stealth abilities?”

Boris sat in the Palace Conference room, patiently waiting. This was to be the first purely one on one meeting he’d had with Queen Dalamai, and it felt strange to be waiting for her to come to him.

The chamber itself wasn’t helping his state of mind. He was surrounded by expensive-looking oil paintings, velvet drapes and so much intricate gold leaf that there was barely a single inch of plain stone anywhere.

He activated his terminal to distract himself. While waiting for the Queen and her final approval, he could at least re-examine his research on Dimonah’s private governance contract. Hass had kindly provided his own

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a summary of the major points, but he was still having trouble keeping track of all the details.

To: Boris
Signed Source: Hass
Subject: Ranboen Contract
Encrypted

Dimonah may seem isolated now, but during the Swarm War two and a half centuries ago it was much worse. Subspace technology was still new, and most interstellar messages took years rather than weeks. The Swarm War was over almost before the people of Dimonah knew it had started.

It's therefore no surprise that it didn't spook them as much as it did the rest of the Cluster. While the other survivor worlds grouped together in fear to form the Confederation, those on Dimonah chose to remain an independent world. They thought the Confederation wouldn't last.

When Confed succeeded and went from strength to strength, Dimonah had a problem. They saw that other independent worlds joining Confed suffered terrible social upheaval, with many people unable to cope. The Hoparin decided to employ the services of a Confederation Corporation to bring their world up to speed.

The Contract they negotiated comes up for renewal every fifteen years. At the completion of each period, the King or Queen reviews the corporation's performance, and chooses how to proceed. Their options are:

- Roll over the contract into the next period.

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- *Resume exclusive Hoparin rule without corporate assistance.*
- *Re-open the contract for open tender.*
- *Put the matter to a public vote.*

The contract is a complex document, and it includes provisions to keep both sides honest. The primary ones are:

- *If there is no ruling Hoparin at the end of a contract period, the corporation may assume executive control themselves, or choose to end the contract and withdraw.*
- *If the King or Queen dies unnaturally, the contract immediately ends and a popular vote must be held.*
- *Should the Confederation dissolve or war encroach on the Dimonah system, the reigning Hoparin may choose to end the current contract.*
- *The reigning Hoparin may also declare the current contract closed if the corporation holding it enters bankruptcy, or if their stock is demoted to C class or lower.*
- *No Hoparin may reign for longer than four consecutive contractual periods. This is a reflection of the law that limits reigns to a maximum of sixty years, but if contracts are cut short it might force early retirement.*

Boris stared at the text, and then leaned back into the hard wood of the conference chair. As far as he could tell, only a fanatical democrats would want to kill

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all the Hoparin. That would force an election. Any list suspect under that scenario would have to include the Confederation itself.

He winced. He was sure there were Confed Senators who saw Dimonah as a threat, but he couldn't picture them being willing to take it as far as assassination. Too many others would oppose them. Still, it was a possibility he should keep in mind.

As for Ranboen, he couldn't see much reason for them to be involved. The firm had held the Contract ever since the first tender nearly a century ago, and their profits on the deal were good. Possibly even too high, considering the state of the planet's public infrastructure. The scar over his right eye throbbed, and he rubbed it irritably. It had been doing that on and off since the gas attack.

The Redeemers were the likely favorites. Local pro-Ranboen militants who simply hated the monarchy. They'd done some pretty stupid things in the past, so there was reason to think they might still be up to similar tricks. Hass was convinced they were the ones behind the King's death, though there was probably no way he could ever know for sure. It was too long ago.

But what about the other corporations?

He summoned a list of all those who had tendered for the contract. There had been an open tender last time, with plenty of bidders. Tantis-Mundsen had come close to winning. Could they be trying to force the issue?

The doors opened, revealing Queen Dalamai and six Elite Guards. The rich robes adorning her aging frame looked bulkier than usual, concealing the protective armor the Colonel had insisted she wear.

He switched off his terminal and stood up. “Good to see you’re back safely.”

Dalamai gestured for the guards to remain outside, and let the doors shut behind her. There was a brief hiss as protective seals inflated. “Good day, Captain. The Colonel will be gratified to hear his suggestion of a short trip worked out well. Our visit to Gloume was gratifyingly free of incidents.” She reached the chair at the head of the table, and sat down gratefully. “What progress have you made?”

The title still sounded bizarre to his ears. “I’ve located and prepared a safe-house. It’s ready for use.” Boris wondered if he looked as tired as Dalamai did. He certainly felt it. Moving around the city in secret had proven to be surprisingly hard work.

She hesitated. “Captain, do you believe this is the best course of action?”

Boris tried to look confident. “It’s certainly too dangerous to keep them here. Moving them both away from the Palace has different risks, and in a sense we’re damned if we do and damned if we don’t...” He took a deep breath. “I’m not crazy about it, but I think it’s the best way forward in an ugly situation.”

“The Colonel mentioned you wanted to take Temae.”

He nodded. “I haven’t told her yet. I intend to leave it to the last moment. I think she’ll be okay with it.”

“I’m sure she will be honored to join you.” She paused. “Where is this safe-house?”

Boris met her gaze. “The Colonel believes it best that not even you know. I agree with him.”

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The Queen nodded, and a hint of a smile suggested he had just passed a test. “I see. When do you intend to leave, Captain?”

“That I will tell you. Tonight.”

The Queen’s eyes briefly betrayed the anguish she felt. He felt a flicker of sympathy for the old woman.

Her children were being taken away from her.

Chapter Five: Exodus

Temae crammed one more food package into the gravcart, next to the spare cooker. With her help the equipment was getting packed at an impressive rate, and Boris was beginning to think they needn't have hurried so much. The children weren't even ready to go yet.

She stood, and crossed the salt-stained floor to fetch the last case. "I do not get to cook very often, Captain. I think I will enjoy experimenting with these rations."

Boris stowed a small ammunition case into the cart. "I've already said you don't have to call me that."

"It is a rank you have earned."

Boris paused, and decided to try a different approach. "It could tip people off, when we're outside the palace. Best to avoid the habit now."

Temae hesitated. "Very well Boris." She grinned.

He crossed to the room's single door and peered at the sensor display he'd positioned by it. It showed the

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short corridor outside, where the Queen was talking to the heirs. Saying their goodbyes to each other.

He wished they'd hurry up.

He glanced at Temae as she loaded the last case. She still seemed more comfortable than he'd anticipated in the pale orange cloak. It was probably the first time she had worn such common clothing in her adult life. She turned with a worried expression, and he saw she'd noticed the water recycler he'd packed.

He chuckled. "It's just a precaution. I don't expect we'll need it."

She blushed, and opened her mouth to say something when the door sensors chimed. He re-checked the sensor array via his terminal, and found the Queen had left. She'd remembered his warning that only the heirs should see the vehicle they'd be using to leave. He hoped she'd keep up her end of the act. As far as the rest of the palace knew, the heirs were in a self-defense class with him for the next few hours.

He opened the door. The children entered, and gazed wide-eyed about the chamber. He put on a smile.

"Hi gang. Do you have any questions?"

Alexander seemed to still be in shock, and he had trouble taking his eyes off the vehicle waiting for them and the fully loaded cart. "It's really true. You're really going to hide us somewhere outside the Palace?"

"That's the plan." Boris ran another scan of the room with his terminal. The arrival of the heirs had not introduced any transmitters or bugs.

"Mum told us to be good." Jem volunteered. The young princess looked both excited and nervous.

Temae hurried to a neat pile of street clothes they had prepared, and retrieved a small teddy bear.

A delighted grin lit the Jem's features. "Ruce!" The girl ran over to her, and hugged the bear to her chest.

Alexander sighed. "You're too old for that."

"That's a lucky doll, is it?" Boris ventured.

"Bear." Jemma replied defensively. "Her name is Ruce." She held it so he could see it. The fabric was impressively worn. He had the impression it had been repaired more than once.

Temae crouched next to her. "She was a present from your father, right Princess?" She spared a meaningful glance at Boris. Jem nodded proudly.

Boris nodded in what he hoped was a sagely manner. "Ruce is a good name. You look after her, okay?" Jem grinned, and nodded enthusiastically.

"Good. Now, the shoes and robes you both came here with, leave them behind. Your terminals too."

The Prince and Princess reluctantly moved toward the waiting clothes. It was clear neither was looking forward to a long period without Network access. He'd already made Temae remove her bracelet terminal. The only device they were taking that could contact the network was his own terminal, and he was keeping that in local mode.

While Temae helped them change, he pushed the loaded cart into the vehicle. His mind was constantly re-checking everything, searching for anything he might have missed anything. He'd checked for chemical and biological agents, electronics, and nanotech. Especially nanotech. He'd once seen what a gyro-mounted laser concealed within a grain of rice could do when activated by stomach acid. It wasn't something he wanted to see again.

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The children seemed to take forever to get changed, but once they had they climbed into their seats readily enough. He helped Temae make sure they were properly seated, then saw her to the front passenger seat.

Oddly, the children no longer seemed to be at all apprehensive. It seemed that the prospect of an incognito adventure actually appealed to them.

He took one look around the chamber, and idly patted the reassuring bulk of the blaster in his holster. Finally, he climbed into the vehicle himself. The door sealed with a hiss, and the engines started with a muffled thrum that belied their considerable power. He checked the time on the vehicle's console. Seven minutes to go.

"We'll sit tight a few more minutes, gang. Then we'll be out of here."

Queen Dalamai's voice came through the intercom in front of him. "Come in Colonel."

The door opened. The wheelchair obeyed his implant and rolled out of the lift and into the Palace Observation Deck. He'd have preferred to use the manual controls, but his hands still shook too much when he tried.

He glanced about the Observation Deck, and tried to remember the last time he'd been there. He certainly didn't visit the highest point of the Palace very often. It seemed much as he remembered it, a broad expanse about the size of a pair of tennis courts. The view of Kalaanda from the encircling windows was magnificent. The sloping rockglass was seamless, and only the stone surrounding the elevator gave any visual

reassurance that the mass of stone and long-range communication equipment above them was properly supported.

The night city sprawled on in every direction, extending all the way to a dust-laden horizon.

The queen stood watching it, her back to him. Her long robe rippling in the gentle current of warm air from vents below the glass. The Colonel hesitated. It was unusual for Dalamai to keep her back to anyone entering a room. He'd cautioned her against it many times.

"Your Majesty?" She turned to look over her shoulder at him. From her expression, he knew it was not her safety she was concerned with.

She turned back toward the view. "I should have known you wouldn't follow doctor's orders. Are you here to protect us?"

The Colonel frowned. "Always. Especially when you make a target of yourself like this."

"I used to come here every day, when I was still young. So much has changed, for both good and ill."

The Colonel rolled up to the railing, and followed her gaze. Dawn was still an hour away, and Kalaanda's city lights glittered in the dust like the light on a windy sea.

"The doctor says you should still be in hospital." Dalamai said. He grinned mirthlessly, and lowered his tired gaze to the ships parked on the roof below.

"For observation only. I'm improving, though more slowly than I'd hoped." He lowered his gaze. On the stone rooftop below them, the dark skycar lay silent. A long boarding tube concealed any signs of activity,

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making it impossible for any observer to know when it might take off. He knew it would do so very soon.

“I’d feel much better if I could only figure out who is behind all this.”

“Perhaps one should ask not who, but *why*.”

The Colonel shook his head. “There is little strategic advantage to any party in this. No individual or group stands to benefit.”

“Even the Redeemers?”

“It would get them no closer to their goal. Destruction of the Hoparin would not make the people support Ranboen.” He sighed. “It’s still a possibility though. Maybe their determination has blinded them.”

The Queen hung her head low. “What if it is the Confederation responsible?”

The Colonel paused. “If that were the case Majesty, I would not fancy our chances.”

The boarding tube slowly retracted. There was no sign of service bots or personnel that usually managed the final flight check. The skycar stood alone, jets of steam rising as its engines charged.

The Colonel spared a glance at the sky, watching the visible stars for evidence of cloud movement.

Dimonah’s long nights usually finished with strong gusts of sun-warmed air. But the sky was strangely still, promising an overcast and very cold morning.

“Dawn in an hour,” he said. “Yet so little wind.”

Dalamai nodded, and pulled her robe tighter about her thin shoulders. “There was a dawn much like this the day Dimonah lost it’s King.”

He glanced at her. Dalamai rarely spoke of her late husband, and her features were unreadable. But there was something in her bearing that suggested a tremendous sense of loss.

He followed her gaze to the skycar, and watched it lift silently from the rooftop below them. It turned, and then shot into the sky faster than his eyes could follow. He searched the sky for the vehicle, but it had already activated the camouflage system and vanished into the darkness.

Dalamai's gaze was still at the empty rooftop.

The Colonel glanced further afield, past the palace gardens. There, a gray surface car passed quietly through the delivery gates, and vanished into the city.

He permitted himself a grunt of satisfaction. After recent events, he'd almost expected one of the vehicles to be attacked then and there.

Dalamai looked at him. "Your manner betrays you, Colonel. You believe this will not end well."

The Colonel remained silent, embarrassed she could so read him so well.

The sky began to lighten, and the breeze playing at Dalamai's robe died. She gazed out at her Realm.

"We have the same fear." She looked up, and watched the sun appear on the horizon through the darkening glass. "Sometimes Colonel, I feel so very old."

Boris squinted into the dark tunnel ahead. His terminal's map showed the exit was straight ahead, but he couldn't yet see it. Probably because it was still so early.

He cut back the throttle, and the boat slowed to a more reasonable pace. "Not long now. Soon we'll be going from closed sewer to open sewer."

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Temae shook her head, still struggling to process everything he had told her since they left. “But, the sky-car and the truck... Who is driving them?”

Boris considered giving a facetious reply, but thought better of it. “They’re both on automatic. I programmed them each to make about a few stops each along their routes, in places suitable for vehicle exchange. Under bridges, canyons, even an old shopping mall. Eventually they’ll return to the Palace. They won’t even have travel records, I removed the black boxes.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“Yep.”

Temae looked up as a widening patch of gray appeared amid the black. Their craft quietly skimmed along the water toward it.

Alexander had been listening in from his seat in the back. “Do you think they’ll be attacked?” he asked.

“Maybe, maybe not. I just don’t want them to be looking in our direction.”

Alexander peered through the vehicle’s canopy at the brightening walls. The one-way roof and windows gave them an excellent view as they sped through the tunnel exit.

Jem was so engrossed, the glass was misting up around her face. “Is this sewer not used anymore?”

Temae turned, perplexed. “Why do you ask Princess?”

Jem scratched her nose. “It looks so clean. I haven’t seen any poop.”

Alexander failed to suppress a groan. Temae didn’t seem sure how to answer, and flashed an uncertain glance at Boris.

He grinned. “Oh it’s sewage all right. Just wait ‘til we open the door, you’ll have no doubt when you smell it.”

Alexander hesitated. “Will we have far to walk?”

“Far enough. Don’t worry, the safehouse is away from the smell.”

They sped on through an open channel with dark outlines of buildings looming above the walls on each side. There were only a few lit windows on the dilapidated buildings. There seemed to be more security lights spilling through walkways than actual street lights too.

Boris had chosen dawn as the least dangerous time to risk the journey. Night owls and early risers alike both avoided the cold morning winds. He watched for signs of life along the banks as they blurred by, and was pleased to find them as bare as they had been yesterday.

Alexander’s nose touched the rockglass. “Where are we? Have we left the Shinuba district?”

“Some time ago, yes. This is the least fashionable end of the old Mazza district. The original spaceport site is close by.”

The Prince’s eye lit up. “Is that where we’re going?”

“No, too many people live in the old hotels around it. Fortunately the Network feed here is pretty bad out here, so if you’re seen there’s a possibility the locals won’t recognize you.” He spotted a splash of bright yellow paint among the graffiti on the left bank and immediately cut the throttle. “Okay, quiet on the set please.”

He brought the craft to a halt next to the yellow mark. Although it was less than a day old, it didn’t seem out-of-place amongst the surrounding mess. Boris

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opened the door, kicking a twisted bicycle frame out of the way so the boarding ramp could extend. Temae's hand immediately flew to her nose, and he was amused to see that her horrified expression failed to trump Alexander's grimace.

Admittedly, the odor was even worse than it had been the previous day. That was probably due to lack of fresh rain during the night.

He ignored the trio's theatrics, climbed out and powered up the gravcart. As the others emerged, he hauled their luggage out of the skimmer and up the bank. The cart's silent antigrav held it a foot above ground level, a necessary measure given that the amount of garbage strewn about would have made anything else struggle.

As his charges followed him up the bank, he pulled out his terminal and sent a code to the vehicle. The skimmer's ramp retracted and the door closed. Then the craft then gently turned, and quietly sped back the way they had come.

Jem, standing by Temae's side, had graduated to holding part of her cloak over her nose. She seemed to be trying not to breathe. Even Alexander had his nose pinched shut.

Boris handed control of the cart to Temae, and led the way with his hand resting on his holstered blaster. He took them into a crooked alleyway, and the channel vanished from sight.

The two heirs stayed close behind him, with Temae bringing up the rear. The Prince and Princess stared at everything, even the windowless walls rising above them. He wondered if any of the three had even seen such areas before. When a rather large rat scampered across their path, Temae stared in speechless shock.

The alley eventually widened, and dust-laden windows began to appear. Clotheslines crossed the alley between metal fire escapes, all of which looked far too decrepit to use. Boris kept them clear of the crumbling monstrosities. There were already fallen girders on the ground beneath some.

The smell of the sewer was gone, leaving a different odor that seemed to come from the walls themselves.

Alexander finally gave in to the urge to speak, his whisper sounding odd though his pinched-shut nose. "This smell is even *worse!*"

Boris nodded, and side-stepped a furry mound that had probably been a rat. The surface of it was moving. "It's the stench of poverty. Remember it when you're King." Alexander blinked, but remained silent.

They turned at a junction, and again a short time later at yet another. There was less garbage the further they went, and eventually all signs of habitation were left behind and they entered a collection of deserted warehouses. Boris finally stopped at a grimy durasteel door with a long diagonal scratch gleaming on the surface. He fished inside his jacket, and produced a key.

The door unlocked swung open with a silent ease that belied its outer appearance. The edge was thin, several inches wider than the doorframe it covered.

A lights jury-rigged to the ceiling snapped on, providing just enough light to see the passageway waiting inside. Boris took only a few paces through the door stooped to carefully examine the floor. His heavy boots had left footprints, their tread picking up a thin scattering of flour on the vinyl flooring. That, along with the small red light blinking on the wall by the entrance, satisfied him that the building was still secure.

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He beckoned in the trio, and handed the key to Temae. “Here, lock the door behind us.”

The servant set the cart to one side for a moment and obediently shut the door. It took her a moment to master the old mechanical lock, accustomed as she was to simpler electronic versions. As it clicked shut, the door startled her with a brief hiss. The airtight seal hadn’t been audible from the other side.

He let her keep the key, and led them thorough the wide corridor. Doorways on both sides opened to old offices, perhaps twenty in all. The doors were all ajar, and each sported a frosted glass panel in the upper half. At least, it seemed frosted. Every panel was laced with dirt and dust, and either cracked or completely shattered. Two doors were missing entirely, though their hinges were still in place. Various items of discarded garbage lined the walls.

“It’s safe to talk now, but don’t touch anything in this corridor. Sorry about the stink on the way. But this was too good to pass up, it was originally an armory. Excellent walls.”

Alexander was the first to reply. “It’s terrible out there! How do people put up with it?”

Boris hesitated, unsure how to answer. Temae came to his rescue. “For some there is little choice, your Highness.”

Despite her words, she looked a little unsure herself. He wondered if she had become too accustomed to the palace.

“Okay gang, for the next two weeks nobody leaves without my approval. We may need to stretch it out longer than that, we’ll see when the time comes.”

They reached the end of the corridor, and entered a large storehouse. Empty cargo containers were stacked

haphazardly, carpeted dust and dirt. They bore the logos of corporations that had ceased to exist over a century ago. In the far corner, a small office was suspended well above the floor, bolted to the thick plascrete walls.

“That’s our new home, the warehouse freight management office.”

Temae stared. “Isn’t it... exposed? If there’s trouble, I mean.” She glanced about the cavernous warehouse. The only entry points were the corridor, and a massive durasteel freight door.

“Believe me, the building is defensible. The freight door is solidly blocked on the outside with stacked containers and a pile of old landfill. It’s been like that for years.”

Temae didn’t look very reassured. He figured there wasn’t much point telling her about the charges and sensors he’d placed around the area. Not yet, anyway.

Jem and Alexander were already venturing up the metal steps to explore their new accommodations. Temae powered down the cart next to the steps, and he helped her unpack it.

He’d give them a proper briefing once they had all calmed down a bit. Then, hopefully he could look forward to a long and peaceful wait.

Major Bekker watched the Commander approach him across the steel gantry. The man’s attention gaze was fixed on the men and women assembled by the skycars below, but his thoughts seemed to be elsewhere.

The assembled team had been ready for days, waiting. But they were holding up well. Every one of

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the group was showing true professionalism. There wasn't a VR cartridge, angry gesture, or drug ampule to be seen anywhere. Instead they talked quietly, and occasionally re-checked their equipment. They gave him the impression they could wait like that for weeks, ready to go at a moment's notice.

That was fortunate. The way things were looking, they might have to.

The stealth skycar had proven very difficult to track, and they had nearly missed the groundcar. That was clever. Even after three days, they still didn't know which of the two the heirs had been in.

The skycar's first observed stop had been at sea. Could the heirs could have transferred to a submarine? His own suspicion was they had never left the Palace at all. Just because their contacts said they had vanished didn't mean they had actually left.

The Commander's footsteps on the metal gantry became louder as he drew nearer.

"Hello Major. No more news from our Intelligence staff, I gather?"

"Several new leads Sir, but nothing concrete yet. I'm afraid we're exhausting leads faster than we're finding new ones."

"Yes, the trail is growing cold." The man turned, setting off back the way he came. "Come with me, Major."

Bekker followed. The man led him along the gantry and through a doorway, into the grubby corridors of the Redeemer headquarters. There were no other personnel in sight, but Bekker still waited until they entered a closed corridor before speaking.

"Sir, have you considered consulting our Benefactor on this?"

There was an unspoken rule that they wouldn't discuss their unique supplier outside the strategy room. But instead of rebuking him, the Commander chuckled.

"I've already done so, Major. We're about to check and see if he's responded yet."

"Do you think there's a chance his source is up to the task?"

"It's possible. But we had best be prepared for disappointment. If the heirs have indeed fled the Palace, their location will be a very closely guarded secret."

They reached the strategy room, and sealed the door behind them.

The Commander crossed to his desk and activated his terminal's secure link. "My hope is he has procured some spysat records. The vehicles..."

He fell silent as a message appeared. There was quite a lot of text, but the Commander was a fast reader and his eyes widened.

The man stared in amazement. "And only a single guard..."

"Sir?" The Commander looked up at him and grinned.

"Give your team the word, Major. We know exactly where they're hidden. Right here in Kalaanda!"

The Colonel looked up as Xavier came in. The Viscount's black outfit made him look like an extension of the palace walls. "Excellency. You're right on time as always." The Colonel abandoned his work for the moment, clearing the displayed documents from the desk.

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Xavier managed a smile in greeting, and sat down in the chair opposite. He gratefully closed his eyes for a moment. “Ah, that’s better. It’s been another long day I’m afraid.” The Colonel nodded sympathetically. Xavier had been saddled with many of the Colonel’s duties in addition to his own.

The Viscount gazed at him. “You look much better today Colonel. How are you doing?”

The Colonel shifted his position in his wheelchair. “Well enough, Xavier. Apparently I’m healing a little more slowly than the doctors predicted. The nanotech is having some trouble because of an old wound. But I’ll be ready for duty again soon.”

Xavier smiled, possibly to conceal his relief. The Colonel had sympathy for the fellow. Xavier’s new duties clearly didn’t rest easily with him, yet he endured them without complaint. The Palace was a big building, and there was a lot to organize.

“Colonel, I’m a bit short on time at the moment. May I assume you asked me here to make an informal report?”

The Colonel raised an eyebrow. For an administrator, Xavier could be devilishly insightful at times. “That’s correct. I’m chiefly concerned with our dutiful Queen. How’s she doing?”

Xavier scratched his goatee as he considered the question. “She’s putting up an excellent public face, but I believe the stress is wearing her down. I have the best of the Elites guarding her around the clock, and she’s agreed to remain within the Palace until you can resume all your duties.”

The Colonel nodded. “Good. Her Majesty has a habit of touring at time of unrest.”

“True. *Keeping in touch with the people*, I believe she prefers to call it.”

“It’s a dangerous habit.”

“Though one that has served her well enough to date.” He hesitated. “Colonel, we can’t guarantee her safety can we? Even here in the palace. The gas attack was terribly close to the central corridors.”

The Colonel smirked mirthlessly. “Xavier, the people behind the attacks on the heirs don’t want the Queen dead. It’s copycat ratbags I’m worried about. She’ll be safe enough from them right where she is.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “You think this is related to the handover?”

He nodded. “When Queen Dalamai retires, it’s Alexander and Jem who will determine the future of Dimonah.”

“But if they’re killed beforehand...?”

“Then Ranboen will gain complete control of the planet, the people will rebel, and we’d have blood in the streets. Ranboen would then be ready to drop Dimonah into the lap of anyone who wanted it.”

Xavier sat back, and shook his head.

“Perhaps, Colonel. But if the Redeemers are involved and they can’t get to the heirs, I wouldn’t put it past them to attack the Queen out of sheer spite.”

“In which case, she’s still safest where she is.”

Xavier sighed. “I suppose so. What of the heirs, are they still safe?”

“Boris is taking good care of them. He won’t screw up.”

Xavier hesitated. “I hope you’re right. Sometimes it’s possible to do everything right, and still fail.”

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The Colonel paused, and gazed at the floor for a time before looking back at Xavier. “We’ll have to hope this is not one of those times.”

Chapter Six: Discovered

Boris scratched the back of his head, and squinted at the two children sitting cross-legged on the mat with him. He knew he wasn't good at explaining things like this, and for once Temae couldn't help. This time, she was learning as much as the heirs.

"It's difficult to describe. In many ways, to me it feels as if this whole planet is in a sort of time warp. Like it's still in a pre-spaceflight era." He tried to think of an example. "Naktef, for example. She was probably the only Calandian on the planet. In a crowd, she stood out a mile."

He switched on the stand-alone terminal he'd brought along for the children, and searched it for images of a typical Confed street scene. He found that Xavier had provided them with plenty, and chose to display footage of a crowded square in New Tania. The image of the crowded underground city bought him a few moments of awed silence from the children.

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Their study material was heavy on offworld topics. He had no doubt the Viscount's was responsible.

"We see very few aliens here on Dimonah."

Alexander explained. "They come on freighter crews, but the Colonel says they rarely leave the spaceports."

Boris shook his head, and smiled. "People come in all shapes and sizes, genetically engineered for different worlds and environments. Mamasians for example are covered head to foot with white fur." He summoned some images of the species on the terminal. "To me, it feels strange being surrounded by nothing but Terrans all the time."

Temae glanced at him over the projected image. "Do you not feel safer here, around your own kind?"

Boris shook his head. "Can't say I do. Dimonah has murder, theft, kidnapping. People just find different justifications for it."

Temae blushed, and turned her gaze back to the display. "Perhaps I am prejudiced," she said. He concluded she was speaking largely to herself.

"I think the Plass are the best." Jem chimed, pointing at a passing image of a towering red-brown Plass. "Are they really made of rock?"

Boris tried to conceal his surprise. In Confederation circles, the Plass Republic was generally regarded as both murderous and certifiably insane.

"They might as well be... No, it's just tough muscle beneath leathery plates." He figured the rock was between their ears, but kept that thought to himself. "You practically never see Plass in Confed space; they're a distrustful bunch. They keep to their own space territory when they're not at war."

“The Plass are not part of the Confederation,” Alexander said, apparently learning the fact as he read it from the terminal.

“No, they don’t want to be. Very independent.”

The group fell silent again, and Boris rubbed his face. He’d been at this for too long. It was wearing him down, and he couldn’t allow that. He decided it was time for a break, but the Crown Prince spoke first.

“Is Dimonah independent?”

Now *that* was a hell of a question coming from someone due to take over the planet! Alexander knew the planet’s political position. Boris hesitated.

“What do you mean?”

The boy frowned, composing his reply before voicing it. “Our own stellar maps show Dimonah as an independent star system within Confederation borders. A state within a state. I wonder how we are portrayed by the Confederation.”

Oh, he means Confed popular opinion! Boris drew a deep breath. He was beginning to notice the prince had a habit of asking questions that required long answers.

“The Confederation’s a big place. Most Confed citizens just don’t know you exist, and wouldn’t care if they did. Stellar maps typically show the system as privately owned, with open access to tourists.”

“So as a world, we are irrelevant to the Confederation?”

“Ah... To a point. There’s probably some staff somewhere paid to keep an eye on events here. If you suddenly allied with a belligerent empire and started building warships, you’d be amazed how quickly the Senate would react.”

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Alexander grinned. “I see. So the Confederation pretends not to care, yet our proximity worries it.”

Boris glanced at Temae. “Am I creating a monster here?”

The servant smiled. “Only if he stays up past bedtime again, which is half an hour away. Do you think it is alright for me to make that trip to the automat now?”

“Yeah, it should be safe enough. We need some fresh water, and it’s late enough for the cold to be emptying the streets.”

Temae rose, crossed to the coat rack on the wall and began to pull on her cloak.

“Don’t be late. I worry easily.”

Temae smiled and bowed, then vanished into the short passage leading to the balcony.

Boris checked the time on his terminal, and climbed to his feet.

“OK gang, you’re free to go goof off in your room. But be ready for bed by the time Temae gets back.” The children took the stand-alone terminal and hurried out, grinning like idiots. The few games he’d brought were a godsend, they were the only thing that gave him any peace.

He flipped his terminal on, and watched the sensors track Temae’s progress through the warehouse. She passed by the empty containers in the warehouse below, and through the corridor to the exit. As she stepped out, he confirmed that it sealed properly behind her.

One of the sensors he’d hidden on the roofline watched her walk up the alleyway and out of view. He switched the display off, sighed, and idly drew his

blaster. He double-checked the charge and dispersion settings, then holstered it again.

Everything was going smoothly, all according to plan. He had no reason to be worried.

So why did he feel so apprehensive?

Pestova sat crouched by the remains of an old firedoor and watched Beta group finish their swift and silent work. To normal eyes, there was nothing there but old cargo containers and the darkness of the alley. But it had been many years since his body had included eyes of flesh. In their place he had two smooth cylinders that looked like burnished steel, but they provided vision that far exceeded nature's efforts.

The bodyguard had chosen an excellent safe-house. Even to his enhanced vision, the thick plascrete walls of the structure were opaque. The building had so much metal it affected his team's communications.

Stub in place, Sir.

The message arrived in his mind through his implant, without ever existing as sound. He straightened, his artificial muscles lifting both him and his combat armor to with ease.

Their stub sniper was good, he even had some offworld combat experience. Pestova was glad to have him on the team.

Good work, Stub. He silently replied. *Stand by, we'll be sending you targets soon.*

He summoned a 3D diagram of the warehouse over his artificial vision. The positions of his team members all glowed reassuringly. Very soon, their extensive preparation would be put into action.

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Hack team here, tapped in and ready to roll. The message in his mind was cheerful, almost excessively so. Pestova allowed himself a quiet sigh.

Hack, since when does one woman constitute a team?

You're not counting my virtual gremlins, Boss! And they're so cute, too. They'd be offended.

Pestova winced. As indispensable as she was, their electronic countermeasure expert was much too flippant for his taste. But her talents and dedication were undeniable.

All right, Hack. Stand by. Pestova drew a fresh breath.
Alpha group, move into assault position.

Two bulky figures separated themselves from the shadows. They moved through the alley with frightening silence and speed, and halted just out of range of the sensor over the warehouse door.

Alpha in place, ready to roll.

Activate your thermoptics. Gamma group, do you have the package ready to go?

Yes, Sir. We're right behind Beta.

The two dark silhouettes of Alpha shimmered, then vanished. Only the indistinct shapes of their shadows in the moonlight remained.

Very good Gamma. Stay put until I give you the word. We can't have you going in early.

Yes, Sir.

Pestova noted the lack of complaint with satisfaction. Gamma had been waiting in that container in scorching weather for half the day. A show of admirable patience.

He spared a moment to look up the smaller alleyway branching off from his position. His synthetic vision zoomed in, targeting a pile of refuse at the end

of the alleyway. The servant girl was still there, lying where he had left her.

The order to leave her both alive and unhurt went against his instincts. He would have preferred to kill the girl, most preferably after questioning her about the building's internal security. But this was not a conventional assault... Not with Gamma group and the package.

Pestova put the issue out of his mind. The Commander knew what he was doing, there was no point him wondering about it.

He studied the warehouse again. The offworld guard had taken care preparing the site. The roof was studded with micromines and sensors, all well hidden. They wouldn't have found them if they hadn't been told which building he was using.

Pestova shook his head. He felt pity for the man.

All right, it's game time. Alpha group, go!

Boris sat and stared at the bottles of beer sitting in the crate. He already regretted bringing them. At the time, he had reasoned that in moderation it would help with the stress. Just to pass the time.

But he couldn't bring himself to even touch it. His tolerance for alcohol was high, but even a single drink would slow down his reflexes. He wondered if he should just empty the damned stuff down the drain and be done with it.

What a waste.

His terminal sounded, signaling that the door had been opened. Frowning, he fished it out of his pocket. Temae had left barely only a few minutes ago. Had she come back for something?

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The display appeared, and he shot to his feet. If it was Temae, she'd put on an awful lot of weight. The sensor had recorded a mass four times her weight. Boris was through the doorway and in the heir's room before he knew he was moving.

Both the Prince and Princess were already in their nightclothes, each atop their beds. Futons on collapsible frames. Alex was reading with the terminal, while Jem was improving the walls above her bed with crayons. Alex immediately recognized the sense of urgency, and dropped the terminal.

"Get your gun," Boris said.

He drew his blaster and glanced back the way he had come while Alexander retrieved a compact handgun. The prince handled the weapon with a familiarity borne of the Colonel's patience over the last year. Jem put down her crayons. Boris motioned her to Alex's side, and she hastily complied.

"Both of you stay here, and lock the door. If anyone but me comes through, shoot them." Alexander nodded nervously.

Boris left before they could say anything, pulling the door shut behind him. A moment later the door shuddered as the heavy durasteel bolts shot home.

He moved toward the metal steps, checking his terminal on the way. There were no further signals from the sensors.

Choosing to avoid the loud metal steps, he lowered himself off the balcony and dropped to the floor. A carefully placed pile of hessian silenced his landing. Concealed in the darkness beneath the office, he glanced at his terminal once more.

There were three sensors monitoring the main door from the inside. If Temae had returned, she should

have tripped all of them. Either one of the sensors was faulty, or an intruder had entered and instantly hacked two of them. He switched to visual, and saw the door hanging wide open.

His stomach tightened. It definitely wasn't Temae.

The sensor readouts abruptly vanished. They hadn't been hacked or jammed, they had ceased to exist. Then the lights went out.

A chill of terror surged through his body. Feeling in the dark, he stabbed the panic sequence into his terminal.

The decision was a calculated risk. The transmitted code told any decoys that were still active to relay the signal, arm any surviving traps, and try like hell to look like a bodyguard with a terminal. But if the decoys were already destroyed, his enemy could triangulate his position, and know exactly where he was.

The floor beneath him trembled, then gave way. Caught by surprise, Boris plummeted into the ground along with a section of floor big enough to hold a truck.

He was still falling when he heard the intruder. The sound was surprisingly clear over the rush of air; a short, startled intake of breath somewhere behind him and to the right. Boris twisted around as he fell, turning toward the sound enough to squeeze off one shot before his headlong tumble was brought to a sudden and painful stop.

His elbow, hip, and head all struck the abruptly stationary slab. Points of light blinked and danced before his eyes. Wracked with pain, he dimly realized his gun was slipping from his hand. He struggled to

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close his grip, and managed to retain his hold on the weapon.

The broken slab beneath had landed at a tilt. He slid gradually across the edge, and fell onto a soft surface which even in his dazed state he realized must have been placed to reduce the noise of the fall. He struggled onto his hands and knees, and tried unsuccessfully to fight down the dizziness enough to get to his feet.

A scrabbling sound indicated at least one other person was present and similarly regaining their footing, but he couldn't tell where the sound came from. It echoed around him, and there was still no light other than the fading stars before his eyes. There *was* an overpowering stink.

Unable to rise, he rolled to his right. The rubble in the direction felt the least jagged.

The sharp hiss of particle gunfire sliced the air out, followed by the much louder noise of shattering rock. Shards of red-hot stone struck him, and the smell of burning leather was added to the air. Boris blindly rolled again, bringing his hips hard against what was unmistakably a pair of armored shins.

He kept rolling, as hard as he could. The stranger staggered off-balance, and his weapon fired again. Boris squinted through the billowing dust, and he spotted the outline of his attacker against the brief glow of the gunfire. He rose and closed one hand around the intruder's wrist. Before he could shoot the man, another hand grasped his own wrist.

The stranger was strong, far stronger than mere flesh. Despite his best effort, his own blaster was aiming uselessly upwards while his opponent's particle gun slowly turned toward his head.

Boris fired his blaster. The brief flash of light revealed a man in a featureless black mask, with a shoulder-mounted automatic that was struggling to take aim amid the cloud of dust.

He head-butted the shoulder gun as hard as he could.

Enduring the burst of pain, Boris released the man's thick wrist and tried instead to grab at the particle weapon. He caught the man's hand at the grip instead.

Damn!

He had no leverage. Frantic, he threw all his weight against the figure. The impact pinned the gun between them, pointing down. As the figure's feet caught on the rubble, Boris squeezed his hand with all the strength he could muster. The gun fired.

The blast threw him into the fallen slab of floor. He managed to hit with his legs and arms braced wide, preventing the addition of broken ribs to his troubles. Skidding over the edge, he aimed and fired his blaster at a dim shape in the gradually clearing murk. The figure was hurled against the far wall, where he crumpled to the floor.

Boris climbed shakily to his feet, and coughed hard in the dusty air. He fired once more at the fallen corpse, and then turned his attention to his surroundings.

It was still very dark, but his eyes seemed to be adjusting. He could just make out a pipe around two feet in diameter that ran the length of the excavated pit on one side. The Intruder had landed on top of it. A neat hole on the side of the pipe seemed to be the only other way in or out of the pit, and it also accounted for the nauseating smell. Apparently the pipe was part of the sewer network. From the look of it, the entire space

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had been silently excavated just to make the intruder's entry a swift and surprising one. That level of preparation implied a coordinated team, with more members entering from other points at the same time. Boris glanced up.

He had to stop them before they reached the heirs.

The rim of the oval-shaped pit was a full yard out of reach. Boris looked around the pit, hoping the intruder had brought a ladder. Apparently he hadn't. From the look of his augmented limbs, he could have simply jumped straight out. Boris holstered his gun and prepared to climb.

A shot from a stub gun changed his plans.

The inch-thick beam of blazing white energy sliced through the plascrete flooring above, the bedrock below it, and everything else that was in its way to burst through the jagged pit wall. The deadly beam of plasma cut across the air before him, then burrowed into the floor on the other side. Boris flinched away from the beam, flattening himself against the wall and raising his arm to protect his face from the intense heat.

The destructive beam stopped as quickly as it started, leaving glowing red lava around the holes in the wall and floor that darkened as it cooled. If he needed proof he was facing a well-funded group, the stub gun was it.

He studied the glowing holes. The angle of the beam was shallow, stabbing through a lot of ground to reach the pit. The surrounding buildings were low, so it seemed likely the stub was on top of one of them.

That was worrying. There was no way the stub could possibly see him from such a vantage point, not through the old armory walls. The only explanation was his attackers were in constant contact with each other.

They must have known about the scuffle the moment it started. In the struggle they couldn't be certain of hitting the right person, so they held off firing until their operative was dead. That meant they would fire again, and soon.

Boris furiously tried to guess how long the firing delay would be. Stub's guns varied a lot, depending on the size of the energy pack and the cooling equipment in use. The shot had lasted less than a second, so the charging period would...

The stub fired again, the bright beam cutting in and out of existence so close to his legs that the fabric was left steaming.

Boris swore beneath his breath. The gun's recharge time had been an impressively short four seconds.

He jumped over the pipe and the dead intruder, and launched himself upward. Scrabbling wildly on the broken rock, he managed to get one hand onto the plascrete floor. With that one tenuous grip, he hauled his aching body up as the precious seconds slipped away.

Once on the warehouse floor, he sprinted for the nearest shipping crate.

The metal sides rang like a broken bell as the stub punched through it, spraying droplets of molten steel. The crate offered a degree of protection from enemy sensors, and Boris meant to take full advantage of it. He moved from crate to crate through holes still shiny from the plasmacutter he'd used, and made his way to one of the largest containers set neatly against a roof support.

The interior was undisturbed.

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He let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, and holstered his blaster in favor of the larger assault rifle that was waiting for him. He then reached up to the ceiling of the container, and grasped a thin rope.

"Here's something you can't hack," he muttered. He gave the rope a sharp tug.

The resulting blasts from the corridor of derelict offices set his ears ringing, but not enough to drown out a series of much quieter detonations from the roof. He ran out of the protection of the crates, emerging in a warehouse bathed in glaring light. Magnesium flares mounted on the ceiling joists blazed white, clouds of white smoke trailing from them. The armor-piercing claymores hidden behind the cardboard garbage in the entry corridor had generated considerably more smoke, and absolutely devastated the corridor itself.

Boris reached the shrapnel-peppered corridor entrance, and crouched to peer beneath the smoke. Glass shards fell from the walls they had embedded themselves in, tinkling to the floor in the otherwise perfect silence.

Boris saw movement in the turbulent mass of smoke; a cloaked outline dashing from one side of the corridor to the other. Despite the debris-scattered floor, it was moving in perfect silence.

Boris aimed and fired almost before he knew what he'd seen. Four searing bolts of energy left his assault rifle and tore through the filthy air. To his utter astonishment, one shot struck home and erupted in a shower of hot sparks.

The shot didn't slow the figure, but because of it Boris learned a few things about this new foe. The figure was well armored, and no longer cloaked.

Thermoptic fields were fragile, and the impact would have fried the system entirely.

Of course, he might have brought friends who were still camouflaged...

Boris moved into the smoke-filled corridor, and ducked through the first doorway he came to. The stub gun fired again, tearing into the section of floor he had just vacated. Drops of glowing plascrete sprayed the corridor. He dived toward a heavy desk, and took shelter behind it.

It was increasingly clear to him that anything the intruders saw, the stub sniper saw. Or at least was aware of. If he took the heirs out of the safe-house without accounting for all the intruders, the stub would cut them all down. These people were being thorough, they wanted to be sure nobody got out alive.

That was good. It meant they intended to take their time... As long as he continued to keep them busy, the Hoparin should be relatively safe.

He risked a cautious glance and surveyed the room. The smoke was just starting to clear, and an array of decaying office furniture and dividers had remained largely intact. The rat-chewed chairs and shrapnel-peppered desks still lay in roughly the same defensive pattern he had placed them in. The desk he was hiding behind was one of the better ones. It was festooned with moss thanks to years beneath a dripping overhead pipe. The cool biomass would play hell with enemy infra-red, but he couldn't risk staying there too long. Gunfire would go straight through it.

He crouched, then sprang out and dashed across the room. As he ran, he sprayed gunfire at anything that looked like a possibility. He shot at smoke moving in

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doorways, fired through open approaches, and blazed through the torn remains of filing cabinets. The bright energy bolts loosed fresh clouds of billowing dust from everything they hit. By the time the showering debris hit the floor, Boris had dropped behind a wide durasteel plate that had once covered the pit for the building's water valve.

He scowled. During his dash, he was sure he'd seen another intruder, in functioning thermoptic camouflage. He'd spotted the telltale dust swirl in the corridor too late to direct accurate gunfire at it, but he was pretty sure he had made the figure duck for cover.

He urgently felt around behind the slab. There was an old floor safe which should contain some compact grenades... He grinned as he found them, and turned his full attention back to the attackers.

The stub chose that moment to fire again, accompanied in the same instant by the thrum of rapid-fire weapons. The nearby door to the corridor shattered, and rubble showered across the room. His foes seemed to have shifted focus, targeting one of his electronic decoys in the corridor. Maybe he could get a clean shot at one of them...

Boris prepared to rise and fire from his barricade.

Before he could, one of the desk barricades vanished in a cloud of splinters. Another durasteel plate, which he had bolted to the privacy panel of one of the desks, whistled through the air and buried itself in the wall just three feet from him.

Maybe they hadn't been fooled by his decoys at all. Boris gave up on the idea of a clean shot, and threw a grenade into the corridor instead.

The explosion was deceptively brief and muted, but the shrapnel was thrown at hypersonic speeds.

Thousands of sharp flechettes hammered themselves into the ceiling and walls. The panel he was hiding behind acquired a collection of protruding bumps as the shrapnel punched deep into the metal.

Boris followed up the grenade by rising up and opening fire, but there were no clear targets. He took the risk of blazing a stream of gunfire in a wide arc, then abandoned the slab and ran for a wooden divider right next to the corridor.

He barely reached it before the spot he'd just left was shattered by a burst of enemy fire.

Both gunmen were still active, and Boris was running out of both time and options. The divider he was cowering behind was three inches of solid hardwood, and offered no protection from their weapons. He grabbed his terminal, and activated the only trap he had left. It was positioned in the offices on the other side of the corridor. He had hoped to make better use of it, but he could no longer afford to wait. As he sent the signal, it occurred to him the receiver may have been destroyed by all the mayhem.

A deafening crash reassured him it had not, and he grinned. The old fire safe across the corridor was a heavy one, and it made a hell of a mess as it was blasted across the room, through the wall and the corridor.

He heard a brief cry of surprise, heavily muted by a combat helmet. The ploy definitely grabbed their attention. Emerging from his tenuous shelter, Boris crept toward the area he had so recently fired at.

The corridor was too exposed, and he avoided it by moving directly into the next office, then again into the one after that. Each office's battered door earned a hawk-like glare as he passed it. His rifle followed his

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gaze, ready to blaze away at the slightest movement of the dust-laden air. The distant stub fired again, but it hit the office he had vacated. It seemed that he had managed to give them the slip, and was circling around behind them.

He edged toward the main corridor, and peered past the twisted hinges still attached to the doorway. The door at the main entrance was still there, ajar and apparently unguarded.

He was about to move across the corridor to the opposite office when the de-camouflaged intruder seemed to appear from nowhere.

The man was silently running down the corridor. Boris was out of his field of vision, and the man ran blindly past and out the exit. Boris considered running after him, but the stub made leaving the building deadly. If he wanted to run, Boris was going to let him.

Leaving his cover, Boris rose and dashed ahead... straight into an invisible figure who was also heading for the exit.

It felt like running into a moving truck. His rifle flew from his hands, and the intruder's camouflage flickered and stuttered, briefly revealing a powerful figure with several protruding cranial implants.

Boris staggered against the corridor wall. Sheer terror gave him the impetus to roll with it and rebound to kick at the man's crotch with all his strength. His boot met smooth armor, and his agony lanced through his foot and up his leg. The contact made the attacker fully visible again, long enough for Boris to see he had dropped his own gun too. The figure moved quickly, and drew something smaller from his hip.

Boris didn't waste time trying to wrest control of it. Instead, he threw his weight toward the man and

gripped his chin. Kicking hard, he used his forward momentum to launch himself into the air and over the intruder's head. Hindered by the weight of his armor, the man couldn't turn quickly enough to follow the move, but he did have time to use the weapon he'd drawn.

Boris felt a blade stab into his forearm as he yanked the man's head backward. His own feet found the floor again, and he found himself standing back to back with the intruder, his grip on the man's chin still intact.

Boris clenched his teeth against the pain, and heaved the figure into the air. The armored warrior's frantic twisting was not enough to compensate, and his heavy body pulled at his contorting neck. Vertebrae cracked, and the body fell limp to the floor.

Boris staggered away, gasping for breath as he looked about feverishly for his rifle. He spotted it, picked it up, and noticed the man's knife was still protruding from his arm. He tugged it out. The wound was slick with blood, which dribbled freely down to his hand to fall in thick drops. He ignored it, and glanced about for further threats.

He couldn't see any. He was standing fully exposed in the corridor over the body of an intruder, and there wasn't another soul in sight. Even the stub seemed to have stopped firing.

From beyond the open door, he heard the distant whine of a skycar gaining height. In a neighborhood like this, it could only belong to the attackers.

They were leaving.

He turned to look back toward the warehouse where the children sheltered, and felt a surge of fear. He broke into a sprint and charged through the

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corridor, leaving a trail of blood on the dust-strewn rubble behind him.

He jumped across the stub-smashed corridor floor, and ran into the warehouse proper. He hurried on toward the elevated offices, glancing from side to side as he took in the changes.

The massive freight door bore a fresh addition, an oval-shaped entry sliced neatly through the metal near the top of the doors. In the darkness beyond it, he could see the inside of a cargo container. It held discarded food wrappers and an empty water bottle.

He stabbed at his terminal and sent the signal to recall the skimmer. A green light flashing in response, signaling that the distant vehicle had heard and was coming to pick them up.

“You kids better damn well be there...” From below, the elevated office looked intact and undisturbed.

He reached the steps, and bounded up them three at a time. With blaster drawn, turned sharply through the open doorway and into the short passage. Slamming into the wall, he halted with his gun trained on the space ahead. It was empty, quiet, and the door to the heir’s room was ajar.

The ends of the shattered security bolts were still lodged in the frame. With his blaster gripped tight in his blood-slick hand, Boris kicked the door wide open.

For a moment, he genuinely wondered if he was having some sort of nightmare.

Possession of a flak gun drew incredibly harsh sentences pretty much everywhere in the Cluster. As a result, they had become so rare they might as well have not existed. But as impossible as it was, only the poisoned ceramic shards of a flak gun could have

produced the result before him. The heir's faces had caught only a few of the high speed fragments, but those cuts were still festooned with swollen veins and lined with blackened flesh.

They seemed to have died fairly quickly.

Alexander's gun was still fully charged, lying at his side in the pool of dark purple blood draining from the bodies. The one hand that was still attached to Jem held Ruce in a tight grip. The stuffed toy's head was sliced open down the middle, the cut splashed with her blood.

Boris lowered his blaster. He'd failed them. The heirs to the throne of Dimonah were dead. He began to feel weak, and leaned against the doorframe.

The movement was detected by a small device about the size of a hockey puck, unnoticed on the floor to his left. The resulting shockwave threw his unconscious body out of the room.

Chapter Seven: Verdict

The Colonel contained his impatience as Xavier sadly shook his head. “I’m sorry Colonel, It simply beggars belief that Boris and Temae both survived while the heirs did not. It is only right that the investigation is treating it as suspicious.”

The Colonel sat back in his chair. The bugproof chamber felt stifling and small, a side effect of the pale gray paneling that consumed sound. The metal table between them didn’t help either. It felt like a police interview room.

“I checked out the warehouse myself Xavier, along with the civilian police. It looked like the killer cut through a freight door to enter. With the stub firing at him, Boris probably never heard a thing.”

Xavier scratched his chin through his goatee. “That is as may be. But I expect you know as well as I that there are other possible explanations.”

The Colonel frowned. Unfortunately, the man had a point. “From what Boris has said, the killers knew where they were.”

“Yes, and on that point at least we must all take him at his word. How could they have known? Do you have any ideas?”

“None that I am ready to share at this stage.” He hesitated, rubbing his eyes. “How is Temae?”

“Her concussion is mild, and she should be able to return to her duties tomorrow. She was very fortunate.”

“Hmm. What other news?”

The Viscount’s eyes narrowed. “Her Majesty has indicated that she intends to follow tradition. The funeral will be delayed until both moons are at their zenith. That’s not far away, only two days before the Handover.”

The Colonel gazed down at the table. “Nothing more from forensics?”

“I advised the chief investigator to notify you directly of any developments. Apparently the flak gun has some genetic material on it, but it is too badly damaged by heat to be readable.”

A message from the civilian police arrived through the Colonel’s implant, and he politely touched his ear as he listened to it. It was news he definitely did not want to hear.

Xavier’s brow furrowed. “I know that look. Is it further news from the investigation?”

The Colonel’s gaze flicked uncertainly from the table to the Viscount. “An arrest warrant has been issued for Boris.”

Xavier winced. “On what charge?”

The Colonel gripped his wheelchair, and pulled away from the table. “Regicide,” he said as he rolled toward the door. “Two counts.”

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Kalaanda Police Chief Benjamin Hill tilted his chair back, prompting the aging furniture to squeak in protest. He ignored the sound, locked his fingers behind his graying crew-cut, and forced himself to watch the morning newscast on the terminal on his desk.

The Ranboen newsreader smiled far too often for his liking, but the channel had the highest ratings and at times like this it was wise to hear what the public was listening to. At least the man looked earnest as he read to the camera.

Yesterday's surprise arrest has done little to quell either the pro-Ranboen or pro-Hoparin demonstrations, many of which continued through the night. Feeding the unrest is growing tensions between Death Penalty advocates and Human Rights groups. Dimonah's colonial laws on regicide have remained unchanged since settlement, and even the Chief Adjudicator has conceded that a regicide conviction would require a death sentence.

Helping matter to some degree is the fact those same colonial provisions also disqualify a public jury for the trial. Our forbears considered capital punishment to be a matter too important for public juries, and a panel of three Adjudicators must be convened instead.

The latest Police report confirms that so far, the Confederation-born bodyguard Boris remains the only person charged with the crime. How many others were involved remains unclear, but it is likely that once the trial starts...

There was a knock on his door, and Hill muted the broadcast. Superintendent Stokes opened the door to lean inside.

“Sir, a visitor from the Palace is here.”

He nodded. “Why do I care?”

“She’s the servant. You know, the one who was there.”

Hill raised an eyebrow, then switched off the newscast to check the time. The girl had been interviewed more times than he could count. “I’ll see her in a few minutes.”

The Superintendent nodded, and began to close the door behind him.

“Stokes?”

The door opened again. “Sir?”

“Get on your terminal and call the Adjudicators Office. Harass them until they tell you if they’ve set a date for the trial yet.”

“Yes Sir.” Stokes hesitated, frowning.

Hill knew what was on his mind. Trials normally took weeks to schedule while evidence was finalized. He took pity on the man.

“I strongly suspect the Palace will fast-track this case.”

Stokes hesitated a moment, then entered the room, and closed the door behind him. “Okay, you have me hooked Sir,” he said. “Why will they rush something as important as this?”

“You can’t guess? With the Prince and Princess gone the handover is everything. The Queen wants stability restored by the time it happens.”

Stokes raised his eyebrows. “That’s a tall order. She’ll *definitely* have to act quickly.”

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“We’ll need additional officers on duty in and around the High Court building, and I need to know when. In fact, go ahead and cancel any leave scheduled to start between now and the handover. This is going to get much worse before it will get any better.”

“Understood Sir.” Stokes and headed for the door.

Hill checked his terminal as Stokes left. Of all the stations in the capital, the servant Temae had come to the one where the offworlder was being held.

That was certainly not a coincidence.

Boris groaned, and rubbed his eyes. The flickering image on the terminal mounted on the wall of his cell was giving him a headache. The plastic 2D display was covered with scratches, and he suspected the device was even older than he was.

He hadn’t been able to find many articles on the case against him. The prison’s Network filters were wide-ranging, and allowed access to little more than a short list of approved texts. He certainly couldn’t access the archive on his ship.

He slumped back onto the prison bunk. The flickering screen was harder to read at a distance, but for some reason it was easier on his eyes.

The text he’d been trying to read was a historical perspective on Dimonah’s criminal code, and it made for terribly dry reading. Like most Colonial worlds, Dimonah’s first laws were uncompromising and brutal. Even some varieties of theft could get people executed. They had mellowed substantially over the years, but death sentences was still technically possible. In practice, innumerable amendments prevented it from actually being used in all but the most extreme cases.

The only crimes for which death was the only available penalty were genocide, and regicide.

Apparently, he had the dubious honor of being the first to be charged with either in living memory. It felt almost surreal.

He sat up and closed the annoying document, and searched instead for details on the method of execution. Among the annoyingly short list of results, he found a summary of the legislation.

A condemned criminal shall be permitted to choose the method of his or her execution. The choices are as follows:

Firing Squad

This is the default procedure should the condemned fail to choose. Three live charges and three blanks are randomly distributed among a squad of six, who fire simultaneously at the center of the chest.

Lethal Injection

A two-phase injection process. The first drug places the subject in a coma, while the second stops the heart and paralyzes the lungs. Generally regarded as the most humane and cowardly option.

Suicide

The subject may use a knife to end their own life and preserve a measure of honor. Update: This option was discontinued under the reign of King Leonard II, when the choice was abused and a guard seriously wounded.

Death March

The condemned is taken to the Baphomet

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wasteland, and abandoned to make their own way out on foot. Satellite monitoring of the desert ensures no outside assistance. In theory, if the subject is innocent the grace of God will grant them survival.

Strangulation

Provided as a fallback method for isolated instances when resources are sparse.

Boris scratched his arm through the bandages, and checked for background data on the *Strangulation* topic. The data appeared quickly, and he wasn't at all surprised to find the option had never been used. The next topic he looked into was *Death March*.

There were dozens of essays and documents on the subject. He started with the first article listed, and quickly reached the conclusion the March was designed to exceed human limits several times over. Nobody had ever come remotely close to surviving, but that hadn't stopped one in eight condemned criminals from choosing it over the centuries. Unused to the extreme weather of Dimonah, he would hardly do any better.

According to the statistics, the last person executed on Dimonah was a woman, convicted over a century ago on an impressive 37 counts of murder. The fact that she had opted for firing squad was one of the factors that had helped change the law. It was clear the prospect of death hadn't deterred her.

Boris switched the terminal off and lay down.

Why the hell were they charging him, anyway? It didn't make sense! He wished he'd never even heard of the stupid planet. He'd failed, and the heirs were dead. Everything was out of his hands, including his own fate.

He wondered what Dalamai was up to. After the assassination, she was out of options. She couldn't fall back on cloning; clones were barred from holding the throne. Besides, it took years to train a child to be a ruler.

He draped his injured arm over his eyes to block out the light. Maybe everything would all just go away if he ignored it hard enough...

He heard a distant door clang open, and two sets of footsteps approaching on the tough vinyl floor. The steps grew louder until they stopped outside his door, then the cell brightened as the door became transparent and let in more light.

“Offworlder! You’ve got a visitor.”

The voice was the Police Chief’s, which he took as an sign that his visitor was someone of note. Maybe the Colonel?

Boris opened one eye, and peered past his arm at the door. Two figures stood on the other side of the smeared panel, with two alert-looking guards standing behind them. He recognized Chief Hill, but the sight of the second figure made him grunt in surprise. It was Temae, her white uniform largely covered by a simple gray cloak.

Armored sensors on the ceiling above her swiveled as they studied both her and him, ready to record anything incriminating.

He grinned mirthlessly. He was the only prisoner in the entire cell block, and there were probably sensors in his bedding. Chief Hill had told him it was all for his own safety. He may even have been serious.

The Chief unfolded a chair for Temae. “You’ve got ten minutes, Miss. That’s all the regulations allow.”

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Temae smiled gratefully. “Thank you, Chief Hill.”

The man departed, but the guards remained. Temae sat on the chair, as close to the glass-like door as she could get. Her knees were practically pressing against it.

Boris stayed where he was on the narrow bunk, and lowered his arm. The prison jumpsuit didn’t have sleeves, and the bandages on his arm were making his forehead itch.

Temae fidgeted in her lap. “Boris?”

He forced his depression out of the way enough to rise to a sitting position on the edge of the bunk where they could see each other properly. She looked distraught. He attempted a smirk to lift her mood, but it didn’t work. She could see his heart wasn’t in it.

“Hi Temae.” He wondered if he looked as exhausted as she did.

Her mouth opened to speak, but she seemed to have trouble coming up with the right words to say. Her gaze dropped awkwardly to the floor. It was the first time they had met each other since she had left the warehouse to fetch supplies, and he wondered if she was having trouble deciding where to start.

“How’s your head? I heard you got hit pretty hard.” he asked.

She looked up, and managed a smile. “It is much better, thank you. I am again able to keep food down. How are you?”

“Bloody miserable.” He let himself slump against the wall behind him.

“Your arm must be painful.”

“Oh, it’s not that bad. I’ve got to say I’m impressed with the bandages. They’re horrible wispy things that tear as soon as you look at them, but they work. It seems my hosts here don’t want me strangling anyone

with them. Or hanging myself either, I guess. Isn't that right guys?" The two guards remained silent. "They're not good conversationalists. Probably just as well, I think they hate me." He sighed. "I'll be nice and healthy for the start of trial tomorrow. Plus the firing squad, if that's what they have in mind."

Temae's face fell. "Boris, *please* don't say things like that! Our laws are good, the court is just. The Prosecutor must *prove* you to be guilty and I know you are not!"

Boris rubbed his brow. "Something about this stinks, Temae. I was arrested far too quickly..."

"It will be all right. Your name will be cleared, nobody will think any worse of you."

Boris burst into laughter. "Like hell they won't!" He shook his head. "Look, people will think what they want. It's the *case* that worries me. The prosecution wouldn't be bringing it to trial if they didn't think they could make it stick. My Defense Consul came by again this morning. She's far from confident."

Temae gently shook her head. "Have faith, Boris. Justice is on your side."

"Well, I admit that stewing over it won't help." He took a deep breath, and tried to relax. "I've caught some newscasts saying there's merry hell in the streets. What's going on?"

Temae hesitated. "There are demonstrations, from many groups. Most of them have been peaceful. Some of them blame the Redeemers for what has happened, while others..." She hesitated. "The others call for your execution." She lowered her gaze to the floor. He wondered if she felt ashamed of her fellow citizens. "Civil Rights groups are angry, they say killing has no

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place in modern society. There are so many voices, but all of them want justice.”

Boris nodded grimly. “Yeah, people love to see justice done,” he grumbled. “But only if it’s not being done to *them*.”

Boris glanced to his left, up at the public gallery. It covered the entire width of the court and it was packed. He hoped the security screening had been thorough.

The hardwood benches laid out beneath the gallery seemed to be entirely filled with journalists, including several that he recognized from local Network news. Temae was among them, intently watching the prosecutor with an intensity he found strangely unreadable. He turned back toward the prosecutor. The man was still talking, arms waving and hands gesticulating like an overzealous stage actor.

“Defendant Boris!” he cried. “I put it to you that as a mercenary, your loyalty can *by definition* be bought. Further, that it was indeed bought, by a party hostile to the Palace, and that you in fact arranged the entire assassination together with the two men who you *claim* attacked you! Is that not true?” The Prosecutor glared at him, a rare pause of his ranting that lasted long enough for his blue robe of office to settle about him. He was standing directly in front of the empty jury bench, serving as an uncomfortable reminder of the three Adjudicators watching over proceedings.

Boris carefully kept his expression neutral, and tried to look more comfortable than he felt. “That’s not true,” he replied.

“Then *how* do you explain the fact that these men clearly knew exactly where you were? Exactly where to find this safe-house of yours?”

His Defense Consul had told him to expect that one, and Boris shrugged. “I can’t explain what I don’t understand.”

The Prosecutor resumed his pacing, one hand behind his back. The pose was so stereotypical it was almost comical. He’d been doing it a lot. It was almost as though he had the cuff caught on something back there.

Text appeared on the court displays, and Boris glanced up at it. It was the record of proceedings to date, all three days of it. The screen selected the record of the first day, zoomed into it, and highlighted one passage.

The prosecutor pointed at a woman in red robes, seated at a bench in front of the gallery. She was his Defense Consul, furiously taking notes. To Boris, that didn’t seem promising.

“Your Defense Consul here claimed that the two dead men found in the warehouse constitute proof that they were hostile, did she not?”

“They sure didn’t come to deliver pizza.” There were some amused noises from the public gallery. That was good, he needed to get people on side.

“Yes or no, Defendant Boris.”

“I believe she did.”

“There is a Confederation saying, isn’t there, that there is no honor amongst criminals?”

Boris drew a deep breath, and tried to contain his temper. “I believe so. We have many sayings, including some about lawyers.”

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The Prosecutor gave no sign of noticing the barb. “I put it to you Defendant Boris, that a greedy mercenary who betrayed his employer would betray his fellow criminals for the same reasons! Such a betrayal would easily account for both the corpses and the very minor injuries you sustained, would it not?”

Boris hesitated. This was a trap, but for the moment he couldn't see a way out of it...

“That is a highly viable explanation is it not, Defendant Boris?”

He shook his head. “No, it isn't. The kind of people you describe sound pretty nasty, and I expect they would never trust each other enough to leave room for betrayal.”

“But surely if those two men believed in their cause, might it not blind them to the coming betrayal?”

Despite his best efforts, Boris scowled.

Through the entire trial, the Prosecutor had consistently stopped short of naming the Redeemers as his supposed partners in crime. But that didn't stop him from alluding to them when it suited him. He opened his mouth to speak, but stopped when his Defense Consul stood and interrupted.

“Your honors. The Prosecution is making ever more fanciful assertions without providing a shred of supporting evidence.”

The Prosecutor turned to face the Adjudicators. “Your Honors, I do indeed have evidence that the accused has indeed behaved as outlined, and I stand ready to present it to the court.”

The three Adjudicators spoke amongst themselves, and then their representative spoke. The only female of the three, seated in the middle

“Very well, let us see this evidence.”

“I recall Doctor Jack Woshan to the witness box.”

Woshan was the Queen’s personal physician. When Boris had first seen him he had taken him to be from a high gravity world, but apparently the man was a local. The court waited patiently as Woshan walked from the benches and entered the witness box.

“Doctor, remember you are still under oath. Yesterday you gave witness in regard to the autopsies you recently supervised, and the deduced method of assassination. I believe you have since been given security clearance to tell us something further?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Please tell the court about the implants you recovered.”

Boris straightened. What implants?

The doctor cleared his throat. “At the age of three, the Prince and Princess were each fitted with a small brain implant, to enhance their language skills and learning speed. These implants also tapped the optical and auditory nerves, recording both sight and sound for internal replay. This was a memory enhancement feature, which also ensured that they would never need to ask anyone to repeat themselves. During the autopsy, I located and removed these implants.”

The Prosecutor nodded. “Was the existence of these implants a secret?”

“Yes, very much so. Only the Hoparin themselves plus some essential security and medical staff were aware of their existence. I myself conducted the surgery to install them.”

“And was Defendant Boris among those who knew of these implants?”

“No. He was not.”

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The Prosecutor spoke to a court official. After a short pause, a civilian policeman entered with a security case handcuffed to his wrist. He placed the case of the evidence table, and opened it. Behind a panel of rockglass, two coin-like objects gleamed on a bed of gel. “These are the implants, submitted as exhibits C-11 and C-12, your Honors. Doctor, tell us what happened after the implants were recovered.”

“Under the presence of Palace security, we examined the implants and found a full 74 seconds of sound and sight still held in storage.”

The prosecutor produced this item himself, in a bag bearing the seal of the court. He held it aloft before placing it on the table. “Exhibit C-13, your Honors. With your permission, I wish to play some of this footage. Specifically, that recovered from the implant of Crown Princess Jemma.”

The Adjudicators didn’t respond immediately. Their designated representative the only female of the trio looked as stunned as Boris felt. But then she spoke without even bothering to consult the others.

“You may proceed.”

A court official took the data slug to the court’s player.

Boris shivered. He felt cold, but there was a sheen of sweat on his skin. As he watched, the court’s 2D displays lit up with the footage.

The viewpoint was low to the ground, and it took Boris a moment to realize it looking out from under one of the makeshift beds. The room looked even more dilapidated from that angle, but a part of him took some pride in the fact it was still undeniably clean. The view was looking toward an alcove that had once

held a small office kitchenette, but he had converted it to a makeshift ensuite.

The viewpoint swung to the right, and showed Alexander lying next to her, anxiously gripping his gun. In the distance, the muted sound of gunfire and explosions rumbled and echoed. It seemed to go on for a long time, and then stopped suddenly. The only sound was the breathing of the children. It seemed that all the fighting had stopped.

Then the chamber door was smashed open. The security bolts snapped, the door swung and slammed into the inside wall. The impact shook loose flakes of paint from the ceiling, which drifted down like a flurry of snow. A man strode in, facing the ensuite with his back toward them.

Boris stared. The figure was him.

At least, it was wearing his jacket. The white skeletal fist was the logo of the *Ghost Boxer*, the first cargo ship he's worked on. The logo was badly worn, with a burn across the middle he'd sustained from a near miss a year ago. In the figure's left hand was a bulky firearm he recognized as a flak gun.

The figure spoke. "Highnesses, it's okay. Come out."

Boris shivered. The man on screen sounded like him. He watched as the children emerged without hesitation, and Alexander lowered his gun.

No, don't lower your gun!

The figure turned, and Boris saw his own face gazing out of the screen. The face grinned, then raised his gun and fired.

The view turned toward Alex, quickly enough to see his gun falling to the floor. The Prince crumpled, his

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young face contorted with shock and disbelief through the pain. Then the view swung back to the murderer. The flak gun was pointing straight at the screen. It flashed. The view became a blur of motion, then settled to become a close shot of the floor. The view twitched or maybe convulsed twice. Then the screen went black.

The Prosecutor stood in silence, showing no sign of his usual exuberance. For a few moments, the courtroom was utterly silent. Then the blue-robed figure finally spoke. “The footage from the second implant corroborates this one, your Honors.”

Boris realized his mouth was hanging open, and he managed to close it. He felt dizzy.

So that was why he’d been charged. The last thing the heirs had seen was the man they trusted turning on them. Betraying them, brutally.

He turned toward the benches, hoping against reason to find some sign of hope. He saw Temae, but she couldn’t see him. Her tear-stained face was buried in her hands as she silently choked out her grief.

Chapter Eight: Baphomet

The Colonel limped around his room in a steady circle, forcing some life back into his legs as he tried to make sense of everything. It was late and he should have been asleep but his mind simply would not rest.

The guard rosters were one of the numerous distraction playing on his mind. The Elites were anxious to protect the Queen, but despite their record he wasn't prepared to trust them all. Not after everything that had happened. It was possible there were enemies within the Palace. Or perhaps someone was being blackmailed or bribed... How far could he really trust any of the staff? He was stationing guards to watch each other as much as the Queen and essential systems.

It wasn't sustainable. Eventually something would crack, and he was worried it could be him.

He paused by the window, and peered out at the Capitol. After the initial chaos, the quiet night was a welcome change. It was largely thanks to a public

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appeal by the Queen, not just the cold. Her influence seemed to be as strong as ever, despite her approaching retirement.

Then again, perhaps the people were still as shocked by the implant footage as he was.

He closed the windows, and continued his pacing. The exercise seemed to be helping him think.

Handover of rule to the Ranboen Corporation had become a foregone conclusion. Governor Keban had a lot to organize in the following week. When it came, the handover would be rough no matter how well he handled it. Maintaining security would be expensive, and there were already rumors of changes to the tax base. The people wouldn't like that.

That might be what the Confederation wanted. Restoration of order would give them a great excuse to move in. The Confederation Senate had a tradition of going soft on large commercial interests, they might even feel obliged to step in if Ranboen started bleeding money. They could take over the whole mess.

Confederation membership would probably be a good thing in the long term. But if it were forced on the planet, resentment would be easy to cultivate. Vested interests would do so, to further their own short term goals. Civil war would be the likely result. That could continue for decades, or even longer.

His gaze shifted to the cylindrical data slug on his desk, his copy of the damning evidence from the trial. He'd monitored the data recovery himself, and was certain the implant hadn't been tampered with. On the face of it, Boris had betrayed them. Maybe for a bribe, or maybe he had simply been working for his native Confederation all along. There was no doubt what verdict the court would deliver in the morning.

But despite that...

He simply couldn't bring himself to believe it. Boris had passed over too many opportunities, taken too many risks to be a traitor. The man was trustworthy, he was sure of it. Yet the evidence was clear.

The Colonel's legs trembled beneath him as their strength started to fade. He realized he had pushed himself too hard, sat down in a large leather chair and rubbed his sleep deprived eyes.

"There has to be something I'm missing," he mumbled.

He heard the distant hum of another riot control skycar passing over the city, patrolling the freezing streets.

Boris stood with the rest of the court, and watched the three Adjudicators entered and headed for their seats. The days of long-winded hearings were over, and the three had spent very little time deliberating.

That couldn't possibly be a good sign. He glanced once more at the gallery, but still couldn't find any familiar faces. Both Temae and the Colonel probably hated him and wanted him dead.

The Adjudicators took their seats, and everyone followed their lead. Boris settled down and watched as the senior Adjudicator addressed the Court.

"This court has completed its deliberations. We have reviewed all the evidence presented during the trial, and considered the arguments presented." The Adjudicator paused, directing her gaze at the assembled journalists. He realized she was speaking not to him, but the populace in general. "Our final determination is unanimous: On the charge of Treason, we find the

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defendant guilty. On the two charges of Regicide, we find the defendant guilty.” Boris clenched his fists by his sides, but otherwise remained motionless. The Public Gallery seemed relieved, even pleased. This was the verdict they had wanted. Or was it more than that? Maybe they had been afraid of the alternative.

“On the matter of sentencing, we are constrained by Dimonah’s standing charter. The crime of Regicide carries only one possible penalty.” The woman hesitated, and swallowed. “This court is therefore forced to issue a sentence of death. This sentence, in accordance with both tradition and precedent, is to be carried out by noon today.”

Boris blinked. *That* was a stipulation he hadn’t read about. He wondered if it had been intentionally omitted by the filter.

He heard the guards behind him shift their footing. Did they really think he’d try to escape in a place like this, surrounded by police? How stupid did they think he was?

“Defendant Boris. I believe you have already been briefed on the options now before you. Do you wish to make a selection as to the manner of your execution?”

Boris bared his teeth and growled. “I didn’t kill them, damn it.”

The Adjudicator’s eyes narrowed. “This court has determined otherwise, and any further outbursts shall forfeit your choice in this matter.”

Boris clenched his jaw, and contained an urge to leap across and throttle the woman. He’d never make it that far, but the very thought was awfully tempting.

“You must choose now, or not at all.”

He scowled. “Fine. I choose the Death March. It sounds like good *fun*.”

He knew he'd probably regret the choice, but it was the only way to live a little longer. It also had the gratifying result of surprising the three Adjudicators.

Judging from the number of gasps from the gallery, he'd startled a few journalists too. That was a worry. Maybe the desert was even worse than he'd heard.

The chief Adjudicator quickly recomposed herself. "Let the record show the condemned has chosen execution by Death March. Remove the condemned."

The guards gripped his ankles and wrists, and clamped chained manacles on him. Part of him kept watching for a chance to escape, but in his heart he knew it wouldn't happen.

Too many people wanted to see him die.

Governor Keban sat by his desk, gazing out of his office's broad window at the busy city before him. It had been a rough few months, with numerous matters proving irritatingly difficult to manage. But with the court verdict, things finally seemed to be improving. There was even a measure of calm on the streets.

Of course, he knew it might not last. The handover would change a lot of things. But for now, things seemed to be on the right track. He permitted himself a contented sigh, and enjoyed the feel of his soft leather chair.

There were of course still some significant issues and costs he still had to contend with. But he had managed to preserve his most significant strategic resources.

Keban ran one hand through his hair, straightened his suit, and returned his attention to his desk and the

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terminal lying on it. “New message. To Ranboen REO, Core systems. Maximum encryption.”

“Ready,” the device replied. Keban considered his words for a moment before continuing.

“Sir. I can confirm your orders have been carried out in full, and both heirs have been successfully removed. Queen Dalamai herself remains unharmed, and is very supportive of the upcoming transition. She is proving as useful as I expected her to be.” Keban paused, considering how much detail his supervisor would and would not want to hear. “The Colonel is recovering from his injuries. That is fortunate, as he will be useful in ensuring we don’t have some hothead assassinating the Queen before the handover takes place. As an added precaution, I have specifically instructed the Redeemers to stand down from all action until further notice. After their success with the heirs, they were quite pleased and compliant.”

He smiled. He had not yet explained his greatest achievement in this affair. “Just one of the four Confed bodyguards still lives. I have arranged to frame him for the killings, and he has just been convicted and sentenced to death. This leaves the Redeemers largely free of suspicion, and available for any future activities that prove necessary.”

He reached across the desk, and picked up his glass of whiskey. The ice had nearly all melted, forming a clear layer at the bottom of the drink. “In all, the handover is set to proceed without incident, and Ranboen shall gain unfettered control of the planet. I stand ready to implement the next phase at the appropriate time.”

Keban swirled his drink, then sipped at it. It was cold, a pleasant complement to the blazing sunshine outside. "Send."

"Message sent."

He turned back to the window. The final obstacle had fallen, and he had effectively already won. All he needed to do was watch everything unfold. Nothing could stop it now.

Of course, there was always potential for troublesome complications. The Colonel still warranted close surveillance. The man's mind was at times a little too sharp.

Well, he was useful for the time being. That would change after the handover. He'd simply have to monitor matters, and dispose of him when the time was right.

The Colonel watched as Xavier switched off the footage and the lights returned to full. The gray walls of the soundproofed chamber seemed to return from the shadows. Xavier seemed both tired and unconvinced.

"Colonel, I do see your point. But you have to admit it's trivial at best."

He nodded. "I will admit it is hardly conclusive evidence." The Colonel studied the tired man's face. "But it hardly fits. Honestly, have you *ever* heard Boris use the term 'your Highness'? It's as though it's against his religion."

Xavier shifted uncomfortably. The irreverence of the offworlder had never sat well with him. "As I said Colonel, I see your point. But people can act out of character while under duress. But enough of that."

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Colonel, I doubt you asked me here simply to hear my opinion. What's on your mind?"

The Colonel hesitated. "I can't really put it into words, but... This entire situation just doesn't feel right. Maybe it's just gut feeling, but I can't accept that Boris was responsible for the assassination." Xavier remained diplomatically silent. He didn't really have to say anything, the footage spoke for itself. "I'm missing something, Xavier. I just don't know what."

The Viscount leaned forward. "Start your own investigation."

The Colonel blinked, startled. "Sorry?"

"Never ignore a strong hunch, Colonel. If you think something is wrong, look into it. I doubt anybody else will. The court case is finished, and everyone is busy worrying about the handover." He put on a tired smile. "I managed your duties while you were in Hospital, so I can surely do it again. For a while, at least."

"You already have too much to organize, Xavier."

"I'll delegate." The Viscount sat back and chuckled. "Come now Colonel. Isn't this what you had in mind?"

The Colonel couldn't help but chuckle. "Xavier, I would hate to have you as an enemy."

The Viscount stood. "Very wise of you. I have no idea what you hope to find, Colonel... But if it's going to do any good you'll have to find it soon."

Boris leaned against the wall of the tiny chamber, and peered through the only window that offered any view of the ground waiting outside. The view was very limited. He could see only the skywagon's airfoils, and beneath them dozens of dunes that shimmered with heat.

They certainly hadn't wasted any time flying him out into the wasteland, but they were spending quite some time just hovering there above the sands. That suited him. He was in no hurry to die.

He turned to squint through the larger view port. If the six armed guards in the wagon saw his nose pressed against the glass, they paid it no heed.

He slumped back against the cell wall. The metal felt cool through his thin jumpsuit. His own clothes would have been far preferable, but when he'd asked they told him they had been incinerated after the verdict. The prison fabric was a poor substitute, and offered little protection against either heat or cold. It was probably intentional.

It was of course possible that the delay was due to some kind of last minute appeal, someone somewhere pleading on his behalf for clemency or something. But he refused to raise his hopes. It was far more likely the crew of the wagon was simply waiting for an appointed hour, or perhaps for satellite confirmation that the area was completely empty.

A voice spoke. The noise was loud and so sudden it made him hit his head against the wall. "As per the determination of the court, the sentence of Death March will now be conducted. May God have mercy on your soul." The accent sounded strange and unfamiliar. He suspected it was an old recording some overzealous public servant had dug up.

He scowled at the featureless metal walls. "*My* soul? You're the ones killing an innocent man, you stupid...!" Before he could finish, the floor vanished.

The surface slid open in the blink of an eye, and he dropped helplessly through into searing desert air. As

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he tumbled, he caught a glimpse of the skywagon rising above him.

He noticed two things about it. Firstly, the ceiling of his tiny cell had lowered until it was flush with the outer hull. *Very thorough*, he thought. *I didn't even think to brace myself.* The second thing he noticed was how horrifically far he had already fallen. It seemed unlikely he'd get the chance to march anywhere.

He hit sand. The side of a steep dune, which he slid and rolled down at a frightening pace. The hum of the skywagon vanished as the vehicle rose into the sky.

Finally, he slid to a halt near the bottom of the dune with limbs and chest aching. He spat sand from his mouth, did his best to blink it from his eyes, and squinted into the blinding sky in search of the departing skywagon.

He caught a glimpse of it as it flew away, and noted the direction it vanished in. Dinonah's massive sun was directly overhead, which gave him no hint of which direction was which. But a moon low on the horizon to his right looked like the larger of the two that orbited the planet. Judging by that, the skywagon had flown roughly west.

He struggled onto his feet. The sand was very fine and yielded readily underfoot with a high pitched squeak. It was as though the ground wanted to swallow him. The sand was a brilliant white, but the long hours of morning sunlight had heated the granules to point that felt painful even through his thin shoes.

The dune above him was too steep to climb. He trudged along the length of it, fighting the yielding sand as he followed the valley west toward a gentler dune. That one proved to be climbable. Clambering to the

top, he finally gained the crest and got his first good look at his surroundings.

The stifling air shimmered like an open oven. There was nothing around him but dune after dune all the way to the horizon. At least, he was pretty sure there was a horizon. The searing air rippled so much it was hard to judge where the land stopped and the sky began.

There were no landmarks, no mountains or prominent rocks that might help him maintain a steady course.

Well, the skywagon had gone west, and the dunes run roughly east to west. For the time being, that seemed as good a direction as any.

He began to trudge through the deep desert sands.

Keban watched Queen Dalamai sitting opposite him as his terminal searched the Network. She looked completely at ease and in control of herself. Only the hint of dark circles showing through the makeup beneath her eyes hinted at the grief she was keeping hidden.

It felt strange having the woman there in his office. Her purple robes and regal manner seemed out of place in a modern office. It was another sign of just how obsolete the Hoparin were.

The terminal completed the analysis with a brief chime. He examined the results.

“Yes Majesty, I confirm that count. Dimonah’s current legislation makes a grand total of 734 specific references to the ‘reigning monarch’, ‘ruling Hoparin’, or similar variation.”

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Dalamai smiled apologetically. “It is not as many as it sounds, Governor. We believe many of them can be addressed with a single amendment. Some are rather more involved, but we must ensure that when the handover arrives they are all references to the current ruler or government.”

Keban paused. “That’s a lot to bite off in a short time, your Majesty. Do you intend to review all changes personally?”

She nodded. “Of course. We must review every instance to be certain there is no potential for complications. Viscount Xavier and his staff shall assist, and I intend to ask Mayor Kent for her input as well. She has considerable experience with drafting legislation, albeit on a much smaller scale.” She paused. “Governor, it is essential we ensure Ranboen is not forced to alter laws too soon after handover. It could be seen in the wrong light.”

Well, the old girl was crafty indeed! Keban wondered if she suspected him as he nodded sagely.

“That makes good sense Majesty. But I fear change will most likely be necessary anyway. It is the one constant of the universe.”

Dalamai smiled. “How smoothly a change is introduced can make all the difference.”

Ah, that was good. She was on board after all. “Yes, I see your point. Very well, I shall send this list to the Viscount. I would be pleased to offer advice on any amendments you come up with.”

“Thank you.” Dalamai stood, and headed for the door. But she stopped just short of the door’s sensor. “There is one more thing you might consider, Governor.”

Keban looked up. “Yes Majesty?”

She turned and looked at him. “We must ensure capital punishment is completely abolished by the time handover occurs.”

Keban realized he was staring, and tried to gather his wits. The old woman’s steely eyes made it clear she was absolutely serious. “But... Even after what happened?”

The Queen looked saddened at the suggestion she might want revenge. “Once people come to believe that killing is acceptable, their thirst for blood can only grow. We must put an end to it as soon as possible. Xavier is already drafting an appropriate bill. I thought you should know.”

He swallowed. “Thank you, Majesty.”

“We shall not take any more of your time. There is much on your shoulders.” The Queen turned and left, the door sealing behind her.

Alone once more, Governor Keban wondered if the Queen Dalamai of twenty years ago would have agreed with the older version. He hadn’t known her then, of course. His own time on Dimonah had started only six years ago.

Well, let her have the changes she wanted. They would serve his purposes, and Ranboen would eventually be free to overrule them anyway.

Evening had come and gone, and it was another late night for the Colonel. He had lost count of how many pots of coffee he’d consumed since dusk. But whether due to his injuries or the need for sleep, the coffee seemed to be the only thing that kept him awake and his brain working.

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Freezing wind howled outside his window, while above his desk the footage from the implant looped over again and again.

His comparisons of the footage from Alexander's implant with Jem's showed no mismatches at all, though Alexander's of course lacked the final few seconds that were recorded on Gemma's.

All voices matched the profiles in his archives, although the recording quality was too rough to rule out the possibility they were very good imitations. All faces and body proportions checked out too. He'd even gone to inspect the warehouse again, before the court-mandated demolition team had moved in to annihilate it. Everything checked out.

He wondered if he was overdoing it. Maybe a good night of sleep would help... It had reached the stage when he knew the footage practically frame for frame. Maybe if there was evidence of tampering, it wasn't in the footage after all. Could he have been mindhacked? No, he definitely didn't have an implant. That had been checked.

Could he be looking in the wrong places? He hoped not. Try as he might, he couldn't think of anywhere else to look.

His door chimed. He queried the security system through his implant, and his terminal displayed footage of the person waiting outside. It was Temae with another small silver pot of coffee. He sent the command to open the door, and she came in. From the look of her, she hadn't been sleeping well either. He paused the footage.

"Thanks Temae. That'll be the last for the night, If I keep this up my stomach will never forgive me."

Temae swapped the pot for the cold, half-empty one on his desk. Her eyes were drawn to the frozen image over his desk. It was paused on a frame of Boris' face. She shivered.

"It certainly looks like him doesn't it," he said.

Temae nodded. "When... When I first saw it, I did not know what to think. But now I am sure it was not him. Boris is too kind to do such a horrible thing."

"You're really convinced he's innocent?"

The girl nodded firmly. "Colonel... If there is anything I can do to help, please tell me. I couldn't..." Her gaze dropped to the floor, and her voice lowered. "I wasn't there when the sentence was read." He took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"I understand how you feel, Temae. But we need evidence."

Outside the window, the wind howled.

Chapter Nine: Dust To Dust

Night on this damned planet was too long, and far too bloody cold!

The sand that had burned so fiercely during the day had cooled with the onset of night. Since then it felt like it had turned to ice. The frozen sands drew out the heat from his sunburned skin while freezing wind chilled him to the core. Yet the night was not even half over. It was going to get a lot colder yet.

Continuing to move helped to warm him a little. So he trudged on, along the top of yet another ridge to squint at the next depression. The moonlight was strong, and illuminated a flat expanse of darker sand between the dunes. In the moonlight, it looked blue.

He had learned to dread patches like that. Turning into the driving wind, he circled around the deadly sinkhole.

From his earlier reading, he knew the record for crossing the Baphomet Desert on foot was at 11 days and 29 hours. That was done only four years ago, by a

man with the latest endurance implants in addition to his environment suit.

The survival record for those on the Death March was less impressive, at four and a half days. That record was set during an unusually mild season, and the prisoner in question hadn't made it even a third of the way out. Nobody else had lasted more than two days.

On the plus side, he did have enough moonlight to see where he was going at night.

The sandy slopes in that area were less helpful. They seemed to have been laid out to curve and weave at random, and far too many were too steep to climb. Maintaining a steady course was proving far more difficult than he'd feared.

He skirted another patch of sand that looked a little dubious by climbing up a different dune. The shifting sand made it hard work, but the exercise provided some warmth.

There was less he could do about the wind that tore away his condensing breath. His body's moisture was steadily leaving him through his lungs. What had started during the day as a powerful thirst had since become a constant ache in his stomach.

The dune proved larger than most, and Boris reached the top to find a thoroughly depressing view of the surrounding wasteland. The crests and valleys curved and twisted into each other, making any path he chose a difficult one. He marched on along the crest, and planned a course through the next six dunes.

Then he spotted a bulge in the sand up ahead. A disturbance on the otherwise smooth flank of a dune far to his right. With his mind concentrating on the dunes ahead, he almost hadn't noticed it.

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He set off toward the anomaly, sticking to the crests whenever possible. The new course put him at right angles to the driving wind, which in turn made it difficult to maintain his footing on the treacherous sand. But whether due to the wind or the growing thirst, as he was drawing close to his target he stumbled and he fell.

The slope wasn't as steep as some, but he still tumbled halfway down before managing to stop. Struggling on toward the half-buried shape, the outline of the buried object became clearer.

It was a wreck, sand-blasted so badly he couldn't recognize the design. He felt sure it had been a ground vehicle, an old type with metal skin. The craft had been polished smooth by the sands, and in some areas even ground away to nothing. The winds must have buried and exposed the wreck countless times, grinding away at a different part each time. He dropped to his knees and dug the sand away, exposing more of the vehicle's side.

The sight of the exposed engine removed any hope of a miracle. Even after the years of erosion, the weapon damage was still evident. A projectile impact had destroyed it. Maybe a hypersonic cannon shell, or simply a guided round fired from orbit. Whether it was a colonial antique or the remains of a death march rescue attempt, the vehicle was never going to function again.

Boris wrenched at the remains of the door. It ground open with a squeal of dry metal, and a small avalanche of fine sand spilled out. Surprisingly, the cabin seemed to have held most of the sand at bay. Boris leaned inside and struggled to see in the dark interior.

A single corpse was there to greet him. It was slumped in the driver's seat, the skin and flesh withered like old paper. Shoulder-length blonde hair still clung to the scalp. Boris grimaced, and forced himself to search through the corpse's pockets.

The only item he found was an ancient terminal, with no power. It rattled when it moved, which was never a good sign for solid-state electronics. He tossed it aside, and searched the rest of the interior.

To his amazement, he found an intact bottle of soft-drink. It had sat there motionless for so long the liquid had distilled into separate layers of sweetener, color, and water. It looked pretty dubious, but at the rate he was going he doubted he could make it through the night without something to drink. He opened the bottle, and took a cautious gulp.

The water tasted like steel, but the sensation of liquid running down his throat was so wonderful he had difficulty forcing himself to stop and re-sealed the bottle. A godsend like that had to be rationed.

The only other item of any potential use was an oiled rain cloak still in the original packaging. He put on the long garment, and quickly decided it was a better find than the bottle. The fabric blocked out the freezing wind, and if he managed to survive until morning it would likely protect him from the worst of the sun too.

With some water in the stomach and somewhat steadier on his feet, he left the wreck to the mercy of the desert and resumed his trek.

After all, he didn't have much choice in the matter. Stopping for sleep in that freeze-drier weather would have seen him dead and buried within hours.

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“Mayor Kent. Would you please accompany us to the balcony?”

Susanna Kent looked up from her terminal, and found Queen Dalamai standing before her. She had been so engrossed in the reports from her office that she hadn't even heard her and the Elites come in.

“Your Majesty! Sorry, I was preoccupied. Goodness, we only have five minutes...” Kent snapped her terminal off, stood and quickly bowed to her Queen. Her long brown hair flowed over her face as she straightened, but she brushed it back with a practiced flick of her hand.

“It's good to see you again Mayor. It's been too long since we last talked.”

Susanna fell into step with Dalamai, and walked by her side out of the waiting room and through a wide Palace corridor. “Yes, it was last year wasn't it? At the last Settlement anniversary.”

Dalamai nodded. “Much has changed in that time, but after the handover to Ranboen the changes will be dramatic. We have too few politicians on Dimonah, and of those we do have we believe you are the most prominent.” The Queen paused, perhaps to make sure her words sank in. “Frankly, we have need of your skills.”

Kent blinked in surprise. The Queen was rarely so blunt. “I'll be honored to help in any way I can your Majesty.” Kent contained her curiosity. It was clear her Queen intended to explain herself.

“The handover is a crossroad for this planet, and nobody can say for certain where the roads ahead of us will lead. That kind of uncertainty is not profitable.”

“So Ranboen wants some certainty, so they can plan ahead?”

Dalamai nodded, pleased. "Ranboen is required by corporate law to put the interests of their shareholders before all else. Are you aware that they will be within their legal rights to resell management of Dimonah?"

"I... hadn't thought about it."

"If they did, the purchaser would have to move quickly to recover their investment."

Susanna's expression darkened. "Higher taxes, less spending."

"Our health and education budgets are already slim. The people would suffer greatly under such a scenario."

For a time, Susanna watched her black shoes and the carpet passing by beneath them. "Would the Confederation allow that? Here, within their own core systems?"

Dalamai's lips formed a tight line. "The Confederation is an unknown element. When it comes to corporate interests versus sentient rights, their resolve is uncertain. They could move either way." They reached a flight of stairs flanked by two Elites. The one on the left signaled Dalamai with a nod as they passed by and started up the steps. The Elites that had escorted them stayed behind.

"That is why we need your skills Mayor. You know the people, and you are accustomed to both popular politics and corporate behavior. We need to chart our world's way forward ourselves, before the handover. Something that provides stability."

Kent considered this. "Some sort of compromise between democracy and corporate management? A legislative bill that would appeal to Ranboen?"

They reached the balcony. The morning sunlight made Dalamai's face seem pale, and the shallow angle

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made her many wrinkles seem even deeper than they were.

The microphone before them was still switched off. A dull roar of wind echoed up from the city.

“Something like that, Mayor. An arrangement under which no party loses face. Please think on it, and test your ideas on whomever you need to. Our staff are at your disposal.” Dalamai stepped up to the microphone.

“Yes. I’ll get straight to work on it Majesty.”

Dalamai smiled. “Thank you. Dimonah needs to salvage a future from this, and I feel you’re best suited for the task.” Kent felt humbled, and then Dalamai raised one thin hand aloft.

The roar increased, and Susanna realized it was not caused by the wind but by the people assembled in the grounds and streets below. Every balcony she could see in every building was filled with people waving. Only two lanes of the street were clear of the throng, the bare asphalt bordered by police and simple rope barriers. It looked like the biggest turnout in living memory.

“I’ll do my best, Majesty,” she replied, her voice lost amongst the cheering.

The din slowly died down. To Kent’s surprise, the two heavy doors below the platform slowly swung open. The Queen had given no speech, in fact she hadn’t even bothered to activate the microphone. The funeral procession of the Prince and Princess began to edge out into daylight.

The Queen lowered her hand, and gazed down at the emerging procession. To Kent’s amazement, the crowd became utterly silent as the motorcade emerged. She could hear the engines of the twelve black groundcars as they moved into the boulevard, and even

the broad leaves of the lisamores could be heard gently rustling in the morning breeze.

Kent realized why Dalamai had asked her to be there. She was using the funeral to build a mental association between them in the minds of her subjects, building political capital Kent could use in the future.

A speech would only have blurred the impression, even for the funeral of her own children.

She turned to Dalamai to express her gratitude, but at the sight of a tear rolling down her monarch's cheek, her voice left her.

The Colonel blinked, and shook his head vigorously. The pilot's seat in his skywagon was too comfortable, and his minimal sleep was catching up with him.

The funeral procession warranted his full attention. He watched the projected displays inside the vehicle, and monitored the behavior of the crowd via police reports through his implant. The protective field around the balcony had limitations, and if they lost the last of the Hoparin before handover the entire planet would riot.

He switched to an optical sensor on the side of the vehicle, and studied the crowd on the street below him. The plascrete lip of the rooftop he was parked on obstructed the view of the building, but he could still see the street.

A voice merged with the stream of data coming through his implant. *Colonel, false alarm on the laser sniper. It turned out to be a discharging coil at an unregistered repair shop.*

The Colonel replied in the same way. *Are the civilian Police there?*

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Yeah, two officers came with us.

Ah, that made things easier. *Leave it in their hands.*

Yes sir, will do.

He took a deep breath.

The most dangerous stage had passed. The procession had cleared the central business district, and the Queen had finally retreated back inside the Palace.

In truth, he probably should head back himself.

A voice call came in from the Elites. He answered on the vehicle's terminal. "Colonel? We have someone calling for you on your direct line. Calls herself June. She's using a scrambled link that we can't trace."

The name sounded familiar, and it took a moment for him to remember that June was the contact Boris said was looking into the Redeemers for him. The call could well be a trap, arranged in advance by Boris and his cohorts. But it might also be the break he'd been searching for.

"Put her through," he answered. "It's a personal matter."

"Linking the call, Sir."

There was a click, and a female voice spoke before he could. "Colonel?"

"Speaking." He analyzed the call's encryption. It was very good, but it did have flaws. It could be being monitored. "I'm a little surprised to hear from you."

"This is so impersonal, we should meet. Are you available?" It seemed that whoever June was, she knew not to say too much over the link.

"As it happens, I'm available right now."

"How about we meet behind the Jakub Arcade?"

The arcade was packed, but the laneway behind it would likely be empty. It was cramped, sheltered from

satellite observation, and the drainage was awful. They'd hear anyone splashing about pretty easily.

"I'll be there in five."

"Good. Last one buys lunch." She cut the link.

The mention of food was presumably for the benefit of any eavesdroppers, but it made his stomach growl. He really shouldn't have skipped breakfast.

He started the wagon's engines, and took the vehicle up off the roof. The arcade was only a dozen blocks away, so he decided to take his time and circle the area first. He weaved around the city towers, and scanned the streets.

The laneway was empty. He drove in as close as the skywagon could get, and parked it on the damp asphalt street.

The door hissed open, and he stepped out into cool, moist air. As the door shut behind him, he strode into the laneway.

A cloaked figure separated itself from a doorway further down the lane. The figure walked towards him with an easy gait that ate up the distance. She came to a halt a few paces from him, and pulled her hood open. Her eyes were bloodshot, and he wondered if she had been pulling even more late nights than he had.

"Colonel," she said. "I wish we were meeting under better circumstances."

He was reluctant to volunteer any information until he learned more about this woman. "Boris mentioned you."

"The poor man... They did quite a number on him. He said I should trust you."

"I'm certainly no Redeemer."

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She studied his face for a time, then sighed and handed a single dataslug to him. "Here. I don't know who else I can take it to." She paused. "I would have contacted you sooner, I want you to know that. But I couldn't get out until today."

He turned the slug over in his fingers. "What's on this?"

"Everything I could get from the Redeemers. There are communications transcripts, supply orders, security directives... plus a few clearance codes I had access to. They might get you into their main HQ, if you can find it."

The Colonel frowned at her. "You don't know where their base is?"

"The HQ is the nexus of the organization. I spent years trying to get in. Fruitlessly, as it turned out."

"Is there anything here about the assassination?"

"Not directly. But you'll find a design for a duplicate of Boris' jacket, plus his voice profile. I also found a supplies list for temporary face alteration surgery, but there were no specifics with it."

He gazed at the small cylinder in his hand. The evidence she described wouldn't be enough to overturn the conviction, but it was exactly the kind of thing he'd been searching for.

"Use it, Colonel. Use it to help the Hoparin."

"I will, I promise. What about you?"

She shook her head. "They're on to me. I'm leaving."

"I can offer you protection."

She smiled and shook her head. "Sorry Colonel, but you can't. I've made my own arrangements offworld. You worry about yourself and that data. Don't trust anyone." Without another word, she pulled the hood

back over her head, turned and vanished back through the same doorway she'd appeared from.

The Colonel walked back toward the skywagon with the data, and loaded it onto the on-board systems.

There were thousands of documents. He recognized some names he'd had suspicions about for years, and there were more files about Boris and the other guards. It even had his latest roster for the elites.

There was a serious leak at the Palace, and Boris was innocent. If he was still alive, he needed to move quickly to keep him that way.

He called Temae as the wagon lifted off.

“Good Morning Colonel.”

“Temae. Do you remember our discussion last night? We spoke of a certain topic.”

There was a pause. “Yes, I remember. I stand by it.”

“I'm going to hold you to that.” He considered their needs. “Pack a few days of food and water. I'll notify the Elites that we're visiting the alpine training facility in Gloume. I'll pick you up from the Palace roof in ten minutes.”

“I will be there.”

He cut the link, and started back toward the Palace. Bringing Temae with him would make his departure seem less suspicious, and it would also allow him to keep an eye on her. The question of how the Redeemers located Boris and the heirs was a riddle that Temae was one possible answer to. It wasn't one he could bring himself to believe, but it would be prudent to allow for the possibility.

Hopefully, his skywagon's stealth abilities would allow them to pluck Boris from the desert without them being tracked. With his help and the information

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in the datslug, it might finally be possible to learn what role the Redeemers had been playing.

He let the vehicle fly toward the palace on automatic, as he pored over the documents from the datslug.

Boris stumbled onward, the sands blurring in and out of focus before him. He'd found that if he didn't concentrate on watching the ground, it tended to suddenly swing up and hit him in the face.

He had survived the night largely by staying on his feet and refusing to rest. The few hours sleep he'd caught that morning hadn't been enough to make up for it. Noon was drawing closer, and he knew he wouldn't live to see the sun set. Hell, at the rate he was going might not even see noon.

The wind was the worst. It blasted dry, oven-like air that drank away every drop of moisture from his body.

He stumbled, and the hood of the oiled cloak caught the wind and flapped open. Bright sunlight glared, painfully hot against his bare face. He tugged the hood back on, and tried to keep the garment pulled tight around his shoulders.

He stubbornly kept the empty bottle in his left hand. He couldn't remember when he'd emptied it... sometime during the night, probably. But he did remember deciding to keep it, with the intention of using it to recycle his own urine. But it turned out that his body was way ahead of him. His bladder was as dry as the wasteland he trudged through. It was pointless. After sparing one final glance at the bottle, he let it fall from his fingers.

Only a few steps later, his feet failed him and he fell.

It was awfully tempting to lie there, to rest. He wanted to sleep, but he knew it would mean death. The driving wind was already starting to bury him with driven sand. He forced himself back onto his hands and knees, then climbed painfully to his feet. After some trouble staying upright, he managed to walk again. It struck him that in this particular contest of mind over matter, matter was winning.

He grinned, and felt his dry lips painfully crack. "Matter matters," he croaked. The use of his dry vocal cords sent him into a fit of coughing. The word *matter* seemed awfully amusing for some reason. He wondered if that was a bad sign, and shook his head in an attempt to clear it.

That proved to be a mistake. The movement induced a wave of dizziness, his feet collided with each other, and he pitched head first into the ground again.

The dizziness took a very long time to fade.

Boris groaned, and lifted his face from the sand. The sun was high in the sky, too high to guide him. He forced himself to his hands and searched for the moon, but couldn't find it. Confused, he looked again. He finally found it, behind him.

That wasn't right. It was too long since he'd checked, and he'd veered south.

Or was it east?

With effort, he managed to force himself back onto his feet. Turning in what he figured was a westerly direction, he set off again.

The sand clung to his face and eyelids, but he was too tired to rub it away. He could still see, after a fashion. There for example, just ahead. He could see...

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The sight made him falter and he nearly pitched over again. It was Alexander, dressed in the full robes of a King. They were too long for him and half the length lay on the sand.

“Why did you kill us?”

Boris swayed, automatically grabbing for his absent blaster. A sudden sense of something behind him made him lurch around, to find Jem and her toy bear Ruce standing behind him. But it was Ruce holding a doll-sized Jem, the pieces of her stitched together with cotton wadding showing through at the seams. The bear was horribly alive, its fleshy head split open and oozing purple blood. It gazed at him, and spoke with Jem’s voice. “You betrayed us.”

Boris stared wide-eyed, struggling to stay on his feet as the world rolled. He tried to speak Jem’s name, but his parched throat managed only a dry rasp. His legs failed and he fell onto his back.

His legs hurt.

He dimly realized Alexander had shot him. He stared down at his legs and saw broken bone protruding from his knees. He reached down and clumsily tried to staunch the flow of blood.

The effort took too much of his strength, and he his grip on consciousness threatened to leave him. Ignoring the instinctive drive to tend the bloody wounds, he lay still and tried to stay awake.

He felt himself sliding down the dune.

Alexander and Jem seemed to have vanished as quickly as they had appeared. Were they ghosts? No, ghosts don’t have guns. The pain in his legs felt too real.

His eyelids were getting heavier, and he knew if he closed them he’d never see anything again.

JOHN ANTHONY CURRAN

Maybe it was all a nightmare, a dream. Maybe that's all life ever was. Real or not, it would be over soon.

He spent his last conscious moments admiring the perfect blue sky through slowly closing eyelids.

Chapter Ten: Foolishness And Trust

Mayor Susanna Kent sighed and rubbed her eyes. It was barely even lunch time, and she already longed for her bed and a good night's sleep. "All right Alby, let me go through this from the start."

On the plain gray desk, her terminal obediently listened. The Confederation-made device was not actually self-aware. Barely a thousand machines in the Cluster were. It didn't even stack up well next to the current crop of artificially intelligent terminals. But she'd had Alby since college, and would no more replace him than she would cut off her own hands.

She frowned as she composed her thoughts. "We need a plan that keeps the people, Ranboen, and the Hoparin all reasonably happy. The Hoparin angle is just Queen Dalamai, now the last of the line." She paused, and her terminal spoke up.

"Suggestion: Since the Hoparin reign will end soon, perhaps you need not consider them?" The AI's had a deep, male voice with a gentle tone. That was the

Confed fashion at the time she bought it, and she had grown to like it.

“No, Alby. Any agreement must be entered into before handover, so we need Hoparin approval.” Kent paused, drumming fingers on the narrow armrest. “You have a point though. Maybe I should focus on People versus Ranboen first.”

“Observation: Complex issues are often best addressed by reducing them into smaller parts.”

Kent turned from the window. “Okay, let’s try just the people. To calm the populace, we need to at least retain the current level of democratization. Preferably increase it.”

“Observation: That would help ensure you still have a job.”

She smiled. “But retaining a level of democracy would cost Ranboen power. To sell it to them, we must convince Keban it is in the corporation’s financial interests.”

She paused, thinking on that for a while.

Her terminal patiently waited a full minute before speaking. “Observation: You once mentioned that Governor Keban is an intelligent man, and may be willing to exchange a degree of power for greater social stability. Correlation: Stability is good for profits.”

Kent nodded. “Yes. But stockholders scare easily and Keban may not want to risk it. Her Majesty was very concerned about the possibility of a resell.”

She stood, and crossed to a cabinet with a refrigerated compartment. She poured herself a glass of cold juice. “But that’s more Ranboen versus Hoparin. I should leave that until later.” She frowned. “Damn, this

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is too difficult without knowing what Ranboen is thinking. Alby, call the CIB. I want to talk to Clint.”

There was a pause, and the fist-sized terminal projected a Network commlink display. A man in his thirties appeared, wearing a rather severe uniform.

“Secure line,” Alby announced.

“Susanna?” The man’s voice had an educated feel.

“Hi there, Clint. Have there been any new developments in the last few hours? Concerning Ranboen in particular.”

The man broke into a smile, and shook his head in wonder. “I swear, you call at the damnedest moments. I was just about to send you a message.”

Kent raised an eyebrow. “What’s up?”

“We’ve just had two reports in close succession, one from offworld and one from Kalaanda’s Spaceport. Ranboen has three large transports inbound, and if the reports are accurate they’re packed with riot control ‘bots. The public manifest suggests there may be troops too, plus enough supplies for an extended stay.”

Well that certainly told her what Keban was thinking. He was preparing for the worst. “How close are they?”

“Very! At typical cruising speed through the jump, the first ship will be here in a matter of hours. Ranboen is bringing them in as security for the handover.”

“How large are these transports?”

“See for yourself.” The reports appeared at the side of the display. “Believe me, you don’t send ships that big without filling them up. Keban must be expecting Armageddon. If they’re all deployed you won’t be able to sneeze without a trooper catching a cold.”

Kent set the glass of juice aside. Her appetite seemed to have vanished. “Thank you Clint. Please

patch any further reports through to me. Keep me posted.”

“You got it.”

The display snapped off.

Kent swallowed. “Alby, it appears I’ve underestimated the seriousness of this. Her Majesty was right to be worried.”

“Query: Shall I cancel the city council meeting this afternoon?”

Kent paused. “Cancel everything. And send for my car, I have to go to the Palace.”

The skywagon’s gravity engines were silent from outside the vehicle, holding it just inches above the sands. The two people laboring alongside it were having rather more difficulty.

The thermoptic sheets draped around them were part of the reason. The wind tugged and drove at the sheets, doing its best to tear them away and leave them exposed to the satellites above. But the primary reason was the limp figure they were gently hoisting into the vehicle’s interior.

The Colonel climbed in, followed by Temae. Securely inside, they cast the sheets aside, lifted Boris onto the craft’s stretcher, and hurriedly set the life support equipment to work.

A bioreadout appeared by the offworlder’s head, displaying weak life signs. The device considered the condition of the patient, and added the preliminary result of *Status: Coma*.

Temae looked to be on the verge of tears. “You were right, he is very sick!”

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The Colonel squeezed her shoulder. “Do what you can, I’m going to get us out of here.” He paused by the open door, and pointed a small scanner at a human shape in the depression where they had found Boris. The device displayed all green results, confirming that the decoy they’d left in his place was functioning properly. It was a top-end military model, and he felt it stood a good chance of fooling the satellites. He slid the door shut, and headed to the pilot’s seat.

Temae was still kneeling by the laden stretcher, so he tried to keep the wagon steady as he lifted off. The inertial compensator was designed to prevent injury in high-gee turns, not to provide a smooth ride.

He accelerated away from the site, banking gently toward the north. As Temae helped the stretcher connect a drip to their patient, he searched for signs that their intrusion had been detected.

The sensors were clear, which to his surprise rather annoyed him. It seemed wrong that such blatant flouting of the law should go undetected. For a time, they flew in tense silence. The thought occurred to him that if the Queen had learned what he was up to, she would have been livid.

He glanced over his shoulder at their patient. Between the stretcher and the various supplies they had brought, there wasn’t much room left in the small craft for Temae. But she seemed to be coping well though.

She had already cut away his dry rags, and was wiping the desert sand from his body with a wet cloth designed to treat burns. His sunburned skin readily drank up the liquid. Temae’s expression radiated both concern and single-minded determination. Boris was in good hands.

He increased their altitude, cutting along the edge of a dust storm to minimize their heat trail. "I know the administrator of a hospital in Dajerton," he said. "It's fairly close, just a few hundred clicks north of the range. He's an old friend and won't ask awkward questions."

Temae didn't take her eyes off her patient. "Good. I am doing what I can, but he needs proper care."

"It's amazing he survived that long. What's the biopanel say, is he stable?"

She consulted the readout. "He is no longer weakening, but he is in a coma."

"Good, that means he'll live. We need to..." A warning panel lit up on the console in front of him. Warnings from a dozen sensors flowed into his implant. "Damn!"

"What is it?"

He veered into the dust cloud. "We're being tracked. It's a tight beam from orbit, I can't lose it." A second warning display lit up, and red dots appeared on the scope. The Colonel canceled the stealth mode, and engines rumbled.

"Patrol interceptors are on the way." The craft vibrated as it continued to accelerate.

Temae finally spared him a glance. "Can we still make it to the hospital?"

"They're tracking us, it's no longer an option." He reached a decision, turned the craft to the left, and started toward the Capital.

A command through his implant switched the cockpit to tactical mode, and vectors filled the air about him. "The interceptors are coming from the coast, so I'm making for Kalaanda. If we get there before they

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reach us, we may be able to lose the orbital beam in the city.”

“Won’t the police be waiting for us?”

He hesitated. “Let’s not worry about them until we make it that far.”

He frowned. It didn’t make any sense... The skywagon wasn’t top shelf technology, but it was among the best on the planet. The tracking beam could only have locked on if it knew what to look for.

Had somebody tipped them off? Temae was the only one he’d told, and even she hadn’t known the details until they left. She hadn’t had a chance to contact anyone since. He knew his vehicle was secure, he checked it regularly.

Maybe they had simply noticed the switch, and carefully scanned the area...

A chime from the bioreadout made him turn and look around. The *Status: Coma* had switched to *Status: Conscious*.

Boris peered up blearily, taking in the pale gray ceiling and the teary-eyed girl in white. He looked far from reassured, and the Colonel guessed that while the offworlder knew he’d been picked up, he was not assuming it to be a rescue.

Temae produced a drink with a wide straw, and offered it to him. At first he flinched at the contact, but then he seemed to realize what it was and drank greedily. She smiled, and the apprehension faded from his eyes.

The Colonel turned his attention back to the dangers outside the vehicle.

The window across the width of Governor Keban's office was dimmed, and the tactical display glowing above his desk lit the room. The events occurring over the desert were laid out before him in detail. He watched with a detached sense of interest, a wry grin on his face.

The Colonel's illegal actions were unexpected, but he had still found a way to exploit the situation. The man certainly wouldn't be able to talk his way out of it. Interfering with a state execution carried compulsory prison time, during which he wouldn't be able to interfere with the handover.

Of course, his decision to tip off the police had a downside as well. If the Colonel did manage to evade his pursuers, he'd become a criminal with little left to lose. A random element.

He watched the display with growing irritation. The skywagon was drawing close to the city outskirts, and the interceptors were still out of firing range. They were designed for desert air combat, useless in the confines of the city. The interceptors were effectively out of the game. The civilian police would have to handle the vehicle with their local forces.

He watched as the Colonel's vehicle reached the labyrinthine streets and tunnels of Kalaanda's downwind slums, and began weaving expertly between the buildings. The pursuing police had difficulty matching the maneuverability of the military vehicle. Even the satellite sensors struggled to keep track of it as the skywagon moved erratically in and out of cover.

The man clearly knew what he was doing.

Keban sighed. It was clear the police were going to lose him. Their craft were too old, and the slums had

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become one continuous stretch of unsanctioned construction. The public sensor arrays there had long since been scavenged by the inhabitants. The tactical display looked something akin to a group of rats bumbling through a hideous, three-dimensional maze. The dot marking the Colonel's vehicle stopped moving, and then vanished as the satellite finally lost track of him.

Well, let him enjoy his little victory. It was a small battle in a war the Colonel didn't even know he'd already lost.

Keban smirked. He would be able to locate the vehicle again, in time. His source was still in place. It had betrayed the man's jaunt into the desert, and it would betray him again.

This time he would make the most of it, and burn away this loose end once and for all.

Boris found the process of waking was strangely slow. His thoughts were sluggish. As his senses slowly reported in, he began to wish he hadn't woken at all. His entire body ached.

"Welcome back."

There was a smile in the voice. Temae's voice, with a strange echo to it. It sounded like he was in a starship's cargo bay. He opened his eyes, and blinked as they struggled to focus on the room around him.

She was wearing her white uniform, but they definitely weren't in a ship, or in the Palace. The graffiti-clad brick walls looked very old, and sported the salt deposits and water stains he'd seen around the warehouse district. But it wasn't a warehouse. The ceiling was too low. He wondered if it was a torture

chamber, but the crates of food and water behind Temae suggested something less unpleasant.

Wait, hadn't he been executed?

He looked up at Temae, sitting there on an old crate by his side. He was lying on a stretcher on the floor.

Memories of the desert returned in a rush, complete with the sight of Alexander and the gun. Panicked, he lifted his head to see how bad the injuries were.

His neck complained, and he merely discovered that his entire lower body was hidden by a bedsheet. He slumped back onto the pillow.

Temae gently ran her hand through his hair. "Your legs are fine. Please rest." He blinked at her in confusion. "You... You talked in your sleep."

Boris tried to relax. Judging by Temae's gentle manner, he had probably been yelling fevered obscenities. He raised his head again, and managed to sit up. His back ached, and he felt terribly weak. He knew he wouldn't be able to stand.

Temae produced a food-pack from another crate. "Are you hungry?"

His mouth instantly watered. "Very."

She pulled a tab from under the pack, and a cloud of firework smoke flowed as the package fizzed and heated. She produced the lid of a crate as a tray and set the meal on his lap. He picked up the pack's disposable fork and attacked the food with gusto. It was chicken, with potato and beans. It was some of the best food he'd ever tasted, and he was working his way through a second pack when the Colonel walked in.

"Ah, I see our patient is awake."

Boris saluted the man with the fork, and kept eating.

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The Colonel sat on the one unopened crates. “Has Temae filled you in on our situation?”

Boris swallowed. “No.” His voice was hoarse, but it didn’t hurt to talk. “This room doesn’t look real promising though.”

The Colonel nodded. “We’re underneath the slums downwind of the mines. Pretty close to the floodplain. Let’s see, where to start...” He took a deep breath, and leaned forward. “The woman called June contacted me after you were sentenced. The evidence she provided confirmed our own suspicions as to your innocence, and we extracted you from the desert.”

“You mean we’re all hiding from the law?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“What did June come up with?”

“An awful lot of documents, including a lot of data about you. Enough for someone to disguise themselves as you well enough to fool the heir’s implants.”

Boris swallowed, and considered the news. “Not enough to clear me then. Wait, that means they knew about the implants!”

The Colonel nodded, but Temae looked shocked. “Yes,” he said. “We have a leak.”

Boris nodded, and started chewing on another forkful of sweet potato. He felt he was getting on familiar territory. Since his arrest, he had come to accept that the universe was out to get him, so not much had changed. “Do we have a plan?”

The Colonel gazed at the floor. “Our only lead is the Redeemers. It’s clear to me that they carried out the assassinations, and that’s where we’ll find further information.” He paused, and then stood up and rubbed his shoulder. “It’s the only way to clear your name and stabilize the political situation.”

Boris finished the last piece of tender, vat-grown chicken, and allowed Temae to clear away the debris. He felt like he could eat another two of the packs, but knew his stomach wouldn't be able to cope with it. "If we do this I'll be free to take my ship and go, right?"

The Colonel blinked in surprise. "Of course. Your ship is still on the palace roof with the others. It isn't up for tender until next month."

"Good." He lay back and closed his eyes. With the food in him he felt much better. "When do we start?"

"Soon. Handover is the day after tomorrow."

Boris winced. He'd been out longer than he thought. "Any ideas on how to find these Redeemers?"

"We have some of their security codes, but I'm open to suggestions."

This was clearly not going to be easy. "How are we for weapons?"

The Colonel patted a compact rapid-fire on his hip. "Well stocked. We have my skywagon and its contents. The police are watching for the vehicle, so it's hidden down here with us."

Boris nodded. "All right, let me sleep on it. Once I've had a rest, we'll go hunt some bad guys."

The Colonel nodded, and stood to leave.

"By the way," Boris added, "thanks to you both for saving my ass."

The Palace graveyard was more like a garden than the stereotypical grid of stone markers. Walled in with dense evergreens, four centuries of Hoparin rested beneath a range of monuments as varied as the individuals that had designed them.

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The graveyard was strangely peaceful, but the Viscount rarely visited it. His duties kept him too busy. But with the approaching handover weighing heavy on his mind, he felt himself driven to make the time and revisit the cause of it all.

The graves of the Prince and Princess were still open pits, ugly marks on the otherwise beautiful garden. Their ashes were still completing their traditional trek around the planet's cities and regions. They would have enjoyed a journey like that. They never got as many chances to travel as they should have had.

He gazed down into the waiting graves. Unlike most of the monuments, these would be in full sunlight year round. He wondered if that was Dalamai's influence, or simply a consequence of their placement in front of their father's dark gray monument. The stone pyramid was a relatively humble eight feet tall, but it was imposing nonetheless. The surface changed color during the day, as the sun caught crystals beneath the surface at differing angles. That afternoon, it was royal purple.

Xavier noticed a flaw in the color. He skirted the small graves, and stepped closer to the monument. Next to the King's chiseled name, he found a small smudge of lipstick in a familiar dark red.

The Viscount bowed his head in admiration. Even while managing a major political upheaval and a punishing schedule, Queen Dalamai had still found time for the family she no longer had.

His terminal chimed, interrupting his train of thought with what the device claimed was a call from Mayor Kent. He immediately answered, and her face snapped into the air before him. "Good afternoon your

Excellency. I have completed some further drafts that I'd like to run by you when you have a moment."

"So soon? I only left you a few hours ago."

She tried to suppress a yawn and failed. He found himself wanting to yawn too. "We have to get this done, the handover is noon tomorrow."

"Quite right. You are still in the Palace library?" The Mayor nodded. "Then I'll head up now and take a look."

A light raindrop struck his goatee, prompting him to glance up at the darkening sky. "It appears the weather wants me indoors anyway."

Kent smiled. "Thank you, Excellency. You've been a real help with this, I appreciate it." Her image snapped out as she ended the call.

Xavier offered a bow to the dead King, and hurried out of the graveyard. Duty called, and the rain was already coming down in heavy drops.

It seemed only the dead would rest that day.

Boris finished tying the laces of the military surplus boot with a grimace of effort, then slipped a boot-knife into it. Temae was still hovering close by, as if afraid he might pass out there in the shadow of the skywagon.

He smiled at her. "I'll be all right Temae. What's the local saying? I'm as strong as a mouse." In truth he felt like he could sleep for days, but there was no point letting her worry about it.

Temae's concerned frown deepened. "As strong as a *house*."

"Okay, house then. Look, the Colonel and I can take care of ourselves. You should worry more about yourself, Temae. Seriously."

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The Colonel dusted his hands off, and stepped down from the craft. “That’s good advice. Even in here, the skywagon will still be a dangerous place to be. Keep your wits about you.”

The servant nodded, slightly mollified. “Yes, I will take care. And I shall be ready to pick you up the moment you need me.”

The Colonel studied their underground hideaway. “Have we loaded everything back in?”

“Just the medkit to go. I’ll fetch it,” Temae volunteered. She dashed into the next chamber.

The Colonel leaned against the vehicle’s hull. “Any second thoughts Boris? This plan of yours isn’t exactly low risk.”

Boris stood, and checked the blaster slung at his side. “Calling it a plan is kind of generous, but it’s a tactic that’s worked for me before.”

Temae re-emerged, and the Colonel helped her lift the kit through the craft’s doorway. “That’s everything, Colonel.”

“Then it’s time to go. Come on Boris, I’ll know just the bar to start in,” he declared, boarding the craft.

Boris lingered for a moment, taking a last look at the old basement that had been his refuge. “At this point,” he muttered, “I wouldn’t put money on us.”

Chapter Eleven: Drunk And Disorderly

Susanna Kent had never been inside Governor Keban's office before. She'd seen it in virtual meetings of course, but her work rarely called for contact with the man. The physical reality brought home just how huge the room was. Her entire apartment could have fitted inside it.

Keban looked up from his work and smiled as she entered.

"Ah, Mayor Kent. Please, take a seat." She smiled back, and set herself down in one of the red leather chairs by his desk. She had meant to shake hands with him, but the gleaming black desk was so large it prohibited the gesture. All his cabinets and other hard furnishings were made from the same material, and all of them were miraculously clean.

Keban closed the documents he'd been working on. "You said you had something to run by me," he said.

She concluded Keban was not in the mood for chit-chat. "Not a finished document Governor, more an

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outline of one. But before I explain what I have in mind, I would like to hear your thoughts on the coming handover. Currently, it seems the transition of power will be neither smooth nor economical.”

The corner of Kegan’s mouth curled up, and he sat back in his chair. “That appears to be unavoidable.”

The Mayor nodded in sympathy. “May I ask how Ranboen plans to handle it?”

Kegan was silent for a moment. “Certainly. Very recently I called in some troopers from the Regional Office to supplement the local Police Force. They will not be a cost-effective solution for the long term, but they will help in the interim. I have various contingency plans of course, as you would expect. But I feel the people will calm down substantially once they experience unfettered corporate rule for themselves. The sky will not fall, and the universe will continue to exist.”

Kent fidgeted with her terminal. Kegan seemed more confident than she had expected. “Ranboen *would* be within its rights to resell custodianship. Has that been considered?”

Kegan smiled. “Ranboen has no intention of reselling.”

She leaned forward. “If you put that in writing, it would reassure a great many people.”

Kegan’s smile didn’t fade. “Tell me of this outline of yours, Mayor.”

So, he meant to play his cards close to his chest. It was clear she wouldn’t learn anything more from him. “Governor, the people are currently very distrustful of Ranboen. Many even believe the corporation was responsible for the assassinations. You’ve seen the

demonstrations. I believe Ranboen will benefit if it has their trust, before the handover at noon tomorrow.”

Keban gazed at her. “The people of Dimonah grew up under Ranboen administration. If they feel they can’t trust us, nothing done in a mere day will make any difference.”

“Nothing except for something new. Something they have not seen before. Pledge to increase democratization and sign it into law.” She paused. “Nobody will be able to ignore that.”

“Control of our investments is a condition under which we sold shares.” Keban’s tone was calm. She began to wonder if he was testing her ideas, or teasing her.

She smiled nonetheless. “I’m hardly suggesting a full republic. Simply open more positions to appointment by popular vote. The planetary Tourism portfolio for example, or perhaps the Welfare budget.”

Keban raised an eyebrow. “Positions significantly more lucrative than Mayor. You could benefit greatly from such a change, couldn’t you?”

She hesitated. “As would you. But if you deem it necessary, I will retire from politics.”

Keban’s eyes narrowed. “I see. How would I sell this notion to the board at Ranboen?”

“Political stability, and an immense public relations bonanza to offset the difficulty of transition. In short, productive workers for a productive economy.”

The Governor chuckled. “You sound like a Hoparin, Kent.”

She remained silent as she wondered if he meant that as a compliment or not.

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“Very well Mayor, your concept seems to be free of any inherent flaws. Develop it into a proper draft, and get back to me with it. Final approval will be up to the Ranboen Regional Executive Officer of course, but he will listen to my advice.”

Kent stood. “Then with your leave Governor, I shall start work on the document immediately.” Kaban nodded dismissively and she left the office.

Walking along the well-lit Ranboen wing, she considered how the draft already prepared in her terminal could be altered to address Kaban’s reservations. Hopefully it wouldn’t take too long.

If the document wasn’t passed by handover he’d have to rely on the troopers, and that would only lead to a cycle of bloodshed.

Chief Constable Benjamin Hill was struggling to keep on top of an obscene number of field reports. Public unrest was rising as the handover approached, and the new roster already looked inadequate. He had only hours to complete planning that would have taken days to do properly. In short, he was in no mood for interruptions.

When his door opened, he didn’t even bother to look up from his terminal.

“Chief, There’s a guy from Ranboen here to see you. Says it’s urgent...” The officer’s voice was flustered, even nervous.

Hill looked up. “Everything’s urgent. Who is it?”

A figure in combat armor pushed firmly past him. “Thank you, I’ll take it from here,” the stranger said.

Chief Constable Hill stared at the intruder. The man was broad-shouldered, and dressed in the foreboding

black of a corporate trooper. His insignia marked him as a Captain in the Ranboen Corporation's private military. Hill had to blink for a moment and look again before he could believe what he was seeing.

He hadn't seen a Ranboen trooper for years, and even that was at a corporate promotion exercise. He could remember being very impressed by them as a military force.

Hill set the reports aside, then spotted at least three more troopers standing behind the man in the office outside.

This was not going to be good.

A projected image appeared in front of the Captain, and the document on it was simultaneously transmitted to his desk terminal. After a moment of hesitation, Hill examined it. The authorization was short and simple; Ranboen had placed the entire civilian Police Force under the control of the Troopers.

He acknowledged receipt of the order by holding his palm against the projected document, then the projected image vanished. When the trooper spoke again, every syllable was an authoritative product of military training.

"Mister Hill. My name is Captain Barker, but you will address me as 'Captain' or 'Sir'. You will remain in nominal command of your staff, but orders from either myself or any of my men supersede your own. Do you understand?"

Mister? Chief Hill narrowed his eyes. "I do, Captain."

"Very good. Your people will commence a three shift roster, under which your patrols will operate in teams of four. Every third patrol will be accompanied

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by one of my men. Our own patrols will run separately.” The man checked his terminal. “The first shift will start in forty-four minutes. You may organize it how you will.”

Hill’s fists clenched, and he forced himself to remain silent. When he did speak, his voice was extremely calm. “We do not have enough staff for that, Captain.”

“You will if you suspend training and investigative operations. Your detectives can play catch-up after the crisis is over.”

Hill blinked. “I see. And what are our orders for these patrols, *Captain?*”

Barker seemed surprised. “To maintain a safe community with good governance, Mister Hill. By whatever means necessary.”

Hill nodded. These people didn’t understand a damn thing about policing.

“Divine providence!” Boris shouted. The man at the bar next to him raised his eyebrows. He was clearly only pretending to be interested in the story because it meant he didn’t have to pay for the rounds.

Boris laughed and took another swig of the spicy booze. “Honestly, what else could it be?! That offworld bodyguard was pulled out of the desert barely an hour after I got the footage.” He belched. “God, therefore, wants me to be rich.”

Boris blinked to bring the man’s face properly into focus. He hoped the blur was due more to the contact lenses coloring his eyes rather than drunkenness. He was usually able to knock back plenty of drinks with no trouble, but he wasn’t exactly in top condition. He

decided it was time to cut back and start spilling the stuff.

He poured the rest of his glass into his mouth and down his chin, then wiped his mouth on a grimy sleeve. “All I have to do is find this offworld guard, and cut a deal with him. Did you know he owns a starship? His own bloody interstellar! Rich, I tell you. I’ll be set for life once I find him.” He belched again, and decided he had definitely drunk too much. He set his glass back on the bar in a sufficiently wonky fashion to ensure it toppled over.

The bearded man he was speaking to seemed skeptical despite his pretended interest. Pretty much all the patrons were. But they seemed to enjoy the free entertainment he provided, and they certainly enjoyed the free drinks.

The bearded guy waved his beer. “This footage. Does it really show the guy was framed?”

How many times is he going to ask that? Boris nodded in frustration. “YES! A whole bloody assault team did it with a double.”

The man frowned. “Double what?”

“A double; an impersonator. He cut his way in through a big door, and shot the poor heirs while the bodyguard was pinned in a firefight. They knew it was being recorded, and framed him with the stand-in.”

A burly man smeared with engine grease laughed from the far end of the bar. “Doesn’t ring true to me, buddy. This video turning up only now and all. How did *you* manage to get it anyway?”

Boris pointed a deliberately unsteady finger at the man. “That is onfidun... conf...” he paused, and crossed his eyes for a moment. “Secret.”

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A new voice asked a question. His voice was calm, and collected. "Isn't it dangerous to have it with you?"

Boris suppressed the urge to grin. At last someone was fishing for information! "It bloody well would be!" He bellowed, turning to face the general direction of the voice. There were too many expectant faces, he couldn't tell which one had asked the question. "That's why I hid it. I'm smart, see! It's encrypted to hell and back too." He grinned. "Anyone who wants it has to pay me first!"

There was a massive gap in his drunken reasoning. He was certain the assassins would spot it, if they were finally there.

The questions abated while he paid for the next round and shouted. "Last round, you cheapskates! If you can't tell me where to find the bugger, I'll have to keep looking."

He stood unsteadily, waited while orders were hastily doubled, and paid with the Colonel's near-depleted funds.

Despite his long spiel, nobody had suggested going to the law. They seemed to think he was delusional, or at best been duped himself. He was sure nobody believed him, except for the man trying to find out if he had the footage.

That man was a wolf in a den of dogs, and Boris was sure the he was already planning to kill him.

So far, so good.

The final night of Hoparin rule had started. Cloud cover had slowed the temperature drop, and a steady rain soaked the streets.

The Colonel pulled his cloak tighter about him, and waited patiently in the wet. There was still an hour to go until he would have to assume something had gone wrong.

He was fairly sure the police wouldn't be a problem for the offworlder. The disguise he wore was hardly even necessary. His short time in the desert had altered his appearance enough. Besides, the police were far too busy just keeping a lid on things.

He shook the beading drops of rainwater off his scanner, and swept it about him for another check. The dripping rooftops about him were still empty, no sign of Boris. He sighed, and settled back against the heating duct behind him. The plastic insulation was badly weathered, and the radiating warmth made it a pleasant enough place to wait. It also offered excellent cover from infra red sensors.

The fact Boris had suggested such a risky plan still worried him. He seemed determined to make it work, too. Could his experiences had changed him for the worse?

It seemed more likely he was simply eager to clear his name, and restore his professional honor. A mercenary has little left if you take away their reputation.

Cold water dripped off his hood on to the bridge of his nose. He began to sneeze, and pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth to silence it.

It looked like he was in for a very long wait.

Boris let the bar doors close behind him and headed up the narrow alleyway. Before he completed ten paces, two men casually stepped out of the shadows ahead of

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him. Their eyes bore the telltale green glint of surgical-grade rockglass, and their broad frames suggested robotic limb augmentation.

Waiting for me, eh?

Boris blinked at them. They must have scoped him out in the bar, so they would have known his only weapon was the knife in his boot. They definitely seemed confident. That gave him some valuable leeway.

The nearer of the two spoke in a friendly tone, his voice unnaturally mild for such a broad neck. "Hey, buddy. Are you serious about finding this guy?"

Half-hidden behind him, the second man's shoulder moved. Boris recognized it as the motion of a man drawing a weapon. He had less time than he'd anticipated.

He tried to look terrified as he grinned uncertainly. Since the strangers most likely intended to kill him in the next few seconds, the emotion came naturally. "I sure am, glad someone was listening," he replied. He squinted past them. "Er... are you three all together or what?"

Both strangers glanced behind them, the rearmost turning with impressive speed to face down the nonexistent third party.

Boris broke into a sprint and ran for all he was worth. He ran toward the nearest junction with every scrap of energy and strength he could muster, his wet cloak flapping about him.

A burst of heat warmed the base of his neck as he rounded the junction. The smell of steam and burnt hair swiftly followed. His pursuer's second shot struck only brickwork. Boris was already around the junction and accelerating.

His plan – which the Colonel had rather unkindly described as insane – actually seemed to be succeeding. Simple muggers definitely wouldn't have been so swift to fire. These men were involved with the Redeemers and they wanted any evidence of their activities buried. All he had to do was stay alive, and lead them to the Colonel.

The alleyway he ran through made staying alive a little easier. Piles of rubbish, corroding car bodies and several occupied cardboard homes transformed the narrow, straight alleyway into a treacherously winding one. His speedy pursuers didn't seem discouraged. The sound of their relentless and destructive pursuit was worryingly close behind, and occasional potshots kept his adrenalin pumping freely.

At the end of the obstructions, he turned and leapt head-first through a boarded window-frame. Narrowly missing a trio of elderly residents, he rolled to his feet and sped on through the common room of an apartment building that made the cardboard homes outside look reasonable in comparison.

He'd planned the route in advance. The knowledge of the layout helped his progress, but the men following him were faster and stronger. Worse, the beer and his less than stellar condition were starting to take their toll.

He turned into an old wooden stairwell and propelled himself up flight after flight for six stories, then emerged into a corridor that sported more mold than paint. He hurried on, desperate to clear the corridor before the men could get a clear shot at him. He heard them emerge as he approached the exit door

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he'd left carefully propped open with a wedge of cardboard.

He pushed open the door, and ripped off the loosened doorknob as he ran through. A single shove flung the door shut behind him, and he heard it lock with a firm click.

The creaking fire escape was white with decades of oxidized alloy, which conspired with the rain to form a slippery paste. He struggled up the stairs another two floors, but hadn't quite reached the roof by the time the door below exploded outward. For a moment he thought they had used a grenade launcher, but as his pursuers came into view below he realized they had merely kicked it out of the frame to sail toward the cars parked below.

He hurried toward the roof, gunshots searing through the air behind him and turning rain into steam. Fragments of metal and molten alloy fell about him as he stumbled onto the rooftop and pressed on gasping for breath.

The rooftop wasn't a wide one. Boris ran across it and jumped. The alleyway was broad, but the building ahead was a floor shorter. He reached the next rooftop, ankles stabbing with pain as he landed. He staggered on, seven stories above the ground, with no other structures close enough to reach. He spared a glance at a structure a hundred yards to his right... Somewhere there was where the Colonel was supposed to be, waiting to follow his pursuers.

All that was left was to let his pursuers kill him. Or more accurately, he had to convince them he was dead. The part of the plan that was the most likely to go wrong.

He skidded to a halt at the edge of the rooftop, and squinted down at the neglected courtyard far below. There should be a net waiting for him, but with all the rain, he couldn't see it. The paving on the ground was definitely visible. It looked very solid.

Boris heaved in lungfuls of air as he turned to face his pursuers. They easily jumped over the alleyway. Ignoring the rain, they closed at a steady walk.

Boris backed away toward the edge, and felt his heels meet the ridge that encircled the roof. Only one of the men had a gun drawn, and he raised it. Boris stumbled backwards, cried out, and tumbled over the precipice.

The men were at the roof's edge in seconds, each several cautious yards from the point he'd fallen from.

The broken figure lying in bloody water below them was visible even to normal eyesight. To their augmented bodies, it must have looked as clear as day. They studied the scene for a time, then turned away without a word. The sound of their footsteps were quickly lost in the constant rain.

From a nearby building, a dark shadow separated itself from a mound of heating ducts and moved out of sight.

Alone and badly off-center in a net that hadn't quite folded aside the way it had been meant to, Boris groaned in pain.

Governor Keban strode into the packed conference room, and took his seat at the head of the table. His terminal projected the agenda on the table in front of him, and identical images appeared in front of the dozen men and women present. It would be the last

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Ranboen Management Council meeting under the Hoparin, and he meant to make it brief.

The people assembled in the room spared no more than brief glances at the document, and gave him their full attention. The magnificent view of Kalaanda behind him, as usual for a meeting, was darkened to insignificance by the window.

Keban grinned. "Thanks to you all for coming in person. Network conferences are fine, but there is something to be said for occasional face to face contact. Now, to business. Our current primary consideration is of course security. The handover of power to the firm draws close, and I'm afraid that leaves little time for chat." Keban flashed another grin. "Besides, I know you're all just as busy as I am."

There were murmured agreements even a few chuckles around the table. Keban gauged them carefully.

Every one of the people before him were responsible implementing his policies across a different section of the planet. They were trustworthy employees, but there were details he couldn't risk sharing with all of them.

"So," he said, "For the immediate future our top priority must continue to be keeping the population as calm as possible. It will take some time for things to settle down, and fortunately I can announce that the Ranboen Head Office has acknowledged that by granting a substantial budget for the operation."

Davis nodded. A bright young man who ran Dajerton and most of the continent around it. "That's good news. Even with the troopers in place, unrest is widespread and continuing. What is the plan for handling it long term?"

Keban smiled. "Certain... individuals in the current Hoparin regime are brewing some plans in that regard. That should be useful, but we'll be fine without it. Once our troopers have secured the most profitable assets, I believe a simple mass bribe will see us through the initial period. Cash payments to all taxpayers."

Davis frowned as he pondered that. "I imagine that plan won't impress head office, or our shareholders."

"Oh, we'll pay for it with appropriate spending cuts. It's our chance to reduce the bloated public health budget, and transfer the more costly programs to pay-as-you-go schemes." He raised his hands, outlining imaginary headlines. "It will be easy enough to sell. 'Moochers are taking your hard-earned tax dollars! Make them pay, more money to families!'"

The man smiled. "Yes, I think we could make that stick."

Keban wagged his finger. "Don't get too complacent. The reorganization will incur a lot of one-off costs. That means no more major purchases, at least for the time being."

A stocky man toward the far end of the table spoke up. "Does that include military equipment, given the current environment?"

"Absolutely. The local Military will be discontinued, and the personnel rolled into the local police. The heavy equipment will be transferred to the troopers or sold off."

The man hesitated. "Won't that cause a backlash?"

"Not if it's done in increments. People, we can turn this world around if we work at it! Profits have not been matching the growth seen in the rest of the firm,

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and the production infrastructure is showing signs of age.”

A woman on his right nodded glumly. “The public infrastructure, too. The upgrade to Kalaanda’s sewer system that the Hoparin were pushing for would have cost a fortune.”

“Without their interference, we will be free to introduce cost recovery. Point of use payment systems will free us from fixed returns on capital expenditure. Once we ride out the transition, I believe we’ll once more be delivering strong and consistent profit growth.”

The woman sat back and smiled. “At least we’ll have cheaper labor. I’ve been pushing for that for *years*.”

The Colonel kept to the shadows, keeping clear from prying eyes as well as the rain. The deluge had grown heavier, and reached a level that made it difficult to hear his own footsteps. On the street ahead of him, his quarry walked through the darkness. As far as he could tell, they were still oblivious to his presence.

The alleyways and the inches-deep water that flowed over perpetually blocked drains were largely behind them, for the augmented killers were moving into the southwestern commercial district. The number of people on the street was increasing, and he took the opportunity to close the gap to prevent losing sight of his targets.

The killers turned into the market grounds, and he hurried to keep up. The empty aisles of locked stalls would make it difficult to track them without being seen.

The pair veered between two badly built stalls, and he realized it was to avoid a separate group approaching from the other end of the aisle. He ducked into the darkness behind a billboard, and hid behind a spaghetti-like collection of power distribution panels.

The group approached, and strode straight past him. Three Ranboen troopers, grinning despite the miserable weather. One had his nightstick drawn, blood gleaming darkly on the stainless steel. As far as he could recollect, Ranboen's private military didn't bother with human rights training.

With the troopers no longer a threat, he studied the stalls and waited for his quarry to start moving again.

Unfortunately they already had. With an start, he spotted the pair briefly silhouetted against the streetlights leaving the other side of the market, heading for the long-defunct underground.

He ran after them, moving as quickly as he dared with the troopers so close. He couldn't afford to draw the attention of either.

At the subway stairs, he descended.

The combination of cracked tiles and stained plascrete was much as he expected; typical of Kalaanda's old subway system. The lines had been shut down for economic reasons at first, and then for safety. The tube itself was sealed off and mostly flooded, but stations and shops continued to survive. The two men had probably entered the underground station because it was a rain-free route from the market.

The lighting was poor, but there was no shortage of people sheltering from the rain. He kept his hood in place and pressed on. His face had been on the news

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after his escapade, and it was possible he would be recognized.

He hadn't closed the distance as much as he'd thought. He saw the pair on their way back up to street level on a distant stairway, and hurried to catch up. He made it to the steps, ran up, and found himself amongst a considerable crowd before a series of nightclubs.

The two men were nowhere to be seen.

He fought a powerful urge to climb onto a bench or car to peer above the crowds, but he couldn't afford to call attention to himself. Instead, he walked to a pedestrian island in the middle of the street. With fewer people around him, he could see a good amount of both crowded sidewalks.

The two he was after were tall and their girth should have disturbed the crowd as they moved, but he couldn't locate them.

Damn it...

There were a few taxis nearby in a rank, but they couldn't have taken any of them. It hadn't been that long. He was also sure they hadn't entered a club; the queues were dense and even those with passes would have taken time to push through to the front.

Searching for alternative explanations, he spotted a nearby side-street almost hidden by the shadows between two buildings. He hurried over to it.

He reached it just in time to see them rounding a corner a hundred yards away, and ran after them.

As he approached the corner, he heard voices and slowed to a walk. Turning, he found a collection of cafes with a common courtyard. Both men were seated at a sheltered table on the opposite side. The Colonel avoided the courtyard, walking on until he reached

narrow road. There was no traffic on the single lane, but he stopped and stood by a crossing light. Three large shop windows opposite offered a reflected view of the table, allowing him to watch the two as they talked to a third man. He tried to hear what was being said, but the rain drowned out any sound that reached him.

Whatever they talked about, it didn't take long. The pair stood up, and left the table. The other man remained behind, with an unfinished coffee in a cardboard cup before him. He looked to be in his late thirties, lean and wiry-looking. For all the world, he looked like he was having a pleasant evening reading the news on his portable terminal.

The Colonel considered his options. Should he keep following the killers, or switch targets?

He elected to stay by the lights as the pair left the courtyard. If the killers had reported to this man, he must be further up the chain.

That left him with the problem of how to wait there without looking suspicious, but that challenge was solved for him. The man took a final sip of his coffee, pocketed his terminal, and stood up. Unfortunately, he then walked right towards the crossing.

The Colonel stayed right where he was. Moving away would only look suspicious. Besides, the pole he was leaning against left his face in shadow, helping to conceal his features. To his horror, he realized his hand had automatically started reaching toward his concealed gun. To salvage the situation, he turned the movement into a gesture to scratch his chest.

The lights finally changed just as the stranger reached him. He kept moving and crossed the street,

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but the Colonel stayed where he was and tried to look like a man waiting for someone.

Once his quarry had covered most of the next block and there were a dozen pedestrians between them, the Colonel finally set off again. Crossing the road, he followed the man from the opposite side of the street.

As the commercial strip fell further behind them, there were fewer people to conceal his presence. Fortunately, the number of functioning streetlights also decreased and to a limited extent balanced the loss.

The shops soon gave way to storehouses, and even an occasional plot filled with rubble. Between two featureless storehouses, the man turned into a laneway shrouded in darkness. The Colonel edged into the lane and behind the shadows of a dumpster, and watched.

The man stopped at a stained structure resembling a cellar entrance, and waved his terminal at the door. The thick slab swung open with impressive silence, and he stepped into the dimly lit interior. The door closed behind him.

The Colonel stayed crouched by the garbage skip. A buzzing noise worried him for a moment, but then he identified it as a healthy colony of bees below the lid.

Content, he dug a field beacon out of his pocket and checked that it was still transmitting. A dull orange light assured him it was.

He settled back, and waited.

Chapter Twelve: Counter-Strike

Major Becker took his cloak off, and hung it on one of the Strategy Room's hooks. Rainwater dripped from it as the guard outside closed the door behind him.

The Commander briefly looked up from his terminal, and beckoned him toward a chair.

He sat down.

"How did it go?" The Commander asked, still engrossed in reading reports.

"Satisfactory overall, sir. Apparently the fellow let it slip that the footage was both hidden and encrypted. Logan and Chen took care of him."

"Any witnesses?"

"Several who saw the chase, but nobody witnessed the kill. In that neighborhood, it won't be intensively investigated."

The commander nodded, and switched off his terminal. "Very good." He finally looked up from his desk. "What about the body?"

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“They left it where it was. It should be taken as an accident, a drunk who fell to his death.”

The Commander frowned, and leaned back in his chair. “That seems very convenient. You are *sure* this fellow is dead?”

Bekker nodded. “Chen’s optics confirmed no pulse or respiration. He’s dead all right.”

The commander grinned. “No evidence to dispose of, and no trouble from the police. Good work, congratulate them.” He gazed back at the work on his desk. “It’s regrettable, when we have to kill our fellow citizens like that. But you made the right call, he might have been telling the truth. I’ll look into it and see where that kind of footage may have come from. If it exists and he got a copy, others may have too.”

Bekker shook his head. “Even if it came to light, it wouldn’t change anything. Ranboen will still get full control, and the brakes on our economy will finally be released.”

The Commander nodded absently. “It’ll certainly be easier to build up our world without the Hoparin messing things up. Everything of worth on this planet was built by the people or Ranboen.” He climbed to his feet. “But with all that said, we can’t take success for granted. Keep up the good work, Major. I shan’t keep you from your duties any longer.”

“Yes sir.”

The Commander gave him a firm handshake rather than the usual salute. Things must have been going well indeed to put him in such a mood.

Boris tossed the spent medpack aside, and let out an exasperated groan. The lines of bruised pain on his

back perfectly mirrored the balcony wall the net had thrown him into. As the pain started to fade, he gripped the balcony railing for support, and hauled himself to his feet. On his feet, he gazed at the net that hung neatly folded between the railing and the balcony of the apartment above.

He'd struck the net too close to the edge, almost missing it entirely. Still, the arrangement had worked and scooped him onto the balcony. A small patch of bare flesh on his arm served as a reminder of the minimal acting involved in his fall. He must have brushed it against something rough while falling.

"I'm *not* doing that again," he muttered.

He stepped through the empty doorframe and into the abandoned apartment. Pale silhouettes on the walls marked the former location of sinks and cupboards. Power and network outlets had been removed too. The building's redevelopment had never made it past the initial gutting of the structure. The apartment door was still there. A ragged hole showed how he had used a blaster to gain entry and place the net.

A medpack waited for him on the floor. He opened it and wrapped the nanogel strip around his bleeding arm. The wound throbbed as the device forced nanogel into the damaged flesh. With the device spent, he studied the tingling wound. The bleeding had stopped, but it would take another hour or two for the skin to fully regenerate.

That just left the two large backpacks by the door. He pulled on the first, wincing as it pressed against his bruised back. The second had a compact torch on top of it, which he picked up before hoisting the pack onto his shoulder.

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Pushing the door open, he headed into the darkness of the building's interior.

The torch showed walls covered with graffiti. He walked along a passageway covered with dusty cans and drug vials, until he reached an enclosed courtyard. He went down four flights of steps to ground level, and headed out of the main entrance.

The original doors had been missing for years. He pulled his cloak's hood over his head, and walked out into the rain.

The decoy was still there. He walked over to it, and resisted the urge to nudge the artificial body with his foot. It was the last of the decoys from the Colonel's skywagon. He considered dragging it away and hiding it somewhere, but decided there was as much risk in moving it as in leaving it there. Besides, it was every bit as heavy and unwieldy as a real corpse. That was its job. All that vat-grown blood and artificial flesh wouldn't do much good if minimal weight gave it away.

He pulled a commlink from his cloak, and fumbled for a moment with the unfamiliar controls. Apparently his terminal had been taken to the furnace after his sentencing along with everything else he's been carrying. The activation stud switched on. "Hey Temae."

The palace servant responded quickly, her voice surprisingly clear despite the wind and rain. "I am here, Boris. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm well enough. How's the Colonel? Any word yet?"

"He has not called me, but his beacon is working."

Boris touched the display stud on the commlink, and a crude arrow appeared above it, pointing to his right. A number superimposed on the arrow gave

distance. “I read it too. He’s gone a long way, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, he crossed two districts. Shall I pick you up?”

Boris hesitated. With the equipment he had to carry, he would look somewhat conspicuous on foot. The further he had to walk the greater the chance of trouble. But the skywagon would be even worse. “No, keep the vehicle under cover. I’ll find an alternative.”

“All right... Please call if you need me.”

He clipped the commlink back beneath his cloak, and headed through an alleyway and into a wide street.

The traffic was minimal, the sidewalks empty. He considered hiring a taxi, but discarded the idea. Their on-board systems might recognize him. He walked toward the Colonel’s position, toting the bags along with him as he approached the distant neon lights of a club district.

He began to pass people, many of which were braving the weather for business reasons. One leggy brunette parted her colorful cloak as he drew close to her, showing how little she was wearing underneath. He wondered how she was avoiding pneumonia, and noticed she was wearing a transparent bodysuit that enhanced her curves.

He gave her a polite grin as he passed. She looked slightly disappointed, but he put that down to her desire for a spell in a warm hotel room.

The sight of the alleyway next to her brought him to a halt. Parked by a row of bulging garbage bags was a police roadbike. It was a powerful model, but the thing that caught his attention was the gear rack. The straps on the packs were digging painfully into his shoulders,

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and he knew he'd be exhausted by the time he reached the Colonel.

He turned to the hooker and smiled. "This isn't yours, is it?" he asked, nodding at the bike.

The girl shook her head, spilling some of her bright pink hair from her hood. "Ha! I'm no copper, mister. That's Sammy's ride. He's not a bad guy, for a cop. Doesn't give us trouble, just wants to stay in touch with what's going on. He's in Club Barge, over there." She pointed at a door below a small neon sign across the road.

"Good to see a policeman who talks to people."

The girl shrugged noncommittally.

Boris hesitated. Maybe the cop was into something underhanded, maybe not. But whether he'd stopped by for information or something more, it didn't really matter. He needed transport.

"I'll keep his engine warm for him." He began to load his bags onto the luggage rack.

The hooker adopted a panicked expression. "Oh, shit... Do you know what you're doing? You'll have every cop in the district after you."

Boris tore off a cover plate, found the locator beacon and pulled it free of its mount. It wouldn't do to have the bike tracked, or raise the alarm with HQ too soon. He bypassed the outdated security by shorting the regulator module, mounted the bike, and thumbed the ignition. The ceramic turbine whined into life. He reversed into the street. The overhead street lamps didn't get far against the driving rain, but the police colors still stood out. He decided to avoid the main road.

The girl shook her head with a resigned air. "Sam will *not* be happy about this," she muttered.

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Boris accelerated gently away, keeping the engine noise low until the area was well behind him. After a quick glance at the arrow on his commlink, he turned into a side street and pressed on.

If the Colonel had found a redeemer stronghold, there was no way to know exactly what they would find. Hass had been cut off from the planet for years, but strangely enough his advice on the matter was probably the best available.

| | |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| <i>To:</i> | <i>Boris</i> |
| <i>Signed Source:</i> | <i>Hass</i> |
| <i>Subject:</i> | <i>Redeemers</i> |
| <i>Encrypted</i> | |

Like most extremists, the Redeemers are terrorists to their enemies and freedom fighters to their supporters.

The group first appeared as a political pressure group during Terran Colonial Wars, to push for a purely capitalist economy. You know, zero taxes, privatized police, the whole deal. But their numbers were few, and they didn't have much impact.

After the Swarm War and the creation of the Confederation, the Redeemers started to gain more clout. The atmosphere of insecurity must have played a part, but I suspect there was a change of leadership.

In the following decades, the Confederation overtook Dimonah. The original contract to outsource government should have placated them,

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but it didn't work out that well and they blamed the Hoparin for that.

The Redeemers want something not found in the Confederation, where legislation regulates and limits the market for the public good. From that, I suspect the Redeemers are being influenced by purely commercial interests, dirty money that wants to establish an enclave free from Confederation law.

If that's the case, they will have no shortage of supplies and funding. Believe me, whatever they get their hands on they're crazy enough to use.

So if things get ugly, don't hold back. They sure as hell won't.

Boris cut the police bike's engine, and coasted along the dark laneway. He guided the vehicle into a shuttered loading bay, and stopped there in the shadows. From the distant road it wouldn't even be visible.

He picked up the commlink and whispered into it. "Temae, you still there?"

"I am here. You are very close to the Colonel, I read him as directly east of your position."

"Roger. From here on, don't call us unless it's urgent."

"Understood. Good luck."

He switched the commlink off and pocketed it. Leaving the packs on the bike, he peered toward the alleyway the Colonel's beacon was coming from.

A fading plastic sign on the wall proclaimed the building to be a power substation. He moved silently around the humming wall, and into the laneway.

There wasn't much there. Old doorways welded shut, a basement entrance, and a lot of discarded metal barrels crumbling into rust. There was also a large garbage skip half buried in refuse. Boris hesitated, squinting at the object through the rain. The arrow on his tracker pointed directly at it. In the gloom was a shape that might be the Colonel, or it might be bags of garbage. Worse, it might be both.

Boris cautiously moved closer to the shape. Amid the gloom, he made out the Colonel's features.

The man turned, and beckoned him closer. He hurried his pace, and crouched by the skip next to him.

"For a moment I thought I was going to find your remains here. Any sign they're monitoring this alley?" he whispered.

The Colonel shook his head. "None so far." He fished inside his cloak, and produced the field beacon that had allowed Boris to find him. He switched it off. "You got here quickly."

Boris rubbed the back of his neck beneath his cloak. His fingers were cold, and it helped keep him awake. "I borrowed a bike."

The Colonel nodded absently. "Your pratfall had me worried. Rather a messy landing."

Boris winced. "Nothing a good sleep wouldn't fix. I came out of it okay though."

"Did you bring my pack?"

"It's on the bike."

"Good. Let's suit up."

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The Colonel followed him back out of the alley to the bike and the waiting bags. The man blinked at the police bike in undisguised shock. “Do I want to know how you got this?”

Boris shrugged as he unzipped his backpack. “I don’t know. Do you?”

The Colonel hesitated.

Boris took pity on him. “It was parked. Illegally, I might add.”

“Good... It’s best if we don’t attract too much attention to ourselves.”

The Colonel took off his cloak, revealing light combat armor. He took two heavy cylindrical energy packs, checked their charge, and fastened them to his outfit. An assault rifle and harness followed, as did an assortment of smaller items including some grenades.

Boris favored smaller weapons, including a blaster similar to his old one. Between the two of them, it didn’t take long to empty the bags.

The Colonel put his cloak back on. The garment did a disturbingly good job of concealing his arsenal of weaponry. “Ready?”

Boris absently patted the clips and grenades he had stowed beneath his cloak. The compact assault rifle felt bulky, but reassuring. “After everything I’ve been through,” he said, “I am *definitely* ready to raise hell.” He loosened his blaster in its holster.

“Try to keep your enthusiasm in check. We don’t want to raise the alarm sooner than we need to.”

“Okay, so we’re Redeemers. No sweat.” He hesitated. “What if June’s codes don’t work?”

“We’ll improvise.”

The Colonel led the way to the bunker door. Boris followed, and waited as the Colonel transmitted the codes directly from his implant.

Nothing happened.

Boris waited as they stood there in the rain. He wondered if there was a facial recognition component, or a spoken passphrase. But surely the Colonel would have noticed?

The door suddenly swung open, revealing an interior as gloomy as the alleyway outside. A weak lighting panel on the ceiling struggled to illuminate grimy steps. The walls were so waterlogged that rows of stalactites had developed.

They moved inside, walking over what looked suspiciously like an old bloodstain. Boris tried to look confident and casual.

They continued down what proved to be a stairwell. Descending flight after flight, they descended four flights below ground where the steps ended with a narrow and better lit corridor. At the far end, an automated turret was mounted on the ceiling in front of a metal door with a small, one-way glass panel. A metal pipe ran the length of the ceiling. It was nestled against the left wall and pitted with pinholes. To Boris, it looked ominously like a gas delivery system.

The Colonel gave a subtle nod at the glass panel.

Well, so much for plan A.

Boris reluctantly moved ahead and strolled toward the door. If some form of personal visual recognition was required, he was their best bet. He still had the makeup altering his appearance, but it was possible the Redeemers still had a member altered to look like him

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anyway. Possible, but unlikely. One of the first rules of assassination was to kill the assassin.

As he neared the door, he could make out shapes moving in the room on the other side. The lighting there was too bright, overpowering the one-way nature of the glass. One of the shapes inside moved closer to the window, and Boris saw a man gazing out at them.

He was still several paces away when the fellow's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Boris heard a muffled yell.

Breaking into a sprint he wrenched his blaster from beneath his cloak and fired, shattering the ancient plascrete surrounding the ceiling turret. The belt-fed gun powered on and lowered its barrel to fire, but the weight of the armored dome was too much for what was left of the ceiling. Firing as it fell, the gun cut a lethal arc through the air.

Boris heard the whine of the Colonel's heavy assault gun charging up, and threw himself at the floor. A wave of thundering noise roared over him, and the remains of the turret fell around the passage in pieces. The next burst buckled the metal door, filling it with craters the size of soccer balls. The barrier tore free of its frame and tumbled into the room beyond.

As the Colonel charged past, Boris pulled a containment charge from his belt and rolled onto his back. He gripped the compact device's padded handle, pulled the ring, and pointed the oval-shaped bulk of the charge at the ceiling. The device kicked as it detonated, driving his elbow painfully into the floor.

As he scrambled back to his feet, he studied the result. The gleaming blue goop was still partially wet, but already visibly hardening. The film completely

covered the gas pipe on the ceiling, plus a large amount of the walls.

“They needed to redecorate anyway,” he muttered.

He turned toward the doorway, where he saw a bare forearm reaching across the floor toward a fallen automatic. The arm was too pale to be the Colonel’s, so he fired at it. The hand and forearm vanished, leaving a bloody stump.

Boris charged into the room. There was an array of sensor consoles, none of which had survived the attack in functioning order. A few upturned seats, a table... several bodies... It was a security room, intended to clear people as they entered.

The Colonel finished the wounded guard with a short blast as Boris entered, then set his heavy gun down and started searching the bodies with a compact scanner. “Keep them out,” he instructed.

Boris turned to the only other exit. It was a solid wood door, and positioned away from the console and the entrance in the far corner of the room. It had a line of smoking bullet holes across it, apparently fired by a dying guard.

Boris flattened stopped at the wall next to the door, and swapped his blaster for the compact rifle. From the way things were going, he’d need it.

The door shattered in a violent burst of splintered shards. The wall opposite crumbled from the impact, revealing water pipes and power lines which immediately struck Boris as an less than promising mix. Pressurized water escaped as a thin jet that hit the ceiling, producing a fine mist which mingled with the dust already enveloping the room.

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There was a brief pause, and Boris used it to grab a quick glance at the corridor he had left behind. There were bulges in the containment film, formed by gas venting from the pipe beneath. His hand hovered over the containment grenade still on his belt, wondering if he should re-coat the mess.

A fresh burst of enemy gunfire distracted him. A fragment of flying wall debris took a nick off the top of his ear, and embedded itself in the room's desk. He risked a quick glance through the shattered doorframe into the compound, and found a wider corridor with several figures moving about beyond the clouds of dust.

He fired at the shapes. There was a distant cry of pain amid the chaos, accompanied by another gunshot. He'd definitely winged someone. He ducked back into cover and shouted to the Colonel.

"There's gas behind us. We should keep moving."

The Colonel finished scanning the last of the dead guards, and nodded. The grim line of his mouth showed he hadn't found what he'd been looking for. One of the bodies – the only female one – was still leaning against the wall where it had fallen. As the Colonel brushed past, she began to fall over until her bloodied head struck the next wall with a sound like a cracked coconut.

The Colonel eyed the shattered remains of the wooden door. "If these guards have passes, they're implanted and inactive. We'll have to handle any more turrets and locks the hard way."

Boris winced. He didn't fancy the prospect of a firefight at every obstacle they met.

More enemy fire rang out, this time from much closer. Boris reached blindly around the doorframe and

fired back in reply. So far the Redeemers hadn't the time to bring in heavy weapons, but the moment they did he and the Colonel would die.

The Colonel gripped his gun's grenade launcher, and moved toward the doorway. "Take cover."

As the Colonel fired grenades through the opening, Boris dove beneath the remains of the desk, and tried to cover his ears.

The ensuing explosions were too loud to hear. Boris felt himself shoved along the floor along with the desk, and pushed into the remains of the female guard. He clambered to his feet, and blinked through the thick dust. "Bloody hell," he managed.

Unsteadily, he moved through what was left of the doorframe. There were no immediate targets, so he moved aside.

The Colonel has his heavy support gun ready, and laid down a ruthless barrage of fire that tore up anything the grenades might have had missed. Then he led the way on, and Boris followed. The corridor was broad, and cables and pipes were jury-rigged on almost every surface. He stayed close to the wall, giving him a clear shot ahead past the Colonel.

They moved past the blood-spattered devastation, alert for threats both living and mechanical. Broken water pipes and substandard power cabling were starting to affect the lights, making them dim and flicker randomly. They found only two surviving guards, which the Colonel finished with short bursts of gunfire.

From the state they were in they probably welcomed it.

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Finally they reached a junction with a ramp on either side. The left one led up, the right one down. The Colonel led the way to the right, and they descended deeper into the compound. The ramp ended with a tight corner, and as they rounded it a trio of heavily armed guards ran bodily into them. In the flickering light, Boris glimpsed an armored helmet directly in front of his face.

Guns fired, and the cramped space was transformed into a deafening nightmare of tearing matter. Boris grappled with his opponent for control of both his own gun and his foe's. Another struggling figure stumbled against them, confounding his efforts. Boris felt his assault rifle knocked from his grip, and saw the man he was fighting regain control of his.

With no time, Boris gripped the man in a fierce bear-hug, and turned him about in an attempt to bat the weapon out of his hand against the wall. Only his sheer proximity prevented the man from using his rifle.

The guard leaned back, lifting Boris off the ground. With his feet dangling in the air and his left ear mashed against his foe's cold helmet armor, Boris threw an arm around the back of the man's head and sought out a grip on the helmet's smooth chin. With his free hand, he grabbed an armored shoulder pad for leverage.

He pulled. With a grinding crack the guard's neck twisted a full 180 degrees. The corpse clung to him as it collapsed, and Boris desperately tried to free himself.

Something hit his neck, and a flash from the lights showed a jet of blood, spraying through the air before him.

He hit the ground, and scrambled away from the corpse of his opponent. Drawing his blaster, he spun about to face the remaining two guards.

The Colonel had already taken care of them. As he watched, the last of the trio crumpled to his knees and fell forward. The Colonel, gasping for breath, glanced at him in concern. Boris touched his neck, and brought fingers slick with blood. The jet he'd seen was from a shot or piece of shrapnel that had touched his neck. It wasn't very deep, but it was bleeding too much to neglect. The Colonel passed him a bandage, and he quickly pressed it into place. The patch made him grunt in pain as it sealed itself against his skin and got to work.

As he recovered his rifle, the lights went out. Then they returned in blood red before he had time to get his torch.

He eyed the fiery glow with a perplexed frown. "What the hell does this mean? Backup power?"

The Colonel checked to make sure the ramp was still clear, then ejected the clip from his gun and selecting a fresh one. The near-empty clip landed in a puddle of water, which instantly boiled. "I don't know," he admitted, snapping in the fresh clip.

It couldn't be the alarm. Boris was sure that had been triggered long ago.

The Colonel pressed on, breaking into a jog. "I think we should hurry."

Boris followed him deeper into the red-lit compound.

Bekker waited as the Commander selected a few more items to add to his olive green briefcase. He was surprised how little his superior was choosing to take. His case held only a handful of dataslugs and papers. "Sir, we're leaving some sensitive information here..."

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The Commander shook his head. “That’s not necessary Major, nothing we leave behind will survive for long.” He added two more dataslugs to his collection, and looked about the ransacked records office. “That’s all we need,” he declared, snapping the case closed. The Commander then drew his semiautomatic and led the way out. Bekker followed, sparing one last glance at the mess they were leaving behind.

The distant bursts of gunfire and thundering explosions didn’t seem to be getting closer, but they showed just how persistent and dangerous the intruders were. The noise combined with the deep red lights made it feel like they were under attack by an entire division. Maybe the Commander was right in his decision to abandon the base.

They hurried onward, dodging past personnel still busy with the evacuation.

Bekker’s terminal crackled into life. “Major, we’ve sealed the armory and cleared out of level 2. But we had to leave most of the armaments behind.” Bekker touched his terminal to reply.

“That will have to do. Get yourselves out of the base.” the static vanished as the call ended. He glanced at the Commander. “Sir, the men haven’t managed to take any heavy weapons. Everything larger than a backpack gun is still in long term storage.”

The Commander nodded, and waited until they passed a bank of noisy machinery before replying. “That’s good enough given the timeframe. We may be able to salvage some of it later, after the handover.” They left the corridor and emerged into the garage.

Bekker looked down in surprise. The garage looked vast with so few vehicles in it. Of the usual hodgepodge

fleet of eighteen, only two old trucks they used as a source for parts plus the command groundcar remained.

The Commander strode on toward his vehicle. “Major, I’m leaving you in charge here to wrap up the evacuation. We’ll need assistance to establish a new base, and I intend to secure it.” Bekker nodded. If the Commander was going to physically meet their benefactor, security protocol dictated that he couldn’t accompany him.

“Yes Sir, I’ll see to it.”

The commander slid open the car’s door and tossed the briefcase in. He began to step into the car, then paused. “Make no mistakes, Major. I don’t care what it costs, make damn sure all the intruders are inside when the base is sealed. I think you can guess who’s behind this incursion as well as I can, and he’s not a man to trifle with.”

“I understand, Sir. I’ll seal the base myself, and watch over it until the purge is complete.”

The Commander got into the car and started the engine. “Don’t linger *too* long Major, this location is compromised. I’ll contact you once I’ve arranged a new HQ. Lay low until then.”

Bekker saluted, as the door slid shut. The dark gray car shot forward and vanished up the long access ramp toward ground level.

The Major checked the time on his terminal. There wasn’t much time left to wrap things up. He turned and strode back toward the door, raising his voice to a harsh yell. “Get a move on people! Hurry up or you’ll be locked in!”

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He took up position inside the corridor, and counted the people as they hurried past.

The exit ramp was the only way out of the hangar, and it stretched thirty yards to the exterior doors. A neat grid of explosives covered the ceiling for the entire distance, ready to close off the base with thousands of tons of rock. The Commander certainly had a flair for planning ahead.

Bekker checked the time once more, and felt the ground rumble beneath his boots. The first charges had detonated. He smiled as he pictured the great plain's water table gushing into the complex through the massive sluices below.

Chapter Thirteen: Rising Waters

Boris eased the door open a few inches, and squinted through into the quiet corridor outside. His assault rifle has ready at his side to fire at any threats.

The Colonel had offered him the heavy support gun, but he preferred the accuracy of the rifle and left the larger weapon lying atop the Strategy Room's conference desk behind him.

Boris nervously thumbed his rifle's safety to ensure it was still off, and watched the corridor's dim corners and doorways for movement. The red light made for poor illumination. Behind him, the Colonel ransacked the room for information.

There was a lot for him to search through.

"How does it look, Boris?" He called out, scowling at a collection of paper documents.

Boris squinted at a distant pile of bodies. Their full-body armor was shiny with blood. "Not a soul in sight," he replied. He shook his head. "I don't like it, I

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can't believe we've scared them off." he eased the door shut and moved back toward the table.

The Colonel nodded. "They've probably fallen back while they bring up the big guns. Here, take a look at this."

The Colonel tossed him a leather starship jacket, a perfect twin of the garment he'd lost to the Justice Department's furnaces. "It's evidence, don't lose it."

Boris fingered the leather. It felt a little firmer than the original. He shrugged off his cloak and donned the jacket instead. It seemed the easiest way to carry it. Besides, you just couldn't get that type of cut anymore...

The Colonel continued his search in silence while Boris stayed by the door. He had moved on to the electronic storage, scanning terminals and racks of dataslugs. "They've cleaned these out rather well," he admitted.

Boris kept his gaze on the hallway. "We'd bloody well better find *something*."

"Oh, there's a wealth of circumstantial documentation, we're definitely in a massive Redeemer base. But there's nothing on the source of their funding. Command structure is referred to multiple times, it looks like the whole organization is run by a single Commander, but I'm sure there's another party he answers to."

Boris frowned. "Why's that?"

"The payroll figures. The Redeemers have been paying themselves well, from a single source. Someone must be footing the bill." He Colonel finished with the rack of dataslugs. "That's everything here. We'll have to find their Commander, he's the link to the next part of the chain."

Something moved on the chamber's furthest wall. Boris pivoted toward it, raising his rifle. The Colonel drew his sidearm and ducked behind a bench.

Clear liquid glittered under the dull crimson light, dribbling out of a wall vent and onto one of the many piles of paper. The documents darkened as it spread across them, the neat typeface leeching out of the paper. The Colonel lowered his gun, and experimentally kicked one of the dataslugs into the liquid.

The plastic slug started to bubble and hiss. The Colonel knelt by the spreading pool and sniffed at it. He nodded to himself, and to Boris' surprise confidently dipped a finger in the strengthening flow of water and tasted it.

He spat. "Salt water. This is straight from the water table surrounding this place." He looked around the room. Water began to dribble from a second vent. "The clever little fellows have rigged their records to be vulnerable to salt water."

A distant rumbling roar from the corridor brought Boris' attention back to the doorway. He wrenched the door open, and stuck his head out into the flickering light. At the end of the corridor, water was gushing through the jambs of a pair of double-doors. He remembered closing them on their way through to protect their backs. The streams became stronger as he watched, the pressure behind the doors was building quickly.

The water was already spreading along the corridor floor, and one of the more distant doors creaked ominously. "Colonel! There's a hell of a lot of water coming this way!"

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The Colonel came to see, grabbing the heavy gun on the way. He reached the door in time to see water lap into the room. He took one look at the water gushing between the double doors and dropped the weapon. "Time to go."

Boris headed into the corridor, and ran away from the double doors. In the red light, the water looked like blood running over the bodies of those they'd killed.

The Colonel splashed his way after him. "Look for a way up! We've got to get to the surface."

The doors burst open.

Major Bekker pulled his cloak's hood up over his head, and walked out into the rain. The downpour above was a heavy one, and would help with the flooding.

As he walked away from the ramp, he pulled out his terminal and transmitted the detonation signal.

The blast wasn't as loud as he had expected, but he felt the shockwaves in the ground beneath his boots. The rampway ceiling and everything on top of it fell with a cacophonous rumble. He put the terminal away, and studied the cloud of dust billowing from the opening into the driving rain. The ramp was completely sealed, and the Colonel was trapped.

The old Ranboen subway maintenance depot had served them well, but it was time to move on. He turned and walked along the abandoned turning yard.

Visibility was still poor, so he took care not to go too far. The rain had helped the evacuation to remain unnoticed, but it also meant he had to stay close until the flooding was finished. He had to be certain nobody escaped.

He reached the gate tower and climbed up both stories. At the top, he was sheltered from the rain and had an excellent view of the collapsed yard over the ramp. He sat down with his terminal and flechette rifle to wait it out.

It would only be another ten minutes at most until the flooding would be complete, and the complex underwater. If anyone turned up to rescue the Colonel before then, he was ready to stop them.

Boris struggled to keep his nose above the rising water. He had only eight inches of air left and the water was still rising. A few of the submerged lights still glowed red, but there were too few to be of practical use. Only the torch clipped to his leather collar still let him see.

With his ears beneath the surface, he could clearly hear keys scraping against metal. The Colonel was showing tremendous patience and lung capacity, but the solid steel door to the locked stairwell remained steadfastly locked. It was starting to look like they would never leave the corridor.

Boris fought the temptation to use his blaster on the submerged door. The amount of power released into the water would create a steam explosion that would almost certainly kill him, but at least it would *open the damn door!*

The sound stopped, and the Colonel swam up to gasp for air. Boris had sympathy for him; the dead Redeemers had been carrying more keys than seemed reasonable.

Cold water splashed up his nostrils. He desperately blew it out, and tried not to panic. His jacket and

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combat vest felt like they were weighing him down. He'd already discarded his grenades and assault rifle. "Try the long ones." He suggested, spitting out the salty floodwater. It tasted metallic.

The Colonel took several more quick gasps, and ducked back beneath the water.

There was only two inches of air left. Boris waited, his nose pressed against the grimy ceiling as he listened to the colonel's efforts. When it came, the firm click of the lock was so loud through the water that he accidentally breathed some in.

Fighting the urge to cough, he swam down toward the door.

The Colonel was pushing at it, but the door seemed to be refusing to budge. Boris gripped a handrail on the wall and planted his boot against the metal. Together with the Colonel, he heaved and fought to push the door open.

It felt like there was a huge object leaning against it, but with an immense effort they managed to force the slab open a few inches.

Bitterly cold water rushed out of the gap, rushing past him. He realized the stairwell was even more flooded than the room they were in, and the pressure difference was trying to force the door shut.

The Colonel dashed forward and jammed his gun into the gap before it could slam all the way shut, and used the weapon as leverage. The pressure differential gradually equalized, then it reached a tipping point and the door abruptly flew open.

The Colonel abandoned his bent gun and swam through the opening without hesitation. Boris eyed the door distrustfully. It looked ready to slam shut again, cutting in half anyone foolish enough to be in the way.

But his lungs were screaming for air. He struggled though the doorway as quickly as he could and swam up the stairwell.

He reached the surface to find the Colonel struggling to catch his breath in what proved to be the top of the flooded stairwell.

Presumably, they had reached the topmost level of the underground base. Worryingly, the floor was already under a foot of cold water. Boris coughed heartily and drew in great gulps of the precious air, then waded away from the stairs in search of an exit.

The chamber was immensely wide, and his immediate guess was it had been built as an underground car park. He waded through the water, studying the peeling and salt-stained markings on the walls. The broad spaces between the marks on the floor revealed it was a parking zone for small trucks. Other markings had been added much more recently by spray cans, outlining clearways, parking spaces, and even a small maintenance area. The spaces outside the marked zones were populated with empty crates and various items of garbage, some of which was already floating on the rising water. Boris found cabinets of spare parts, and empty tool chests. Only two vehicles were left, half-gutted trucks standing next to each other. They were contributing to a film of oil that gave the surface of the water a rainbow-like shimmer under the torchlight.

The Colonel ran his own torch around the walls, and located two exits. One was an open corridor, and the other a large vehicle access door. He waded toward the door that covered the vehicle exit while the Colonel inspected the corridor.

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Boris stabbed at the ramp's lifeless control panel. "Hey, can you contact Temae?"

There was a pause before the Colonel's voice echoed back from the corridor he was exploring. "No, we're still too far underground."

Boris gave up on the panel's buttons. There was no power, and the door seemed to be stuck so fast it was probably welded in place. He clutched his blaster, and belted the door with the bottom of the grip. The sound was short and dull, and the door didn't reverberate at all. He noticed the smell of spent explosives.

Scowling, he fired at the middle of the door.

The blaster punched a hole through the metal, and a brief stream of rubble and small stones tumbled out. Shining his torch at the hole, Boris could see rubble piled against the door.

The Colonel returned from his explorations. "No way out through here, it's just an annex. How about that door?" His torch explored the broad panel, and located a series of cracks radiating out from the doorframe. They looked fresh.

Boris holstered his gun. "It's completely blocked, they must have collapsed the roof on the other side." Wading on, he searched the chamber for an alternative exit. Moving about the chamber was becoming more difficult, the rising water was already up to his thighs. "I don't suppose you can think of a way to swim out? There must be an entry point for all this water."

The Colonel nodded. "There would be, on the bottom floor, most likely. It wouldn't necessarily be an exit though, just enough tunnel to collect water from the table. Unfortunately I didn't think to bring diving equipment."

“No submarine either, I note. How short sighted of you.”

The last of the red lights finally went out. A few seconds later, the Colonel struck a flare and held it aloft. Boris fished behind his back for his own flare, and lit it. There wasn't much point saving it, by the time they ran out the chamber would be flooded.

The flares bathed the area in light, and details formerly hidden by shadows became clearly visible.

Together, they systematically combed the chamber for a way out. The two abandoned trucks didn't seem to be concealing anything beneath them... In fact, they looked like they hadn't been moved in years. There were racks of equipment along the walls, along with old electrical distribution boards, small air vents, and a maintenance hatch on the wall that looked promising until Boris found it merely led down. Boris looked at one of the air vents, but the opening covered by the grille was barely large enough for a cat. Some of them dribbled with water too.

By the time they completed their search, the water was up to his chests and he could move faster by swimming rather than wading. Fortunately, the flares could burn even underwater.

The Colonel looked at him. “I'm open to suggestions.”

“Wish I had some,” Boris studied the cracks around the doorway. “I guess we could try shooting our way out, either through the door or straight up. But I expect we'd only collapse the roof.”

The Colonel nodded. “Absolutely. Look at the columns in here, the weight on the ceiling must be tremendous.”

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Boris looked around the room one more time. The flares had created a layer of hazy smoke that floated around the ceiling. It seemed thicker around the side of the room with the annex, yet he was sure the ceiling was level. The air vents in the wall were probably responsible. He crossed to the nearest, and held his flare next to it. The smoke was sucked through the grille. “The power’s gone,” he said. “It can’t be fan-forced.”

The Colonel nodded. “It’s the rising water, pushing the air out of the room.”

Boris frowned. “They must go above ground eventually, but they wouldn’t have hundreds of tiny outlets dotting the surface. These tiny ducts must meet a larger one *somewhere*.” He pulled the grille off the closest vent.

The duct was just as narrow as the opening, and it seemed to lead away from the car park. He threw his flare aside and shone his torch into the darkness inside the pipe. “It looks like it joins up with a larger duct about ten feet in. What would you say this wall is made of?”

The Colonel drew his knife and jabbed the wall with it. “High grade plascrete. Behind that’s it’s probably just rock and clay. Most underground infrastructure in Kalaanda was laid by tunneling ‘bots, so the pipe may be the only thing holding up the earth above it.”

“It’s had time to settle. Let give it a go.” Boris set his blaster up to full power, medium spread. The Colonel moved away and got behind some cover, shoving a floating water tank toward him as he went. Boris positioned the tank between him and the wall, and fired at the exposed duct.

The flying fragments made the tank ring like a badly designed bell. Metal shards ricocheted off walls and ceiling, and skipped over the water. The smoke quickly cleared as the vents sucked it away, revealing a gaping hole big enough for a man to slither into. Unfortunately it only extended a few feet into the wall. Boris poked a finger in his ear in an attempt to stop the ringing as the Colonel swam over to study the wreckage.

“Plascrete for the first few feet,” he observed. “Looks like solid rock from there on. I believe I have something that will break it up.” The Colonel swam over to him, drew a sidearm from his vest, and snapped a clip marked with a red band into it.

“Didn’t you throw your gun away?”

The Colonel grinned. “It’s wise to carry a reserve.”

They got back behind the damaged tank, and he aimed and fired. Each deafening shot caused more debris to fly.

By the time the clip was spent, the barrel of the Colonel’s gun glowed red-hot and the shattered vent was a mass of broken rock. The Colonel studied his gun with evident approval, and tossed the ruined weapon aside. It sank in a column of bubbles and steam.

They moved forward to clear the broken stone. It was a painfully slow process, especially as they could only have one person at a time stretched out inside the narrow space, scrabbling at the sharp fragments of rock. The Colonel took on that duty, shoving the rubble back toward Boris.

Eventually he was so far in Boris could only see the man’s boots. The rising water reached the vent, and began to run into it.

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The exposed seams of rock creaked ominously.

The Colonel pushed on, and after a struggle managed to climb through into the larger pipe. It looked like a bit of a squeeze, but he managed to turn left and follow the flow of the air.

Boris scrambled into the flooding opening and tried to follow him. His shoulders were a little broader than the Colonel's, and the space seemed to get narrower the further he went. He reached the side of the big pipe with water lapping at his face.

He tried to force himself around the turn, but his muscular frame became wedged. Ignoring the pain, he doubled his efforts and squeezed himself through the tight opening.

The pipe was already half-filled with floodwater, and most of it was flowing from the direction he was trying to go. Boris swore. It was difficult enough to keep moving forward in such a confined space, but grabbing a breath while torrents of water splashed against his face was impossible. He turned onto his back to keep his face above water, and continued to wriggle through the pipe.

He finally joined the Colonel in a circular shaft lined with brick. Boris trod water and gratefully took great lungfuls of air.

The shaft seemed to be an old well. It was only a few feet wide, and the darkness beneath them seemed disconcertingly bottomless. The water rose past the pipe they had crawled from, and kept on rising.

High above them was a disc of night sky, gray rainclouds lit from beneath by the grimy light of the city. It looked bright in comparison to the darkness of the base they had left behind. Boris could hear the rain

still falling above them. As the water rose, it lifted them closer to the surface.

Unfortunately, it also lifted them closer to a moss-encrusted metal grille. Barely six feet above their heads, the grille had the skeleton of a large dog lying on top of it.

It looked capable of supporting the weight of a tank. Above it, rungs mounted in the brick led to the top.

Boris checked the reading on his blaster. He'd spent nearly all the remaining charge widening the duct, and there was nowhere near enough blast away the grille. "Damn. I guess the water's not going to stop this side of that thing, is it?"

"I suspect the Redeemers placed it here for that very reason," the Colonel conceded. He checked his weapon belt beneath the water. "I have some grenades left... But in such close quarters they won't help."

"What happened to always having a reserve?"

"I believe it was well spent."

The barrier drew nearer, almost close enough to reach up and touch. The gaps looked like they would admit an arm, but nothing wider than that.

He wondered if he could shoot out the brick supporting it. There were six support points... If he could free four of them, The whole grille might tilt from horizontal to vertical. But no. Even on the lowest setting, his blaster was only good for two more shots.

Maybe one powerful shot would shatter the old iron? He set the weapon to full and prepared to spend the last of the power on one shot.

Then a figure appeared in the moonlight above, and peered down at them. The figure was silhouetted

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against the cloud, but the set of his shoulders distinguished him as male. Presumably he had heard their voices, and looking down he would be able to see their torches beneath the grille.

The man held a slim rifle, which he brought to bear. He fired, as did Boris.

Chapter Fourteen: Rooftop

The terminal on Governor Keban's gleaming desk chimed, and projected an urgent message alert over the reports he was working on.

Keban frowned, and put the reports aside. The alert was set to interrupt him only when the sender was somebody important, and there were thankfully few of them.

He spared a glance at the door. It was a redundant gesture, but the sight of the green security light was comforting. Reassured, he opened the message. It was plain text, short and characteristically to the point. He would have known it was from the Commander of the Redeemers just from that alone.

The content of the message startled him. Despite the simplicity, he read it twice before deleting it. The Redeemers had obviously grown lax with their security.

He frowned. The force he'd carefully fostered and spent so much on, over so many years, was in serious trouble. It would require further investment to survive.

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He swiveled his chair, and gazed out his broad office window. The city lights were barely visible through the downpour. For a few moments he stared at them in silence, pondering his options.

It took only a few seconds for Keban to make his decision. He turned back to his terminal and summoned a map of the city. The blue dot was already there, waiting to meet him ten clicks from the compromised Redeemer base.

Interestingly, he noticed his source was still operating, the reassuring yellow marker as bright as ever. Her signals had of course been few while the Colonel was hiding underground, but that was no longer the case.

Temae's position was close to the Redeemer base. Most likely in the Colonel's skywagon, which would have automatically tracked the vehicles leaving the base. If the Colonel still lived, he would be able to use that information to follow the Commander to the rendezvous site.

He had to make sure that couldn't happen. Decision made, he stabbed his terminal's comms switch. "Burleigh!"

A deep, calm voice responded. "Yes Sir?"

"I need a detachment ready for departure. This is a confidential operation, so I want trustworthy staff only."

"Understood sir." Keban cut the link.

This was not the time to make a foolish mistake, like the Commander so obviously had. Framing of the offworlder had seemed an excellent way of preserving the Redeemers for future use, but it just wasn't working out. It was time to tie off the loose ends.

Within the hour, the Redeemers would cease to exist.

Boris watched the Colonel's skywagon slowly circle around the tower, then swing down to land in the remains of the old turning yard. The craft's door slid open, and Temae hurried down the steps before they had finished extending. Under one arm, she carried a medpack.

He grinned. She made an excellent angel of mercy.

"I came as quickly as I could!" Her eyes wide as she realized the dark lines on his face and arm was blood. "Is it very bad?"

He let his head rest again on the concrete block he had chosen as a pillow. "It's not so bad. Took a flechette round in my shoulder. I believe acupuncture can be very therapeutic, but the pins aren't supposed to be fired from a gun."

Temae crouched by his side, and examined the protruding metal slivers. "They are very deep. I'll inject some anesthetic..."

"No, it'll dull my senses. Just yank them out and patch me up."

She produced a pair of pliers from the kit, and glanced at his face with a worried expression. "Are you sure your head is not hurt?"

The Colonel finished checking the yard and answered for him as he walked toward them. "Don't let the blood bother you Temae. Most of it belongs to the former owner of this rifle." He patted the slender weapon in his hand.

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Boris grimaced as she gripped a metal sliver with the pliers and eased it out. The remaining two were deeper. “Yeah,” he said. “He didn’t need it any more.”

The Colonel nodded. “I’m surprised it worked that well on the brickwork around that grille. It must have been very old.”

“I’m just glad it didn’t mind getting wet.”

Temae ignored their banter, concentrating on pulling out the last two flechettes. One of them was scraping against his collar bone and felt like it was on fire. Boris tried to take his mind off the pain by keeping up the talk. “Temae, here’s a riddle for you: Why did the Redeemer fall down the well?”

“I do not know,” she said, only half listening as she carefully gripped the next fletcherette. “Why did the Redeemer fall down the well?”

“Because he was dead.”

Temae tugged, and almost lost her balance as the flechette pulled free. She gripped the last one, which to his immense relief didn't hurt anywhere near as much.

“Here’s another one: Why did the rifle fall down the well?”

“I have no idea.”

“The Redeemer was holding it.” The second flechette pulled free, and Boris let himself relax. His shoulder still ached, but he could move his arm freely again.

Temae managed a grin. “You need to work on your jokes Boris.”

“You better finish up in the wagon,” the Colonel declared, heading for the vehicle. “We need to locate the leader of this base.”

Boris climbed to his feet. “Yeah, okay.”

Temae grabbed the medpack and followed them inside as the Colonel took the pilot's chair. The door sealed shut behind them and the craft smoothly lifted off.

Boris shrugged off the jacket to let Temae treat his throbbing shoulder, then turned his attention to a navigation map in front of the Colonel while she worked. The 3D projection showed a command vehicle on top of a multi-level car park. "Don't tell me you've located him already?"

The Colonel smiled. "I'd put money on it. It's a command car, and it left the base during our incursion. The driver took a lot of twists and turns, but the wagon tracked him through a remote."

The building in question was in a nearby low rent neighborhood, but from the look of it the place had once seen better times. Water towers and communications arrays stood on spaces originally designed for rooftop skycar parking.

Temae activated a sub-dermal medpak, and Boris bit back a curse as it flooded the wounds with nanogel. "It... looks like he's waiting for someone."

"Maybe a contact, but he may be consulting his superior directly; the one who's been bankrolling the Redeemers. I'll find us a place within walking distance." The skywagon dipped, then leveled out as he guided the craft through the maze of buildings. Boris wondered how much longer they could evade the satellites searching for them. The stealth technology wouldn't protect them forever if they kept moving in the open like that.

"That should repair the worst of it," Temae declared, putting the medpack away.

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Boris gingerly moved his arm. It tingled as the gel stitched tissue back together, but it felt like his strength was starting to return. “Thanks, Temae. You’re wonderful. Hey, have you noticed the jacket?”

“I was wondering about it. It is a duplicate?”

“Yep. Good evidence, I’d say.” He opened the wagon’s armory, and retrieved a fresh clip.

Temae looked worried. “Please do not strain that shoulder, it is still healing.”

Boris smiled. “You don’t have to remind me. Hell, if there hadn’t been a metal barrier over our heads at the time... Well, it would have taken more than a medpack to fix me.” He loaded the clip into his blaster. “Of course, the night is still young.”

They set the skywagon down between two delivery vans. Boris opted for the portside door, and found the wind had strengthened. He climbed out into driving rain. The darkness was illuminated briefly by a flash of lightning, revealing a laneway strewn with waterlogged bags of garbage.

This weather isn’t getting any better, he mused.

The Colonel followed him, toting a sensor package with twin lenses and a self-righting tripod. “Temae, wait in the driver’s seat,” he commanded. “We may be in a hurry to leave when we return.”

Temae nodded. “I will. Good luck to you both. The gods are with you.”

Boris decided it was best not to respond to that, and headed away from the skywagon. He spared a glance back at her, and saw the blonde, white-clad figure framed in light within the vehicle. Then the door slid

shut. Feeling like he'd been cut off from a warm flame, Boris trudged through the shadows after the Colonel.

They pressed through an alleyway toward a large brewery, where tall windows showed off a series of floodlit stainless steel vats. Enough of the light poured out into the streets to warrant caution, and the Colonel took them on a brief detour to avoid it. Boris followed him to a residential stairwell that flowed with rainwater. The Colonel waved him up the steps, and signed that he would move on to approach the target from the other side.

Boris gave a thumbs up and splashed up the stairs as the Colonel vanished. Taking care to face every corner as he rounded it, he moved steadily up all ten stories.

At he reached the top, he paused to study the roof.

The space was small, there were items he could take cover behind. The larger building where the command car waited. Was across the alley and two stories taller. Unfortunately, several other buildings in the area were much taller still.

He hesitated.

The top of the car park would be a great place for a trap. The skywagon hadn't detected anything suspicious on the scans, but that was no guarantee of safety. The Redeemers had shown themselves to be a sneaky bunch.

He moved across the roof and toward the parking structure. The dark alleyway separating him from the structure was only a few yards wide. He leapt across, cleared a protective metal railing and landed inside the structure. The never-ending din of the storm drowned out his footsteps, so Boris moved on to the closest stairwell without regard to stealth.

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The steps were broad but steep. He headed up them carefully to the top level, where an open doorway waited. There was no sign of the original door, but from the look of the rusting hinges it hadn't been removed recently. Cautiously, he peeked out.

He could see the rear of the command car, but only because he knew what to look for. It was almost hidden by a range of support girders and graffiti-clad communications dishes. The rain made it impossible to make out any further detail. He crouched and moved quietly, making sure he stayed hidden behind either metal girders or the slowly rotting supports of a cluster of wooden water towers.

A surprising amount of empty space in the middle of the rooftop had survived the alterations, and the car was parked on the left side of the clearing. Boris closed the gaps as much as he dared, and took up position by the humming mass of a mushroom-shaped power regulator. The position offered a good view of the clearing, plus effective cover. Cooling coils even gave him cover from anything watching from above.

He waited, blinking the constant rain from his eyes. Eventually, he caught sight of the Colonel. The man had reached position on the other side of the expanse by the foot of a massive Network tower. He was hidden from the command car, and only just visible to Boris. The Colonel caught his gaze, and made several hand signals.

The gestures stretched his rusty signing skills, but after a little difficulty Boris realized he was saying there was one enemy, and that he should stay put.

Boris signaled that he understood. The vehicle's windows were tinted and hazy in the rain, and he couldn't confirm the Colonel's count. In truth, he

couldn't even tell if the car was empty or not. The Colonel's expensive camera was probably seeing more than either of them could. Boris settled in for a long wait.

He needn't have bothered. Within minutes, a sleek black skycar emerged from the storm clouds. It slowed as it approached, then came to a halt above the building. It lowered gently down to land, and touched down facing the command car.

As the gleaming vehicle's engines wound down, the rain pouring about the vehicle changed direction. A deflection field appeared over the car and grew into a dome that forced the rain aside and protected both the car and a good deal of rooftop.

Boris was impressed. Deflection fields were far from cheap, and drew a lot of power. Adjustable fields like this one were ludicrously expensive, and yet here was one in a small skycar. On a world like this, only a few could afford such a luxury.

The car's door opened, and Governor Keban stepped out into the shelter of the dome. The command car's door also opened, and a figure dressed in military greens stepped out. His cropped blonde hair and piercing blue eyes seemed even colder than the storm.

Boris glanced at the Colonel. He'd shown foresight in bringing the sensor. From where he was, he would be able to record what was going on. Boris watched as the dome formed an opening, allowing the man in green to enter and approach Keban.

Why had Keban come without guards? Maybe he was there without Ranboen's knowledge. Boris

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frowned, and strained to hear them over the hum of the power regulator.

“Alright, explain your message,” Keban said.

Boris watched the blonde man’s face. He didn’t seem at all intimidated by the planetary governor.

“Sir. A group most likely led by the Colonel has attacked our HQ. To protect the organization, I ordered evacuation and destruction of the base.”

Keban’s expression remained unchanged. “I gathered that much from your message. Is the sterilization complete? And where are your men?”

“The base has been sealed. The Redeemers have dispersed, I ordered them to stand down from all activity until further notice.”

Boris hoped the Colonel really was recording what he was seeing. Of course, with only one 3D camera the footage would have limited scope, but it would be undeniable evidence nonetheless.

The Governor nodded, and drew a deep breath. “I see. What of those who attacked the base?”

“Major Bekker contacted me confirming all exits were sealed, Sir. The base will have fully flooded by now. There are no air pockets.”

“Well, that’s something at least. A new base will take some time to prepare.”

“Yes sir. But once a site is chosen I guarantee the men will work hard on it.”

“Good. This incursion has made it clear to me that more effective armament is required. I’ve brought one for you to evaluate.” Keban turned to his car, pulled out a metal carry-case and set it on the roof. He opened it.

Boris couldn't make out all the details of the firearm Kaban produced from the case, but it was compact and bore the expensive gleam of fibersteel.

The Commander gave a delighted grin. "*That* will make us much more powerful."

Governor Kaban retrieved a clip from the case. "This is a delicate weapon that requires care when loading. Clips are loaded from the side, like this."

The Commander watched attentively as Kaban loaded the gun.

The gun fired, and the Commander's body was thrown against the dome's interior so hard Boris heard bones crack. The twisted remains fell to the ground as the centerpiece of a red crescent against the edge of the dome.

Kaban lowered the weapon. "I should have done that a long time ago." He looked up at one of the larger buildings, smirked, and drew his finger across his throat.

He knows we're here!

It was the man's expression that convinced him. It was as though he could read his mind. Kaban already had men in place around them, and he'd just signaled them to attack.

"Incoming!" he cried, dropping flat beneath the shelter of the regulator.

He hadn't moved a moment too soon. The power regulator shuddered, and electricity flashed in bright and deadly arcs. A spray of molten metal showered over him. His blaster, already in his hand, gave partial protection to the back of his head. He felt tiny droplets burn his skin and sizzle in the rain.

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There was no point searching the rooftop for the gunman. The shot could only have come from a sniper. He glanced up the way the shot seemed to have come from, and tried to pinpoint the source. There were two positions that looked likely, a narrow rooftop and a row of one level below it. He lay perfectly still as he studied them both. Loud gunfire from the Colonel's direction was a distraction he ignored.

A hint of movement at the top left corner of the structure caught his eye, and he carefully took aim and fired at it.

He kept on firing. The rain crackled dangerously against the damaged regulator behind him, and arcs of electricity lit the darkness with sudden flashes. That was a mixed blessing. It would make him a difficult target for a sniper scope to focus on, but it also meant the failing machine might electrocute him at any moment.

He heard gunfire join the mayhem, a line of tracer fire cutting across the air from his right. The shot struck an elevator assembly close to his position, and sent glowing fragments of wreckage spinning across the roof around him. Boris grinned. A second sniper was coming to the rescue of the first, which meant his blaster fire was on target. He ignored the heavy chunks of masonry and steel, and fired several more bracketing shots at his distant target. The structure was becoming difficult to see through the smoke and fire he was creating.

To his amazement, a burning figure tumbled from the building's obscured roofline, and fell toward the street below. Boris spared a moment to shake the sweat and rain from his eyes, and rolled back into the shelter of the alarmingly hot regulator just as it took another

shot. The device failed entirely, sending an arc of electricity straight through him.

The jolt was fortunately brief, lasting only until the the main coil erupted in a great shower of sparks. He gasped, struggling to breathe. His chest felt numb and his limbs refused to move.

He hadn't seen the shot responsible, so it must have come from the direction of the Governor's skycar. Another sniper was on the structures somewhere that side of the building. It seemed unlikely it could be the same one that had the tracer round.

Control of his limbs began to return. The jolt had fortunately been too brief to stop his heart, but he still felt like he'd been kicked in the chest. He glanced about for the Colonel. The man was still by the foot of the large communications tower, sheltering behind a badly damaged plascrete footing. He was reloading his heavy assault rifle, and steam spat from the weapon with every drop of rain that struck it.

The dead power regulator behind him took another shot, and listed dangerously over him. Moving further away would risk exposure, but staying meant he could be crushed like a cockroach.

He bit his lip. From the way the regulator had moved, the latest shot had come from the same direction as the earlier tracer shot. There were *two* snipers left, and they covered both paths of retreat. Worse, he couldn't even begin to guess which building either was positioned on. There were too many buildings, and sticking his head out to take a good look at them all risked getting it blasted off his shoulders.

Boris gave up on making it to one of the escapes, and simply searched for somewhere to run to.

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Keban's dome was still operating, but it offered no protection. It was low, and the snipers were high enough to shoot over the curve. The Redeemer's command car had already been hit and was on fire. Only the Colonel's position offered solid protection from both angles, and it was a terrifyingly long distance away.

The regulator took another hit. One of the cooling coils plummeted past his head and took a chunk out of the roof by his hand before rolling aside. The teetering mass listed further, and he knew it wouldn't withstand another shot.

Out of options, he rose to his haunches and prepared to sprint to the Colonel. A flash of lightning painted a vivid image of the man as he threw a grenade into toward the dome. There was a chance that it would distract the snipers when it detonated...

Without a further thought, Boris launched himself in a sprint toward the Colonel and strove to cover as much ground as he could. The grenade detonated, with a concussion blast that shoved his legs from under him and hammered his senses. The world flashed and then darkened. Sounds were suddenly muted and indistinct. Even time seemed to slow down.

He found himself on the ground. It was wet and cold. Bright red lines briefly cut the air before him, and it took him time to realize they were targeting lasers. He wondered if he would feel the shot that killed him.

Something grabbed his left arm. It pulled him across the rough plascrete and up against a cold wall that he belatedly realized was the Colonel's shelter from the snipers.

He grunted in surprise. He had somehow kept hold of his blaster, and the blast had helped carry him across the last of the space.

With his eyes gradually recovering from the flashbang, and he gazed back the way he had come. The power regulator had been crushed by a toppled water tower.

An ominous creak of metal made him look upwards. The antenna array mounted on the tower was starting to tilt over them. As he watched, it took another precise sniper shot and dropped even further.

The Colonel shook his head in frustration. "They've got us pinned down," he shouted over the din, reloading his gun. Boris noticed it was his last clip.

He looked at the nest of the dead sniper. It was still smoking. "Keban knew we were here."

The Colonel nodded. "They're jamming comms. Any ideas on an exit?"

Boris glanced about the surrounding rooftop. The snipers had all the exits covered and it was twelve stories down. "Jump and flap our arms?"

The crumbling antenna above them creaked again, and fresh cracks appeared in the plascrete block around the metal leg it supported. The tower above sagged, and a flurry of flakes of rust came down with the rain.

Boris checked the charge on his blaster. It was low, so he swapped the clip with his spare while the Colonel retrieved a dataslug from his camera. "Did you get it all?"

"I did, but we can't transmit the footage to Temae. We have to get it out physically." He put the dataslug inside his jacket, and ventured a burst of return fire. Boris hoped there were no workers in the office tower

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he was targeting. Every window seemed to have taken a round.

A long girder fell and smashed into the roof, making the rooftop crack. Jarred, Boris gazed up at the structure. The structure was falling apart; it wouldn't be much longer until it came down.

He scowled, and ventured a few shots of his own at likely places on the office building. The resultant burst of hostile fire barely missed him as he ducked back into cover.

There was nothing left he could do. It was just a matter of which would get them first, the gunfire or the tower.

Chapter Fifteen: Final Flight

Fresh air warmed by the Palace vents blew across the lounge, making the tapestries gently sway. Mayor Susanna Kent sipped some water, and rested the glass against her forehead. The pleasant coolness helped ease her headache a little. It had been a very long night, and at the rate they were going it wouldn't stop when morning came.

Both the Viscount and Queen Dalamai had suffered along with her, seated around the low, circular table. They had been through the Ranboen contract and the Dimonah colonial charter more times than she could count. She had practically memorized the documents and their ramifications as much as their latest draft of the proposal. The legislation would permanently guarantee restrictions on Ranboen's actions, if they signed it before the handover.

According to his secretary, Governor Keban was examining their latest draft. If only the man could join them in person! The whole process would be so much

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easier with him present. Still, she understood he was dealing with many pressures.

Queen Dalamai rubbed her eyes. She looked tired, but nowhere near as exhausted as Kent felt. “We had hoped that Dimonah would be undeniably better for our efforts at the end of our reign.” She tapped her terminal’s display off, and closed her eyes. “That now seems unlikely.”

Kent gazed across at her. “Even the greatest navigators must ensure storms, your Majesty.”

Xavier looked across at Kent, with a barely detectable grin of approval. It was becoming increasingly clear to her that he admired Dalamai. He possibly even loved her.

The Queen smiled at her. “Mayor, we’re not going to abandon ship. That is simply not an option.”

Xavier pointedly gazed at an antique clock hung between two tapestries. “Still no word from the Governor.”

Kent involuntarily glanced at the same clock. “Perhaps that’s an encouraging sign. His criticisms with the drafts so far have been relatively minor ones. Maybe we finally nailed it.”

Dalamai’s expression hardened. “There’s no deal until we have his signature. Until then we should neither relax, nor ignore other avenues.” She leaned forward and tapped her terminal. The contract with Ranboen appeared, and she scrolled through it.

Kent looked at it again on her own terminal. “It’s a fairly simple document, considering. Even the Confederation Consul couldn’t find any loopholes in it.”

“Perhaps we will find what he could not.”

Kent frowned. The text was very simple. Almost too simple for such an important agreement. If only it had more provisions, or exceptions. The authors had never anticipated every Hoparin *but* the reigning one to be slain. Their reign was going to end, and sovereignty would transfer to Ranboen.

If only Ranboen would agree to be bound by a constitution before handover! She had at least thirty different versions of the legislation, each altered to cover the various hitches and quibbles Keban had pinpointed over time.

She wondered if he'd been intentionally dragging out the process, playing for time. Was it possible he had no intention of signing at all?

Kent sighed, and tried to hear if the rain was still pouring down outside. She'd been in the palace during storms before, and sometimes it was possible to hear the thunder rumbling through the filtered vents. But there was nothing. Perhaps she was too far inside the Palace.

The Colonel was out there somewhere, in that awful night. Along with the bodyguard turned assassin. Xavier had suggested one of the inner servants might be with them. She glanced at the two seated with her. They seemed very unconcerned considering their head of security had absconded.

Perhaps the Colonel's actions were part of some kind of undercover operation? If so, it was a dangerous course of action to take. Every police officer on the planet was looking for him, and the last thing they needed was another complication.

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On impulse, she summoned the current most wanted list. The Colonel and Boris were still listed at the top. They obviously hadn't been caught yet.

Alby took the initiative to add an observation as silent text alongside the list. Apparently, the same list had been requested by somebody in the room only ten minutes ago.

Kent glanced across at the Queen, poring over a mass of Contract documents. Somehow, she was sure it was her. Despite her air of indifference, she hadn't forgotten about her head of security. Did she hate him for his betrayal, or did he have her trust?

Dalamai looked up, giving Kent a guilty start until her eyes settled on the Viscount. "Xavier, what would it take to negate the Contract? To cancel it entirely? Let us suppose for example that Ranboen had a hand in the assassinations."

Xavier considered this. "The individuals in question would be liable under Dimonah law, though if they were in the Ranboen Wing we'd need to extradite them. But the Contract would be unaffected." He rubbed his goatee as he thought about it. "Publicly it would be different. If Ranboen were responsible, we'd have open revolt. A relentless campaign of resistance that would eventually drive them out. Of course, the human cost would be considerable."

Dalamai shook her head. "We will not bring about full scale war, that option can be ruled out right now."

Xavier shifted uncomfortably. "I am simply speaking hypothetically, your Majesty."

"I know, Xavier. That was not a reprimand." The Queen sat back from her terminal. Kent wondered if she looked as tired as Dalamai did. She felt like she could sleep for a week.

Boris braced himself against the plascrete block. The tower above them wouldn't survive much longer. He decided that the moment it started to go, he would run for the edge and jump. If he made it that far, he could at least look forward to a quick death on the street below.

He noticed a new sound amongst the rain and incessant gunfire. It was gunfire striking metal, but it was distant and came from direction away from the rooftop. A steady whine accompanied it, swiftly growing louder.

In the next instant, the sound became both recognizable and deafening. He saw the Colonel's skywagon roaring toward the building, the stealth field destroyed. Boris felt a flicker of hope, tempered with dread. Temae must have witnessed their predicament, and had decided to fly to their rescue.

She wasn't trained to operate the Colonel's skywagon, and the rooftop was a terrible maze of towers. Worse still, the vehicle was being hammered by armor-piercing gunfire. The vehicle drew closer, and it looked like she meant to bring the vehicle straight in to protect them from the snipers.

An explosion overhead shoved him to the ground. Dazed, he struggled to rise amid a shower of burning sparks. Risking a squint up above him, he saw the horribly damaged tower had been hit by some kind of rocket. It was slowly pitching over, falling toward them through a wreath of smoke.

Boris hurried to his feet and struggled to help the Colonel rise to run away from the collapsing tower. It meant they were leaving the only shelter they had, but

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he didn't see any other choice. Maybe the snipers were being distracted by Temae.

The skywagon was taking so many hits it was sparkling. It accelerated, which was not reassuring because Temae was already bringing the vehicle in way too fast.

The Network tower struck the rooftop behind them with a deafening crash of tortured metal. A twisted beam whistled through the air a foot above their heads, and tore into one miraculously intact water tower. The tank ruptured, loosing a torrent that knocked them both off their feet. Boris fell into a flood that carried the unmistakable smell of kerosene.

The roof was awash with fuel.

A terrific crash announced the skywagon's arrival on the roof. The vehicle plowed through a series of structures, and skidded across the surface toward them with deep gashes in the hull. They ran, both of them showing enough presence of mind to head for the side that would keep the vehicle between them and the remaining snipers.

The wagon smashed into the remains of the collapsed tower, and finally came to a halt. One of the engines at the rear was on fire.

Boris winced in pain as he coughed water from his lungs. The fumes prompted tears that helped wash the kerosene from his eyes.

"Bloody hell," he managed.

The bark of a powerful handgun made him flinch. It sounded like Keban's expensive toy, and seemed to come from the other side of the skywagon. Boris rose and started toward the vehicle.

The kerosene ignited, and flames rushed toward him and the vehicle. He doubled his efforts. The Colonel

sprinted along just behind him, barely managing to stay ahead of the spreading flames.

Boris reached the skywagon's buckled door, and tugged at the latch. The metal slab refused to budge. The Colonel arrived at speed, and slammed an outstretched foot against the outward bend of the metal. The dent remained unaffected.

The flames caught up with them, and Boris heard metal strike metal inside the wagon. Frantic, he wrenched at the latch. "TEMAE!"

The Colonel, flames rising up his body, fired at the damaged runners. Boris pulled the door with all his strength, and this time it pulled free from the hull. With his legs blazing, he rushed inside.

Temae was nowhere to be seen.

The cockpit windscreen was pocked with holes, and the flight console was a mess of cracked panels. The Pilot's chair sported a glistening wet bloodstain. The door opposite was open. From the rooftop beyond, he could hear the Governor's skycar starting up.

He ran out, toward the sound. The Colonel, trying to extinguish his blazing fatigues with the wagon's fireblanket, wasn't close enough to stop him. "Boris, the snipers!"

Boris sprinted toward the sleek black skycar. It was already rising from the rooftop. He lunged forward and grabbed at the car's smooth hull, but the vehicle's deflection field prevented him from touching it and shoved him aside. He fell sprawling to the rooftop. Rolling onto his back, he fired twice at the vanishing car. The field deflected his shots, sending them veering into the sky. Unharméd, the skycar vanished into the rain.

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Boris climbed to his feet and glared at the vanishing shape. His hand gripped his blaster so tight his knuckles were white and his arm trembled.

The Colonel cautiously followed him out of the burning skywagon. "The snipers have pulled out as well."

Boris blinked, and glanced at the nearby buildings. He'd been so consumed he'd forgotten about them.

The Colonel inspected the remains of the command car. "We won't be learning much from this." The vehicle was blazing so much it was barely recognizable any more. "They did a good job on him too."

Boris looked down at the Commander's corpse, and felt his stomach clench. The body was a melting skeleton, the bone *bubbling* in the rain. "Potassium?" he ventured.

"Acid charge. Neat way to eliminate any potential evidence. You do know your legs are on fire don't you?"

Boris looked down, and discovered several persistent flames still clinging to his fatigues. He managed to pat them out without much trouble. It was the first time that night the freezing rain had done him any good, the water in his clothes had kept the kerosene at bay. Exhausted, he slumped against a fallen girder. Half the rooftop around them was on fire. "I don't get it. Why did they pull out? And why take Temae?"

"I expect Keban intends to blame the destruction on us, and let his troopers finish the job. That way, he can turn the whole thing into a PR victory."

Boris scowled. "He'll pay. I swear it." He climbed to his feet, and looked at the Colonel. The man's outfit looked charred. "You all right?"

“Fine. Finally warmed up a little.” The Colonel checked the dataslug inside his jacket. It was still intact. “We must get this recording to her Majesty. It may not affect the handover, but she needs to know.”

Boris scoffed, and shook his head. “Isn’t the Palace Network difficult to hack?”

“Very. We’re short on time, so we’ll have to deliver it physically.”

Boris winced. “Breaking in to the Great Palace? It just keeps getting better.” He glanced at the wreckage of the skywagon. “Okay, let’s go. We’ll need some transport.”

The Colonel took the lead. “This way. On the way up I noticed an old groundcar we can probably hot-wire.”

Chief Hill cupped his hand over his terminal’s pickup, trying to protect it from the worst of the wind and rain. “Honey, just stay inside the apartment. It’s not safe to go outside.” A sudden gust of wind threw his cloak’s hood into his face, and he shifted his footing on the broad steps. The vast bulk of the fusion power station at the top of the steps was proving to be disappointingly poor shelter and the wind seemed to change direction every few seconds.

The sound of an approaching groundcar distracted him from his call, and he turned into the driving rain to see who it was. Past the line of men filing out of the police wagon below him, a Ranboen vehicle was coming into view. It glided to a halt at the bottom of the steps, and three figures emerged. He recognized Captain Barker leading the group.

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Hill turned his back to the wind again, and hurried to wrap up the call. "That's right, it's just a precaution. Take care, I've got to go. Okay? Love you." He cut the link as Barker came to a halt in front of him. He made no effort to conceal the fact he'd been talking to his wife, and Barker gave no sign of caring one way or the other. "Hill, have your men finished securing the Station?"

"Yes, Captain. We're still reinforcing the perimeter but that will be finished in a few minutes. We've retained two of the station staff in the power distribution room, to monitor the system."

"That's excessive. Reduce it to one, and see to it he has two people watching him at all times. Have you met any resistance?"

"Nothing serious, Captain." Not yet, anyway. He was sure that would come once people realized what was going on.

"Good. We have all ports and utilities secured, but we'll have to expand that to include active mines and the gas plant before the handover at midday."

Hill stared at him. "That will leave very few officers to patrol the streets. If there's unrest, it won't start at the utilities."

"Protection of assets comes first. If large groups assemble and become a threat, we have fast response units ready to break them up."

Hill felt his jaw drop.

"You mean aircraft! What will they do, strafe the crowd?"

"They *do* have some non-lethal weaponry. Besides, only troublemakers will get hurt. Law-abiding citizens won't be there in the first place, will they?"

"You're serious aren't you?"

“It hardly matters anyway. Such matters are no longer your concern. Do I make myself clear?”

The Chief kept his fists by his sides. “Yes Captain. Very clear.”

“Then let’s not tarry further.” He nodded at the two troopers behind him. “These men will be posted in the main Control Center of this facility.”

Hill nodded to the officer by his side. “Superintendent Stokes here will show them the way.” Stokes saluted, and led the two troopers up the wet steps.

Barker took several steps back toward his car, and paused to rub his chin. “Hill, this is the primary power source for Kalaanda.” It was a statement more than a question, but Hill replied anyway.

“Yes, Captain. It was the first large-scale fusion station built on Dimonah. There’s only one other like it in Gloume, and it’s half the size.”

“It’s too far inside the city outskirts. Erect some crash barriers. I want a strict security zone around the building, two hundred yards minimum.”

“I’ll see to it, Captain.”

Barker strode back to his car, still apparently oblivious to the rain even as he entered the vehicle. The door closed, the car accelerated away into the haze. With the Captain’s departure, Hill felt his blood pressure drop back to tolerable levels. He took a deep breath, and gazed up at the stormy night sky.

It was starting to lighten. A red dawn was coming, and soon millions of workers would be waking up. When they stepped out of their homes, they would find a new order taking hold. Tax cuts or no, the unrest of the past week could only worsen. Dalamai would no

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doubt appeal for calm, for what good it might do.
Ranboen was not in a tolerant mood.

On the brightening horizon, he could just make out the distant silhouette of the Great Palace, a somber shape against the crimson clouds.

This was definitely not going to go well.

Chapter Sixteen: Friendly Fire

Boris opened his eyes. The car's rear windscreen lay above him, dirty and cracked. Through it, he could see a narrow strip of morning sky above the narrow alley. Orange clouds against a gray sky. "The gods have found the light switch," he mumbled.

The Colonel must have heard him over the rumble of the old turbine engine. "Yes indeed. We'll need to move quickly to get inside before the morning shift starts and the guards are fresh."

Boris shifted wearily on the car's back seat, searching unsuccessfully for a more comfortable position. The seat was just too narrow. "Next time, steal a more upmarket car."

"I'm afraid this is as good as you'd find in that part of town."

"I don't care," Boris muttered. He closed his eyes and tried to rest. The rocking motion of the car was hypnotic.

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The Colonel's voice switched to a concerned tone. "Are you sure you're up to this? You don't look so hot."

Boris opened his eyes and smirked at the Colonel. "You don't look so great yourself you know. Don't worry, I'm right to go whenever."

The Colonel returned to concentrating on his driving, just in time to swerve around an aging dog. "Tired men make mistakes Boris."

Boris let his flippant smirk fade away. "Yeah, that's why I'm getting some rest."

The car swerved gently scraped against the narrow alley's wall. Boris fancied he could have gotten out and walked faster, but it was good to sit for a while.

The Colonel kept talking. "The footage should clear your name. If we can reach the Queen and explain ourselves, I'm sure she'll give you a pardon. You'll be fine."

"Pity nothing else will be."

The Colonel didn't have a reply for that.

They reached a tight corner, and the Colonel added a little more character to the vehicle's exterior as they scraped through. The turn took them out of the alley for a time, and the Great Palace came into view. The perimeter wall was only fifty yards away, and the massive building behind it seemed to blot out the sky. The Colonel gently braked, and brought it to a stop close enough for the wall to hide the palace from view. Boris figured he didn't want the groundcar identified by palace sensors.

The man reached underneath the dashboard, and pulled apart two wires that had been twisted together. The engine immediately died. "This is close enough, we'll walk from here."

Boris sat up, and rubbed his eyes. “What, no driving through the front gate?”

The Colonel rummaged through the equipment they had salvaged from the totaled skywagon, and clipped a torch onto his vest. “We wouldn’t live long if we did. I brought us all the way around to this side because an old escape route exits here.”

Boris checked the fresh blaster clips on his belt, and followed the Colonel out of the car.

The perimeter wall looked endless. The heavy black stone was a perfect match for the Palace itself, albeit a lot dirtier. The bottom few yards were so bad they were indistinguishable from the rest of the alley.

A narrow lane separated the wall from the nearest buildings, and the Colonel led the way into it. He let his hand run over the lichen-clad wall as he walked, as though feeling for something. “The escape tunnel was part of the original construction,” he explained. “I didn’t learn about it until I took command of the Elites.”

He stopped, and scratched at the grime with his hand. After a time he outlined a block much smaller than the others, barely a foot along each side. He flattened his palm against it and waited. “Later on that same year, I ordered it filled in.” He frowned at the block. “Strange, this should be responding. It’s a separate system and the dirt shouldn’t affect it...”

A loud click rang out as machinery lurched into life, and a pair of tall blocks sank into the wall. They moved in for several feet, and then slid aside to reveal a steep flight of steps leading down into darkness. The Colonel brushed the worst of the grime off his hand, and smiled. “Excellent, it still recognizes my DNA. Either

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Xavier's been too busy to send someone out to change it or he's cutting me a break."

Boris switched on his own torch, and shone the beam into the darkness. The light fell on a multitude of dust-laden cobwebs. The Colonel cautiously led the way down, wiping the cobwebs aside. The door sealed shut behind them.

The air smelled stale, and it seemed to get worse the deeper they went. Boris winced, and did his best to ignore the odor. "So why wasn't it filled in?"

"It was. At least, the part that worried me was. We filled in everything from the basement entrance through to the Palace grounds. The fill was capped with tamper sensors in case somebody tried to clear it." They finally reached the bottom of the steps, and started along a long corridor with an arched ceiling.

"So this tunnel is a dead end?"

The Colonel grinned. "A few years before he died, the King got it into his head to reopen the tunnel. He thought it would prove handy. I disagreed, and talked him into a compromise. Instead of clearing the tunnel out, we put an access shaft into the Palace grounds linked with the surviving length of tunnel. The shaft is monitored, but I never felt that outweighed the risk."

Boris winced. "So there are sensors."

"I think I can breach them. I know the system very well."

Boris loosened his blaster in its holster.

The passageway seemed to go on forever, but they finally reached the end. Smooth plascrete sealed the way ahead, while a gleaming metal ladder on the left wall led through a circular opening in the ceiling.

The sensors the Colonel had mentioned were not visible anywhere.

Boris stayed clear as the Colonel climbed carefully up the ladder. He recognized the signs of heavy implant use in the man's intent expression, and didn't dare interrupt him.

A green light appeared in the shaft, and the Colonel hurried up the ladder. "Quickly! We've got three minutes until the system reactivates."

Boris hurried to the ladder and climbed up after him. The shaft was too narrow to see past the Colonel's broad frame, but the sound of running water didn't reassure him. He'd spent too long in flooded spaces already.

The sound grew louder as they climbed. When they reached the top, he found they had entered a small chamber lit only by their own torches and the green light from the shaft. A single door with no handle and an impressive lock was the only apparent exit.

The water was a steady stream gushing out of a large pump on one side of the tiny room. It then ran along a wide channel across the length of the chamber, and vanished through an opening in the opposite wall. The Colonel pulled out his scanner then thrust it into the water and through the opening.

The device projected a representation of the grounds outside, and highlighted the security sensors with bright red circles. The corner of the display showed the countdown until the sensors in the room reactivated. It was already below two minutes.

Boris watched as the device selectively dazzled, distracted or deceived the numerous sensors outside. The countdown continued while the sensors were gradually overcome, and the Colonel snapped the device off with less than twenty seconds to go.

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“Move!” He urged, launching himself into the flow of water and out the narrow opening. Boris followed without hesitation.

Boris slid along the channel, bumping against the uneven floor and sides. The Colonel vanished, dropping away ahead of him to reveal an opening bright with dawn light. The opening had two great metal spikes on either side.

Boris quickly folded his arms against his chest and slid between the vertical spikes to drop into a body of water. His boots found a smooth floor, and he stood up.

Blinking away the water, he found himself standing waist deep in a marble pond crammed with lilies. A giant bronze lion towered behind him, the water gushing from its mouth. The fangs looked no less threatening from the outside. He turned, and saw the Colonel already hurrying across a series of flowerbeds. He switched off his torch and ran to catch up.

They were well within the Palace grounds. Boris glanced nervously at the towering trees and hedges, searching for guards and turrets. The shallow morning light made the task impossible, but he knew the sensors were there and recovering. He leapt over the flowerbeds and sprinted after the Colonel across a soggy lawn. He finally caught up with the man in the shelter of a tall hedge, within the shadow of the building itself. An brief grin and nod from the man reassured him they were safe from the sensor arrays, for the time being at least.

The hedge sheltered them from the driving wind, and offered a view of the freight area. The loading bay's broad doors were shut, as was the personnel entrance close by it. The Colonel crouched, and used his scanner

to check the area. Boris was glad for the chance to catch his breath.

The personnel door swung open too quickly to let them hide. A frowning Ranboen guard was illuminated by the door's overhead light, sidearm drawn. Boris concluded they had made too much noise, and the guard had come to investigate.

Boris leapt at the man before his eyes could adjust. The man saw him coming, but not quickly enough to evade the arm thrown around his neck. The tight squeeze would have knocked out an ordinary man, but the moment Boris felt his bicep press against tight muscles on the guard's neck, he knew this was no such person.

The man threw himself to the ground, sending them both crashing in a tangled mess. Boris saw the guard bringing a gun to bear on him. The sound of a second scuffle from the doorway told him the guard wasn't alone, and that he couldn't count on the Colonel for help. He let go.

The guard swiftly rose to his feet. Boris rolled onto his back and kicked as the man turned toward him, catching his gun and making him take a step backwards. That bought him enough time to steady himself with one hand, and draw his blaster with the other. He fired.

The Guard shuddered, then collapsed. Boris watched the torn body long enough to be sure he wasn't feigning death, then climbed to his feet to assist the Colonel.

He needn't have bothered. The Colonel had won his own fight, and crouched to drag the body into the building. Boris grabbed his late foe's shirt, and dragged

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him inside to a small deliveries room. With that done, he leaned against the wall to catch his breath.

The Colonel nodded at his own opponent, a female in a Ranboen uniform. “Edgars,” he said, wiping the rain from his face. “Good woman. She left the Elites a year ago; really had potential.” He sighed, and stood to check his gun. “Her Majesty will almost certainly be in one of her lounges, preparing for the handover with Xavier. Our best approach will be through the food stores and the old infirmary. Both should be empty at this time of day, and it avoids the Elite barracks. Mind you, it is technically part of the Ranboen wing.”

Boris nodded at the dead guards. “What if we find Elites? I doubt they’ll welcome us with open arms.” He hesitated, and played that last sentence back in his mind. “No offence meant.”

The Colonel nodded. “We’ll do what we have to. I was hoping we wouldn’t have to kill anyone.”

Boris glanced at the corpse at his feet. “So much for that. Why are there Ranboen guards here? I thought they weren’t authorized for this area.”

“They weren’t. Xavier must have accepted an offer from Keban to help with security.” The Colonel peered into the corridor. Boris hoped Xavier was bright enough to keep the Ranboen troops away from the Queen.

The Colonel moved cautiously out of the room, and beckoned him onward.

Boris gripped his blaster and followed. As they moved, the gaslights brightened into day mode. Nervous, Boris spared a glance for the trail of water droplets they had left behind them.

“This is a bad idea,” he mumbled.

Chapter Seventeen: Inside

Senator Jenael Pollock supported the Confederation Senate's practice of requiring physical meetings, despite the demonstrated superiority of networked Virtual Reality. In his experience, the requirement filtered out those who didn't take their job seriously.

Of course, it did require a lot of moving about.

The Andrea Prime Senate complex dropping behind the sky limo was a vast structure, but the white cluster of domes couldn't hold everything. It might accommodate the largest and most diverse political union in recorded history, but with so many senators it was only natural that most of the decisions were not made in the Senate Chamber itself but in the smaller structures and estates surrounding it.

It was a situation Pollock had learned to exploit. As representative of the Sol region, he carried more clout than most of his peers. He had also developed a talent for using that to defuse awkward developments before they could grow into long-winded Senate hearings.

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It was that talent that had prompted him to join Newman in her personal skycar. Lissa Newman was the Minister of Confederation Internal Security, and he needed to quiz her.

Newman turned from the sea of domes outside, her brown ponytail brushing the low headrest behind her. She smiled artificially perfect teeth. It easy to forget she was fifty years older than he was. The wonders of technology allowed people to change their appearance as they liked, provided they could afford it.

“Jenael,” she said. “I’m *always* dealing with security issues in the core systems. Why don’t you just say what’s on your mind instead of dancing around the issue?”

Pollock grinned, and nodded. He hadn’t expected Newman to let information slip by accident, but she did allow herself to provide helpful leaks on occasion. He switched to a direct approach. “I’m thinking about Dimonah. I’m sure your department has supplied you with reports on the situation there.”

“Ah yes, little old Dimonah,” the woman mused, nodding. “Soon to become another privately owned system, it would seem.”

“If so it will descend into civil war. I believe the inhabitants would rather join the Confederation. The notion has been gaining increasing support there over the last two decades.”

Newman’s poker face was unreadable. “Perhaps. I expect your own constituents wouldn’t be so enthusiastic about it. All that cheap labor overpowering the tariff barriers.”

Pollock shifted his weight, and waved dismissively. “A drop in the bucket, economically.”

“Economics and politics are hardly the same thing, particularly if you plan on being instrumental to the process. Your great grandmother emigrated from Dimonah after all. It could be seen as favoritism.”

Jenael hesitated. The Minister’s Network implant wasn’t unique in its ability to swiftly call up such information, but he’d hoped she wouldn’t bring it up. “Yes, I know. But I fear the situation will threaten Sentient Rights, and that is unconscionable.”

The view through the window tilted suddenly, an unsettling sight without the inertia to accompany it. Pollock looked away from the window as the craft’s electronic pilot banked into a less crowded air corridor, and quickly accelerated.

The Minister sighed. “You’re a brave man, Jenael. But of course I cannot tell you what my advice to the executive is.”

“Of course. But if I were to ask your personal advice on the matter?”

Newman smirked. “Personally, I would recommend that the Confederation take no action at all.”

Pollock blinked, and forced himself to maintain his appearance of calm. “May I ask why?”

“Oh, you know the score Senator. Ranboen is money, and Dimonah isn’t. Can you imagine the backlash if Ranboen profits took a dive after government interference? Besides, Dimonah is something of a political embarrassment. An independent system in Confed space. Most Senators believe we’d be better off if the system *was* a corporate asset.”

Pollock winced. “Obviously, those Senators are not considering the welfare of the system’s inhabitants.”

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“Of course not. They’re all foreigners.” The car began to lose speed, and descended toward the southeastern tower of the archives complex.

The Minister surprised him by leaning forward and placing her hand on his shoulder. “Jenael, I understand how you feel. Frankly I’d like to see Dimonah join Confed as much as you would. But this is one case where we must not only follow the rules, we must be *seen* to be following them. Interfering would be counterproductive.”

Pollock blinked, and turned away from the Minister to gaze unseeing out the window. He took a deep breath. “So even if specific individuals might have broken the law, that doesn’t affect Ranboen.” He turned back to her. “Your department will continue to watch developments?”

The Minister nodded. “Of course.”

Pollock had expected no more from the discussion, but he still felt strangely disappointed. He sat in silence as the car set down outside the CIS offices.

The door slid open, and he thanked Lissa and stepped out. His own car landed only a few yards away. He'd had the machine follow him on automatic, in order to take him back. It was the kind of waste taxpayers loved to hate, but he considered the in-flight meeting well worth the effort. He climbed inside, and sat back for the return journey.

Hopefully, Queen Dalamai had something hidden up her sleeve. If she didn't, there wasn't much hope for her people.

It was impressive how much food the Palace went through. Boris followed the Colonel as he threaded his

way through rooms crammed with stack after stack of crates reaching all the way to the ceiling. There looked to be enough fruit and vegetables alone to keep several farms in business. The sight made his stomach rumble. It had been a long time since his last meal.

As they passed an open box of muesli bars, he grabbed one and started munching through it as they walked.

The Colonel ignored his energetic snacking and nodded at a door that looked a little stronger than the others. "That will take us past the old infirmary. From here on we're in the Ranboen Wing, but this area hasn't been used for years so it should be empty. With luck we can get through it without being detected."

Boris swallowed the last of the bar and belched. "Scuse me. Does Ranboen have a separate security grid?"

"I'm afraid so. This is a calculated risk." They reached the door, and the Colonel pulled open the security panel. "Fortunately I have spent some time examining their protocols."

"Interesting pastime."

"I wanted to be confident it didn't represent a weakness in Palace security."

The Colonel set to work, using his implant in conjunction with some manual re-wiring. The Panel was complex, and looked to Boris like a lot to take on without a specialized kit. He kept watch for guards and palace staff while the Colonel worked. Most of the people were still asleep, but they would be rising very soon. Once the casual staff arrived from the city, the corridors would be flowing.

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Several minutes later, the door finally slid open for them. Boris glanced at the security panel and memorized the code. He might need it if he got separated from the Colonel in the Ranboen wing.

The corridor stretching before them was lit with standard lighting panels instead of gas. The walls were covered with gleaming white tiles, and a non-slip material covered the floor. Compared to the usual royal carpet and stone, the hospital-like brightness felt harsh and hostile. The Colonel led the way in.

The hard surfaces produced echoes from even the slightest sound. They did their best to walk in silence on the hard floor.

The rooms they passed all seemed to be unoccupied. The benches and surgical tables all looked to be fully stocked, but they lay covered and unused. Boris wondered how much of the massive building was similarly ignored or forgotten.

There were voices from ahead of them, a male and a female engrossed in conversation. The sound became clearer as they approached. The Colonel slowed his pace. They reached a turn in the corridor, and moved carefully around it.

The voices were coming from an open surgery on their left up ahead. It was a room they would have to pass, and with the doors wide there was a strong chance of detection. The Colonel slowed to a silent creeping pace, and edged closer toward the open doors.

From behind him, Boris could hear what the voices were saying.

“It’s an old model, that’s why,” said the woman. “It even predates the GX20.” She sounded well educated, and spoke with an accent Boris recognized from the Confederation core. It was possible she was a Senior

Ranboen executive, but he figured it was more likely she was some kind of expert brought in temporarily.

“Really?” Said the male. He sounded younger than the woman. “What’s its range?” Boris couldn’t tell if the man was a local or not. He leaned closer.

“Range isn’t the problem. Every time it receives a request signal, it transmits a microburst at high power. The drawback is the limited band of frequencies. It’s not good in dense urban areas, and hopeless any further than a few feet underground.” There was a clatter of metal, like someone had dropped a spoon on a metal tray.

“But if it’s no good for re-use, why bother removing it?”

“Keban said to remove it and destroy it, and he’s the one who’s paying us.” A firm click came next, like a lock snapping shut.

The Colonel began to peer around the doorway.

“Personally, I think he worries too much.” Another click. “OK, that’s got it steady.” The sound of a power saw started, and rose to a high pitch.

Realization dawned, and Boris felt his blood chill. He launched himself past the Colonel, and heard the sound of the saw deepen to a grinding noise as he rounded the doors with blaster in hand.

The two medics stood on either side of an occupied surgical table. The woman, the taller of the two, was holding the saw against their patient’s head as the other watched. Both wore surgical gowns as white as the uniform on their patient.

Her head was held in a padded clamp, but her arms and legs were unhindered. The startled surgeon pulled back, and he saw the saw’s circular blade was already

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buried several inches into her head. A thick slice on a nearby tray had apparently already been cut out.

His arm seemed to move without any thought on his part, the shot spraying the bright walls with the surgeon's blood. Her body convulsed as it fell, tugging the surgical power saw off the table and sending it skidding across the room.

The man reached for the bench behind him. There were several items there, including a portable incinerator and an open surgical kit. But the item he was reaching for was a sidearm still in its holster. Boris fired before he could draw the weapon, and the man was hurled against the wall with a broad hole punched through his torso.

Boris stood before the scene in horrified silence. The Colonel said something from behind him, but he didn't hear what it was. He couldn't pull his eyes away from the bloody hole in Temae's head. With his heartbeat thumping in his ears, he lowered his gun and stepped closer to the table.

The Colonel moved toward a metal kidney-shaped tray beside her butchered head and peered at an object inside it. It was a small gray capsule. "It's her implant," he said. "It's supposed to be the same model as Alexander and Jemma's. All our inner staff have them."

Boris managed to turn his gaze away from Temae's unseeing eyes, and stared at the implant. The implant was smooth, perhaps half as long as his thumb. The side of it had a shallow protrusion that the ones he'd seen in court hadn't. Presumably it was the burst transmitter the two had talked about.

Boris drew a deep breath. "That... explains a lot." He handed the device to the Colonel, and felt a need to sit down for a time. He pulled over a trolley and set

himself down on it. The stainless steel bent, but supported his weight.

The Colonel studied the implant, clenching his jaw. “A long range locator. Ranboen must have added this years ago, when it was implanted.” He shook his head, and looked down at Temae. “That’s how they found us. All those security checks and medscans, and all the time *this* was sitting there.”

Boris felt himself nod. “It’s clever. Remotely activated, dormant between transmissions. Very difficult to detect.”

“Ranboen has been planning against us for longer than I thought.” The man took a sample bag from the surgical kit and sealed the implant inside it. “I’ll have to schedule fresh scans of the staff,” he mumbled. He carefully pocketed the device next to the footage from the camera inside his vest.

Boris stood, and walked back to Temae’s body. He touched her neck, and found it felt cold.

A single neat chest wound marred her uniform. Despite all the mayhem on the rooftop, only one shot had hit her. He looked at her hands and found they had no blood on them. That was good, it meant she’d probably died pretty quickly. Her green eyes were still open, fixed in an expression more of concern than pain or fear.

He pushed her eyelids closed. “She never knew about it. Keban saw the chance to grab her and remove the evidence, and he took it.” He remembered her saying she would give her life for the Hoparin. “I hate this bloody planet.”

The Colonel gave his shoulder a light squeeze. “Come on Boris. We have to move.”

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Reluctantly, he straightened and turned toward the doorway. The Colonel made sure the corridor was still clear, and led the way out.

Boris spared a last glance at the stainless steel table, and the body lying on it. Her skin was white, almost luminous under the harsh operating light.

“So long, Temae.”

He hurried to catch up with the Colonel.

The dawn had driven the rain away, and there were even patches of blue appearing in the sky. Governor Keban was therefore able to stand on the Palace roof without endangering his suit. But he stood before Dimonah’s enormous rising sun with a degree of apprehension.

Ranboen’s Regional Executive Officer Aceldama Gouyoku was coming to pay him a visit. Keban wondered if the man intended to take the credit for the handover, but it seemed unlikely. The acquisition of Dimonah was significant, but the REO managed holdings in thousands of systems. The more worrying possibility was that he lacked confidence in Keban and had decided to oversee the final hours himself.

Then again, maybe he was simply worrying too much.

Keban spotted the REO’s personal starship before it struck the atmosphere. The bright white vessel caught the sunlight brilliantly. As it sliced through the atmosphere, the field around the ship glowed.

It slowed as it approached. The ship was a beautiful chorus of graceful curves, broken only by a series of black oval-shaped windows. The vessel eased itself

down to land before him with no more noise or fuss than a sky-car.

An entry ramp extended. Keban hurried forward and stood a few paces from where it touched the ground.

The REO stepped out onto the ramp, dressed in a light gray suit with a fashionable diagonal seams. The sheen of the fabric matched the ship surprisingly well.

Keban shook his hand with as warmth as he could summon. "Welcome to Dimonah, Mister Gouyoku! I hope you had a pleasant journey?"

The REO smiled with perfect teeth. "Good morning Keban! Yes I did, as a matter of fact. A pleasantly brief one." The REO spared a glance around the rooftop. The diverse range of vessels parked around them included Boris' starship. The man smirked at them. "I feel like I've arrived in a museum."

Keban laughed. "I know what you mean. There's work ahead to clear out the Hoparin cobwebs."

"It certainly seems that way. But before we get down to such business, I'd like to freshen up a bit. I've been up for the last twenty hours."

"Right this way, I'll show you to your rooms." They started toward the broad apex of the building, and the rooftop doors of the Ranboen section. "The Management Council can assemble in VR whenever you need, and the main Meeting Room has been reserved for your use."

The REO admired the view of Kalaanda as they walked, and Keban fancied he saw a speculative glint in the man's eyes. "The Council is of no interest to me. As for the Meeting Room, you and I shall make use of it ourselves. There are some matters we must discuss."

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Boris gazed at the polished brass of the gas lamp. In it, he could see the reflection of the lustrous black doors that the Colonel assured him led to the Queen. Apparently it was her favorite lounge and the doors were usually open. Stationed on the red carpet outside it were Elite guards.

He leaned toward the Colonel. "There's six of them. You're nuts," he whispered.

The Colonel unbuckled his weapons belt, and removed it. "Do you have a better idea?"

"Save time and shoot yourself now," he suggested.

The Colonel raised his arms, the belt in one hand and his other empty. "It'll be all right. They're Elites."

He walked around the corner before Boris could ask why that was supposed to be reassuring. Swearing under his breath, he edged further away from the corner and listened.

To their credit the guards reacted instantly. "Halt!"

"I surrender. Lieutenant, I respectfully request you notify her Majesty of my presence."

"Keep your hands up. Alpha to base, intruder in section twelve." Boris closed his eyes. What was he supposed to do if the Colonel's tactic didn't work out?

The Colonel adopted a firmer tone. "Lieutenant, I again ask you notify her Majesty we are here."

"Colonel, there is a warrant for your arrest and I must take you into detention. Her Majesty will be notified once that is done."

"Lieutenant, there are forces at work in this very building that would see me dead by the time she hears! I must report to her while I am still able."

The Elite raised his voice. "It is my duty to take you into detention, Colonel."

"Your duty to the Hoparin comes first, Lieutenant!"

"That is the duty I refer to! I must take you to detention."

Boris groaned, and removed his own holster. The only thing he could come up with was to make the surrender more noteworthy by turning himself in too. Maybe then it would be big enough news for the Queen to be notified.

Before he could walk ahead into the room, a gun pressed into his lower back. He froze.

"Keep your hands right where they are," Said a stern female voice. "Now walk ahead slowly."

Boris obediently moved around the corner, and turned his head to catch a glimpse of his captor. The silent-footed woman was an Elite.

"Drop the gun here and keep walking."

Boris complied. The Colonel was already in handcuffs, and guards wasted no time helping their colleague to cuff him as well.

His arrival certainly distracted the Lieutenant. Judging from how heated his discussion with the Colonel had been getting, that was probably a good thing. "Good work. Where did you find him?"

"Just around the corner sir. I think he was about to surrender."

The man raised an eyebrow and looked at Boris. "Were you?"

"I didn't want to buck the trend."

From the expressions on the guards faces, they all knew who he was but were keeping their reactions in

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check. All except for one of them anyway. “That’s Boris! Isn’t he supposed to be dead?”

Boris smirked. “You’re thinking of chivalry. Lieutenant, listen to the Colonel. He’s been out gathering intelligence that the Queen *needs to know*. Hell, I’m an offworlder and I’m putting my neck on the line over it. What’s your excuse?”

The lieutenant didn’t look impressed. He opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by a voice from his terminal. The voice was Dalamai’s. “Colonel, step closer to the doors.”

The lieutenant hesitated only for a moment, then stepped aside. The Colonel moved ahead and stood in front of the doors. Boris assumed there was a security camera there, or perhaps the black slabs were actually one-way rockglass.

“Explain why should we listen to you,” said the Queen through the terminal. The doors were still sealed. The Colonel stood before his own disheveled reflection.

He bowed. “Your Majesty. Boris and I have penetrated the Redeemer headquarters. We have uncovered evidence that shows they were the true perpetrators of the regicides.” He paused for this to sink in. “Boris is wearing a jacket we found. It is a replica that was used by the impersonator who assassinated the Prince and Princess. Most importantly, I have in my pocket footage proving Governor Keban financed both the Redeemers and the assassinations. I also have further evidence proving Ranboen started planning against us many years ago.”

“Is Temae not with you?”

“She was, Majesty. We discovered her body in the Ranboen wing on the way here. We had to kill several people to get here.”

Boris was pleased to see that particular revelation made a few Elites stare in surprise.

There was a tense pause.

“It appears you have much to report, Colonel.”

The heavy doors slid open. The Queen was seated at a table inside. With her sat an attentive Viscount, and a startled-looking woman wearing a simple golden sash across her torso.

The Queen stood, and the two with her hastened to stand as well. “Lieutenant. Remove their handcuffs and return their weapons.” The man hesitated, but then obediently complied. “Colonel, Boris. Please come inside and tell us all the details. Viscount Xavier and Mayor Kent, please remain. We would have you hear this.”

The Colonel bowed. “Thank you, Majesty.”

Dalamai gave a dismissive nod. Boris had the impression she had intended to let them in all along. Had she chosen to question them merely to observe form, or was she upset at the Colonel’s flouting of the law?

They re-fastened their weapons belts and came in. Dalamai sat down again, but the Colonel remained standing.

Now that Boris thought about it, he couldn’t recall the man ever being seated while a Hoparin was in the room. It seemed like a breach of protocol to him, but then he’d never been able to keep track of all the etiquette rules. He gladly took a seat himself, slumping into a soft leather armchair.

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The doors closed, and the Colonel clasped his hands behind his back. “After the conclusion of the trial,” he began, “I received a message from a woman working covertly among the Redeemers...”

Governor Kaban sat gazing at the REO across the conference room’s dark table. Gouyoku appeared to be relaxed, sitting with glass in hand as he gazed out the window. But Kaban carefully adjusted his posture anyway. Posture affected voice, and he needed to present a positive and confident aspect given that Gouyoku had just questioned the trooper deployment.

“I believe preemptive action was necessary,” he said. “To do less would have been to risk damage to assets. We depend on that infrastructure for our profits.”

Gouyoku kept gazing at the city through the sloping, full-height conference room window. “You misunderstand me, Kaban. Deployment certainly was in order.” The man swiveled to face him, and swirled the drink in his hand. “It is the *manner* in which the troopers were introduced that I am uneasy about. You used a rather heavy-handed approach. That’s poor presentation, as anyone in marketing could tell you. It was bound to produce friction and resentment, which is why we see it flowing on to the broader populace.”

Kaban forced himself to nod. “I see. May I ask how you would have handled it?”

A smile tugged at the REO’s lips. “I’m very glad you asked Governor.” Gouyoku set his glass down on the gleaming table, and pressed his palms together. “The troopers *could* have been presented as a reserve force for the local Police to call on. Funded by Ranboen out of *immense* concern for the populace. The constabulary

would have been grateful, and they'd certainly have been forced to call them in eventually. Actual trooper command would have remained with Ranboen of course. Increasing their powers could have been justified as a necessary response to increasing unrest."

"That would have taken a lot of time. What about the short term situation?"

The REO waved his hand dismissively. "What of it? Mayhem in the short term could be blamed on the Hoparin regime. Ranboen would be cleaning up their incompetent mess. Some of the locals would see through it of course, but we only need a third or so on side to keep the Confederation content. With full force brought in this quickly, I'm concerned with how the Senate might react."

Keban blinked in surprise. "The Senate wouldn't dare interfere! Not with a current contract in place."

Gouyoku grinned. "I agree that it's unlikely, but it's wise to maintain a respectable facade with the senate. It makes it easier to control which way they vote."

"Yes, the Senate can be a challenge." Courting Confederation Senators was essential to gaining advantage in the market. Keban had hopes of moving into that area himself, after he finished his work with Dimonah. "But there are many ways to influence the votes."

"You also failed to make effective use of the Redeemers."

Keban blinked. He definitely hadn't seen *that* one coming. "I believe I utilized the Redeemers very well. This operation was run almost exclusively through them."

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“Through them, yes. I would argue that you should have *used* them.”

Keban frowned. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

The REO took a sip from his glass, then licked his lips. “The Redeemers are a political pressure group. An aggressive one, but still political nonetheless. As such, they would become superfluous after the handover. With their cause realized, they would become more difficult to control. In time they might even decide to push for greater competition.”

“I believe it’s never wise to throw away an asset.”

“Hmm. I take it that’s why you framed a bodyguard when you could have left the Redeemers to take the fall?”

Keban nodded. “Correct. You’re saying I should have pulled the plug on them earlier?” The REO nodded. “I did consider it. I chose to preserve capital.”

“But in the end you had to dispose of them anyway.”

“Unfortunately so. The Redeemers would have been useful in suppressing anti-market rebels.”

The REO leaned forward. “In itself, that is laudable. But in your haste to salvage them, you chose to frame a proud professional. That was an immense risk, Governor. To a man like that, reputation and honor *matter*. It raised suspicions.”

Keban shook his head. “A few mercenaries here or there are of no importance. Nothing can stop the Handover.”

The REO sat back, and to Keban’s surprise, chuckled. “I will grant you that.” He sighed, and gazed back out the window at the city dawn. “You’ve done a poor job on some aspects of the job, I wanted to be certain you understood that. But results are what truly

matter. Everything appears to be on course, and for that I can only offer you my congratulations.”

Keban smiled, and relaxed for the first time since Gouyoku's arrival. It looked like he was going to be in for one hell of a bonus.

Chapter Eighteen: Queen Dalamai

The footage from the rooftop finished, and the projected image snapped off. Boris glanced at Dalamai. To his surprise, she didn't look either shocked or angry. There was simply a cold and distant look in her eyes.

“Thank you, Colonel. Tell us what occurred after these events.”

The Colonel rubbed his neck. “Keban and the snipers retreated. I believe they wanted to leave before police and fire services could arrive, the crash and the blaze attracted too much attention. Temae vanished at the same time, when we reached the wagon it was empty.” He paused. “Communications were dubious at best, and time was short. I decided we should report to you in person. To that end, Boris helped me break into the Palace through the old tunnel. While we were passing through the old infirmary in the Ranboen Wing, that we chanced on two Ranboen medics removing the implant from Temae's body in order to destroy it.” He placed the bag containing the implant on the table. “This implant will contain the events on

the rooftop from her perspective. Keban took her to prevent that evidence from getting out, as well as to conceal the fact Ranboen had altered the implant.”

Boris looked at the capsule sitting in the bag on the table. It hadn't occurred to him that the blood-smeared device held Temae's last moments. He decided it was something he didn't want to see. There was nothing it could tell him he didn't already know. He reached for a bottle of whiskey and poured himself a glass.

The Colonel indicated the bulge on the implant. “This protrusion is a built-in locator. That's how Keban — and through him the Redeemers — knew where Boris was hiding Alexander and Jem. It's also how he tracked us across the desert and the city.”

The Queen picked up the bag and studied the transmitter.

Xavier looked up from his terminal's busy display. “I've checked rooftop sensors, and the Governor's car just left Ranboen maintenance. It's now back in its usual parking place.”

Mayor Kent nodded. “I'd bet half my savings he had it sterilized. We won't find any hint of Temae's DNA in it.”

Dalamai put down the plastic bag. The sharp glint in her eyes made them seem more like those of a predator than an old woman. “Thank you, Colonel. Your activities have confirmed a number of our suspicions. All three of you have shown great bravery. You said Temae's body was in the Ranboen Wing?”

“Yes Majesty, in the old infirmary. We killed two armed medics in the same room.”

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Dalamai tapped her terminal into life, swiftly called up some documents, and transmitted them to the Viscount. "Please witness these, Xavier."

The aristocrat glanced through the documents on his own terminal. "Full pardons for the Colonel and Boris, and a royal search warrant." He nodded in approval and pressed his thumb against the device without further comment. "So witnessed."

Dalamai touched her terminal. "Lieutenant."

The man's face appeared immediately. "Yes Majesty?"

"Take a dozen men to the old infirmary and deliveries area and secure all evidence you find until the police can arrive. The necessary warrant is already lodged."

The Elite saluted. "Yes Majesty."

"Xavier, please circulate the fact that the Colonel and the bodyguard Boris have our full pardon for all actions to date. Their authorities are fully reinstated and along with the late Temae they are all designated as heroes."

The Viscount frowned. "Perhaps it would be wisest to wait until the Elites have secured the infirmary, Majesty?"

"No, they have our warrant. We must not allow Ranboen any legal excuse to fire on these men."

"Very well." The Viscount started working furiously on his terminal, implementing the flurry of orders. Boris finally felt he could relax, and topped up his drink.

The Queen turned to him. "We apologize to you Boris, for the undeserved pain and suffering that was forced upon you. Our pardon has cleared your status under our law, but we believe recompense is in order."

Boris realized the Queen was preparing a transfer of funds on her terminal.

The device signaled success. "Full ownership of your vessel has been returned to you," she said. "We have also transferred the equivalent of ten years of pay to your account."

Boris almost choked on his whiskey. "Thank you," he managed. He'd made it. Despite all the odds, he'd actually managed to come through.

It felt like an eternity since he'd been sentenced, but it was finally over. He'd been pardoned. Hell, he'd even been thanked and paid for his trouble. He was free to go.

There wasn't much left to stay for. He longed to return to independent serenity of space. The Confederation core worlds with all their color and chaos would always be his home.

But he wasn't ready to leave just yet. If nothing else, he needed to give Xavier's announcement time to filter through all the security staff.

Dalamai was still busy with her terminal. She glanced across the table at Xavier, and her expression softened. "Xavier, please take this document and keep it close to hand." The Viscount's terminal received the file. "Keep it sealed for now. It's something we prepared some time ago."

The Queen turned off her terminal and neatly clipped it to her robes. The ornate device looked like a ceremonial part of the outfit. "Is the Broadcast Room ready for use?"

"Yes Majesty, it was fully tested last night. The handover Ceremony is scheduled to start in just over two hours."

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“We shall broadcast early, Xavier. Colonel, please escort us to the Broadcast Room.”

Boris hadn't anticipated that Ranboen guards might have been stationed at the Broadcast Room door, but the Colonel didn't seem at all surprised. He kept his hand close to his holstered blaster as the Colonel spoke to the pair. The conversation was reminiscent of the one earlier with the Elites.

“This is her Majesty the Queen, not some interloper.”

“My orders are to allow nobody to enter until the appointed time.” The man glanced back and forth between Queen Dalamai and the Colonel. The four Elites escorting the group also seemed to be making him nervous.

Boris had sympathy for the man. He and his partner both seemed to be locals, unprepared for the sudden conflict of loyalty between employer and sovereign.

“Orders be damned! Her Majesty has sovereignty here. The room behind you is not part of the Ranboen wing!”

The guard swallowed. The Colonel had one hell of a reputation, even with the Ranboen staff. Maybe that was why Dalamai seemed content to let him handle the situation. The guard's partner swallowed nervously. The Mayor, Viscount and Queen all remained silent.

The Colonel adopted a more conciliatory tone. “Now, we *would* be within our rights to arrest you for defiance of your sovereign, but your superiors wouldn't be happy if that happened.”

The guard nodded despondently.

“But that is what I will do if you do not move aside. You have followed your orders to the utmost, but to persist any further would be to provoke an incident, contrary to the interests of *all* concerned. Wouldn't you say?”

The man's expression brightened. Boris got the distinct impression the man was already memorizing the excuse to repeat to his superior.

“I'm sure you'll do the right thing for Ranboen's reputation and stand aside.”

“Yes sir!” The guard snapped out a crisp salute, and stepped aside.

His partner moved just as quickly, following his friend's example. He even saluted as Dalamai passed by and the group entered the room.

It wasn't a large chamber, at least by Hoparin standards. One wall was curved, and adorned with rich drapes. Before that backdrop was a surprisingly simple and comfortable-looking throne, on a platform just two inches higher than the surrounding floor. The simplicity of the arrangement looked modest.

Boris checked the room for concealed threats, largely out of habit. The Colonel concentrated on the cameras and broadcast equipment.

Dalamai rested a hand against the back of the throne. “Xavier, how soon can we broadcast?”

Boris glanced at the Viscount, who had already taken one of the seats at the control console. “The uplink is already established and running in standby. For a smooth switch, five minutes Majesty.”

The Queen nodded, gathered her robes and sat firmly on the throne. Boris figured she should have

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seemed thankful for the rest. Instead, she looked more like a warrior prepared for battle.

Senator Jenael Pollock's implant fired the appropriate neurons to tell him he had a VR call from Minister Lissa Newman at Internal Security.

The call was tagged as non-urgent, but it came as a welcome distraction. The charity ball was proving to be one of the least productive he'd ever attended.

He finished his champagne, and smiled apologetically to the green-robed figure towering before him. "Please excuse me ambassador, I have to take a call."

The Abishai tilted his head forward in understanding. It was impressive how much expression the ambassador could manage with only his unblinking, black eyes. "Of course. Perhaps we can catch up again." The ambassador's voice had the impossibly perfect resonance of a cheap translator. But since he was an Abishai, the technology was probably so incredibly advanced the sound was a conscious choice. Pollock made a note that the Abishai was trying to keep a low profile.

He walked across the gleaming oak floor to the end of the ballroom. Of the two hundred or so people present at the benefit, the ambassador had been the only one yet he had enjoyed talking to. The fellow's eyes made it that much harder to tell when he was lying.

Jenael reached the secure booths. Almost half of them were unoccupied, which was a pleasant surprise. The planners must have expected more guests.

Pollock stepped into a vacant booth, closed the soundproof door, and sat down. He signaled his implant to open the waiting call, and the VR kicked in.

He found himself sitting on a sofa in what appeared to be Newman's home, or at least a representation of it. The Minister sat opposite him with a cup of coffee in her hand. In the background, he could hear the sound of children laughing. It looked early, and he wondered where the woman's home was. Given the real-time call, it had to be on Andrea Prime. Presumably somewhere many hours east.

She raised the coffee to him. "Morning, Senator. Hope I'm not distracting you from your charity work."

He chuckled. "The Benefit is a disappointment, I'm afraid. But I did promise to attend."

Newman took a gulp from her coffee. "May I assume you still have an interest in Dimonah current events?"

Pollock's heartbeat increased. "Yes. Very much so."

"Then you may find this interesting." A 2D image appeared on her right. It was a familiar shade of purple fabric, gently waving behind a crisp image of the Hoparin crest. The words 'Important Broadcast' were emblazoned above the logo, while 'Stand By' sat at the bottom next to a countdown. According to the display, there were two minutes left to wait.

Pollock's eyes narrowed. "I take it this is an unscheduled broadcast?"

"Full points, Senator. It's a priority broadcast from the royal palace, according to my boffins. It's on every channel they have, even some of the Confed feeds there have been interrupted. Handover is still hours away."

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The Senator stared at the screen. “Interesting times indeed. Thank you for letting me know, I want to watch this.”

“You won’t be alone. My department is watching very closely indeed.”

Queen Dalamai caught the Viscount’s attention. “Xavier! We need you by our side for the broadcast. Here, with the Mayor. You too, Colonel.”

The Viscount nodded, still at the console. “Very well Majesty. The broadcast will manage itself once I’ve finished the final settings here.” The man’s terminal chimed, and he paused to inspect it.

“A message from the Elites. They have secured the Ranboen Infirmary, and confirm the presence of three bodies.”

Dalamai turned to the Colonel. “Colonel, your status has been fully renewed. Why are these reports still going to Xavier?”

For a moment the man’s chiseled features looked ready to blush. “Given my involvement in the bloodshed Majesty, I felt it politic not to take that initiative.”

The Queen gave him a stern look. “Leave the politics to us. Your security status has already been fully restored, make proper use of it.”

“Yes, Majesty.”

Xavier looked relieved. Boris grinned as he watched the man, then he noticed something unusual on one of the displays from the Viscount’s terminal. It was showing the ships parked on the roof, among which there was a new addition.

The vessel was sleek and clean, and the vivid white hull gleamed in the morning sun. The nose of the craft bore the Ranboen logo.

Someone high up the chain had dropped by. Probably a divisional manager, come to pat Keban on the back for a regicide well done. The thought of the Governor profiting from his actions made him clench his fists.

He stepped closer to the Colonel. "Hey, do you have a moment?"

"That depends. What's up?"

"Is my ship out of lockdown?"

There was a pause as the Colonel consulted the Network with his implant. "Yes, it's cleared for flight. It's still parked in the same spot and the AI is online, so it should be right to go."

"Thanks." Boris looked once more about the room. Everyone seemed busy. Even Mayor Kent and the Queen were huddled in consultation with each other.

"Keban's not going to be prosecuted is he?"

The Colonel hesitated. "It's only a matter of time until a warrant is issued for his arrest, but our police can't enter the Ranboen wing. It's a legal black hole."

Boris nodded. "That's what I figured. Colonel, it's time I went. I have to see a man about an assassin."

The Colonel glanced at the broadcast countdown. There was little time left. "I'd be happy to keep you on staff. As an Elite Captain perhaps."

Boris shook his head.

"Very well. Keep the equipment you're carrying, the jacket too if you like. We have all the evidence we need." He hesitated. "Are you sure I can't tempt you to stay on?"

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Boris smiled. "Sorry. Besides, I don't make much of a guard."

The Colonel nodded. "I beg to differ, but I see your mind is made up. Be cautious around the Ranboen guards. Their loyalty is an unknown quantity."

"Will do." He offered the Colonel his hand, and they shook. "Goodbye Colonel."

"Farewell Boris, and thank you."

"One minute!" warned the Viscount. "Everyone in position." He got up from the console, headed for the throne, and straightened his uniform.

Boris left as the Colonel rejoined the others. Unchallenged by the four Elites and two Ranboen guards at the door, he headed for the nearest elevators.

"I don't like the look of this Chief."

Benjamin Hill walked to the rooftop railing and followed Stokes' gaze at the crowd below. The man had a point. There wasn't a patch of bare pavement in sight. The entire city square was a mass of people. It glowed with countless personal terminals, all displaying the same Palace transmission.

The terminals seemed pointless. The public projection display above the Great Palace wall was high enough to be visible to everyone in the square. The funeral procession of the Prince and Princess had drawn large crowds, but the unexpected broadcast had pulled in even more.

Hill whistled. "Let's treat it as a blessing for the moment... I doubt anything else could have distracted the populace the way this has."

“But how long will it last? There’s nothing the Queen can say to make people happy with the handover.”

Hill remained silent. He had no answer for that one.

Stokes should have left it there. “We’ve never had a Civil War, Chief.”

“So there’s no reason to break such an excellent record,” He said, rather more sharply than he meant. He noticed the last of the police cars were finally moving into place, strengthening the northern roadblocks. That was good; the crowd couldn’t grow further without raising the probability of crush injuries. “See if there are any more ambulances available. I’d like another one ready on the north side, behind that roadblock. We’ve already had two hospitalizations with heart problems.”

“Yes Sir.”

He glanced at the vast projection. There was less than a minute to go until they finally heard from the Queen. He wondered what she was planning to say.

“Do you have the air support standing by Mister Hill?”

Hill clenched his jaw and drew a sharp breath of air, then turned to face Captain Barker. He hadn’t even heard the transport land. “Yes, Captain. Two units are on standby, ready for takeoff.” He hesitated. “They refused to remove their antipersonnel ordnance.”

“Good. It gives them something to fall back on.”

“My people in maintenance managed to get an additional skycar prepped from storage, loaded with stun rounds only.” Barker’s eyes narrowed.

“Stun rounds do not inspire discipline.”

“Live rounds do not inspire respect, Captain.”

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Barker arched an eyebrow at him, and the corner of his mouth curled upward. Hill wasn't sure if he was being mocked or not. "Hopefully of course, the vehicles will not be needed."

"That would be a pleasant surprise, wouldn't it?" Barker turned and returned to his craft without further comment. Unfortunately he didn't board it, and the armored Ranboen transport showed no sign of leaving.

Hill sighed, and turned to watch the end of the countdown.

The final seconds passed in silence, which was unsettling. He had expected the crowd to count the seconds out loud. They probably wanted to be certain they didn't miss a thing... That would explain widespread use of terminals too.

Queen Dalamai appeared on the screen towering above the square. By her sides stood three familiar figures: Mayor Kent, the Viscount, and... The third figure made Hill doubt the evidence of his eyes. It was the Colonel, wearing a damp combat uniform.

Hill's men had been trying to track down the man all night. The warrant for his arrest had been canceled only within the last hour, at the same time the offworld assassin was pardoned. But he hadn't expected to see the man back at her side so quickly!

Dalamai's slate-gray eyes gazed out of the screen, and seemed to focus on the assembled crowd. "Our dear subjects, this shall be our final broadcast as your Queen."

Boris stepped into the elevator and tapped the selection for the Palace roof. It was around that level that Ranboen kept most of their reception and

conference facilities. If Keban was meeting his boss, that would be where he'd find them. The lift began to rise, and he leaned back against the solid wood paneling and closed his eyes.

Dalamai had started her broadcast. It was being displayed all over palace, even in the lift. He studied the image as the lift rose. The broadcast room looked much better on screen, very colorful and regal. He closed his tired eyes, and let the Queen's words wash over him.

"The loss of both heirs has set in motion a sequence of events that will leave Ranboen Corporation in complete control of our world. As you may have heard, one of our own bodyguards was found guilty of the crime."

Her expression hardened. "That finding was in error."

She paused to let that sink in. "We now possess conclusive evidence that the killers framed him the crime. We have therefore extended to Boris a full pardon and apology." Boris rubbed his tired eyes. It was good to hear her say that publicly. In his line of work, he couldn't afford many enemies.

"To fully understand the true nature of these terrible events, one must understand the contract that our government is built upon. In outsourcing the governance of Dimonah so long ago, our ancestors made an arrangement with a commercial organization. Such organizations value profit over human welfare. This arrangement has therefore generated mixed results." Boris opened his eyes. *Mixed results* was an interesting way to put it.

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“The improvements to Dimonah’s economy have reached a plateau, and the Ranboen Corporation cannot continue to increase their profits from our world without directly taking it from the people. That is why Governor Keban himself planned and orchestrated the murder of Crown Prince Alexander and Crown Princess Jemma,” she said. “Many of you have witnessed the military forces Ranboen has positioned around the planet.”

The elevator slowed, and stopped. He’d made it all the way to the roof level without a single stop. It seemed that the whole Palace had come to a stop to listen to the Queen.

He stepped out into the dark stone corridor, and turned toward the Ranboen wing. Dalamai’s voice was still clearly audible from the lift behind him.

“Ranboen has given these Troopers command over our civilian police. Already, the welfare of the average citizen has taken a back seat to Ranboen profitability. With such priorities, life for the average citizen shall only worsen as the years go on.” The voice ceased as the lift doors closed.

Boris reached the brushed steel doors of the Ranboen wing. He gripped his holstered blaster, then thought better of it and tapped in the code the Colonel had used earlier. The door opened, and he walked in.

The dark stone was left behind, replaced by gleaming panels. The doors were all a uniform pale gray, with a random array of pastel colors adorning each doorframe and length of trim. It was like the architect had dropped a box of colored pencils on the blueprints, and the builders had just gone with it.

There was no sign of people, at least not within view. He wondered if they were all clustered around displays, watching the broadcast.

He located a floor map, and paused to study it. The Management Council room was marked as in use, and it was close to the spot where the white ship had landed. He set off toward it.

With the handover approaching, the Ranboen Wing *should* have been thick with activity. Boris was starting to wonder if anybody was there at all when a pony-tailed young man in a suit rounded a corner and almost collided with him.

Boris grinned apologetically, and was immensely relieved when the man returned the gesture and continued on his way. Continuing, he adopted a more casual pace.

It was the slower pace which allowed him to spot the guard outside the meeting room in time to duck back behind the corner.

The man was no local. He wore a gray suit and sunglasses, and looked powerful enough to wrestle bulls. He was standing right outside the double doors of the Meeting Room.

It was good news, in a way. An offworld guard meant there was someone in the room worth guarding. Unfortunately, it meant he had to get past him.

The man was frustratingly alert. The only reason Boris could watch him while staying out of site was thanks to an abstract sculpture that looked like a waterfall of apple peels rendered in bronze. He was sure he could shoot the man, but the noise would bring every other guard on the level. Besides, he didn't want to kill the guy if he didn't have to.

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Boris waited until the guard turned away, then silently hurried toward him with blaster drawn.

The guard never heard him. He struck the base of his neck with the grip of his blaster and the man crumpled to the floor. An additional blow saw to it he'd stay unconscious for at least the next half hour.

Boris glanced about to see if he had attracted any unwanted attention, but the corridor was still thankfully empty. He dragged the guard toward a smaller meeting room whose panel proclaimed was vacant. The lights flicked on as he opened the door and dragged the man in.

The room turned out to be a large dining area, with only two large tables and a lot of empty floorspace. There were places set for perhaps a dozen people, but no food had been laid out. He shoved the motionless guard under one of the tables, and let the long linen tablecloth hide him. He frisked the guard and found a sidearm neatly concealed in his suit, and another in an ankle holster. He dropped both of the weapons into a decorative vase by the door.

Things seemed to be going well, and that worried him. The lack of staff might be due to the broadcast, but it could also mean Keban had already cleared out of the building along with many of his people. He ventured back into the corridor and tested the Meeting Room doors. They were locked.

A tap of the door's control panel brought up further information about the meeting underway inside. The text proclaimed that the Regional Executive Officer and the Planetary Governor were inside. The panel also advised him they did not wish to be disturbed.

Maybe fate was finally on his side. He drew his blaster and thumbed up the setting.

Then he was shot in the back.

Chapter Nineteen: Final Balance

The first thing Boris was sure of was that his head hurt. It was proving very difficult to think, which made was helping matters. There was something bright and blurry in front of him, and there were voices. He couldn't figure out what they were saying.

He figured it was probably Karl. The old Yamorian was the closest thing to a father he'd ever had.

Of course, there might have been others. His memory was erased when he was around the age of twelve, and he was pretty sure he was the one responsible. He'd never looked into it that hard.

If Karl was yapping away, he was probably drunk again. He tended to laugh and shout advice to strangers when he got drunk.

No, wait, hadn't Karl died years ago?

Boris tried to clear his mind. He became aware of a burning sensation down his back, and the pain helped jar him sufficiently awake for the voice to start making sense. It was Queen Dalamai.

“Ranboen believes itself to be Dimonah’s new master, and is acting accordingly. The firm is aware that we have served our full complement of terms, and we must retire at noon today. The contract states that should there be no heir to follow, as is the case, then the Hoparin Reserve Powers shall fall to Ranboen.”

Boris blinked a few times. Everything seemed too bright, and it took a while for his eyes to start to adjust.

His back must have taken a stun round at close range. Had there been a guard he’d missed?

It was more likely a concealed turret. He’d probably brought attention to himself by tapping at that damned control panel. It probably had a DNA scanner or something.

His vision finally returned to normal. He was inside the Meeting Room, propped up in a chair at a long, black table. Keban was sitting on his left.

“Ah, our guest is awake already.” The voice was firm, authoritative, and utterly unfamiliar. Boris looked up toward the sound.

The man seated opposite them had an artificially youthful face. Presumably he was the Ranboen REO mentioned on the panel, Keban’s immediate superior. The windows behind him showed a tinted view of the palace roof outside, while a 2D display on his left showed the Queen’s continuing broadcast.

“Boris isn’t it? I do believe you recognize me! How flattering. I am indeed Aceldama Gouyoku, the Ranboen REO for this sector. I believe you already know Governor Keban.”

The REO clearly didn’t expect an answer, and Boris gave none. His throat, like the rest of him, felt like jelly.

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He knew he couldn't have been out for long. He fumbled for his gun, and found the holster empty. Belatedly, he realized the weapon was lying on the table in front of Gouyoku. The REO grinned, and lightly patted it. The REO knew he was in no condition to be a threat.

Had Keban dragged him in from the corridor? Someone certainly had. If it was a guard, he must have left since.

Gouyoku smiled thinly. "Have a rest for now, Boris. We'll chat properly once Dalamai has finished her address."

Boris needed time to recover, so he didn't object. Dalamai was still going on about the contract.

"Our ancestors knew the Contract might be exploited, so they added a caveat. It stipulates that if the Hoparin line ends by an unnatural means such as assassination, then a Global Referendum must be held to allow the people to choose their own way forward." She adopted an indignant tone. "Ranboen has skirted this caveat by waiting for our final term, and instructing their killers to leave us as the last surviving Hoparin."

Governor Keban shook his head, clearly displeased with what he was hearing. "Sir, we should stop her. Before she incites the people any further."

The REO chuckled. "This is live, Governor. If we interfere, we lose a quantity of plausible deniability. Besides, a popular uprising will give us all the justification we need for emergency laws." Keban's eyes narrowed. He didn't seem to share Gouyoku's amusement.

Dalamai returned to her usual calm tone. "Understand therefore, that these conditions offer only one viable way for Dimonah to break free of Ranboen's

grasp. I choose to take this action because it is my honor and duty to do so, both as a responsible ruler, and as an individual.” She reached one hand inside her robes, and Gouyoku’s amused expression suddenly vanished.

“God save Dimonah,” She produced a compact gun, and placed it under her chin. “God guide you all.” She fired.

The REO and Keban looked every bit as stunned as the surviving trio on the broadcast. Finally, the REO snapped off the display, and leveled a gaze at Keban that could have frozen worlds.

Chief Constable Hill stared at the great screen in disbelief. The gentle wind finally forced him to blink, and the break in his vision brought him to his senses. Dreading what he might see, he gazed down at the crowd.

They were utterly still, still coming to terms with what they had witnessed. He glanced behind him at Captain Barker. Even the trooper seemed a bit lost.

The sound of a terminal chime echoed from the big display over the square. Hill turned back to the screen, where the Viscount was gazing at a document projected before him. Judging by the man’s startled expression, it had opened entirely on its own. As Hill watched, the Viscount’s expression changed. The shock and confusion gave way to sudden comprehension, as though he was finally seeing a bigger picture.

The Colonel was the only one of the trio moving. He pulled down a segment of the drapes behind the throne, and as Viscount started to speak, he covered

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the gory sight. The cloth merely stained to a darker version of the same color.

“As your Viscount, it is my lamentable duty to assume Dimonah’s reserve powers until a full referendum can be completed.” He paused to swallow, and Hill noticed his chin was trembling slightly. “I call upon the Confederation to aid us in this endeavor as a neutral party, and to oversee the legitimacy of proceedings. Further, all decrees and legislative alterations issued by the Ranboen Corporation within the past two days are hereby repealed by Executive order. The Royal Police are no longer under Ranboen command and control.” He stopped. Hill saw he had reached the end of the note, and not even a signature remained to be read.

The Viscount switched the document off. Then he gazed at the camera. He raised his chin, and seemed to grow taller. He looked somehow more impressive. “People of Dimonah, please contain your anger and honor the wishes of her Majesty. It is the duty of all citizens to chart a new future for Dimonah, together.” He bowed, and the screen switched to the royal crest.

Superintendent Stokes turned toward Captain Barker, and smirked. “You hear that, Chief? We can finally lock up every one of these damned troopers.” Barker’s gaze hardened.

Chief Hill hesitated, then smiled and clapped Stokes on the back. “Come now stokes, there’s no need for that. After all, I believe our friend the Captain here wants to round up his men before they do anything *rash*. Then, I expect he’ll be reporting back to his superiors for orders. Am I correct, Mister Barker?”

Barker considered Hill’s words, and nodded slowly. “I think you’re smarter than I gave you credit for,

Mister H..." The trooper stopped himself. The Viscount's words rescinding recent changes were clearly replaying in his mind.

Hill nodded politely. "The term 'Officer' is quite adequate sir."

Barker blinked at the 'sir'. Hill couldn't help but grin. He was speaking to him as he would to any civilian, and Barker definitely knew what that meant. The trooper nodded to himself. "Officer, of course. You are correct, I do wish to pull my men back to HQ."

"Then we wish you well, sir." Hill offered his hand. Barker hesitated, but then grinned and shook. "Don't forget we have speed limits here."

Barker chuckled. "I'll ensure my men observe the law." The trooper turned, and started back toward his transport. Before he was halfway to the craft, he had started shouting out orders to his men.

Hill turned to look back at the crowd. The din of people talking to one another filled the square, but there were very few shouts and screams. So far, so good. But the very size of the crowd made him feel nervous.

He pulled out his terminal, and tried Mayor Kent. She responded almost instantly, her face snapping into the air before him. She was walking somewhere at a brisk pace, with several attendants, and looked as busy as hell.

"Chief Hill!" she said. "You were next on my list. How are things going out there?"

"Surprisingly well so far, Ma'am. But I'd like approval to open the stadium, and its kitchens." He

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glanced over the surrounding buildings at the Stadium Dome. It was only two blocks from the square.

Kent considered that for a moment. “You want to tame the monster by feeding it?”

“Yes, plus give them somewhere to sit.”

“I guess we could do that. Do you intend to keep the playing surface sealed off?”

“Initially. We may find we need the space.”

Kent blinked in surprise. The Kalaanda stadium was far from small. “There’s *that* many people out there?”

He nodded. “Packed like sardines, ma’am.”

“You have my approval, we’ll foot the bill somehow. Anything else?”

“Just the one more, I’d like to use the big screen. It’s been in lockdown since the broadcast.”

She nodded. “I’ll see to it. Keep me posted on developments.”

He ended the call, and Stokes stepped forward expectantly. Sign of a good Superintendent.

“Stokes, get the stadium opened up and tell Owens in traffic what we’re up to. He’ll need to move some of the roadblocks.” Hill took a deep breath. “I’m going to see how much more catering we can get out there.”

Stokes raised his eyebrows. “There are some big automated stands with the circus in Westfield Park, Sir. Took my kids there last Friday.”

“Good suggestion, I’ll contact them.” Stokes saluted and hurried off, leaving Hill to make another call. This time he contacted the station switchboard.

A female voice replied. “Yes Chief?”

Sound-only was the default for station calls. It made it that much harder to tell when a patrolling policeman was in contact with the station and when he wasn’t. Hill recognized the voice.

“Wilkes, take a note of this. We have approval to use the main square’s big screen, and I want Stef to put ‘Stadium facilities open to all’ up there, maybe with a picture of some drinks and a hot dog or something. Get word out to all our people that this means free food.” He paused, and gazed down at the sea of people. “I want this crowd thinned out fast.”

“Yes, Sir. You don’t want ‘Free food’ on screen?”

“I want it thinned, I don’t want a stampede. Besides, we may not be able to feed everyone. This isn’t the Sermon on the Mount.”

Wilkes hesitated. “Sermon, Sir?”

“On the Mount. Loaves and fishes?” Hill paused; not everyone had the benefit of religious studies. He shook his head. “Never mind Wilkes. Just get the message on that screen.”

“Yes Sir.”

Hill figured things must be looking up if he was relaxed enough to make a joke. But there was a lot still to do. He turned away from the railing and started toward the elevators.

By the time the lift doors were closing, he was talking to an increasingly eager circus manager.

Aceldama Gouyoku shook his head, and pressed his lips into a tight line. “I knew you’d underestimated the danger of your actions. She’s seen through the deception and used the contract against us! Keban, you could not have screwed things up any more.”

Keban worked his jaw, thinking desperately. “This is still salvageable. Before the Referendum is voted on, I can...”

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“You can do nothing! Those people have been turned against us, and with Confederation involvement we will not be able to sway them. Our investment here is a complete write-off.” The REO picked up Boris’ blaster, and examined it as one might an interesting curio.

Keban’s eyes widened, Boris wondered just how much the man stood to lose over this. The Colonel had said the Ranboen Wing was a legal black hole for Dimonah and the Confederation. Within those walls, Ranboen managed their own laws.

The Governor stood, his legs trembling beneath him. For a moment he simply stared at Gouyoku in shocked silence.

“But I did as you said!”, he cried. “I was carrying out your orders. If anybody is to blame for the way it turned out, it’s the board of directors!”

“Really? I seem to recall that you heartily endorsed the plan. Not that it matters mind you, the directive was sound. We simply instructed you to eliminate the heirs, and to ensure the Queen lived. How you handled the detail was left to you. Dimonah would have fallen into Ranboen hands like an overripe fruit.” He shook his head, and sighed. “You’ve fouled it up. Your mishandling of the Redeemers and framing this gentleman here resulted in Dalamai learning what you were up to.” He shook his head. “As it stands, I expect this planet will vote to join the Confederation.” He settled back, blaster in one hand. “You have cost Ranboen an excellent profit center.”

Boris remained silent. Most of his strength had returned, but the REO had the gun and the table was broad.

Keban managed to regain some of his composure, and sat back down. "I believe you are searching overly hard for a scapegoat, sir. The scheme's failure is due to the Colonel's suspicious mind, and a string of very bad luck." He glared at Boris. "Not to mention this hired gun. Dalamai would have been none the wiser if it wasn't for him and the Colonel."

The REO put the blaster back on the table in front of him, and rested both hands on top of it. The muzzle, Boris noticed with disappointment, was pointed away at the wall. There was no chance the REO would accidentally shoot himself. "Your only reason for framing this man was to salvage the Redeemers. That was foolish! They had outlived their usefulness. Your reluctance to fully exploit them led directly to the failure of the first assassination, and that was what alerted the Colonel."

Keban shook his head dismissively. "The detection of the bulletmissiles was due to a fluke, not poor planning."

"I doubt the Redeemers would have seen it that way."

Keban's smile twisted into a contemptuous sneer. "The mercenary bodyguards were rabble! They had neither the equipment nor the training to oppose us."

Gouyoku's gaze was unwavering. "You're talking about paid *professionals*!"

Keban scoffed. "They were paid far too much."

Gouyoku rose to his feet, and pointed accusingly at Keban. "*You* are the overpaid one, Keban. Attempting to frame this man Boris? *No* other course of action could have sown greater seeds of suspicion."

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Keban swallowed hard. He'd let his mouth get him into trouble, and he knew it. He glanced at Boris. "The locals saw him as just another offworlder, an outsider. They distrusted him, and never suspected deception."

The REO glared down at the man. "An offworlder, yes. With no possible links to the Redeemers. A professional who is loyal to his employer! Why else do you think the Colonel trusted him? You have failed, Keban."

The Governor trembled, possibly as much from anger as fear. "The Colonel placed too much stock..."

Gouyoku snatched up the blaster, and leveled at the Governor. "Oh, shut up! I've heard enough of your sniveling and your narrow perspective. Assigning you to this position was clearly a mistake." Keban was dumbstruck. "By framing Boris here, you made him your enemy. Even now, with his name cleared, he has risked his neck to hunt you down." He looked back at Keban and shook his head. "You won't understand, but he's a man of honor. In many ways better than you'll ever be."

With that off his chest Gouyoku calmed down, and smiled at Boris. "My good man. I take it you are feeling better?" It was more a statement than a question.

Boris flexed his shoulder. The stun round had aggravated the flechette wound. "Yeah, I guess."

"Excellent. It was Keban here who initiated the smear against you, but given his association with Ranboen at the time I imagine that you are not currently well disposed to the corporation, or myself."

Boris hesitated. What was he up to? "You might say that."

"Then please, allow me to apologize for what he did to you. On behalf of the company as well as myself."

Boris remained silent as the REO reached into a finely tailored pocket. He produced a creditslug, and carefully passed it to him. "Mister Keban here is no longer part of Ranboen Corporation. Perhaps that, as well as this token sum, will balance any remaining debts you feel remain between you, and Ranboen or myself."

Boris cautiously examined the slug. It was hard cash, stored value that could be transferred into any account through any terminal. The amount stamped into the tiny object's surface had one more digit than the Queen's payment. He swore.

"Speak your mind freely, Boris. This room is as bug free as you are yourself." He smiled. "We took the liberty of having you scanned for recording devices while you were unconscious."

Boris met his gaze, and concluded the man was being honest with him. "This is a very generous amount."

"I believe it is justified. Is it enough to clear the slate between Ranboen and yourself, Keban aside?"

Boris frowned, and eyed Keban seated next to him while he rolled the slug between his fingers. The Governor was sweating. He clenched the slug in his hand. "Yeah, I'd say so."

Gouyoku beamed. "Very good! I'm pleased we would reach an agreement." The REO touched a control by the window. A broad section of the transparent wall silently retracted into the ceiling, opening a walkway onto the rooftop. The morning light was dazzling without the darkened glass to filter it, but he could make out his ship standing only a short walk away. The white Ranboen vessel was there too, further to the right. "Similarly, Ranboen holds no grudges

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against you, Boris. I quite understand your motives in coming here, and bear you no malice. You are free to go.”

Then he held the blaster out to Boris, grip first. Boris wondered if the man had lost his marbles.

Gouyoku stood back and smirked. “You are also free to settle any remaining grievances before you leave. Keban is no longer under the protection of Ranboen.”

Boris hesitated. “Does that mean Ranboen won’t defend him from Regicide charges?”

“I’m afraid I can’t permit that matter to go to trial. As matters stand, Ranboen can salvage a degree of deniability from this affair. Allowing Keban to testify would tarnish our image.”

Keban's chin quivered.

Boris looked at the offered blaster. “So I get revenge, and Keban takes the blame, and Dimonah gets closure.” He accepted the gun, and checked the charge in the clip. It was in order. “No conditions?”

The REO chuckled. “No conditions, no tricks. You and I are very similar, Boris. We are both professional, honorable men who work hard for our pay. You are free to do as you wish.” Gouyoku stepped away and poured himself a drink, leaving Boris with Keban.

The REO sipped from his glass.

Boris nodded to himself. Listening to Gouyoku had brought home why he had stayed on at the Palace after the initial attack. Why he had chosen to risk his life so many times, why he had sought out Keban instead of simply leaving.

The former Planetary Governor seemed too terrified to move from his seat. The shirt beneath his suit was stuck to his chest with sweat.

Boris raised his blaster, and shot REO Aceldama Gouyoku in the chest.

The man's mouth fell open in shock, and the glass slipped from his hand and smashed on the floor. Falling to his knees, he touched the gaping wound with an expression of disbelief. Artificial and natural organs were spilling out, burnt and torn. He looked up at Boris with wide eyes. "W... Why?" he gasped.

Boris calmly met his gaze. "For the children, Mister Gouyoku."

The REO stared, and then his eyes lost focus. His corpse toppled to the floor and came to rest in a pool of blood.

Keban hesitantly rose to his feet, and stared at the lifeless body. "You..." He tore his gaze away, and looked up at Boris. "You didn't come because of the frameup? You're here because of two kids who are already *dead*?"

Boris gazed down at the body and nodded. "Yeah. I did."

Keban fumbled for his terminal, and found the device to be as lifeless as his former superior. "Damn that man! He canceled my access." He dropped the useless device. "I have to get off this planet... Boris, you have a ship!" Keban began to pace back and forth. "Yes... I've got an anonymous account on Culinda Four. Take me to the Culinda system and I'll make you rich. From there, I can go where I choose..."

Boris scowled. "Who said you were off the hook?"

Keban stopped his pacing and stared. "You can't be serious? I'm talking about real money! Nothing like what that cheapskate tried to buy you off with. You can't change anything!" Boris raised the gun and leveled

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it at Keban's face. The man recognized that his death was imminent. "You're nothing but a cold blooded killer," he breathed.

Boris felt the scar over his eye twitch. "You'd know." He fired.

The headless body took two steps backwards before falling. Boris holstered the gun, and stared at the gory scene before him. The huge sun added an orange hue to the red. He remembered a similar sight in different colors, but this time there was no teddy bear amongst the carnage.

The creditslug was still in his left hand, and he dropped it on Keban's corpse. From what he could tell, the man had wanted nothing but money. He could have it.

He rounded the table and headed toward the exit. The bright sun was dazzling after so long indoors, and his waiting ship glinted in the warm rays.

He walked out, into the light.

THE END