

THE MORGOTH WHEEL

by

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I

"Elvis! This place is cold!" The Margrave of Golonida hissed at his Chief of Staff, an elderly man with a white mane of hair reaching down to his shoulders.

"It is much colder than I remember, Margrave. Perhaps something's wrong with the heating unit."

The Margrave, a man of forty, not tall, in a plain, white uniform tunic and black trousers with gold epaulettes and an ornate blaster holstered at his right side, looked up at the vaulted ceiling and marveled. "This damn hall is made of wood! Look at that carving."

The Chief of Staff grinned. Twelve years as Margrave and this was his first visit to Morgoth. His ruler never ceased to amaze him with his capacity for amazement. "I told you it'd be different."

"You didn't tell me I'd be freezing my ass off."

"I didn't expect it to be frozen."

"That's no excuse. If I were Prince Brian, that white scalp of yours would be decorating my belt."

The Chief of Staff chuckled. "Which is why your people are glad you aren't Prince Brian."

The Margrave chuckled in response. "Which is why I'm glad I'm not Prince Brian. Who would also like to be High King Brian."

The Chief of Staff felt his hand move instinctively towards his pistol. Like everyone else in the hall, both he and his Margrave wore side-arms and he expected most were wearing body shields, though there were a few wearing reflective plastic armor as well.

"Seems beards are in fashion again, Goth. Do you think I should wear one?" asked the Margrave, in the mood for small talk.

"Up to you, Margrave, but your grandfather had a beard and it kept getting caught in his helmet strap."

"Gramps was quite a character. I wonder what he'd say if he were here?"

"He'd be complaining about the cold."

"Don't blame him. So would I."

The two men, older and younger, laughed aloud and the others around them stared with scandal in their eyes. What could be funny about civil war?

For it was the coming civil war that brought the electors of the Confederacy of Systems to Morgoth. Prince Brian of Tremulon had challenged for the throne and both sides had summoned the Conclave to Morgoth to announce the place and time of the battle. It was a very serious affair, made more serious by the fact that the Conclave was meeting under the guns of the Morgoth Wheel.

"How long are we supposed to stand shivering here?" the Margrave groaned. "Do they think that just because they rule sheep we have to bleat as well?"

"That's exactly what they think, Margrave. And John," the Chief of Staff used the Margrave's name because he knew that was the one way to get his attention, "it is not a good idea to let them think otherwise at this time. Just because we have the ships."

Margrave John 8, ruler of Golonida, pursed his thin lips and sucked in breath through his nose, a dangerous gesture which the Chief of Staff had last seen when the Margrave had ordered a judge beheaded for some major malfeasance. John 8 was getting angry and anger and cold were not a good combination. "Someday I may teach them a lesson in diplomacy, battleship diplomacy!" whispered the Margrave.

"That chance may come soon enough."

"Right about that. What's keeping those bastards?"

"Margrave John!" came a friendly, if deep voice. "It's good to see you again."

The Margrave spun and looked at the chest of the man behind him. Not really short, he nevertheless felt dwarfed by the speaker, who quite literally towered over both him and his Chief of Staff.

"Count Aethelwold! I expected you to be nearer the back of this hangar."

"I was, but if you think it's cold here, you should be near the doors. I thought my boots were going to freeze to the floor."

The Margrave laughed softly. "I think mine already have. If my feet get any colder, I may have to piss."

The Count looked around, furtively and bent over to whisper to the Margrave "That'd be a good use for Brian. He can decorate a urinal."

The Chief of Staff looked around with speed and let his breath out. These two could start a war in the meeting hall and he knew all too well that his Margrave was in the mood to do precisely that.

"Goth, what are those men near the window wearing?" the Margrave suddenly asked with his eyes widening.

"Fur jackets."

He raised his eyebrows in mock scandal, "Fur? The skins of dead animals?"

"Yes, Margrave."

"Aethelwold, did you hear that?"

"I did, John. Things are coming to a bad state."

"Worse. Goth, is that smell what I think it is?"

"Wood in combustion."

"Fire. They use fire to heat this place. No wonder we're freezing."

The Count bent over again. "Makes you wonder what they fight with."

"As long as they have the Wheel, they don't have to."

"But who protects them from the Wheel?"

"No one. They have to trust the loyalty of the crews."

Goth shook his head. "They keep a close watch on the families of the crewmen. No one is allowed on the Wheel who is unmarried and without children."

"Sensible," grunted the Margrave, fingering his shield controls placed in the center of his belt buckle. He turned the area dial ever so slightly, expanding the field outward towards the front until it pushed on the shield of the uniformed man in front of him, who turned to reveal himself as another elector.

"Excuse me," the Margrave apologized, hiding the snicker at the offended dignity of his victim. Touching shields in a place where it was not admitted that shields were worn was considered improper to say the least.

"John, behave yourself," hissed the Chief of Staff.

"I am, Chief."

"Badly, as usual."

"Do you have any ideas on how to end this frigid boredom?"

Goth grinned. "How about a blast to the main pillar."

"And bring down the ceiling?"

"Exactly."

"I'll consider it."

"Chief, you know what would be fun? We get the prettiest girls from every world and bring them here naked and give a prize to one who turns the brightest shade of blue."

Goth rolled his up eyes and shook his head. The Margrave was considered a good ruler, but when his sense of humor got away from him... And it was starting to get loose.

There was only one way to stop the Margrave from causing a dreadful incident and that was to keep him thinking. "Why not put itching powder down the back of the High King?"

The Margrave smiled. "Like we did with the Hierophant at the spring rituals two years ago?"

"Yes, Margrave."

"John?" it was the Count again.

"Yes?"

"Do you remember the grapes we harvested about twelve years ago?"

"About the time dad died?"

"Yes, we talked about them at his funeral, remember."

"To tell you the truth, I don't remember much of dad's funeral. I was not in very good shape myself."

"Understandable. But the wine from those grapes is just about ready to drink and my vintners tell me it should be a spectacular one."

"That's the best news I've had in this cooler. I'll have my bursar give yours an order after this nonsense today is over."

"Thanks. I have a couple of cases aboard my ship and I'd be honored if you'd accept one."

"That's very kind of you. Goth?"

"Yes, Margrave."

"Did we bring any of those new globes?"

"I think we have a couple."

"Excellent. Count, our jewelers have a new Earth-globe out, solid turquoise with gold and silver settings. I'd like you to have one to take back with you. And I think we have a new set of engraved blasters. I'll have them sent to your ship."

"You are too generous."

"I know. My treasurer keeps telling me that."

All three laughed. The Chief of Staff sighed and remembered the last time he had attended one of these affairs. He had been a young officer with the Old Margrave, the grandfather of the man standing next to him. The Old Margrave had been short too, only coming up to his shoulder and everyone at the court had wondered why he had decided to bring Goth along with the delegation. There had even been some unpleasant rumors, all untrue, but not unexpected. Still, it was good that his new lord was capable of humor, if bizarre at times. Humor was necessary in tense times and this was a very tense time.

"Civil war is bad enough, but to delay dinner for it is intolerable," a new voice stirred the Chief of Staff out of his reverie. He, the Margrave and the Count all turned to face a tall, heavy-set man in a white uniform with silver epaulettes and facings.

"Baron Surbo," the Count spoke first, "I expected you to be over by the wall with the rest of your party."

"I was, but the talk there is getting boring, so I decided to visit the center for a while."

The Margrave laughed. "And are you finding us Neutrals better company?"

"Better humored, at least. The Prince is a loyal friend, and a good master, but his followers make terrible conversation."

"Not to offend," whispered the Count, "but I hear that some of them fight even worse than they entertain."

A broad smile filled the lower face of the Baron, pushing his full beard apart in a way that would seem threatening to those who did not know him. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Of course."

"Some of them smell even worse than they fight."

"You should take the livery of a neutral, like us. Not only do we fight like devils, but we tell great jokes and bathe once a month."

"You shouldn't tempt me like that."

The Margrave chuckled softly at the exchange as he remembered his Chief of Staff telling him on the ship as it brought them to this frigid place "Trust no one."

"I know that, Goth. I'm not a complete fool."

"And I know you value friendship too highly to be safe in times like these."

"A weakness, yes. And you're right to remind me. How are we divided?"

"Roughly into thirds."

"One third king, one third prince, one third sane."

"Something like that, but try not to be so blunt."

"Goth, credit me with some brains."

"Sorry Margrave, but I'm nervous about this."

Looking at the hale fellow the Prince was sending around to try to woo neutrals to his cause, the Margrave was nervous too. Maybe a blast bolt at the ceiling was what they all needed. Maybe a blast bolt at the heads of Prince Brian and the High King would be even better. Kill them both off, and then have dinner. That made sense. It made more sense than standing around feeling like idiots and looking at the clumps of potentates gathered into their parties around the room, High King at one side, Prince Brian at the other and the Neutrals in between, like the virtuous devil between two lawyers.

"Baron?" the Margrave spoke, his voice just a bit lower than before, to signify serious intent, "Is it my imagination or are those the barons of the slaver worlds standing with your party?"

The Baron raised his eyebrows sharply for the barest instant and then recovered, a true diplomat. "Unfortunately, yes. Between you and me, I urged the Prince not to accept their help, but the Prince is a worried man."

Another chuckle from the Margrave. "Seems like a lot of trouble for a plastic crown and a title that, well, does not carry a lot of weight except for these little affairs."

The Chief of Staff tightened his jaw to keep from blurting "What are you getting at?" He knew what his Margrave was getting at.

The Baron stroked his beard for a second. "The Prince has thought about that himself for some time. He hasn't spoken about it, but my guess is that he would like to make the position something greater than it is."

"I see. Of course the presence of slavers in your party would seem to make your job just a bit more difficult?"

The Baron laughed. "Just like his father. Never could fool him either. Right you are, John. The Prince put me to work to get him more people and I told him just that."

"For example, myself. If I were to put Golonida behind the Prince, just saying if, mind you, I would have the devil to pay with my council and army. They've no love for Slavers. And such an arrangement would virtually ruin my relationship with Kanden."

The Baron nodded in agreement. "I see your position. Just out of curiosity, how long ago did your family end slavery on Golonida?"

"Four generations ago and we've never missed it. Damned lot of trouble. Look over at the Margrave of Transor. His family has fought four civil wars in two hundred years. His planet is nearly bankrupt from them. Slaves are a very expensive commodity. They have to be fed, housed, and controlled, or else."

"I see. We've not had much trouble with ourselves..."

"But you keep them from the population. Only your nobles have them. On Golonida, the only noble is me."

The Baron had no wish to get sucked into this hole. "I see where your policy with Kanden might present a problem."

"They are not only allies, as much allies as you can expect a planet of pacifists to be, but they are friends of me and my house. I could not desert them to fight alongside the very people I defend them against. That would make worthless the trust of my people and the word of my house."

"And your word as well."

"Exactly, Baron. If the Prince wants my battleships, the slavers have got to go."

It was plain talk, the sort of talk that the house of Golonida had used for centuries. It drove the diplomats to distractions of all kinds, and not rarely to drugs as well, but the Baron had expected it and was actually happy to have the matter of the slavers, and the Golonidan battleships out in the open. It would make the next three months easier. He looked around the room and then coughed a little. "Well, you see what I'm about, so I have to continue my work. I'll give the Prince your message."

"Thank you. And my compliments to his highness as well."

As the Baron began to thread his way to the next group on his list, Goth looked down at his Margrave and sighed more heavily this time. "Will he?"

Both the Margrave and the Count smiled and nodded. "He will. Count, I hope you didn't mind being left out."

"Not at all. Its your ships they want."

"Exactly."

"Then you believe the rumors too."

"About fighting in space this time? Uh huh."

"Doesn't make much sense."

"None of this does. Right, Goth?"

Goth looked around as if he wanted to make certain that no one heard him. Even if he were the Margrave's Chief of Staff there were those in the hall who still held to the principle that that which was permissible to Jove was not permissible to the oxen. In a low voice he said "It is unusual, that's true."

"Of course, the rumors could be wrong. They have been before."

Across from the three, under a large chandelier, there was a heated, whispered argument going on. It seemed that Baron Surbo's much-vaunted diplomatic skills were not serving him very well today. Either that or the cold of the room was annoying more than the Margrave.

"Goth."

"Yes, Margrave."

"The last time you were involved in this sort of thing, about how long did they keep the electors waiting?"

"Several hours, at least."

"Damned stupidity. Count?"

"John?"

"What do you think'd happen if all the neutrals left before the High King and the Prince came out?"

"The High King and the Prince would both be very insulted. It would, unfortunately, also be considered very bad manners and probably cause all manner of diplomatic crisis."

Goth rolled his eyes. This thing had better end quick or the Margrave might do just that. "It would not be a good idea, Margrave," he said, quickly. "Having everyone mad at you is not good for trade."

The Margrave nodded, pursing his lips again. "Your probably both right, but I'm getting more disgusted by the minute and I don't think I'm alone. When we get home, I want the council to consider a proposal for the next meeting of the Electorate to put a stop to this nonsense."

"That might prove difficult. After all, this only happens once or twice in a lifetime."

"That's no excuse for treating us like a bunch of Travonian peasants."

"John?"

"Yes Aethelwold?"

"Have you noticed that strange smell?"

"Wood in combustion."

"You can't be serious!"

"Frozenly."

"It could be worse, Count," the Chief of Staff said clutching his pelisse to his shoulder and trying not to shiver.

"How?"

A short laugh. "On one of the slaver worlds, they use cow dung for fuel, lots of it."

"Prince Brian has excellent taste in allies."

"Which is excelled only by his intelligence."

The Margrave shook his head. "Don't underestimate Brian. He doesn't want the crown for the honor of it."

Count Aethelwold turned his head back and forth a couple of times to make certain that none were listening in and asked "Why, then?"

"I don't know, but you heard what the Baron said."

"You must admit that it makes very little sense, as things sit now."

"Things change, so do political systems. Right Goth?"

"As you said, Margrave. I always told you that nothing lasts forever and our way of doing things has lasted longer than most."

"Great Elvis!"

"Count?"

"I just noticed. Look over at Duchess Serena."

The Duchess was wearing a gown which could best be described as abbreviated.

"She must be half frozen to death."

Goth laughed. "Margrave, Count, put your goggles on for a second and look at her."

The Margrave reached into a pocket inside his tunic and pulled out a small pair of goggles which he put on with haste. The goggles were designed to see the pattern of a shield around a person and it was clear that the Duchess had modified hers to provide a thermal field.

The Margrave sneered with contempt. "Suicidal vanity. If someone unloaded a thermal blaster in here--what was that ancient phrase I came across in the new material from Kanden--celebrity roast. It would get a new meaning."

It was the Count's turn to laugh. "Who'd fire a thermal in here?"

"Look around. I can think of at least ten of this princely heap who would love to do it at the slightest opportunity. The Count Rath, over there, for example. He isn't wearing reflective armor because it looks nice."

"Does anyone?"

"Depends on what's in style."

" 'Fashion is the collective opinion of fools' ."

The Margrave laughed. "Just like politics."

A tall, very thin man with a pronounced Hermetian accent walked over and bowed to the three saying to the Count "Your Nobility, I was supposed to remind you..."

"Yes, thank you. Margrave, you know my secretary of state?"

"Of course. It's good to see you again."

"Thank you. If you will permit the interruption, my Count instructed me to remind him when Lady Tertia of Goldonis was, er, available."

"Aethelwold! You should be ashamed of yourself."

"I am, John, I am."

"Have fun."

"I'll try." And, with that, the Count and his secretary of state walked towards the back of the hall.

Goth chuckled and shook his head as he watched them. "Fine time for romance!"

"Hermetia has nothing to fight with. He might as well have some pleasure out all this. Damned more than we're having."

"Margrave. I don't want to seem like I'm lecturing you."

"But you're about to."

"Well. Your complaining about the cold may make you feel better, but its making me even colder."

"Sorry. I suppose we could get Duchess Serena to warm us up."

"Margrave. We have a fleet to think about."

And the Margrave nodded thinking "And you can imagine what some of these uniformed baboons would be thinking if they knew the real size of it."

"I think its finally going to start."

"Praise the Gods! Maybe then we can eat!"

Four uniformed men, two in the livery of the High King and two in the costume of Prince Brian came onto the low stage at the front of the hall. They walked ceremoniously to the middle of the stage, did a little marching around which had great significance when it was

first choreographed centuries before but now merely seemed time consuming and silly, then they divided and marched to stand at either end of the stage. This dance was followed by ten trumpets, five trumpeters in the uniform of each contender, playing as loudly as they could and not very well at that. This continued for some minutes, until it was determined that everyone in the hall was deafened and at that point mercifully ceased. Six heralds came out, three from each camp and stood next to the men at the end of the stage. Finally, the High King, in all his doddering antiquity and Prince Brian, oozing duplicity from each end of his moustache came onto the stage, coming from the ends to the middle, each with a herald.

The Margrave of Golonida was trying very hard not to laugh.

"All of the Human Realm attend," the heralds in the center stage spoke in unison. "It has been agreed that three months hence, from this day, in the system of Cadwallader, the fleets of the High King and Prince Brian of Tremulon will meet in combat to determine the justice of the Claim of Prince Brian to the estate of High King."

The air in the hall behaved as if someone had turned on a static generator and left off the shielding. The Margrave turned to his Chief of Staff and whispered, more loudly than he planned, "The rumors were true, for once."

"You've just become very important."

"Don't remind me."



The ships around Morgoth were crowded into a tight orbital pattern for three reasons. The asteroid pattern in the Morgoth system was so complicated that it was dangerous to have ships floating just anywhere and the Morgoths wanted to be able to keep all the visitors under the guns of the Wheel. And the landing field was too small for all of them and the protocol problem would have been unthinkable. For a few hours, shuttles had been flying in relays, taking all of the assembled dignitaries back to their space-craft. It was an elaborate procedure, made more complex by the protocol surrounding the gathering. A margrave is pretty far down on the list, so the Margrave of Golonida had to sit fidgeting and fuming while waiting his turn. It was not a pleasant time for his Chief of Staff, either. His ruler had never been known for his patience and there had been more than enough delay this day for anyone. And the banquet had proven to be a boring affair, not at all to the Golonidan taste in entertainment.

"Goth?"

"Yes?"

"When was the last time the Wheel fired those cannon?"

"A couple of hundred years ago, I think. During the last dynastic war here. Why?"

"Curious. You'd think in a couple of centuries, they'd have been able to rebuild better than they have. I'm still having trouble with the idea of that hall being heated, and I use the word loosely, with fire."

"The old palace was slagged."

"In two centuries they had time to build a new one."

"True."

"So why haven't they?"

"Interesting question."

"Very. When we get back I'm going to need some records from the Kanden Library."

"Margrave, we have a civil war in three months. I think this can wait."

"It's the war I'm thinking about."

"What?"

"Later."

"I think we're next."

The Margrave growled, "About time."

The shuttle craft were older model transports, not native to Morgoth, but then nothing was anymore. As the doors sealed behind them, the Margrave and Goth settled into the chairs in a lounge with wide view-screens showing the landing field. There was a slight acceleration as the shuttle cleared the ground and lifted towards space where there were still a goodly number of orbiting ships, most of them heavily armed. The idea of keeping them under the guns of the Wheel was not only for the protection of Morgoth. The shuttles were easy, undefended targets. A waiter came up to the Margrave and Goth, bowed from the waist and said "We'll be about an hour, Lords, can I get you anything?"

"Brandy," the Margrave ordered with a sigh.

"Silurian Vodka, if you have it," said Goth.

The waiter bowed again and left. The Margrave looked out towards the screen and noticed that several other transports were lifting at the same time.

"I wonder who's on those ships."

"We can find out when we dock. Waiter!"

He came almost running, "Yes, Lord."

"Do you have a hyperphone?"

"At once."

"Thank you."

The handset came with two carved crystal glasses, one containing clear liquid, the other dark. Goth handed the phone to the Margrave along with a small coder to be placed over the handset. The Margrave picked up the phone and coded his cruiser and set the security pattern in place. The touch of the send button brought an immediate response in the form of a clipped, military voice.

"Sword."

"Good, you're still awake. Goth was afraid you'd fall asleep waiting for us. We damn near did. I want the other shuttles with us monitored, visual and transmission."

"Condition?"

"Blue."

"As you command."

"Thank you. And Captain?"

"Yes, Margrave?"

"Is the heater working?"

"We're nice and toasty warm."

"Thank Elvis."

The handset was replaced and Goth put down his glass for a minute. "Curious again?"

"Slightly."

"You know that every ship out there heard a coded transmission."

"I know. I wonder what they'll do."

"Depends on if they have a decoder."

"Brian certainly does. I imagine Rath does. The Wheel might."

"It'd be a good bet."

"But not a sure one."

"Later?"

"Later."

There was a slight movement discernable through the shuttle. The view-screen showed a large asteroid-like object flash by.

"I'm surprised they keep getting caught like that. The junk around this planet was charted ages ago. It can't be that random."

Goth nodded. "It's strange, no question about that. I wonder how bad things really are on that planet."

"My sentiments exactly."

It was a welcome relief to see the bulk of the Sword in the viewer. An Imperial Class Cruiser, it had a spherical main body with two large delta wings at its lateral equator that acted as energy collectors. A long boom from the rear of the sphere held the drive system. The five-hundred foot sphere held the quarters for the crew and the ground fighters, weapons systems and shield units. Ringing the ship were reflective circles, the equivalent of gun ports and at the top and bottom were two turret batteries. Like all his ships, the Sword was home-built, from the Golonidan ship-yards and the Margrave was justly proud of her.

"Docking in ten minutes," the voice came from a speaker set in the lounge ceiling.

The Margrave adjusted his tunic as he stood and went over to the screen. His narrow lips pursed, he ran his right hand over his short, dark widow's peak and nodded. The Chief of Staff sat watching him, remembering the days when the Margrave was his pupil. Goth had the distinct and somewhat unpleasant feeling that the roles had been subtly, but clearly reversed. This war business was bad, both in prospect and in reality. And the Margrave had no heir. That would have been settled this year, but now...

"Goth, come here and take a look at this."

The Chief of Staff rose and walked over to the Margrave. "What is it?"

"The top turret. Where would you say those guns are pointed?"

"From this angle it's a bit hard to tell, but my guess would be the Wheel."

"Then why hasn't the Wheel said anything?"

"No idea."

"Maybe they think the guns have to point somewhere and perceive no threat?"

"Probable."

"Or maybe they're getting soft, or stupid."

"Possible."

A waiter came up to the pair and bowed "Lords, if you will please be seated. We'll be docking now."

The Sword grew in the viewer until nothing showed but the hull of the cruiser. There was a gentle shudder through the shuttle as it connected locks with the larger ship. The Margrave left the traditional gratuity for the shuttle captain and he and Goth walked from the lounge directly onto the receiving bay of the Sword.

"Margrave on the deck!" a voice cried and the waiting shipmen stood to attention, weapons ready.

"At ease."

The officer, a lieutenant, walked up to the Margrave and Goth, saluted with the edge of his hand at the middle of his breastplate and said "Welcome back, Margrave, Sir."

The Margrave and Goth returned the salute. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

Ceremonies over, the Margrave and Goth entered an elevator, punched the number for the Bridge and turned on the intercom.

"Captain."

"Yes, Margrave."

"Where did those other shuttles dock?"

"Two slaver ships."

"I see. Any com from the Wheel?"

"None."

The elevator stopped opened and a cry of "Margrave on the Bridge!" echoed through the room. There was more saluting and the Margrave went over to the hypercom. "Get home."

The officer at the com unit pushed three buttons and the face of the watch officer back on Golonida filled the screen. The Margrave did not wait for him to respond but said in a clipped voice "Margrave command. System to red, fleet to yellow. Fire on alert, maintain until we return."

He turned to the Captain. "General Quarters."

The siren screamed warning through the ship.

"Arm all batteries. Extend shields."

"Ship ready, sir."

"Lock onto the slavers."

"Yes sir!"

Turning to Goth, "That should give them something to think about."

The slaver ships detected the shields of the Sword and discovered immediately that the blasters were aimed at them. Both raised their shields and began taking evasive maneuvers, to put the space garbage between them and the Sword.

"They got the message, Margrave."

"They're very good at running away. We have to grant them that."

"I wonder what they're thinking on the Wheel."

"I doubt they like the slavers any more than we do."

"Who does?" asked the Captain.

"Prince Brian of Tremulon, Captain. And he wants to be High King."

"Is it war?"

"Between Brian and the King? Yes. Between us and Elvis knows who? Probably."

"Shall we get under way?"

"Yes. Let's go home. And open me a channel to Kanden. Send this. 'From the Margrave of Golonida to the Senator of Kanden. Request all Library data on Morgoth Wheel. Request that it be delivered to Golonidan squadron commander as soon as possible.'

"Now, open me a channel to our commander off Kanden. The face that appeared in the screen was that of a man in middle age, with slightly graying hair and the air of man who had seen his fill of duty. "Kanden Squadron, Commodore Trevor."

"Commodore,"

"Yes Margrave."

"I've made a request for some urgent data from the Kanden Library. Send a ship with it to Golonida as soon as its ready. Oh, and Commodore, watch out for slaver ships. I think one side of this conflict is going to use them for his hatchets."

"As you order."

"Captain?"

"Yes, Margrave?"

"I'm going to get some rest. Let me know when we're an hour out."

The Margrave's stateroom was just that, a room of state. He had two flag-ships, this cruiser and the battleship Star of Vengeance. The room itself was more of a suite, with a bedroom, bath and sitting room which doubled as a receiving chamber for any other dignitary who happened to be on board. It had a round, antique lucite table with seven chairs made of gold tubing and velvet seats. They were more comfortable than they looked, but the Margrave preferred the rocking chair in his bedroom. He had never been able to sit still and rocking back and forth settled his nerves. He was settling them now, a bit more violently than usual, but he had more to be nervous about. It was times like these when he envied the common ruck, those whose lives consisted of work, drink and procreation; whose only political concerns were in the form of taxes and the Margrave worked harder than most of his fellows to keep them down. Facing the chair was view-screen, but in hyperspace, the stars moved by so rapidly that it was painful to watch them. A com board was slightly raised on the table next to the bed, but the Margrave hoped that no one would want to talk to him for a while. He was forty years old and had ruled for twelve years. He was already growing weary of it.

"Now I know how constitutional monarchies get started," he grumbled to himself. "The rulers get tired and let the nobles take over. Next thing you know, the people want a say. Either that or the ruler is an idiot and the people take over and make him a dead idiot."

That's what happened on Kanden in Grandpa's day. Now the Senator rules in name only and a council makes all the decisions, usually the wrong ones. So I have to put ships in orbit over that damned planet to protect its library. Good old Gramps. He couldn't just go in and take the place, oh no! That would have been too expensive. Hell's Hubs! It cost more men to guard the damn place."

The Margrave took off his tunic and hung it and his belt in the closet among a group of other uniforms, one for every conceivable occasion and combat armor as well, stacked not very neatly in the corner of the closet. A valet robot would have kept the place in better order, but the Margrave did not want an extra robot floating around the ship in a fight. The Confederacy had been established to keep the peace, centuries before, but the only thing it kept were planets run by slavers and a convention that prevented him from blowing them out of space, planets and all. "Some day, Golonida will be strong enough to violate any convention," he thought, thinking of the ship-yards and weapons' plants. "Someday, soon. That, at least was something Grandpa did right."

He rose from the chair and walked over the ceremonial helmet laying on bed, picked it up and began playing with the plume at the crest. He put it down and moved the com unit over to his chair, sat down and punched a series of codes. The face of a female servant appeared in the screen. "Yes?"

"Would you please tell my mother that the Margrave is on the phone?"

"Of course, Lord."

Thinking that he was going to have to do something about this "Lord" business, the Margrave waited for a few seconds until the face of his mother appeared in the screen. "Son, are you back so soon?"

"No, mom. I'll be in space for about another day. I'm calling from the ship."

"Thank Elvis! I thought something terrible had happened."

"Not yet. I wanted you to know I'm all right and I'm going to increase the guard around your estate."

"Is there some trouble. Did you embarrass poor old Goth again?"

"There might be trouble. It's definitely war, only this time they're going to fight a space battle."

"Is that bad?"

"For anyone dumb enough to get suckered into it, yes, very bad. And with Prince Brian as the challenger, not good for us neutrals. He's got slavers on his side."

His mother's eyebrows rose a full inch at that. "Slavers! since when are they allowed at conclave?"

"Surprised me too. Brian probably got them in."

"He always was a bad one."

"I know, mother. But he's a big boy now."

"And so are you. And I know that you'll be more than a match for that disgusting little delinquent. Your father always had great confidence in you, you know."

And the Margrave knew that his mother had never recovered from his death. "Yes, mother, I know that. but I thought I'd tell you so you wouldn't get upset when the new troops come. And I'm going to put a heavy cruiser in stationary orbit over your general area. So you don't have to worry."

"That's my good boy. Now I have to go, my petunias are waiting for their water. It's watering day, you know."

"Yes, mother. good bye."

As the screen went blank, the Margrave bounced back into his chair and buried his face in his hands. "Great Elvis! She's getting worse. I hope it's not hereditary or Golonida is in very serious trouble."

The Margrave's father had died young, in his eighties, as the result of an accident in a plant he was visiting. Goth had been prepared to execute the workers who had made the mistake, but the new Margrave had persuaded him that most of those had died with their ruler and the rest were so maimed that killing them would be an undeserved mercy. His mother had stood up reasonably well for the coronation and the funeral, but that front collapsed soon after and she had retired to an estate on the side of the planet opposite the capital. Her worsening condition was another burden on the mind of the Margrave.

He punched a code and the screen stopped its outside view to replace it with the image of a waterfall from the Faller river on Golonida. The soporific effect of the water dashing against the rocks was just what the Margrave needed. He remembered some reference in one of the old disks from the Kanden Library about ancient Earth. It mentioned people sitting in front of a viewer watching a recording of fire. The disk author was having some fun at their expense and the Margrave was convinced that he had never tried to run a planet. It was a lot of work.

Arrival on Golonida was never a peaceful experience. Just because their Margrave hated ceremony and considered it a waste of time and money did not mean that his beliefs were in any way shared by his people. On the contrary, they enjoyed parades and festivals, coronations and state funerals more than any of the participants. Whenever something of

great import was in the air, mobs of them would congregate near the residence, not as an angry mass, demanding blood, but rather in the hope that their presence might in some way encourage the Margrave. And such a mob was waiting now, not only by the residence and the road leading from the spaceport to it, but also at the spaceport itself. It seemed that the entire population of his capital city, Herefall, was waiting for him.

The Margrave was on the bridge, in an appropriate uniform of black with gold facings and belt with Goth sitting next to him, both looking out at the view of the growing planet. It was a beautiful sight. The explorers who had found GOLONIDA had said that it looked like Earth in the early days of space. They had already passed the orbiting screen of detection satellites and gun stations and were on the final descent. The shields of the Sword were shifted to thermal repulsion and the ship prepared for landing.

A slight distortion around the edges of the viewer indicated that the Sword had broken atmosphere and in a matter of a few minutes would be home. "Glad to be back?" the Margrave asked, turning to Goth.

"Very, for once. It's going to be a little wild out there, even for an old space-dog like me."

"I don't blame you. Not looking forward to the next couple of months either."

To the Captain, "Anything from ground?"

"Just landing instructions."

"That's good. I was half expecting to land in the middle of a battle."

The Captain and Goth both grinned, "Well," Goth said, "There was a little action, but we didn't want to bother you with it until you were back at the residence."

The Margrave took a deep breath and made an unhappy face. "I would appreciate it if you would bother me if something important happens. I am the Margrave, you know."

"Well, if you insist. We got a hyper about an hour out from Morgoth. It seems that a slaver gunship tried to penetrate system and was destroyed."

The Margrave rolled his eyes and nodded. "That could have been important."

"Anyway, it was blasted after ID, about forty seconds."

"Could have been a little faster. Any transmission from it?"

"None."

"I think I made a mistake with my fire on alert order."

Goth started. "How?"

"We told Brian that our defenses are good enough that his attempt at reconnaissance never got to send off a message."

"That's bad?"

"Yes, it is. May cost us an opportunity someday."

The ship captain looked at Goth and got a shake of the head in return. "He thinks too far ahead for me. I'm worried about this mess and he's planning the next war."

The Margrave laughed. "Always think a war ahead. Dad always said that."

"Well, try to think about this one for a while. And look at that crowd!"

The ship was close enough that the viewer showed the mob waiting by the landing field. "I hope nobody mentioned raising taxes."

"Very funny. Captain."

"Yes, Chief."

"Try not to land on any of them."

"Don't worry about that, Chief. Blood's bad for the paint."

"To say nothing of my public image, Captain."

"Yes, Margrave."

The bulk of the Sword caused a minor eclipse as it passed between the sun and the landing field. By that time, the crowd was cheering and waving small flags as a television reporter tried to describe the scene to those three people left in the capital and the rest of the planet. It was apparent that those who did not believe in psychic energy were wrong that day, as the populace obviously knew that danger was brewing in the stars, even though they had not been told yet just what.

The Margrave pulled his crested helmet over his ears as he walked down the short stairway leading from the ship elevator to the landing field. The ceremonial helmet did not have the ear baffles that his combat helmet did and the shouts of the crowd were loud to the point of deafening. The Mayor of the capital was waiting on the field as were a number of court dignitaries and the usual hangers-on all seeking to bask in the reflected glory of the return of the Margrave.

"Lord Margrave..." the Mayor began with a pomposity that would have done credit to the Heirophant. "It is with great and lasting joy that I, that we the people of Herefall and all of Golonida welcome you home again."

The Margrave acknowledged the ceremonial bows with a nod of his head and responded "Thank you for your kind greeting, Mayor. It is always a pleasure to be among our people and an even greater pleasure to return to them after even so short an absence."

This, broadcast over the speaker system, which was actually working properly this time, caused an even louder cheer from the mass of humanity jammed onto the sides of the field. One of the officers of the Margrave's staff left the body of retainers and walked up to the Margrave, saluting. "Margrave, the Guards are ready for review."

More ceremony, and more time wasted, but the Margrave set his face and allowed himself to be led between lines of uniformed troops, all at attention, weapons ready. "To see these troops, anyone off-world would think me the greatest tyrant in the galaxy," thought the Margrave. "But the last thing I need now is a sloppy army."

The Margrave made it a point to look at the faces of his troops as much as possible. This time it was not as easy. He looked at one young trooper and thought "In four months this boy may be dead, died for his Margrave and a planet that may survive only because he is willing to die for it. I wonder if he realizes just how cheap his life is."

The cheers of his subjects brought the Margrave out of his depression. "Hell, if I blow this, all our lives are going to be damn cheap."

"They want to fight," the voice of the staff officer sounded in the Margrave's ear.

"Then they're bigger fools than the High King," the Margrave rasped in response.

Goth now. "We'll probably have to."

"I know, but I'm not asking for it, not yet."

The procession finally made its way to the ground cars at the far end of the field. Security was virtually nonexistent. If anyone were crazy enough to try to assassinate the Margrave, the mob would rip him to pieces and if anyone were that determined, no security in the world would stop him. Better to let the crowd see their ruler than hide him behind a wall of guards and armor. More than one government had died because of that. And the Margrave must never, ever, seem to be afraid of his own troops.

The cars began the ride to the residence, in the center of the capital. It would have been easier and much faster to take a flier, but the Margrave, like his father and grandfather before, did not have the heart to deprive his people of the opportunity of seeing him. And the thought of the mountain of petitions that waited for him back at the residence made the Margrave roll his eyes with horror.

The ambassador from Count Rath had been shocked when he had been ushered into the Margrave's office a year before to see the ruler almost buried behind his desk in paper. And the apology that came with the sight unnerved him even more.

"Sorry, Baron. But I'm a little behind on this week's petitions."

The Baron shook his bearded head with wonder and asked "Can't your secretaries do this?"

"Nope. Every citizen has right to petition the Margrave and know that his Margrave reads every one of them. Besides, some of them are quite funny."

And some of them were not. Like the one from a family whose son had been sentenced to death for a crime with virtually no evidence against him. Or the child whose pet had been siezed by a town council. Once, when his father had intervened on behalf of such a case, the judge, called to account, said "The law applies to all, equally."

His father had said "There is a power above the law--me." And the judge was shot.

Finally, mercifully, the motorcade pulled into the gates of the residence and the Margrave could stop smiling as he pulled off his helmet. "Goth, I'll never get used to this job."

"Your father said the same thing."

"He was right, as usual."

"But now, Margrave, to work."

"Agreed. I want everything we have on Prince Brian on my desk in an hour. Lieutenant!"

"Yes, Margrave."

"I want the recording of the slaver ship that got blasted."

"At once."

"And let me know when that material from Kanden is coming."

"It's already here, with a surprise."

The Margrave jumped a little. "I hate surprises. They usually mean trouble."

"This one's no exception. It's the Senator's daughter."

III

"Would you repeat that?" the Margrave asked feeling that the floor of the Residence was giving way beneath his boots.

"The Daughter of the Senator of Kanden, Lady Margot came with the disks you asked for."

"It started to be a good day."

"It could be worse, Margrave."

"Not very. I remember her."

The Margrave had last seen the Lady Margot of Kanden just after the death of his father. She was a tall, unkempt adolescent with a face full of pimples, clothes that refused to fit and hair that flew out all over the place. For the daughter of a ruling house (and the term, applied to Kanden, was used loosely indeed) she was the most ignoble creature the Margrave had ever seen. For her part, the Lady Margot had viewed the Margrave as a carnivorous savage who probably ate small children for lunch. Considering that the only contact she had ever had with Golonidans was with the commanders of the Golonidan divisions guarding the Library of Kanden, her impression was not completely inaccurate. If the Margraves of Golonida revered the Library of Kanden as the last true repository of human history, the people of Kanden hated it is a symbol of outworld oppression and had tried to attack it during the last rebellion. That was when the grandfather of the present Margrave sent troops to Kanden and they had remained there ever since. The ships of Golonida also served to protect the Kanden from slaver raids, something their openly pacifist government was unable to do, but the Kanden felt no gratitude.

Nor was any expected. The Margraves had kept a cordial, and at times friendly relationship with the house of Kanden, but made no secret of the fact that they despised that house's ideals and the people of that world. The present Margrave's father, when told by a delegation from Kanden of the opinions of the people responded "I don't give a damn what they feel. To save that Library, I'd gladly exterminate them." John 8, Margrave of Golonida, shared his father's view in its entirety.

It was the sort of situation that made mutual dislike inevitable.

"I suppose I have to greet her," the Margrave growled between clenched teeth. "I wonder what the hell she's doing here."

"The dispatch with her requested that you provide a ship for her to Morgoth."

"Certainly, but Morgoth?"

"Maybe they're marrying her off."

"Then Morgoth is in worse shape than I thought. An alliance by marriage with the house of Kanden is worse than no alliance at all. Look at what protecting that damned Library is costing us!"

"It might be good to get her out of the way as quickly as possible."

"Agreed. I'll receive her as soon as I change out of this uniform. The damned collar is too tight."

The throne room of the Golonidan Residence was a great improvement over the hall on Morgoth. For one thing, it was more comfortable. Morgoth was a cold world, Golonida a warm one. The humming of the air-conditioning was a constant noise in the background everywhere on the planet. Where the Morgoth hall had been a carved nightmare of gargoyles and demonic gods, the throne room was of almost Zen-like simplicity, with the throne being a simple chair on a low dias. The lighting, all indirect, came from panels discreetly laid into the ceiling. The residence had a large hall for great receptions, with more decoration, but the throne room was for small gatherings, formal presentations of diplomats and local councils. Its very simplicity sometimes created the misunderstanding that the house of Golonida felt itself to be humble. When taxed with that, the grandfather of the Margrave had responded "If they want to see the trappings of power, I can show them our ship-yards."

It was here, then, that the Margrave entered by a side door just behind the dias to sit on the throne, in a new and more comfortable uniform, his blaster left behind but replaced by an ornately hilted dagger in his belt. The dagger was an unusual addition to a court reception, but if he were going to be considered a savage, the Margrave felt that he should look the part.

Flanking him were Goth and the Minister of State, a round little man with a shiny, bald head and a suit that barely fitted his girth. Several soldiers of the Guards stood at rest in the corners of the room, a purely ceremonial gesture as the Margrave was protected by a brace of blasters firing from behind the throne, fitted into the wall disguised as part of the family coat of arms.

The large door at the back of the room opened and a herald (actually an officer of the Guards in an unusual role) announced the Lady Margot of Kanden, with the usual titles and pronouncements that came with such things. A second later, the Lady herself entered, walked to the center of the room and bowed slightly to the Margrave.

The Margrave returned the bow with a nod of the head and looked at the Lady Margot. He was surprised by what he saw.

The pimples were gone. Well, he had expected that. But the face had a simple beauty about it that he had not expected. The high cheekbones were topped by a pair of blue eyes and the nose, which the Margrave had remembered as being a bit pointed, was

perfect for the face. In a peasant, or even a common worker, her features would be considered highly attractive. But, as the Margrave expected, she would need some work to be mistaken for a noble. Her clothes, while they fit, were not exactly elegant and her hair was still flying all over the place. The Margrave wondered if she had a static generator hidden somewhere.

"This is a rare privilege, Lady Margot. It is not often your house graces us with one of its members." The diplomatic lie almost did not come out. The Margrave really wanted to ask "Have you thought of shaving it off and wearing a wig?"

"Thank you, Margrave. My father and the Council deemed it best that I travel on one of your ships here and thence to Morgoth."

The Margrave nodded and smiled. "I will have one of my heavy cruisers take you there. It is not wise to travel in anything less."

"I know. That was the reason my father gave for sending me by way of your world."

"I have always valued your father's wisdom, even when I disagree with it."

"As my father values your friendship."

"I assume that you're going to Morgoth to remain under the protection of the Wheel until this crisis is over." There was no need to name the crisis.

"Exactly, Margrave."

"I also trust that you will be able to enjoy our hospitality for at least a few days before you complete your trip."

"I would enjoy that, yes."

"Then we would be honored if you would join us at dinner."

"I would be honored as well."

"Excellent! Now, I fear you must excuse me. I've just arrived myself and there are pressing matters."

The interview ended and the Margrave felt no small relief as he was able to descend from the throne and walk into his office. It was a large room, with a desk, several screens, chairs and a couch with two large pillows on one end. the Margrave wished that he had time to take a short nap, but first there were a couple of details to attend to.

He sat down in the high-backed chair, swiveled it to face his desk and punched a number into the com set which rose as a small, round bump out the desk. Instantly the face of an attractive, young woman appeared in a hologram projection in the center of the room.

"Elise."

"John, I mean Margrave. You survived."

"Do you mean the conclave or the welcome?"

"Both."

"I'm giving a dinner tonight for the Lady Margot of Kanden."

"What's that bitch doing here?"

"Jealous?"

"Hardly. But I hear that she's lost her pimples. I bet she's a beauty now."

"Well, not exactly, though I do wonder what she looks like without those rags they sent her in. But try to behave yourself and don't get mad if I seem to neglect you in the next three months. It seems we have a war on our hands."

"What?"

"Civil war. A space battle off Cadwallader. It's going to be all the news in a day or so."

That bit of business out of the way, the Margrave called another number and again a female face popped into the room, this time wearing a uniform.

"Lady Theresa please."

"At once, Margrave."

"Auntie!"

"John. Welcome home. We were all worried about you, what with that slaver ship trying to penetrate the system and all."

"It seems that the only person who doesn't hear state secrets is me. I was only told this morning. Anyway, I need your help."

"My help?"

"Yes. Lady Margot of Kanden is here."

"Is her hair still as bad?"

"Worse. But seriously, she's going to Morgoth for the duration."

"A good place for her."

"She must have made quite an impression at dad's funeral."

"You don't want to know."

"I really don't remember."

"I know."

"Well, she's grown up, I think, and she'll need some decent clothes. I'm amazed that skinflint council doesn't let her wear rags. And I can't let her run around Morgoth looking like a street peddler. People would wonder about my taste in friends."

"And you want me to take her shopping?"

"Something like that. Now it's winter on Morgoth and they don't heat their buildings so good."

"So well, John."

"So what? I'm the Margrave and I'll mangle the language if I want to. Anyway. She'll need something warm, a coat and what ever else you think is right."

"She could set her shield to keep warm."

"Bad idea. First, she really does not have the confidence to wear something showy. Second, if she uses her shield for that, all it takes is a thermal blast and she's cooked meat, something which I doubt would set well with the vegetarian sentiments of her father."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks. And Auntie, remember, dad's funeral was twelve years ago. She's not the obnoxious kid she used to be."

With that out of the way, the Margrave called in Goth.

"I thought you'd take a rest," the Chief of Staff said as he walked in the door.

"Sit. I'd like to. But I need to see the recording of that slaver they blew."

"Hit three."

A hologram of a ship appeared in the center of the room, flew around for a few seconds and then blew up.

"One of their smaller gunships."

"We assume that it was a simple recon."

"I agree. But for what. They know that only the confederation prevents us from blowing them out of space but if they land on this planet or attack it in any way, we have a free hand."

"It is a puzzle."

"A big one. What was the time on it, relative to us in space?"

"We would have been four hours out of Morgoth."

"Some weird retaliation for our little sport at Morgoth?"

"Not likely. If they were trying to make a point, they got stuck on it themselves."

"True. Did the slaver send anything, anything at all?"

"No."

"Display ship position."

A hologram of the Golonidan system appeared, showing the place of the small craft inside the asteroid ring.

The Margrave pursed his lips and nodded. "Trying to hide?"

Goth nodded. "A good guess. It's what I'd try to do."

"So would I, but then you taught me. So let's go with that idea. If this little gunship is trying to hide from our detectors, which are pretty good by any standard, then why?"

"Waiting for some of the outer planets to move into a position relative to the asteroids."

"The other way around, more likely, but why"

The Chief of Staff got out of his chair and walked to the display. "I'd guess that he was looking for our hidden bases. It's common knowledge that we have them and if I wanted to plan an attack on this system I'd have to know where they are before moving."

"Assuming that an attack is being planned, that's a good guess. Who'd plan it?"

"The slavers themselves, Prince Brian for after the battle."

"True."

"They have to know how many ships we have before they can plan anything."

"I wish them luck. I don't know how many ships we have."

"I think it comes to..." and the Margrave stopped him with a wave.

"I can punch up the number if I need it. But let's consider another possibility."

"Such as?"

"Assassination."

"What gives you that idea."

"We have a reasonably large space force."

"That is, your Margraveship, an understatement. It's one of the biggest in the human worlds, if not the largest."

"If something happens to me with the succession unsettled, then the slavers, or Brian, could count on some confusion which would render that force less effective than usual."

"Such is the danger of autocracy."

"You sound like Grandpa."

"It was his saying."

"Anyway, where was I? Oh yes. So a small ship with a big gun..."

"To knock down the Sword it would have to be a very big gun."

"Don't interrupt your Margrave. As I was saying, a big gun could catch the Sword coming out of hyperspace, decelerating for a landing with its shields down and guns unmanned and hit it with one lucky shot. Good bye Margrave."

"And his Chief of Staff."

"And chaos results."

"Make sense?"

"Very."

"Only the slavers, or Brian, did not know about our positions in the asteroid ring."

"They do now."

"Well, let's say they might guess. They really only know that a ship failed to return."

"If they have any ears at all, they know it was destroyed. We haven't exactly kept it a secret."

"Except from your Margrave."

"I wish you'd stop saying that. We didn't want to disturb your rest."

"Goth."

"Yes?"

"Please, disturb me."

"So what do we do about it?"

"Good question. First, we don't try to hide what happened. It's all over the planet anyway. Second, order all merchant ships to be convoyed by warships and delegate the fifth fleet for that purpose. We'll stop all shipping two weeks before the battle, maybe sooner if we have to. That'll give us enough time to put the fleet back together for our next move. Order all ships to remain on battle stations when not in hyperspace. Full alert, no exceptions. And send it in clear. I want Brian to hear it."

"Done."

"Now send in the Professor."

The Professor was a thin man, slightly balding with a tendency to the dandy. He walked into the office and bowed deeply to the Margrave.

"Sit down Professor. What have you got for me."

"I assume I was right about Brian and the slavers."

"You were. I had the devil's own time trying to look surprised at seeing them at the conclave."

"There is some evidence of the popular movement on Kanden preparing for a rising again."

"That explains Lady Margot."

"Not really. The council on Kanden knows nothing about it. It seems that an informal agreement was made between a number of the weaker systems to send the heirs to Morgoth for the duration."

"Sensible."

"Not really. It means they'll all be in the same place."

"There is the little matter of the Wheel."

"Our information is that Brian has thought of that as well."

"It'll bear further watching. Right now I want to know if Brian is going to attack this system."

"He may have to, but I have nothing on that at this time."

"Well, look for it. And try to find out what that slaver ship we blew was doing in our system."

"Of course. I have my people working on it now."

"Do you have anything on the slavers' newest ships?"

"A little."

The Margrave punched a button and the display of the destroyed ship reappeared. "What do you make of this one?"

"One of their new Model 15s, I think. About the same speed as the 14, but little heavier firepower."

"Can it knock out a heavy cruiser?"

"It'd take some luck, like the cruiser being unready, but yes, it could."

"Who has them?"

"Only one slaver so far, Baron Tomas of Edessa."

The Margrave punched the intercom. "Goth!"

"Yes, Margrave," came the surprised voice.

"I was right about an assassin. I want the Fourth Fleet to make a demonstration off Edessa. Order them to destroy everything not on the surface of the planet."

Then to the Professor. "That should keep them worried."

Worried would hardly describe the feeling his action would cause. Terror would be more like it, and not only on Edessa. If it were not for the Confederation, he would have ordered Edessa and its sister worlds destroyed long ago, assuming his father and grandfather had not done it first. The Margrave leaned back in his desk chair, put his hands behind his head and his feet upon the desk and smiled. He had a clear vision in his mind, a vision of the people on Edessa going about their everyday business of selling people grabbed from other worlds and then looking up as warning sirens screamed fear all over the planet. On the night side, the sky would fill with bursts of light as every satellite, every ship in space in the Edessa system would be blown to hell. It was a beautiful vision of lights popping all over the evening sky. And the slavers would think very seriously about how much their deal with Prince Brian, his noble and dear cousin of Tremulon, was truly worth to them.

Still smiling, he punched his intercom again and looked into the face of his chief cook.

"Have you got the menu set for tonight?"

"The banquet will be up to your usual standards, Margrave. have no fear of that."

"Just remember that the Lady Margot is a hay-burner, I mean a vegetarian, so try to give her something besides three plates of beans."

The chef laughed. He remembered when the Margrave's father had ordered just that for the Kanden ambassador as a joke. The ambassador had not been amused. "Of course, Margrave. She will sup like a Princess."

Not a bad idea considering that she was one, thought the Margrave. "Now, if only Auntie can get some decent clothes on her."

IV

A royal banquet on Golonida was part ceremonial dinner, part cabaret and part barbarian orgy. As the three parts tended to mix together, it was sometimes difficult to tell what was supposed to be going on. These events were also once described by the Old Margrave as

institutionalized food fights. It was, for example, considered traditional and quite humorous to heckle the toasts offered by Goth to the Margrave and his guests. It was also great fun to throw the food around. It was not wise to ask someone to pass the rolls unless one was a good catcher or a fast ducker. The Lady Margot of Kanden had been warned by her father, her very anxious father, about this strange custom but she was not really prepared to see it, much less survive it. The Margrave sat next to her and tried his best to shield her from the more extreme behavior of his court, but nevertheless the Lady was almost debrained by a flying potato on at least two occasions.

"Enjoying yourself?" the Margrave asked her leaning so far that he almost spilled his wine on her white gown.

"I think so," she answered as honestly as she could get away with. "We have nothing like this on Kanden."

"That's very kind of you. Of course, everyone is on their best behavior tonight, so far at least."

"You mean it gets worse?"

"No one's tried to rip your gown off yet."

"You're joking!"

"Nope. Elise here left the last banquet stark naked and covered with whipped cream."

Lady Margot had visions of public exposure. "I hope that doesn't happen to me. This is my best gown."

"It won't. We try to behave ourselves for foreigners. We rarely succeed, but we try."

Lady Margot said "That's reassuring," but she did not feel reassured at all.

"I hope you like the wine. It was a gift from Aethelwold of Hermetia."

"It's very good, a little strong.."

"We like it that way."

"Margrave."

"Yes, Lady?"

"I have to appologize for the way I acted when I was last here. I was a rotten kid."

The Margrave laughed. "Forgiven, and in my case totally forgotten. The only thing I remember about my father's funeral was the fact that I was terrified of being Margrave, especially since I did not expect to be it until at least 100. And the robes I had to wear. They weigh more than I do. Besides, you should have seen me at sixteen."

Goth laughed as a handful of grapes went flying along the table to land on the head of the Minister of State. "The Margrave's youthful excesses were legendary."

"Damn near started a war, a big one."

Lady Margot, her naivete showing more than she wanted, opened her eyes wider than usual. "How?"

"Some of the High King's court wanted to charge me with Superior Treason."

"What did you do?"

"Have you ever heard of device, pre-space called a whoopee cushion?"

"No."

"It's a bladder, usually of rubber or other such material, filled with air and placed under a seat cushion. When sat on a valve releases the air and makes a rude noise, thus causing great embarrassment to the sitter."

"The Minister of State doesn't need one for that," Elise laughed. That Minister, sitting three seats down with his head now covered with grape juice, was not amused.

"In the case of the High King, the embarrassment was most severe."

The Margrave tossed a fruit. "It's my story, Goth. Anyway, some of his court failed to appreciate...Duck!" A tomato flew by the head table. "They didn't think it was funny. My father did and put the entire space force on alert. On hearing that, they realized at once the humor of the situation and joined in the general merriment."

The Margrave was further distracted from his story by a commotion, louder than usual, at a far table. Elise and Goth were laughing so hard that they almost knocked each other into their wine and Lady Margot strained to watch. "What are those two women fighting with?" she asked trying to be heard above the general tumult.

"Turkey legs, I think," the Margrave shouted back. "Five hundred on the one in red!" he shouted to Goth.

"Done!"

By now both of the female would-be gladiators were holding their drumsticks with both hands and swinging wildly. It was obvious that the first one who connected a blow would be the winner and after several seconds of frenzied activity, one of them did. The one who should have been in white, except that she was so covered in barbecue sauce that it seemed that she was in red as well.

"You owe me five hundred, Margrave."

"So I do, Goth. I'll add it to your pay." And the entire group at the head table laughed. The Chief of Staff served at pleasure and received no formal salary. By now the laughter and the shouting from the table nearest was so loud that it was impossible to be heard. Three men and one woman were dancing on top of the table and waving knives and forks in a drunken tarantella.

"Hey!" the Margrave shouted. "Keep it down over there. You want the Kanden to think we're barbarians?"

One of the dancers shouted back "Hell, Margrave! They already do."

"Can't argue with the truth." and with that the Margrave picked up a vegetable and hurled it at the head of the man who shouted. He ducked, laughing.

"Having fun?" he asked, turning to Lady Margot.

The Lady from Kanden was actually beginning to enjoy herself, but with some feelings of guilt mingled with real fear of being a victim of some dreadful prank. "It's unique. I've got to admit it. We never do this on Kanden."

"I know. That's why I've never gone there. Too civilized."

"Elise?"

"Yes, Lady Margot?"

"Didn't the Margrave here get angry when you lost your gown?"

The entire table laughed at such innocence. Goth explained, between gasps "The Margrave was the one who ripped it off!"

"I was going to later anyway and there didn't seem much point in waiting."

By now the entertainers, the ones who were really supposed to sing, had come out and one of them was being passed over the heads of the company at a far table.

"This, Lady Margot," said the Margrave, with mock seriousness, "is what makes Golonida unique in all the human worlds. It is the only place where our entertainers get combat pay."

"Look over there," Elise pointed, excitedly at a group of people hanging someone upside down from the chandelier.

"Oh, it's just the woman who lost the fight."

By now the Lady Margot was wishing that she was in a space battle. "Her penalty for losing?"

"For losing five hundred Grickles for her Margrave."

"Treason!"

"Kind of dull tonight, Goth," complained the Margrave.

"Too short notice to get any gladiators."

"I see. Have you ever seen gladiators, Lady Margot?"

"No." And she really did not want to.

"It's quite a show. Next time you're here we'll have to arrange a fight for you, see what the average Golonidan spends his leisure watching."

Several of the singers were trying to perform, accompanied by chorus of soldiers who could not carry a tune in the hold of a freighter.

"What does the ruling class do for fun on Kanden?"

"Nothing like this."

"I know that. Really, what do they do. My generals have never attended one of your entertainments."

"They'd be very bored. We all sit around and talk quietly about philosophy or chant ancient plainsong."

"That sounds boring all right. Incoming!" and a vegetable flew over the Margrave's head to splatter on the wall behind.

"Of course on Kanden we eat our food, rather than throw it."

"But what do you do with the leftovers?"

"We eat them too."

"No wonder the child has nothing to wear," Aunt Theresa shouted. "Never fear my child. Tomorrow I'll get you outfitted properly."

"Can't have you going to Morgoth looking like a misplaced peasant."

That hurt and it showed. The look on Lady Margot's face sobered the Margrave, who, for some inexplicable reason was beginning to feel protective of this recently unwelcome guest. "If you would like some fresh air, I would be happy to see you safely out of here."

Gratitude. "Thank you."

There were some quick excuses and the Margrave took the Lady Margot out of a door hidden just behind him, covered with tomato.

"I'm afraid it takes some getting used to," he said to her as they walked on the vine covered terrace under the two moons of Golonida.

"They really don't like me, do they?"

"Unlike me, Aunt Theresa remembers dad's funeral and holds grudges when drunk. But the idea of getting you some decent clothes was my idea."

She turned a face that was beginning to tear to the Margrave. "Why?"

"No insult intended. It's just that on Morgoth you're going to be among some strutting birds and I want your plumage to match theirs."

"But what that soldier said about Kanden?"

"Your people have no love for ours and my people are not overly fond of yours. Me, I'm content to accept our differences and get along as best we can. And it is true your people think of us as barbarians. But hell, Margot, we are barbarians and I'm just a warrior chieftain. But if it were not for us barbarians, your library would be so many ashes and all of human history with it."

"It's always the library. My people hate it. It dominates our entire lives."

"You're the holders of the most important trust in the human worlds. Do you think I enjoy tying down my fleets and divisions for another world?"

"But we can't do anything because of that library. The council has always decided how I should dress, or eat, or act because the Library requires a certain decorum."

"I'm beginning to develop a great and lasting dislike for your council."

"Well, that, at least, is something we can agree on."

The Margrave looked out at the garden and shook his head. "But I've never understood why, if your people hate their council so much, they keep electing them to the same offices. You'd think they'd be thrown out with the next election."

Lady Margot looked a little embarrassed. "The elections aren't exactly, well, honest. The Council members are very good at buying votes."

"You know, if your father should ever decide to rule instead of just reign, my troops would be more than happy to help."

"I'm afraid getting my father to do that would take more than your troops. We have a long tradition."

"We're not big on tradition here. Look at me. I'm an hereditary military dictator with a fancy title. And that's all I am, or any other monarch in the human worlds. You know, I remember one time when my father first took over and your father was talking to him over the hyperphone. Your father started talking about some council elections or something like that and my father told him that we had elections on Golonida. Well, I was as surprised as your father to hear that and then my father said that he was elected every day his soldiers decided not overthrow him."

"It makes a certain sense."

"It's true. The monarch is nothing more than a glorified dictator in a funny suit. And the love of the people aside, it's the guns of the army that keep him on the throne. The problem is to keep those guns loyal."

"A serious one indeed."

"Really. You're going to Morgoth. Do you know what Morgoth was like a few hundred years ago?"

"Not really. I was always terrible in history."

"Oh? It was my best subject. Anyway, Morgoth was at one time like Golonida is now, only more so. Huge population, lots of industry, tremendous military. Had a space force twice the size of any now, including mine. Several Dukes of Morgoth had been High King. But the Dukes of Morgoth made a mistake. They ascribed to an ancient, and I mean ancient belief that the key to power and domestic bliss was to keep the army rich and not worry about anything else. It is a very stupid idea. Oh, you might get away with it for a generation, if you're lucky and the economy is booming, but let things get a little slow and the army decides it wants more. Well, when workers go on strike, you can always replace

them or shoot them, but when the army demands more, it might shoot you. So, the Dukes gave in and kept giving in until one day there was nothing left to give. The treasury was bankrupt and there was hardly any industry or trade left because anyone with any sense and money had pulled out long ago. The army rebelled, and so did the fleet. By the time the civil war was over, Morgoth lost two thirds of its population, all its industry, its entire fleet, except for the Wheel and the reigning Duke was dead, his palace a slag pile and him melted with it. The army picked the last surviving general to be the new Duke and try to put things back together, but there was nothing to put them together with."

"So how do you avoid that?"

"I keep the army busy, not rich, but busy. They're so busy keeping their Margrave happy that they don't have time to rebel. And certain personal touches, like a bottle of wine if one of them gets married, presents for the children, that sort of thing. It works."

"I guess it must, you're still here."

"And working myself into an early grave. Do you know what I'm going to be doing while my crazy aunt is buying you new clothes?"

"No."

"Reading petitions from my loving subjects. Thousands of petitions. They cover everything from fights over a backyard fence to complicated criminal stuff."

"Then it's true? You read all of them?"

"You heard about that even on Kanden?"

"My father told me, but I really didn't believe him."

"I read them all. Of course I have staff people to take care of most of the stuff. Basically I divide them into groups, trivial, unimportant, significant, important, very important, state security."

"I see."

"The actual reading is very fast. I can go through several thousand in an afternoon. It all depends on how many require my personal attention. And then there are the ones from children."

"Children petition their Margrave?"

"Every subject has the right to petition his Margrave. Those can be kind of cute at times, and funny at times and some times they tear your gut out. I try to send each child a

personal answer, even if its only a couple of lines attached to a form letter and, depending on the age and situation, sometimes a little gift. And why are you laughing?"

"On Kanden they say you eat children and here you are telling me that you send them presents."

"They can be very tasty with barbecue sauce. But I only eat foreign children. It is not good policy to devour one's subjects."

"That's very reassuring."

"I'm glad to hear it. But the worst time is around Elvisday. Very small children get their Margrave confused with Sinder Klaus and think that I'm the one who turns into microwaves and comes out of the videoscreen with a bag of goodies."

Lady Margot began to laugh again, this time so hard that she had to sit on the balustrade. "I-I-I can't imagine you in a beard and purple tights."

"But the problem is that I can't possibly send presents to all of them. My finances don't grow on the Elvis Bush. So I have my secretaries work overtime to send out little notes and then I deal personally with the most pressing ones, like if the family really is strapped for money, I send them something in the form of a gift certificate for the requested toy. That way they don't spend any money on wine or worse, clothes."

"Clothes?"

"Only a real Grampus would give a kid clothes for Elvisday."

"We never got anything for Elvisday on Kanden. The council didn't think that superstition should be encouraged."

"That council of yours would be very accident prone if I were Senator."

"I think they know that."

"Good. I may have my troops distribute presents next Elvisday just for the fun of it."

"Like when your commander stepped on a bug in front of the Minister of State?"

"Is he the one with the funny broom who sweeps the sidewalk to make sure he doesn't step on anything?"

"That's him."

"I remember hearing something about that when he was last here. He was a bit unhappy."

"What did you do?"

"Ate a rare hamburger in front of him."

"He must have loved that."

"Then I threw a banquet in his honor."

"That's why he didn't want to come with me."

"Really? He seemed to enjoy himself."

"He was thoroughly scandalized when he got back. The council talked about your bad behavior for three meetings."

"I'll give them more to talk about if I have the chance. No Elvisday presents indeed."

"The chairman doesn't believe in Elvis."

"Neither do I, and it's all Moloch Paphnutius fault for ressurecting the ancient cult, but the Elvis Bush is always buried in gifts. And the different cities are always sending delegations to sing Elvis carols around the holidays. And every year I swear that if I hear one more version of 'Screw My Tender' I'll go berserk."

"I don't blame you. I always hated that song."

"I thought the council wouldn't let you celebrate."

"We don't, but the people love it and the council doesn't dare try to stop them."

"Not without good reason. My troops would side with the people. Sometimes I think they'd like to anyway. Don't tell anyone this, but one of my officers has been giving out secret liqour for ten years."

Lady Margot tried to look scandalized, but failed and merely giggled. "The secret is safe with me."

The noise from the party was lessening and the two realized that they had walked almost to the center of the large garden below the terrace. The Margrave looked up at the twin moons of Golonida and shook his head.

"Don't you like them? I think they're almost romantic hanging up there together," the Lady Margot said looking up at the same time.

"Romance has nothing to do with it. I like it better when their orbits keep them on opposite sides of the planet. That way we get better protection from their guns. When they're like this, I have to position a battleship on the other side to cover it."

"It's that bad?"

"Don't you know? A slaver tried to assassinate me on my way back here. A system is a big place and we might not be so lucky again. Even now, I have a fleet on its way to retaliate."

"Well," Lady Margot said, quietly, "I kind of like them, so lets just sit down on this bench and look at them for a while. I need a rest after that dinner."

"We both do. I think we should arrange something quieter."

The Margrave and Lady Margot stayed a long time, looking at the two moons before the Margrave took her back to her suite. When he left the next the morning, a new chapter in Golonidan-Kanden relations had opened.

V

Ten days in hyperspace is a long trip, when you consider that Morgoth is twenty light-years from Golonida and that trip took less than twenty hours. But that was how long it took Admiral Richter and his Fourth Fleet to reach the slaver system of Edessa.

Slavers were outlaws, professional bandits who traded in whatever they could steal from those worlds which were ill protected, which meant the bulk of the human worlds. People, because it was harder to store them for any length of time, were a prized and expensive commodity. On half the worlds of the Confederation, slavery was legal and winked at on half where it was not. The Margraves of Golonida were almost unique in their opposition to the custom, claiming that it was ultimately bad for business and often added an unpredictable civil element.

In carrying on his feud with the slaver systems, however, John was not being sentimental. Hunting slaver ships gave his troops something to do besides clean their ships and guns. And the troops, in turn, could demonstrate their loyalty to their Margrave by attacking those who tried to kill him.

Admiral Richter was a tall man. He towered over the Margrave and was about thirty years older. He was towering now, over the pilot of his battleship, the Exterminator. It was the Golonidan custom to find dreadful neames for their battleships. The pilot was sweating more than usual and was not sure if the air-conditioning was set too high or the admiral was breathing on him. Neither was comfortable, especially going into battle.

"I want the fleet to come out of hyperspace between their major worlds," Richter had ordered. "At that point, it will split into ten battle groups, five to attack the outworld installations and five to go near the main planet itself and do what our Margrave has ordered, destroy everything not on the surface of the planet."

It was a very delicate maneuver. Ideally, ships came out of hyperspace nowhere near anything to leave room for errors. A serious mistake either by the computers or the pilot would put them literally inside a planet. Of course the planet would not be in very good shape after that either, because the result would be one hell of an explosion as all of the material in the planet and the ship tried to be in the same place at the same time. During the centuries of Madness, there had been serious attempts to design a weapon to do just that, but for some reason, the guidance system had never worked. Of course, a large piloted ship could make a suicide run and that was the sole reason for the rule of the Confederacy about attacking the surface of a home planet. Richter had little use for rules, but he had no desire to go up with his ship and the pilot shared the admiral's opinion.

"Ten minutes to normal space," the pilot spoke firmly, trying not to let his voice shake.

Richter smiled and nodded. "Shields out, blasters armed. Sound battle stations."

The main screen, normally blank during hyperspace, shifted to reveal a spectacular panorama of worlds dancing in space, their gentle pavane belying the frenzied activity of their human inhabitants. Almost immediately, the ten battle groups, each led by a heavy cruiser and containing varying mixes of gunships and destroyers swept in front of the Exterminator towards their targets. The Exterminator itself, a ship almost a mile in diameter with four large turret positions as well as the interior batteries, bore down on the main world, Edessa following the five groups assigned to that target.

"Detection from fifth planet, Admiral."

"Group six. Hit fifth planet."

"Hyperwave traffic."

"Can we translate?"

"Coded. We'll try to break it."

"See what you can do."

"Twenty ships coming around fifth planet."

"Group two, you've got company."

"We see them."

The twenty slaver gunships, small, torpedo shaped craft, broke into five four-ship teams and moved to close with the approaching Golonidans. The heavy cruiser Axe turned and fired its top turret into one group removing all four of its ships with one shot. The remaining slavers turned to attack the cruiser, hoping for a lucky blast through a gap in the shielding.

Admiral Richter watched and grinned. "They never learn, do they?"

"No sir."

As the slaver ships swarmed around the heavy cruiser, its shields not showing any gaps even as it fired, the destroyers and gunships of the second group raked the fifth planet of the Edessa system. A tremendous flash from that world, at twenty-five degrees north of horizon, indicated that if any slaver ships survived the encounter, they would have to land somewhere else.

But none of the twenty slaver ships survived. Within ten seconds of their turning maneuver, ten of the remaining slavers were destroyed by the forward battery of the Axe and the last six were picked off by the turrets as they flew into the line of fire. The Axe turned to the fifth planet and ranged its forward battery on the main population center of the planet. That was gone in a matter of seconds.

"They won't try to kill our margrave again!" came a shout over the hperwave.

"Celebrate later, gentlemen," Richter spoke into the open transmitter.

The first group was embroiled in a running fight with fifty gunships around the second planet. These slavers were led by a better officer, because they were doing their best to avoid contact with the Heavy Cruiser Trident. In doing so, they left the surface of the planet open to the fire from the Trident's guns. A number of bright flares on the surface of the planet and on the skin of the Trident were indications of a running fight between the cruiser and some large surface batteries.

"Pilot, move us around the Trident."

The Exterminator turned forty-two degrees lateral and five degrees vertical to point its own main, forward battery at the the second planet.

"Blasters level two."

"Level two."

"Wait until Trident is clear."

The Trident was in a tight orbit and soon was on the other side of the second planet.

"Fire."

A burst of light from the front of the Exterminator was answered in thirty seconds by a huge explosion on the surface of the second planet, which sent debris flying almost to orbital velocity. There remained a crater, at least ten miles in diameter and a mile deep. The blast itself was nowhere near the point of origin of the return fire, but the shock wave would create earthquakes rendering any defensive position inoperable.

"I said level two, gunner."

"It was, Admiral."

"Those new blasters are better than I thought they'd be. I wonder what a level ten would do?"

"Edessa'll be in range in a minute. Want to try?"

He chuckled. "No, the Margrave wants to follow the rules, for now."

The Axe came around the planet and fired a few more blasts at the ground before joining the fray with the slaver ships. The slavers, seeing that the Axe was coming as well as the battleship, broke off and ran for Edessa.

The three large moons of Edessa were sprouting new craters as the five attacking groups moved in circle the planet. Small points of light indicated exploding satellites and a larger blast took out what appeared to be a liner of some sort. The battle computers of the Exterminator showed the three remaining outer groups engaging small forces, but nothing of significance. The captain of the Cruiser Mace appeared on the hyperwave.

"Admiral, there's nothing worth killing out here. Can we join the fun?"

"Not this time. I don't want any surprises coming out of hyperspace."

A flash came from one of the attacking groups off Edessa.

"Ground battery got a destroyer, Admiral."

"Edessa groups. Watch your horizon. Don't let those ground stations pick you off."

"Thirty ships off horizon."

"You've got company coming."

"We see 'em!"

Battle group one did a turning maneuver and charged towards the defenders. They arranged themselves into a spinning cone formation with the Heavy Cruiser Bowie Knife opposite. It was a standard formation, designed to trap the enemy between the small ships and the cruiser while not exposing the smaller ships to the fire from the cruiser. The greatest danger in a space battle lay in the range of the weapons, a heavy cannon having a range of ten light-minutes. Avoiding being shot down by friendly fire was constantly a concern.

Bursts of light appeared all over the intervening space between the defending ships and the battle group. As that space grew smaller, the light became coalesced into a continuous glow of blast and counter blast, through which only the fleetingest forms of space-craft could be seen, swirling in a melee. The ground batteries, firing at anything in range, were taking a heavier toll of their own craft than the attackers.

One officer on the bridge of the Exterminator laughed slightly. "Admiral, their ship identification is even worse than ours."

The Admiral laughed as well. Any relief from tension was welcome. "The Margrave will be happy to hear that. He's been concerned."

"Enemy coming for us."

A wide grin spread across Rictor's face. This was what he had been waiting for. "Good. How many?"

"Close to fifty."

"Excellent! Blasters, level one."

"One, sir?"

"I don't want any stray bolts taking out our own ships."

"Level one it is, sir."

"Up thirty-one, starboard seventeen."

"Forward battery ready, sir."

"Fire as they come in range."

Starbursts filled the sky as the defenders split into ten groups of five, their tight formations designed to allow them to mass fire on small point of the battleship, thus to may, with luck, pierce the defensive field. Luck was not with them and, as the guns of the battleship found them, paradise was not denied them. In thirty seconds, very long seconds, the engagement was over and three surviving slavers ran into hyperspace.

Ricter stood on his bridge and then went to sit in his chair of authority on a small platform overlooking the floor of the bridge. "Groups one to three, start hitting the planet."

The three battle groups began to descend from orbit to fly low over the surface. The Margrave's orders had been specific. "Destroy everything not on the surface of the planet." He had not said how far off the surface. Aircraft, civilian (according to Golonidan tactical doctrine, especially civilian) and military, even a transport being floated into a hanger, were fair game and exploded with the satisfying bangs that only come when something is blown up inside an atmosphere.

"I hope they're getting some good video of this," Ricter told his first officer. "The Margrave'll wish he'd been along for the fun."

"Admiral!" screamed the hyperwave.

A second of consternation, then recognition. "What is it Trident?"

"You'll never guess what just popped out of hyperspace."

"This is no time for games."

"A slaving expedition. Thirty gunships and a freighter."

"Groups seven and eight. Did you hear that?"

"We did."

"Get them. Standard procedure."

At that point, a large bang shook the Exterminator. "Ground battery, sir."

Ricter shook his head. Well, no risk, no joy. "Thought we were below their horizon. Any damage?"

"Small surface burn at aft quarter. Nothing serious."

"Evasion pattern."

A blast of light ripped past the port bow.

"They seem angry with us."

"Hardly blame them. Group one, there's at least one ground battery near our horizon. Take it out for us."

"It'll be on the surface, Admiral."

"I don't think the Margrave'll be too upset if we bring the ships back."

"It's dead."

"Thank you."

"Good thing this is a slaver world, Admiral. Those grumps at the next Conclave'll be furious."

"If there is another Conclave."

"Admiral, this is Bowie Knife."

"Well?"

"We took out twenty gunships before the rest ran into hyperspace. We've got the freighter disabled and on traction. We'll be boarding it in five minutes."

"Good. Any losses?"

"Minor damage to a couple of destroyers and a gunship, nothing serious."

"Good, very good. The Margrave will be pleased."

One at a time, the groups over the surface completed their runs and returned to high orbit. Parts of the surface, visible through the clouds at the beginning of the attack were now covered with thick smoke. A few stray shots had obviously touched the ground.

"Bowie Knife. What about that freighter? It's almost time to leave."

A smiling captain appeared in the hyperwave viewer screen. "Good news. We got three hundred slaves, all intact. And a pile of rugs."

"Rugs, Captain?"

"Rugs, Admiral."

"Excellent. Are the slaves happy?"

"They don't know whether to be ecstatic or terrified. None of them have ever been in space before, much less in a space battle."

"Well, take them home with you. The Margrave'll send them back where they belong."

"All groups reporting in, Admiral."

"Good. We jump home in two minutes, mark."

The sky over Edessa cleared.

VI

Ten days of waiting were nothing new to the Margrave. The first couple had passed quickly and happily, the Lady Margot proving to be a more charming guest than anyone had expected. Even Aunt Theresa had been won over and when she departed on the cruiser for Morgoth, the Margrave had stood at the space-port until the ship was out of atmosphere, to the worry of Goth, who remembered the last time the Margrave had acted that way, and the jealousy of Elise. But then there was work to be done.

Count Rath had arrived with gifts and messages from the High King and his more powerful supporters. The Margrave had graciously accepted both and assured the Count that even though Prince Brian was his cousin, (the Margrave's mother was the Old Prince's sister) he had no intention of joining Brian in a battle that the Margrave viewed as being suicidal as well as stupid.

Count Rath had been surprised at this answer, and the Margrave had explained "You've fought in space like I have. Think of fifteen thousand ships, all swarming around shooting at each other. I'll be amazed if a thousand ships survive and those'll be the ones whose pilots have enough brains to run into hyperspace when the battle starts. This idea is madness and the High King, with all due respect, must be getting senile to have agreed to it."

Hearing this, the Count played with the buttons on his jacket and mumbled something about not wanting to risk troops in a land battle.

The Margrave laughed. "I'm not exactly careless of the lives of my men either, but I can replace ground fighters a hell of a lot faster than I can ships and they're a lot less expensive. My battleships don't grow on trees."

It was a hard argument to counter, but the Count tried. "And the slavers, don't you want to get at them?"

The Margrave tried equally hard not to laugh in the Count's face. Rath was notorious for his temper, though this time he at least had left the armor back in his ship. "I'll tell you a secret, Count. As we speak, I have fleet on its way to tangle with slavers."

"But the truce!"

"In this case, the rules of truce do not apply. Its a retaliatory strike. Of course, I have to ask you not to say anything to anyone until you hear that it's occurred."

"Your secrets are safe with me, they always are. But there may be hell to pay in the next Conclave. Especially if your crazy cousin wins."

"Another secret, Count. I don't think that there will be another Conclave after this battle you have planned. I think my cousin and the High King have figured out a way to kill the Confederation."

"I don't understand?"

"I think the Centuries of Madness are coming back."

"You're not serious!"

"Very, and for me that's something rare. I think that the human worlds are trying to commit suicide and this is just another knot in the noose."

Rath shook his head and sat in the offered chair, facing the holograph. "I really don't understand this, John."

The Margrave punched a code and a display map of the human worlds appeared in the center of his office. "This is the extent of the original Terran Empire, before Earth withdrew its control."

"Got run out, you mean."

"No, that's what the textbooks say, but the old records make it clear that the Earthmen simply got tired of the trouble of running an empire and just announced that it was going to be every colony for itself."

"Nice of them."

"We don't know a whole lot about Earth, except that our ancestors came from there and it's still floating around its sun, very old and incredibly powerful."

"Go on."

"This is the extent of the human worlds after the Centuries of Madness ended and the Confederation was founded."

"So it's smaller. The way they were blowing each other up, "I'm not surprised."

"You're not supposed to be. But look at this. This is the space covered by known human worlds now."

Count Rath stared at the hologram for a second and then said quietly, "Ye Gods!"

"Human space now is less than fifty per cent of what it was at the end of the Terran Empire and it's shrinking. The Confederation has slowed the shrinking, but it's still going on."

"And where is this leading?"

"Back to Earth. Literally. In a couple millenium, Earth may very well be the only human world left. Just like at the beginnings of space flight."

Count Rath slumped in his chair. "Why all this about Earth. I thought it had blown itself up ages ago, or died of old age or something."

"That's what we're supposed to think. Have you ever heard of Moloch Paphnutius?"

"The Wilusian war chief? Of course."

"I was reading his biography. It seems that he went to earth."

"So?"

"He was a great fighter, right? They called him the slayer of worlds and the killer of dreams. During the Centuries of Madness, Wilusia was the most powerful system and that was due to the work of Moloch Paphnutius. He killed because he enjoyed killing. To him, humans were prey."

"So the legends have it."

"The legends don't tell the whole story. He was also a something of an idealist. A great believer in human freedom and most those he killed were people who tried to take that away. And he did like to fight. No question about that. But anyway, after he had been virtual dictator of Wilusia, and I know there's a contradiction in there somewhere, he more or less retired and went into space. Four years later he returned, started up the practice of Elvis-worship which had died out ages before and moved into a hut in the mountains to spend the last years of his life meditating."

"What happened?"

"He found Earth, or rather he went to Earth. It's location has never been a secret, just far."

"And what he saw affected him that much?"

"That, and what they apparently taught him."

"So?"

"A hundred years after Moloch Paphnutius died, the good folk of Wilusia decided that Earth had somehow corrupted the mind of their great leader, so they tried to take revenge. A fleet, and they had big fleets in those days, was sent to Earth for the express purpose of wiping the place out. Four thousand ships, heavy ships, battleships and cruisers, went off on the crusade and none of them came back. Wilusia never recovered."

"And? I know you're trying to get somewhere with this tale."

"Do you know what Wilusia is called now?"

"Of course not!"

"Kanden."

"Kanden?" The shock was genuine. "You mean to tell me that those hay-burning scumballs are the descendants of the toughest fighters in human history?"

"Well, let's not give the old Wilusians that much credit. But yes. And there's more. Earth has not abandoned its old colonies like we thought."

"Huh?"

"The library on Kanden is something of a transit point for them. Just how they get there is a mystery. They don't use ships."

Count Rath looked the Margrave directly in the eyes, "And how do you know this?"

"My commander on Kanden has met them."

"And how did your commander know they were from Earth?"

"They showed him some things that we don't know how to do. And they have very strange eyes. That's why they always wear sun glasses."

"Strange? In what way?"

"The color. It's a weird shade of green, unlike anything any of us have ever seen. And they, well, glow."

"Special evolution?"

"Undoubtedly. They've played around with genetics on earth from before space flight."

"And what does this have to do with the present crisis?"

"I'm not sure. But my intelligence people say there's a lot of unusual people appearing on Kanden. I think Old Earth wants something. What, I have no idea."

"Pleasant thought. But we still have a war on our hands. And we would like you to join us."

"Sorry, Count. Much as I like a good time, I think Golonidan policy is going to be our traditional armed neutrality. In fact, I've ordered warships to accompany our merchant vessels."

"Now John, you know the High King won't..."

"I don't think he will, but emotions tend to run high and I have to tell you the same thing I'll tell Baron Surbo when he comes, which will probably be right after you leave."

"Diplomacy!"

"For a diplomat you seem to dislike the word."

"I'm a fighter. I got stuck with this job because no one else would take it."

"In other words, you missed the staff meeting and got volunteered."

"Exactly."

"Well, enough business. I've ordered a dinner in your honor for tonight."

The Count began to shift in his chair. "Now that isn't necessary. I have to get going to my next system tomorrow. Early tomorrow. I have to get my sleep."

"Nonsense. You're an honored guest. You can sleep on your ship."

"And I just had my uniforms cleaned," thought the Count.

Recovering from the party took another couple of days and then there was just waiting and looking at intelligence reports and answering the piles of petitions, the usual business of Margravey. It came as a relief, that moment in the war room of the residence, when the Margrave and his staff listened to the hyperwave traffic from the Edessa system.

Cheers and laughter were still echoing through the residence as the Margrave made his way back to the relative quiet of his office. And it was only a matter of minutes after the Fourth Fleet was back in hyperspace that a tone indicated that Admiral Richter was contacting his Margrave.

"Yes, Richter. How was it?"

"A sporting shoot, Margrave. We blew the hell out of them. Right down to a few inches off the surface, just as you ordered."

"Good. Now the bad part. Losses."

"Two gunships and a destroyer."

"Not bad. Could have been a lot worse."

"And I have real good news."

"We caught it. How many slaves were on that freighter?"

"Three hundred. They're coming back on the Bowie Knife."

"That is good news. Glad you didn't have any marines."

"Be a little crowded, but we'd manage."

"Thank you, Admiral. Safe trip home."

With a sigh of relief, the Margrave settled back into his chair. Three small ships. Well, it could have been a lot worse. All in all, it was a good day's work. And that feeling of satisfaction was hardly disturbed at all by Goth, showing uncharacteristic shock on the intercom telling him the Prince of Tremulon was on the hyperwave and not at all pleased.

"And what does my dear and noble cousin want?"

"He didn't say, but that's Brian. Always was a little snot."

A chuckle escaped the Margrave. "Have you been talking to my mother again?"

"Hell, Margrave, no one can stand the bastard."

"That's true. Well, put him on."

The form of Prince Brian of Tremulon floated angrily in the center of the office. He was a squat man, even shorter than the Margrave, with a hairline that was receding fifty years too early. And, like Goth had said, he was not pleased.

The Margrave sat up in his chair and, trying very hard not to laugh, looked into the camera set so that by looking at the holographic projection, he would be staring straight into it, thus creating a nice illusion that he and the Prince were talking to each other in the same room. "Dear and Noble cousin, what causes this honor?"

Brian almost sputtered "Don't dear and noble cousin me, you bloodthirsty baboon."

"Cousin, if I'm a baboon, what does that make you? I suggest that you modify your statement."

"You've done some rotten, vicious and underhanded things, John, but this one is the worst. I thought you were neutral."

The Margrave shook his head. That was not the comment he was expecting. "Of course I am. What would make you think otherwise?"

Brian took several deep breaths, obviously to keep from shouting, and said "Then why did your ships try to kill Baron Surbo?"

"Moi?"

"Don't 'moi?' me you madman! Baron Surbo wasn't on Edessa for ten minutes when your ships blew the hell out of the place and came down specifically to blast his transport while it was being floated into a hanger."

And with that outburst, the Margrave could no longer control himself. It was all too funny, him, of all people, being accused of double dealing. Even if it often was true, reasons of state being what they were.

"And stop laughing!"

"I'm trying! Is the Baron all right?"

"Why should you care? But yes, except for a new nervous tick in his left nostril and a distinct lack of desire to show his face in daylight, yes he is all right, no thanks to you!"

"Brian. Let me assure you, most wholeheartedly, that the Baron was in the wrong place in the wrong time. If I had know he was there, I would have delayed my attack until he left."

Now it was Brian's turn to look puzzled, something which may have annoyed him even more than the potential loss of his chief diplomat. "I take it you expect me to believe that."

"I usually expect people, even you cousin, to believe the truth. Baron Surbo, who is a valued friend and has, let me assure you, kept my battleships out of your system a few

times, was not the target. He happened to have the misfortune to land just before my fourth fleet carried out a retaliatory strike against Baron Tomas, who tried to kill me."

"He tried to what?"

"Do you mean you haven't heard?"

"Of course not. If I knew that, I wouldn't let Surbo within a parsec of that system."

"I find it difficult to believe that you are suddenly solicitous of my welfare, cousin. After all, if I die, you're next in line until I produce an heir."

"And the same is true of me. And I know well enough that your forces would violate every rule of the Confederacy rather than see me as their Margrave."

The Margrave thought "He's actually using his brain for once. This is dangerous." And then spoke "True, very, very true. But apparently your new friends may have thought otherwise."

"John, just because I need them does not mean that I like them. And what are you getting at. What attempt to kill you?"

"Tomas of Edessa had one of his new gunships try to wait for me in my own system to blast me on my way planetside."

"You have the proof?"

"I can hyperfax the holograph records to you right now. The gunship was definitely Edessan and it probably assumed, not unreasonably, that my cruiser would only come in with meteor shields. The crew, in their home system and tired of space, would be a bit lax, just lax enough for the gunship to put a blast into the fusion system and then hyperspace out before anyone had time to recover from the sight me becoming a pile of loose quarks. Not a bad plan, actually. I considered doing it to you, once."

"Now, cousin..."

"Now who's 'now cousining'? I'm sorry about Surbo. I'd be very unhappy if anything happened to him. But Brian, reign in your friends, or you won't have any friends left to reign in."

"I'm willing to make a deal, cousin."

"That, for some reason, does not surprise me."

"You don't like slavers."

"As is well known. And I find it difficult to be tolerant of people (and I use the term loosely indeed, cousin) who try to kill me. I consider it to be very bad manners."

"Having sat through one of your state dinners, I will reserve judgement on the comment about manners. But listen. If you join me, family ties and all, I'll dump the slavers and let you have them, on a platter."

"Sorry cousin. You know my opinion of this madness. I told Surbo, I told Rath and I'm telling you. You're throwing away human civilization for a plastic crown and a meaningless title."

"The title, cousin, does not have to be meaningless."

"I have a serious suspicion that I know what you mean by that, and it won't work. Have you ever fought a space battle?"

"I'm not like you. I don't enjoy fighting."

The Margrave assumed a lecturing posture before the camera. "That's beside the point. Then you don't know what happens. Let's say that you have about 7500 ships going in, which is about what you expect to have. And you can reasonably expect the High King to have about the same number. There is no way you or the High King can efficiently command that many ships. Oh, you may have some good plans going in, but once everyone starts shooting at everyone else, it becomes very difficult to keep some kind of tactical judgement. Within the first three minutes, there will be a complete breakdown of communications on both sides and it'll be every ship for itself. In addition to that, that much shooting makes it inevitable that friendly fire will take a large toll on each side. The smart captains will run into hyperspace before they get blasted. But not many'll be that smart. The winner, or rather the survivor, will be lucky to have a thousand ships left after the battle and that is not enough to enforce anything."

"I wasn't necessarily talking about force, cousin."

"Force, cousin, is all that matters. If you have it, you can do anything, with the will. Without it, nothing else counts."

"There's always reason, persuasion..."

"Which only works when the sheep are willing to be sheared. No, cousin, I prefer to knock people down, kick them a couple of times and then negotiate. It works better."

The conversation ended and Goth came into the office to find his Margrave doubled with laughter over the desk.

"Margrave? Are you all right?"

"Would you believe it if I told you that my cousin was trying talk to me about the virtues of reason?"

"No."

"It's true. His police reason with electric nerve prods and he talks to me about a gentle government ruled by reason and persuasion."

"He has either nerve or a serious mental problem, do you know which?"

"I hope, if it's a mental problem, that it's not hereditary. I don't want to end up like mother."

"Sorry, Margrave. Forgot about that."

"I'd like to."

VII

The discussion was then interrupted by a loud signal from the intercom and an excited junior officer shouting "System penetration off Kanden!"

The Margrave jumped out of his seat, leaped over the desk, something he had not done in a couple of years and ran down the hall to the War Room, followed by a much slower Goth, who was finally beginning to feel the effects of his hundred-plus years. As the Margrave turned into the room, grabbing the side of the door-frame to spin himself in without falling from inertia, he looked up at the holographic map and asked, much louder than his dignity would permit under normal circumstances "When?"

"Picked up twenty seconds ago. Depending on where they came out of hyper, could have been in system anywhere from ten minutes to three hours."

"Put the fifth fleet on alert."

"Never get there in time."

"Retaliation, if necessary."

"I think that's what this may be about."

"Not unless someone was expecting us to attack Edessa. They had to leave a few days ago at best."

"Well, lets worry about that later. How many enemy?"

"Thirty slavers, ten destroyers, twenty gunships."

"Freighters?"

"None."

Goth stood looking at the map as the points of light converged to battle. "The freighter is probably hidden. The gunships would engage and draw off, possibly destroy our ships and then the freighter is brought in to pick up the loot."

"Makes sense. Open com unit?"

"Opened. No traffic."

"Margrave," Goth spoke quietly, "General Micheal probably has a preset plan of defense. The slavers will probably be as upset about not hearing from him as you are."

General Micheal had been placed in command of the reinforcements sent to Kanden.

"Possibly. Are they identified as slavers?"

"Visual from Kanden."

The viewers and combat computers on the flagship were connected by coded hyperwave to the war room, so that what they knew, the Margrave and his staff knew. It was a useful system, as long as no one broke the code. The cruiser screens showed a slaver destroyer, surrounded by group of smaller ships moving in on its upper port side in a tight circle. The cruiser was backing away from them to give the gunnery computers just a little more time and, as always, there was the surprise flash and the attacking group disappeared.

"Goth?"

"Margrave?"

"Would you say a few hundred Kanden slaves are worth the loss of one ship?"

"Ours or theirs?"

"Either."

"Of course not!"

"We guard Kanden because of the Library, and other things, right?"

"Right."

"So if the slavers are attacking our ships there, and risking a retaliatory strike if they win, they must be after the Library."

"Or us."

The talk stopped as the battle board showed a group of slaver ships about to engage a combat team of Golonidan gunships. A simulation provided an approximate holographic view of the battle as it would be seen from just outside the perimeter of the action. It was, of course, the usual swarming melee firing and maneuver as the slavers attempted to hold the Golonidans in their sights while avoiding becoming targets, intentional or otherwise, themselves. The craft themselves were about equal in performance, with the Golonidans having a slight advantage in the power of their guns, and better computers. But the slavers were good pilots as well and this time had the advantage of being the attackers. The Golonidans, however, had better training.

But were it not for the presence of the cruiser, the issue would have been in serious doubt.

General Micheal had made his plans with the cruiser as the centerpiece. The defending Golonidan gunships slipped and ran, turned and engaged again, deftly and gradually bringing the attackers under the guns of the cruiser. The slavers, occupied by the stress of combat and lacking a unified command outside the battle to give them instructions, fell, unit by unit, into the trap. Five attacking units flew, one after another, into the blast-beams of the cruiser.

"Now we see why they don't use the hyperwave," Goth said turning to the Margrave.

"Brilliant," was the response. "The slavers, even if they can decode the traffic, have no idea what to expect if there's no traffic to decode."

"I think they've had enough."

And the slaver lights on the battle board began to wink out as the attackers ran into hyperspace.

"What were our losses?"

"Five gunships."

"Too many for an operation like that. I want a tactical reassessment."

Goth felt his eyes widen. "I thought you just said the tactic was brilliant."

"It is. It's also just a bit costly. We shouldn't have lost any ships."

"Reality does intrude, sometimes."

"Maybe. But I still want those losses cut. Maybe the training needs to be intensified."

"Possibly. We'll look at it."

"Look closely, gentlemen. In a couple of months we'll need every ship and man we have."

And with that, the Margrave left the war room and stalked back to his office. He entered to see a pile of petitions had been deposited in his absence. Shaking his head, he took them off the desk and piled them, less than neatly, in the corner of the office, behind an extra chair. The people were going to have to be a little patient. With a growl, he picked up a light wastebasket and threw it across the room. That was what the wastebasket was for, relieving the Margravian temper. One time, he had kicked it, causing it to bounce off one wall and out the door, nearly braining Goth who had been walking by at the time.

"Five ships! Fifteen men!" he kept thinking. "We can get nibbled to death before the war even starts."

He turned to the intercom, "Goth!"

"You thundered?" came the reply.

"Get in here!"

Goth was used to these tantrums. He moved a little more quickly than usual, but no one who knew either him, or the Margrave, would say it was out of fear. He came in to find the office furniture still in one piece, which was a good sign. "I take it you're not happy with the battle."

"I'm worried."

"Why?"

"Do you think Brian is smart enough to sacrifice his slavers to cut down our force?"

"You've lost me."

"My cousin has delusions of grandeur. It's a common failing among planetary rulers, especially with our bloodline. He wants more than that plastic crown. He wants to be emperor."

"Impossible."

"Possible."

"How?"

"By having the only large fighting force left after the battle off Cadwallader."

Goth nodded and plumped himself into the chair across the room, as the Margrave sat behind his desk. "That would mean eliminating the neutrals."

"Exactly."

"Can he?"

"Yes. It would be costly, but yes."

"Then the question becomes 'can he afford to?'"

"I don't know. I want a strategic assessment of the losses Brian can sustain and still expect to beat the King."

"The Professor will bless you to his dying day."

"Which may be closer for all of us if he's wrong. So have him try to think like Brian for once."

"Of course."

"I know it's not easy, but this time he has to."

"I'm sure he'll try his best."

"I'm sure as well. But seriously, Brian is power mad. That will blind him to certain risks. I want that taken into account. He'll be willing to accept a higher level of loss than we would."

"He has more to lose. This battle is a one shot deal for him. He loses this, he loses everything."

"Even if he wins."

"Depends on his losses."

Goth left the office and the Margrave put a tiny disk into a slot on his desk. The original plan of the Morgoth Wheel appeared on floating before him, rotating. The Margrave rose and walked over to the projection and stood staring at it for a long time.

His mind ran on overdrive, wondering. "Why do I keep thinking that this Wheel is going to be the key to the matter. There's nothing on Morgoth worth fighting for. Even if the Wheel weren't there, I don't think that even the slavers would bother with the place."

He went back to the desk and punched a code. A display of the armament of the wheel appeared.

"Strange they never made this stuff secret. Probably wanted everyone to know how well armed the wheel was and that would keep them from attacking. An ancient trick."

A touch of a button and the display winked out of existence. Another code and the production figures for warcraft appeared in the screen on the desk. The Margrave pursed his lips and nodded. He would have no trouble replacing the lost ships, thus far. "I suppose I should be happy that the slavers don't have anything big. I'd hate to lose a battleship now."

A new thought came and a new display appeared. Ship blaster and shield production was still ahead of what would be needed for the new ships. Maybe there was time to create a new type of ship, between a cruiser and a destroyer. Time seemed to be the major problem. The battle was almost two months away.

A chime signalled that someone wanted to come in. The Margrave opened the door to see the smiling face of the Professor.

"What have you got for me?"

"Pretty good news. The question of how many ships Brian can afford to lose before he closes with the High King isn't that high."

"Is that what he really can't afford or how many he thinks he can afford?"

"Both. He'll have the same numbers we have."

"I hope he knows that."

"Brian is a little crazy, but not stupid. Nor is he suicidal, at least as far as we can tell."

"I'll grant that, with some reservations, for the moment."

"According to our figures, he cannot lose more than one hundred ten more ships before he compromises his chances off Cadwallader."

"Then why did the slavers attack our ships off Kanden?"

"Retaliation for the raid on Edessa was unlikely. They would have to have been in space almost after the Conclave. My guess is that there's something on Kanden they want bad enough to risk some ships for."

"Like what?"

"Information."

"The library is open to all. They just have to send in the request like we do."

"But that makes it a matter of record."

"So they land a small force, create general chaos for a small time, pick out the data and leave without anyone knowing what happened."

"If everyone is thinking they were hunting slaves, they would not be likely to check the data records to see if anyone was in them during the fighting."

"Could a planted agent do the same thing?"

"Of course."

"Send to Kanden. 'Check library records for any retrieval during the ship action.'"

"Do we proceed on that?"

"For the moment. I still think that the slavers would act without Brian knowing it. I doubt he expected them to try to assassinate me."

"Chaos here would help Brian."

"It might also kill him. Remember, Brian values his skin as highly as I do mine. Maybe even more."

"And the slavers could be playing a game of their own that we know nothing about."

"Likely."

"Unfortunately, it's a bit difficult to get accurate information from inside the slaver courts."

"Work on it." and a second later the display of the wheel reappeared floating between the two men. "What do you make of this?"

"The Morgoth Wheel."

"Of course."

"Original design, or updated?"

"Updated, at least from the time they mounted the guns."

"The origin of the wheel isn't really part of my job."

"No criticism intended. The wheel, however, was not originally a fighting base. That came later."

"Does that matter?"

"Your job is to get information and make a strategic assessment. Assess that design."

"Simple. The wheel configuration is fine for an orbital base but doesn't make a lot of sense from a defense standpoint."

"I agree. It takes more guns to cover the same area than a sphere."

The gunnery display appeared.

"Now this."

"I see three possible gaps. But, more importantly, why was this in the Kanden library?"

"I've just been thinking the same thing. The position and number of the guns is not something you just tell anyone."

"Two possibilities come to mind. There are two styles of misdirection. The first is that you mislead an opponent into thinking that you are stronger than you really are, thus to deter attack. The weakness of that lies in the possibility that he will attack anyway, and in doing so prepare his attack to defeat what he feels will be much stronger force. If that occurs, disaster is inevitable, provided the skills on each side are equal.

The second is the method we have always favored, namely to appear much weaker than we really are. For example, no one really knows just how many ships, including battleships, we have."

"I'm not sure of that myself."

"But you, at least, can find out. We've worked very hard over the years to make sure that such information is always inaccurate. And we cross-check to make sure that our possible enemies, including Brian, have the wrong numbers."

"But they still think of us as being too strong to attack."

"True, but if they should take the risk, we could surprise them."

"So where does that lead?"-

"The placing of the data on the wheel defenses is clearly for one of those purposes. The only problem is that we don't know which one."

"Sounds like something I read about Old Earth."

"I'm not sure I follow you, Margrave."

"It seems that about the time men first blasted into space, and that was how they did it, there were two powers contesting for control of the planet. One use the first method of misdirection, and for forty years made everyone think that it was too strong to be attacked. The other used the second, and fooled no one except themselves. but then the time came and the second power decided to match the pretended strength of the first. It began building so fast that the other power couldn't afford to keep up with it and had to give up the fight. Then they kissed and made up, joined forces and cleaned up on everyone else on the planet."

"Interesting, I think."

"The point is that there is a risk in either course. The question is which risk does the power taking it think is less severe."

The Professor nodded with understanding. "And once we know that, we know what the answer is."

"Precisely."

"It makes good sense."

"And there may be an easier way."

"What?"

"Look at the specs on those guns. Old protonic cannon. Good in their day, but tricky to maintain."

"I see that."

"They need to be fixed every now and then. Nothing spectacular and obvious, like new guns, but small stuff, diodes, microcircuits, that sort of thing. Start checking the shipping manifests to Morgoth for say, the last fifty years for those things. And look into the prospecti of our competitors for the same thing."

"That may take a few days."

"We have almost two months before we have to worry. But find out, as closely as possible, how well that wheel has been maintained."

"Margrave?"

"Yes?"

"This is very interesting, about the Wheel and all, but isn't it a bit away from the point?"

"It is, and that's why it keeps bothering me."

"I'll get on it."

"And Professor, keep track of any neutrals that might be joining either side in this nonsense."

"We already are. The only important ones that seem wavering are Circe and Tyrins."

"That figures. They've been shooting at each other for a thousand years. The moment one takes one side, the other will join the opposite."

VIII

Two weeks later Baron Surbo arrived, with drums and trumpets. The Margrave made a point of being at the landing field to meet him and congratulate him on his close escape from the Margrave's own warships, even though it meant having to go out into the hot, Golonidan summer sun wearing a starched uniform tunic.

The Baron, who was now more or less recovered from the experience, and equally warm, laughed. "I'm glad it was an accident. I'd hate to have that mad Admiral of yours gunning for me."

"We're all very proud of Rictor. He's my most efficient commander."

"With all due respect, I think I'll admire his efficiency from a somewhat greater distance in the future."

"Spoken like a true diplomat!"

Actually, the Margrave enjoyed both the company of Baron Surbo and the opportunity to visit his landing field without having to put up with crowds of cheering subjects. It was a long-standing policy on Golonida that visiting dignitaries were not given parades or giant welcomes. Even the High King had to put up with a small delegation when he came, which was increasingly rare as his age could no longer support the strain of either travel or Golonidan dining customs. Or, to put it plainly, the High King did not duck as fast as he used to.

It was a clear day, a quiet day. The sky of the field was bright blue-green and the smaller of the two moons was just visible overhead. The Baron had a new ship, an armed

transport, which was a surprise to the Margrave. He would have expected at least a cruiser. And the crew of the transport were all wearing armor and shield units, even though the Baron kept his shield off. The household guards were looking warily at the doors of the ship and across the field a heavily shielded vehicle with a four-blaster turret was trying very hard not to be noticed.

"I take it that things are getting more exciting, Baron."

"Oh, the armor. You would notice that."

"It's a little hard not to."

"Your cousin's idea. And not a bad one. There have been three deliberate attempts to kill me in the last month."

"I'm glad you said deliberate."

"I'm glad it wasn't. But anyway, the opposition has been spending a fortune on assassins and thus far they've had precious little return on their investment."

"If it's that risky, why just a transport. Why not a heavy cruiser?"

"Your cousin needs all his warships for defense against a surprise attack. And this transport is almost as well armed as a light cruiser."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. It was quite a job getting it ready on short notice, but after my last ship met with its accident..."

"Er, yes. Well, I'm glad you survived. My cousin was most upset."

"He upsets easily these days."

"I wonder why."

"You know why, Margrave."

"That's true, I do know why. But about this transport of yours. You say it was fitted quickly, just how quickly?"

"A week. I've never seen a ship-yard work so fast."

"Well, it is a piece of work. But could you persuade your crew to get rid of the armor while they're here? It's making my guards nervous."

"And your guards are notoriously trigger-happy."

"These days, yes."

"I'll see to it."

"Thank you. And here comes our flier. I hope you have lots of clean clothes, Baron. My chef is working on a bunch of new sauces."

The arrival of Baron Surbo also meant a relief from the strain at the Residence. Where Count Rath was all diplomacy and business, Baron Surbo was joy buzzers and exploding wine glasses. His laugh, deep and hearty, boomed down the hall from the throne room after the formal presentation and at the dinner that evening he threw tomatoes with the best of the Margrave's court.

You would almost think that peace had broken out.

After the banquet, the two retired to a small sitting room off the Margraves apartments, where they could talk like civilized men without worrying about flying vegetables or prying ears. "So tell me, Baron, does my cousin really think that he can control the human worlds if he should win this battle?" the Margrave asked over a snifter of Hermetian brandy.

The Baron swirled his brandy in the ancient manner and took a small sip. "I think he means what he says. And by the way, that little display you showed Rath when he was here is all over the human worlds by now. It shook him deeply."

"It was meant to."

"Circe has joined us."

The Margrave took a sip from his glass and nodded, "And Tiryns has joined the High King."

"How did you know that?"

"I didn't. But it's inconceivable that those two would fight on the same side in any conflict. Do you know how long they've been at war?"

"As long as your people and the slavers."

"Longer than that. Their feud goes back to the Centuries of Madness."

"You don't say."

"I do say. I found an old record of them fighting each other during the war between Wilusia and Athens."

The Baron set his glass on the table and sighed. "That is long. I'm amazed they haven't destroyed each other by now, Confederation or no Confederation."

"So am I. I have the sneaking suspicion that they haven't because if one of them was gone, the other wouldn't have anyone to hate."

"That's been known to happen. The legendary Master of the Evil Mind on Old Earth was said to be terribly distressed at the death of a neighbor because he lost the person he hated most in the world."

"But he was a legend."

"We think. What you told Rath about Earth is also all over the human worlds."

"Remind me to never tell anything to the Count again. A good diplomat is supposed to keep his mouth shut."

"As I said, he was shaken by it."

The Margrave took another sip of brandy, put the glass back down and looked up the stars decorating the ceiling. "You know, Baron, after this mess is over, I might take a long vacation and try to visit Old Earth."

"That's a long vacation, all right. What is it, five years one way by hyperdrive?"

"At least. That's why no one goes there. Too much trouble. And after the fall of Wilusia, no one wants to risk getting them mad."

"Understandable."

"Of course, Kanden isn't the only planet they visit."

"No?"

"They've got a large delegation on Macrinus, openly."

"Not many people go there either. That's almost two years by hyperspace."

"It's the edge of the human worlds. Beyond them, the non-humans. I'm told by my intelligence that Macrinus is the most heavily armed world in the human sphere."

"Not surprising, if they hold off the alien."

"But about my cousin. How is he holding up?"

"Well. He could use five more battleships, though. And he is your cousin."

The Margrave clasped his hands behind his head, looked back up at the ceiling, and sighed. "Family devotion is not a trait either of us is noted for. And there is still the little matter of the slavers."

"Without your ships, Brian needs everyone he can get."

"And with my ships he has the human worlds."

"To put it bluntly, yes. Your Admiral Rictor, and you have no idea how it pains me to say this after what he did to me on Edessa, would be just the man to command the Prince's force. The High King has no one to match him."

A small chuckle escaped the Margrave. "Count Rath is not exactly an idiot. I wouldn't want to fight him."

"Fear, Margrave?"

"Rational prudence, Baron. And I don't want to risk my ships or the lives of my men for something that has no value to me, my house, or my people."

"The Plastic Crown business again."

"Exactly."

"And nothing will persuade you."

"Much as I hate to grieve you, old friend, nothing. But enough of this business. Enjoy your stay. At least no one is going to try to assassinate you here."

The next morning a small freighter came in from Hermetia with a load of wine and several members of Aethelwold's family. The Margrave did not know what was annoying him more, the constant pressure of the coming struggle or the need to continually wear his dress uniforms, sit in the throne room and not get any work done.

As the two elderly women, Aethelwold's mother and Aunt, and three small children, the heirs to the Hermetian throne were presented, the Margrave looked down from his throne and had the terrible feeling that the entire human universe was going to be passing through Golonida and he was going to have to receive all of them.

"You are all most welcome. May I ask why you have come to us at this time?" The question was formal and he knew the answer, or thought he did.

Aethelwold's mother answered for them. "We have come seeking your protection, Margrave. Three days ago a slaver force raided our capital. They took a number of our people, destroyed much property and damaged the Residence itself before leaving. We have no warships, Margrave and our defenses are weak from not being used for so long."

The Margrave looked very dangerous. "Goth? Why wasn't I told of this?"

"There was no hyperwave from Hermetia, Margrave. And we have no ships on the planet at the moment."

"I understand." And to the Hermetians. "You are welcome to stay here as long as you wish. As far as Hermetia having no warships, lady, it has them now." Turning to his Minister of State, "I want a treaty of alliance drawn up between ourselves and Hermetia."

"Thank you, Margrave. Aethelwold will be grateful."

"My staff will escort you to the lounge until your quarters can be prepared. Now if you will excuse me, I have matters to attend to. Goth, I want you in my office. And have Baron Surbo join me there within the hour."

In the office, the hologram display showed the Hermetian system and the possible approaches used by the slavers. The Margrave stalked around it like a vulture eyeing its dinner, hands clasped behind him, chin jutting, every inch radiating purest fury. Goth stood near the door, embarrassed by a failure that his head knew was not his, but his heart saying otherwise.

"I know," the Margrave was saying. "I know that you didn't know it happened. The hyperwave station must have been one of the first targets. And I should have expected it as well. So we got caught with our buns showing. So what do we do now?"

"I know you're upset. So am I. But Margrave, we cannot afford to station fleets around all of our trading partners. That is exactly what the slavers would love, and your cousin, I expect."

The Margrave pursed his lips and nodded. "You're right, of course. But I can improve his ground defenses and put some cameras on the the moons. That way we can find out who staged the raid, if another one occurs."

"You expect a second one?"

"No, not really. But it will make us look involved and give our troops a chance to travel. I want Admiral Richter to detach two battle groups from his fleet and use them to escort the transports with our men. And send a couple of hospital ships. Tell them that as soon as they land to set up the hyperwave station and tell Aethelwold that we'll give him anything he needs to rebuild."

"Of course."

"And Goth, tell the Professor that I don't like surprises. We should have seen this one coming."

"I will."

"Now send in Surbo. He has some explaining to do."

Baron Surbo, already informed of the news, was expecting the Margrave to be a little upset. A full-blown tantrum was not what he expected.

"Baron!" the Margrave bellowed. "If you weren't an old friend your head would be on its way to my cousin."

"Now Margrave," Barons Surbo put on his best shocked diplomat face, "you know that I had no idea that this would happen."

"No, Baron, I don't know that. You were on Edessa. You've been visiting my cousin's new friends and I know you wash your ears."

"I assure you. This was as great a surprise to me as it was to you."

"I doubt that. So carry this message to my cousin and his allies. Any attack on Hermetia from now on will be considered the same as an attack on the surface of Golonida. Is that clear enough?"

"May I point out that that statement may be pushing the terms of the Confederation just a bit."

"Right now, I don't give a damn about the Confederation. I've just been saddled with the mother, aunt and children of Aethelwold of Hermetia and I'm amazed that his wife isn't here has well."

"She probably wanted to stay with him."

"I hope so. But tell my cousin this. If my ships encounter any slaver ship from now on, anywhere, they fire first and ask questions afterwards."

"Anywhere?"

"I don't care if it's under the guns of the Morgoth Wheel itself. I warned him to keep those scumballs under control. If he won't, then he may be missing some allies when he fights the High King."

The Baron took a deep breath and tried one more time. "John, do you honestly think that your cousin would try to drive you into the arms of the High King?"

And it worked. The Margrave opened his eyes to their fullest width and sat down. He was silent for many seconds and then said quietly "Baron, I believe you. My cousin may be as crazy as my mother, but he isn't stupid. It may be that his friends are following their own plans, at his and everyone else's expense. But my policy stands. From now on, it's open season on slavers."

"I understand."

"Then please forgive the ravings of an angry Margrave."

"Forgiven, and, as you always say, forgotten. But I think I'd better call home and tell Brian. I don't think he's heard."

"Please do."

And Baron Surbo left the office. As soon as he was well into the hall, the Margrave got Goth on the intercom.

"Cancel the orders to Richter. I've got a new idea."

"I expected that."

"I'm going to Hermetia."

"But Baron Surbo..."

"I think he has to make a quick trip somewhere."

In a matter of minutes, the Baron was back and the Margrave's suspicions were confirmed.

"I have to leave, today."

"I'll miss having someone to yell at, but I'm not surprised."

"Well, there's always Goth."

"Yes, that's true. By the way, I'm making Goth my heir until I have one. That way if anything happens to me, the succession is assured."

"Very wise."

"I'll see you to your ship. When are you taking off?"

"In two hours."

Three hours later, Baron Surbo was in hyperspace and the Margrave was on his throne, in front of several cameras and surrounded by his entire court.

"Know that this day, I, John 8, Margrave of the House of Golonida, do name my chief of staff Goth to be my lawful heir and regent, to reign in my name when I am not in contact with Golonida and to take the position of Margrave if I should die without direct issue. I instruct all of my subjects to obey him under those circumstances as you would me. Furthermore, this declaration shall take precedence over all conflicting claims."

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, takes care of Prince Brian."

IX

"I don't think this is wise, Margrave," Goth was saying as the Margrave looked at the hologram of the Hermetia system.

The Margrave sighed, nodded and walked from his desk to the hologram. "The things we have to do never are. But we do them anyway."

"There could be slaver ships still in the system."

"I'm going in the Star of Vengeance. I doubt they can damage it."

"You have to transfer to a cruiser to land."

"We've done combat transfers before."

"But never with the Margrave."

"I'm going."

"So go. But I don't want the Margrave job, so come back in one piece."

The Star of Vengeance was the flag of not only the Margrave, but the First Fleet as well. The Fourth, under Richter, was placed in orbit around Golonida in place of the First and the Star, as well as five battle groups, was detached for the three day trip to Hermetia, along with two troop-ships, four transports, two hospital ships and a freighter full of building supplies.

It was not a pleasant journey.

The crew of the Star had the feeling that they were travelling with a hungry lion. The Margrave was in a foul temper from the time they lifted orbit and it did not get any better. He paced the decks, bellowed at the officers and grumbled about the time it was taking. He also spent some time arranging the affairs of the ground troops he was going to leave behind.

"I want each man limited to three glasses of wine per day, with food. Any man exceeding that amount will be broken in rank and returned to Golonida for court martial."

General Trag, who would command that force, objected. "Isn't that just a bit severe?"

"What does Hermetia make?"

"Wine, liquor of all types."

"Do you want to command an army of drunks?"

That ended the argument.

The relief that went through the Star was obvious as it came time to leave hyperspace. Fighting slavers would be a joyous romp compared to living with the Margrave.

"We exit in one hour, Margrave," the captain reported.

"Finally! I want full battle stations through the fleet. And every man in combat armor."

Combat armor was almost never worn on a battleship.

"Armor sir?"

"For when I transfer to the Spear."

That, at least, made some sense.

The fleet left hyperspace an hour out of Hermetian orbit, the ships in combat formation, the five cruisers in a star pattern around the Star of Vengeance and the gunships and destroyers in conical formations around them. It was a defensive, rather than an offensive tactic designed to give greatest coverage to the Star and the Margrave during the transfer.

The shuttle for the transfer was a converted destroyer, with its hyperdrives replaced with shield generators and extra guns. The Star and the Spear came within 1/2000 of a light second and a box of eight destroyers moved to virtually touch the Star with the shields of four. The shuttle slid into the center of the box, which closed up so that the shields locked around the shuttle. The box then moved to the Spear and reversed the procedure, the shuttle docking at the landing bay of the cruiser.

The Margrave emerged into the Spear in full combat armor, made of reflective plastic with a hard breast and back plate, flexible arm and leg coverings and the combat helmet, with its radar comb. He had the reflective visor raised into the helmet, so his face could be seen, but otherwise, the Margrave looked as if he were a pirate, siezing an unfriendly vessel, rather than a man taking personal command of a cruiser in his own fleet.

But the armor was a necessity. A shield could not stop a direct hit from a blaster. It could deflect an angled or reflected shot, and stop debris with no trouble, but the armor could deflect most of the force that got through, as well as reflect visible light weapons. It could not stop a short range direct hit, but it increased survivability more than enough to justify the trouble of wearing it.

"Margrave on the Bridge!"

The doors irised open and the Margrave strode onto the command deck of the bridge, his helmet couched under his left arm. The entire crew stood at rigid attention and then went back to work with a wave of his right hand. "Captain."

"Yes, Margrave."

"Do you have any contact with the planet?"

"None, sir. They mustn't have their com units back in service yet."

"Possible. Keep your eyes open. Open com to Star."

"Open, sir."

"Trag."

"Trag here."

"This is your Margrave, but you probably guessed that. Are you picking anything up from the planet?"

"The usual internal com, nothing else. I don't think they've got hyperwave anymore."

"Try standard radio."

"Golonidan battleship Star of Vengeance to Hermetia control. Do you receive us?"

A crackly voice, barely understandable, came over the speakers. "This is Hermetia control, or what's left of it. Are you really Golonidan?"

The Margrave spoke to the com unit. "Transfer them to me, Trag." Then to Hermetia, "We are definitely Golonidan, Hermetia Control. This is the Margrave of Golonida aboard the heavy cruiser Spear. We..."

And from the sound of cheering or crying in the background, it was hard to be understood, so the Margrave stopped for a second.

"We would like some landing instructions."

"I hope you can land Margrave, our field is in terrible shape."

To the flight engineer, "Do we have a visual of the surface?"

"I think we might be close enough now."

"Let's see it."

And the viewer opened to a study in devastation. "Holy Elvis!" escaped from a junior officer in the back of the bridge.

"I see your problem, Hermetia. We'll have to make our own field. Can you direct us to an area outside the capital we can work from?"

"We're feeding the co-ordinates now."

"Make sure everyone is cleared from that sight. We'll be glazing a field."

"Understood."

"Is Duke Aethelwold all right?"

"He was wounded in the action, but he'll live."

"Inform him we're on our way."

To Trag, "We're transferring our landing co-ordinates to you. I want the troopships to come down with us, then the hospital ships and transports as soon as the area is secure."

"Understood. And Margrave."

"Yes,"

"Please be careful."

The Spear flew low over the capital city, Vinland and the extent of the damage was clear. The slanted rooves of the city were mostly blown off and the warehouses simply did not

exist any longer. Over the empty field a few miles outside the city, the Spear hovered and turned on its blasters at their lowest power and widest aperture. This ground up several feet deep of ground into a fine powder. Then the blasters were re-set to thermal and the powder turned to a field of glass, which cooled to a depth of several feet with the aid of a thermal absorber field generator dropped from the cruiser, capable of supporting the weight of the landing ships.

The first transport disgorged a number of small, one-man fighters designed for landing coverage while the cruiser and the other ships landed. The fighters swooped over the field and the surrounding area, providing top cover for the armored troops and vehicles pouring out of the cruiser and the transports. Moving in open order, the ground-fighters set up a perimeter around the landing field and only then did the Margrave emerge from the Spear. He was not happy about the wait, but there were times when the better part of valor was indeed discretion and this seemed to be one of them. He pulled on his helmet, lowered the reflective visor, opened the flap of his holster and put it backwards into the pistol belt so he could draw his blaster quickly. Only then did he walk down the landing ramp to the glazed field.

They were far enough out that the tops of the city buildings were just visible over the horizon, which would make the center of Vinland and the Residence approximately fifteen miles away. As the Margrave watched the city through his binoculars, the area around him was filled with activity as his men set up temporary communications units and began unloading the air and space defense equipment. A temporary building was erected and the Margrave sat at a table inside it while his fighters and troops made certain that the city itself was secure and free of slaver traps. Only then, after about four hours, did he summon the flier to take him into Vinland itself and to the Residence of Count Aethelwold.

He was about to board it when a alarm was raised from the fighters. A large group that had been seen walking out of the city before was getting perilously close to the landing area. It seemed that several thousand, if not more, Hermetians were about to descend upon the Margrave.

The ground fighters swarmed into position, trotting in neat, open groups to pre-assigned positions while tanks swung their multiple blaster turrets into position to cover the approaching mob. The Margrave himself, less disturbed than his officers, walked to the edge of the field, and pointed his glasses at the coming throng.

"You can calm down, gentlemen. I think the natives are friendly, unless, of course, you think they are going to beat us to death with flower stalks."

Four thousand armored troops laughed at the same time.

As they came closer, it became apparant that their numbers had been terribly underestimated. Well, that was understandable. They probably picked up people all along their line of march. At the head of the assemblage were a number of ornately

costumed men and women, holding what looked like framed pictures and a large, crystal sphere on top of a long pole.

"Margrave," a junior officer of the guards spoke nervously, "What are they carrying?"

The Margrave laughed. "Superstitious nonsense. Typical of agriculturalists everywhere. Those people in the silly clothes are the Archimandrite and his officiants. And the things they're carrying are ancient icons painted on black velvet and the round thing on the pole is the most famous and sacred relic on Hermetia. It's a Sequin of the True Jacket of Holy Elvis. How do you like being summoned by divine intervention?"

"It's a new experience. I was on Kanden a year ago and the natives didn't greet us at all, much less with this!"

To his men over the com unit. "It's a welcoming party, but don't let it go to your heads. It never lasts."

"Well, Margrave, they seem to like us at the moment."

"At the moment. And try not to laugh!"

The Margrave took off his helmet and recovered his blaster before the procession reached the field. The Archimandrite left the crowd and walked to the Margrave who bowed his head to the Archimandrite as reverently as he could without laughing himself. It was not good to offend one's friends.

The Archimandrite placed his hands on the Margrave's head and spoke loudly and pompously. "Holy Elvis, who grants all things to those who deserve his blessing, has answered our prayers. For six days we called upon him and on the sixth day you came. May the power of Great Elvis be upon you and yours."

"Praise Holy Elvis!" shouted the crowd.

At that, the throng of Hermetians swarmed onto the field, decking all of the Golonidan troops with strings of flowers and even putting flowers on the blast-cannon arrayed around the perimeter. The Golonidans, not used to being so welcomed, were a bit overwhelmed by the emotion and some of the officers even had to choke a tear back. But the sight of tanks covered with flowers like holiday floats was almost too much for the Margrave. He laughed with his soldiers and the welcoming mob and no one was the wiser about what he was laughing at.

Turning to the Archimandrite, the Margrave asked about Count Aethelwold. "I couldn't get much out of his family, which isn't surprising considering the state they were in."

"The Count is alive, but was seriously wounded in the fighting. A blaster took his left leg off."

"We can grow him a new one. And Lady Alice?"

"She is well, but has aged much this week."

"I'm going to the residence now. Would you do me a favor and help get this mob back to where they came from? I appreciate the welcome, but this field has to be kept secure."

"Of course."

"Thank you. We'll have plenty of time to celebrate once we start getting you rebuilt."

"Thank you."

The trip to the residence took only a matter of minutes, but it was enough time for the Margrave to get an even closer look at the utter mess that was the capital city of Hermetia. Whole blocks of buildings had been levelled by blaster fire and the residence itself had seen a lot of fighting. By the time the flier set down on the landing court of the Residence, the Margrave was in a deadly mood.

The flier landed in a space cleared of rubble, which seemed to be piled randomly all over the place. The robots and human servants were still busy cleaning up after six days. Parts of the walls were missing and much of what was left was heat-scoured, so the fighting at this point must have been pretty fierce.

Speechless with outrage, the Margrave climbed out of the flier and no sooner stood on the court when a cry came from the nearest door.

"John!"

Lady Alicia, the wife of Count Aethelwold, who was used to his womanizing and accepted it as part of the role of being the Countess, was not prepared for a war in her living room. But she had stayed behind to manage the rebuilding and prepare for a second attack, as best she could. She looked the part she had chosen, her elegant clothing, which John knew must have been peace offerings from the Count, was replaced by somewhat dirty coveralls and the Archimandrite was right in saying that she seemed to have aged, but she was still Alicia, the one who never failed to charm the Margrave, even when he was at his most uncharmable.

Like now.

"Countess!" It was the only word the Margrave could get out before she ran to him and grabbed him so hard that he almost lost his breathe, even with the breastplate.

"We heard you'd landed. Nimrod's been standing in the tower window with binoculars all day watchin you."

"Nimrod?"

"Our nephew. You haven't seen him in two years. He's only still fourteen, but he's the one who saved Aethelwold."

The Margrave looked down at the Countess and said nothing. So she continued.

"The slavers were running all through the Residence and Aethelwold set up a position in the throne room. The slavers shot their way in and Aethelwold was wounded in the fighting. They were almost able to kill him when Nimrod came out from behind a side door with a blaster in each hand like Moloch Paphnutius on Luxor and killed all of the slavers before they had a chance to fire a shot at him."

"Great Zeus! And you said he's only fourteen?"

"And never fired a blaster before in his life!"

"How many did he get?"

"Ten!"

"I was fifteen before I killed a man and that was an unarmed criminal my father had me execute so I could see a man die at close range. How is he?"

"Nimrod or the Count?"

"Nimrod?"

"It was pure instinct, or so I'm told."

"I can use some instinct like that in my army. I just hope he doesn't get to enjoying that sort of thing. He might start using your subjects for target practice."

"I don't think..."

"I'll have my psych team check him over anyway. There's probably some latent trauma at best."

"About the Count."

"I was going to ask. The Archimandrite told me his leg was shot off."

"Exactly. His spirits are, well, not good."

"Understandable. I'd feel pretty bad myself in the same circumstances."

"I keep telling him he did his best, but we aren't a fighting world. It's just that we never had to."

"I know. Can I see him?"

"He's waiting for you. We fixed up a small medical unit with what we had left, but it's not as good as any of us are used to."

"I've brought two hospital ships."

"And a battleship. I heard..."

"My flagship's in close orbit right now. You won't be attacked while I'm here. And I'm going to leave you some of the best ground defenses in the human worlds. Now where's the Count?"

They walked through a series of corridors that seemed almost endless. The internal transport system was gone the way of the hyperwave and most of the plumbing, a fact apparant from the smell coming from the back of the residence that had been turned into a temporary latrine area. The Margrave had such a terrible scowl that those who wanted to come up to him and thank him for coming were frightened of him. He did not notice them but kept thinking that this damage was nothing compared to what he was going to do to the slavers in retaliation. "I will exterminate them for this. But first I'll give them the inestimable pleasure of watching their children beg for death!"

By now Nimrod had come down from the tower and was at his uncle's bedside. As the Margrave walked down the final corridor he heard the young voice, cracking with coming manhood shout "He's here!"

Nimrod stood by the door as the Margrave entered. A tallish boy, still thin with red hair, he wore a dirty uniform and the Margrave noticed that there was a blaster shoved into the belt. It was only then that he saw that the Countess had one as well and there was a blast-rifle by the bed of the Count along with the box of an area shield.

"I come in peace, Count," the Margrave said, trying to lighten the gloom in the chamber.

The Count tried to pull himself up in the bed, but his wound made sitting virtually impossible. The Margrave went over to him and gently pushed him back down. "No need to rise for me friend."

The voice was choked. "We knew you'd come, John."

"I'm sorry it took me so long."

"Hyperdrive only goes at one speed. You're the one who's always saying that."

"And this is the hero?"

"The man who saved my life."

"Well done. My medical units are being unloaded now and I'll have them set up a decent hospital here. Nimrod, I want you to talk to some of my people. We need to know exactly what happened here and they can tell me what has to be done."

At that, the Countess escorted the boy out into the hall so the two rulers could be alone.

"I lied to the boy. I'm going to have him checked out by a psych team."

"Why?"

"There's a thin line between a hero and a psychopath. I want him on the hero side."

"Either way, if it weren't for him, the new Count would be on Golonida right now."

"I know. With the right training, you've got one hell of a fighting man there."

"We weren't fighters before."

"And I'm not going to say that I told you so."

"Thank you, again. I've been lying here wishing I could kick myself for turning down your offer of protection. I really didn't think we needed it. The slavers never came here before."

"Our worlds have been friends for centuries. That used to be protection enough. It will be again."

"Nothing will be the same again."

"I know. I saw that blaster the boy has."

"The blasters you gave me at the conclave. Alice has the other one. Nimrod was hiding in the small ante-room while we were fighting in the throne room. He broke the trophy case to get them. So I guess you did help me, after all."

This was getting too maudlin for the Margrave. "Wait until you see what I've brought. My engineers'll have the city rebuilt in a month. And this place, well the plumbing has to come first."

"The wind shifted again, didn't it?"

"Indeed it did."

"And we have to grow you a new leg. I can't let you have an unfair advantage at the next banquet."

"What unfair advantage?"

"You might use the hollow of an artificial limb to store extra vegetables."

A few minutes later, the Margrave was in the hall with the Countess. "He is in a bad way."

"He can't sleep, John. And when he does, he shouts orders and thrashes around in the bed."

"Shock."

"Possibly. Can your people help him?"

"I don't know. We never lose battles, and that's what's getting to him."

"But the slavers were driven off."

The Margrave shook his head. "No," he said gently, "They didn't want to stay. Look at it from their point of view. They're on this planet, doing what they do best, and one of my freighters comes in to buy wine. The captain of the freighter takes a hologram of the action and transmits over the hyperwave to me. I send a fleet immediately, not to Hermetia, but to the planet where the attackers came from. They timed the attack to when my ships weren't here and destroyed the hyperwave system with their opening shots. And I doubt that they left any of their bodies behind."

"That's true. We wondered why they went to so much trouble to gather their dead."

"What about the throne room?"

"Nimrod and a few surviving guards pulled the Count out of there and set up a new position down the hall, but the slavers never attacked it."

The Margrave pressed his lips together and looked around at the burns on the walls and the other battle damage. "Still, they probably left something behind, a blaster, a helmet, something that might tell us where they came from. Maybe one of your people took a picture while hiding."

"We can ask."

"Do so. And offer a reward for any captured items, like I mentioned."

X

The Margrave sat before the square communication console in the temporary command hut setting the code system. It had not been a good day. He was still furious at the destruction of Vinland and he was shaken by the condition of his friend. A few seconds later, he punched the code and the face of the duty officer appeared in the small screen. "Margrave."

"Yes, Lieutenant, it's me. Could you connect me with the Professor." It occurred to the Margrave that he had not used the Professor's name for so long that he had forgotten it.

"Yes, Margrave," the Professor looked out through the screen.

"I've got a problem. The slavers made damned sure that nothing to tell us where they're from was left behind."

"That does create a difficulty."

"I want some information ready before the battle off Cadwallader."

"Such as?"

"The location of every outplanet installation in all the slaver systems."

The Professor's eyebrows raised slightly, "All, Margrave?"

"All."

"As you wish. And while you're on the com, I assume this is coded?"

"It is, Professor."

"Good. There was an extract of data from the Kanden Library at exactly the time the slavers were attacking our ships."

"I expected there would be."

"It was damned hard to find, and the Kanden are not the most helpful librarians, but we finally discovered it."

"What was it?"

"The same data you asked for. The specifications of the Morgoth Wheel."

"Thank you."

The Margrave cut the com unit and rocked back in his chair. "Now why would slavers want data on the wheel? And why did I want it? They can't have the same hunches that I have, or can they?"

Nothing was making sense, and the Margrave knew it. He walked back out on the field and looked around. The Spear was back in orbit and the hospital ships had been moved into Vinland itself. By morning the Count would be growing a new left leg. The freighters were almost completely unloaded and would be on their way back to Golonida.

It could have been a lot worse.

The Margrave spent about an hour walking back and forth around the compound, checking matters here and there, looking in on tank crews and inspecting shield units. His men, at least, were in good spirits in spite of his limit on liquor. Well, they deserved to be. It was not often Golonidans were welcomed with flowers.

"They've attacked my friends!" thundered through his mind, over and over again.

The next morning came all too soon. It had been a hard night for sleeping. The bed in the command hut seemed to refuse to adjust itself properly and the Margrave did not feel rested from the little sleep he got. It had been years since he had bivouaced in the field and he seemed to remember that that time it was not as uncomfortable. This was different. He did not know why.

He rose from his cot, cleaned himself in the bathroom, one of the few working near the city, and put on a fatigue uniform, shield unit and pistol belt. He doubted that he would need either, but it would make General Trag happy to know that his Margrave was being cautious.

He went to breakfast and was greeted by a Colonel of his Guard. "Did you sleep well, sir?"

The Margrave shook his head. "Not really. How are the men?"

"Pretty good, but I don't think any of us had a good rest last night."

"Any news for me?"

"No, Margrave."

"That, at least, is something to be happy about."

"And the robots are working."

For the first time since arriving, the Margrave smiled with pleasure. "That is good news. Are they fixing the Residence plumbing?"

"As you ordered. But it does seem a reversal of the usual procedure."

Now the Margrave chuckled. "It is, but my poor nose can only stand so much. That's why I spent the night in the command hut, in spite of the fervent entreaties of my host."

"I hope they weren't too offended."

"They've got other worries. And so do I."

Breakfast over, it was back at the com unit, this time with Goth. "Well, oh great Regent, is everyone behaving himself?"

In the small screen, Goth could be clearly made out looking up at the ceiling. "Yes, Margrave, and why you gave the job to me is beyond anyone's imagination."

"Because you're the one person on GOLONIDA who doesn't want to be Margrave."

"I find your trust gratifying. By the way, the coup went over very nicely and your personal effects are on their way to Hermetia. I hope you enjoy your exile."

"Very funny. And I can use a good joke right now."

"Will a bad one do?"

"Anything."

"Okay. How many veterans of the New Akiowa War does it take to change a light bulb?"

"I don't know."

"Five. One to hold the bulb, two to turn the chair, one to sweep up the pieces of the bulb after the first one drops it and the last to change the diapers of the other four."

The war with New Akiowa was fought during the beginning of the Margrave's grandfather's reign. The present Margrave laughed. "That's good. Now to business. Do we have any more neutrals taking up sides?"

"You know about Circe and Tiryns. Hattilusa is joining the High King. We heard that yesterday and Count Rath is hoping that your sojourn on Hermetia will induce you to the same."

"He's doing his job, but Rath should know better. By the way, don't let me forget that I'm just a bit mad at him for screaming our conversation all over the human worlds."

"He's still shaken. He's taken to looking for Earthmen everywhere. He even suspected Colonel Smith just because he always wears sunglasses."

"Why is it when generals become diplomats they get paranoid?"

"I don't know. But how are things on Hermetia. The holograms looked terrible."

"Worse. The plumbing was destroyed in the Residence. The smell is unelvisly."

"I hear you got blessed by the Archimandrite himself."

"Complete with a Sequin from the True Jacket."

"You are in the odor of sanctity."

Laughter. "I wish it were the only odor around here. I'm beginning to have great respect for the ancient warriors of Earth who fought in mud holes with no plumbing for weeks on end."

"At least you can laugh about it."

"I have to. If I don't, I'll start blubbering like the Count."

"I heard he was wounded."

"In heart as well as body. He had to be rescued by his fourteen-year-old nephew."

"Poor man."

"And this place is a mess. The slavers weren't just looking for booty on this raid. They didn't even touch the wine cellars."

"That makes no sense at all."

"And they didn't take a lot of slaves either."

"A terror raid, pure and simple."

"I think so. I'm going to teach them what that word really means, but not just yet."

"I see."

"You probably do, but not on the hyperwave, even if it is coded."

"Well, nothing's happened here. The Count's family is settled in and his mother is drinking everything in sight. I think the Count planned this so we'd have to buy more booze from him."

"I wonder if my mother would like to do some entertaining."

"Margrave!" Goth's voice rose a full two octaves.

"Sorry, just a thought. And please don't shout at your Margrave. Not only is it bad manners, but he had a terrible night."

"Sorry. I forgot you slept in the hut."

"We've got the only working bathrooms around here. Anyway, have we heard anything from my cousin or the Baron?"

"The Baron was on the hyperwave, telling me that the Prince is quite displeased with his allies for this."

"They wouldn't be displeased enough to tell us who launched this raid, would they?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"A pity. It would save me a some trouble and ship time."

"And one of our convoys sighted a slaver freighter in the Gronik system. The slavers have one less freighter."

"Good for us. Now, I have work to do, so keep things running at home and don't let the Residence catch fire."

The Margrave touched some codes on the com system and the screen showed an aerial view from a hovering drone over Vinland. All over the city, robots were moving debris, shoving it into converters and putting up prefabricated buildings. The work on the residence was being done even faster, with walls being poured and form-locked by a large construction unit that had arrived during breakfast. The Margrave watched with some interest. He had never really had time to see construction before and he wondered how the Hermetians were going to like their new city.

The old one had been a model of pastoral elegance, with hand-built homes and commercial structures spread out around the Residence. The new one would not be quite so elegant, the robots could copy the style, but not the individual touches that made each building a unique work of art. Well, the natives could add that themselves once the work was done. It was the Residence that would see the real change.

The old palace was just that, a palace. It had no perimeter walls, little shielding and no gun emplacements. The new one was going to be a fortress, a true reflection of the lost innocence of this world.

The old building would be restored as best as possible, but around it would be a perimeter of wall, heavy shielding units and large gun positions, both anti-ship and ground cover. There would also be a new landing field in the city, designed with defense in mind as well as a new landing area in the Residence compound. Also, there would be a network of interior defenses inside the restored palace itself.

The Margrave hoped his old friend would not be too offended.

The flier was waiting for him at the edge of the landing area. The Margrave had a little trouble finding it because it had been sandwiched in between a couple of gunships. The controllers' hutmet was turning into a house of confusion and the Margrave had only stayed in a few minutes that morning to watch everything. His people were jamming what would normally fill the Herefall spaceport onto a glass field a tenth of its size. There was a continuous rotation going on between orbit and field as ships launched the day after the fleet left were coming in to unload their cargo and get out again to make room for more ships and more cargo. The Margrave felt a strange, unaccustomed warmth at all this activity.

"I didn't think we could do this sort of thing," he thought. Not since the Centuries of Madness had one planet put so much material into space to aid another. It was traditionally assumed that every world was on its own and if it got raided, then it had to rebuild as best it could. Besides, the planets that were most often on the receiving end of a bad strike were the ones that had made the most enemies and everyone was too busy enjoying the misfortune of a foe to lend much help. And shipping costs were never cheap.

The Margrave shuddered at the thought of his Chancellor of the Exchequer's face when he returned. This would probably rate an hour lecture on the need for more economy.

"Well," he said softly to himself as he picked his way around the field, "that's what he's paid for."

The flier took to the skies and the Margrave could see first hand the work that was already being done. It was one thing to look at a tiny viewer screen, it was quite another to see the scale of the some the rebuilding that was already in progress. Rebuilding the Hermetians, however, was going to take a little more doing and he new that there would be little thanks for it in the future. That was the reason why no one bothered any more.

The Residence was being worked on as well and the new plumbing was almost finished. It was a simple matter of pulling out what had to be removed and sticking new stuff in, occasionally clearing rubble with cutter beams. Some of it must have already been working because a couple of oddly configured robots were covering the latrines in the garden, or what had been the garden, with an aromatic foam that would harden into a nice

sculpture that would cover not only the latrine, but the smell as well. And in a few decades no one would remember why it was put there.

"The Count, at least, had better be grateful for that."

The landing field had been worked on as well and the flier set down amidst Golonidan engineers setting up blast cannon turrets. The Margrave stopped a few minutes to talk to them, asking them how the guns would be positioned for the best coverage and the other matters attendant upon such labor. He already knew the answers and his engineers knew that he did, but it was the gesture that counted.

Lady Alice was much improved over the day before. She had managed to clean herself up and was wearing something a little better than the clothes she had on the day before, but she was still not the elegant woman the Margrave remembered. That would take some time as well. She greeted him with a ritual hug and then led him through the new door into the palace.

The work was going on rapidly inside as well. Robots were spraying new walls into position and replacing sections that had been blasted into complete ruin. "It's amazing, John," the Countess gushed. "I've never seen building machines like these."

The Margrave laughed. "We rebuilt them from old Terran plans in the Kanden Library. The technology was thought lost after the Centuries of Madness."

"Even Aethelwold is excited. He spent an hour in that mobile hospital of yours and his leg is already growing back."

"That's good news. They do some great work in that thing, but don't let him get too carried away. They tell me that his new leg will take about a month before it's ready for real use."

"They told him that too. I hope he listened. He can get real stubborn."

"I know. I remember one time..."

"No stories now. The servants are around."

"So they deserve a good laugh too."

"This isn't Golonida. We don't make fun of the Count like you let your people make of you and we don't throw food around."

"We only throw the vegetables. Would you expect us to eat them?"

"It is done, John."

"Only on Kanden."

The Countess made a wry face. "Speaking of Kanden, what's this rumor I hear about you and Lady Margot?"

"Just that. She was my guest for a few days on Golonida before she trans-shipped to Morgoth."

"That's not what the gossip wave is saying."

"The gossip wave almost had us married once."

"It was almost right, but you wanted to be with your ships."

"We were fighting Hattilusa at the time."

"Over some silly trade rights on-what was that planet?"

"Loedebrok."

"But it seemed like you'd never be anywhere but fighting."

"True. And it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"No regrets?"

"Not really. And you?"

The Countess looked out a window at a pile of rubble that was waiting to be removed.

"No, not really either. Aethelwold isn't the easiest man to put up with, but he's good in his way."

"He may have to learn to be a little less good."

"That may take some doing. And I thought that Margot was a snot-faced little bitch."

"She probably was, last time you saw her. She's grown up considerably and on a better planet would be even more attractive. But the Kanden are stuck with that despicable council of theirs and it's made up of the biggest cheapskates in the galaxy. They make my Chancellor of the Exchequer look generous."

"But you never listen to him."

"Oh yes I do! I just try to let people think I ignore him. It doesn't grow on the Elvis Bush."

"Now just because you got blessed by the Sacred Sequin..."

"How do you stand it?"

"I lie a lot."

"Don't let the Archimandrite hear that. He takes his role very seriously and so do your people."

"Don't remind me. Just once I wish I had the nerve to put itching powder down his back like you did to your Hierophant."

"Don't forget that Golonidans take their religious beliefs a lot less seriously than Hermetians."

"I'd still like to do it. He's not a bad fellow, but he's awfully boring."

"Hazard of the profession, so I'm told."

"And he's not very brave. He spent the entire raid hiding under an altar."

The Margrave chuckled and the chuckle turned into a laugh. "That's the smartest thing he could have done. At least he didn't get shot."

"But the cowardice of it!"

"Bravery only makes sense if you have something to shoot back with. It shouldn't be confused with suicide or stupidity."

"But he could have waved the Holy Sequin and they all would have disappeared in a cloud of smoke."

Wince! "I should have guessed that was coming."

"I fooled you again."

"I think that's why I stayed at the wars."

They walked down the corridor for a little way and came to the throne room. The battle damage was being repaired, but the elaborate tapestries that had decorated the walls were a total loss and would have to be replaced by something other than construction robots. It was amazing to the Margrave just how bare the place looked without them. The room was not laid out for austerity, like his own throne room which would have looked ridiculous with wall hangings depicting happy wine pressers stomping grapes (even though wine had not been made that way for millenia) and drunken farmers next to primitive distillery system in the middle of a grove. One of the walls had to be replaced completely and a cylindrical robot was pouring the new wall in place while another one was shoveling what looked like pieces of the old wall into its conical bottom.

"We'll have to send to Terpsichore for replacements for the tapestry," the Countess was saying as the Margrave went over and looked at the new wall as it hardened.

"I imagine they'll be able to make new ones for you. I'm told they keep every design on record for just such emergencies. Apparently slaver raids are good for their business."

They left the throne room by the side door and went through the ante room where the shattered trophy case that had held the blasters still stood and then came into a new corridor. They walked down this in silence until they reached the chamber of the Count, which seemed much more cheerful than the day before.

"John!" came the greeting. "Have you seen what your machines are doing to my city?"

"How could I miss it. The smell is a lot better."

The Count could still not quite sit up, but he was smiling broadly and the blast rifle was nowhere to be seen. And then the Margrave realized that the Countess was unarmed as well.

"Wonderful!" he thought. "Now they'll expect me to defend Hermetia as well as Golonida and Kanden."

The Count pointed to the window. By rolling on his side, he could look out over the city. The Margrave realized that he was going to have to make a change in the plans for a defensive wall if the Count wanted to keep that view. "It's really something, these machines of yours. Why haven't you put them on the market?"

"No call for them. On settled worlds, they'd put a lot of people out of work and no one bothers to colonize any more. Why be trade goods for the slavers?"

The Count nodded in agreement. "Then why did you build them. Construction isn't one of your hobbies."

"They can build a defensive installation faster than anything I know and this way I can put bases up fast before anyone knows they're there."

The Count turned to his wife. "You see, Alice. I told you if you married him you would have spent your entire life planning battles."

The Margrave did not think it polite to mention that it was unlikely that she would have been in one. Instead, he bent over the bed and looked out the window. "This is some view you have here."

"It keeps me occupied. On slow days I can sit here with my binoculars and watch the entire city."

"I didn't know the residence was set so high."

"It fools you from out on the plain. What are those things your men are putting in the garden?"

"Shield generator units. And I have some other things on order for this place after the rebuilding is done."

"As long as I can watch my people."

"I'll see to it. But you have to realize that this palace is going to look a little different if you want it to be defensible."

"I know, but try not to be too harsh, John. You Golonidans don't like a lot of decoration, but we Hermetians thrive on it. I'd go mad in that Residence of yours with that empty throne room. The only color in the place is your dining hall and that's from not cleaning the vegetables off the walls."

"Alice. You didn't tell me he got wounded in the head."

The Count laughed. "Okay, so I'm exaggerating a little. But you know what I mean. If it were up to you, the Archimandrite would be wearing a gray uniform."

Now it was the Margrave's turn to laugh. "It might be an improvement over that ridiculous outfit."

"This from a man who was blessed by the Holy Sequin!"

"You are in no condition to make jokes. It was the divine intervention of Holy Elvis that brought me here and I have that on the authority of the Archimandrite himself."

The Count laughed so hard he almost rolled out of bed. The Countess was sitting convulsed in an ornate side chair that was not in the room the day before. The Margrave guessed that it had been dragged out of storage.

"I give up," the Count gasped out between laughs.

The Margrave drew himself up in mock dignity. "Now there is another matter we must discuss. The Countess informs me that you do not throw food here, as is the custom of all truly civilized people."

This made the Count laugh even harder and the Margrave wondered if all that laughing would hurt his leg. "We only throw food after we drink too much and then we throw it up."

The Margrave continued his role. "I am gratified to hear that. I should be very distressed to hear that I was wasting all this money on savages."

The Countess spoke. "This is Hermetia sir, not Kanden."

"The Kanden are a very dignified people, Countess, and not given to vain amusements and the throwing of dinner. I am told they even eat the leftovers."

"That's disgusting!"

"So are the Kanden."

It was a vast improvement over the day before.

In three more days, the spaceport had been rebuilt sufficiently to allow the rest of the shipments from GOLONIDA to land and the Margrave bade farewell to his friends and shipped for home. If he stayed, he would only have been in the way of the reconstruction teams and there was more important work waiting for him. The battle of Cadwallader was getting closer.

XI

The strains of "GOLONIDA the Powerful" sounded through the Residence as the Margrave's car pulled through the entrance. Rockets were going off in the sky, making a terrible noise which practically drowned out the anthem. The Margrave himself, in a dress uniform for the first time in a week, thought the welcome a bit excessive. After all, it was not like he was coming home from the wars. He had taken a good sized fleet with him and had not fired a single shot, a fact which disappointed him only slightly. Hermetia had been shot up badly enough as it was, without his gunners making an even worse mess.

He looked up at the explosions filling the sky and wondered why they could not find a way to make the ancient skyrockets go off without so much noise. Maybe they could float special drones and destroy them with blaster fire. But then the thought of stray blast bolts going off into space for several light minutes killed that idea. The banging of chemical bombs was preferable to accidentally losing ships.

The gate of the Residence closed behind the car and the Margrave noticed that there seemed to be more men in combat armor than usual. And for just the barest second, he wondered if Goth had been kidding about the coup. There were also a couple more anti-ship guns in position on the upper walls. Well, a few precautions never hurt and it kept the men busy.

The court, as may be expected was out to greet him and the Margrave stepped out of the car to the massed applause of his staff and guards. Goth, in a new uniform with a black

tunic and white trousers, with only a couple of medals, one of which he actually earned, came up to the Margrave. "Welcome back, Margrave. As you can see, the planet is still here."

"I was worried about that," the Margrave responded, clapping Goth on the shoulder. "I had visions of you accidentally blowing up the place with those damned fireworks."

"They are just a bit loud."

"A bit. Perhaps we should save a few for the next banquet."

"Actually, we have something really big for the next celebration. An ancient nuclear warhead."

"Where did you find one of those?"

"We built one from some plans in the Kanden Library that you brought home and forgot about."

"Does it work?"

"I dunno. We haven't tried it yet."

"Well, try it out in space first. Those things were supposed to have some side effects."

"A little radiation. Nothing to worry about."

"They were supposed to make a very big bang, so I think we should be a little careful. It'd be kind of embarrassing to accidentally destroy Herefall and have to ask Hermetia for help in rebuilding."

Goth coughed and felt it wise to change the subject. "Everyone is surprised you came back so soon."

"Nothing more for me to do there, except hold Aethelwold's hand and tell him everything was going to be all right."

"Is he still that bad?"

"It's a mood thing. He swings between tremendous joy at the rebuilding and depression from having been hit in the first place."

"And the nephew?"

"Bad. He went into a catatonic state two days ago and the psych team can't get him out of it."

"Pity. But not surprising. He must have been acting like a robot during the battle."

"He seemed fine when I left, then I got the news on the way back. I tried to warn the Count that something like that might happen, but he's still taking that bad too. He blames himself for everything."

"The Hermetians aren't exactly what you would call a warlike race. If any of them stay sane after this it'll be almost a miracle."

The Margrave followed his guards into the inner court of the Residence and he and Goth were soon alone in the familiar office. "Now, Goth, what's going on?"

Goth chuckled a little. "We couldn't tell you for security reasons, but two things. First, the slavers have disappeared."

"What?"

"There have been no slaver raids, or other activity for five days now. That freighter we blasted off Gronik was the last anyone's seen of them."

"Where'd they go?"

"Either to hidden bases in their home systems to wait for the Battle, or someplace we know nothing about. But there are no slaver ships to be found in space at the moment."

"And the second?"

"Brian is turning commercial transports into troopships and his land forces are drilling like crazy."

The Margrave looked at his boots for a second. "What have we done?"

"I took the liberty of sending the rest of the Fifth fleet to Kanden and ordered a recall of all our other warships."

"Very good. I see why you couldn't tell me over the hyperwave. Do you really think the Kanden Library is the target?"

"No, but all the slavers combined don't have enough firepower to take us here and Kanden would be the logical choice to attack us."

"What about Hermetia?"

"Nothing there worth taking and holding. And I doubt that Brian wants us attacking Tremulon right now. Those are his troops being readied."

The Margrave shook his head. "The same principal applies to the Kanden Library. I won't let Brian have that to give his friends."

"True, but the two might not be connected."

"Another possibility. We can guess that the slavers are following their own ideas in this."

"My real thoughts are that only one of two things is possible. First, the slavers are in hyperspace on their way to a hidden destination. I added some ground defenses on the thought that it might be us, but that is not really likely. The second is that they're hiding until the Battle and Brian has plans that don't include them."

The Margrave loosened his collar and nodded in agreement. "I wish we could do something about these collars. My tailor thinks my neck is the same size it was when I took office. But I think you're right. There is another possibility, though. Brian may have a plan that has nothing to do with Cadwallader."

Goth shook his head. "Doesn't sound like your cousin. He may have some thoughts about after Cadwallader, but the battle is the main thing on his mind at the moment."

"I agree. And ground troops are useless in a space battle. So what is he planning to invade?"

"Us?"

"Don't be ridiculous. They'd never get past the outer worlds and he knows it."

"It makes little sense to us, Margrave, but you can be certain that whatever your cousin is up to makes very good sense to him."

"And that's the problem. Meanwhile, we have a missing slaver fleet to worry about."

"If the professor's calculations are right, they won't be missing long. If they want to attack either us or Kanden, they'll be coming out of hyperspace within the next four days. In any event, they'll most likely appear for the party off Cadwallader."

"Unless they plan to double cross Brian."

"That gains them little. The High King would win with ships to spare and the slavers' status would be even lower than it is now. If Brian wins, however, they have a certain leverage in that they will be probably the bulk of his surviving supporters."

"Well, we'll know in four days, I hope. Any other news of interest?"

"Duchess Serena has joined the High King."

"With her Amazons?"

"Of course."

"Let me think. If I remember correctly, the last time they saw action was against a slaver unit off Morphagia. And if memory serves me, the slavers won."

Goth nodded. "It was a rare, stunning victory for them. The entire Amazon force was destroyed in ten seconds."

The Margrave played with the buttons on his desk and laughed. "I'm sure the High King and Count Rath are beside themselves with joy over this."

"Well, the Count has always had a liking for the Duchess."

"I know. It's caused him some embarrassment seeing as how the Duchess is peculiar in her tastes."

Another strange, coughing sound emerged from Goth at that point and the Margrave looked at a face that was turning slightly flushed. "Out with it!"

"Speaking of peculiar, your little friend on Morgoth was on the hyperwave yesterday. She's been asking a lot about you."

"Margot? She could've called me on the ship."

"She had visions of you fighting your way to Hermetia and back and battling on the ground as well."

"I take it she knows better now?"

"I tried to calm her and so did your aunt. Even Elise took a hand. The child was almost hysterical."

"She's not exactly a child. I was about her age when I got this job." With a sigh, "I suppose I'll have to call her."

"I think it'd be a good idea. Elvis knows what she's doing out there."

"Women!"

Goth left the office, on the pretext that there was some important work to do, which was a lie because if it were really important the Margrave would have heard about it, at least that was what he hoped. He rebuttoned his collar, cursed his tailor, and punched a code. A directory appeared on the desk screen and the Margrave carefully punched another code.

There was a pause of a few seconds and then the image of slightly harried bureaucrat floated in the air before the desk. "Yes, Lord?"

The title was an obvious one to use over the hyperwave channel reserved for monarch to monarch communication. "Margrave of Golonida for Lady Margot of Kanden."

And the thought came "I'm going to regret this."

The Margrave sat and waited. He was not sure what the relative time was on Morgoth and he had visions of Lady Margot being dragged out of bed and hurriedly dressing. Of course the type of clothes she usually wore could be put on in a hurry. And, as he expected, there was the annoying light show playing in front of his desk to keep him occupied while he was waiting. But that could have been worse. At least there were no Elvisday Carols playing in the background.

A chirping noise from the holograph unit told him that Lady Margot was about to come on. That, at least, was something that made sense. Sometimes it took so long to find somebody that the person making the call would fall asleep, something like that had happened during some delicate negotiations between Circe and Sparta and the war that resulted lasted ten years.

A second later, a nearly hysterical Lady Margot floated in the office before the Margrave.

"John!" She shouted forgetting all protocol, "Are you all right. I called about ten times while you were away and they told me that you were..."

The Margrave sighed deeply. "I'm okay! Slow down. How are things on Morgoth?"

"Cold! And lonely. That's why I wanted to talk to you. But when I called, you'd just shipped out. I was so scared."

The Margrave tried not to roll his eyes. "No reason. The slavers pulled out days before we left."

"But they could have set some terrible trap for you. You're their worst enemy, you know."

A slight chuckle. "Well, I'll agree with the last. But we were quite prepared for any tricks of that sort. Of course, you don't know anything about that stuff, do you?"

The image shook its head. "Of course not. No one on Kanden even has a blaster."

"I'm surprised. They had them in Granpa's day. We lost a number of men in that battle outside the library."

"Well. They're not supposed to!"

He tried not to laugh. During her stay, the Margrave had been alternately amused and made furious by her naivete. "Margot," he said, gently, "if I based my actions on what people were supposed to do, I'd be a dead Margrave."

"That, I suppose, is true, but I still worried terribly."

"You and my generals. Trag virtually made me wear combat armor on the way down."

"That was very nice of him. If you got killed I'd have to go to another funeral and I don't want to make a fool of myself again."

At that, the Margrave did laugh, loudly. "You know something, Margot, I'm very glad I don't remember Dad's funeral. I might still be mad at you."

"Well, you wouldn't be the only one mad at me. I think everyone on this iceball hates me."

A low groan escaped from the Margrave as he said "What did you do this time?"

"Nothing. But since I landed, everyone seems to go out of their way to be mean to me. I didn't know Kanden were so disliked."

"You think Kanden are disliked, try being a Golonidan on Kanden for a while."

"That was nasty."

"I'm sorry, dear, but when you have to give your troops orders to open fire at any provocation for fear of their being mobbed, well, now you know what it's like."

"But why do they hate me?"

"I don't think it's you they hate. Kanden has a reputation of, well, you should pardon what I'm going to say, being populated by self-righteous bastards."

"Anyway, I've called my father and asked him to ask the council to bring me home."

"I'd rather you were here, on Golonida. It's warmer."

"In more ways than one."

"And don't think they hate you. They're probably jealous of you."

"Of me?"

"Haven't you heard the rumors about us?"

"Rumors?"

"On Hermetia, they're already planning the wedding."

"Zeus no!"

"It was the first thing Lady Alice asked about when I landed."

"That's terrible. The council would have a fit."

"The council would be too frightened to have anything but terror. I doubt they want me angry with ten divisions on your planet."

"That may be true. Courage is not a Kanden strong point."

"I love you for your honesty. But seriously, I think some of our matchmakers have a bad case of mixing me up with Moloch Paphnutius."

Lady Margot giggled and tried to stop the giggle by covering her mouth with her sleeve.

"The ancient warlord?"

"And possibly a relative of yours."

"What?"

"Surprised. You told me history wasn't your strongest interest, but I thought you might know something about your own planet."

"Not a lot."

"Then allow me to enlighten you. The original name of Kanden was Wilusia."

"So?"

"You should have seen the look on Count Rath's face when I told him that. The Wilusians were the most powerful people in the human worlds for a time until they made a slight blunder, which I need not go into here. Anyway, Morgoth was called Luxor in those days and it was uninhabitable until John Morgoth, who designed the wheel, terraformed it. Luxor emitted a ground level radiation that sterilized in one year and killed in five.

Well, Luxor was being used as a penal colony when Moloch Paphnutius was just a Wilusian general, albeit already a hero. He found out about the colony and, for some complicated political reasons, attacked it.

You know the story of Moloch Paphnutius and Julia Marcia?"

"Of course. He stood over her with a blaster in each hand."

"The story is true. Julia Marcia was a Govindan. Govinda was destroyed a couple of centuries later. She and her family had been imprisoned on Luxor and her family was already dead. She was being literally starved to death in an outdoor cell when the sky opened and the Wilusian battle fleet appeared. And their battle fleets were a lot bigger than ours.

Moloch Paphnutius was never one to lead from the rear and he was in the first landing wave. He saw the small, foam cells and ran along them, blasting the locks as he moved, all the time the air being filled with blast-bolts and debris. He shot open Julia Marcia's cell and she literally tumbled out at his feet, unable to walk or take cover. So Moloch Paphnutius stood straddling her so that she was covered by the cone of his shield while shooting guards with a blaster in each hand. And that's the story."

"And he became dictator of Wilusia."

"Exactly. The entire story is somewhat longer, but you get the idea."

"But I don't even know how to fire a blaster."

"So you told me. It's real easy. You point it and pull the trigger. The gun does the rest."

"Is that all?"

"That's it. Oh, there's some complicated crap about charging it and whatnot, but you don't need to know that."

"I don't even want to learn it."

"You may have to, someday. I'd feel better if you were here."

"So would I. I miss you."

"And I miss you. And if someone else is picking this up neither of us will ever hear the end of it."

The conversation ended with a good laugh and the Margrave sat for a time wondering why he told her that story.

Actually, the Margrave was wondering about a lot of things. He was behaving like a lovesick adolescent, worrying about a planetary defensive installation that had no bearing on anything and worrying about why he was worrying. It was not a situation that he enjoyed being in. He kept trying to remember that old saying of his grandfather, that when nothing makes sense, it means that it really does make sense. The Margrave could not figure that out. It sounded like something his mother would say, but his grandfather had enjoyed a long and powerful reign, even if he did miss the opportunity to sieze Kanden.

Most of the Margrave's policies were based on the work of his grandfather and much of Golonida's power as a system was built on the foundation the Old Margrave had laid.

XII

Four days passed. Four days of worry, wondering when the slaver ships would appear in the Kanden system, and, when that time passed, wondering if they would have the stupidity to attack the Golonidan system. Nothing happened. The Fifth Fleet remained on station for another week and then came home, after sending scouting patrols outside the Kanden system just in case the slavers were stopped, waiting for an opportunity. The risk would remain, but the Fifth Fleet was needed for the defense of the Golonidan system as the time of Battle approached. Already, the farther worlds were sending their ships to Cadwallader and the Golonidan observers were preparing to leave.

Baron Surbo came, to ask the Margrave for one last time to join his cousin. The Margrave, as was expected, declined. At the final banquet, between flying courses, The Margrave turned to the Baron and asked him about the troop movements.

"After all, Baron, it's not a land battle you're going to. Ground fighters are precious little value in deep space."

The Baron laughed and ducked a cucumber. "I know. I think it's to reinforce the defenses on the outer planets of our system."

"Why?"

"The rules of engagement are clear on both sides, but as you often say, emotions tend to override rules and somebody on the other side might take this affair too personally."

It had been known to occur. When the sixth High King had won his challenge, one of the rulers on the losing side had launched an invasion of the High King's system. The Margrave had no doubt but that the High King now was preparing his own planetary defenses, or leaving that to Count Rath.

Count Rath came one more time as well, landing just hours after the departure of Baron Surbo. Unlike Surbo, his role of a diplomat was temporary at best and he was making one last effort to recruit the Margrave before taking command of the High King's flotilla. They met in the familiar office, with its studied informality where both could sit and not waste time with court ceremony.

"I imagine it's too late now to call this off," the Margrave opened, playing with a pencil on the desk top.

The Count had taken up the annoying habit of bouncing a small, rubber ball, probably to calm his nerves. He was bouncing it now as he answered "It's too late. For better or worse, the fleets are gathering now and I'm taking over in a few days. In a week, the issue will be decided, one way or another."

"You seem to lack confidence."

"It's finally dawning on me that you were right about the problems in trying to control eight thousand ships from a bunch of different systems. The only chance we have is that your cousin has the same problem."

"I wish you'd stop calling Brian my cousin. It's not exactly something I'm proud of at the moment."

"Can hardly blame you. I understand that Surbo is mad enough that he's considering leaving Tremulon."

"With his entire family, all ten children, fourteen aunts, various uncles and his wife?"

"To say nothing of siblings and cousins whom he recons up by dozens."

"I hope he doesn't bring them here. The Residence is crowded enough with the Hermetian clan."

"You seem to be quite the attraction for refugees."

"I liked it better when everyone hated me. It made things nice and quiet. Now I'm stuck with the Hermetian royal children playing in the throne room and leaving chewing gum in the meditation room."

"In other words, they're picking up your bad habits."

"A few of them. But at least they're not bouncing that damn ball! Will you please stop."

"Sorry." And the Count put the ball back into his tunic pocket where it made an embarrassing bulge.

"Now about Surbo. Mad at what and when did you hear that? He was just here and said nothing at all to me."

"He's being the diplomat to the end. It seems that Brian had a hand in the raid on Hermetia and didn't tell the Baron who is not sure just what makes him angrier, not being told, or being put in the position of a liar to you."

"Now Count. The Baron is a professional diplomat. He wouldn't know the truth if he crashed his ship into it. And, my friend, with all due respect, you're telling me this at this point is just a mite suspicious."

"I swear it on my mother's pet moose."

"At least you didn't swear on a sequin from the true jacket."

At that, Rath was able to laugh. "How did you stand it there? I know Aethelwold's an old friend of yours, even though Alice married him instead of you, but the planet's populated by superstitious baboons!"

"They're farmers, Count. You have to expect that. Grandpa always said that people who live close to the land become dirt themselves."

The Count failed in his mission, as even he expected to do. After his ship lifted towards orbit, the Margrave took another call from Lady Margot and called in the Professor.

"I need to know a couple of things," he said as the Professor entered the office. "Did you get the data I wanted on Morgoth shipping?"

The Professor smiled and pulled out a small disk. "Right here. We just finished it this morning. You can look at it any time, but the gist of it is that Morgoth hasn't bought any of the stuff you mentioned from us for some time and we can't find any evidence of it from our competition. The conclusion is that the Wheel isn't very well maintained and we estimate it might be functioning about half as well as it should."

"Very good. I don't know what I want to know that for, but I'm glad I know it. Now the other matter. Did my cousin know about the raid on Hermetia, before it happened. And did he have anything to do with it?"

"That does not make a lot of sense, Margrave. He can hardly afford to have you destroying a number of slaver ships when he'll need all of them in a little over a week."

"I guessed that, but Count Rath said something that made me wonder. Of course, he wanted me to join his side. Do you know if Baron Surbo has been up to anything strange lately?"

The Professor made an ill-disguised grin. "Baron Surbo is always a little strange, Margrave."

"That's not what I meant. Is there any indication that he's been moving his family to one place, so they could pull out of Tremulon fast?"

"No, but if he were planning such a thing, he wouldn't do anything to alert Brian. He'd wait until Brian took off for Cadwallader."

"Of course. That's quite correct."

"I can set out some feelers."

"It might be a good idea, just in case we have to expand the Residence."

There was no humor in the next act of the Margrave. He sat behind his desk, in one of his more severe uniforms and faced the commanders of his Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Fleets. To each one handed two sealed envelopes. "Gentlemen, this first envelope you are to open as soon as you reach your ships. It contains the code settings for your fleets and the coded command you will receive from me if the Battle off Cadwallader goes as I expect it will. Once you receive that command, you will open the second envelope and your fleets will each carry out the assignment included. I cannot tell you at this time what that assignment will be, but I can assure you that it will be a popular one with your men, though the other worlds of the Confederation will not be pleased. I can also tell you that it touches on the personal feelings of your Margrave and I wish that I could be out there with each of you if you have the opportunity to carry these orders out. You will receive your further orders one hour after you join your ships. That will give you sufficient time to give the codes to your other commanders and pilots. That's all gentlemen."

The fleet commanders turned and walked out of the office, leaving the Margrave more alone than he had been in many days. He turned on the viewer and watched the landing field as the shuttles lifted off, taking each admiral to his battleship. "Goth?"

The voice came from the com unit. "Yes, Margrave?"

"Have the codes been placed in the hyperwave units?"

"All coded up. All you have to do is punch send. I assume you still want to go through with this?"

"It's something we should have done centuries ago."

"If the Confederacy survives, it may mean the end of Golonida."

"I know. But the Confederation won't survive."

"John, even if we get away with this, history is not going to be very pleased with you."

"History doesn't have to make decisions and it doesn't carry guns. If I have to be one of it's great villains, so be it."

The hours passed. It would take almost an hour for the admirals to reach their ships and a second hour to be certain all the codes were distributed. The Margrave could think of at least one battle that had been lost because one of the sides could not get its coded

messages straight and could think of more that had been lost because the codes were not changed enough. Goth was right in his concern. If this project were badly timed, or it leaked out what was being planned, the entire combined force of the two fleets heading for Cadwallader might be on its way to Golonida instead.

The timer chirped. The Margrave turned a combination switch on his desk and a small, insignificant looking button popped out. He gave a small laugh and pushed it.

Instantly, in the new code, a hyperwave message was sent to the five fleets and five hundred ships shot into hyperspace, each fleet headed towards a destination in deep space, far from Cadwallader, but close to other worlds, there to remain on station, undetectable except by a lucky scouting mission (highly unlikely).

The Margrave walked out of his office and passed an officer who was wearing a blaster. He patted his own. Everyone, it seemed, was carrying sidearms in the Residence these days. Blast rifles and shields were being distributed to the people as well, along with instructions on how to use them, for those who had forgotten.

Yet there was something about the impending conflict with its dangers, no matter how seemingly remote, that made the very air of Golonida more interesting, more exciting. The very uncertainty, which would have been devastating to lesser men (the Margrave had visions of what things must be like on Kanden) seemed to energize his people. Of course there were the ludicrous aspects of the situation, such as old veterans trying to fit into uniforms ten sizes too small, and the strange offers of help, secret weapons designed in a basement or garage, messages from Elvis, the usual sort of thing he remembered his grandfather telling him about. The Margrave knew that those would be part of it, but it was the activity in the landing field, the armored troops marching in their neat blocks from place to place, the trappings of war without the danger that made the situation wonderful and stirring to the heart.

He remembered Hermetia.

If he failed. If his plan were detected, or the Battle off Cadwallader did not end as he expected it would, it would not be slaver gunships and destroyers attacking Golonida. They were only a threat to the weak and unready. It would be battleships, twenty to his ten. Hermetia would be a garden by comparison with the destruction Golonida would sustain.

"My people think I'm preparing to protect them from a side battle during the the big one. If only they knew the danger I'm putting them into."

The Margrave remembered his first battle, a small reprisal raid. He had been very young and the battleship, the Exterminator, had been very large. The crew were all deferentially respectful towards the heir, but he was in the background, full of excitement and not really understanding what was happening. He understood now and he noticed that he still felt the same excitement. Fear was for the foot soldiers.

He reached the terrace overlooking the central court of the residence. In the middle of the garden, a six barrel heavy blast cannon was being positioned. For a moment, the Margrave thought that that might be going just a bit far. The defenses of the Residence were pretty good as it was. Still, he did not complain. Whoever ordered it (Goth, most likely) felt he was doing what was right and as long as the soldiers did not damage the flowers there was no cause for objection. And if the cannon should prove to be needed, well the flowers were easily replaced, more easily than the Margrave.

A further walk around the parapeted outer walls showed the Margrave that the wall emplacements, usually covered for the sake of making the Residence look pretty, were uncovered now and the Residence, viewed from the outside, would seem to be literally bristling with guns. This image would only be made stronger by the fact that the Residence had been designed to look like an ancient (pre-space ancient) fortress, complete with towers and bastions. The Margrave could hardly suppress the laugh that came to him at the thought of how everything looked. "If someone landed on Golonida now, he'd think me the greatest tyrant in the human worlds."

Then he did laugh "Hell, that's what some of them think of me now."

He walked back into the Residence to hear that Prince Brian had departed Tremulon for Cadwallader.

XIII

The rules of engagement for a space battle to determine who would be High King, a form of challenge not used for centuries, required that the opposing forces come out of hyperspace at opposite points of a circle inscribed on the vertical plane of the system chosen for the conflict. It was all very complicated to put together and thus the usual time of one month from the announcement of the Battle, to the actual time of conflict was extended to three months. Of course, this meant that each side had more time to recruit ships and the participants had more time to remember old feuds.

On Cadwallader itself, an uninhabitable planet noted at one time for some mineral deposits, now no longer needed, a habitat had been set up and was occupied by observers from several systems that had, through luck or resolve, managed to stay neutral. Traditionally, their role was make certain that the forms were observed and the loser died fair and square. The obvious problem of enforcing their rulings never occurred to the diplomats who set the procedure up. That was not what they were paid for. In the final analysis, the only force the observers had was that of moral disapprobation and that depended on the willingness of the sheep to be sheared.

But at the moment the sheep on both sides were shearing each other with tremendous energy. On Golonida, the war room was a mass of activity as a large holographic map of

the Cadwallader system filled with moving lights, each light representing a different fleet within the two larger bodies. In this affair, you quite literally could not tell the players without a scorecard.

As they moved towards each other, computers displayed possible maneuvers for each side, based on the formations being used and the relative positions of the two forces. Another machine was rapidly decoding the battle codes of the two forces in an attempt to read the hyperwave traffic of each side. As the fleets came closer, an alarm sounded.

"They can just see each other now, Margrave," Colonel Smith spoke quietly. He was the staff officer Count Rath was convinced was an Earthman in disguise because of his sunglasses. Goth had had the devil's own time convincing Rath that this was only because the Margraves had always felt that their officers should add something to their appearance. They even had a saying that went "The one thing a uniform should not be is uniform."

The lights on the board began to split apart as Prince Brian, who was obviously in personal command of his force, and Count Rath, who was commanding for the High King, his role as diplomat now ended, began dividing their forces into battle formations. For the Margrave, this was the most interesting, and most important part of the conflict. In a space battle, especially one with a number of big ships, battleships and cruisers, the opening formations could very often be the key to victory or destruction. In this case, the opposing forces were running close to eight thousand ships each, higher than the Margrave had expected but apparently there were going to be lot of old feuds settled today.

Each side was keeping its individual fleets together. That was a mistake. The wise thing, as the Margrave would have done, would have been to parcel ships out as needed to make each smaller formation as powerful as possible and, at the same time, decrease the possibility of an entire sub-fleet going off to fight its own war with an enemy on the other side. Neither Brian nor Rath had done this, and the Margrave assumed that either they had not thought of it or were politically unable to pull it off. As he watched the hologram, it was apparent that he was right.

As both fleets came into gun range, they began to make severe spiral maneuvers. That meant the shooting had started and the ships were moving to not be where the blast bolts were going to be in a few minutes. At this point, parts of each force began to split off and a quick reading of the scorecard made the Margrave laugh. The fleets of Circe and Tiryns could not wait to ram into each other and very shortly a separate battle had developed between them, in spite of the screaming orders from both Brian and Rath to their respective allies to get back into formation.

With that, all internal discipline broke down and both forces fell into an insane frenzy, each small system trying to destroy the fleet of some other small system that had offended it a century before. As ships began to be hit, lights on a second board, keeping track of the

individual ships, began to go out. First small ships, gunships mostly and a few destroyers, and then cruisers. "That was a battleship," came a voice from the assembled staff.

The Margrave was pleased. His own gamble, in a game not yet played, was based on precisely what was happening. And there was the satisfaction of someday telling Count Rath that he had told him so. The Margrave hoped that Rath would survive, if only for that.

"I think that was Duchess Serena's ship, Margrave," Goth said as a light went out on the tote board.

The Margrave shook his head. Serena was an odd one, in a universe of oddities, but he would miss her.

"Another battleship. Circe."

The lights in the hologram were so mixed up now it was almost impossible to tell who was where. The Margrave knew that somewhere in that mass the High King and his cousin were trying to find each other, to fight a single ship action that would bring this madness to a close. He hoped that they would not do it quickly.

Whole banks of lights on the tote board were out. At least two thousand ships had been destroyed.

Goth noted that it seemed that no one had run into hyperspace yet. "Honor," he said just above a whisper.

There was no loud talk in the war room now and the Margrave's answer was equally quiet, "Honor gets you killed."

"That was Tiryns last battleship, Margrave."

More lights were going out.

A young officer approached his Margrave, gathered his nerve and asked "What would you have done?"

"If I were in this? Kept my ships out of the battle as long as possible and then used them as a reserve as the enemy lost ships. Either that or fired a good salvo and run for home."

The fighting was nearing Cadwallader itself. The observers had reported several large blasts had already hit the planet.

"It would have been interesting to see this off a slaver world," Goth said with a chuckle.

The Margrave appreciated the joke. "In more ways than one, Goth."

A group of fifty lights blanked out at one time.

"That was a Tremulon battleship," Colonel Smith said as another light went out, followed closely by a bank of them.

The Margrave walked over to a chair on a raised dias and sat down, cupping his chin in his left hand. "Goth, How long do you think this madness can go on?"

"From what we're seeing, as long as either side has a ship."

"The lights are going out all over the human systems."

"You said it'd be mass suicide."

"And I was right. How many left?"

A lieutenant took a quick look at a screen and spoke softly, "Both sides are almost down fifty percent."

The observer station on Cadwallader reported a near hit. The observer team from Morgoth was killed.

"I assume we gave our people there some decent shielding?"

"As best we could, Margrave, but if a battleship cannon hits them, they're atoms."

"At least they won't feel anything."

"A comfort to the next of kin."

"Sarcasm is not an appropriate response to your Margrave, Goth. But you're right. I wish we could have done this some other way."

"The tradition is hard to break."

"So is the news that daddy died because he was watching some idiots kill each other over nothing. Tell them to take cover. We can follow what's going on by hyperwave."

"We're sending now, Margrave."

"Good."

More lights went out and the mass on the hologram was beginning to thin out, now showing small groupings scattered about the Cadwallader system. It was obvious that a some of the smaller craft were running into hyperspace.

"What's the loss figure now?"

"Each side is down by seventy-five percent."

"Goth, what figure do we send at?"

"It has to be at least eighty."

The observer team reported that they had entered the underground, heavily shielded bunker. As they did that, the external observer station was destroyed. The only surviving observers were Golonidan and a few from the smaller systems.

The slaughter continued.

"That was the last Tremulon battleship, Margrave. Do you think Brian was on it?"

The Margrave turned to the Professor, who had been silent throughout the battle. "What do you think?"

"Our information is that Brian expected his battleships to be prime targets and moved his flag at the last minute to a heavy cruiser. As you can see, his fleet is showing no signs of retreat, so we must assume he's still alive."

"Agreed. If Brian is killed, we'll see it on the map. About the High King?"

"He's still in his battleship, but Count Rath is in a separate ship. We don't know which one."

"Knowing Rath, it might even be a gunship. It's the sort of thing he'd enjoy."

"Quite possible. But both of them must still be alive."

"For the same reason that we assume Brian is."

"Exactly."

"Eighty two percent loss on the High King, eighty on Brian. There are now only five battleships left."

"Send to the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth fleets: Conditions right, go."

And on the flagships of the five fleets, anchored in space far from the battle, the fleet admirals read their orders, sealed until this moment.

"By order of the Margrave. You will take your fleet to the following slaver systems and destroy all worlds containing human life. You will leave no, repeat no survivors."

The five fleets entered hyperspace and in the war room, silence. Goth, and every other officer who knew what was in the orders, looked up at the Margrave who sat in his chair, staring at the lights going out on the map of the Cadwaller system.

Goth broke the tension first. "I never believed you'd give the order."

The Margrave took several deep breaths. "I wasn't sure I would either. But it has to be done and now it can be."

"You've broken the first, the primary rule of the Confederation. No system shall destroy the primary world of any other system. You know what it means."

"It means that I've broken a stupid, old rule and if you look at the board, you'll see that the Confederation, such as it is, is no longer in a position to enforce any rules. All I've done, Goth, is take advantage of an opportunity."

"And destroyed the basis of our civilization in the process."

The rest of the room was silent. The Margraves of GOLONIDA had always encouraged disagreement, but to have it this open, in front of the junior officers, was almost unheard of. But the Margrave was aware of his audience. He had even counted on Goth to say what he was saying, knowing that every word would be recorded someday and answered, "Our civilization was dying. It's been dying for centuries and the slavers were bleeding it even faster. How many worlds would be able to withstand them after today? Or do you think they joined my idiot cousin because they like Tremulon cooking?"

Goth was silent for a time and then looked up at the board, with its dark lights that were once warships, only minutes ago. "Cruel necessity. They'll seek revenge, of course."

"A risk we have to take."

"And if one of them comes out of hyperspace in the center of GOLONIDA?"

"Their ships don't mass enough to do that kind of damage. A few minor earthquakes, nothing we can't handle. In any event, the decision is made. The slavers are doomed."

The dialogue ended before Goth could say another word because at that most inopportune of moments, an alarm sounded from a communication desk at the far side of the room.

"The High King is dead. Brian won."

"Is Brian alive?"

"Yes and on his way back to Tremulon."

"With less than a fifteen hundred warcraft in the human worlds, except for ours and Macrinus."

"Exactly. Oh, and one other thing Margrave. We're getting garbled traffic from Morgoth. There's fighting going on on the surface."

Goth and the Margrave looked at each other for a barest second, shock emitting from both their faces. The Margrave almost shouted "What fighting? Who?"

"A fleet has entered Morgoth space, the Wheel is offering no resistance."

The Professor spoke "Duke of Morgoth, be not bold. the Morgoth Wheel is bought, and sold."

"Can you open a channel to Morgoth?"

"We're trying Margrave, but Morgoth center is off the air."

Goth looked at a screen in front of him. "The fighting would be centered in that area, Margrave. The hyperwave system is probably out."

"System penetration!"

"Where?"

"Eighty five vertical, ninety two horizontal."

"Display!"

"A Tremulon transport. One of the armed hybrids."

"Battle stations. Residence and city shields up. Have the Star bring it in."

"Communication from transport, Margrave."

"Play it."

"Golonida Control, this is the Transport T 855. Please do not fire. We are carrying Baron Surbo. Repeat, please do not fire."

And the voice of the Baron came immediately following, cracking with near panic, "John! This is Baron Surbo. Tell your men to hold their fire. I've come to join you. My family is with me!"

"Have the Star hold its fire."

"It could be a recording."

"We'll find out. Keep the shields up and guns on it, but don't destroy it yet."

"Traffic from Morgoth. It's a Tremulon battle code."

"Tremulon?"

"That's where the troopships were going."

"But why Morgoth?"

XIV

"Morgoth," the Professor was saying as the Margrave looked at a projection of the human worlds, "is placed almost at the exact center of the human worlds. While that has little serious strategic value in an era of hyperspace travel, it has tremendous psychological importance, especially now that most of the combat ships in the Confederation are floating particles around Cadwallader. And there is the little matter of the Wheel."

The Margrave played idly with the blaster laying on his desk and nodded, "And that explains why I was so concerned about the Wheel all this time?"

"In a way, yes. You didn't know it consciously, but subconsciously you were aware of the situation. What we think has happened is that Brian bribed the troops on the Wheel some time ago and merely waited. It was certainly not a spur-of-the-moment act."

"And the families of the Wheel guards? The Dukes of Morgoth were quite certain they'd keep the guards on the Wheel under control."

"And it worked, as far as preventing an open rebellion from the Wheel was concerned. But a foreign invader could guarantee the safety of those families which a rebel could not. My guess is that once the Wheel is in Tremulon hands, the Morgoth will be removed anyway, so their little deal was an act of supreme stupidity, something the Morgoth have shown in abundance through their history."

The com unit on the desk chirped.

"Margrave."

"Baron Surbo is landing."

"Bring him to me as soon as possible."

"Any more form Morgoth?"

"Nothing but battle traffic. The natives must be putting up quite a fight."

The Professor frowned and shook his head. "Not likely. They don't have a lot to fight with. Probably local resistance and the Tremulons weren't ready for it."

"But that leaves Prince Brian, excuse me, my cousin is now High King Brian, with the Wheel, and all of the heirs of the smaller systems placed on Morgoth for their protection. Some protection. If I know Brian..." and the Margrave punched the buttons on the com unit. "Code and send to General Michael. Establish protectorate on Kanden. Respect the person of the Senator, but eliminate any of the council who object. Suppress any popular uprising immediately with whatever force you deem either necessary or entertaining. And take and hold the Library."

The Professor stood in amazed silence for a few seconds before stammering "Why?"

"Like I said, I know my cousin. I just removed one of his bargaining points."

"He still has Lady Margot."

"I know, but now he has no reason to keep her."

"Unless he guesses something we've been suspicious of."

The Margrave nodded. "Cancel the suspicions. I won't sacrifice our interests for a woman, any woman."

"That's gratifying to hear."

"I don't want any surviving slavers to get their hands on any part of that library."

"All they'd do is sell it."

"Maybe. But the survivors, few as they are, will have a serious grudge against me in a couple of days."

"Agreed."

"Okay Prof. What I need from you, quick, is an accurate count of how many warships Brian has and where they are."

"Instantly, Margrave."

As the Professor left the room, the Margrave turned back to his com unit. "I want a hyperwave channel to High King Brian. Send it in clear."

There was a wait of a couple of minutes while the diplomatic niceties were taken care of and then the image of High King Brian appeared, backed by the sight of the cruiser bridge.

"We give our greetings to our cousin of Golonida."

"And Golonida gives its congratulations to your Majesty."

"Thank you. We look forward to your cooperation in our plans for the human worlds."

The Margrave took a deep breath. No emotion could be shown now. "I promise you that. Even now, your minister of state, Baron Surbo, is arriving at our residence to discuss how we may be of assistance to you. Do you return to Tremulon?"

"No, cousin. You should know that we have decided, due to its central position, to make our capital on our new possession of Morgoth."

"We understand," damn right about that, "that the Lady Margot, of our new Protectorate of Kanden, is on Morgoth. We would consider it a favor if she were placed under your royal protection until she can be returned home."

If Brian had any emotion about that, he did an excellent job of hiding it. Most likely he had expected the move for some time. "It shall be as you request, cousin."

"Thank you. And may I say that I am pleased to see my kinsman so elevated."

"Thank you. Now we must attend to our new estate, so I must end this interview."

The image disappeared as the hyperwave signal was cut and the Margrave laughed to himself, "He always was a pompous son of a bitch."

The screen on the desk showed a transport being unloaded of tons of human cargo. Baron Surbo had indeed brought his entire family to Golonida and the Margrave shook his head and groaned at the thought of his Residence being overrun with offspring. The Margrave, it must be admitted, never liked children around him. He did not mind writing little notes on petitions, but having the little monsters under boot was another and much less pleasant matter. The Baron was going to have to be housed someplace else, perhaps a large hotel, if he could find one large enough to hold the clan.

"Goth."

"Yes, Margrave."

"I need help. Has hyperwave been restored with Morgoth?"

"Not yet. We guess it may take a day or two."

"Brian is moving his court there. I want the Fifth Fleet back around Kanden as soon as possible."

"That leaves us with only four fleets here, plus our own hybrids."

"I know. But if Brian has no battleships and only three heavy cruisers, we don't need more than four. At least not for a few days."

"It'll take at least ten days for the first of the other five fleets to return after they carry out their mission."

"It'll take three days for Brian to get to Morgoth. We can delay anything for seven days."

"It's going to be close. A better move would be to order the Sixth Fleet to a position to blockade Tremulon and the Seventh Fleet to the edge of the Morgoth system. That will take a couple of days off their travel time if we have to move in those directions."

"Agreed. Send the order. And get the ground fighters ready. I want to be able to send troops to the Morgoth system at any time."

"You expect war with Brian."

"I'm certain of it."

"What about the Wheel?"

"We're going to be working on that."

Baron Surbo found the Margrave pacing the floor of his office and he noticed that the wastebasket was lying at an odd angle in the opposite corner from where it usually stood. A map of the Morgoth System was floating in the air before him and the Margrave was studying it with as much care as he could muster while pacing around it. The Baron had the image in his mind of a tiger circling its prey. The latest Margrave of Golonida was clearly preparing to live up to his family's reputation. That, and the fact that it seemed that everyone on the entire planet was armed made the Baron very nervous. He had come to Golonida to get away from a war, not enlist in a new one.

The Margrave spun on his left heel and extended his right hand in a gesture so fast that the Baron actually jumped a little. "Hello, Surbo. I'm glad you could join our little party."

"Party, Margrave?"

"A surprise party I'm planning for your previous employer, who, incidentally, thinks that I think you were on your way here for a diplomatic visit."

The Baron looked like a dog who had been found digging up the prize petunias. "I was rather hoping it would be a few days before the Prince, pardon me, the High King, discovered that I was gone. He has a temper almost the equal of yours."

The Margrave stopped pacing, raised his face to the ceiling and laughed, a loud, roaring, harsh laugh that few even in the Residence had ever heard. "Surbo, my cousin doesn't even come near me in temper. Let me show you something." And with that, the map changed to a depiction of the human worlds, with the slaver systems illuminated.

"Have you ever heard an ancient word 'genocide'?"

"I think it was supposed to mean the extermination of large numbers of people, wasn't it?"

"Very good, my friend. In two days, every man, woman, child and other living thing on the slaver worlds will be either dead or dying."

The Baron forgot protocol, turned very pale and sat unceremoniously in the chair in the far corner of the room, behind which he noticed was a large pile of petitions. He looked up at the Margrave, unable to speak.

"Sitting down is a good idea, I think I will as well." and the Margrave sat behind his desk, with equal unceremoniousness.

The Baron was still silent, shaking his head, disbelief replacing shock across his ample face.

"I see you're surprised. You should have seen Goth's face when I told him about my plan. Let me explain. I told you, and I told Count Rath, on whom be peace, that this battle of yours would destroy the Confederation. It's done just that. I told you, I told Rath and I told my nutty cousin exactly what the losses on each side would be. I was right. Do you honestly think that any rule, of any society, can stand if the society has not the force to uphold it?"

The Baron croaked a whisper "The Convention, the Compact, the Conclave."

"Meaningless without the ships and the guns and the men. The precious Confederation was meant to give a framework by which the human worlds could expand in peace and, if war broke out, it would be confined. It failed, Baron. It created a disease, a cancer, do you know the ancient word? It created a system within a system that allowed the slavers to ravage any new colony unless it could be protected by a fleet, and most worlds did not have the resources to protect themselves and colony worlds. So exploration stopped. After all, why should anyone go to all that trouble merely to become merchandise in another corner of the galaxy. I'm told that the price of a human on a non-human world is quite high. But every world was afraid of the precedent. If one planet blew another one to hell, who would be next, who would be safe? So we let the slavers run through our worlds, stealing everything and every one they could get their hands on, protecting only

ourselves and those we felt important enough to spend the resources to protect. But now who can protect themselves, besides Golonida and Macrinus and Earth? I've got the Hermetian heirs here, now I've got you and your clan. Do you think this planet can hold the entire population of the human worlds, all hiding from slaver raids?"

"That's why I'm here. Your cousin made an arrangement, a deal with the slavers. They'd support him and he'd give them Morgoth as a base."

"Where, protected by the Wheel, they'd be able to raid in security from reprisal. After all, in its day, the Wheel was equal to five battleships in firepower and still equal to at least two."

"Exactly."

"Then why in the name of Zeus is Brian on Morgoth? If he had any brains, he'd be back on Tremulon preparing his own defenses."

"If Brian had any brains, Margrave, he'd never have gotten himself into this in the first place."

"Well, I won't argue with that. But his motives seem obscure at best."

"He may regret his bargain and want to keep Morgoth for himself."

"That's a possibility. Its position is of some psychological value, otherwise it would never have been colonized in the first place. You know the story of the Wheel?"

"Not really."

"The Wheel was not originally designed as a defensive installation, that came later. It was built as a habitat for the terraformers who were trying to clean the radiation off the planet. The Wheel was designed by John Morgoth and the planet was renamed Morgoth. Originally, it was Luxor, where Moloch Paphnutius opened the sky and carried off Julia Marcia."

"Interesting."

"Yes. The only reason anyone bothered with it is because of its location, and it is relatively easy to defend, with the only truly safe way to the planet blocked by the Wheel, which also serves to blast an occasional bit of space gunk that gets too close. It has not been particularly well maintained in the last two hundred years, not since the last rebellion."

"But still dangerous."

"Yes, still. I could blast it but the losses would be unacceptable."

"A serious consideration."

"Considering that I may have to defend Golonida against surviving slavers, and a few outraged worlds that still think the Convention means something. But that doesn't solve the problem of my nutty cousin, who's now High King, as if that meant anything."

"It does to a lot of people, and there's divinity hedging that title."

"Baron, do you have any idea how old that saying you just used is?"

"Pre-space, so I'm told."

"Very. But a king without guns is a figurehead and Brian is not exactly well armed at the moment. And he isn't going to be rearmed if he stays on Morgoth."

"The Margrave is hiding something."

"The Margrave hasn't gotten to the point yet. I'm prepared to blockade the Tremulon system to make sure that nothing gets to Morgoth."

"That would mean you'd have to blast any ship as it was taking off."

"If necessary. The Wheel is not going to be rearmed for the surviving slavers."

"There is the little matter of the neutral heirs."

"Unimportant, except for one and Brian is not stupid enough to harm her."

"But his slavers might be crazed enough."

"I know. That would be unfortunate."

The meaning was clear. "Golonida comes first, then."

"How could it not?"

"Men have been misled by emotion before."

"And everyone around them paid. I won't make that mistake."

It was at this moment that Baron Surbo had a revelation about the Margraves of Golonida, that their wild behavior was only a mask, that behind them lay a terrible sense of duty which drove them and controlled them at the same time. The Margrave would sacrifice Lady Margot if it meant protecting his realm. "John, when Brian finds out why I'm here, it

may prove to be a little embarrassing," he said quietly, having visions of his entire family being sacrificed to the glory of Golonida.

"I thought of that. Don't worry. For the moment, I want my cousin to think of me as a new supporter who is only interested in aiding his rule and you as a loyal servant who has come to advise me. When he discovers otherwise, you'll be safe."

"I'm gratified to hear it."

"As well you should be."

"One question. You said you weren't going to be led by emotion, but you've ordered your fleets to destroy the slaver systems. Aren't you being just a little bit emotional about that?"

"Surbo. I decided to do that two months ago. The attack on Hermetia was all I needed to ensure my men would go along with it. Very considerate of the slavers, actually."

A sigh. "I was afraid you'd say something like that. But think of this. If a demonstration could be made, perhaps the other slavers might decide to change their business practices. You can always use new customers."

The com unit on the desk chirped madly, to tell the Margrave that someone had something so important to tell him. He bent over and punched the button. "Yes?"

"Admiral Michael on the hyperwave, Margrave. You'll never believe what he's saying."

"Put him up."

General Michael floated in the center of the office. "Margrave. We hold Kanden."

"Any trouble?"

"The council members objected, as you guessed. They object no longer. It's the people."

"Well, suppress them!"

"No, Margrave," the General spoke more rapidly and with more excitement than he had shown in ten years, "you don't understand. Once they heard we were taking over and the council was dead, they started treating us like heroes of legend. My men are patrolling the streets decorated with flowers and being cheered. The Kanden all think they're going to become rich Golonidans."

"I don't believe it!"

"Neither did I until I saw a tank with garlands wrapped around its turret. Margrave, it's crazy. They hate us for a century and now they love us. The men are very puzzled."

"Let them enjoy it while it lasts."

The signal was cut and the Margrave leaned back in his chair and, to the surprise of Baron Surbo, laughed harder than he had in a month.

XV

The meditation chamber was even more sparsely furnished than the throne room. It was a bare room, with light-colored wooden walls and a low dias at one end. There were a few vases filled with flowers and the scent of incense wafted slightly in the air. On the dias was a cushion and on the cushion the Margrave sat cross-legged, a somewhat difficult position in his uniform because the boots did not set right against his legs. The problem troubling him had been gnawing at his mind for days and had to be resolved. He was still for a long time and he had been sitting there for more than an hour when he opened his eyes and rose from the cushion. He walked to the sliding panel door, opened it and walked into the ante-room of his office. He looked around and shook his head, emitting a small chuckle at what he deemed to be his own stupidity and went into the office.

The door that led from the office to the main corridor was closed and the Margrave saw that the pile of petitions was still behind the chair where he had placed them so long before. He was going to have some explaining to do to his citizens, who would probably understand, but he still felt guilty about allowing himself to become so behind in his work. He sat down at the large desk and punched the com unit.

"Goth," he said, more calmly than he had spoken in days, "could you come in here for a minute."

The very quietude of the request made Goth very nervous. The Margrave was more inclined to be frantic than calm, loud than quiet. He walked rapidly down the hall to the office, trying not to let his concern show. He entered to find his Margrave sitting up at his desk with his fingers entwined on top of it. Something was clearly wrong.

"Goth," the Margrave began, "I've made a decision. I'm going to recall the fleets against the slaver worlds."

Goth stood silent. He was without words. The Margrave never changed his mind once a decision had been made. He did not believe in it. The Margraves of Golonida had always had a maxim that stated that it did not matter if a decision was good or bad, once it was made, it had to be followed through. It was almost a full minute of embarrassed silence before the Chief of Staff could choke "why?"

"I've been thinking. The only reason why the slavers were able to act as they did was because no one was willing to control them. Now we are willing to do just that. And if we can keep them under control, then there is no reason to exterminate all of them. One

system will do, merely to show that we mean what we say. It was Surbo's idea and I agree with it."

"And if that fails?"

"Then we can go ahead with the first plan and tell our consciences that at least we tried."

Goth fell silent again for a time, pondering the change in his ruler. Finally, he spoke again. "How do you propose to control them? No one has been able to do it up to now."

The Margrave nodded. "No one was willing to exterminate them up to now either. I'm going to make them an offer. They can change their ways and behave like civilized worlds, or they can go the way of the one system we will obliterate. The choice is theirs. Peace, and trade, or total annihilation."

"Margrave, this isn't like you. Can I ask how you came to this decision?"

"You can."

"Very funny."

"All right. It's like this. If we wipe out all the home worlds of the slavers, that still leaves some of them alive and we and our successors spend centuries hunting them down."

"That thought had occurred to us before."

"But now we have an alternative to offer them. I'm ordering the sixth fleet to destroy the Edessa system. After all, they did try to kill me, so I've got a legitimate complaint. To the rest I'm sending an ultimatum. One more raid and we blow all of them to hell."

"If it works."

"I hope it does. And besides, I really don't want history to record me as its greatest butcher, not if I can find another way to solve the problem."

Goth pursed his lips for a second and then said "That still leaves the problem of Brian on Morgoth. As long as the slavers think they can hide behind the Wheel they might be less than willing to listen."

"I want our minister of state to begin negotiating with Brian about that."

"I doubt that your cousin, assuming he's in a frame of mind to listen, will be able to enforce anything on the slavers. He only has three cruisers, his hybrids and a small force of gunships and destroyers. The slavers on Morgoth will have him and his troops outgunned."

"Then the slavers have taken Morgoth?"

"They began landing there this morning. It seems that large force was kept back from the battle for the purpose. We guess that there are about five hundred slaver craft around Morgoth and Brian doesn't know it. He's flying into a trap of his own making."

"But the Wheel?"

"High King Brian, be not bold. Your men in the wheel are bought and sold."

The Margrave laughed. "Well, it serves him right. I wonder how the slavers managed it. Whatever we may think of the Tremulon, they tend to be loyal."

Goth looked at the chair in the corner. "May I?"

"Please do."

Sitting down, the Chief of Staff leaned back and sighed. "We really don't know yet. My guess is that in the confusion of preparing for this little soiree the slavers managed to plant their own people in with the troops picked to sieze the wheel. With their experience in space combat, they may have even been asked. Assuming the deal Surbo talked about is true, Brian may have suspected nothing, or planned a few tricks of his own, not expecting the welcoming committee."

"You know what this means, don't you?"

"I have a terrible suspicion."

"It means we have to take Morgoth."

"We can expect to lose at least two battleships, maybe more. The Wheel may not be what it once was, but it's still dangerous."

Leaning back in his chair, the Margrave put his boots up on the desk. "Maybe not so dangerous after all."

"I don't understand."

"Code some new orders for the Eighth, Ninth and Tenth fleets. I want them to change course and proceed to a position outside the Morgoth system and hide. Have them hide real good, Goth. And let me know when my cousin lands on what he thinks is his new capital."

"I understand that. But I don't see how we can avoid losing ships."

"Trust your Margrave. Now, how long before the Sixth fleet blasts Edessa?"

"Twelve hours."

"Good."

Twelve hours later, the Margrave was in the war room watching for more lights to go out. The Sixth Fleet emerged at the outer ring of the Edessa system and moved in in an open order to confuse the defense systems which were usually programmed to find tighter formations but ignore isolated ships. The principal concern was not counter-fire. The slavers never had anything big enough to do serious damage that far out, but rather to prevent word of the attack from getting out too early.

The battleship Massacre, appropriately named for its mission, moved towards firing position against Edessa itself, while each of the ten heavy cruisers moved to attack positions and settlements on the outer worlds. Small drones with blast wave detectors and hyperwave transmitters were launched at twenty light-minutes out from the main world. These would give the flagship several minutes warning if return fire was coming from the planet, enough time for the Massacre to maneuver out of the way.

On his bridge, Admiral Klingsor looked out the viewer at the display of worlds with Edessa highlighted at the center. "Blasters level ten."

"Level ten."

The ruse was working. Most of the slaver ships were still returning from the battle off Cadwallader and those which were not were preparing to shock Brian. From the traffic being monitored on Edessa and its other worlds, there was no indication that the fleet was even being noticed. Space is, after all, a pretty big thing.

"Fire at ten minutes."

To fire at extreme range was not usual, but then firing at level ten was neither. The crew on the bridge was more silent than usual. The normal chatter just before battle was absent. Everything was ready. That was all anyone on the bridge needed to know, or apparently wished to know. A small man, with thinning hair, Admiral Klingsor was notorious for his joking with the crew, even more than Richter was. He was not joking, but as silent as the rest, giving minor orders and asking distance in light minutes.

The hyperwave chirped with coded messages indicating that the cruisers were in firing position around their targets and awaiting the signal from the flag to open fire. Their guns were slaved to the hyperwave and the moment the code was received, they would all fire in unison. The computers on the flag performed the relatively simple task of determining the position of each cruiser relative its target and would send the code so timed that all the targets would be hit simultaneously, at least for the first shot.

"Traffic increasing," the communications officer on the bridge of the Massacre said softly.

Klingsor nodded. "They probably know we're here and are trying to figure out what to do."

"Do you want to bring in the gunships?"

"No. They'll only get in the way. Watch the drones."

"We'll be in range in fifteen minutes."

"Very good."

On Golonida, the Margrave and his staff were still sitting in the war room waiting. For men about to break the most important rule of their civilization, they were surprisingly calm. But in his mind, the Margrave had decided that that civilization was already nearing its end and a new one was coming to take its place.

On the battle board, the projection of the Edessa system showed the positions of the Golonidan ships as they moved at half-light speed, the safest normal space speed they could use, towards their targets before weird, Einsteinian things began to happen. There was no need and no desire to communicate with Admiral Klingsor. From the positions of the ships it was obvious what his tactics would be and now all that remained was to hear the news that he had succeeded.

Around Edessa, the fleet tightened its noose. The battleship decreased its forward acceleration and made a slight lateral move to bring its main batteries to bear on the planet. That meant that the nose cannon, the top, bottom and side turrets were all ranged on Edessa.

"In range, Admiral," said the gunnery officer.

"Fire."

Instantly, the front of the Massacre was bathed in light as all the guns fired in unison, projecting their ravaging beams toward the surface of the target. Immediately thereafter, the Massacre turned and moved to a second firing position as the combat computers sent the timed signals to the cruisers and they too fired.

The heavy guns of the warships were designed to cut through the shielding of opposing battleships. Fired at the surface of a planet, they would first burn a hole in the atmosphere itself, leaving a total vacuum the width of the beam. The hydrogen atoms in the path of the beam would fuse from the heat, creating a tremendous burst of further energy release. Upon reaching the surface, the beam would burn through the crust of the planet with such heat that it would literally disintegrate a hole where it touched and the discharge from that would cause a vast explosion of the material of the ground itself. But it would not stop there. The power of the beam was such that it would cut right through the planet itself and come out the other side. Exploding matter would precede the blast and the vacuum

created would be filled by rushing air and planetary refuse. The immediate result would be large scale volcanic activity, not only at the ends of the hole, but for hundreds, if not thousands of miles around it. But that would not be the whole of the matter.

The force of the blast beam would weaken the crust of the planet and the seismic disturbances created by its passing would further aggravate the damage. Naturally, any structure or person caught in the path of the beam would be vaporized instantly, in addition to the total destruction wrought by the side effects of the blast. A large city, in the path of a level five burst would be instantly obliterated. A level ten removed not only the city, but any possible trace of it.

Two such blasts would inflict great damage on the structural integrity of the planet itself. Few worlds, with exceptions of gas giants and dead stars, could hold together well with two large holes bored right through them along with the explosion of matter. Three shots would render any world totally uninhabitable as its atmosphere would be literally blown away.

The power drain of a level ten blast was such that the battery had to be closed down for five minutes after each shot to let its energy banks recharge. The ship had to be in motion in the direction of the blast so that the reactive force of the blast would not act as a photon drive and push the ship backwards.

The Massacre fired five blasts at level ten at Edessa. In the space of twenty five minutes, a human world ceased to exist except as floating debris, forming a new asteroid belt around its sun.

But the people of Edessa fared perhaps better than the ones on the outer worlds. Cruisers did not have the firepower to destroy a planet. But they could destroy cities and with the cities the atmospheric pressure plants and the climate control systems that made them inhabitable. Those away from the blast could survive, but only in suits and the life support of a suit was only good for three hours.

On Golonida, in the war room, the Margrave and his staff watched the cleansing of Edessa. Not since the Centuries of Madness had a planet been completely destroyed. Human populations had been wiped out, or driven out, but the planet itself remained as mute witness to their presence. Now even the planet was gone. Only the Margrave spoke.

"I wonder if Baron Tomas was home?"

XVI

The attack on the Edessa system went unnoticed for some time. The spaceways were still in confusion over the results of the battle off Cadwallader and the attack itself had gone so well that no message had gotten out of the system. If anyone had been listening

to the coded traffic between Golonida and the Sixth Fleet, they would have assumed that it involved the occupation of Kanden, which was all the news, eclipsing the ascension of Brian. And if the final takeover was no surprise, the reaction on Kanden surely was.

Golonidan forces had been on Kanden for a century, ever since the Old Margrave, who was not so old at the time, ordered them there to protect the Library from a popular rising which threatened to destroy the last repository of human history outside of old Earth itself. The people of Kanden had become united in one feeling, and only one, that the Golonidan were hated occupiers who could not be thrown out because they had the unsporting habit of killing their opponents. But it seemed that the people of Kanden hated one thing more than the Golonidans and that was their own Council.

That made sense to the Golonidans, when they bothered to think about it, which admittedly was not often. The Council was obsessed with maintaining what they thought was a moral superiority over their occupiers, something which did not impress the Golonidans, who did not believe in morality, at all. That would not have been so bad for the populace, were it not for the fact that the Council had some very strange ideas about what constituted that superiority. They virtually dictated everything the people could or could not do, from the time they got up to when they went to bed, literally. And whom they went to bed with. The only exception was the Senator's daughter when she was on Golonida, if for the obvious reason that it is difficult to dictate with a gun at your head and the Margrave was not a man to tolerate such nonsense.

When it was all added together, the Council made life on Kanden a pretty dull affair, a situation not made any better by the gray-green sky of the planet which tended to depress the Golonidan troopers, raised under the stirring blue of their own beautiful world.

The first evidence the Kanden had been given of the change in management was the lowering of the Council flag and the raising of the Golonidan with its crossed lightning bolts inside the black circle. Then the rumors began. The Margrave was going to live on Golonida and spend the rest of his life in the Library. The Margrave was going to bring Golonidan industry to Kanden. But the rumors caused no joy greater than the truth that the Council, when told by Admiral Michael of the new situation, sat on the floor as a body and began to chant something which was supposed to make the Golonidans feel guilty and leave their planet. The Golonidans, while normally easily amused, were not and the Admiral ordered the Council shot.

He could not have done a more popular thing if he been named Elvis Reborn. Even the Senator, a man hemmed in all his life by the pompous Councillors, allowed himself a smile at the news. The Kanden went wild. Pictures of the Margrave, from who knew where, appeared all over the planet, on every place a picture could be hung. Powerful liquor, homemade and highly illegal under the Council, was quaffed on every street, and the local officials, who had been stuck with the hapless task of trying to enforce the ban, drank with the people, not only because they wanted to, but because Golonidan soldiers were literally pouring it down their throats to the accompanying laughter of the crowds. Then one Golonidan officer made the shrewdest diplomatic move in a century. When asked what

had taken the Golonidans so long to act, he answered "Well, it wasn't because we didn't want to."

The occupation force had become a liberating army and both army and people were thoroughly enjoying their new role.

On Golonida, the Margrave and his staff were concerned with more important matters. Now that they had Kanden, they were going to have to figure out what to do with it. A largely pastoral people, the Kanden were not truly equipped to deal with Golonidan machinery. Schools would have to be set up and the Kanden economy totally revamped. And Kanden had to wait.

The new High King, cousin Brian, had arrived on Morgoth. The Margrave was taking a nap fully clothed when the communicator in his room chirped the news. With a groan, he had not had much rest in the preceding days, the Margrave rolled out of bed pulling his legs under him to stop him from falling on the floor. It was a manner of rising that had proven humorous to more than one young woman. He went to the office and found Goth, his Minister of State, the Professor and Baron Surbo waiting for him.

"Your cousin has landed," the Professor said as the Margrave took his position behind the desk.

"I know that. Tell me something I don't know."

"He still thinks his troops are in control."

"How?"

"The slavers made some arrangement with them. They fool Brian and they stay alive."

"Not a bad deal."

"Except for Brian. He thinks he has some power there."

"For how long?"

"We think the slavers will try to continue the illusion until they can rebuild their fleets. At that time, Brian will be superfluous."

"How long would it take them to rearm the Wheel?"

"From what we think the best condition the Wheel is, it would take at least a month of hard work."

"Then that's our time limit."

"You intend to take Morgoth, then?"

"Do you want a slaver base behind that Wheel?"

"The blood runs cold at the thought."

The Margrave, now fully awake, but with eyes just a little bloodshot, hit some keys on his desk and looked the screen set into the top. "Well, gentlemen, from what we have here, and for once I hope the Professor is right, the slavers only have about two hundred ships left between them. That makes sense if only because off Cadwallader every small fleet attacked them first. Brian has three hundred small ships, fifty of his hybrid transport cruisers and three heavy cruisers. He also has about five hundred other allied ships of various types, all small stuff, from different worlds. By now, these will be on their way back home, leaving him with his slavers and his own units, five hundred fifty three in all. In other words, once we take out the Wheel, we have him if we want him."

Goth looked around and then, being the only one willing to ask the question, asked "Do we want him?"

"Not really. But he's technically still High King and if we want to get away with blowing up a slaver system we have to get rid of any vestige of the old legalities. We don't want anything coming back to haunt us."

"Finish the job, and Brian as well."

"Something like that. I'd like to avoid killing him if I can, but if we have to we will."

Surbo, the convert, said what was on everyone's mind. "If you do kill him, you become Prince of Tremulon as well as Margrave of Golonida and Protector of Kanden."

"And a dynastic marriage can make me Senator of Kanden as well. The two major industrial arms producing planets and the Library, with its contacts with Old Earth. Not a bad start."

It was the first the Margrave had mentioned any serious thought of such an arrangement. Goth felt his eyebrows rising at the words.

"When did you come up with this idea?" he asked in amazement. The Margrave had avoided any such thoughts since his failed romance with Alice of Hermetia and Goth remembered his Margrave nearly going berserk when that had happened. All Golonida had been amazed that the Margrave had maintained his friendship with Aethelwold in spite of it.

So had Aethelwold, who had expected to be assassinated.

But now the Margrave was laughing and everyone in the room was laughing with him. "Actually, about an hour ago in my sleep. But it would solve two serious problems. First, there is the little matter of my needing an heir. I know Goth here doesn't want the job, that's why I named him regent. And, given his advanced years and wretched appearance, I doubt anyone who knows him would stay on the planet very long if he got it."

Even Goth laughed at that.

"The second is the problem of what's going to happen on Kanden after a few months and the euphoria of the Council's execution wears off. If we want to keep that planet, and it looks like we're stuck with it, we're going to need a stronger hold. We may even have to have a plebiscite to ratify our takeover."

"Are you feeling well?"

"A bit sleepy, Goth, but otherwise fit. Why?"

"If I remember, your family has never been exactly enthusiastic about, if I may use the obscenity, democracy."

"Is that all? For a second I thought you might be thinking that you want to be Margrave after all. But you're right. It's useful for local matters, but at the planetary level it's more trouble than it's worth. Still, the Kanden seem to like it and if they think they voted me in, they might be a little more tractable."

"They may also try to vote you out."

"We can blow up that bridge after we cross it."

Goth made a little cough. "There is then another small matter which may stand in the way of this little scheme."

"And that is?"

"The Lady Margot should be willing. If not, you could be in for another, well..."

"I think we don't have to worry about that, for the moment."

"If you say so."

"So now we have to do something about that damned Wheel."

The Professor inserted a small cube into a slot in the wall and pushed a button. "Here is a cross section of the Morgoth system. The red dots are asteroids whose orbit is of such a nature as to make predicting their movements very difficult, if not impossible. The green

line is the route used by Moloch Paphnutius in his attack on the Luxor Camp. As you can see, the Wheel stands directly in its path."

The Margrave was too tired to be patient. "We know this, Professor."

"Of course. But it's a good starting point. As you can see, the rogue asteroids, as we call them, never quite get into the orbit of the Wheel. But they do come in range of a heavy cannon."

Goth walked around the display, his right hand worrying his chin and realizing that he needed a shave. "In other words, if we could mount something big on one of those asteroids, we could get in firing range of the Wheel before the Wheel could respond."

"Not exactly. To do that, we would have had to have acted two years ago."

The Margrave chuckled. "From now on, then, Professor, may I suggest that you make our plans three years in advance."

The Professor, used to this sort of thing, ignored the sarcasm and continued.

"As I said, these asteroids are supposed to be unpredictable due to collisions with various flying junk and the sheer number of things floating around that planet. But if we isolate just one, we may be able to get a close approximation of its movements. Close enough that it can mask a ship."

"How big a ship?"

The Professor grinned with triumph. "A battleship."

"I take it we are not talking about a small meteor."

"If you will look at the blue dot. That asteroid, R 892, is larger than the Star of Vengeance."

"And if we calculate wrong, good bye ship."

"We don't have to get that close."

"But it would have to make an approach hidden from the planet and the Wheel."

"Our evidence is that the Wheel has no hyperwave drones and has to depend on light-speed detection."

"Probably always did. Drones wouldn't last long in that mess."

"Still, there isn't a lot of room to move around out there. Let's try something else."

A cough came from Baron Surbo. "There's always diplomacy."

"I agree," said the Margrave. Let my cousin think we want to talk."

The Minister of State, who had been silent heretofore spoke. "I have been in continuous communication with Brian's people. They look forward to our mutual cooperation."

"Good for them."

"Of course, they have no idea what they're flying into and know nothing about Edessa."

"Not yet."

"And when they do find out about Edessa, I'm going to have to do some persuading to calm them down."

The Margrave looked at the growing pile of petitions in the corner and then back at the Minister of State, who was sweating a little more than usual. "That's what I pay you for. You're a diplomat. Lie."

"About what, Margrave?"

"About our intentions towards my cousin. And as far as Edessa goes, we'll blow up that bridge..."

"After we cross it. It would have been easier if we'd waited to do that, you know."

"That which you must do, do right away.' Book of the Songs of Elvis, chapter twenty three, verse one hundred thirty six."

"It would still have made things less complicated."

"When the news gets out, we'll make a statement threatening the rest of the slaver worlds with the same thing if they continue raiding."

"Sitting on Morgoth, they may not take it with the appropriate seriousness."

"Morgoth, technically, belongs to my cousin. At the moment and the slavers will do nothing to change that as long as they need weapons from Tremulon."

Goth sighed and looked around the room. The staff meeting was getting buried in details. "When do we attack?" he asked with an abruptness that even startled the Margrave.

"As soon as we can put our fleets in position. The fleets I rerouted will be in position in how many days, Professor?"

"Six days."

"And the Sixth fleet is on its way back from Edessa and should be here in a week. I want to be able to take out that wheel and land troops within a day after that. Now are we sure that nothing got out from the Edessa system?"

"The hyperwave was clear. But if any ships come to trade, they'll discover real quick what happened."

"That can't be helped. So we assume that in a couple of days, everyone knows about Edessa. Let's announce it now."

"Now?"

"Now. We state exactly what we planned to. The Confederation is dead and we have decided to act."

"Your cousin is going to have a fit."

"Let him, Goth. Let him. I think it'll make him want to negotiate with me all the more."

"You're the Margrave. Do we use a simple statement or pictures?"

"Both. I think seeing a system blown to hell'll have an instructive effect on my cousin."

"I think it'll have an effect on a lot more people than that."

"I'd expect so. For once our bad reputation may prove useful."

"Barbarians acting like barbarians."

"Something like that."

Four hours after the meeting, the first video of the destruction of Edessa went out over the hyperwave and the complaints began arriving within minutes. Even worlds that had been the subject of repeated slaver raids were outraged. There was enough impotent fury being unleashed to make a convention of clergymen jealous. The Margrave thoroughly enjoyed it.

It became obvious that his cousin, the High King, did not share in the jest. A bell announced his transmission to the Margrave, who took it in the throne room, rather than the office. And for the first time since his father's funeral, the Margrave wore the full robes of state. He had forgotten how heavy and hot they were and now realized why he had put them away.

Brian was also richly arrayed, which made more sense in the climate of Morgoth. His close-set eyes were even closer it seemed and his entire image seemed to growl.

"Cousin of Golonida. We are highly displeased, no, make that angered, at the senseless slaughter of the people of the Edessa system. This action of yours violates all the laws of the Confederation."

The Margrave responded, trying desperately not to sneer, but finding it difficult to keep the disdain out of his voice, "We are sorry that you feel that way, but there are times in history when reason must override law and when the forces of law are impotent to stop you, so much the better."

Brian nearly jumped off his throne. "This time, cousin, you go too far. I demand a full apology and explanation."

"Which I shall be happy to give you, your Majesty. But not over the hyperwave, for these are matters which must be spoken of with discretion and in private, rather than on open channels."

High King Brian settled back into his throne and smiled under his large crown, which was actually a little small for his head. The Margrave noticed that and bit his cheek to keep from laughing. Brian nodded and spoke.

"We understand, cousin and will await your coming with anticipation."

"Of course, your Majesty. May I send my Minister of state in a few days to make the preparations, as this is to be a serious state visit."

"Naturally. In how long will he be coming?"

"There are some matters involving our new Protectorate of Kanden which require urgent attention. He should be arriving in about seven days."

"We will look forward to receiving him."

"Now, your majesty, I must request that the Lady Margot of Kanden be returned to our care."

"She is safe and We are certain that she will go willingly."

More than willingly with slavers running around Morgoth.

"Thank you. I will inform my Minister of State of our plans."

"Very well, cousin. We are certain that this matter of Edessa can be worked out."

The interview ended and the Margrave pulled off the heavy robes as fast as he could grab them. His uniform was covered with sweat.

Goth was almost doubled with laughter. "You handled that fool brilliantly. When did you figure out that that was what would get to him?"

"About two minutes ago. I think his brain's losing its charge. He was never that stupid before."

"He's getting worse, no question about that. Now what?"

"Now we break the news to our Minister of State about his new role in the glorious new age of Golonida."

Breaking the news was easy. Waiting for the Minister of State to recover his senses after hearing the Margrave's plan was something else again. When he was finally coherent, the Minister of State, his voice two octaves higher than usual, said "Margrave, I beg of you. I'm a diplomat, not a soldier."

XVII

The Margrave smiled with true malevolence and said, "You've got nothing to worry about. The captain of the Sword will do all the work. You just have to talk on the hyperwave a little."

The Minister of State was not impressed. "That will be a great comfort to my widow and my two children."

"But look at it this way. If anything goes wrong, which is highly unlikely, you'll be the first diplomat in our history to die with honor and leave a nice pension at the same time."

"I'm sorry, Margrave, but I find that less than reassuring."

"And, if we all survive, you don't have to attend any state dinners for a year."

That cinched it. The Margrave had to hold his Minister of State back to keep him from running to the ship. The opportunity of avoiding the institutionalized food fights was enough of a bribe for anyone of the Minister of State's placid nature. He had never really learned the art of aiming a potato.

Back the office, which the Margrave was now considering redecorating, the Professor sat nervously as his ruler looked over the latest intelligence material from Morgoth.

"And the Lady Margot is still safe?"

"As of our latest news, yes."

"And you're certain of this report?" holding up a separate sheet.

"That Tomas of Edessa is on Morgoth? Definitely. We have three eye-witnesses and a short video."

"Show it."

The slightly blurred image of the Arch Enemy floated in the center of the office. The Margrave leaned over his desk to take a closer look at it and then leaned back. "I want Lady Margot out of there before we attack."

"Not easy."

"I didn't say anything about easy. I said I want her out and safe before we move and Tomas decides that he can take revenge on me by killing her. My dynastic plans are at stake."

"It can be done, of course, but it'll mean losing one of our best contacts on Morgoth. He'll have to be the one to fly her out."

"Is he reliable?"

"I'd stake my life on it."

"If I were my cousin, I'd say you just have. But there can't be any mistakes in this. Do we have any of our own people there we can use?"

"No one who can steal a slaver gunship and fly it out past the wheel before anyone knows who's on board."

"I see the point. Okay, do it."

"How soon?"

"Our newly courageous Minister of State is taking off in four days for Morgoth. She has to be on her way here by the time we leave."

"We, Margrave?"

"When he leaves on the Sword, I leave on the Star."

"I see."

"I'm told we can project a hologram on the Star shields to make it look like an asteroid, almost. If the detectors on the Wheel are as bad as we think, we should be in firing range before anyone notices."

"Assuming they haven't put anything on the ground looking up."

"My guess, and I hope to Zeus it's right, is that they won't bother. Everyone's afraid of the Wheel, remember?"

"Including us, I hope."

"There's a difference between fear and rational prudence. I don't like suicide missions, especially if I'm on one."

The Professor allowed himself one of his rare laughs. "Your subjects will find that thought comforting."

"Good. Now there's a little detail that I want you to take care of. A bunch of troopships, with about twenty divisions, are leaving tomorrow. I want the news put out that we've had a little more trouble on Kanden than we expected and they're going there to restore order."

"A simple matter. I take it that the troops are not going to Kanden."

"Correct. Two divisions are going to Morgoth. The others are going to positions near Tremulon. Surbo is on his way back to Tremulon now. With any luck, we won't need them, but policy is useless without the force to back it."

"Then your cousin is a dead man?"

"Not if I can avoid it. But the eventuality must be considered. I would hope to be able to exile him somewhere where he can't cause me any trouble, but somehow I doubt I'm going to be that lucky."

"And Surbo?"

"If we beat Brian, he'll persuade the local forces to lay down their arms. I've already got a fleet nearby to move in right now."

"Margrave, you are aware of my projections concerning the losses of such an invasion, if the Tremulon decide to fight."

"Of course. That's why I'm hoping Surbo is more persuasive than usual."

Two days later, on Morgoth, the Lady Margot opened her door to an officer in a slaver uniform. She was about to scream for help when he put his hand over her mouth and

whispered a code word into her ear, something the Margrave had given her during their last conversation before the Cadwallader battle, hoping that the hidden microphones that were assumed to be in every room in the Morgoth palace were not sensitive enough to hear.

He removed his hand and she was about to pack some things when he shook his head and motioned to the hall. She followed him as he led her out of the palace to a waiting ground car. The car sped to the spaceport where his uniform got him past the guards at the landing field, who did not know Lady Margot from Elvis and were used to slaver officers taking local women to their ships. They boarded a ship and took off without clearance, the officer shouting next to an open com unit "Not that switch you stupid bitch!"

As the controllers at the port laughed the ship headed straight out of the atmosphere and a message went to the Wheel with the order to hold fire. The crew of the Wheel was still laughing as the ship jumped into hyperspace and only stopped when the spaceport was overrun with security people looking for Lady Margot.

It seemed that High King Brian, thinking that Lady Margot was kidnapped by a slaver, was panic stricken.

The Margrave was in the bathroom when the High King's form appeared on the Hyperwave. The Margrave took his time getting back to his office and then sat down to receive the message.

"Cousin of Golonida," the High King began, "It grieves me to tell you that a treacherous guard has done the unthinkable. The Lady Margot has been stolen away in spite of the best efforts of my troops and even now is somewhere in space."

That the High King himself would make the announcement was an indication of the nervous state he was in. The Margrave was tempted to take some advantage of it for a second but relented. "Your Majesty need have no fear for the Lady. If I may reveal a state secret to you, the man who took her was in my pay and even now she's on her way to Golonida. I apologize for what may seem to be a breach of trust, but I've had some very disturbing news about conditions on Kanden and it seemed necessary to have the Lady in my care as soon as possible. You may have heard that I've had to dispatch some troops to reinforce my garrison."

The High King was visibly relieved. "You are forgiven, cousin and I understand the situation. But please, in the future, consult with me first. Wars have been known to start from such things."

The connection broke and the Margrave called in Goth. As the Chief of Staff walked through the door, the Margrave started laughing. "I can't believe that my cousin once ran an entire planet. He's the biggest idiot since Duke Leto."

Goth, who had missed the conversation, had the strange feeling that he was walking into something. "Uh, Margrave, who was Duke Leto?"

"Oh, some pre-Earth human dictator with the brains of a mouse. I ran across some book about him the Kanden Library a few years back. Complete fool!"

"I see. I take it your cousin is being stupid again."

"And a weakling to boot. I don't understand it. He used to be a formidable opponent."

Goth thought for a minute. "Do you think he may be beginning to understand his position? I doubt his allies'll let him go back to Tremulon."

"No, I doubt that too. A pity. If he did, I might be tempted to let him stay High King and clean out the slavers for him. He's clearly in no mood to oppose me on anything."

"He's in no position to oppose anyone."

The arrival of Lady Margot was accomplished with much ceremony. The small craft landed to the accompaniment of a regimental band and the Margrave in dress uniform, tight collar, engraved blaster and all, meeting her at the landing field. She was quite surprised by the greeting and even more disturbed by the fact that she was wearing the same clothes she had left Morgoth in.

"The Margrave must forgive my appearance," she said with the most formality she could muster.

"Of course. There's a whole new wardrobe waiting in your quarters. You have to look proper for the dinner I'm giving in honor of your escape tonight."

Remembering the last one, Lady Margot was less than enthusiastic in her thanks.

That evening, amid flying vegetables and the usual brawling, she turned to the Margrave and, ducking a low-flying carrot, asked why the sudden change in everyone. "The last time I was here, Kanden was a swear word. Now everyone likes me. What did you do?"

The Margrave hurled a cucumber across the room and answered, "You mean you haven't heard? Of course not. Kanden is now a protectorate of Golonida. And your people seem happy with the situation. They're getting my troops there drunk."

"But the Council made alcohol illegal."

"Admiral Michael had to have the Council shot. Your father was happy with the decision. I think he would have liked to pull the trigger himself."

"I certainly would've."

"I somehow got that impression the last time you were here. Anyway, with everything being the way it is, I thought formalizing the situation that's existed for the last century would be a good idea. It's turned out to be a better one than I hoped. Golonidans are very popular on Kanden right now and so my people like Kanden better in return."

A potato bounced on the plate in front of Goth sending food splattering up onto his tunic. "Blast it! I just had this thing cleaned!" he roared and threw a glob of something at the offender, who returned fire and soon there was a lively exchange of produce and even meat between the head table and the other side of the hall.

"I think it's time we excused ourselves," the Margrave whispered to Lady Margot and they escaped out the side door just as a large joint of urz-beast flew past where her head would have been.

"I still don't know how you stand those things." she said breathlessly as she sat on the balustrade overlooking the garden.

"It's a tradition. And it's fun. Besides, in a couple of days I'm going to have more serious stuff flying around me."

The meaning was obvious to Lady Margot, who looked a combination of pained and terrified. "Fighting? I thought the battle was over."

"Not really. I have to take Morgoth. That's why I had to get you out of there, in spite of the vociferous objections of my Professor."

"Professor?"

"The officious, balding man at the end of the table with the tall blond on each arm. He heads up my intelligence service and provides lots of good advice, which I even listen to on rare occasions."

"I see."

"Maybe you do. The man who flew you here was our best agent on Morgoth. Of course, if things go well, he'll no longer be needed there and if they don't Goth'll just have find a replacement, or rather have the Professor find one for him."

"When do you leave?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"But I thought Morgoth couldn't be attacked. The Wheel..."

"No defense is impenetrable. We've got that solved."

"Then why are you worried about it?"

"The Wheel can be made stronger than it is, that means if I wait, the slavers have a well defended base that may prove too costly to attack. Right now, there aren't a lot of worlds that can defend themselves. The losses in the Battle off Cadwallader were as bad as I expected. And Baron Tomas of the former system of Edessa is on Morgoth, instead of dying honorably with the rest of his disgusting breed."

"What?"

"I've been naughty. My Sixth Fleet obliterated the Edessa system. The idea is to make our decision to end the slaver raids credible, but we didn't expect them to take the Morgoth Wheel."

"But your cousin's people have the Wheel."

"No, the slavers really hold Morgoth and my cousin is too foolish to realize he's been had."

"And you have to go?"

"This time I have to. My commanders can do the work, but I have to be there. Honor."

"I thought you didn't believe in honor."

"Not usually, but this is something a Margrave has to do, to be with his men."

"I won't claim to understand."

At this point the Margrave put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close to him.

"Margot?"

"What?"

"Before I go, there is a little matter I want to talk about."

"Oh?"

"Kanden is now a Golonidan protectorate and I need to secure the succession. And I'm really not very good at this..."

"Are you asking me to be the Marquesa?"

"Well, something like that."

"Well, my warrior prince, I accept."

"Wonderful. Goth can plan the ceremony for right after I finish with Morgoth and Brian."

"I still don't understand all that, but if you have to go..."

"Good, just accept the fact and know I'll be back for you."

XVIII

The Sword emerged from hyperspace at the edge of the Slot, that corridor of relative safety that led to Morgoth. That safety was conditional on two factors, the first being the peculiar activity of the accumulated junk in the Morgoth System. The second factor was the trigger-happiness of the guards on the Wheel. Under the reign of the Dukes of Morgoth, the Wheel guards had been relatively well disciplined, but with the new management, that could not be counted on. And, if slavers were in charge on the Wheel, then it was extremely unwise to expect it. A Golonidan target might be too much for them to resist.

That fact lay heavily upon the mind of the Minister of State, who had expected to collect his own pension, rather than have his family gain it posthumously. As he sat in his stateroom looking at the holographic display of the system with a dot representing the ship as it moved towards Morgoth, he prepared to make the first contact with the High King's men, to prepare for the coming visit of the Margrave.

Several hours after the Sword, which was moving at slow cruise speed, emerged from hyperspace, a rogue asteroid appeared at the edge of the system, moving slightly more rapidly than usual, but erratic in its maneuvers. The asteroid was the Star of Vengeance, with the image of an asteroid projected on its screens to camouflage its presence.

The meteor screen was reinforced and the gun shields dropped. The Margrave was on the bridge, strapped in as were the rest of the crew. It was unusual to do this, when not actually in combat, but the violent movements of the Star, necessitated by its disguise, made it dangerous to stand on the deck. Anything not glued down was also at risk.

"A bit of a rough ride, Margrave," the captain said as the ship jerked again. "We may be going back with the shields holding her together."

The Margrave released a grim chuckle. "I agree. All the welds'll have to be checked. I hope we don't take any battle damage."

"Let's not even think about that."

"Okay, we won't. How long 'til we fire?"

"A couple of hours. We're moving slow."

"I wonder how my Minister of State is holding up?"

"I really couldn't say, Margrave."

"I'd imagine he's on the verge of a breakdown by now. He's never seen a ship fire its guns."

"And I bet he's never been shot at either."

"You'd win that bet."

On the Sword, the Minister of State was worrying his collar and sweating profusely. In front of him floated the image of the High King's Major Domo who was being hopelessly bureaucratic.

"I cannot allow my Margrave to come under those conditions," the Minister of State was saying. "Just because of some ancient compact."

"According to that ancient compact," the Major Domo went on "the Margrave of Golonida is a criminal and has to appear as a seeker of pardon. It is all very clear."

"May I remind you that if this were Tremulon and not Morgoth, my Margrave would start a war rather than agree to such terms."

"But he has chosen to submit to the High King instead and thus the forms must be followed."

The Minister looked frustrated. "I'll have to consult with him directly. He may not even wish me to land."

"Do so and get back to me. The High King is most anxious that this meeting take place."

The Minister of State broke the connection and transmitted a signal back to Golonida which Goth answered, instructing the Minister of State to continue negotiations. Actually, this was what the Margrave had counted on. The more diplomatic gobbledigook going back and forth, the less likely an attack would be expected.

The Sword continued its approach on a straight line, its turrets all aimed straight forward. The Minister of State took a trip to the bridge and asked the captain how it was going to destroy the Wheel without being blasted first, especially since the shields were down.

"It's really quite simple, Minister," the captain responded with a certain condescension. "We actually only give support fire, to add a few levels to the real blast that the Star'll give. But to be effective, we have to be within two thousandth of a light second range."

The Minister of State felt his legs decide that they wanted to leave his body. The Margrave had mentioned something about short range, but this was carry matters to an unwarranted extreme.

The captain, seeing his passenger's obvious distress, shook his head and said "We calculated the length of time it'd take to raise our shields, cut it in half and that gave us the closest we could get. The computers on the Star have our speed calculated and will fire its main battery at level 12 at such a time that our blast will hit the Wheel at the same moment. We assume, or rather the Margrave assumes, that the combined fire our ship, which can hit level nine with the power from the shields being fed to the guns, should be enough to overcome the shielding on the Wheel, which was designed to withstand a lot more but is a little out of service at the moment."

The Minister of State was not greatly comforted. He had visions of the Wheel firing without warning and the Sword, to say nothing of himself, being blown to atoms. And there was the little matter of the troops on the planet. The Margrave's assumption's aside, they might very well have anti-ship batteries aimed straight up.

On Golonida, the Margrave had laughed the suggestion off. "No, the Dukes of Morgoth kept those batteries concentrated at the other weak points on the equator of the planet, just in case someone decided to clear a path through the junk with blasters. Which is why we aren't doing that, at least not now."

There was no possibility of lowering the shields on the Star of Vengeance. In addition to the necessity of using them for camouflage, junk was bouncing off them at a regular rate as the ship made its final rapid shift in course to bring all its main batteries to bear on the Wheel. This was further complicated by the fact that the blast from the battleship had to hit the Wheel at an angle which would send the blast beams continuing off into space, vaporizing junk, rather than on towards the planet. The Wheel, being a single unit, could be shielded, like a battleship, much more heavily than a ground installation which had to have its shields stop at the ground. To do otherwise would be to have the ground position float off into space at the speed of the rotation of the planet. It was not something anyone wanted to try.

The Margrave had donned his armor, with some difficulty as his stateroom was moving with the rest of the ship, and had returned to the bridge. A clock on one wall counted down to the moment of firing. "I hope that Captain Monash has the sense to stay out of our line of fire," he commented while watching the clock tick away, one second at a time.

"I'm sure he will," General Trag, who had returned from Hermetia for this mission, answered chuckling. "I think he knows how expensive heavy cruisers are."

"It wasn't the money I was thinking about."

Trag looked at his Margrave with mock astonishment. "Are you well, Margrave?" he asked with a broad grin.

"No! If this ship jerks around one more time I may lose my lunch and my dinner."

"We're not doing that anymore. We've got our firing position marked and it's pretty straight running now, assuming nothing large runs into us."

"Nothing will. I just issued an edict to that effect."

"I hope the junk understands."

"I doubt it, but it made me feel better."

"We should have gotten the Holy Sequin from Hermetia. No asteroid would dare hit that."

"This is no time for blasphemy. One more collision and I may get religion myself."

"That's only small stuff, Margrave. If we hit something big, we'd know it."

"I'm gratified to hear that. Can't we move in any faster?"

"No, Margrave. Our firing is timed and if we shoot too soon the Sword won't be in position. If the guards on the Wheel take their eyes off it and look at us now, we could have some problems."

"I see. Very well, continue on course."

"It's only five more minutes until we fire."

"Thank Zeus!"

Aboard the Sword, the Minister of State was engaged in another conversation with the Major Domo.

"And the Margrave will not come as a supplicant. Law or no Law, he comes as a peer of the Human Confederacy."

"There is no question of his peerage. The question is one of protocol. It's not like the old days when he and his cousin had contests on GOLONIDA to see who could throw food the farthest."

"My Margrave fails to see the distinction."

"That, my dear Minister, is the problem."

"The opinion of the Margrave in this matter is quite strong. I agree that certain forms must be followed, but this is not one of them. By the way, I've been instructed by my ship's captain to tell you that we should be passing very close to the Wheel in a few minutes. I assume they know we're coming."

"The Wheel has been watching your approach since you left hyperspace. There's a rogue asteroid some distance out, but its movements indicate that you should be in no danger. Also, the fact that your ship has lowered its shields indicates the peaceful intent of your mission. We're getting the banquet ready for this evening."

The Minister of State felt, for the first time in his life, a pang of guilt. "Thank you," he said, hoping to keep his face as expressionless as possible.

The batteries of the Star of Vengeance fired.

The Sword moved closer to the Wheel, turning slightly to present its batteries while looking harmless. "I hope the gunners on the Star know how to aim," the Captain said, not entirely joking.

"If they don't," answered the first officer, "we'll never know what hit us."

The ship was automatic now, the clock ticking away the final seconds until the viewers went dark for an instant and a brilliant light covered the Wheel side of the ship. One two thousandth of a second later, as the blast bolt from the Star reached it at the same time, the Morgoth Wheel ceased to exist. By that time, the shielding on the Sword was at full and the camouflage of the Star had been turned off. As pandemonium developed on Morgoth, the Sword Captain ordered his blasters set at level one and fired at the space port. Three seconds later, the Morgoth spaceport, all its ships and occupants, became a sea of molten glass.

Aboard the Star of Vengeance, the Margrave spoke into the hyperwave. "Fleets move in. Take Morgoth."

It was not the most eloquent order he had ever given, but it was one of the most effective. Three battle fleets and the troops ships of two divisions of ground fighters emerged from hyperspace at the end of the Slot and began accelerating towards Morgoth. As they approached, the Star began using its blasters to clear a wider path towards the planet and the Sword moved into position to cover the final approach in case any ground batteries could be moved into position. The Eight Fleet stayed at the far end of the Slot to take out any approaching relief ships which may have been their way from Tremulon or the High King's other allies.

With these preparations, it was a surprise for the Margrave when a transmission from the Palace on Morgoth reached the Star.

"Do we want to talk?" General Trag asked the Margrave.

The Margrave thought for a second and nodded. "Sure. Maybe my cousin has some offer I might like."

But it was not the High King who stared out of the viewer. It was Baron Tomas of Edessa, unshaved, his uniform ill-fitting and dirty. "Greetings, Butcher of Golonida. So now you add treachery to genocide."

"Pesticide, Baron. I'm surprised to see you. I thought by now you'd have been gathered to Elvis' bosom. Of course, it doesn't matter, you're dead just the same."

"Perhaps, Margrave. I have the small satisfaction of having done this first. Your cousin, I believe."

And with that, the Baron reached down and lifted up a severed head which had formerly been attached to the body of the High King.

But if Baron Tomas had expected dismay, he was surprised in his turn by laughter. "Thank you, Tomas. You've done me a service. I was wondering what I was going to do about him. Now I'm not only Margrave of Golonida, but Prince of Tremulon as well."

The Star cut its reception and Baron Tomas sputtering never was heard. The Margrave sat down and quickly composed a short speech. "Open a clear channel for me."

"Done, Margrave."

In a matter of seconds, all over Morgoth, Golonida, Tremulon and anywhere else someone was listening, the Margrave's picture appeared. "People of Tremulon," he began, "your Prince and High King Brian has been killed by the slaver units at this moment holding Morgoth. Even as I approached to rescue him, his head was cut from his body by the savage Tomas of Edessa. I call upon the people of Tremulon to recognize me as their rightful Prince and for the soldiers of Tremulon on Morgoth to turn their guns upon the slavers who have so treacherously murdered their Prince."

The transmission ended just in time, for General Trag could only keep from laughing for so long and that time had passed very quickly indeed. The Margrave turned to find him literally doubled at the waist and roaring.

"What means this shameful levity?" he asked with mock seriousness.

The General had a hard time speaking and when he finally could get the words out "Here you were going to blow your cousin to hell and we all expected a blood-bath on Tremulon. Now I bet they greet you as some kind of hero. Coming to rescue Brian indeed!"

"It was good of Tomas to do that for us. I may let him die honorably for that. You know, General. I have the sneaking suspicion that Brian was dead for a couple days. Tomas

probably used a computer simulation to send that hyperwave message to me after we grabbed Margot. Brian would have had a little more dignity."

"If I were Tomas, I would've done anything to get you in blaster range."

"So would I. I'll grant him that."

The gunships of the attacking fleets swept past the Star and headed down towards the surface of the planet, looking for ground batteries and troop concentrations. They reported seeing heavy fighting on the surface as Tremulon soldiers engaged the slavers at all points, including the Palace, which was apparently burning in several places.

There was no significant opposition left outside the capital by the time the Golonidan forces set down on Morgoth. Landing in the open, they moved towards the Capital jumping in open order, spread out one man per mile, to protect them from any incoming fire which made concentration suicidal. Propelled by small lifters, they swept across the several miles in a matter of minutes and were soon on the outskirts of the Capital city which was ringed by what had been hastily constructed defense positions but were now blasted hulks, many containing the bodies of both defending slavers and attacking Tremulon. A few positions were still operative, but they were quickly overcome with minimal losses.

In space, the Margrave transferred to the Sword and the Minister of State to the Star. The Sword began to descend to the newly burned landing field which was now surrounded by heavy Golonidan batteries.

Golonidan troops were in the Capital city fighting house to house with slavers. Apparently, the Tremulon forces in the city proper had been killed off quickly, probably as part of a planned move if the Wheel should fall or be destroyed.

It was in this kind of fighting that the role of both shields and body armor became obvious. The shields could not stop a direct hit from a blaster, but they could deflect its force and the reflective armor would keep a fatal shot merely a wounding one. The shields, however, cut out the thermal effects of blaster bolts and protected the soldiers from flying debris, of which there was a lot in the capital, as every shot sent pieces of something in all directions. It is impossible to fire a horizon-range weapon inside a city and not hit anything.

Back at the landing field, the Margrave studied the continuous pictures of the battle being sent back by forward cameras mounted in the helmets of selected troops. A computer plotted the positions of the units and, by assessing the time between movements, calculated the level of enemy resistance. Meanwhile, word came from the Eighth Fleet that a small slaver force had come out of hyperspace and attempted system penetration. It was destroyed with no losses.

In the Capital, the Golonidan troops were finally closing in on the Palace, or what was left of it. Even from a distance it was obvious that large parts of it had been literally blown away from the inside and the fires around it were still burning. A small group of skeletons facing one helmet camera told the Margrave that some soldiers, of which side could not be told, had been foolish enough to try to use the thermal absorption capability of their shields to stay warm and had been caught by surprise before they could switch it off. The unfortunates had been quite literally cooked alive.

In the center of the Capital, a reinforced company of Golonidan troops, backed by four tanks was able to concentrate at the palace and smash in through the shielded wall. One tank was immediately destroyed by blaster fire from a position off to the side and several soldiers more killed before the enemy was neutralized. The Margrave, watching the action screamed into his com unit "Stay spread out, idiots! And cut down those walls before you move."

A colonel on the Margrave's staff looked at the screen array and said calmly "It won't be long now. Another part of the city's clear."

"Can't be over soon enough for me, Colonel." And then to the communications officer, "anything from the rest of this planet?"

"Observers report no fire or troop movement. Apparently everything's concentrated here."

"Stupid of them. You'd think they'd have guessed we'd slag the spaceport first."

"They didn't think you'd get past the Wheel."

"Probably that's the case. Well, we've got 'em. They can't get out of the city and they can't get off planet. What about our new subjects?"

"The Tremulon are in rear areas licking their wounds and being very loyal to their new Prince."

"Thank Zeus for small favors. At least we don't have to fight them too."

The fighting was inside the palace now, with more hunks of the building being blasted apart as the Golonidans and the slavers fought for each hallway.

"Perhaps we should withdraw our men and slag the building with tank fire," the Colonel suggested.

The Margrave grunted. "Uh uh. I want Tomas alive, if possible."

"We can save some men."

"I know that, Colonel. I know, but this is of some personal importance to me."

It seemed to go on forever. The movement on the screens stalled around the Palace and then crept ever inward. The cameras transmitted images of walls being blown apart as detectors found hidden positions and parts of the roof falling in as supports were blown away in the fighting. No one without a shield was going to get out of the Palace alive. Fortunately, most of the neutral heirs had taken cover in a protected area of the city when the Wheel blew. It was one small feat of Golonidan intelligence that they had known where to go without the slavers finding out. That had been the Professor's idea, which the Margrave had first opposed thinking it might add an unacceptable risk to the plan. They had finally agreed that Golonidan agents in the Palace would be the only ones to know where to take the neutrals and they would only be informed as the Wheel blew.

But it ended. The image of a defeated Tomas of Edessa appeared on one of the screens and the fighting in the ruins slowly halted as the last slaver positions were destroyed. The Margrave mounted a tank and rode into the city to be confronted with a scene which had not changed from the ancient days of pre-space. A ruined city always looks like any other ruined city.

As he dismounted in the courtyard of what had once been the Palace the Margrave found it difficult to believe that only three months before he and Goth had been here to party, attend the Conclave and complain about the heating. The Palace had a lot more drafts now than it did then.

The Margrave backed up to a floating robot chair and sat down as a squad of Golonidan infantry dragged a heavily restrained Baron Tomas before him. At a sign they stood him facing the Margrave and moved away. The Margrave drew his blaster.

"Did I ever tell you the story of the first man I ever killed, Colonel?"

"No, Margrave."

"It was when I was fifteen. My father had me shoot a criminal, I don't remember what he did, probably overtime parking or something like that that dad got upset about, so that I'd get used to seeing men die. I will confess that I was less than enthusiastic about it at the time."

He pulled the trigger.

"As you can see, I no longer feel the same revulsion. Now have the men find some natives to get this mess cleaned up and lets go home. I've got petitions to catch up on."

The END