



Riposte

DEATH FORCE

Waves of heat washed up and over him as dazzling white fire flashed around the *Firestarter*. Again, he felt himself slammed down into the couch, but his legs had fallen from their positions on the jump jet controls. Some titanic force grabbed his *Firestarter* at the feet, whipping the thirty-five-ton 'Mech into the air like a doll.

Andrew clawed desperately for the eject button, but gravity pinned his arms into place on the command couch's arms. Spots flashed before his eyes and a dim, horrifying realization crawled up from the place where his nightmares hid. *Out of control . . . G-forces too much. Can't black out.* Gritting his teeth, he forced his right hand to punch again at the eject button, but consciousness had already drained away before he could hit it.

WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 2

BATTLETECH

08609

WARRIOR: RIPOSTE

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ROC

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WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 4

To my family:

Mom, Dad, Kerin, Patrick, and Joy.

Thanks for the help, encouragement, and support throughout the years.

The author would like to express his special thanks to the following people for their help (in many different forms) in completing this novel: Liz Danforth, Jennifer Robertson, Ross Babcock, Don Ippolito, Jordan Weisman, Bob Charrette, and Sam Lewis. Thanks for straightening out problems, pointing out omissions, filling in the details, and noticing errors that I had allowed to creep into the manuscript.

WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 6

Prologue

ComStar First Circuit Compound

Hilton Head Island, North America, Terra

15 July 3027

Standing alone in the center of the First Circuit chamber, she held her head high and glared straight ahead at the Primus. Her golden hair fell to the shoulders of her red robe, and hooded her face, cutting off her view of the other Precentors standing at their translucent podiums. Beneath her feet was the gold star inlaid into the alabaster floor, and the harsh overhead spotlight almost seemed to pin her to the spot.

They do not matter. They may surround me physically and their smug contempt provide background annoyances, but this is a battle between Primus Julian Tiepolo and me. Myndo let a thin smile upturn the corners of her mouth. A battle between the Primus and the Word of Blake.

The spotlight's backglare left no shadows on Primus Tiepolo's face, whose sallow, waxy flesh was barely a shade lighter than his unpretentious dun robe. His aquiline nose and flat, dark eyes had something predatory about them, and his voice was strong, despite being barely above a whisper. *Force still has some strength. I must be careful here.*

Unblinking, the Primus met her stare. "Do you understand, Myndo Waterly, Precentor of Dieron, that we have summoned you here to account for your actions on May the twenty-second of this year? After hearing your version of what happened, we, the First Circuit of ComStar, will determine whether or not to convene a trial of excommunication. If we do so decide, you will be temporarily stripped of your rights and privileges as a Precentor until the verdict is rendered. Do you also understand that the penalty for the alleged infraction of our directives is death?"

Myndo forced herself to nod calmly. "I do."

The Primus folded his arms, tucking his hands into the robe's voluminous sleeves. "You have been charged with informing the Internal Security Forces of the Draconis Combine that Melissa Arthur Steiner, Archon-Designate of the Lyran Commonwealth and fiancée of Prince Hanse Davion, ruler of the Federated Suns, was present within their territory. This action involved use of information that ComStar had culled from confidential messages sent through our stations as well as through other covert methods of information-gathering. Your deed, therefore, threatened to reveal some of our Blessed Order's secret operations. It also jeopardized our neutralist posture by helping the Draconis Combine." The Primus paused, fixing Myndo with a piercing stare. "Furthermore, your action flaunted a policy agreed upon by this body—a policy we all know you personally loathe. Do you offer any defense of your action?"

Precentor Dieron nodded slowly. "I would submit, Primus, that my action differed in no way from the other operations ComStar has undertaken. We have used information leaks throughout the two and a half centuries that our Blessed Order has been custodian of interstellar communications. Did not

Jerome Blake himself write, 'A well-placed word can defeat a BattleMech legion ...?'"

The Primus nodded mechanically. "You should complete the quote, Precentor Dieron. 'A well-placed word can defeat a BattleMech legion, but worry for the messenger if his duplicity is revealed.' You claim that your action mirrors those performed throughout our history could only be true if you were to warp beyond recognition the concept of similarity. Only the Primus can initiate when and how we might meddle in the politics of the Successor States—not some renegade Precentor with delusions of divinity!" Tiepolo's voice echoed from the chamber's shadow-shrouded walls, seeming to batter Myndo from all sides.

"Above all, our actions must be subtle!"

Summoning her courage, Myndo laughed harshly. "Subtle? Since when, Primus, have your actions been subtle? In 3022, you allowed Hanse Davion and Katrina Steiner to sign a treaty that bound the two realms together. Next year's marriage between Hanse Davion and Katrina's heir—a match made possible by the treaty's secret provisions—will seal that bargain. At the same time, you directed me to engineer another treaty, one allying the Draconis Combine, the Free Worlds League, and the Capellan Confederation. How is that subtle? Certainly, all the players have seen our hand in this series of alliances.

Do you even know what subtle is?"

Myndo's outburst provoked not even the slightest reaction from the Primus. Allowing the echo of his words to die out, he narrowed his eyes. "I understand subtle, Precentor Dieron, and understand it to degrees you will never comprehend. As an example, I offer our gracious reduction in prices for all communications sent out by the guests who will gather here for the wedding of Hanse Davion and Melissa Steiner next year. Already the rulers of the Successor States plan out their lines of communications, and their messages of praise for our action come pouring in. We will be privy to every communication transmitted from this most important of gatherings, and our policy encourages that those messages will be sent in *abundance*."

Myndo shook her head. "What you consider subtle I find needlessly reckless. I dislike the idea of having so many people invade our home. If anything goes wrong, it will be upon our heads. There is too much that could be discovered here. As for encouraging increased messages, will this not raise suspicions about our motives?"

Myndo waved off the Primus's attempt to reply. "Name one thing, Primus, that you have done in the past that does *not* bear the stamp of your manipulation."

The coldness of the Primus's smile shook her confidence, but her anger was undiminished. *What is his mind?* she wondered briefly. *There is no quote from Blake to answer this.*

An amused tone wove its way through the Primus's answer. "I would not have expected you to notice as you were so busy provoking a war, but Justin Xiang Allard is now a member of the Maskirovka within the Capellan Confederation. His addition to the Capellan intelligence organization will help Maximilian Liao deal with Hanse Davion. Justin Xiang, as he now styles himself, knows how his father, Quintus Allard, runs Davion's Ministry of Intelligence, Information, and Operations. Xiang's addition to the Maskirovka should blunt Davion's intelligence operations."

Myndo snorted derisively. "And you claim this chance happening as something you engineered?"

The Primus nodded. "Though we cannot claim credit for having Justin Allard tried for treason and exiled from the Federated Suns, we did manage to turn the situation to our advantage. I ordered dispatches about Justin's victories in the BattleMech games on Solaris VII to be paired with depressing messages also ruing to Maximilian Liao. More often than not, news of Justin Xiang's victories was the only bright glimmer in the Chancellor's dark days. I manufactured Liao's fascination with and hunger for Xiang. That moved him into place."

Myndo bowed her head in a gesture that was equal parts respect and penitence. "I understand what you have said, and I stand corrected." Her head came back up, slowly, and she met Tiepolo's dark stare.

"I submit, however, that my action was just as carefully orchestrated. I merely jested to a person known to us as an ISF agent that I was surprised at the Combine allowing bandits refuge in the Styx system. The ISF itself manufactured all the other information. They discerned Melissa's presence on the *Silver Eagle*.

They reacted."

Myndo narrowed her eyes. "What has happened as a result of my actions that is so important? Quintus Allard has successfully created a story to explain why the *Silver Eagle* was so important, while keeping Melissa's presence secret. Melissa was delivered safely into her fiance's arms. Some bandit ISF troopers, and mercenary MechWarriors died. This is no great calamity."

The Primus winced, and Myndo's heart leaped. In that instant, she knew that she'd struck some chord that worried him, and that told her he had some weakness she could use against him. *By the same token, it means there is something he fears, something he cannot control. Perhaps it is something he should fear as well.*

The Primus forced emotion from his voice, but the effort made his lower lip tremble slightly. "One of the mercenaries killed was Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Kell. Indeed, it was fortunate that his Kell Hounds arrived in time and with sufficient force to save the Archon-Designate, but his death unlocks a problem that I believed was safely behind us. I have no doubt that his elder brother Morgan will return and once again take control of the Kell Hounds."

Myndo frowned. *This frightens you?* "I fail to see the significance of that eventuality, and I challenge the possibility of it ever occurring. The Kell Hounds have not even sent Kell a message about his brother's death."

The Primus shook his head slowly. "No, they have not, nor would they. They will send a messenger to tell Morgan personally. That messenger will also tell him that his old enemy, Yorinaga Kurita, once again fights for the Combine. If the conflict between those two men ignites again, it could become a conflagration beyond our control."

Myndo watched as the strength drained from the Primus's body. *It is as though he is deflected from his attempt to crucify me.* Myndo opened her hands. "I have offered my defense, Primus. I submit that my effort was subtle, and undertaken at a time when it would have been impossible to summon this august body together. Rash though my judgement may have been, I contend that it has caused no real harm."

Let it serve as a lesson for all of us concerning the true power behind information, and let the experience temper our thinking. Let it be so in the sacred Name of Jerome Blake!"

The Primus looked up and polled the Precentors, then nodded wearily. "In the Name of our Blessed Blake, let it be so." His body jerked with an silent laugh. "Your peers absolve you of any guilt. You are free to go, but mark your own words. Let this experience temper your thinking, Precentor Dieron."

WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 8

Myndo bowed her head. "It shall, Primus. It shall." *When next I make a move to undercut your power it will be even more subtle—so subtle, in fact, that you'll not see it coming, nor will you survive it.*

BOOK I

Envelopment

WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 10

1

New Syrtis

Capellan March, Federated Suns

10 October 3027

"Damn you, Hanse Davion!"

Duke Michael Hasek-Davion's oath echoed off the white adobe walls of his private office. Angrily, he crumpled the message he'd just read and hurled it across the room. It bounced from the wall and Michael stared at it, wishing fervently that it would utterly vanish or, better yet, have never arrived at all.

The Duke narrowed his restless jade-green eyes and shook his head in a motion that made his long black braid slither like a snake. "How pained your wording sounds, brother-in-law. Written even by your own hand. You honor me with the information. You trust me with the information." Michael spat at—but missed—the crumpled piece of paper. "You *damn* me with it."

He crossed to the missive and recovered it in his prosthetic left hand. Returning to perch himself on the edge of his desk, he smoothed out the sheet against his thigh. Though he hated to do it, he reread the message, hoping that somehow he had missed some fact, some nuance, that would cast the whole communication in a more benign, beneficial light.

"My dear Michael," it began—with a lie. "Had it been solely up to me, I would have apprised you of this information much earlier. As well you know, I value your wisdom and devoted service as the guardian of the Capellan March. However, other forces have prevented me from sharing this joyful news with you before now."

Michael snorted derisively. *You pretend to blame the security precautions of your own Quintus Alliance or the Lyran Commonwealth's Simon Johnson for this unspeakable breach of faith, but you do not fool me, Hanse. You are not known as the Fox for your slavish devotion to the wishes of subordinates. No, Hanse, I see your shadow hand behind all of this.*

The Duke slid from his desktop and crossed the room to stare out the arched window. Any other time the view he had of the New Syrtis Spaceport would have calmed him, because it was such a strong reminder of how much power he did wield. He studied the dozen egg-shaped DropShips squatting on the tarmac. Their cargo ports stood open for loading, with service personnel hurrying about to fill the ships'

empty bellies before New Syrtis's unpredictable weather could close the scheduled launch window.

In and around the DropShips marched BattleMechs on sentry duty. Ten meters tall and humanoid in configuration, the heavily armored war machines moved steadily around the spaceport's perimeter.

Though the Duke was too distant to hear the thunder of their heavy tread, he accurately conjured up the sound from memory. Each step raised a thick, red cloud of dust, but Michael saw it as a bloodmist.

I am the master of all this. I command those ships. My orders dispatch them to rendezvous with JumpShips, and my orders send those JumpShips hopping thirty light years at a burst to carry out my whims. And I command the BattleMechs of a dozen Regimental Combat Teams. I should be invincible. He glanced down at the note. *How is it that this piece of paper can destroy me?*

He forced himself to continue reading. "Ordinary though the situation is, it will come as a shock. Yes, Michael, my years of bachelorhood come to an end next August. In Melissa Arthur Steiner, I have found a woman who is all that I have been looking for."

Michael's fingernails scratched across the window's casement as his right hand slowly tightened into a fist. *You speak of your bride as though she is secondary to the whole situation. You call her a woman, but she'll reach her majority barely six months before your wedding. Yet, I must agree that you speak true in saying she is all you have been seeking. She is the link that forges an alliance between your Federated Suns and the Lyran Commonwealth. You'd have married her as a babe in bed if her mother Katrina would have stood for it, or you would have wed Katrina herself were she capable of bearing you an heir.*

A purple stormcloud roiled overhead, cutting off the soft golden glow of New Syrtis's nearest star. It robbed the angular landscape of its bright scarlet, bathing it in a deep maroon whose color reminded Michael of dried blood. Lightning spikes stabbed down into the earth with terrible power, forcing even the Battle-Mechs to retreat before the storm's fury.

Michael returned to his desk as the storm started the wind howling like a *kalacine* waiting its turn at a slaughterhouse. "I'm sure, Michael, that you see the political benefits of this marriage. With the Lyran Commonwealth tied more tightly to us, we will box in the Draconis Combine. This means, as you have long requested, that I will be able to shift some of my military resources to your Capellan March.

Together, we can strengthen your domain so that the covetous Capellans will be persuaded to look elsewhere."

Michael smashed his right fist into the desk and then, raising it to his mouth, sucked at his bruised knuckles. *No, Hanse, you'll not sink your military talons into my realm. No. You seek to be Brutus and I am my Julius Caesar. You cloak your attempt to oust me with words of friendly intent, but I see beyond them.*

Once you have married Melissa Steiner, you will need fear no one.

Michael glanced at the shelves behind his desk. There, in rare leatherbound originals or holoedition editions, he had amassed an enviable collection of histories, some dating from the time even before the Star League. His bloody knuckles tasted salty-sweet, but he barely noticed it as his mind raced on.

It's all there, Hanse. Don't you think I know it? Man's history has always been the story of conquest by war. The advent of BattleMechs some six centuries ago did not change this basic fact, yet you have ignored it. You consider 'Mechs to be a necessary tool, yet you do not see these glorious war engines for what they truly are—the highest evolutionary state of mankind's drive for conquest. A warrior may not become one with his BattleMech— though that legend persists—but in his 'Mech, he can reach the pinnacle of his personal abilities.

Michael dropped his hand and pursed his lips. Hanse, you ignore this fact and force me to join you in playing at politics. How much do you know of my ties with Maximilian Liao? If you knew I'd visited him, you'd have stripped me of my office and settled it like a noose around my captive son Morgan's neck. You may have your suspicions about me, but you have no proof. Trust me, Hanse, you shall never have any.

Michael walked over to a map of the Successor States and let the fingers of his right hand trace the slender wedge that marked his Capellan March. My realm, larger even than the Capellan Confederation. I should be one of the five Successor Lords, but you ignore me and the claims of my blood, Hanse. You have forced me to deal with Maximilian Liao because you have refused to give me the forces I need to conquer him. Had I the troops, I could destroy him. Ah, but then, having proved to the entire Federated Suns my ability to lead, I would be able to take your place on the throne so that our people could have a proper leader at the helm of our nation.

The salty taste still lingered on the Duke's tongue as his eyes flicked over the other Great Houses pictured on the map. Already, Hanse, your hatchling alliance with the Lyran Commonwealth has drawn your three foes together. The Draconis Combine's leader, Takashi Kurita, has forced Janos Marik and Maximilian Liao to set aside their bickering so they may deal with you and House Steiner. Their alliance is not as strong as yours, for suspicion continues to undermine the ties between the Free Worlds League and the Capellans but their alliance is far from impotent.

Michael smiled slowly. But then, your rivals do not know your alliance has fledged, do they? News of your impending marriage will galvanize them. They will bind together and they will come to crush you.

Michael took a step back from the map. But how may I benefit from this turn of events?

The Duke of New Syrtis tapped his index finger against his chin. Studying his map, he saw how the borders of the Draconis Combine and the Free Worlds League were poised like the jaws of some fierce hunting animal to snap the life from the Lyran Commonwealth, Davion's ally. As his thoughts raced, he slowly nodded to himself.

Yes, I must inform Liao of your betrothal. I will continue to forward the information you send me on the strengths and positions of your troops, and I will continue to undervalue the strength of my own troops in the same reports. I will convince Liao that the Lyran Commonwealth could fall to a combined strike by Houses Marik and Kurita.

Liao, that little viper, will agree to this because it means that Marik will shift troops to the Lyran border, giving him a chance to recover some of the worlds his Confederation lost to the Free Worlds League over the past century. Liao, so confident that he knows my own strength, will pull forces from my border to launch an attack on his enemy.

Michael touched the long border between the Davion and Kurita realms. *Hanse will strike at the Draconis Combine to relieve pressure on the Lyran Commonwealth. He might even finance some insurrections in the Rasalhague military district, for haven't they always resented House Kurita domination? No matter what he does, though, his war will be a stalemate, because he does not possess enough strength to defeat the Draconis Combine.*

The pain forgotten, Michael balled his right fist and punched it into the palm of his artificial hand. *When the people grow weary of a war that cannot be won, a war launched to help the Lyran Commonwealth and Hanse's child-bride, I will strike at the Capellan Confederation and crush it. I will be the Federated Suns'*

conquering hero. In one bold stroke, I will prove myself Hanse's superior militarily. I will negotiate peace and the people will proclaim me the new Prince of the Federated Suns.

WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 12

Michael returned to his desk, where he took from a drawer his leather-bound copy of the Lyran classic, *Origins of the Three Great Families*, by Thelos Auburn. Without committing anything to paper, he mentally composed the message he wanted to send. Then, thumbing through the book, he assigned a three-number code—corresponding to page, paragraph, and word numbers—for each word in the message.

As he did so, he cupped his artificial hand in his good hand and pressed his flesh and blood fingers against the joints of their artificial mates. Executing simple, natural, and almost indetectable motions, he recorded the appropriate numbers in a RAM cache that Capellan scientists had implanted in his hand during his first visit with Maximilian Liao. Even the closest observer would see nothing more suspicious than the Duke skimming a book while massaging his artificial hand.

The Capellan engineers had also equipped the hand with a tightbeam, high-speed data pulser that would broadcast information in one incredibly short burst. Limited to a range of about four meters, its onboard programming prevented operation unless activated by a signal sent from a receiver—receiver of the type built into the local Capellan Ambassador's prosthetic leg. Then, by pressing his thumb to the base of his little finger, the Duke could pulse the message out.

Michael closed the book and returned it to the desk drawer. Scanning the stacks of documents on his desk, he quickly selected one showing the local Capellan Ambassador's letterhead. Michael read the text, then stabbed the button on his personal intercom. "Agnes, tell Ambassador Korigyn that I expect him in my audience room in two hours."

His personal secretary hesitated, her fear almost crackling through the speaker. "Forgive me, Your Grace, but the Ambassador is not in the capital right now . . ."

"I don't want you giving me his excuses, Agnes!" he snarled. "If that idiot thinks we're going to increase his embassy's yearly shipment of vodka from the Confederation just so he can sell it on the black market here to keep his mistress, he is sadly mistaken. Two hours, Agnes, or there will be hell to pay."

Michael never heard her reply. He patted his left hand and smiled to himself. *In two hours, the*

~~Ambassador will get this information Hanse has so graciously supplied me. Korigyn will turn it over to ComStar and their HyperPulse generators will flick it across the stars via their communication network.~~

Liao should have it in a matter of days, and then he will act. Through him, I shall light the fuse that will throw the Successor States into one final Chaos, and from the ruins will I rise to rule supreme over all. . .

2

Sian

Sian Commonality Capellan Confederation

15 October 3027

Justin Xiang smiled as his subordinate, Alexi Malenkov, handed him a stack of blue files. "I appreciate this very much, Alexi," he said, setting the files on his desk and idly covering them with his left hand. A black leather glove sheathed the prosthetic limb, and Justin chose to ignore Malenkov's look of repugnance as his gaze fell on the lifeless hand.

Nodding his blond head, Malenkov quickly recovered his composure. "I assumed, Citizen Xiang, that you would be especially interested in our reports on how the Davion unit you once commanded has done in the recent military exercises. The First Kittery Training Battalion will be shifted, in a month or so, from probationary status because of their performance, and will become part of the Davion Light Guards, First Battalion."

Justin smiled easily. "Is Captain Redburn still in command, or did they provide a new commander for the unit?"

Malenkov seated himself on the edge of Justin's desk and lowered his head to just beneath the level of the gray cubicle walls. "It's all in the reports, Justin. Because of Redburn's loyalty to you during the trial, Count Vitios recommended that he be replaced. Apparently, however, the MechWarriors in the battalion protested and he was retained."

"Good." Justin raked his right hand back through his straight black hair. "When do you anticipate your analysis team will finish up with their assessment of the Moravian part of Operation Galahad '27?" Lady Romano is quite concerned with the units used in that battle. She maintains that the First Bell Training Battalion was configured along the lines of Marion's Highlanders, the 'Mech regiment serving on her world of Highspire, and she was upset at the 'casualty reports' suggesting that the defenders, the Sixth Crucis Lancers Regimental Combat Team, ripped the Bell Battalion apart."

The analyst from the Tikonov Commonality of the Capellan Confederation shrugged. "Your father has his Counter-intelligence Division working overtime to give us plenty of false data about Operation Galahad

'27." Malenkov smiled weakly. "The report Romano Liao is talking about has been utterly discounted."

Justin pursed his lips thoughtfully. "That's something."

~~Malenkov nodded, then a pained look came over his face. "Unfortunately, the real report about the exercise is almost as dismal as the fake. About the only thing the Bell Battalion did right was capture a mining center, but that was because it had been abandoned during a hideous blizzard in the area. The Bell Battalion got lost in the same storm and stumbled upon the mine—which was never the objective of the exercise."~~

Justin chuckled softly to himself. "Were the Highlanders able to accomplish as much against the overwhelming forces pitched at their surrogates, we'd be more than happy."

Malenkov raised his head and looked around toward the other cubicles, then hunched down and nodded enthusiastically. "Just don't let Lady Romano hear you say that."

Justin raised an eyebrow. "My dear Alexi, remember, we are the Maskirovka. Others must fear that you will overhear them utter disloyal truth, not the other way around." Justin shot a glance at the appointment book on his desk, then looked up at Malenkov. "See if you can get a preliminary report from your people in the next two days. I..."

Justin hesitated as a slender, smiling man framed himself in the cubicle's doorway. He shared Justin's oriental features, dark hair, and brown eyes but the sharpness of his expression—while not unhandsome—

gave him a calculating, cunning look. He smiled at Justin, and nodded respectfully at Malenkov.

"Excuse me, Citizen Malenkov. Justin, we have been summoned immediately." The visitor pointed toward the ceiling with his index finger as he spoke. Silhouetted against the bronze flesh of his hand and wrist, Justin saw the ten-centimeter long nails on the last three fingers of the man's right hand.

Justin stood and stretched. "Do you know what he wants, Tsen?"

Tsen Shang shook his head. "No. The message just came down from Chandra Ling's office. She told me to collect you and to report to the Chancellor without delay."

Justin nodded thoughtfully. *Summoned to a meeting with Maximilian Liao by the head of the Maskirovka. I hope this is more than one of Liao's temper tantrums.* Justin turned to Malenkov. "Alexi."
WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 14

light a fire under your analysts. I want you at your desk, or easy to reach, while I'm in conference—just in case I need you to bring me some data."

Malenkov nodded and Justin swept past him. Shang led the way from the Analysis Division to the elevators. The two Death Commandos flanking the elevator up to the Palace checked the identification papers and radioed for permission to allow the pair passage.

Justin and Tsen Shang shared a secret smile as the commander barked a tinny order that made the soldier flinch. Ashen-faced, the guard inserted a key in the lockplate and twisted. The inlaid bronze doors opened and the Maskirovka agents entered the wood-paneled box.

Once the doors had closed and the elevator was climbing up from the subterranean depths, Justin

turned to his companion. "I realize you might not have wanted to speak in front of Malenkov. Have you any clue to what the Chancellor wants?"

Shang shook his head. "The Chancellor has been edgy of late..."

Justin nodded. *Both Maximilian's daughters, Candace and Romano, have been fighting since they arrived on Sian for their father's birthday. They've trapped him in the middle of their little war, and he's been in a bad mood ever since.* Justin coughed, then shook his head. "If I've been asked in, we can bet it has something to do with the Federated Suns. Do you think it's new troop strengths and deployment figures from our friend?"

"Possible ..." Tsen Shang looked at his right hand and flexed it like a claw. The overhead light glinted off the black and gold nails. "I don't like the way this whole thing feels . . ."

Justin stared at the talons and barely heard Shang's comment. He'd seen those carbon-fiber reinforced nails slash through thick leather as though it were tissue paper. He still wondered if Shang kept them coated with the poison he liked to use on Solaris VII, where he had succeeded in recruiting Justin.

The elevator slowed to a stop and the doors slid open soundlessly to admit the two men directly to the Chancellor's throne room. Normally hidden behind a wall panel, the elevator opened midway along one of the rectangular room's long side walls. The half-light cast strange shadows over the teak latticework that screened hidden alcoves in the upper half of the opposite wall. Though Justin saw nothing to indicate they were being watched, he did not feel totally comfortable.

Glancing at the people assembled in the room, he understood why Shang had been disturbed by the summons, and it heightened his own sense of unease. *This is bad. I can feel it.*

Tall and slender, Chancellor Maximilian Liao stood before his massive throne. His steel-gray eyes stared down at the sheet of paper clutched in white-knuckled fingers. The sheet trembled with the rage Justin could feel pouring off the Chancellor in unseen waves. The Chancellor's lips curled back from his teeth in a silent snarl as he reread the words.

Standing below and to the right, Chandra Ling seemed untouched by her master's fury. Small and slight, this gray-haired, elderly woman appeared to be nothing more than a benign grandmother. Justin narrowed his almond-shaped eyes. *She's the grandmother type, but no one gets to be the head of the Maskirovka by baking cookies—unless those cookies are laced with cyanide and fed to one's rivals.*

Across from Chandra Ling, Maximilian's two daughters stood side by side. Romano, the younger of the two, barely concealed her irritation. With angry twists of the head, she flicked her reddish-brown hair back across her shoulders while pure rage flared in her green eyes. With her gold silk robe tied only loosely at the waist, it gaped open enough to provide a glimpse of her MechWarrior's cooling vest. As she impatiently shifted her weight from one foot to another, the robe revealed glimpses of her slender figure and long legs.

Justin noticed that her agitation lessened slightly when she saw Tsen Shang. *I wonder if she was angry at having been called away from 'Mech drills, or if she couldn't understand what might have been delaying Shang ?*

Candace Liao, heir-apparent to the throne, also seemed to notice the shift in her sister's attitude. Clad in tight black leather boots, slacks, and a looser leather blouse with padded shoulders, Candace raised her chin and slowly folded her arms across her chest. Her long, black hair fell to mid-back, but the thin ribbons of it falling forward of her shoulders framed her exotic face perfectly. Her eyes half-closed as she made eye contact with Justin, then she turned and watched her father.

Justin felt a thrill tingle in his belly, but quickly smothered it. *No, Justin. She's got her father's cunning and quick temper, and her mother's icy soul. She'd use you up and spit you out. Were her sister less obvious in her pleasure at seeing Shang, Candace would never have even noticed you. This is as it should be, for she's a tiger and you should be a mouse.*

Maximilian's head came up and he spitted Justin with a savage stare. "You, Xiang, you are Quintus Allard's son! Why did you not know of this?" He held the message up in his right hand like a torch. "Are you sent here to betray me?"

Liao's accusation ignited a jet of fear that quickly changed to anger in Justin's heart. He opened his mouth to snap a harsh denial, then hesitated. *Ease off, Justin. He's not thinking rationally. How can you defend yourself when you don't even know the charge?* Bowing his head, Justin replied quietly. "Forgive me, Celestial Highness, what should I have known?"

"This, dammit!" An inarticulate sound of rage squealed from the Chancellor's throat. "Hanse Davion is to marry Melissa Steiner!"

The information hit Justin like a laserblast. He hugged his arms to his midsection and swallowed back the caustic bile that bubbled to his throat. He bent forward and shivered. Slowly he straightened up and addressed Maximilian Liao in a low, cold voice. "Had I known that information, Supreme One, I would have communicated it to you the instant I was exiled from the Federated Suns. Had I even guessed at it, had I heard even the slightest hint of it. . ."

Chandra Ling's voice sliced like a razor through Justin's denial. "Had you any suspicions, Citizen Xiang, you would have died at your own father's hand before he would have permitted you to leave the Federated Suns."

Liao glanced down at the Maskirovka mistress and snorted derisively. He studied Justin again, then stiffly lowered himself onto his throne. "Of course, the Director is correct." He nodded at her, half-lowering his lids. "Your shock at hearing this news is obvious. Still, you and Shang are my top two people in the Davion section. Why have we not known before?"

Shang bowed. "I offer no excuses, Excellency, but I should point out that Davion's Ministry of Intelligence, Information, and Operations sends out much chaff, through which we must sift carefully to obtain any kernels of truth in reports we get.

True, we did not provide you the information that you now have, but we can surmise how the negotiations took place, and where the meetings were held."

Liao frowned and made to wave away Shang's explanation, but Romano straightened up and smiled at the Maskirovka analyst. "Please, explain what you mean," She turned and smiled sweetly at her father.

With a nod and a sigh, he gave Shang leave to comply with her request.

"Thank you, Lady Romano." Shang cleared his throat and gestured with his right hand. "You might recall the reports we had that a Lyran ship had been hijacked into the Draconis Combine roughly four months ago."

The Chancellor nodded. "Yes, I seem to remember something about rescue by a mercenary unit." He looked up at Justin and frowned. "That unit in which you have a brother, wasn't it? The Hell Dogs or something . . ."

Justin nodded. "The Kell Hounds, Enlightened One."

Shang continued. "We received initial reports that a highly placed member of the Lyran court had been traveling in secret to the Federated Suns on that ship. Our sources reported the purpose of the trip as medical treatment at the New Avalon Institute of Science. Since then, we have determined that no such treatment ever took place, and we have confirmed schedules and firm reports of sightings for all the important members of the Lyran court. Obviously, the purpose of the visit was to seal a trade agreement—"

Justin was prompted by the success of the 3024 accords you signed with Marik and Kurita on Terra—the accords arranged for the marriage."

Liao leaned back in his throne and steepled his fingers. "Why did you not have this information sooner before?"

Shang hesitated, and Justin stepped forward. "If I might, Highness, I would suggest that we did not have this information sooner because of the bureaucracy and the way it has become entrenched. Getting the reports we needed to confirm these suspicions took months . . ."

Liao shot forward. "Who denied you this vital data? Give me his name and he will be dealt with shortly."

Justin replied, "I will not have incompetents around me."

Candace glanced at Justin, then moved forward, eclipsing her sister. "Father, I do not believe Citizen Xiang is singling out one person as the cause of this problem." She turned toward Justin and nodded to him. "Please, Citizen, continue."

"As your daughter has suggested, it is not the fault of any one person, Universal Paragon. Consider this: WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 16

that, for the longest time, the Maskirovka was concerned with the Free Worlds League. This is a valid concern, and the civil war we prompted there certainly sapped much of House Marik's vitality. Because of this attention, the Maskirovka's Marik section has grown, and much of the information from the Lyran sector now filters through it. The longer the chain, the slower the transmission and the more likely the distortion of the message."

Tsen Shang nodded cautiously. "Citizen Xiang and I have also noticed a reliance in our sector on the troop information and other intelligence coming from Michael Hasek-Davion."

"What is wrong with that?" the Chancellor roared. "It is from him that we have finally learned of the marriage."

Shang held his hands forward. "Nothing is wrong with using his information, Highness, but our other operations seem to be secondary to this one source. The information still comes in, but our analysts are so busy sorting through the Duke's data that they cannot clear as much of the other data as they should."

Liao narrowed his eyes and turned to Chandra Ling. "What are you doing about this?"

Ling smiled serenely. "In my discussions with Shang and Xiang, they have suggested creating a 'crisis team.' It would be an elite group of analysts concerned solely with solving special problems investigating odd situations. They would operate at a level just below my office, and could command information from all the sectors, bypassing the normal bureaucratic channels."

Liao nodded curtly. "Very well." He pointed at the two analysts. "You will assemble the staff you need and will move into the Palace. I want you here and on call at all times. You will never be more than twelve hours distant from me, unless I order you away on some mission."

Shang's jaw dropped open. Justin shared a timid glance with him, then looked up at the Chancellor.

"Excellency, I believe the Director might have more suitable candidates in mind for this crisis team."

Liao rocked back in his throne. "How could she disagree that the two of you are the correct choices?"

You are new enough in the Sian organization not to have become trapped in the bureaucracy. It is your plan, and so you will execute it. I am certain the Director sees this as the only logical choice."

Liao glanced down at the Maskirovka Director long enough to see her weary nod of agreement, then he stared off above the heads of both analysts. "Now, what shall we do about this treacherous new turn of events that Hanse Davion has engineered for us?"

Before they could answer, Liao had shot to his feet, anger darkening his expression. Justin turned just enough to see the chamber's main door opening and the helpless minister cringe beneath Liao's verbal assault. "What are you doing?" the Chancellor screamed. "I gave orders I was not to be disturbed!"

"May I die a thousand deaths if this is not important, O He-Whom-The-Universe-Envies." The pauper minister looked back toward the outer chamber. "It is Lord Victor Robertson, the Federated Suns'

Ambassador. He says he comes concerning a matter of great urgency!"

"Indeed!" Maximilian Liao settled back down on his throne like a cat basking on a sun-warmed window sill. "Send him in. It has been too long since I have eaten a Davion envoy alive. This I shall enjoy."

3

Sian

15 October 3027

A large, robust man with a thick shock of black hair, Lord Victor Robertson ate up the distance between the door and Liao's throne with the enthusiasm of a child dashing for presents. A large, more undiplomatic smile displayed his true feelings, though it faded slightly when he noticed Justin standing beside Tsen Shang. He shot Justin a dagger glance of pure hatred, then faced Liao and bowed respectfully.

"I am grateful to you for taking the time to see me." Robertson's tenor voice expressed deep sincerity, yet rang with a counter-current that Justin recognized instantly.

Victor, you cannot fool me. I remember the time you spent as my father's aide when he served in the Embassy here. You have something up your sleeve. But what is it? Justin lifted his head and caught Candace watching him. She turned away smoothly. *Smoothly, but not naturally enough to prevent suspicion. What does she have up her sleeve?*

Maximilian Liao bowed his head, then smiled in his most predatory fashion. "I will always have time for an envoy from the Fox." Liao swept his right hand toward his daughters. "You remember, of course, my daughters Candace and Romano."

Robertson bowed to them—though not as deeply as he had to their father—and smiled. "A pleasure, as always. It must give you great joy to have *most* of your children here for the coming celebration."

Liao ignored the veiled reference to his disinherited son Tormana, and nodded at the mistress of the Maskirovka. "And you have met Chandra Ling?"

Again Robertson bowed and smiled effortlessly. "Madame Ling and I met two years ago, or has it been even longer than that?" When Ling made no reply, the Davion Ambassador shrugged almost imperceptibly. "It is good to see you, Madame Ling."

Liao let his smile grow as he directed Robertson's attention toward the two Maskirovka analysts. "Let me think you think me impolite, allow me to present Tsen Shang and Justin Xiang. They are Maskirovka specialists in dealing with the Federated Suns."

Robertson reinforced his automatic smile and nodded to Shang. "If I may be of service . . ."

The Ambassador started to turn back toward the throne, but Liao did not let him escape so easily. "Oh, it occurs to me that you might already know Justin Xiang. I believe you knew him as Justin Allard."

Robertson stiffened. "If it pleases you, Chancellor, I would prefer not to renew my acquaintance with this quisling."

Liao stood. "It pleases me, Lord Victor, for you to be polite to my citizens."

Justin stepped forward and offered the Ambassador his right hand. "Hello, Victor."

Robertson ignored Justin's gesture. "Xiang! You should have died on Solaris VII. It would have saved

everyone so much trouble."

Justin smiled slyly. "Lost some money on that last fight, did you, Victor?"

Robertson turned back toward Liao. "Chancellor, I have come on important business for my Prince."

Liao shook his head slightly, then wearily settled back against his throne. "This, Ambassador, I cannot understand. In the Federated Suns, you place so much importance upon mission and duty. Here, in my realm, we value friendship and people even higher. I would have thought you pleased to see an old friend again."

Robertson started to reply, but Justin cut him off. "The Ambassador was not, Celestial Worship, friend *per se*. He worked for my father and spent much of his time pushing my stroller through the Teng Gardens and the Chou Zoological Park."

Liao stiffened. "Forgive me then, Citizen Xiang, for forcing remembrances of this *servant* upon you."

The Chancellor plunges the knife in, and I get to twist it. "No matter, Highness, I recall him fondly. He served well."

Robertson's face flushed scarlet, but he managed to retain his composure. "If you will permit me, Chancellor, I serve still better now than I ever did before. I have a message here for you from my Prince."

WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 18

Hanse Davion, I am told, personally wrote and sealed the letter. It has come by JumpShip all the way from New Avalon with instructions that I deliver it into your hands." Robertson drew a small tablet envelope from the breast of his suit, and extended it toward the throne.

Liao slitted his eyes. "Citizen Xiang, bring the envelope to me."

Robertson half turned to shield the note with his body, but Justin plucked it from his hand effortlessly.

Never did have a MechWarrior's reflexes, did you, Victor? Sharing a smile with Maximilian Liao, Justin mounted the steps to the throne, but his head did not rise above the level of the Chancellor's own pate.

Liao took the proffered missive, but stopped Justin's retreat with a single word. "Wait." He slid his finger beneath the seal and broke open the envelope. Pulling the folded note from the envelope, he glanced at the writing on it and smiled. "As I suspected, the Prince wrote it in his native tongue. If you will, Citizen Xiang, read it."

Justin accepted the note and hesitated. *Davion's own handwriting, that's certain.* One word caught his eye and the shock registered throughout his body. *No! I cannot believe it!* Justin glanced up at Robertson and his heart sank. *You know, don't you, you bastard, and all your training can't keep the mirth from your eyes.*

Liao leaned forward and rested a hand on Justin's shoulder. "I meant for you to read it aloud, Citizen."

Justin nodded. "Forgive me, Universal Wisdom, but I am not sure..."

The hand tightened on his shoulder, and Liao's voice grew colder. "But I am, Citizen, read it ALOUD."

Justin swallowed hard. "My dear Chancellor, I know this is unorthodox, and official documents and invitations will follow soon, but I wanted you to hear it from me first. On August 20 of next year, I shall wed Melissa Steiner, and the day would not be complete without your presence."

4

New Avalon

Cruris March, Federated Suns

21 October 3027

The image of Lord Victor Robertson smiled out from the holoivid screen. "And so, my Prince, Justin Xiang read your note aloud, as he had been so commanded. You would have loved the look of dread that turned his face pale. Trapped between you and Maximilian Liao, he suddenly came to the realization that you could reach him even in the heart of the Capellan capital."

The Ambassador let his unbridled pleasure at the tale he was about to relate show on his face. "When Liao heard the words Xiang was reading, he snatched the paper from him and read it over to himself."

Then he ripped the note into a cloud of scraps, and stared down at me." Robertson hunched his shoulders and thrust an imperious finger at the audience. In a fair imitation of Liao's hoarse and angry hiss, the Ambassador continued. "Leave here immediately, you jackanapes. Tell your master that this is an outrage!"

The Ambassador bowed his head. "I regret to report, my Prince, that I was not able to carry away a formal reply to your message."

Hanse Davion hit the pause button on the remote control and froze his Ambassador's image on the screen. He turned and smiled easily at the other two men in the room. His light blue eyes flashed with pure pleasure. "The Ambassador did well."

"Indeed." Quintus Allard, the acting Minister of Intelligence, Information, and Operations nodded his white-maned head toward the leader of the Federated Suns. "Not only does he accurately portray Chancellor Liao in a rage, but his report of the people assembled 'by chance' in the throne room indicates that something was up."

The third man in the room wore the blue and gold uniform of a Colonel in Davion's House Guards. "You don't suppose Hanse's note to Michael was being discussed in that room, do you?"

Hanse Davion stared at his best friend. "Once again, Ardan Sortek, your ability to locate a needle within a haystack amazes me."

Ardan shrugged. "As much as I hate politics, Hanse, you know I despise traitors more." Ardan turned his attention from the red-haired Prince to Quintus Allard. "Michael got his note on the tenth. Could the news have been transmitted that quickly to Sian?"

Quintus nodded. "For a huge fee, ComStar can transmit anything across space very quickly. I would guess that the information in that note to Michael would have been considered important enough to be sent by the quickest possible means. Even though we all agree that Michael must be working with Liao, proof of their collusion is not conclusive, and some facts might even contraindicate the idea of their partnership."

Hanse stood and walked from the overstuffed chair back to his ancient wooden desk. "Break it down simply, Quintus. What do we have that suggests Michael was the one who transmitted the information?"

The Minister smiled. "Within two hours of receiving your message, Michael demanded an audience with the Capellan Ambassador, Serge Korigyn. The meeting was short, and by some reports, very heated."

Aides believed, at one point, that the two would come to blows."

Hanse nodded. "Nothing in the meeting has been taken as an information transfer?"

Quintus shook his head. "We only have a written transcript of the meeting. As you know, we have still been unable to get recording devices in: Michael is paranoid about them and has the place swept constantly. My cypher section has poured over the words and they cannot discover the trace of any code in them. We've even tried correlating the speech patterns with other speeches or conversations we have on file for either man. The meeting dialog came across as natural and unrehearsed."

Ardan frowned. "I had really hoped that this trap of yours would work, Hanse. We knew the information would be irresistible to Michael—and vital to Liao."

Quintus held up a hand to calm Ardan. "Michael's not out of the woods yet, Colonel. He summoned Korigyn from a hunting lodge, and the Ambassador appeared in full regalia—everything from rubber waders and a warm jacket to a bird dog. At one point, when the Duke and the Ambassador stood nose to nose arguing, the dog began to howl."

Hanse lifted an eyebrow. "The dog was trying to protect its master?"

WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 20

Quintus laughed. "Reports from the field agents we slip into the Capellan Embassy from time to time report that this dog has no territorial instincts at all. In fact, the agents say that for a scratch behind the ears and some treats, the dog will stand guard while they're placing bugs around the compound. No, it was not protecting its master. I think something hurt it."

Ardan stood and crossed to the small bar in the corner to Hanse's right. "What do you mean, hurt it?"

He opened a refrigerator and withdrew a bottle of soda water. "Nobody in the room hit the animal, did they?"

~~Quintus shook his head, both to answer the question and to refuse the refreshment Ardan offered him.~~

"You may recall that some of our people hypothesize that Michael was using a sonic transfer device to shoot encoded data over to a Capellan agent? Because we can't record in the office, I never had any proof. I'm willing to bet, though, that a sound at a frequency too high for a Human to hear would probably sound like a piercing shriek to the dog. It's flimsy, but we'll work on it."

Ardan smiled. "What will you do, bug the dog?"

Quintus nodded. "Orders to that effect went out last night."

Hanse frowned. "Something you said earlier bothers me. That there was evidence to contradict collusion between Michael and Max Liao. Explain, because if this is true, we're working on a strategy on a very shaky foundation."

The Minister nodded slowly. "Don't take what I said as a denial of Michael's treason. Never doubt it."

Michael *is* selling us out. Liao's troop movements are perfectly consistent with the figures and troop strengths we send Michael. There is even some movement on the Draconis border that suggests Liao is leaking information to Takashi Kurita. Fortunately, the information we've been passing Michael could be considered, at best, flawed. In fact, because of Liao's reliance upon Michael, some indications show Capellan field operations to be withering in our area."

Hanse pursed his lips. "So, what is it that makes you think Michael and Max are not working fist and glove?"

Quintus laughed. "Well, just as we are sending Michael false information, it appears he is doing the same to Max Liao. Michael faithfully and accurately passes along information on Federated Sun troops and operations, but he has been altering the reports of his own troop strengths. We know this by the way Liao has been posting troops facing Michael's forces. The Liao garrisons are 10 to 20 percent understrength for the troops they are facing."

"Why, that little weasel!" Ardan shook his head. "Can't trust him at all. Is he loyal to anything?"

Hanse nodded slowly. "Michael is loyal to House Hasek. His father, Duke George Hasek, worked hard to improve the family fortunes, and Michael grew up believing in the 'Hasek Destiny.' He married my half-sister Marie to ensure a place in the line of succession, and until I marry and my wife bears me a child, Michael's son Morgan is, technically, my heir."

Hanse leaned back and steepled his fingers. *We could have worked together, Michael. You would have been where Quintus Allard is now if you'd not chosen to work for yourself instead of the Federated Suns.*

You have never understood that your father made the family famous through his service to the Federation. "It is a pity that Michael has strayed so far from the fold."

Ardan shook his head. "Whatever happens, he'll have brought it on himself. He wants to play both ends against the middle, and it just won't work."

Hanse nodded his agreement. He glanced down at his desk and picked up a piece of paper. "By the way, Quintus, I want you to congratulate Sarah Hebert for her work on those documentary features that have been showing on the networks. According to our polls, acceptance of the alliance and the people's positive impressions of Melissa are up sharply."

The Minister smiled and nodded. "I will tell her. She's asked if she can do a docu-drama about the Kell Hound rescue of the *Silver Eagle*. She only knows the public story about the Kell Hounds going in to pull a Lyran official out of Kurita hands. I thought that perhaps she could work on the project, and if it is written correctly, we could give her the real facts toward the end of the project. She could shoot some new scenes with an actress who looks like Melissa and the program could be broadcast soon after your wedding."

Hanse frowned. "I like your idea, Quintus, and I think it would be a fine idea for her to produce a program about the rescue. The difficulty I have with shifting the focus late in the project is that it won't focus the story on the Kell Hounds. I'd rather have a vid on that incident be full of action and with emphasis on duty, loyalty, and patriotism than let it turn into some sort of romance capitalizing on my new wife's image." The Fox smiled. "Let her do the first one with the focus on Patrick Kell and his sacrifice. Later, we'll give her the facts and let her do 'the Real Story.' "

"As you wish, my Prince."

I am indeed fortunate to have you with me, Quintus. And you, too, Ardan. "One more thing, gentlemen. Tomorrow we release the news of my betrothal to the people, but a few of the details are still incomplete." Hanse turned toward Ardan Sortek. "If you have nothing else to do on the 20th of August next year, Ardan, would you consider being my best man?"

Ardan's bottle stopped halfway to his mouth. "I, ah, Hanse, you honor me."

The Prince chuckled at his friend's surprise. "Dan, we've known each other for a long time, and you're a closer friend in these worlds I do not have. You alone stood with me when Maximilian Liao managed to substitute a double for me. If not for you, I wouldn't even be here, and the whole of the Federated Suns would be in ruins. How could I choose another man to stand with me?"

Ardan sighed heavily. "All that praise just for being your friend. Just to be asked means a great deal to me, Hanse. I don't know how to thank you enough."

"It's simple, Ardan. Just say yes."

Hanse's broad grin began to shrink as Ardan hesitated. "I wish it were that simple, Hanse. Were you just my friend asking me to stand with you, I would accept without question." Ardan met Hanse's icy blue eyes. "Please understand, Hanse. I dearly love Melissa, and I know there will be nothing but happiness for the two of you. I do, honestly, wish you all the best. . ."

The Prince lowered his eyes. "But you will not stand beside me. . ."

Glumly, Ardan shook his head. "I cannot, Hanse, because you're more than my friend." Ardan pounded his fist on the bar. "The one time you act without considering the political angles— as I wish you could act all the time—is the one time you *should* consider the politics. And just my luck, too." Ardan

leaned heavily forward on the bar. "For the sake of all you hold dear, I have to refuse in favor of another."

Hanse brought his head back up slowly. *What have you in mind, my apolitical friend?* "Give, Ardan.

What sort of plot is that festering in your brain?"

Ardan straightened up. "No plot, Hanse. Just clearer thinking than you've allowed yourself on the subject. I would suggest that as your best man, you employ Morgan Hasek-Davion."

Hanse blinked twice. "Morgan?" The Prince frowned and thought. *Choosing Morgan would send signal to the people of the Capellan March that I have not forgotten them, but what would it say to Michael?* The Prince turned toward Quintus Allard. "Opinion?"

Quintus chewed on his lower lip for a moment. "Yes," he said thoughtfully. "That choice would be appropriate in a number of ways. Morgan is well-known and popular both in the Capellan March and throughout the rest of the Suns. In essence, because he is your 'heir,' single, and a MechWarrior with good reputation, he plays well as a subject for the media. Morgan is most often linked with holov stars in the trash magazines, but his performance with the Heavy Guards has won him praise in military circles."

Ardan shot Quintus a wink. "Not only that, but remember when he hosted the Prince's Humanitarian Awards and Charity Ball last June while you were off on Northwind? I saw a vid of that whole thing later and he came off as witty, charming, and likeable."

Hanse shook his head and held up his hands. "I understand how well people like him. *I* like him. He brought him to New Avalon as a hostage against his father, and everyone knew it. But Morgan seemed to forget why he'd been called from New Syrtis. In just a few months, he 'owned' my people and the world."

Why can't you two see what is my real concern about him? "Dammit, gentlemen, he's a Hasek!"

"Hanse, he's a Davion!" Shaking his head, Ardan stepped from behind the bar and positioned himself in front of the Prince. "I've talked to him here, in court, at parties, in the barracks, and during operations for Galahad. He's a Davion, through and through. His father may despise you, but Morgan sees *himself as* a Davion. His first duty is to your House, and you'll never know how thrilled he was to be called to New Avalon." Ardan stared at his friend. "If he's disloyal, I can't see it."

Hanse frowned impatiently. "Reading disloyalty is not your job, Ardan. Quintus, what say you?"

Quintus smoothed the white hair at the nape of his neck. "Everything I have on Morgan echoes what Ardan says."

"Yes, but how certain are you of the information?"

WARRIOR. RIPOSTE 22

Quintus looked puzzled. "Sire?"

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