

The Hammer

Volume 2 of *THE GENERAL*

by S.M. Stirling and David Drake

CHAPTER ONE

"Raj?" Thom muttered. Then, slightly shocked: "Raj!"

The two young men stared at each other for a moment. Raj Whitehall felt his skin ridging in horror; *nothing* had changed here in nearly two years. Nothing at all since that moment when Thom Poplanich had frozen into immobility in the round mirrored room that was the body of the being that called itself Sector Command and Control Unit AZ12-b14-c000 Mk. XIV. Thom still had the unhealed shaving nick on his thin olive cheek, the tear in his floppy tweed trousers made by a ricochet when Raj tried to shoot his way out with his ceremonial revolver. Whereas for Raj . . . *a lifetime*. Thom had remained here; Center had sent Raj Whitehall out to be its agent in the fallen world.

"Raj, you're —"

"Older. Two years older. Everyone's older except you, Thom," Raj said gently, forcing calm into his voice.

He had been forcing calm ever since he made himself go down once more into the catacombs beneath the East Residence. This place was something that did not belong in the prosaic world, in the one thousand one hundred and fifth year of the Fall. Forcing himself not to run at the remembered scent, the absolute neutrality of filtered air, like nothing else in the world . . . The eerie not-floor that somehow supported him without touching his bootsoles, the perfect mirror of the walls that reflected one thing and not another. His hand clutched the grip of his five-shot revolver, not for any good the weapon might do but for the comfort of the honest iron and wood.

This was where his life had changed twenty months ago; the shock in Thom's eyes made him aware of it again, that and the fresh-faced youthfulness of the friend who had been older and wiser and more knowing in the ways of the City. Raj brought up an image of himself as he had been, and as he was: still tall and raw-boned, 190 centimeters, broad-shouldered and long-limbed. The brown, high-cheeked, hook-nosed face was more lined now, and there was something in the eyes

"What's happened to me?" Thom asked shakily.

"Nothing. Center is—"

thom poplanich has had access to all knowledge in the human universe as of the fall of the Federation, Center said in a slightly waspish mental voice; there was no tone to it, but there was some inner equivalent of inflection, **in addition, he has the services of a Sector Command and Control Unit AZ12-b14-c000 Mk. XIV to guide him through it. surely this is more than nothing.**

"That's right," Thom said, some of the tension easing out of his voice; he licked his lips, and Raj wordlessly handed over his canteen. His friend uncorked it and drank gratefully; it was water cut one-quarter with wine and a slice of lime thrown in. Raj had come properly prepared this time; just a pistol for the rats and native spersauroids, a rope and an old jacket.

"That's right, it's been showing me. . . . Raj, what's happened to Bellevue since we lost FTL travel is like a scale model of what happened to the Federation—"

Thom was never religious before, Raj thought. In fact, Thom had scoffed at his friend's simple belief in the Holy Federation, and the scriptural tales of the days before the Fall from the Stars, when all men were one with the Spirit and there was neither poverty nor age nor death. Now he talked of ancient things as if they were as real and tangible as the prosaic modern world of gaslights and carriages.

"— Center says there's some sort of natural centrifugal effect at work, breaking things down smaller and smaller—"

observe Center said.

— and men and women howled, milling across the great square. Some of the buildings around it had the glossy look of UnFallen Man, huge things that looked to be built impossibly of crystal and lacework. Others were more conventional, stone and brick, columns and domes, although not in any style he knew, and ancient-looking beyond words; a great reflecting pool ran down the center, ending in a spikelike monument. A single small moon hung yellow in the night sky, but the lights below bathed the faces of the crowd brighter than daylight, brighter even than the arc-lights at a Gubernatorial Levee. A man was speaking from a dais on one side of the pool; some UnFallen technological magic threw his head and shoulders hill-huge across one of the great buildings behind him. His voice boomed like a god's, and the crowd shrieked back in an agony of adoration and fear.

Suddenly there was a commotion at one side of the mass of humanity. Troops were pushing into the crowd, heading for the speaker; in dreamlike oddity they were primitively equipped, with helmets and long clubs, and shields that looked like glass but could not be, from the battering they were taking. Locked in a phalanx, they pushed through, a bubble of order in the milling chaos. Then the man on the dais pointed and shouted a command. Bottles and rocks flew toward the soldiers, then a wave of human bodies. What followed was like heavy surf breaking on a reef, but here it was the reef that crumbled. When the mob withdrew, the shield-bearers lay scattered . . . many scattered in separate pieces.

What looked like flying boxes darted out over the crowd. Streaks of fire lanced out from one, trailing smoke toward the man giving the speech. The timber framework of the dais exploded into a ball of orange flame, and more fire-lances slashed down into the crowd. Suddenly the supernal lights went out,

and the buildings were dark except for the light of fires, light enough to see the thousands trampled to death as the crowd fled . . .

— and the viewpoint was in a room. The walls were lined with technology, flat screens and readouts such as you might see on any altar in the Civil Government, but functioning, incomprehensible pictures and columns of figures, the whole giving off a subliminal hum of life. Two men *floated* in the center of the room as if it were underwater; they were dressed in tight blue overalls, the uniform of Holy Federation as preserved in the ancient Canonical Handbook. The younger man was speaking, an urgent whisper. The language was Old Namerique, a tongue that survived only in fragments and in the debased form the western barbarians used, but somehow Raj understood it:

"Admiral Kenner, we've got to cut off the rot in that sector. *We must*, sir. One quick raid, we drop off a Bethe missile on delay, and take out the Tanaki Net. It's like cauterizing a wound, sir."

The older man nodded, his face stony. "Make it so, Commodore," he said, jackknifing to grab a handhold and touch a screen. "I've keyed the release codes in to your access."

"Thank you very much, sir," the younger man said. The Admiral had just enough time to look around and meet the knife . . .

— and Raj was watching East Residence from far above; not the city of his own day, but the ancient town with its broad grassy avenues and dreamlike towers. Then light sparked at its center, sun-bright, and spheres of cloud rippled out across the cityscape in its wake. A cloud rose towering, mushroom-shaped . . .

— and he was in the streets of East Residence, seeing familiar buildings but turned tumbled and weed-grown. Men in the uniform of his own service fought a desultory street-battle, seeming more intent on plundering the few remaining shops and homes. Two tumbled in combat below his motionless eye-point, faces distorted as they struggled hand-to-hand with rifles braced against each other. Then one twisted aside and smashed the butt across the other's face, reversing and driving the long bayonet through his belly. He did not bother to withdraw it before he went through the victim's pockets, ignoring the twitchings and feeble pawings of the dying man . . .

— and the Governor's Palace was a grassy mound grown with oaks; Raj recognized it only because of the shape of the harbor below, a long oval running east-west. You could still see the pattern of the streets through the forest, and here and there a snag of walls, or the humped shapes of the defensive earthworks. The sound of children running and playing echoed through the open parkland. In the foreground two men crouched by a fire; one was skillfully chipping a spearhead from a piece of glass, with the wooden shaft and a bundle of sinew for binding lying near. The other was butchering a carcass for roasting, working with slivers of glass and a stone hammer for breaking the bones. Both men were naked save for hide loinclotssand shaggy as bears; it was a moment before Raj realized the body they were butchering was also human

Raj shuddered; visions of things that had been, that were, that still might be. "That's what men come to without the Spirit," he said.

Thom blinked at him. "Well, that's one way of putting it," he agreed.

Raj nodded, swallowing and looking away. "Yeah. I, ah, well, I asked Center if I could see you,

because we're — the Expeditionary Force is leaving for the Southern Territories. The Governor — Barholm; his uncle Vernier died and Barholm's in the Chair—is set on retaking them. I'm certainly going with the army . . . and I'll probably be commanding it."

It was Thom's turn to be shocked. "Congratulations . . . but isn't that a bit of a jump for a Captain, even if he is one of the new Governor's Guards?"

Raj smiled, rueful and bitter. "Things have sort of changed, Thom," he said.

He saw his friend stiffen and a faint almost-glimmer slide across his eyes. Raj Whitehall needed no vision from Center to see what Thom Poplanich was being shown. Raj's memory provided that, and his dreams more often than he liked.

The line breaking at El Djem as the fugitives took them in the back. Suzette wild-eyed, shouting *They're dead, they're all dead* to his question. The milling bulk of red-robed Colonists around the final laager, his own voice shouting *Fall back one step and volley!* over and over again, raw and hoarse, the choking cloud of powder smoke as the cannon cut loose, and the nightmare retreat through the desert. Governor Vernier dying, and Barholm and Lady Anne Clerett at the foot of the bed amid the ministers and priests and doctors; Anne's face, like something perched in a tree watching a sick sheep. Sandoral, and the Colonist battalions marching over the ridge in perfect order under their green banners, down into the gunsmoke where two hundred cannon dueled. The heaps of dead before his trenches, and that last moment when he knew they weren't going to break and then they did — wondering where the Colonist ruler, the Settler, had escaped to, until the Skinner mercenary brought him Jamal's head grinning at some private joke of death.

"So there are advantages to being a hostage, you see," Raj said with envious sadness.

thom poplanich is not a hostage, Center corrected, with the passionless pedantry that was its most frequent tone, **to release him now would threaten the plan to reunite Bellevue, to rebuild the Tanaki Spatial Displacement System, and if necessary to rebuild the Federation from here.**

Thom smiled, looking up slightly; when he spoke, Raj recognized the tone of a long-standing argument.

"That'll take generations; centuries, even. Provided that it doesn't fail, which you admit is more probable than not"

the shortest journey ends at one false step, Center replied.

Thom laughed, cutting off the chuckle at his friend's bewilderment. "There used to be a saying that the longest journey — oh, never mind, it doesn't translate well into Sponglish anyway." He shrugged, the expressive "unavoidable — circumstance" resignation of an East Residence dweller. "Since Center has elected you its instrument in the crusade, what do you think of the idea, Raj?" he asked.

Raj ran his hand through the short black curls that covered his head.

"I don't know, Thom, I honestly don't. I'm a soldier, not a priest; it's what I was born for."

For five hundred years the Whitehalls had fought the Civil Government's wars, dying in them often enough, and leaving only an urn of ashes or a sword to be brought home to their ancestral lands in Descott County.

"But you know me, too old-fashioned and country-bred to have an original thought. I serve the Spirit of Man of the Stars and the Holy Federation; and since I'm a soldier, I serve them as a soldier must, in the field and under arms. I . . . I don't think I deserve an angel for a counselor, not really. If that's what Center is." It was certainly a computer, and such had been the immaterial servants of Holy Federation, right enough. "I just know I have to do my best.

"I used to think that war was glory. Now . . . the only thing to say for it is that it shows you what men are. I've made some good friends over the past year, damn good. And I think I've got some aptitude for this shit; what that says about me, I don't know. But I have to try."

Thom held out his hand; Raj squeezed it in his. "I know you always will do your best," Thom said. "Spirit, how I envied you that single-mindedness." He laughed shortly. "Starless Dark, this isn't so bad; I was a scholar by temperament anyway; just my bad luck I was the old Governor's nephew. You might say we both had the misfortune to get what we asked for."

Raj made himself meet his friend's eyes. "Thom, there's one last thing. About—"

"Des, yes. Center told me." Thom met the gaze. "He was my brother; he was also an idiot. Letting himself be sucked into that scheme to overthrow Barholm was suicide, Raj. He ran onto your sword."

Actually I burned him alive,Raj thought, swallowing and remembering the sound and the smell from the room below. *Him and about a hundred others.* Most of them had deserved it, although not the hapless troopers who'd gotten caught up in the coup attempt. Des Poplanich had been no more guilty, so naive he didn't even know he was a puppet. And Spirit knew Barholm had done enough to deserve enemies . . .

"That'll leave Ewardo as the head of the family — since I'm effectively dead down here," Thom went on; that was his first cousin, and the only adult male Poplanich left. "Raj . . . look out for him if you can?"

"I'll try. He's never shown any interest in politics, or anything but commanding the House battalion, anyway. I've got some capital with the Chair . . . I will try." He drew himself up and saluted, fist to brow. "Goodbye, Thom. I'll be back, if I can."

Even as he turned, Thom Poplanich was freezing into immobility, a statue in the perfect mirrored sphere, nothing alive but his mind.

"Great Spirit, Raj, the War Council meeting is starting in five minutes; where have you—" Suzette halted, forced a smile.

Her eyes flicked over the dirt and ancient dust on her husband's clothes.

In the tunnels,she knew with a chill. Raj had never told her exactly how Thom Poplanich had disappeared down there with his oldest friend . . . which meant he had told nobody.

Barholm thinks Raj shot him in the back and left the body,she knew. *Which shows how much our esteemed Governor knows about my husband.*

Suzette would have done that — Thom had been getting too dangerous to know, with the succession uncertain and so many of the old nobility still loyal to the House of Poplanich—but her family had been

City dwellers, court nobles until they lost their lands a generation ago. The Whitehall estates were secure and far enough from East Residence to afford luxuries like honor.

"Well, no matter," she said brightly. "Come on, you useless girls, attend to the master! You don't have time for a real change, darling, but *do* get that rag off!"

"They'll have to wait for me, then — or more likely they won't," Raj said harshly; the new lines graven from either side of his nose to the corners of his mouth deepened. Then he forced relaxation and smiled at her. "I've had other things on my mind," he said more gently.

The maids descended on him in a twittering horde of perfume and rustling linen and soft hands; there were a lot more of them, now that he had bought the rights to the old House Poplanich section of the Palace. Four courtyards, a reception hall, a dining room with enough seating for a forty-guest banquet, servants' quarters . . . and this pleasant terrace with glass-door walls overlooking the gardens. There was a view through tall cypress trees, down across velvety lawns and marble statuary — mostly religious, spaceships and terminals — fountains, topiary and winding paths of colored gravel. The air was cool and fresh from last night's late spring rain, clearer than usual in this smoky city; a tumbled majesty of red-tiled roofs and low square towers spread down to the great warehouses and the docks to the south, a distant surf-roar of noise from the streets.

"Just the jacket," he grunted. Two of the maids knelt and did their best with damp cloths on his boots; others stripped off his coat, brought the walking-out uniform tunic with its epaulets, buckled him into it, fastened the belt and shoulder-strap with the dress saber and ivory-handled revolver, dropped the sash with its orders and decorations over his head, combed his hair, handed him the dress gloves and gilded plumed helmet—both of those were seldom worn but it was *de rigueur* to carry them at Court functions . . .

"At least I don't have to wear those damned tights and codpiece," he grumbled. Full-dress uniform was not required for business meetings. *Pity poor Barholm*, he thought ironically. The Governor had to wear twenty pounds of gold embroidery every time he got out of bed. *Of course, he probably enjoys it — he spent enough time scheming to get it.*

"Oh, I think they bring out your . . . assets quite well, my sweet," Suzette said, sinking into her chair and considering him with her chin on one fist

Raj gave an unwilling snort of laughter, meeting the tilted green mockery of his wife's eyes. His heart gave a little lurch as he watched her, even then; Suzette Emmenalle Forstin Hogor Wenqui Whitehall had that effect on most men. Small, scarcely up to his shoulder, greyhound-slim and graceful, breeding showing like light through fine porcelain. And alive, so alive . . .

"Will you take it?" she asked quietly.

"Probably. Spirit of Man knows nobody else with any experience wants the Expeditionary Force. This is a formality, really . . . unless I screw up."

"Can you do it?"

Raj slapped his gloves into the palm of one hand. "I think so." *One more thing I love about you. You never give me an optimistic lie, and you think, my angel.*

"A lot depends . . . We don't know enough about the Squadron. The Ministry of Barbarians hasn't been

expending enough effort in that direction. Orbit of Righteousness! We've had little enough contact with them for a couple of generations now. At least the Governor has picked the right man for the civil side."

Suzette's brows arched a question.

"Just heard," he said. *Was that Center? Sometimes I can't tell, these days.* "Mihwel Berg; he's from Cyudad Gut, his family trades heavily all through the central Midworld Sea, he's got friends and relatives outside the CivilGovernment area too. He'll be invaluable . . . *if he cooperates.*"

She came over to him, put her hands on his shoulders and stood tiptoe; he bent to take the kiss. Suddenly she gripped him fiercely.

"You *can* do it," she said, whispering in his ear. "You — sometimes I think the rumors are true, you know, and the Spirit *has* touched you."

He straightened, giving her a crooked grin and a salute.

MessaSuzette Whitehall stood as he left, blinking in thought and tapping her thumb against her chin.

"Leave me," she said to the maids. "Not you, Ndella," she added to a tall gawky Zanj woman as the others made their curtsy and rustled out. When they were alone: "Fetch kave, and get me Abdullah and . . . hmmm, Fatima. Bring them yourself. Be discreet."

"Messa."

The black left with silent efficiency. Suzette had been raised in a great household of East Residence, and she had her own ideas on how to manage here in the Palace. Raj would have been glad to find their servants from Hillchapel, the Whitehall family estate, but Descotters were too awkward in the city and free servants too easily corrupted, in her opinion. Like most, she bought her household staff, but unlike most she gave it personal attention. Only those from outside the Civil Government, with neither friends nor family here, only the strong, healthy, and intelligent, and only after careful personal examination. She saw to their training, and education in some cases. Each was paid a small wage, with promise of eventual manumission and enough for a dowry or a shop or a farm. The only punishment was the threat of sale.

Most people underestimated slaves, even more than men underestimated women. And they talked in front of their servants as if they were deaf, too.

Ndella entered bearing a tray. A man in nondescript but respectable clothing followed her, pewter-buckled shoes and dull-gold pants, black coat and plain linen cravat. A plumply pretty young woman carrying a year-old child followed him; she was dressed in the pleated skirt, embroidered jacket and lace mantilla of a respectable city matron, perhaps a bureaucrat or artisan's wife, but her looks were pure Arab. The child was darker, and even barely walking had something of the heavy-boned solidity of a Descotter.

"Peace be with you," Suzette said in fluent Arabic, a tongue they all had in common, and a little safer than Sponglish.

"And upon you, peace," they replied. Ndella served the others and then sank back on her heels. The tantalizing odor of fresh-brewed kave tinged the flower and incense scents of the room; bees murmured

in the lilac bushes outside the window.

"Abdullah," she said.

"*Saaidya*," the Druze replied, rising quickly to check outside the window and back through the door before returning to the table. He had been born Abdullah al'-Azziz; technically, he would have been Abdullah cor Wenqui — freedman of the Wenqui family — if the records of that transaction had been in the register. "I have prepared a preliminary report on Messer Berg; his home, connections, wealth, and opinions."

The little Druze pulled a small roll of paper from one sleeve of his jacket and handed it to her.

"My summation: Messer Berg is indeed the most promising man for the post. However, he was appointed primarily because he is in disfavor with Chancellor Tzetas; a little matter of percentages from intervening fees in a tax-farming bid. He is furthermore under suspicion from the Anti-Viral Cleansers" — the investigative arm of the Church — "because relatives of his, living in Brigade territory, have converted to the cult of Spirit of Man of This Earth. All in all, this is a hardship posting for him, a punishment. He may recoup his position either by brilliant success — he probably considers this unlikely, sharing the general opinion of the military probabilities — or by ruining Messer Whitehall, thus gaining the favor of Tzetas."

She nodded. It was quite possible he *could* somehow contrive the expedition's ruin; and escape blame for it, too.

"Thank you, Abdullah," she said sincerely, tucking the sheaf of notes into her own sleeve. He bowed, smiling. Pleasure at her gratitude, and at the excitement of the task.

"Ndella," she continued.

The Zanj bobbed her head. Her flat black face was exotic to East Residence eyes, and Suzette had added gold snake-coils for her arms and neck to heighten the effect. People in the Civil Government rarely encountered Zanj, and knew them mostly through highly biased accounts from the Colony. The Colonists were commercial rivals of the southern continent's city-states, there were frequent military clashes — full-fledged war quite recently, which was how Ndella had ended up on a Sandoral auction-block — and the orthodox Sunni Muslims of the Colony detested the Reformed Baha'i heresy the Zanj practiced. To hear the Colonists talk, all Zanj were depraved savages who ate their young and mated with anything, carnosauroids included.

So nobody in East Residence would be likely to suspect that Ndella, for example, was literate in four languages

"Messa Whitehall, I have now access to Messer Berg's Palace household; a few matters of healing, and, ah" — she coughed discreetly — "I have become very good friends with one of the household servants, an undercook." Ndella liked girls, usually a matter of indifference but here rather useful. "Lorhetta has been adding the *capoyam* to Messer Berg's chili, on the understanding it improves his digestion and temper.

"Add the *beyem*," she went on, briefly showing a small glass vial, "to anything he drinks, and . . . heart failure. Perfectly safe for those not sensitized by the *capoyam*. Undetectable."

. . . and nobody would be likely to suspect Ndella was a doctor, either. Women could learn medicine in

the Civil Government, although most who did were also Renunciate Sisters, but the Colony was very restrictive. Everyone would assume the Zanj were even more so.

"Excellent," Suzette said. "Thank you, my friends."

Abdullah and the black woman took the hint, leaving quickly. Fatima released her squirming son; the boy ran half a dozen steps and grabbed the cushions of the opposite couch. He turned his head to give the two women a toothless grin of delight, then hauled himself along the settee hand-over-hand, until he came face to face with the house cat sleeping curled up on a cushion at the end. The animal opened yellow eyes and submitted to pats and gurgling cries of pleasure for a moment before fleeing; the baby went on all fours and began a determined pursuit.

Fatima turned back to Suzette with the same bright-eyed interest she had shown for the last half hour; the hint had been delivered, however. She had a child to consider.

Suzette put aside envy; there was no time, not now, later . . . "Young Barton seems to thrive," Suzette said.

Fatima sighed. "Only if his father does," she replied, a little more subdued.

Suzette leaned back, nodding and sipping at her kave. Her own point had been conceded. *Whichever one is his father*, she thought. *But both of them are Raj's men.*

The Arab girl had nearly taken out the eye of a 5th Descott trooper while he and his squad tried to rape her, back in El Djem, the Colonial border-hamlet where she had grown up as a very minor daughter of a minor concubine of the town's mayor. Fatima bint Caid, she had been then; Fatima cor Staenbridge, she was now. Two of Raj's officers had rescued her from an unpleasant death by the trooper's bayonet — on a whim more than anything else, being lovers themselves — and she managed to make it back to the Civil Government border with the 5th during the chaotic nightmare of the retreat through the desert. A prudent career move, given the options available to an ex-virgin with no family in the Colony's strict Islamic society.

She had been pregnant as well; by Gerrin or Barton, but it was the heirless Gerrin Staenbridge who had manumitted her and adopted the child. Which made her a free commoner technically, with a nice little annuity and excellent prospects as mother of a nobleman's heir; besides that, she was still the — very occasional—mistress of both men, and well-liked. Gerrin Staenbridge and Barton Foley were both Companions now, their fortunes as one with Raj's; Gerrin was his right-hand man. "You have been very kind to me, Messa Suzette," Fatima said, in a quiet tone.

That was true enough; Raj and she had stood Star-parent to young Barton Staenbridge, which was a lifetime tie and taken seriously by the Civil Government's nobility. And Suzette had eased her path socially, as well. A mistress could not be received formally, even if she was the mother of an acknowledged son, but informal acceptance was possible — if the consensus of the *Messas*, the gentlewomen, favored it. Suzette had seen that it did, and she had the ear of Lady Anne, the Governor's wife.

"I anxious am — sorry, am anxious to repay your kindness," she said, dropping back into the Sponglish she had made such an effort to learn.

Suzette leaned over and patted her on the shoulder. "Don't worry, my dear — it's just that sometimes we have to . . . look out for the men. Now, what I'd like you to do is drop by on Tanha Heyterez."

Berg's mistress, and rather a neglected one, according to rumor. "She's a country girl, just in from Kendrun, and doesn't know anyone here." Hence likely to be desperately lonely and ready to talk. "She needs a friend . . . and *Berg* needs to be brought around to helping — himself, too — rather than hindering.

"So what I need to know," she went on, lowering her voice, "is *everything* about Messer Berg. Particularly the things his woman would know: what he fears, what he likes, what his tastes are."

Fatima nodded slowly. "I understand, Messa Whitehall," she said formally. Then she grinned, an urchin expression that made her face look its eighteen years again. "I have a problem, though. Barton and Gerrin, they don't want me to come on campaign with them this time. Gerrin wants me to go back to his lands, stay with his wife."

"Why not?" Suzette asked. Since a childless wife could be divorced at will, the lady in question ought to be fairly grateful; now that Staenbridge had an heir, she was safe. Nor was there likely to be much jealousy, since, from what Suzette had learned, Gerrin's wife had known his tastes before the wedding.

"Boring!" Fatima said. "Besides, I want be there if they're hurt."

Suzette nodded understanding; she had always followed the drum herself. It was bad enough to send Rajoff to battle; to be a thousand kilometers away, not even *knowing* for months — she shuddered slightly. *And he needs me.*

"I can't interfere in Messer Staenbridge's household," she pointed out gently.

"Oh, I take care of that. I got Gerrin to promise I could come as long as I healthy — now he and Barton trying to get me pregnant again so I *have* to stay home."

"You don't like that?" Suzette said, surprised.

"Oh, I like the *trying*, just don't want it to *work*. "

They laughed together, Suzette a little harder than she had expected. There had been few enough chances for humor, in the past few months here in the Palace. Maneuvering against Chancellor Tzetas was not something you could do with less than your whole intent, even if you were a good friend of the Governor's wife.

"That I can help with," Suzette said, wiping her eyes. "Or rather Ndella can, when I tell her to." She quieted. "I'll be glad to get out of East Residence again," she said. "Out where you can see things coming."

Which was odd, she thought, sitting in silence after the young Arab girl had left. Back in her own girlhood — sometimes she had to remind herself she was still four years shy of thirty — Suzette had never looked uphill to the Palace without a stab of envy. That was her birthright, the legacy of the Wenqui *gens* ; forty generations of East Residence nobility, ever since the Governors had come, fleeing the military takeovers in the Old Residence. Poverty had kept her out, and the need to care for Father after Mother died coughing her lungs out, leaving Suzette chatelaine of a dying house at fourteen.

Poor Father. Always with his books and a few old cronies, never even noticing. Not noticing when she had to sell off the furniture and the paintings and the rugs to feed them and pay the doddering ancient servants she hadn't the heart to dismiss, when the pitiful rents from their last few farms had to go to keep

the townhouse from being sold under their feet. All the years of scrimping and wheedling to get invitations, lessons, research, the coldly calculated dalliances, all aimed at precisely this. A big suite in the Palace apartments, wealth, recognition, to be a known and feared player in the ancient, stylized minuet of intrigue . . .

All wasted, my love, she thought with a warm irony. Whom had she been hoping to meet at Alois Orehuela's garden-party? She couldn't even remember that now. Raj Ammenda Halgern da Luis Whitehall had been just another name on a stolen guest-list, another uncouth Descotter squire down from the northeastern hills, doubtless with a tail of bandits-in-uniform dangling after him and barely able to tell which fork to eat the fish with . . . *and then I saw you, looking like a sword in a silverware set and all that training and effort I went through was for nothing.*

"No, not *quite* for nothing," she mused softly to herself, walking to the windows and out onto the terrace.

Leaning on the railing she could look down toward the graceful but square-built barracks that flanked the main gates. Insect-tiny with distance, the Guard was changing, figures wheeling and halting on the checkered colored brick of the plaza. Faintly the cool brass of trumpets and the rough beat of drums sounded; the blue-and-gold Star banner of Holy Federation was lowered and raised, salutes and ritual words were exchanged.

"Here there are so many enemies you can't fight face to face, with gun and sword and soldier's honor," she whispered. Her face grew bleak as the edge of a knife. "So I'll do it for you, my love. Whether you ever know it or not."

CHAPTER TWO

The four Companions rose from the benches and saluted as the door to the Whitehall apartments opened; a pair of 5th Descott troopers snapped to attention and raised bayoneted rifles to the present. Raj grunted in acknowledgment and returned the gesture; these were old comrades, veterans of the Komar campaign and the Battle of Sandoral out on the eastern frontier. His Companions, to use the archaic phrase they had resurrected in what was only half a joke.

"We'd better hurry, gentlemen," he said shortly.

They fell in behind him, left hands resting on the hilts of their sabers. The whole party fell unconsciously into step, the iron hobnails and heel-plates of their riding boots echoing on the marble flags of the corridor. Like most of the East Residence, this section consisted of two-story blocks set around courtyards; they clattered up a flight of stairs and into an entry hall, where whispering knots of officers and courtiers parted to make room. Brigadier Whitehall was well known, after last year's triumph in the east, and the suppression of the coup attempt that followed. So were his Companions; for that matter, the almost ostentatious plainness of their issue uniforms, maroon pants and blue tail-coats and round helmets, stood out in a Residence crowd.

Kaltin Gruder was the first to speak; he was still limping slightly, from a bullet through the thigh during the

battles on the Drangosh. He had been something of a dandy, before he met Raj Whitehall; the Komar raid had left him one brother shorter and covered the right side of his face with lines of scar tissue.

"The 7th's still a bit shaky," he said. The 7th Descott Rangers was his new command. "Lot of replacements, after the casualties."

"I could spare a few NCO's from the 5th," Gerrin said.

Raj's step checked slightly; the 5th Descott Guards was his original command, and it had been expanded recently too. He was still nominal Captain-in-Chief, but Gerrin had taken over the actual running . . . *and you trust him*, Raj reminded himself.

"Thanks, Gerrin; Spirit of Man knows I could use them," Gruder replied. "By the way, did you catch those Brigade ambassadors?"

Antin M'lewis chuckled slightly, showing a few crooked tobacco-stained teeth amid gleaming gold replacements for those knocked out in battle. "Wunnit enough ter fright t'kiddies, though?" he said.

Da Cruz scowled at him slightly, then shrugged in resignation as M'lewis grinned back and jerked one shoulder, marked with an officer's chain-mail epaulet and a Senior Lieutenant's stars. The little ex-trooper from Bufford Parish had been one of the two Companions Raj had taken with him to foil the attempt on the Governor's life last spring, while the rest guarded Lady Suzette. Governor Barholm's gratitude had lasted long enough for M'lewis to get a commission and a moderate-sized estate near the capital; quite a step up for a former rustler and part-time bandit, enlisted one step ahead of the headsman.

At least he didn't have a line command; respectable Descott County yeoman-troopers wouldn't put up with it, even if he was a technical gentleman now. Being from Bufford Parish, the County's disgrace, was enough; never mind his dubious social status. He did well enough with the collection of gallows-bait that Raj had authorized him to recruit, mostly from guardhouses and punishment details. Officially they were the Scout Group of the 5th Descott, more commonly known as the Forty Thieves. Da Cruz had preferred to stay at Master Sergeant rank, even though he had made enough out of the eastern war to buy land of his own back home in Descott County, the farm he had planned to rent on retirement.

"Interestin' weapons them barbs had," the noncom said stolidly. "Not bad shots; surprised they could get that sort of accuracy out of them muzzle-loaders."

The Brigade were fairly civilized for barbarians, having ruled the old Civil Government lands in the far west for centuries now. The emissaries had still been a gaudy sight, fringed buckskins and purple silk, broad-brimmed hats stuck with carnosauroid feathers, gold and jewels and long slashing swords hung over their shoulders. Most of them had had four or five cap-and-ball revolvers slung around them, besides their head-high rifles. They had put on a display of marksmanship in the gardens, smashing bottles at a thousand paces, which was performance as good as you could get from an Armory rifle.

Gerrin tapped a ringed thumb meditatively against the pommel of his saber. "Slow on the loading, though," he said. "Looked as if they were more used to hunting and target-practice."

Kaltin snorted. "Not much real fighting recently, I suppose."

"Not our problem, eh, ser?" da Cruz said dryly. "Anyways, the Squadron won't be as tough as thet-there Brigade, nohow."

The others nodded; the Squadron had come roaring out of the northern wilderness a century and a half ago, to take the Southern Territories from the Civil Government. They had been outright savages then, and the Territories had gone downhill under their management.

"Can't say the men are over-eager to take them on, even so," Gerrin said carefully, glancing aside at Raj. "Not after a year's hard fighting out east. The Squadron's no match for the wogs, true, but you have to sail to get at them. A wet way to fight, and not a Descotter's choice."

Raj grunted again, ducking his head slightly.

observeCenter said.

— Raj was standing on the quarterdeck of a three-master, his disembodied viewpoint beside the wheel, looking over his own shoulder. The storm had died down, leaving whitecaps on a ruffled wine-colored sea. The Civil Government sailing-transporters were scattered from horizon to horizon, many dismasted or wallowing with their sails blown to flapping rags on bare poles. In among them the Squadron war-galleys plunged, huge plumes of spray flung back from the bronze rams at their bows. Oars worked like centipede legs; they were painted vermilion and white, the long snaky hulls were black. Off in the middle distance more came up, their sails not yet struck for battle; the towering lateen shapes bright crimson with the barbarians' golden Sun-and-Comet. One shocked to a stop, the mast-tops lashing as its ram knifed into the planks of a transport.

The helpless merchantman heeled far over under the impact. Tiny figures flew into the water from the rails, thrashing about briefly until the eager tentacles of scavenging downraggers hauled them toward gnashing beaks. Others went under the oar-blades as they rose and fell like a mincing machine. Off in the middle distance cannon echoed and smoke rose as a lone CivilGovernment paddle-steamer loosed a broadside; the solid shot skipped along the waves, and one crashed into the oarbank of a galley, but the other vessels turned nimbly aside to avoid the bigger ship's blundering rush. There was only one in sight. Perhaps, from the smoke, another lay over the horizon; dozens of the galleys, and hundreds of their helpless victims.

The Raj-figure wheeled sharply as a seaman tugged at his sleeve, and the viewpoint turned with him. A Squadron two-banker was boring in on their ship; Raj could see the sea falling off the arrowhead shape of the ram, and the mouths of four brass carronades running forward through the square deckhouse above it. Gunners waited with smoking linstocks; the forward mast bristled with the raven-beak spikes of boarding ramps ready to fall and nail the craft together, and behind them crowded the Squadron marines shrieking and waving their massive flintlocks and axes in the air.

"Yeah, well," he said softly, without looking around, conscious that his step had faltered.

The others had gotten used to these fits of introspection; none of the Companions had known him well before he . . . *became an Avatar of the Spirit of Man of the Stars?* Raj shuddered and worked his shoulders. For the others, it was times like this that he pulled something impossible out of the hat.

As if he was inspired.

"Well," he went on, "I can see how the people who were out east would like a little more rest." That had

been the biggest campaign in sixty years, and the first time in forty-odd the Civil Government had defeated the Colony in a major battle. Memory flashed across his mind: Colonist cavalry sweeping toward Raj's shrinking circle in the Valley of Death. Section leaders yipped and waved yataghans, sharpened on the inner curve, but the mass of bright-colored riders were silent because they held their reins in their teeth to work their carbines with both hands. The recollection was so vivid that Raj missed a step.

I could use a break myself, he thought ruefully.

the man you have become in these past two years would not know how to take a break, raj whitehall, Center said. If the mental voice had a tone, it was of regret. **no more than i would.**

Raj shook his head and continued aloud: "The problem is, if I *am* going to be sent to take back the Southern Territories, I'd prefer to have some people with me who've gotten into the habit of pulling their heads out of their arses for a look around now and then."

The Council of State for War was meeting in an old chapel, a semicircle of seats sloping down to the altar; behind it was a smooth wall of the same gray-streaked white marble as the rest of the big room, with a balcony choir-loft above, screened in carved nairstone that glittered silver and rose in the yellow brightness of the gaslights. Lady Anne Clerett was rumored to observe the meetings from behind that screen . . . and the faint elusive scent of jasmine under the wax-and-incense of the room strongly hinted that rumor was correct. The altar was coated in shining electrum, and held a featureless ball about the size of a man's head. The material was part of its mystery; nothing present-day technology produced could even scratch it, should someone be impious enough to try. It was a computer of the Ancients, from before the Fall, timeless and holy.

a 7ec42, Center said in its emotionless monotone, **in charge of automated traffic control for a suburb of the Old Residence before the collapse. A pause, and it had an unacceptable error rate even then.**

The crowd below was all-male, except for one of the Supreme Reverend Syssup-Hierarch's assistants. About fifty present, mostly military, and dressed in a dozen colorful variations on standard uniform. They turned to look at Raj as he and the Companions entered through the big doors at the rear of the arc of seats, relief on their faces. Governor Barholm sat in the Chair before the altar, a shining confection of electrum and brass, pearls and jewels, with a huge golden Star-burst for a back.

"Ah, Brigadier Whitehall," he said.

His voice carried easily in the chapel's superb acoustics, a well-trained instrument. Despite the cloth-of-gold robes, Barholm Clerett looked very much the simple squire from the Descott County hills, a brick-built man with a barrel chest and a nose like a beak in his square dark-brown face. Only a very stupid man would believe that appearance; Clerett had ruled the Civil Government for fifteen years, as Vice-Governor to his ailing uncle and then in his own right, through intrigue and riot and war.

Beside him on a crimson cushion rested a mace, a short weapon forged from a single billet of steel, inlaid with silver and platinum. The emblem of rank only a commander of an independent army corps sent beyond the Civil Government border could carry.

" *Thankyou* for joining us," he went on dryly, as Raj and his followers slid into the seats reserved for

them in the front row.

A few of the high-born officers in the front ranks smirked; Chancellor Tzetzias leaned back, slimly elegant in his robe of midnight-blue torofib silk from Azania. One eyebrow rose, an expression calculated to the millimeter.

"We were discussing," Barholm went on, "the sacred task of reclaiming the Southern Territories from the barbarian heretics currently occupying them. A task," he added waspishly, "which arouses very little — surprisingly little — enthusiasm!"

"Your Supremacy," an elderly man in uniform protested, "we would serve you ill if we did not counsel you honestly. My father" — he shuddered slightly — "my father's elder brothers and my grandfather sailed with the last fleet sent to reclaim the Territories."

observeCenter said.

— and Raj was on the docks, down where the deep-sea merchantmen came to harbor. It was East Residence, but an earlier one; the East Railway station was not there, and the Messer-class men in view were wearing drooping broad sleeves that covered their hands to the knuckles. A fashion from his great-grandfather's time, like the lace fans of the ladies among the crowd. Miniluna and Maxiluna were both aloft and full, across the horizon from the setting sun, pale translucent crater-marked spheres floating above the darkening sea.

Troops ringed the berths where a dozen transports were docked; gulls chased hissing dactosauroids through the tarry maze of rigging, the sound lost in a surf-roar of voices. The mob was anxious enough to crowd the leveled bayonets. Raj could see the men jab them forward now and then, the long blades coming back red-tipped and the edge of the crowd stumbling away in an eddy; mounted officers with drawn sabers sat their dogs behind the line of guardsmen. Other figures were coming down the gangplanks of the transports, figures in the tattered remains of Civil Government uniforms. They shuffled down the creaking planks in groups, groups of eleven; ten men with their hands each in the belt of the one before them, and pus-wet bandages across the ruins of their eyes. The leading man in each group had one good eye, but no hands

". . . and never will I forget my father's words, when he told me how his only living brother came back, a blinded eunuch. Your Supremacy," the old man went on, holding out his hands almost pleadingly; they were calloused from the grip of reins and saber. "Mighty Sovereign Lord, only because my father had not yet entered Holy Church did our line survive at all. I have served the Chair in war all my life, and my sons and my sons' sons. Spare them, Your Supremacy!"

There was a moment of ringing silence. Chancellor Tzetzias coughed discreetly into a handkerchief.

"Most moving, most moving." He was a tall slender man in his mid sixties, with the fine olive skin and delicate features of old City nobility. "Your Supremacy's will is mine, of course; still, this is a rashly adventurous course of action we contemplate. The campaign in the east concluded so successfully last year" — Tzetzias bowed easily in Raj's direction — "did no more than pay its own costs."

Raj felt his lips tighten, then forced an easy smile and a nod of polite acknowledgment. *Because I didn't*

let you get your hands on all the loot, Tzetas, he thought coldly. Some of it had gone on victory-bonuses, a good deal to pensions for troops crippled from their wounds, soldiers the Chancellor had thrown off their land grants as soon as they were registered as unfit for duty.

"Our mighty sovereign lord, Governor Barholm, has embarked on numerous projects to glorify the Spirit of Man of the Stars" — the new Temple, paid for out of an increase in the salt tax — "and to better the lives of the people" — railway extensions, new harbors and dams and steam mills — "and in conclusion, I am forced to confess myself at a loss as to where the funds for this expedition might be found."

" *Take it out of what you steal, Tzetas.*" The call was a sotto voce whisper from one of the more junior officers up in the higher tiers of seats. Laughter rumbled from all the military men present, although the Chancellor's robed bureaucrats sat in appalled silence. Tzetas's head turned, and the movement reminded Raj of a carnosauroid he had seen in the Governor's menagerie, one moment death-still, the next snapping an insect out of the air. Then the Chancellor relaxed, smiling thinly as Barholm joined in the bellow of mirth.

I would not like to be the man who said that, Raj thought. There was an old joke about a fangmouth biting Tzetas; rumor had it that the poison reptile died in convulsions.

observeCenter said.

—and a young officer jerked erect in bed; Raj recognized the room, or rather its pattern. Company commander's quarters in an East Residence barracks, although the sleeping woman was decidedly non-regulation. The officer's face was fluid with sleep; he reached out to touch the holstered pistol hanging from the headboard by unconscious reflex.

"Heysos? That you?" he mumbled.

" *Nao*" a voice said, as the door swung open and a masked man in dark clothing stepped through. The naked soldier had just enough time to clear the heavy dragoon pistol from its holster before the shotgun blast caught him in the face, flinging his body back and much of his head across the wall behind him.

The woman screamed twice; the assassin stepped to within a meter of her before he fired the other barrel.

Tzetas spread his hands. "And in any case . . . military affairs are outside my area of expertise; I would not care to speculate on the chances of success. The dangers to the eastern frontier, however, are, one would think, obvious. We lost several provinces to the Colony when the *last* expedition was destroyed."

Thump. All eyes swung back to Barholm, as he brought the stylized keyboard down on the arm of the Chair. The diamond and padparascha sapphire symbols on its surface glittered, matching the autocrat's robes.

"Thanks to Brigadier Whitehall here," Barholm bit out, "the Colony is without a Settler. Ali and Akbar are still settling who's to be master—"

observeCenter said.

— and dark men in doghair robes waited behind an alabaster planter filled with rose bushes, the blossoms plate-sized disks of crimson and yellow. A figure in long robe and cloth-of-gold turban came striding along the pathway beyond, where fountains tinkled among delicate tilework; behind him walked guards, black giants naked to the waist with long curved blades resting unsheathed on their shoulders. The planter overturned and those behind it leapt forward, curved daggers raised, shrieking. Their screams of rage turned to fear as swords hissed and rifles from the snipers on the rooftop opposite spat puffs of white . . .

— and stocky grizzled Tewfik stood in the open flap of a field-commander's tent, dressed as ever in the plain scarlet burnoose and spired helmet of the Colonial Regulars, with the Seal of Solomon on his black leather eyepatch. His left hand was clenched on the hilt of his scimitar until the knuckles showed white, but there was unshakable calm in his voice, and in the face that watched the soldiers drilling. Behind him a man in civilian robe and ha'aik waited by the map table, looking uneasily at the officers who stood around him with their arms crossed. From his expression, he was fully conscious that they would be delighted by an order to take him out — and shoot him as soon as he cleared the rug.

"My regrets to my noble brother the emir Ali," Tewfik ground out, "and my message to him is as my previous message — please, we both know it was read by other than its intended recipient — to my noble brother the emir Akbar; the peace of Allah upon them both. No troops can be spared for . . . missions in the capital. Not now, or until the council of the ulemma has chosen another Settler to lead the faithful."

The civilian hesitated, then bowed. "Peace be upon you, sa'yid," he murmured, and slipped past to his waiting borzhoi.

"And upon you, peace, you viper," Tewfik muttered, when the messenger had gone. Then he wheeled, cutting off the officers with a glare and a chopping motion of his hand. "And there *will* be peace. Either of my brothers will rule well enough — but for me to reach for power would mean civil war; you know the Law." The Commander of the Faithful must be perfect in body. "It will be as God wills; and all things are accomplished according to the will of God."

"Inshallah," the officers murmured.

"—and Tewfik's disqualified, praise the *Spirit* for that" Raj nodded in unconscious agreement; Tewfik was far and away the most able of old Jamal's legitimate sons, but he was missing an eye, lost in the Zanj Wars a decade ago, and by Colonial law that disqualified him.

"Indeed, Your Supremacy," Tzetzas said; his voice had a softly reasonable tone that made you want to agree immediately, for fear of seeming shrill or irrational. "For a year or so the Colony will be weakened. But the conquest of the Southern Territories would take *decades*."

"We certainly can't afford to *strip* the eastern territories," Fiydel Klostermann said; he was Master of Soldiers these days, an administrative command and as close to a Chief of Staff as the Civil Government had. "Which we'd need to do. The Squadron can field a hundred thousand men; granted they're equipped with blunderbusses, and they've no artillery to speak of, that's still two hundred battalions of fighting men." The Civil Government kept a quarter of a million men under arms, but most of those were

immobile garrison infantry.

Admiral Tiburcyo Gharderini spoke up; he was a nervous looking little man with gray-shot black hair, in the black-and-gold uniform of the Civil Government's navy. Naval officers often came from the City itself, and from merchant families, unlike the Army, which was dominated by the landed gentry. You could see his consciousness of his own social insignificance as he glanced around at the others.

"Well . . . we *do* have the steam rams and gunboats," he said. "We've managed to keep the Squadron corsairs at a distance, this last generation."

"Mostly," a cavalry commander said dryly. Gharderini flushed darkly.

"But that's a different matter from attacking Port Murchison," the sailor went on doggedly; that was the capital of the Territories. "We don't have enough fleet units to spare to guard a convoy that size, we don't have coaling stations close enough, and we're just too undermanned and underfunded. Begging Your Excellency's pardon," he finished rapidly, with a bob in the direction of the Chancellor.

Barholm was tapping the keyboard-scepter on the arm of the Chair with ominous patience.

A younger officer sprang up. Raj recognized him: Anhelino Dalhouse, commander of the 17th Valley Cuirassiers. Exceedingly wealthy and well-born and without much combat experience, unless you counted putting down the odd peon uprising.

"We sit here quibbling like a lot of old women!" he burst out, the points of his mustache quivering. "What are we, fighting men or duennas at a coming-out ball for our maiden sisters? The Squadron heretics sit on our lands, collecting our revenues and persecuting our people and our church. What more needs to be said?"

The Supreme Reverend Syssup-Hierarch rose, fingering the circuit amulet on his chest. "More than persecuting!" he said angrily. "Your Supremacy, you are guardian of the Church's flock in every land — the Squadron beasts stable their riding dogs in our churches, or worse, convert them to their heretical worship of the Spirit of Man of This Earth" — most of the audience grasped their amulets and murmured a prayer — "and they rob and plunder and enslave our communicants who refuse to follow their beastly superstition. Their Admiral forbids the appointment of Syssups to guide the dioceses of the Territories; Syssups-Missionary I have appointed have been burned alive, priests mutilated, Renunciate Sisters gang-raped. The Spirit of Man of the Stars demands we act! Endfile."

"Endfile," the others murmured piously, touching their amulets. *At least there's one sincere voice*, Raj thought

Barholm nodded, pleased.

Klostermann cleared his throat and spoke: "All respect and reverence to Holy Church and Its Supreme Reverend Syssup-Hierarch, but we've been receiving reports of atrocities for the century or more the Squadron has held the Territories. Why does the Spirit of Man of the Stars demand we act *now*, rather than later when the conditions favor us? Will it serve Holy Church for us to lose another fifty thousand men, and perhaps the borderlands we fought the Colony last year to keep?"

Silence fell again, broken only by the scritch of secretaries writing up the records of the meeting and the slow tick-lock of the brass clock set into one wall of the chapel.

"Brigadier Whitehall," Barholm said at last, softly. "We require your opinion in this matter."

Raj felt cold. *This is the time, Center? The Civil Government really is strong enough now to retake the Southern Territories?*

as i have shown you, raj whitehall, replied the voice in his mind, **i cannot guarantee success, but . . . i did not choose you not to try.**

The young general came slowly to his feet, looking down at the backs of his hands. They were scarred, with faint darker lines on the knuckles, trail-dirt, from long marches, that could never quite be scrubbed away. When he raised his eyes he felt a slight forward sway from the other seats; only desperate fear could have made so many openly disagree with the Governor, who was not a forgiving man. Most desperate of all the fear of being appointed to command the expedition; defeat probably meant proscription as a traitor, death or confiscation of estates for the commander's whole family.

"Your Supremacy," he said, and paused. "On your orders, I've made a study of this problem. I believe the reconquest of the Southern Territories *can* be accomplished." A collective sigh of indrawn breath.

"And it can be accomplished at acceptable cost and risk. No slight to the valiant dead, but the last expeditionary force was neither well organized nor well led. And the Squadron they faced was still the terror of the Midworld Sea, with a first-rate navy.

"They've let their fleet go downhill, and their army too, such as it is. They don't have a standing force, you know. That didn't matter when Admiral Ricks" — the legendary war-chief who had led the Squadron down from the north, and then created the fleet that pillaged the Midworld for generations — "called up his warriors for pirate raids every year, 'to make war on those with whom the Spirit of Man is angry' . . . but these days all most of them do is sit on their behinds and watch their peons work.

"Sending fifty thousand men would be an unacceptable risk and far too expensive. With thirty thousand I can be fairly confident of success."

He watched the faces change; Tzetas relaxing, Barholm tightening into a frown.

you will not be given thirty thousand, Center said. **probability 89% ± 6%.**

Raj sighed inwardly; Center took some of the fun out of bargaining, with its ability to tell you exactly what an opponent would settle for beforehand.

"Fifteen thousand *could* do it: five thousand cavalry as a strike force, ten thousand infantry for garrisons and as a base of maneuver, and thirty guns. I'd estimate no more than a year of real fighting if it's properly handled, and plunder alone will pay the expenses of the campaign, not to mention the revenues afterwards. With less than fifteen thousand, I would regretfully decline to assume any position."

Barholm's face was unreadable as he nodded to Tzetas. *An I told you so* expression; the Chancellor's face looked as if he was sucking on a lemon for an instant, and his voice actually sounded animated, as good as a shout.

"Even if the expedition *is possible*, that's no reason to *do* it," he said testily.

Raj rubbed a palm along his jaw; the sword-callus that ringed thumb and forefinger rasped on blue-jowled stubble.

"True, Chancellor, if only ordinary matters were at stake. But . . . well, religion may sound odd, in a soldier's mouth, and the Spirit knows a soldier is all I am. Gentlemen —" He glanced around the circle of faces. "Gentlemen, we *are* civilization; we *are* the last representatives of the Holy Federation. The Civil Government is not just another successor-state living in the ruins of sacredness; we have a *duty* to bring all the Earth—"

bellevue,Center interjected,**earth later.**

"— *al*of the Earth and its people back into the Holy Federation and oneness with the Spirit of Man of the Stars. Isn't everyone — everyone, barbarian or Colonist or heretic — made in the Spirit's image? If we deny that, we deny the Spirit in ourselves, and our faith is a sham —"

His voice had risen; he cut himself off abruptly as he saw the others blink at his vehemence, flushing at the murmur of "hear, hear" from many of the other officers, the Supreme Reverend Syssup-Hierarch's gesture of blessing.

"And who should lead this expedition?" Barholm asked neutrally.

"The decision is yours, of course, Your Supremacy," Raj said awkwardly. "But I've thought about this for a long time, and in all honesty I feel that I would be the best choice."

i have thought about it for a thousand years . . .Center whispered at the back of his brain,**at last . . .**

Barholm nodded. "Let it be recorded that Messer Brigadier — no, we'd better make that Brigadier General Raj Ammenda Halgern da Luis Whitehall is appointed Field Commander of the expeditionary force to reclaim the sacred soil of Holy Federation from the Squadron barbarians, with viceregal authority while in the *barbaricum*. Let all servants of the CivilGovernment and Holy Church render lawful aid to him in this matter. Brigadier General Whitehall, please submit a list of units and commanders to *me* by . . . hmm, this time tomorrow for my consideration and approval."

He made a sharp gesture, and an aide lifted the cushion with the mace of office on it, going down on one knee before Raj. Raj lifted it in both hands and raised it to his lips; the officers raised a sharp cheer of approval, formal and brief.

The Governor looked around the ranked officers, brows raised. "If there's no further *advice*?" he said with heavy irony. "No?"

The Supreme Reverend Syssup-Hierarch began the elaborate ceremony of dismissal. Holding his amulet and making the keying gesture of prayer with the others, Raj almost smiled at the looks of envy some gave him out of the corners of their eyes.

Envy for a man who's just condemned himself to death,he thought. The mace seemed heavier than worlds.

CHAPTER THREE

East Residence sat on a peninsula that jutted out like a thumb from the foothills of the coast range to the west, enclosing a narrow tongue of water on its south side. Eastward was the estuary of the Hemmar River, flowing from the south out into the Midworld Sea. Both moons were down; the Palace and the inner districts around it were bright with gas streetlights, while the bulk of the capital was a lumpy darkness of buildings and hills, black picked out by the yellow dots of lamps. Off in the west there was a sullen light from the foundries and factories, while to the east on the highest point the gold Starburst on the Temple's dome was underlit by electric arc-lights and touched by the first rays of the sun. There had been no night at the harbor-side, with thousands of torches to magnify the gaslights.

It was a cool spring morning, the sky cloudy and dark and drizzling down a thin mist of rain; coal smoke drifted down from the city's hills. The bitter smell of it mixed with the silty sewage-tainted tar stink of the harbor, and the smells of thousands of dogs and tens of thousands of men embarking.

The first ships of the Civil Government's fleet were making way out of the inner harbor, but the naval docks were still in a state of barely-organized chaos. Stubby little paddle-tugs and twenty-oar galleys were towing the big three-master cargo ships out east past the breakwaters; as each cast loose the sails went up with a series of rhythmic jerks and the long hulls heeled sharply, catching the northerly wind. Others were still loading, endless files of slave longshoremen trotting up the gangplanks with sacks and crates, the timbers of the cranes groaning as they swung field-guns and wagons aboard. Troopers were leading their riding dogs through side-doors in the hulls of specially fitted transports; most of them had thrown their jackets over the dogs' heads, for the comfort of darkness and familiar smell, but there was a constant whining and occasional outbreaks of thunder-deep barking from the big animals. The infantry stood in ordered clumps further inland by company columns. A hundred or so was the limit for a single ship, and it also served to discourage the press-ganged sailors from deserting.

Raj watched from the shadow of a crane as one unit made ready to embark:

"Company A, 17th Kelden Foot! *Alo sinstra, waymanos!* By the left, forward!" The soldiers marched bowed slightly under pack and rifle, a long centipede of maroon-clad legs and blue-jacketed bodies, faces stolid-set under their bowl-helmets as they followed the furled battalion standard. The hobnails clashed on the granite paving, and the men began a hoarse chanting:

" March! The mud is cakin' good about our trousies

Front! Eyes front, an' watch the color-casin's drip.

Front! the faces of the women in the houses

Ain't the kind of thing to take aboard the ship."

Star Spirit be with them all, he thought. Raj was standing by a warship; they would cast off last, being all steam-powered. Black smoke poured from the tall twin funnels on each; they were low-slung snaky craft, with big boxlike wooden covers for the paddlewheels on each side of the midships deckhouse, an iron-clad ram at the bows and six light breech-loaders along each side. Those were nearly hidden by the ton-weight wicker baskets of coal standing on the decks, crowding right up to the masts fore and aft.

"There's something wrong with the coal?" Raj asked the man beside him.

"Messer Whitehall, there's not much *right* with it," Muzzaf Kerpatik said. He sneered, the flash of white teeth brilliant against teak-dark skin and his pointed beard and mustache. "Half of it is shale — and the rest is soft, not hard anthracite. Half the price of good steam coal. Not one half the heating power."

"Tzetzas," Raj said with weary resignation, straightening. The big crane above them chuffed as the handler eased the steam-powered winch into action and swung the heavy net of fuel onto the warship's deck.

Muzzaf was a Komarite, from one of the southern border cities along the Colonial frontier; one of the strange new class of monetary risk-takers, men who invested large sums in manufacture or trade yet were not really merchants or moneylenders or artisans. It still seemed a little unnatural to Raj, gaining wealth without inheriting or plundering it.

"Back in Komar I thought myself wicked because I entered a conspiracy with the Chancellor's men to bilk the Fisc of soldiers' pay," he said. Neither of them needed to add that it was Raj Whitehall who had accepted his repentance, when that conspiracy left Muzzaf's native city defenseless. And Raj who had protected him from the Chancellor since. "Tzetzas . . . since coming to the capital, I have seen his hand in everything," the Komarite confirmed. "He has interests in the Coast Range mines." He straightened, flicking at the black dust on his brown cotton coat and the cloak draped over his arm; normally he was something of a peacock, but today he had limited it to a few pieces of silver jewelry and a spray of colored sauroid feathers clipped to the brim of his fore-and-aft peaked cap. "Messer, I'm surprised anyone ever makes a profit on *anything* in this city. Except the Chancellor and his cronies, of course."

Raj nodded. "I appreciate your work, Mezzaf. You've been invaluable. Try looking into the rest of the supply situation, would you?"

"As you wish, Messer," Mezzaf replied; he bowed and touched brow and lips, already looking abstracted. Behind him the sound of the soldiers' singing faded as they boarded the ship:

"Cheer! An' we'll never march to victory.

Cheer! An' we'll never live to hear the cannon roar!

The Large Birds o' Prey

They will carry us away,

An' you'll never see your soldiers anymore!"

The general gave a hitch at his sword belt as he walked out to meet the commanders one last time. They were standing in anonymous clumps, the heavy military cloaks about their shoulders. His eyes seemed to be ridged with sand, and everything stood out with a slightly feverish clarity. Complete exhaustion: about what you would expect putting this all together on short notice.

Barton Foley stood scratching his chin *carefully* with the point of the hook where his left hand used to be, his right clasped in Gerrin Staenbridge's. Jorg Menyeyez was talking to Mekkle Thiddo, who was still inclined to look admiringly at his own Battalion Commander's stars now and then; he had been a gentleman-ranker once, and a Lieutenant until the Komar campaign. Kaltin Gruder was saying goodbye to an implausibly large collection of ladies, most of them crying too hard to quarrel with each other as he shooed them firmly away. M'lewis was off to one side, conferring with a few of his Scouts; several of them managed the minor miracle of looking more furtively unsavory than their commander.

. . . and there were the strangers. Ewardo Poplanich, Thom's cousin, for one. A little older, but with the same thin intellectual's face, a little uncertain in this company. Anhelino Dalhouse for another; and Mihwel Berg, the Administrative Service panjandrum, sulking as usual. He was supposed to set up the civil administration in the Southern Territories, once they took it back; talking to Suzette seemed to be animating him a little. Barholm had said he was a first-rate man who'd be a great deal of help. So far there was fuck-all sign of it, which was odd since the Governor was a judge of men, in his way.

Except he saddled me with Dalhouse, Raj thought sourly. That was fatigue speaking; he hadn't had a decent night's sleep in a week or more . . . about par for the course, out on campaign. Dalhouse probably had too many connections for Barholm to ignore. Besides that, Raj had asked for all the units that campaigned with him in the east — slightly suspicious, from a Governor's point of view.

"Good morning, Messers," he said.

One of the servants handed him his helmet, a plain bowl of black iron with a riveted neckguard of chain mail on leather at the back. The rank-badge over the brows was new, an eighteen-point star of gold and silver on a blue shield, orbited by seven more. He buckled it on, the familiar weight making the war seem real after the paperwork and quartermaster's nightmare of the last month. Dalhouse sneered slightly; *his* helmet was polished bronze with inlay in niello and silver, and the neck-guard was torosauroid hide traded down from the northern steppes, the type that grew natural crystals of metal in the skin, brought to a high polish.

"Now, I'm going to give you some final instructions," Raj continued, deliberately dropping his voice slightly. Men leaned forward, straining to hear. "The fleet has been divided into ten sections, plus the naval escorts. While at sea, instructions from *any* naval officer commanding an escort are to be accepted as if they were mine. Is that understood?"

He waited until all the ten section officers nodded. "Admiral Gharderini, your first priority will be to keep the fleet together. If any vessel becomes separated for any reason whatsoever, the fleet will halt until the escorts bring in the strays. If we're scattered by weather, everyone will head for the assigned rendezvous for that section of the journey — check your maps, Messers. Anyone who gets ahead of the fleet may pray to the Spirit of Man of the Stars for help, for he'll get none from me. And anyone" — he paused — "anyone whosoever who turns back without authorization will be shot, and every officer on his ship, and every tenth enlisted man taken at random. Master Sergeant da Cruz, you may inform the men of that."

Slight chance anyone could use a little bad weather as an excuse after that; even if the threat was not altogether credible — many of the officers had family connections powerful enough to rescue them from anything short of heresy — but the men would believe it, and likely shoot anyone risking a decimation. There was a slight stir among the officers, and several of the Companions smiled. Several of the non-Companions looked again at the men who had campaigned with Raj Whitehall, noting the scars and missing limbs and limbs; many of them looked a little green. There had been no great rush of commanders volunteering their units for this expedition. Dalhouse waited with elaborate patience, fingers tapping at the glossy leather of his Sam Browne belt.

"Final dispositions will be made at Sadler Island, according to what intelligence information we can pick up there" — *because the Ministry of Barbarians has dick-all here* — "and under *no circumstances* is anyone to attempt to enter Port Murchison without orders. We'll probably land well south of the city and work north by land."

Dalhouse snorted. Raj looked at him mildly, raising his brows. "Yes, Messer?" he said.

"Waste of time, *ferramente*, going all the way past Port Murchison and then walking back," he said, stroking one finger down a waxed black moustache. "We should sail straight into Port Murchison and *kill* the sons of whores, not flounce about in the bloody bundu. They outnumber us, so we should take them by surprise. Sir."

Gerrin Staenbridge laughed. "Advice from the depths of your many years of combat experience?" he said. Dalhouse let his right hand drop to the hilt of his saber and took a half-step forward.

"Messers," Raj said patiently. *Don't provoke him, Gerrin*, he thought. *I know he's a fool and a fop, but the Palace wants him in.* "Messer Major Dalhouse," he continued, "last year we fought the wogs out east. They had an army every bit as good as ours, much bigger, and commanded by Prince Tewfik. So I used the only advantage we had, position, and dug in where they had to come to us.

"Now," he said genially, "we're fighting the Squadron, who are the people the phrase 'dumb barb' was invented to describe. Fighting them, *our* advantages are our weapons, our organization, our discipline. We know what they'll do; they'll rush in like a pack of sicklefeet around a cow. *Their* advantages are their numbers and ferocity." Suddenly he leaned forward, pushing his face into the junior officer's.

His voice went flat. "So I'm not too entranced by the idea of wallowing into a blindsided street fight at close range, Messer Major Dalhouse. I do not intend to imitate a mob of racing enthusiasts in an after-game brawl. I prefer an open-field battle of maneuver to start with, I really do."

Dalhouse looked around. Most of the other officers were staring at him with the shocked almost-consideration they would have given a man who had just been run over by a hansom cab. Young Barton Foley had slipped the leather sheath-cover off his hook and was stropping the razor edge of the interior against a ceramic honing stick. Dalhouse began a sneer. He stopped as he met the young Companion's eyes, flushed darkly under his native olive, and fell silent.

"Now," Raj went on, voice mild and slightly under-pitched once more. "Dinnalsyn?"

Major Dinnalsyn nodded. "*Seyhor*," he said: Sir, with the flat East Residence accent of a City man. The artillery recruited many such, like the engineers and the navy. "Thirty standard fieldpieces, ready to go." Seventy-five-millimeter rifled breechloaders; the Squadron didn't use field guns at all, only fortress guns and muzzle-loaders on warships. It was something of an innovation to appoint an over-all artillery commander, but Grammek Dinnalsyn was a man he trusted. "We stripped out first-rate pieces from other units and dumped anything that looked chancy on them."

"Menyez?"

Jorg's long melancholy face sank deeper into gloom as he ran a hand through his thinning russet hair, damp from the almost-rain. He was from the northwestern provinces, Kelden County, and an infantry specialist by choice. Rare — cavalry was the prestige arm, and the Menyезes were very rich — but he was allergic to dogs.

"The foot regiments are all up to strength. Not too many of them are fresh meat, and they're fully equipped," he said. That was something; away from dangerous frontier posts some infantry commanders equipped their battalions with flintlocks originally made for trade in the trans-border *barbaricum*. His would all be furnished with standard Armory breechloaders. "Apart from that, they're about as usual, except for my 17th and the 24th Valentia."

Tzetas had been *very* reluctant to let him take even those two infantry battalions from the force he'd had in the Army of the Upper Drangosh, out east. A matter of expense, since Civil Government infantry units were supposed to live off farms granted by the *fisc*, in the neighborhood of their garrisons; the enlisted men were paid only when on the move or in the field, between permanent postings. Cavalry and mercenaries received regular pay in hard cash, but they were the elite troops; infantry were press-ganged from the peons of the central counties, and usually fit only for second-line duties. Barholm had seen little difference between one infantry unit and the next. So would Raj have done, before he saw what Menyecz could do with them.

"Making bricks without straw, that's the Army," Raj said resignedly. "Settling in all right with the Slashers, Mekkle?"

The young man grinned shyly. His family were what Descotters called bonnet-squires: possessors of an ancient name and half a dozen small farms, along with several hundred hectares of third-rate grazing; freeholders, but there were yeoman tenants who had more livestock and cash. Not many prospects, living on a Lieutenant's pay, although he had a fair education. Raj doesn't care about your birth, only what you can do, he thought. You worked harder under him than a mine-slave, but he'd bought back land his grandfather had lost, and married Maria

"The 1st Rogor Slashers are ready for action, sir," he said. "Took some getting used to — they're not as, hmmm, unflappable as Descotters" — the Slashers were recruited from the southern border — "and they don't like to sweat much, out of the field, but they'll fight, Spirit knows."

"Good, keep at them. Southerners tend to have more dash than sense. All right, Messers. Dismissed."

He saluted; the Companions leaving for their units stayed a moment longer, and they all slapped fists together in a pyramid of arms.

"Hell or plunder, dog-brothers," da Cruz said, the old Descott County war cry, and the officers dispersed to their commands.

Ehwardo Poplanich lingered for a moment. "Hmmm," he said, clearing his throat. "Sir?"

"Yes, Major?" Raj asked.

"I'd . . . like to thank you, on behalf of the men," he said quickly. At Raj's raised eyebrow: "I heard rumors, convincing rumors, that Poplanich's Own was to be disbanded after the . . . problem last year. I'm happy for the men's sake; they're used to serving together."

Raj nodded. The special uniform, dark-green with gold piping, told that story. Poplanich's Own was recruited from the family's estates, from among the more prosperous tenants-in-chief and bailiffs and such, and the family coffers paid for their initial equipment, against a remittance of land-tax. It was not an uncommon arrangement, particularly a few generations back, and it had the advantage of helping build unit esprit. Of course it also had its political risks, with a family that had fallen from power and favor but

not from some political popularity among the older nobility.

Especially after Des Poplanich was fool enough to let himself be put forward as a figurehead for a coup attempt, Raj thought brutally. It was amazing that a man as smart as Thom had had a brother so politically naive. He remembered the screams when the flame-fougasse he improvised went off in the tower basement. The screams, and then the smell. "I did point out it would be a shame to waste a loyal unit," he said mildly. Ewardo's personal fete had also hung in the balance, but Raj liked the fact that he thought first of his command.

"Yes. And" — in a rush — "I never believed those rumors about you having something to do with Thom's disappearance. He was your friend."

Raj nodded, his face implacable. "He was. However, Des was not. And I *did* kill him. With regret, but I did it."

The man who thought himself the last living Poplanich met his eyes. "I know. Messer Whitehall —" He stopped and looked both ways before lowering his voice. "I'll be honest with you; I don't approve of many of the Governor's policies, and I approve even less of some of his ministers. The Poplanich gens have a better claim to the Chair, too, although I wouldn't take that job if the Spirit of Man came down from the Stars and handed it to me. But Barholm isn't the sort of disaster that has to be deChaired at all costs; and the Civil Government can't afford an internal war. That above all."

He extended his hand, and Raj gripped it for a moment. *That'll look bad if anyone's watching*, he thought. And: *To the Starless Dark with that*.

"Those noncoms you lent me did a world of good," Poplanich added.

Raj smiled grimly. "This isn't a border skirmish we're going off to," he said. Poplanich's Own had been a central-provinces garrison unit until the change of dynasties, and doing routine patrol work up north since then. Ewardo was conscientious about his profession — not a universal characteristic among well-born officers with a patrimonial unit — but inexperienced, despite being a few years older than Raj.

"It's perked up the men in more ways than one," Poplanich said. "A little regional rivalry; your veterans thought my people raw, and were pretty plain about it. The troopers are eager to show you can be a fighting man without being a Descotter born in a thunderstorm, half-Doberman and half sauroid . . ."

Raj joined in the chuckle, until an infinitely cold voice spoke in the back of his mind:

observeCenter said.

— and a solid roaring wall of sound lifted from the crowded docks of East Residence, signal rockets lifting from the shining bulk of the Palace above as the bunting-decked ships edged toward the docks. Sailors and soldiers crowded the rails, waving bits of prize loot—

—and a single warship plodded wearily into the harbor, masts chopped off level with the deck for emergency fuel. A huge wail went up from the city, as the black flag at the masthead came into view —

CHAPTER FOUR

"Ser."

Raj blinked open eyes that felt as if the lids were fastened with birdlime.

"Ser." It was da Cruz, looking worried. "Trouble, ser."

The general sat up on his cot and swung his feet down; he had gone to sleep mostly dressed. Too much work to do, three days out of East Residence. Sailing south along the Coast Range and stopping every night to let the troops sleep under canvas. Easier on the men to start with — mass seasickness on a troopship was no joke, not to mention dogs going berserk with fear — and easier on the supplies: this way they could buy from civilians without dipping into the jerky and hardtack that would have to last them, later. Too much paperwork, and nobody who really knew their administrative jobs. Last year at Sandoral had been easy by comparison; the army had just collected in and around the city and sat there for months before the Colonists moved north.

Spirit damn it to darkness, we should have some sort of permanent contingency command and staff for things like this, he thought, not for the first time. *We're too defense-minded.*

The Master of Soldiers, East Residence, controlled pay and overall logistics, but that was for routine operations in garrison. Field armies' administration had to be improvised out of the handbooks for a particular campaign . . . and he didn't know how anyone before him had coped, without Center to prompt and to remember things.

. . . then again, the you can see why the Governor would be antsy about a permanent mobile force. More than one Governor had been overthrown by a victorious general; a few had even been shot off the Chair by defeated ones.

He stamped his feet into his boots; a valet came in with hot towels and hot water and soap and began to shave him. *Some compensations to general rank, at least,* he thought ironically. Another was laying out his jacket and a clean shirt and bringing in kave.

Damn Berg for keeping him up. No way he could afford to snub the man by refusing to eat dinner with him, and every one turned into a bloody banquet with potted delicacies from East Residence. Did he think this was a bloody *picnic*? And a man with a full day's job of work ahead simply couldn't sit up drinking all night.

Suzette had seen him off with a joke about worker bees and an ironic toast from Berg and his cronies and some dashing young rips in uniform like Dalhouse . . . Her cot was still neatly made up. Lamplight made the big tent an oasis of light in the darkness of predawn; only a sliver of Miniluna was up, and a frosty sheeting of stars. It was not quiet, not with nearly twenty thousand human beings about, but the noise was a murmur of voices and deep resentful *wuffs* from cavalry dogs sensing they were about to be led back on board the detested ships.

"Report," Raj growled through the suds. The barber was an artist, and the blade slid through thick blue-black stubble effortlessly. Raj would have preferred a soldier-orderly, but a general had to keep a

certain minimum of staff to maintain respect. More of Suzette's work. "What the Starless Realm is going on?"

"Devil's work right enough, ser," da Cruz said; he pulled at the orange-black-red neckerchief all the 5th Descott wore, souvenir of a looted warehouse in El Djem. The lamplight danced across the heavy keloid scars on one cheek, drawing the corner of his mouth up into a parody of a smile. "Killin' over a dice game."

Raj swore; that was *not* his job, and the Top Soldier ought to have known it. "That's their bloody Battalion Commander's—"

"Skinners, ser; 'twas Skinners did it. A civilian. Probably usin' crooked dice, but they cut 'im cold without warnin'. Local man; then they broke bones when the *guardia* came for 'em. One lad looks like to die."

"*Scramento*," Raj said: shit.

The Skinners. Mercenaries, and barbarous ones even by comparison to the Brigade, or even the *Squadrones* he was sailing out to fight. They lived on dogback, up in the northern steppes, hunting the big grazing sauroids and anything else that moved with their huge two-meter 15mm rifles. Endless trouble in camp: not so much their viciousness — although the Star Spirit knew that was bad enough — as their habit of doing exactly as they pleased whenever they pleased. He sometimes wondered whether the flop-eared hounds they rode had trained their masters in that, or vice versa.

And afraid of nothing, nothing at all. But the ill-temper fell away from him like a cloak; there was work to be done. He took the towel from the servant and wiped his face, ran fingers through the curly black mass of his hair and fastened his helmet. Shrugging into his uniform jacket and buckling his swordbelt made him feel halfway normal despite three hours of sleep; his hands drew the revolver and snapped it open, spinning the cylinder and clicking it home again. Scalding-hot kave heaped with sugar, and a cornmeal bannock gulped while he thought, helped even more.

He ducked out the tent flap, past the sentries who snapped to attention and presented rifles. The sun was coming up behind him, over acres of tents, dog-lines, cookfires just starting into life as they prepared the morning meal and dogmash. Most of the smaller transports were drawn up on the beach, their masts canted over where the tide had left them; the bigger merchantmen and the steam warships lay at anchor farther out, their riding lights yellow-blue stars on the purple-dark water. It was very calm—Admiral Gharderini had kittens every time he thought of what a storm could do to the ships at a time like this—and the water had a surface like a dimpled mirror, throwing back the fading stars. Just chilly enough to be glad of a jacket, and the sparse reddish grass on the sandy soil was damp with the morning dew.

Raj nodded to himself as his mind made lists. "Duty officer," he said.

"Ser!" Antin M'lewis stepped forward and saluted; he had gotten more enthusiastic about that since his promotion.

"M'lewis, turn out the guard."

Company A of the 5th Descott answered his barked orders, coming up at the trot and leading their dogs by the bridle. The bulky rectangle of their formation filled much of the space before the command tent, over a hundred men and dogs. Barton Foley commanded it; he saluted silently and waited beside A Company's standard: a silk serpent covered with red-enameled brass scales. It slithered limp against the

pole in the motionless air, a metallic rustling noise.

"Get me Dinnalsyn." A messenger clapped heels to his dog and pounded away, throwing sand over them.

"Written orders to the following battalion commanders: Staenbridge, 5th Descott Guards; Gruder, 7th Descott Rangers; Menyez, 17th Kelden Foot; Thiddo, 1st Rogor Slashers; Poplanich, Poplanich's Own —" He continued down the list; five ought to do it, even with Skinners. "Turn out with battle kit and stand by; prepare for movement to encircle the Skinner camp. When the drum beats to arms" — normally the command to turn out and stand to — "be ready to move quickly. Staenbridge to assume tactical control." The artillery commander came up, fastening his jacket. "Ah, Grammeck."

"Sir?" he said, saluting casually; the other hand was full of kave-cup. "What guns have you ashore or accessible in the next thirty minutes?"

The artilleryman straightened, his light-hazel eyes narrowing, taking in the waiting troopers. "Three," he said. "No, two — one's got a suspicious-looking trunnion."

"Two will have to do; turn them out and get them here and stand by, full load in the caissons, all canister. I'm anticipating some trouble with the Skinners; hopefully not fighting, but goodwill and artillery will get you more than goodwill."

"Yes, *sir*," Dinnalysn said, spinning on his heel. He tossed the cup to one side as he strode. "Captain Har-ritch!" he shouted. "*Hadelande!* Move —"

Raj nodded absently, tapping his hands together to seat the gloves. A groom had brought up his hound, Horace, and was sliding on the bridle, a complex leather-and-iron affair that pressed levers against the cheekbones to turn the animal's muzzle. Horace sat and dropped his barrel-sized head on Raj's shoulder, rolling a huge brown eye toward his master.

"Right, it's up to us, now, old boy," the human murmured, scratching under the dog's chin and pushing it aside as a washcloth-sized tongue lapped at him. Hestraddled the saddle, and Horace rose underneath him.

"M'lewis," he said. The wiry little man looked up from the papers on his desk, a kitchen table outside the commander's tent. "In exactly one half hour" — officers synchronized their watches daily at the sunset service — "have the drummers beat to arms." That would get everyone standing in place, at least. The Skinners would ignore it the way they did most any Army ritual. "Captain Foley, to me. Da Cruz, lead on."

The night watch had set up their holding cage near the little fishing-hamlet of El Sur, whose strong springs were the main reason for the fleet stopping in this particular spot. This area was south of the point where the Coast Ranges turned east and became the Oxheads; it was dunes on the coast, and rolling dun-colored hills of sparse grass elsewhere, pasture for sheep, with an occasional cash-crop of barley. Further inland several rivers came down from the north, and there were irrigated lands and cities; where there were cities there were sutlers and whores and gamblers, and plenty of all three seemed to have guessed right about the Expeditionary Force's stopping place. Their straggling town of palm-leaf shacks and tents lapped over the date palms of El Sur and out into its stubble-fields; the villagers were huddled behind their mudbrick wall and locked gates.

"Sir!" the officer of the watch said, coming to his feet and saluting as Raj rode up. "Lieutenant Orfirio Dyaz, 23rd Hemmar Valley Foot."

The Lieutenant was a graying man in his forties, with the face of a tired basset hound. Infantry outfits were a dead end, and watch duty was the sort of thing that got handed down the pecking order to the most defenseless. He had a rickety wicker table in front of him, with a jug and some paperwork; overhead was a spindly looking oak tree, the only sizable one in sight

"Report," Raj said.

Some things were obvious from first glance. Two Skinners in the portable iron cage, both bleeding from half a dozen cuts and sporting spectacular young bruises. They were wrapped in rope like mummies from neck to knees. One was semi-conscious; the other crouched like a carnosauroid in a corner, glaring at them all. Shaven headed except for their scalplocks, horribly scarred, with brown skin and button noses and tilted eyes, they were little men, square-built and solid, wearing beaded dogleather leggings, soft shoes, padded and decorated breechclouts, and little else. They both looked half-naked without the monstrous 15mm rifles, shooting-sticks, cartridge belts and half-dozen or so knives that lay piled on a saddle blanket nearby. They probably felt that way, too.

There were two bodies on the ground, covered in blankets; a woman crouched near one. The feathers in her hennaed hair and the gaudy-gauzy cut of her skirt and blouse proclaimed her occupation; she was weeping steadily, tears running through the thick makeup and turning her clown-faced in the harsh light of morning. Half a dozen other men of the 23rd Foot were being treated for injuries ranging from broken ribs to an ear bitten half off; two dozen hale, armed ones surrounded the cages with leveled bayonets. A further clot of civilians stood under guard some distance off, raggedy-bright women and men with a fair bit of metal flashing from belts and ears and fingers.

"Sir," Dyaz said. "At a dice game run by the deceased" — he glanced down at a pad — "one Halfas Arreyo, freeman of Cyudad Harenaz, the deceased was assaulted and killed by the accused, the two Skinners there — they refuse to give their names, sir. Multiplewitnesses. The accused resisted arrest, resulting in many injuries and one fatality, Private Third Class Floreyz Magon."

Raj winced inwardly. A soldier dead, a Regular; that put a different complexion on things, even if he was only an infantryman.

"Let me see the bodies," he said. A soldier pulled back the blankets. The dead infantryman looked to be about seventeen, his head lolling in a manner that left no doubt about the cause of death. A bristle-haired recruit haircut, and a thin pockmarked brown face like a million others, still gaunt with malnutrition; the Army had probably been his first experience of eating his fill.

The other figure had probably been well-dressed. It was difficult to tell that or much else about him. One arm was off at the elbow, and thrown on the bulging intestines that showed through the rents in his belly; half his face was lying down in a flap that exposed a red-and-white grin, and his testicles had been sliced off and stuffed in the gaping mouth. Both eyes lay in smears of jelly across the face, and the flies were already like a black carpet from feet to forehead. The hard stink of blood and shit was underlain by a little of the sweetness of decay. Behind him Raj could hear the A Company standard bearer swear softly, and Foley's quick "*Silence in the ranks!*"

"That's the gambler," the Lieutenant added helpfully.

"Yus!"

Both men looked around; it was the prostitute, standing now and forcing herself to look straight at the officers. Her fists were clenched by her sides. At first glance they looked to be covered in brown gloves; then you could see it was dried blood coating her arms up to the elbows, where she had tried to staunch impossible wounds.

"Yus, Messers, he were a gambler," the woman said, in a thick singsong south-country dialect, spiced with Arabic loanwords. "He were a liar and a thief and a pimp, too, jus' like I's a whore. That weren't no call fur yer tame barbs to cut him! He were shit like me, but he were m'man, what'm we and me *beni*, me kids to do now? I ask yer justice, m'lud; or ain't there no justice fur the likes a' us?"

Raj raised his brows. The infantry officer flipped his notebook:

"Dohloreyz cor Arreyo, freedwoman of—"

"The deceased, I know," Raj said. He shut his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, and —

if you do not rule your army, Center said, **then your army will rule itself, observe.**

— and officers and non-coms were trying to push a mob of soldiers back from the edge of the surf. The men's faces were distended with fury; out on the edge of sight a flotilla of ships had hoisted sail, turning tail and running for home, and the men were screaming *come back, come back* —

—troopers looking at him with dull-eyed peasant defiance, refusing to move, standing shuffling in the trench while the broken Squadron troops rallied just out of rifle range, rallied and prepared to come back again across the ground littered with their dead —

— and Raj was standing on a hilltop, watching a whole battalion breaking forward out of the battle line, charging in ragged clumps; over their heads, over the scrub to their right he could see the sun winking on the steel of the dismounted Squadron warriors. Powder smoke filled the air, the rhythmic crashing of volley fire. Frantic orders spilled out of the viewpoint-Raj's mouth, and messengers spurred their dogs down from the hillock, but it was far too late. The Squadron gunmen crashed through the screen of brush and rose to fire their double-barreled muskets, loaded with ball and buckshot. The muzzles of the flintlocks were bell-shaped; that did little to spread the shot-cones, but it made the discharges thunder-loud. Thousands of lead balls made their own sound, like the humming of wasps. The hill was just too far away to hear much of the screaming.

Another wave of flame and noise, and another; the barbarians were carrying two or three muskets each, throwing them aside when fired and unslinging the next. Then they were drawing the great chopping blades slung over their backs and charging forward.

The binoculars came up to viewpoint-Raj's eyes. Tattooed faces with long drooping mustaches sprang out. Many of them were frothing at the mouth as they shambled forward; some were chewing on the thick back edges of their long swords —

—and he was standing on a three-legged stool under a long beam, with a coarse sisal rope around his neck. It was fastened to the beam above, tightly enough that he had to rise on his toes on the wobbling

surface. He could tell that, despite being limited to sight and sound in the vision, because of the little desperate catches of breath as he shifted; it is not easy to balance like that, with hands tied tightly behind the back. A crowd of Squadron civilians shifted and seethed behind a barrier of warriors standing with the points of their swords resting on the earth; they screamed curses in guttural Namerique and threw things, lumps of cow dung and tomatoes. A barbarian noble was walking along in the shadow the beam threw, black on the white dust of the square. His floppy-brimmed leather hat was tooled and inlaid with silver, and there were jewels in the hilt of his sword. Raj's viewpoint saw him pause at each stool, each stool supporting a Civil Government officer.

At some he kicked the support out with a booted foot, watching for a moment while the prisoner writhed and kicked. Before the others he put the point of his sword on flesh and pushed with gradually increasing force until the victim's feet slipped. Each time there was a roaring cheer from the bystanders. His grin was broad as he stopped before Raj and rested the point of the blade on his genitals —

— and Raj opened his eyes and looked down at the woman.

"You'll have justice," he said, laying a hand on Horace's neck. "Military justice."

Which was to real justice as military music was to music, but you settled for what was available.

"Captain Foley," he said, swinging down out of the saddle and looping the reins over the pommel. Horace folded to the earth with a grateful *muff and* laid his chin flat on the ground, watching and hiking up his ears. "Attend, if you please. Lieutenant Dyaz, you as well. Have your man bring chairs: do you have a watch-stander here?" Watch-standers received extra pay and reduced duties in return for literacy.

"Ah, yes — Sergeant Hiscobar."

"Have him join us and take notes, if you please, Lieutenant. We'll use this table. And —" He looked behind him; yes, the 5th's chaplain was with the guard platoon. "Under-Hierarch Dohminko, do the honors, please."

Dyaz's dull eyes flickered with belated recognition— three commissioned officers were the standard for a court-martial on a capital case—and began to snap orders. Soldiers of the watch platoon set up the cleared table facing the cages, with three chairs behind it.

"You," Raj went on, "get those witnesses here. You and you —" He changed his mind and turned to the ranks of the 5th. "Lieutenant Gonhalvez, a squad to bring out the prisoners, please."

Eight of the Descotters dismounted and started toward the cage, winding the lashes of their dogwhips around one hand to use the flexible hafts and iron-bound pommels as clubs. The infantry backed away, keeping their bayoneted rifles leveled. The Descotter noncom in charge of the squad checked for a moment, turning to look at them.

"Ye peon dickheads, put them stickers *up*, an' git yer fingers off the triggers," he snarled. "Now, do it *now*, er we'll ram 'em up yer bums."

The infantrymen backed away and fell into line, nervously clicking on their safeties and sloping arms.

"And hand over t' key." One of them extended it gingerly.

"Right," he said, turning his full attention back to the cages. "Everybody ready." The cavalry troopers withdrew the sabers from the taches at the left sides of their belts and stacked the weapons in tripods, brass basket hilts together; then they rolled up the sleeves of their uniform jackets.

The cells were cubes of welded iron bars, fastened along the edges with thumb-thick nuts and bolts for easy take-down. The door was fastened with an ordinary iron padlock. He turned the lock with a click and threw back the door.

Whump. The dazed-looking Skinner came up off the floor like a hyperactive sack-racer and sprang into the air, kicking out with his bound feet. His judgment was a little off, or he might have missed his footing on the uncertain iron-bar floor, and the sergeant was already blocking; instead of breaking the trooper's neck the feet punched into his stomach and knocked him back a dozen paces, winded. The other Skinner hopped forward, growling.

The Descotters piled into the cage, cursing and swinging the weighted handles of their dogwhips. The sergeant followed, limping.

The chaplain was standing before the officers, holding out the small-print copy of the Canonical Handbook that was part of his kit. All three extended their left hands to touch it, gripping their personal amulets with their right.

Saint Wu, aid me now, Raj prayed fervently. The circuit-board amulet he bore had been blessed by her, over a century ago. Beside him Foley was licking his lips nervously; it was hard to remember the boy—man — was still over a year short of twenty, sometimes. And he had never sat on a court-martial.

"You are met here to decide on a matter of human life," the priest said. He spoke pure Capital-dialect Sponglish, a bit surprising, since his features and the old saber-slash down one cheek made him look like a caricature of a thirty-year man out of the County backwoods. "Do you acknowledge this?"

"We do."

"The Spirit of Man of the Stars is with us always; Its justice is perfect, even as all data is stored in Its cores, ROMed forever. Do you acknowledge this?"

"We do."

"Do you swear to act with impartial justice, excluding all tainted Data Entry, exercising only the Authorized Codes, deviating not from the subroutines of Correct Evaluation?"

"We do."

"Then may your souls receive Input from the Holy Terminal, be lifted into the Orbits of Righteousness, and be as one with the Net; spared from all infection of the Virus of Corruption, in the name of Holy Federation Church. Endfile."

"Endfile," they murmured.

Raj sat, his left foot making the automatic sweep that knocked the scabbard of his saber out of the way; the homey familiarity of the motion bringing home the strangeness of the action. *I've killed and ordered killings before*, he thought. *But these are my men.* Part of the force under his command, at least . . . So

was Private Floreyz Magon, he reminded himself coldly. *And even Halfas Arreyo was a citizen of the Civil Government of Holy Federation.*

"Bring forth the prisoners," he said.

Battered and bleeding anew, the Skinners were shoved and hauled to within double arm's length of the table. The sergeant was a disciplined man, and did not use the improvised club in his hand on them again, although it was quite obvious how much he would have liked to.

Raj's head turned to the clot of witnesses. Several of them flinched, trying to hide among a miniature crowd of a dozen or so; most of them looked to be the type for whom any sort of court was bad news. He pointed at one in a brown jacket with the remains of a good lace cravat and silver-buckled shoes.

"You. Did you see the deceased killed?"

"Yes, Messer General," the man said.

"By the accused?"

"Yes, Messer General."

"Did he provoke them?" A blank look. "Did he strike first? Insult them?"

"No, Messer General. Halfas was pretty dumb, but not *that* dumb. He just sort of smiled when he raked in the pot."

"Were the accused drunk?"

"Yes, Messer General, at least, they'd been knocking back the arrack pretty fast. Hard to tell with barbs, you know? Staggering drunk, I'd've said, but then they moved *so fast* . . . Anyways, there was a pipe going around, *mahrawan*, and I think it had some opium in it."

Raj nodded. "Did any of the rest of you see the fight?" he said.

One of the witness half-raised his hand. "Weren't a fight, m'lord," he said. "One held him, other cut him. Cut him slow. When the gunboys got there, the barbs just grabbed the first one and turned his head around till it looked backways, then the others, ones that didn't run, just started hitting the barbs with their rifle butts and stuff. Would have run myself if I hadn't had to go within reach of 'em to get out the door."

Raj turned back to the Skinners. "*Hustai able Sponglishi?*" he said: do you speak Sponglish? Blank looks answered him; he was close enough to smell the mercenaries, a mixture of the fresh sweat and blood that ran down their bare brown chests and a heavy spoiled-butter stink.

"*Say hum*," he said, scrabbling mentally for fragments of Paytoiz, the Skinner tongue. Suddenly they were there, with the crystalline authority of Center's insertions.

"*Say hum*," he repeated. "This man, did you kill him?"

The more alert-looking of the Skinners blinked, then grinned broadly at hearing someone speak his language. Even then, Raj wondered suddenly why Center hadn't provided such fluency last year; it would have been useful dealing with the Skinner troops out east.

unlike mine your information storage capacity is limited, Center replied.

" *Napas hum*," the Skinner said: Not a man. "Just a farmer. I, Luk Belhok, I kill him; he steal our money, the pig." The Skinner lofted a gobbet of spit toward the mutilated corpse. "You got any drink, sojer-man? My friend and I are thirsty."

"Did you kill the soldier?"

"No — too drunk, too much black smoke. My friend, Loway Daygus, he kill the blue-shirt." The other mercenary looked up and nodded, smiling himself. "He look so surprised! We laugh very much."

"Did you know that that was against the law of this army?"

Both the Skinners broke into high-pitched giggling and hoots.

"We *frai hum*, Real Men!" the first said indulgently, as if explaining something to a retarded child. "Kill when we want, take what we want. Maybe we kill you, eh? Where is the drink?"

"Let the record show," Raj said, pitching his voice slightly higher, "that the accused have confessed to the crime." He glanced to either side. Foley was slightly grey under his natural brown, digging at the wicker of the table with the point of his hook.

"Guilty," he said softly, not meeting his superior's eyes.

"Guilty," Dyaz said stolidly, slightly bored.

Raj stood. "By the authority vested in me, and under the judgment of Holy Church, I pronounce these men guilty of the murders of Halfas Arreyo, freeman of Cyudad Harenaz and citizen commoner of the Civil Government, and of Private Third Class Floreyz Magon. The murder of Halfas Arreyo was with insufficient provocation; the murder of their fellow soldier without provocation. Sentence is death on both counts. May the Spirit of Man of the Stars edit their core programs and reunite them with the Net. Endfile."

He dropped his eyes from the eastern horizon, sun-dazzle sparkling across his retinas as he turned to the Descotter sergeant. When he spoke again his voice had the unmusical timber of struck cast iron.

"Hang them."

"Yes, *ser*," the noncom said.

Two troopers trotted their mounts out from the guard company and tossed the nooses of their lariats over a branch of the oak tree, snubbing the other ends through the rings on the horns of their saddles, vakaro style. The Skinners struggled for a moment as the squad hustled them toward the dangling loops, then began singing in a high-pitch chanting wail, their death-songs.

Muffled by distance, drums began to roll in an endless *ratatatatat*, beating to arms.

CRACK.

Another of the 15mm Skinner bullets went by overhead, slanting off into the west. None of the fire had been aimed, not yet, but the noise inside the Skinner encampment was growing steadily; screams, shrieks of rage, the throb of tomtoms. He could see clots of them eddying about, some dancing in shuffling circles, barking and wailing, others talking with the wild gesticulations Skinners used when they were upset. A few would run out of the tangle of hide shelters and bedrolls every now and then to shout defiance at the thin scatter of Regulars they could see on the ridges around their bivouac, turning to wiggle and slap their naked buttocks at the Civil Government troops above. A chant was growing throughout the camp, centered on the largest shelter, where a two-meter sauroid skull stood on a long pole. *Mi -herda mau- dit, Mi-herda mau- dit . . .*

Raj raised his binoculars, and the toothy grin of the beast-head standard sprang out, the hollow eyesockets and fangs the length of a bayonet. The chiefs were beneath it, arguing furiously.

That thing would have been fifteen meters tall, when it was alive and walking on its hind legs. Fifteen meters and twenty-five metric tons of muscle coated in hide that secreted metal into its scales.

"Raj Whitehall, this is *stupid*," Gerrin Staenbridge hissed beside his commander's ear. Quietly enough so that nobody else could hear, of course.

"Quite possibly, but it has to be done," Raj replied distantly. *Does it?* he asked in silence.

this course of action has the best probability of accomplishing the mission, Center said, **probability of your death is 21 % ± 7%. within acceptable parameters.**

Acceptable to you, *perhaps*, Raj thought. Aloud to Staenbridge: "Now, soldier, shut up and soldier."

success will increase your charisma factor by a useful degree as well, Center added.

Raj closed his eyes for a moment and prayed, raising one hand and laying the other flat against his ear in the formal gesture. *O, Spirit of Man of the Stars, guide me, he asked. I do not fear to die in Your service — much — but I ask that You ensure that it furthers the return of Holy Federation and our reunion with the Stars. Download unto me that which I most need, though it be that which I fear most. Endfile.*

He opened his eyes. Suzette was standing beside him, in pleated white-linen riding pants and tunic, but still in her blond court wig and party makeup. There was no mistaking the stubborn set of the cupid's-bow mouth, though, or the white-knuckled grip on the Colonial repeating carbine she carried. Her palfrey Harbie stood behind her, tugging slightly at the reins and wagging its tail with a supplicating look. The bitch knew when its owner was about to ride into danger

"*Scramento*" he said, letting his shoulders slump. It really was dangerous to pray; you might get what you asked for.

"Get *out* of here. I don't have time to argue," he said in a fierce hiss.

"No, you don't. And you can't afford to in front of the men, not right now," she said, sliding a hand through his elbow. Her smile was a little forced, but only a little.

messa whitehall's presence reduces the possibility of your failure by a factor of 10% ± 3%, Center said unhelpfully, **a public quarrel at this time will substantially increase probability of failure of your**

mission.

" *Scramento!*" he said, with more feeling. And there was no time to order a couple of troopers to cart her off bodily. For that matter, only 5th men were in sight, and they might refuse. A lot of the 5th Descott considered their general's *Messa* to be a lucky charm, or a witch, or both.

"All right," he said bitterly. "If you *must* give me more problems."

Suzette winced at that, but she walked back to mount Harbie without another word. He regretted the words, but there was no time for others.

Raj straddled Horace's back, the toes of his riding boots finding the stirrups automatically. Iron hobnails clicked on the steel, and Horace whined at the smell of his rider's fear, looking over one shoulder.

"It's all right, boy," Raj said. *I hope*. As an afterthought he took off his helmet and clipped it to the ring on the saddlebag.

The volunteer standardbearer closed up on his right and Suzette on his left. It was his personal banner, awarded with his promotion after Sandoral: the ancient Whitehall blazon, a stripe of white over a stripe of red, with a blue triangle at the staff-end marked with a single star. Legend had it that an ancestral Whitehall had borne it from the planet *Tekhanos*

He looked behind, nodded once to Staenbridge — *poor bastard, you'll be in charge if I die* — and touched a heel to Horace's flank.

"Nice and slow, boy," he said; the dog twitched ears in recognition and went forward at a walk, up and over the ridge. It was no accident the Skinners were camped in a hollow; nobody in their right minds wanted thosesauroid-killer guns with a clear field of fire toward anyone else. The Skinner idea of a practical joke included things like shooting a cigarette out of your mouth at a hundred meters.

If it took your head off instead, that was even funnier.

Silence fell as the three dogs walked over the ridge and down the long slope, rippling out like rings in water from the men who noticed them first. The chant that had been growing — had been whipping the whole six hundred or so of the savages into a blood-frenzy — faltered and died as the mercenaries recognized the general. Many of them had been with the Army of the East in Sandoral last year, and most of the rest had seen him since. Raj kept moving at the same slow swaying walk until they were a hundred meters down the shallow slope, more than halfway to the first of the straggling hide shelters. Close enough to see the faces of individual men, and to see the round muzzle-holes of the big rifles. A hundred or so were pointing his way, enough to tear him and Horace both to butcher's-meat gobbets.

Him and Horace and Suzette too.

Raj let the reins slack on Horace's neck and clicked his tongue softly. The hound stopped and stood stock-still, lowering his head and lolling tongue. Then Raj stood in the stirrups and raised one hand in the air.

Abuzz of sound came from the Skinner camp. Behind him came the thud of nearly a thousand feet, and the multiple rattle of equipment. The 5th Descott's color-party stopped on the ridge, the bannerman planting the staff and letting the bullet-marked silk and the campaign ribbons flutter free, trumpeter and drummer to either side. All along the ridge the unit deployed in dismounted close-order, the first rank

marching over and going to one knee, the second halting when head and shoulders showed over the ridge. Bayonets flashed as the rifles went to slope, held at a forty-five degree angle across the chest. Not aiming, but ready. Regularly spaced along the line were the company pennants. A few sharp calls came from noncoms and junior officers, correcting dressing, and then the loudest sound was the wind snapping the banners.

Raj waited until the voices died down among the Skinners, then slowly swung his arm and pointed to the right, the east. Barked orders sounded, and the ridge sprouted a crop, glittering bayonet points and the burnished gilt bronze of the Stars on the tops of the flagstaffs, then the rounded helmets of the men. *Tap . . . tap . . . tap* went the drums, over the crunching of boots in the soft soil; Kaltin Gruder called halt beside the banner of the 7th Descott Rangers, and the whole long formation crashed to a stop, then rippled as the front rank knelt and both brought their rifles to port.

He swung his arm over left, and the spectacle was repeated. The Rogor Slashers this time, frontiersmen from the southeastern districts. Then Raj pointed ahead, due south, where there was low ground and a view of sandy flatlands and the curve of the beach. Another battalion double-timed into view to close that gap, trotting in earth-shaking unison in column of fours, a long snake of steel and blue coats and maroon legs; the officers beside their units with their sabers sloped back over their shoulders. Jorg Menyez and the 17th Kelden Foot: big fair men from the northwest, no better than any other despised peons in uniform, until their commander convinced them otherwise. He called, and the color party around him turned smartly left and marked time. Officers fell out and stood beside their pennant-bearers, holding out saber and arm to mark the line. The drum tapped one last time and the trumpet blew; the foot soldiers halted and faced left like one man.

Behind them two eight-hitch teams of dogs appeared, each pulling a 75mm field gun and caisson. The gunners rode the guns, or the lead pair of dogs. Both weapons turned right and halted; the crews were leaping down before they fully stopped, unhitching, riding the teams out of range, the rest opening the caissons and pushing the fieldpieces forward through lanes between companies of the 17th. Ready to spill their canister loads of shot into the Skinner camp. Behind guns and infantry a battalion of cavalry came into view: smart-looking men in green-and-gold uniforms on currycombed Border Collies, sauroid-plume crests nodding from their helmets. Poplanich's Own, recruited from the estates of his old friend,

And the estates of his brother I killed to keep Barholm Clerett on the Chair, but let's hope they overlook that, Raj thought.

The cavalry halted and reined about, the dogs' muzzles dipping and rising as they turned. A shouted command, only a blur at this distance, and six hundred hands slapped down on saber hilts. Another, and the blades came out with a rasping clatter, bright and long, flashing up and then back to rest on the right shoulders of the troopers. The glitter was like sun on rippled water, almost painfully bright, moving as the dogs shifted weight from foot to foot and growled in basso unison. The Skinners were shouting again now, and a few random shots banged into the air. Solid as stone, the soldiers of the Civil Government waited.

Behind him Suzette's voice whispered. "I love you," she said.

"I love you too," Raj said quietly, through a focus that was narrowing his vision like a tunnel, down to the strait confines of the next five minutes.

The standardbearer chuckled softly. "Spirit bugger me blind, 'tis a honeymoon."

That brought Raj back to reality; he turned slightly in the saddle to bring the man's face into view. He was

grinning, as if to ask what punishment Raj had in mind—being sent on a suicide mission, perhaps?

"What's your name, soldier — ah, Hallersen M'kintok, isn't it?"

"Yesser," the trooper said. "Yer won't catch me sleepin' this time, ser."

Ah, that snap inspection last year, Raj thought, facing front once more. *Now, just enough time for the realities to sink in.*

The Skinners were in a box; all the Regulars could deliver plunging fire without hitting each other, the cannon could rake them, and anyone who broke through would be cut down by the mounted men. Not that many would, with nearly three thousand rifles firing volleys at close range, not to mention the canister rounds from the guns. The Skinners' range and accuracy would be irrelevant, and the Armory rifles were faster-loading than the long guns the barbarians used.

The Skinners were savages but not stupid. The problem was that physical hardihood and courage were practically a religion with them. Skinner warriors would not, *could* not admit that fear of death altered their actions, especially not to themselves. No threat alone would be sufficient, no matter how deadly. He touched the heel of his boot to Horace's side again, and the three walked their dogs forward. Dead silence fell as they passed the perimeter of the Skinner camp, if anything so loosely organized could be called by that name. It stank, although not too badly after only one night ashore, just smelled as you'd expect where six hundred men and riding dogs had all been pissing and crapping wherever the impulse took them; he shuddered to think what their transports must be like. More and more of them fell in behind him and followed, a few mounted, most walking afoot with a bowlegged swing. When he drew rein before the skull-standard there were hundreds pressing about him, their breath and body-odor rank.

The chiefs looked up at him silently. That was bad; no ritual insults, no half-serious threats, and no offer of liquor. Raj waited impassively until the senior chieftain spoke; it was the same man who had commanded them last year. The one who had brought him the head of Jamal, the Settler of the Colony, when they drove the wogs back over the border in defeat

"You kill *mes gars*, my men, sojer-boy," he growled. "I, Juluk Paypan, no like! Hang on rope, not warrior death, no death for *fraihum*, Real Man."

"Yes, I killed them," Raj replied loudly in the man's own language; he saw the Skinner blink at his sudden command of Paitoiz. "They killed a Civil Government tribesman" — as close as you could get to "citizen" in this hog-tongue — "and one of *my* men, without cause."

He stood in the stirrups. "Any warrior who feels a wrong can come to me with it, as a free man to his chief. Anyone who mutinies, anyone who kills his comrade, I will kill like the mad dog he is!"

Another murmur from the Skinners, and the long rifles slanted up and away from him.

Juluk Paypan scratched himself. "You got balls need both hands to carry, sojer-man," he said half-reluctantly; he eyed Suzette sidelong, fingering charms against witchcraft. "Wrongs—we got plenty wrongs!"

"Then come and tell them to me, in one hour at my tent. Tell me to my face, not whining in corners like old women."

He turned Horace sharply, the dog twisting into a U to reverse in its own length, then rode at the same

ambling walk directly at the wall of Skinner bodies, free hand on his hip and eyes raised to the middle distance. The barbarians parted from them; he heard whispers. *Baraka*, spirit-power; *wheetigo*, devil-saint-wizard. None of them looked back until they were through the ranks of the 5th and over the slope from the Skinner camp.

Raj hung over the pommel of his saddle for a moment, gasping.

"Darling! Are you all right?" Suzette asked; her face was gray as well, white around the lips.

He took a deep shaky breath, and scrubbed a hand across his face. The palm came away slick.

"I just didn't expect it to work," he said frankly, and then grinned, fighting a surge of light-headed well-being as dangerous as panic. "I *thought* it would work— wouldn't have done it, otherwise—but I didn't *believe* it would work, not really."

my calculations, Center said with a trace of reproach, **are invariably accurate within the limits of available data.**

"Come forward, fellow soldiers," Raj said.

He was seated at his table in the command tent, with the front flap pinned open to leave a three-sided room four meters on a side; over the delegations' head he could look down through the bustle of the camp to the beach and the ships at anchor beyond. The tide was coming in, coming quickly with Miniluna and Maxiluna in harmony, and the first black lines of troops were forming up to board the ships small enough to come aground. Longboats ferried more to the big three-masters farther out, and columns of black smoke reached into a cloudless sky as the warships stoked banked furnaces and made steam. There was a fresh breeze setting in parallel to the coast, smelling of salt and coalsmoke.

"Come forward," he said again. The Companion officers were standing behind him at easy parade rest, with their helmets under their arms, and the open flap of the tent was flanked by troopers standing at ease. "No names, no pack drill; I said I'd hear your complaints, and I will."

The delegation was about a dozen men. Not just Skinners; there were the blue coats of Regular officers, and four or five commanders of tribal levies and mercenaries. Two big blond Halvardii, with butter-slicked braids and long halberds and multiple flintlock pistols stuck through their belts; a few Brigade types in their short-waisted fringed buckskin jackets; and a Stalwart from the far northwest, with the back of his head shaved and dressed in a long horizontally-striped knitted jersey and jerkin. His face, arms and legs were pink and peeling with sunburn; the leather jerkin was sewn with bracelet-sized iron rings, a dozen of them serving as holders for light throwing-axes. For the rest he carried two cut-down double-barreled shotguns in holsters, and a full-length model in his hands.

"You Messers first," Raj said to the Skinner chiefs. At a sign an orderly brought them cups of gin.

"Pig vomit," one said after tasting, and then both gulped the clear liquid down.

Good, Raj thought. *They've calmed down.*

"Look, sojer-man," Juluk said almost genially, speaking Sponglish for the others' benefit: "We Real Men, we want go home, hunt sauroid, fuck our own women, teach our sons. Bargain with Big Stone-House

Chief Barholm say we fight one year, then one more year if we say yes. One year finish in three tens of days, and we say no more. Fight enough. We not like your way, all the time, don't do this, don't do that, get on big water and puke our guts."

The Stalwart nodded somberly, and spoke next in a nasal dialect of Namerique; the man beside him translated:

"True, lord. You are a harsh man; one of my warriors was fined because he beshat as a man should, behind a bush. We do not like this digging of holes. Or walking back and forth while blue-coat soldiers with marks on their arms shout at us. We fight as men should, running forward to meet the foe whenever we see him. Another of my men was whipped like a slave because he took the blood of one who called him a heretic! We do not like your harsh, cruel ways. We will follow you and fight because we are true to our salt. All know we will every man of us die in far lands beneath the Squadron guns and lie in nameless graves forgotten of our kindred. So you should be less harsh and unforgiving and ungracious with us. I, Hwilli Morgen, have spoken."

He thumped himself on the chest for emphasis, making several of the axes jingle. Since he had the shotgun in that hand, the men to the side ducked back to avoid the muzzle.

"Your pardon, Messer General," one of the Regulars said, taking a half pace forward and saluting crisply. "The barb's right, more or less. Spirit knows few enough of us are likely to sail back into East Residence. Sir, doesn't it make sense to cut the men a little slack?"

The Halvardii nodded and thumped the butts of their halberds on the ground; Raj waited, but the mountaineers were as notoriously parsimonious of their words as their money.

"That's all any of you have to say?" the commander said. "Very well." He paused, looking down at his fingers on the table, then back up at the men.

"Messers," he began, meeting their eyes. "I'm a soldier, like yourselves. I know we're going into a dangerous campaign, we're outnumbered, all of that." He let the words sink in. "So our hope, our *only* hope of coming through alive, most of us — and of winning — is with the Spirit.

"Yes, the Spirit of Man" — he left out the "of the Stars" ; several of those present were Spirit of Man of This Earth cultists — "is our *only* hope. And the Spirit will not be with an army if that army forgets justice — justice within its ranks and justice to the helpless it is our duty to protect."

His hand thumped the table as he stood. "And so in this army there *will* be justice — justice enforced the only way it can be, by *discipline*. For all our sakes, because without that the Spirit will forsake us, and I say to you that I know as if a holy vision had told me that without the Spirit we will wander in little bands across the Southern Territories. And the *Squadrones* will fall on us like an avalanche from orbit and slaughter us piecemeal. So you can obey me or kill me, Messers, because I'll die where I stand rather than fail to do my duty, for the Spirit of Man and for the army the Spirit has called me to lead."

Silence echoed; the delegation stared at him wide-eyed, as did many of the guards outside. A feeling like a warm flush crossed his skin, and suddenly he felt conscious of their stares. *Did I say all that?* he thought.

"Wheetigo," Paypan murmured. The others shuffled their feet, speechless.

"Dismissed," Raj said. "We have an army to embark."

He sat as they walked away, beginning to talk among themselves, feeling as if the strings of his tendons had been cut.

i had not expected the situation to be defined in these terms, Center's mind-voice said, **but it seems to have served the purpose.**

Purpose indeed, Raj thought *But whose?*

CHAPTER FIVE

". . . and those are the Malfrenek Mines," Muzzaf Kerpatik said.

Raj nodded and gestured for silence; the Komarite was a mine of information himself, but given the least encouragement he would give you much more than you wanted to know, mostly about trade. He could see the small black smudge on the distant land where the smelters' coal-smoke stained the sky; Kobilassian cast-iron and steel were famous throughout the Civil Government. There was no hint of the sulfurous smell, only the huge purity of the waves, whitecapped across the darkening sea, breaking in thunder-foam on the breakwater of the harbor of Hayapalco Town, where the fleet waited to enter.

Elsewhere the high spine of the Kobilassian peninsula hung like a dark-blue saw to their south and west, tinged with blood-red where the evening sun touched the glaciers. The upper slopes of the mountains were dark with forest, reddish-brown native whipstick and featherfrond, black-green with beech and silver fir. Lower the steep mountainsides gave way to open hills covered in russet grass and dotted with olives and cork-oak; lower still narrow irrigated valleys drew wandering strips of green through arid scrub occasionally scarred by mine tailings or marble quarries. Whitewashed villages stood amid orchard groves and small checkerboard fields; the narrow coastal plain bore scrub, coconut groves, sisal plantations, and estates on recently drained and irrigated marsh with large square plots of cotton, indigo, sugar, and rice.

"Coal's available?" Raj said.

"In plenty, Messer," Muzzaf said. With a tinge of bitterness: "The best and cheapest in the Civil Government. I have kin here" — he seemed to have relatives in every province south of the Oxhead mountains, come to that — "and much money has been invested in collieries of late, and railways. Yet high-priced trash from the old Coast Range mines has the monopoly in East Residence, even in the Armory foundries."

"Tzetzas," Raj said.

"Tzetzas," Muzzaf confirmed.

"You two using foul language again?" Suzette asked, coming up behind them; she stood a little behind Raj, squeezing his arm.

Her fingers were slim and strong on the muscle of his biceps. The faint jasmine scent she wore carried lightly through the odors of tar and sea. Muzzaf moved down the rail, and they waited in silence while the little galley-tug came out to take them in tow. The strong choppy motion of a ship riding "in irons" changed to a longer plunge as the sailors made the towing-line fast. The transport inched through the narrow channel between the breakwaters; each ended in a massive stone-and-concrete fort, the walls sloping upward to the gun ports. The snouts of huge cast-steel rifles showed through, and after that it was not surprising that there was no seawall.

It's grown,Raj thought.

He had studied perspective and plan-drawings of all the major cities in the Civil Government, mostly with an eye to their fortifications. Hayapalco was medium-sized, forty thousand at the last census, but the old-fashioned curtain wall he remembered had beentorn down and a broad avenue laid out in its place. There were suburbs and tenements and factory developments beyond, although most of the town was a tumbled maze of pastel and whitewash cubes climbing up the hills to the district commissioner's palace and the Star temple. A new aqueduct showed raw in cuttings and embankments on the mountain slopes beyond, a big new bullring, and the beginnings of modern earthwork ravelins and forts adequate to stand up to siege guns. The docks were thronged, with everything from little lateen-rigged coasters and fishing smacks to the big three-master beastcatchers, hunting craft for taking the big marine thalassasauroids. Wharfside was black with people, and massed cheering roared out as the first of the fleet steamed in.

The sound of brass bands followed. "I hope they keep singing," Raj said grimly. His hand touched his wife's. "I . . . need to talk to Berg," he said.

"I hope you'll report that Hayapalco shows its loyalty," Sesar Chayvez said.

The District Commissioner of Kobilassa leaned back, making an expansive gesture out the french doors; the brass bands that had followed the command group up to the Palace were still playing. Behind them the city streets were filling with more purposeful sound, marching feet and the heavy padding of riding dogs as the Expeditionary Force disembarked. There would be a week or so to exercise the men and mounts, lay in supplies of fresh fruit and meat . . . and have a last taste of city delights before the campaign, of course.

Which probably accounts for the citizens' good nature,Raj thought cynically. Fifteen thousand well-paid men with hard coin in their pockets could do a great deal of spending in a week. *Although the Arch-Syssup's blessing* was probably sincere.All the southern territories were notoriously pious: inland, because of the Colony and its Muslim hordes just over the border; here on the coast for that and for the ever-present menace of Squadron pirates. The western barbarians were followers of the heretical Spirit of Man of This Earth, which added extra zest to their plundering of churches and burning alive of any clergy they could lay their hands on.

He looked at the Commissioner: a southerner, much like Muzzaf in appearance if you added thirty years and ten kilos, his tunic shining white Azanian torofib, clanking with decorations; the hand that stroked his goatee and double chin shone with rings. It had taken several strong hints to get this meeting before the ceremonial banquets began, and the round of bullfights announced in honor of the visiting troops, and the ball . . . *and their little cats too*, he thought. Even more hints to strip the meeting down to himself, Gerrin Staenbridge, Suzette, Berg, the Commissioner, and his private secretary.

"I hope so too, Your Honorability," Raj said. "Unfortunately, there's a small problem. Two small related

problems."

"Problems?" Chayvez said, frowning slightly.

There was a noise outside the doors, shouting, the heavy *thump* of a steel-shod rifle butt striking a head. Barton Foley stuck his head through the leaves, winked and saluted with his hook before drawing them shut. Outside the glass panes on the other side of the room a line of figures took stance at parade rest. The Commissioner's head swiveled to note them: Regulars in bluejackets and maroon pants holding rifles with fixed bayonets, not his private troops. A closer look showed stocky beak-nosed brown-skinned men. Descotters.

"Don't worry, I've just taken the precaution of replacing the Palace guards with men from the 5th Descott," Raj said soothingly. Chayvez jerked slightly; everyone knew that was the unit that had followed Raj to hard-fought retreat at El Djem and massive victory at Sandoral. "For the duration.

"Now," Raj went on, "first there's the matter of the coal."

"Coal?" Chayvez echoed. His face was fluid with disbelief, anger struggling with the shock of sudden physical fear.

"It seems the wrong variety was loaded in East Residence. An accident, I'm sure. Luckily, you have excellent steam coal here in Hayapalco, I'm told, so we'll just unload what's left of ours and take on all that we need from the government stores. We'll exchange it weight-for-weight, and pay the difference with sight drafts; do be prompt in paying them, won't you?"

Raj drew his pistol and rapped sharply with the butt on the satinwood table, leaving a dent in the soft silky-textured surface. Even then Chayvez winced; he had been Commissioner for over a decade, and must have a highly proprietary attitude to the Palace.

The doors opened again; Antin M'lewis came in, leading two troopers with slung rifles. The *solhados* carried a box between them, one hand gripping the rope handles on either side. They heaved it onto the table with a thump, and M'lewis flipped it open. The interior was filled with dark brown rectangular biscuits. A stale, musty odor filtered out.

"It's the hardtack, you see," Raj said.

"Hardtack?" Chayvez said, with a lift of his brows.

"Hardtack, Messer," Raj said. "Such a humble thing, isn't it? But armies march on hardtack, when they're far from home and markets. As on a long sea voyage away from landfalls, which the Expeditionary Force is about to make." To M'lewis: "Show him."

"Yis, ser," M'lewis said cheerfully, leaning over the table.

He picked up one of the biscuits and held it on his palm in front of the bureaucrat's nose, then slowly closed his wiry brown fingers. The hardtack crumbled at once, falling onto the brilliant white fabric of Chayvez's tunic in streams of dirt-colored powder; when the soldier opened his fist nothing was left but a single weevil, hunching its way over the calloused palm. M'lewis grinned with golden teeth and crushed it between thumb and forefinger, wiping the remains off on the priceless torofib silk. The Commissioner's protest died unspoken.

"Yer knows," the ex-trooper said companionably, "this stuff oughten t' be baked twice. Costs summat, though; gots to use charcoal."

"And," Raj continued in a voice suddenly flat and gray as gunmetal, "this hasn't been twice-baked from whole-wheat and soya meal. Fired only once, using dry dough to hide the fact; so now I have several thousand tones of moldy wheat dust in the holds of my ships. An *unaccountable* accident — since the Chancellor's office listed all of it as first-class ration biscuit from approved contractors, *didn't they, Messer Berg?* "

The Administrative Service representative's face was sheened with sweat, far more than the dry heat could account for. The soldiers' heads turned toward him like gun turrets tracking, and he smiled sickly. It was far too late now to back out; he had said too much.

"*Bruha*," he mumbled softly. "She's a witch. He's *mad*, but *she's a witch*."

"What was that, Messer Berg?" Raj asked implacably.

"Ah, *ferramente*, certainly, the books" — he gestured at a large leather-bound ledger, with the Star symbol of the Civil Government embossed in silver on its cover — "show it quite clearly."

Chayvez hesitated, giving Berg a venomous glare before smoothing his features into a bland smile.

"Well, Messer General, you know these accidents happen," he said, with a broad men-of-the-world gesture. "In any case, it shouldn't be a problem, not at all. You must have specie along to pay your troops" — at six-month intervals, although advances were sometimes given — "so you can just buy ordinary flatbread here, and make up the difference from plunder after your victorious campaign in the Southern Territories is concluded."

"Well, that's one possibility," Raj continued. M'lewis had gone round to stand behind the Commissioner. "I really don't think much of spending the troops' pay on rations for which the Civil Government has already paid — Messer Administrator Berg . . ."

"Eighteen thousand four hundred sixty-four gold FedCredits," the functionary said.

". . . more than eighteen thousand gold."

"There doesn't seem to be much alternative," Chayvez said, licking his lips.

"Messer Berg?" Raj said.

Berg wiped his face with a linen handkerchief and opened the account book, spreading out several loose sheets of paper stamped with the golden seal of the Central Land Registry Office.

"According to these records," he said, coughing. "Ah, according to these, our Most Excellent Chancellor owns a grand total of twenty-three thousand four hundred and twenty-two hectares in landed estates in the four Counties making up Kobolassa District. Of which five thousand fifty-six are irrigated grainland, not counting smaller amounts on fighting-bull ranches and —" Raj rapped the pistol-butt on the table again.

"Ah, yes. Yielding — according to the taxability receipts of the fisc" — which meant a fifty percent underestimation — "over a quarter of a million bushels of wheat, barley, maize, and rice. The wheat and

barley should be just harvested and threshed."

"That much!" Chayvez said, blinking. Then he nodded: "I'm sure the Most Excellent will be glad to sell sufficient for your troops."

"I'm sure he would," Raj replied. "Unfortunately, I haven't the hard currency to pay for it, so he'll have to accept barter. To be precise, thirty-kilogram boxes of double-baked wholewheat and soy meal biscuit."

Raj looked over at Berg. The man swallowed unhappily and began to recite:

"Fifteen thousand troops, three weeks' rations at one and a half kilograms of bread equivalent per day, plus four thousand sailors, equivalent, plus three thousand two hundred civilian auxiliaries, ditto. Carrying the boxed biscuit at book price, East Residence quote—"

"Don't forget a reasonable shipping charge," Raj interjected helpfully.

"With ten *sentahvos* per ton-kilometer, the value of the biscuit should cover all necessary grain purchases," Berg said, his voice speeding up into an almost-babble. "Plus a surplus of two thousand three hundred gold FedCredits. That's after grinding, transport, and baking expenses, of course."

"Of course," Raj said, "we'll take the surplus in cash, or salable assets from the estates." He slid a parchment with multiple seals across the table until it nudged Chayvez's hands. "The requisition and exchange order, signed by Messer Berg, as representative of the Administrative Service and the fisc, by me as Expeditionary Force commander — and by you, Your Honorability, right there at the bottom, as head of the District government."

"I'd as soon sign my own death warrant," Chayvez whispered. "You fool! Do you think —"

Raj nodded. M'lewis moved, his fingers snatching at his belt and tossing backhand; the woven-wire garotte hummed as it cut through the air. The other wooden toggle slapped into his left hand as it completed its circuit around Chayvez's neck and he pulled on his crossed wrists with a knee braced against the soft tooled-leather backing of the chair. The garotte did not cut the bureaucrat's skin yet, although it sank nearly out of sight; it was not piano wire. It did begin to cut off breath and blood, and if M'lewis used all the strength in his arms against the leverage of the loop it would amputate all the way to the neckbone.

Chayvez's eyes bulged, and his hands scrabbled strengthlessly behind him. Raj waited until he smelled the ammonia stink of the other man's bladder releasing, then leaned forward on both hands.

Benefits of having an ex-bandit among your followers, he thought bitterly. Bufford Parish was famous for its rustlers and bushwhackers even in not-very-lawful Descott County . . . and Antin M'lewis had made even Bufford unwelcoming enough that the Army seemed a better proposition. *Loyal man, though.* Service to Raj had brought him from *despoladho* to riches.

The bureaucrat's private secretary had started to reach inside his jacket; he was a boyish nineteen, but his hand moved very quickly. Gerrin Staenbridge seemed almost leisurely by comparison, but before the long *schinnnng* sound of steel on wood was over, the point of his saber was tucked under the young man's chin. A single point of blood showed on the clear olive skin, then trickled slowly over the damascened patterns in the steel. Staenbridge's wrist was thick, and his hand held the sword as motionless as a vise, but the secretary froze.

"There's a good fellow," Staenbridge said, with a charming smile. "Under other circumstances we might be good friends—but right now, would you please bring whatever-it-is out with *two* fingers, and slide it over the table to me?" It was a four-barreled derringer, with a carved grip of sauroid-tooth ivory. "Splendid taste."

Raj waited impassively, until the Commissioner's feet began to scrabble at the El Kebir rug. "Ease off a little," he said. M'lewis obeyed, and Raj pushed his face into Chayvez's, until their eyes were only centimeters apart. The bureaucrat took several cautious, whooping breaths, and the black flush faded from his cheeks.

"Now, Your Honorability," Raj said bleakly, "are you listening to me? *Are you?* "

A nod, quickly checked as it dragged the wire deeper into his flesh.

"You see, Your Honorability, I'm a soldier. I'm used to being screwed over by people like you . . . or our beloved Chancellor. But *nobody* — absolutely *nobody* — fucks over my men's rations or pay while I can do anything about it. I have a job to do, for the Civil Government of Holy Federation and the Spirit of Man of the Stars, and I'll do whatever I have to do to get it done. Anything at all. Understood?"

" *Ci! Ci*, Messer General, yes, yes, I'll sign, get him away from me *pahvor* , please!"

At Raj's nod M'lewis freed the garotte with the same easy motion, flipping the left-hand toggle to the right with a hard snap that swung it around to clack into his right palm. Then he stepped back carefully, swinging the wire back and forth through the air with a whisking sound.

Chayvez coughed raggedly, massaging his throat where a thin red line circled it. Staenbridge withdrew his sword and wiped the tip carefully on one sleeve, sheathing it without looking down. The young secretary's eyes were as steady as the hands that opened a writing-box and handed his employer afreshly dipped pen. Only then did he pull a handkerchief from one sleeve and press the cloth to the underside of his jaw. Staenbridge smiled toothily.

"I'll just keep this, thank you," he said, scooping up the derringer. His right hand rested on the butt of his revolver.

The Commissioner signed the document in the three blanks left for him; his secretary peeled the greased-paper cover off a disk of soft wax and fixed it to the empty circle on the bottom of the page. Chayvez banged his signet-ring down on it with unnecessary force.

"You'll be here more than a week," he said. With triple authorization there was nothing — nothing legal, at least — that Chancellor Tzetas could do; and the Governor had already made clear that Raj Whitehall was a tool nobody else could break. Sesar Chayvez would simply have to *plead force majeure* with his patron; it was even possible it would work, if he made up enough of the loss from his private funds. There were fifteen thousand troops in the city, after all. That was a major force by anyone's standards.

"Much longer than a week," the Commissioner went on. "The bailiffs on Tzetas's land aren't government employees. They're going to think a lot more of the Chancellor's anger than any paper you wave at them. If you wave guns, you'd better be prepared to shoot, and explain *that* to His Supremacy."

Raj nodded. The Tzetas estates would be run the usual way, rented out on five-year leases to men who were themselves gentlemen of some wealth, able to furnish working capital and making their own profit

on the difference between the rental and the net sales. It was a variation on the tax-farming system the Civil Government used to collect its own revenues, and like that worked well enough if carefully supervised to prevent the lessee running the estate down for short-term gain. Tzetzas would see to the supervision; nobody had ever accused the Chancellor of being stupid or lazy, and nobody in their right mind would cooperate in stripping a Tzetzas estate. Not if they knew what was good for them. There would be endless delays . . . and it would not look very good to send Civil Government Regulars out on plundering expeditions against the private property of the Chancellor. "I have my methods," Raj said, almost smiling.

"Va, va!" the wagoner cried. The oxen leaned into the traces and the ungreased wooden axles groaned.

Gerrin Staenbridge leaned to one side in the saddle, and his dog skittered sideways, upslope from the road. The long train of wagons wound across the hillside; tall reddish-tawny three-leafed native grass rippled, under the twisted little cork-oaks and silver-leafed olives men had brought here a millennium and a half ago. The road was cut into the low hillside and ditched on both sides, surfaced with a packed layer of gravel. That crunched and popped under the iron wheels of nearly a hundred vehicles, two- and four-wheeled, drawn by anything up to a dozen yoke of oxen. The hot dry air had the hard musty smell of sweating cattle, gritty dust from the road, and the lanolin and dung scent of the big herd of sheep being driven in downslope of the path.

The wagons were heavily loaded with woven sisal sacks of grain, figs, dried tomatoes, and beans, but there was no point in denying the men a little fresh meat, either. The dogs would be glad of the offal and bones.

The estates being put under contribution had furnished the transport, most of it standard gaudily-painted farm carts; they could haul the Expeditionary Force's worthless biscuit back if they pleased. Pigs might eat it, if they were hungry enough.

Staenbridge whistled sharply, and a platoon of troopers peeled away from the double column at the end of the wagon train. Master Sergeant da Cruz and a special squad of double-pay men were sticking close to one small cart with sealed heavy chests . . . and Barton was leading up the duty platoon. He felt the familiar twist of guilt at the sight of the hook flashing in the sun; Foley would not have left to follow the drum so young if Gerrin had not—

Guilt's an emotion for shopkeepers, he told himself.

Foley reined in and saluted, grinning. *He was a pretty boy*, Staenbridge thought, *and now he's an exceedingly handsome young man and even more irresistible*. The dogs paused to sniff noses, panting slightly and waving their whiplike tails; they were farmbreeds, mottle-coated, point-nosed animals sixteen hands at the shoulder, weighing in at about a thousand pounds each.

"You think those recalcitrants will be ready to pay up?" Foley said.

"After having a troop of Skinners as house guests for a week?" Gerrin said. "My dear, they'll be *enthusiastic*. And we'd better be prepared."

Foley turned to the soldiers. "Sergeant Saynchez, rifles at the ready, if you please. We're paying a call."

"Ser!" the noncom said, and half-turned in his saddle. "Plat-oon, rifles at the saddle ready— *draw*."

A multiple rattle sounded as thirty-two hands slapped down on the rifles in their scabbards by the right knee; polished brown wood and blued iron flashed as the long weapons were flipped up. *Slap* as the forestocks came down in the soldiers' rein-hands, then chick- *chack* as the right thumb was thrust into the trigger guard-lever. That brought the bolt down, its grooved top making a ramp for a thumb to push one of the heavy 11mm cartridges into the chamber; then chack -*chuck* as the levers were drawn back to lock position.

Foley looked back and nodded satisfaction; the sergeant straightened, and Gerrin suppressed a slight smile of his own. Barton had had some problems with the men when he was an aide, protege-cum-boyfriend of then-Captain Staenbridge; very little since he had carried Gerrin's unconscious and bleeding body into the laager at El Djem; none at all since he lost a hand and won field promotion and the Gold of Valor at Sandoral.

"Remember, we're visiting our *allies*, " the young officer said, turning away. He snapped open his combination watch and pocket compass and chopped one arm forward across the ridge to their left; the farm lane lay in the valley beyond.

Behind them the sergeant whispered hoarsely: "That means *yer arse* if ye pop off without orders, Hermanyez."

The soldiers rested the butts of the rifles on their thighs and settled into a steady trot behind the officers. They crested the ridge in a flutter of tiny dactosauroids startled out of their nests, little jewel-scaled things about the size of a man's hand, with skin wings and long naked tails that ended in diamond-shaped rudders. One flew past Staenbridge's face close enough for him to hear it hiss and see the miniature fangs in its lizard mouth as it banked and glided down the slope ahead. The dactosauroids paused to dart at the insects stirred up by the cavalry's paws. Wings flashed above, and a red-tailed hawk dove in turn, snatching one of the little pseudoreptiles out of the air.

There's a metaphor for you, Staenbridge thought.

" We're ridin' on relief over burnin' desert sands,

Six hundred fightin' Descotters, the Major an' the Band

Hail dear away, bullock-man, ye've heard t'bugle blowed,

The Fightin' Fifth is comin, down the Drangosh road!"

The soldiers were singing for amusement, and to let the Skinners know they were coming and were not afraid; the tune was a folk song from Descott County, roared out by thirty strong young voices. As they rode along the little country lane. Staenbridge cast an eye left at the mountain spine of the Kolobassa peninsula and sighed slightly.

"Homesick?" Barton teased.

"Only when I'm not there," Gerrin replied dryly.

This was actually prettier country than most of Descott—the County's landscape was often grand but seldom pretty — and much richer. The Staenbridge *kasgrane*, manor-house, was a stone barn compared to most of the estates they had visited here. Home was bleak volcanic upland, sparse rocky twistgrass pasture, badlands, canyons, thin mountain forests, here and there a pocket of soil coaxed into production with endless care. Descotters lived more from herding than farming, and nearly as much from hunting — wild cattle, feral dogs, and the fierce, wary native sauroids. There were no towns except for the County capital, and that was a glorified village; no peasant villages, just scattered steadings; no peons and few slaves. The Civil Government had never gotten much in the way of taxes out of Descott; what it *did* produce was men like those riding behind him, sons of the yeoman-tenants and vakaros. Hardy, independent, and bred to saddle and gun. *And I miss the homeplace, now and then.* He even missed his wife occasionally, and he was a man who did without women quite well most of the time.

"Skinner," Barton said quietly. His head inclined slightly, indicating a copse of umbrella pines a thousand meters to their left; extreme range for Armory rifles, but middling for the great sauroid-killing guns the northern barbarians used.

"Ah, for the eyes of youth," Gerrin said.

There were probably others they had not seen, possibly within a few meters. The road was lined with waist-high whitewashed stone walls, and planted with eucalyptus trees, dipping down toward a small lake held back by an earthwork dam. Staenbridge stood in the stirrups and held up a hand for halt as they rounded the last corner and started down the road to the *kasgrane* of the estate.

"Whew," he whistled softly.

The big wooden mill-wheel down by the dam was a twisted, charred wreck; so were the timber and tile buildings that held the gristmill, cane-crusher and cotton gin. Water poured unchecked through the mill-race, already eroding the earth away from the stone channel, probably flooding the irrigated lands that spread away downstream like a wedge where the land opened up toward the coast, too. The fields and orchards there were empty, and so was the peon village of adobe huts along the edge of the main canal. They had been gone before the Skinners arrived, driving the stock up into the hills

The manor had survived, mostly. The windows were all gone, except for shards that sparkled in the flat afternoon sun; it had been a big square building around a patio, two stories high and built of whitewashed brick overgrown with bougainvillea. Most of that had been stripped away, for some unfathomable barbarian purpose or for its own sake. There were plumes of black soot above several of the windows; a pit had been dug in the garden before the main doors and a whole bull roasted above it on a fire kindled with furniture. Half a dozen Skinners were baiting another in the open space of the drive, stripped to their breechclouts. The bull was a prize fighting animal nearly as tall at the shoulder as a man. As the soldiers entered the driveway, one of the near-naked men leaped forward to meet its charge, whooping, bounding up over the horned head and backflipping over its rump. A long knife flashed in his hand as he landed, and the animal gave a bawling cry of pain as its tendons were slashed. Laughing, the others waded in to butcher it alive as it threshed, crowing mirth at its struggles and at one of their number who took a deep stab in the thigh from the horns.

A few of the Skinners lounging around the open ground looked up from the killing; they were variously occupied, sleeping or working on their weapons, playing odd games with pebbles and boards scratched in the dirt, or fornicating with an assortment of cowed-looking women, girls, and boys from the manor's household staff. Their dogs mostly just slept, huge flop-eared hounds with brindled markings and droop-ing-sad faces; a few of them raised their muzzles and growled warning at the cavalry mounts.

"Deploy, if you please," Foley said to the platoon sergeant.

"*Inline* — walk-march, *halt*," the noncom barked; the platoon peeled off in two columns of twos to either side, halting smoothly in a double rank behind the officers and facing the Skinners. The ones butchering the bull barely even looked up, a knot of glistening-red figures reducing a thousand FedCreds of pedigreed ring-bred animal to ragged gobbets. One of the recumbent Skinners rose, scratching his buttocks vigorously and urinating on a pile of tapestry. Elaborately casual, he rearranged his breechclout and lit his pipe before walking over to an upended barrel of brandy and sticking his head into the broached end. Coming up blowing, he spat out a mouthful, drank hugely and then picked up a battered golden cup from the ground beside it and filled it to the brim.

"Eh, sojer-man," he called, walking over to where Gerrin sat his dog, kicking aside bits of shattered crystal, trampled cloth, human excrement, bones, and dog turds. "Why I no kill you all now, eh?"

He stood grinning at arm's length; a Bekwa Skinner, with four-inch sauroid teeth through the lobes of his ears, face a mass of scars, some ritual, and crossed belts of huge brass shells on his chest. The feral smile on his flat slant-eyed face showed two incisors filed to points; even with the nose-stunning smell of the courtyard, the rancid butter smeared on his skin and shaven scalp was noticeable. A scalplock, woven with diamonds and rubies and bits of crushed gold jewelry, bounced down his back.

At least he speaks some Sponglisch, Staenbridge thought as he reached down and took the cup, mouthing a swallow and spitting it out on the Skinner's feet.

"Where did you get this dog-piss?" he said; actually, it was excellent brandy, but you had to observe the amenities. "I spit it on your sow-mother's grave, corpse-fucker." He drank the rest, letting a little trickle out of the corners of his mouth, crushed the goblet in his fist and threw it over his shoulder.

The Skinner's grin grew wider. "You got nuts *cum pomme*, like apple, sojer-man," he said, and slapped his chest. "Moi — me — Pai-har Tradaw, fils d' Duhplezi, shef bukkup—big chief. Who you, what you want?"

"Gerrin Staenbridge, and I bring you word from the *shefdetowt*, the big chief of chiefs, Raj. He says get off your useless arses, come down to the ships—we go to fight!"

"Ahh, Raj—he *mal cum mis*, bad like us, that one!" The chief's face almost split with his smile. "Hang, shoot — kill all de time! We go, make big *thibodo*, kill lots."

Still smiling, he turned and let the two-meter rifle drop from his shoulder; his hand released the crossed shooting-stick at the same time, and the heavy weapon fell neatly onto it. He fired without bothering to bring the weapon to his shoulder, and two hundred meters away an iron weathervane pealed like a bell and sprang into blurring motion. The long lance of flame from the rifle's muzzle stabbed into the sky, and before the puff of gray-white smoke had drifted roof-high the Skinners were in motion. Men sprang up, snatched their sacks of loot and jumped onto the backs of their dogs. The bull-killers paused a minute to pile lumps of the raw meat into the animal's hide and roll it up before joining the rest; big Skinner hounds jumped the low garden wall as outlyers and scouts poured in. Four minutes from the shot thirty Skinners boiled out of the estate's gates at a pounding gallop, screeching shrilly and firing their weapons in the air.

"Mamma, yer won't see *that* comin' down t'road from Blayberry Fair," the sergeant said with a slight tone of awe in his voice. "Orders, ser?"

" *Allya waymanos*," Foley said; all of you get going. "Picket the dogs out in that paddock — not worth our while cleaning up here."

He swung down out of the saddle and walked over toward one of the women, still lying huddled on a blanket; her stringy hair clung to her shoulders in black rattails, and she scuttled backward with a shriek as she saw the hook gesture.

"Shhhh, *danad malino nayw, machacha*, " he said soothingly: nothing's the matter now, girl. "I won't hurt you. The Skinners are gone, understand? Gone."

He flushed with embarrassment when she came forward on her knees and seized his hand, kissing it fervently.

" *Stop*that," he said firmly, rapping her lightly on the top of the head with the back curve of his hook. "Now, go find your master" — it was a safe bet all the house servants knew where the bailiff had taken the estate stores and money — "and tell him they're gone, and won't be back *if he comes down and cooperates. Comprene? Understand?*"

Between hysterical fear and the singsong southern dialect of Sponglish it took a few moments before she did; then she wrapped herself in a blanket and sprinted out the gate and up a path into the higher hills beyond the olive groves.

Foley walked back to his dog shaking his head. "That's disgusting," he said quietly, his face troubled. "I don't like seeing women mistreated like that, even if I don't have much use for them myself."

"Don't let Fatima hear you say that, sweet one," Gerrin grinned. "She's hard enough to handle as it is. Next campaign *I'm definitely* parking her back in Descott with the wife—between the two of you you're going to wear an old man like me out."

"Oh, she's an exception," Foley said, raising a foot to the stirrup.

"Don't let her hear you say *that*, either."

The younger man snorted laughter, then looked around at the wreckage. "I hadn't realized how true the stories about Skinners are," he said.

Seaborne Skinner raiders from north of Pierson's Sea had landed in Descott County a century or so ago, and the tales were still told; presumably in the northern steppes as well, since only half a dozen wounded survivors had escaped, and nobody had tried that again since. Besides which, the Skinners had killed off all the inhabitants of the old northern coastal towns who had once furnished them with ships and seamen.

"This isn't the half of it," Gerrin said, brushing the backs of his fingers over the other's cheek as he swung back into the saddle. "Well done, by the way, my dear. No, this is how Skinners act when they're on good behavior." His eyes scanned the ruined house.

"Back when I was about your age and a new-minted Ensign, I was up in the northwest provinces, around Byrgez, when we had a bad raid. They fight like devils. . . but it's worse than that: they're the death of the land, wherever they go. They burn forests and poison wells and break down irrigation canals because they can live in total wilderness and nobody else can. Compared to them the Brigade are Renunciate Sisters and the Stalwarts a bunch of boon companions."

"Well, what about the Squadron?" Foley said, smiling and leaning into the hand for a second.

"The Squadrones, my heart, are the essence of evil."

"Why?"

"Because they're going to be trying to kill *us*. Compared to that, the Skinners seem as cooing pigeons. Back to the ships; Stern Isle awaits."

CHAPTER SIX

"Piggie! Su-su-su-su! Come t' papa, piggie, pappa loves yer — *git 'im, boys!*" Sergeant Hallersen M'kintock called; emphatic, but not loud. This was the first opportunity for some fresh meat since they landed this morning, and he didn't intend to waste it.

The pig was a rangy young shoat, half-wild and suspicious of the strange-smelling men; it turned and made a dash off through the scrub, leaving a scent like bergamot as it crushed the native succulents. A riding dog with its reins looped up over the saddle horn rose in its path and lunged, snapping shut its half-meter jaws with a sound like a wet door slamming. Squealing panic the shoat turned at a ninety-degree angle and made tracks. Two troopers leapt for it; one landed facedown in a patch of wait-a-while thorn, and the other across the pig's hindquarters. He rose with a grunt of effort and his arms locked around the animal's midsection. Another soldier stepped in and grabbed the pig deftly by the ear, avoiding its frenzied snap, and drove the bayonet in his hand up under its jaw. The beast wheezed, kicked a few times and died.

Two others were grinning as they helped their luckless comrade out of the organic barbed wire. The brush rustled, more so when several chicken-sized sauroids with short horns on their noses and lines of feathers down their forearms scuttled away from under the thrashing body.

"Better 'n the circus, Halfons," one of the troopers said. "Saynchez, ye and Smeeth git 'im bled out an' gutted," the sergeant cut in, cocking one eye up at the sun through the branches of the maquis. About four hours until they were relieved . . . "Carmanaz, bait the dogs with th' offal 'n find us sommat wild garlic 'n greens."

Halfons Carmanaz was a recruit signed up only a few months before the Expeditionary Force left East Residence, fresh down from the County.

"Yer never goin' to waste the blood an' guts, Sergeant?" he said, mopping at his scratched and bloody face and gaping at the noncom. He hung his head when the other soldiers laughed.

"Yer not home on yer daddy's fuckin' farm, butt-fuckin' sheep, Carmanaz," the sergeant said patiently. "And yer mamma ain't here t' make us all blood sausage 'n' chitterlin's, neither."

"Tum-te- *tum*," Billi Saynchez hummed, stripping off his bluejacket and the gray cotton shirt underneath.

He pulled a short double-bladed knife out of his boot — a bayonet was as long as a forearm, far too much for butchering — and made two diagonal slashes in the pig's throat as his companion threaded a thong through its anklebones and hauled it up on an overhead branch, turning it to one side to avoid the first thick stream of blood.

"Say, Sergeant — what is this place, anyhow?" he said, making the long incision from anus to neck. It was a pleasant, homey task; he stopped to strop the knife on his pocket hone before making the next cut. *Reminds me a' fall*, he thought nostalgically. Pa and his brothers diving into the pen and catching the slaughter pigs on a frosty morning, Ma and his sisters getting the big scalding-pots boiling, the dogs wuffling in the stable as they scented blood

"Thisshere's Stern Island," the sergeant said.

"Them Squadron barbs run it?"

"Nao. Different bunch a' Spirit-deniers, t' Brigade— friendly heathen, loik, er so the El-Tee says. Er at least theyuns don't like the Squadron much. We'z t' rest up an' refit here, loik. Buy stuff. Mebbe a week. Then we sails on an' gits to the fightin'."

"They say them Squadron barbs is all crazy fer blood, 'n they *eat* their prisoners' *balls*," Carmanaz said.

The others chuckled. "Don't git yers all drawed up, every one a' them barbs dies when yer shoots er sticks 'em," Billi said, hooking his fingers underneath the skin and slitting it away from the layer of fat. "Hey, Sergeant—d'ye think they'll be hoors, here?"

"What's it to ye, Snow-Balls —" the sergeant began; then a call came, like the trilling of a dactosauroid. That was one of the lookouts.

"Scramento," the sergeant said, diving for his rifle and helmet. Half the squad went to ground along the ridge where they had caught the pig; the others followed M'kintock down the slope. Their dogs came to heel at call and trotted sure-footed at their masters' wake, through scrub and then an apricot orchard, until the ground leveled out. There was an old stone-lined irrigation channel there, fairly well-kept and gurgling with cold water from a spring a kilometer to the south; the road ran just west of that through an orange grove, an eight-meter curve of rutted dirt sketchily covered in gravel.

"Sergeant," a soldier in the top of one of the trees said. "Riders comin'. 'Bout fifty er sommat more, ridin' obvious-loik."

The troops fell in on either side of the road, taking firing positions behind the tufa boulders that scattered across the soft volcanic soil, with their dogs crouched behind them. Sergeant M'kintock slung his rifle and drew his saber, waiting in the middle of the road.

"Yer a credit t' the County," he called up to the observer. "Smeeth, ye ride t' get the El-Tee. These is supposed t' be good barbs. So any bastid pops a round before I tells him, gits a new asshole cut with this." The blade went back and forth twice with a *whirt-whirt* sound.

"What if they ain't friendly barbs?" Carmanaz asked, nervously working the lever of his rifle and licking his thumb to wet the foresight.

M'kintock grunted and spat aside. "Then they gits to learn t' price of a Descott boy's balls, eh? Shut yer gob."

"How do you keep the outposts so alert, Major?" said Regional Commander Boyce. "I didn't see the ones under cover until that sergeant stopped us."

"Discipline and constant vigilance," Kaltin Gruder replied. Not least the outposts' vigilance about inspections, when there wasn't any real danger. No need to mention that to the Brigade overlord, of course.

Farther back in the mounted column one of the Brigade nobles muttered something in Namerique, something about *dishonorable hiding like bandits*. Probably he didn't expect the Civil Government officer to understand his language. Few non-Brigade members did, and members generally dealt with their civilized underlings in Spanjol, which was the common tongue of the provinces the Military Governments had overrun, and still officially the second language of the Civil Government. Kaltin Gruder spoke Arabic and Spanjol and Namerique and had a fair smattering of Old Namerique and Neosawhil and Afraantu as well; it was a minor gift, like the ability to learn juggling quickly.

He turned slightly in the saddle. The fifty or so brightly-clothed figures behind him bore no more than ceremonial arms, and many had brought their wives; the thirty battalions of Civil Government troops in the Expeditionary Force vastly outgunned anything the Brigade had on Stern Island. They were assuming — rightly — that the Civil Government did *not* want a war with the masters of the Old Residence, yet. Either that assumption was correct, and they were safe, or it was wrong — and then nothing short of a relief force from Carson Barracks would be any use. And Carson Barracks was over a month's sail away.

Gruder's face swept the line of guests, flanked between two double columns of 7th troopers. There were other ways of communicating than with languages He knew they were looking at his face: not that the scars were anything very drastic, just a series of white lines reaching up from the high cloth collar of his uniform tunic and over the cheek and into the hair. One cut a little V into the lower lip. Nothing very bad, although he had been a handsome man in a square-jawed Descotter fashion. He still was, they told him; at least, women still seemed to like it, although usually women of a rather different type than before. It always made him flush, though, when people looked at the scars, and that made them stand out more despite his oiled-wood natural color. It made him remember his brother looking around, and then his chest splashing open under the pompom round —

Which had an effect on his expression he knew quite well by now. His eyes met one of the Brigade officers, and the man looked aside. Suddenly realizing that the geopolitical considerations did not necessarily apply to *him*, personally.

Well, he had to be an idiot or totally inexperienced to say something like that, Gruder thought, turning back. The Brigade had not seen much serious fighting around here for a generation or more. Though come to that, he could think of Civil Government aristocrats just as brainless. Some of them with the Force.

Commander Boyce had noticed the brief byplay, and his lips compressed into a line for a moment. Boyce was a diplomat.

I don't envy that loudmouth, Gruder thought ironically.

"We should be coming up on our perimeter soon," he said aloud.

The escort party was riding down out of the hills that made up the spine of Stern Island's western peninsula. They were closer to the coast here on the northern shore; Wager Bay was ten kilometers away on the south side, a fine natural harbor and the island's largest city amid broad coastal plains. On the north the forested hills gave way to a steplike series of tablelands, some in mixed scrub of illex and thornbush, some cultivated in orchard crops.

The noonday sun was hot, and sweat soaked his armpits and trickled down his back. The Expeditionary Force had traveled south into summer as they sailed. It baked out smells of resin from the umbrella pines along the road, lavender and the cooking-spice smells of native Bellevue scrub. Life-forms not intimidated by riding dogs or humans whirred or fluted or hissed

And the delegation stirred, murmuring, as they rode a switchback down the last escarpment and got their first clear view of the encampment.

"How long did you say you'd been here?" Boyce said, then answered himself with a wave of his hand to show the question had been rhetorical: less than twenty hours. "You've been busy."

Gruder nodded. Impressing the locals was not the object, but it was a useful by-product. Almost all of the force was ashore, the smaller transports drawn up on the broad, gently curving beach, the others anchored out in the bay, and the dozen steam warships in a rank beyond that. On shore the tents were going up in severely regular rows along the camp-city's streets, grouped by company and battalion, each one holding an eight-mansection. The dog-lines stretched endlessly, equally neat, with a thunderous barking as the evening tubs of mash were carried out. The artillery park stood at the eastern end of the camp, thirty guns standing nose-to-tail with the harness laid out ready for the teams. A ditch, earth berm, and firing-trench ran all around the perimeter, and groups of men could be seen marching or riding in formation along the streets or in the broad trampled space outside the main gate.

The marketplace was to the west, behind rope barriers, and even that was fairly organized under the vigilant eye of troops *with guardia* armbands. Muzzaf's work, Kaltin knew; the Komarite could tell you exactly how to get merchants to do what you wanted with the minimum of fuss. Wagonloads of fresh produce were already streaming in, herds of slaughter stock milled, and a coastal schooner was unloading sacks of flour and vegetables.

Most of the Brigade people looked *extremely* impressed.

Thank the Avatars of the Spirit they weren't there to see the first couple of camps, he thought, leaning back in the saddle as the dogs took the last of the slope. *Shambolic chaos*.

"Advance and be recognized!"

"Major Gruder and escort, with the Honorable Messer Commander Boyce and party," Kaltin replied. The officer of the watch saluted with his saber and the men lowered their weapons.

"Pass, friend."

"What are those men doing?" Boyce's wife said, pointing across the broad stubble field.

"Drill, ma'am," Gruder said, with a broad smile. The woman was built like a wine tub and dressed in implausible gauzy fabrics, now rather dusty, and mounted on a slim little Afghan that was wheezing with the heat and the load. "That's the Colonial Countermarch, I think." Menyez was supervising, on his

long-legged riding steer.

Several of the more militant Brigade members were watching with more than idle curiosity. Two infantry battalions were marching at the quickstep to the tap of the drums across the drill field, trotting with their rifles held across their chests; moving rectangles parallel to the road, four men broad and a hundred and fifty long. Twelve hundred feet struck the earth in unison, a sound that thudded through the dirt as much as the air. The colors at the head of each unit were cased in their cylindrical leather covers, but Gruder recognized the 17th Kelden Foot and the 55th Santanerr Rifles. He grinned to himself. Jorg Menyez had been working the foot soldiers unmercifully — a real shock after years in sleepy garrisons where little was expected of them. A tenth of their officers had been broken out of the service, and as many again had resigned their commissions. Raj had remarked what a pity it was that he couldn't do the same with some of the cavalry units — although their commanders had too much pull for that.

Bugles sounded and the drums beat. The columns had been following each other, well-spaced. Now the head of each turned sharply toward the road, making an L that shrank along one arm and grew on the other until the whole battalion was moving at right angles to its original course. Gruder's eyes narrowed; the 17th was doing it with machine precision, the inner man stamping in place while the outer lengthened his stride, but the 55th were having problems, bunching and sagging and losing their dressing. More showed when the bugles sounded again and the columns split into a T, double files peeling off at right-angles from the marker of the color party. That was supposed to leave the whole battalion deployed in double line with the colors in the center . . . but not if men forgot which way they were supposed to turn, which several of the 55th's embarrassingly did.

" *Halt!*" The drums crashed into silence.

" *To the right—face!*"

Now the two battalions were facing the road.

Menyez rode slowly down the line, from the ruler-straight 17th to the clumped and ragged 55th. At last he spoke.

"Soldiers . . . men of the 55th Santanerr Rifles. I am disappointed in you." He pointed to his left, at the 17th. " *That* is the way to do it properly." His arm swung back. "This is *not* the way to do it."

There was a ripple down the ranks which grew to an almost moan as Menyez signaled, and the color party of the 55th marched out and turned over the pole with the furled banner to the detachment with the commander. Menyez reached out and touched the flagstaff gently.

"You will get it back when you've *earned* it. 17th may return to quarters."

The 17th's banner-party advanced to the front five paces, turned smartly right and marched down the line. When they came to the end of it they reversed, and the double file of men there followed, bending the formation in a U; when they reached the other end the battalion was back in a formation of fours, and it made two sharp turns onto the road and marched back into camp. Jorg Menyez spurred his beast over to the Brigade party, grinning under a covering of dust.

Behind him a stentorian bellow rang out in a drawling Kelden County accent. " *BLOODY MARTYRED AVATARS' BLEEDING WOUNDS, DOES YO MOMMAS STILL HAVE TO HOLD YUH COCKS WHILE YO PEE? NOW WE DO IT AGAIN, GIRLS, AND THIS TIME—*"

"Kaltin," Menyeze said, smiling. He inclined his head back to where the luckless 55th was trying the formation again, and going without dinner to do it. "I've lent them Master Sergeant Tobol. They're not happy, but he has a magic charm for making riflemen out of mud."

Kaltin made the introductions; Menyeze nodded amiably enough, slapping at the dust on his tunic.

"I'm for a bath," he said finally. "See you at Messer Raj's for the reception."

Gruder was conscious of Boyce's slight surprise; interesting that he caught the linguistic subtlety. That was the form of address an old family retainer might use for the young master, not what another member of the upper classes would employ. The whole army had taken it up, now: *Messer Raj will do you right, or Try and old-soldier Messer Raj and you'll be sorry and sore.*

He grinned. Raj hated it, of course.

Mill and swill, Raj thought disgustedly. *What a waste of time.*

He composed his face hastily; Boyce was *very* sharp for a barbarian. Hardly a barb at all, despite the orthodox fringed leather jacket, beard, and huge sword. Of course, the Brigade presence had always been thin on Stern Island. Better than half the bigwigs Boyce had brought along were of the old nobility, the families who had ruled before the Brigade took the Western Territories from the Civil Government. Nor were many of the Brigade the hulking blonds of legend; then again, that would be true even in Carson Barracks, these days. Most of the Spanjol-speaking inhabitants of the Western Provinces were lighter-skinned than those of the Sponglis-speaking areas around East Residence; the Brigade members here seemed to be only a little taller and fairer, on average. Raj suspected many of them spoke Spanjol at home and Namerique only at formal gatherings.

The Squadron would be closer to the raw Northern beginnings.

"I was impressed with your camp, General," Boyce said. "And almost as much at the way you could entertain us so lavishly, at such short notice."

He made a gesture with the wineglass in one hand and the canape in the other.

"Largely Messa Whitehall's work," Raj said, sipping at his own glass.

It was Hillchapel *slyowitz*, plum brandy from the Whitehall estates in Descott County; meant to be sipped, but the locals were knocking it back fairly fast. Tearing into the buffet, too, one or two Brigade types reverting and picking up joints in their hands, and the civilian nobles shying aside with mortified expressions. There had been only one suitable building on the bay, a small manor-house owned by a civilian, non-Brigade landowner. Suzette's charm and East Residence polish and a substantial golden handshake had persuaded him to rent it and visit relatives elsewhere. Her traveling household and the manor servants had laid out this spread on the patio, decked it out with hangings and tapestries and Al Kebir rugs. The wrought-iron grilles of the gate framed a broad circle of beach and gave a view out to sea, where the moons cast two glittering paths over the water as the sun inclined to afternoon.

A squad of cavalry went by on the beach, heading out west to patrol, their rifle butts resting on their thighs. Raj smiled as he saw Boyce's eyes follow his.

"Yes," the chieftain said, turning back. "She's certainly put our local ladies in the shade."

Suzette was holding court, half a dozen local nobles vying for her attention and Administrator Berg looking smug. She was in full Court regalia, white-on-white patterned skirt of torofib, slit down the front and pinned back to show the glittering metallic embroidery of her tights and the platinum-and-diamond nets over her sandals; her belt was fretted silver, the bolero jacket above it cloth of gold with ruby dragons, and an ancient Star symbol crafted around a display crystal hung between her breasts. The long blond court wig hung shimmering down her back, covered with a fall of Novy Haifa lace and bound at the brow with padparascha sapphire. Every gesture and intonation was a work of art, and it was not the least of that art that she never seemed stiff or artificial.

It was more than that, or the clothes or the prestige of a great lady of East Residence, that gathered the crowd, though. Even from here, even after all these years Raj could feel the magnetism; the dour middle-aged politician beside him did too.

Raj took another sip of the plum brandy, somewhat larger this time. Boyce smiled and shook his head and looked away.

"*There are times I'm glad to be fifty*," he murmured to himself in Namerique. Then in his smooth capital-dialect Sponglish: "I'm happy to see that the diplomatic envoys of the Civil Government have been well-treated here . . . even if there are so many of them."

"Yes," Raj said, equally bland. "It's important that we reach the Lion City area with no unfortunate incidents. The Stalwarts are so difficult to deal with, little sense of civilized restraint."

That was the *official* reason the Expeditionary Force was here, that they were going to "discuss" the status of some port cities in the Western Territories held by the Stalwarts after several decades of war with the Brigade. Claimed by the Civil Government, of course, but not held by it for better than six hundred years. *If I can make him believe that, I can sell pork to the Colonists*, Raj thought.

Boyce smiled whitely in the vast pepper-and-saltbush of his beard. "Indeed. It's unfortunate that my government has had so little success in its diplomatic dealings with the Stalwarts."

Almost as little as in its military dealings, Raj noted. The Brigade had a more advanced military structure than the Stalwarts, but there was something to be said for several score thousand shrieking berserkers, too.

"Yes, conditions are unsettled. I understand there's trouble down in the Southern Territories, too."

Boyce raised a shaggy eyebrow. "Well, there's been rumors of trouble on Sadler's Island," he said; that was just off the west coast of the main peninsula that made up most of the Squadron lands. "But no, I wouldn't say there's been much trouble. Apart from that I couldn't say at all; my government has excellent relations with the Squadron — we are relatives and fellow-believers, after all — and I wouldn't dream of interfering in their affairs in any way."

In other words, letting us land here is as far as they'll go.

"A pleasure to meet you, young man," Boyce said, shaking Raj's hand; the grip was unexpectedly firm. "I'm sure you'll go far."

"And you likewise, Messer Boyce," Raj replied.

"Oh, I've gone just as far as I want," Boyce said. "Staying there is the problem." He bowed slightly to Raj and left, heading for the buffet and several cronies.

"Ah, Raj darling," Suzette said. It was her Court voice, smooth as buttered rum. "*Look*who Messer Berg has caught for me."

"Messer Hadolfo Reggiri, at your service," the man said. He was ordinary enough, well-dressed in a conservative southern provinces style, plain silk cravat and dark jacket with only a little jewelry. Slimmer than Berg, a little gray in the black of his hair and mustache, with the weathered look of a man who spent much time at sea.

"Hadolfo and I were at the Cyudad Gut town Academy together," Berg said expansively; his face was flushed a little with the wine. "He was always more adventurous than I, alas — he's been here on Stern Isle these twenty years, trading and doing very well."

"Trading in . . . ?" Suzette asked.

Reggiri looked at her, blinking. Normally a shrewd face, Raj thought, probably closed and secretive; you would have to be, trading in these waters, where there was little law. Now he looked as if he had been hit between the eyes with a rifle butt, quite hard.

"Ah, Messa — ah, saltpeter and rosauroid hides, mostly; wine, grain, dried fruit, wool, ironware, slaves —but mostly nitre and hides."

Aha. Raj felt his ears prickle. There were only two really good sources of saltpeter west of the Colony. One was in crusts in some soils of Diva County, part of the Civil Government . . . and the other was in caves on the desert fringe of the Southern Territories. Back before the Squadron took them, that had been one of the district's main sources of tax revenue, a government monopoly. Doubtless something of that sort now, too; Southern Territories saltpeter was exported to powder mills all over the Midworld Sea, even to East Residence, since it was cheaper than the domestic product. And rosauroids came from the central rocky hills just south of Port Murchison; their hides had high concentrations of silica, and were much in demand for factories, as power belting for transmission from steam engine drive shafts.

Anyone who dealt widely in those products would know a *lot* about the Squadron. He could tell the Squadron a great deal, too; and would, if he was thinking straight. A Civil Government administration in the Southern Territories would make the saltpeter a monopoly again, as sure as Tzetzas stole.

"Hadolfo . . . Messer Reggiri has been kind enough to invite me and Messer Berg to dinner at his country place," Suzette said. Her slim fingers rested on Raj's forearm. "Do say yes, my dear. We'll need an escort of course, but it's *quite* safe and only a few kilometers away."

"By all means," Raj grated. "I'm afraid I can't come, far too busy, but by all means . . ." Berg glowed, preening before his old friend. "Kaltin!" the General called.

"Messer Raj?" the younger officer said.

I wish they wouldn't keep calling *me that*, Raj thought, gritting his teeth against the need to lash out "Do me a favor, would you, and take . . . oh, a company, and M'lewis, and escort Messa Whitehall and Administrator Berg to this gentleman's manor? They'll be staying for dinner—and I'm sure you'll be welcome as well?"

Reggiri nodded without even taking his eyes off Suzette.

"I'd be glad to," Gruder lied coldly.

"And now if you'll excuse me:— my dear, make my apologies to our guests — I have a great deal to do." *At least I inflicted M'lewis on him*, Raj thought vindictively. He tossed back the slyowitz. M'lewis had the morals of a dactosauroid and the effrontery of a dockside rat . . .

The camp had settled into late-night routine by the time Raj was finished with the last of the personnel reports. *Damn, this is like being a mayor of a city*, he thought. Worse; most County capitals in the Civil Government had fewer people than the twenty-thousand-odd concentrated here. He was working in his tent; if the men slept under canvas so would he. *And I used to be able to know the names of every man I commanded*, he continued, pouring himself another glass of slyowitz and lighting a cigarette. *Now I'm damned lucky if I can remember the officers and a few hundred more.*

He took the glass and leaned on the tentpole, looking down the main avenue of the camp. There was little traffic, it was quiet enough to hear the *laplaplap* of waves down by the beach. Most of the troops were sleeping as men did after a hard day's work, glad enough of a hot meal and solid dry ground with room to stretch out. The camp had already taken on the universal smell of an army on the move: sweat and dogshit and greased iron and woodsmoke. Both moons were out and full, low on the horizon, silvering the sea and giving enough light to read by even without the coal-oil lantern hanging from the roof behind him. He took a long drag on the tobacco, holding it until it bit the lungs in a peculiar pleasure-pain, then blew it out at the moons.

The Canonical Handbook said that the True Earth had only one moon, smaller than either Miniluna or Maxiluna . . . there were whole schools of theology which debated whether that was literal, revealed Truth or mere allegory, like the Personal Computer that was supposed to watch over every soul, or the wars in heaven between the angels of the Apple of Knowledge and the Ibenmeraphim. Or whether this had once been the True Earth and so had only one moon, later split into two at the Fall, although that was dangerously close to the Spirit of This Earth heresy.

"I know," he murmured, taking another mouthful of the plum brandy. It burned, like white fire along his gullet, and he exhaled with a hard *sshha*. "I've seen the True Earth and the Single Moon. I *have* a personal angel, access to all the wisdom of the Spirit's Mind."

"Sir?" The guard officer was a figure in shadow.

"Nothing, son. As you were."

exercise more care, Center said coldly in the back of his mind.

Quiet, he replied. "We all have our Operating Code, try and edit it as we will." *You too, I suppose.*

Faintly he heard the sound of a challenge and response from the main gate, and the squeal as the spike-studded logs were pulled aside. The muffled thumping of paws sounded down the deserted alleyways; another challenge came from a roving internal patrol, close enough to be separated into words.

" *Who goes?*"

" *Escort party a' th' 7th Descott, returnin',*" he heard.

" *Advance and be recognized . . . Pass, friend.*"

But there were too few, far less than the company that had gone out. Eight men, a squad, and a ninth on a big shambling Chow. Administrator Mihwel Berg, sliding off with a sulky look on his face as he stalked into the puddle of yellow lamplight outside Raj's tent. His own was nearby, here in officer country.

"Messer Berg," Raj said. "Where are the others?"

Berg's thin face looked as if he had bitten into a lemon, and bloodshot eyes blinked behind his glasses. "Back there. With *my friend* Messer Reggiri. Your *wife* decided it was too late for anyone to come back, but *I* made it well enough." The bureaucrat glared at him like a rabbit turning on a hunting sauroid. "What do you propose to do about it?"

"Do?" Raj said. "Finish this bottle. Come on in, half drunk is only half done."

The remaining hundred and fifteen men of the escort company came into camp an hour after the dawn service. Most of the troops were at drill or fatigues, but there were enough left in the 7th's billet area to groan and whistle their envy at the escorts. The men were riding their usual dogs, mostly Descotter farmbreeds, but each was leading two or three others on checkreins. The led dogs were Ridgebacks, a short-muzzled, long-legged breed easily distinguished by the odd uprightcurl of hair along the spine that gave the breed its name. These were pedigree animals, clean-limbed, bitches and geldings of two or three years and broken to the saddle; the breed was famous for its endurance in hot weather, and each animal was worth a year's pay for a cavalry trooper, possibly more. Their pack-saddles held coils of sausage, flagons of wine and boxes of cigarettes, sacks of Zanjian kave beans and cured hams from the Stalwart territories.

Gruder, M'lewis, and the company commander, Tejan M'brust, had extra dogs as well. They were also each accompanied by a woman on a palfrey-dog. The girls — none of them looked over seventeen — wore the collars that Brigade law required of slaves, but theirs were of thin chased silver. They carried light parasols to shade their complexions, necessary since two were blondes and one a redhead, and any of them would have fetched five hundred gold FedCredits in East Residence; not to mention their clothes and jewelry, and the twin suitcases each had on a packdog.

The officers reined in in front of the command tent and saluted; all of them were stone-faced, and Gruder did not meet Raj's eyes.

"Sir!" he barked. "Returning as ordered. Permission to report to my command, sir?"

"Nothing to report, Major?" Raj asked.

"No, sir."

"Dismissed."

He heeled his dog around with unnecessary violence; the slave-girl squeaked and clutched at the

pommel of her saddle as her mount followed his. Suzette dismounted and handed Harbie's reins to a groom.

"What, no presents for me?" Raj said softly, with a stark grin.

There were spots of red on her cheeks, but her eyes met his steadily as she offered a sheaf of paper. Raj took it and looked down at the first page. Then he grunted as if belly-punched.

"Fellow soldiers," Raj began.

A long slow roar built up through the crowd, a huge semicircle of blue jackets and brown faces, spotted with the green-and-gold of Poplanich's Own, the gorgets of the 17th Hemmar Valley Cuirassiers, and the multicolored blaze of the barbarian mercenaries. A corner of the berm and the gentle slope leading up to it gave seating sufficient that most of the army could see him and the Companions seated on the improvised dais. The officers of the force were down in front where they could hear him; many of the men could too, and there was a rippling murmur as his words were relayed back to the rear ranks. Only the officers could see the map on the easel behind him, but that was not much of a drawback.

The cheer had started with the men who'd served under him in the east, then spread to the others. Da Cruz had told him — with an innocent expression — that the story of the hardtack had gotten out.

Spirit damn it, shut up, he thought. *I may be leading you all to death, for Spirit's sake.*

"Fellow soldiers," he continued, when the noise had died down. "You all know that we're embarked on a dangerous mission. Well, I'm glad to say I have some good news for you; it's still dangerous, but it's not suicide. The Squadrones — I have this on the best of authorities — the Squadron still has its head tucked up its behind — they don't know we're coming!"

This time the cheer was a roar.

"The Squadron's Admiral thinks everything he's heard about us is just smoke and mirrors, rumors like the ones that come up every couple of years since the last expedition failed." Raj leaned forward, grinning like a sauroid and tapping one fist into a palm. "Isn't he going to be surprised?"

The soldiers howled laughter. "In fact, the pick of the Squadron levy, ten thousand men, sailed three weeks ago for Sadler Island, to put down a revolt" His swagger-stick traced the course, from Port Murchison away around the western coast of the north-pointing peninsula. "Under Commodore Curds Auburn, the Admiral's brother and his best general. With all their fleet, every war-galley they have in commission. The biggest threat to this force was being intercepted at sea — and now it's gone. The Spirit has put its protecting hands over us."

He spread his hands for silence. "Wait! Cheer when we've won, not before!" More grimly. "This means we've got a better chance, not a walkover. There'll be hard fighting yet.

"Now, here are the general orders. We'll take the shortest sea route from here" — he tapped their position on Stern Island — "to here." The stick traced a line directly south, landing on the indented coast south and east of Port Murchison. "We'll land and concentrate in this bay and establish a base.

"Nobody," he went on, tapping the stick into his palm, "is to leave the landing site without orders;

nobody under *any circumstances whatsoever* is to enter the Port Murchison harbor. We're going to land close enough to panic them, then grind up what they send out."

He paused. "Any questions?"

Gharderini shot to his feet. "You say there won't be any interception at sea," he said furiously. "How can you be so sure? Did the Admiral send word, or the Spirit of Man of the Stars inform you personally?"

Raj stood and let his hand fall on Suzette's shoulder. "The information," he said slowly, "is from a source I trust absolutely."

as you should, raj Whitehall,Center said,**as you must.**

"Hear us, O Spirit of Man of the Stars," the priest intoned.

"*Hear us*," the massed troops answered. Everything was aboard except the men; the tide was making, and a breeze blowing down from the hills and out to sea.

The priest lifted his hands to the last of the stars, vanishing as night faded under the spear-rays of the sun.

"Code not our sins; let them be erased and not ROMed in Thy disks."

"*Forgive us, O Star Spirit!*"

As Raj led the response, another voice spoke in the back of his mind:

observeCenter said.

— and a high surf beat on a rocky beach under a gray sky. Dinghy-loads of troops and the light transports drove in regardless, men leaping into head-deep water and wading ashore with their rifles over their heads or clinging to the saddles of swimming dogs. The first of them were just forming up when the Squadron troops rose from behind the dunes, their double-barreled muskets blasting at point-blank range

— and viewpoint-Raj was clinging to a rope-line, on the deck of a ship lost in sea and spray. The sound of the storm was beyond belief, a solid roar in all the frequencies a human ear could perceive. Walls of water rose higher than the masts, but the wind tore off their tops and flung them as a horizontal sheet of spray like low cloud, until there was no telling where air began and sea stopped. The ship rose as a wave belled out beneath it, and for a moment they could see the rocks ahead. Then they struck, and the hull exploded into fragments beneath their feet—

— and the fleet was crowding into the bay, the beach black with men and the sea with dinghies and swimming dogs. Everyone's head came up at the first cannon shot. The Squadron warships came around the headland in a surge of gilded beaks and vermilion oars, the first flying the sword-and-comet banner of Commodore Curtis. Its bow-guns cut loose, the roundshot skipping over the low waves and into the side of the first Civil Government warship. Timbers smashed over the paddle wheel, and then the deck came apart in a shower of splinters and white smoke as the boiler ruptured. Behind the galleys came the

transports, their rigging thick with the elite troops of the Squadron roaring out their war cries

"The Spirit of Man is of the Stars and all the Universe; this we believe."

" *Witness our belief, O Star Spirit!*"

"As we believe and act in righteousness, so shall we be boosted into the Orbit of Fulfillment."

" *Raise us up, O Star Spirit!*"

"Deliver us from the Crash; from the Meltdown; from the Hard Rads; spare us."

" *Spare us, O Star Spirit!*"

"We receive diligently the Input from Thy Holy Terminal, now and forever."

" *Forever, O Star Spirit.*"

"As we believe, so let Thy Holy Federation be restored in our time, O Spirit of Man of the Stars; and if the burden of a faithless generation's sin be too great, may our souls be received into the Net. Endfile."

" *Endfile!*"

Raj looked out over the sea of bared heads. "Right, lads. Enter your sins at the Terminal, and fight with the Spirit at your side."

The priest lowered his hands. "The Spirit be with you."

" *And in thy soul.*"

CHAPTER SEVEN

The longboat cut through the darkening purple of the waves toward the shore of the bay. Senior Lieutenant Antin M'lewis crouched in the bows, his eyes flickering restlessly as the muffled oars beat behind him. No way of telling if the barbs were waiting for them . . . probably not. He looked up for a second; low scudding clouds, and a wet breeze from the east, overland. Rustler's weather, they called it at home in Bufford Parish. Home to the only men in Descott County, or so his Pa had told him the first time he took him out to try for some of Squire Rahmirez's sheep. It had been Squire Rahmirez got him into the Army, too, after the little matter of those two riding dogs he'd sold him. Well, good Spirit bless, did the man think he'd *bought* them, to be selling them at that price? Good-hearted of him to sponsor M'lewis's enlistment, though. " *The Army will be the making of you, me lad,*" he'd said.

Truer words never passed yer teeth, Squire, M'lewis thought, and spoke under his breath:

" *An' if you treat a barb to a dose a' cleanin'-rod*

He's like to show ye everthin' he owns

When he won't produce no more, summat water on the floor

Where yer hear it answer hollow to yer boot

When the ground begins to sink, shove yer

baynet down the chink —"

"El-Tee?"

"Jist some ol' Army musik," M'lewis said.

The keel grated on sand, very quiet. He turned to look at the other boats, half a dozen, with the tethered dogs swimming alongside. None of them made any sound as the men leaped overboard with their rifles over their heads and led the animals up beyond the high-water mark before crouching down beside them. M'lewis slapped palms with the petty officer in charge of the detail — to whom he had been careful to lose money as yet unpaid — and vaulted over the bow, running quickly through the shallow water before too much could soak into his boots. His dog followed with the reins in its mouth, silent-trained, and they all ran crouching up to the lee of the ridge six hundred meters inland. It was good to feel solid land again; the last night had not exactly been a storm, but the wind had been up high enough.

"All right," he whispered, as the others crowded round; there were twenty-two, not forty as battalion legend had it. *I has me standards*, he thought ironically. "Ye bastids all know yer assignments," he said. "One last word. Yer here t' scout, not finger. Any one a yer stops to lift a shiny pretty or a skirt, better run fuckin' fast an' far."

His hand blurred, and suddenly the man across from him was gasping, hands clawing up to his neck at the coil of wire that had whipped around it. Then he froze, his eyes rolling down in a frantic effort to see the knife-point pricking just above his belt-buckle.

"Fast an' far, because I'll be behind him wit' me little friend here t' take yer breath away. That means ye partic'lar, Dommor Alleyman. *Comprene?* "

" *Grrk! ci!*"

M'lewis flipped the toggle and unwound the wire, patting the man on the cheek. "Good. When th' fightin's done, ye'll all have more gold 'n yer can carry, more likker n' ye can hold, 'n big-titted barb princesses spreadin' wide and askin' fer it. Until then, do yer fuckin' jobs!"

Silent nods, and then they dispersed; two began to put up the big tripod-lantern that would flash directions to the fleet and guide them in safe to the center of the bay. M'lewis smiled to himself; he had chosen them all well. Most were old neighbors — some even from Hole Canyon, his family's subdistrict

— and they all had a professional's deep respect for a really successful operator. He pulled the pocket compass out of its case at his belt and took a reading. Surprising how few men realized the value of tricks like that. Gentry-doings, they'd say. How did they think the gentry got on top in the first place?

"Thissaway," he said to the six with him, straddling his dog. "Go."

The felt-muffled surfaces of the stirrups made no sound as he slipped the toes of his boots into them. *Well, I'm gentry now.* Of sorts; his sons would be Messer-class . . . *Keep yer mind on business, ye butthead,* he told himself. The dogs moved off, paws almost silent in the deep soft dust of the road, spaced out to ten-meter intervals. *Messer Raj's business.* A shooting Star of a man, and if you hitched your cart to his harness he'd draw you along. Or you'd go over with him in a crash.

M'lewis smiled into the warm summer night. They were coming up on a hut, and lantern-light leaked through the warped shutters.

"Dicinsyn, Felodez," he whispered. "Around the rear. No killin'!" Time to find out some local news, then on to that well the map marked.

"Yer map's not bad, but sommat incomplete, ser," Antin M'lewis said. "Anyways, no concentration of barb sojers anywhere within three hours' ride. Hardly spotted a man under arms; no Squadrones t' speak of."

"Bring that lantern over here!" Raj called over his shoulder. The landing was going surprisingly well, considering that it was night and there was a moderately stiff onshore breeze. At least the transports had not had to tack their way in.

The coal-oil lamp was the bull's-eye type; Raj took it and clicked open the shutter to illuminate the map. M'lewis crouched. He had burnt cork on his face and hands, and a black bandanna around his head. The map was copied from originals more than a century and a half old. The gross terrain features would be there, but the most valuable parts of the Ordinance Survey, the houses and field-boundaries and woods, would have changed drastically.

"Thisshere ridge" — his finger pointed inland, to their west — "don't have the houses over the edge what's marked, ser. Jist a couple'a huts. I got two, three men in each. Land over t'ridge is all split up into little fields coppers work fer th' barbs. I got a couple, they talkin' pretty free. Don't love them barbs, nohow. Then here" — he touched a spot marked with the symbol for an inn — "'tis a village now. Mondain by name. 'Bout two hundred houses, rubble wall shoulder high. Not hardly no problem. Some militia; we kin take it an' use it fer a base right off, yer gives the word, Messer Raj."

Raj thought, turning again to look at the bay. With both moons down, the night was pitch-black, and the beach was milling chaos. Lights darted back and forth on the water, and he could see a dull red glow from the funnel of a steamer, but the running lights of the vessels were out by his order. This was far too close to Port Murchison for safety; only twenty-five kilometers, one day's forced march and less than that for a ship. As he watched another transport ghosted in, the long rumbling crunch of its keel bedding in the sand ending in a louder crackle as its prow struck a ship already ashore. There were yells of fury ending in the *thwack* of a rope's end on a bare back, and the moaning whimper of a frightened dog.

"No," he said. "First things first; we'll get this sorted out." He leaned forward and slapped the little ferret-faced man on the shoulder. "Good man. Excellent work." He looked up. "Captain! How many of

your company ashore?"

Foley stopped in mid-stride. "All of them, sir," he said. "Gerrin's in the next boat; we've got about half the dogs in. Bloody hell getting them over the rail in the dark."

"Good; get two platoons up on the ridge. There are some of the Scouts in those two hovels on the ridge. Relieve them, get up there, and lay me out a perimeter defense. I'll feed men up as they arrive. Now, M'lewis. What I want you and your scouts to do is get me some farmers. And their wagons; collect them, tell them they'll be paid — *no, pay* them, for whatever spare supplies they'll bring in."

"Already done, Messer Raj; figgered we couldn't nohow leave 'em t' run off to the barbs after they'd seen us."

"Good. Put a dozen wagons aside —"

Menyez came by, with a pair of infantry battalion-commanders in tow. "Sir," he said. "It's going according to plan, but Dinnalsyn says we can forget about the guns until tomorrow or until we can get the floating pier up, whichever comes first."

"Fine. That transport?"

"Rock under the sand; broke her spine. Hopeless."

"There's some good in everything; get some fatigue-parties breaking her up for fuel. Warm or not, I want the men dry; dig fire-pits, no big blazes."

"Sir!"

Raj turned back to M'lewis "— and leave them half-full. Fodder, for choice, hay, anything like that." He gave the map a last glance and stood, considering. Men with banners were forming up on the beach, a few hundred meters between each, calling—

"3rd Chongwe! 3rd Chongwe!"

"88th Seyval! 88th Seyval!"

Out of sight of his men for a moment, Raj rubbed his temples, his knuckles rapping against the rim of his helmet. The landing was a complete ratfuck. A thousand Squadron cavalry — the personal retainers of a single major landowner — could slash the force into bloody windrows at the edge of the surf.

How are we doing, Center? Raj thought bitterly.

better than expected, Center replied.

Raj stiffened in surprise; the machine voice sounded almost jovial.

if the enemy reacts perfectly, both in making a plan on the basis of statistically-insignificant intelligence and in execution of that plan, then they could successfully attack us tonight. in that case, i will begin to believe in a god myself. A pause, perhaps a heartbeat long. **theirs.**

More than half the 5th had already gathered around their standard; he came up to it himself just in time

to see Gerrin Staenbridge wading up from the surf, sopping water from head to foot and sneezing.

"Evening, Raj," he said cheerfully. "Stepped out of the boat into a bloody sinkhole."

They slapped palms. "Glad to see you. As soon as the next wave of men and dogs are ashore, take the 5th inland to the ridge; Foley's setting up there. Dig in, and push out some patrols, men who won't fall over their feet in the dark. M'lewis has supplies and wagons coming in; I want everyone who can to have a hot meal and at least a couple of hours' sleep. I'll send some infantry up, relieve you eventually. Staff meeting one hour before dawn."

"Got it," Staenbridge said. Then he looked beyond Raj's shoulder. "Ah, Messa Suzette. More radiant than ever," he said.

Raj turned; Suzette was in her riding clothes, linen and leather looking stained with salt

"You flatter, Gerrin."

"Not in the least," Staenbridge said; he smiled warmly and raised the extended hand to his lips for a brief moment. "Not being as blinded as most men by the exterior, I can see better within."

Some of the rest of the household came up behind her. Fatima first; the nurse and her son were back on the ship, until the beachhead was secure. She had a cork-insulated flask in her hands, and began pouring cups for Suzette and the Companions.

"Ahh, nectar," Raj said; it was hot black kave, sweet and with a dash of brandy. The Southern Territories were dry enough that even an early-summer night could be chilly, and there was a sea breeze.

Fatima handed cups to the others; Mekkle Thiddo came up, his boots sloshing, and passed his clipboard to Raj.

"Gerrin," she said, with a mock pout. "How come you kiss her hand and not mine?"

"Because, mother of my son, you are an imp and she is a very great lady. *Sahud!*" he finished, raising his cup.

"*Health,*" they replied.

"Where's our good Administrator?" Raj went on, looking over the papers Thiddo had handed him. "Outstanding, Thiddo. All right, bivouac them. One company up to the ridge; Gerrin will assign the sectors."

A fleeting hardness went across Suzette's face as she shrugged and answered her husband. "Still puking his guts out on the flagship, while Admiral Ghardineri runs around looking at the sky and tearing out his hair," she said. Then she smiled and took a deep breath of the damp, chilly air. "It's much nicer here."

Raj threw back his head and laughed. The stars were very clear through the gaps in the clouds. Suddenly he felt bright, almost transparent, at the cusp of a moment more rare than diamonds.

"A night landing in a high wind, on hostile soil, with a battle to fight tomorrow. Not enough sleep, or intelligence . . . maybe all the Squadron's hosts roaring down on us."

"Marriage to you is an education, darling."

"Perfect, sir."

"Couldn't ask for better."

"Harem was so *boring* compare to this."

"You *can* throw a party, Whitehall, I'll say that for you."

They looked at one another, grinning, and touched fists in a pyramid.

"Well," Suzette went on, "Fatima and I will scare up those priests and Renunciates and get the infirmary open. There'll be enough broken legs and smashed hands from *that*," she said, nodding out to where yard-arms were being used to lower nets of supplies to men standing waist-deep in the surf.

"Men, ammunition, dogs, food, and medical supplies *in that order*, Captain," Raj said patiently. *You ruddy imbecile*, he thought. Patience was like a millstone that could crush out results if you gave it time. The young man looked harassed and bewildered and out of his depth, here under the curving stempost of the ship.

"Yessir. I see, sir."

I hope you do, Raj thought. "So that's why we have to push this ship off even though it's still partly loaded. The wheeled transport and tents can come ashore when we're more secure. See to it—"

A voice spoke at his elbow, more insistently when he made shooing motions. He turned; the torchlight was dim, but—

"Admiral Gharderini," he said resignedly.

"General, we must stop this — stop this unloading immediately!"

For a moment Raj stared at him, then looked up and down the crescent beach. Firelight provided more visibility now, but the operation was just getting into high gear. Soldiers with *guardia* armbands were getting most of the ordinary soldiers off the beach and to their unit bivouacs quickly enough, though that often meant pushing a way through the working parties carrying supplies up to the piles just above the high-water mark; stiff, grumpy dogs were led up out of the surf, their heads held high. A torch hissed as one stopped and shook himself in a spray like a salt thunderstorm. The dogs would have to be watered, and soon, or they would be very unhappy indeed. Unhappy five-hundred-kilo carnivores were bad news anywhere, and worse than that on a crowded sandspit in the dark with fifteen-thousand-odd men trying to find their unit assembly areas. There was a freshwater spring just under the ridge inland

"There is an onshore storm coming, I am *sure* of it," Gharderini said, making a hand-washing gesture. "I can *smell* it. We cannot let the fleet be caught on a lee shore! Embark the men—we can beat off the coast and sail right into the harbor at Port Murchison, they'll never suspect on a night like this, and the fleet will be safe behind the breakwaters."

For a moment Raj simply stared at the naval officer. When he took the smaller man by the elbow and

steered him several steps into the darkness, it was more gently than he had first intended. Gharderini was afraid for his ships, not himself, and he was a competent seaman; he'd done a pretty good job of getting everything here. The problem was that he was focused on his own aspect of the task, not taking in the big picture — which was Raj's responsibility, sure enough. His responsibility to make it clear to Gharderini, without an open quarrel, which would be bad for the men, bad for morale.

"*Listento* me, Messer Admiral," Raj said, facing the man. His hand was on the other's shoulder, his saber-hand, and he used willpower to prevent it dosing like a mechanical clamp through the Admiral's deltoid muscle. "That doesn't matter." Gharderini bleated. "The fleet is expendable; the troops are not. If worse comes to worst, beach your ships and get the crews ashore. We can fight as long as we have the soldiers and their dogs and rifles." *Although the Spirit knows I'd appreciate having my artillery ashore.* Dinnalsyn was moving mountains getting a temporary pier rigged, but it was man-killing work.

"Lose the *fleet*?" Gharderini said, with a tone much like that of a man just asked whether he would like to eat his children. "*Ground* the warships?" The steamers were much more heavily built than the transports, but grounding their rams in a surf would mean having them pounded to bits in short order.

"If necessary," Raj said. Then he thrust his face into the naval commander's. "Do—you—understand—me?"

Gharderini pulled himself free and stumbled clear.

It would have to do. *Damn, I wish I had time to get him on-side,* Raj thought. *Now, what was I doing before that damned interruption* — It was going to be a long night and a longer day.

"Who goes!"

Several of the men at the fire had started up. Two more walked out of the shadow, rifles leveled at the cloaked figure. Raj let the hood slip back, and the men halted, gaping.

"Suh!" the corporal said, springing erect.

"No need, not tonight, men," Raj said, walking forward into the light of the fire. The soldiers were infantry, he could tell from the blanket-roll packs some of them still had slung. He returned the noncom's salute. "Mind if I warm myself at your fire a little?" he said.

There were awkward murmurs; he sank into a crouch and warmed his hands at the coals glowing in the pit they had dug in the sand while they shuffled and sank back to the ground. He looked around the little encampment. Two sections, sixteen men; they'd laid out their shelter-halves as groundsheets, and stacked their rifles regulation-wise, in tripods with the helmets hanging off them like grotesque fruit. Down by the beach unloading went on, but more slowly; most of the men were ashore, and only some of the dogs and the heavier supplies waited for dawn. A pier of longboats covered with planking had been rigged, braced with cable, and a jib-boom crane was lowering a field piece onto the seaward edge of it. It swayed and dipped under the weight, but the waiting crews were running it forward as soon as the wheels touched wood, a sound like thunder over the loosely fastened planks.

There was a pot of bean soup bubbling on the fire, and a stack of flatbread laid out on somebody's blanket-roll next to a helmet full of small ripe apricots.

"Just stopped by to see you lads had what you needed," he said. "Water all right?"

From the lack of conversation before he walked in, they'd been sitting and worrying.

"Yes, suh," the corporal said. "Got a length o' sausage 'n summa ham fuh d'pot. 'N other stuff."

Raj took out a packet of cigarettes and handed them around. One of the soldiers broke his in half and tucked the other part behind his ear before lighting it.

"I really hope you paid for it all, too," Raj said. The troops nodded, although the older man who had broken his cigarette frowned slightly.

"Yas, Messer General, suh. Seems a might waste a' money, it do. Weuns doan' see much cash-money."

"Well, lads, think of it this way. The most of you were croppers, before you went to follow the drum, right?" They nodded, a circle of ox-eyed faces still struck with awe to see the general within arm's reach. "These farmers here, they're not our enemies. They're croppers too, only for heretics who don't worship the Spirit of Man of the Stars, as we do — and as the peasants here do, too. No, they have to pay tithe to the heretic church at peril of their souls, and hide their priests like rabbits. On top of all that, they don't need us to come and steal their pigs and chickens, do they? We're here to set them free, not afflict them."

The others nodded, although the old sweat looked a little skeptical. "We'll be fightin' tomorrah, then, suh?"

"Probably, fellow soldier. And the day after: but not tonight; you'll have time for a meal and some sleep. It was only the thought of the barbs attacking us when we came ashore that had me worried; but the Spirit was with us. That's why we have to act with justice, lads; the Spirit won't fight for an army that doesn't." More nods, round-eyed and solemn with agreement.

"Messer Raj, suh," one of the young soldiers said. "Kin Ah ask a question, suh?" At Raj's smile and nod, he plunged on. "It's muh ma, suh. Mah pa's dead, 'n if Ah was to die . . . she'd be hard put to it without mah guvmint-farm. She worries 'bout me sumthin' awful, she do."

Raj slipped his notebook out and jotted briefly. "Don't worry, lad . . . Private Dannal Huitierrez, isn't it? Spirit preserve you, but if you fall we'll see the campaign bonus and your share of any plunder gets sent to your family. I'll have a note sent her, by the way; it's a good son thinks of his mother, and she should know."

And I should know why the officers of the 88th Seyval Infantry haven't attended to that, he thought to himself. He sighed and stood, butting out the cigarette.

"Spirit of Man of the Stars with you, boys. Get your rest."

"Spirit bless ye, Messer Raj!" they chorused; there was a buzz of excited talk as he left. *Much better than brooding silence*, he thought.

The next campfire he stopped at was some distance away; a group of the 5th Descott. Some of them were cleaning rifles or putting a last edge on a saber or bayonet, or just leaning back against their saddles watching the chickens they had turning on an improvised spit over their fire. One man was strumming at a guitar:

"Listen to 'em callin'—callin' with all their might

All a summer's evenin', and halfway through the night—

Donna —"

The music broke off as he strode up; you needed a different approach with County men.

"Hello, dog-brothers," he hailed them. "Wouldn't happen to be wine in that water, would there?"

Mondain woke early, like any farm town; it had perhaps two thousand souls, almost all of them land workers. A gong was ringing from the little church of the Spirit of Man of This Earth; by far the minority congregation in the village, but by law the only one allowed to have bell or signal. Woodsmoke rose from chimneys, or through the smokeholes of houses too humble for that. Most of Mondain was narrow lanes partly cobbled and partly packed dirt, between houses of peeling whitewashed adobe. A few houses near the central well were more substantial, multiple rooms around small patios, although the exterior of the Star Spirit church was deliberately humble. Men rose yawning, to eat the morning gruel prepared by women who had been up for an hour or better. The smell of kave came from a few of the better-off households: the priest, a notary, the headman, and the single half-breed Able Hand who was the Squadron's only representative in town. Riper smells came from middens, compost heaps, and the honeybuckets of the night-soil collectors, taking their contents toward the gate and the farmers' fields that would receive it.

At the gate, grumbling fieldworkers waited for the militia guards to open the woven-lath doors, leaning on spade and hook and bill; the militiamen were freeholders or artisans, but the laborers had walking to do before their day's work on nearby estates. Beyond, the narrow dirt road wound away into the fields, dusty olives and figs near the village, with reaped wheat and barley beyond. A dozen or so carts were waiting to enter the village, high-wheeled and vividly painted, mostly loaded with alfalfa fodder for the town's few oxen. It was a brilliant early-summer morning, last night's unseasonable wind and cloud gone, still crisp but with a hint of the heat that would turn afternoon into a white blaze.

"'lo, Danyel," Aynton Mugirez said to the first farmer outside as he leaned against the midpoint of the gates to swing them open. "Spirit bless." He was corporal of town militia; no great honor, but it brought a little extra blacksmith's work his way, paid in hard coin.

The farmer mumbled nervously; from the loose hay behind him a rifle was poked firmly against the base of his spine. He chucked to the oxen and they walked forward with the stolid, swaying pace of their breed, the ungreased wooden axles protesting. Farmworkers crowded past, and the wheeled traffic within waited impatiently in side lanes. The militia leaned their backs against pounded rubble of the town wall, waiting for the second gong that would send them to home and bed, free for another month of the irksome duty barely worth the tax remission. Wagon followed wagon, until half were through the gate and curving down the lane. It was then that the militia corporal grew suspicious. The farmers driving the carts were *very* quiet; Mugirez's eyes widened, as he thought of the tricks bandits sometimes played.

The Squadron lords were supposed to scour bandits out of the hills and wild woods. Some attended to

it, others ignored anything that did not threaten their rents. Some actively connived at outlaw gangs, as long as they raided a neighbor's estates: Most outlaws were of Squadron blood at that, broken men or ones who'd lost their lands. *Bandits*, Mugirez thought. Rape, fire, the best young people dragged off for foreign slave markets, the survivors starving without the seed corn and plow-beasts, and the rents for the masters would be abated not one *sentahvo*. He stepped toward the nearest wagon, raising his musket.

"Hoy!" he shouted. "Stop them —"

A figure catapulted from the hay. The militia corporal leveled his musket and pulled the trigger. *Whang*, and the other's rifle swept it aside; the ball thumped into hard-packed dirt. The blacksmith roared and tried to club his weapon, but the follow-through stroke drove the steel-shod butt into the side of his head with force enough to send him reeling back. It was only as he slid down the wall clutching his bleeding head that he noticed the men exploding out from the wagon-loads of fodder were dressed in uniforms — blue jackets and dark-red pants.

M'lewis held his aiming-point on the militia, grouped in a frozen tableau, half-rising from their resting positions. *Rick me fer an ijit volunteer*, he thought bitterly. *I had t'go 'n have ideas. Mother M'lewis didn't raise no volunteers*

"Drop it, drop it, *drop* it," he shouted. The words were comprehensible enough; Sponglish and Spanjol were closely related tongues, and many simple words were very similar. The leveled rifles spoke volumes more, and the taut grins of the dark hard-faced men behind them. "Nobody gets hurt if yer drop 'em!"

The muskets clattered to the ground; the soldier winced at the weapons' rough treatment, and one hammer did click home. The flint sparked against the frizzen, but the musket misfired. Shouting grew and died in the immediate area as the ones under the menace of the guns backed up against the nearest wall and froze. A murmur ran among them: *Gubernio Civil*. Civil Government, the fabled overlords their great-grandparents had known. Awe touched their faces, growing when the man beside M'lewis unfurled the blue-and-silver Star banner of Holy Federation. A few raised their hands in prayer or touched amulets.

Other Scout parties were on the wall elsewhere around the town. M'lewis nodded at one of his men, who raised a small rocket on a stick and struck a match.

". . . come to set you free," Raj concluded, hooking his thumbs through his belt. He was standing on the steps of the headman's house, the only stone structure in the village, and it gave him a good vantage.

The people of Mondain stood silently in the little plaza of their town; all of them, save for the sick and two-score This Earth heretics, under guard in their chapel. They were not that different from a crowd of central-province peons back home; dressed in unbleached cotton pants and shirts, holding their floppy straw hats respectfully at their chests. Women in blouses and skirts of the same fabrics; both sexes mainly barefoot, and smelling fairly strong. Taller and lighter-skinned than most in the east, although lives spent working under the sun could hide that Very old legend spoke of migrations from different worlds — or countries, it was unclear which. *Tekhanos*, *Sonoras*, and *Pairhagway* back home; *Hargentin*, *Hespanya*, and *Hile* out here.

"No soldier will steal or kill," Raj went on, keeping it simple. His Spanjol was book-learned, and

probably hard for these peasants to understand. "They will pay for everything they need, in good silver." That brought a stir, and an incredulous murmur. The concept of armed men paying for their food was strange. "If any causes harm, tell an officer, and the criminal will be punished. Let us pray to the Spirit of Man of the Stars."

He made a gesture with one hand, and the local Star priest came forward with the 5th Descott's chaplain beside him. They raised their staffs of office and began to chant a hymn, one of the most ancient of the Star faith; the peasants joined in, showing more enthusiasm than they had for the speech. Religion was something they understood very concretely, and they knew no public service had been held in their faith since the Squadron came. A few of the older villagers were in tears, weeping with joy as the soldiers joined in the song.

I hope tears of joy are the only ones I bring you, Raj thought. But I sincerely doubt it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The army of the Civil Government was a moving city as it marched north along the coast road; a rippling pattern of human organization, transforming the landscape as it passed, like a weather-front. There was a shudder ahead of it, a froth of Squadron refugees lucky or canny enough to abandon everything but ready cash and spur their dogs toward Port Murchison. Many even of those met roving bands of Skinners and died, on the inland western flank. Next came the scouts, mounted and moving by half-squads at a steady wolf-trot, probing at gullies and woods, sniffing around the outskirts of Squadron manors and farms. Information flowed back to the main body, and the first most of the enemy knew of the army was the arrival of a raiding-column of cavalry. Dun clubs of smoke marked the spots of resistance, towering up into the hot cloudless sky; that and livestock, wagonloads of household goods, and the dwellers roped neck-and-neck as they moved back to the main column. Those willing to submit and swear allegiance to the Civil Government were left their lives and property, except for arms, riding dogs, and wagons. A third of their lands would be forfeit later, but that was for peacetime.

The main body moved like a hub at the center of those spokes, spokes carrying inward plunder and produce brought for sale by native peasants, outward scouts and well-paid emissaries promising good treatment for those who surrendered. The coast road ran north through rolling plain scarred by the odd gully, mostly wheat and barley stubble with the odd patch of woodland, orchard, or vineyard; most farmers lived behind walls in tight-packed villages. An observer waiting in the road would have seen lines through the heat-shimmer of late afternoon, first marked by pillars of dust.

Those became company columns of cavalry, spaced out at regular intervals a half-kilometer or so across the line of march; blue of uniforms, dun-brown of dogs, the long formations wiggling a little as the animals instinctively kept to the level. An occasional glitter marked them —the star at the point of a pennant, the brass guard of a saber — but mostly they were faded to the color of the earth they crossed. At a walking pace the feet of the dogs were only a muffled thudding scuff. Louder was a clatter of metal buckles on harness, the steady bang of scabbards on stirrup-irons, an occasional hoarse command. The men rode with an easy swaying slouch, but they were alert enough; the cavalry would deploy to screen the rest of the column if an attack came. More mounted units flanked the road on the vulnerable western side; everyone knew the Skinners were *supposed* to be out there somewhere, but nobody was going to stake

their lives on it. Galloper-guns with eight-dog hitches followed, a three-gun battery to every five companies, ready to wheel about and form a firing line.

Behind the mounted men came the foot-soldiers, marching by battalions, eating the outriders' dust. They were grouped three battalions abreast, one on either side of the ditch and one on the road; ten thousand men would have stretched forever, lined up like beads on a string. Rifles on one shoulder, blanket-roll over the other, they moved with a swing born of short marches and good rations. Six hours into the day the drummer-boys had fallen into a common beat, and the ten battalions at the head of the column were singing:

" Sojer boy be full a' fight—sojer boy be randy:

Mind the drumbeat—mind the step

And with the girls be handy—"

The command group followed them, in a dust-cloud still more dense; behind shambled the mass of the wheeled transport and camp followers. More guns, dogs panting wearily; the heavy mortars on their ox-drawn carriages; wagons with tools and tents and ammunition and provender; herds of cattle and sheep and bleating goats; several small, heavily guarded carts carrying iron-strapped chests of coin and high-value plunder . . . And the army's civilians: Priest-doctors and Renunciate nun medicos in their ambulance-clinics, cavalry troopers' servants afoot, officers' valets, sutlers, the loot-fences and slave-traders who followed war the way the vultures did, girls picked up in the days since the landing, enlisted men's wives smuggled aboard the transports against all regulations, the odd officer's lady on her palfrey. The mounted guards who chivvied them on had standing orders that anyone who couldn't keep up was to be kicked out of the line and left. That was no problem with most who had followed the drum before, but all too many straggled and sprawled and chattered, as chaotic as the livestock and harder to manage. Then the remainder of the infantry — four thousand men — and behind them the cavalry screen.

"They're shaping well," Raj said critically, lowering his binoculars.

Then he looked around; he and his trumpeters and bannermen and messengers were on a slight rise half a kilometer to the east of the road. Men in the red-striped blue trousers of the artillery were laying out a camp with pegs and rope; five hundred meters to a side, with diamond-shaped bastions at each corner, and a regular gridiron of streets within centered on an open square. Spots were allocated for each unit, for the dog-lines, for the infirmary and the knockdown shrines that housed the battalion standards, for the camp-followers and the wagon park and the latrines. There was a little stream nearby, still flowing, that would do for water; woodlots stood conveniently near, but not close enough to give an enemy shelter.

"This is a nice little piece of work, too," Raj went on. He mopped his face with the orange, red, and black checkered bandanna of the 5th and opened his canteen. Any Civil Government officer was supposed to be able to do basic surveying and lay out fieldworks, but the artillery did it better, no doubt of that. "Water?"

"Thanks, sir," the artillery major said, lighting a cigarette. "We've all had four days' practice. Not that it's a forced march, either."

Raj grinned at the hint and looked at his watch: 1600 hours. "I have my reasons," he said. Center painted a map across his sight, distances and times. Six kilometers a day since they landed. They were only a day and a half from Port Murchison . . . "It's an excellent regulation that the army has to entrench every night on hostile ground; they used to say barbarians were more easily defeated by seeing us go into camp than by fighting us. I intend to see it's strictly enforced.

"Trumpeter," he went on. "Sound *attention*. "

Everyone was expecting it; the column fell silent except for the jackdaw-chatter of the civilians and one tapping drum per battalion. The avalanche sound of thousands of bootheels slamming down echoed across deserted countryside.

"Sound *general halt*. "

A more complex rhythm: *ta-ra-ta-ra-ta-rarara-ta-ra*, twice repeated. Unit trumpets sounded to relay it, and shouted commands for smaller groups. The halt began at the rear of the column, the only way to prevent people running into the heels of the men ahead; it rippled down the long line of humans, dogs, and vehicles like a wave through a pond. A second ripple as the infantry units called *slope arms* and *stand at the easy*; multiple rattle of hands on iron and wood, then the thudding of butt-plates on dirt or gravel. There was a slow-motion traffic pileup among the transport and camp-followers, but that was to be expected.

" *And fall out to quarters*, if you please."

What followed was almost as complex as a dance, along a front of nearly two thousand meters. The cavalry screens closed in to group by battalions and then stood to in three directions around the campsite, acting as an outer guard. The infantry battalions marched off the road at a trot with their rifles at the trail, and swung into the campsite by the notional gates in each string-marked wall. Standardbearers and officers trotted down the streets to their assigned sectors. The men halted, dispersed to drop most of their gear on their squad plots, then three-quarters of them formed up stripped to the waist, with only rifle, bayonet, and bandolier. Each company hurried at the same jog-trot to its assigned sector of wall; by the time it arrived, wagons had dropped offloads of shovels, picks, and baskets.

Raj looked at his watch: 1620, and the first spadefuls of earth were flying. In another ten minutes nine thousand men would be working; hours before sunset there would be a ditch two meters deep and precisely two meters wide around the entire camp. Inside that would be a steep-sided embankment the height of a tall man: working parties of camp followers were being shepherded to the nearest patches of wood — for fuel, and for the stakes that would be rammed into the top of the mound and woven together with brush. Guns went by below, headed out to the bastions; emplaced there, they could shoot outward, or rake any side of the square with enfilading fire. Hammers sounded on tent-pegs all across the camp; a more musical sound cut in, cavalrymen driving in the metal rods that anchored the picket-lines of dogs for the night. A file of them went by, trotting behind a single handler and standing in a well-trained row while he snapped their bridle-chains to the wire cable stretched between the steel posts.

Latrines, fire-pits, field kitchens, water-barrels at set intervals . . .

"That reminds me," Raj said. "Da Cruz, no drinking the water from the stream, or barrels until they've been blessed." The priests used a ritual with a short prayer and a sprinkling of chlorine powder.

The senior noncom nodded. "If ye order, ser," he said.

Raj half-turned in the saddle. "Meaning I wasn't always so superstitious, Top?" He shrugged. "Let's say a little voice told me it'd be a good idea. Haven't had many down with the squirts, have we?"

Diarrhea was no joke in an army: it killed. More men than bullets, when you took them into an area with strange food and uncertain water, even if it didn't bother the locals.

"No, ser." He saluted and wheeled off. Dinnalsyn flicked away the butt of his cigarette and chuckled.

"They didn't call you the King of Spades, either, a while ago—but I'm not objecting," he said. "I remember Sandoral — if there's one thing worse than sitting in a hole while someone shells you, it's not *having* a hole when someone shells you. Ah, our brothers in arms."

The battalion commanders were riding up, some of them with a few of their subordinates. Dalhouse looked to have brought all his company commanders and most of the Lieutenants. The Cuirassiers had a little polished ceremonial breastplate on their tunics, a reminder of the time when they had worn back-and-breast armor. To Raj it had always seemed a curious habit in a combat zone — rather like hanging a *shoot me here* sign on your chest — but Dalhouse swore by the tradition. His crony Hingenio Buthelezi of the 1st Gaur Rangers was with him.

The officers reined in and saluted; Raj answered it and leaned forward with both hands on his pommel.

"Excellent work, Messers," he said. "We'll have sunset service at 1900, reveille at 0600, then, if I give the order — there may be a change of plans depending on fresh intelligence — we'll demolish the camp" — there was no point in leaving a usable fortress right behind them — "and make another day's march."

"Sir." Dalhouse made the word a half-insult; but then, his voice usually seemed to have that tone of throttled impatience, a *you fool* to all the world. The tips of his mustache were still waxed, and they quivered as he flung an arm northward. "Do you intend to stop and camp with four hours of daylight remaining?"

Raj let his eyes rest on the thousands of men entrenching the army, then looked back to Dalhouse.

"Yes, Messer Major, that's more or less my intention." Somebody coughed to hide a chuckle.

"Sir, we're moving like a collection of old women on washday! Every barbarian in two hundred kilometers will know we're here; they're already stripping their estates of stock and goods before we get there."

"Well, Major Dalhouse . . ." Raj went on, with a slight smile, pausing to light a cigarette. *Who I would strip of his command and bust back to East Residence if I could*, he thought wistfully. Far too influential for that, worse luck.

The match went *scritch* between thumb and forefinger. ". . . this isn't a razziah or a slave-raid, you know. It's a campaign of conquest."

"How are we supposed to bloody conquer them if we *don't fight* the sons of whores? We spend all our time digging dirt like peons. You —" He reconsidered. "We're giving them time to concentrate."

Raj looked behind Dalhouse at his junior officers.

tell them, Center said, **as i told you. some of them will listen and learn.**

As I listened and finally learned,Raj thought dryly. *After arguing for a swift thrust at Port Murchison, because I'm so afraid of crawling along, waiting to be hit with everything the Squadron has*

"Exactly, Major," Raj went on aloud. "Exactly. My actions are quite precisely calculated to *make* them fight; at a time and place and in a manner of *my* choosing, not theirs. I'm giving them enough time to mobilize some of their strength, and not enough to gather all of it. Making them come to us in bite-sized chunks, as it were.

"You see," he went on, making a spare gesture with the hand that held the cigarette; it trailed a curve of blue smoke. "We of the Civil Government have the most disciplined army in the world; apart from the Colony, the only disciplined army on earth."

bellevue,said Center.

"The strength of that discipline is that it provides for a series of set contingencies of battle, but no drill can cover *all* the possibilities. So it behooves us to avoid the ones that aren't provided for, does it not? Our army is a battlefield army; all its weapons and its training are for set-piece battles in open country, where volley-fire and formation count. Its great weaknesses are close-quarter ambush and night attack; you may note, Major, that I'm carefully avoiding the possibility of either."

He indicated the pillar of smoke that marked a Squadron farm in the middle distance.

"By advancing slowly on their capital and scorching the earth, we accomplish three things. Some of their chiefs will surrender, to spare their estates. Others will try to pressure their Admiral into a premature attack on us,also to spare their estates—and he can't afford to alienate too many of them. This is the richest land in the Southern Territories; the most influential nobles own it. And thirdly, we make the *Admiral* fear native uprising and a siege of Port Murchison—not that I intend to besiege it The fortifications aren't modern, but we don't have a siege train —and sure as a tax-farmer grafts, if we sat down to siege we'd get a visit from Corporal Forbus."

Cholera morbus;a few of the men winced. A close-packed camp in hot weather was an invitation to it.

observesaid Center:

— and rows of men lay on pallets soaked in feces. They shook, and their faces had the fallen-in look of famine victims. Flies crawled over them in sheets; Raj saw one man too weak to blink as they walked over his eyeballs, although his chest still rose and fell. Renunciates in soiled white jumpsuits and overrobes went down the rows, trying to make the victims drink; water mixed with sugar and salt was the only thing that did cholera victims any good, that and the careful nursing that they could not give so many

— and Raj watched from a mound as the armies closed in on both sides of a fortified siege-camp; the Squadron host from landward, a huge mass of men and metal that surged in disorderly dots from horizon to horizon, the whole land-levy of the enemy. On the other side stood the walls of Port Murchison, old-fashioned curtain and tower built but cored in concrete and faced with huge granite blocks, immune to the pecking of his fieldpieces. The gates opened, and out poured another army itself larger than his, the garrison of the town and Commodore Curtis Auburn back from Stern Island with the elite of the barbarian armies, moving to some sort of coordinated command. Viewpoint-Raj looked down. The

parapets were thinly manned, units at half-strength or less. As he watched one man collapsed, knees too weak to hold up his weight even leaning against the firing ledge, and nobody moved to aid him . . .

probability of serious epidemic $80\% \pm 6\%$, Center said, **probability of city surrendering to siege before return of Stern Island force $6\% \pm 2\%$. probability of decisive results from siege operations, too low to calculate meaningfully.**

Raj blinked back to awareness, shocked as always at how little time had passed. Dalhouse was talking:

"— so how do we know the garrison *will* come out? Or that the Admiral will attack before he's reunited his forces?"

"Two reasons, besides the ones I've listed," Raj said, holding up his fist. He raised a finger. "First, because the Squadron are barbarians, who think like children — like thirteen-year-old boys, really. Honor demands they attack at once; glory and fame to those in the forefront, eternal shame to the laggard; they'll overthrow the Admiral if he doesn't lead them to battle, and he knows it. They haven't had any real wars to temper it with common sense lately, either. Second." He raised another finger. "What time of year is it, Major?"

Dalhouse blinked bewilderment. Raj swung an arm to indicate the harvested fields.

"Wheat and barley and beans, Major, a holy trinity like the Christo's. All cut, and carted to the villages, and stacked — hence easy to burn — but not threshed or bagged, and certainly not carried into Port Murchison. I doubt they have a year's reserve on hand, either."

The officers nodded unconsciously; even absentee landlords who visited their estates only to hunt, collect rents, and lay the odd peon girl knew that threshing grain was the longest task in the farm calendar; not time-pressured like harvesting, either. A well-thatched stack would keep the grain safe for half a year, rain or no, so you threshed it a bit at a time, as the other demands of the land allowed. A few of the best-managed estates near East Residence had simple ox-powered threshing machines—more of an affectation than anything, with labor so cheap — but such would be unknown here. They had all seen signs of neglect on the march, old irrigation channels allowed to silt, fields left to grow back in ruddy native scrub. Yet the Southern Territories still exported grain in most years, apart from the odd dearth or famine such as any area suffered, so reserves must be low.

"So," Raj finished gently, "it's easy to support a *moving* army — there *was* a reason for attacking this time of year, Major — but even the Squadron leaders aren't going to cram fifty or sixty thousand people and thirty thousand dogs into a city living on what's left of last year's yield. Not when they think their mighty warriors can crush our little band; after all, they won last time, didn't they?"

Dalhouse was silent for a moment. "Sir — what if you're wrong?"

"This isn't a safe profession, you know. If I'm wrong, we all die. And now, Messers, I think we should attend to the men."

"Spirit, Raj, you could have fired a locomotive by sticking Messer Bloody Dalhouse in the boiler and letting the steam coming out of his ears do the work," Kaltin Gruder said.

A guffaw ran around the table in the command tent. All the Companions were there, and Ewardo Poplanich—it suddenly occurred to Raj that he might be sliding into that category too. *Poor bastard.* They were sitting Colonist-style on cushions around a wickertable; a sauroid somebody's men had shot was the centerpiece, a local biped grazer about man-size, with a head like a sheep and a feathered ruff around its neck. It had been baked in a temporary earth-oven with strips of bacon over the back, and the crackling skin had covered succulent flaky white meat, ranging to brown on the haunches. Bowls of new potatoes swimming in butter flanked it, with fresh piles of fresh flatbread and olives and a salad of greens; the main course had been reduced to hacked remnants, and they were all leaning back with fruit and cheese and another glass of the local wine. The whole army was living well, from plundered storehouses, or what they bought from the peasants with plundered goods. The main supply problem was keeping the men from getting their hands on too much booze, which they *would* drink if they could.

It's a bloody military picnic, so far, Raj thought. None of the Companions expected it to last, of course . . . but there was no use borrowing grief beforehand when you knew it was coming down the pike. M'lewis seemed mostly concerned about his table manners at a Messer-class gathering, fairly futile since most of the others were resting their boots on the table or spearing bits out of bowls with their daggers.

Gruder, M'lewis, and Tejan M'brust had brought along the girls Reggiri had given them. Joni, Mitchi, and Karli, of Stalwart stock captured young; they all spoke Sponglisch and had been given a social education. Fatima was there as well. She and Barton were throwing clandestine peach-pits at each other across a recumbent and indulgent-looking Staenbridge. It reminded Raj that young Foley was still a little shy of eighteen. It also reminded him that Suzette was not there; she was dining with Berg and his cronies. Berg's feathers had come unruffled since Stern Isle; Berg wasseeing less of Dalhouse, and Dalhouse and Berg together had far too much pull at Court . . .

To the Starless Dark with it.

"Come on, Mekkle," he said to the young Descotter; Mekkle Thiddo was silent, looking at an opened locket. His wife of one year was back in the County, pregnant according to the latest letter, that having been suspected but uncertain when he left. "You're the honeymooner — give us *Road to Santanerr.*" Ewardo looked a little alarmed; that was a very old tune in the Civil Government's army, and officially strictly forbidden. Then he shrugged.

"*Hole*, Mekkle—start us off!" he yelled, leaning back and loosening his collar.

Well, at least here Ewardo gets to relax without looking under the rug for Barholm's spies, Raj acknowledged. Even if the life-expectancy of Companions was not very good.

"*Hadelande, dhude!*" Gerrin called. *Go for it, youngster!* He reclined sultanic on a pile of the cushions, with a head on each shoulder.

Thiddo grinned and ducked a half-eaten apricot. "On your own heads — and eardrums," he said, and threw back his head to sing in a strong young baritone:

"*When I left home for Lola's sake—*

By the Army road to Santanerr

She vowed her heart was mine to take
With me and my sword to Santanerr
Till our banners flew from Santanerr—
And I've tramped the desert—and Sandoral
And the Diva's banks where the snow-flakes fall
As white as the smile of Lola —
As cold as the heart of Lola!
And I've lost the desert, and Sandoral,
And I've lost home and worst of all,
I've lost Lola!"

From his place at the head of the table Raj could see down to the west gate of the camp, and north along the coast road. From the edge of sight northward a shuttered lantern blinked. That was where the main cavalry picket guarded the approach from the north; from Port Murchison, among other places. *Party — escort — embassy — truce flag*, he read. The gate acknowledged: *Proceed*. Two lights glowed, bobbing as the embassy rode southward with a squad of the cavalry to guard them. It was probably some Squadron noble looking to save his skin. Amazing how these pirates turned meek when the devastation showed up on their own doorsteps. Old Admiral Geyser Ricks, the conqueror of the Southern Territories, must be spinning in his marble-and-gold mausoleum.

They all joined in:

" *When you go by the Cantina Bellica*

As thousands have travelled before,
Remember the Luck of the Soldier
Who never saw home any more!
Oh, dear was the lover who kissed him
And dear was the mother that bore;
But then they found his sword in the heather,
And he never saw home any more!"

The torches reached the gate, and paused for challenge and response. They spurred up the long shallow incline, up the main cross-avenue of the camp to the open space before the commander's tent. Raj raised an eyebrow; they were cantering at least. Something must have impressed them, and Civil Government regular cavalry were generally not easily impressed by barbs. The troopers pacing guard outside the open tent door were fighting back grins; the song everyone inside was roaring out was a flogging offense, officially—and then next verse was the reason. No Governor liked it, especially the ones who shot their way onto the Chair:

" When you go by the Cantina Bellica

from the City to Sandoral,

Remember the Luck of the Soldier

Who rose to be master of all!

He carried the rifle and saber,

He stood his watch and rode tall,

Till the Army hailed him Governor

And he rose to be master of all!"

A jingling and flash of bright metal in the square; he could see the dark forms of the Regulars around the jewel and gold brightwork of the barbarians. The officer of the guard ducked into the tent and bent to talk to Muzzaf Kerpatik. Raj raised his glass in an ironic toast; he had given the Komarite the job of compiling a list of Squadron notables. He had done it with smooth efficiency, drawing on his commercial contacts; right now he looked more interested in staring sideways at Joni, M'lewis's new concubine. She was leaning back on one elbow in a way that did interesting things with the front of her sheer linen blouse *Duty calls*, he thought

The voices rose to a bellow:

" It's twenty-five marches to Payso

It's forty-five more to Ayaire

And the end may be death in the heather

Or life on the Governor's Chair

But whether the Army obeys us,

Or we serve as some sauroid's fare

I'd rather be Lola's lover

Than sit on the Governor's Chair!"

Muzzaf came back in; his face was like a bucket of cold water amid the shouts of laughter. He bent down to whisper into the commander's ear, and Raj came erect like an uncoiling spring. Silence spread outward. "Messers, I think we'd better bid the ladies goodnight," he said.

"You're Ludwig Bellamy?" Raj said in Spanjol.

The barbarian noble stepped forward: He was young, no more than twenty, taller by a hand than the general's 190 centimeters, broad-shouldered and handsome in a thin-nosed blond way: His hair was in braids tied at the right, and the back of his head shaved in the old Squadron style, but he had only the beginnings of a beard. The retainers behind him were scarred men in their thirties, looking naked without the flintlocks and long swords. The younger man's empty scabbards and belts looked to be worth the price of a thousand Merino sheep, and the fringed leather jacket was sewn with platinum sequins.

"*Ci, heneral-hefe Whitehall,*" he said in excellent court Sponglisch: *Yes, Supreme General Whitehall. "Ludwig Bellamy este, mi, elto spreyt d'Karl Bellamy, ho esten gran Capetain do sojadas marihenos en afilo d' Ahmiral Rick, Ispirito Persona dondi fahor on el"* :I am Ludwig Bellamy, oldest son of Karl Bellamy, who is Senior Captain of Marines, descended of Admiral Rick, upon whom be the blessings of the Spirit of Man.

Ludwig licked his lips; his eyes did not dart to the shadowed figures of the Civil Government soldiers around them. "Perhaps, Messer General, this is not the place?"

Raj smiled grimly, left hand resting on the hilt of his saber. This place would do quite well, with the light from the tent behind him casting his shadow over young Bellamy's face. Raj would be a featureless silhouette, with all the ordered sleeping power of the encampment behind him. *Karl Bellamy*, he thought. About fifth from the top in the Squadron hierarchy, fantastically rich, personal lord of thousands of armed Squadron vassals and tens of thousands of native peons, warships, merchantmen, mines, slaves, herds . . . and father of only two legitimate sons, by Muzzaf's account This one matched the description in the files, down to the crooked left finger that had healed wrong after being broken in a hunting accident.

"This will do quite well," he said. He carefully refrained from offering refreshment, which would make the noble feel he had the quasi-sacred status of a guest. "I take it your father—if you are who you say—wishes to make obeisance to the Civil Government of Holy Federation?"

Ludwig paled. "That is, Messer General—Your Excellency — we were given to understand —"

"— that those who surrender unconditionally will have their lives and most of their estates spared," Raj completed. "In a word, yes. But loyalty must be *proved*, and proved in person. I won't treat with an emissary. Let him come himself."

The Squadron noble closed his eyes for a second, gathering strength. "Messer General, you must understand . . . these things take time —"

"If he hasn't surrendered by the time we reach him, his life and lands are forfeit," Raj interrupted brutally. "We have a saying in the Civil Government: *time to crap or get off the pot.*"

A sigh and a nod. "Yes, of course. Messer Whitehall, my father — you see, if there is any suspicion by the usurper Admiral . . . Well, my father waits at a manor not three kilometers from here. He has with him only a dozen of his most faithful guards; come with as many men as you like, Messer Whitehall. We have more than submission to offer. We have vital information, most vital to the progress of your campaign."

Raj stood for a moment, his eyes probing the other man while his mind raced. *This is Bellamy's land we're on* . . . and Bellamy would know a great deal of his monarch's plans; the Squadron mobilized for war by sending a summons to the chief nobles, who called out their followers in turn.

"Get our guest a cup of wine!" he called. Bellamy's shoulders slumped a little in unconscious relief; the veterans behind him kept the same silent cornered-carnosauroid tenseness. "I'm afraid we can't offer more, since we'll be returning immediately."

He turned on his heel and walked back to the open flap of the tent.

"M'lewis," he rapped out. "Turn out your dog-thieves; I have some scouting for you. Gerrin, I want the 5th by the west gate in battle order in fifteen minutes, if you please. The rest of you — Companions, I suggest you get some sleep; I'll be back in a couple of hours — battalion commanders' meeting at 0300. Then there are likely to be happenings tomorrow."

A wolfish growl swirled past him, to where the barbarians waited under the Descotter guns.

"Ser."

Raj looked down, slightly startled. M'lewis had appeared out of nowhere, at the entrance to the Bellamy *kasgrane*'s gardens; his face was blackened, but the gold teeth shone. It was dark under the high stone arch, but . . .

"All safe, ser, me men's in place. Nobbut a dozen a' th' barbs, loik they said, even th' slaves've run er been sent off. Couлда took them's dogs 'n siller too, easy-loik."

"Good man. Come along."

M'lewis whistled softly, a hissing note like a night-flying dactosauroid; his dog walked out of the underbrush with its reins in its teeth and dropped them at his feet. He vaulted easily into the saddle and fell in as they spurred back into a lope. Glancing back brought only a gleam of eyes under the feint light of half-full Miniluna, a dark mass rising and felling as the battalion swept down the long curving drive. Gravel crunched under paws; the soft warm night was full of the smells of eucalyptus from the bluegums along the road, of warm dog and powdered rock and fading spring flowers.

Karl Bellamy was waiting on the portico of his manor, under a lantern that showed him and his retainers standing with no arms but their swords. It was an old building, far older than the Squadron conquest, mellow marble and tile. A tall fountain stood before the steps, a marble maiden reaching for a globe that

danced on her fingertips. One foot was missing, and a well had been sunk through the stone pavement beside the basin. Hitching posts showed that it was a watering trough for visitors' dogs, now. Raj beat down a rush of irrational anger and flung up one hand. *Van-dak*, he thought

The command party reined their dogs and the animals sank back on their haunches, breaking in a spurt of gravel and dust that billowed to the front steps of the portico. Behind them the 5th split both ways and peeled into a single two-deep line of men and guns, wet dog-fangs catching the lantern as the animals panted.

"Captain Staenbridge, secure the area," Raj said, swinging down. Behind him boots clattered on stone as the flanking companies deployed on foot; the banner-men and trumpeter stayed mounted, the long poles and silk-fringed cloth swaying overhead.

The Squadron men saluted in their manner, right fist to breast and then straight out; Raj tucked his helmet under one arm and inclined his head very slightly.

"Captain Karl Bellamy?" he said.

"I am the Bellamy," the Squadron leader said, in a slow deep voice that seemed to rumble from his chest; the Sponglish was much more accented than his son's, but understandable. His gray-shot beard reached nearly to his waist; the kettle belly beneath it only added to the aura of gross strength about the man.

"Brigadier General Raj Ammenda Halgern da Luis Whitehall," Raj said.

"This is my son Benter." A younger version of his brother Ludwig, staring at the dark foreign faces with a boy's delight in wonders. "Be welcome on my land; drink the guest-draught with me and be peace-holy."

Bellamy took up an heirloom drinking cup, priceless ancient plastic cradled in modern silver filigree; his sons drank first, a solid mouthful each, before their father. Some of the wine spilled into his beard; he wiped his mouth on one paw and offered the guest-draught. Raj drank in his turn, moderately — there was still a quarter of a liter, excellent red wine — and handed the rest to Gerrin. *Let all my officers be peace-holy and none of us drunk*, he thought ironically. Still, by all accounts most Squadron members actually put some store in this sort of thing. With a Stalwart, say, you knew an oath was the time to look out for the hidden knife; *their* favorite sport was fratricide.

Bellamy blinked solemn pouched eyes, sad as a hound's in their nests of cheek-beard and bushy eyebrow.

"We must speak," he said. None of the retainers objected aloud when a squad and Gerrin Staenbridge accompanied the two leaders, or when another squad sealed off the door behind them. Bellamy led the way through shadowed corridors of faded magnificence and gaudy splendor to a small room. He glanced at Staenbridge.

"This man is my kinsman and right arm," Raj said. True enough: They *were* fourth cousins or something of that sort. Every gentry family in the County was related somehow, just as every one had a vendetta or two if you went back far enough.

Bellamy nodded slowly. "I will not snipe with words," he said. "Admiral Auburn is no friend of mine. The Bellamys were kin to old Admiral Tonbridge. *He* would not have sent our best men away when war threatened!"

Actually, he was an even bigger idiot than the present one, Raj thought. Also the old Admiral's mother had been a very minor relation of the previous Gubernatorial family in East Residence, sent to the *barbaricum* as a maiden sacrifice to the gods of diplomacy. Many Squadron nobles had thought him too influenced by his mother, and suspected — quite rightly — that he leaned to the Spirit of Man of the Stars. The change of dynasties was one of the official *causi belli*, not that it mattered. A bit ironic coming from the equally usurping Cleretts

"The Auburns are usurpers," Raj nodded. "The Spirit will not favor a usurper in war."

"You promise —" Bellamy began, stroking his beard. "You promise those who swear to you keep their lands?"

"Yes," Raj said firmly. "Minus one-third for the Civil Government." Bellamy winced, but it was better than losing everything and being sold to the mines. "Just as I promise oblivion for those who resist. The Civil Government would rather have you as loyal subjects— we can use your fighting men, for one thing — but if I have to grind you into dog meat to pacify these Territories, I will do it."

Bellamy's thick-fingered hands twisted at each other, and sweat broke out on his ridged forehead.

"So you say, Messer General. Yet you will not be king here — will the next Vice Governor abide by your word?"

A good question. Once the Civil Government was firmly in charge, a reversal of policy would be nearly impossible to resist.

"Probably. I'm privy to Governor Barholm's War Council, and the policy is to conciliate where possible. We want to rule stable and productive lands, not put down rebellions every other year. And the Southern Territories are a long way from East Residence . . . I'll not mince words; you'll find our taxes hard—Spirit knows, most of *us* do — and we'll probably see that a lot of your young men see military service elsewhere, on the Colonial frontier, for example; but that's not altogether bad. We don't hold a gentleman's origins against him in the Army" — much — "and your sons, for example, could go far as officers. Perhaps on my staff

"The rest of you will be disarmed, at least at first. In return you'll get stable government, peace, and prosperity."

Bellamy leaned forward. "These are good words. But what of your Church? What of the Viral Cleansers?"

Raj winced slightly. "Well, that *is* something of a problem — especially given the way you've treated members of *our* faith. Certainly the church properties will have to be restored. I can only say that my policy will be tolerance, and the civil administrator appointed to follow me thinks likewise. As long as you don't try to proselytize or worship in public . . . Not one in a hundred of the people here is a This Earth follower, anyway. Those who want to rise in the Army or at Court will have to embrace orthodoxy, of course."

Bellamy hunched back in his chair, covering his eyes with one hand; after a moment Raj was startled to see silent tears trickling down into the bushy beard.

"*I must preserve my sons' heritage,*" he whispered hoarsely in his own language. "*I cannot destroy*

the Bellamy line for Auburn's folly"

Suddenly his face froze in Raj's sight; lines and patterns moved across it. The mottled image hung imposed over the living man, then jumped toward the general in silent leaps. Arrows sprang out around it, indicating the pupils and the pattern of coloration.

stress analysis indicates subject bellamy is sincere, Center said, **probability 96% ± 2%.**

"You speak honestly, like an honorable man. I will swear," Bellamy said. "Fetch my sons! They too will swear to you!" He rose and then fell to his knees.

Raj stood and awkwardly took the noble's hands between his, stumbling through the ritual of allegiance; this was *not* the time to explain the difference between swearing loyalty to an individual and to the State. *All the same, it's lucky nobody but Gerrin is here. Put the wrong way, this could be sticky back in East Residence.* Ceremony complete, Bellamy went over to a desk whose grace and sauroid-ivory inlays were incongruous beside his bulk. When he turned there was a sheaf of papers in his hands.

"Admiral Auburn has summoned the war host," the Squadron commander said, all business and flat impersonal tones now. "He attacks tomorrow, thus —"

"So the city garrison, under Commodore Conner Auburn, the Admiral's youngest brother, will sortie south down the coast road. Twelve thousand men, give or take a thousand."

Raj looked up, across the circle of officers grouped around the map table, under the swaying lantern. It was 0330; some of them were bleary-eyed, others gulping kave or gnawing on bannocks. There was sand under his eyelids as well, and sleep was a distant memory of childhood. Seventy thousand men were in motion, barbarian and Civil Government, like huge ponderous pieces of machinery in a big steam engine. His mind felt like that too, like machined shapes of iron and brass whirring and camming in oiled precision; everything was bright-edged and clear.

"They're expecting to hit us around noon — which means they're probably leaving Port Murchison around now. Conner Auburn's a hothead even by Squadron standards, so I expect the ones on the best dogs to arrive first and the rest to straggle. Major Staenbridge, I'm sending you with the 5th and the 7th — the 5th was overstrength, so that meant fourteen hundred men, and very good ones — "and two batteries, six guns, to meet him around —" His finger stabbed down on the coast road about halfway to Port Murchison. "— here. Get there early; otherwise I leave the details to your discretion, but don't get out of reach or let them flank you. Bloody their noses and fall back on the base here if they press you—fire and movement."

"Understood, sir." Gerrin rotated his shoulders, frowning at the map and unconsciously flexing the heavy muscles like a plowman looking at the field and preparing for a day's job of work.

"The next element of the enemy's plan," Raj went on, "is a diversionary attack by two thousand picked cavalry—some of Admiral Auburn's household troops — coming in from our west and planning to hit us around 1000 hours and make us face front west while the other forces approach from north and south. I've sent the Scout Group of the 5th to get their exact position, and Master Sergeant da Cruz to get the Skinners moving to block them."

Raj's finger moved south until it was below the Expeditionary Force's original landing site, then moved

north parallel to the line of march but farther from the coast.

"Admiral Auburn has been sweeping up from Sefex" — the southernmost city on the Territories' east coast — "calling out the home-levy of the Squadron, plus anyone who's managed to get out of our way and run southwest. He has the remainder of his household guards, fifteen hundred men, and whatever he's been able to rally: at least thirty thousand, perhaps forty." *Or possibly more; they're likely to answer the call whole-hearted, with us here burning and killing.*

There were grunts around the table; Raj's expression might have been called a smile, by someone who did not look too closely.

"They'll have all the unit coordination of a street brawl after a racetrack meet—but don't forget. They're fighting on the doorsteps of their homes, for their families and Church and the graves of their fathers.

"There are only two real routes of approach from the south for a force that size" — which could not get far from potable water, for one thing — "here and here. Major Zahpata, you'll take your battalion, the 1st Gaur Rangers, and the 3rd Chongwe Dragoons with one battery, and push down this route."

Haldolfo Zahpata of the 18th Komar Borderers nodded, stroking his pointed black beard. He was a leathery middle-aged professional, experienced but not ambitious, and middling gentry at home. Buthelezi of the 1st Gaur was a crony of Dalhouse's, but he wouldn't give Zahpata trouble.

"Major Thiddo, you'll take your Slashers, the 21st Novy Haifa Dragoons, the 17th Hemmar Valley Cuirassiers, and likewise one battery." Putting Dalhouse under Thiddo was a calculated risk; the man was insanely birth-proud, and senior to boot. On the other hand, putting Poplanich in charge of that column was out of the question; nobody with any ambition, of which Dalhouse had more than his share, was going to associate with a Poplanich. *I can accompany that column in person*, Raj thought

"Both of you: Your mission is to fix the front of Admiral Auburn's column and force it to deploy—which, knowing the Squadron, will take quite some time. Move forward fast, but do *not* allow yourselves to be drawn into a melee. Remember, you have four times the range of their weapons and five times the rate of fire; put one battalion up on point, and keep the other two and the guns on overwatch from defensible terrain every time you move forward. When you make contact, have your lead battalion gall them with long-range fire. When they charge, fall back on your base-of-fire and give them volley fire and shrapnel until they start to envelop you. Then fall back and repeat the process. The column which hears the other engage first will ride to the sound of the guns and repeat the process; draw them back on the camp, but as slowly as possible.

"Colonel Menyez, you will be in charge of the camp and the infantry," Raj went on. Menyez nodded, wiping his nose on a handkerchief in his perpetual allergy problem. "Keep them standing to arms; light combat load, hardtack, water, and double ammunition, but man the walls and stand ready to support either cavalry force if it's driven in, or to move forward." Only a couple of the infantry units were really steady enough to face cavalry in the open. "Major Poplanich, you will act as central cavalry reserve at my or Colonel Menyez's discretion." At that, Ehwardo could be relied on to work with an infantry officer without complaint; not something to be assumed with many of the others.

"Major Staenbridge will move immediately; the cavalry columns at dawn, when the camp beats to arms. And if that's all, Messers, I suggest those of us who can get some rest and the remainder attend to business. It's going to be a long day."

The meeting broke up quickly; nobody was in a mood for chitchat. Raj stood by the outer post of the

tent; the two Descotter battalions were outside, filling the square as the men sat beside their crouching dogs.

"Keep them in play while you can," Raj said to Gruder and Staenbridge. "I'm giving you all I can spare because I'd really rather fight one battle at a time, if I could."

Gerrin nodded, slapping his fist into his palm to tighten the gloves. "City militia and sailors on dogback," he said, "apart from Conner and his house-men."

Kaltin grinned. "Mebbe we'uns kin do summat fer ye, loik, ser," he drawled in broad County dialect

They all slapped fists together, and Raj watched them walk out to their commands with envy. *Damn, but I'd like to have just one job of manageable size*, he thought as he watched.

"Mount!"

The troops swung into the saddle; forward file-closers in each company carried lighted torches of bundled oilwood sticks, so that the formations could keep position in a fast night march.

Gerrin Staenbridge stood in the stirrups and pitched his voice to carry:

"Right, lads, it's time to earn our pay and show the enemy what County men are made of. These barbs make a lot of noise and look a sight, but they'll go back faster than they come forward after they meet us. Just remember to mind the orders and aim low." His right fist shot skyward and then chopped down to the front "To Hell or plunder, dog-brothers—walk-march, *trot*. "

Suzette came up behind Raj, sliding her hand through the crook of his elbow as they watched the streaming fires pour down to the gate and turn northon the coast road; the moons were both down, and there was only the rippling frosted light of the stars to show them against the white dirt of the track. Her voice was a murmur at his shoulder.

"You should sleep, my darling," she said. "A little while, at least."

He put an arm around her waist. "Can't," he sighed. "Too wired — hell, too much kave."

"Come." She pulled him gently toward the rear of the tent. "I can make you sleep. Come with me, my love."

"Raj. Raj, wake up."

"*Huh*." Raj sat upright with a jolt, out of dreams of fear and flight. It was still hard dark; Suzette was there in her wrap, touching his shoulder. He slid the pistol back under the pillow and swung his feet to the floor, scrubbing his face with his hands, then splashing water over it from the basin and running fingers through his hair. Right now his brain felt muzzy, worse than if he had not slept at all, but he would be better for the rest in a little while.

"It's da Cruz," Suzette said quietly.

Swift and skillful, one of the servants was laying out fresh kit: trousers, boots, underclothes, belt,

ammunition pouches, slide rule, mapcase, binoculars. And another mug of kave with a cup of goat's milk. *Spirit*, he thought, swigging them down in alternate gulps. *If the Azanians ever cut off our supply of kave beans, the Army high command is doomed.*

"He's wounded," she went on. "Not seriously. It was the Skinners, not the enemy."

Scramento, he thought, grunting. "There goes the western flank." And a three-battalion force of the Admiral's death-sworn household guards getting ready to fall on him out of nowhere, too.

"Don't worry," he said, laying a hand on her cheek for an instant. "Just the usual desperate emergency."

Da Cruz was swearing as Raj dipped a shoulder through the doorflap into the outer room of the tent, fastening the collar of his tunic and knotting the red-and-black checked bandanna. The noncom was on a stool, bare to the waist while a Renunciate medico in jumpsuit and robe worked on a long superficial cut on his forearm. The coal-oil lamp showed the stocky torso and knotted arms laced with scar tissue; knife, sword, bullet, and shrapnel had all left their marks, and it looked as if someone had once tried to write their name on the Master Sergeant's stomach with a hot iron, getting as far as the second letter before trailing off.

Now he had a new wound, a long shallow slash along the outside of the arm from wrist to elbow. The nun swabbed it out with iodine, washed the arm with blessed water, and began building a substantial bandage with linen and gauze.

"Spirit's holy static, careful with that, Sister!" he said.

"Watch your language," she snapped back. "No hope of getting you to rest it?" She clicked her tongue. "Boys. Well, try and keep it clean."

"What happened, Top?" Raj said.

Some of it was obvious from da Cruz's uniform tunic, thrown on the floor. The left arm was blood-soaked and slit — it had taken a *very* sharp blade to do that — and one of the tails had been cut off as an improvised bandage. A Skinner *patcha* knife, Raj judged, the arm-long type they kept as general-purpose chopping tool. It had been originally designed to cut firewood and hack through the massive bones of grazing sauroids; but the Skinners were nothing if not versatile.

"It's them Skinners, Messer Raj," da Cruz said. He took the water-jug a servant offered and drank, Adam's apple bobbing. Wounds made a man thirsty, and he looked to have lost some blood. "Theyun er five klicks outa position, an' boozin' summat fierce in a Squadron *kasgrane*. Tole 'em to git movin' — git this fer my pains, ser. Lucky to 'scape wit' me life."

"Joy," Raj said.

Think. This is your job, think. The Squadron battle plan was a monstrosity, even before it was compromised; it depended on things going right and precise coordination between what were little better than armed mobs. The two thousand out west were the only enemy force that was really mobile, and the only one that was all full-time professional fighters—not really soldiers, but they would have *some* idea of what they were doing.

"The Skinners won't listen to anyone else, and they're the only force in reach," he said, mostly to himself. "The Forty Thieves have the line of march pegged" — that bunch of guardhouse rejects and

throat-cutters really *could* do reconnaissance now that M'lewis had put the fear of the Spirit into them — "but only the Skinners can intercept them."

Unless he committed his only reserve battalion of regular cavalry . . . but the roll call of battles won by the last man to commit his reserves stretched back beyond recorded history. *Here's where I start cursing sending Kaltin and Gerrin both*, he thought. Then: *It was the right decision. We can't have them catching us like a pinyata between two sticks.*

"Suzette?" he called. She came through the curtain in her riding costume, holding the Colonial repeater carbine and thumbing a last round into the tube magazine through the gate above the lever. "Sorry, darling — you're staying behind this time. Officer of the guard!"

"Get me Colonel Menyez." Cavalry snobbery be damned; Menyez would have to hold the fort, and send the two columns south. Poplanich would be his second. . . *and if I'm ever in a position to do it, we're going to have a regular table of ranks and establish permanent brigades*, he decided. Damn the political risks. *We need formations that are used to working together.*

CHAPTER NINE

Four men are just right for this, Raj thought.

Not a squadron of Poplanich's to clank and clatter in the night, though they were shaping to be good battlefield soldiers. Just himself and da Cruz and two of the Scouts, for quiet work in the dark. One was a cousin of M'lewis's, a little rat-faced man everyone called Cut-Nose, because most of his had been removed with something sharp; the other was a silent hulking brute called Talker from the northeast border of Descott, on the mountainous fringe of Asuaria County. The battalion rolls listed their former occupations as vakaro and sauroid hunter; offhand, he judged Cut-Nose for a sheep-stealer. Talker had the eyes of someone who just liked to kill — people by preference, though sauroids would do at a pinch. If either had come calling back home he'd have had the vakaros whip them off, or hang them for the County's peace. Both rode with an easy slouching seat, reins knotted on their pommels and eyes never still; their rifles they cradled in their arms, and both weapons had rawhide sleeves shrunk onto the forestocks.

And Spirit, but it's good to be doing something myself *for a change*, he thought.

It was very quiet in the hour before dawn, somehow blacker than deep night. Dew beaded the dogs' coats to the breast as they pushed through a rustling cornfield, chill on the soaked cloth of trouser-legs. Their way led through the last of the coastal plain, foothills heavy with fruit-orchards where springs welled up at the foot of the escarpment. Water rippled in stone-lined ditches beside the road.

Da Cruz reined in beside the general. "'Tis thissaway, ser," he said quietly, nodding at a rutted cart-track that led up the face of the limestone ridge that loomed at a sixty-degree angle on their west.

"This way's quicker."

The holographic map hovered over his vision at every turning, and beneath it he picked out the trail better than his eyesight could have done; somehow Center looked through the darkness even though It had only his vision to use. He remembered the visions It had shown him, of the floating *satellites* that had been Its eyes before the Fall. *They* could have looked through absolute darkness or deepest cloud Not for the first time, he wondered how an angel came to be condemned to the cislunary sphere of Fallen corruption.

The hillsides ran upward in steep scree-clad illex and whiphorn, then leveled off into a plateau; once a herd of wild grazing sauroids fled in honking, hissing confusion and a little later a wild boar held the way against them for an instant.

One of the troopers hissed a little through his teeth at the commander's certainty, and Raj smiled silently to himself. "That way," he said, cutting his palm over the fields.

There are advantages to having a legend, he thought.

" *Cowards!*"

Raj let his voice roar out over the patio, as the dogs picked their way in among the broken glass and rubble of the Squadron manor's courtyard. Horace stepped delicately over a Skinner facedown in a pool of vomit, and up the steps, not even looking aside when two Skinner hounds growled and raised their hackles at him. A human leg was hanging by a cord around its ankle from the wrought-iron balcony above the mainentrance; judging from the bits and pieces scattered around, they'd hung whoever it was off alive and then used him for target practice until the body fell apart.

"You cowards hide like old women!" Raj shouted again. "Your ancestors die again with shame to see you run from battle!"

Roars and grunts answered him as troll-figures stirred amid the doors and shrubberies. A squat shape appeared on the balcony and jumped down, long gun over one shoulder.

"Eh, sojer-man! Neck-stretcher!" The banter was less friendly than usual. "What you want, eh? *Tu peti lahpan hilai kouri ahvent nus coup*, you little rabbit, run away before we get skin — mebbe we skin you now, eh?"

"I want you to *fight*, Juluk," Raj said, leaning over. "Or is killing farmers and drinking all Skinners can do?"

The chief grunted. "No Squadron men here — all run away," he said a little defensively.

Raj lifted one hand from the pommel of the saddle to point behind and to the left, southwest. "There are two thousand Squadron troops there, moving fast to the east — no more than three kilometers away. I ask you again, Shef Juluk Peypan — will you fight, or just sit here drinking while better men do battle?"

The Skinner chief grunted again and leaned on his long rifle, making a motion with one hand. Three of his men leaped to dogback and pounded out of the courtyard; others were moving about, readying gear and kicking their dogs to wakefulness. Then they gathered around the little group of Descotters, staring with the steady hungry gaze feral dogs gave guard-hounds. Barely half an hour passed before the scouts returned, shouting in Paytoiz. An exultant yell went up from the assembled warriors, and a deafening

chorus of howls from their hounds. Juluk had been standing with a hunter's patience, both hands on the rifle and one foot crooked behind the opposite knee; now he straightened and unhooked a flask from his belt.

"Today we doan' skin you, sojer-man," he said, holding it up.

Raj took the ceremonial drink, fighting not to cough.

Gah. Juluk had really done him honor; not looted wine or brandy but *arak*, the date gin spiked with red pepper and gunpowder that was the Skinners' own favorite drink.

"I'll piss out this sauroid-gall on your grave," he replied politely. "Now, can you keep the Squadron troops off my men's flank, while we fight our battle?"

"*Hoya-hey!*" The chieftain laughed, and the others joined him in a barking chorus. "Six hundred Real Men against only two tens of hundreds of long-hairs?" he chortled, using the Skinner's slang term for any of the western barbarians of the Military Governments. "We chew their bones! We kill them all, take their dogs and cattle and guns, fuck their women, burn their houses! *Hoya-hey*, it is a good day to die!"

He pulled at one long drooping mustache, leering up at the Civil Government commander. "You come with us, kill long-hairs?" he said. "You got balls enough to fight like Real Man, sojer-boy?"

Raj looked up at the eastern horizon; the sky was paling slightly behind the distant mountains. *On the other hand, I can kiss goodbye to any chance of controlling these wild men if I don't*, he thought.

"Can you girls fight like me?" he said.

Juluk swung onto his hound. "*Fray hums!*" he shouted, shaking his rifle in the air. "*Hoya-hey*, it is a good day to die! Let's go fight!"

Yipping and howling, they poured out of the gate at his heels. Raj and his men heeled their dogs into the same loping stride.

"When we make contact, I'll send you back with the news," Raj said to the senior noncom. They swerved apart a little to avoid a cork-oak tree in the middle of a pasture, then set their mounts at a thorn-hedge beyond, leaning forward into the saddle. Their dogs soared, *wurfin*g slightly and lashing their tails to match the pack-excitement of the Skinners' dogs.

"No ser," da Cruz said in the same stolid tone, as they landed and continued stirrup to stirrup.

Raj looked around at him in surprise. Da Cruz was a long-service man, only two years short of the thirty-five maximum, steady to a fault. He'd bought Casanegri Farm from Squire Dorton back in the County on his last leave, the property he'd thought to retire to as yeoman-tenant. Bought it free and clear and stocked it well, with the prize-money and plunder from the campaign against the Colony, and married a sensible woman of middling years who was managing it until he returned. That had been his private dream, to be a well-respected yeoman freeholder with a good farm.

"Didn't figure you for a fire-eater, Top," he said with deceptive mildness.

"Ser," da Cruz replied; the slick surface of the massive scars on his face caught at the starlight. "Them barbs run me off. Not goin' ter let them see me turn tail again, beggin' yer pardon. Nor leave yer wit'

nothin' but those two at yer back."

He jerked a thumb over one shoulder at the two Scout troopers. Raj looked behind him; the two soldiers were a half-dozen meters back. Cut-Nose looked nervously alert as they rode to battle, but Talker . . . his face was still basalt-still, but there was the edge of a smile in his eyes.

"I take your point," he said.

" *Gittem, Gittem!*"

The Squadron battle cry sounded over the dry valley. It would have been difficult for Raj to estimate their numbers, if he had not known; they came in clots and bunches, each under the flag of some chief of note and his principal henchmen. They paused as they topped the low ridge and saw the Skinners ambling toward them on the opposite slope, grouping together into larger clumps. Then the clumps slid down into the valley, gathering speed. They howled, shaking their swords or muskets in the air, and they glittered in the dawn sun with metal and jewelry. Raj drew his pistol and pulled back the hammer; from the looks of it they would keep coming right to close quarters.

It was three thousand meters from one side of the valley to the other; reaped wheatfields flanked it, but the slopes were too rocky to be tilled. Even the dusty-gray olive trees that spotted it were few and straggly, although the remnants of tumbled stone terraces hinted that cultivation had been more intensive once. The morning sun cast broad shadows from every tree, every low native brush, throwing a blushing pink shade that seemed to foreshadow the blood to come. It was almost a relief to have only himself to fear for, at the beginning of an action; the dry tightness of his stomach and the brittle clarity of sight were less terrible than the knowledge of thousands of other lives dependent on him making the right decisions.

Juluk Peypan knocked the dottle out of his pipe and shouted. Men began sliding out of the saddle in the long loose line of the Skinner warband, scores of them. Their dogs dropped flat, and the warriors stuck the iron butt-spikes of their shooting sticks into the ground. The rest continued on their way at a brisk walk, holding their weapons across their laps with an ease that belied the ponderous weight of iron and brass and wood.

CRACK. The first 15mm rifle spoke, in a long gout of flame and puff of off-white smoke. A Squadron officer dropped fifteen hundred meters away, next to the main banner. Raj leveled his binoculars in time to see the round take off the skull at eye height and the man's head splash away from the lead.

" *GITTEM, GITTEM!*"

This time a full two thousand throats roared it out, and the whole Squadron host rocked into a gallop, big men on long-limbed dogs pounding through a fresh-raised cloud of dust. More of the huge sauroid-killer guns spoke, and when the dismounted Skinners fired, a man died at every shot. More than died — the thumb-sized bullets ripped off limbs, drove fist-width holes through men's bodies, and splashed their comrades with blood and bone-chips and pulverized flesh. Dead men were torn out of the saddle, and when the bullets struck dogs the big Ridgebacks and Banzenjis went spinning head over heels as if struck by invisible sledgehammers in the hands of giants. The Skinners around Raj hooted and giggled at the sight, grinning and jostling each other like little boys on an outing.

When the Squadron charge reached six hundred meters every Skinner opened fire from the saddle. The noise was stunning, loud as artillery, and a dense bank of smoke hid the front for a moment.

Spirit of Man,Raj swore to himself as the brisk wind tore it away.

The whole great block of Squadron warriors seemed to shudder in mid-step; it was like watching a sandbank eroding under a high-pressure hose. Where two or three in the front rank went down together, the men behind had to leap their dogs over the head-high obstacle or collide and join the writhing tons of man and dogflesh. War cries and the bellowing of dogs on the attack were suddenly swamped by screams of human and canine agony. The Skinners were not quite so accurate firing from the back of a moving dog, but with a massed target, even rounds that missed their first mark often went home. Yet the Squadron men kept the charge coming for a full hundred meters more.

One dismounted giant came forward at a lumbering run, whirling his long sword over his head. A Skinner thumped heels to his dog and rode out to meet him. The first shot smashed the steel out of his hands, sending it pinwheeling end-over-end into the sky in a blurring circle. The Squadron fighter stood stock-still for an instant, looking incredulously at his numb and ringing hands, then leveled the big blunderbuss slung over his back, fumbling with the hammers. Laughing, the Skinner went down on the opposite side of his dog, holding the pommel of the saddle with one foot. Lead balls hummed through the space where he had been, and he bounced back to his seat as if pulled by rubber bands. Then he was at arm's length; something bright flashed as he rode by, and the Squadroner toppled like a felled tree, a sheet of blood running from his throat beneath hairy clutching hands. The Skinner swooped far over and came erect waving a string of silver medallions the dead Squadron warrior had been wearing around his neck, whooping as he rode back.

Spirit, withdraw for the Spirit's sake,Raj thought; but the Squadron men had more courage than sense, it seemed — or perhaps just no command structure to tell them to get out. Instead they were dismounting and going to cover behind dead dogs or rocks or olive trees and bushes, trying to return fire. Skinners darted forward in twos and threes, sometimes firing point-blank; he saw many lope up and spring out of the saddle with knives in both hands, screeching like a powered saw going through rock. But at close range the shotgun blasts of lead balls from the Squadron smoothbores were taking effect. A Skinner ahead of Raj took one such in the face and slumped backward off his dog, his head a mass of red meat and shattered yellow bone. The others ambled on, the good cheer in their voices undiminished, their long guns bellowing with the regularity of triphammers.

Those Squadron barbarians could be good soldiers if they had training and decent weapons,he thought. This was a victory, of sorts, but it offended his sense of workmanship to see first-rate material wasted.

The advance continued at a brisk walk; Skinners were dismounting to loot the hundreds of Squadron corpses and to slit throats. A few were taking heads or scalps, ignoring the men firing at them from less than a hundred meters away. At this range the 15mm bullets blasted right through tree trunks to kill the men behind them . . . Raj heard the sharper crack of Armory rifles from his rear and glanced over a shoulder; Cut-Nose and Talker were firing from the saddle. Ahead a Squadroner slumped down and lay draped across the low branch of the olive tree. Another leaped up from behind a low stone terrace-wall and turned to run. Talker fired again and the barbarian seemed to leap forward with a red splotch on the leather between his shoulder-blades.

Smoke hung over the battlefield like a drifting pall, heavy with the scent of burnt sulfur. A third warrior rose from behind the rocks, leveling his musket. They were close now, close enough to see the pockmarks on the man's face, the polished bronze scales sewn to his leather jacket . . . and for both barrels to be circles, tunnels to hell. The battle had been curiously detached until then, but now Raj felt a raw stab of scrotum-tightening personal fear. He leveled the revolver and fired. The big weapon kicked in his grip, and he let the weight bring the muzzle back down onto the target. Da Cruz was firing beside him;

bullets pocked the stone around the kneeling man. The hammers of his flintlock snapped forward. There was a dreamlike slowness to it, a flash of sparks as the flints struck the steel, a puff of smoke from the firing pan, then a world-waiting pause until the gun fired, a jet of sullen red flame and smoke.

TUUNNNgggggg. A slapping blow snapped Raj's head around, throwing him back against the cantle of his saddle, and the chinstrap of his helmet broke. Savage pain lanced down his neck as the vertebrae grated together. Blood spurted from his nose. *Whack*, and something icy-hot coursed the length of his forearm. A second later two Armory rifles barked behind him and the Squadrone flipped backward, the blunderbuss arching from his outflung hands. Raj reeled in the saddle and forced himself erect; his helmet fell off and he grabbed it by reflex with his free hand, almost dropping it again as the metal bit at his palm. A gouge of bright steel and smeared lead showed across one side of the black enamel, where the bullet had struck glancingly. His arm was untouched, but the sleeve of his uniform tunic floated open almost to the elbow, cut as neatly as though with shears.

"Hunnh."

It was da Cruz. He was slumped over the pommel of his saddle, clutching at his belly; then his eyes rolled back in his head and blood came out of his mouth and nose. Raj reached for his shoulder, but he fell with a boneless finality that told its own story. His dog bent itself in a circle, trying to support the body with its muzzle, then sniffing frantically at the dead man. It flattened to the ground an arm's length away, whimpering.

"Oh, bloody hell," Raj whispered. Da Cruz had been a County man of the old school, and a first-rate professional . . . *and he should have died at home on his own land, among his sons*. "The bullet doesn't care if you're ready," he repeated to himself, the ancient Army motto.

It had taken only a few seconds for da Cruz to die, but when Raj looked up the battle was over. *Such as it was*, he thought. The only living Squadron men visible were lashing their dogs into a gallop, or stirring weakly on the ground.

Juluk reined in beside the Civil Government commander; he laughed uproariously at the sight of the bullet-grooved helmet in Raj's hand.

"Mebbe you wheetigo, maybe you one big devil!" he said. "Eh, you want prisoner, man to sell, man to ransom?"

"No," Raj said softly. "Kill them all. No prisoners. And when you're finished, head east — that's where the fighting will be."

He leaned down and closed the dead man's eyes. "You!" he barked. Cut-Nose was rifling the Squadron dead, but Talker showed more interest in those still alive. A neck parted with a wet crunch as the big mountaineer wrenched a head around to look back between its shoulder-blades.

"Ser!" Cut-Nose said, saluting with one hand and stuffing a pouch under the tail of his tunic.

"Trooper, bury this man — a cairn. Then rejoin Lieutenant M'lewis; he's to rendezvous with me at the camp or on the trail there." He caught the hideous little man's eye. "*Understood?*"

Cut-Nose went slightly gray under his natural brown. "Yisser!"

"Ah, suh, tank Spirit yuh here!" the sergeant cried. The infantry picket of the 17th brought their rifles up to salute with a snap.

Raj swung up a hand; the Forty Thieves reined in behind him. He stood in the stirrups and closed his eyes for an instant; yes, firing to the north. Heavy firing, volley fire by Armory rifles. Staenbridge and Gruder were engaged, something more than two or three kilometers up the road toward Port Murchison. The sun was over the eastern horizon now, 0930 hours; but the cavalry were still standing beside their resting dogs, command banners beside the main west gate, nearest the road. A murmur ran through the blocks of men as he and the Scouts plunged past them toward the gate, gravel spurting from beneath their dogs' paws.

"What the Starless Hells of Darkness is going on here!" Raj roared, pulling Horace up on his haunches before Menyez's banner. "I ordered the columns out!"

Most of the battalion commanders were grouped around a map table; he could tell from the set of their shoulders that they had been arguing. Now they were bracing to. Most of them had the grace to look a little shamefaced, or carefully blank. Dalhouse's face was still dark with rage, and Suzette— *what in hell is she doing here?* —Suzette's hands were clenched on the stock of her Colonist carbine until white moons showed beneath the nails. Her eyes closed and her lips moved in prayer as she saw him; thanks, he supposed. Even young Ludwig Bellamy was there, skulking around the edges of the gathering.

"Colonel Menyez!" he snapped, swinging down to the ground. He checked a half-pace as he saw the others' eyes on him, on the blood and dust smeared across his face and the bullet-rip in his sleeve, the lead-splashed helmet.

"Sir," Menyez said. "Sir, the flanking force?"

Raj made a chopping gesture of dismissal. "Dead. Slaughtered to a man." Somebody offered him a canteen, and he rinsed his mouth and spat. The news was spreading in whispers out from the circle of officers, and cheering broke out from the infantry units for a moment.

"I'm waiting, Messer," Raj went on, dangerously quiet.

Menyez met his eyes squarely, hands folded behind his back. "Disputes arose, sir, over the best course to take, with you out of communication. Major Dalhouse felt that as senior officer he should lead the column assigned to Major Thiddo; Major Buthelezi concurred. Several officers were of the opinion that the force should be kept intact to go to your rescue; Messa Whitehall also forcefully expressed that view. Sir."

Raj stood silent for a moment. Suzette went white around the mouth under his stare.

"My lady Whitehall," he said softly. "Please stand aside for the moment; this is not your place." He made a signal behind him with one hand; the twenty Scout troopers dismounted and formed up behind him. Two swift steps brought him in front of Dalhouse, and he took the waxed mustaches in thumb and forefinger of each hand. The move was swift and utterly unexpected; Dalhouse rose on tiptoe as Raj jerked his hands up toward his face. That left their noses almost touching.

"You refused an order to advance in the face of the enemy, Dalhouse," Raj said. His voice was metallic. "For which the penalty is *death*. "

He released the smaller man. "And I'll have you shot here and now if you question an order again."

Dalhouse took a step back, his hand not quite touching his saber. He cast a quick glance from side to side. Mekkle Thiddo was smiling with relief, no surprise in Raj Whitehall's crony . . . but so was Hadolfo Zahpata of the 18th Komar, who was a professional's professional. And Hingenio Buthelezi was keeping his face to the front and carefully neutral. Dalhouse looked beyond Raj for a moment, and met the eyes of a hulking Scout trooper. The trooper started to smile.

He swallowed and made a stiff salute. "As you command, General."

"Exactly," Raj said. He turned ninety degrees on one heel. "Colonel Menyez, all of you, I am not pleased. This is supposed to be a civilized army, under discipline, not a barbarian warband."

He gave a brief nod, dismissing the matter for the moment. "Now. Major Poplanich, you'll accompany me with Poplanich's Own. Colonel Menyez, I want the highest possible state of alert on the part of the infantry. Majors Thiddo and Zahpata, you have your instructions; move your columns out. In the event of your being driven in on the base, you'll be under Colonel Menyez's orders until I return. And, gentlemen, I expect effective coordination." He looked around, found the white robes of a priest. "Reverend Father, the three-minute battle prayer, if you please."

"Spirit of Man, Spirit of the Stars, make us strong for battle in Thy name—"

PAMM. PAMM. PAMM.

The sound was muffled in the distance as the battalion column of Poplanich's Own jogged forward. A rattle of shots echoed it, like very loud and slightly blurred rifle shots stuttering one after the other. A faint tinge of sulfur drifted down the wind; so did flocks of winged creatures, skipping from tree to tree and falling again to disappear in the wheat stubble on the rolling fields — skin-winged dactosauroids mostly, and the toothy-mouthed feathered types that were almost birds but could only glide, and behind them true birds of Earth descent

"What's that, my lord?" Ludwig Bellamy asked nervously, nodding forward at the noise. He was riding to Raj's left, near where Suzette sat her palfrey with the butt of her carbine on one hip. The Squadron turncoat had his sword, but no firearm.

"Cannon," Raj said absently, frowning over the map in his hand. They were nearly to where Staenbridge had planned to set up. Whatever had happened, it was not the slow retreat they anticipated. "Field guns and volley fire." There was a burbling chorus of dull pops behind the crisp sound of the Armory rifles; *that* was Squadron smoothbores, but there was no need to point it out

Ehwardo Poplanich lowered his binoculars. "I'd say rifle fire from about four, five companies," he said. "Not in any great hurry, either."

A whistle sounded from ahead, and a Scout came pounding back along the rutted, potholed gravel road. Sunlight flicked across him in bars between the roadside trees as he pulled up.

"Barbs, dead, ser," he said, raising a gloved hand to his helmet-brim. "Looks like some action."

The road rose slightly to an almost imperceptible ridge, marked in the fields to either side by a low

fieldstone wall. Metal glinted amid the stubble along the near side of it, thin brass cartridge cases for the Civil Government breechloaders. The column topped the rise, and Raj flung up his hand. Behind him the trumpet sang, *walk-march* — *walk*, and then *halt*. Ahead lay a windrow of bodies, men and dogs lying in layers on the road and spilling off to either side. He counted about a score of men and as many dogs; it always looked like more, when they lay like this. Every man and beast bore multiple wounds, with exit-holes the size of fists where the hollow-point 11mm rounds had punched out. Enough blood had followed to make mud of the dusty surface of the road; the musky stink of it was already growing under the warm sun, and flies swarmed. Dozens more corpses scattered the fields to either side, and the road for a half-thousand meters back.

"Walked right into it," Poplanich said absently.

"That they —" Raj began; he was interrupted by Bellamy, who had spurred closer to the main clump of bodies with a handkerchief held to his face.

"*Gawdammit!*" the young noble swore in Namerique. "*Eh bi gawdammit!*" He wheeled his mount, pointing at a richly-dressed corpse. The dead man's face was undamaged, a jowly pug countenance with brown muttonchop whiskers. Ludwig stuttered, then forced himself back into Spenglish:

"That's Conner — Conner Auburn, the Admiral's brother, the Grand Captain of Port Murchison. He's *dead*."

Ehwardo's mouth shaped a silent whistle. "Very," he said.

Raj rapped his knuckles on the pommel of the saddle; Suzette met his eyes with a quirk of raised eyebrow.

"We may find that convenient," he said, and turned to the Scout trooper. "Arnez — take the head and bag it."

"They ran," Ludwig Bellamy said, with something halfway between anger and shame in his voice. "They all ran."

He looked depressed. The Squadron bodies littering the road merely looked dead, as if they had been caught and time-frozen in a dozen different postures. Most were lying facedown here, where the pursuit had caught them as they galloped their dogs back down toward Port Murchison much faster than they had marched south. Few of the bodies were of dogs; it had been saber-work here, and the barbarian bodies lay tumbled with great black sprays of blood where the blades had left them. Cuts across the neck were most common; half-severed limbs, and multiple slash-wounds to the shoulders and arms where they had tried to turn in the saddle and defend themselves.

"Not all of them," Raj said, rising in his stirrups.

They passed through a stretch of fig trees, and on the other side there was a windrow of bodies a hundred meters or so out into the open ground — several hundred of them, some deployed out into the fields. Dactosauroids and gulls were busy crawling over the bodies and squabbling for dainties, and packs of little knee-high carnosauroids burrowing their fanged heads into the soft parts of the bodies. There were plenty of dogs here, caught by case-shot and shrapnel by the tattered look of them.

"Well, Spirit eat their eyes," Ewardo said. "You thinking what I am?" The road stretched twisting ahead of them, sparsely lined with trees and rising and falling over hills and small valleys. The noise and smoke were closer, now.

"I can hardly believe it," Raj murmured. "They came down the road straggling any old way — hardly two or three hundred of them together in a single bunch. Conner right out ahead like a point-man. Gerrin just deployed, shot them to ribbons, stayed in line abreast across the axis of the road as he advanced. Chased the survivors into the next lot, then repeated the process. Is repeating it."

"Ser!"

Two of the Scouts were waving from fifty meters farther down the road. The officers spurred over, to find a wounded Descotter propped up against a roadside gumtree with his dog standing at stiff-hackled guard. The man had the shoulder-flashes of the 5th, his rifle by his side and a wadded red-soaked bandage around one thigh; a stocky young man of medium height, facegray-brown and sweating, but grinning at the Scouts.

Bwenya daito ye, dog-brothers," he said. "Got sum-mat ter drink? Mine's empty." He swigged at the offered canteen. "Ahh, good." One of them jostled his leg slightly as he reached for it again. "*Son of a bitch!*" The dog barred its teeth and growled. "Down, Jaimy, down."

"Trooper Hesus M'Kallum, isn't it?" Raj said, drawing up.

"*Ci, seyor,*" the soldier said, sketching a salute.

"Report, soldier."

The man seemed a little light-headed with pain, and he laughed until the jiggling moved his leg.

"*Scramento!* Sorry, Messa. Ser, it warn't nobbut a sauroid-shoot. Them barbs, they come along loik 't was they were ridin' groomsmen ter a weddin', right at dawn, loik. T'Major, he jist sings out *volley fire*, an' then we starts gobblin' 'em loik a dog eatin' a snake headfirst, all along t'road. Chase 'em till they clumps up, then out a' the saddle and shootin' by platoons an' up comes t'field guns. Not hardly no casualties fer us, 'cept I didn't check an' one were shammin'. Major Staenbridge, he says ter tell ye he 'spects they kin keep goin' right ter the gates a' Port Murchison, ser. Ser, happen ye have some brandy, loik?"

Suzette touched her toe to Harbie's foreleg and the dog crouched; she walked over to the wounded man carrying a pouch from the saddle and knelt at his side.

"Brandy isn't what you need, soldier," she said. The man stiffened and closed his eyes as she slit the field-dressing with a small razor-edged knife and examined the torn flesh carefully, maintaining pressure with a pad of gauze. "Did you use the blessed powder?"

"Yis, m'lady," he gritted. "Hurt summat." Iodine did that.

"It will probably save your leg," she said; the man slumped slightly in relief. "The bone's broken, but it's a clean fracture and the hamstring's not cut. I can feel the ball — close to the surface, right here." She taped a new cover over a fresh bandage. "There'll be an ambulance cart along to take you to the Sisters soon enough, and you'll be fit for duty in six months. Take some of this. Not too much; we don't want you passing out."

"Ye're an angel, m'lady," the man said fervently. "Spirit bless ye an' Messer Raj too!"

The officers looked at each other. "Doesn't really seem to be much for us to do here," Poplanich said mildly, then broke into a broad grin. His hand shooed away some of the swarming flies; the cries of the scavengers, hissing and shrieking, were raucous in the background.

Raj smiled back, for the first time since he returned to camp. "And we're likely to be needed back south," he said. *Gerrin's finished off twelve thousand of the enemy. Now we've fifty thousand more coming at us.*

CHAPTER TEN

"Sixty thousand if it's one, Major, Spirit be with us," the Slasher captain said in his singsong borderland accent. " *Malash*. The Spirit appoints our rising and our going down."

An' ye'll nivver see that *comin' down t'road from Blayberry Fair*, Mekkle Thiddo quoted to himself in County dialect. Instinctively he crouched a little lower on the ridge, pressing his body against the rough-barked trunk of the olive tree.

"Well, that solves the problem of which route they're taking. They're using all of them. Runner to Major Zahpata with the other column, Captain Belagez: our location, and that we're engaging."

The sight of the Squadron host was stunning enough, spreading from the sea on the east to the edge of sight on the west. A huge clot of them were shambling down the road, ox-drawn wagons and a rabble on foot that must be the servants and unarmed followers. The mounted Squadron lords and their retinues sprawled over the open country by twos and threes, by scores and hundreds; enough of them that they flowed over the stubble and through the orchards like dark water on the sere yellow and green. A huge mist of dust smoked up over them, hiding the endless waves that followed, and the packs of spare dogs. The sound was like a long slow roar of surf.

Thiddo raised his binoculars. Faces jumped out at him across the kilometers; there were groups ranging from a lone freeholder with a rusty musket, ambling along on a gray-muzzled dog, to the households of magnates glittering with metal-studded saddles and jewelry.

"Nothing to worry about, Peydro," he said. *Although it's more than enough to piss your britches for.* He touched the amulet at his throat, and the locket with the picture of his wife. "Not a cannon among them, and most of these barbs have never heard a shot fired in anger."

There might be a few ox-drawn brass guns among the host, but if so they were back among the transport and useless. The border barons who fought the desert and mountain tribes were too far away to have answered the summons so soon, and the best of the Squadron levy were away with Curtis Ashburn. And sixty thousand more were barreling down on his three battalions. *My three battalions.* A third of the Expeditionary Force's striking power, fifteen hundred lives, and they all depended on *him*.

Spirit.

He turned and slid back downslope to where the others waited. "Right," he said, in the cool tones he'd heard Messer Raj use. "Majors Dalhouse and Istban, keep your force well-concealed on this ridge. When we come back" — because he was damned if he was going to put the tricky part in Dalhouse's hands, not when everyone's arse depended on it being done right — "give them rapid volley fire by companies as soon as we're clear. Lieutenant Muhadez, open fire with airburst shrapnel at three thousand meters."

The gunner nodded, looking up from his rangefinder. "Seyor," he said, nodding. The commander of the Novy Haifa Dragoons added the same; Dalhouse grunted wordlessly.

Thiddo gave a final look both ways. The two supporting units were spread along the ridge just below the crest in double file, with their dogs crouched only a few meters behind them. The guns likewise, with the teams crouching in their harness and still hitched to the caissons; all they'd have to do was let the last round roll the weapons back from the crest, slap the trails onto the caissons and gallop away.

Nothing to do but stand ready and then shoot, he thought, turning to his own command.

The company officers crowded around him: dark as Descotters but more slightly built, mostly bearded, with the ends trimmed to points. They had khaki-colored cloths wound around their helmets and crimson sashes under their sword-belts; merrier than County men, swifter-witted on average although less steady, and fine foray-and-ambush fighters from generations of fighting Bedouin raiders on the Drangosh frontier with the Colony . . . and from raiding over it themselves, of course. Like weasels in a henhouse with civilians, unless you watched them. They grinned at him now, unconcerned at having an outsider appointed over them as long as it was by Messer Raj, the Spirit-blessed general who'd sent the head of the Colony's Settler back to East Residence in a keg of arrack.

"Right, men," he went on. "We'll do some Slashing now, eh?" More grins, punctuated with spitting on the ground and holy oaths; every man of them was jingling with Star amulets, circuit chips and display modules in a display of the violent piety of the southern border.

"Open-order column until we're within a thousand meters. Then we'll deploy into line by companies; company advances, fire and retreat by alternates on the trumpet. Spirit of Man be with us."

"Holy Federation Church with us, brothers," they answered. "*Hingada thes Ithorantes!* Kill the Infidels!"

He swung into the saddle as the rest of the battalion raised their amulets and fell into line behind the color-party and the banner; then he raised his hand and chopped it forward. The trumpet sounded and the mass of men and dogs rocked into a lope, opening up to two-meter spacing between each man in the column of fours as they crossed the ridge. The banner flapped behind him, the silk making a ripping noise as they picked up speed; he knotted the reins and let them lie on the horn of the saddle as the column rose over the ridge. There were parties of Squadrones all over the plain, mostly surging forward, but a few moving south on errands of their own. None of them had the geometric order of Civil Government troops, but it would be a moment before they were noticed. He waved his arm twice and pointed toward the largest clump of enemy troops; his body adjusted to the long swooping movements of the dog with a lifetime's ease.

Two or three thousand of them just in that one bunch. Merciful avatars.

Dohloreyz had told him to be careful, before he'd left from his last leave. The house had still been in

chaos with the additions going on, the barns and cottages first for the help and the new stock for the land he'd bought. Pa and his younger brothers still looking at him as if the sun rose behind his head, Ma wringing her hands — she always distrusted good fortune, little though the family had had of it in her lifetime . . . Dohloreyz wasn't sure if she was pregnant yet, hard though they'd tried since the wedding. Everyone had wanted to know them all of a sudden, relatives who hadn't called in years; they'd even had that greasy Christo moneylender sniffing around again, and the satisfaction of flogging him off their now-unmortgaged estate.

" *Scramento*," he muttered; the Squadron unit ahead had definitely seen something.

Better than a kilometer to go. The Slashers' formation slid down into a hollow like a ground-hugging snake, and when they came up the opposite lip the enemy unit was milling like a kicked anthill. Messengers splattered out from it toward the others around, and the remainder clumped about the tall cloth-of-gold standard in its midst. Thiddo signaled to the trumpeter and he raised the curled brass to his lips. *Ta- ra-ra -ta*. The color party slowed, and the column of fours behind them opened out on both sides like a fan. Three minutes, and the whole Battalion was trotting in a double line abreast, with each trooper two meters from his neighbor and double intervals between companies.

Damn, but these are good troops, Thiddo thought with a glow of pride. Just over two thousand meters to the target. He lifted a clenched fist and pumped it twice into the air. The trumpet sounded again over the thunder of massed paws and the growing buzz from the enemy. Three companies launched themselves forward, out of the line like teeth on a saw. The slender desert-bred dogs rocketed forward in a stretched-out gallop, hindpaws coming up between forelegs and bounding off again.

" *Despert Staahl!*" the men screamed. *Awake the Iron!*, the war-cry of the southern borders. Then: " *Aw! Aw!*" in an endless yelping falsetto chorus. They stood in the stirrups as the lines pounded forward, rifles leveled over their left forearms; the enemy ahead of them was still milling. A few rode forward to meet the attack; some others were already firing at the Civil Government soldiers.

Might as well try to hit the moons, Thiddo thought contemptuously. That was beyond range for Armory rifles, much less smoothbores. *A thousand meters. Eight hundred. Six hundred.* Anything beyond two hundred was safe from Squadron weapons, more or less. *Four hundred meters. Now, now!*

As if in answer to his thought the first rank of charging Slashers fired. Not quite a volley, more like a rippling crack down the line: *BAMBambambambam*. The dogs dropped their haunches and reared, turning; the second line galloped through the first and fired ten meters farther toward the Squadron troops, then turned as well; less than a minute and the three companies were galloping back along their own path, reloading as they guided their mounts with knees and voice. The trumpet sounded, and the two companies with Thiddo rocked into a gallop in their turn.

Nobody could achieve any useful degree of accuracy against individual targets from a moving dog, not at these ranges. With enough practice, you could learn to hit *large* targets — several thousand men bunched shoulder to shoulder would do nicely — and the Slashers, like most units recruited on the Colonial frontier, made a specialty of this maneuver—the *fantasia*, it was called. The mass of Squadrones ahead of him was littered with dead men, and with dogs dead or thrashing around wounded, which was much worse. He could hear their howling, and a flurry of blurred *whumps* from Squadron smoothbores as the animals were put down before they turned on the nearest human.

Closer; six hundred meters. More groups pouring across the plain, angling out toward his men or in toward the golden spaceship-and-planet banner . . . *Spirit save me, that must be the Admiral we're attacking, no wonder they're upset.* Five hundred. Four hundred, and he drew his saber; a pistol was

about as much use as a holy-water sprinkler at that range. It flashed up and then down in a shimmering arc. *BAMBambambambam*, another stuttering crash, louder this time as the tongues of flame shot forward from either side of them. He wheeled his dog, the big animal scrambling sideways as it killed velocity and threw clods of dust and wheat-straw, then riding back and *BAMBambambambam* behind him as the second file fired. Ahead the first three companies had reined in and turned, galloping back toward him.

Awl Awl They passed in a flash of combined speed; the trumpet sounded *rally* as Thiddo reined in and turned.

"Well, that's got them worked up and no mistake," he said to himself.

The whole mass of odds-and-sods around the Admiral's banner was rocking forward into a wild charge, waving swords and blunderbusses, banners flapping. The sound of their bellowing was almost as deep as the massed baying snarl of their dogs; more and more groups merged into the galloping mass, as individual noblemen and their retainers rallied to the Admiral. The last *fantasia* was from barely a hundred meters, and whole sections of the Squadrones went down before it. A few Slashers were hit by the return fire; a few more were dismounted, and swung up pillion by their comrades. The loose dogs mostly followed the retreating companies; two remained with bared teeth to fight and die over the bodies of dead masters.

"Sound *retreat*," Thiddo said.

The Slashers heeled their dogs and headed back for the ridge; the companies closed up and fell in one behind the other as they rode. The ridge grew ahead: The gap with their pursuers was growing; the Civil Government cavalry were on faster dogs and knew where they were going. A mob as big as that following them would include a lot of slow riders, and not many wanted to be right out in front. Especially when the rear ranks of the pursued were turning in the saddle to shoot backward occasionally

POUMM. A pulse through the air as much as a noise, and a long tongue of flame from a field gun among the olive trees on the low ridge. *POUMM. POUMM.* The shells went whistling overhead with a sound like ripping canvas. Thiddo looked back. Two of the shells airburst over the advancing host with vicious *crack* sounds. Dirty blackish smoke-puffs at ten meters height, and oblongs opening below in the dark densely packed mass of galloping men and dogs. Thiddo winced slightly: the casings of the shells were loaded with hundreds of lead balls packed around a bursting charge. A third shell's time-fuse was off and it exploded on contact in a dark poplar shape of pulverized soil. That one was less deadly than the airbursts, but there were bits and pieces of men and dogs among the debris cast skyward.

POUMM. POUMM. POUMM. Three more shots, ten seconds later. There were ten thousand of them at least following him now, a huge moving carpet that heaved and sparkled in the sun, sparkled with steel and brass and polished iron musket-barrels. More riding in from all over the rolling plain. But the Squadrones were not used to artillery; the front rank faltered, and hundreds of dogs went wild with panic, throwing their riders or attacking those next to them — always a risk with animals who had not trained together — or riding off across the battlefield in uncontrollable funk with the men sawing at their reins. "Shooting stars," they were called The huge roaring noise of the charge changed timbre, mixed with the frenzied screaming of wounded dogs.

Major Anhelino Dalhouse cursed as the 75's let out another salvo and his wolfhound attempted to curvet.

The third gun of the battery had fired with a CRACK! an instant after the BOOM/BOOM of its sister tubes. Recoil from previous shots had driven the gun far enough back that this round was from the top of the ridge itself. The other two guns were still down the forward slope where the mass of earth and rock deadened their muzzle blasts. The shift in timbre made Dalhouse's knees clamp, multiplying the dog's own nervous reaction. The men behind him were murmuring to their crouching mounts spaced out through the sparse olive grove; a chorus of whines and growls sounded.

"Redlegged muckeating wogs!" Dalhouse snarled as he fought his mount back under control. No way *he* was going to dismount, of course.

The artillerymen ran their gun forward, heaving at the tall iron rims of the wheels to get it started as it disappeared down the forward slope again. Rifles volleyed at a greater distance, cutting through a sound like heavy surf that he couldn't identify. *I can't see a damned thing from here*, Dalhouse thought, his mouth working. He had a gleeful momentary vision of heavy bullets scything down the gunners, ringing on the gun tubes . . . the caissons exploding, blowing to hell the whole *damnable* mess of stinks and noises and men with as little social position as the mongrel mule-dogs that drew their guns.

"How close are they, sir?" asked Ensign Meribor, Dalhouse's aide—a cousin from the wealthy side of his wife's family. His restive mount tried to lick the muzzle of Dalhouse's wolfhound, causing the latter to first snap, then growl in embarrassment at being startled.

Dalhouse fought his reins. "How in the bloody Starless Dark would *I* know?" he snarled. "And keep your dog back! What do you think you are, you shopkeeper on dogback, a *bleeding gunner*?"

"Sorry, sir."

Boom. Boom. Boom.

A bullet whickered high overhead. Probably aricochet, certainly no threat to anyone . . . but an evil sound, and a reminder of the things that *might* be taking place unseen on the other side of the ridgeline.

The thought decided Dalhouse in the instant it flashed across the surface of his mind. If that incompetent heathen-loving Descotter savage Thiddo thought he was going to leave Dalhouse to be shot down when a wave of Squadrones appeared on the ridgeline, he had another think coining . . .

Dalhouse spurred his mount toward the ridgeline from which he could view the battlefield for himself. "Come along!" he ordered Meribor.

Dalhouse wore rowels with long spikes for the look and jingle rather than need, but tension dug his heels deeper than he'd intended this time. The wolfhound yelped and brought its long jaws around by reflex, before it realized that the target was its master's booted leg—and therefore sacrosanct. The beast lurched forward, whining deep in its throat.

Boom.

"Sir, should we be —"

Boom.

"—leaving our position?" Meribor called desperately from behind Dalhouse. The boy wasn't a natural

rider. He was a city lad, raised in the East Residence in a house which would have stunk of trade were the smell not smothered by so *much* money.

Boom.

One has to be practical, even in matters of honor.

Dalhouse glanced over his shoulder. Meribor's mount had followed Dalhouse's own, unbidden, catching the boy unprepared. His left hand was tangled in the wolfhound's curly neck fur, a white-knuckled grip that instinct said was safer than the reins.

"We're not leaving our position!" Dalhouse snapped.

Beyond Meribor, the helmets and polished brassards of the 17th Hemmar Valley Cuirassiers blazed with reflected sunlight, framing and concealing the faces of the troopers watching their commanding officer. They were glorious next to the rather drab issue uniforms of the Novy Haifa Dragoons.

"Do you think I'm going to trust a Rogor County half-wog to decide when *my* troops —"

CRACK! and the rest of the sentence— "advance" — was shocked out of Dalhouse's mind by the muzzle blasts; a field gun and volleying Armory rifles no longer blocked by the ridge that his wolfhound had just surmounted. His head whipped around just as the other two guns let loose together. They bounded backward uphill behind a red flash an instant before their paired *CRACKCRACK* slammed Dalhouse's ears.

The view across the ridge was as sudden a shock as that of the unmuffled gunfire. Dalhouse had never been good with numbers. "Fifty thousand Squadrones," Whitehall had said, but that meant nothing, it was not *real*. It was like listening to a bailiff talking about tithes and harvests, when all that mattered to Dalhouse was that there be a sufficiency of money to buy whatever his whim required.

The mass of men and weapons and brightly caparisoned dogs now visible in the valley before Dalhouse was *real*. It was enough to sweep the whole world before it and grind anything that tried to stop it into dust. The sound he had wondered at was their voices and the paws of their dogs, beating like the roar of surf, like a natural force, an earthquake or forest fire. Three guns and a handful of the Rogor Slashers — irregulars, near as no matter, half-breed wogs—would be swallowed up unnoticed by the Squadrones' advance. Even as Dalhouse stared, half of Thiddo's force turned their dogs and galloped toward the doubtful safety of the ridge.

A round musket-ball, flattened into a miniature frisbee when it ricocheted from a stone, moaned *burrburrburr* past Dalhouse's ear.

Powder smoke, white and sulfurous, lay like a gauze shroud over the valley. A breeze curled hazy whiffs up the slope. Dalhouse, breathing through flared nostrils as he considered the situation, the *impossible* situation, gagged as something like the blade of a buzzsaw scoured the back of his throat. His dog whined and pawed its nose.

Dalhouse wheeled his wolfhound. "Ensign Meribor!" he ordered. "Ride back to the camp! Tell Whoever's in charge there to advance at once and support us. At once! Or it'll be too late!"

It was no doubt too late already. Well, a gentleman of the Civil Government was willing to die when honor demanded

Without waiting for Meribor to respond, Dalhouse spurred his mount into a deliberate trot toward the standard-bearer of the 17th. He had been betrayed. Thiddo and Whitehall had put him out here to die. Everyone knew what Descott County was like. Whitehall's blood father was undoubtedly some groom his mother had taken a fancy to, as sure as Whitehall's wife was a whore!

Meribor's mount passed Dalhouse at a dead gallop. The ensign clung to the big wolfhound's neck with both arms. He'd managed to lose the stirrups, and his brassard turned on its chains to jingle against his back. The stirrup-irons beat a tattoo in time with it on the mount's ribs.

Meribor was shouting — perhaps to the dog, perhaps to his mother. The dog, at least, took no notice.

"Pull him up!" Dalhouse bellowed. He spurred his own mount in pursuit. Dalhouse's wolfhound, nervy already from the noise and smoke, put its long head down and bolted after its companion.

Dalhouse realized his mistake at almost the instant he made it. He sawed his reins, but the half-ton carnivore had taken control of its immediate future and ignored the levers pressing on its muzzle. Neck and neck, the two dogs and the officers astride them swept around the southern flank of the 17th Hemmar Valley Cuirassiers, heading for the far hills. The color party and trumpeter dashed out to keep their station by the commander.

Like a sweater unraveling, the twin glittering ranks of the battalion began to trail off behind Dalhouse and his aide.

POUMM. POUMM. POUMM.

Mekkle Thiddo stood in the stirrups and stared ahead at the ridgeline: Where was the glitter of ranked riflemen moving forward? He heard a bugle blowing, sounding *stand*, *stand to*, and *halt*. The bottom seemed to drop out of his stomach as he swept over the ridge. The artillery was there, gunners slamming fresh shells into the breech and rolling the pieces forward by the wheels to their firing positions. And about a company of the Novy Haifa . . . and the backs of everyone else, spread out in wild disorder and racing full-tilt back north toward the camp.

There were shouts behind him, rage and fear as the men of the Slashers realized what had happened. The halt was ragged when the trumpet blew, but they halted . . . Mekkle Thiddo felt the collar of his uniform tunic cutting into his flesh, tasted a sudden rush of acid bile at the back of his throat. *Defeat. We're all fucking dead. Disgrace . . . Dohloreyz—*

"Turn!" he screamed. "Battalion firing line along the ridge — keep your dogs with you — move, move, now now now!"

The trumpeter sounded it, again and again; the men moved, a little slowly at first and then with desperate speed. The five companies wheeled out into line just behind the crest of the ridge, the dogs crouching flat and the men staying seated in the saddle. The Squadron was spread out over three, four times their frontage and beginning to come forward again, although there were milling clumps where the dogs were still panicked by the shellfire, and swirling confusion where the rear ranks pressing forward had run into them. *No more than a minute's leeway*, he knew. Suddenly everything was diamond-clear; his own lips seemed too slow, too numb for the words he must pour out of them.

Major Istban of the Novy Haifa came up, weeping tears of rage and shame. "The Cuirassiers bugged out. It was like a dam breaking — Dalhouse couldn't hold them and when they didn't rally he took off after them" — There was red dripping from the edge of the other officer's sword, a sign of how he had turned back some at least of his own men.

"Shut up," Thiddo said calmly. "Take those you've got, rally what you can on the way, set up there—" He pointed to a clump of eucalyptus four thousand meters to the north. "Lieutenant Muhadez!" The gunnery officer had come running. "Limber up after your next shoot, then get the hell back there and support us as we withdraw. We'll slow them down, you shoot hell out of them as they come over the ridge — leapfrog. Understand?"

He nodded. "Go!" The guns fired once more, but this time the crews caught them as they finished their recoil and used the momentum to run them to the caissons. An iron clang sounded as the trails were dropped onto the loops and holding-bars slammed home, then they leaped to saddle and handhold, and the men mounted on the lead pairs of the dog-teams shouted their mounts into a gallop. The remnants of the Novy Haifa Dragoons followed the bounding, jolting passage of the guns.

Then there was nothing but his own command and the pounding thunder of the Squadron host starting their climb up the long shallow slope to the ridge. Light flashed across the raised sword-blades: The front of the charge was a thousand meters, and the ranks were packed up to fourteen deep.

"Wait for it!" Thiddo shouted, keeping his voice flat and his mount well back so that only his head and shoulders were above the crestline. The last thing the men needed was to hear him screeching. "We'll be giving them five rounds and then pulling back to the next position."

Gray sweating faces under the helmets on either side. A thousand meters to the spray of brave men on fast dogs the Squadrones were casting ahead. Nine hundred. They would be firing down a long slope into the mass of the enemy. Beyond the Admiral's standard the whole plain was alive with growing clumps of them, gathering and heading toward the sound of combat. Down along the line he could hear officers and NCOs giving last-minute instructions:

"Steady, brothers, and aim for their feet, aim low."

"Malash, Malash, the Spirit is with us — and I'm behind you, Assed."

"Volley fire by platoons and rank. Prepare for rapid fire."

Eight hundred meters. He heeled his dog forward to the crest, the standardbearer and trumpeter following, and raised his saber. The men stood; they were in double file, with the ranks staggered so that the rear men had a clear field of fire through the gaps in the front rank. There was a yell and surge through the Squadron formation as the figures rose as if by magic among the edge of the olives. The enemy vanguard recoiled on those behind

"Aim." The front rank brought their long Armory rifles to their shoulders with a single smooth jerk; there was a barely perceptible ripple as each picked his target

"Fire!" His saber slashed down.

BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM. Like five blurred shots, very loud walking down the line from the left; three hundred fifteen rifles firing, the sixty-man half-companies ripple volleying. Very crisp, the sound of long practice. All along the Squadron front men and dogs went down in threshing tangles. A cloud of

smoke rose from the line, drifting up into the flickering velvet-silver leaves of the olive trees. A few last dactosauroids fluttered up with it.

"Aim!" The rear rank's rifles came up in unison; the front were working the levers of their weapons and reaching back to the bandolier for a fresh round to push into the breech. Clatter and snap amid the shouting and echoes. Six hundred yards.

"Fire!"

BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM. A horizontal comb of red tongues reaching out for the enemy. The whole formation staggered; it was turning into a C with the open end pointed at the ridge, as the solid bar of volley fire punched into the middle of it like a fist. Dead men and dogs were piling up all across the frontage covered by the Slashers' line, but there were too many Squadrones, too many swinging wide around the barrier of flesh.

"Fire!"

BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM. You couldn't fault their courage, at least; there must be hundreds dead and more wounded, but the dismounted were coming on at a run, leveling their flintlocks, more pushing upon either side, and new bands galloping full-tilt to join them.

"Fire!"

BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM. A bit of a stutter in the line now; if the Squadrones got to handstrokes his command would be chopped into dogmeat in less than a minute. Four hundred yards . . .

"Fire!"

BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM.

"Withdraw!"

The trumpet sounded, and the dogs knew the call as well as the men. They surged erect under their riders and wheeled; the whole formation was moving back at a trot in a few seconds. A huge bellow of triumph came from behind them, as the Squadron force poured forward. Thiddo glanced to either side; the formation was tight and the men were keeping their dogs well in hand, as some of the shock of betrayal faded. Most of the men were riding with their rifles in their right hands, the lever down to let air cool the barrel and chamber. Extraction-jams were the great weakness of the Armory rifle, the fragile brass cartridges ripping when softened by heat or coming loose from the iron base. A few men were hammering at the levers with knife-hilts or trying to pick the cooling metal scraps out of the breech with the points as they rode.

Ahead of them the cannon had drawn up; they flashed as the Slashers reached the flat ground below the ridge. Men ducked as the shells went by overhead. This was extreme range, and if someone had turned a time-fuse improperly — or if the trail of powder in it burned a little too fast . . .

Thiddo looked behind. The ridgeline was a mass of men, many halting with screams as they heard the shells again; the three airbursts speckled the front behind them. Six hundred meters gap, and they would push it to three times that by the time they got to the guns and wheeled to sting their enemies again. Ahead, Istban had managed to draw up nearly two companies of his Dragoons off to one side from the Slashers' line of retreat, so he could take the Squadrones in enfilade and open fire while the battalion

covered the last thousand meters.

"Peydro!" he shouted. Senior Lieutenant Peydro Belagez angled his galloping dog over beside the battalion commander. "Messengers to Zahpata and Messer Raj, verbal reports."

Another flight of shells went overhead and cracked open their loads of hissing metal. The Squadron might be chasing him and the Slashers, but they would pay for the privilege.

The Squadrones would *pay first*.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"And who ordered this withdrawal?" Raj said coldly.

The Cuirassier captain flushed and braced to attention, staring to the front. "Sir. The withdrawal was spontaneous. I attempted to rally the men —"

"Which was why you ended up in front of most of them?" Raj asked, dangerously mild. "Shut up."

He looked to the front; there were several hundred men immediately ahead of him —

two hundred seventy-four, Center said.

—and more straggling in across the fields. The base was half a kilometer behind him; he could hear the steady throb of drums as it beat to arms. Menyez's own Kelden Foot were moving out from the gate, forming in square and marching smartly to the tap of the drum, out to cover the entrance in case the retreating columns of cavalry came in fast with the Squadron on their heels. The mid-morning sun was bright, bleaching the fields to a yellowish-white and making the clumps of trees almost black by contrast. A pillar of dust over most of the southern horizon was growing steadily closer; the air was already dry with it, even though the wind was from the north.

"Captain . . . Hermano Suharto, isn't it? Captain Suharto, right now I'm about convinced that I should have every officer in the 17th Cuirassiers shot, and the unit's enlisted men decimated, for cowardice-in-the-face. So you'd *better* rally them, right now, and bring them along smartly. Convince me to change my mind, Captain. Work hard at it."

Suharto gave an unanswered salute and rode off to the men; they responded quickly, losing a little of the lost expression as they heard orders. Sergeants began to push them into line, and troopers accreted in their platoons and companies,

"Ehwardo," Raj said, "this looks like a complete balls-up, and we're going to have to pull it out of the pot. Form up for a company advance in line" — that meant a column a hundred and twenty men wide and six deep— "ready for extension, rifles out and a round up the spout

"Jorg," he went on to Menyez, "I'm not going to let them besiege us if I can help it." Everyone nodded;

the position was impregnable, but badly supplied. Once closely invested, the Civil Government army would be swamped if it tried to come out and starved if it did not. "We'll draw up a battle line here." There were two kilometers or more of clear ground to their front, only a few shaws and the odd dip in the ground to provide cover. "Spread the infantry across in a shallow crescent. When the cavalry comes in we'll dismount two battalions on each flank and keep one in reserve."

He pointed. "Anchor your right flank on that," he said, pointing to a deep ravine to their west. "But be careful, use your best — I don't like the look of the ground beyond it" — broken, and largely covered with olives and cork oak. "Left flank over on the ravine opposite." That one was open to the east, but the western bank was higher, a sheer clay wall. "Grammeck, guns in three bastions — left, right, and center. Quickly, Messers, if you please."

"Ser," the bannerman said, leaning forward behind him and pointing. Three riders were coming across the open ground, slanting in from the west.

They pulled up and saluted: A sergeant and two troopers, with the sand-dune and palm-tree shoulder blazon of the 18th Komar overlain with its motto: *Dehfenzo Lighon*, Defend the Faith.

"Zur," the sergeant said. "Message from Major Zahpata." He handed it over.

Raj unfolded the paper. *Am heavily engaged and my flank is exposed by withdrawal of first column*, it said. *Request permission to withdraw more quickly as my left is in danger of encirclement.*

"Sergeant, verbal reply: inform Major Zahpata that the western and northern Squadron forces have been completely routed. I'm bringing up Poplanich's Own to rally the first column. He's to fall back as slowly as possible and bloody their noses. Understood?"

"Zur!" They swung off, leaning over the necks of their galloping dogs.

"On our way, Ehwardo," Raj said.

"Walk-march . . . trot "

Suzette fell in beside him as they broke into a lope toward the highest and nearest of the dust clouds. "Is it going very badly?" she said. Harbie whined, catching his mistress's anxiety.

"No," he replied, slightly surprised and blinking away one of Center's maps. "It just isn't going according to plan."

". . . and I take full responsibility, Sir," Mekkle Thiddo finished.

Raj looked at him, and then at the action ahead. The Slashers and Poplanich's Own were in line on either side of the guns; the steady crashing of their volleys complemented the louder bark of the field pieces. The vast mass of the Squadrones had stopped cold and was withdrawing from the suddenly extended front. Parties of the enemy edged forward on either flank; officers ran down behind the firing line, indicating new aim-points with their drawn sabers.

Raj looked over to his right: the remaining four hundred or so of the Cuirassiers were standing in solid

ranks, and Suharto seemed to have them well enough in hand. Dalhouse and the others probably wouldn't stop until their dogs died.

"Runner. C Company is to face right and fire in support," he said. The man dashed off and the outermost of Poplanich's companies came to and stood, shuffling backward and pivoting on the left like a door swinging back to face the Squadron units lapping around them. "Runner, to Senior Captain Suharto. Prepare to see that party of barbs off."

BAM. BAM. BAM. C Company had opened fire, rifles coming up and dropping like the motion of a loom's shuttle.

There were four noblemen's banners among the Squadron flanking party, and about eight hundred men; two of the glittering flags went down under the hail of 11mm rounds. Through the growing haze of smoke and dust, he could see men pitching out of the saddle, and the whole body bent and curved a little away from the fire. The Cuirassiers' banner dipped toward him in acknowledgment and readiness; he waved his arm around his head twice and chopped it forward to the right. A trumpet sounded and the Cuirassiers moved from stand to walk, from walk to trot. The sabers came out with a uniform snap and rested on their shoulders, then forward as they rocked into a gallop and swung wide right to charge; the volley fire continued in their support almost to the moment of impact. The disordered ranks of the Squadrons shattered under the impact of the boot-to-boot charge, only a few of them managing to fire their flintlocks; then the Civil Government soldiers wheeled and galloped back, emptying more saddles.

They cantered back into place, bloodied sabers in their hands, and dressed ranks again. Raj nodded; Senior Captain Suharto was taking his words to heart.

"Runner to Major Zahpata," he said, pulling out his notepad: *Major, I expect the Squadron to fall into disorder for a short period. If you can break contact easily, pull back to the left flank of the main position.*

"No, Mekkle," he went on, "I'm not relieving you. Quite the contrary — you kept your head when all about were losing theirs, and turned what could have been an unmitigated disaster into a mitigated one." *Although when I find Major Dalhouse . . .* Thiddo looked stunned; until then he had been a mixture of relief at having someone to take the responsibility off his shoulders, and dread of what his leader would say.

Raj leaned forward and slapped him on the shoulder. "If you'd lost those guns and come barreling into camp with the barbs on your heels . . . well, you didn't. My friend, this is not a business in which elegant plans buy you any yams. The ability to retrieve matters when someone screws up is much more important.

"Now," he said, viewing the field.

They would have to pull back soon; someone on the other side was finally realizing they were in a meeting engagement. The Squadron host was clumping into four main groups — what he could see of it—with the transport train far behind pulling into a classic Military Government-style circular wagon-fort. And dismounted Squadrons were working their way to the east through the patch of broken country that was protecting his left. Fairly soon they'd be through it — and he couldn't afford to be pinned. Raj massaged the back of his neck under the leather and chainmail guard; the day — he glanced up; about 1100 hours, morning rather — had been a real surf-ride. *In garrison, we complain about the boredom. But when you consider the alternative . . .*

"Sir?" Thiddo asked. "Ah, I expected —"

"You can't," Raj went on, "let yourself get too focused on a plan, Mekkle. Actually things are going rather well. We've lost, oh, two hundred men" — da Cruz's face came before him for a moment, and he pushed it away — "including those who just buggered off, and how many do you think the Squadron's lost? Two thousand? Four? Six?"

They both glanced to the front. It was difficult to tell through the drifting mass of powder smoke, but there was a positive carpet of unmoving figures on the ground out beyond the Civil Government line. Another series of volleys slapped out, hiding the Squadron front for a moment; smoke billowed from the enemy, too far away to do any real damage.

"And more important, they're still coming on the way we want them to. Notice anything about them, Mekkle?"

"Ummm — they do tend to react like a bull stung by a *pihkador*, sir. Confirms what we were told."

"Hit them in the nose and you can lead them by it," Raj nodded. A trooper came up with a flagstaff; the banner on it was pure white. "I've got something for you to take to the Admiral," he went on, reaching for a bag tied to his saddle "that will concentrate his mind even more. Yes, things are not going badly at all. Trumpeter, call *cease fire*."

"Hnnng."

The soldier arched his back as the Renunciate cut away the remains of his boot. Sticky blood had pooled inside the leather, and it slid out in a gelatinous mass. One of the assistants wilted and began to sag; Fatima cor Staenbridge reached out and shook her sharply.

"Scrub," the nun said; the pants-leg had been slit far back. "Come on, I've got to see what I'm doing here."

The soldier — the boy — was glassy-eyed from opium, but it was dangerous to give too much when shock was involved. Fatima gripped his wrist and hand more firmly and leaned over him, smiling; it seemed to make it easier for them to bear, if someone was looking at them. *At least there aren't many*. A Descotter trooper with a shot-broken thigh right at the beginning, and a few more ever since; they had even had time to treat some enemy wounded. Not like Sandoral; she remembered the tubfuls of amputated legs and arms at the bottoms of the operating tables . . . just a trickle so far. The word was that the north force was almost to the city. Soon they would be there, under the walls and the cannon. Gerrin and Barton would be there.

The boy with the mangled foot had a shield-shaped shoulder — flash with crossed sabers over a black numeral "5," and the motto *Hell o Zpalata* above — "Hell or Plunder." The 5th Descott Guards.

"What's your name, soldier?" she asked.

His eyes darted to her, and his teeth showed in something like a smile; they were yellow-white in the muddy shock-molded brown of his face.

"Hyllo Carasyn," he gasped.

"You're in the 5th, aren't you?" she said.

"Yis, ma'am," he said. A probe clicked down by the foot of the table, and his hand gripped hers until the bones creaked; it was his saber hand, and he was a strong young man. "Yer t'Major's lady, eh?"

She nodded. "What happened up there?" she said. *Allah—Spirit of Man* — she prayed silently, remembering Foley on the table, his ruined hand . . . *Please, let anyone die but them.*

The soldier was panting, and his eyes slid out of focus. "Barbs," he muttered. "Gunmen, swordsmen. Barbs, thousands, I shot 'im and he— *nnnnnnn!*"

"Ah, *got* it," the stern-faced Renunciate said, her arms glistening red to the elbows. The probe held a misshapen piece of lead a little larger than a pea. "Clamp there, move sharp!"

There was a clatter at the door of the tent "Mediko, mediko! More of 'em!"

Young Hylio Carasyn had fainted. Fatima put her hand on the sweat-cold forehead. *You don't know any more of what's going on than I do, poor baby,* she thought

The doctor looked up. "Get me that damned catgut," she said, frowning. The assistant handed her a curved needle. "Time to close this one up."

"Took them long enough," Raj grunted, raising his binoculars. He had drawn a little ahead of the group around his banner, messengers, and aides.

The firing had finally stopped, along the front at least. Wind drifted the smoke away; unfortunately, it also showed the true size of the Squadron war-host again, looking all the more terrifying because it had hauled itself together. It would show them how few their enemies in this particular skirmish had been, as well — which might be either good or bad, depending on how bright they were. Raj turned and looked down the ranks. The men were resting stolidly, faces and hands black with burnt powder; a few were taking sips from their canteens and carefully spraying a fine mist into the open breeches of their rifles, then wiping them with the tails of their coats. Hell on maintenance, but you did what you had to when it came down to cases.

"Did we really have to send Mekkle?" Suzette asked.

"It's a favor," Raj said absently. "I'm demonstrating that he's still trusted. Which," he added quietly, lowering the binoculars for a moment, "might not have been necessary if somebody hadn't interfered in the chain of command this morning."

Suzette looked away. "That was a mistake," she said.

"It was. My heart," he went on more softly, "we're partners, I know that. You were concerned . . . but I don't take unnecessary risks. Don't second-guess me on my specialty, or you *will* get me killed."

She nodded stiffly, and he raised the glasses again. "And it would be an insult to send a man of no rank to treat with the Admiral," he went on.

The group around the Admiral had advanced a little to meet the party of Civil Government troops under the white flag. Admiral Auburn was a tall portly man, with a spray of gray-brown beard covering half his chest, and small sapphires and diamonds on the ends of the leather thongs that fringed his jacket. He glittered as he moved, leaning forward with a hand cupped to his ear. It was like watching a puppet show; the big barbarian reared back in the stirrups, shaking his head. *Probably refusing to believe his brother Conner's been defeated and killed*, Raj estimated.

Mekkle was handing over the canvas bag. Auburn ripped it open and sat gasping for a moment, while men recoiled all around it and his dead brother stared at him in eternal surprise. Then he dropped the head, fumbled for it as it bounced off his saddle and fell to the ground, rolling. Buried his hands in his beard and began to scream, half-falling as he slid from his dog's back to the object it was sniffing curiously. Screaming and moaning, he rocked back and forth over the head, and one of his hands came free with a handful of hair in it. There was chaos around his banner, as men turned to each other, shouting into faces, waving their weapons. Sections of the Squadron line surged forward; the news spread outward as ripples did from a stone dropped in a pond.

Good man, Raj thought, as Mekkle and the trooper carrying the flag of truce turned and began to canter back to the Civil Government line. Then he stiffened as dozens of weapons leveled behind the envoy.

"Son of a bitch — son of a *bitch* !" he shouted, as they fired in a flicker of smoke-puffs with red spearhead cores of fire.

The flag of truce went over as the trooper and his dog collapsed. Mekkle slumped forward over the neck of his dog; the animal laid back its ears and ran, howling, one paw flinching every time it struck the ground. Raj and his color-party were galloping forward too; they met the wounded man a hundred meters in front of the Civil Government line. The wounded dog crouched, and Horace sank to the ground beside it, snuffling and licking at the injury. Raj took Thiddo's shoulders, easing him to the earth; Suzette ran up with her medical box, then halted, eyes wide. The shotgun blasts of the Squadron had pulped the muscle off the young officer's back, and the yellow bone of spine and ribs snowed through it, along with loops of gut. The flow of blood was slowing even as they watched.

Raj leaned over the dying man. Thiddo's mouth moved, but nothing came out of it but a spatter of blood that flecked across the general's face. Dust from near-misses spurted around them both as Raj set the dead man's head back on the ground and rose; several of the others flinched slightly as he turned back toward the enemy.

"Get a record of those banners," he said, pointing to the standards of the noblemen grouped around the Admiral. The whole Squadron force seemed to be paralyzed for the moment. "Get a record of every one of them, because afterward I want to identify them."

The Admiral was still kneeling by his brother's head, wailing and beating the ground with his fists; many of the men around him were doing likewise, or gashing their faces with their knives as a sign of mourning. Their howls were nearly as loud as those of their dogs, and as inhuman.

Children, Raj thought. *Vicious grown-up children, and nothing but the Army to keep them from wiping out all the adults in the world.*

in the universe, Center said. **a universe of vicious children for us to school, as we will do in time.**

"And now," Raj went on, "Major Thiddo bought us some valuable time. I suggest we use it."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The sun was nearly overhead and a little to their west; Raj squinted into it as he and his command group rode down the front of the Expeditionary Force's position. His personal banner dipped each time he passed a battalion standard, and he saluted; the men raised a rolling cheer that swelled and pulsed in his wake. At each he stopped for a moment.

"It's all very simple now, lads," he said for the tenth time. "They run up to us, we shoot them down. Mind the orders, keep the muzzles down, and everything will go fine. Spirit of Man with you!"

The cheer swelled and then died down again as he galloped back to his post on the west corner of the formation, next to Poplanich's Own. The palisade of the overnight camp was just visible behind, and closer were the light two-wheeled ambulance carts. It was intensely hot in the early afternoon. Insects whirred, and a bellows sound came from the rear, where the dogs lay and panted. The men were down on one knee in orderly rows with their rifles held in the right hand; sweat darkened the blue tunics. The air smelled of it, and dust; on the border of sight to the east, the sea added its tang of salt.

"Here they come," Ehwardo Poplanich said.

"Took their time," Raj replied, looking at his watch: 1300. "Better than an hour."

He looked left and east, along the Civil Government position. It stretched between the two ravines like a huge shallow C; the infantry in the center had had time to dig sketchy fieldworks, throwing up a meter-high ridge of dirt. With the front rank prone and the second rank kneeling that would give them excellent cover if the enemy came close enough to hit anything. The guns were more elaborately protected; each had a man-high bulwark in front of it with a V-shaped cutout for the muzzle, and a sloped earth bank behind it so that it would rise with the recoil and run back into the battery. Three battalions of dismounted cavalry under Hadolfo Zahpata held the seaward flank; the other four were anchoring the right wing, under Raj's personal eye, although that included the still-shaky Cuirassiers and Novy Haifa. There had been time to bring water carts up, as well; water the dogs and men, issue bread, stack spare ammunition close at hand but protected by sandbags. Time to have the priests parade down the front, sprinkling each banner with holy water and censuring it with fragrant smoke.

The horizon to the south turned black as the Squadron came on — black edged with winking brightness from their weapons and flags. There was a rumble that seemed to shake the earth, the paws of more than forty thousand dogs pounding the dirt; dust towered into the sky over the barbarian host. They slowed as they approached, less from caution than from the way the terrain was squeezing them down like a wedge. Those in the front were nobles with a reputation for valor, or the desire for it. They were there of their own free will; the Admiral could direct their advance, but not stop it. The Civil Government line looked frail and still by comparison, delicate and structured as a snowflake.

Raj leveled his binoculars. The area in front of his position was bare, except for the poles marked with colored rag that gave the distances.

"Major Dinnalsyn," he said. "Commence firing for effect at four thousand meters on my signal. Don't get

fancy; rapid fire at the foremost edge of their formation." The artillery chief nodded.

"Colonel Menyez?" Raj asked.

"Everything in order, General," the infantry commander said. "All sights have been checked, and set initially at nine hundred meters; the men've been drilled in readjusting, and aim-points established. I'd like to have had more firing-range work — the fisc has been shorting ammunition training allowances for years—but they'll do."

"Go to it, then," Raj said.

The three of them slapped fists, with Ehwardo Poplanich joining in a little awkwardly; then the others dispersed to their commands. An aide handed Raj a sandwich of roast beef and mustard; Horace looked over his shoulder at his master and whined plaintively.

"Shut up, you son of a bitch, you were fed this morning," Raj said, then relented and tossed him a scrap. It was only a token to the huge jaws that slammed down on it, but dogs liked to share and have eye contact while they ate. The cavalry mounts were all pretty frisky these days, what with plenty of bones and offal to go with their mash of boiled grain and beans.

Young Ludwig Bellamy spoke; he was watching the Squadron host advance with his hands white-knuckled on the reins, but his voice was calm.

"Your warriors must be men of iron, to watch that and not fear," he said, glancing sidelong at the silent ranks of the Civil Government battalions. Nothing moved except the bright silk flags crackling in the breeze from the sea, and dogs shifting restlessly from foot to foot under mounted officers.

Raj grunted bitter laughter through a mouthful, and swallowed.

"The only warriors here," he said, waving backward with the sandwich, "are *there*" — he indicated the battalion equivalent of Stalwarts and Halvaardi held in reserve for the unlikely event of a hand-to-hand melee — "and *there*" sweeping across the southern horizon.

The Squadrones had begun to chant, paced by drums and oxhorn trumpets: "*Ha-ba-da , ha-ba-da, ha-ba-da.*"

"My men are not warriors, they're soldiers, Messer Bellamy — and they're about to demonstrate the difference." He finished the sandwich and wiped his mouth. "While the Squadron is doing exactly what I've been trying to get them to do in the week since we landed."

"What else *could* they do?" the young man asked.

Center offered map displays of alternatives, but Raj knew them well already. Center had always given its human tool the whole truth, the ways that a plan could fail—inevitably more numerous than the ways it could succeed.

"Leave enough men here to pin me and go around," Raj said. "I don't have enough troops to divide my forces; I'd have to backpedal, and then they could do it again and again until I was trapped against the walls of Port Murchison. The Expeditionary Force is big enough to fight a battle with the Squadron—it *isn't* big enough to occupy any significant area of land. As long as the Admiral keeps a large force in being and hovers around, I'm stuck — we certainly can't charge them at bayonet-point. I desperately

need a battle; the Admiral might well defeat me and force me to withdraw by skillfully refusing one. That he isn't even trying shows that Auburn and his principal advisors are all incompetent"

"But . . ." the Squadron noble tugged at his braids. "You killed Conner Auburn — honor demands that the Admiral attack you! The levy won't follow a commander without honor. And the nobles can't run from a smaller force; their men would laugh at them."

"Exactly," Raj replied, with a grin like a carnosauroid.

I hope. The sandwich lay like a lump of molten lead in his stomach; his mind knew what he said was true, but his gut heard fifty thousand voices howling for his blood. The chanting dropped off a little, and the horns sounded in unison. The Squadron array was divided — somewhat—into three successive groups, "Battles" as they called them. The first seemed to gather itself a kilometer or more away. There was a huge metallic ringing as they pounded musket-barrels and swords on each other, and a shout fit to stun the ear of heaven. They charged, the mass of the first Battle stretching like warm toffee over the ground.

" *GITTEM, GITTEM!*"

Center reeled off ranging figures before his eyes as he watched; he raised one hand. The Squadrones had rocked into a full gallop, a mass of fangs and faces and long flashing swords looming up out of white dust, bellowing deeper than thunder. The glowing-green numbers scrolling over his vision came up to 4100, and his hand slashed down. An aide touched his cigarette to the match-paper of a signal rocket, and it arched over the empty space to the center of the C. There it burst in a green *pop*. And twenty-seven field guns fired within half a second of each other; a great *POUUMMMMPH* of noise that hit the lungs from the inside, echoing slightly with the distance between the three artillery redoubts.

With hideous perfection the shells airburst directly over the Squadron line. A thousand men and dogs died fractions of a second later as shrapnel sleeted through the close-packed ranks. The men behind had no chance of avoiding the sudden bloody shambles ahead of them; massive six-deep pileups of dogs and men blossomed, the collisions killing nearly as many as the explosions. The whole galloping mass of Squadrones checked, as if a single beast had stumbled hard.

Raj looked to his right, into the artillery position. The guns had run up the earth ramps the gunners had shoveled behind them; now they hung suspended for a second and rolled forward again to jerk to a halt against wooden chock-blocks. As they did, the gunnery teams jumped in, moving with metronomic precision: breechman to jerk open the lever that swung the block aside, spongeman to swab out the chamber, loader to slam home the next round; even as the breechman swung the crank back up to close the eccentric-screw breechblock, the gun captain was squatting over the trail, sighting. His hands moved and the others spun the elevating screw under the barrel; the muzzle depressed, and the gun captain sprang aside and jerked the lanyard.

This time the sound was much longer, as slight differences in the loading speed of the crews told: A stuttering *POUM-POUM-POUM* that lasted six seconds or so. Half the shells were airburst and half contact-fused explosive, hammering up tall candles of dirt and flesh from the front of the Squadron line. Clouds of smoke were rising from the artillery emplacements as well, bending over to the right as the breeze from the sea blew them away. The crews had settled into a steady implacable rhythm of three rounds per minute, the pace that preserved barrels and broke armies. Raj raised his binoculars again.

"Yesss . . ."

Those overgrown adolescents in floppy hats were as brave as anyone who ever forked a dog, and it

was impossible to actually *kill* fifty-thousand-odd men, even with massed artillery. The dogs were a different matter; they were already nervous and overstressed from being forced into close contact with strangers, and it took long and careful training to accustom the big animals to the sound of artillery. He saw one turning in circles as the pressure of the cheek-levers in its bridle fought against its determination to turn and run. Then it caught the rider's thigh in its half-meter mouth and ripped him screaming out of the saddle, shook him until he struck the ground in two places. The man behind pressed his blunderbuss to its chest and pulled both triggers, but his own frantic mount dropped and rolled over him before rising to dash off with flapping reins and wet-red saddle.

The Squadron formation shredded away from the rear as men still out of range of the guns let their dogs turn; they had little alternative, with thousands of snarling uncontrolled animals fighting their way back to safety against anything that tried to stop them. Oxhorns blew and flags waved from the group to the rear around the Admiral, as the guns hammered retreat into rout. Only the motionless bulk of the second Battle kept the first formation from charging off the field altogether. Down the line of Civil Government troops there were cheers and ripples as men shook their rifles in the air.

But the sound was quickly quelled. "Damn your eagerness!" Ewardo Poplanich shouted as the noise reached his battalion. "Silence in the ranks!" Then he took another glance to the front. "Sweet merciful Avatars and the Constellation of Saints," he said, when he lowered his glasses. From the point where the Squadron charge had begun, a thousand meters of ground was carpeted with bodies. Many of them were still moving; a heap of them slid aside as a dog burrowed its way from underneath and hopped three-legged back toward the south. The whimpers and moans were strong enough to reach the Civil Government line, and so was the copper-salt stink of blood and feces.

Raj glanced around. *Ah. He's never seen a large-scale pitched battle before*, he thought. "Sandoral was worse," he said. "More guns, on both sides."

He studied the enemy. It was difficult to make out details through the smoke and dust, but the wind was freshening. Shouting, waving swords, more horn-calls; he saw one man dismount and shoot his own dog as it cowered and whimpered and tried to lick his face. Others were grouping again on foot around the banners of their chieftains, flags with the skulls of dogs or carnosauroids or men, lofting up through the dust. Warrior after warrior snapped the sheath of his sword across his knee, and more were dismounting as they reached the second Battle, servants leading strings of dogs off to the flanks and rear.

"They won't turn as easily next time," he said quietly. "They've been shamed."

Ewardo lit two cigars; Raj took the other gratefully and dragged the smoke down into his lungs. It took a good half-hour for the enemy to prepare; just getting the riderless dogs out of the way was difficult enough.

"Runner, message to Colonel Dinnalsyn," Raj said thoughtfully. "Have case-shot on hand."

"Here they come," somebody murmured.

"*GITTEM, GITTEM.*"

This time the enemy came in some sort of formation, an irregular blunt wedge. Raj focused and saw them tramping stolidly with their heads held rigidly up and hands clutched on swords and muskets. *Must be uncomfortable marching in those boots*, he thought; the Squadron model was thigh-high and had a pointed heel, designed strictly for the saddle. They roared as they came, chanting and gradually picking up the pace, trying to work themselves into the famous barbarian frenzy of the Military Governments. A few

in the front ranks were already glaze-eyed and frothing, gnawing on their weapons and throwing aside their clothes to run forward naked.

There must be at least thirty thousand in this wave,Raj thought.

thirty-eight thousand four hundred ± **three hundred**,Center said.

" *GITTEMGITTEMGITTEMGITTEMGITTEMGIT TEM GITTEM GITTEM—*"

4100 meters.

The general's hand chopped down and the rocket rose. The guns spoke and the Squadrones broke into a run, crouching over in useless but human reflex. Air-bursts blasted circles in the edges of the formation, and explosive rounds hammered into the center of it. Banners fell, and other men caught them up and ran forward; the whole mass of humanity was running forward, more people than the average city in a single block, a thousand men across and thirty deep.

3000 meters.

"Run away, you poor brave silly buggers, run away!" Raj whispered, slowly drawing his saber. "Go home!"

There was a long wave through the enemy as they clambered over the last of the bodies from the first attack and came pounding on across the open ground. The guns were firing faster, as if the teams had caught the contagion of madness. He dropped his binoculars into their case on his belt and fumbled it closed one-handed; there were some things it was better to see no more clearly than you must.

2000 meters.

The giant wedge was more ragged; another two or three thousand down in the last few minutes. Close enough now to see the figures grow from ants to dolls by naked eye, close enough to see contorted mouths and for their roaring almost to drown the shellfire. A quiver ran down the long thin blue line of Civil Government soldiers. Only the guns spoke. The Squadron ranks were packing tighter and tighter as the men on the outside edged in away from the artillery redoubts on either wing.

1500 meters.

"Ready," Raj said, raising his blade. The aide puffed his cheroot and went down on one knee.

1000 meters.

"May the Spirit forgive us," Raj whispered.

900 meters.

" *Now*," he said in a clear loud voice.

The sword came down in a glittering arc, and Horace danced a half-step sideways. The rocket arched skyward and exploded in a silver dazzle.

Seven thousand men came to one knee and fired. The sound was loud enough to drive needles of pain

into the ears.

What happened to the enemy was hidden for an instant by the cloud of flame-shot smoke that erupted from his line. When that parted, he saw that the whole front of the enemy host had vanished; the heavy hollow-point 11mm bullets drove right through bodies and into the men behind. Time seemed suspended, moving in amber honey so slowly he could see the faces of the charging barbarians turn from fury or fear to uncomprehending shock.

Then the second rank of his men stood and fired over the heads of the first. Ahead there were muzzle-flashes and reports along the Squadron front line — what had suddenly become their front line — as men reflexively tried to strike back. Some of the ones in the middle of the formation fired too, into the air or into the backs of the men ahead, as the unreachable death combed them. All of which meant that even if they did get to within a hundred meters of the Civil Government line they would be helpless, since nobody was going to stop for the tedious business of reloading a flintlock in the middle of *this*.

"They're still coming on," Ehwardo said in disbelief. "All guts, no brains."

Raj stood in the saddle. Directly ahead of him an officer of Poplanich's Own shouted " *By half-companies, volley fire!*" Others were repeating it all along the line, and a steady column of smoke rose from the riflemen, like a long thin chimney across the face of the battlefield, and a stuttering rattle of BAMBAMBAMBAMBAM underneath it, continuous. Noncoms ran down the lines of the infantry units, pushing rifles down and checking that men were adjusting their sights; most of them were firing blind to verbal direction, into the pall of smoke ahead.

"Oh, the evil, evil bastard," Raj breathed. Behind the engaged Squadron units still more men were dismounting and running forward into the smoke, into the artillery and massed rifle fire. Admiral Auburn was sending in the last Battle. The bulk of the Squadron troops were slowing; exactly the wrong thing to do, but inevitable as terror balanced and fought against courage. The rifle-fire beat on, under the steady roaring of the guns; more and more of the enemy were falling flat and trying to crawl forward, or taking shelter behind bodies.

400 meters.

A new sound from the artillery, long *PAAAMMM* reports as they switched to case-shot. No bursting charge, just a giant shotgun shell with hundreds of half-ounce lead balls ahead of the powder . . . they whistled through the air with a malignant hum, like giant wasps, and where they struck they carved pathways through the packed Squadron fighters, as clean as wedges cut by a giant invisible knife. Raj walked Horace forward between two companies of Poplanich's Own, coughing with the powder-smoke and peering out. The Squadron attack had stalled . . . or rather, it was acting like a stick of butter thrust slowly onto a hot frying pan, melting away at the front despite the pressure thrusting it forward from behind.

A last knot of men ran out of the smoke, grouped around a banner. The Captain to Raj's left barked a command — probably unheard in this racket—and swung his sword. Muzzles turned; the next volley ripped half the men around the flag off their feet. They came on, feet pumping; more fell, until there was only one to scoop the banner out of the dirt and continue with bullets kicking clods out of the dirt all around him. He staggered, red spots blossoming on his chest, came on again, sank to his knees and thrust the iron spike of the flag into the ground and slid down it, arterial blood pouring out of his mouth. Raj sat watching as bullets snapped the flagstaff and the folds dropped over the last man to hold it.

The steel of his saber tapped against Horace's stirrup-iron. *Three hundred meters*, he thought. *I doubt*

any of them got closer than that.

Behind, through the gaps in the smoke, he could see the Squadron forces disintegrating. They had been locked for a moment as the last ranks trapped those in front when they turned to flee, but shell fire had knocked holes in that wall. Now the last Battle were fleeing as well, some still mounted, individuals and blocks scattering away. Panic spread faster than ripples in water, and in moments scarcely a hundred Squadrones were facing the Civil Government line. Hundreds more died as bullets and shrapnel took them in the back, as they ran sobbing with exhaustion and fear over the bodies of the dead.

"Sound *rifles cease fire*, " Raj called.

It spread down the line, faster than the sea breeze pulled away the dirty cotton blanket of smoke. The guns cracked on, hammering the fleeing enemy.

"Sound *prepare for general pursuit*, " he said; that rolled out too, a complex of drums and bugles.

Down the line of infantry orders barked. Men stood, and there was a ten-thousand-fold glitter as the long bayonets snapped onto the bars and cleaning-rod fasteners beneath the barrels. Banners swayed to the front and drums beat; in a long waving front like sea-surf the infantry advanced at the walk. A staccato rattle of aimed individual fire swept out ahead of it, marksmen and NCOs shooting and reloading as they advanced. Around Raj the cavalry line dissolved as men raced back for their dogs and slid their rifles into the scabbards before the right stirrup: There was a scent of scorched hide over the sulfur stink, as the glowing metal burned the liners; then a massive jingling as twenty-five hundred riders formed by battalions behind him: He heeled Horace forward as the banner of Poplanich's Own moved up to one side.

"Sound the charge!"

At both ends of the Civil Government line sabers slithered free by the thousand, a blinding mirror-brightness.

His sword swept up and then down, pointing to the dispersing mass of the enemy.

" *Charge!*"

"Coward! Whelp! You fled, you fled!" the women screamed at the defeated Squadron warriors.

Many of the Squadron levy had brought their households along with them to share the victory, leaving them in the wagon-fort a few kilometers behind the line. Now the women stood on the wagon-beds with their black shawls fluttering, striking clumsily at the fugitives who had made it this far, at their husbands and brothers and sons; they had swords and clubbed muskets in their hands, or stock-whips.

"Coward, coward!"

Some of the wagons were burning, and women threw themselves into the flames. Others cut their children's throats before stabbing themselves, or hanged themselves from the tall wagon-poles with their children at their heels. Raj passed a family strung up thus like obscene fruit; beyond them, inside the great circle of wagons, men who had thrown away their weapons were rolling under the feet of the milling frantic oxen to die. Their bawling covered the screams, an undertone to the roar of flames and the

occasional crackle of shots. A field-gun went bouncing by, on its way to some pocket of holdouts.

WHUMP. A powder-wagon blew up a thousand meters across the fort, and a globe of orange fire strobed for seconds across retinas in counterpoint to the ringing in ears stunned by the blast.

"Let's get some order here, Spirit-dammit!" he shouted hoarsely, waving the revolver at a clump of cavalry. "Get these people under control!"

They cantered over and began prying two wagons apart, slashing at the hide bindings with their sabers; one trooper looked up as dead feet brushed his head, swore and cut twice to sever the rope. His comrades shouted curses as they heaved and bodies rained down on their heads. Infantry were already at work inside, rounding up the survivors, stunning and binding; when the wagons were heaved apart a column of prisoners came through at a stumbling run, kicked, prodded with bayonets, and whacked along with rifle butts. A blond girl fell almost at Raj's feet; she would have been very pretty, except for the swelling purplebruise across one side of her face. She spat at his feet and stumbled off with the rest, holding a torn blouse across her breasts as a shoulder pushed her.

"You, Captain," Raj said. The officer saluted. "Get more of these wagons dragged apart or we'll lose them all to the fire. Move the oxen out but keep them bunched. And for the merciful Saints' sake, keep the men in hand!"

Ludwig Bellamy was looking white, even in the ruddy light of the fires and the dust-shrouded afternoon sun.

"Your father made the right decision," Raj said, sweeping his pistol in a circle over the scene. His voice was a little louder than need be, even with the level of background noise. "He knew the Squadron was going to lose. This is what defeat is, Messer Bellamy. Avoid it."

Raj heeled Horace into a canter, and the command-group and the Scouts followed, past growing roped-off squares where Squadron prisoners sat under guard with their hands behind their heads. The fires were dying as the soldiers pulled the wagons away; other men were spreading the tilts as groundsheets and piling loot in a rough-sort, separate heaps for fabrics and weapons and whatnot. Many of M'lewis's men were casting longing glances at the wagons — a sack was one of the rare pleasures of a soldier's life — but their Lieutenant was there . . . and Messer Raj had a name for seeing his men right.

He halted as Muzzaf Kerpatik rode up with a platoon of the Slashers: The men dropped back as they halted their mounts nose-to-tail, and Raj leaned forward to listen. The little southerner was not formally a fighting man, but his face was black with powder smoke under his cap and puggaree, and the Komar-made pepperpot pistol stuck through his sash had seen use this day.

"I have the Admiral's wagons under close guard," he said. Leaning closer and speaking in a whisper: "I estimate the value of what we found at two hundred twenty thousand gold FedCredits, Messer Raj — and he escaped with the best of it. Many of his private papers were left, as well."

Even then Raj shaped a silent whistle. Enough to equip and mount the entire Expeditionary Force, and pay it for a year; that was making war support war with a vengeance! So *much for Tzetas*, he thought; the Governor would be very well pleased indeed.

"Also, I have these men," he said. Raj looked at the column of prisoners behind the Slashers, roped neck and neck. Ordinary-enough Squadron warriors, from their looks; a few had the rich equipage of high nobles. Then the Slasher Captain rode up; it was Pehdro Belagez, the new commander. He carried

a Squadron banner over his shoulder, and swung it down for Raj to see.

"These *Ihorantes* dogs are the ones who killed our commander under a flag of truce, *mi Heneral*," he said in a gentle voice, with an almost kittenish tone. "Messer Kerpatik brought us to them as they tried to escape with their sows and spawn, for which the Spirit of Man of the Stars will shine upon him. What is your will concerning them, my General?"

"The families? Slave market."

"And the men?" Belagez asked. The troopers leaned forward in their saddles: Mekkle Thiddo had been a popular commander.

Raj looked at the big burly figures who stood with downcast eyes in their bonds.

"Crucify them," he said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Thank you, no," Raj said firmly.

The delegation under the high arched gate looked downcast and astonished. It was fairly impressive for something cobbled together on short notice: the heads of the merchant guilds in long robes of a cut that had been fashionable in East Residence fifty years ago; a scattering of old aristocracy families who had hung on under Squadron rule; the underground Arch-Syssup of Port Murchison, understandably overjoyed to be representative of the State church once more; with a chorus of hymn-singing girls in garlands and white dresses and a flock of priests

"Messers, Messas," he went on, in careful Spanjol, "my troops have just won a major battle and their blood is up. The war isn't over, and it wouldn't do discipline any good to let them scatter in a rich city at night—nor, to be blunt, would it do your city much good, at all. We'll enter the city tomorrow, and I'll call you together then to settle billeting and other arrangements."

"But . . . but, there are still Squadrones inside the walls, thousands of them!" the head of the delegation said. Even now he was visibly afraid of the overlords. All to the good, or else the mobs would have torn them all limb from limb.

Former overlords, Raj thought. "Are they under arms?"

"No — no, most of the fighting men marched out with Conner Auburn." And died, many under the walls when the gates were shut against them. "They crowd into the Earth Spirit temples, and into our Star churches, even, seeking sanctuary."

"Then give it to them. Post guards. Tomorrow, Messers, if you please."

Raj stretched and sighed, looking upward. The stars were very bright, with only a three-quarter Miniluna

to dispute the heavens; it was mildly warm as they rode away from the torchlit bulk of Port Murchison's walls. Those were the old-fashioned curtain type, twenty meters high and ten thick with a rubble core in none too good condition, but they bulked huge in the darkness. The cookfires of the Expeditionary Force were a glowing constellation of their own, through the groves and gardens outside the city; it was rich land, well tended with noblemen's country-seats. Wagons and handcarts were creaking out of the city with food and cooked delicacies, although the guards were supposed to be turning back anything too blatant in the way of liquor or whores. Mostly the men seemed too tired to be restless and too excited to sleep.

"You sure about the war not being over?" Gerrin Staenbridge said, as he and Foley fell in beside their commander. "What happened today . . . that was about as decisive as anything I've seen or heard of."

Foley nodded. "We must have killed, oh, eight or ten thousand," he said with a slight shiver. "Toward the end they couldn't fight and wouldn't give up . . ." Gerrin reached over and squeezed his shoulder.

Raj nodded absently. "It was no more trouble than slaughtering pigs in a pen, Spirit strike me blind for a Christo if I lie," he said. *Except to poor Thiddo and a hundred or so others, every one of them as dead as they'd be if the barbs had won.* "I doubt if five thousand of their main force got away: we took twenty thousand fighting men prisoners, and twice that number of civilians. They must have lost nearly thirty thousand dead — over forty thousand counting the ones here and the two thousand the Skinners slaughtered. We'll have plague unless we get them underground fast, in this weather."

That meant half of all the Squadron males of fighting age were dead or captured, if the Ministry of Barbarians' figures were anything like accurate. Of course, the Squadron could mobilize every non-cripple; they didn't have the vast peon mass the Civil Government did.

"But the Admiral got away, worse luck, and the evil, senile old bastard will probably do his best to get *all* his people killed. He can still raise another forty or fifty thousand men from the western counties, if they answer the call, and the ten thousand Curtis Auburn has out on Sadler's Island are their best anyway."

"Gah," Gerrin said. "I didn't join the Army to work in an abattoir."

"Well, we can't *count* on their being as obliging next time," Raj pointed out. "See you in the morning," he said, as they came up to the villa that was his billet.

He walked Horace into the courtyard, then halted him with a silent touch of the rein. Suzette was sitting on the veranda in a pool of lantern-light, playing her long-necked *gittar*, and two-score men were crouched motionless on the flagstones at the base of the stairs; roughneck Scouts as quiet as the officers and Ludwig Bellamy, who was looking at her with the expression of a man who has just been struck hard on the head.

" *For we are all one way riders —*

Riders on that one way street,

That runs across a golden valley

Where the rivers of joy and hope run deep."

It was her favorite song, one a Stalwart nurse had taught her as a child.

" Rain must fall and winds will blow—

Lost men die in the mountain snow

Souls break their wings on heaven's wall

Night must come, come to us all —"

She rose and set the instrument aside as he walked toward her, lamplight sheening on the raven's-wing hair and gilding her eyes. He knelt and kissed her hand, then swept her up effortlessly in his arms as he rose and carried her indoors. Good-natured cheers followed them as he kicked the door shut behind him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A roaring chorus of soldiers' voices echoed back from the houses of Port Murchison, louder than the frenzied cheering of the crowds:

" The heathen in his blindness bows down to dirt an' stone;

He won't obey no orders, 'nless they is 'is own;

He keeps 'is side-arms awful: he leaves 'em all about—

Then up comes us Regulars and we poke the heathen out!"

The Expeditionary Force was marching into the city down the Sacred Way in a mass two battalions wide, each in column of fours. Raj and his household first, and then the 5th Descott and Poplanich's Own, in the position of honor at the front; then the Arch-Syssup of the diocese with a chorus of priests and nuns, then cavalry, guns, infantry, long columns of stumbling prisoners roped neck-and-neck, wagons filled with captured banners and weapons . . . The citizens were massed on the sidewalks behind barriers of infantry holding their rifles across their chests, on balconies and rooftops; they threw streams of

flowers at the soldiers, muck and rotten vegetables and dogshit at their former overlords. Star Spirit priests stood on every corner to bless the return of the True Faith.

"Spirit-damned waste of time," Raj muttered to himself, keeping his gaze fixed straight ahead.

"We all have our burdens to bear," Staenbridge said beside him. Ehwardo snorted laughter on the other side, brushing flower-petals off his tunic. Suzette smiled regally, nodding and waving to the crowd.

Well, they certainly can't afford to have the Admiral back after this, Raj mused. Which was also the reason Ludwig Bellamy and his father were in the parade a little farther back, conspicuously well-treated and armed.

Gerrin muffled a shout of laughter, looking over his shoulder. Raj snuck a look back himself, pretending a genuflection to a Syssup spraying holy water from a platform. Kaltin Gruder had fallen out by the outer line of the 7th Descott Rangers, sweeping off his helmet and bowing in the saddle as his dog caracoled and pranced. A striking young woman in the mantilla and shawl of a matron was waving from the wrought-iron balcony of an affluent-looking townhouse; she covered her face with her fan and flung a rose. Gruder snatched it out of the air and bowed again with the stem between his teeth before galloping back to his position at the head of the battalion.

"Damned fast work, even for Kaltin." Staenbridge laughed.

"Damned bad example," Raj said grumpily. Although Gruder's reputation didn't do him any harm with the troopers, to be sure.

Port Murchison was much like a Civil Government town, of a rather old-fashioned type; the streets were lined with three-story buildings of whitewashed brick and stone, arched arcades on the ground floors and screened balconies above. No gaslights, and not much of a factory district; the fountains were not working, and though the houses and shops were fairly well kept, the surface of the road was not, cracked and uneven and actually muddy in places.

"I just hope they love the Civil Government as much once Tzetzas's tax-farmers get here," Raj said ironically.

Ehwardo snorted. "Even Tzetzas only loves Tzetzas because he's paid to," he said.

They wound into the plaza, a big U-shaped pavement surrounded by public buildings and the townhouses of wealthy nobles. There was a dry fountain in the center, the marble pile of the Palace of the Vice Governors—the Admirals, for the last three generations — at the head. The ancient Star Temple, with a high golden dome and pillared portico, stood to its right; there was no many-rayed Star at its peak, though. Raj's lips tightened in genuine anger. He had been in to survey the route, earlier, and he had seen enough of the damage the Squadron had wrought in the churches, even in the ones they had converted to their own cult. Holy statues splashed with bullet-lead — the Squadrones seemed to have a particular liking for shooting off the noses — mosaics ripped up, icons burned . . .

"Vandals," he muttered. "Nothing but a bunch of fucking *vandals*."

a universe of vicious children, raj whitehall,said Center,**and us.**

Grooms ran to take their horses as they stopped before the steps of the Palace; he laid the ceremonial mace in the crook of his arm and turned to hand Suzette down from Harbie. She stepped regally by his

side, her fingertips resting on his arm and the plumes of her headdress nodding. The officers and civil dignitaries followed him as he walked up, seating themselves as he turned at the marble plinth that divided the stairs and served as a raised podium; that put him nearly a story above the level of the pavement, with a fine view out over the plaza and down to the wall. He rested easily with his left hand on his saber hilt, letting the breeze ruffle fingers through his dark curls and watching the remainder of the Expeditionary force march in and drop to parade-rest. All except the units already busy, of course.

And the Skinners. Not even the Spirit of Man with a thunderbolt in hand could control Skinners in a town; he'd camped them a kilometer from the walls, with a continuous stream of high-proof liquor and highly paid entertainment, and a cavalry battalion to watch them. Muzzaf's work; invaluable man . . .

At last the final unit came to a halt and crashed into parade rest; the prisoners were elsewhere, filing off to the bullrings he was using to pen the Squadron captives and their families for now. The other half of the square was black with civilians, including a clump of important personages directly below the stairs.

"Citizens of Port Murchison," he began in Spanjol. The acoustics were superb, as they had been when the long-ago engineers laid the buildings out. "You are once more united with the Civil Government of Holy Federation — and with Holy Federation Church." Deafening cheers from the crowd, while the soldiers stood patiently at the easy.

"Soon we will begin the work of rebuilding this province and making it secure for all time. Rest assured that the Army of the Civil Government is here as a liberator, not a conqueror. All citizens will be protected in their persons and property" — *as long as they don't go near the Skinners* — "and any offense by military personnel should be reported immediately. By the same token, any disloyalty, any treason, any failure of cooperation with the new and lawful authorities, will be crushed without mercy."

Everyone had seen the bodies from Gerrin's pursuit piled in windrows under the gates, and selected individuals were being marched out to see the battlefield and help with the mass burials. Most of the inhabitants would probably get the point.

"Please disperse, and remember that this city and district remain under martial law for the present. Go about your usual business, and further instructions will be issued as needed. The remainder of this day is a public holiday, and the warehouses are to be opened for an issue of free wine to the citizenry."

That brought hearty cheers, and the crowd began to flow out rapidly enough, helped by soldiers with *guardia* armbands. When Raj resumed, it was in the Army's own Sponglis:

"Fellow-soldiers," he began, then had to halt while a roaring cheer battered at him. He blinked in slight surprise, then held up his hands for silence.

"Fellow-soldiers, I'm not a politician, so I'll keep this short. We've come a long way together, and done great things. By our count, every one of you has done in at least three barbs" — massed laughter — "which is a good start. Remember, the job's not over yet! The barb Admiral is still loose, raising more troops, and Curtis Auburn isn't back yet either. There's more fighting to come, so don't let your guard down.

"Also remember this is a city of our own people, not a conquered enemy. You're guests where you're billeted — act like it. There's enough honest liquor and willing women in this town without acting like bandits. Everyone will get leave over the next week, in rotation; and just so you can drink the Governor's health, I'm authorizing a donative of six months' pay for everyone —"

This time the cheers were enough to make the stone vibrate slightly under his feet, and lasted for minutes.

"— as an advance. You've all done well and I'm proud to lead you. Dismiss to quarters!"

Trumpets blew, but instead of scattering the men began to chant:

" *RAJ! RAJ!*"

He waved good-humoredly, but the chanting did not stop; the men surged forward around the stairs, their helmets thrusting upward on the muzzles of their rifles.

Spirit, some idiot will start hailing me for the Chair next, he thought with genuine alarm; no Governor forgave demonstrations like *that*, spontaneous or no. He smiled and saluted and turned, leaving the officers and dignitaries to follow in his wake.

The huge audience hall was almost full as well, with a crowd whose gowns and jewelry shone under the skylights high above; soldiers with polished bayonets stood at rigid attention, clearing an aisle down which ran a red-velvet carpet. The Arch-Syssup of the Diocese of Port Murchison greeted him, and Raj knelt to receive the anointment of power, a dab on both temples and a touch of the the wired headset that symbolized contact with the Spirit's Net. There was a certain irony in it, for him Then he was striding toward the Chair, high on its dais at the end of the room, blinding-bright in a peacock glory of sapphire and emerald and silver. Blazing mosaics covered every wall; even the Squadrones had not touched the huge abstract Star that covered the solid portions of the ceiling, glittering with burnished platinum.

The only drab things in the chamber were the uniforms of his troops, grim and worn. There was a certain symbolism in that, too. His boots sounded, harsh metal on the stone of the dais; there was an iron clatter from the chape of his saber scabbard as he turned, holding aloft the mace of office. Heads bowed like flowers rippling before a breeze, and stayed bent in a low bow until he seated himself and laid the mace on the broad arm of the Vice Governor's Chair. Suzette took the consort's chair, lower down the stairs.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we have a program of work before us. I suggest that we begin."

Faintly through the doors and the thick stone, he could hear the soldiers chanting his name.

"Spirit damn you, get those drumsticks back! Don't drip grease on this!" Raj said again, resting his palms on the map.

The big room was buzzing with officers, administrators from Berg's contingent, and members of the Port Murchison city administration; few of those last had been Squadrones, anyway, and most seemed enthusiastic about the new order. Cork-boards were ranged around the walls, covering the murals, and maps and lists were pinned to them; more were scattered down the long glossy table. Suzette had gotten the household organized in record time, and Admiral Auburn's own servants were wheeling around trays and dispensing a working lunch. Some of the officers showed a tendency to gnaw on the honey-garlic sauroid sticks while leaning over important documents

"We've got to patrol vigorously," Raj went on, his finger tracing a circle around Port Murchison, "but not in penny-packets; Auburn's men will be trying to snap up foraging parties. Gerrin, see to it. Which reminds me — Muzzaf, what's the news on grain supply?"

"No more than two weeks currently, counting the extra mouths," the Komarite said, looking up from a huddle of clerks at the foot of the table.

"Right. Put out an offer for, hmmm, ten percent above current market for clean threshed grain, beans, meat, fruit, alfalfa fodder — payable in hard cash. The enemy will try to stop us, of course; coordinate with Gerrin. We can name collection points and use the captured wagons."

"Messer."

"Grammeck?"

The artilleryman flourished a pad. "Messer Raj, the walls are in a mess — crumbling on the outside, down to the rubble core in places. The city services — it's a pigsty, looks like nothing has been kept up in a century. You *saw* what the main avenue was like — the delivery pipes from the aqueduct blocked years ago, and the ham-handed pigs have never gotten them properly fixed. The sewer system —" He shuddered. "Don't ask."

"Do what you can; organize night-soil carts if you have to. I'm worried about the bull-rings" — where fifty thousand Squadron men, women, and children were crammed; plague was no respecter of nationalities.

He looked over at the *halcalde*, the mayor, a sleek-looking civilian named Carlo Arrias. "Messer Arrias, do you have anyone who knows the systems?"

"Certainly, Messer General," the man said, rubbing his hands together and grinning. *Well, somebody's happy, at least.* "The Squadrones would never authorize the funds — as long as the whorehouses and bars were open the city was working fine to their tastes; *real* warriors live out in the country." A trace of bitterness there. "There's emergency repairs we can do. A relief to finally get something *done* in this job."

"Grammeck, see to it; you can use on-duty units for labor, and prisoners when we've gotten them organized. Maximum priority on the defenses." His first impulse was bunkers and earthworks, but against the barbarians a nice high masonry wall would do, if it stood. "Then roads, here and around the city."

Thank the Spirit *we didn't have to fight in the rainy season*, he thought, sipping at a cup of soup. Even the main arteries near the city were in shocking condition.

"Will do, sir."

"Now, about billeting," Raj said. Arrias frowned.

"Messer general, couldn't more of the troops be accommodated in Squadron properties?"

Raj grinned. "Not until they've been properly inventoried and stripped," he said. "I can keep them from stealing too much from living, breathing fellow-citizens, but not from absent barb heretics. Speaking of which, Jorg; I want three full battalions of infantry on continuous patrol as *guardia*; I'm authorizing you to take over whatever police arrangements this city had —"

He looked at Arrias. The man spread his palms: "The Admiral didn't like civilians having any sort of armed organization," he said apologetically. "We had a volunteer watch, but it was mostly poorer Squadron members."

"Well, we'll work out something permanent later," Raj went on. "Jorg, I want strict control. Come down like a ton of cement on anyone who so much as stiff a barkeep or a hooker."

Menyez dragged off three of his infantry Majors and they went into a huddle at a side table over a street map of the city.

"Kaltin," Raj went on.

Gruder looked up, alert and smiling; he was nattily turned out, freshly shaved, and had a ruby stud in one ear; rumor had it that a prominent young widow had already invited him to use her townhouse as billet for his headquarters.

"Kaltin," Raj went on, "I'm still concerned about Curtis Auburn and those damned ten thousand men of his; it's only a week's sail from here to Sadler Island, he's going to have to hear about what's going on *sometime*. If he lands outside and joins his brother the Admiral, well and good— but he *might* just try attacking us here. Go over the harbor defenses — personally, and whatever records you can scrape up: get Grammeck to give you some of his people. I want a fallback plan for defense against simultaneous assaults on the walls and the outer harbor."

Port Murchison had two linked lagoons; the outer was the merchant docking area, and the smaller circular one farther inland was the military. They were joined by a canal, but only the merchant harbor was directly accessible from the sea.

"Which reminds me," he continued: "Security. We want no tales getting out to the hot-blooded Curtis."

"Ahem," Arrias said. Raj raised an eyebrow. "Messer General Whitehall, I have here" — he pulled out a slip of paper — "a small list, compiled with the help of the Reverend Arch-Syssup, of— hmmm—questionable non-Squadron persons. You will understand, since the barbarians ruled here so long . . . and to tell the truth, there are those not anxious to see our city back under East Residence rule."

For which there are good reasons, Raj admitted. The Admirals had been sloppy, inefficient, lazy, corrupt, and occasionally oppressive rulers. The Civil Government was nearly as corrupt, but vastly more sophisticated and energetic. The Southern Territories would be better-organized and more productive now, but the local ruling class would not necessarily reap the benefits. He made an inquiring noise.

"Guildmaster Ferteryo Saylazar, to begin with," the mayor said. "He was instrumental in having the Civil Government's resident merchants interned when the news of the invas—of the liberation first arrived. And —"

Iron-heeled boots slammed to attention outside the door, and hands slapped on iron as rifles were brought to salute.

"The honorable Messer Senior Administrator Berg," a voice said briskly, as the doors opened.

"Ah, Messer Administrator Berg," Raj went on; the man came through the door and handed his riding cloak to a servant, accepting a glass of lemonade and dusting himself down.

Raj raised an eyebrow. "You didn't come in with the fleet?" he said. Orders to bring the fleet and enter the harbor sometime today had gone out to Admiral Gharderini right after the battle, while the fleet worked north in concert with the Army. There had been little contact, but according to the last report —

his eyes flicked down to the map — the fleet had been resting in a cove about three kilometers south.

"No," Berg said, puzzled. "Admiral Gharderini sailed immediately on receiving news of the victory, right after Major Dalhouse arrived with his detachment. But I had some matters to get in order first . . ."

"Wait a minute — *quiet, please!*" The buzz of conversation died. "Whendid Gharderini sail? With *who?*"

"Yesterday: Your courier arrived, then Major Dalhouse with about a hundred men. They embarked, and steamed off right then, well, actually around midnight . . . Why?"

Raj held up a hand to stay him and turned to the halcalde. "Messer Arrias?"

"Ah — then the four warships weren't supposed to be in dock?" the mayor said nervously. He looked around, touching a finger to his cravat. *How can I avoid getting sucked into Army politics I know nothing about?* was written plainly enough on his face. "They've been, ah, loading supplies since last night."

"Supplies?" Raj said flatly.

"From the Admiral's warehouses. A number of export trades were the Admiral's property . . ." His voice trailed off. Raj spun on one heel like a gun-breech closing.

"Who's got the harbor sector?" he snapped.

"17th Cuirassiers," Jorg Menyez said. Everyone was suddenly conscious of the absence of Captain Hermano Suharto.

"Major Gruder," Raj said. "Turn out the 7th Descottand get them down there. Find out what the *hell* is going on. See that all naval personnel return to their ships; and if you find Dalhouse, put him under close arrest and bring him here, immediately."

"Sir!" Gruder said; suddenly the carefully brushed tunic looked like the glittering skin of a hunting carnosauroid. "If he resists, sir?"

"Kill him."

Captain Hermano Suharto needed the two troopers on either side to hold him up; the bandages on his face and side were still leaking red. He tried to salute as Raj stood.

"Get this man a chair, for the Spirit's sake," he snapped. "Kaltin?"

"Gharderini right enough," the scarred young Descotter said. "And Dalhouse with some of his cutthroats, and Hingenio Buthelezi and about half a dozen others — officers from the 17th and the 1st Gaur, mostly. That seagoing counter-jumper and his Blackjackets" — marines — "had a cool half-million worth loaded by the time we got there. Captain Suharto had some of his own men there; he was arguing with Dalhouse, then the *hijdaput* drew down on Suharto and cut him. There would have been a firefight right there and then if we hadn't ridden up; the warships fired blanks over our heads while the bastards got back on board, then they made steam. The last anyone saw of them, they were heading right out to sea."

Raj sank back in the chair, his hands clenched white on the arms.

observesaid Center:

— and Dalhouse bowed before the Chair. It was a private audience in the Palace, in the Negrin Rooms; the Governor, Lady Anne, and Tzetzias seated, Dalhouse, Buthelezi and Gharderini standing as petitioners. Cool evening light came through the tall windows, picking out the ancient murals of waterfowl and reeds.

"Sovereign Mighty Lord," Dalhouse said, rising from the prostration. "With a heavy heart I bring Your Supremacy news of your servant's treason."

"Explain," Barholm said dryly. Lady Anne frowned, and the Chancellor steepled his slim fingers and raised a brow.

"Whitehall's arrogance is beyond belief, Your Supremacy!" Dalhouse's face contorted with anger. "He appoints known traitors like Poplanich and baseborn nobodies, peasants and infantrymen, to command over loyal men of good birth. Why? Because they owe everything to him, of course! Instead of sending back his loot to Your fisc as is his plain duty — as we loyal men have done —"

Tzetzias leaned forward and handed the Governor a slip of paper; this time Barholm's brows rose at the amount.

"— he spends it on donatives to buy the loyalty of his troops. I fear, I greatly fear, Your Supremacy, that Whitehall intends to make himself an independent ruler in the Southern Territories, using the Expeditionary Force and Squadron lords he's won over by bribes and by favors to their heretical cult. Already he's forbidden plundering of the abominable Earth Cult shrines, while they drip with a century's stolen wealth from Star Spirit churches."

Barholm nodded. "You may go," he said, and the three officers withdrew.

"Well?" he said.

"General Whitehall is a very able man," Tzetzias murmured, riffling a file of papers. "Even Gharderini's report concedes a smashing victory over the Squadron army. Very able . . ." He spread his hands; the dangers of extremely able commanders were never far from a Governor's mind.

"Well, we certainly can't panic on the report of a spiteful little backstabber like Dalhouse," Lady Anne said.

She glared at Tzetzias; the feud between them was old and bitter, running back to her childhood as a dancer down in the stews. Tzetzias had been her client then, in the years before she met and captivated the rising star of Barholm Clerett. Most men would have flinched before that gaze; the Chancellor merely smiled thinly and inclined his head in a show of deference as she went on:

"Either Raj Whitehall is loyal or he isn't — Lady Whitehall certainly is, and she's proved it. We can't do anything until we receive unbiased reports."

"The matter needs more thought," Barholm said, biting his lip. "We'll—"

"Good riddance," Raj said, shaking away the vision. "Major Gruder, I approve of your actions; the last thing we need right now is a major battle among ourselves. In the unlikely event that we see those swine again . . . Captain Foley" — Gerrin's friend was the most scholarly of them — "draw up formal charges of mutiny, theft, and attempted murder against them all; we'll forward it to headquarters."

"And now," he went on, "back to work."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"No, I'm *not* going to the pen-pushing bastard's party," Kaltin Gruder said, rising on one elbow. The servants had cleared the remains of the picnic lunch away, all except for the stone jugs of lemonade and thrice-watered wine. He sipped moodily at his. "Neither is Raj, you'll see."

"I really don't see what you've got against Berg," Gerrin Staenbridge said, leaning back against the oak tree and linking his fingers behind his head.

It was a comfortably warm summer's day, with the breeze off the sea; the headland park they had chosen was the highest land inside the walls, once a nobleman's pleasance, now the 5th's headquarters bivouac. Two weeks in Port Murchison had seen them well settled in, enough that the officers could take an hour or two for lunch. The air smelled of sea and warm grass, and he felt pleasantly drowsy, amused at the bitter passion in the other man's voice.

The rest of the picnic party were farther down the hill. Raj Whitehall was on all fours, with toddler Barton Staenbridge riding on his back and crowing delightedly; Hadolfo Zahpata crouched and gibbered in front of him, giving a remarkably accurate imitation of an arborosauroid. Barton Foley and Ewardo Poplanich were lying on the rugs scattered under the jacaranda tree, singing to Suzette's *gittar* while Muzzaf kept time with a spoon on his knee. Pehdro Belagez and Hermano Suharto were doing slow-time fencing with wooden sabers in front of a wildly enthusiastic audience composed of Fatima and her new friends, Joni, Mitchi, and Karli. The three girls from Stern Island had turned out to be sisters, and they had all adopted Fatima as mentor.

"Berg should keep his hands off other men's wives," Kaltin spat.

Gerrin abandoned his abstract enjoyment of the four young women jumping up and down as they squealed and clapped — it reminded him of flowers swaying, especially given the varying hair colors—and turned wide eyes on the younger cavalry officer.

"Please," he said in a choked voice. "Tell me I didn't just hear the Rooster of East Residence, the Stud of Descott County, the man who's fought three duels over married women in the past year, say —" His coughing turned into helpless whoops of laughter.

Kaltin struggled and gave in to a sour grin, shrugging. "Well, that's different," he said, turning his own gaze on the fencers. Redheaded Karli blew him a kiss. He smiled briefly, then continued with a frown:

"There's Raj's honor to consider."

Gerrin shook his head, pulling a handkerchief out of the sleeve of the uniform jacket next to him and mopping at his streaming eyes.

"You *mehmacho* types," he said, "just don't appreciate women."

It was Kaltin's turn to stare round-eyed. "Apart from the part between navel and knees," Staenbridge amplified. "And you might remember that Berg's testimony may very well be all that stands between us and the frying post when we get back." He sighed. "Not to mention putting Dalhouse there, where he belongs."

"Endfile to that," Gruder said; his hand stroked the hilt of his sword. "Although I'd prefer to see him get what that traitor Saylazar got."

Staenbridge grimaced; the evidence had been fairly damning, but he was still surprised that Raj had ordered the merchant impaled. He looked over; the General was bucking, with Barton Staenbridge's hands wound in his hair and heels drumming on his ribs. There were a few threads of silver in the thick black curls . . . and Ferteryo Saylazar was still alive that morning on the steps of the Palace, standing straddled over the sharpened stake rammed up through his anus. A strong man could survive three, perhaps four days on a short stake.

"I'd rather shoot Dalhouse in the back and be done with it," Gerrin said. "And speaking of sneak assassins, have you heard what M'lewis found?"

"Ah- *ha*." Kaltin shook off lesser matters. "The Admiral?"

"Might be. In which case . . ."

"Battalion sweeps," Gruder said happily. "Hi! O Great Leader!"

Raj stood, holding the squirming child under one arm while he dusted himself off with the other. Fatima reclaimed her son amid a cooing crowd of her three protegees; the fencers came drifting over too, arms over each other's shoulders. Belagez had been very fond of Mekkle Thiddo, and anyone who tried to arrest the man who betrayed him was a blood-brother, even if he did now command the 17th Cuirassiers.

"Who gets the first rip-and-run at the Admiral's beard?" Gruder asked.

"Well —" Raj began, and froze. The others turned at his expression, to see the heliograph on the topmost tower of the Vice Governor's palace clicking out its sun-bright flickers.

" *Confirm please*," Gerrin read. As one, they all pivoted to watch the eastern horizon; the hill was nearly as high as the tower, and they could all see the reply from the warship stationed at the edge of visibility.

" *Multiple—sails—stop— estimate +40—stop— approaching—northwest— stop— Squadron—galleys—and— transports—stop— am—heading—in—stop— estimate enemy will arrive two hours minimum four maximum*.End."

Four voices whispered it aloud. Seconds later the women and child were alone on the hill, staring after the soldiers.

Barton Staenbridge began to cry.

"Bloody hell, bloody *hell*, " Raj said, squinting up the dockside street.

Port Murchison rose on low rolling ground from the water it enclosed on three sides. Like most cities originally laid out in the Civil Government, it was built on a partial grid plan; most of the waterfront was cut off by three- and four-story warehouses, there were tangles of alleys in parts, but the major streets ran more-or-less straight up from the water.

And on one of them, a barricade of wagons was visible. "Runner!" Raj said. "Message to whoever's in command up there, *get those wagons into a side street and keep them there until the word's given.*

"You," he went on, jabbing a finger at the harbormaster as the messenger clapped heels to his dog. "You've got the tugs ready?"

" *Say, Messenor,*" he replied in nervous Spanjol: Yes, my lord.

They were tubby little vessels, with ten two-man oars to a side and a raised catwalk; a tiny lazaretto stood under the wheel at the stern. Two more just like them were towing the final Civil Government steam ram into the inner military harbor; the bosuns danced down the catwalk swinging their ropes' ends, and the oars splashed with haste. Low smoke showed over the stoneforts, as the remaining six warships made steam in there; no help for that . . . He turned to the Captain of the 5th standing at his elbow.

"The men have been thoroughly briefed?" he said.

Tejan M'brust stroked his long black hair. "Yes, sir," he said cheerfully. "No sound unless the barbs catch on. Then they toss a grenade into the rower's pit and swim for it"

Risky duty . . . but the best way to keep the oarsmen honest, and *they'd* been told the orders too. M'brust would be going on one of them himself.

"Go to it, son," he said.

"Move, move, *move*, " Menyez shouted.

The drum beat in a long continuous roll: *to arms, to arms*. Men poured out of the houses down the long narrow street, some hopping as they jammed their feet into boots, others buttoning tunics loosened for the *siesta* . Hobnails clattered as they fell in by platoons, then dashed off with rifles at the trail; at the intersection outside, traffic directors in *guardia* armbands were grabbing file-closers and pushing them in the direction they should go, then halting everyone in a chorus of bone whistles as a battery of guns went by, the iron wheels rumbling on the cobblestones.

"Look," Menyez went on, turning to the assembled company commanders. Not his own 17th Foot—they didn't need a pep talk, although he'd be with them when it started — this was the 10th Melaga, an ordinary line outfit.

"You showed the dogboys what you could do at the Slaughterhouse" — that was the nickname for the first engagement with the Admiral — "and now you're going to do it again. It's all quite simple; you stand in reserve at the assigned locations, *keeping out of sight from the harbor*. No noise, no movement—the longer it takes until they realize we're here, the better. Then when the signal comes, get the stuff across the street, lie down behind it and shoot. In the unlikely event they get as far as your positions, give them the bayonet Understood, gentlemen?"

"Sir yes sir!"

"I make it thirty-zero-and-one meters," the sentinel sang out from the rooftop above.

"Keep it peeled and be ready to call it," the commander of the mortar battery said, before he turned back to Grammeck Dinnalsyn.

"Should be ready to go in less than twenty minutes, sir," he said.

The mortars were massive weapons; most of the weight was in the big circular baseplate of welded wrought iron and cast steel. Those had clanged to the pavement minutes ago, and the wheels on their cranked axles had been dragged away. Now the crews were pounding long iron spikes through its slots into the ground and shoveling dirt from the little plaza's garden into the trough that ran around the edge. The barrel was a stubby tube of cast steel with a 100mm bore, mounted on a ball joint in the center. As he watched, the men finished rigging a knock-down lifting tripod over it and ran a cable through an eyebolt at the muzzle. The aiming frame waited to take the barrel, a thing of rods and screw-wheels. Others were unloading crates of shells from a wagon.

"Good," Dinnalsyn said. "Remember, I want those things dropped right on the decks if I call for them."

"You'll get it, Major," the lieutenant said. "Glad to have someone in charge who knows a gun isn't fought from the same end as a dog," he went on.

"You'll find Messer Raj fully aware of that," the artillery specialist replied.

"Well, of course, *him*, sir!" The tone strongly implied Messer Raj used ships only because walking on water was tiring.

"Carry on." He mounted and heeled his dog, cantering until he came to the Captain at the head of a two-battery train of field guns.

"Got your position?" he said. The man looked up from a map he was holding across his pommel against the wind of passage.

"Checked it yesterday, sir," he replied. "The road goes over a lip there, no sight-line to the harbor. We can set up and then just manhandle the guns forward, and we'll cover the outer harbor mouth nicely. *And* the road down to the docks."

The forts at the outer entrance were useless for this work; they had been intended to keep ships *out* of the port, and were ruinous anyway.

"I'll go along to see you get that infantry support company," Dinnalsyn said.

The iron racket of the gunwheels echoed back from shuttered houses amid the whining panting of the dog-teams. No civilians were in sight: War had come to Port Murchison with a vengeance . . . and most of them would be indoors, imagining a vengeful Squadron force turned loose on the city that had betrayed their Admiral and their families.

"Do *not* break the windows out, you fools!" Barton Foley snapped. The trooper froze with his rifle butt poised. " *Openthem.*"

"Yisser," the soldier said, flushing.

Like children, Foley thought. *They just love to break things.* It seemed to be an ineradicable enlisted-man trait, like pyromania . . . *Good men, though. Steady.* None of them showing any nerves at being rousted out of a comfortable billet for a surprise battle.

There were a dozen men of A Company, 1st Platoon of the 5th Descott setting up in here; a fire team and a set of 500-round ammunition boxes back by the door. The room had been some merchant's salon until a few moments ago, when the Descotters broke in and threw the protesting family out to find their way uptown against the massive flow of military traffic. He stepped to the tall narrow windows and looked out over the balcony; the slanting road below made a dogleg here, giving a clear field of fire right down to the main docks. Across the way more troopers were settling in along the roofline with only their eyes showing, and he saw movement at the windows; at ground level there was a pounding of feet and tap of drums as company columns pounded past doing the double quickstep.

"Where's Lieutenant Ahlvayrez?"

"Up t' roof, Cap'n."

"All right, men," Foley said; acutely conscious of his own youth for a moment. He made a sweeping gesture with his hook. "Remember, don't let *them see* you — just like a sauroid hunt. This is a blind over a game-trail . . . memorize your firing positions and the terrain, then get well back and wait for your corporal to give you the word. Understood?"

Nods and grins, even on this unfamiliar urban terrain. None of them were townsmen by birth, and none of them had fought in a built-up area before either. That was rare enough that even the handbooks didn't deal with it, much.

"Carry on."

Gerrin was coming upstairs outside the room, slightly out of breath; they had time for a quick hug.

"Everything in place?" the older man said.

"More or less. They'll be settled in in about fifteen, twenty minutes." They both looked at their watches; an hour and a half since the heliograph message. "It's those cow-handed peon infantry I'm worried about — they take a week to chew the cud of an unfamiliar idea."

"Raj thought of that," Gerrin said, taking a deep breath. He squeezed the younger man's shoulder. "I'm off to the command post. Be careful, my dear."

Foley grinned and flourished the hook where his left hand had been. "Always," he said.

"Bloody odd way to run a battle," Raj said, leaning back in the deck chair and raising the binoculars.

The overall command post had been set up on a rooftop patio with a good view down to the harbor and a crenellated wall; that was meant to be ornamental, but the stone was thick and the gaps for riflemen quite functional. There was a map table set up, and a rank of messengers waiting; a portable heliograph stood with the operator's hands on the levers. The soldiers seemed incongruous among the potted rosebushes and bougainvillea The city had fallen very quiet; perhaps quiet enough to be suspicious, but there was not much he could do about that.

Not much I can do about anything, he thought, swallowing acid.

does it distress you to have to give orders and trust others to carry them out? Center commented drily.

Raj laughed, drawing awed looks from some of the troopers. *It's easy for you*, he thought.

is it?

Raj blinked in surprise, then turned to Suzette. "How's our mutual friend Berg?" he said, raising the glasses again.

The first transport was being towed between the ends of the breakwater; he could see the long blue swells creaming into surf on the rough line of interlocked stone that guarded the harbor. A substantial ship, bluff-bowed and three-masted; sailors were standing on the bare spars, at their ease — and away from the rowdy mass of Squadron warriors crowding the rails. *Getting ready for the knocking-shops if they're from the country, and home to the wife and kiddies if they're not*, he thought

"Nervous," Suzette said quietly. "He's . . . not a fighting man, after all."

"Well, I hope he doesn't bugger off for the bundu — the Admiral's out there somewhere," Raj said.

Two more ships were coming into the harbor mouth; there was a crowd of them dotted across kilometers of calm ocean, rising and falling with the long swells, bows to the wind under jibsails as they waited for their tows. Forty or more sail, and beyond them the long snaky shapes of war-galleys, their beaks flashing as the crews dipped the oars just enough to keep them head to the waves and holding station. They made a brave sight, familiar from the visions Center had sent him; from what he'd been told, they could be smelled a kilometer or better downwind. The Squadron navy used chained slaves and convicts as rowers, ten men to an oar and single-banked. The slave-barracks over on the military harbor had provided thousands of extremely enthusiastic volunteer laborers for the Civil Government forces, even though they were three-quarters empty with the decline of the Squadron's naval power.

"Feel that trembling in the ground?" Raj asked.

"What?" Suzette replied.

Raj gave a harsh laugh. "That's old 'Geysler' Ricks trying to burrow back from Starless Hell and strangle his descendants for ineptitude," he said.

Suzette sat beside him and took his hand; he squeezed back gratefully, feeling a little of the tension go out of his back. "What's going to happen?" she said softly.

"I don't know," he replied honestly. "As far as I can tell, I've got everything covered . . . but this isn't like a normal battle where you can sit on a hill and *see* everything." Most battlefields were less than a kilometer on a side, and in open country. "Even the reserve is decentralized — and I've got to keep enough men on the walls, just in case. I've told the front-line people to use their initiative."

The first transport was nearly to the docks, and a dozen more were inching in as the tug crews bent to their oars. It would be the men first, the dogs second, and then the warships following through to the inner harbor; tradition, for the Squadron. Convenient for him . . .

"Spirit knows what'll happen when they do *that*."

Hereditary Sector Commander Henrik Martyn leaped down the gangplank and fell full-length to kiss the grimy concrete of the dock.

"Home!" he howled, between smacks. "Eats! Booze! Pussy! No more hardtack, no more hairy hardcases!"

The men behind him on the ship yelled good-naturedly and poured down after him, slinging their weapons; servants and slaves would follow with their baggage.

"Fuckin' waste of a campaign," one of them said.

Martyn nodded, rising and dusting himself off; he was a tall young man, full-bearded and with shoulders like a bear. "Damn straight, Willi," he said. "Go to Sadler Island, sit in front of the city walls, scratch our butts, come back because somebody's seen a Civvie boogiemán behind a peach tree."

"Too much peach brandy, maybe," one of his friends laughed. "Hey, come back to my place for dinner? Try out your lies on Marylou."

"Sure, can't head home until tomorrow anyway — then I'll kick some peon butt. Lazy bastards probably let my wheat rot in the fields."

They shrugged their slung flintlocks to their backs and strolled off away from the docks, peering around for the friends and family who should have been there to greet them. The broad paved area along the piers was deserted, except for the thousand or so men from the ships fresh in dock. No stevedores but the few handling the ground-lines, and those went about their work with heads down and mouths shut; no bustle around the anchored merchantmen, no trains of carts and slaves at the warehouses. It even *smelled* quiet, like a hot dusty day out in the country or in some little *puheblo*, not like Port Murchison. Granted it was siesta time, but this was ridiculous.

"Where the fuck is everyone?" he asked, as he and a half-dozen others ambled up one of the cobbled roads toward the central plaza. "There a bullfight or a baseball game on today?" He hitched uneasily at his swordbelt

"Naw — nothin' scheduled; it's Holy Week, remember? There aren't even any *natives* around. Earth

Spirit — you don't think there's something to those latrine rumors about the Civvies invading, do you?"

"Those rabbit-hearted bastards? You've got to be — *hel lo , that's* better."

One of the dockside taverns seemed to be open, from the tinkling of a piano coming through the rippling glass-bead curtain that closed the entrance. A girl was standing in the doorway; Martyn angled over for a better look. *Rowf!* he thought: a high-breasted young one, with long shining blond hair and a complexion to match. She pouted at him as he approached, raising a wineglass to bee-stung lips and shooting out a hip. That made her slit skirt fall open, showing one long smooth leg right up to the hip; she turned and vanished into the door with a bump and grind as he came near.

"Hooo, darlin', wait for *me*, " he called. "C'mon, boys, a drink before dinner!" he added, over his shoulder.

He ducked through the bead curtain of the door, blinking in the dim light. Then his eyes focused on the girl; she was leaning her buttocks back against the rail of the bar and raising her skirt in both hands. A *natural* blonde. Martyn roared happily and reached for his belt-buckle as he stepped forward.

Darkness, and the floor rushing up to meet him.

"Is he dead, Antin?" Joni asked anxiously, dropping her skirt and hurrying forward.

Antin M'lewis chuckled as he slapped the chamois leather bag of lead shot into his palm, then bent to expertly slit the Squadron warrior's wallet loose from his belt. It was gratifyingly heavy; he tossed it to the girl.

"Joni," he said; then paused for a moment. Outside a single shout sounded, a few meaty smacks as of steel buttplates chunking into flesh, and the distinctive butcher's-cleaver sound of a bayonet driven into a belly. Scouts dragged bound or dead or feebly twitching bodies in through the door.

"Not th' first man led ter ruin by 'is prick — er the fifty-first, Joni," he went on. "Ye jist git yer pretty ass back t' th' door; keep on earnin' that there manumission an' dowry, flies to the honeypot. Hell, er a 'baccy shop fer yer very own!"

A calloused hand smacked down on her backside. She pouted uncertainly and resumed her pose in the door as a voice sounded softly from the second story.

"More comin!"

"Mounted party, Cap'n," said the man with the mirror on a stick poked up above the window. "'bout twenty a' em. Real important lookin' barbs, fer sure. Nice dogflesh."

"Wait for it, everyone," Barton Foley said. "Not until they get past the dogleg." His stump was itching; it always did, just before. It itched, and he saw the hand — what was left of the hand — just after something snatched at it, and he looked around from urging his men on toward the Colonists and it was *gone* He checked his weapons one more time; the cut-down double barreled shotgun in the holster across his back, the pistol, the saber — *and my hook*. Better than a hand in some ways.

Dog paws thudded in the street outside, and suddenly he felt fine. Fine and clear and light; that always happened too. Almost as good as reading the old poetry or making love, except that this was a feeling of being *more* in control, not out

"Now."

He turned and rose, as the men knelt up and leveled their rifles out the ground-floor window, and more from above and across the street. The pistol was in his hand as he stepped out into the sunlight. Twenty mounted Squadrones, right enough; one with a banner covered in stitching and brightwork: the comet-and-planet of the Admiral's family. Gaudy richness on the sleek, beautifully groomed dogs — and *that* must have taken some doing on shipboard; jewels on clothes and belts and weapons. The men were roaring in surprise, clawing for their weapons; mostly in their thirties, hard-looking even by Squadron standards.

One lifted his flintlock. *Crack*, and the top of his head spattered away from a bullet. A twin file of men double-timed out behind Foley and formed up with bayoneted rifles leveled; the Squadrones' heads swiveled, their faces liquid with shock. More rifles bore on them from rooftop and window. Nor could experienced men doubt the trembling intensity of spirit in the eyes of the young one-handed officer standing with his revolver making small prodding motions. The dogs wuffed uneasily, snuffing their masters' fear. Two extended curious noses toward the blood and brains leaking out on the worn paving stones, and the dead man's animal whined in distress.

"Drop the weapons and out of the saddle by three or you're all *dead*," Foley shouted. "One! Two!" The hook rose.

The Squadron noble next to the banner swung down to the ground and unbuckled his swordbelt; the others followed suit, moving like men drugged or newly wakened. Troopers in bluejackets and round helmets with chainmail neckguards darted forward to lead off the dogs and drag away the corpse.

A gaping Squadron warrior blinked in disbelief. "Earth Spirit! It's the *cunnarte gisuh sharums*," he blurted in Namerique: the phrase translated into Sponglish as *chickenhearted little darkies*.

The man screamed and fell to his knees as a Descotter rammed his rifle butt home over the kidneys. Foley took him under the chin with his hook, very gently.

"Times," he said to the wide-eyed face, "have *changed*."

The senior Squadron warrior shook off his bewilderment as troopers grabbed his elbows and began to lash them together behind his back.

"Take your hands off me, you peasant dogs!" he roared. "*I am Curtis Auburn!*"

"Oh- *ho!*" Foley said. Auburn stared at his smile and fell silent. After a few seconds he began to shake.

"They captured *who?*" Raj asked incredulously; the runner grinned back at him and saluted with a snap. The General shook his head. "Get him back here by all means — immediately. And my congratulations to Captain Foley. By all means, congratulations." He was still shaking his head as he turned back to the harbor, standing close to the parapet and using a tripod-mounted telescope. The wharves were black

with men, now; all the transports had docked. The war galleys were spider-walking in toward the inner harbor, a dozen or so still outside waiting. More shots crackling across the city; a half-dozen here or there, then the unmistakable slamming of a platoon volley. He focused on the docks; men were milling around in circles, twisting their heads to look up into the city, shouting questions at each other. Weapons were flourished overhead; a banner went up, and an ox-horn gave its dunting snarl. Warriors formed behind that, shouldering their way through the press toward the main road up from the harbor.

"It's time," he said, looking up to the man at the heliograph. " *Now.* "

"Now!" the commander of the mortar battery said, swinging his saber down.

Two men dropped the heavy cylindrical shell into the muzzle of the mortar. *SCHUUMP*, and a tongue of flame and heavy smoke shot into the air; the bomb was almost visible, a blur arching up over the rooftop and down toward the harbor.

"Overshot seventy-five," the observer lying on the tiles of the roof shouted.

"Up three," the officer snapped. Men spun the main screw-wheel beneath the muzzle, and the fat barrel swung a fraction higher. "Fire!"

SCHUUMP.

Smoke was beginning to haze the street, drifting away slowly west. The loading crew had stripped to the waist, only their Star amulets swinging against their hairless brown chests as they waited with hands poised over the next shell.

"On target, right in the middle of 'em!" the spotter shouted exultantly.

"Fire for effect—all tubes — five rounds!"

"Now!" the infantry officer barked.

His men put their shoulders to the sides of the wagons and pushed; the ironshod wheels rumbled as they ran the vehicles out of the laneway and across the broader avenue. Boots thundered behind them, and they heaved in unison to tip the four-wheeled farm carts over. Scores of strong hands dragged them together, and the footsoldiers crowded up behind them as their sergeants cursed and pushed them into order.

"Aim!"

The bayonets winked as the long rifles leveled, a line three deep. Four hundred yards down the road, a black mass of Squadron warriors halted their tentative advance. There was just time for them to let out a scream of rage and begin to dash forward.

"By platoons — volley fire — *fwego!*"

"Now, lads!" Gerrin Staenbridge said.

Four hundred rifles spoke in a stuttering crash; from behind the barricade of furniture and boxes across the road, and from rooftops and windows along it. The head of the charging column disappeared; a two-wheeled cart they had been pushing ahead of them shattered in a shower of splinters and fell sideways. A wheel broke free and rolled away backward toward the harbor, overtaking some of the fleeing men who ran or limped or tried to drag wounded comrades back with them.

"Ser!" a man called from the back of the room.

Staenbridge turned just in time to hear the shot and see him stagger back with his face pulped by a shotgun blast.

"Face about!" he called crisply, bringing the blade of his pistol's foresight down on the window.

The rear of the room was a row of windows, giving out on the courtyard of the house. A Squadron warrior blocked one for a moment, and then the revolver kicked in his fist, the recoil a surprise as it always was when the aim was right. The body slumped and lay across the sill. Men turned from the street windows and fired from the hip, the ricochets as dangerous as enemy fire; one plucked at the sleeve of his coat as it wasp-whined by. Then the enemy were pouring through. He picked his targets and shot four times, dropped the empty weapon and drew his saber. Steel clashed about him, sword on bayonet; a charging barbarian came at him with long blade upraised above his head and practically ran up the outstretched point of Staenbridge's weapon.

"Feh," he said, kicking the man free of the saber and blocking another cut, locking wrists. The Squadron warrior fell away as a trooper drove his bayonet into his back, blade carefully horizontal to the ground to avoid catching on the ribs. The room fell silent.

"Lieutenant," Gerrin said, in a clear flat voice. "Take your platoon and check the courtyard and roofs, if you please."

"Messer Raj!" the company commander said in surprise.

"Damned if I'm going to sit on a couch *all* the way through a battle, Captain," Raj said, sliding out of the saddle.

The reserve company of the 5th was standing to arms in front of the pillared forecourt of a Star church, short a platoon already called away. The men were quiet, straining attention toward the firing nearer the docks; they gave a cheer as Raj's banner rode up, though. A panting runner skidded around a corner and jogged up to the steps.

"Ser," he said, facing Raj. "Major Staenbridge reports infiltrators tryin' to use the courtyards an' alleyways to git around his block-force. Thinks it's some Squadron chief got hisself a bright idear. Asks fer reinforcement to block it, got enough on 'is plate where we are."

"Sir, that must be —" the Captain began.

"I know, Captain Saynchez," Raj said. Center was painting a map on his eye, the most efficient route

strobing across it in a red line. "Fall in and follow me."

There was a murmur of awe as they did, and a quick three-minute run to the mouth of an alleyway that gave into a gated internal patio shared by four houses. Downhill toward the harbor it was divided from a service lane by a low wall.

"Take up positions under that wall," he said. "Strict silence."

They crouched, the only sound their panting; these back alleys were heavy with the scent of stale garbage, and less pleasant things. Raj could hear nothing, see little, but Center shone a red light in front of his eyes. Then voices muttered on the other side of the wall; more and more of them, trying to be quiet. The narrow-heeled boots of Squadron warriors grated on the flagstones out there, and a sword clanged as it was brushed against a wall. The light before Raj's eyes turned green. He shot out a fist, conscious of the eyes on him, and extended one finger. Two. Three.

"Aim!" the Captain screamed, as the men leaped erect and leveled their rifles over the wall.

The Squadrones were massed not ten meters away, at least two hundred of them in the irregular opening beyond the wall and more down the five-meter alleyway between the houses. All their attention had been on the rooftops and to the west, where they hoped to filter through the buildings and move to take the 5th Descott's roadblock in the rear. Most of them had just enough time to look around when the rifles came level.

BAM. Smoke hid the enemy for a second; then it showed what happened when seventy-five rifles were fired into a confined space. Most of the bullets had found two or three targets, and the misses were bouncing down between the stone walls that lined the narrow lane.

BAM. The Squadrones were screaming in sheer horror as the rifles spoke again. A few managed to fire back; the young Captain beside Raj dropped, pawing feebly at the wound on his back. The legs did not move, except for a few pithed-frog twitchings as the severed spinal nerves sent their last impulses.

BAM. An attempt at a charge broke up in bloody chaos; Raj aimed his revolver carefully and gave mercy to a man crawling toward the Descotters guns with a mask of blood across his face.

"*Marcy, migo!*" A few voices called it out first: Mercy, friend. Then more, many more: "*Marcy, varsh!*" "Mercy, brother. Some down at the end of the alley tried to run out, and more gunfire greeted them. All the Squadrones were throwing down their weapons now, those who could, and falling to their knees, crying out for quarter.

"Cease fire!" Raj shouted. A few more aimed rounds pecked out, and a man in front of him flopped backward, still kneeling, his long brown hair dropping into a pool of blood from the massive exit-wound in his back. "Cease fire, I said!"

The rifles fell silent, and men vaulted the wall to round up the stunned survivors. Raj suddenly felt a stab of pain and put a hand to the seat of his trousers; it came away red.

"Yer wounded, ser!" one of the troopers said, leaning his rifle against the wall and fumbling out the package of blessed powder and boiled gauze on his belt

"Only a graze," Raj said. There was a flat sadness in his tone as he watched the Squadron prisoners stumble by, disbelief on their blood-flecked faces. *And only in the arse. The poor bastards couldn't*

find their own.

"Cease fire," Dinnalsyn said, raising his head from the telescope. "Signal the mortars to cease fire too."

All around him in the little park men slumped to the earth; air quivered over the scalding-hot barrels of the field guns, and the brass shell casings that littered the earth behind them.

Ships were burning and sinking all over the outer harbor; over the inner, too, from the smoke. One was on fire right in the mouth of the breakwaters, aground on the moles. Tiny figures dropped over the rails, wading on the half-submerged rocks; eager tentacled forms cruised just below the waves, moving forward to the scent of blood. Beyond them in the ocean the last half-dozen galleys were well out of range, helpless spectators to slaughter. A long black shape churned out of the inner harbor and turned for the outer, its low-slung ram casting back twin waves and its stacks fuming. Five more followed it in line, paddles beating the harbor water to froth, moving with a butting purpose utterly unlike the organic grace of sailing craft.

"Sweet merciful Avatars and Holy Saints," he murmured. The water was actually tinged with blood — pink more than red, but . . .

He turned the binoculars on the nearest street. Three field-guns fired as he watched, and the Squadron rush dissolved as the canister shot filled the roadway and bounced between the walls. Freakishly, the man who had led it remained standing for a second; he had dropped his banner because both arms were off at the shoulder, and he stood screaming amid the fragments of his men. The dismounted cavalry below the guns gave him a volley in mercy. Further down the street the last Squadron holdouts were trying to return fire from prone position behind bodies, but each time one raised himself on his elbow to reload his muzzle-loader, a Descotter marksman fired. From the roofs of some of the larger buildings heavier weapons were firing, huge rifles in the hands of squat figures in leggings and breechclouts who danced derision between shots.

"Not much longer," Dinnalsyn whispered.

"You made the right decision, calling for surrender," Raj said.

"I, ah, I —" Curtis Auburn stuttered.

The dogs whined as they picked their way among the hot shell-casings. The gunners were dropping them back into the round holding slots in the caissons, using tongs. Beyond the gun positions the sloping surface of the road was black with powder residues; beyond that, littered almost to covering with spent rifle cartridges. Auburn's eyes were farther down the street, though, on the windrows of bodies: the dogs whined more loudly as their riders pressed their knees tighter and forced them onto the slick-slippery surface. Prisoners were busy, working under guard to throw bodies and body-parts onto handcarts. Load after load was lumbering away, down toward the harbor.

There was a cleared lane down the center, more or less, but that was reddish-brown with a scum that pooled and clung. More flies than Raj had ever seen in one spot swarmed about, making the mounts toss their heads: The late afternoon sun was hot, and a miasma was already rising from the street.

"I've heard the expression," Raj murmured to himself as they proceeded at a slow walk. There seemed no end to the carpet of bodies, no impression the carts could make on their number. "But this is the first time I've actually seen a street run with blood."

Administrator Berg had been riding behind them, with a handkerchief pressed to his face. Now he stumbled out of the saddle and to the side of the road, bending over and heaving with his eyes squeezed tightly shut to avoid seeing what he was spattering with vomit. Raj turned his toes inward to touch Horace's ribs; the dog stopped and began to sit, then straightened at his jerk on the reins. He looked around, feeling as if there was a thin pane of glass between him and the world. *Only two hours*, he thought. *Only two hours*. The blood had splashed and stuck far up the sides of the whitewashed buildings; blood and bits of flesh.

"We'll have to flood the streets and scrub everything down," he mused.

They were coming into the wider open areas around the warehouses; the bodies were scattered here, with room between them, although the blood from higher up had pooled and clotted around the dams of flesh. Many of them had been bayoneted or sabered in the back; others had the mutilated look produced by the 15mm Skinner rounds. On the dockside itself thousands were squatting with their hands on their heads, or helping to put out the fires that smoldered on the wrecked ships. The sea breeze was a touch of cleanliness — if you ignored the glistening shapes that cruised just below the surface of the harbor, broad smooth humps as they nearly surfaced, a fluke or a beak or a writhing arm protruding when they turned to dive. Shots had taught them to keep back from the dock—you could see intelligence in the huge unwinking eyes that showed now and then — but the water writhed when a corpse-cart was backed to the edge.

"And I hope you can persuade your brother to do likewise," Raj went on, in the same emotionless voice.

Curtis Auburn shook himself; on the third try his voice functioned roughly.

"Ah, I'm sure, recognition of the Civil Government's suzerainty —" he began.

Suddenly Raj reached out and grabbed the Squadron leader by the knotted braids on the side of his head.

"*Look, Auburn!*" he shouted, his voice a shocking roar. He forced the other man's head around effortlessly, despite the bull neck's resistance. A cart piled high with bodies tipped and slid two-score more into the waiting serrated beaks. "Look at that!"

The Grand Captain of the Squadron wrenched his head away and buried his head in his hands. Raj waited, lighting a cigarette and turning his eyes away.

"Don't try to bargain with me, Auburn," he went on, when the other man was calmer; his own voice had the metallic flatness back. "I beat Conner, I beat your Admiral Charles, and now I've beaten *you*. We've lost less than a battalion, and killed half the fighting men in your entire nation. Once might have been luck, twice a mistake — three times is the Voice of Heaven, man!"

He offered a cigarette, and a light when Auburn's hands shook. *Not fear, not really*, he decided. *Shock*. Curtis Auburn's entire world had vanished in an afternoon; this morning he'd been a ruler of a century-old kingdom, leading home a powerful army. Three hours later, the army was downdragger food — and he was a rightless prisoner.

"What do you intend for my men — for your prisoners?" he said quietly.

"Well, under the laws and customs of war, they're mine to do with as I please," Raj said grimly. Quite true; he could execute, enslave, or ransom them — and their families — as he pleased or his ruler instructed. Auburn would be remembering what his ancestors did to the Civil Government prisoners from the last expedition, blinded and castrated en masse. Raj let the silence stretch for a moment

"But Governor Barholm has decreed as much mercy as possible," he went on.

"Only those who refused to surrender when summoned on the march north will be enslaved." Several thousand, and a profitable object-lesson. "And any among the prisoners who refuse to swear allegiance, of course. Those who do swear will be formed into military units under Civil Government officers, and sent back to East Residence for retraining and deployment to the eastern frontier. All their property here is forfeit, of course — only those who came in voluntarily will keep their lands — but they'll have their families, and if they give good and loyal service, they can expect to rise in the hierarchy of Earth's proper government."

He leaned forward and caught Curtis's eyes. "If your brother comes in and makes unconditional submission, you and he can take your households with you; you'll be granted estates near East Residence" — carefully watched, of course— "and Charles's followers will get terms at least as good as those yours do. Failing immediate surrender, tell him he can run but he can't hide; I will send every living Squadron man, woman, and child to hell or the auction block and *I will send Charles Auburn's head to the Governor packed in salt*. By the living Spirit of Man, I swear it."

"Are you a man or a demon?" Curtis asked hoarsely.

"*I am the Sword of the Spirit of Man*," he said, with the conviction of absolute belief. "Now get out — and tell your Admiral what you've seen. Tell him everything."

"Well, a great victory, yes," Administrator Berg said. His eyes were carefully unfocused as they rode back toward the Palace; he seemed to be trying to avoid seeing either the man beside him or the world around. Raj handed him a clean handkerchief, and he accepted it gratefully. "We've been . . . very fortunate, yes, the Spirit has favored us."

"Oh yes, not with luck," Raj said calmly. Berg jumped a little at the normality of the tone. "The enemy made every mistake they could . . ." He paused to return the salute of a detail marching back to quarters. "And with men like these behind me, if they *hadn't* screwed up we'd have won anyway."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"It's him," Muzzaf said, bowing beside the Vice Governor's chair. "All the most important lords are with him, Messer Raj; but . . ."

Raj sat calmly, his hand on the Mace. The audience hall of the Palace was not nearly as crowded as it had been for the assumption of power, leaving plenty of room for the Squadron nobles — soon to be ex-nobles — who would be brought in to swear submission with their leader. Much of the rest of the room was piled with captured Squadron battle-flags, and not even the thick incense from the priest's censurs could entirely hide the smell of the rotting blood many of them were soaked with. The Admiral and his retinue had also been routed past the mass graves . . . and the soldiers and their weapons lining the whole route in from the gates and up to the Chair were also an exercise in education.

There was no point in being subtle with barbarians, not if you wanted to be clearly understood. Sometimes he thought that applied to most civilized men as well.

"Yes?" he murmured to the Komarite.

"Ah . . . the Admiral is, shall we say, not entirely well. Functional, but not well."

Raj nodded; there were rumors about hereditary instability in the Auburn family — and Spirit knew the man had had enough shocks of late. The Companions glanced at each other a little uneasily, and there was a ripple of comment through the civil dignitaries below the dais at the exchange they could see but not hear.

"Don't worry, my friends," he said quietly, smiling. It had been three days since the battle, and they were all thoroughly relieved that there wasn't going to be another. "Charles Auburn can be a raving lunatic for the rest of his life, as long as he sings out loud and clear today. How's the loading going, Gerrin?"

"Right on schedule," the older man said, in the same low murmur. "We should be able to get ten thousand Squadrones to East Residence in the first wave, without overcrowding. With the cadre of Regulars they'll need; they can start their training as soon as they're sworn in, and continue it as they march east."

There were rumors that Ali had consolidated his position and was looking for revenge for the death and defeat of his father Jamal. Not to mention a victory that would rally his *emirs*.

"Ali may get a surprise," Raj nodded.

The noise through the great open bronze doors became a swelling roar. The troopers at the door snapped from at ease to attention, and the motion rippled down the silent ranks lining the red-carpeted corridor with the smooth regularity of falling dominoes. Halfway down the corridor was a structure of spears lashed together, forming an arch about chest-high. Charles Auburn checked slightly as he saw it, checked again with a grimace of hatred as he saw Karl and Ludwig Bellamy standing in places of honor at the foot of the dais. Then he came on, with the defeated lords behind him; they all bowed their sackcloth-covered shoulders to pass under the spears.

Then Auburn was grinning as he reached the first of the stairs. Raj's foot was resting on the staff of the last Squadron banner, the ancient flag of Admiral Ricks, taken from the great Temple now restored to the Holy Federation Church after one hundred and twenty years. The faded gold silk spilled down almost to the last Admiral's feet, and he bent to finger it.

"Vanity!" he cackled, looking up. Raj felt a slight chill; there was something inhuman there. "It's all vanity . . . I was vain with flags, now you are — vanity, vanity, all vanity!"

Curtis Auburn nudged his brother sharply, and the glaze left his eyes. He dropped clumsily to his knees,

and the others behind him; Charles drew his sword and unloaded pistol, laying them down. Officers bore them up to the Chair and laid them at Raj's feet, and the trumpeters behind blew a fanfare. All the spectators cheered, as the Auburns and their followers were lead away.

"Messer general," a voice said at Raj's ear. He looked around, and felt a small cold shock at the expression on Barton Foley's face.

"Yes?"

"There's a courier from East Residence, sir. From the Palace; it's Colonel Osterville."

One of Barholm's Guards; as Raj was himself, technically. A jack-of-all-trades, specializing in discreet strongarm work.

"Sir, he demands immediate audience . . . and his dispatches carry the Seal."

The voices of an infantry regiment marching down to the docks to embark came clear through the windows. That was the only sound to break the nervous silence, as Raj and his officers waited in the upper audience room:

" Where have you been this while away,

Peydro, Peydro?

Out with the rest on a picnic lay.

Peydro, my Peydro, ah!

They catted us out of the barrack-yard

To Spirit knows where from Residence-ward

And you can't refuse when you get the card

And the Guv'nor gives the party!"

Osterville was in an immaculate uniform of white and gold; he checked a little as he entered, under the glares of the Companions. His hard smooth face showed nothing, though. Barholm Clerett was a judge of men, in his way. He made his way briskly to the head of the table, saluted and presented a thick parchment envelope stamped with a gold-and-purple seal.

"Sir," he said, "I present the order of the Governor."

Raj took the envelope and turned it in his hands. "Upon whom may the Spirit shower blessings. I acknowledge receipt, Colonel. Do you have a verbal digest?"

Osterville looked around at the hard glares.

"I have no secrets from my officers . . . unless the orders are confidential?"

"No." The Guard cleared his throat. "You are directed to turn over your command to me and to return immediately to East Residence, there to render accounting to the Chair for your actions."

There was a chorus of oaths from lower down the table; Kaltin Gruder leaped to his feet and slammed his fist down on the teak.

"Actions! 'Account for his actions,' like a criminal? He's bloody well destroyed the Squadron in three weeks' campaign — after everyone else failed miserably for a century — and left the Civil Government richer by a province, by twenty-five thousand soldiers and a million gold FedCredits! *Those* are his fucking actions, you Palace popinjay, you lapcat for—"

"*Major Gruder!*" Raj barked. Kaltin sank back into his seat, but his left hand stayed clenched on the hilt of his saber. "If you can't restrain yourself, you are excused!"

Raj's fingers broke the seal; he touched his amulet to his lips and then read the vermilion ink.

"Accurate, Colonel. The written version's a little more formal, but accurate."

He closed his eyes, his fingers playing with the thick paper. Barholm was suspicious to a fault, and Dalhouse *had* been back quite a while. Successful generals were always under a cloud; it went with the territory, and he was the most successful for a long, long time.

observesaid Center:

— and Raj was seated once again on the Vice Governor's chair. This time the viewpoint was well back; he could see his own face, stiff as if carved in stone, as the Arch-Syssup lowered the regalia on him — the sacred keyboard and headset that only Governors could wear. Below, an audience of Expeditionary Force soldiers and Squadron nobles cheered in a frenzy of adoration: *Conquer! You conquer!*, the traditional call for an Enchairment—and a city was burning. Sandoral, he thought; the great eastern bastion he had held against the Settlers' armies. Now it burned like a pyre, a throbbing red pyramid reflected crimson in the waters of the great Drangosh River. Behind it innumerable lesser fires marked farms and villages in all the stretch of fertile irrigated land that ran to the foothills of the Oxheads. Troops marched by on the road, men in the spired helmets and scarlet jellabas of the Colonial regulars. Flags waved above them, the green and crescent of Islam, the peacock of the Settlers, Tewfik's Seal of Solomon —

— and a Raj aged beyond belief lay in a bed he recognized, the Admiral's quarters in this very palace. Each halting breath was a struggle; the flesh had fallen away from the strong Descotter bones of his flesh. Priests prayed, and a few elderly officers wept. Outside came the sounds of gunfire and the clash of steel, as men fought for the old king's legacy —

Better for the Civil Government that I had never lived at all, if I make myself ruler here, he thought. *Of*

course. These men are the best troops we have.

accurate, Center said implacably, **although oversimplified.**

And nothing I built here could last.

97% ± 6% indicates immediate civil war and continued fission upon your death, Center said, the centrifugal process will continue unabated on Bellevue until maximum entropy is attained, the next upswing of the cycle will, with a high probability, take at least eight millennia.

Raj remembered the vision of flint-knapping cannibals crouched on the ruins of East Residence and shuddered. The soldiers' song came louder through the windows, as the battalion passed along beneath the Palace windows:

"What did you get to eat and drink,

Peydro, Peydro?

Standing water as thick as ink,

Peydro, my Peydro, ah!

A bit o' beef that were three year stored,

A bit o' mutton as tough as a board,

A sauroid we killed with the sergeant's sword,

When the Guv'nor gave the party."

He opened his eyes and smiled wryly. "Vanity, vanity," he murmured. Then aloud: "We'll need a few formalities, but for the present —" He lifted the Mace of office and stood, offering it to Osterville. There was a gasp and long sigh of exhaled breath from the others as the Guard took it in his hands. "If you'll excuse me and these officers, Colonel," Raj went on softly, "we have a few administrative matters to prepare for you."

Osterville looked around; by the strict letter of the instructions all Brigadier General Raj Whitehall should do now was walk down to the docks, but there were times when initiative was necessary.

"By all means, sir," he said.

The babble broke out the minute the door closed; Raj looked at the faces, tense with anger and concern, and smiled gently.

He waited until the noise died away.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "My friends, I thank you more than words can say. But before anyone

says a word that might be considered treasonous — *no*. Not for any reason."

"But, Raj — he'll *kill* you," Barton Foley said. A tear trembled at the edge of one eye. "Spirit damn it, it isn't *fair*."

"Well, it's possible that will happen," Raj said, taking a cigarette out of a box on the table. He contemplated his hands for a second.

"Understandable, perhaps. Generals have shot their way into the Chair before" — *including Barholm's uncle Vernier Clerett* — "always with disastrous results. But hell," he grinned, "it's not an arrest order, after all. As Kaltin pointed out, I *have* accomplished the mission assigned — and going back peacefully as ordered will be the best testimony possible. Plus I'll have yours, of course."

A chorus of agreement; Administrator Berg rapped his water glass down.

"By the Spirit, mine too!" he blurted; the soldiers' eyes turned toward him. "It's well, only just," he said. "Besides," he added shrewdly, "when the Governor sees the figures on what we're bringing him, even Chancellor Tzetas will have to sing Messer Raj's praises. Three years' total revenue! Not *counting* the value of three-quarters of the lands in the Territories, now forfeit to the fisc."

There was a thoughtful silence inside the room, and a ruffle of drums from outside the window:

" *What did you do for knives and forks,*

Peydro, Peydro?

We carries 'em with us wherever we walks,

Peydro, my Peydro, ah!

And some was sliced and some was halved,

And some was crimped and some was carved,

And some was gutted and some was starved,

When the Guv'nor gave the party."

"And even if the worst happened, rebellion cannot be justified," Raj said. "Say what you like about Barholm Clerett, he's a strong Governor — the strongest we've had in generations. Gentlemen" — he leaned forward in an unconscious attempt to drive home the lesson — "these barbarians we just fought, *they* started off as soldiers of Holy Federation as well; look what rebellion's brought *them*, over the years. Beyond that, Barholm has my oath, which is all the honor a soldier has; and beyond *that*, he's the Vice Regent of the Spirit of Man of the Stars upon Earth."

He rose and offered his arm; Suzette took it. "Gerrin, if you'd draw up movement orders for the Skinners? I promised them they'd be sent home, and Osterville might not consider himself bound." A wry

smile. "See you on shipboard, gentlemen."

"There goes," Gerrin Staenbridge whispered, as the door closed behind them, "a true hero. The poor luckless bastard." The Companions sat in silence, listening to the receding footsteps and the fading song:

" What was the end of all the show,

Peydro, Peydro?

Ask Messer Raj, for I *don't know,*

Peydro, my Peydro, ah!

We broke a King and we built a road—

And a Star church stands where our boot-heels goed.

And the harbor's clean where the raw blood flowed

When the Guv'nor gave the party."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Raj," Suzette went on, looking up from the table, "at least don't rush straight back to East Residence!"

Her delicate tilt-eyed features were furrowed with anxiety. The brass cabin lantern cast moving shadows over the captain's cabin of the transport, commandeered for the General and his lady. The sterncastle windows still shed more light, from the westering sun behind them. The manifold creak and groan of timbers and planks surrounded them, the almost-living noise of a wooden ship under full sail. The huge salt smell of the sea filled the cabin, with the warm brass scent of the lantern and clean wool from the bed. Raj turned from watching the long white wake of the ship and the long-winged dactosauroids hovering over it as his wife went on:

"Darling, stop over in Hayapalco. You can say you need to rest the men, it's a long voyage . . . and then I can go back to East Residence and talk to Lady Anne. You can be sure *she* isn't listening to that tattletale Dalhouse, who's been sniffing around Tzetzas for years now."

Negotiate, Raj knew she meant. With Lady Anne pleading his loyalty, and thousands of troops at his back; negotiate terms with the threat of insurrection unspoken in the background.

observeCenter said.

— and Barholm sat on the Chair, the arc-lights blazing on the gold-tissue robes and peacock jewelry of the Chair as it rose on its soundless hydraulic cylinder. He stared down impassively at the kneeling figure of Raj Whitehall; only someone who knew him well could see the cold anger in the expressionless black eyes.

"Our well-beloved servant General Whitehall is returned victorious," he said. "Let all honor—"

"Yes, that would work," Raj said quietly. "For a while. Maybe for a year; maybe even for four or five, Barholm's a cautious man. Then he'd kill me . . . or I'd have to kill him to stop him." He paused for a moment, and his voice grew sharper: "*Wouldn't I?*"

Suzette nodded unwillingly, nervously lighting a cigarette and jamming it into the ivory holder with unnecessary force.

probability of disgrace/execution at a later date $60\% \pm 25\%$, given hayapalco scenario as outlined by lady Whitehall; large variant factor due to subsequent dependent variables, Center said.

"So I wouldn't be much improving my chances. If I have to die, I want it to have some point — and trying to make Barholm bargain under my guns would make it meaningless."

"Sailing right into East Residence and being sent to the Pole has *meaning*?" Suzette asked.

"Yes." Raj's eyes were focused on something beyond the rafters. "Why am I in this fix in the first place? Because Barholm Clerrett is a paranoid ingrate?" He shrugged. "He's a politician, that's much the same thing. But Governors have a *reason* for being afraid of successful generals, and *that* is the reason we've never been able to subdue the barbarians. The Civil Government has more than enough power to reunite the planet; it just doesn't have the will, not as long as whoever occupies the Chair is more afraid of his own Army than of foreigners."

Suzette blinked, her eyes wide with incredulity. "You're going to sacrifice your life — our lives — to reassure Barholm? Or some future Governor?"

Raj smiled, running fingers through his curls. "No. To reassure future rulers *and* to teach future soldiers that there's no honor in rebellion. I'm not going to contribute to the climate of fear that's rotting us out from within." His smile turned to a grin. "And Starless Dark, I don't expect Barholm to give me the chop, anyway. It'd be crazy, and he's not that crazy. Yet."

probability of eventual clinical paranoia in barholm clerrett is near certainty if subject's lifespan extended past 60 standard years, Center noted.

"To make a point? You're risking everything just to make a *point*?"

"There *has* to be a point," he said, driving one fist into a palm. "Or what's it all for? I — we — killed *sixty thousand men* out here, Suzette." He wiped one hand across the back of his mouth. "I can still see it . . . That wasn't a battle, a whole nation died there. What for? To make a reputation for me? Or to give Tzetas a new province to loot — for a while, for a few generations, until some new bunch of barbs takes it away again? No."

He shook his head, turning to look at her with his hands clasping behind his back. "I don't fight wars because it's the most efficient way of piling up corpses. I'm not spending my men's lives for that. It has to have some point, or I might as well do the world a favor and blow my own brains out." More gently: "Don't you see?"

Suzette's shell of control cracked, and she flung herself against Raj. He held her, stroking the sleek black hair; it caught occasionally in the cracked calluses of his hand.

"Spirit, I'm afraid, Raj!" she said. "He's mad with jealousy . . . I'm so afraid."

"I'm afraid too, darling," he said gently. "It's for the best, though. Believe me, it's for the best."

It was evening, cool and gentle in the bows where Raj sat alone. His feet dangled over the netting that linked bowsprit to deck, almost within reach of the spray as the ship took the swell with all sail set in the mild breeze. The water was dark-purple beneath, fading to almost black at the edge of sight, rippled with white foam. Six-winged flying things skipped in shoals over the waves and then dove; stars were coming out, a frosty bridge from north to south across the sky. Miniluna and Maxiluna were both full on the eastern horizon, throwing brilliant paths of silver ahead of him, on the road to home.

— and the image of red-hot irons glowing toward his eyes faded.

probability of blinding, 22%, Center concluded, $\pm 4\%$.

Well, at least it's less likely than outright execution; I'd prefer that, he thought.

Stretching, he rose and took a last puff on the cigarette, letting the breeze ruffle through his hair like a woman's slender fingers. Off to the left the smoke of the escort-warship had a ruddy tinge from the fires of her furnace, only visible in the hours of darkness. He flicked the butt away, and it was a tiny meteor toward the water that slapped with thousandfold hands at the hull.

And whatever comes, it doesn't really matter. I'm obeying the Spirit that made all — his gesture took in the night and the horizon.

i am not god, Center said; there seemed to be a troubled overtone to its monotonous internal voice, **i cannot guarantee a desirable result, i can only indicate actions whose results are most probably beneficial to human society, optimization for you as an individual would be a completely different calculation.**

"I am the Sword of the Spirit," Raj whispered, raising his arms to the arch of stars. Once men had traveled there. "And I will obey that Spirit — whatever the cost."

== The End of Book II ==

APPENDIX

Southern Territories Expeditionary Force

Order of Battle

Mai 1, 1106 After the Fall

REGULAR CAVALRY

5th Descott Guards —800

Major Gerrin Staenbridge (Companion)

Captain Barton Foley (Companion)

Captain Tejan M'brust (becomes Companion during *The Hammer*)

Senior Lieutenant Antin M'lewis (Companion)

Recruitment area: Descott County.

Insignia: a black "5" over crossed sabers.

Motto: "Hell o Zpalata" ("Hell or Plunder") across top of shield.

7th Descott Rangers—600

Major Kaltin Gruder (Companion)

Recruitment area: Descott County.

Insignia: a black "7" over a running dog.

Motto: "Fwego Erst" ("Shoot First") across top of shield.

1st Rogor Slashers —590

Major Mekkle Thiddo (Companion)

Senior Lieutenant Peydro Belagez (becomes Companion during *The Hammer*)

Recruitment area: Upper Drangosh Valley, north and east of Sandoral and in the southeastern foothills of the Oxhead Mountains.

Insignia: a black "1" on a rayed star. Motto: "Hingada thes Ihorantes" ("Death to the Infidels")

Poplanich's Own —620

Major Ewardo Poplanich (becomes Companion during *The Hammer*)

A House regiment, recruited mostly from the estates of the Poplanich family (in the provinces along the Coast Range seaboard, south and west of East Residence). Officers from gentry families related to or clients of the Poplanich.

Insignia: Chrysanthemum (Poplanich sigil) on a blue background.

Motto: "Eweyz Widya" ("Always Faithful")

21st Navy Haifa Dragoons —610

Major Hemilo Istban

Recruitment area: Northeastern frontier, near the Singre mountains.

Insignia: a black "21" on a silver background, flanked by rifles.

Motto: "Singre Guzzlah" ("Blood Drinkers")

17th Hemmar Valley Cuirassiers —608

Major Anhelino Dalhouse

Captain Hermano Suharto

Recruitment area: Central Provinces, mostly the Hem-mar Valley near East Residence.

Insignia: black "17" on a light-green background. Motto: "Waymanos" ("Forward!")

(N.B. After the Southern Territories campaign, tavern brawls frequently start when members of other units say "Backwards!" in the hearing of a member of the

17th Cuirassiers.)

3rd Chongwe Dragoons —610

Major Hesus Anderson

Recruitment area: Chongwe Island, a large island in the middle Midworld Sea, and the westernmost Civil Government province.

Insignia: black "3" on blue background, over a stylized wave.

Motto: "Rahpeedo" ("Swiftly")

1st Gaur Rangers —628

Major Hingenio Buthelezi

Recruitment area: Central Provinces; upper Hemmar Valley, near the north flank of the Oxhead Mountains,

Insignia: black "1" on purple background, crossed bayoneted rifles.

Motto: "Sehuro Comphadres" ("Faithful Comrades")

18th Komar Borderers —559

Major Hadolfo Zahpata (becomes Companion during *The Hammer*)

Recruitment area: Central southern border country, on the frontier of the Colony and on the south flank of the Oxhead Mountains.

Insignia: black "18" on stylized sand-dune with palm tree.

Motto: "Dehfenzo Lighon" ("Defend the Faith") on the top of the shield.

Total Regular Cavalry = 5625 (9 battalions)

IRREGULAR CAVALRY

Skinnners — 600

Chief Juluk Paypan

Chief Pai-har Tradaw

Halvaardi — 500

Chief Francor Genhuvaa

Stalwarts —581

Leader Hwilli Morgan

Total Irregular Cavalry = 1,681

INFANTRY

17th Kelden County Foot

Colonel Jorg Menyez

24th Valentia Foot

Major Ferdihando Felasquez

55th Santanderr Rifles

Major Fitoriano Huarez

1st Kendrun Foot

Major Pernardho Reyez

88th Seyval Infantry

Major Franhesco Alleyman

10th Melaga Foot

Major Alfaro Orzoco

23rd Hemmar Valley Foot

Major Lazaro Trahn

71st Upper Hemmar Foot

Major Sule Mihn

1st Asaurian Mountaineers

Major Andreu Three Bears

3rd Upper Drangosh Light Infantry

Major Algrood Naxim

42ndjernelle Marines

Major Dohminko Falcones

9th Irtish Skirmishers

Major Tentito Cortinez

21st Ceres Guards

Major Omar Sherf

101st Forest Hangers

Major Nortestino Negrotete

2nd Gurnyca Mountaineers

Senior Captain Luis Ordhaz

1st Malga Foot

Major Heanar Fillipsyn

3rd Denson Foot

Major Jenkynz Ordonto

32nd Straits Rifles

Senior Captain Daniel Villegaz

9th Hayapalco Volunteers

Major Nikros Arayfet

Total Regular Infantry = 10,721

ARTILLERY

Colonel Grammeck Dinnalsyn, commanding.

No siege guns were taken on this expedition. Thirty standard field pieces were embarked. These were 75mm (3 inch) rifled cast-steel breechloaders, with iron-bound wooden wheels and iron carriages, drawn by four pairs of dogs — usually Alsatian-Newfoundland crosses. The muzzle velocity is 650 mps, with a range of approximately 4,500 meters with shell and 4000 with shrapnel. Canister (lead balls with no bursting charge) is effective to 500 meters.

Rate of fire is 3 rounds per minute. (Note: since the gun has no recoil system, it runs backward after every shot and must be manually returned to battery.)

Five mortars were also taken. These were 100mm smoothbore weapons, firing from 45 to 95 degrees. They were mounted on a modified gun-carriage with the cast-steel firing base slung under the tube.

Guns required a crew of eight, and were organized in three-gun batteries. Four of each crew had their own riding dogs, and the remainder rode on the gun, caisson, or the two lead dogs of the team.

Each battery was commanded by a Lieutenant, and included a squad of eight supplementary personnel to perform auxiliary tasks and replace casualties.

Gunners carry rifles and sabers as their personal arms; officers and noncoms also carry 5-shot revolvers.

ORGANIZATION

All regular Civil Government forces were organized in *battalions* (Sponglish: *bandata*), of 500-800 men (average around 600).

A battalion was made up of *companies* (Sponglish: *tabora*) and *platoons* (Sponglish: *campadra*) of roughly 120 and 32 men each, respectively.

A battalion would normally be commanded by a Senior Captain or Major; companies by Captains or Senior Lieutenants, and platoons by Lieutenants.

Platoons were comprised of eight-man *squads*, commanded by a Corporal or Sergeant. Enlisted men were *privates* (infantry) or *troopers* (cavalry); there were several grades within these ranks, based on skill (e.g., "marksman"), seniority or other skills (e.g., "watch-stander," open to literate soldiers).

Each squad generally bunked and messed together, shared a tent, and in the cavalry each squad was allowed one general servant to help with fatigues. (This provision was often exceeded.)

Units larger than a battalion were organized *ad hoc* as situations demanded. While there was a schedule of ranks above Major — Colonel, Brigadier, Brigadier General and General, with administrative titles (e.g., "Commander of Eastern Forces") — there was no permanent unit organization above the battalion.

Companies and battalions would also have their senior NCOs — Master Sergeants — and a larger formation might have one appointed by the overall commander.

RECRUITMENT, PAY, AND RATIONS

The Civil Government's army still bore some traces of a period when units had been raised by provincial noblemen on their own initiative. Battalions generally had a number (denoting when they had been first mustered) and a county or district designation, showing where they had been raised. (Proprietary battalions were named for the individual who first raised them.) Recruitment was largely, although not exclusively (particularly for infantry), from the same area. Enlisted men and officers below the rank of Major almost always stayed with the same battalion throughout their careers.

In theory, all male subjects of the Civil Government were subject to military service. In practice, this had long ago been commuted to a compensatory land-tax (levied on farm units, not on the owners from whom they were generally rented), for most of the central provinces. In many frontier or upland areas the tradition of direct service continued; families were required to send one son per generation, and pay for his equipment as a cavalry trooper; service was for ten-year enlistments. In return, the family holding was exempt from tax. Those without suitable recruits could find a substitute, and volunteer enlistments from the same areas — with a substantial enlistment bonus — were also common.

Cavalry districts tended to lie on the frontiers, or in remote wilderness; Descott County alone, with about 6 percent of the Civil Government's population, furnished over 20 percent of its mounted troops. Cavalry soldiers came from the Civil Government's closest equivalent to a rural middle class: freeholders, or what in Descott were called yeoman-tenants, men renting substantial areas and able to afford riding-dogs. In other counties tenants-in-chief, overseers, and bailiffs might furnish such recruits.

Cavalry officers generally came from middling or wealthy landowning (Messer-class) families with a tradition of service to the Chair.

Infantry were effectively conscripts for the most part, or "volunteers" one step ahead of the courts, or sons of soldiers with no other trade; generally they were men their landlords were eager to see the last of. Most of them (with the exception of Asaurian units from the semi-civilized mountaineers of that County) came from the arable heartlands of the Civil Government, in the Peninsula, the Central Territories and the Hem-mar River Valley and were peons — debt-bonded peasant sharecroppers — in social status. Their

main role was as garrison and internal-security troops.

Infantry troops were issued their equipment, but did not receive payment in cash unless mobilized for field service. In time of peace they were supported by moderate-sized (30 hectares, or more if the region was infertile) farms on state-owned land; this land was worked by State peons, but managed by the soldier (who often spent as much or more time helping on the farm as drilling, in consequence). When an infantry unit's base was moved, new farms were assigned.

A battalion's commander was paid a lump sum, dependent on the number of men fit for duty; an infantry commander in garrison received cash pay for his officers and senior NCOs, as well as substantially larger land-grants. Periodic musters (inspections by muster-masters sent by the Master of Soldiers) were held to check on readiness.

Cavalry and artillery troopers were paid in cash, twice yearly. Stoppages were made for replacement of equipment and for rations, where issued.

Infantry soldiers generally drew their food from their land grants, and sold the surplus for cash to pay for their uniforms and equipment. Most cavalry troopers bought their rations (and their dogs) out of their pay; many units arranged to do this by clubbing together and buying in bulk. Where sutlers—merchants specializing in the military trade—were not available, food would be issued, and the soldiers' pay debited. Many cavalry battalions had unit savings funds, mutual-benefit clubs which stored their members' money and paid funeral expenses and small pensions out of the interest. Particular commanders might also buy annuities for the disabled and the dependents of casualties.

Pay for cavalry troopers amounted to 55 FedCredits per year; this was roughly equivalent to the annual earnings of a skilled artisan such as a blacksmith. Various stoppages would generally take about 10 FedCredits off the total, but there were bonuses for seniority or for foreign service. A Master Sergeant would make twice that; Lieutenants 150 FedCredits, Captains 250, and a battalion commander 500 (plus, in some cases, the pay of men carried on the rolls after their discharge or death — a common abuse).

Many officers had at least some independent income as well, usually from landed property.

Infantry pay schedules were half those of cavalry, when in the field; an infantry private made roughly the same wages as a dockworker or bricklayer.

Plunder and bonuses. In legal theory, the persons and property of areas outside the Civil Government which refused obedience, or ones within it in case of rebellion, were forfeit. This was rarely enforced with full rigor, for political reasons. On campaign, plunder was (theoretically) collected from assigned areas by battalions after an action was complete, then shared out according to rank, length of service and accomplishments (conspicuous gallantry, etc.). Troops might be allowed to "glean" through an area already picked over. Under certain conditions — e.g., refusal to surrender when summoned — towns might be turned over to the troops for a sack. Successful generals often used the proceeds of large-scale looting (e.g., sale of confiscated lands, or prisoners to the slave markets) to give cash or property donatives to the troops under their command. This was immensely popular with the troops, but frowned on by the authorities — especially by Governors nervous about too-popular Generals.

UNIFORM

Most cavalry and all infantry in the Civil Government's regular forces wore a uniform of calf-high boots, buckled at the sides with two straps, rather baggy maroon-colored trousers, a blue swallow-tail jacket with a high collar, (the tails ending just above the knees) and a bowl-shaped iron helmet. Enlisted men wore a canvas belt with shoulder-strap carrying a bandolier with 125 rounds of ammunition, bayonet, canteen, and messkit. (Bayonets were worn on the left hip by infantry; cavalry wore their sabers on the left hip, and the bayonet beneath the bandolier.) Other equipment was carried on the dog, or in a blanket roll worn over the right shoulder by foot-soldiers. Cavalry helmets usually had a neck-guard of leather covered in chain-mail; line infantry went without. Officers and many cavalry troopers wore a leather belt of similar pattern with a shoulder strap. Officers wore their sabers on the left hip, pistols on the right, and carried no bandolier. Their standard equipment included binoculars, map case, and slide rule. Cloth for uniforms was generally bought either by the soldier, or by unit commanders in bulk, and made up by local tailors to central-government patterns. Cavalry uniforms were usually of much better material.

Battalions that had originally been proprietary might wear distinctive uniforms; usually these would be of different colors and better cloth than standard, and might have "extras" — e.g., plumes on the helmet.

Noncommissioned rank is indicated by chevrons on the arm, of red or silver cloth. Commissioned rank is indicated by Star insignia on the epaulets and on the front of the helmet, as follows:

Lieutenant: one small seven-pointed silver star on each shoulder; one likewise on the helmet.

Senior Lieutenant: one small seven-pointed silver star on each shoulder, points enclosed in a thin gold

circle. Likewise on the helmet.

Captain: Asper Lieutenant, but with two stars on each shoulder and on the helmet.

Senior Captain: Asper Senior Lieutenant, with two stars on each shoulder and on the helmet.

Major: Three golden stars encircled with a silver band; one of these on each shoulder and one on the helmet

Brigadier: One large eighteen-rayed silver and gold star on a blue shield, on each shoulder and on the helmet.

Brigadier General: A large eighteen-rayed silver and gold star on a blue shield, "orbited" by small silver stars; one each shoulder and on the helmet.

General: A large eighteen-rayed silver and gold star on a blue shield, "orbited" by small silver stars and enclosed by a gold band with overlaid stars at 10mm intervals; on each shoulder and on the helmet.

Dress uniform has more elaborate rank insignia, with the Star emblems on the collar, braid epaulets, cuff-braid, etc. Soldiers customarily wear the insignia of their battalions on shoulder-flashes, shield-shaped cloth badges sewn to the upper shoulder on the right arm.

WEAPONS

All Regulars in the Expeditionary Force were equipped with the *armory rifle*.

This is a breech-loading, single-shot, lever-operated rifle of 11mm (approximately .45) calibre.

To operate, engage the end-loop on the trigger guard (directly to the rear of the trigger) with the thumb and press downward until the lever is at 90 degrees to the stock. The bolt will retract, ejecting the spent cartridge directly backward, and slide down. A grooved ramp on the top of the bolt surface will then act as a guide to the next round, which is pushed home with the thumb. Pull the lever back into the original position, and the bolt will come up and forward, engaging two locking lugs at the bolt-face, and the firing pin will be cocked. The weapon is now ready to fire.

Sights are a forward blade and adjustable rear notch; the weapon is sighted, rather optimistically, to 1000 meters.

There is an iron cleaning rod carried under the barrel in the forestock of the weapon.

Range is approximately 1000 meters against massed targets and 600 against individuals.

Ammunition is a wrapped-brass cartridge on an iron base, with a center-fire percussion primer; the bullet is cradled in a papier-mache wad at the upper end of the cartridge case. The cartridge is rather fragile, and care must be exerted—particularly when the weapon is hot from rapid fire—not to jerk the lever too hard, as this may tear the base off the cartridge and jam the action. Drawn-brass cartridges were available but very expensive.

The bullet is unjacketed lead (lead-antimony) alloy, with a hollow-point nose driven by a 50-grain cake of compressed black powder. At battle ranges it has excellent stopping power.

The 220 mm (10-inch blade) *bayonet* is attached by a ring and bar system under the barrel. The bayonet is a straight single-edged sword-knife model, with the reverse edge sharpened for 50mm back from the point; the hilt is wood, with a brass strip guard.

Cavalry also carried single edged *sabers* as sidearms; officers of all branches of service, and artillerymen, also carried sabers. These were usually of about a meter in length, very slightly curved and suitable for thrusting as well as slashing; the blade was sharpened along the back for about 75mm back from the point. Scabbards were of wood, covered in leather and with metal chapes and mouths, worn slung from a saber-tache attached to the left side of the belt.

Officers and NCOs of cavalry and artillery, and infantry officers, also carried *revolvers*. These are 11mm weapons with swing-out 5 shot cylinders and fairly long barrels, firing a shorter, lighter version of the rifle bullet; they have a quite heavy kick.

Almost all troops carried privately purchased general utility knives.

NAVAL FORCES

Admiral Tiburcyo Gharderini, commanding:

10 steam warships. These vessels are between 1000 and 2000 tons displacement, with wooden or wood-and-wrought-iron frames and wooden hulls. They are flush-decked and 65 meters long by 11 meters maximum beam, with a single-story deckhouse and bridge amidships, pierced by the twin funnels.

Each is propelled by two 275 hp two-cylinder double-expansion steam engines; each engine drives one paddle-wheel at the midships position. The engines are coal-fired, with cylindrical three-flue riveted iron boilers, producing steam at 50 psi pressure. Salt water can be used, but requires frequent down-time to clear the pipes and boilers.

Maximum speed under steam, 11 knots.

The warships each carry two masts, schooner-rigged, and can cruise under sail at up to 8 knots with favorable winds.

Armament is six 75mm breechloading rifles per side on the upper deck or as bow and stern chasers; these are modified versions of the standard cast-steel field gun, on heavy metal pedestal mountings. Swivel-guns (25mm break-open rifles on pintles) were carried on the rails and deckhouse for use against boarders. The ships also carry a reinforced, steel-shod ram just below waterlevel on the bows. This is a very effective weapon, but its use requires great skill and if mishandled may damage the ship.

Standard crews per ship were 150, including 25 marines and 60 in the "black gang," the engine-room crew. Officers include Captain, First Mate, Second and Third Mates, Chief Engineer and Lieutenant of Marines.

Ordinary crew were recruited by conscription — press-gang—from merchant sailors, as necessary; Marines were transfers from infantry units. Officers were usually townsmen of mercantile background, more literate and technically-minded than Army officers but looked down upon socially.

The several hundred transports used to carry the troops and supplies of the Expeditionary Force were wooden-built merchantmen under contract to the Civil Government, with their usual crews. Size ranges from 40 to 1500 tons, with 200-400 being average; most of the ships were three-masters, with a mixture of square and fore-and-aft sails. A half-dozen of the largest had auxiliary steam-powered paddle wheels, usually used only in calms or when entering and leaving harbors.

THE GENESIS OF *THE GENERAL* SERIES . . .

When I met Steve Stirling for the first time about five years ago, I was so impressed by his breadth and depth of interests that I told Jim Baen that Steve was a writer to watch out for. Jim did, and Baen Books became Steve's publisher.

Steve and I wondered how the two of us would work together in collaboration. Jim provided the opportunity: *THE GENERAL*. I researched the life of the great Byzantine general Belisarius, then wrote approximately 20,000 words of background and plot set on a human-settled planet which had sunk to roughly the technological level of 19th century America. I outlined in meticulous detail the battles by which my hero reunited his world.

"The Forge [Book One of *THE GENERAL*] . . . *is quite simply one of the best novels to bear my name.*"

Then it was Steve's turn. I waited nervously. I'd invested a great deal of my self as well as my time in that outline, and one thing I was sure was that the finished novel wouldn't be quite the way *I* would have written it

I was wrong: *The Forge* is *exactly* the way I would have written it, if I'd had Steve's knowledge base in addition to my own. *The Forge* is quite simply one of the best novels to bear my name—but the main credit for that goes to Steve Stirling, who translated my outline into life and vibrancy.

— David Drake

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