

Great Kings' War

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GREAT KINGS' WAR

Roland Green and John F. Carr

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To the memory of H. Beam Piper, and his Paratime/Aryan-Transpacific hideaway.

"FIRE!"

The first Hostigi volley tore into the Ktemnoi front rank as if they were a battery of artillery guns firing case shot. A great cheer rose up from the Hostigi ranks. The second volley and third were almost as devastating; the fourth less so. Still the Ktemnoi squares held. Now the musketeers were supposed to sling their weapons and fall back; instead many picked up the pikes of the wounded or dead, while others drew their swords and held their places.

"Pikes advance. CHARGE!"

As Xykos began to run toward the Sacred Square straight ahead, he was amazed at how quickly the Ktemnoi rear ranks moved forward to replace their fallen comrades. It was an admirable display of courage. He would make a toast to Galzar after he buried their bones. The remaining Ktemnoi musketeers fired a last ragged volley at almost point-blank range, then fell back, leaving the billmen to take the Hostigi charge.

There was a cry from ten thousand throats—

"KILL THE DEMON SPAWN!"

The billmen began their charge.

The Hostigi reply came—

"DOWN STYPHON!"

The two armies collided with such a shock that the first two Hostigi ranks disappeared before Xykos' eyes. He was eight ranks deep into what had once been the Ktemnoi line before he came to a stop with his thirty-six inch pike head buried halfway to the end of its iron head into a billman's hip. He dropped the pike and drew the two-handed sword Boarsbane from its scabbard across his back. He had the sword blade out in time to parry a blow from a billhead. His next stroke sent the edge through the billman's shoulder, splitting him down to his tripes.

"My friend Beam Piper would have liked this book."

—Jerry Pournelle

"GREAT KINGS' WAR is a lot of fun, a fine adventure story in the tradition of the original H. Beam Piper works."

—Poul Anderson

"Kalvan of Otherwhen goes resoundingly to battle once more in skilled hands."

—Gordon R. Dickson

"We both enjoyed the book very much. When is the sequel coming out?"

—Robert Adams and Andre Norton

PROLOGUE

After her visit with her Graduate Advisor, Danar Sirna was still in a state of shock as she rode the gravlift down to the 40thFloor of Dhergabar University Tower where the large assembly halls were situated. Her Advisor had dropped a bombshell, as he put it; he was a well-known expert on Fourth Level, Europo-American—specializing, she thought wryly, in clichés.

Still, Sirna had just received the dream posting of the decade; she'd been assigned to the Kalvan Study Team as the only undergraduate!

Lord Kalvan, the former Pennsylvania State trooper Calvin Morrison, had been picked up on a transtemporal conveyor accidentally and been dropped off on Aryan Transpacific, Styphon's House Subsector where he'd created enough of a stir to spin off an entirely new time-line, identified almost immediately by the Paratime Police. Suddenly, for the first time in history, the University had an opportunity to study and observe a new time-line from the exact moment of divarication.

And Sirna was going to be there.

She was an undergraduate specializing on Fourth Level Studies, with an emphasis on Alexandria-Macedonia, Ptolemaic Subsector History, which was about as far away from life on First Level as she could find. After a disastrous marriage, she was literally retreating from reality, as her Mentalist had put it, when she'd informed him that she intended to return to the University of Dhergabar and work on her Scholar Degree.

Sirna's scholastic scores were high, but not exemplary, so it had come as a shock to her, and her advisor, to learn that she had gotten this dream assignment to the Kalvan Study Team. It could easily translate into a career in Outtime Studies or a chair in Aryan Transpacific. Still, there were thousands of more deserving graduate students at the University and she couldn't come up with any reason that she, of all people, had been selected.

After the pseudo-grav cushioned the drop, Sirna got out of the lift and stepped on the nearest slideway toward the Main Assembly Hall—the University's largest lecture hall. Danthor Dras, the Dean of Aryan-Transpacific and one of the most respected, and feared, scholars at the University, was going to speak on the history of Styphon's House Subsector. Dras focused interest on any topic he covered, but this time media interest in the displaced former Pennsylvania State Trooper was attracting serious news and broadcast attention all on its own.

The lecture hall was almost filled and Sirna was forced to sit at the back, near the main entranceway. She had just settled into her form-fitting seat, when Danthor Dras strode up to the lectern, newsies trailing behind like jackals after a big cat. Dras' hair flowed back from his leonine countenance like silver wings, giving him the look of a successful Fourth Level politician or preacher. As he cleared his throat, the noisy Dhergabar University lecture room fell silent.

"I've been invited here to address the Kalvan Study Teams and interested observers," Danthor Dras smiled to acknowledge the crowd, which spilled out into the hallways of the large lecture room, as well as the millions of viewers watching his three-dimensional image on all the major networks.

"As most of you know, I've spent more than fifty years researching Fourth Level, Aryan-Transpacific, as part of my research on theocracies and their effects on political and economic structures. And, let me say this," Danthor Dras grinned widely, "this outfit is the nastiest bunch of religious frauds and out-and-out crooks it's been my pleasure to study."

The switch from dry lecture to informality had the desired effect and the crowd responded enthusiastically.

The wall sized visiscreen behind Scholar Danthor came to life showing a Styphon's House temple-farm slave pen filled with skin-and-bone wretches eating slop out of animal troughs before switching to a scene where white robed priests were wielding whips on slaves, wearing nothing but tattered shirts and trousers, hauling rocks in what appeared to be near-freezing weather. Next the display featured a room full of yellow and black robed high priests eating at a table laden with food and delicacies, while being entertained by musicians and scantily clad dancers. Then the scene changed to a burning village assaulted by armored men with red capes and silver armor wielding some kind of long bladed poleax. A black robed upperpriest pointed to a group of comely young women who were led away in chains, while their neighbors were burned out of their houses. Any who tried to defend themselves were hacked to death. One man attempted to run away and was shot by a primitive pistol the length of a small carbine.

"Rather than bore you with too many details," Dras continued, "let me give you Styphon's House history in capsule form. Some five hundred years ago the 'god' Styphon was a minor deity, a healer god, among a much larger pantheon, with only a few half-hearted followers on the primitive Aryan-Transpacific

Sector. The dominant gods among the Zarthani, as this group of the Sanskrit-speaking Indo-Aryan settlers called themselves, were Allfather Dralm—the usual wise all-knowing father god figure, Yirtta Allmother, the female goddess of fertility and Galzar Wolfhead, god of war.

"This all changed when one of the priests of a small temple who called themselves Styphon's House was mixing a batch of primitive chemical compounds that pass for medicine on this backward Sector. When he mixed his ingredients and put them under a flame—they went BAM!"

His voice boomed through the room, echoing this primal moment.

"So it was that gunpowder, or fireseed as they called it, was born on Aryan-Transpacific. This underpriest was smart enough to keep his discovery a secret, contacted his boss and suddenly the 'Fireseed Mystery' was born. Styphon's House has used this knowledge to turn Styphon's House from a minor cult to the dominant religious institution on a new branch of Fourth Level, Aryan-Transpacific, fittingly named Styphon's House Subsector.

"By withholding fireseed, Styphon's House has been able to make and break nobles, princes and kings. Since 'fireseed' is doled out, usually in small quantities, to favored allies, Styphon's own coffers have swelled with hundreds of years of accumulation of precious metals. Styphon's House has used their accumulation of wealth to dominate the primitive banking system, inter-kingdom trade and keep technological innovation to a minimum. If they hear of any invention or discovery that threatens their monopoly they buy it. If the inventor is uncooperative, they arrange to have him killed and continue on with business as usual.

"Now, this is where it gets interesting," Dras said, with a knowing wink to his audience. Even Sirna felt herself leaning forward in her seat. "One of the characteristics that almost all outtime religions share is that the followers actually believe—despite all contrary evidence—that their deity is real. As real as this lectern!" Danthor said, pounding on it for emphasis. "Typically, in the majority of temples, churches and ashrams, the priests are the most fervent believers in their supposed gods and goddesses. True, all religions have doubters and lapsed believers among them, but the average priest believes his god or gods are the true gods, or One God—only the competitions' deities are fakes!

"Yes, as hard as it is for us to believe, most of these outtimers really truly believe the drivel they're fed, which is what makes them so damn dangerous, giving rise to religious persecutions and wars—the nastiest wars of all. There's nothing holier than killing your neighbor for the benefit of his soul, or to keep him safe from heresy.

"In a large number of pre-industrial societies, the priests have a monopoly on centralized record keeping and accumulation of wealth. In many cases, the result is a theocracy, even if not in name. With the power of the state behind them, these 'theocracies,' having a monopoly on the 'truth' and a pipeline to the deity, accumulate a lot of economic assets, be that property, precious metals or symbolic currency.

"However, there are very few religious organizations founded on a sham miracle, which they *know* to be a natural event, such as Styphon's House. Not surprisingly, Styphon's priesthood has taken full advantage of the economic opportunities their monopoly on fireseed allows—all in the name of their deity, of course."

Dras paused to wink at the camera recording the event. There was a smatter of nervous laughter.

"In this area,' Danthor continued, "Styphon's House is both refreshingly and appallingly dishonest! The Temple Upperpriests and Archpriests of Styphon's House are out-and-out crooks and make no

apologies for it."

Just like us, thought Sirna with uncharacteristic cynicism, as we Home Timeliners rob uncountable time-lines of their resources for our own use. Only we apologize for it—to ourselves—all the time!

"Styphon's House's first temples were in Hos-Ktemnos and, ever since the Fireseed Mystery was discovered, they have used their discovery to turn their formerly minor deity into the dominant god figure within the southern kingdoms of Hos-Ktemnos and, to a lesser degree, Hos-Bletha."

Danthor Dras paused to whip out a concealed yellow robe, which he quickly donned before his audience. His countenance underwent a complete metamorphosis, taking on a feral cast as, right before their eyes, he actually became a Styphon's House Highpriest. Many of the assembled academics moved back in their seats or hissed audibly. Sirna was certain Danthor's unsuspected acting talent was a major part of his success as an outtime researcher and media phenomenon.

After grinning wickedly, Dras resumed his talk. "In an effort to infiltrate Styphon's House, I set up a cover as an Hos-Blethan temple Highpriest. Part of my background was passing myself off as a son of a noble family, who had come to religion in his middle years. The Zarthani are unduly impressed with titles and birth pedigree."

The room was filled with titters since many of the Home Timeliners, outside of the University, responded the same way to outdated patents of nobility.

"Since the majority of Zarthani, including the priesthood, are illiterate, I was able to advance rapidly through the Temple hierarchy. After a few years at the Temple of Hos-Bletha in Bletha City, I was able to obtain a transfer to the Holy City of Balph, which is to Styphon's House much as Memphis is on Fourth Level Alexandria Macedonian, or the Vatican is on Europo-American, Plantagenet Subsector. My reading abilities got me a spot in the Archives, which—trust me—is not a popular posting with most of Styphon's Highpriests. The corruption and influence peddling in Balph, to make a good First Level analogy, is best compared to the Management Party's machinations in our own Executive Council!"

The audience roared. Management Party, which everyone considered the Paratime Police's political mouthpiece, had been in control of the Executive Council since the Mystic Wars some four thousand years ago. Management Party—and therefore the Paratime Police—was considered by most academics to be the major obstacle to serious outtime research. Sirna wasn't convinced that the Paratime Police were doing anything more than their job as mandated by the Paratime Code since, as a collective body, the University had about as much vested self-interest as Styphon's House. That 'view' of hers had long been a major area of contention between her and her former husband.

"The Archpriest of the Archives was a half-blind highpriest of some eighty years and he was pleased to at long last find what he saw as a successor. In the Archives, most assistants leave as soon as they can buy, bribe or blackmail their way to a better position within the Temple hierarchy. After a short period of administrative work, I was promoted to his assistant and allowed access the High Temple of Balph Archives, a treasure trove of ancient parchments and documents. After a number of years in the Archives, I was able to put together a complete history of Styphon's House—not that I'll go into that here."

There was an audible sigh of relief throughout the room. These were all academics and they understood how much time a complete history briefing might involve.

Sirna noticed wryly that Danthor did manage to add a plug for his new book. "However, I will mention

that the new edition of my history on Styphon's House, *Gunpowder Theocracy*, is now available from the Dhergabar University Press."

Danthor made a dramatic cough before starting again, "The actual priestly apothecary who invented the fireseed formula is forgotten. However, while searching through the Temple Archives, I found a statue of the priest who discovered its lethal potential. In the beginning Styphon's House used fireseed to create explosions of colored gas and light to awe the locals. Then Highpriest Trythos discovered, while making primitive fireworks, that fireseed, when used inside a tube with a fuse, could propel a stone a significant distance.

"It was Highpriest Trythos who contrived the first primitive handgun—a metal tube cradled in a wooden stock which shot a stone pellet." Dras reached down and picked up a golden statue, which he then took to the first row of seats and handed to one of the professors. "Trythos was pronounced as the first Styphon's Own Voice and devised the Inner Circle of Archpriests as a means to protect the Fireseed Mystery. This is Trythos' image recorded in gold. The statue bears a striking resemblance to Styphon's Great Image in the Great Temple at Balph, made several decades after his death, where the Inner Circle of Styphon's House meets. Styphon's true believers see this as proof that Styphon himself was the author of the first handgun.

"Please pass it to your neighbor after you've had a look at it," he admonished the professor who appeared mesmerized by the statue.

It took several minutes to reach her row, but Sirna found the small gold statue to be very heavy and cold, but vibrant with a life force all its own. The work was vaguely Babylonian, reminding Sirna of some of the stonework she had observed from Fourth Level Babylonian Hegemony, Assyrian Subsector that she had studied in her Empires Frozen in Time class. The beard was long and braided; whoever had made the mold—probably using the lost wax method—was a talented artist. The face looked almost real; there was an arrogant sneer to the tiny lips—probably made after Trythos was elevated to the top of the Temple hierarchy. All the Archpriests she'd seen on spool had shared the same look of innate superiority.

Once everyone had been given the opportunity to examine the idol, Danthor continued, "Styphon's House was quick to exploit their new discovery. To the Zarthani of that time, it was a fearsome unearthly weapon from the gods. Styphon's House used that superstitious awe to destroy their enemies and reward their allies.

"The rest, as they say, is history. It took Styphon's House a century to go from mealed fireseed to corned, or black powder, and another century and a half to evolve the firing mechanism from the early matchlock handguns to flintlocks. Firearm technology has remained in a state of stasis ever since as Styphon's House can discern no advantage to making their weapons more efficient. In fact, there's evidence they've held back the evolution of firearms, such as cast cannon with flintlock mechanisms, to keep the military forces from developing more effective arms. Through their control of military technology, as well as the supply and dispensation of fireseed, Styphon's House has been able to keep the majority of the inter-kingdom conflicts small and contained, preventing any decisive wars that might establish peace and lessen the Great Kingdoms' dependence upon Styphon's House.

"The Temple Archives do not contain any documents regarding Styphon's divine beliefs or revelations at all; in fact, there's a conspicuous lack of normal priestly records of revelations and devotions in the Temple Archives. Other than Styphon's Way, a series of homilies that pass for divine revelation, there appears to be a conspiracy of silence over the whole issue of Styphon's godhood—except when it comes to Styphon's oracle. As I already mentioned, in the Great Temple of Balph resides the other

'miracle' of Styphon's House, Styphon's Great Image"

Danthor paused and dramatically smacked his lectern for emphasis. "This is no small statue, either; it rises up over three stories and is bathed in enough gold to feed the Five Kingdoms for an entire year! When the Temple faces a problem, the righteous flock to the Great Temple, where the Golden Image, on rare occasions, 'speaks' to the multitude. It's the usual primitive voice amplification with articulated joints at the jaw. The 'secret' of Styphon's Great Image is so well guarded that only the head of the Temple and the highpriests who rule the Great Temple and all its worldly possessions know that it's a fraud.

"Styphon's Own Voice is the head of the Styphon's House and is presumed—like the Pope on most Europeo-American time-lines—to speak for their god and rule the Temple. In actuality, Styphon's Voice is typically a figurehead chosen to represent the interests of the Inner Circle of Archpriests, a closely connected group of thirty-six Archpriests which includes the highpriest of each Great Kingdom High Temples of Styphon."

Dras turned to the visiscreen and they were shown the innermost chamber of the Great Temple where a dozen yellow-robed Archpriests were surrounded by kneeling pensioners and penitents. "Only on rare occasions will Styphon's Own Image will speak to the multitude. These believers are attending the great idol in the hopes that Styphon's Golden Image will speak and answer their questions—believe me, they pay a lot for the privilege of waiting.

"The current Styphon's Own Voice, His Divinity Sesklos, was an activist until the past year when Lord Kalvan's rapid military successes discredited his leadership." The visiscreen showed a wizened old man with a beaked nose and ice-gray eyes dressed in a red robe. "For the past decade, Sesklos has been promoting his handpicked successor, Archpriest Anaxthenes who has now emerged as Speaker and the dominant member of the Inner Circle. On the Kalvan Control time-lines it is presumed that Anaxthenes will follow Sesklos as Styphon's Voice.

"One of the true believers, Archpriest Roxthar, has attracted our attention because he's become a pivotal player within the Inner Circle on Kalvan's Time-Line. However, this is not the case on the Kalvan Control time-lines where Roxthar is viewed as a crackpot by the other Archpriests of the Inner Circle and his harangues on Styphon's Divinity are greeted with derision. Only on Kalvan's Time-Line has Archpriest Roxthar become one of the major power centers or created his Office of Holy Investigation, to seek out Kalvan fostered heresy within Styphon's House. Thus, it is now evident that Archpriest Roxthar's rise on Kalvan's Time-Line is a direct response to the threat Kalvan poses to Temple's continued existence."

A beefy professor with a red face shouted: "Next you'll be telling us you are a supporter of the Great Man in History theory!"

Danthor cocked his head, ran his fingers through his hair, looking thoughtful. "It's still too soon to draw any definitive conclusion, but I will admit the evidence is pointing in that direction."

Sirna couldn't have been more surprised if the Scholar had admitted to friendship with Verkan Vall, membership in the Management Party or relations with a barnyard animal! The red faced professor and the rest of the audience were shocked into silence. Was what she was witnessing possible—a tenured University Professor rising above his prejudices and the group consensus of the Dhergabar herd?

Danthor acted as if the interruption had not occurred, continuing on with his talk. "Now before we get any further into Styphon's divinity, let me inform you that Styphon and his prime competitors—Dralm, Galzar and Yirtta—are not the only gods on Aryan Transpacific, Styphon's House Subsector. The

original Indo-Aryan invaders, who called themselves the 'Zarthani,' a contraction of 'za-aryan-thani' meaning in their language 'the noble people,' brought with them some twenty-five to thirty gods and goddesses. Many of these 'original' deities have since disappeared from popular consciousness as their worshippers have declined and are now *remembered* only in curses, old sagas, legends and yarns. These days there are only twelve True Gods and four Demons—five if you count Styphon as a Demon as many of Dralm's worshippers do. Although some of the so-called True Gods, like Phydros, God of Wine and Music, and Lytris, the Weather Goddess who is worshipped primarily by sailors, have a small or select constituency.

"As I mentioned previously, the primary Trinity—before Styphon's prominence—was Allfather Dralm, Yirtta Allmother and Galzar Wolfshead, the God of War. Dralm is the all-knowing, all-powerful Father god, like Zeus, Jupiter and a host of others familiar to most Fourth Level Indo-Aryan scholars."

Heads bobbed up and down in agreement.

"Yirtta is the goddess of harvests and fertility and as such she has maintained her prominence within Zarthani life and ritual, primarily among women who are more conservative about their gods. The Temple of Yirtta Allmother is a very traditional and conservative temple, similar in many aspects to the Roman goddess Vesta and her cult.

"Galzar God of War has seen no diminution of status with the passage of time; if anything, as Dralm's influence has waned, Galzar—with the constant internecine warfare and proliferation of mercenary units—has grown over the years. The Uncle Wolfs, the priest of Galzar, have even taken over many of the healing duties of older gods, including Styphon.

"Dralm's position among the gods has dropped dramatically, particularly, within the last hundred years, as Styphon's influence has increased in the Northern Kingdoms, principally among the gentry and the upper classes. The Styphoni do not consider Appalon, Dralm's son, the Patron of gamblers and gaming, a True God. Whereas the followers of Dralm add Lyklos, the Trickster, who has a powerful cult in the Middle Kingdoms, to their pantheon instead of Styphon.

"As Styphon's House's political and economic power grows, the worship of Styphon has spread its way through the upper strata of society, whereas Dralm is in danger of becoming almost exclusively the god of peasants and artisans. Styphon's House with its tithing and manure collection continues to be unpopular among the lower classes, except in Hos-Ktemnos where his worship is firmly rooted after four hundred years of priestly tyranny.

"As I've demonstrated, Styphon's House has used their 'fireseed' miracle to awe the unsophisticated and manipulate the politics of the Five Kingdoms, the dominant ruling states on Aryan Transpacific. Furthermore, Styphon's House has its own military of which there are two arms; the first being Styphon's Own Guard. The Guard is an elite corps and very well paid; most are former mercenaries and are not above doing the nastiest kind of deeds. Often times, they are poised behind unreliable troops with the orders to execute anyone who retreats or runs from battle. They've earned the sobriquet the Red Hand through their scrupulous attention to such orders.

"The second martial arm is the Order of the Zarthani Knights, who protect the western borders of Hos-Bletha and Hos-Ktemnos, as well as act as a buffer between the Five Kingdoms and the Sastragath and migrating nomads from the Sea of Grass. The Grand Master of the Order is also an Archpriest in the Inner Circle, but like most military holy orders they have little participation in the day to day running of the Temple. The Zarthani Knights are a formidable fighting force and the Grand Master rules more territory than the largest Great Kingdom.

"Styphon's House's usual tactics are to encourage grudges and border disputes among the princedoms of the Five Kingdoms, helping allied princes with ample supplies of fireseed, while withholding it from their opponents and placing them under Styphon's Ban. The Ban is a very important tool since it not only deprives that princedom under the Ban from purchasing fireseed from Styphon's House, but also carries the threat of withholding fireseed to any other lord or prince who might be willing to sell his excess powder to the proscribed lord. Without any other recourse to obtain fireseed for their smoothbores and guns, the opponents of Styphoni supported armies are quickly dispatched. It's been a very successful policy throughout Styphon's House Subsector, except on one time-line—Kalvan Prime.

"From all reports, with Lord Kalvan, Styphon's House ran up against someone from the outside who knew the Fireseed Mystery and was not cowed by their wealth or military might. Kalvan is the former Calvin Morrison, a Pennsylvania State Policeman, who was picked up as a transtemporal 'hitchhiker' on a Fourth Level Europo-American time-line far advanced over Aryan Transpacific, both socially and technologically."

There were snickers from the audience as they all were familiar with Hispano Colombian. The dominant culture there was socially backward, but also explosively creative and technologically innovative. Lately, the latest Hispano-Colombian music crazes and flat screen *movies* had become very popular with the masses on First Level—especially the proles.

"This Pennsylvania State trooper, after an interpenetration foul-up with another transtemporal conveyor, was able to subdue his Paratime Police host and was dislodged from the conveyor onto Styphon's House Subsector."

There was a murmur of appreciation for his feat. While most University professionals disliked the Paratime Police and their over-zealous regulations concerning outtime travel, they did appreciate their physical training and abilities.

Scholar Danthor stepped back from the podium and a 3-D image of a lanky Paratime Policeman in his green uniform seated in front of a table appeared on the visiscreen. "Here is a recent interview of Araln Folen, the Paratime Policeman who picked up Calvin Morrison and was being prepared for broadcast on the Dhergabar morning news show, *Newsworthy*. This has never been released for public viewing."

Sirna wondered how Danthor was able to access internal Paratime Police documents. *What would Paratime Police Chief Verkan do if he knew?*

The familiar voice of Yandar Yadd filled the hall. "So, Officer Araln, what were the circumstances of your unexpected pick-up of Calvin Morrison?"

Araln looked sheepishly into the recording lens. "I had finished making a standard pick up on Europo-American, Confederate States Subsector, and was returning to Fifth Level Police Terminal when my conveyor merged transtemporal fields with another conveyor on an unscheduled jaunt to Third Level."

"Then what happened?"

"When the two fields juxtaposed there was an opening created in the transtemporal field—"

"Hold on a minute, Officer Araln, not all of our listeners are familiar with Paratemporal jargon. Just what is an opening in the time field?"

Using his hands, Araln continued, "When two conveyors pass the same spot their fields try to occupy the same time/space continuum," he paused to inter-twine his fingers. "This creates a transtemporal void, or opening. Any objects and/or lifeforms, including humans, that are in the immediate vicinity can be 'accidentally' picked up and deposited into one of the interpenetrating conveyors. This is what happened with State Trooper Morrison. Now you understand," continued Officer Araln, suddenly animated, "sometimes when two fields meet head-on there are a lot of collateral effects—the reactor engines, electronics, control panels, visiscreens get jumbled filling the conveyor with light displays and noise, so I wasn't even aware Morrison was there until he got the jump on me. I tried to shoot him with my needler, but he's fast—very fast. Instead, I ended up taking a slug to the shoulder."

Araln winced, and rubbed his shoulder. "Next thing I remember was I was back at Police Terminal Fifth Level with a medic giving me emergency treatment. I understand Morrison's drop on Aryan Transpacific has caused quite a fracas there, but I don't remember anything after he shot me. Just a shadowy gray figure and BAM! That's it."

"What's going on here, Yadd!" asked a familiar voice off-screen, which Sirna recognized as belonging to Paratime Chief Verkan Vall.

There were some hisses and catcalls from the audience.

"I'm just exercising my rights to question Officer Araln for a segment of *Newsworthy*."

Verkan's not-so-happy countenance appeared on the screen. He was a tall man with a rangy body. He was wearing his Paratime Police Chief's green uniform and a Vandyke beard. "Yadd, you know full well this is a Police Internal Investigation and I'm going to have to confiscate that recording."

There was a string of Second Level curses from Yadd; a sudden yelp of pain and then the shot rotated showing a scowling Verkan Vall and the newsie being marched off-screen in a come-along hold by a big Paracop.

The visiscreen went blank. Danthor turned back to face the audience with a smirk on his face.

"I doubt very many of us," Dras continued, "would have reacted quite so decisively as State Trooper Morrison in an unexpected, strange and even frightening new environment. That he reacted as quickly and decisively as he did is a testimony both to his quick reflexes and training from the Pennsylvania State Police, which is one of the finer constabularies on that particular Europo-American Subsector."

"When Calvin Morrison dropped off the conveyor, he managed to land himself smack right in the middle of a war between the small Princedom of Hostigos and several of its neighbors, encouraged by Styphon's House, who wanted ownership of a sulfur spring on Hostigos territory—sulfur being one of the compounds that makes up the Fireseed Trinity. On Kalvan's first day, with the help of some locals, he managed to fight off a small sortie from one of Hostigos' enemies and won the love of the local princess."

Someone in the audience let out a whistle of appreciation.

"You do have to keep in mind that while this Fourth-Level policeman was certainly quick on the uptake, he also arrived at a point in time on Styphon's House Subsector where social and political events were coming to a head. That he was able to exploit them so quickly lends credence to Kalvan's initiative and survival skills. However, I do believe that certain personages in the Paratime Police and media have prematurely awarded a mantle of brilliance and superiority to Lord Kalvan, as he is called, that has yet to

be earned. His superior knowledge of military tactics and technology is nothing remarkable coming from a man transplanted from a highly industrialized time-line and suddenly tossed onto a pre-industrial time-line.

"What is unusual was how quickly Kalvan realized that he was cast adrift in a 'world' not his own and how swiftly he responded to the situation he was thrown into. His successes in besieging Tarr-Dombra, an important border castle with neighboring Nostor, and defeating Styphon's forces at the battles of Fitra and Fyk demonstrate Kalvan's resourcefulness and military leadership abilities. So far his successes have been those of a second-class man triumphing over third class opponents."

There was a sigh of relief in the auditorium. Maybe Danthor wasn't a proponent of the Great Man in History theory after all, thought Sirna, nor of the University approved view of history as a course molded by vast, impersonal forces and Historical Inevitability. *Could it be that Danthor Dras was that rarity, a scholar who believed in letting the evidence stand on its own?*

"The true test is yet ahead now that Styphon's House is awakened and is assembling a great army of their own, the Holy Host. Kalvan has awakened the sleeping giant and is about to get mauled. If he is truly the Great Man of his era, he has met his equal and accordingly, for the first time, we will be able to actually see a test, from the moment of divarication, of the Great Man in History Theory, and whether they truly make events happen, or are simply chosen to act out grander social impulses.

"Winning a few battles will not answer the question. Only a total victory over Styphon's House will be acceptable and that is yet to be seen. Let us see if Lord Kalvan—actually Great King Kalvan now—can decisively and profoundly change Kalvan's Time-Line—in comparison to the Kalvan Controls—before we pronounce him in the University and media as Kalvan the Great!"

There was a round of applause from the crowd. Danthor preened before the cameras and did everything but bow.

"The Kalvan Study Teams have their work cut out for them, but I am convinced that with my oversight the Study Teams will be able to find the answers to this question and other profound social issues. I will be joining the Balph Study Team on Kalvan's Time-Line from the Styphon's House Subsector time-line where I've been doing my previous research. My agents have laid the groundwork on Kalvan's Time-Line for a 'transfer' from Hos-Bletha to the Holy City of Balph where I plan to work in the Archives. Within a few years, I should be able to scale the hierarchy from Highpriest to Archpriest of the Inner Circle. My intimate knowledge of their personalities and peccadilloes from the neighboring time-line should aid in my progress.

"As head of the Aryan-Transpacific Academic Oversight Committee I will be in contact with the Hostigos and Harphax Kalvan Study Teams as time and events allow. Thank you all for attending and there will be further updates as we make our findings public." Dras waved his hand to indicate the lecture was at an end. Sirna had seen 3-Ds of Ptolemaic emperors with less panache!

Sirna marveled at her good fortune. She would not only be a member of the most coveted study team in University history, but also be there on Kalvan's Time-Line watching history in the making. Maybe in some small way she could be a part of that history.

As Danthor Dras began to pick up his materials and the audience began to leave, Sirna felt someone slip into the seat next to her. She had to repress her startle reflex when she recognized Hadron Tharn. Something about the cold way he eyed her made her feel like a cold piece of meat. Tharn himself was tall, with regular features, except for a sharp jaw that reminded her of a sturgeon's, and not the least bit

physically domineering—until you looked into his eyes. They were the cold measuring eyes of a predator, one who feasted on human weakness.

Tharn grinned. "I'm sure you're wondering how you were selected by the Oversight Committee."

Sirna had a sinking feeling at the pit of her stomach. Her father had been a part of Hadron Tharn's political action group. Even worse her former husband was still working as one of Tharn's staffers. Hadron had an oar in every pond and stream in Dhergabar City. Tharn was also a big financial donor to the University, even though he himself had left the University some 10 years before in some hush-hush incident believed to be connected to a Paratime Code violation. Rumor had it only his sister's pull as a top Paratime Police official had kept Tharn out of the hands of the Bureau of Psy-Hygiene.

She knew that in this case the rumor was true, since her parents had told her about Tharn's antipathy towards both the Paratime Police and its current Police Chief, Verkan Vall—who happened to be Tharn's brother-in-law. And how Dalla Vall has interceded in Tharn's behalf with her husband...

"I was wondering how I was selected for the Study Team." She had the feeling she was going to learn both the how and why very soon.

"I had one of my 'friends' present your name to the selection committee," Tharn said with a smirk. "I need someone to represent the action group on the Team. Your name came to mind as the perfect choice."

"I don't understand..."

"I needed to have someone on the Kalvan Study Team I can trust to report any violations of the Paratime Transpositional Code committed by Chief Verkan"—Tharn fairly spit out the name—"or any of his minions."

That certainly confirmed there was bad blood between Tharn and his brother-in-law.

She thought of telling him to forget it, but the hard look in his eyes told her to keep her thoughts to herself. Of course, if she refused, she could also kiss her dream assignment good-bye.

"What do you want me to do?"

Tharn smiled as if he's just tasted a succulent morsel. "I want you to write nice little letters to your Uncle Tharn telling me all about your new assignment. I'll see that you have an ample supply of message balls. You just report what is going on at the Foundry— No, I guess you don't know. You and all the other Study Team members are coming in as Zygrosi and Grefftscharrer foundry workers and support personnel. I believe your job will be as pattern maker."

"I had no idea."

"You'll be briefed shortly, once all your inoculations are finished and the background check is completed. Don't worry, purely administrative wheel turning. Your appointment has been approved at the top."

"How do I let you know about any Transtemporal Contamination?"

"By using the transtemporal message balls that will go to the target area on Fifth Level. These will be well

disguised so there's nothing for *you* to worry about."

Sirna felt her heart thump. Tharn had all the answers; there was no way out of becoming his spy unless she excused herself from the Study Team, which would effectively end her University career—and she wasn't suited for anything else. Sirna didn't even want to consider the consequences of defying Hadron Tharn; her ex-husband had told her some hair-raising stories about his insane displays of temper.

Typical of the man's arrogance, Tharn took her compliance for granted.

"This is the last time we can meet until the end of your assignment on Kalvan Prime. I know you'll do a good job for us."

Sirna nodded numbly. What a terrible end to what had started as the best day of her life...

"What did you think of Scholar Danthor's little presentation?" Tharn asked.

Sirna shook off the black cloud descending around her. "Fascinating. He is the pre-eminent authority on Aryan-Transpacific."

"He certainly makes that claim. I need to talk with him."

Sirna shrugged. "I can't help you there. I'm an undergraduate. I don't even exist as far as a Scholar is concerned, much less a recognized authority such as Danthor Dras."

"He's been ignoring my calls, too," Tharn said with a pointed glare towards the lectern and speaker that promised future retribution.

After Dras left the podium, Tharn rose out of his seat, saying, "I'll be looking forward to your reports on Kalvan Prime. You know the drill. I'll expect a letter every ten-day. And a message ball every thirty days."

He turned and left, malevolence trailing behind.

Sirna shivered in spite of herself. She noticed how quickly even the most respected faculty members moved out of Tharn's way and the ingratiating greetings they made as he strode by, oblivious to one and all except Scholar Dras.

As Hadron approached the Scholar, even ten rows away she could sense the mutual antipathy. Hadron said something too softly for her to hear, but everyone heard Danthor's reply. "Tharn, I'll have no part of your business! I've said that before and I'll stand by it. And don't approach me again."

Again, Hadron Tharn said something too low for her to hear, but she could see the red blotches on Dras' face. "Stay away from me, or I'll have the University guard remove you."

Thank providence; Danthor hadn't noticed that Tharn had been sitting next to her, she thought. *I wonder what I've gotten myself into...*

WINTER

ONE

I

The howl of the wolf floated down from the wooded hills to the right of the trail. A moment later, several more howls replied from farther off.

"Your Majesty. That first one's on the scent of prey. He's calling the pack!"

Kalvan reined his horse to a halt and looked back at the bearded trapper riding behind him. He might be Great King of Hos-Hostigos, but when it came to hunting wolves he would defer to Hectides' forty years accumulation of knowledge.

"The forest's too thick for us to blaze a trail here, Sire," Hectides added. "We'd best ride on a bit."

"What about them scenting us?" Kalvan asked.

There was another howl, this one closer.

Hectides pulled off a fur glove and held a finger up in the icy winter air. "Not enough wind. With wolves this hungry, they'll eat anything. They've got their minds on something."

There was a shot from the trees, then the sound of hooves at a canter. One of the buckskin-clad scouts came plunging back down the trail, his horse churning up the fine powder snow into a silvery spray.

"Your Majesty! There's a fire over the hill. Not too far. A big fire!"

As an intelligence report the scout's words left a lot to be desired, but they told Kalvan enough to make him think about his tactics. Wolves could be ridden down with lances or swords, or shot from the saddle with pistols. A fire could mean bandits and they could shoot back. Two of this winter's worst problems appeared to be up and about tonight. At least they were also the two easiest to deal with.

"Musketoons to the front," Kalvan ordered. That was ignoring the chain of command, of course, and one of these days he'd have to start being more careful. He also had time to wonder, not for the first time, if the confidence these people had in him was entirely justified. *Do I really know what I'm doing?*

Kalvan had known what he was doing when he'd shot his way out of that—call it cross-time flying saucer, for lack of a better term—that scooped him up out of Pennsylvania 1964 and dropped him off here-and-now. Of course most of that was self defense, a fairly simple job for the trained reflexes of Corporal Calvin Morrison of the Pennsylvania State Police and former sergeant, United States Army.

It was when he landed that things started to get complicated. Here-and-now was still Pennsylvania, but nothing like the one he grew up in. It was an alternate Pennsylvania that had never heard of William Penn or even George Washington. From what he'd been able to deduce in the past year, this was an alternate Earth where the Indo-Aryan migrations had gone east across Siberia, then in ships to the northeast along the Aleutians, instead of moving into India and Pakistan as they had in Kalvan's home world.

They had built city-states in all the natural harbors along the Pacific Coast as far down as Baja California. Later arrivals, proto-Germans who called themselves the Urgothi, had settled the Great Plains

and the Mississippi River valley. Then, about five hundred years ago, there was a large-scale migration from the Pacific Coast to the Atlantic seaboard, where there was now a gaggle of what Winston Churchill had called "pumppernickel principalities."

The local inhabitants of the Five Kingdoms had a late medieval to early-Renaissance culture and technology, with steel blades and gunpowder, using a back-acting flintlock. The monopoly of gunpowder gave Styphon's House, a here-and-now theocracy whose priesthood claimed that gunpowder (or "fireseed" as they called it) was a magical secret they alone knew passed down from their god, Styphon. Any ruler who defied them was put under the Ban of Styphon, which cut them off from any supply of fireseed—and that meant disaster.

Prince Ptosphes of Hostigos was under such a ban from Styphon's House when Calvin Morrison landed in his small Princedom, helped rout an enemy cavalry raid and was accidentally shot by Ptosphes' daughter Rylla. He'd spent his convalescence in Tarr-Hostigos as a guest of the Prince. He'd had no qualms about telling the Hostigi what he thought of Styphon's House, an outfit as bad as Al Capone's mob, and taught them the fireseed formula so they could make their own. Then Calvin Morrison had helped them prepare for the coming battle against Styphon's Princely pawns; the alternative was having Rylla's lovely head stuck on a spike on the battlements of Tarr-Hostigos—well, that was as good as no choice at all.

After that, developments had followed one another more or less inevitably. While the new Lord Kalvan had sometimes felt as if he were riding a runaway horse, he'd known there was no dismounting in mid-journey. More important, he could look back and say he hadn't made too many avoidable mistakes.

Taking the castle Tarr-Dombra was easy; that was craft and common sense, as well as a few otherwhen tactics, all used against an unwary and complacent opponent. The Battle of Fitra against Prince Gormoth of Nostor was a lot bloodier, but not much more difficult. Stupid generalship by Kalvan's opponents helped. So did new field artillery, with trunnions and proper field carriages, able to outshoot anything else in this world.

Then came the Battle of Fyk; Kalvan still wondered how anyone had emerged alive out of that fog-shrouded slaughterhouse where the eventual outcome was due more to luck than skill. Regardless, that outcome was a victory for Hostigos over the Princes of Beshta and Sask, and a resounding defeat for Styphon's House.

Now Hostigos was a power in the Five Kingdoms, whether it wanted to be or not. There was nothing else, really, but to proclaim it the Great Kingdom of Hos-Hostigos. And who was the only man everyone would accept as Great King?

Corporal Calvin Morrison, Pennsylvania State Police (Forcibly Retired).

That was as far as Kalvan's memories took him when he realized his escort and the wolf hunters were waiting for his orders. They were also crowding closer to either side of his horse, making a wall of horseflesh two or three ranks deep. Most of them were troopers of Queen Rylla's Own Dragoons; they'd rather be eaten by wolves or shot by bandits than return home to report to their colonel-in-chief they'd allowed her husband to be killed.

"Forwarrrrd!" Kalvan shouted. The hunting party moved up the trail at a walk, until the trees to the right started thinning out. As they did, the wolf howls came again. This time it was the whole pack, closer than before—much closer.

At last Kalvan could see the fire for himself—a wavering orange glow from near the crest of a low hill to the northeast. In the light he could see a zigzag trail leading downhill, ending among a dozen sleek gray shapes. Whatever had made the trail; it was down now, with the pack ready to dine.

"Follow me!" The old infantry command turned everybody's head toward Kalvan as he swung his horse off the trail. In the lee of the hill, the snow lay only a few inches deep on hard-frozen ground. Kalvan's horse barely broke stride as it plunged in among the trees. He bent low to keep snow-laden branches from scalping him and cantered out onto the open field while drawing a pistol from his saddle holster.

A dozen wolves made a target impossible to miss even from horseback. Kalvan's shot drew a howl from the pack, and one rangy specimen yelped and jumped into the air as if it'd been horse kicked. Half the wolves drew back with snarls and bared teeth, while the others turned from the blood-spattered mess on the snow to face Kalvan. A quick look over his shoulder told Kalvan he'd outdistanced his escort by a twenty yards or so. For the moment, he was going to have to face the pack alone.

He cocked and fired his other pistol. The gray wolf he hit dropped as if it had been poleaxed.

The other four charged Kalvan, led by the biggest black wolf he'd ever seen. Even half-starved, it was the size of a Shetland pony. He was going to have to remember to stop judging animals here-and-now by the pitiful remnants of wildlife in his more civilized homeland. Kalvan dropped the empty pistols onto the snow, pulled two more out of his boots and discharged them both just as the wolves reached his mount.

Kalvan never saw whether or not his shots hit; he was thrown back in his saddle as his horse reared and struck out with its hooves at the attacking wolves. The next thing he knew, he was on the ground and the black wolf was worrying his left boot.

Kalvan tried to pull out his sword, but it was caught in the scabbard now pinned under his left leg. He found his knife at the same moment the black wolf realized its prey wasn't dead or stunned.

The wolf lunged and Kalvan threw his knife. The blade sank into the wolf's shoulder, but the oversize beast never even flinched. Suddenly he could smell its carrion-laden breath, stinking like the Hellfire and Brimstone his minister father had so often and so eloquently described. He closed his eyes and braced himself for terrible pain.

Instead of pain, he heard a deafening explosion. Then the wolf smashed into him, knocking the wind out of him but thankfully not sinking its teeth into his flesh.

He opened his eyes to the blurred movements of someone throwing off the wolf carcass. The next thing he saw was the face of Captain Nicomoth, his aide-de-camp.

"Your Majesty! Are you hurt?"

He looked down and saw bloodstains on his breeches. He quickly felt his legs. No pain or cuts; the blood must be the wolf's. He shook his head, sighing in relief. The prospect of a bite-wound without reliable antiseptics was bad enough, but more than a score of his subjects had died this winter of rabies. That possibility frightened him more than all of Styphon's armies.

"Sire..." Nicomoth stammered. "I don't know what to say...I can't understand how you rode so far ahead of the rest of the party. What will I tell the Queen?"

"Nothing, Captain. She has a breeding woman's fears, and I want nothing to upset her now."

Particularly since I'll be on the sharp end of her tongue, not you! "Understood?"

"Yes, Sire."

"What about our party? Was anyone hurt?"

"Yes, one. Petty-Captain Vantros. He was badly mauled by one of the wolves. He will most likely never use his left leg again."

If he survives, thought Kalvan, cursing to himself. One more victim of the hard winter and one less trooper to fight the war that would arrive with spring.

"Mount up," he ordered. He waited until Vantros had been strapped into his saddle before giving the order to move out. He examined what the wolves had left behind: the body of a heifer calf, dead and already half-eaten in the few minutes the wolves had been at it. He could also see the fire more clearly now; it was the thatched roof of a log barn, blazing merrily and quite out of control. In the glare he saw figures in peasants' clothing darting among the other farm buildings, beating out embers with old sacks or dousing them with buckets of snow. Two stood guard over what looked like a cow and a couple of pigs. Half a dozen clipped turkeys ran in circles.

No bandits, just an accidental fire and an escaped calf to draw the wolves. They had paid a high price for their half-eaten meal, too. Now what could he do for the people on the farm? Kalvan dug in his spurs and set his horse at the slope.

He didn't find any surprises at the farm: animals with their ribs showing, a father and two grown sons with eyes too large in thin faces, the plaintive cry of a baby from inside the house. The men stared at Kalvan without making the slightest sound or gesture of respect. Was it because they didn't know him, or were they too awed by the presence of Dralm-sent Great King Kalvan? Or maybe they just thought their being hungry was his fault.

A big war or a long one in an agricultural society always meant trouble; some parts of Germany took two centuries to recover from the Thirty Years War. Last year's war with Styphon's House had been both long and big, with raids all over the place, even when the main armies weren't in the field. There'd also been a high percentage of the peasantry sucked into the poorly trained militia, where casualties were always the highest. Cannon fodder.

Crops that weren't burned by the enemy or trampled down by either side rotted in the fields because the harvesters were dead, on campaign or had run away. Hostigos had harvested barely half its normal crops, war-ravaged Nostor still less. The people of Hostigos were facing a hungry winter even before the snows began and the temperature dropped. It was the worst winter in living memory, so everyone said—and Kalvan wasn't about to argue. He hadn't felt cold like this since Korea.

All winter snow had clogged the roads, so there was no carrying food from places that had a surplus to those where rations were short. To fill their larders, people went out and hunted; even a winter-thin groundhog could keep a family from starving. More animals died of hunger, unable to find food under the snow and ice. Wolves that had grown fat on escaped livestock and battlefield dead suddenly found themselves going hungry.

It was inevitable the wolves would turn on the hunters, then on travelers, then on isolated farms and even small villages. Men who might risk a blizzard and death from exposure wouldn't face being dragged down and eaten alive by starving wolves.

He knew that for this winter, the main enemy wasn't Styphon's House. It was the wolves, which were going to gnaw his Kingdom out from under him if they weren't stopped. That was what had brought him to swear a public oath two days ago that he would bring an end to the wolves' reign of terror. Hunting parties would go out everywhere the wolves were a problem. Which also meant leading one himself, to set an example, which was why he was out here tonight, slowly freezing in his saddle and doing a cavalry lieutenant's work.

"We took seven wolves as the price of your heifer," Kalvan told the farmers. "You may have the skins, and the bounty for them."

Wolf-bounty was five ounces of silver, or five talos—a silver coin about the size of a silver dollar, with a stamped image of a young King Kaiphranos on the face and a two-headed battleaxe on the obverse. Kalvan had recently added an official gold coinage, a one-ounce gold piece called a Hostigos crown, minted from the loot taken from Styphon's temples.

Maybe the silver from the bounty would keep the farmers alive until spring, maybe not. "Also, I will have soldiers come and rebuild your barn. In the spring," he added; there was no hope of finding fresh thatch in the dead of winter.

"Dralm Bless you, Your Majesty!" the father said. He bowed his head. "It has not been easy this winter, Sire. We have prayed to Dralm and Yirtta Allmother..." His voice trailed off as the baby started crying again.

"Go on praying," Kalvan said. "When you can spare a prayer for someone else, pray for Queen Rylla—she's with child, too."

The three men managed a smile at that news, which lasted until the ridgepole of the barn cracked and fell into the fire. Sparks flew up again, geese squawked and they dashed madly for the buckets and sacks they'd left to greet Kalvan.

He thought of writing out his promise and leaving it with the farmers, and then he remembered they most likely couldn't read. Only nobles, priests, scribes and clerks read here-and now; like the Middle Ages back home. Also, parchment was scarce and expensive. Which reminded him to stop off at the paper mill on the way back to Hostigos Town to give *those* poor bastards some encouragement! They were working hard with what little knowledge of papermaking he'd been able to dredge up out of his memory. Unfortunately, to date, all their results were still various grades of foul-smelling mush.

That too would eventually change; there were already quite a few people learning their way around Kalvan's new world: Rylla, of course. Ptosphes, First Prince of the new Great Kingdom of Hos-Hostigos. Count Harmakros, Captain-General of the new Royal Army. Trader Verkan the Grefftscharrer. Master Ermut, here-and-now's first experimental scientist. Count Phrames. Chancellor Xentos, also Highpriest of Dralm. Brother Mytron, the healer priest who had listened with great interest to the lecture on antiseptic techniques Kalvan delivered the day after he learned Rylla was pregnant.

There would doubtless be more. And the child who would be born in late summer, he or she would grow up with all these changes, learning to ride the runaway horse from the cradle. Now that he had a real stake in the future here-and-now, Kalvan was determined to be even more careful about what changes he introduced. After all, he didn't want to start a stampede, just save Hostigos from Styphon's House and Great King Kaiphranos of Hos-Harphax. Kalvan's own history was full of examples of technology changing the world faster than peoples' ability to adapt to those changes.

He was going to make mistakes, of course. Probably already had, but only because he'd been running hard on his feet ever since he'd arrived. Maybe when—if—this Styphon menace were ended, he'd have time to think of ways to help his subjects adjust to the changing world around them better than the people he'd been snatched away from had done. Regardless, even uncontrolled social upheaval was better than the nasty type of theocratic despotism Styphon's House was using to enslave the peoples of the Five Kingdoms—well, Six Kingdoms now. Much more of that, and the people here would be worse off than the Chinese under Mao!

Right now he knew more than anyone else here-and-now. So he had to be out in front, leading the battle against Styphon's tyranny, even if he barely knew what to do himself.

There wasn't anybody else who knew it at all.

Kalvan was glad to turn his mind from that thought, to concentrate on getting his horse down the hill without its stumbling and rejoin his escort.

II

In the flickering torchlight Archpriest Anaxthenes, First Speaker of the Inner Circle of Styphon's House, searched the faces of his fellow conspirators to see if they shared his growing anxiety. Only Archpriests Cimon and Roxthar looked comfortable in the white robes of village underpriests; if caught, their disguises would mark them as conspirators fit only for burning.

Archpriest Neamenestros was more than a candle overdue, and the atmosphere in the cellar of the abandoned winery in Old Balph was damp and oppressive. At least they were away from the chilling wind that tore through the cheap robes like daggers. At any moment Anaxthenes expected to hear the tramping feet of Temple Guardsmen coming to arrest them. He knew that half the Inner Circle would have smiled to see visible discomfort written on his usually expressionless face.

"How much longer do we wait?" Archpriest Euriphocles asked, a trace of hysteria raising his already high-pitched voice.

"Another quarter," he replied, pointing to the notched candle flickering in a niche within the rock wall. "We must know if we can count on Archpriest Heraclestros' support."

As Highpriest of the Great Temple of Hos-Agrys far in the north, Heraclestros was a man of some influence within the Inner Circle, especially among the uncommitted moderates—the group the conspirators needed most to court if they were to save Styphon's House from the winds of change banging on the Temple's doors. Archpriest Dracar already saw himself in the flame-colored robe of Primacy, as Supreme Priest Sesklos voice grew weaker. Dracar! He wanted to spit out the name so foul was its taste in his mouth. Were Dracar to become Styphon's Own Voice, he would quibble and quiver until the Usurper Kalvan had the Temple drawn and ready to quarter.

It was the mistaken belief of Dracar, and too many others among the Inner Circle, that King Kaiphranos the Timid should be the principal agent of Kalvan's destruction. *Witless fools!* Didn't they realize that

Kalvan was a warlord of the stature of King Simocles the Great, who had led the Zarthani people to victory over the Ruthani Confederation of the Northern Lands. They would have to scourge the Hostigi heresy with fire and sword as Simocles had the Northern Ruthani—until as a people they were exterminated.

Were it not that Kaiphranos employed so many food tasters, Anaxthenes would have solved this problem long ago with one of Thessamona's little vials. Not that Great King Kaiphranos' sons were any improvement; the elder was too rash, while the younger was a debauched witling! Grand Duke Lysandros, the old king's brother, was the only man in the dynasty with any mettle.

Suddenly the candle flared brightly and there was the squeal of a door opening upstairs. Anaxthenes began to rise from the barrel he'd been using as a seat when he heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs leading to the basement. He grasped the hilt of his poniard and, without willing it, found himself holding his breath.

There was an audible sigh of relief throughout the chamber when the bent and white-hooded figure of Archpriest Neamenestros entered the room, throwing off his cowl. "I'm sorry, Brethren. I was followed so I took a longer route through the streets."

"Did you lose them?" Euriphocles asked.

"Are you certain you were not followed?" Anaxthenes asked, as his fingers tightened on the handle of his dagger.

"Yes, First Speaker. I lost him in the ruins of the Old Temple of Dralm." All the Archpriests, but Anaxthenes, made the sign of Ormaz's forked tongue with the first two fingers of both hands. "As your foresaw, Speaker, my follower thought the Old Temple was my destination. After I slipped out the back I waited for two quarters and no one followed."

Using the deserted Old Temple of Dralm as a decoy had been another of Anaxthenes' ideas. As always when one of his plans went well, he felt a sudden surge of pleasure. For him, the joy of a well-wrought scheme brought to a successful conclusion overshadowed the lust for gold, or even the willing women other men prized so highly.

"Is Archpriest Heraclestros with us?" Euriphocles asked, no longer able to contain his anxiety.

"Yes, he knows King Kaiphranos the Timid from Great King Demistophon's court. Not even with all of Styphon's Host and treasure would Kaiphranos be able to smite the Daemon Kalvan. He will support our policies even though he distrusts our fervor."

Anaxthenes shared Heraclestros' reluctance even as he used the True Believers for his own ends. They were useful tools as long as one remembered they were sharp and double-edged. Before the man called Lord Kalvan had arrived out of what seemed to be nowhere, the followers of Styphon's Way had attended their worship in private, fearing the ridicule and persecution of their peers. Who in their right mind would trust Styphon's House's business to the devout? Not when there were storehouses filled with gold, silver, jewels, and wonders from all over the lands—even the deadly and mysterious southern lands of the Mexicotat.

Before Kalvan the only known True Believers in the Inner Circle had been Cimon, the Peasant Priest, and Roxthar—the self-proclaimed Guardian of Styphon's Way. Cimon had proved a useful spokesman to the Outermost Circle, while Roxthar had his own small fanatical following, and ill luck was known to

befall those who blocked his path. The most feared man in the Temple, Roxthar was not only surviving but also prospering since the Daemon's arrival.

As long as Styphon's House was strong, feared and respected, it was able to survive the disbelievers and cynics within the high priesthood. Then Kalvan had appeared, out of nowhere, disclosed the Fireseed Mystery and turned the wretched backwoods Princedom of Hostigos into a Great Kingdom! Yet it was not Kalvan's military victories, nor his disclosure of the Fireseed Trinity that had shaken the very foundation of Styphon's House On Earth; it was the callous and self-serving defection of two members of the Inner Circle—Archpriests Zothnes and Krastokles.

How could Styphon's House expect the laity to put out the Temple's fire when its own highpriests fought their way out of the back doors?

That both of the venal Archpriests had accepted baronies and a share of the gold looted from Styphon's temples from the Usurper Kalvan had only made matters worse. Even the most faithful of Ktemnoi peasantry were beginning to question their faith, as well as the rule of Styphon and his earthly representatives.

Neither gold nor armies could return that which Krastokles had stolen from Styphon's House. Only the physician's lancet would bleed the Temple of all the corruption that threatened its doom and destruction. As the only servant of Styphon who clearly saw what must be done, it was up to Anaxthenes to act as that healer—even if it meant dealing with the most repugnant and unpredictable of true believers.

When Styphon's House was restored to health, Kalvan could be disposed of as a minor headache. Next the Temple would be lanced of its cankers and boils. Then, with Kalvan out of the way, the time would be right to consolidate Styphon's dominion over the Northern Kingdoms—and someday even the Middle Kingdoms of Grefftscharr, Thagnor, Dorg, Volthos, Wulfula and Xiphlon.

"Heraclestros' support in the Great Council of Styphon's House is indeed good news," Anaxthenes proclaimed. "It will go a long way toward convincing the moderates that we need a better weapon than the blunt sword of Kaiphranos to rend the army of the Usurper. Now, Archpriest Roxthar, have you been able to clear the vision of our blind brother, Dimonestes?"

Roxthar was a tall man, well over half a lance in height, thin to the point of looking gaunt but known to be almost supernaturally strong. But it was his eyes that were his true strength; they burned with a light not of this Earth. Of all the Speaker's tools, Roxthar had the sharpest blade, although there were times when even Anaxthenes was not sure whose hand gripped the hilt.

"I have restored his vision," Roxthar said with a grin that made him look even more cadaverous. "He now sees what must be done, although one eye had to be sacrificed to save the other."

Archpriest Dimonestes was a physical coward, so Anaxthenes wasn't sure just how literally Roxthar's words were to be taken. Nor did he really wish to know. Roxthar had no peer among those who understood the mastery of fear and pain over other men. Had he understood the power of loyalty and love as well, it would be Roxthar who ruled this conspiracy.

"I hope the others have done as well," he said. There were a few confirming nods, but most of the Archpriests averted their eyes.

Anaxthenes turned to Highpriest Theomenes, who was Great King Cleitharses' palace priest and their window into the royal chambers of Hos-Ktemnos.

"Where does our Great King stand in the fight against Kalvan, Theomenes?"

"The Infidel's disclosure of the Fireseed Mystery has sorely tested our Great King's faith in the True God. The weakness shown by Styphon's traitorous Archpriests has weakened his faith even further. Where he once was certain, he now doubts."

Anaxthenes had to clench his teeth to keep from grinding them to the nubs. King Cleitharses was one of the major secular pillars of Styphon's House On Earth. "Did you tell the Great King that the traitor Krastokles is now dead?"

"Yes, First Speaker. However, his thoughts are still troubled and he questions what was once unquestionable."

Roxthar's harsh voice sliced through the growing clamor inside the cold chamber like a sword blade. "Anaxthenes, why do you not release your viper upon the Daemon Kalvan, as you did with Krastokles, and thus remove the sting from the impious armies of Hostigos?"

Anaxthenes cursed silently at having to reveal any knowledge that might uncover his best-kept secret, a jealous relative of Prince Ptosphes who valued gold and glory above family. "It is because my snake values its skin too much to commit itself wholly to either one side or the other. Archpriest Krastokles was old and not in the best of health; his death was easily accepted. Furthermore, as a member of the Inner Circle, his knowledge of our secrets was more a threat than all of Kalvan's armies."

"Yet, Zothnes was spared?"

"Zothnes was only recently Elected to the Inner Circle and not yet privy to all the Inner Mysteries. He was but an infant to the adult Krastokles. Yet were my snake not so coy I would have had him silenced as well. But enough of this, Theomenes, will Great King Cleitharses release the Sacred Squares of Hos-Ktemnos upon the Daemon Kalvan?"

"Cleitharses has little love for mercenaries parading as Great Kings. The Usurper Kalvan vexes him mightily. Yet Hostigos is far away, while rumors say the Mexicotol will soon march on Xiphlon, stirring up the barbarians in the Sastragath. I have weighed his words and do not believe our Great King will march upon Hostigos unless so directed by the Great Council of Balph."

"Then our own path is clear. Brothers, we must impose our will upon the Council, or this time next winter it will be our heads upon the walls of Balph!"

TWO

I

Former Paratime Police Chief Tortha Karf stepped through the sliding door into the outer office of the Chief in the Paratime Police Headquarters. The door hissed shut behind him, cutting off the drumming of the rain on the landing stage. He unhooked his cloak and presented it to one of the green-uniformed Paratime Policemen on guard duty. It dripped water as the policeman headed for a closet, and the janitorial robot in one corner let out an electronic whimper as it detected damage to the carpet.

For at least the hundredth time, Tortha wondered why First Level civilization couldn't manage weather control. A handful of Second Level civilizations and one or two Third Level ones managed it; it was talked about and sometimes experimented with on a few of the more advanced Fourth Level time-lines. On First Level, however, they'd conquered space, controlled gravity, converted mass directly into energy, learned the ultimate secret of paratemporal transposition, and still endured rain dripping on rugs.

Also for the hundredth time, Tortha Karf came up with the answer almost at once. Any agreement on what the weather should be over a whole planet could only be a fragile, artificial one, sure to break down sooner or later. The human animal wasn't made to come to enduring agreements. The best Tortha had seen it do, in more than three centuries of watching its behavior on thousands of different time-lines, was to limit the extent of its disagreements.

He'd also seen the ruins, usually radioactive, of a good many civilizations that hadn't even gone that far.

First Level humanity had at least outgrown a higher percentage of the silliest delusions about itself than any other level. Not that this made it well behaved, let alone completely trustworthy—otherwise both Tortha Karf and the man he'd come to see could have spent their lives as something other than policemen. Yet a race that knew avoiding artificial agreements was worth a few wet rugs wasn't completely hopeless.

That, Tortha reflected, was probably about as high as the human animal could reach, at least until the next evolutionary step was achieved. Waiting for that day to arrive would keep the Paratime Police busy for the next four or five hundred millennia.

Ex-Chief Tortha straightened his neckcloth as he approached the familiar secretary's desk beside the door to his former office. He wore a civilian tunic and breeches, although as a former Chief Tortha had the right to wear the uniform of the Paratime Police for the rest of his life. However, it was only thirty-two days since people had stopped calling him "Chief" and started calling him citizen. The less he wore his uniform, the faster they would think of him as citizen and remember the man they now called "Chief."

Before he could reach the anteroom, Tortha was bumped aside by the stocky figure of Barton Shar, Deputy Inspector in charge of Stores and Equipment, his face beet red and all but puffing steam.

Tortha used his own not inconsiderable girth to bump back and Barton turned, with fist raised, until he recognized his former boss. "Oh! Sorry, Chief."

Barton had once thought he was on the fast track to being the new Paratime Chief, but Tortha had gradually shunted the bean-counter aside for Verkan, who was as good in the field as he was in the office—maybe better. Tortha had never liked nor trusted Barton Shar, and had assigned him to a place where he thought he couldn't do any harm—Stores and Equipment. Somehow Barton, over the past century, had managed to turn it into a rather large fiefdom.

"In a rush, Inspector? What's the emergency? I don't see any Code Yellow or Red signal?"

"No emergency. I was just in to ask Verkan for a budget increase, and he turned me down flat! With all the credits flying down the exhaust hole with his Kalvan Project, I'm forced to make appropriation cutbacks in other Sectors. It's not fair!"

Fair, thought Tortha, *now there's a novel view of the world*. He'd stopped believing in fair about the time he passed his sixth birthday, when his father had given his younger sister his favorite stuffed animal

because she could wail louder than him. In retrospect, it was a valuable lesson: there was nothing fair about the universe; indifferent and inexorable certainly, but *fair* —never!

Maybe he'd made a mistake in not dealing with Barton a long time ago, but as Chief in charge of a hundred thousand Paracops, it was tough to get to know even the men you depended upon.

Barton's face tightened up as if he realized he'd said too much. He gave Tortha a sticky sweet smile and said, "How's life on your plantation? Enjoying your own time-line?"

That was another thing Tortha hadn't liked about Barton; he was an inveterate rump sniffer. He also spent a lot of his time in the company of politicians. "It's been different."

Barton stiffened at the rebuke, spun on his heels and left the room.

Same old Barton, he thought. He'd fawn over you at the drop of a hat, but if you didn't preen he took it personally. *I really should have fired him a long time ago; saved Verkan the trouble!*

As he entered the room, the secretary was already on the screen, informing Chief Verkan Vall about his visitor. A familiar but slightly distracted voice replied, but there was no picture with it. "Tell the ex-Chief to come in, if he can entertain himself for a minute or two."

The secretary was red in the face as he turned to face his former Chief, but Tortha only chuckled. "Sounds as if the Chief has the right spirit. Finish the job, even if the world's about to fall down on your head."

The office hadn't changed much since Tortha Karf last saw it, a ten-day after leaving it to Verkan Vall. Most of the movable furniture had been his private property and had gone with him; most of the fixed furniture, except for the horseshoe-shaped desk, was data-processing equipment intended to resist any effort to move it without using chemical explosives.

Verkan Vall was seated at the Chief's desk, apparently watching a visiscreen with one eye and a keyboard with the other. Both arms of the desk had acquired the inevitable litter of papers, photographs, discs, data wafers, charts and filmspools. Without raising his eyes from his work, Verkan waved him to a chair that gave him a clear view of the whole office and one of the transparent walls.

A luxurious couch squatted by the rear wall; it was made from carved dark wood with leather upholstery and had a Fourth Level Europeo-American look to it. It was hidden from the outside by an obviously Indo-Turanian ornamental screen of ivory plaques set in lacquered bronze frames.

Another artificial alcove held several overstuffed reclining chairs, probably from Fourth Level Julian-Roman or Macedonian Empire Sector. They looked comfortable, although Tortha Karf wasn't prepared to be as charitable about the colors. Above the chairs several elaborately woven decorative hangings draped a carved wooden screen. He recognized the work of Vall's adopted sister-in-law Zinganna, who'd been raised from prole to citizen because of her help in breaking up the Wizard Traders. (Or at least in breaking it up as much as it had been broken up, Tortha added by way of a mental footnote.) She now had a happy marriage to Paratime Police Inspector Kostran Galth and a growing reputation as an artist.

At one end of the screen was a wooden liquor cabinet of the sort that seemed to be universal in every civilization that reached the level of inventing distilling. At the other end was a long case with transparent sides and several glass shelves. He walked over to it and studied the contents, then began to laugh softly.

The rest of the decorating showed the firm hand of Verkan Vall's wife Hadron Dalla. This case was Vall's, the souvenirs from some of his most important outtime cases.

There was the .357 magnum revolver from Fourth Level Europeo-American, Hispano-Columbian he'd used to kill an escaped Venusian night-hound. On the second shelf were two thumbscrews from Fourth Level Spanish-Imperial, where Verkan had once rescued a missing Paratime damsel from the Holy Office of the Inquisition. To the right was an ugly jade idol of a crocodile with wings like a bat and knife blades for a tail from the Crocodile-God Case. On the next shelf were a knife and a more sophisticated solid-projectile pistol Vall had used on a Second Level Akor-Neb time-line when Dalla (then between marriages to Verkan) got herself into trouble over a reincarnation fracas.

Trouble was one of Dalla's natural habitats, of course, but that batch was worse than usual.

There were half a dozen models of Paratime Police-issue weapons, needlers and slug throwers—even a beam weapon, two or three swords, depending upon whether one of them was considered a long knife, an ivory harpoon and a flintlock pistol from Kalvan's time-line.

There was also a lady's handbag, and Tortha remembered rather too well how it had earned its place in the case. Dalla had used it to disarm a would-be assassin from the Wizard Traders, or Organization as they called themselves, saving Vall's life and proving she had the makings of a good policeman. She'd done well, but she shouldn't have had to do it at all. Now, he was inclined to believe the Paratime Police had been too restrained in their dealings with the Wizard Traders; politicians, trade magnates, industrialists and stranger bedfellows were involved. He'd never gotten to the bottom of it. Even now, after ten years of hard work, mostly Vall's, Tortha still wasn't sure if the Organization was dead or just lying quiet until trouble elsewhere diverted the Paratime Police attention.

A polite cough drew his attention toward the desk and the man now rising from behind a darkened visiscreen. "Welcome home, sir. How are the rabbits in Sicily?"

"Breeding like rabbits, as usual. I've tried everything short of importing cobras, but I can't do that because they have no natural enemies on the island. So I suppose I'll just have to be content with exporting what vegetables the rabbits are gracious enough to leave for me." He gestured toward the screen. "What had you by the leg there?"

"Somebody on a Fourth Level Alexandrian-Roman time-line has reinvented the steam engine and one of the local kings has decided to conquer the world with a fleet of steamships. He has a nasty habit of burning cities to the ground, and he's on his way toward the island of Crete. Exotic Food and Beverages has a central conveyer-head there, for their wine imports. It's also a major tourist trap; Dalla spent a ten-day there as a girl. I was trying to get a computer evaluation of the risks of teaching some of our pearl divers from Fourth Level Sino-Polynesia to attach limpet mines to the king's ships. The time-line has gunpowder, so it's only a minor secondary contamination at worst."

"What did the computer say?"

"That it wasn't going to say anything for several hours. I was going to have dinner sent up, and Dalla can join us when she gets back from the Bureau of Archives. She wanted to check their artifact collection on limpet mines so that if we decide in favor of training the divers we can produce a mine that looks as right for that time-line as possible."

"Any other problems?"

"Yes, more trouble on Europo-American."

"I'm not surprised," Tortha said. Europo-American, Hispano-Columbian Subsector, was an area of about ten thousand parayears' depth in which the major civilization had developed on the Major Land Mass and from there spread to the Minor Land Mass, Northern Continent. The Hispano-Columbian Subsector had been very volatile since the Big War had concluded there twenty years ago, when it fractured into half a dozen new subsectors and belts. Ever since, the major power (usually two, sometimes three or four) had been acting like participants in a mutual suicide pact. Since they had nuclear weapons, the subsector had been under observation by a Paratime Policy study-team. The same political polarization had happened all over most of Third Level, where only a few time-lines had escaped nuclear destruction.

There were a near infinity of time-lines, all on the same planet and each needing to be policed. The humans of First Level had reached civilization first, but in the process exhausted the earth's resources some twelve thousand years ago. All that had saved First Level, from a world-wide economic collapse and descent into barbarism, was the development of paratemporal transposition and the discovery of an uncountable number of exploitable time-lines. Ghaldron, working to develop a faster-than-light space drive, and Hesthor, working on linear time travel, combined their research and discovered a means of physical travel to and from a second, lateral time dimension. Once paratemporal transposition was discovered, the First Level race began to send its conveyers to this near infinity of parallel worlds, bringing wealth and unlimited resources back to Home Time Line.

Over the course of twelve thousand years, First Level civilization developed a parasitic culture so nearly perfect that the host worlds never suspected its existence. This was the Paratime Secret; Home Time Line's one vulnerability. The Secret had to be protected and was the Paratime Police's primary mission. If this secret were to be exposed, the very existence of the First Level race would be in jeopardy—to say nothing of the devastation that knowledge of their predations would cause the billions of host worlds!

When it didn't interfere with their primary duty, the Paratime Police also tried to prohibit flagrantly immoral conduct by First Level traders, tourists, observers, criminals and out-and-out fools. It was a difficult job, and it sometimes seemed the Paracops spent more time covering up dislocations than apprehending and punishing wrongdoers. This was one reason why Chiefs tended to retire early, along with First Level politics and headaches like the one Verkan was facing on Fourth Level Europo-American. Tortha had come close to quarantining the entire Sector during the last Big War.

Fourth Level was the biggest level. It was divided into a number of sector groups based on where human civilization had first reappeared. There were four major sector groups: Nilo-Mesopotamian, Indus-Ganges-Irrawaddy, Yangtze-Mekong and Andean-Mississippi-Valley of Mexico. The Nilo-Mesopotamian Sector Group, the largest, was the home of Europo-American, Alexandrian-Roman, Sino-Assyrian and Macedonian Empire Sectors.

Europo-American Sector was now the home of the a brand-new subsector, the Kennedy Subsector, which included those time-lines where the major ruler of the Northern Continent, Lesser Land Mass had survived an assassination attempt. John F. Kennedy's assassination had left other Hispano-Columbian subsectors moving quickly into instability.

"I'm beginning to think we're going to have to close the entire Hispano-Columbian Subsector," Verkan said, as he paused to pick up his pipe and light it. "It's only a matter of time before this new undeclared war on the Major Land Mass has the two major powers in a missile-throwing contest. When that's finished, there won't be much that passes for civilization on that Subsector—just a long dark night. And

this is getting to be a continuing danger throughout most of Hispano-Columbian, especially those dominated by the Nazi and Communist sects."

"I agree. I've had my eye on that Sector ever since the first Big War to Free the World. I only held back because of pressure from the Executive Council. Some of the biggest outtime trading firms—Sharmax Trading, Paratime Petroleum, Holnyt Art House, Consolidated Outtime Foodstuffs and Synthax Spectacles move a lot of product out of that Subsector. Before you make up your mind, I suggest you have a talk with Councilman Lovranth Rolk to see what kind of support he can drum up from management in the Executive Council.

Verkan Vall's face, normally as expressionless as a pistol-butt, relaxed visibly. "That's good advice, Tortha. I'm glad you came in today. I don't want to tell you how to live your new life any more than you want to tell me how to do my job, but I have this to say: I think you may have left for Sicily too fast and stayed too long. I could have used your advice a few times."

"I'm sure you could have," Tortha said. "That's why I went. I might have yielded to the temptation to give that advice. Then where would we be?" He answered the question with a Sino-Hindic phrase from a time-line extraordinarily rich in scatological allusions.

"It's not just the people who have some real grievance against you, Vall. It's everyone in and out of the Paratime Police who isn't happy with the youngest Chief in five thousand years. One who has appointed his wife as Chief's Special Assistant—" Tortha held up his hand to stop Verkan's objections. "I agree Dalla was the best-qualified candidate, but not everyone knows her as well as I do. Even you have to admit, her record is spotty.

"Not to mention that you're an aristocrat with a rather peculiar hobby time-line that's going to make or break the careers of a lot of Dhergabar university professors. I'd rather desecrate a temple to Shpeegar Lord of the Spiders than beard a professor who thinks he's lost a publication opportunity because the Paracops meddled!"

Verkan laughed, but Tortha could hear the strain in it. Guiltily he realized he'd been doing exactly what he'd left for Sicily to avoid—giving unasked-for advice. He also realized that Verkan looked—older? More strained? Tired? None of the words seemed completely wrong, or completely right either; all implied more emotion than Vall was letting show even now. He finally decided that Vall really looked like nothing more than a handsome man just into his second century who also happened to have the most nearly impossible and by far the most thankless job on Home Time Line.

"Vall, tell the computer and the limpet mines to wait. Or put a limpet mine on the computer, for all I care. I'm taking you and Dalla out to dinner at the Constellation House—"

"But I can't—"

Tortha drew himself up into a posture of mock attention and saluted with the precision of a new recruit who hadn't learned which superiors insisted on salutes. "Sir, if I can't obtain your cooperation, I'll be obliged to inform Chief's Special Assistant Doctor Hadron Dalla that you have refused."

Verkan pulled his face into an expression of mock horror. "No, no, anything but that!" He emptied his drink and set the glass back on his desk while reaching for his green uniform jacket with the other hand.

II

Sesklos, Styphon's Own Voice and Supreme Priest of Styphon's House, sat alone in his private audience chamber, wondering why fate had permitted him to live so long and rise so high, only to fall so low. He sat shivering before his charcoal brazier; Sesklos would have cursed all twelve of the so-called true gods—had he believed any of them were other than humbuggery. Wasn't it bad enough the Daemon Kalvan had fallen upon Styphon's House On Earth like a blazing rock out of the night sky? Did he need to hear from the lips of Archpriest Dracar that First Speaker Anaxthenes, his most trusted advisor and one he considered like a son, was the head of a conspiracy that threatened to turn priest against archpriest?

The Styphon's Great Council of Balph, already halfway through its second moon, seemed as interminable as the winter wind and just about as likely to abate.

Just thinking of the howling wind outside brought on a fit of shivering to his frail body. He quickly added more charcoal to the brazier. The additional heat stopped his tremors, but did not reach his fingers or toes. These days they were always cold; the price of ninety winters. Despite his discomfort, he hoped it would not be his last—the grave would be far colder.

Sesklos' eyes lovingly caressed each of the treasures that furnished his private chamber in Styphon's Great Temple: a rainbow-colored feather tapestry of a plumed serpent from the Empire of the Mexicotol; a Thunderbird buffalo skull layered with hammered gold and turquoise from the Great Mountains; a twisted ivory narwhal horn from the White Lands beyond farthest Hos-Zygros; a great stone battleaxe from the time of the Ancient Kings; a sacred golden bull from the Ros-Zarthani of the Western Sea; a fist-sized gold torc from a long-dead Urgothi Warlord in the Sastragath...

Too many priceless objects to count even on a hundred lonely nights; the treasure of kingdoms, yet only the merest fraction of Styphon's House's great wealth. How could it be that one man, arriving out of nowhere, could place all this wealth and power in jeopardy? Or had he? Was it possible the golden throne of Styphon rested upon mere sand?

Treasure was only one of the Temple's strengths. Styphon's House was as rich as any two Great Kingdoms combined. The Temple ruled the trade in corn, chocolate, cotton and tobacco. Owned the Five Great Banking Houses. At sea, Styphon's House had two fleets of galleasses and galleys and more merchant ships than a scribe could count beans in a long summer day. Granaries filled to bursting, armories with enough pikes, bills, halberds, swords, arquebuses, calivers and muskets to fill a valley. Magazines filled with tons of Styphon's fireseed—perhaps not as good as this new Hostigos mixture, but good enough.

In soldiers, Styphon's House could count twenty-five thousand of Styphon's Own Guard, forty thousand Zarthani Knights, and enough gold and silver to buy every free companion in the Five Kingdoms; Sesklos refused to count Hos-Hostigos as *atrue* Kingdom. Plus scads of rulers, from petty barons to Great Kings—one and all in Styphon's pocket.

A sharp rap at the door brought Sesklos out of his musings. "Enter."

First Speaker Anaxthenes came through the door in his yellow robe, followed by two of Styphon's Own Guard in their silvered armor with Styphon's design etched in black on the breastplate, matching silvered

glaives and bright red capes.

Sesklos gave a nod of dismissal to the Guardsmen. When they had departed, he asked, "What are these rumors I hear about you and the One-Worshippers?"

"Father, they are true. Yet, there is more to be said than you have heard."

Sesklos winced at the First Speaker's use of the term "Father" now, although it was surely true that he was Anaxthenes's *spiritual* father. Sesklos had been Father Superior of the Temple Academy when the young Anaxthenes, the youngest son of a destitute noble, had been brought to the Academy to be raised as one of Styphon's Own. There was little to recall now of that tow-headed adolescent in the broad shouldered, shaven-headed Archpriest who faced him now; only the piercing, startlingly blue eyes were the same.

Like that outcast of thirty years ago, Sesklos too had come a long way. After twenty-five years as Father Superior, few had considered him as a candidate for the Inner Circle, much less Styphon's Own Voice. But he had been given the authority to mold the minds and hearts of young priests-to-be, and mold them he did. When he had at last entered the Archpriesthood, his rise had been meteoric. Even now half the Archpriests of the Inner Circle were his former charges. Anaxthenes had been his best and brightest pupil, as well as his most willful. His body had grown straight and tall, but his ambition had grown even greater.

Anaxthenes don't fail me now! he thought. He was too old, too burdened with past sorrows to see the son of his heart burned at the stake or buried alive in the catacombs beneath Old Balph. Styphon's House needed all her strongest sons now more than ever. For a moment he could see all the young priests he had raised over the years march through his chamber, starting out young and growing into to old age as they passed through the room.

"Father, are you all right?"

Sesklos shook his head to clear it of ghosts from the past. Old age was like a thief, at first stealing those things rarely used, then growing bolder and more daring, until nothing was left but oblivion.

"Why, my son, in our hour of need have you helped rend the very fabric of the Temple?"

"That cloth has already been rent asunder, first by the Usurper Kalvan who violated the secret of the Fireseed Trinity, then by the traitors Archpriests Zothnes and Krastokles. The old ways are doomed; our House must rebuild itself, or die."

"These are strong words, my son. Yet, true. There is a new wind in the air, one so strong it shakes Styphon's Own Throne. Are you so certain the blocks of Roxthar and Cimon are strong enough to build a new foundation for his Temple?"

"I believe so. They are the only clay of this House that does not crumble at Kalvan's words. There is far too much sand in the clay of Dracar and Timothanes."

"And what of the clay of Sesklos?"

"Like rock, but deeply etched by the winds of time."

Sesklos had to fight to keep a smile from his lips. Anaxthenes always had a way with his old teacher, like

a favorite concubine with an old king. "I fear you are right. But the One God worshippers are like a flame in the breeze. Only the Weather Goddess knows which wind will fan them or willy-nilly blow the fire into your face."

"Yes, Father, but it is also true that only they have roots that dig deep into the soil itself. The others but live on the surface and are buffeted by every zephyr. And it is a strong and ill wind blowing our way."

"What if I agree? What can I do?" he asked.

"My Father, place your hand upon mine in the Council."

"Dracar will denounce us both. His lust for my chair blinds him even to the weather."

"Then promise him that which is his innermost desire."

Sesklos felt an invisible hand clench his heart. "But I have saved that gift for the son who is not of my loins but of my heart. Does he value it so little?"

"Father, as a sign of your love, I value it above all things. But of what value is the chair when the body lies prostrate and unmoving?"

Sesklos sighed, and rubbed the sudden goose bumps on his arms. He was too tired and cold to resist. "I will do as you ask, my son. It is all I have left to give. I only hope the Temple you build will be stronger than the ruins I fear I will be leaving behind."

THREE

I

Grunting with effort, two workmen and an underpriest of Dralm pulled the heavy door of the pulping room shut. The noise from the pulping room faded from an ear-battering din to a distant rumble, although Kalvan could still hear the vibration of the horse-powered pulper through the stone floor. The other sounds—the thump of the horses' hooves, the squeal of un-oiled chains and green-wood bearings, and the shouts of the foremen as they drove the ex-Temple slaves of the work crew to keep things going—were no longer clearly distinguishable.

Kalvan turned to Brother Mytron. "How are the horses bearing up under this work?"

"Better than men would," Mytron replied. His tone hinted of problems best not discussed here in the open hallway. Had Mytron been listening too long to Duke Skranga, who saw Styphon's spies everywhere? Or was he just been naturally cautious about speaking within the hearing of men he didn't know? Kalvan hoped it was the latter; Skranga's zeal to prove his loyalty to the Great Kingdom (and therefore his innocence of any part of Prince Gormoth's murder) was leading him to see Styphoni lurking under every bed and urge others to do likewise.

Meanwhile, Kalvan decided against mentioning his plans to make most of the paper mill equipment water-powered. Apart from the matter of security, it would involve either moving the mill or a lot of digging of millponds and building of dams and spillways. There was no guarantee the men and money

would be available when spring came and the ice melted, and it would be pointless to even make the effort if the winter's work hadn't discovered how to produce usable paper. So far all the mill had produced was mush that smelled like the Altoona drunk tank on the Sunday morning after a particularly lively Saturday night.

"How goes the rag room?"

"Well enough, Sire, but no one is working there now. We've chopped all the rags as fine as necessary and no more have come in the last moon-quarter."

This was no surprise. There wasn't too much difference between the rags the mill was cutting up for paper and the clothes the poor of Hostigos were wearing this winter.

"I'll see what the quartermasters can do about providing you with something." The quartermasters would probably say they couldn't do anything, but Kalvan's experience of supply sergeants led him to expect they would be holding back more than they'd admit to anyone. A platoon sergeant was "just anyone," the Great King of Hos-Hostigos was somebody more.

Brother Mytron led the way down the hall and through a freshly-painted wooden door into another hall, with log walls and a roughly-planked roof. It was cold enough to make Kalvan wrap his cloak more tightly. Wind blew through chinks between the logs and planks, and dead leaves crunched underfoot. About all that could be said for these hastily-carpentered passageways between the buildings of the mill was that they were better than wading through knee-deep snow in a wind that made five layers of wool seem as inadequate as a stripper's G-string.

Warmth and foul-smelling steam greeted Kalvan and Mytron at the end of the passageway: also, flickering torchlight and heartfelt curses in an accent that Kalvan could only tell was from somewhere other than Hos-Hostigos. Beyond a row of shelves holding a fine collection of blackened clay pots, Kalvan saw a muscular man with a blond beard standing stripped to the waist beside a row of posts on a stone-walled bed of hot coals. The smoke from the coals mixed with the steam to make Kalvan swallow a harsh cough. The man wouldn't have heard it in any case; he was too busy thundering at a small boy who was cowering in one corner of the room.

"—and next time you let the goat fat burn, I'll try to find a coating that calls for boy's fat. *Your* fat, you lazy Dralm-forsaken whore's son—oh, I beg your pardon, Brother Myt—*Your Majesty!*" The man bowed and started to kneel, but Kalvan waved him to his feet.

"Don't stop your work for me. Just tell me what you have here. It smells like a glue works."

"Well, maybe that's not so far from what it is," said the bearded man. "You see, Sire, you said that sometimes animal fat was used to coat the—*pulp*—to make *paper*. You didn't say what kind or how much, which was a good test, by Dralm, of our wisdom."

It was really a sign that Kalvan didn't know himself; there were times when he would have given a couple of fingers for one college-level chemistry textbook. Not that anybody here would know the scientific names of the essential chemicals for treating wood pulp, but at least the book would help him to recognize them. Right now, he wouldn't have known aluminum chloride if he fell into a vat of it. So they were going to have to make do with clay and animal-fat sizings on the paper, if they ever made *those* work.

"You're trying to find out what kind of animal fat works best?"

"Yes. I've got all these pots lined up and I try a different mix in each one. This first one's goat and sheep, the next is sheep and horse, the third one's pure horse fat..."

The man listed the ingredients of all eight pots, with the pride of a father listing his children, but Kalvan only remembered the first three. After that he realized he was listening to a description of the experimental method: rule of thumb—crude no doubt—but a foundation by which a lot of things this world desperately needed could be built."

"Master—?"

"Ermut, Your Majesty."

"Master Ermut, I'd say you passed Dralm's test very well. Your wisdom will be rewarded."

Ermut bowed. "Thanks be to the Allfather Dralm and Your Majesty. I'll say this much, though. Being a freed man here has been a boon. Still, I'd not cry at being still a slave as long as I was free of Styphon's collar."

Ermut didn't dare turn his back on his Great King, but Kalvan got a look at it on the way out. He'd always wondered what the scars left by those iron-tipped whips they'd found at the Sask Town temple-farm looked like—now he knew.

II

Kalvan sipped at his freshly refilled cup of mulled wine and contemplated the logs crackling in the hearth of what had once been the lord's bedchamber. Now Mytron had his bed in one corner of it and used the rest of it for an office and for entertaining junketing Great Kings.

When young Baron Nicomoth rode back from the Battle of Fyk, where he'd fought gallantly, he found his mother dead, his outbuildings burned, most of his hands run off to the Hostigi army or even farther, the crops rotting in the fields and not two brass coins to rub together to remedy any of it. So he buried his mother, swallowed his pride, sold the family lands to the Great King, then took a commission in the Royal Horseguards.

Since the qualities of intelligence and adaptability were in as short supply here-and-now as they were back home, Kalvan quickly noted the young man's usefulness and made him his aide-de-camp. In the way some junior officers will favor a respected senior, Nicomoth had his beard trimmed into a Van-dyke similar to Kalvan's. He was even said to walk like the Great King. Nicomoth was on the slim side, but other than that their builds were quite similar, particularly when they were both in armor. Kalvan was sure that one of these days he'd be able to take advantage of having a double.

Nicomoth had left behind a rather good if small wine cellar, which Kalvan and Mytron were now busily depleting. Kalvan emptied his cup, set it down and decided against another if he wanted to be fit to ride back to Tarr-Hostigos tonight.

"Mytron, I've said I'll see what I can do about more rags. Is there anything else you need?"

Mytron looked into his wine cup, wrapped his ink-stained fingers around it and then shook his head. "The Potters Guild has promised to deliver what they call 'all the clay they have found fit for the Great King's service.' I will be charitable until I have seen how much or how little that is. It is said that the clay pits have frozen harder than ever before in living memory."

That was probably true, but for the sake of the Potters Guild Kalvan hoped "all the clay" was "much" rather than "little." Brother Mytron's placid and even-tempered manner was deceptive, and Kalvan himself couldn't endlessly bow to the guilds.

"We have enough old swords to cut all the rags we are likely to see this winter. I have had to be harsh with some of the workers who would take such swords or sell them, in either case to defend against wolves and bandits. Have I done well?"

"Yes." Another of those painful decisions. Respect for the Great Kings' property had to be enforced—by the headsman, if necessary—no matter how many wolves and bandits were roaming the countryside. Besides, a sword given out for wolf hunting today could be in a bandit's hands by moon's end.

"As to wire—we shall need much more when we know how to make the *paper*. For now, what the Foundry is sending is enough."

The brass wire for the screens on which the rags and wood pulp were supposed to drain into paper was produced by an ancient practice that Kalvan had needed to see with his own eyes to believe. One apprentice fed bar stock through a hole of the right gauge cut in an iron or stone plate, while another sat in a suspended chair underneath. The apprentice sitting in the chair gripped the end of the wire with pliers and swung back and forth, so that his weight and movement dragged the bar through the hole and forced it into wire.

Like so many of the here-and-now metalworking techniques, it was fine for high-quality, small-scale production—the beautiful steel springs of the gunlocks, for example. It was hopeless for really large-scale production work. For that they'd need horse- or water-powered wire-drawing equipment, something else he'd needed a month ago at the latest but would be lucky to see before their unborn child was old enough to walk.

Kalvan wondered if the primitive state of large-scale metallurgy was the result of economics, military tactics, deliberate interference by Styphon's House or a combination of the three. Certainly the good small arms and poor artillery made for a lot of small political units instead of a few large ones. The large ones could have generated enough revenue to make their rulers independent of Styphon's House, particularly if the economic surplus also supported an educated class—something like the medieval monastic orders. Of course, such a class would be an intolerable threat to the fireseed secret.

If that series of guesses was anywhere near the truth, Kalvan now understood why Styphon's House was rumored to be preaching the next thing to a war of extermination against the temple of Dralm. The priests of Dralm would be more than ready to be such an educated class—with a little help from Kalvan I of Hos-Hostigos.

Kalvan decided he really didn't want to ride home tonight and poured himself some more wine. "Mytron, I meant what I said about rewarding Ermut. I'm going to charter a Royal Guild of Papermakers as soon as there's any paper to make, and he'll be one of the first masters."

"He deserves the honor, Your Majesty. He's done the same as he did with the animal fats on other work here."

"Then he has the makings of a Scientist."

"A what?"

"A kind of priest in my own land, one who was sworn to seek new knowledge. Ermut has stumbled upon one of their methods. It was called 'Experimenting.'"

"*Experimenting*." Mytron rolled the word around on his tongue several times. "And these *Scientists*—priests—what gods did they worship?"

"Seldom the gods of my own land. They were not good gods, and did not help a man to know much. Although some of the Scientists served in the temples of Atombomb the Destroyer. They were free to choose to worship any god or none at all. Their oaths concerned how they were to do their work and not hide it from others or tell lies about what they had learned.

"Most of them did work in temples called *Universities*. Some of these were as large as Hostigos Town before the war with Styphon's House." Now Hostigos Town was the thriving capital of a new Great Kingdom and fast on its way to becoming a city.

"The *Scientists* must have been very rich. Or did your Great King pay them?"

"All were rich by Hostigos standards. Some were in the pay of Great King LBJ, but most worked for the *Universities*. If Dralm and Galzar give us victory in the coming War of the Great Kings, I mean to found such a *University* in Hos-Hostigos. There men such as Ermut will teach *Experimentation*, *Deduction*, *Invention* and the other arts of the *Scientific Method*. Had there been such a place anywhere in the Great Kingdoms long ago, when the lying priests of Styphon proclaimed their Fireseed Mystery, its *Scientists* could have flung that lie in their teeth.

"Mytron, your work in the paper mill will end when you have taught all you know and chosen someone fit to replace you. When do you think that will be?"

Mytron frowned. "'No less than five moons, Your Majesty. But not much more than that either. Why?"

Kalvan smiled. "Good, Mytron. The time has come to found a *University* of Hostigos. I want you to be head of the new *University*—*Rector* would be your title."

Mytron frowned even more deeply. "My first duty is to Allfather Dralm. I cannot forsake him."

With equal care, Kalvan explained to Mytron what some of his duties as *University Rector* would be and how they would not be antithetical to his duties to Allfather Dralm. He finished with, "I do not know the duties imposed on you by that oath. This is shameful in a Great king, but it is the truth. So I do not know for certain if I am asking you to forsake your service to Dralm. Yet I can say certainly that you will not have to swear any oaths against Dralm, or do anything I know to be unlawful, or to cease to perform the rites of Allfather Dralm."

"Then I will not refuse now." Mytron's frown faded a bit. "I cannot accept without the permission from Highpriest Xentos, of course. He is judge of the oaths of the priests of Dralm in Hos-Hostigos. Also, he

would find me hard to replace at the Temple."

In truth, Chancellor of the Realm Xentos had already bent Kalvan's ear several times about how he and Brother Mytron were being forced to neglect their duties to Dralm to serve their Great King.

"I will speak to Highpriest Xentos, and learn more about the duties of the priests of Dralm. It is my hope that he will permit you to become *Rector* of the new *University* ."

"If it is proper that I serve Allfather Dralm by serving Your Majesty in this, I shall do it with all my heart." This seemed to call for a toast, so Mytron poured out the last of the mulled wine, and they both drank to the University finding favor in the eyes of Dralm.

After Brother Mytron left, Kalvan knocked the heel out of his pipe, re-loaded it with tobacco and used his tinderbox to light it. He sat back and stared into the dying fire. He could see all sorts of church-and-state complications bearing down upon him like a runaway truck on an icy mountain road. They would have been likely enough in the best of worlds; with Xentos they were certain. In spite of his unworldly air, the highpriest was as tough as a slab of granite and as shrewd a bargainer as an Armenian rug dealer. Anything Kalvan got out of him—particularly the permanent reassignment of his right-hand man (and probably handpicked successor) as Rector of the University—was going to cost.

But Dralm-damnit, he had to begin somewhere to make sure that he wasn't the *only* man in the world who knew half of what would be needed to bring down Styphon's House. Until he'd at least made that start, everything could fall apart if his horse put a foot in a gopher hole! Kalvan thought of King Alexander III of Scotland, who'd started three centuries of Anglo-Scots wars by riding his horse off a cliff in the dark...

Being the Indispensable Man sounded like fun until you were actually handed the job. Then you realized the best thing to do with it was to get rid of it as fast as humanly possible.

III

The job of digging Dalla out of the Archives lasted another round of drinks. When they finally reached her, she told them to go on to the Constellation House; she would change at the Archives and meet them there.

Constellation House was perched on top of a mountain a good half hour's air-taxi ride outside Dhergarbar City. That gave Verkan plenty of time to bring his old Chief up to date on everything of mutual interest, starting with Kalvan's Time-Line, Styphon's House Subsector, Fourth Level Aryan-Transpacific.

"Everything was going about as well as anyone could hope until winter came. Kalvan had no more internal enemies, Nostor was a shambles and Sask and Beshta were beaten into submission. Even the Harphaxi Princes who didn't want to join Hos-Hostigos weren't about to make trouble."

"No," Tortha said. "I imagine a lot of them are thinking along the lines of 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend,' and anybody who's as heavy-handed a creditor as Styphon's House is bound to have more than its share of enemies. What about the big council Styphon's House was going to hold in Harphax City?"

"They moved it to Balph. We think it's because of the bad weather; it's been the worst winter in living memory, and the roads have been completely impassable most of the time. We haven't infiltrated the Inner Circle yet, and they're not talking. I suspect Styphon's House may be waiting to see what happens during the rest of the winter. Not that enough hasn't happened already, of course."

Tortha recognized the signs of coming bad news in Verkan's voice. He wasn't surprised, either. "I can imagine," he said. "My first independent assignment was shepherding a party of tourists fleeing from a sacked city to the nearest operating conveyer-head. It was five days' journey downriver, through country that had been fought over two years running. If we hadn't been able to use boats and travel mostly by night I don't think we'd have made it. I stopped having any arguments from the tourists after the first village where we found human bones in the soup pots."

"It hasn't been quite *that* bad in Hos-Hostigos, except in parts of Nostor. The Hostigi are calling it the Winter of the Wolves, though. Between the wolf packs and the snowdrifts, nobody's going anywhere unless they absolutely have to.

"I haven't been back to Hos-Hostigos myself since I took over as chief. Dalla went once, to Ulthor. They're not as badly off as the Hostigi, since they missed the fighting and shipped in grain and meat from the Upper Middle Kingdoms before winter. Dalla still tried to ride to Hostigos until she lost two horses and a guard to wolves the first day. After that she decided to stick to interviewing refugees and building our cover."

They sat in silence as the air-taxi passed out of the rainstorm and Dhergabar together. Ahead the mountains loomed against the clear sky, spangled with the lights of country homes and resorts. A full moon silvered the scattered clouds above and the occasional stream visible through the trees below. From the air it might have been the wilderness of Kalvan's Time-Line; in fact, it was a garden planted with trees instead of flowers, like most of Home Time Line. If the air-taxi let them down in the middle of this forest, they might wander for all of ten minutes before a robot or prole gardener found them. The nearest wolf was in Dhergabar Zoological Gardens.

"We don't really have any work in Kalvan's Time-Line that's worth sending in people."

Tortha recognized another note in Verkan's voice now, the frustration of a man who has to live in ignorance because he won't send men into danger where he can't go himself just to satisfy his curiosity. It was a frustration he knew his former Special Assistant would become accustomed to as the years passed. If there'd been any chance he couldn't come to terms with it, he'd never have become Chief of Paratime Police.

"Fortunately, Kalvan's going to have the best army in his time-line, if not the biggest. Brother Mytron and Colonel Alkides were experimenting with methods for improving the quality of Hostigos 'Unconsecrated,' and Kalvan's integrated the four to five thousand mercenaries he captured at Fitra and Fyk into a regular royal army."

Tortha Karf said nothing. He'd recognized a third note in his young friend's voice—what on some time-lines was called "whistling in the dark."

Verkan appeared to be getting too attached to his outtime friend Kalvan; that could prove to be a major problem if push came to shove. After all, Kalvan was still a theoretical danger to the Paratime Secret, the foundation upon which the whole of First Level civilization rested. If Kalvan became a threat to that secret, Verkan Vall, chief guardian of that civilization, might find himself with a job no man could

welcome.

The two men were beginning to look hungrily at the menu by the time Dalla arrived. She made her usual dramatic entrance carrying a medium-size flat package and wearing a blue cloak that covered her from the base of her throat to the floor.

Tortha couldn't help wondering what Dalla had on under the cloak. There'd been a time when the answer to that question would have been "little or nothing," but that time was long-past—or so he hoped. Dalla was as decorative as she was competent, and this had led to a few episodes that made her first companionate marriage to Verkan Vall rather hectic.

Both had learned something. Dalla was now much less impulsive and more careful about the company she kept. Vall didn't wear his pride in his sense of duty so openly on his sleeve. They appeared to be settling into the kind of marriage a Chief of Paratime Police really needed. Either that, or no marriage at all—what Vall and Dalla had the first time around included the vices of both and the virtues of neither. Not to mention what a Chief's political enemies could do to exploit his personal problems!

A few minutes passed in kissing Dalla, ordering dinner and consuming the first round of drinks and a large plate of appetizers. Dalla's gown was reasonably opaque and not too revealing otherwise, although it did show enough skin to tell Tortha that she'd had a deep-layer skin-dye to match her blond hair. Like Vall, her coloring would not attract attention on any Aryan-Transpacific time-line.

Her gown also seemed remarkably precarious in its attachment, and Tortha found he couldn't keep his eyes off the solitary fastening that stood between her and disaster. He noticed he wasn't the only man in the room doing so either. Finally Dalla said in an expressionless voice. "Don't worry about it. I have a laboratory now, and test critical components of my gowns for resistance to fire, acid, mechanical stress and telekinesis."

Verkan knocked over his glass in trying not to roar with laughter, and this seemed to call for more drinks. While the waiter was bringing them, Dalla unwrapped her package. It was an elegant leather-bound printed book, with a title on it that Tortha didn't know but an author he knew rather too well.

"*Gunpowder Theocracy*, by Danthor Dras?"

"It's his *Styphon House: A Study of Techno-Theocracy in Action* retitled," Dalla explained, with new material chronicling the arrival of Kalvan and his effect upon Styphon's House and the Five Great Kingdoms. The public edition will be out in a few days, but he sent one of the presentation copies to Vulthor Tarkon. For the Archives, not as a personal gift," she added, answering the unspoken question of both men. "I wouldn't have asked to borrow it otherwise."

"Is it rewritten as well as retitled?" Verkan asked.

"I had it computer-scanned and the answer is no. However, there's a new preface summarizing Kalvan's Time-Line up to the beginning of winter. He also promises a full-scale study of Kalvan's Time-Line, and an update on all the Styphon's House time-lines where Hos-Hostigos wound up under a ban, as a companion volume."

"He'll do it, too," Verkan said.

Tortha nodded absently, aware that he'd suddenly lost much of his appetite for dinner. The greatest living expert on Aryan-Transpacific culture did nothing by chance, or at least he hadn't in the last three centuries. If he was bringing out a new edition of his definitive study of Styphon's House at this point, there had to be a reason. He had a number of theories about what that reason might be, none of which made for pleasant dining.

"Has Kalvan's Time-Line been receiving more public attention while I was in Sicily?" he asked.

Both Verkan and Dalla said yes.

"Kalvan's Time-Line has been proscribed as too dangerous for civilians and newsies since we can't offer them Paratime Police protection," she added. "But that hasn't stopped the newsies from interviewing the Kalvan Study Team members and their families."

Tortha shook his head. "Then Danthor Dras has a fertile field for his speculations. Few of which will be kind of the Paratime Police..."

Verkan added. "We don't need any more distractions with publicity hounds or day trippers. We're having a hard enough problems guarding the Dhergabar professors."

"From themselves, mostly!" Dalla rejoined.

They all laughed.

After a pause for another round of drinks, Dalla continued, "The University people have been writing a lot, but all in the scholarly journals. I'd have expected one of them to try a popular piece, but none of them have to date."

"Sounds as if Danthor Dras is sitting on them," Tortha said grimly. "He probably wants to be the first to reach a popular audience. Once he's sure of being in the bright light of public attention, Kalvan's Time-Line is going to become everyone's favorite topic of conversation. So will any mistakes the Paratime Police and their Chief make in handling it."

Dalla frowned. "That incident where one of your predecessors found one of Danthor's colleagues was guilty of—something worse than academic fraud?"

"It was," Tortha said. "And it wasn't one of Danthor's colleagues, either; one of Chief Zarvan's inspectors caught the Scholar himself using an undisguised pocket recorder to tape The God Alexander on one of the Fourth Level, Alexandrian-Macedonian time-lines. If it hadn't been for Danthor's pull, he would have been prosecuted for Outtime Contamination; his father was an administrator at Dhergabar University and major contributor to the Management Party, and he used all his *influence* to protect his son. The fallout from that incident was one of the things that convinced Old Tharg to retire and put me in the Chief's chair."

"Tortha, do you think Danthor still holds it against the Paratime Police? That incident was a long time ago!"

"Dalla, Danthor Dras reminds me of some Fourth Level mountain-tribe chieftain. Once somebody's done him an injury, he won't die happy unless he's paid it back or at least had his sons swear they will."

"After not saying a word for over a century?" This time it was Verkan sounding skeptical.

Tortha took a firm grip on both his glass and his temper. "By the time he was in a position to fight the Paratime Police, I was too firmly seated in the Chief's chair. He also had a few enemies of his own at the University. He's not the most lovable man there, even if he is right most of the time."

"That's like saying Queen Rylla isn't the most even-tempered woman in Hostigos," Dalla said. "But go on."

"Anyway, he seems to have spent the last few centuries out-arguing, out-writing or outliving all his enemies. Now there's a new Chief of the Paratime Police who isn't on quite such a firm footing as old Tortha Karf. Danthor's own flanks and rear are safe, and Kalvan's war against Styphon's House will give him a ready-to-hand audience without his having to do anything except write his fiftieth book. That's a situation a child couldn't fail to notice, and Danthor's forgotten more about strategy than most generals ever learn."

Before either Verkan or Dalla could reply, the waiters arrived with dinner. Tortha had thought his appetite was gone for the evening, but the fish, house sauce and hot bread smelled irresistible. He let the waiters load his plate. Before long he was picking at his dinner.

A little later, he noticed that Verkan and Dalla were no longer paying him or their own loaded plates any attention. They were so lost in each other that they didn't even look up when the pattern of projected constellations on the ceiling overhead flared into a supernova. If they'd been fifty years younger, he'd have suspected they were holding hands under the table.

The sight restored his good humor, and appetite. Strictly between him and his conscience, he was willing to admit that Dalla's old hostility toward him had some justification. He had been careless about their first marriage, keeping Verkan grinding away at one job after another.

Well, Dalla had no more worries coming from him. Now she had a much more difficult job: protecting her husband from himself.

FOUR

I

Balph, the hub of Styphon's House, lay downstream on the Argo River from Ktemnos City. While nowhere near as large as the capital with its half a million people, Balph was still large enough to be called a city—the Holy City.

Despite being the fourth largest city in Hos-Ktemnos, its major industry was religion. Its secondary trade was shipping. Old Balph, the original trading settlement, had long ago been encircled by its strange offspring, except near the dockyards. Someday the old buildings would be leveled for some new monument to Styphon's glory. Balph proper was already home to Styphon's House Upon Earth, an old golden-domed basilica that contained Styphon's Own Image, sixteen Great Temples and the Shrine of Styphon's Ascension, the Temple Treasury, the Temple Academy, the Supreme Priest's Palace.

Supreme Priest Sesklos sat at the apex of the Inner Circle's Triangle Table, with First Speaker

Anaxthenes to his right and Archpriest Dracar on his left, facing Styphon's Golden Image, the huge idol of Styphon that the lay members only saw during times of great crisis or special events. As Speaker of the Inner Circle, it was Anaxthenes' *duty* to provide the voice for the mechanical bellows that allowed the giant idol to mimic human speech. Typically, this duty was the province of Styphon's Voice, but when Sesklos had reached eighty winters Anaxthenes had assumed some of Sesklos' formal duties.

Ever since Sesklos' talk with Dracar, opposition to Anaxthenes' coalition had evaporated. With a clear majority of the thirty-six Archpriests of the Inner Circle behind him, Anaxthenes was forging a program that would change the shape of Styphon's House in ways the others would never realize until it was too late.

After the ritual Blessing of Styphon, benedictions and ritual chants, the Fifth Council of Balph unanimously passed a resolution to lend two hundred and fifty thousand ounces of gold to King Kaiphranos to hire mercenaries and buy supplies for the war against the False Kingdom of Hos-Hostigos. Next they'd put together the First Edict of Balph, condemning the Usurper Kalvan, but leaving an escape clause for any of his princes whose loyalty was wavering.

By Styphon, thought Anaxthenes, they would crush this interloper before another winter passed!

As he'd been prompted earlier, Archpriest Neamenestros spoke up. "I suggest we frame a reply to the false rumors spread by the Daemon's dupes, that Styphon's House recognizes no other gods but Styphon."

A polite way of saying what Archpriest Zothnes and the dearly departed Krastokles had said in public should have only been said in the privacy of the Inner Circle: that Styphon's House recognized no other god but Styphon. The truth was even harsher; Styphon's Archpriests believed in no gods, including Styphon.

Archpriests Roxthar and Cimon squirmed in their seats but kept quiet as promised.

"Why should the Council of Balph deny the special divinity of our God, the brightest star in the night sky?" Archpriest Timothanes snapped.

"Because the mercenaries we need to win this war against the Usurper worship Galzar with a fervor our priests lavish only upon the offering bowl," Anaxthenes replied. He hoped that would be enough to make Timothanes think twice before opening his mouth again.

He continued, "The time for declaring Styphon's sole divinity will come when the Usurper's bones are moldering in their grave cloths. Already some of the Wargod's priests openly counsel their charges to side with the Usurper in the coming war. We must keep our peace with Galzar before Kalvan forces a breach. He who owns the mercenaries, owns the Five Kingdoms."

"Yes," Heraclestros agreed. "And *we* own most of the gold."

"Wise words," Styphon's Own Voice declared. "I call for a vote."

"Aye, aye," said twenty-four voices, while twelve said "nay." Dracar and his allies looked like cats passing fish bones.

"The resolution passes. It is Styphon's Will. It shall be decreed that Styphon respects the divinity of all true gods, except for the False God Dralm. We also offer the services of our healers to any and all

priests of Galzar engaged in the struggle against the unlawful Usurper who calls himself Great King Kalvan of Hos-Hostigos. Styphon's Will Be Done."

When Styphon's Voice had fallen silent. Anaxthenes added, "The Daemon Kalvan and his minions threaten not only our lives, but the very timbers of Styphon's House On Earth, as well. King Kaiphranos is but a poor weapon, one easily broken or thrown aside, against the might of the Daemon Kalvan. Should this weak tool be broken, I fear that Kalvan's path will lead straight to the Holy City itself!

"We need a sharper sword. Why not that of Great King Cleitharses of Hos-Ktemnos? Let him lance the boil of Hos-Hostigos that corrupts the body of the Five Kingdoms. I say we must issue a proclamation, calling for the Sacred Squares of Hos-Ktemnos to come to the aid of the God of Gods."

That was the prearranged signal to Archpriest Theomenes, spiritual guardian to King Cleitharses, to touch his first two fingers to his mouth. Anaxthenes touched his fingers to his forehead, by way of reply, granting Theomenes permission to address the Council.

"Great King Cleitharses has found his faith disturbed over the misfortunes brought down upon Styphon's House by the Daemon Kalvan. Thus, he will no longer willingly and of his own free will grant that which is ours to ask, but he will listen to our united voice. As we all know, the wise and fair King Cleitharses has little love for the clamor of battle or the open air."

That pronouncement brought snickers from the assembled Archpriests. Cleitharses' last campaign was over ten winters ago against King Leophon, one of three petty kings who claimed suzerainty over the Upper Sastragath. The war had quickly turned into a nightmare of lost skirmishes and misdirected supplies. Only the fighting ability of the steadfast Sacred Squares had saved the Hos-Ktemnoi Army from complete disaster. Since then Cleitharses' idea of military glory was reading about ancient deeds of valor or adding another such scroll to the Royal Library.

"However," Archpriest Theomenes continued, "It is true that Great King Cleitharses is worried about a new Great Kingdom so close to the borders of Hos-Ktemnos, especially one who adds Princedoms as a lodestone pulls iron fillings."

"Who will the Great King choose as his Captain-General?" one of the Archpriests asked.

"DukeMnesklos, Lord High Marshal of Hos-Ktemnos."

"He has seen over seventy winters! Isn't it time he hung up his spurs?"

There was a loud harrumph from Supreme Priest Sesklos.

Another Archpriest hastily added, "Duke Mnesklos still sits tall in his saddle. It is true that he is good at fighting barbarians in the Sastragath, but will he be able to stop the Daemon?"

A dozen voices attempted to answer that question at once, but Roxthar's voice cut through them like a saw. "The Daemon Kalvan must be stopped. We need a warlord that can be the Fist of Styphon."

Styphon's Own Voice raised his hand for silence. "Archpriest Roxthar is right. We need a soldier of the Temple. Someone we can trust to sow the fields of Hos-Hostigos with the blood and corpses of her sons. I move we call upon Grand Master Soton of the Holy Order of Zarthani Knights to lead our Holy Army."

The Grand Master rose from his seat and bowed. He was the shortest man in the room and also the broadest. Seated he appeared a normal man, but when standing his short legs robbed him of full stature. Still, his *presence* was undeniable and Soton was known as a terrible foe; few in this room had the temerity to beard him to his face.

There was more shouting, although this time the voices were raised in protest. Soton was known to be as much a servant of Galzar Wolfhead as he was an Archpriest of Styphon's House. The lands he governed west of Hos-Ktemnos and Hos-Bletha as Grand Master of the Zarthani Knights were greater than any two Great Kingdoms combined. His Order Knights were the finest cavalry in the known world.

"Silence!" Sesklos shouted. Anaxthenes jerked back in surprise; he'd not thought old Sesklos had that much strength left in his worn body. After the news of Zothnes' and Krastokles' defection to Hos-Hostigos had reached his ears Sesklos had thrown a fit, fallen to the floor and knocked his head on the flagstones. He had lain paralyzed for a moon quarter; when he had awoken, it was if he'd aged ten winters—and for a moon his right side was paralyzed. Even now he drooled when speaking and his words were often slurred.

"Grand Master Soton is a man of the battlefield," Sesklos continued, "not some lickspittle underpriest currying favor with his superiors."

Anaxthenes smiled. Things were going even better than he'd planned.

"All this weighs in Soton's favor in this endeavor. I shall ask him to bring as many Lances of Knights as he can spare from the outer marches and offer him an additional three thousand Temple Guardsmen. That should stiffen the Army of Hos-Ktemnos enough for our purposes. We shall put the Grand Master in command of the Holy Host, the Army of Styphon and his allies. Let Duke Mnesklos parade before the troops, but it will be Soton who gives the orders."

Suddenly Sesklos appeared to flag and Anaxthenes stood up and spoke. "You have heard Styphon's Own Voice. The time for talk is finished. This Assembly is hereby dismissed. Grand Master Soton, will you attend His Divinity?"

"It will be my pleasure, First Speaker."

Sesklos stiffened. "First Speaker, you and Archpriest Soton will attend me in my chambers. And bring a scribe, too. I have letters to draft."

"Yes, Your Divinity."

II

King Kalvan reined in his horse and held up a gloved hand as a signal to the riders of his escort. "Hold up there!" he added, in case someone hadn't seen the signal. This visit wasn't a public relations hunt for wolves but an opportunity for Kalvan to get away from Tarr-Hostigos. He had a bad case of cabin fever and it helped when he took time to visit his here-and-now touchstone, the spot where he had landed after jumping off that cross-time flying saucer—or whatever the hell it was.

During the last month, the hunting parties had taken their toll of wolves, but not all of the hunters came back. A man who didn't kill his wolf with the first shot might find its teeth in his throat before he could reload. Some parties came back short half their strength; tales began to go around that the wolves were Styphon's demons in animal form. He was here to put those rumors to sleep.

Other parties marched off into storms and didn't come back at all. In Nostor, Kalvan had to stop the hunting parties completely; they were being ambushed by bandits and starving peasants for their horses and weapons.

Kalvan remembered Duke Chartiphon's speech at the banquet celebrating the beginning of fireseed production in Hostigos. He'd predicted they'd make a howling wilderness of Nostor. They had too, with help from the weather, wolves and the civil war that broke out after Prince Gormoth had attacked the Nostor Town Temple and a nearby temple farm. The unrest had continued, with mercenary armies roaming the countryside, until Prince Pheblon, Gormoth's cousin, had restored token order.

Not that anyone but his cronies missed Gormoth, to be sure. He'd been a bad enemy and would never have been a friend worth having. But as long as a nominally friendly Prince ruled Nostor, the Great King of Hos-Hostigos couldn't simply march in and take charge—even if the place was falling apart! That would make it look as if Great King Kalvan was more concerned with his own power than with the overthrow of Styphon's House, and that reputation would be a political headache. Not as big a one as a live Gormoth would have been, but a live Gormoth could have been turned into a dead one. Prince Pheblon, on the other hand, would have to be supported as much as possible, in the hope that he would repay that support by his contribution to the spring campaign against Hos-Harphax.

It was the coming campaign that concerned Kalvan as the riders on the road disappeared behind a copse of trees. This latest inspection tour made it clear the hunters were finally getting the better of the wolves. Woodcutting parties were going out again so people weren't freezing to death quite so often, and winter had to be two-thirds gone unless another Ice Age was making its appearance. However, when spring arrived so would the next round against Styphon's House and their puppets in Harphax City.

By the time Kalvan's thoughts had gone that far, the snow was up to his horse's knees and it looked as if it would be even deeper farther on. Kalvan guided the horse to the left, down into the bed of the little stream, and then stopped as he felt his mount's hooves begin to slide on the ice.

The clouds were thicker and darker, and while it wasn't snowing—thank Dralm for small mercies!—the wind was blowing the snow already on the ground.

"Your Majesty, should we be stopping here?" Count Phrames' voice came from behind. "We are too strong to tempt wolves or bandits if we keep moving, but if we stop we may look like easy prey."

"In that case, they're gong to get a nasty surprise," Kalvan said, as he pulled a pistol out of his boot and checked the load, the flint, the priming. Then he pulled his horse's head around with one hand, holding the pistol cocked and ready with the other.

As he left the road, he heard Phrames calling out that the Great King wished to ride apart with his scouts and pray to the gods of this homeland for guidance. If he'd thought there was anyone home, Kalvan would have done exactly that. However, neither the late Rev. Morrison's determination that his only son follow him into the ministry nor the here-and-now baker's dozen of gods and goddesses had altered his basic agnosticism.

What he was doing probably wasn't any more rational than praying, but it worked better for him. He intended to ride up to the four-foot thick hemlock standing below a little cliff that marked the place where Kalvan had left otherwhen Pennsylvania on May 19, 1964 and wound up here in the Five—now Six Kingdoms. The hemlock marked the site of the farmhouse where an escaped murderer had been holed up. A murderer who'd escaped jail, come home to this ramshackle farmhouse and beat on his wife until she'd escaped and told a neighbor. According to his wife, Bill Kirby had a rifle and a grudge against the State Police.

Kalvan had been skulking toward the yellow farmhouse, his hand close to the butt of his .38 Colt, with fellow Pennsylvania State Policemen Steve Kovac, Larry Stacey and Jack French, when he was scooped up by the cross-time flying saucer. He wondered what they thought about his disappearance...probably thought he'd turned tail and ran, Dralm-blast it!

Kalvan didn't like that at all; he'd never run from a fight in his life. One thing was true: no one back home had seen hide nor hair of him since he'd been picked up by that a cross-time saucer. Other than Aunt Harriet, there was no one to miss him back home; he'd broken up with Kate over six months before he disappeared. Last he'd heard, she was engaged to a dentist... She'd always fretted over the danger of police work; he'd never known how right she was!

Of course, Kate had imagined dangers closer to home than here-and-now, where medicine was of the barber and leech variety and one was as likely to get run over by a runaway Conestoga wagon as die peacefully in bed. Not a lot of old folks here-and-now...

Still, climbing the cliff and visiting the tree calmed him down when he needed calming, and sometimes gave him an idea for the solution of some particularly knotty problem. Call it his touchstone to the past. Kalvan had visited this spot three times since his arrival here-and-now; on this, his fourth visit, he needed a relaxing place to ponder events more than ever. Next year's battles would determine whether or not the fledgling Great Kingdom he'd created would endure or end in an orgy of blood-letting and burning...

Thisspot was also where Kalvan had started to write his Journal—maybe a foolish conceit, but it helped keep his perspective on who he had been, a little over a year ago—Corporal Calvin Morrison, Pennsylvania State Policeman—and who he was now: Great King Kalvan I of Hos-Hostigos.

"Over here, Your Majesty!" Hectides the old wolf-hunter and scout cried out.

He pushed past a low hanging chestnut tree and there before him was the little cliff and the big hemlock with the deep three-foot wide X Kalvan had carved into the trunk with his knife on his first return visit; he had wanted to mark it so that he would recognize it twenty years from now. Already Hectides had two of his hunters clearing the snow out of the fire pit that they'd built on their last visit. When the pit was just bare stone, they brought straw, twigs and some firewood. Within minutes the old wolf hunter was using his tinderbox to light a fire at the base of the cliff and soon had a roaring fire. The scouts fanned out to keep watch and, as soon as his fingers thawed over the fire, Kalvan took out his quill pen and lambskin parchment and began to write.

Journal – Corporal Calvin Morrison

Winter – 1965 – January 29th, plus or minus a day or two.

I'm glad I decided to write this diary now while my memories of 'former life' are still vivid; I'm afraid, after a decade or two here-and-now, my experiences of the earth I grew up on will begin to fade and recede much like a long dream. Someday when I'm an old man—should I be so lucky!—these entries will help convince me that I am not the Dralm-sent Kalvan that everyone believes me to be. Or that my previous life was not some fever dream...

Thus, this permanent record in English so no one else can 'accidentally' read it and have me sent to the local equivalent of a loony bin, which far exceeds the horror of those state institutions in far away Pennsylvania.

The journal entries I've been making during the past few months have helped me reconstruct my childhood and early life. As much as I despise the current double-speak and gobbledygook that passes for 'psycho-therapy' back home, these diary entries about my childhood, my college years at Princeton, my military service in Korea and my time as a Pennsylvania State Policeman have improved my morale. They have also helped to clear my mind of the doubts that were plaguing me at the onset of winter, when the day-to-day crises of kingship were no longer keeping me preoccupied, and I once again began to try to 'analyze' the event that catapulted me here-and-now.

No matter how unlikely it seems, the truth is I was 'picked up' by some kind of cross-time flying saucer and dropped off on a world far different than my own, both in history and technological development. I can still see in my mind's eye the flicker of other worlds passing overhead through the iridescent dome of the saucer, which means there must be millions of 'alternate' earths. My friend, Steve Kovac, who used to read 'Analog Science Fiction Magazine,' would loan me the magazines after he finished reading them, and during long nights in the barracks, when I had trouble sleeping, I would read them.

So I'm not unfamiliar with the idea of alternate worlds; however, it's a long road from Altoona to Piccadilly Circus! Especially, when the saucer pilot—some kind of military officer in a green uniform—tries to shoot you with a long-barreled soldering iron!

It was a combination of quick reflexes and luck that got me out of that saucer alive; still, I hope that pilot took a good one from my Colt Official Police. I don't know what the Sideways Police Service does about unauthorized 'pickups,' but I suspect it isn't preferential treatment with kid gloves. No, I must have killed him or there would have been someone from that outfit snooping around Hostigos, trying to pick me up. The probabilities of what might happen to me, should they 'pick me up' are not thoughts to aid in either good digestion or a good night's rest.

If that sounds paranoid, well, living in an era where paranoia is a survival tool will do that to one.

The day started out as an ordinary duty day at the barracks, when we got a call from old man Gustav that Bill Kirby had come back to his wife's place and shot it up pretty good—

"Your Majesty, sorry to interrupt," Hectides said, pointing up at the fast-moving and darkening clouds. "A storm could be upon us in half a candle, and there's still wolves about."

Kalvan's horse snorted as if to punctuate the wolf hunter's words.

"You're right, Hectides, we should be getting back to the main party." Whatever ideas might come here couldn't be worth risking his neck, or even his horse. Good mounts weren't easy to replace in Hostigos, and wouldn't be for quite some time.

Kalvan mounted his horse, then rode back downstream followed by Hectides and his scouts. He returned faster than he'd come, because as he turned off the stream the howl of a wolf floated down from a nearby hill. The horse whinnied nervously; Kalvan had to tug on the reins to keep him from breaking into a trot.

Count Phrames met Kalvan by the road with an I-told-you-so expression on his face. "Your Majesty, I beg you not to ride out like this again while we are in wolf country. So much depends upon your safety—"

Kalvan cut in saying, "Phrames, Queen Rylla has appointed six nursemaids for our child. I'll recommend you as the seventh, if you so wish."

Phrames winced as if slapped. Kalvan immediately felt guilty for taking out his frustration with the weather and the state of the world on him. He felt even guiltier for throwing the fact of Rylla's pregnancy in Phrames' face. One of the many little details about the Principedom of Hostigos Kalvan had learned, after the campaigning season ended and there was time to think and ask questions, was that Count Phrames had been Rylla's betrothed since childhood. To see her married to a total stranger, even if sent by the gods, couldn't have been pleasant for him—even if the stranger gave her a throne and a crown.

"I am truly sorry, Phrames. I spoke in anger and in haste; my words were unworthy of a king."

Phrames grinned, white teeth showing above a frost-tinted brown beard. "I spoke without proper respect to you, I admit. But I did speak with proper respect for Queen Rylla, who's the one I'll have to reckon with if I'd let you come to harm, be it by wolves, bandits or an ill-fated fall from your horse."

"Then by all means let's both show her respect and turn for home. There appears to be nothing more out here worth seeing or doing today than a helmet full of snow. Also, the envoy of Prince Araxes is coming tomorrow, and I want to show him at least the respect of being awake and unfrozen."

Kalvan pounded his gloved right hand against his saddlehorn to see if there was any feeling left in the fingers. It was a good thing he hadn't done any more writing in the Journal; he'd had one bout of frostbite in Korea that had made him more susceptible to a second.

Phrames snorted. "What his Reluctance Prince Araxes needs is a swift kick where he sits down from the Great King's army and everybody else who wants to help. We may have to sell tickets."

Kalvan didn't entirely disagree, after three months of hearing Araxes' excuses for not swearing fealty to Hos-Hostigos and another of total silence. He wondered if the Prince of Phaxos was deep into Styphon's pocket. However, if he was going to the trouble of sending an envoy over wolf-ridden, snowbound roads, common courtesy required listening to him.

They rode across the little bridge built over the stream last autumn, one of a score or so that Kalvan had ordered built by peasants and prisoners of war to make it easier to move guns and wagons around Hostigos. The beams and planking seemed to be holding up, but one railing was sagging ominously. Kalvan called out to his scribe to make a note. He pretended not to hear a petty-captain adding that if the Great King could notice something like that, he would certainly notice a man riding a horse like a sack of cabbages, "—so remember that you're on a horse, Nicos, and not on the ridgepole of your father's barn, thank you, you'll wish to Dralm you'd never been born!"

Two hundred yards up the road, the head of Kalvan's escort overtook a woodcutting party—twenty men and a dozen oxen, with horns the size of Texas longhorns, and horses laden with branches and logs—that completely filled the road. Phrames swore like a trooper, several of the woodcutters swore back, and finally Kalvan had to urge his horse through the drifts to restore order. Voices stilled as he approached.

The leader of the woodcutters was the yeoman farmer, Vurth, who'd been Kalvan's first host here-and-now. Kalvan had amply repaid the farmer for taking in a stranger, who didn't know when or where he was, by helping fight off a band of Nostori raiders threatening Vurth's homestead. Kalvan didn't believe in omens, but he had to admit that seeing Vurth's homely bearded face grinning up at him made him feel better—despite the rising chill wind and lightly falling snow.

"The wolves aren't what they were a moon ago, Your Majesty," Vurth explained. "It's worth it, to not sit by a cold hearth. So we went out, and what with the frost breaking off the branches, we didn't even have to do much cutting."

"Good work, Vurth. We'll buy three mule-loads for the shelter at Hostigos Town. Pick men to take it and they can ride along with us." Kalvan looked past Vurth to a pair of oxen halfway up the train. "I'll pay the bounty on those wolf skins, too. How many are there?"

"Five and a half-grown cub, Your Majesty."

"I hope you didn't use any of the royal fireseed on them?"

"No, no. Styphon's owl dung is good enough for those, and we didn't even have to shoot two of them. My oldest daughter's husband, Xykos—he's as big as a bear and found himself a suit of armor at Fyk—just stands there and lets the wolf bite his armor. Then while the beast's trying to reckon why the man doesn't taste right, Xykos swings his axe. Wolves don't take to being hit on the head with axes, let me tell you!"

Kalvan and Hectides laughed. "Your son-in-law sounds like a good man. Would he care to join the

hunting parties, or take a post with my Guard?"

"I don't think he'd say no if you asked him come spring, Sire. Right now, though, my daughter's half a moon from her first. So he'd as soon not be away from home for a spell. I know you understand we mean no disrespect."

"None taken, Vurth. I know a little of what he's going through, and by summer I'll know more. I'll send a gift for the child and speak of this again some other time."

"Dralm bless, Your Majesty, and give you and Queen Rylla a son to go on ruling over us as well as you've done." Kalvan heard murmurs of agreement from the other woodcutters. He backed his horse away, thanking Somebody or Other it was too dark for anyone to see his face turning color.

It helped to hear things like that whenever he had the feeling that maybe he was on the wrong course and should have simply ridden on instead of starting the biggest war this world had known in half a century. If his subjects, the people who had to pay the price in burned houses and ruined farms, stolen livestock and poisoned wells, dead sons and raped daughters, thought he was ruling well—maybe he was doing something right.

"God helps those who help themselves," had been one of his father's favorite aphorisms. He wasn't going to place any bets on the source of whatever help he received, with all due respect to the late Reverend Morrison, R.I.P. It was also true that Kalvan had never heard of any good coming from just lying down and letting events roll over you like a steamroller.

FIVE

Kalvan sighed happily as Rylla wrapped the freshly heated cloths around his feet. He wasn't worried about frostbite any more, but the warmth seeping through him still felt delicious. The temperature must have been dropping toward zero when he rode into Hostigos Town, and the wind had been blowing half a gale.

"There," Rylla said decisively. "Your toes don't feel quite so much like dried peas." She stood up and took his hands. "Your fingers still feel cold, though." She sat down on the bench beside him and tucked both of his hands inside her chamber robe.

Between the warm fur lining of the robe and the warm Rylla inside it, Kalvan's fingers quickly finished thawing. In a few minutes, he could feel how Rylla's waist was beginning to swell with the child she was carrying.

"Has it moved yet?" he asked.

Rylla's blue eyes clouded for a moment. "No. Amasphalya, the chief midwife and Brother Mytron both said it would not be a good sign if the child moved so soon. When the snow turns to rain is when it should start moving."

"If the snow ever stops! If the winter is at all like this in Grefftscharr, they must be watching for the coming of the Frost Giants and the last battle of the gods."

Kalvan tried to keep the fear out of his voice. He doubted he'd succeeded any better than he had all the

other times since he learned Rylla was pregnant and what had happened to her mother. Princess Demia had two miscarriages, bore Rylla safely, then died in childbirth trying to give Prince Ptosphes a son. That was why Ptosphes had never remarried; he had a daughter who was as good as any son. He would not send another woman to Ormaz's realm when he didn't have to.

It didn't help allay his fears knowing that he'd done just about everything he could hope to do to improve Rylla's chances. He'd explained antiseptic theory to Mytron and some of the other temple priests of Dralm, as well as to the Chief Priestess of Yirtta Allmother. He would have taught it directly to the midwives, but they were even fussier about their guild privileges than the gunsmiths, who were still arguing whether or not bore-standardization for infantry muskets would infringe on their traditional rights! Taking lessons from a mere Great King was beneath the midwives' dignity.

At least they'd sworn to learn from Mytron and the others. If they didn't, all the guild privileges in the Six Kingdoms wouldn't save them. The midwives who attended Rylla were going to be clean and keep her clean if Kalvan had to stand over them through the whole birth with a pistol in each hand!

Kalvan pulled his hands out of Rylla's robe and looked at the maps on the north wall. It made him feel better to see something where he'd made a difference and would go on making one. He'd not only taught his General Staff to see maps as an important weapon, he'd established a Cartographic Office that was producing one complete set on deerskin and four smaller sets on parchment every week. The deerskin sets would go to the major castles, while the parchment ones went to the field regiments. With luck, every castle in Hos-Hostigos, every army commander, and most of the regiments would have maps before the campaigning season opened.

The first map was Hostigos—or Old Hostigos, now that it was the senior Princedom of a Great kingdom—Center County, the southern corner of Clinton County and all of Lycoming County south of the Bald Eagles. Hostigos Town was on the exact site of Bellefonte otherwhen, with Tarr-Hostigos guarding the pass through the Bald Eagles.

Then Hos-Hostigos, with its seven other Princedoms. Reading counterclockwise around Old Hostigos, from northeast to south, they were Nostor (a former enemy turned weak ally), Nyklos, Ulthor (with a port on Lake Erie), Kyblos (with its capital on the site of otherwhen Pittsburgh), Sask (another former enemy now turned into the gods-only-knew what kind of ally), Sashta (a new Princedom created originally as part of the alliance against Hostigos, which Kalvan had allowed to remain in existence as a favor to Sask and Beshta), and finally Beshta itself. That was the map Kalvan had studied most closely; he hoped he wouldn't need to do much if any fighting in Old Hostigos itself.

Finally, the map of the Six Kingdoms (including Hos-Hostigos). From north to south, they ran:

Hos-Zygros—New England and southeastern Canada to Lake Ontario;

Hos-Agrys—New York, southwestern Ontario and northern New Jersey.

Hos-Harphax (or what was left of it)—Eastern Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and southern New Jersey;

Hos-Ktemnos—Virginia and North Carolina (the richest of the Great Kingdoms); and

Hos-Bletha—From South Carolina to the tip of Florida, part of Cuba, and as far west as Mobile Bay.

Kalvan didn't spare too much time for the Six Kingdoms map either; he'd long since decided it was a

waste of time to worry about grand strategy for the war to overthrow Styphon's House. They didn't have enough intelligence about the enemy's plans, potential resources or high command—which for the time being meant the Inner Circle of Archpriests at Balph, the Holy City.

They might have been better off if the "Council of Trent" Styphon's Voice had called last autumn had been held in Harphax City as originally planned. Somebody must have realized that Harphax City was close enough to the borders of Hos-Hostigos to be full of Kalvan's spies, or at least people willing to sell him secrets for the right price. So they had moved the Council, Archpriests, bodyguards, baggage trains, old Uncle Tom Cobbley and all, to Styphon's House Upon Earth—the largest of the golden temples of Styphon. Balph was a two-industry town, trading and religion, with Styphon's House holding most of the cards. A mouse couldn't get in there without being vouched for by three upperpriests; Styphon's House might not understand the military value of security, but apparently it knew how to practice it.

Without knowing what was happening at Balph, it was impossible to tell if Styphon's House was going to step out from behind the Kings and Princes it had always used as front men and wage this war on its own. There were military advantages to either choice.

Making war by proxy was always risky; the proxies might develop minds of their own, as any number of Italian city-states had discovered with their *condottieri*. In fact, the cult of Galzar the Wargod encouraged a general brotherhood of all mercenaries and fighting men, and there was no way Styphon's House could do anything about that without appearing to declare war on Galzar Wolfhead.

Kalvan rather wished they would be that stupid; the war would be over by next winter if Styphon's House made enemies of enough mercenaries. However, he doubted that would happen. Supreme Priest Sesklos might be ninety-two winters (or ninety-five by his reckoning since the Zarthani did not name their children until they reached the age of three; a realistic acceptance of here-and-now hygiene and infant mortality) and past being a war leader, but some of the other Archpriests were said to be shrewd enough to head off militarily disastrous decisions.

On the other hand, the Kings and Princes might not be willing to be Styphon's front men anymore. They would now make their own fireseed, raise their own armies and go to war without the consent of Styphon's House. They still might need gold and silver to pay mercenaries if they wanted top troops. However, other people besides Styphon's House could now provide specie; Great King Kalvan I of Hos-Hostigos, for example.

Styphon's House could probably find a respectable force of allies if it were willing to pay enough, in both gold and power. Styphon was not a popular god, at least in the Northern Kingdoms. Few would fight for Styphon's House cheaply. The price of the rulers' aid might bring down Styphon's House as completely as any defeat in battle.

Except that then the countryside might be overrun by mercenaries whose employers could no longer pay them, living off the land, gradually turning into armed mobs and turning that land into a desert. The idea of the whole Atlantic seaboard winding up like Germany at the end of the Thirty Years' War turned Kalvan's stomach.

He reminded himself sharply that he was speculating much too far ahead of available intelligence and forced the nightmare out of his mind. What about the one man who would certainly fight Hos-Hostigos whether Styphon's House helped him or not?

King Kaiphranos of Hos-Harphax didn't care one whit whether Kalvan worshipped Styphon, Dralm, Galzar or water moccasins like some of the Sastragathi tribes. He did care that Kalvan was in rebellion

against him, suborning the loyalty of his sworn Princes and generally committing treason, insurrection, usurpation, riot, robbery and spitting in the public streets. Proper Great Kings put down rebels, and even King Kaiphranos (known to all as Kaiphranos the Timid) considered himself a proper Great King.

What Kaiphranos thought and what he was were two different things. The man was well past seventy, and it was notorious throughout the Five Kingdoms that he'd always wanted to be a flute-maker. He'd never rule and now barely reigned. At best he drizzled. Left to his own feeble devices, he'd barely been able to rely on more than his own Royal Army of five thousand, less than half of it at all well trained or well armed.

His family was another matter. Kaiphranos had two sons, Philesteus and Selestros. Prince Philesteus, the elder, was a soldier with a reputation for courage, which would be more important than competence in the here-and-now army he was leading. Princes and barons loyal to Kaiphranos or wanting to get rich off the loot of Hos-Hostigos would follow him, and so would enough mercenary captains to make a useful difference.

According to Skranga's spies, Selestros was morally destitute and called the Prince of Whoremongers in the wine shops of Harphax City. No one took him seriously, including his father, who'd even stopped paying-off *themothers* of his bastard spawn. The only people who loved Selestros were the pimps and tavern owners who depended upon him and his cronies for much of their income.

King Kaiphranos also had a younger half-brother, Grand Duke Lysandros, who was that fortunately rare thing, a publicly devout worshipper of Styphon. If Styphon's house sent gold and men to aid Kaiphranos, Lysandros would do his best to see that neither was wasted. That made it far more likely that Styphon's House *would* send the money and men, and make Hos-Harphax a far more formidable opponent.

Kalvan stood up and started pacing up and down the room beside the maps. Rylla, who'd been putting her long blond hair up in a nightcap, looked at him in silence. Then she sighed, handed him his fur-lined slippers, and stood up to join him. He stopped long enough to hold her briefly and kiss her. His list of Reasons Why I Love Rylla would now fill a long parchment scroll. High on the list was the fact that with her he didn't have to pretend to be the sent-by-the-gods Great King Kalvan with answers to everything. He didn't have to be afraid to admit it when he was scared, too tired to sleep or with no idea at all of what to do next.

"Dralm-damnit! Everything—the survival of Hos-Hostigos, you, the baby—it's all going to depend on whether Styphon's House sends King Kaiphranos against us by himself, or waits to get help from Hos-Ktemnos and Hos-Agrys. If they wait, we could be outnumbered three to one."

"We could be," Rylla said. "On the other hand, time lets us find new allies, too. Also, if what one hears of Prince Philesteus' is true, he will be as hard to hold back as a yearling colt. He will attack for the honor of Hos-Harphax, even if he had no hope of victory."

"So it will be a race between Prince Philesteus' sense of honor and Styphon's House offering him enough to make it worth holding back?"

"That's a good way of putting it."

That also should mean a spring campaign against nothing more than a Styphon-reinforced Hos-Harphax. Say, forty-five thousand enemies against forty thousand Hostigi, total strength. Allow five thousand Hostigi left behind in garrisons to defend the Trygathi border, key towns, castles and depots, assume the

Styphoni-Harphaxi alliance would risk throwing all their men forward, and the two field armies came out at forty-five thousand enemies against thirty-five to thirty-six thousand Hostigi.

Not hopeless, but not good either. If all the Hostigi troops were up to the standard of the regiments of the Royal Army of Hos-Hostigos or Ptosphes' Army of Hostigos, and all the artillery were the new mobile guns, Kalvan would cheerfully have faced two-to-one odds. They weren't, they weren't going to be, and there was nothing to be done about it.

He could hire more mercenaries, of course. But Styphon's House could easily outbid him, and even if they didn't, the money would be better spent on improving the Royal Army or his Prince's troops. That was another mistake the Italian city-states had made: spending all their money on mercenaries and none on arming and training their own troops. The *condottieri* not only hadn't been reliable, but they hadn't learned how to fight anybody except one another. When the French invaded in 1494, they rolled up Italy like a rug from the Alps to Naples in a single campaign.

So he had thirty-six thousand men, some of them twice as good as anybody they'd be facing, against possibly as many as fifty thousand of unpredictable quality. Definitely not good. Kalvan doubted he could afford a single major defeat, or even more than a couple of drawn battles or expensive victories. He had to destroy his enemies without losing the ability to protect his friends and allies from the vengeance of King Kaiphranos and Styphon's House. Otherwise those friends and allies would dry up and blow away.

He could afford to hire many mercenaries, either. Much of the Royal Treasury would have to go to repairing winter damage, purchasing supplies for the coming campaign and buying more horses and arms. Could he afford to take the offensive, in spite of what the Winter of the Wolves might have done to their food stock and the draft animals for the wagons and guns?

"We can probably afford it better than anything else—if we can move the guns," Kalvan said out loud. Rylla gave him one of her why-don't-you-talk-to-me-instead-of-just-yourself looks and he explained.

She nodded when he'd finished. "If we can put all of our men into the field, that will lessen the odds against us. Also, if we take the offensive, we can keep all our men together and improve the odds still more. If we wait for the enemy to come to us, there will be calls for a regiment to defend this town and a battery to defend that bridge. If we honor all the requests, we will soon have no army left. If we ignore them, the people will wonder about their safety. Many of the soldiers may desert to defend their homes and families.

"Also, if we keep the army together, it will be easier to send messages. That's almost as good as growing wings on—"

Kalvan interrupted Rylla's dissertation on the principles of war by kissing her again, harder and longer than the first time. For a moment, he was almost sorry that she was pregnant. Still, at first, he'd been upset by the news: his first thought was of losing her to here-and-now's pitiful childbirth practices and sepsis. His second thought was that the spring campaign would be long over before she could be in the saddle again—and Rylla was one of Hostigos' Best generals.

She was also someone who couldn't stay out of the thick of the fighting once she got within hearing range of gunfire. A recurring nightmare for Kalvan was finding Rylla the way he'd found a Nostori cavalry officer—shot out of the saddle by a charge of case shot, ridden over by his whole troop, then stripped naked by looters and tumbled into a ditch. He hugged and kissed her again until the nightmare went away.

Rylla looked at the map of Hos-Hostigos again. "We can move food and guns down to the castles in southern Beshta, especially the border castles like Tarr-Veblos and Tarr-Locra, as soon as the roads are open. That way we don't have to move the whole army and all its supplies and ordnance at once, or as far."

A depot system made sense if they were going to take the offensive. It even made sense if by some miracle the enemy struck first. A few well-gunned, well-supplied forts in the path of Kaiphranos' army could tie down a lot of strength. There was even a place he'd heard of near Three Mile Island where there was an old castle, Tarr-Locra that would stop up the Harph like a cork in a bottle if fortified strongly enough. If Kaiphranos wasn't brave enough to move until he had Styphon's aid, the forts could support cavalry units to scout and harass him all the way to the walls of Harphax City.

Harmakros in particular would just love a chance to take his troopers south and singe King Kaiphranos' beard!

"We'll have to be careful to give them adequate supplies and reliable garrisons," Kalvan said. "It won't do for the main army to march south and be shot at by our guns because the garrisons have been starved out or turned their colors."

"I know the men for the garrisons," Rylla said with an impish grin. "The mercenaries that Balthar's men rode over at the Battle of Fyk. If there's anybody absolutely sure not to love Beshtans, it's those men."

Kalvan agreed and tried to remember the disposition of those troops in the new Royal Army. He had offered amnesty, land and a place in the Royal Army of Hos-Hostigos to the mercenaries who had been captured during the wars with Nostor and Sask; a majority had signed on.

Now he recalled which regiments the mercenaries were with. "They're in the Third and Fourth Regiments of Horse. We can send them to Beshta as part of an observation force under Captain-General Harmakros."

Before Rylla could reply, Kalvan realized that he might finally be tired enough to go to sleep and draped an arm over her shoulder. "Let's go to bed."

He wasn't as tired as he'd thought, but it didn't take long for the warmth of the bed and Rylla's steady soft breathing to put him under. The last thing he remembered thinking before dropping off was that despite all his problems, he was still a lucky man to be here with Rylla as Great King Kalvan instead of merely Corporal Calvin Morrison of the Pennsylvania State Police.

SIX

I

Outside the shuttered windows of the Great Hall of Tarr-Hostigos, Kalvan knew that it was a dazzling bright winter day without a breath of wind disturbing last night's freshly fallen snow. It was also cold enough to perform a traditional form of surgery on brass monkeys.

Inside the Great Hall, both fireplaces were blazing and charcoal braziers stood in every corner and to either side of the two thrones. Candles and rush tapers added their flames to both heat and the light. It

was still nothing that Kalvan would have called warm in either English or Zarthani, but at least he could hope to refrain from undignified gestures such as stamping his feet or blowing on his fingers.

The Royal Herald at the head of the stairs blew on his trumpet with more enthusiasm than talent. His companion carrying the double-headed copper poleax that accompanied each Great King at official functions raised his voice.

"Baron Menephranos, envoy of Prince Araxes of Phaxos, craves audience with the Great King of Hos-Hostigos."

Baron Menephranos stepped into the Audience Chamber followed by an attendant carrying four scrolls in a silver tray and flanked by two efficient looking bodyguards in the black and green livery of Phaxos. The guards fell back as the Baron strode forward, stopping halfway to the throne to bow until Kalvan waved him forward.

Menephranos was a tall, gangling young man who was almost certainly older than he looked, which was about eighteen. Kalvan found it hard to be optimistic about Prince Araxes' allegiance; the Baron wasn't the sort of negotiator he would have sent on serious business. It did quell his worries about Menephranos being a double agent.

Menephranos approached the royal throne, bowed again, and handed the first scroll to Kalvan. He inspected it to make certain that Chancellor Xentos' seal was on it along with Prince Araxes', signifying that the Chancellor had read it and found satisfactory. After a cursory inspection of the Duke's credentials, he handed the scroll to Rylla.

In the normal course of events, Rylla would have handed them back to Xentos, but the old Highpriest of Dralm was in bed with a nasty cold that might turn into pneumonia if neglected. Kalvan and Rylla had forbidden him to attend the audience. Rylla had added that if he continued arguing she would tie him to the bed, put sleeping draughts in his wine and, if all else failed, shoot him in the foot. The latter threat was probably a joke, but with Rylla you could never be sure.

"Baron Menephranos," Kalvan said, "It is Our understanding that your lord, Prince Araxes of Phaxos, has some considerable matter he wishes to lay before us. Let Us hope it is one that will lead to good relations between the Great Throne of Hos-Hostigos and him. We have suffered no injury at his hands, nor have We given him any that We are aware of." Araxes' example had undoubtedly encouraged other Princely waverers to refuse their allegiance to Kalvan, which counted as an injury on anybody's book but why not be tactful?

"The Great King speaks the truth," Menephranos said. His voice was also older than his face, a fine baritone that seemed too strong to come from such narrow chest. "It is my Prince's message that he must refuse his allegiance to the Throne of Hos-Hostigos, and that he does out of this out of no enmity to the man proclaimed Great King Kalvan I, but out of a greater concern for his own nobles and people."

Menephranos picked up the second parchment, ignoring the general hostile muttering that had begun when he had used the word "proclaimed." He went down on both knees to Kalvan, who saw that the parchment was sealed with both Araxes' seal and that of the High Chancellery at Balph, seat of Styphon's Voice and of the Inner Circle.

Kalvan described the seal and waited for another round of muttering to die down, before speaking, "We have long been curious as to what plots against the True Gods, and those who honor them, the Arch-Deceivers of False Styphon have hatched in their sty in Balph. Now, perhaps, we shall know more

than we have; if so Prince Araxes *may* have Our gratitude, although We do not as of yet have his allegiance."

Kalvan drew his dagger and slit the seal. The scroll had two sheets: one was a short letter from Araxes that restated in more flowery language what Menephranos had already said about the Prince's refusal of allegiance; the second was heralded *First Edict of Balph*. Kalvan skimmed the Edict, heard Rylla muttering under her breath and realized his face must be showing too much. He pulled it straight, finished reading the Edict, then cleared his throat and began reciting it aloud.

FIRST EDICT OF BALPH

*Sesklos Supreme Priest and Styphon's Voice
To the Lawful Kings and Princes of the Known World*

Greetings:

Be it know, that; throughout all the years since the Revelation of the Fireseed Mystery, given to us by Styphon, God of Gods, that secret has been guarded by Styphon's House.

Throughout all the years in which that secret has been guarded, it has been guarded not in hopes of temporal power or wealth.

This time harsh laughter joined the muttering. Kalvan waited for silence before continuing.

The Fireseed Mystery has been guarded in the hope that by moderating the power of the Kings and Princes to make war at their whim, the lands of the Known World might remain unravaged by war and the people secure in their lives and wealth. Now the Godless Usurper and ally of demons, calling himself Kalvan—

Cries and curses filled the room. Kalvan waved the Hall to silence; if the court continued to reply to every insult they would be there all day.

Now the Godless Usurper and ally of demons calling himself Kalvan has revealed Styphon's Holy Secret to all men. He has given to Kings and Princes the power to release the scourge of war upon the land whenever they wish, without let or hindrance save from their own wills.

He has so greatly deceived and led astray certain Princes that they have sworn impious oaths to

join him in his rebellion against their duly recognized overlords, Styphon's House and the God of Gods.

As all may bear witness, Styphon and the other True Gods have visited their curse upon the land for the crimes of the Usurper and the allies of the Daemon Kalvan. Not in the memory of man has war wrought such havoc, nor has the winter been so fierce, nor have demons in the guise of wolves ravished the land so freely.

It is proper and lawful that Styphon's House endeavor to lift the curse from the land by all mean in its power so that the innocent will not suffer along with the guilty.

To this end we proclaim: that no oath sworn to the Usurper and ally of demons, Kalvan is binding in any way whatsoever upon any man or Prince.

That Styphon's House will freely give the secret of fireseed to any Prince or King who has sworn no oaths to the Usurper and ally of demons, and that this fireseed shall be free of demons, fireseed devils and all unclean beings which abound in Kalvan's foul and impious substance.

That such Kings and Princes who receive the lawful secret of fireseed shall admit into their councils such consecrated highpriests of Styphon as may be necessary to guard the fireseed from the influence of demons, and that these priests shall be allowed all that they deem necessary to preserve the cleanliness of the fireseed and the true worship of Styphon, God of Gods.

That against such Kings and Princes who have made unlawful oaths, proclaimed unclean fireseed or foully used the priests of Styphon, Styphon's House may proclaim all measures it deems fit, even unto Holy War, save that these Kings and Princes abjure their crimes and make full and fit restitution and repentance.

Done in the Great Council of Balph this 26thday of the Moon of Long Darkness in the four hundred and eighty-second year of Styphon's Revelation.

SESKLOS

STYPHON'S VOICE UPON EARTH

Kalvan was too angry to sit still. He jumped up from the throne and grabbed the third parchment from the tray and tore it open. This document denounced the words of the traitorous dupes of the Usurper Kalvan, the so-called Archpriests Zothnes and Krastocles who had fraudulently disparaged the other True Gods except for the False Dralm, god of bilge-cleaners and latrine-diggers. Kalvan was glad Xentos wasn't there when he read *that* aloud to an accompanying chorus of "Down Styphon!" and "Death to Sesklos!"

"I know it stinks," Kalvan said when he could make himself heard. "But consider where it comes from. Would anything from the Lord of Flies and his servants *not* stink?" That drew laughter, reminding those in the Audience Chamber of the endless peasant jokes made to explain why the priests of Styphon's House were always demanding more cow and horse dung for their saltpeter mills.

Kalvan was privately sorry to see that someone at Balph had the sense to see what the result of a

One-God, One-Way schism might lead to here-and-now—especially considering all the mercenaries who took the worship of Galzar Wolfhead as seriously as the Roman Legionnaires took the Cult of Mithras. There went the holy crusade against Styphon—at least for now.

When he opened the fourth parchment, Kalvan began to laugh. "Sesklos seems to think he has some hope of proving his case and provides a great many words on demons, oaths, fireseed devils, prophecies, divinations and such matters.

Kalvan sat back down and looked at Menephranos. "Nonsense does not become less nonsensical by being repeated in more flowery language, or did no one ever teach Sesklos that?"

Menephranos seemed to feel that he had to reply. "I cannot judge the thoughts of Styphon's Voice. Yet, I know that Prince Araxes is greatly concerned, not only for his own lords and people, but also for others who have been—whom Styphon's House sees as having being led astray by the Great King Kalvan. Surely, even your Majesty must see—"

"Little man," Rylla replied in a voice that lowered the temperature of the Audience Chamber by about ten degrees. "The word 'must' is not used when addressing Great Kings." Rylla's hand was very close to the hilt of her dagger, and Kalvan did not like the expression on her face. The last time he'd seen one like it, she'd thrown the lid of a stone chamber pot at him and would have thrown the pot itself if he hadn't made a strategic retreat in the face of overwhelmingly bad temper.

Kalvan decided the situation needed defusing before some hothead took his cue from Rylla and turned the audience into a brawl or worse. Kalvan did not care to be known as a ruler who could not keep order in his own court or worse still, allow the envoys of allegedly friendly Princes to be lynched before his eyes.

He stood up, ostentatiously wiped his hands on his breeches, then drew his own dagger and thrust it through one corner of the Edict of Balph. "Will someone please summon the Steward of the Privies?" he called. "Have him bring one of the buckets. I believe he is the man among us most skilled at dealing with such filth."

Several people promptly dashed for the door. Even the green and black liveried guardsmen burst out laughing. Menephranos tried to join the laughter but wasn't very successful since his face was turning the color of the coals in the braziers.

When he could make himself heard without shouting, Kalvan went on. "Baron Menephranos. Like a good dog, you have barked as you master taught you. It is not your fault that you bore a shameful message that does your lord no honor. Therefore, We will not violate the laws of hospitality sacred to Allfather Dralm and Yirtta Allmother by bidding you to leave Hostigos at once. However, We would consider it a courtesy if tomorrow's sunset did not find you within the bounds of Hostigos Town."

"As you—Your Majesty commands." Menephranos said. His face was still flushed but his voice was almost steady, and he bowed himself out with as much dignity as anyone could reasonably expect under the circumstances.

"Someone ought to make that little cockerel a capon before he gets too fond of crowing," Rylla said to no one in particular. Kalvan hope nobody at all had heard. Otherwise, he might end up like Henry II, who'd lost his temper before some of his more hotheaded knights and wound up being held responsible for the death of Thomas à Becket in his own cathedral.

"Baron Klestreus," Kalvan called.

"Your Majesty?" The barrel-shaped former mercenary captain-general who was now Chief of Internal Intelligence lumbered over to the throne.

"Do any of your people have old friends among Menephranos' retinue?"

"Not that I know of. Why, Your Majesty?"

"It doesn't matter. Send some of your most trustworthy men to Menephranos' lodgings tonight with enough money to make new friends. Men who can hold their wine and keep their eyes and ears open."

Klestreus nodded and lowered his voice to nearly a whisper. "Not friends of Skranga, either." Duke Skranga was head of the Hos-Hostigos Secret Service and Kalvan had fostered a rivalry between the two services as a way of keeping them both relatively honest.

He stopped Klestreus as he backed away. "Before you go, Baron we don't need any more surprises such as this Edict of Balph. Hasn't the Royal Treasury been spending gold on agents in Balph?"

"Yes, Sire. However, the results to date have been poor, I fear to say. Balph is far away and some agents take the gold and don't bother to report back—or are caught. Others have trouble obtaining reliable information since the highpriests are leery of outsiders, even those of high birth and wealth. Balph is a city of priests and so far we've only been able to bribe several highpriests, but none of any real stature and, of course, no one within the Inner Circle."

"By Dralm, get someone inside the Inner Circle if you have to bankrupt the Royal Treasury! If you don't have any news within a moon, I'll have Duke Skranga stick his nose into it."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Klestreus voice was a little shaken.

"Now, put your men on Menephranos. Klestreus withdrew calling for his messengers. Anyone the Chief of Intelligence sent out tonight could be trusted to remember anything Menephranos' men spilled, not sell it to the highest bidder and guard Menephranos from any Hostigi hot-heads. Kalvan wasn't prepared to trust Duke Skranga's secret servicemen that far, although the former horse trader was a natural intelligence officer. Unfortunately, Skranga was so crooked that he probably saw playing both ends against the middle as sort of an indoor sport to keep the winter from getting to dull.

Kalvan hoped Klestreus wouldn't call his bluff and force him to use Skranga to crack Balph. It was good strategy to keep both intelligence agencies mistrusting each other; he paid a price, however, when it interfered with their real work.

He turned to the advisors nearest the throne. "I want a message taken to Chancellor Xentos that the Great King and Queen would like to seek his help in drafting a response to this—he paused to hold his nose—this *Edict of Dung* from Styphon's Foul Den."

Everyone of suitable rank within hearing immediately started arguing about who should have the honor of doing the Great King's bidding. Kalvan slipped an arm around Rylla's waist, although it felt like embracing a suit of heavy-cavalry armor. The Zarthani were a long way from the "I say to one, come, and he cometh; I say to another, go, and he goeth," of the Roman Legions. In the Great Kingdoms at least, they tended to regard that sort of obedience as fit only for serfs, barbarians and the Middle Kingdoms of the Missouri/Mississippi Valley.

"Why must we take council with Xentos?" Rylla asked, but apparently at the world in general and Styphon's House in particular rather than at him.

"First, for the same reason we made Xentos Chancellor, he's the top highpriest of Hos-Hostigos and everybody respects and kowtows to his opinions. Besides, he'll know the right tone to take when we answer this piece of offal."

"What's *akowtow*?"

"In the Great Kingdom of China, back in my homeland, the vassals would kneel before their Great, Great King and touch their heads on the floor to show their submission and deference to his authority. They called it kowtowing."

"Oh, something like what King Theovacar would like his nobles to do?"

"Exactly, but if the Greffan nobles are as hard headed as the traders, such as Colonel Verkan, he will have a tough job of it! But getting back to the point at hand, I want to write a Writ of Denunciation before everyone has had a chance to read Styphon's propaganda sheet. I also want to hold a Great Council for the same reason we held one before the Battle of Fyk. Styphon's House has stolen a march on us, we may have to move fast to catch up, and I don't want everybody and his uncle complaining they weren't consulted."

"Answering Styphon's Edict, I can understand, but for a Great Council to meet, it will take the better part of a moon to have all the Princes of Hostigos assembled in Hostigos Town. Can we give Styphon's House a gift that big?"

"We can't and we won't," Kalvan answered. "What I want to find out is how much I can safely do by way of appointing men to represent each Prince and telling the Princes themselves afterward. Also, if I can do that at all, Xentos may have good advice about which men we can trust. Finally, all the priests of Dralm in Hos-Hostigos look up to Xentos, and many of the other priests as well. If we have his support for what we do in advance, we'll be more likely to have the priests on our side if any Princes make a fuss."

Rylla giggled. "You have a devious mind, Kalvan. A wise one, though. If you were not a prince in your own land, you should have been."

Kalvan tightened his grip on her waist and felt some of the stiffness go out of her spine. *Devious? Maybe I look that way, but if it makes my job easier, I don't mind.* What he really wanted to be was intelligently cautious about this business of setting up a Great Kingdom to make war on Styphon's House, while learning how to rule it as he went along.

Maybe he did have some natural talent for ruling. Right now, though, it looked as if it would be mostly on-the-job training that would make the difference between keeping or losing both his throne and his head.

II

Kalvan sighed heavily as he hitched his shoulders and pulled the neck ruff up over his head. The neck ruff was four hundred years out of fashion back on otherwhen; here-and-now it was the latest fashion craze out of Hos-Agrys—all the Great Kings and Princes wore them, or so Rylla claimed. As far as he was concerned, ruffs were far worse than neckties, or even the clerical collar his father used to wear. For at least the five hundredth time, Kalvan reflected that there was more to the business of being a Great King than leading armies and taking Great Queens to their bedchambers!

At least his afternoon audiences were over. The first had been a group of Nostori merchants come all the way from Nostor Town to inform him that this was a bad winter. Thump! What did they expect him to do—raise his arms, mumble abracadabra, sending the storm clouds fleeing? The sad part was that's exactly what they expected from Great King Kalvan, Sent by Dralm to Save the People of Hos-Hostigos from the Armies of the Evil Styphon.

Next he had heard from a delegation of the Fletchers Guild with a list of complaints, chief of which was a strongly worded query as to why the new Royal Army of Hos-Hostigos wasn't using any archers. When he had suggested that they consider joining the Gunsmiths Guild, they'd reacted in horror, as if he'd asked them all to undergo a voluntary orchidectomy!

Finally, to put a cherry atop his day, Rylla had insisted that Hos-Hostigos needed a Throne, and not just any throne, but one with a 'name.' After all, all the Great Kingdom thrones had their own names: Hos-Harphax had the Iron Throne; Hos-Zygros the Ivory Throne; Hos-Ktemnos the Golden Throne; Hos-Bletha the Silver Throne—which made sense since it was originally an off-shoot of Hos-Ktemnos. Hos-Agrys, the richest of the Five Kingdoms, had the Throne of Light, a jewel encrusted throne. Rylla had insisted it was only proper that Hos-Hostigos have one, too.

And, as to be expected, everyone and his brother in the Great Hall had his own suggestion: Xentos came up with the Throne of Dralm—Kalvan overruled that, too religious and bound to make Hos-Hostigos more enemies from the priesthoods of the other True Gods. Harmakros came up with the Granite Throne, which he thought was a strong name but Rylla nixed it. "It's a stone!" Someone in jest had suggested the Wooden Throne which almost got him tarred and feathered! Skranga came up with the Throne of Steel, and almost got into a fight with Sarrask who thought it would make them look like vassals to the Iron Throne.

Finally, Rylla came up with the Fireseed Throne; a name even he found uniquely appropriate and had given it his blessings. Furthermore, she was going to design and commission the throne herself as a present to their Great King! Afterwards, to celebrate, casks of ale and winter wine were brought into the Hall and opened.

Kalvan sat at his *desk* trying to ignore his wine headache. He had the only "desk" in the Hos-Hostigos (although Skranga claimed to have seen one in Hos-Zygros) and he'd had to make it himself because no one in the Fitters and Joiners Guild would be responsible for such an abomination. Furniture-making, like so many other crafts he'd once taken for granted, had a long way to go here-and-now. The only 'real' furniture were tables, chests, cupboards, stools, benches and contraptions that looked like a old-fashioned upright wardrobes for holding clothes. Valuables were kept in chests, such as the implements that passed for silverware here-and-now, tinderboxes and candleholders. Chairs were new and all the rage, but hardly found outside palaces and the homes of the wealthy. Kalvan would have given a couple of cavalry regiments for a Lazy-Boy armchair with a footrest!

The top of Kalvan's desk was made from the bole of an oak tree that had been young when Leif Ericson sailed to Vinland, and it was covered with scrolls, maps and parchments weighted down by one of the new rifled pistols he'd designed for his own use. The workmanship of the pistol was magnificent: mother-of-pearl inlay in dark walnut wood, worked and etched silver facings and an ivory butt with a carved representation of Galzar Wolfhead. It must have taken a master gunsmith and his apprentices all of three or four months to handcraft it for the King. Three or four months in which the craftsman could have turned out a dozen utilitarian pistols, or even five or six muskets.

With the immediate crisis over, everyone—well, almost everyone—seemed to want to return to the old ways of Before Kalvan. Output at the rifle shop had dropped from fifteen rifles a day to six. Part of the slowdown was due to the harsh weather, but what was really happening was simple economics; the gunshop could turn out five smoothbores for each rifled musket it produced. Despite the fact that the Royal Treasury was paying them five times as much for each rifle, every time they thought their Great King wasn't watching, they went and stepped up production of smoothbores. The only reason they were still making at least six rifles a day was because Kalvan had threatened to mount a few of their heads on the palisade of Tarr-Hostigos if production dropped any lower.

Cannon production had dropped to almost nothing because they'd run out of brass. Last month, he'd had them melt down every brass chamberpot and ornamental vase, brass utensil and brass coin in Hostigos Town and the outlying towns and villages. Result: one cast-brass sixteen-pounder, three eight-pounders and one six-pounder.

Note: find local source of copper.

Kalvan could well appreciate the love for handcrafted quality goods; after all, wasn't he from the land of Maytag, Westinghouse, Sylvania and General Electric? The real problem here-and-now was not one of aesthetics, however, but of survival. *Now, how can I get that across to the provincial-minded guilds and mercantile associations?*

Not that there weren't successes. His army reforms had gone over well throughout Hos-Hostigos, especially standardization of regiments and ranks: primarily because the career army officers loved them. There were now three grades between captain and captain-general where before there'd been only one—grand captain. All of this meant promotions and pay raises—in peacetime, too! The career officers weren't so happy about the Royal Army; perhaps, they'd caught a glimpse of the future to come. In return for the promotions and raises, they'd still swallowed it and helped quell their Princes' objections.

The only question now was: would these reforms be enough to allow the Royal Army to defeat Hos-Harphax, destroy Styphon's House and enforce the peace? And that was a question—barring a revelation from Dralm—that only time would tell. Time and the mettle of Styphon's House.

Kalvan looked down at the at the mountain of parchment and vellum piled on his desk and wondered if here wasn't doing a bad thing, reinventing paper? He was certain that legions of his descendants would curse him for it. That is, if the papermakers ever produced anything better than the soggy throw rug they'd brought him this morning. At least it didn't smell as bad as the last batch; he never remembered paper smelling much—certainly not like rotten eggs! It had to be the primitive sulphuric acid by the Nordhausen process (that he remembered from Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island*) made by distilling iron sulfate which was reacting to the pulp and causing the stench, but they needed to use *something* to bleach the pulp after it was pounded and beaten.

Maybe he was going in the wrong direction. It was becoming obvious that acid, even in mild solutions, was destroying the fiber. Why not try a completely different bleaching agent? What about lye or slaked

lime? It would certainly bleach the fibers, and without the smell. *Maybe I'm on to something?* As soon as he finished with today's paperwork, he'd visit Ermut and suggest a lye solution. He'd leave it to the papermaker to discover the right strength.

It was nice to have people around him he could depend upon, even if he could count their number on the fingers of his two hands. *Now, back to work!*

He picked up the first parchment; it was a plea from Ryx Town, a small hamlet some thirty miles north of Hostigos Town, for a party of hunters to track down a wolf pack. Kalvan made a note to send it to Colonel Hestophes, the hero of Narza Gap, whom Kalvan had put in charge of Hos-Hostigos internal security, which right now meant wolf-and-bandit hunting.

Good officers were another thing in short supply; Chartiphon had politely refused to leave the Army of Hostigos for an appointment to the Royal Army. That was just as well, since Kalvan didn't want Ptosphes to lose all his best officers. Harmakros was now Captain-General of the Mobile Force and Colonel Alkides was now Brigadier-General Alkides in command of the Royal Artillery. Phrames was a proven fighter and Kalvan was grooming him for better things—maybe a principedom or second in command—behind Rylla, of course—of the Royal Army.

There were other requests—some of them desperate—for hunters, trappers, food and fireseed; there was even one ludicrous request for two hogsheads of winter wine! The last request was the easiest to fulfill; he placed the parchment into a basket for scraping and reusing. The only groups in Hostigos that this ill winter wind had blown good were the innkeepers and royal scribes.

Kalvan kept at his work until he could see the wood grain of his desktop, then used the bell pull to ring for his body servant, Cleon, to bring him some sassafras tea. It was a poor substitute for coffee, but...

Arriving along with the steaming sassafras was Chancellor Xentos, wearing his blue robe, with the eight-pointed white star of Dralm on the breast. Xentos had an aristocratic face that looked young despite the deep lines in his face and snow-white hair. Perhaps it was his perpetual alertness and twinkling blue eyes that made him appear young; in truth, he was only three winters older than Prince Ptosphes. The Highpriest was both hated and loved, and in some cases even feared. Kalvan had heard stories about his fearsome temper.

Xentos' nose was still red and dripping from the end of his cold, but otherwise he looked far better than when Kalvan and Rylla had waited on him three days before.

"It appears I arrived at just the right time, Your Majesty."

Kalvan nodded and motioned for Xentos to sit down. "Cleon, bring the Chancellor some hot tea, but add some tincture of willow bark."

"Yes, Sire."

When Cleon returned with the tea, Xentos took a sip. "This *is* good. I seem to feel the cold in my joints more with each passing year."

Kalvan laughed. "Even I felt this *cold*."

Xentos nodded. "Young and old are suffering from this chill breath of the Cold Lands. A winter to stay close to the hearth, if ever there was one. Which reminds me of one reason for this visit, Your Majesty:

Brother Mytron was threatening to chain Rylla to the bedposts if he caught her riding bareback again! In her condition and with her mother's example, Dralm be merciful!" He struck his forehead with the palm of his hand.

Kalvan had to swallow a fist-sized lump in the throat before he could trust his voice. "Dralm-blast it! I've told her—ayyyy! I'd have more luck talking to a hurricane. I'm just glad she's in Mytron's capable hands; Prince Ptosphes and I..." Kalvan made a washing motion with his hands.

"She been like that since she first learned to crawl," Xentos said with a smile. "And the cries she could make! I love her like a daughter, but I wish Allfather Dralm, in his wisdom, had paused to mix a little caution into that bundle of fireseed." The Highpriest paused, his eyes peering into a realm no one else could see. "She's the very image of her mother, Demia... Enough of that! At least, now that Rylla's with child, we won't have to worry about her riding off into battle once more."

Kalvan laughed. "Don't let her hear you say that, Xentos!" Kalvan felt pretty good about Rylla being laid up; her pregnancy had turned out to be one of his best-executed plans—even if it had cost him the help of one of his best generals. Also, it had been a plan in which he'd enjoyed the campaign even more than the victory. Now if only the spring campaign against Great King Kaiphranos went half as well...

"Chancellor, have you heard anything from the Harphaxi priests about King Kaiphranos' plans for this spring?"

The Highpriest pulled out his pipe and made a full production of knocking out the heel, cleaning the bowl, filling and tamping it with tobacco and lighting it, before beginning to speak. "We have had few strangers from outside Hostigos Town this winter. I did recently meet with a priest of Galzar from Arklos who came to pray at the Allfather's Temple of Hostigos. In our talk he mentioned that Kaiphranos has ordered his princes and nobles to call forth their levy and prepare for war against the Usurper—excuse me, Your Majesty."

Kalvan winced. He wondered if that had been a purposeful slip of the tongue. Or maybe he was just too sensitive on the subject, being exactly that: a Usurper who now called himself a Great King.

"He also said that many of the Uncle Wolfs Kaiphranos has sent out as heralds have not yet returned to Harphax City, which may be due either to the storms or to those who would rather not reply to their Great King."

That was about what he'd expected. Some of Kaiphranos' nobles would use the winter as an excuse for not preparing for a war they did not intend to fight. Others would heed their liege lord's call. The fewer the better for Hos-Hostigos; unfortunately, the winter worked as much against Kalvan sending out antiwar propaganda as it did against Kaiphranos' calling up his levy.

Earlier in the year Kalvan had stopped using Uncle Wolfs as heralds—the custom here-and-now—not because he didn't trust them, but because he didn't have enough of them. Healers were few and far between in the Five Kingdoms and the Uncle Wolfs were the best here-and-now medicos. He intended to keep his priests of Galzar busy doing what they did best, fixing broken limbs and giving herbal potions, not haring off on errands better done by the lesser sons of the nobility. To give the office some prestige, he'd created the Royal Office of Heraldry and designed colorful costumes to appeal the young nobles; it was working well enough that he had two applicants for every position! Not only that but Skranga was enrolling the brighter lads into the Secret Service.

Now, it was time to start the work of passing on his real legacy—knowledge, before it was lost to a

stray bullet. "Xentos, I want to discuss with you the founding of a university in Hostigos."

"What's *auniversity*?" Xentos asked, his forehead wrinkling.

Kalvan understood the Chancellor's perplexity. Other than the temple schools for priests and scribes, there were no institutions of higher learning in the Great Kingdoms. The nobility learned to read and write the Zarthani runes with tutors; everyone else picked up what he could at home, joined one of the temples or served an apprenticeship with a scribe.

"A university is similar to temple school, only instead of just teaching about religion and ritual, it teaches reading, writing, arithmetic and everything in the world."

"Everything?"

"Astronomy, alchemy, agriculture, medical arts, the law—even drawing and painting."

Xentos shook his white head. "Dralm be praised, but Your Majesty never ceases to keep this old man befuddled. These things are not mysteries, such as Dralm's teachings, but common matters learned at any man's hand. Why should they be taught in schools?"

Kalvan spent the next half hour explaining the Enlightenment view of a classical education to Xentos, only stopping when he sighed in resignation, nodding his head.

"Yes, yes, you are right. We must build our own *university*. How else can so much knowledge be packed into one man's head? These new arts need to be shared among your subjects. The Allfather, in his wisdom, has given Hostigos far more than a warlord in you, Your Majesty. Sometimes I wonder if you have come from a land even more distant than the ends of this earth."

To divert Xentos from this line of thought, Kalvan said, "For this new University of Hos-Hostigos, I will need a headman—or rector. However, for the man I have in mind, I will need your permission."

"My permission?"

"Yes. The man I want to act as rector is one of your priests, Brother Mytron."

"Brother Mytron! Why?"

"Besides being a fine herbalist and healer, he knows about the weather, geography, history and many other things. Everyone likes and respects him; he is fair in his thoughts and has an even tempered disposition."

"He is all of this. Mytron's wisdom and great piety are why the Temple of Dralm values his work and why he is needed more than ever in our great struggle with the false god and devil who calls himself Styphon. If he were not our best healer, he would already be highpriest of one of the major Great Kingdom temples. Upon my death, Mytron will follow me as Highpriest of Hos-Hostigos."

Kalvan knew next to nothing about the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Dralm, other than that the Great Kingdom Highpriests had great latitude, although in theory the High Temple of Hos-Agrys was in charge of the Temple. In the hinterlands, everyone regarded the High Temple—with its intrigues and hierarchical struggles—as most of Europe had treated the Papacy during the Babylonian Captivity. *I know Xentos is ambitious; maybe there is something that he wants that only I can provide: More gold to build*

new temples, or a High Temple for Hos-Hostigos?

"Chancellor, I know you value Mytron greatly; however, I only need his help for a few winters, until the new university is founded and running itself. Is there something I could give you in exchange?"

Xentos looked down at the floor, leaving him with a view of the top of his cowl, then he looked back into Kalvan's eyes. "Because of this abominable Edict of Balph, Highpriest Davros of High Temple of Dralm has decided to call a Great Council of Dralm in Agrys City to determine the Temple's strategy in this struggle against the false god Styphon and Allfather Dralm. In return for Brother Mytron's help in establishing the new *university*, I would like your permission to attend this Council."

Kalvan drew back. It would be a blow to lose the head of the Temple of Dralm just as the country went to war; however, that might not be a bad thing—considering Xentos' foot dragging in regards to marshalling temple support outside of Hostigos. In the beginning Xentos had helped with intelligence and information gathering, but lately he'd had 'doubts' as to the wisdom of *involving* the temple of Dralm.

Kalvan could smell the way this wind was blowing: no Great Council, no Rector Mytron. To stall for time, he began to knock the heel out of his pipe.

He was really beginning to think that Xentos' appointment as Chancellor of Hos-Hostigos was a bad decision; Kalvan needed someone without divided loyalties, someone he could trust one hundred percent. Maybe *allowing* Xentos to travel to Hos-Agrys was no bad thing; at worst, he'd be out of the way. At best, he'd be a useful ally in obtaining help from those Princes and Dukes who were faithful followers of Dralm. Also, if he could get the University of Hostigos established, then all of his work here-and-now would not be in vain were something bad to happen to him in the war. Generals who led from the front were poor insurance risks—look at Gustavus Adolphus or Turenne.

There would be no end to the mischief the priests of Dralm might cook up at their Great Council, but they wouldn't need Xentos' help for that. In fact, there was a need for the voice of Hos-Hostigos to be heard in Agrys City. If only he could be sure just which way Xentos might pull if it came to a tug-of-war between church and state.

Then it occurred to him that perhaps it didn't matter. Even if Xentos' loyalties were divided, more good than harm might come from a Great Council of Dralm. The Council could rally all the people whose religious beliefs were mortally offended by the unmitigated gall of Styphon's House, which was attempting to demote a major god! And, not just any god, either, but Dralm the Father God—The Allfather—foremost figure in the Zarthani pantheon. One did not have to be particularly devout in one's worship of Dralm to believe that no good could come of men presuming to cast down gods.

Kalvan felt like laughing, but he knew it would have offended Xentos by appearing irreverent. If the battle between him and Styphon's House had come to a straightforward question of who had the biggest army and the longest purse, the victor would certainly be Styphon's House. As it was, a serious religious offense had been committed, and might decide the outcome of a war between a lifelong agnostic and a Temple run mostly by *priests* who worshipped at the altar of Mammon and Machiavelli.

God, or the gods—if any such should exist—must have a sardonic sense of humor!

After drawing a lungful of smoke, Kalvan nodded graciously. "You have Our permission to attend the Council of Dralm."

Xentos gave a smile that bordered on the triumphant, which he quickly reined in. "Thank you, Your

Majesty. I hope the new *University* prospers under its new Rector."

"I believe it will. Of course, with Brother Mytron in charge of the University, the Temple of Dralm will have a voice and ear in its affairs."

"So I had assumed, Sire."

Kalvan had to fight the impulse to grind his teeth. "Now that this is settled, what are your recommendations for the Great Council of Hos-Hostigos."

"After asking guidance from Allfather Dralm, I have reached a decision."

Xentos' decision was that it would be worth the delay for Kalvan to secure the presence of all the Princes or at least their lawfully appointed envoys. To be sure, a Great King did have the power Kalvan was proposing to exercise, but was it wise to exercise it so early in the history of the first new Great Kingdom in three hundred years? Xentos gave, at great length, a good many reasons why it was not, but added that only Dralm could judge for certain.

"If Xentos really left as many things up to Dralm's judgment as he wants people to think he does, he'd be a doddering old fool," Kalvan told Rylla afterward. "However, that's one of the few things I *not* worried about. Xentos may be as determined as a Ruthani sachem to win his feud with Styphon's House before he dies, but he's no kind of fool. Nor is he anywhere as old as he *pretends* to be."

"Nor as old as he looks," Rylla said with a broad wink. "I've heard it said that Xentos uses a special bleach to get his hair and beard so white. But—will you take his advice."

Kalvan shrugged. "It's good advice, and I'm not sure I'd have a choice even if it wasn't. After all, I publicly asked for it in the hearing of the full court."

"Follow it: you will be honored for your respect to the Allfather, as indeed you ought to be."

"Thank you, darling." Kalvan said. He hoped he was keeping the sarcasm he felt out of his voice. Respect for local gods was one thing if it stayed at the level of politicians kissing babies and putting on Indian headdresses. It was something else if it meant dividing authority in Hos-Hostigos between himself and Xentos. Not that the Highpriest wasn't competent, but—according to Ptosphes and Chartiphon—Xentos had always been and would stay incredibly stubborn and hardheaded; and church-state conflicts (more shades of Henry II, as well as the Tudor Henry with all the wives) were exactly what Kalvan didn't need as long as he had Styphon's House at his throat.

SEVEN

I

Chancellor Xentos was shrewd enough to realize he should do something in return for Kalvan's cooperation, such as help assemble the Great Council of the realm. Sending word of the Council and copies of the Edict of Balph to all the Princes in Hos-Hostigos used up horses at a rate that made

Harmakros wince when he contemplated mounting his cavalry for the spring. It also used up a few of the messengers; the wolves were fewer now, but the weather was only slightly warmer, and a two-day blizzard swept across the Great Kingdom while half the riders were still on the road. Xentos dipped into the Treasury to replace the horses and help the families of the dead.

On the twelfth day of the Red Moon the Great Council of Hos-Hostigos met in the Great Hall of Tarr-Hostigos. Prince Sarrask of Sask and his silver-armored bodyguard were the first to arrive. When not drinking beer at the Crossed Halberd tavern, Sarrask was in Hostigos Town square watching the Royal troops at drill and on parade.

Prince Balthames arrived three days after his father-in-law. Before the evening was through, he tried to seduce one of the royal pages. This earned him a ruined nose that Brother Mytron spent all night trying to repair. His older brother, Prince Balthar of Beshta, arrived the next day in a mail-curtained wagon with an escort of fifty cavalry and never left his room until the day of the Council.

Prince Pheblon, the new ruler of war-torn Nostor, was the next to arrive. He had salt-and-pepper hair worn down to his shoulders, a black goatee and an understandably harassed expression. Prince Armanes of Nyklos not only came himself, but he brought two-hundred thousand ounces of silver to contribute to the Royal Treasury. Kalvan made a mental note to find out whose confiscated estate had produced the silver. More work for his secret services. Prince Tythanes of Kyblos was the last to arrive.

Prince Kestophes of Ulthor did not come himself, pleading illness. It was said that while hunting he'd been thrown when his horse broke its leg in a gopher hole. Kestophes had taken a bad spill, leaving him unconscious for several days. But he did send a large embassy. The head of it, a Count Euphrades, assured Kalvan that he also bore what might be called a watching brief for several Princes of Hos-Agrys who had ties of blood or friendship to Prince Kestophes. Kalvan made another mental note to see if anyone in Euphrades' retinue could be persuaded to tell who these mysterious Princes were. He had no objection to Princes who wanted to join Hos-Hostigos learning the secrets of his Councils; he did object violently to those who might simply want to know which way to jump when the spring campaign opened.

However, a limited gain in military security was not enough reason to mortally insult Prince Kestophes by refusing to seat his ambassador. So far, Ulthor City was Hos-Hostigos' only port on the Great Lakes, or Saltless Seas as they were called here-and-now, which meant the only route to the Upper Middle Kingdoms and the west, particularly Grefftscharr. Prince Kestophes was going to have to do something much worse than send an unduly inquisitive ambassador before Kalvan would take notice of it—official notice, that is...

Kalvan's modified enthusiasm for Chancellor Xentos underwent a further modification when the Council of the Realm assembled and Xentos walked in with Baron Zothnes, the former Archpriest. The hisses of indrawn breath made the Great Hall sound like feeding time in a snakepit, and Kalvan heard someone mutter, "Styphon's spy." Rylla's father, Prince Ptosphes, went as far as grasping the hilt of his ceremonial dagger. Kalvan made another mental note to sit down with—or if necessary, *on*—Xentos until he explained why he'd brought the turncoat Archpriest into the Council without a word of warning. Meanwhile, he had to stand behind his Chancellor or look like an even bigger fool than he already was. Which would make the Council a waste of time, and the Princes would not take kindly to that. Not one little bit...

Kalvan rose and rapped the table with the ceremonial mace that was used as a gavel. "Peace, my lord Princes. Baron Zothnes is high in Our confidence. He has renounced allegiance to the false Styphon by oaths to which most of you were witnesses. Will you deny this, so denying hope of reward to those who see the truth about Styphon and repent of their sins and errors? Will you be harsher in your judgments

than the Great Allfather Dralm himself?"

As Zothnes sat down in the face of a temporarily subdued Great Hall, Kalvan reflected that there was something to be said for being the son of a minister with a fine line in hellfire-and-damnation sermons.

Zothnes, whalelike in his fur robes, was abject in his thanks. Personally, Kalvan would much rather have had the other defecting Archpriest, Krastokles. He'd been one of Sesklos' handpicked troubleshooters, and it wasn't really his fault that the trouble shot first. However, only Dralm could get the benefit of former Archpriest Krastokles' repentance now. He'd died early in January, so suddenly there was talk of poison, although Kalvan personally suspected appendicitis.

As it turned out Baron Zothnes was about the most useful member of the Council. Everyone had read the Edict of Balph, everyone knew that Styphon's House was sharpening axes for them and everyone knew there was only so much they could do without knowing more about the Inner Circle of Styphon's House than they did. Unlike Krastokles, Zothnes had only recently been Elected Archpriest of the Inner Circle. He was essentially a manager, and one of his managerial skills was a very good memory for useful facts about everyone who might support or hurt him.

As Zothnes delivered his rambling briefing on the Balph hierarchy and Inner Circle, Kalvan realized that if Zothnes ever rode one of those cross-time flying saucers to a world with gossip columnists he'd make his fortune overnight. The names of highpriests, upperpriests and archpriests swirled past Kalvan until he felt as if he were reading a long Russian novel without a cast of characters to help him keep track of who was doing what to whom.

He made yet another mental note, this one for at least twentieth time: *Get the scribes together and work out a system of Zarthani shorthand.* One of these days something vital was going to be forgotten because everybody thought it was somebody else's job to remember it.

Gradually five names came to the front: Sesklos, Supreme Priest and Styphon's Own Voice; Archpriest Anaxthenes, First Speaker of the Inner Circle; Archpriest Roxthar, keeper of the sacred flame and political in-fighter *par excellence*; Archpriest Dracar, next in line of succession behind Anaxthenes for Sesklos' chair and not at all happy about it; Archpriest Cimon, the painfully honest and reform-minded "Peasant Priest."

Remembering the Cluniac Order and the Franciscans Kalvan suspected Cimon might prove to be the most dangerous. A serious reform movement within Styphon's House was something Hos-Hostigos needed like more wolves.

"There have been First Speakers of the Inner Circle who have achieved the title only by outliving all their rivals," Zothnes emphasized. "Anaxthenes is not one of them. No man knows his mind, and few learned of his plans for themselves until he has executed them—for better or for worse. Sesklos loves him like a son, but is often child to Anaxthenes' plans. Should he thwart them now he might die clutching the viper to his chest. More than one of Anaxthenes' opponents has died thus.

"Let us not be among them," Rylla said.

"Praise Dralm," echoed through the Great Hall.

Note, thought Kalvan, royal food-tasters. Yesterday at the latest.

"Bless Your Majesties, and with Dralm's help may it never be so," Zothnes added.

"Anaxthenes is no believer in Styphon," continued Zothnes. "Indeed, it is said that he believes in nothing save his own ability to outwit all his enemies. Nor is Archpriest Dracar a believer. Cimon is useful for public appearances and talking with the local backwoods priests, while Roxthar wears his piety like a shroud and his ambition like a dagger. There are so many tales about Archpriest Thymos and Archpriest Heraclestros, Archpriest of the Golden Dome of Agrys City, being true believers it is hard not to wonder."

Zothnes dabbed at rheumy eyes with a handkerchief that appeared to have been stolen from a chimney sweep. "A strange, sad fate for Styphon's House—that men subject to all the weaknesses of believers should be among those who control its destinies. Indeed, Dralm works in mysterious ways."

Sarrask of Sask howled with laughter, and everyone else except Prince Balthar of Beshta at least chuckled. Kalvan and Rylla looked at each other but stifled their own laughter at the expression on Xentos' face. To hear even a former priest say that it was a sad fate for a temple to be run those who believed in its god was clearly something Xentos had never believed he would hear and very much wanted to believe he hadn't heard now.

Zothnes' supply of gossip eventually ran dry, but before it did the Council knew they had a better idea of whom and what they were facing. The Edict of Balph and the leading personalities of the Inner Circle pointed only one way.

Prince Ptosphes stood and summarized, "Styphon's House will not fail to send gold and fireseed to King Kaiphranos. They may even place a portion of the men in their own pay under Harphaxi command. Most certainly, though, such men will shake off Kaiphranos' authority like a dog shaking itself dry the moment Styphon's House gives the order."

"I almost feel sorry for Kaiphranos," Prince Tythanes of Kyblos said. "He won't know which way to look for enemies."

Sarrask snorted like a boar interrupted a feeding. "I'll feel a damn sight sorrier for him once his head is on display outside Harphax City."

In order not to appear to be dominating the Council, on the second day Kalvan let Ptosphes continue with a military briefing he'd worked out in advance with Rylla, Ptosphes and Duke Chartiphon. Before long they were all standing in front of the big deerskin map of the Five Kingdoms, while Ptosphes used a poker from the fireplace as a pointer.

Hos-Zygros was neutral, at least for now. Great King Sopharar was known to be a dedicated follower of Dralm, yet far enough away from Balph to sit out the coming storm. The Zygroshi would make trouble for anyone who made trouble for them, and for the time being nobody else. Even if they wanted to raise an army to intervene in the war, their population was small—Hos-Zygros was the least populous Great Kingdom after Hos-Bletha—and by all reports hardest hit by the Winter of Wolves.

"Hos-Bletha, at the other end of the eastern seaboard, is nominally neutral, but would probably interrupt its neutrality in ways friendly to Styphon's House if they have an opportunity to do so. Mostly the Blethans are too far away to have much of a say in next spring's campaign," summarized Ptosphes. "I say, 'if' because the nomads and wild tribes from the Sea of Grass are said to be stirring, even moving eastward. Small blame to them, if it is true the Mexicotals are moving north on Xiphlon."

"Small blame, indeed," Rylla echoed.

The Mexicotol held here-and-now Mexico as far south as Yucatán and bore a grisly resemblance to the Aztecs, complete with a fondness for human sacrifice. The semi-desert country of northern Mexico and Texas and its savage tribes had kept the Mexicotol away from the Kingdom of Xiphlon in here-and-now Louisiana, Mississippi and east Texas—at least, until now.

"That may also keep the Zarthani Knights at home," Ptosphes added. "I will count it as a gift from Dralm if it happens."

The Holy Order of the Zarthani Knights were here-and-now cousins of the old Crusading orders and had protected the western frontiers of Hos-Bletha and Hos-Ktemnos from Sastragathi nomads and tribal uprisings for centuries. Kalvan didn't know a great deal about them, but as heavy cavalry they might be somewhat handicapped in broken country, particularly against Hostigi pikemen and mobile artillery.

What Hos-Ktemnos would send depended upon the movements of the nomads and upon whether the Knights came north. "King Cleitharses would at least send mercenaries in his pay and money to the Harphaxi Princes he trusted to spend it wisely."

"If Cleitharses can find any who are fools enough to trust *him*," Sarrask put in.

"They'd be no greater fools than you, willing to fight Kalvan for a pittance and a chance to marry off your—daughter," Prince Balthames said, referring to the origins of his arranged marriage to Sarrask's daughter.

For a moment it looked as if Sarrask was going to reply by drawing his sword. Kalvan made another mental note: *stop those two from behaving like Kilkenny cats, and sit on Princess Amnita if necessary since she's behind it.*

One of Skranga's agents in Beshta had heard rumors that Amnita had claimed a false pregnancy, fingering one of Balthames consorts as the father. Balthames had ordered accused cavalry officer murdered, only to learn afterward that Amnita was not pregnant. In front of witnesses, Balthames had wept copious tears and promised to end her next pregnancy with his rapier. One of Sarrask's spies had informed the Prince of Sask of the threat to his daughter; in return, he'd promised to "geld the little bung-hole boy with my mustache trimmer if he injures my little girl!" in front of the Beshtan ambassador.

An open fight between Sarrask and his son-in-law would inevitably involve Beshta, which contained the most invasion routes both into and out of Hos-Harphax. The last thing Hos-Hostigos needed was for Balthar to become a turncoat and play havoc with the invasion plans.

"If he feels safe enough, Great King Cleitharses may even send some of the Sacred Squares of Hos-Ktemnos," Prince Tythanes of Kyblos said. Kyblos was the southernmost principedom in Hos-Hostigos and closest to Hos-Ktemnos. "Some of us will be greeting Ormaz in Regwarn, Caverns of the Dead if that happens."

Kalvan saw no reason to disagree, even to cheer up all the glum faces around the table. The Sacred Squares of Hos-Ktemnos were universally regarded as the finest infantry in the world. They reminded him of the Old Spanish *tercios*, but with better firearms; they didn't use sword-and-buckler men so a Sacred Square was four hundred musketeers and four hundred billmen. They even had something like a divisional system with a Great Square of three Sacred Squares, five hundred cavalry and anywhere from four to ten light guns. Then there was the Holy Square, comprised of the three Sacred Squares of Ktemnos—the only Principedom in Hos-Ktemnos to have more than one Sacred Square. As far as

Kalvan was concerned, the Sacred Squares of Hos-Ktemnos could stay home with his blessing, as well as Dralm's!

Hos-Agrys was the biggest and most dangerous question mark. It was the closest, it could do the most damage if it chose to intervene, and in Ptosphes and Kalvan's opinion it probably would.

To be sure, the evidence was conflicting. On the one hand no fanatically pro-Styphon monarch could sit firmly on his throne when two out of three of the Agrysi Princedoms were ruled by Princes favoring Allfather Dralm—and in many cases openly hostile to Styphon's House. On the other hand Great King Demistophon was the heir to a long tradition of Agrys hostility to Hos-Zygros; it was possible he would unfriendly to Hos-Hostigos merely because King Sopharar was not.

Chief Klestreus added, "Personally, Demistophon is hot-tempered and prone to strong, even insulting language. His sharp tongue has made him enemies within Hos-Agrys and without. However, Demistophon is not prone to hold grudges and prefers to be on good terms with everyone. When that isn't possible, he will choose what looks to be the winning side."

"To anyone not knowing we have Kalvan's wisdom and Dralm's Blessing fighting for us, that must look like Styphon's House," Ptosphes said. "Demistophon has an army twice that of Kaiphranos the Timid and the wealth to hire as many mercenaries as Styphon's House will let any one man contribute to their cause."

That was a point Kalvan wanted driven home. Styphon's House might do battle mostly by proxy, careful not to alarm the kings and princes too much. They'd even been more careful not to let any one ally claim too large a share of the victory. The Archpriests were not about to defeat Kalvan only to make one of the other Great Kings an equally dangerous adversary. Not now with the Fireseed Mystery bandied about on every street corner in the Five Kingdoms.

So it would be a complicated and uneasy alliance marching against Hos-Hostigos, with even troop deployments likely to be affected by politics. That was fine with Kalvan. Hadn't Napoleon himself once said he preferred to make war against allies?

Of course, there was one way of taking Hos-Agrys out of the picture. If those unknown Agrys western princes were really interested in revolting, and a little help could tip them over the edge, King Demistophon's temper might do the rest. Of course, Demistophon might eventually want to take vengeance on Hos-Hostigos, but "eventually" might not mean this year. Also, if by some chance King Sopharar of Hos-Zygros could be persuaded that Demistophon's army moving so far west to suppress the rebels was somehow an a threat to him...

Very neat. Except that some of those western princes of Hos-Agrys had claims on Zygrozi lands too, or at least said they had. If they seized those lands, and even worse, if they insisted Hos-Hostigos recognize the seizure in return for their support against Styphon's House, then Great King Sopharar would be persuaded that it was Hos-Hostigos threatening him. If that happened...

Too many 'ifs,' Kalvan decided, and too little solid evidence. Not even the names of those princes! File the whole question of raising a rebellion against Demistophon and get back to the business at hand.

Kalvan discovered that while he'd been speculating the discussion had turned to the best strategy. Ptosphes was arguing for the southern strategy, for meeting what was coming at them from Hos-Harphax, that Kalvan and Rylla had worked out in their bedchamber.

"An army in Beshta is close to Harphax City, which is the best way of making Kaiphranos fidget. It will be on the flank of any army coming through Arklos or Dazour. If our cavalry knows its business, we'll have warning in time to cut off either advance."

And if the cavalry didn't know its business, they were all dead—much deader than Lee's hopes of victory at Gettysburg, killed because Jeb Stuart forgot that he was supposed to scout before anything else.

"What about two advances, one along each possible route?" Prince Balthar of Beshta asked his cadaverous face growing even longer. Balthar wore a food-stained black robe and wooden peasant clogs. He looked exactly like what he was: the Ebenezer Scrooge of the here-and-now princes, and the butt of ribald songs and jokes throughout the Five Kingdoms. Last year he'd been happy enough to loot the vaults of Styphon's temples in Beshta but was now beginning to regret letting greed overcome his usual foot-dragging paranoia.

"Then each force will be weaker than our united army," Ptosphes replied. "We will fight them one at a time and smash them both."

"And if they come through Nostor?" Balthar squeaked. "Or what if the Army of Hos-Agrys moves far to the west, then rides into Hos-Hostigos? What of Nyklos and Sask then?"

Sarrask of Sask snorted. "If they come through Nostor, half of them will starve and Prince Pheblon can knock the rest of in the head. Sorry, Pheblon, from what I've heard a mule crossing Nostor would starve unless he carried his own rations."

Pheblon's bleak expression was all the reply anyone needed.

"As for the advance all around Yirtta's potato patch, to come from the west—Balthar, do you think we're fighting fools who will try to reach a man's brain by the way of their arse hole?"

The only man who didn't laugh was Balthar, and Kalvan didn't entirely blame him for not seeing the humor of the situation. In last year's war his lands had escaped the fighting; this year, no matter how he wriggled, Beshta seemed to be the main battleground.

They didn't discuss taking the offensive, but Kalvan didn't worry. An army in the south with good scouting on either flank could be as offensive as it wanted to be against what had to be the objective: the Styphoni army. An offensive movement before the enemy's plans became clear could only be aimed at real estate, and there was only one piece of real estate whose capture would be decisive—Harphax City itself. Unfortunately, there was no way the Hostigi were going to be equipped to storm and besiege a city of two hundred thousand residents.

They did discuss garrisoning the forts in Beshta, Tarr-Veblos and Tarr-Locra, and southeastern Sask so the Hostigi could start raiding and scouting as soon as the roads dried.

Balthar's face grew even longer, if possible, but he'd noticed Rylla's eye on him and kept his mouth shut. That was further reason for putting reliable garrisons into Beshta as soon as possible—to keep an eye on Balthar. There were rumors (note: have Skranga and Klestreus investigate independently) that Beshta had been buying grain in Hos-Harphax. If Balthar had been paying for it in information...

The Council ended by appointing Duke Harmakros Captain-General of the Army of Observation and they christened the garrisons. He was to be based at Tarr-Locra and Kalvan showed Harmakros and the

Council his design for rebuilding it into a star fort. Then it turned into a party, with only tough venison, potatoes, succotash, salt pork and rabbit stew, but plenty of wine. Kalvan kept wishing for bourbon, but also held his cup out every time a servant passed by, and they came by every time they saw it empty. He was in the middle of his tenth cup and a long dissertation on the difference between an enemy's capabilities and his intentions, when Rylla squeezed his hand.

"Kalvan, I think it's time we were to bed," she whispered into his ear.

"Bed?" He realized he'd spoken louder than he'd intended and tried unsuccessfully to lower his voice. "I'm not sleepy, but—"

"I know that you idiot! Do you think I'd ask you to come to bed if I want to *sleep*?" She pinched him on the ear and kissed the side of his neck.

Kalvan felt his face turning the same color as the wine and started to swear, then heard the stifled laughter all around him and saw Ptosphes nodding slowly to Rylla.

Kalvan kissed Rylla, then led her toward the door. Not quite so stifled laughter followed them out.

Score one for Rylla! In a week it would be all over the Great Kingdom that the King and Queen were still like lovers on their wedding night. Who couldn't think that was a good omen and proof that there was nothing to worry about in the spring campaign?

On-the-job training in kingship might be hard on a king's subjects; with teachers like Rylla, it wasn't so bad for the king.

II

Danar Sirna found herself a seat in the section reserved for the Kalvan Study Team in the University Presentation Hall. Today was the last of Scholar Danthor Dras' lectures on Kalvan's Time-Line. The Chancellor of Dhergabar University in his usual natty charcoal-gray tunic stood to one side. Half a dozen newsies, including Yandar Yadd, and several she didn't recognize, fussed at the technicians working the lights and recorders.

She searched for the distinctive profile of Danthor Dras, Scholar Emeritus, Chairman of the University Department of Outtime History and supreme authority on Fourth Level Aryan-Transpacific, Styphon's House Subsector. But he was nowhere in sight. No doubt the time for a properly dramatic entrance hadn't arrived. Sirna's former husband had taught her about those, even if he'd only called himself a politician...

Enough of that, she told herself firmly. She tried to find a seat as close to the front as possible. I spent twelve years in the Outtime History Department and never saw Danthor once until appointed to the Kalvan Study Team. She shook herself mentally. Enough complaining, already! You won't have to worry about University politics and faculty game playing for five long years. It's time to get ready a new life—an outtime life on a barbaric world!

Sirna sat down next to a striking woman with unusually blond hair. She wondered if the woman was an adopted prole until she turned, then Sirna recognized the familiar profile of Baltov Eldra, the First Kalvan Study Team's Historian and member of the Second Team.

While she was debating whether or not to strike up a conversation, Eldra said, "Hello. My name is Eldra. What's yours?"

"Danar Sirna."

They touched hands in greeting.

"You must be a new member of the Team."

"I am. How did you know?"

Eldra laughed a pleasant chiming. "You're one of the few around here who doesn't look like a stuffed shirt."

"A *whatshirt*?"

"Stuffed shirt. A colloquial expression from a semi-civilized Fourth Level time-line. It means someone who's overflowing with himself, or stuffed into his shirt."

"Oh. I should have guessed. What was it like on Kalvan's Time-Line."

"Fascinating—if you don't mind no hot and cold running water, no decent heating, food that's either undone or burned—"

"I have that every time I try to cook for myself," Sirna said. They both laughed. "What about King Kalvan? What's he really like?"

Eldra sighed. "He's handsome, regal, charismatic, brilliant—just about everything you could want in a man."

"It sounds as if you got to—well, know him rather well..."

Eldra shook her head. "Not that I didn't want to, but Queen Rylla's a she-wolf protecting her cubs when it comes to her husband! Furthermore, Kalvan's Time-Line is like most Indo-Aryan descendant cultures—a strong paternalistic moral tradition, with virgin icons and sub-legal houses of prostitution. Any woman with healthy, natural urges who doesn't sublimate them to marriage and motherhood is considered a harlot. Unless you find a lover on the Team—and I wouldn't recommend that—be prepared for a long, lonely five years."

"It wouldn't be the first time," Sirna said. She hadn't had a relationship with a man since her marriage foundered.

The sudden appearance of Danthor Dras ended their conversation. Today he had his long silver locks combed dramatically back in great waves. As he greeted acquaintances among the newsies, his voice was low and gravelly, never missing a dramatic emphasis or pause.

He probably keeps his hair long so he doesn't have to resort to implants or wigs when he's back

on Aryan-Transpacific...

After an overlong introduction by the University Chancellor, the Scholar strode to the podium. "Usually my Outtime Preparation Seminars are not so well attended, at least by non-students not seeking credit." He paused for the expected wave of laughter, then continued, "After several centuries of promoting Outtime Historical studies, I'm gratified by this sudden surge of public interest—even if it was brought about by the bumbling of the Paratime Police."

Both the newsies and the University people applauded.

"I hope you don't mind a little repetition, class, but I'd like to frame this talk so the public doesn't get the wrong idea about what we're doing here." He paused to wink at a clot of newsies who smirked like old friends hearing a familiar story. Like most of the professor and politicians of her acquaintance, newsies held the public in smug contempt.

Danthor continued, "Kalvan's Time-Line is of special importance to paratemporal studies, because we can pinpoint the precise moment that Kalvan's Time-Line split off from the parent Styphon's House subsector. Usually we do not spot the creation of a new time-line for months, years or even decades. The discovery of the Kalvan Time-Line is a unique event in Home Time Line history.

"What makes Kalvan's Time-Line even more important is that it is limited to a single time-line. This means the University can place the time-line under detailed surveillance, comparing any changes with the five adjacent time-lines we have chosen as controls. I do not believe it is possible to overstate the importance of this discovery. At the *least*, it should revolutionize our understanding of Paratemporal processes and social change. If the 'Kalvan Effect' makes long-term social and technological changes on Kalvan's Time-Line, we will be very close to the day when we can prune, graft and trim outtime societies to our own specifications by the selected introduction of 'gifted' individuals. The end result will be an enormous increase in the outtime resources that can be safely brought to Home Time Line and our Fifth Level Industrial and Service Sectors as well as greater protection of the Paratime Secret."

To say nothing of giving University historians and sociologists more control over outtime activities, thought Sirna. The University had been fighting the Paratime Police for that for over a millennium. Remembering some of the faculty dinners she had attended, she questioned whether the academics would do as well overseeing Paratime as the Paratime Police had done over the past ten thousand years.

She frowned. That was a heretical thought for a future faculty member and a supporter of the Opposition Party. Maybe her bad marriage had soured more than just her outlook on men; it was probably just as well she would soon be too busy to worry about such things.

Danthor Dras went on to explain how he'd become an authority on Aryan Transpacific, Styphon's House Subsector. Several hundred years ago he'd been involved in a survey of Fourth Level Indo-Aryan Religious Studies when he'd happened upon Styphon's House Subsector, at that time virgin territory. Danthor had spent about a third of his time since his discovery either on Styphon's House studies or outtime. Twenty of those outtime years had been spent as an upperpriest of Styphon's House.

At the Great Library of Balph, Danthor had discovered scrolls chronicling the Zarthani migrations from the west coast of the minor landmass to the east coast. The roots of this migration began in Upper Middle Kingdoms over fifteen hundred years before, when the Great Lakes'—or Saltless Seas'—iron ore deposits were discovered. Until that time, trade between the iron-poor city-states of the Pacific Coast and Middle Kingdoms was sporadic and of no great importance. Soon the Iron Trail was

upgraded and large convoys from Greffa were making the transcontinental trek for California gold. The Grefftscharri kings made treaties with some of the barbarian tribes, conquered or exterminated others and paid bribes only when necessary.

Trade with the Upper Middle Kingdoms brought increased wealth and power to the west coast city-states and aggravated tensions between the northern kingdom of Echanistra and the city-states of the south. This rivalry broke out in open warfare when iron was found in Great Desert, putting the Iron Trail out of business and ruining the economy of Echanistra. The northern city-states banded together to conquer the south and thereby turn it back to a captive market. The southern city-states allied against the northern kingdoms and defeated their army. Twenty years later a great southern land and sea force sacked the great city of Echanistra.

An uneasy peace held for a few decades; unfortunately, four hundred years of intermittent warfare had depleted the treasuries of the southern city-states and led to the deforestation of much of the Pacific Northwest which had been supplying the lumber for uncountable war ships and stockades. With the trees cleared, the land changed from forest to meadows and pasture lands and the population continued to grow. When there was no longer enough land, they began to move south. The southern city-states saw this folk migration as another invasion of northerner barbarians, with uncouth ways and a corrupt tongue, and went on the offensive.

Meanwhile, the Upper Middle Kingdoms, much richer from their sales of arms and iron, began to expand into the Ohio River Valley. Here they collided with the newly formed Iroquois Confederacy, the fiercest and most organized Amerind resistance the Zarthani had faced. King Childrek the Red of Grefftscharr knew full well he didn't have the manpower to defeat the Iroquois while simultaneously containing the Crow and Shawnee to the south. To counterbalance the Confederation, Childrek invited the northern Zarthani to migrate to the Atlantic seaboard. They came over the Iron Trail in families, tribes, clans and nations.

The Zarthani immigrants quickly became embroiled in long and bitter war against the Iroquois. The Zarthani had the advantage of better arms and armor as well as Grefftscharrer military aid. The Iroquois were fighting for their homeland, their families and their lives. It was a savage war with no quarter given or asked. After a century of warfare, the Zarthani armies under the command of Simocles defeated the Iroquois army at the Battle of Sestra. Within fifty years the victorious Zarthani had scoured the native Amerinds from every mountain and valley in what was to be Hos-Harphax, Hos-Agrys and Hos-Zygros.

The last migratory wave came after the entire Pacific Northwest was subjugated by the south. The new Zarthani refugees found the lands of the Northeast already occupied or war-torn. So they moved down the Potomac River into Maryland and Virginia. Here, aided by adventurers and experienced fighters from the north, they build a line of forts and proceeded to subdue the Tuscarora, Powhatan, and other local tribes. In the south, internal turmoil, mistrust and conflict made the Indian resistance less determined than in the north. Many fled west or were assimilated—most died. Within a few decades there were hundreds of small towns and villages dotting the lush southern tidal lands.

"We now come to a day, thirty years after the founding of Ktemnos City," Danthor Dras said, with a toss of his head that made his silver hair ripple and catch the lights. "A village highpriest of the minor healer god, Styphon, experimenting with various medicinal compounds mixed together a batch of saltpeter, sulfur and charcoal. The results were explosive, but not fatal. Once the formula was perfected it didn't take very long for the hierarchy of Styphon's House to see the military and political potential of this 'miraculous' explosive, 'fireseed.'

With an ironic raising of the eyebrows, he added, "In the beginning their motives for guarding the secret

of gunpowder may have been the noble desire of the follower of a healer god to protect their world from the ultimate weapon. Whatever they were we shall never know. We can be sure they have descended to the basest of motives now."

A picture of a Styphon's House temple-farm appeared on the screen behind Danthor's head, displaying a priest in black robes lashing at several temple slaves with an iron-tipped whip.

Sirna heard gasps of horror and disgust around her. Religion and other pseudo-philosophies hadn't flourished on Home Time-Line for at least five thousand years. Many at the University believed that First Level culture and psycho-hygiene should be spread among the less enlightened time-lines as a matter of duty. That they were successfully opposed at every point by the Paratime Police and their supporters had fueled the fierce hatred of the guardians of the Paratime secret among the University Faculty and leaders of the Opposition Party.

Weren't the Paracops just as callous and self-serving as the outtime primitives who subjugated and enslaved their fellow beings through pseudo-religions?—or so the argument ran. Sirna didn't know the answer herself, but she hoped a few years on Aryan Transpacific, Styphon's House Subsector might provide her with an answer to that question and a few personal ones—like what she was going to do with the rest of her long life.

EIGHT

I

"Way! Way, there. Way for the Great King of Hos-Hostigos!"

The leading riders of Kalvan's escort were shouting at the wagon train ahead loudly enough to make the draft oxen look up dubiously. Kalvan suspected they were also shouting loudly enough so that any hostile ears within half a mile would know who was riding along this muddy Beshtan road with only sixty-odd men for escort.

Note: top priority, a system of highways based on the Roman roads. Like the highway that ran up and down the West Coast, Highway101, El Camino Real, The King's Highway, which I saw during my vacation in California after the Armistice. Why not a Great King's Highway in Hos-Hostigos?

He remembered that Rylla hadn't liked his coming so far east on this tour of inspection. *Her* asking him to stay out of danger was a real turnaround. But she did have a point. Was he doing anything useful other than indulging a Great King's power to get rid of a bad case of cabin fever? It didn't matter now; he was less than four miles—or eight marches as the locals counted them—from Harmakros' headquarters at Tarr-Locra. He could dine and sleep at the castle tonight, then consult with Harmakros and Count Phrames on the situation of the Army of Observation. Maybe they could tell him what he needed to know, if not, he'd head south.

Prince Balthar had been sending a stream of messengers complaining about how the Army of Observation was infringing upon his Princely rights and demanding access to the border tarrs, which Harmakros—upon Kalvan's suggestion—had put under Royal authority and castellans they could trust. In a time of war, this was not an unusual state of affairs and he wondered what was behind Balthar's complaints. Balthar had probably expected Kalvan's rule to be *aslaissez-faire* as old Kaiphranos'. If

Kalvan were half the despot Balthar claimed, he'd have hanged the old miser from the nearest tree and appointed a new Prince of Beshta—Phrames or Harmakros.

And he would have strung Balthar up, too, if in so doing he hadn't feared gaining the name of a Great King who does not honor his vassal's rights. Being saddled with that kind of reputation, in the Great Kingdoms, was an open invitation to revolt by one's vassals—and invasion by his neighbors. And right now, despite last year's impressive victories, he was only one defeat away from losing everything to Styphon's House. And his princes and nobles knew it.

He only hoped his neighbors didn't.

At least Kalvan had accomplished one major thing during the harsh winter months; he had created an independent Royal Army of Hos-Hostigos. It was necessarily a compromise force, since Kalvan had no hereditary lands to supply troops. He would become Prince of Hostigos upon Ptosphes' death, of course, but he hoped that event was decades away. When the invasion of Sask, last fall, ended in Sarrask's surrender, there'd been seven to eight thousand mercenaries, hired by Gormoth of Nostor and Sarask for the war against Hostigos, with no place to go. Styphon's House considered them Kalvan's troops since they hadn't fought to the death, and King Kaiphranos considered them generally untrustworthy.

Kalvan made the free lances an offer, with the blessing of Prince Ptosphes and the grudging agreement of Prince Pheblon of Nostor and Prince Balthames of Sashta; twenty-acres of land and twenty newly minted silver crowns for each enlisted man; a hundred acres, a hundred crowns and a team of oxen for each petty-captain; and a small barony and a hundred gold crowns for each captain in selected regions of war-ravaged northern Hostigos, Nostor and Sashta. Well over two-thirds of the unemployed mercenaries had taken Kalvan up on his offer.

Kalvan had organized these 'volunteers' into four infantry regiments of five-hundred men, ten cavalry regiments of two-hundred and sixty men and an additional Mobile Force of six hundred mounted pikemen and musketeers—two hundred of the musketeers with rifled weapons. Hopefully, the following year would see them all equipped with rifles and sabers. The new Royal Army and the tried and true Army of Hostigos would form the anchor for the Army of Hos-Hostigos. Kalvan would have liked a better ratio of foot to horse in the Royal Army, but here-and-now mercenaries were predominantly cavalry, reminiscent of the German reiters, Sixteenth Century mercenary pistol-wielding heavy cavalry who had dominated the battlefields of France during the Wars of Religion.

His next step had been to reform army organization without turning it on its head, starting with the new Royal Army and ending with all the princely armies of the Great Kingdom of Hos-Hostigos. Standard here-and-now organization had been companies, bands and blocks or squares, of varying size, sometimes in the same army. The whole system wasn't much advanced over the Medieval battles: vanward, center and rearward.

Kalvan retained the companies, made them one hundred and ten men strong under a petty-captain, put two companies into a battalion and made a regiment under the command of a colonel out of three battalions, one a headquarters outfit with sixty officers and halberdiers. With the cavalry it was troops, squadrons and regiments.

Kalvan sent a third of the army to their new homes and quartered the rest in Hostigos Town and Tarr-Hostigos for the drill and training in his new tactics. This had put a real strain on the capital's housing, despite some hastily built barracks, nor had his subjects been happy about competing with the new Royal Army for rations...

The hill the road climbed ahead was higher than the one his troop had just descended. As they left the shelter of the valley, Kalvan felt the chilly wind on his back and his horse whickered irritably. At least the wind was only chilly, not cold, and the hard blue-sky overhead now shed freezing rain instead of snow. The mud of the road had turned rubbery elsewhere, and in a few places it had thawed enough to be sticky. It wasn't spring yet, but the Winter of the Wolves was definitely behind them.

Towards the middle of the wagon train Kalvan came to a big long, hauling wagon—two sets of wheels connected by a long beam and drawn by eight oxen. Tied to the beam was a massive canvas wrapped bundle; on either side of it were two iron-rimmed gun wheels. Another eight-pounder was on its way to the Army of Observation, disassembled for easier travel. The carriage, trail, tools and harness would be back somewhere in the train. When the whole piece was assembled at Tarr-Locra, one more Beshtan gun could go into the shop to be modernized with trunnions and a proper carriage.

The head of the wagon train his troop was passing reached the crest of the hill before Kalvan's party came up with it. He saw the train's captain rein in abruptly and throw up his left hand in a signal to halt. As Kalvan rode up, he drew a pistol from his saddle holster. Kalvan and his troopers did the same.

The far slope of the hill was steep enough so that the road made a wide bend halfway down, where a small village straggled along the bend. Smoke billowed from three or four houses, too much for a chimney, and mounted men were riding up and down the road in front of it, shooting randomly into the windows of the unburned wattle and daub huts.

Farther down the road, half a dozen troopers were driving a miscellaneous gaggle of livestock, with dead fowl hanging from their saddles. The Harphaxi colors of yellow and red fluttered from lance tips and on the banner held by a dismounted man standing over a dead horse.

"Move out!" Kalvan shouted, sheathing his pistol and drawing his sword. Major Nicomoth, commanding the escort, drew his and held it out with the flat of the blade across the chest of Kalvan's horse.

"Drop back to the rear, Your Majesty!" he cried. "I beg you!"

It sounded more like an order than a humble subject's request.

Kalvan controlled his first impulse, which was to tell his aide de camp to perform unnatural acts upon himself and let the escort pass on either side. Charging down that hill, at the head of his troop, he'd be in as much danger of being unhorsed and trampled as being shot by the enemy.

All along the train, teamsters were running to the heads of their teams, while guards checked the priming of their muskets and took position. Some perched on their wagon seats to keep a lookout; other crawled under the wagons to fire from cover.

Nicomoth shouted, "Charge!"

The one order no cavalry outfit in any land at any time ever needed to hear twice.

Kalvan's troop of the First Royal Horseguards were all experienced soldiers and expert riders; they didn't bunch up as they plunged down the hill. Halfway to the village, the hillside's boulders and scrub gave way to cultivated fields. Some of the riders took their horses over the ditch beside the road and into the fields, taking a shortcut toward the cattle thieves.

The Harphaxi raiders weren't beginners, either. They dug in their spurs and rode for their lives, except for two who were picked off by wild pistol shoots at miraculously long ranges. Another stayed behind to give the banner bearer a hand up onto his own mount.

Three pistols and a musketoon banged, and both the helpful rider and his mount screamed and went down kicking. The banner bearer knelt, holding the banner out before him like a pike with one hand while drawing a pistol with the other. He fired as Nicomoth charged him but the bullet went wild. In the next moment, Nicomoth's sword came down splitting the man's face. The Guardsman behind Nicomoth drew rein and leaned down out of the saddle and picked up the fallen banner on the tip of his sword. Kalvan joined in the cheering.

As if the cheering had frightened them out of their cover, six mounted men rode out of the rear of the village. Kalvan noted that several wore three-quarter lobster armor and each held a heavy-barreled musketoon slung across his back as well as a brace of pistols. They were riding real destriers, much bigger than the usual Harphaxi horses. Whatever or whoever they were, they weren't friendlies. One the raiders threw a lighted torch onto a thatch roof as he passed, then all six were riding hell-for-leather across the hillside fields towards the far end of the hill.

"After them!" shouted Nicomoth. The squad chasing the cattle thieves had already anticipated the order; they were pounding across ditches, fences and last year's stubble. The few who still had loaded pistols were firing as they rode. An unarmored rider dropped out of his saddle, and one of the armored knights reined in to help him. It was a gallant but futile gesture. Two of the Hostigi lost their seats jumping a fence, but others came up with the fallen rider and his comrade. Two war cries, a quick flurry of swords and another Guardsman and the raider were down.

That was all Kalvan saw as he rode into the village at the rear of Nicomoth's second charge. Houses and barns narrowed his view as they thundered through the village, turkeys and geese overlooked by the raiders, flapping frantically in their path. Doors and shutters slammed hastily as villagers who'd been coming out to greet their rescuers ducked back into their wattle and daub huts.

By the time Nicomoth and Kalvan passed the dead raiders, their surviving comrades were out of sight around the far end of the hill. Kalvan rode with his Guardsmen that far, then reined in. The raiders had obviously followed a trail that ran straight as an arrow between two farms, then climbed a hillside into second-growth forest. A hundred yards beyond the forest, horsemen would have had to go single file within pistol shot of the trees. A better place for five men to ambush fifty couldn't have been found within miles.

"Your Majesty!" Major Nicomoth was dismounted now, kneeling beside the two dead men. "This one is a Zarthani Knight, I swear it. Can you see where the Tarr-Ceros proof mark has been removed?" He was holding the dead man's helm, which looked like a Fifteenth Century armet—beautiful work with wings on the side and the front shaped like a hawk's beak.

It certainly did look as if a proof mark on the helm had been defaced with a heavy file. Kalvan looked down at the other dead man. He was dressed in deerskin from head to foot and wore his long black hair bound up in a simple iron cap. If Kalvan had seen a face like that in Pennsylvania he would have said the man had a good dose of American Indian blood in him. The resemblance was increased by the iron-headed tomahawk trailing from his out-flung wrist on a braided leather thong.

Kalvan attempted to recall what little he knew about the Order of Zarthani Knights. They were one of the two martial arms of Styphon's House, the other being Styphon's Own Guard—or the Red Hand as they were called by the populace, for obvious reasons. The Zarthani Knights were a crusading order,

more along the lines of the Teutonic Knights of the old Holy Roman Empire than say the Knights Templar. Like the Teutonic Knights, it was their job to hold and subdue the frontier areas of western Hos-Ktemnos and Hos-Bletha. They had a line of forts that went up and down the Great River, the largest being Tarr-Ceros which was located at Louisville, Kentucky. They were reputed to be among the finest cavalry in the Five Kingdoms and were constantly at war with the Sastragathi and Trygathi barbarian clans. The Zarthani Knights were not an outfit he was looking forward to meeting in force.

"He must be the Knight's oath-brother," Nicomoth said, kneeling and pulling the dead man's cap over his face.

"He doesn't look Zarthani," Kalvan said.

"He is probably from one of the Ruthani tribes who live by hunting and fishing in the swamps of Hos-Bletha, Your Majesty. Some of them have turned to the worship of the True Gods and their warriors often serve the Zarthani Knights as scouts. Then they may swear oath-brotherhood with a Knight and he with them. To abandon an oath-brother is a crime no Zarthani Knight's honor would allow."

Counting the possible Zarthani Knight and his oath-brother, the raiders had lost seven dead and one badly wounded prisoner. In return for two Hostigi dead and one wounded, plus two horses dead and four injured. Allowing for what losses the village may have suffered, the day appeared to have gone to Hos-Hostigos. Kalvan felt good about that.

He felt almost as good about the simple chance to be in action again, able to fight his enemies with a sword and a pistol instead of parchment, pen and sealing wax. A Great King had to use more of the second than of the first, of course, but Kalvan knew he wasn't going to be happy doing all of his leading from behind a desk.

By the time Kalvan's men had picked up the bodies, the wagon train was up to the village and Count Phrames himself had ridden in from the opposite direction—regular Hostigi cavalry, mercenaries and a handful of tattooed Sastragathi on horses that looked more fit for the soup pot than for the field of battle. Kalvan made a mental note to ask where the Sastragathi had come from, then a more urgent note to get at least some of the mounted men out of the village. The villagers' defenders now considerably out-numbered the villagers themselves; they were in as much danger of being trampled by their friends as they had ever been endangered from their hit-and-run enemies.

Kalvan gave his men the order to clear the streets of villagers, then rode over to ask Prince Phrames for an escort.

"By all means, Your Majesty," Phrames replied. "I'll send twenty of my men with your Guardsmen and you can all ride over to Tarr-Locra in time for dinner. I'll follow as soon as I've heard the villagers on what they've lost and told off some men to help them re-build. Phrames raised his voice. "We can't give back everything they've lost, but we can add it to the debt the Harphaxi are going to pay when we come to grips with them."

A lot of cheering followed that last sentence.

Kalvan turned his horse leaving Phrames to ride over to the largest unburned house and knocked on the door with his pistol butt. With Phrames on the scene, there was nothing more to worry about. Correction. There was nothing more to worry about in this village, or today. There was a Styphon's Own Lot to worry about if Zarthani Knights were coming north so soon. Six might just be scouts, learning the

countryside and Hostigi tactics, but what would they be scouting for except a larger body—and where were they?

Kalvan wracked his brains all the way to Tarr-Locra without coming up with a reassuring answer to that question.

II

Captain General Harmakros' page poured more wine into both men's cups, bowed and stepped back. Kalvan sipped at his, trying to keep his face straight; the wine apparently couldn't make up its mind whether or not to turn into vinegar.

"Where did those odds-and-sods with Phrames and down in the barracks come from?" Kalvan asked.

"The mercenaries were mostly men we were going to settle in Sashta, who couldn't find free land."

Kalvan looked steadily at him. Harmakros sighed. "Or those who didn't want to settle down and become farmers at all."

"I thought so. And the Sastragathi? They're a little far from home."

"A couple of small tribes of Urgothi forced off their land by raiders coming across the Mother River, and some chief's younger sons."

"No outlaws?"

"None that I know of."

For once Kalvan's attention to Xentos' rambling lectures paid off. "They wouldn't admit it if they were. But if the Sastragathi learn we are accepting their outlaws and forcing lawful warriors to serve besides them, the whole Sastragath would think twice before giving us aid. Not to mention the problem of keeping the outlaws from making off with everything that isn't tied, nailed or boarded down."

Harmakros grinned. "Remember those gallows on the hill aside the stream that feeds the moat?"

"They did look new."

"They were busy, too, at least for the first half moon. After that, I think the survivors learned their lesson. Besides, we're feeding them much better than they ever ate at home."

He lowered his voice, although the boy was standing discreetly out of hearing distance at the far end of the chamber. "There's more food in Beshta than I'd expected. There must have been trading across the border into Hos-Harphax, just as we expected. Paying only in silver as far as I can tell, but there are a few court officials I wouldn't mind questioning rigorously for a day or two."

"You haven't arrested anyone?"

"I couldn't touch anyone important enough to know anything without Prince Balthar throwing a tantrum. I wasn't going to do that without asking. I just informed some of the merchants that the Great King might forgive their treasonable trade if they would sell their grain to his loyal soldiers at the same prices they paid for it. I wasn't going to make Beshtan grain merchants rich just feed a few hundred Sastragathi, I swear to Dralm!"

Kalvan laughed. "I didn't expect you would."

Apart from the initial act of hiring soldiers without proper authorization from his commander-in-chief, Harmakros had handled the situation well. However... "I'll forgive you this time, Harmakros. Only don't do it again. If you do, I'll have to dismiss you or stand accused of letting my favorites hire private armies."

Kalvan had to force himself to continue, trying to ignore Harmakros' crestfallen expression. Maybe there was a remedy to that problem. Patents of nobility were a glut on the market after the blood letting at the Battle of Fyk. He would enjoy making one of his top generals a nobleman; only a few of the 'old' nobility might find cause for complaint—and to Styphon *with them* !

"I don't want to lose your services, Harmakros, or disgrace you, but I don't want people like Skranga to think *they* can go off to the Sastragath and bring back a private regiment of storm troopers!"

"Furthermore, you were lucky this time. What if you hadn't found the Beshtan grain hoard? We don't want to hire more men than we can feed with what we have on hand. They'll just turn to looting our allies, then when the war starts, live off our enemies."

"As Your Majesty wishes."

His Great King was speaking and Harmakros would obey, although he obviously found it hard to believe there was anything wrong with living off your opponents' land. That didn't bother Kalvan; Harmakros was intelligent enough to realize sooner or later that in a war where the real enemy was Styphon's House, every bit of unnecessary damage done to the land of a potentially friendly or neutral ruler was bad strategy, even if it might look like good tactics.

Harmakros emptied his wine cup, set it on the table, then made a gesture toward the page. He went out, closing and latching the door behind him.

"You have him well trained, I see. Now all he needs is a pistol so that he can shoot Prince Balthames if the man takes his usual liberties with young pages."

Harmakros turned red and swore. "If that Sashtan son-of-a-diseased-sow comes within half a march of the boy, I'll geld him myself with a dull knife!" He looked down at the table. "The boy is my son."

Kalvan mentally reviewed what he knew about Harmakros' career, which wasn't as much as a commander-in-chief ought to know about one of his corps commanders: He knew that he was Kalvan's best friend here-and-now, discounting Trader Verkan who was based in Greffa. Knew Harmakros' troops worshipped the ground he walked on, and would follow him to Regwarn—the here-and-now equivalent of Hades—and back.

Kalvan knew that Harmakros had enlisted in the Army of Hostigos at an early age, in his mid-teens. Knew he had worked his way up through the ranks solely on natural ability and a fierce disposition on the battlefield. Knew he had never learned to read and was embarrassed about it. Knew he had an inborn

sense of direction and could read the contours of a map like his own palm. Knew he was *atrifle* atrocity-prone—that would need some work. Knew Harmakros' father was a small time merchant who ran a stall in Hostigos Town selling herbs and medicinal ointments. Knew his mother was dead and that he had no brothers and sisters.

This was the first Kalvan had heard of any children... "A bastard?"

"Yes, his mother was the daughter of one of the Beshtan grain merchants, with an office in Hostigos Town. She's dead now, but his grandfather is a good man."

Well now, thought Kalvan, that explained how Harmakros knew so much about the affairs of the local merchants.

"Raised him, then told me about him when I visited him two moons ago. The boy was already so well trained for service that I knew I could take him with me and nobody would ask questions. He takes after his mother more than me."

"I would have never guessed he was yours, if you hadn't told me."

"Good. The problem is I have no legitimate children. Empedila—my first wife, a cousin of Phrames—was killed in a riding accident. We'd been married only a year and-a-half. I was about to contract a betrothal to the daughter of a minor noble in Nostor, when all at once Hostigos and Nostor were deadly enemies. I don't even know if Jomesthna is still alive."

"What's the boy's name?"

"Aspasthar."

"So Aspasthar is the last of your house?" Kalvan wished he knew more about Zarthani inheritance laws and customs. One of these days if he lived long enough, he would be more of a Supreme Court Justice than a commander-in-chief and the more he learned about the laws he would be interpreting before that day arrived, the better for both him and Hos-Hostigos. Meanwhile, there was a solution that didn't require admitting his ignorance of law and custom.

"I think I can see my way to making Aspasthar a Royal Ward with some kind of palace post suitable to his new rank." Kalvan said. "We can call him the orphan of someone who has deserved well of the Great Kingdom and leave it at that. We can even provide him with a small estate, so that you can marry again without your wife having to worry about any of her dowry going to enrich your bastard."

That problem had caused a number of miserably unhappy marriages and more than a few wars in the Middle Ages, if Kalvan recalled correctly. He saw no reason to suspect that human nature was much different here-and-now.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Harmakros said: he was looking down at the table even more intently and Kalvan decided to look away until the Captain-General had gained control of his face. "Thank you, again, for one less thing to worry about if Galzar's Judgment goes against me in this year's war."

III

The freezing drizzle was making the courtyard into a skating rink when Count Phrames rode in before nightfall. The three men dined in Harmakros' chamber on tough passenger pigeon, succotash and corn bread that could have been chopped up and used for case shot. Kalvan chewed the bread cautiously, dipping it into the succotash from time to time. He had a full set of sound teeth and wanted to keep it that way; here-and-now dentistry would have satisfied any Constitutional lawyer's definition of "Cruel and Unusual Punishment."

Phrames ate little but drank a lot of wine from a barrel that was at least one grade better than that which Harmakros and Kalvan had drunk earlier. "If I had just one wish," he said after the fifth cup. "I would ask to be left alone with Balthar's chief tax gatherer for an hour. I wouldn't even ask for weapons. Bare hands would be enough." He gripped the silver wine goblet as if it were the tax gatherer's throat.

"Better yet, what about an hour in Balthar's treasure room with a large sack?" Harmakros asked.

Kalvan paused to re-load his pipe, saying, "You could probably pay for the whole Army of Observation for a year with what you collected."

"Or I could pay Prince Araxes' debts to his nobles," Phrames said. "In return, he'd probably name me heir to Phaxos."

All three laughed. A little investigation by Klestreus, chief spymaster, had provided an adequate explanation of why Prince Araxes was becoming the Great King of Fence-Sitters. He'd stayed out of debt to Styphon's House—give him that—but only at the price of going heavily into debt to eight of his richest nobles. That gave them a veto over everything Araxes did beyond choosing the menu for dinner; they were exercising it now on his foreign policy. Great King Kaiphranos had ruled Hos-Harphax with benign neglect, so the last thing they wanted to do was join a Great Kingdom where the Great King rode his nobles with a very tight rein. On the other hand, they didn't want to risk Kalvan's wrath by enlisting under Styphon's banner.

"Not that Our wrath would be much to fear," Kalvan said. "At least, not for now. We have all the enemies we can handle already. But Araxes doesn't know that, and *I'm* not going to tell him. If Styphon's House had the wits to pay Araxes' debts, they could probably win him over, but right now I don't think they'd agree to do that even if they could agree on any policy at all about Araxes. It's pretty obvious that Araxes let the Edict of Balph out of the bag at least a moon before Styphon's House wanted anyone outside of the Temple to know about it. That gave us time—time that has been put to good use, too."

Kalvan was able to bring the others up to date over the next round of wine. The three Agrysi Princes hadn't sworn allegiance or even revealed their identities, but they had not only pledged but paid enough silver to hire three thousand mercenaries. Count Euphrades rode in as an escort for the silver with two hundred and fifty men of his own, well mounted, well equipped and apparently well trained. He looked as if he'd intended to stay for the duration and pick up one of the bumper crop of vacant Princedoms the war was expected to produce. Kalvan wasn't so sure about that and was determined to prevent it if he could but he wasn't also going to turn away willing recruits.

So Kalvan was hiring mercenaries after all. He was also improving the weaponry of his own soldiers, since both the Hostigi musket shop and Royal Foundry (located outside State College) were working full blast. The output of the Royal Foundry was now up since the weather allowed some overland transportation. Brass and iron were once again arriving. Not to mention the companies of pikemen who

were training every day the weather let them, and all the captured and obsolete weapons that were going into the hands of the militia...

To oppose this, Styphon's House was issuing unconvincing denials of designs on *any* true king or prince's wealth and *volunteering* to sanitize any "unconsecrated" fireseed. "At least, they haven't convinced those princes who see that the demon exorcising priests would simply be spies and paymasters for pro-Styphon factions," Kalvan added. "That seems to include a great many of the Zygrozi, including Great King Sopharar. He sent Rylla a beautiful set of silver armor, with a helm plumed in snow-owl feathers. She says she'll wear the silver plate when we storm Balph."

"How is Rylla?" Phrames asked, a little wistfully, Kalvan noticed.

"She says she's well. Brother Mytron and the midwives say she's well. Ptosphes says she's well. She looks well to me and there are so many prayers going up to Yirtta Allmother that the goddess must be clapping her hands over her ears!"

He wasn't about to mention his fears over her pregnancy, at least not in Phrames' presence, and how he sometimes woke up in a cold sweat from nightmares about Rylla dying like her mother. He doubted that if he'd been in Phrames' place he would have taken things half so well, even if Kalvan *were* a "God-Sent Hero" who won his intended bride.

It was his fortune and that of Hostigos that Phrames was a here-and-now Sir Galahad.

"I just wish I knew what was being hatched at Balph," Harmakros said, attempting to steer the conversation onto safer ground.

Of course, Styphon's House was like an iceberg; the important seven-eighths of it were out of sight. A lot of things that would eventually be dangerous to Hos-Hostigos were doubtlessly being plotted down there, but for the moment it didn't look as if Styphon's House would be able to convert itself to a proper Pentagon in time for this year's campaign; at best, Hos-Hostigos, would face not just an alliance but an alliance run by a committee—the Inner Circle.

"There is an animal in my homeland called a camel," Kalvan said. "We have a fable about it." He described a camel and then told them about a camel being a horse designed by a committee.

Harmakros paused to strike his tinderbox, lit a wooden splint and then his pipe. "Here's to Styphon's plans having humps, bad-breath and a foul temper."

They drank to that toast, then Harmakros added, "Although the worst plans can still bring victory if there are good men that fight for them."

He didn't need to say "Zarthani Knights."

The Knights themselves were no secret; their plans for this year's war were, and were likely to stay that way. "I asked the villagers if they'd seen men who looked like the dead Knight," Kalvan said. "A few said they'd had, but only a six or a dozen at most."

"Any House Master has sixty Knights at his personal command," Harmakros put in. "I suspect that Grand Master Soton has sent one of his trusted comrades north to do some surveillance on our forts and castles. Soton is not the sort of man to take the word of Styphon's priests on a military situation that could draw in two-thirds of his forces." As a young man, Harmakros had spent three campaign seasons

in Hos-Ktemnos as a mercenary captain and knew the area and local politics quite well. He had liked the duty, but didn't like the priestly meddling of Styphon's House in everything from military strategy to local bordellos. Styphon's House had originated in Hos-Ktemnos and had fully franchised the place. According to Harmakros, "there wasn't a town small enough that you couldn't find a Styphon's House shrine, temple farm or domed temple within spitting distance."

"I suppose not," Kalvan said, "But Soton's a consecrated Archpriest of Styphon's House and, thusly, a member of the Inner Circle. I suppose the Knights also take vows of some sort. Can they refuse obedience to Styphon's Voice?"

"Not if Sesklos gives them a simple order to come north and wage holy war against us. But if Soton receives no such order—well, he's not only an Archpriest of Styphon's House, he's also the prince of more land than most Great Kings—Kaiphranos, for one—never mind what the law says. If those lands under the Order's suzerainty were endangered, Soton could behave like their Prince if Sesklos would let him. He may do it anyway."

Harmakros walked over to the deerskin map hung on the wall, drew his sword and ran the point along the western borders of Hos-Bletha and Hos-Ktemnos. "Our friend Soton wears three helmets. One is Grand Master of the Holy Order of the Zarthani Knights, consecrated to defend Styphon's House from all martial enemies; another is Archpriest of Styphon's House; lastly, he's a general in the armies of Hos-Ktemnos and Hos-Bletha. The Knights are the principal weapons against the clans and tribes of the Lower and Upper Sastragath. Great Kings neither have to spend a single piece of silver to keep it, nor worry about princes winning battles and becoming ambitious.

"If Styphon's House wants to take away that weapon and use it somewhere else, they're going to have to persuade the Great Kings of the south that it's a good idea. If the nomads are on the move, that may take a while. It may not even happen at all. Hos-Hostigos may be a headache to Hos-Ktemnos and Hos-Bletha, but a nomad invasion could be more like a kick in the guts!"

Harmakros' explanation made sense to Kalvan, even if it probably erred on the side of optimism. No point in raising that objection now, when they knew so little about Styphon's House's plans.

"Put Klestreus on to interrogating everybody who's ever been near the Sastragath. Talk to Colonel Verkan when he returns from Grefftscharr, and see if he would discreetly question fellow traders." They got around, and usually kept their eyes open. They kept their mouths shut, too. But gold, silver and trading privileges—or losing them—could do something about that.

Kalvan poured himself some more wine and relaxed. The Zarthani Knights were here-and-now's 'Afrika Korps,' but they were also widely scattered and no cavalryman was much good on a half-starved horse. They couldn't begin their move north until they could cut fodder on the way; cavalry mounts couldn't maintain their strength by grazing.

Spring was coming late in the south. It would be another month before there was any chance of bringing thousands of heavy cavalry, remounts and all their support troops north. The Sacred Squares of Hos-Ktemnos would be even harder to recruit for a blitzkrieg since they would also have to walk and be fed while they did; although their rations could be carried by wagons whose oxen could graze...

Kalvan wasn't going to object if Dralm did decide to swallow up the Knights in Chesapeake Bay. God or no gods, it was best to be prepared for the worst, and there was a great deal that could be done along those lines right now.

Let Harmakros buy fodder as well as rations from the Blethan merchants; five hundred well-fed horses were better than two thousand starving one. Another shop to make field carriages for artillery; the Royal Foundry would scream if it had to give up more of its trained people. But he'd see if Verkan could recruit replacements in Greffa or Zygros City. Bring a squadron of Mounted Rifles south to add to the Army of Observation; he'd been holding off on that to keep the Harphaxi from learning about rifles but they wouldn't be a secret much longer.

Meanwhile a few points of Zarthani Knights ambushed at three times the range they were used to might encourage the others to stay...

Kalvan refilled his wine cup and carried it with him as he went to stand beside Harmakros and Phrames at the map.

NINE

I

Phidestros, Captain of the Iron Company, strode into the alley as if he were walking into his favorite tavern. Behind him Xelos imitated his captain's manner; it would be hard for them to avoid being seen sooner or later. As long as no one saw them behaving as if they didn't have a perfect right to be in this dark, smelly alley behind the Drunken Harlot their chances for success were much greater.

Phidestros checked his pistols, then watched while Xelos did the same. They both had two horsepistols, while Phidestros also carried a sword and a pocket pistol. The smaller pistol was no good against an armored man or even an unarmored one at much more than arm's reach, but within those limits it had provided a nasty surprise to several of Phidestros' late foes on the battlefield.

Xelos started to roll an empty barrel toward the rear door of the Drunken Harlot. Phidestros clutched the man's shoulder and shook his head emphatically. Xelos looked confused but obeyed. There was no point in explaining to Xelos again how Lamochares' men were *supposed* to come out; Xelos had the strength of two men but only half a man's wits and neither was going to change tonight.

Phidestros put his ear against the rear door to listen for signs that the brief rattling of the barrel had been heard. All he could hear was the tinker shop rattle of pots and plates in the kitchen, and beyond it the rumble of the crowd in the front rooms and the occasional sound of a lyre. There was too much noise to let anyone inside hear street noises easily, and even if someone did, he would probably not be suspicious. By law, Harphax City had a curfew and a City Watch to enforce it. Although ever since mercenaries from all over the Five Kingdoms had started swarming into the City for the coming war of the Great Kings, the Watch had found it wiser to look the other way at men on the prowl after dark.

This, thought Phidestros, was only just. The mercenaries might occasionally brawl and rape but they'd driven the common thieves and footpads of the nighttime streets to skulking in dark corners like rats—at least, that is, those who'd learned in time that mercenaries were well-armed, deadly opponents. Phidestros was about to back away from the door when he heard shouts rising above the usual crowd noises. One was unmistakably a woman's voice, shouting a stream of obscene accusations against his Banner-Captain. He didn't need to hear the actual words to know what was being said; he'd rehearsed Clynia in her part often enough.

He'd been both impressed by Clynia's quick memory and her insistence on being given half the silver in advance, but then he hadn't been looking for a common whore when he'd found her. He'd been on the look out for someone intelligent enough to learn quickly to act like a common whore and in the meantime keep her mouth shut, without being so intelligent that she'd realize that the climate in Harphax City would soon be too hot for her continued health.

Clynia was supposed to proposition Petty-Captain Ephentros and lead him toward the back of the tavern; meanwhile Geblon, pretending to be soused, would claim Clynia's favors for himself. When refused, he would launch an attack on Ephentros' person. The whore would then scream a litany of curses against Geblon. A familiar enough tavern scene that Lamochares' soldiers would sit back to watch the fun instead of suspecting foul play. Next Geblon was to feign a fall, while Clynia told Ephentros: "Let's escape out the back way."

At least, that's what they'd rehearsed; however, plans on—and off—the battlefield had a habit of going awry. Phidestros was taking no chances. He stepped back from the door, then moved to the left. Now anyone coming out would be illuminated by the light from the second-floor bedroom window just above the door, while Phidestros would be as invisible as one of Styphon's fireseed demons.

A sudden explosion of howls and curses told Phidestros that someone had knocked down the torches in the front rooms. Geblon was doing double duty, picking a fight with Lamochares' men now that the slattern was gone. The dozen or so Iron Company soldiers inside the Drunken Harlot knew nothing about the plot, but would step in front of loaded pistols to protect their Banner-Captain. The fewer who know the real reason for this night's work, the less chance he and any of his men faced of meeting the Royal Executioner.

Phidestros had too little belief in any god to ask Galzar to ask him for aid in this plot; instead he made a Sastragathi gesture of aversion against snakebite. Two pistols went off practically together, then a third, then two more. Chairs stopped going over and started smashing as men fell over them or picked them up for use as weapons, while women screamed—the girls of the house—who hadn't expected the war to start in their own tavern.

Now Phidestros ordered Xelos to wrestle the barrel into the middle of the alley, where it wouldn't block the door but would confuse anyone bolting into the alley. He heard no more pistol shots, but an appalling amount of every other kind of noise. It reminded Phidestros of the bear pit in the Royal Menagerie of Hos-Zygros.

Without any warning the door flew open, crashing against the wall so hard that loose chunks of brick splashed into the mud. Five men burst out, followed by a cloud of thick smoke and the heartfelt curses of the Drunken Harlot's cook. Four of them were soldiers, two each from Lamochares' and Phidestros' companies. The fifth was Petty-Captain Ephentros, the only man fit to keep Lamochares' company together now that the Captain himself was too fever stricken to command it in the field. Phidestros would not have wasted time in prayers or thanks even if he'd known where to send them. He drew his pocket pistol and shot Ephentros through the head.

Then Phidestros threw his hideout pistol as far as his arm could propel it, over the alley and onto a rooftop.

In his fall, Ephentros knocked over the barrel. Between the pistol shot and the clatter of the barrel, the other four men seemed to think they'd run into a thieves' ambush. Three of them dashed madly for one end of the alley while the fourth headed in the opposite direction at a slightly more dignified pace. Halfway to the street he raised his pistol, saw Xelos trying to set the barrel upright again, and shot him in

the throat. Xelos gave a horrible gurgling scream as he fell.

The inhuman sound frightened the couple in the second-floor bedroom into putting out their light, plunging the alley into complete darkness. It also made the man who shot Xelos stop at the mouth of the alley. The faint moonlight reflecting off the man's armor told Phidestros two things: first, that he wasn't a member of the Iron Company; and second that he was a fool not to darken his armor so that it wouldn't reflect the treacherous moonlight. Phidestros fired his pistol, and was raising the other pistol when the man collapsed with a groan and lay kicking in the mud.

Xelos was dead. He made certain of this after re-loading his pistols. He heard the thump of a bar dropping into place, the scrape of furniture against the kitchen door of the Drunken Harlot. Whoever or whatever was screaming and shooting off pistols in the alley, the people inside wanted to keep it outside.

He quickly exchanged his still smoking pistol for the one in Xelos' belt.

Phidestros hurried towards the south end of the alley, stopping briefly to see if the man he'd shot needed finishing off. While he wasn't completely dead yet, he was bleeding so profusely that nothing short of Styphon's Own Blessing would save him, or even let him speak before he died. Phidestros stepped out into the cobblestone street just as a party of the watch rounded the corner at a brisk trot, more than a dozen men with half-pikes as well as a few boys carrying torches.

Phidestros holstered his remaining pistol and strode toward the approaching watchmen, half of whom kept straight on and disappeared in the direction of the Drunken Harlot's front door. His troopers in the front rooms would do what they could to prove their innocence; he would have to do most of the work, both tonight and during the next few days. The stakes were high; he could end up with the authority over Lamochares' company, a hundred and sixteen good men, less the two he'd just shot, and two guns. He could also end up facing the axe as a traitor, or the noose as a common murderer.

At least he would not be breaking one of his iron bound rules. He would not be risking his authority over the Iron Company by wantonly expending them to advance himself. If he lost this gamble, the good will of the Iron Company toward a man under sentence of death would hardly matter all that much.

Two torch boys and four men of the watch approached Phidestros, their hands on the hilts of their swords.

"Greetings, Captain," he said, to the man who was obviously in charge, wearing a plate back-and-breast instead of leather jack.

"What are you doing back here, sir?"

Obviously the Guard Captain was aware of City politics and the practice of nobles to roam the city streets as armed soldiers. No need to unnecessarily offend one of Prince Selestros' favorites by accident.

"Forgive me, but I'm somewhat uneasy for my men."

"Your name?"

"Captain Phidestros of the Iron Company."

"Where are your men?"

"In that tavern. I was coming to join them for a drink when I heard shots in the alleyway. I ran back to help and found one of my troopers shot in the throat behind the kitchen. The cook has barred the back door and I was through the alley to make my way to the entrance."

"Please, give me your pistols."

"May I keep my sword?" Phidestros asked, while handing over the pistol from his belt holster. Then he bent down to remove the one holstered in his boot.

"Of course, you're not under arrest." Although the tone of the captain's voice indicated that might well be happening shortly, given the absence of any other suspects.

The watch captain sniffed both of Phidestros pistols. "Well, neither of these has been fired this eve."

Phidestros shrugged his shoulders.

The captain looked at him with squinted eyes. "Come with us, Captain. "I want to examine those dead men."

"What about my soldiers?"

"They will be dealing with the laws of Hos-Harphax and the will of His Majesty, King Kaiphranos," the watch captain said. "You, follow me."

One of Phidestros' men tripped and was promptly smacked across the face with the back of a halberd head. Phidestros clenched his fists, holding them low so the watch wouldn't see, swallowing curses, and fell in behind the watch captain.

II

The rabbit peered impudently from beneath the gnarled surface root of a lemon tree just downhill from Tortha Karf. Tortha could have sworn it also wiggled its ears at him.

Tortha reached for his needler, then remembered he was unarmed except for the muzzle-loading pistol from Kalvan's Time-Line he'd brought out for target practice after lunch. It was primed and loaded and maybe he could hit the rabbit with it; on the other hand, he hadn't had much practice. If the bullet kept going, it might reach the workers in the nearest grove before it fell to the ground. Solid projectile weapons weren't like needlers or beam weapons; those solid projectiles could bounce.

The workers would probably forgive him for accidentally shooting one of them, or maybe even doing it on purpose. They didn't think of Tortha Karf as quite a god perhaps, but certainly as the sort of hero entitled to a whim or two now and then. Considering their history, this wasn't altogether surprising. The Altides were descended from a Madagascar tribe on the Afro-Sinic Sector of the Yangtzee-Mekong Basic Sector Grouping. Tortha Karf's father had found them suffering not only from famine but also from slave raiders let loose by a civil war in China that kept the Chinese Imperial Fleet's patrol squadrons at home. Bringing them to Fifth Level Agricultural Sector as a work force for the Tortha family estate had

earned their enduring, if not necessarily eternal, gratitude.

That was all the more reason for being careful with his shooting. An early lesson for any Paracop was not to take advantage of people's hospitality, women or superstitions for his own pleasure. One seldom knew when their patience was going to run out until it was much too late. Even if you escaped the people you abused, you were apt to become careless, then some other outtimer would save the Paratime Police Bureau of Internal Control the trouble of putting you up on charges.

Tortha Karf firmly put away both temptation and the pistol, then noticed he'd forgotten to turn off the recorded message playing on the portable recorder perched on top of the picnic basket. He played it back and listened to Verkan Vall's description of the latest crisis on Fourth Level Europo-American, where a number of penetrated subsectors were getting thoroughly embroiled in a war in a place called locally Viet Nam. A map showed it as part of the coastline on the southeast corner of the Major Northern Land Mass.

"The situation in Europo-American has grown worse since our last conversation, increasing the possibility that this war could finally trigger a full scale nuclear slugfest. Even if this doesn't happen, suspicion of anything unusual will increase and internal surveillance has become much more efficient throughout these subsectors since the Second Global War. There are also authors making fortunes with stories of aliens from space dropping in unannounced, making abductions and spying on the world. All we need is for the KGB or the CIA or the Vatican to start taking them seriously. Our dis-information program has been a great success to date, but increasing technological development in the areas of communications and electronics may hamper our present operations and force us to curtail future commercial operations.

"The odds definitely favor our having to pull out of other Fourth Level Europo-American, Hispano-Colombian Subsectors as well. The commercial interests that opposed you twenty years ago are going to make an even bigger stink now, so I'm not going to rush into things. I'm going to recommend that the Paratime Commission appoint a study group to analyze the whole Europo-American Sector, with representatives from everybody who thinks they have something useful to say.

"That will make it a committee much too big to do anything except talk, of course. However, nobody will be able to claim he didn't get a chance to be heard. Also, if we keep an eye on them, we may learn who are the real idiots and who, or who cannot, be trusted. I'm going to give Dalla the main responsibility for watching the Europo-American Study Group. I'm afraid that means she and I won't be going outtime this year, but she sees why."

Tortha Karf hoped Vall was right; a discontented Dalla could give the new Paratime Chief a full-time job he didn't need.

"I have to be in a position to spend at least the first two months of the campaign on Kalvan's Time-Line. Otherwise, I'll seem to be a man who ran out on his friends when they were in danger. Even if somebody doesn't shoot me for that, I'll certainly lose command of the Mounted Rifles and access to Kalvan."

The screen flickered into a map of the theater of the coming Great Kings' War. There were two red blobs, one in northern Ktemnos and one around Harphax City, facing one large blue blob in southern Hos-Hostigos. And a number of blue spots etched all the way back to Hostigos Town. "About forty thousand men for Kalvan, slightly less than twenty-five thousand for Kaiphranos and about the same for the Styphoni army in Hos-Ktemnos." With three opponents to every two of his own men, the odds didn't look good for Kalvan, although he was victorious with worse odds in the war against Nostor.

Suddenly a blue line lanced out from Beshta almost to Harphax City and then back again. Vall's voice explained:

"The armies would already be moving if they were of normal size, which on Kalvan's Time-Line for a major army would mean at most ten to twelve thousand men on a side. However, thanks to all the snow from the Winter of the Wolves most of the roads—they're all dirt roads on Aryan Transpacific except for main thoroughfares in the capital cities—have been washed out and a few are out-and-out running rivers—or sewers, depending upon the population density. It's only within the past few days that the roads have begun to dry out—although not enough for heavy wagon traffic."

Tortha laughed, remembering a few such 'streams' in his own forays on Second and Fourth Level 'barbarian' time-lines.

"On top of that, there still isn't enough forage to support either army advancing as a single body. That's the one advantage Kalvan has. With his better discipline and staff work he can probably maneuver two armies independently without losing touch with each other, that is, when he learns about the army in Hos-Ktemnos. I've already figured a way of leaking the information without letting anyone know it's coming from me."

Tortha Karf winced. It was one minus already just for a Paratime Police Chief to have an outtime 'friend,' but it was something else again to aid that friend with supplies—which Verkan was already doing—or intelligence. At the moment it didn't add up to a violation of the Paratemporal Code, but it skirted the line too close for Tortha's peace of mind, besides providing useful ammunition for the new Chief's enemies—who would multiply geometrically the moment he closed Fourth Level Europo-American.

What Vall hadn't taken into account, as Dalla had so determinedly pointed out, was the faddish nature of Home Time Line society—for the past few years Europo-American, Hispano-Columbian Subsector was *it*! He remembered a few years back when every child under the age of twelve had a coonskin cap and a hula-hoop! Millions of flat screen TVs had been imported along with drive-in theaters. And the music! Scratch and racket he called it! About two years ago they'd had to squelch a ring of kidnappers from Home Time Line who were abducting this Presley boy from other subsectors where he hadn't become a *famoussinger*, having him play *inunderground* dives and 'hops'—as they called them! What next?

Every century or so Home Time Line adopted the 'culture' of an 'interesting' Belt or Subsector. He remembered during his youth when Second Level Gorphyx Sector with its 'spaceships' and 'spacemen' had been all the rage. They'd even 'imported' a few of these *ships* and traveled to other stars, but the cost was prohibitive and there wasn't anything really interesting in space. It was much cheaper and easier to *travelsideways* through Paratime...

The one big disadvantage was that First Level was in danger of becoming a society of mimics, adopting other cultures to the point of losing their own. This decade everyone wanted to ape Europo-American manners, dialogue and sometimes even social manners. This faddish fever had gotten worse as he'd gotten older—he wondered if it was the price they paid for 'living' off of these outtimers. When was the last time he'd seen a First Level art show or entertainment worth viewing that wasn't based on some outtime work or its re-interpretation?

Paratemporal theorist, Ulton Dorth, contended it was it another symptom of First Level cultural decadence, which along with the unnecessary dependency upon 'personal servants,' or proles, had weakened the very fabric of their ten thousand year-old society. Tortha wondered where it would all end; fortunately, it wasn't his problem anymore.

Verkan's voice continued, "However, the roads are now dry enough so that the cavalry carrying their own rations can move fast. Kalvan had Harmakros send two thousand Mobile Force cavalry under Count Phrames into Hos-Harphax. They were to loot and burn anything belonging to King Kaiphranos or Styphon' House, scout out the land, fight only if they had to and above all *keep moving* .

"Phrames did a good job. He stayed out seven days, because he overran a supply dump and the band of Harphaxi cavalry holding it. With the extra supplies, he was able to swing west, outrun two Lances of Zarthani Knights and make it back losing only a hundred men and two hundred horses. He seems to have raised the very Styphon on the way. Our people in Hos-Harphax said you could see the smoke of his fires from the walls of the city.

"This should tickle up something in Hos-Harphax, but it's too soon to say exactly what. We are definitely having a problem getting intelligence from our agents there. Grand Master Soton is there trying to whip the Harphaxi Royal Army into shape, and is also installing some rudimentary notions of security; he's the one who also came up with the secret mobilization in Ktemnos. We wouldn't have known about that one ourselves if we hadn't just managed to get a man into Balph.

"We have two of our people working in Harphax City taverns frequented by mercenaries, and two more passing themselves off as sutlers. The second pair will move out with the army, when and if. We're not getting much information from the University people; most of them are up to their eyebrows in work at the Foundry. The only two who aren't are Professor Baltrov Eldra and Director Talgran Dreth, who are back on Home Time Line assembling this year's team of scholars.

"So I'm going to send out Inspector Ranthar Jard to join both the Royal Foundry and the Mounted Rifles as a Zygroshi friend of mine. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that he can still keep his eyes and ears open and his mouth shut better than most. He's also remarkably hard to kill.

"He'll reach Hostigos Town in about a ten-day with some Grefftscharrer brass for casting and a message from me. I'll follow in less than a moon with a full-scale caravan of food and military stores from one of our Control Time-Lines. That should land me in Hostigos before the shooting really starts, but after Ranthar Jard's had time to look around and ask a few questions. I hope he doesn't find anything that requires official action. Apart from the dividing the University team, when they'll need to be guarding each others' backs, Danthor Dras could easily make something out of any hint of scandal. He's going to be broadcasting a series of lectures on Styphon House Subsector, Kalvan's Time-Line, using all his favorite visual effects. Anything he says about the Paracops will have an audience of several hundred million. We can just as well do without that, thank you..."

II

Grand Master Soton signed his name at the bottom of the parchment with less than his usual flourish. The scroll contained a requisition to the Royal Granaries of Hos-Harphax for enough food and fodder for three Lances of Knights and their horses. It was the least he could do having signed their death warrant by ordering them to this dreary and inhospitable land. He'd spent the last moon-half since he'd arrived from Hos-Ktemnos inspecting King Kaiphranos' pitiful excuse for an Army. It was even worse than First Speaker Anaxthenes had feared, and Anaxthenes was not known for his optimism. Anaxthenes had been

right to send him here to reconnoiter the Army of Hos-Harphax; now he understood why he'd been ordered to bring the Lances with him.

Yet, to send so many Brethren to almost certain death stuck in his throat like a fish bone. If there was one thing certain, by Ormaz, it was that he'd never make a statesman—good or otherwise.

King Kaiphranos' Royal Horse Guard wasn't up to muster, and singularly ill-equipped—a polite phrase for bridles that fell apart in your hands and pistols whose locks were frozen with rust. The fifteen hundred Royal Lancers led by Prince Philesteus were, if anything, over-equipped; silver and gilded armor that could blind friends as well as opponents on a sunlit battlefield. They were composed of younger sons of the nobility and wealthy merchants and were hard to control unless used wisely. And who in Styphon's name could do that: Kaiphranos, so frail he couldn't mount a horse without help? Prince Philesteus, as rash as he was courageous? Grand Duke Lysandros, who was a competent commander, but untested against a worthy foe? Besides, everyone knew that his true ambition was not to lead troops but to rule Hos-Harphax. Count Aesthes, a commander who'd never won a battle although he'd fought three, owed his present rank of Captain-General of Hos-Harphax to the fact he could listen to Kaiphranos' endless monologues about the best kind of reeds for bassoons? Only in the Harphaxi Army...

There were some good mercenary troops, but they were of little use unless competently led. The Hos-Harphaxi levy were the dregs of the Five Kingdoms, gallows-fruit, cutpurses, imbeciles and the scourings of every prison in the eleven Principedoms of Hos-Harphax. And their mounts! Never in his whole life had he seen such an assortment of nags, bags of bones and swaybacks. The entire lot wasn't worth the lead it would cost Kalvan to bring them down.

The Knight doing steward's duty entered and said, "A Captain Phidestros to see you, Grand Master."

"Bid him enter."

Soton glanced at the parchment detailing the Throne's accusations against the mercenary captain—murder topped the list. The Harphaxi Royal Provost had wisely refrained from passing sentence, leaving it for him to pass judgment. In a private note, the Provost appealed to the Knights' justice rather than the Great King's. A wise choice as more than one mercenary commander had been hanged to appease the local citizenry. The Provost had based his appeal on the fact that they Royal Army needed every mercenary captain they could beg, borrow or kidnap. Sadly, he was right.

Soton wondered what Phidestros would have done if he'd known that the Grand Master was satisfied that the Captain had plotted and committed cold-blooded murder to place the Blue Company of Captain Lamochares under his own banner. Personally, he thought the young blackguard should be drawn and quartered; however, the Holy War against the Usurper was more important than any single murder or the ambitions of a mercenary captain. Unless he could prompt a full confession, which he rather doubted, he would rather find a lesser punishment. Otherwise, Phidestros' death would seem arbitrary and offend the other mercenaries, making for bad blood between them and the Order at a time when they needed every man-jack of them.

There was no doubt Captain Phidestros had shown initiative and cool courage: two things in desperately short supply in the Army of Hos-Harphax. If all else failed, Kalvan's army would soon dispatch Phidestros to Regwarn, Cavern of the Dead, final resting place for those without honor or belief in the gods.

When Phidestros entered, Soton with a silent gesture sent the steward Knight out for ale. Then he leaned back in his chair as best he could and studied the man standing before him on the far side of the table.

The captain was still young and lean, with assured and fluid movements, like an upright panther. He was handsome enough in a rough, vital sort of way, but his eyes had the color and warmth of a mountain stream. All in all, he looked like the hard-bitten and ambitious mercenary commander he was.

It was a contemplation that would have been easier if Phidestros had been shorter. Then he would not have made Soton more conscious than usual of his own lack of height, and how over-sized this chair borrowed from the Palace was for him. The next time he traveled north he would bring one of his own chairs from Tarr-Ceros, like the one he had at the Triangle Table in the Golden Temple at Balph.

Meanwhile, there was no purpose in letting himself be distracted from great matters by trying to dominate in small ones.

"Sit down, Captain Phidestros, and tell me why you think you and your men should not be punished for your *work* at the Drunken Harlot five moons ago."

Phidestros sat down with an almost contemptuous grace of movement that told Soton very clearly the Captain knew why he was being told to sit. Either he was very sure his case was fireproof, or he was playing some deep game with someone else pulling the strings. Soton decided to assume the first since the second was too disquieting to even contemplate without evidence. He had enough of hidden plots and machinations in his dealings with the Inner Circle without searching out more.

Soton also had no evidence for the story that Phidestros was a bastard of someone too highly placed to acknowledge him, but practical enough to find him *useful* and to advance his career whenever this could be done quietly. The Iron Company was the best-fitted, well-horsed and sharpest appearing mercenary company in Hos-Harphax. No evidence—yet Soton's belly told him that no other explanation made sense; still, he would not wager on which of the half-score men named as Phidestros' sire might be the one.

"I do not think we should be punished for this unfortunate mishap, since neither I nor my men had anything to do with the Petty-Captain and trooper Vilthos' death. However, I do not think that I and my men are without blame, Grand Master."

Soton nodded, not sure what to make out of this—was the Captain confessing to the killings?

"That morning there was a horse race among the mercenaries and Royal Lancers. My mount, Long Shanks, took first place that day and our wagers emptied many a purse. My victory was well known among the populace of Harphax City, including most of the footpads and thieves. I feared a misguided attack upon my person—or whom the attackers believed to be me and my command—to relieve me of my purse resulted in this contretemps involving the Blue Company, whose only crime was celebrating my success at the race with the Iron Band."

It took all of Soton's self-control not to break out smiling: *Does Phidestros really think that he can sell this stale codswallop to me?* The verifiable facts would check out—the Captain was no fool, but what band of thieves in Harphax City were brave enough to beard a mercenary captain and his armed troopers in a public brothel? On the other hand, if he were not overly anxious to punish this ambitious captain, the story did give them all a way to save face.

"Indeed, Grand Master," Phidestros continued, "I believe that Lamochares' men suffered quite innocently from this heinous ambush upon my person and I would see to making provision for their kin. I know that Ephentros left a widow and two daughters. Also, the owner of the Drunken Harlot has the right to recoup his losses for the cost of replacing his furniture. After this cowardly ambush, he was left with

nothing but a lavish supply of kindling wood."

Undoubtedly, Phidestros could pay enough to quiet a great many tongues; the Iron Company had left the battlefield of Fyk last winter not only in good order, but well rewarded, having thoroughly looted the baggage train of Sarrask of Sask. There were barons with smaller war chests than Phidestros; furthermore, there was no chance of Phidestros selling his services to Hos-Hostigos as long as Sarrask of Sask was alive. The one neatly balanced the other, depriving Phidestros of one major weapon in any ambitious mercenary captain's arsenal: the ability to switch sides whenever he found a pretext plausible enough to satisfy the scruples of the more devout Galzar worshippers among his command.

"I will pay whatever you believe is fair, Grand Master, in return for a grant of the right to take Lamochares' men into the Iron Company. Ephentros was the only man fit to command under an independent company. The other petty-captains are not bad troopers, but they lack experience—they're green. Also, there is bad blood between some of them."

Soton clenched his jaw so tightly his teeth ground together like millstones. *This mercenary captain has as much gall as the so-called Great King of Hos-Hostigos!* "I have heard as much. Aren't you burying Lamochares without bothering to find out if he's dead?"

"I am far from interring the worthy Lamochares, Grand Master. I wish him long years and an honorable career. However, all my wishes will not drive out the marsh fever and rattle-lung in time to let him take the field this season. His healer says it's Styphon's Own Miracle he has lived so long, but if by another such miracle he recovers, he will never ride a horse again. If Lamochares' company is not put into the hands of an experienced captain it will be lost to Styphon's service this year."

That was true enough, particularly since one of the things Soton did know was that Lamochares had become careless about the pay and equipment of his men as the fever worsened. Too much of the paychest spent on quacks and leeches. The late Petty-Captain Ephentros had done his best, but that hadn't been good enough. Lamochares' men would need a good deal of discipline hammered into them and silver spent on their arms and appurtenances before they were any fitter to take the field than their captain.

They would probably also follow the man who gave them what they needed like lost sheep following a shepherd. And almost certainly if said man had the reputation and—Hadron take the man, but there was no denying it—the commanding presence of Captain Phidestros, the Blue Company would be reformed into a useful unit. "How will you heal the bad blood between your men and Lamochares' troopers?"

"As recompense for their losses, the Iron Company has helped pay for their drink and victuals. We also shared our lodgings with them when I learned that the company paychest was empty and they were being evicted from the Bent-Horn Tavern."

Phidestros' answer demonstrated that he too had been doing a great deal of thinking on the matter, too much thinking, in fact. Soton began to have the feeling he was listening to a superb actor playing a part in one of the Fireseed Plays. However, it was not the sort of feeling Soton was prepared to let carry him away when plain facts were shouting in his ear.

Fact: Lamochares' men would indeed be leaderless if they weren't put under some other captain.

Fact: If they were left leaderless, they would not be taking the field this season when every man would be needed to crush the Usurper Kalvan, even if they were nothing more than cannon fodder. The Blue Company would be left behind, idle, unpaid and a menace to the lawful subjects of Harphax City whose

fondness for mercenaries would doubtless run out when the mercenaries' purses did.

Fact: Phidestros had a deep enough purse to give Lamochares' company everything they needed. That would save one hundred and fourteen troopers and two good guns to the service of Styphon—an addition not to be despised.

Fact: Under Phidestros the men would also be under a captain loyal to Styphon's House—or at least as loyal as any mercenary captain could ever be—they would not be under Prince Philesteus and Duke Aesthes or obeying Styphon's House through the offices of Grand Duke Lysandros. Soton knew enough about those men to trust the first two hardly at all, and Lysandros only as long as his ambitions for the throne of Hos-Harphax were not threatened.

Fact: Phidestros' Iron Company strength was now one hundred and thirty-seven men. With Lamochares' company, Phidestros would have a double company with over two hundred and fifty men.

Soton had far more pressing concerns than Phidestros' cold-blooded ambition if his current estimation of the Harphaxi Armies incompetence was correct. The mercenary's claim to Lamochares' Blue Company was worth granting—at a price.

"Captain Phidestros, I have already discussed this matter in detail with the Provost Marshal and shall render a final judgment today despite my concerns that I have only have your word for some important matters regarding the murder of Petty-Captain Ephentros."

"So be it, Grand Master. My men and I have little to fear, for Styphon will guide you to the truth."

Soton had to hold back the laughter that threatened his poise. It would not serve his purpose to reveal his suspicions so blatantly. However, he needed to caution Phidestros against placing that long nose of his in places where people might be tempted to cut it off. "Before I render judgment, I will warn you, Captain Phidestros, that another such *incident* as this will not be so easily dismissed! Am I understood?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I would also add that if I do find you fit to take command of Lamochares' men, I will request one further thing of you."

"Ask, and if it is lawful in the sight of Styphon, first among gods, and Galzar Wolfhead, it shall be done."

"It is lawful," Soton said tightly. He wanted badly to say, *Oh, demons fly away with your false piety and drop it in Kalvan's chamber pot!* Prudence silenced him. "It is certainly lawful to ask you to have Lamochares' guns fitted with trunnions and the new style carriages at *your* expense."

Soton again wanted to laugh; Phidestros was finally looking unsettled. "We have already fitted the eight-pounder with trunnions and my petty-captain is building a carriage. But fitting the eighteen-pounder they call the Fat Duchess will take some time, Grand Master, and also a good deal of gold."

"None the less, I must be satisfied that you will take proper care of the weapons entrusted to your care before I raise you higher among the captains serving Styphon's House. Is this not also lawful?"

"Yes, Grand Master, it is lawful. You shall be so satisfied, Grand Master."

"Good. I then rend my judgment of Not Guilty in the murders of Petty-Captain Ephentros and trooper

Vilthos. You may leave."

Phidestros didn't look so sure of himself as he left the chamber. Soton kept a grin off his face until the Captain had departed, drained an entire goblet of wine and, without taking it from his lips, hooted with laughter.

Adding the Provost's hefty fine for the brawl at the Drunken Harlot to the cost of refitting the two guns, and even the Saski loot would be stretched a bit. Then Phidestros might also be encouraged to give up his intrigues and ambitions and settle down doing the work he knew so well. Styphon's House had plenty of ambitious would-be-allies; it had rather fewer reliable captains of mercenaries.

TEN

I

It wasn't until Soton entered Great King Kaiphranos' audience hall that he finally began to understand how Kalvan had been so successful so quickly. The Grand Hall was dingy and filled with ancient furniture that looked as if it had been used for pistol practice. The only window worthy of the name had been laboriously carved through the wall, but otherwise the only outside light came through firing slits made for arrows. When they built the keep of Tarr-Harphax, petty barons and outlaws were fighting almost yearly over the lands left vacant by the annihilation of the Ruthani tribes. Princes and kings who wanted to sleep peacefully at night built for defense, not comfort. While still stout—the ancients built their tarrs to last—Tarr-Harphax hadn't been well maintained for a hundred years.

At least Kaiphranos had beeswax candles to light the Great Hall, not the grease-soaked tapers that filled the rest of the castle with a great deal of smoke and stink. Most of the hangings and tapestries were faded, some ripped or frayed at the ends. Even the Iron Throne of King Kaiphranos IV showed rust stains along the arms and legs. Soton had seen better furnishings in the longhouses of Sastragathi headmen.

Kaiphranos himself seemed hardly more than another shadow. He was bent and crooked, while his wispy white hair splayed out of his crown like an unruly bird's nest. Even from a distance his red velvet robe showed dark purple wine stains.

Flanking Great King Kaiphranos in lesser chairs of state were his eldest son and heir, Prince Philesteus, and the stooped, white-bearded Captain-General of Hos-Harphax, Duke Aesthes. Philesteus wore armor under his robes and was eccentric enough to go clean-shaven, which left his thick neck and double chin exposed to all. Duke Aesthes could hardly carry himself at all; at seventy winters and suffering from arthritis he was past active campaigning. During the thirty past winters, a time when Hos-Harphax didn't need to take war and armies seriously, this wouldn't have mattered. Now, however...

Across from Kaiphranos sat his much younger half-brother, Grand Duke Lysandros, a slender fine-featured man of middle age whose mink-lined, gold-filigreed robe was worth more than the entire contents of the Hall. Out of all Kaiphranos' advisors, he was the only adherent of Styphon's House and the fittest general. For once Soton wished he had a purse full of Anaxthenes' little vials, so he could put the scales of Hos-Harphax back into balance.

As he sat down next to Lysandros, Soton wished even more that he had a drink in hand, preferably

good winter wine. From the look on Lysandros' face he knew this was going to be an ordeal. He leaned over and whispered to Lysandros, "Where's Prince Selestros?"

The Grand Duke answered in a voice loud enough to startle Kaiphranos. "Selestros is out wallowing with some he, she or it."

Great King Kaiphranos cleared his throat. Quite unnecessarily, Prince Philesteus barked, "Give ear to the Great King!"

The Hall was so silent that Soton could hear the creaking of his joints as Kaiphranos straightened up in his throne.

"Grand Master Soton," Kaiphranos said, in a whining voice that reminded Soton of a befuddled old tutor who had roamed the streets of Geas, the village where he'd grown up, then left as soon as the first whiskers graced his chin.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Is it true, what I've heard? That you plan to leave Us with tomorrow evening's tide?"

"Yes, it is true. I have been called upon by the Inner Circle to lead the Sacred Squares of Hos-Ktemnos against the Usurper Kalvan."

Great King Kaiphranos' face crumpled like that of an infant about to start squalling. "What have I done to bring this plague upon our land? I have worshipped all the true gods and paid Styphon's offerings. I have given my people peace and now the gods re-pay me with Daemons! Now, the Grand Master prepares to steal away in the night, to leave my Kingdom to death and ruin."

Soton made an effort to keep his expression neutral. He glanced over at Grand Duke Lysandros and saw him roll his eyes.

"I am not deserting anyone. I told Captain-General Aesthes three days ago that I would be leaving soon. I was not sent here to command the Army of Hos-Harphax, but to see that it was fit for battle." Soton raised his voice. "This I have done. Styphon's treasure has armed and refitted the Royal Army you have so long neglected."

If Kaiphranos had been a turtle, his head would have retreated into its shell; as it was he made a passing good imitation of one.

"Styphon's gold has bought you twelve thousand mercenaries and provided you with three Lances of the Holy Order. Your army has a commander, two, perhaps three. You don't need me."

"Grand Master Soton is correct, Your Majesty," Archpriest Phyllos said. Phyllos was Styphon's House top cleric in Hos-Harphax, as well as a member of the Inner Circle and head of the High Temple of Harphax City. "Furthermore, I have just received word that a convoy is on its way from Balph with a hundred tons of Styphon's fireseed and three thousand of Styphon's Own Guard. There is to be another convoy from Agrys City with eight thousand more mercenaries and a fifty thousand ounces of gold for the war against the Usurper."

Soton's head reeled. He'd have to completely re-think the war against Hos-Hostigos. Why hadn't I been informed of these reinforcements? What other surprises are hidden in the sleeves of Anaxthenes' robes?

"I want the Grand Master to lead Our Army!" Kaiphranos cried. "He will bring us Styphon's Own Blessing."

Soton stamped on his anger until his voice came out in a deadly monotone; after all, it has been the Inner Circle's policy to weaken the central authority of the Northern Kingdoms. Yet, it was Kaiphranos' failure of leadership that had made their efforts so successful. "If you had kept your own house in order, there would be no need for Styphon's troops and Styphon's gold to give you back the kingdom *you* have lost. We are not here at your pleasure, but at Styphon's Will. Remember this: What has been given, can be taken away."

As Soton had expected, Kaiphranos' anger melted away like last moon's snowfall. Left behind were a frightened old man and a son who'd never grown up, puffing himself up in anger. To defuse the situation, Soton added, "Let your son re-unite his future kingdom and earn his spurs. Even in distant Tarr-Ceros we have heard of the fame of the Harphaxi Royal Lancers." It was so easy to salvage Philesteus' pride; yet, it went against Soton's very grain. Let Anaxthenes do his *own* double-tongued work from now on!

"Yes, Father," Philesteus said. "The Grand Master is right. With our own Royal Army we will skin the snake in his own den."

Kaiphranos waved away his son's words. "I want to know more about this army you plan to lead from Hos-Ktemnos, Grand Master. Why do they not open the battle against the Usurper Kalvan?"

"I am not at liberty to speak about their plans. We have learned in Harphax City that even the stone walls have ears."

"Are you accusing me of harboring traitors and intelligencers?" the old king was beginning to get his color back.

"Of course not. But is it not true that a highpriest of the false god Dralm passes through these doors every day?"

Kaiphranos averted his gaze and stared at the floor. A moment later a servant, bearing goblets of wine on a tray, entered the chamber. Soton was shocked when he took one and saw the green corrosion on what appeared to be a golden stem.

"Highpriest Cratos is an old friend and trusted advisor. I could not believe he would violate Our trust. Besides, this war is not about Dralm or Styphon, but about the lands that were stolen from my Kingdom by this Usurper Lord Kalvan!

"Nor is this what We have come to this Council of War to discuss." The old King brightened as though struck by inspiration. "I now want to announce Our decision in the matter of a proper reply to the godless attack by the Traitor, Rebel and Daemon Kalvan into the land of Hos-Harphax one and a half moons ago. We have in this matter sought the advice of our Councilors and Captains and the wisdom sent only by the gods."

Soton steeled himself for the worst; he was fairly sure that the part about "seeking advice" was pure diplomacy, meant to placate Styphon's House. The Temple had ears and eyes in too many places in Harphax City not to have known whether or not Kaiphranos had consulted with any significant numbers of his "councilors and captains." No, whatever was about to come out now was likely to be the old man's decision—or whim. Kaiphranos' last major decision had been to appoint Lysandros Captain-Governor

of Harphax City, which meant that the only competent general of the House of Harphax would not be taking the field during the upcoming campaign. All of which left Soton less than optimistic that the words he was about to hear would contain any great amount of wisdom.

"It is Our will that the Royal Treasury be called on to ease the suffering of those who lost homes, herds and kin to the Host of the Traitor, Rebel and Daemon Kalvan.

"It is Our will that Count Phrames and all other invaders who may be proved to have followed the Usurper's orders to march into Harphax to the destruction and wasting of Our lands shall be under the same ban as the Traitor, Rebel and Daemon Kalvan, and shall suffer the same penalties at the hands of Our justice.

"It is Our will that Duke Aesthes shall take his seat at Tarr-Minnos and shall from there command a force of horse to watch a line from Tarr-Minnos south and west to Tarr-Kyloth that no further invaders may cross it without warning.

"It is Our will that no man who has sworn oath to the Iron Throne of Hos-Harphax shall pass forward of this line without Our express command, given under Our hand and seal.

"It is Our will that the Host of Harphax be readied with the greatest dispatch to march and utterly crush the Traitor, Rebel, Daemon Kalvan, at such time as Our noble and loyal allies may be able to give of their strength for this purpose.

"This is Our will in this matter, proclaimed this 11th day of the Moon of the Tall Grass in Our seat of Tarr-Harphax."

Soton was glad he hadn't been smoking his pipe; if he had, it would have clattered to the floor, betraying to all his gaping mouth. As it was, he was able to compose his features before anyone noticed, although safely out of sight under the table, his hands were clenching into fists. Kaiphranos' strategy was simple; to lie down and let the Hostigi do what they pleased—as long as they did it only along the frontier. Aesthes' patrols would detect any enemy attacks penetrating deep into Harphax territory, Soton supposed, but they would be unable to scout out such an attack before it was launched. Add to this lack of warning, Duke Aesthes' past performance and Prince Philesteus' rashness and what might the Hostigi do before the Harphaxi met them in battle, assuming now that Kaiphranos really meant to array his army and that it was fit to do so?

Lysandros' face gave away no more than usual—which was nothing. The Captain-General Aesthes' face was too swathed in white, tobacco-stained whiskers to reveal much expression. Philesteus had neither whiskers nor any reason to hide countenance. He looked horror-struck and gobbled like a turkey for a moment before he found his voice, while his face turned the color of a turkey's wattles.

"Fa—Your Majesty! This—the honor of Hos-Harphax demands—we shall seem...!"

Kaiphranos looked mildly at his heir until he could be sure that the Prince had lost his voice again. Then he said more firmly than Soton would have expected, "I am the judge of the honor of Hos-Harphax and what it demands. And what it demands now is that we not expose any more Harphaxi to attacks—from which we cannot defend them—by provoking the Hostigi further. With the help of the true gods and our friends and allies this will not always be the case, but most surely it is so now."

Soton looked at Captain-General Aesthes, hoping to hear him deny that his men were as helpless as Kaiphranos implied. When he saw the old Duke slowly nodding his head, like a bear just awake from

sleep, Soton's stomach turned to cold iron. There would be no opposition to Kaiphranos' witless demonstration of spite against Styphon's House, as well as fear of the strength of Hos-Hostigos, unless one wished to intrigue it in to existence by dealing directly with some of the mercenary captains, or even Lysandros. Such dangerous games Soton would leave to Archpriest Phyllos who would never have to worry about facing a former ally, now turned enemy, on the field of battle.

"Your Majesty," Grand Duke Lysandros said, "It seems to me we provoke the Servant of Daemons Kalvan by our very existence, or at least by our refusal to let an enemy of the True God proclaim himself Great King and rule over our lands and subjects any time it pleases him! Unless we are to cravenly submit ourselves to—"

"It is not well done to call your Great King and elder brother a coward," Kaiphranos said. "Were it not for my affection for yourself—"

From the battle running across Lysandros' face it was easy to read that he felt neither respect nor affection for his older brother, but with two healthy heirs between him and the Throne he so obviously coveted, there was little he could do but swallow his bile.

"For...forgive me, brother..." Lysandros finally choked out. "I do not wish to go beyond calling Your Majesty's attention to facts that your advisors, perhaps, have not called to your attention."

"This wish does you credit," Kaiphranos said, "so I will overlook any indiscretion that arises from your eagerness to defend the honor of Hos-Harphax. We will speak of this no further, Duke Lysandros. I will take your advice under consideration."

Lysandros now looked as if he'd swallowed not only his bile, but his tongue as well. It occurred to Soton that perhaps there was a method in the apparent madness of keeping Lysandros out of the field during this campaign. A major victory to his credit, or more likely a valorous part in a Harphaxi in defeat, would give him allies among the nobles and mercenary captains who could only feed his ambitions. It also occurred to Soton that very probably Styphon's House would not be losing so greatly by Lysandros remaining safely behind the walls of Harphax City. Barring the direct intervention of Styphon and Galzar on the side of the Harphaxi, Kalvan was going to eat Kaiphranos' army for first meal and pick his teeth with their bones.

Lysandros was as brave as he was able; he might not wish to survive such a defeat and if he were in the forefront of the battle, he might not survive whether he wished to or not. Some men could do Styphon's House as much service dead as alive; Lysandros was not one of them.

King Kaiphranos continued, "Prince Philesteus, it is Our wish that you may lead such part of your Royal Lancers as you wish into the field to form part of Our strength watching the hosts of the Traitor, Rebel and Servant of Daemons Kalvan. You and they are to obey the orders of Captain-General Aesthes in all matters where his authority runs."

It would take the God of Judges, Galzar Himself, to determine that, thought Soton. Both Aesthes and Philesteus started to reply, then both seemed to think better of it. For the first time in half a candle, Soton felt like smiling. Duke Aesthes was clearly none too happy about having under his authority a Prince notoriously hot-headed enough for three captains half his age. Philesteus was just as torn among his joy at going into the field at the head of his beloved Lancers, his frustration at being under the Captain-General's orders and his reluctance to leave Harphax City with the opportunity to intrigue with the captains of his own faction against Kaiphranos' policy.

From the bland way Kaiphranos was studying his two commanders, Soton was quite sure he was reading their thoughts just as clearly. Had the servants of Styphon underestimated the wits remaining to Kaiphranos? If so, he would have to discuss the matter with First Speaker Anaxthenes when he returned to Balph.

"My Knights and I must take counsel as to how we may best obey the will of the Great King. I must say that I think he has been given advice by men not knowing the true strength that Styphon's House may bring to the aid of its allies. Yet, it is no shame to them not to know the secrets of the God of Gods."

"Will be you taking your Lances of Knights away from the Army of Hos-Harphax?" Duke Aesthes asked, his rheumy eyes remained aimed like twin cannon mouths at Soton, ignoring the glare from Philesteus and the cough from Kaiphranos.

"As I said, I must take counsel with my Knights. I can say, however, that there seems to be small need for that at present."

Which means, old man, that two thousand of my Brethren will be within reach of your orders if you need to rein in that spirited stallion Philesteus the Bold and find no one else will help you because they're all afraid of offending their next ruler. But Styphon have mercy upon you, should you make ill use of them—for I shall have none!

By the Gods, let me escape from this snake pit and I will do anything you ask of me even if it means sacrificing captives to you as the Mexicotat do on their stone altars!

Archpriest Phyllos moved for the first time and Soton found himself looking into eyes that made him think of a whole battery, loaded and with the matches smoking in the gunners' hands. Certainly Styphon's House could not afford to leave the Knights alone in supporting Hos-Harphax against Kalvan. Too many Harphaxi nobles would never forgive or forget if they did that and Lysandros' devotion to the True God would become even more a black mark against him.

Too bad for Anaxthenes' catpaw if this was another of the First Speaker's grand schemes. Archpriests were going to have to learn the difference between cavalry and infantry just like everybody else if they wanted to stop Kalvan before grass grew on the ruins of Styphon's temples!

II

Master Gunner Thalmoth finished winding his slow match around the eight-foot linstock, then held the lighted end up to his lips and blew on it until Kalvan was afraid the man's beard would catch on fire.

"Everyone back!" Thalmoth shouted. The other gunners and foundry workers backed away from the gun-testing pit, leaving Thalmoth standing alone with a smoldering match poised over the touch-hole of the new sixteen pounder inside. "Farther, farther!" he shouted as a few of the younger workers showed signs of wanting to stay close enough to the pit to see what happened.

The workers kept back and somehow in the process Kalvan had to join the retreat to avoid being jostled in a manner not befitting a Great King's dignity. He grinned, wondering if Thalmoth had planned

this to avoid having to publicly give orders to his sovereign.

Suddenly the linstock dipped, the priming powder puffed and the sixteen pounder spewed flames and white smoke. Double-charged for the proof firing, it reared halfway out of the testing pit on its oak beam, then thumped back into place. From where Kalvan stood, it looked completely intact.

Half a dozen picked men ran forward with sponges to cool the barrel, rammers and tools to measure any deformation of barrel or bore. As a light breeze blew away the smoke and dust, they leaped down into the pit, leaving Thalmoth posing dramatically at the rim with a linstock over his shoulder.

Kalvan didn't begrudge the old man his moment of glory; he'd come out of retirement to take care of the testing program for the Royal Hostigos Arsenal and was clearly worth any two other gunners in Hostigi service, except Alkides. Although a native of Hostigos, Thalmoth had spent twenty of his younger years as a mercenary and he'd handled guns in more battles than he had fingers and toes.

Finally, Thalmoth turned to the spectators and gave the thumbs up signal for success which Kalvan had introduced. The next step would be firing a proof charge with the breech dug in to give the gun maximum elevation, then a field carriage—thank Galzar or Somebody that the gunsmiths, black smiths and carpenters had finally stopped arguing about who would be in charge of the carriage shop!—and last of all, a naming ceremony, with Uncle Wolf Tharses presiding over the gun's acceptance into the Royal Artillery. That would be about the last such ceremony for a while, though. No more brass for the Foundry, or at least not much; Kalvan doubted there was a brass chamber pot left in the entire Great Kingdom.

Hooped wrought iron would do for the four and eight pounders, but Hostigos already had about as many of those as there'd be horses to draw. What was needed was the heavies, the sixteen pounders and those thirty-two pound siege guns he'd been dreaming of since last summer. Made of brass and firing either solid shot or iron shells—he'd seen the first experimental shells last week—the heavies would pry open any tarr he'd seen here-and-now like a sardine can. Made of hooped wrought iron, those brutes would simply be too heavy to move over here-and-now roads without slaughtering draft animals like hoof-and-mouth disease.

Wait a minute! If he couldn't make siege guns with hooped wrought iron, what about siege mortars? They would be made large enough to lob a really destructive shell a few hundred yards and have a trajectory that would carry it over any walls. Solid shot, too. If castles couldn't be battered open, perhaps they could be hammered flat from above. Or, at least, made uninhabitable if the shells could be filled with some sort of incendiary compound...

Of course, the mortars would have to be very short range in order to be light enough to move easily. Four or five hundred yards would probably be the limit. However, they could easily be dug into pits like the one being used for gun testing. It would require some fancy shooting to hit them, and a few dozen riflemen in other pits close to the walls could discourage any gunners standing in the open long enough for that.

Mortars might be a poor man's weapon, but Kalvan had been at the wrong end of enough Chinese mortar barrages to have a lively respect for them. Besides, anything that impressed castle-holders that a siege was no longer something to sneer at would be an asset to the Great Kingdom.

Kalvan sent a page off to his tent for a piece of the thin-cut pine he used in place of notepads and some charcoal. For at least the fiftieth time he cursed the slowness of the paper project which had worked up only as far as a high grade of mush. For the fortieth time he realized that Brother Mytron was doing the

best he could with the knowledge and tools at hand, not to mention the time he could spare for the paper project. Mytron in fact now wore three hats: he was Royal Papermaker of Hos-Hostigos, Surgeon-General to the Royal Army and Rector of the new University of Hostigos. Unofficially, he was also chief Rylla-watcher, a job in which Ptosphes and Kalvan gave him all the help their military duties allowed. That wasn't much, with the campaign season growing nearer each day. As soon as the streams and rivers shrank a bit...

Unfortunately, the warm weather had only given Rylla her own bad case of cabin fever; she felt fine and was firmly convinced that keeping her shut up like the crown jewels was good for neither her nor the baby. She argued the point with her husband, her father, with Brother Mytron and even Head Midwife Amasphalya, who as a girl of fifteen had helped her grandmother bring Ptosphes into the world.

Maybe Rylla had a point. Certainly there were plenty of "good breeders," as Amasphalya put it, among the women on both sides of her family. Maybe Princess Demia's troubles hadn't been passed on to her daughter? Maybe any baby who didn't miscarry from its mother's temper tantrums could easily survive mere cannon shot? Maybe Kalvan was being a little selfish, keeping Rylla shut up, just to save himself one more headache?

Maybe, but he wasn't going to change his mind now. If Rylla sailed through the last two months of her pregnancy as well as she did the first seven, she could have her next baby in a trench at the siege of Balph if she wanted to. But for this one, she'd stay put!

The page returned with the pine board and charcoal. Kalvan realized he was hungry and sent the boy off to the gunner's mess to scrounge some food and wine. Rylla claimed he didn't keep enough ceremony with his meals, but he'd be damned if he was going to waste time with that sort of thing now. With a twenty-nine hour day and no need for sleep, he just might get done half of the things that needed doing no more than a moon or two late.

III

Kalvan was finishing his first sketch of an eight-inch mortar and the wing of a rather tough goose, when he heard one of his pages clearing his throat. "Your Majesty, Duke Chartiphon wishes audience."

Kalvan tossed the goose bones aside, wiped his hands on his breeches and stood to greet Chartiphon. Despite his new titles and responsibilities, the old Captain-General of Hostigos appeared much the same as he had when Kalvan had first entered Tarr-Hostigos. He was a big man with a gray-streaked golden beard and rugged features, still wearing the same battered and lead-splotched breastplate and two-handed sword.

Chartiphon bowed, then motioned to a man standing beside him to come forward. "Your Majesty, this is Ranthar, a free trader come from Grefftscharr. He bears a message from Colonel Verkan."

Ranthar was a tough-looking young man with sandy hair and a bristling beard; he wore well-worn leather riding clothes and looked to be well under thirty until you saw his eyes. Kalvan hoped he would have a chance to hear from Ranthar the stories of some of what those eyes had seen.

More immediately to the point was the signet ring on Ranthar's left middle finger; it was Zygroshi work, plain brass, and there were only four rings like it in the whole world—none of them likely to be in the possession of someone Colonel Verkan didn't trust.

"You've assured yourself of a warm welcome already, Trader Ranthar. How is Verkan?"

Trader Ranthar bowed gracefully, as though meeting Great Kings was an everyday event for him, then smiled. "Colonel Verkan was well the last time I saw him. Also very busy, putting together a shipment of victuals and weapons for Your Majesty's use. He sent me on ahead overland with a pack train while he followed the ships across the Saltless Seas to Thagnor, Morthron, the Nythros City States and Ulthor Port. If you send men to Ulthor Port now, they should be just in time to meet him and help unload his cargo swiftly."

Ranthar handed Kalvan a leather wrapped wooden tablet listing what Verkan was sending. It was quite an impressive list, with its most notable entries, a thousand stand of muskets, five tons of Kalvan-formula fireseed, six hundred sets of pikeman's armor and a hundred tons of grain and salt pork. Also a thousand ingots of brass and two hundred of lead riding on Ranthar's pack animals along with a miscellany of gunlocks, flints, powder horns and other lightweight but necessary gear.

"Well done," Kalvan said. "See my Paymaster at the Treasury for twenty gold Crowns for yourself. I'll tell Colonel Verkan that he's chosen a good messenger."

Not that this was any surprise; a free trader who didn't learn to pick good subordinates probably wouldn't live to wear out his first hunting knife.

"My Thanks, Your Majesty," Ranthar said. "Colonel Verkan says he wishes he could have sent more sooner. However, the nomads of the Sea of Grass are now on the move. King Theovacar would let neither food, nor arms, nor fireseed leave his realm until he was certain the nomads were not turning north. Even then, Colonel Verkan had to pledge all he owned and all he could borrow from his fellow traders in payment."

"He will be repaid in full, if not before the campaign, then afterward."

"At Styphon's expense?"

"Exactly."

Ranthar's report confirmed others, both about the nomads and about Theovacar's character. Theovacar was in his mid-to-late twenties and definitely ambitious to expand his kingdom, but equally determined not to risk what he already had. Not a bad man to do business with if you had something of value to bargain with—and Kalvan realized that if he offered to show Theovacar the way to the copper and iron deposits around Lake Superior, he'd have something the man should jump at. Also a permanent solution to any shortage of metal for cannon.

He'd have to talk with Verkan when he arrived in Hostigos Town to be sure he wasn't planning to sell King Theovacar knowledge he already had. Even if the ore deposits were known, of course, that didn't mean they couldn't use a better way of getting the metal from the shores of Lake Superior down to the docks of Greffa.

Kalvan only knew a little more about mining than he did about paper making, but it could also solve his shortage of artillery...

He'd have to work mostly with Verkan, of course. That might mean turning the man from Colonel of the Mounted Rifles into here-and-now's first copper magnate, which would be a pity; the man was too good a combat officer to be spared easily. However, it was probably necessary; one of these days Kalvan might have to stop making ten men do the work of fifty, but he suspected he'd be a grandfather before that day was even in sight.

Ranthar was now fumbling something out of his belt pouch. "This is not from Colonel Verkan, it was from a man who thought someone trusted by the Colonel would be the best way to send it to Your Majesty secretly. As you will surely see, it would be the end of him if any of Styphon's minions were to discover his betrayal. I shall tell you the man was on his way from Agrys City, but I would rather not tell any more."

He handed Kalvan a piece of parchment, folded in four and with the badge of the Inner Circle of Styphon's House stamped into the sealing wax. It directed a certain sea captain to transport two thousand cattle southward in ships to the mouth of the Thebra (Potomac River). He was to return with a full Lance of Zarthani Knights, landing them in Harphax City no later than eighteen days from today. The meaning of the date was obvious; it was about when the Harphaxi were supposed to march. That in itself was useful to know, although Kalvan had never had any intention of waiting more than another half moon.

This last minute movement of Knights, particularly when the Harphaxi Army would need more than a single Lance to stiffen its spine, was perplexing. They had three Lances of Zarthani Knights—with oath brothers and auxiliaries about twenty-five hundred horse—with them already, according to his spies, but they would need five or six more to stiffen the well-born nitwits and ill-paid mercenaries of their cavalry enough to face the Army of Hos-Hostigos.

Several of the 'traders' working for Skranga had reported troop movements throughout Hos-Ktemnos and, for the last half-moon, it had been apparent that Styphon's varsity would be coming from the south. Kalvan didn't like the idea of dividing his forces, but it looked as though he wouldn't have a choice.

There have been rumors of bad blood between the Harphaxi and Styphoni, who were mostly Knights and Styphon's Own Guard, popularly known as the Red Hand for their bloody treatment of enemies and allies alike. The Temple Guardsmen were placed behind unreliable mercenary companies or poorly trained levies with orders to kill all those who turned, ran or attempted to surrender. The Red Hand weren't above killing civilians, either; if that's what it took to put down a peasant uprising. Mostly recruited from hardened mercenary units, Styphon's Own Guard gave one and all, high and low, respect for the might of Styphon's House—and a healthy dose of fear as well.

Was Soton was using his Knights to put some backbone into the Harphaxi Army? If so, were even more Lances moving toward Harphax City? Or was the Inner Circle, now that it had decided to fight its own war, strengthening the Harphaxi just enough to make them a better grade of cannon fodder? If that could be proved and a word whispered into Great King Kaiphranos' ear by a well-placed and reliable secret agent, if there were such a thing... He'd have to talk with Skranga about whether or not they had such a spy.

One thing was certain; this wasn't something he could decide all by himself. "Chartiphon, send out messengers. We're going to hold a Council of War at Tarr-Hostigos. Count Phrames should be arriving from Beshta sometime tomorrow, so we'll set it for tomorrow night. I want Ptosphes, Klestreus, Xentos, Rylla and Brother Mytron."

"Good news?"

Kalvan shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Styphon's House is up to more of their slippery tricks. Here. Take this message to Prince Ptosphes and have him read it to you."

Chartiphon nodded and left. Like most Zarthani men who were not scribes or priests, he felt no shame at not being able to read, although he was good at recognizing map symbols. Harmakros was the same way. Fortunately, most of the upper nobility and merchants knew how to read and write the Zarthani runes, but Chartiphon had begun his career as a simple trooper and owed his rank to Ptosphes' eye for talent.

Kalvan turned to Trader Ranthar. "I'm afraid you'll have to stay in protective custody for a while. It's not that we don't trust you, it's that I don't trust Styphon's House not to have spies here. If they learn what you've done, the first news I might have for Verkan is that you've been kidnapped and tortured for what you might know about their plans. That would be poor payment to him, and even worse to you."

Ranthar laughed. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I hope you're not allowing the Styphoni more common sense than they've shown thus far."

"I'd rather give them credit for too much, than for too little."

Ranthar nodded, and at Kalvan's gesture of dismissal bowed himself away. He suspected that Ranthar would visit the nearest tavern, probably the Crossed Halberds or Silver Stag, and have a drink or two before surrendering himself to protective custody. After he left, Kalvan directed several of his plainclothes bodyguards to discreetly follow the Trader and make certain he wasn't accosted until he was in custody.

Left alone except for the pages and bodyguards watching him from a discreet distance, Kalvan began to pace up and down. It was now certain that Hostigos was faced with something more like a war on two fronts than a single attack with two prongs. That would throw all their strategic plans into the melting pot, and mean major changes at the last minute. Of course, it would also mean the same for the Harphaxi, and because they were so much less likely to be able to cope with last minute changes to their plans, things might just balance out.

Kalvan decided to stop worrying about troop movements until he had a map in front of him and some reliable advice in his ear. One thing was certain: the University's next job after developing paper was going to be inventing a semaphore system. Relay riders would have to do for this campaign, but he would need something faster if he was going to have to make a habit of coordinating two or three armies spread over two or three hundred miles of real estate. Napoleon's campaign in Russia had fallen apart as much because of lack of staff communications as because of supply problems.

Also, a system of codes—nothing fancy, simple substitution would do—for now. There was no evidence that Styphon's House used ciphers, but it needed to be confirmed. *Note: Have Skranga spend whatever gold necessary to purchase an ear in the Inner Circle*. The Inner Circle was as corrupt as the French Papacy had been during the Babylonian Captivity. There had to be an Archpriest for sale. Skranga's biggest problem so far was getting a spy with the proper credentials, preferably that of a Highpriest of Styphon's House. The upper priesthood of Styphon's House was as status conscious as the Court of Louis the XVI and thus almost as unapproachable. Furthermore, Balph had buttoned up its breeches and was checking credentials at the gates and docks.

Finally, do something about the Temple's command of the sea. Styphon's House hadn't done much with it this time; until now most of the troops moving into Harphax City from the south and from Hos-Agrys

had marched overland, supplied out of the Temple warehouses when they couldn't buy or forage locally. This might be about to change; one of Xentos' friends who had already reached Agrys City had written to him reporting many laden merchant vessels sailing up the Hudson and returning empty. *Put Skranga on that, too.* Was Great King Demistophon planning on joining the war? If so, on whose side?

This war would be decided on land. The next time, Styphon's ships might do a lot more damage and Kalvan had no desire to play the role of the French in some here-and-now future Mahan's *Influence of Seapower on the Wars Against Styphon's House*.

Royal Navy of Hos-Hostigos. Note: put on the list of long-term projects. Now what about ports; they had one on the Great Lakes—Ulthor Port; now they needed one in the Atlantic. This might mean rolling up more of Hos-Harphax than he had planned, but that would have to wait. This coming campaign would be for survival and more time. Time, the one thing Styphon's House seemed determined to deny him.

ELEVEN

The sunset light reddened the walls of First Speaker Anaxthenes' chamber and the smoke curling up from Soton's pipe. The First Speaker's luxurious chamber was perched at the second highest level of Styphon's High Temple. Below them all of Balph stretched as far as the Great Wharf, bathed in a sea of red.

After his inconclusive meeting with Great King Kaiphranos, Soton had left Harphax City at the next high tide. The wine in his cup was already red; he sipped at it and tried to shut out Archpriest Roxthar's voice breathing fire and slaughter against Prince Philesteus. It was not wise to ignore Archpriest Roxthar completely even when he was apparently talking for the sheer pleasure of relieving his feelings or hearing the sound of his own voice.

The tall, dour Archpriest made a dangerous enemy and a quarrel with him would put Soton at the mercy of Anaxthenes, who was a good deal less bloodthirsty but considerably more skilled at taking advantage of another's mistakes. *Great Styphon, what I wouldn't give for a stout Lance of Knights and a band of Sastragathi berserkers to fight instead of all this verbal swordplay!*

Eventually Roxthar went off the boil and bubbled into silence. Anaxthenes refilled everybody's cups and appeared to lose himself in contemplating the sunset. From outside he could hear the muffled sounds of clanking armor and boisterous cries that signaled the changing of the watch in Balph.

When he had his audience squirming in their seats, Anaxthenes began, "What are we to do, then, now that King Kaiphranos appears to have lost what wits he had? Roxthar, we know your advice is to deprive Kaiphranos of his Captain-General by charging Duke Aesthes with heresy. You say that with no other captain fit to command the army of Hos-Harphax against the Daemon Kalvan, Kaiphranos will either have to send Lysandros into the field or turn to Styphon's House for aid. That is wet fireseed! With Aesthes out of the field, Kaiphranos will appoint his elder son, Prince Philesteus, as commander of the Harphaxi Army—and that would be a complete disaster for Hos-Harphax and Styphon's House. As well as a gift to the Usurper! What say you, Grand Master Soton?"

What Soton would have liked to express was his desire to spend half a candle taking his warhammer to

Kaiphranos, Philesteus and Duke Aesthes. However, that course had even more disadvantages than Roxthar's since it could be seen as moving directly against Great Kings or important Princes. Styphon's House had to show itself loyal to those rulers who at least did not lift a hand against it or else mold the bullet for Kalvan to fire into its head—as some of these blockheads appeared ready to do. Unlike Roxthar, Anaxthenes appeared to have some grasp of politics outside of the Temple turkey roost.

"Captain-General Aesthes is the only man—other than his son—King Kaiphranos will allow to lead the Royal Army of Hos-Harphax. And Philesteus would attack Kalvan's Army as if he were an Urgothi berserker and die a vainglorious and sudden death along with most of his army. We have to leave Aesthes to his own fate."

Roxthar looked as if he wanted to spit at those last words.

"I know these Harphaxi are hardly worth their rations and fireseed," Soton continued, "but we can't afford to lose them entirely. If nothing else, they and their followers are fifteen thousand more bodies to spend Kalvan's lead.

"Also, Philesteus is popular with no small number of mercenary captains and certain of the Harphaxi nobility who are leading their own levies." No need to add that many of those nobles were men who had no wish to see Lysandros, the Inner Circle's favorite, on the Iron Throne of Hos-Harphax.

"I should also say that harsh dealing with Aesthes or Philesteus might cost us the good will of men who lead ten thousand soldiers and twenty guns."

"That seems likely enough," Anaxthenes said. "That also doesn't make it any easier for us to march with Aesthes, if the old King ever lets him march."

From Anaxthenes' tone, the First Speaker obviously expected the Harphaxi to sit in their camps until Styphon's Second Miracle.

"Your Eminence, there is no need for us to do likewise," Soton said. "In the field or in their camps, the Harphaxi will draw upon themselves a substantial portion of Kalvan's forces. At Tarr-Thebra, I already have five of the Sacred Squares, the Royal Square of Hos-Ktemnos, three thousand Royal Cavalry, including the Knights of the Royal Bodyguard, eight Lances of Knights and four thousand of the Order's foot. And five thousand mercenaries, with another two thousand on the way, and another Sacred Square and several thousand Holy Warriors are on their march to me. Let me stay where I am, give me sufficient stores and fireseed and I can march north to challenge Kalvan without one word to Philesteus."

"Will the captains of Hos-Ktemnos follow you in this?" Anaxthenes asked.

"They are likely to shoot me if I don't lead them north. Cleitharses has left his best captain-generals in the western marches to guard against the Upper Sastragathi war bands. Some of these eastern Squares haven't fought a battle for two generations. This is their chance for glory and honor and they will let none stand between them and it."

It took some time for Soton to explain what he planned to do with the Host swollen to more than twenty-five thousand men. It would have been easier with a map, of course. Soton reminded himself to make sure that any of Kalvan's mapmakers who were captured were brought straight to him. If the arts by which Kalvan made maps increase like rabbits were not demonic, they would be worth learning.

"If the Harphaxi move at all, Kalvan will have to pit much of his strength against them. He cannot throw it

all to the east because he will not want to leave himself open to an advance through Sask."

"And if the Harphaxi do not march?" Styphon's Own Voice asked.

"Your Divinity, when one fights the nomads, one quickly learns to spy out the land ahead as one marches. Either that or one dies young. I will have a day's warning and more on the approach of any host large enough to destroy mine, if indeed, even the Daemon Kalvan can conjure up such a thing."

Roxthar's face was working. "And if our weakness toward the cowardly Harphaxi defiance of the God of Gods makes them abandon our cause all together?"

"Then there will be civil war in Hos-Harphax, because not all the Harphaxi are cowards and will not sit quietly to be called such!"

Soton knew his face must have turned the color of the sunset and he had to relax before he could trust his voice again. He removed his pipe and tobacco pouch from his belt and filled the bowl. After tamping the leaf and lighting a wooden splinter from his tinderbox, he lit the pipe, made sure the tobacco was drawing and inhaled. He took several puffs before saying, "To guard against this, another Lance is on its way north to join the three already there. That will bring the strength of Styphon's armed servants to over six thousand, including the Temple Guard, and if all else fails they can fight their way to safety."

With an extra Lance, the Knights in the north would be equal in fighting power to the bands of Styphon's Own Guard and Knight Commander Aristocles would thus have an equal voice with the Temple Guard's Captain-General. That was worth giving up a Lance from the southern Host where the Knights of the Ktemnoi Royal Guard could do everything except scout nearly as well as the Order's Knights.

"Is this a real possibility?" Anaxthenes asked.

Soton inhaled deeply, then blew out a small cloud of smoke. "Yes, Your Eminence. This is why I have pressed the Inner Circle so hard to persuade Hos-Agrys to attack Kalvan in Nostor. This would force the Usurper to further divide his troops until our armies would so outnumber the Daemon's forces that even our weakest allies could bring victory home."

Anaxthenes shrugged. "We are having problems convincing Great King Demistophon to join our war, despite lavish gifts of gold and silver for the hiring of two score of mercenary companies. If I judge his strategy correctly, Demistophon wants to wait until both Hos-Harphax and the False Kingdom of Hostigos have squandered their forces fighting each other, then attack the victor and add both kingdoms to Hos-Agrys. Using soldiers that Styphon's gold has purchased, no less!"

"As usual," Soton spat, "a flawed analysis. Does Demistophon expect the Host of Styphon to sit upon its hands while he draws the spoils of war into his large lap?"

The Archpriests laughed. Demistophon had the bloated bulk of three men and the prodigious appetite of twice that number.

"He will see which way the wind blows, then come in when it suits his purpose," Styphon's Voice added. "His father before him would have done likewise. They are branches of the same tree."

Soton felt his blood rise.

"If this Demistophon fails to support our cause," Roxthar said in a harsh tone of voice that was more

impressive than his shouts, "we will turn our wolves of war upon his bloated Kingdom. He will rue the day he took Styphon's gold and failed to give full value. It appears that all the Northern Kingdoms are rife with heresy and overflowing with worshippers of the False God. They must be made to pay for their transgressions—in blood!"

In the hope of stopping Roxthar's inevitable harangue, Soton asked, "Your Eminence, what about the Army of Hos-Zygros? Will they join the fight against the Usurper?"

Anaxthenes all but snarled. "King Sopharar is Kalvan's ally, all but in name only. He dillydallies and bandies words with Archpriest Idyol, but refuses to commit a single soldier to the war against the Usurper. Many Zygrosi still worship the False God and I suspect Sopharar is among their number."

Roxthar looked like a wolf that had just bolted down a tasty morsel.

Soton suppressed a grin of triumph at wresting a secret out of the Inner Circle. It had been clear for two moons that Great King Sopharar of Hos-Zygros would not send any of his own troops. Now it appeared the Zygrosi King was a follower of Dralm and thus an enemy of the God of Gods! There would have to be a reckoning for that, one day—much later than Roxthar would like, of course, but much sooner than the Zygrosi expected.

Soton poured more wine and they drank toasts to Kalvan's downfall, the vengeance of the True God on False Dralm and the proper ruler for Hos-Harphax. And one to victory in the Northern Kingdoms. Soton also drank a silent toast to the Wargod for a place of honor in Galzar's Hall for the Knights he had abandoned to the Harphaxi lackwits.

TWELVE

I

They held the Council of War in the Royal bedchamber.

"You—people—would do anything to keep me walled up," Rylla protested, only half-joking. Even Rylla admitted, however, that her bedroom was the most secure room in Tarr-Hostigos that was also large enough to hold the whole council and the necessary maps. Tarr-Hostigos was no longer crammed to the rafters the way it had been five days ago, when a draft of six hundred new recruits for the pike companies was camping in the courtyard because every other place it was physically possible to quarter them was already full. It was still too crowded to make certain that everybody there was on legitimate business, or that eavesdroppers could always be kept at a safe distance from important meetings.

Kalvan hoped this informal council wouldn't have to do more than act as a meeting of the minds among the "inner circle" of the Hostigi high command. There were going to be a good many captains among the forces of Hostigos who would take umbrage at not being able to put in their half-crown's worth at a more formal council, especially among the nobility—something Kalvan was still getting used to. Nobles here-and-now had a lot of prerogatives and they guarded them as jealously as Styphon's House upperpriests protected their collection boxes. Some of them might even think of taking their troops out of the campaign.

Hoping was the best Kalvan could do. It seemed far more likely that this was as much a council of war

as this campaign would have. They were no longer preparing for the invasion of Hos-Harphax; now it was a war on two fronts against two different armies of conquest. The army would have to be on the march before all the princes and captains could be gathered in one place. Napoleon had said, "Ask me for anything but time," and time was running out.

Correction: The *armies* would have to be on the march fairly soon. It was obvious even to Chartiphon, when they studied the map, the Hostigi army was going to have to be divided into two forces. The odds were that for most of the campaign the army moving against Harphax would be out of supporting distance and even out of easy communication with the army facing the Ktemnoi and Zarthani Knights. Had it been possible, Kalvan would have preferred fighting them on their turf, not his. But he couldn't afford to extend his forces too far into hostile territory. If either of his armies suffered a setback, he needed the other army as close as possible. This also meant it was unlikely that he'd be able to deliver Hos-Harphax the knockout blow he'd intended.

Kalvan called for suggestions for names of the armies.

The one he would be leading personally against Harphax wound up the Army of the Harph: the one Ptosphes and Chartiphon would lead in the west was christened the Army of the Besh. Once they knew what to call the two armies, they got down to the more serious business of what troops should be assigned to each one.

"We can't do too much shuffling," Kalvan emphasized. "Moving infantry exhausts them and takes time. Moving cavalry around takes less time, but it wears out horses and uses up forage. As for moving artillery, forget it. Also, we don't want to take anyone away from Harmakros' Army of Observation. They all know the territory they'll be fighting over like their father's backyards by now. Out west they'll be much less useful."

"That is true, only up to a point, Your Majesty," Chartiphon said.

Kalvan suppressed a sigh. Chartiphon only became formal when he was going to be stubborn and when he was stubborn he made mules look docile. "Harmakros also has the best-trained scouts in all the strength of Hostigos and the Army of the Besh will need every one of those to be sure of even *finding* our enemies. Remember what Klestreus has said about how good the Knights are at concealing their movements."

Kalvan couldn't recall when or even whether or not Klestreus had said that, but it certainly agreed with everything he'd heard or guessed about the Knights. Ptosphes was nodding, obviously in agreement with his Captain-General and old friend; Klestreus was as close to looking embarrassed as he ever seen him. Obviously, he wasn't accustomed to being dragged into this kind of high-level argument over strategy, which wasn't really his fault; of course, here-and-now warfare had been much simpler when he was learning it.

Count Phrames, travel-stained and weary from his three-day ride over the rough trails that constituted roads in their portion of what had once been Hos-Harphax, bent over the map. He was looking at the squares of red parchment centered around Thebra City, the here-and-now equivalent of Fredericksburg, Virginia and the northernmost major fortress of Hos-Ktemnos.

"If I were Soton, I really wouldn't be considering any other way north except the Pirsytros Valley." He drew a finger from Thebra City to the here-and-now Shenandoah Valley, then north up through the valley where it ended in the Princedom of Beshta. "The Valley has good roads—not washed out and pitted by forty years of neglect under King Kaiphranos, good forage, plenty of water and mountains on either side

to guard the flanks of the army." This passage had long been a major merchant trading route between Hos-Ktemnos and Hos-Harphax and even the most miserly of princes, such as Balthar, had realized the value of safe and passable highways.

"We're not planning to move south and attack them on the march," Ptosphes said dubiously. "Why should they worry about their flanks?"

"They don't know what our plans are," Kalvan said. "But Soton does know that *wecould* do it. Which means that if he's half the general he's supposed to be, he'll be taking precautions against it."

"If Soton is in command," Chartiphon added.

Klestreus grinned with what looked remarkably like triumph. "I won't say that everybody in the Army of Hos-Ktemnos will be jumping when Soton says 'frog.' I do say that everybody will be listening to him, and not doing anything he doesn't like without a very damned good reason for it. The Lord High Marshal, Duke Mnephilos and Princes Anaxon and Anaphon all know and trust Soton and are interested in maintaining the military reputation of the Golden Throne of Hos-Ktemnos. The only chief captain I've heard of who might balk is Prince Leonnestros of the Princedom of Lantos who wants a military reputation of his own so he can succeed Mnephilos as Lord High Marshal.

"Even he won't defy Soton openly. He will be outwardly obedient, then try to claim his share of the glory afterward by spreading rumors about how he advised Soton. If anything goes wrong, he'll claim he saw it coming but didn't want to go against the Grand Master."

Not for the first time, Kalvan thought that Niccolo Machiavelli would have felt right at home here-and-now.

"Besides, the Pirsytros Valley makes sense even to someone less battle savvy than Soton," put in Rylla. "If the Ktemnoi move much farther east, they might have to fight with their backs to the Harph or even with half their army on one side and half on the other. Also, they'll be close enough to our Army of the Harph so that if the Harphaxi don't move, Kalvan will be able to turn west faster than we planned and strike at the Ktemnoi. Skranga's agents in Ktemnos City have informed us that Kaiphranos is reluctant to let the Harphaxi Army go on the offensive, despite urgings from Styphon's House and his older son; however, if we move the entire Army south to attack Soton, that dynamic will change and Kaiphranos will be forced to attack."

"Or face a palace revolution," Kalvan said, with a grin.

"On the other hand," Rylla continued, "if the Ktemnoi Army moves any further west, they'll be in the Trygath. They'll never be able to move artillery and wagon trains on its trails. I like to think our enemies are big enough fools to try, but I don't think Dralm has addled their wits that badly.

"No, father, you can wait for them around here—" She tapped the map west of South Mountain near Gettysburg—"and be fairly sure they'll come close enough to be found easily. You'll need the dragoons and as much cavalry as we can spare since that's in hostile Syriphlon. You'll be able to forage to the south, but it's also only four days' march from our supply depots in Sashta. You can leave the country behind you intact so that if you do find some reason to retreat in a hurry, you can just go back the way you came. In fact, you even can—"

Ptosphes burst out laughing, then looked up at the ceiling rafters in mock anguish. "Dralm, Yirtta, Appalon, Galzar—you told me to raise my daughter as a warrior and look what comes of it, she flouts

her father at his own Council!"

Rylla giggled and Ptosphes laughed again more gently. "I sometimes wish I hadn't had to raise you by myself, little one. You didn't have much of a girlhood."

Rylla shrugged inside her tent-like chamber robe. "Hostigos was only a poor Princedom then, Father. A girlhood for me was something we couldn't afford. Now that I'm a woman, I have everything anyone could ask for." She threw Kalvan a look that would have made him blush if it had been anybody except old friends present.

Joking aside, even those who wanted to couldn't find a flaw in Phrames and Rylla's logic. Since Ptosphes had his case for a cavalry-heavy army, that made the job of dividing the Hostigi forces a few minutes work with soap stone tablets and pine board note pads. Parchment, never plentiful, was guarded like gold ever since Kalvan's arrival.

The Army of the Harph would have most have of the Royal Army's "regulars," Prince Armanes commanding both his own Nyklosi Army and contingents from Kyblos and Ulthor—and an impressive quantity of mercenaries, some eight or nine thousand, many recently arrived from Rathon and the Trygath as well as the Upper Middle Kingdoms. Word of the war against Styphon's House was household news everywhere east of the Great River.

Kalvan would command the Army of the Harph in person with Harmakros, Phrames, Armanes and Hestophes as his subordinates.

The Army of the Besh would have an even more impressive quantity of mercenaries, half of the Army of Old Hostigos, the princely armies of Nostor, Beshta, Sashta and Sask. Ptosphes would be commander-in-chief, with Captain-General Chartiphon, Prince Pheblon and what everybody hoped would be more help than hindrance from Balthar of Beshta and Sarrask of Sask.

Each army would have a reinforced company of Mounted Rifles and a few hundred of Harmakros' almost-tame Sastragathi. The grand total Kingdom strength would be somewhere around twenty-six thousand men for Kalvan and twenty-four thousand five hundred for Ptosphes. Kalvan would have about one-third cavalry; Ptosphes close to half, since he had the most traveling to do, but not as good and each would have roughly half of the sixty-odd field guns, some of them more antiquated and unusual than Kalvan cared to depend on, but Great Kings with their backs to the wall can't be choosy.

Since this arrangement meant an absolute minimum of troop-reshuffling, both Armies could be on the march within ten days, their advance guards even sooner—with a little help from Galzar and a little more from Lytris, the hawk-faced Weather Goddess. The two Army commanders would probably find it prudent to hold their own councils of war before they moved, but even these shouldn't take too much time. The strategy of the campaign was being kept as simple as possible—partly because nothing complicated was necessary, partly because Kalvan didn't entirely trust Ptosphes and Chartiphon to get grand strategy right the first time they attempted it.

The Army of the Harph would move southeast by whatever route offered the easiest going for the heavy equipment that also let it rest its right flank on the Harph itself for protection and fresh water. It would advance straight at Harphax City until the Harphaxi Army marched out to be fought and smashed. Not just defeated, but smashed, routed, driven back to the walls of the City and made useless for the rest of this year and maybe the next.

Meanwhile Ptosphes would wait by South Mountain keeping track of the whereabouts of the Styphoni,

discouraging their scouts and foragers as vigorously as possible, destroying any unsupported detachments he could find, but above all keeping his army intact, united and between the Styphoni and the heartland of Hos-Hostigos.

"Are we supposed never to face up to them in battle?" Chartiphon growled.

Kalvan would have like to say "No, not until I come to join you," but to say that would be such an insult to both Ptosphes and Chartiphon, not to mention their Princely lieutenants, that he'd have real trouble getting their cooperation. If only this war could have been postponed until he'd finished training his subordinates. Political quarrels in the enemies' camp had given him a few badly needed weeks, but he needed *years* .

"Not unless you are sure of winning, or at least of not losing too many men," Kalvan said. "Remember you are defeating them every day your army is there in front of them, ready to block their advance or strike them in the rear if they turn again me. The Harphaxi are the easy ones to reach, push into a fight and knock right out of the war. The Ktemnoi have plenty of room to maneuver, they're not defending home territory and they can be reinforced as long as Great King Cleitharses can hold Styphon's House up to ransom in return for more help in the holy war."

Once the Harphaxi forces were smashed, Kalvan would take the Army of the Harph across the river, establish communications with Ptosphes and coordinate an attack on the Styphoni from both front and rear, with at least a two to three advantage in numbers to the Hostigi. The Ktemnoi should be badly mauled, and King Cleitharses taught an expensive lesson about the cost of making war on behalf of Styphon's House. The invaders might even be destroyed outright—

"—and if that is the case, we may even have peace as a naming gift for my daughter's child," Ptosphes said, nodding slowly in approval as he lit his pipe. "Hos-Bletha has always been a moon late and a crown short in fights outside their borders. Hos-Ktemnos and Hos-Harphax will have precious little left to fight with. Hos-Agrys will be more concerned with guarding its back against the Zygrozi and scooping up loot from the ruins of Hos-Harphax. We could really have peace with everybody except Styphon's House itself. And Dralm knows that would be no bad thing."

"Amen," Kalvan said, as heartily as his father had ever ended a prayer. "Now, the only thing left to discuss is how to provision two armies instead of one."

Logistics had been the bane of most pike and shot armies back otherwhen, and things were obviously no easier here-and-now. As Napoleon once said, "An army marches on its stomach." Armies of more than twenty thousand men had large stomachs indeed.

Standard fare for each soldier was about two pounds of bread or grain a day, supplemented by about a pound of meat, beans or some other protein-rich food. For a force of some twenty-five thousand this meant thirty-seven and a half tons of foodstuff a day, not including boiled water and a ration of beer or wine.

Nor did this include hay and grain for the horses who ate eight to ten times as much as a man. Each army had about ten thousand cavalry and artillery horses, including remounts, and more than eighteen thousand horses and oxen to pull its three thousand or so carts and wagons. Even if each man carried four day's rations on his back or mount, Kalvan's most optimistic estimate only gave the armies twelve to fourteen days' supplies. They were going to have to find a way to supplement those rations without making bitter foes out of their present enemies and future neighbors.

At least they would be an army on the move; a large stationary army in a pre-industrial society had a choice between dying of starvation or dying of disease. Kalvan remembered the case of Louis XIV and his armed party of three thousand, who'd had to delay their departure from Luxembourg for two weeks because the main French Army had exhausted all food and forage along their intended route.

Here-and-now armies supplied themselves by the time-honored method of stealing everything that wasn't nailed down and by looting the local peasantry's barns, pens and pantries. This was cost effective, but otherwise undesirable, since it turned soldiers into bandits and caused public relations problems that had more than once led to the independent discovery of guerilla warfare. Probably the most successful pre-Napoleonic system of logistics had been Albrecht von Wallenstein's program of "contributions." This *program* was a polite way of extorting money from enemy civilians to pay for an army's supplies with a promise of eventual restitution, but only if the attacking army won! A consideration which gave enemy non-combatants really mixed emotions about the course of the war and their undermined morale.

"Brother Mytron, I want you to take your artisans off the paper project and have them make wood chips about the size of a Hostigos Crown."

Everyone looked at Kalvan curiously, waiting for him to pull another rabbit out of his hat. One of these days he was going to reach into that hat and dismay everybody, including himself, by finding it empty. But thank Dralm, it hadn't happened yet.

"We will use these wooden 'crowns' to represent real gold Crowns."

Chartiphon looked scandalized and Ptosphes' lower jaw dropped to where it was about to scrape the floor. Kalvan had just introduced a form of paper money into a world where it had been hard currency or barter. The closest they'd come to soft currency had been letters of credit, mostly to Styphon's Great Banking House which had branches in the major towns and cities. He had a feeling that his great-grandchildren were going to hate him for this.

"Chartiphon, I want you to set up a quartermaster battalion for the Army of the Beshta. Phrames, you do the same for the Army of the Harph. I want both battalions to have plenty of wooden crowns. Upon entering enemy territory, the quartermasters will be responsible for circulating letters to every town, village and hamlet under our control. These letters will ask the council leader or headman for a monetary contribution for the Royal Army of Hostigos."

Chartiphon looked appalled. "Were I to hear of a man bringing such a letter into Hostigos, I would have him hanged. And set the rope myself."

More harshly than he intended, Kalvan snapped, "Would you rather have your soldiers running wild all over the countryside, robbing and looting isolated farms for their own benefit?"

Chartiphon looked sheepish. "No. It's—just hard for me to see how *anyman* could take such a letter seriously."

Kalvan's smile was so grim that even Rylla stared. "You're wrong, Chartiphon. The letters will threaten death by hanging to anyone who doesn't comply. We will send out squads of cavalry to gather the contributions. At any village or town that refuses to obey, the leading men of the town will be executed, their houses looted, then burned. I expect it will only take three or four such examples before our letters are taken very seriously—indeed."

Rylla was looking at him as though he'd just turned into one of Styphon's devils.

Hestophes was the first to smile. "I think it will work."

"So do I," Harmakros said. "At least it will work if we can keep thieves from making false tokens and passing them off as the real ones."

"We'll use a machine to cut a pattern in each token, one so complicated that it will take a counterfeiter too long to copy it to be worth his while," Kalvan said. "We'll also keep records of how many tokens went to each place. If they turn in two or three times that number after the war—well, the hangman will have some more business. Also, the next time we have to do this we can have the tokens made out of iron."

The rest of the military men were now nodding in agreement. Mytron refused to meet Kalvan's eyes. He mentally crossed his fingers that he would come around in time. Then concluded, "We'll give them the tokens in return for gold, silver, jewelry and food. They can redeem them after the war for gold Crowns, courtesy of Styphon's House. We'll use the money we collect to buy supplies from local merchants and farmers. With the magazines we've already established in Sask and Beshta, we should have enough supplies to let us engage both hostile armies. Now all we have to do is win the war!"

II

Rylla didn't look up from her loom as Kalvan entered the whitewashed room. It was the first time he'd even seen her at a loom so she must have just started and needed to concentrate on her work.

She'd also put on old clothes for her weaving. In fact, her gray dress was almost a rag, with rents here and there showing the bare skin underneath. It was dirty, too. That bothered him. Rylla took great pains to keep herself and her garments clean. The dress was cut off just below the knees.

And there was an iron ring around one ankle that was attached to a chain ending in another ring set in the wall—a ring that looked heavy enough to restrain a full-grown bull. Above the ring hung a tapestry showing Styphon hurling balls of fire down on a writhing armor-clad figure surrounded by cringing, flaming demons.

He gasped, and Rylla turned, showing a lip freshly cut, a burn on her chin, a left eye blackened and swollen almost shut. He realized the skin underneath the iron ring was raw and—

"Nooooo!" Half gasp, half shout, Kalvan's cry woke himself up. He had just enough self-control not to cry out again once he realized he was awake. He was sweating as if he'd just stepped out of a Turkish bath, and for a long moment he was afraid he was going to lose his dinner.

He didn't—not quite. Instead he forced himself to lie still and breath evenly while he tried to drive the latest nightmare out of his mind. Seeing Rylla dead in battle or during childbirth was bad enough. Seeing Rylla a brutally mistreated slave in Balph was indescribable.

After a while he realized he wasn't going to get back to sleep. If he stayed tossing and turning half the night—well, the nightmare might be indescribable, but if Rylla woke up and saw him, he was going to

have to describe it. Either that or pretend nothing was wrong, and he knew that his chances of getting away with that were about the same as his chances of storming Harphax City single-handed.

It wouldn't help Rylla either to know what was on his mind, or know she was being lied to. For the first time since she was a girl, she was afraid for herself, not for her father or her soldiers or Hostigos or for her husband, but for herself and the baby she carried. Out of that fierce pride Kalvan knew almost too well, she was trying to hide her fears. But sometimes when she thought no one was looking she dropped her guard.

He knew nothing short of canceling the war, so he could be home when the baby was born, would really help Rylla. But he could at least make sure she could wrestle with her own demons without having to worry about *this* as well.

He swung his feet out of the bed, listened to her breathing again, then tiptoed to his wardrobe, pulling on the first clothes that came to hand. He would probably look like a scarecrow, but this wouldn't be the first time he'd spent a sleepless night prowling Tarr-Hostigos. It was beginning to be said that this was another ritual by which he communicated with the gods. There were some that claimed he was Dralm's half-human son, a demigod they should worship. He tried his best to curb these rumors, being well aware of how the Persian concept of the god-king had perverted Alexander the Great and taken him away from Greek tradition and Aristotle's teachings.

Kalvan, unlike Alexander, was not at all comfortable with being deified; it would not only be corrupting for him and his dynasty, but bad for his subjects as well. Verkan had told him about King Theovacar, a despot whose unbridled ambition was to be absolute ruler of the Grefftscharr and the Upper Middle Kingdoms. He suspected Theovacar would find the idea of god-hood greatly to his liking.

It was a bright moonlit night and Kalvan was recognized the moment he stepped outside the keep. Since he wore both his sword and a short-barreled artilleryman's pistol thrust into his belt, the guards made less fuss than usual about letting him wander out on his own. He knew there would always be half a dozen pairs of eyes watching him, but as long as they kept their distance and the mouths attached to those eyes stayed closed everyone would be as happy as could be expected under the circumstances.

He checked the priming and load in the pistol, then started walking. The night breeze blew past him, drying the sweat on his skin and bringing the familiar smells of Tarr-Hostigos: mold, stone, stables, close-packed and seldom-bathed humanity, and the ghosts of burnt grease and roast meat. From beyond the walls of the castle, the wind brought the smell of smoke from the nearest campfires, as well as the sound of singing. He stopped to listen and made out a new version of an old song.

*"Hurrah! Hurrah! We'll burn the bastards out!
Hurrah! Hurrah! We'll put them all to rout!
We'll steal their pigs and cattle, and we'll dump their sauerkraut,
As we go marching through Harphax!"*

Campfires dotted the slopes of the Bald Eagles on either side of the gap down to Hostigos Town. Around the town itself lights glowed from the doors and windows of the new barracks and from establishments catering to the less authorized needs of the royal soldiers. Far beyond the town, the brightest glow of all told Kalvan that the Royal Foundry was hard at work. No more artillery for now,

but there were fifty other kinds of metal work that any army needed, and never enough of any of them.

Brass was still unavailable at any price, but iron was pouring in from Kyblos. The highly valued Arklos plate was under the Ban of Styphon, but Pennsylvania had always been iron rich, and someone in Hos-Hostigos would soon be making comparable armor. *Note: design a working blast furnace and send a model to Prince Tythanes.*

For a good blast furnace they'd also need to build a working steam engine to drive the air pumps necessary to produce the 'blast' of air. And a better source of heat than wood. *Coal mine: start as soon as war ends.* Coal was threaded throughout the Appalachian Mountains; they even knew about it here-and-now, although it was primarily used as a medicine.

Many of the campsites were on wooded land, since he discouraged pitching tents in the fields of working farms. Every acre sown and harvested was another small victory after the Winter of the Wolves, and the farmers defended their crops as fiercely as their wives and daughters. Kalvan made a mental note to draw up fire safety regulations to prevent forest fires, then remembered there had been plenty of rain the past month; no danger of setting the woods on fire for a while.

He also remembered that some of those campfires were on land that had been wooded until war, the Winter of the Wolves, barracks building and the foundries all made their claims on the trees. The farmers would be getting a lot of newly cleared land if this went on; he and Ptosphes would have to set up some regular method of awarding claims to avoid bloodshed and even feuds. He would also have to do something to make sure the new land didn't erode with its topsoil cover gone and in the long run he'd have to encourage using less wood for heating. Heating and fuel, another reason for mining coal. Maybe he could even tinker up a steam engine for the paper mill?

Maybe, if he not only won, but survived the war. There was also nothing he could do to be sure of that—or at least nothing he hadn't done already—except see about getting as much sleep as he could without the nightmares. Not that there was much that he could do about his dreams. He would just have to depend upon time or luck for that and hope he got it. A Great King who was so tired he could barely sit in his saddle was not doing his job in war or peace.

Kalvan was making his fourth circuit of the walls of Tarr-Hostigos when he happened to look down into the courtyard. The two men whose movement drew his eyes were in the shadow of the wall for about twenty paces, but something in the way they walked...

Then they came out into the moonlight and Kalvan laughed softly. Down below were Ptosphes and Phrames, neither of them talking to the other. Phrames looked like a man suffering from acute indigestion; Ptosphes looked more like a man facing hanging at sunrise.

It was some consolation to know that he was not the only leader of the Hostigi spending a sleepless night.

It was also some consolation to remember that while he, Phrames and Ptosphes were all spending sleepless nights, they had more respectable reasons for doing so than Prince Balthames of Beshta. He was rumored to be pacing his castle's halls over the fact that Princess Amnita might be pregnant with a child who couldn't possibly be his. That would be enough to irritate even a Prince like Balthames whose moral fiber had the consistency of wet Kleenex.

Have Klestreus send agents into Beshta to find out if there is any truth to these rumors. Once in his cups, Sarrask of Sask had complained that his daughter, besides being willful and moody, would on

occasion falsely report being pregnant to punish him when he refused to accede to one of her demands. Another reason, besides the obvious dynastic one, why Sarrask had been willing to marry Amnita off to a sodomite like Balthames.

Definitely a consolation only to have only minor matters like life and death to worry about. In fact, it was enough of a consolation that by the time Kalvan had completed his fifth circuit of Tarr-Hostigos, his eyelids and feet were becoming remarkably heavy. By the time he'd finished the sixth, he felt as if he needed to prop his eyes open with his fingers and lift his feet with a block and tackle.

He didn't even contemplate making a seventh circuit. Instead he stumbled up the stairs of the keep, then into the bedchamber. He was just awake enough by the time he reached the bed to notice that Rylla was still asleep, and remember not to undo his night's work by falling into bed with all his clothes on.

Then Kalvan collapsed peacefully, and only woke up well after dawn to the sound of Rylla's singing. He listened for a moment, so happy to find her in good spirits he could even ignore the fact that she couldn't carry a tune in a saddlebag. He sat up and stretched.

"Welcome back from the dead, Your Majesty," she said.

"Thank you. I hope our child doesn't have much of an ear for music."

"Why?"

"Because if he does, and you sing him a lullaby, he's going to wind up absolutely *hating* his mother."

"You—!" She got as far as throwing the nearest pillow at him before she broke into laughter.

THIRTEEN

Baltov Eldra rose from behind her desk as Danar Sirna entered her office.

"Welcome back," the professor said. "How was Greffa?"

"I'd expected more impressive ruins; after all, when the Iron Route was open, Ult-Greffa, or Old Greffa, had a population of half a million. Now it has about half that many. I suppose the Grefftscharrers were thrifty and used the abandoned temples and merchants' palaces for building stone. As far as the 'new' Greffa is concerned, it looks like any other Great Kingdom capital."

"Exactly. Would you like a drink? Don't be ashamed to ask for something civilized, either."

Sirna blushed, remembering the Eldra's lecture the day she'd let a remark slip about "her last chance for a civilized drink for quite a while." That sort of remark, Eldra had said eloquently and at some length, could put her or indeed the whole University Study Team in danger. At best it could force the Paratime Police to kill, or at least alter the memories of some innocent outtimer.

"It will be even worse on Kalvan's Time-Line," she concluded. "There a remark like that could reach Kalvan's own ears. He already knows too damn much about the Paratime Secret for everybody's comfort. If he's given a clue that Paratemporal travelers are in Hostigos watching him—well, it will be an open-and-shut case for making him dead.

"Colonel—I mean Chief Verkan will do his duty, but he won't thank the people who made it necessary. The University Team will be shut down regardless of what happens after Kalvan's death, and as for the person responsible—if she ever goes outtime again, it will be over a lot of people's dead bodies. Mine included. Remember that," she added with a jab of her pipe stem that made Sirna feel a pistol was being pointed at her.

"Ale, thank you," Sirna said, bringing her mind back to the present.

"Ahh, a proper lady's drink," Eldra said as she punched in the order on her desk keyboard. "However, if you want to be sure of being taken for a proper lady, I'd suggest leaving that gown behind."

"Oh. Is it dressing—above my station?"

"Not really. It's just too revealing, particularly with your height and figure. It doesn't quite suggest the degree of propriety I think you want to maintain, unless you can persuade one of the Team to play a legitimate male protector role."

"I thought Zarthani laws and customs didn't absolutely require that I have one."

"The laws and customs don't. The University does, for the time being. Kalvan's Time-Line is in the middle of a war, and there are lots of rough types running around who might try to get away with more than they normally would with an unprotected woman. Also, there are bound to be ordinarily quite decent men who believe that tomorrow they may die: 'so why not have a little fun tonight?' We don't want to have to kill too many of either kind. It offends comrades and kin and generally attracts the sort of notice we'd rather avoid."

"Suppose I dealt with the man myself?"

"You could; as a free trader's daughter, they'd expect you to be handy with firearms. I don't recommend it. You're not a noble woman, and even if you didn't start a feud you could end up on the wrong end of a wrongful-death suit. We don't want the Study Team dragged into court, either, if we can avoid it."

"So I should keep my head bowed, my mouth shut, my neckline high and my skirts low?"

"Until you have a feel of the time-line, that's the safest course. Once the war is over Hostigos may be a better place for women than the rest of Kalvan's Time-Line, but that won't be for at least another year."

"Is that from Rylla's example?"

Eldra nodded.

"How could have Ptosphes have raised her any other way, if she was going to be heiress of Hostigos?"

"Very easily, my dear. Or do you still have a touching faith in male decency at your age?"

The tone was light but Sirna detected bitterness and disappointment underlying it. She remembered the stock University phrase for Professor Baltov's four noisy companionate marriages: "the victory of optimism over experience."

"No, I suppose another Ptosphes could have re-married and had more children, or even adopted a male

heir and then married Rylla off to him as soon as she was of age."

"Yes. One we know of on another time-line did just that—Styphon take him! Rylla was about fourteen and the adopted heir combined the worst features of the late Gormoth of Nostor and Balthar of Beshta. *Our* Rylla was allowed to do what she wanted, and landed herself a first-class husband on top of it. Oh well, if we start moaning about how unequally the luck of the universe is divided up, we'll never get anything done."

A robot rolled in with Sirna's ale and winter wine for the Professor, and the conversation took a backseat for a moment. While they drank, Sirna picked out a list of equipment she'd selected from the terminal's surprisingly well-stocked storerooms. She'd known that the Fifth Level Kalvan Project terminal had been expanding as the project grew, but she hadn't expected storerooms that looked big enough to supply all the needs of a small belt. She deleted the questionable gown, replaced it with another she knew had a neckline up somewhere around her chin, then skimmed the rest of the list and handed it back to Eldra.

The History Professor's eyebrows rose. "That's a pretty big medkit you're taking, isn't it?"

"Yes, I was surprised to find some of the things in stock."

"We've been unloading new shipments every couple of days while you were in Grefftscharr. Things are about to get very lively in Kalvan's Time-Line and we don't want to have to spend time sending requisitions all the way back to First Level where the clerks can lose them. The Kalvan Project has a Grade Two priority, but you know how much that means. Our request for a hundred needler chargers will still be kicked down below some bureaucrat's request for a new rug."

Sirna knew that; she also knew that the stockpile of equipment here on Fifth Level would be out of sight of the Executive Council, newsies or the people who were waiting for her reports. They would not be out of reach of the University people—or the Paratime Police, starting with Verkan Vall.

To turn the conversation away from this potentially dangerous territory, Sirna shifted into Zarthani and told the story of how her father, the Free Trader Sharthar of Greffa, had been gifted by the gods with some skill as a healer, had learned healing arts wherever he went and practiced them when trade was poor and finally taught much of what he knew to his daughter before he died.

Eldra was smiling by the time Sirna finished. "I'm impressed. You have the Grefftscharri accent better than any of us except Verkan Vall."

"Thank you. I practiced it a lot while visiting Ult-Greffa, the start of the old Iron Trail, and the other Grefftscharrer princedoms. Grefftscharr is larger than any of the Northern Great Kingdoms, yet Theovacar is only considered a king."

Eldra smiled. "And not very happy about it. Four power blocs dominate Grefftscharrer politics: the king, the Greffan nobility, the Grefftscharrer Princes and the merchant magnates. No one of the four is strong enough to enforce its will on the other three, and as a result Grefftscharrer politics has been shaped by constantly shifting alliances among the power blocs. This is typical of most of the Upper Middle Kingdoms' princedoms and city-states, like Volthus, Morthron, Ragnor, Karphya or the Nythros City States. It hasn't helped Theovacar that the Grefftscharri kingship has been diluted by three weak kings in the last century. He's bucking the tide and not very popular at the moment, which has helped Verkan in his role of Trader Verkan since he represents a powerful new ally for the king to court. Of course, little is predictable about Theovacar; paranoia is common in the royal Greffan line and he appears to have

inherited more than his share. He could use a ten-day with the Bureau of Psych-Hygiene!"

They both laughed.

Sirna winced when Eldra took out her pipe; she was allergic to tobacco smoke, which reminded her to take an anti-allergy implant before she left for Kalvan's Time-Line, where everybody but the household cat smoked. "I was surprised at how large Grefftscharr really is."

"Yes, it's the dominant kingdom of the Upper Middle Kingdoms. The early Zarthani and Urgothi—most of the Middle Kingdoms were settled by the Second Wave Urgothi migration—followed the navigable waterways and settled along them. Around the Great Lakes, as they're called on Kalvan's home time-line, are a number of rivers and large tributaries, which attracted settlers like a lodestone. They stopped at the eastern border of what is now Glarth in Hos-Agrys. At its peak half a millennium ago, Grefftscharr ruled over most of the Upper Middle Kingdoms with a heavy hand. Some of the Princedoms, like Thagnor, are now Grefftscharri possessions in name only. Theovacar has his work cut out for him if he truly intends to re-create the Glory that was Greffa at the height of the iron trade."

Eldra paused to light her pipe, which was self-igniting.

She would have to leave her pipe on Fifth Level when she went outtime, thought Sirna, and exchange it for a tinderbox and a corncob pipe.

"Next to Hos-Hostigos," Eldra continued, "Greffa is the most exciting Study Team post on Kalvan's Time-Line."

"How about Balph, Styphon's House's Holy City?" Sirna asked.

"It's both more dangerous and boring—who wants to listen to a bunch of priests chatter about a religion *they* don't believe in? Plus, there are too many cabals; Kalvan's really stirred up a hornet's nest. We only have a small observation group stationed there. The odds are, as soon as he deals with Hos-Harphax, Kalvan will clean out the entire clutch."

"I hope so," Sirna added. "Is there anything in the kit I should have left out, or anything missing I could have safely put in? I was thinking of antiseptics—"

Eldra shook her head. "Kalvan doesn't have much faith in the local midwives and was drumming antiseptics into Brother Mytron's ear five minutes after he learned Rylla was pregnant. That we know. The knowledge hasn't spread generally, yet. That there's no distilling to produce high-proof ethanol in most of Aryan-Transpacific doesn't help either, although their winter wine would make a pretty good antiseptic if anyone there understood the germ theory of disease.

"Also, we have to reckon with the possibility of Styphon's House declaring any of Kalvan's non-military innovations to be of demonic origin. They won't dare outlaw his fireseed formula because they'd lose too many allies, but something that doesn't kill people—"

"That doesn't make any sense!"

"It makes sense to the people of Kalvan's Time-Line, and their opinion is the one that will matter once you're out there among them. Remember that, and face the fact that one day you may have to let an outtimer you've come to care about die of blood poisoning because you can't use outlawed or contaminated medical knowledge to save him. You'll find such an outtimer, too. Maybe not on Kalvan's

Time-Line, but much sooner than you expect."

Sirna wanted to express grave doubts that she would ever care for someone so barbaric as to fight and die for a religion, but something in Eldra's face and voice stopped her. There was a story there that even the most scurrilous University gossip had never hinted at but which had obviously left something sunk very deep in the professor.

"I'll remember," Sirna said and covered her uneasiness with another drink.

Eldra sat looking into space or maybe into the past for a moment, then keyed the big visiscreen on the wall behind her desk to life. A map of the current theatre of action in Kalvan's Time-line sprang into sight.

"As you can see, things are building up rather quickly to as nice a pair of pitched battles as you ever want to be a long way from. Ptosphes has moved down into what Kalvan would call Chambersburg, Pennsylvania—Tenabra in Kalvan's Time-Line. The vanguard of the Knights and the Ktemnoi is up to Tarr-Corria—Hagerstown, Maryland. Ptosphes may be about to decide to give battle, because as far as he can see the enemy only has about seventeen thousand men assembled at Tarr-Corria. He knows the rest have to be catching up sooner or later but he doesn't think they've done so."

"Do we know differently?"

"We suspect Soton either knows something we don't or is just confident that he can fight and win against three-to-two odds. We don't have anybody on the ground with Soton, and we've done all the air reconnaissance we can do without giving any portents. We don't want that, not when we don't know to whom we'll be giving them!"

Sirna looked up at the map again. "Wasn't there a battle in the American Civil War on the Europo-American Subsector fought near Tarr-Corria?"

"Yes. Antietam—I think. That was the Northern victory that ended the War and made General McClellan President after Lincoln. No, wait a minute—that was another Europo-American Subsector, not Kalvan's. Have you been studying up on his home time-line?"

Sirna nodded. "Mostly American history, but some European, too. Genghis Khan is fascinating in a horrid sort of way. Hitler is just plain horrid."

"Wait until you've talked to a few people who've been out on timelines where the Third Reich won." Eldra made a face and took a long pull at her drink. "Some of them make Aryan Transpacific, Styphon's House Subsector look pleasant."

"So Kalvan and the Army of Hos-Harphax will probably be going at it within the next few days?" Sirna asked.

"It looks that way. Kalvan's Mobile Force has moved down to within three days' march of Harphax City itself without meeting any serious opposition."

"Does he plan to besiege Harphax City?"

"I don't think so. According Aranth Saln, our Study Team military expert, it appears that Kalvan is baiting a trap with the Mobile Force—using the smaller force *totaunt* the Harphaxi to come to battle. He's slowed his advance now to give Prince Philesteus and Duke Aesthes a chance to come out of their

tarrs and meet Kalvan on the battlefield. Either that or face a prolonged siege that the Harphaxi are ill prepared to suffer, since they have less than two weeks provisions—if that!—in their storehouses in Harphax City and Tarr-Harphax.

"Aesthes isn't much of a general, according to Records. They show he's only fought in four minor campaigns, usually princely rebellions or peasant uprisings, and in each engagement he dragged his heels; usually, the Harphaxi won because they had the bigger army and more supplies. There hasn't been a war this big in Hos-Harphax in over a century. Aesthes' tactics—if you can call them that—are not going to work against a large, very mobile army like Kalvan's Army of the Harph.

"Saln's theory is that, beside being a family friend, King Kaiphranos appointed Duke Aesthes to head the Harphaxi Army as a counterpoint to young—that's only relative to Aesthes advanced age, since the Prince is some thirty-six winters old as the Zarthani count years—Philesteus, who is known to be hot-headed and rash."

Eldra went on to explain how Kalvan did not want to engage in a siege as the opening move of the battle. "No siege guns and too few men to blockade the City. Also, Kalvan would run into supply problems, since the country between where he is now and the City will be foraged bare in another ten-day. It would also see him far removed from his storage depots in Sask and Beshta. In which case, he would have to depend on supply trains vulnerable to smaller Harphaxi units and local bandits. Protecting the supply trains, would tie up too much of his cavalry.

"Nor, does Saln suspect, that Kalvan wants to spend the time and men it would take to pacify the territory between Beshta and Harphax City, which might take four or five ten-days and tie down much of his infantry guarding prisoners and *pacified* villages and towns. If Kalvan can 'convince' the Harphaxi to chase the Mobile Force to near Beshta, where he has the majority of his forces, it will be the Harphaxi who have stretched supply lines and re-supply problems. The Hostigi will be rested and able to maneuver the Harphaxi into a picked battlefield."

"So what are the Harphaxi waiting for?" Sirna asked.

"Philesteus and Aesthes are waiting for another shipment of Styphon's muskets and fireseed to re-arm the City Militia Bands and re-equip some of the worse-off mercenaries. If they march now, almost a quarter of the Harphaxi Army would be Styphon's House troops, the Temple Guardsmen and the Order of Zarthani Knights. Prince Philesteus doesn't know whether he'd rather be called a coward or give Styphon's forces the chance to claim credit for the victory."

"He sounds like a fool," Sirna said.

"He isn't really. Philesteus is an acceptable cavalry commander, but high-level politics and grand strategy are over his head. He's also caught up in a chivalrous code that was obsolete in the Five Kingdoms a hundred years ago. The same goes for most of the other Harphaxi nobility, which is why Kalvan is going to stamp them into the mud of the Harph, like the dinosaurs they are, when the shooting starts." There was no mistaking the positively bloodthirsty note of anticipation in Eldra's voice.

"Anyway, the shooting is going to start within a ten-day at most. I want to take you to Kalvan's Time-Line in time to at least catch the aftermath."

"Isn't that going to cut short our field orientation on Kalvan Control One?"

Sirna was annoyed. She'd been looking forward to a month or so in the similar time-line the University

used for orientating the Kalvan's Time-Line Team members to what Styphon's House Subsector, Fourth Level Aryan-Transpacific looked, sounded and smelled like."

"There isn't any more Kalvan Control One," Eldra said grimly. "That's why we're leaving sooner than I'd planned."

"But—I thought that was the safe one, where Gormoth of Nostor fell off his horse at Marrox Ford—"

"—and dashed out his brains that none of us thought he had?"

"Right!"

"Unfortunately, somebody with even fewer brains forgot to check out the other changes between Kalvan's Time-Line and Kalvan Control One. One of them was a very good mercenary captain named Sthrathos. The other was Sarrask of Sask, a much abler and more thoroughly vicious Sarrask than the one on Kalvan's Time-Line. Hostigos had a one-year reprieve, then Sarrask and Sthrathos led twenty thousand men against it. Green shifted to show blue and red arrows writing all over the map of what was now Hostigos. The screen shifted over to show a night aerial view of a burning town.

"That was Hostigos Town from the local sky-eye after we got all but two of our people out."

Another shift. "Afterwards we were able to send in a few people disguised as traveling harness makers. Men only."

Sirna recognized Bear Creek Bridge on the west side of Hostigos Town, or at least where the bridge had been. Now its stone abutments stood smoke-blackened on either side of a stream fouled with ashes, burned timbers and some floating...things?...Sirna was very glad she didn't have to smell.

Shift. The Street of Coopers, formerly hard packed earth lined with the kind of solid wood and plaster houses skilled craftsmen could afford under the peaceful rule of a good prince. Now the street was churned into mud and littered with dead bodies and horse droppings. A few scavenger dogs gnawed at the corpses and from the ashes of houses, chimneys poked skyward like monuments to the dead.

Shift. The road up to Hos-Hostigos lined with gallows with a corpse dangling from each one. Carrion birds were pecking at some of the bodies. Others had decomposed to the point where not even a bird would approach them.

Shift. The gateway of Tarr-Hostigos, the gates themselves gone, the hinges pried loose by looters, smoke-blackened stones, dark blood stains on the flagstones of the courtyard, and over the gateway a row of spikes—

"No! No!"

Sirna's stomach twitched, then rolled. She closed her eyes briefly, swallowed and decided that she could live with the sight of the heads decorating those spikes. Harmakros, she noted, had his skull split from the forehead to the left ear. They must have taken his head when they picked up his body on the battlefield. Some of the others—Ptosphes and Chartiphon—must have suffered the same fate. There was also one empty spike.

"What happened to—Rylla?"

Eldra swallowed. "You don't want to know the details. As to what happened to her body—someone lifted it off the spike one night. Probably took it away for a decent funeral pyre, at least that's what Sarrask thought. He retaliated by herding two hundred Hostigi hostages into the local temple of Dralm, setting it on fire and having musketeers shoot down anybody who tried to get out."

Eldra silently punched in an order for more drinks, then made an elaborate business of re-filling her pipe. When it was lighted again, she chuffed on it for a minute until there was a thick veil of smoke over her head. "So Kalvan Control One is gone and we haven't really staffed the other Control Lines for full scale orientation. You could learn something on one of them, but not enough in time to go out with me to Kalvan's Time-Line this season.

"You could also go out with me to Kalvan's Time-Line with nothing but Hypno-mech orientation. You already have the language down very well, and your Greffan accent has at least some of the right flavor, so you wouldn't be completely a lost lamb. Normally I'm as strict about the 'No field orientation, no go' rule as anyone, but a time always comes when you have to bend the rules. If you're willing, I'll make this one of the times."

If Sirna had thought any of the Zarthani gods existed to hear a prayer of thanks, she would have sent one that she hadn't lost control of her stomach. Those pictures of the sacked and ruined Kalvan Control One must have been a test, one she'd apparently passed—at least to the point of being given another test.

Spend a safe summer of orientation in an unmolested but badly equipped Control Time-Line, or plunge headfirst into Kalvan's Time-Line in the middle of a major war with nothing but her hypnotic learning and experience in Greffa to arm her against all the deprivations and horrors of a Pre-Industrial Society at war.

She knew she should analyze the situation before making her decision, as both a proper student and First Level Citizen. She also knew that only one factor really made a difference, and that was the knowledge that if she didn't go to Kalvan's Time-Line with Eldra, she would never be sure of her own courage again.

Her ex-husband would doubtlessly have called that attitude a relic of barbarism, along with physical courage itself. He might even have called it a sign of reverting to her prole ancestry; that had been something he'd flung at her often enough when they were alone and he didn't have to be concerned about *hisimage* as an enlightened man utterly opposed to all class, sex or race considerations.

"I'll go," Sirna said. Her ex-husband didn't matter. All that mattered suddenly was Baltov Eldra's triumphant grin as she raised her glass to toast Kalvan's victory. Sirna felt slightly guilty at that grin—after all, she was taking advantage of Eldra's kindness to spy on her—but not guilty enough to change her mind. Besides, her ex-husband would have called her guilt a reversion to pre-enlightened hygienic socialization.

For once, Sirna agreed with him; raising her cup, she made her own toast: "To ex-husbands—and may they stay that way, with Dralm's Blessing!"

Eldra enthusiastically joined her and clanked their glasses together hard enough to slosh out a good mouthful of ale.

FOURTEEN

I

The Heights of Chothros were blocking the view to the northwest by the time Captain Phidestros reached the van. He could have reached it sooner if he hadn't wanted to spare his horse and inspect his columns. This was the first time the Iron Company had been the advance guard for the left flank of the Army of Hos-Harphax, and Phidestros knew that his men were on display even if they didn't.

So far he'd seen nothing to concern him, or at least nothing that couldn't be handled by petty-captains—loose saddle girths, frayed musketoon slings and the like. Even had these minor flaws been ten times as common as they were, the Iron Company would still have made much of the rest of the Army of Harphax look like rabble. That would not have kept the other captains from trying to advance themselves or at least conceal their own ineptness by pointing out Phidestros' minor lapses.

He spurred his horse at a trot along the Great Harph Road—a deeply rutted wagon trail that was Great only in name—until he was fifty paces ahead of the lead horseman of his center column. He would have given his next ten-winters' honors and booty for the Iron Company's horses to grow wings so that they might fly across the Harph and join the Holy Host of Styphon.

In the eight days since the Harphaxi leaders, if such well-born milksops could be called *leaders*, had chosen to march against Kalvan, it was possible that there were mistakes they had not made, but Phidestros was not prepared to wager more than the price of a cup of bad wine on it. They had paid dearly in blood for every march they *chased* Kalvan's 'Army of Observation,' as the Hostigi prisoners called it—what few there were. Kalvan's new far-shooting muskets—"rifles"—had taken a stiff butcher's bill. Every day the army marched, there were a hundred to two hundred new casualties—many of them irreplaceable captains and petty-captains.

Duke Aesthes, the nominal commander, kept saying that Kalvan was not fighting fairly; he should halt his army and fight like a civilized king, not like a Sastragathi warlord. Prince Philesteus was so angry he couldn't talk straight; instead he puffed and sputtered like an overheated teakettle.

If they were taking a beating this bad from Kalvan's forward body, Phidestros wondered what the butcher's bill would be when they joined battle with Kalvan's Army of the Harph! He feared that the Army of Harphax was a sinking ship—a ship sinking, moreover, through the fault of its builders and crew. Unfortunately, it would be some time before the Iron Company could safely imitate rats.

He wondered, for about the hundredth time, if he was fighting for the wrong side, that is, the losing side. He'd already fought against Kalvan at the Battle of Fyk; there he'd been lucky. In the confusion that followed the battle, he had found himself in charge of Prince Sarrask's baggage train. When word had arrived that the Prince had surrendered to the Hostigi, he had taken command of the baggage train and hot-footed it out of enemy territory. Of course, after giving short shares to another mercenary company, he had claimed the bulk of Sarrask's paychests.

This had left him able to outfit his company with style, but at the expense of making an enemy of a Prince who was renowned for never forgetting a slight. Unfortunately, this had also wedded Phidestros to Kalvan's enemies, primarily the Harphaxi Royal Family and Styphon's House. Any captain worth his steel knew his best bargaining tool was his ability to change sides when the paychests showed bottom, or the war effort appeared doomed. For now, he had no other options, but new opportunities would arise if this war were to continue for a few winters.

Especially, if Sarrask were to die in battle, as he likes to lead his Guard from the front. With Sarrask

dead, he might find a place for the Iron Company in Kalvan's service. Maybe a bounty of a hundred gold rakmars on the Prince's head would help bring that day a little sooner.

He topped a little rise and looked back at the Iron Company. At least the Harphaxi would have their scouting done well today. The center column was mostly Lamochares' men, armed with pistols and swords, ready to come to the aid of the flankers and meanwhile under Phidestros' eye. The left and right columns were the old Iron Company with musketoons, pistols and swords. The left was nearly invisible in the brush and small trees toward the Harph; the right was on more open ground that stretched toward the wooded base of the Heights of Chothros.

He cantered down the far side of the rise, opening the distance to the men behind him another twenty paces. It felt good to be out in the fresh air, not breathing the dust and sweat and dung smells of even his own men, let alone ten thousand more.

He'd have to drop back into the center column before long, though. The Great Harph Road ran through the West Chothros Gap just ahead, with the Heights to the right and rugged, wooded country running down to the Harph on the left. The Hostigi had been foraging on this side of the gap; too many abandoned farms had been stripped bare to let Phidestros believe otherwise. Even without the signs of foragers, the West, Middle and East Gaps were places no one but fools like Philesteus and Aesthes would fail to picket. No point riding into an ambush, and being the Harphaxi's first—

Four smoke puffs rose from behind a stone wall lying across the path of the Iron Company's right column. Phidestros heard the distant *pop* of the discharges and saw two riders and one horse at the head of the column go down. He measured the distance from the wall to the targets with his eyes and whistled.

Three hits out of four shots at six hundred paces!

To Phidestros, that meant Hostigirifles . He'd felt their bite before at Fyk.

Four more smoke puffs rose from behind trees on the near side of the wall, and two men nearly eight hundred paces away dropped from their saddles. That settled the matter for Phidestros. Few infantry weapons could reach that far, and those that could did well to hit a fair-sized barn at extreme range. Hostigiriflemen , for certain.

The rightward column was bunching up, whether to help their comrades or organize for a charge he wasn't sure. He was sure that he didn't want them to present such a fine target while they made up their minds.

He cantered back to the center column, shouting orders the moment he had their attention. Two men rode off to the leftward column to warn Petty-Captain Kyblannos, his second-in-command and titular commander of the Blue Company, of what was going on. Two others rode back along the column to order the gun team to bring up the eight-pounder. If he could have made a wager, he'd have bet Kyblannos would be near the eight-pounder. They'd had to leave the eighteen-pounder, the *Fat Duchess* , behind or risk killing a brace of horses dragging it up the Heights after the Hostigi. It was too heavy to be truly mobile, but Kyblannos had complained as if they were leaving behind one of the Petty-Captain's beloved children!

The eight-pounder was a good deal handier for this kind of work anyway, so for now that did no harm.

A dozen troopers gathered around Phidestros himself and followed him off the Great Harph Road along a glorified track that led across two farms toward the right flank. He was working up to a

canter when he came to a narrow but steep-banked stream cutting between the two fields. He trotted onto the rough log bridge that carried the track across the stream, and was halfway across when from underneath he heard wood creak and begin to crack.

Suddenly the whole floor of the bridge tilted to the right, spilling Phidestros and his mount into the cold stream.

Phidestros was kicking his feet free of the stirrups from the first cracking sound, so he and Snowdrift parted company in midair. Somehow the horse landed on his feet, to come up snorting and dripping foul-smelling mud but undamaged except for temper.

He wasn't quite so lucky. Most of him landed in the muck, but his right knee met a stone that felt like a blacksmith's hammer. He could raise his face and upper body out of the mud, but for a terrifyingly long moment he couldn't move his legs.

Then four or five of his men were dismounting and half scrambling down the bank of the stream to his aid. With their help, he found that he could stand, although his right knee was throbbing, sending red-hot jabs of pain up and down his leg. That he could feel and move it suggested that nothing was broken, but the pain warned him to plan on spending the rest of the battle in the saddle and pray to the Wargod that nothing happened to Snowdrift. He'd have prayed to Galzar for that anyway; tractable mounts that could carry his weight for long weren't easy to come by and cost the Treasury of Balph when discovered.

The rapid popping of musketoons suggested that at least some of the right-flankers were wisely dismounting to shoot at the Hostigi rather than charging headlong. Two grunting men hoisted Phidestros on their shoulders and let him take a look over the bank of the stream, which confirmed it. He also saw about twenty of the right-flankers riding towards a small orchard that ran to within three hundred paces of the Hostigi position. There they just possibly might be able to hit the Hostigi instead of just slightly interfering with their marksmanship.

Another of the Iron Company's mounted men went down as Phidestros watched, then he turned at a shout from one of the men who'd been examining the wrecked bridge.

"Captain, look! The Ormaz-forsaken timbers were sawed through, or pretty damned near."

Someone had indeed sawed three-quarters of the way through each of the main timbers supporting the floor of the bridge so that it would look sound until an unsuspecting passerby put weight on it. Phidestros looked again, then clawed muck out of his beard and grinned.

"We'll burn three candles for Galzar tonight! Whoever sawed the timbers went too far, so the bridge gave way under a horseman's weight. Suppose it had held until we tried to take the eight-pounder—or Galzar forbid—the *Fat Duchess* across? We'd have had send for Kyblannos and his block-and-tackle to fish her out! "

By the time the forward skirmishers had reached the orchard, they'd lost four more men, and the rest of the Iron Company's right-flankers had lost three. Phidestros saw some movement behind the wall that looked suspiciously like horse handlers bringing forth the *riflemen's* mounts so they could withdraw. He cursed the Hostigi, but not too loudly, because he had to respect what those eight men had in them to make them willing to stand up to odds of thirty-to-one—even if they did have half-magical weapons.

When the *riflemen* broke cover, the skirmishers fired a small volley and one of the *riflemen's* mount was hit. The Hostigi took a bad spill, but one of the other *riflemen* turned back and helped him onto the back

of his horse before Phidestros' skirmishers could reload and shoot.

"Dralm-blast it!" he cursed.

Magical or not, those *rifles* were going to have to be thought about. A man armed with one of them would be worth three or four ordinary musketeers; a larger force—well, he was glad he didn't have to solve the problem of fighting one today. He hoped that whatever knowledge went into making those *rifles* was not demonic, or rather would not be *called* demonic by Styphon's House. He had his own opinions on the existence of demons, whether allied with King Kalvan or anyone else.

One of the skirmishers approached him with a canvas hat. "The Hostigi left this behind, Captain!"

Phidestros took the billed cap in his hand, saying, "Too bad it's not one of those Hostigi rifles."

The man nodded, making a sign of aversion with his index and baby finger.

Phidestros examined the cap and saw a gold insignia—two crossed rifles! These troopers were Kalvan's Mounted Rifles; furthermore, this was the largest body of *riflemen* he'd heard of since the Army of Observation had begun their sniping at the Harphaxi Army. Perhaps Kalvan was close at hand; the Mounted Rifles of Hostigos were the crack troops of his Mobile Force. He'd tasted their lead before in Sask. And Kalvan's Mobile Force, in turn, would not be far from the main body of the Army of Hos-Hostigos—not if Kalvan was half the general he'd proved himself to be at Fyk. Battle was possible today, certainly no later than tomorrow—unless he *did* have demons at his command and chose a night attack, in which case there'd be nothing to do but keep a sharp lookout, load weapons and pray to Galzar.

Assuming that Kalvan had merely a human captain's resources, however—

"Yoooo!" Phidestros called up to the mounted men on the bank. "Six of you, ride back to Prince Philesteus. Report that we have found the Mounted Rifles of Hostigos scouting for Kalvan's main body six marches south of Chothros West Gap. We expect the Mobile Force is close enough to us that we will need reinforcements as fast as they can be sent up." That was as much as he could be sure was the truth, and perhaps more than was tactful to say to Philesteus—who was known for his hard head, not his brains. To Regwarn with tact, he had his men to consider!

The mounted men started arguing among themselves as to who should beard Philesteus. Phidestros gripped Snowdrift's saddle with one hand and drew his pocket pistol with the other, then followed his men downstream until the banks were low enough to let everyone climb out. As he moved, he was aware again of the sharp pains in his knee and also of the fresh muck oozing into his boots, not to mention the drying muck on his arms, clothes and skin that was beginning to ripen in the hot morning sun.

II

Kalvan was on the bank of the Harph, inspecting the night's haul by the Ulthori raiders. A good quarter of Prince Kestophes' foot soldiers were fishermen, and Kalvan had been sending them across the Harph each night to bring back anything and everything that could float to the east bank. Kalvan had no intention

of leaving his river flank vulnerable in case the Harphaxi had a captain with the brains to think of an amphibious landing; he had every intention of being in a position to conduct one himself.

After a couple of days of Ulthori piracy, the local citizens who hadn't taken to their heels or their boats formed the habit of hauling their watercraft up on shore and hiding them. The Ulthori search parties wandered farther and farther inland, usually burning the boats and making off with everything portable worth carrying down to the Harph. So far they hadn't started burning houses or assaulting civilians, and one reason for the morning inspections was to make clear to them exactly what would happen to them if they did and how little they would like it.

He was discussing what to do with this morning's pile of loot with the Ulthori commander, when a messenger rode up to tell him that the scouts reported contact with the Harphaxi vanguard.

The messenger's report was not the clearest that Kalvan had ever heard, even here-and-now, but it was plain that the Heights of Chothros was the key point in the coming battle. Kalvan, Major Nicomoth and the escort of Royal Lifeguards mounted up and rode east. They could have covered the eight miles to the West Gap in half the time, but Nicomoth sent scouts ahead to smoke out ambushes each time trees crept within musket shot of the road.

Kalvan consoled himself by thinking that this pace at least spared the horses, but he was not in good temper by the time they reached the West Gap, about where New Providence would have been back home. He nearly lost his remaining patience when he saw the entire High Command of the Army of the Harph, with the exception of Verkan, waiting for him, with nobody sure just where the enemy was or how strong. This looked like a good way to lose not only the battle but the war if hostile cavalry suddenly galloped up the Great Harph Road.

Second thoughts and a second look kept Kalvan's temper under control. Without radio, the corps and regimental commanders had no way to coordinate tactics or pass intelligence except for mounted messengers, who would likely be snapped up by prowling enemy cavalry.

Also, this Forward Command Post wasn't exactly undefended. Harmakros' Sastragathi were lurking behind every tree, the personal staffs of most of the commanders were still mounted and armed, their regimental and brigade banners flying proudly; a glint of armor around the flank of the low rise hinted at a cavalry regiment or better within easy reach. Kalvan's Lifeguards had joined the staffs by the time he dismounted, and Harmakros' aide had unrolled a map and was pointing out who was where, or at least appeared to be, when he joined the generals.

The Harphaxi advancing toward the West gap were almost certainly the whole left-flank column of the enemy, possibly fifteen thousand strong. The rest of the Harphaxi should be off farther to the east, probably making for the East Gap north of the village that occupied the site of Christiana.

"At least that's our best guess at the moment," Hestophes said. "Colonel Verkan has picketed the Heights, and we expect messengers from him within three candles. The other column can't be out of sight from the Heights without being as good as out of today's fighting."

In this kind of country that was probably the case, particularly for an army with inadequate transport and communications, as well as discipline that hardly deserved the name. In fact, it was possible that the two Harphaxi columns were completely out of supporting distance of each other. Did this give the Hostigi a chance to smash the left column before the right could come to its support?

A look at the map told Kalvan there was a chance, but not a particularly good one. At the

moment the Harphaxi probably had more men close to the West Gap than the Hostigi, if the estimates of the Harphaxi columns' strength were accurate. The Hostigi army was echeloned back as far as Middletown (Lesthos) and down to the Harph, at the Ulthori camp somewhere just below the site of Safe Harbor Dam. To concentrate his troops before the Harphaxi could seize the West Gap would mean grinding, foot-blistering, horse-wearing marches. It also meant a good chance of having to open the battle with a frontal assault on the West Gap, which didn't appeal to Kalvan even if he did have the edge in numbers and many of the Harphaxi were the scourings of every dive and almshouse in Hos-Harphax and Hos-Agrys.

Not to mention that the currently unlocated or at least out-of-sight Harphaxi right probably contained Styphon's House troops—the fanatical infantry of Styphon's Own Guard, who had not won the name of Styphon's Red Hand for their good knightly behavior—and the cavalry of the Zarthani Knights. Everybody else he was facing, except probably the Harphaxi Royal Army, could be fooled or frightened away. The Styphoni would have to be fought, whenever and wherever they turned up.

So much for what he shouldn't do. Now for the hard part: *What should I do, other than wait for the Harphaxi to make the first move and then react to it?* While that wouldn't necessarily cost him the battle, it would probably lose him the chance to make it decisive enough.

Kalvan lit one of his special stogies with his gold tinderbox, a gift from Rylla, and squatted by the map again, careful not to drop ashes on it. He was mentally composing orders for bringing up the rest of the army when the sound of galloping hooves drew him to his feet. A Mobile Force officer on a thoroughly lathered horse pounded up and hurled himself out of the saddle before his mount had come to a complete stop.

"Message from Colonel Verkan, Your Majesty. The right column is making for the Middle Gap. The Zarthani Knights are with it. One of our patrols has also seen enemy reinforcements moving from the left column to the right."

"How many?"

The officer paused to catch his breath before continuing. "The patrol said at least four thousand, mostly cavalry."

Kalvan's eyebrows rose. He ignored the fact that his cigar had gone out and bent over the map again. The Middle Gap was north of—what was its name otherwhen? Georgetown?—and the road through it followed roughly State Highway 896 to Strasburg—Mrathos, here-and-now.

If the estimate of four thousand reinforcements to the column headed for the Middle Gap was correct, that was now the main enemy thrust. For a moment, Kalvan wanted to curse in frustration at the ancient commander's dilemma: can you trust the people you need to send you intelligence when you can't go see for yourself?

Kalvan decided to trust the report. Dralm-damnit, if he couldn't trust somebody who was probably handpicked by Verkan—whom he did trust—he might as well turn around and march home right now!

Harmakros traced the Middle Gap road over the Heights with his sword point. "It looks as if somebody in Harphax has heard of flanks, other than horse's or women's."

Kalvan nodded, then stood up grinning. What he was about to do was a gamble, but less of one than he'd faced last year, and this time he was using his own dice.

"Hestophes. How many men do you have ready to march for the West Gap?"

It turned out that Hestophes had about five thousand: the four Royal regiments of foot—the King's Lifeguard, Queen Rylla's Foot and the First and Second Regiments of Foot; the infantry veterans of Old Hostigos; and several companies of first-grade mercenaries.

"I'll give you a thousand cavalry and twelve guns to add to that. Take the whole force to the West Gap, find the most defensible position that blocks it and defend it."

"For how long?" The General didn't look perturbed; his young blocky face, still wearing a splotchy beard, was as expressionless as a stiff-upper-lip Englishman's. He still obviously wanted any suicide missions to be clearly labeled as such.

"Until you've drawn the main weight of the Harphaxi left into trying to push through you," Kalvan said. "Or until there's danger of your retreat being cut off—if that happens first."

"Done, Your Majesty." Hestophes pulled on his leather gloves and turned to Harmakros. "Duke, if you can give me an escort from your guards, men who were down this way on the spring raids, I'll ride on ahead and have the ground all picked out while the men are coming up."

"Will twenty be enough?"

"That should do, if they all have eyes in the back of their heads."

Even if they did, General Hestophes was going to have his hands full if the enemy came up in force before his men did. Kalvan tried not to think of losing the man who'd stood off a Nostori force ten times his own strength at Narza Gap last year, or of what all the widows and orphans in Hostigos would say if it turned out that he was sending Hestophes' six thousand to their deaths. That was not likely, though. Man for man they were probably the best infantry force ever seen here-and-now, and they weren't supposed to defeat the Harphaxi left outright, just keep its attention while the rest of the Hostigi plan unfolded...

Harmakros' five thousand cavalry, mostly veterans of the Royal Horse and the Army of Observation, would be stationed on the open ground north of the Heights to watch the Middle Gap and hold it as long as possible. Kalvan would give them a thousand infantry and four guns; the infantry should mostly go up the Heights to reinforce Colonel Verkan and the Mobile Force.

"If we can make them think the Heights are held in force, so much the better." Harmakros was looking down in the mouth, and Kalvan knew why. "Don't worry. I know your troopers are spoiling for a fight. They'll get one sooner or later, and if it's sooner, it will probably be against the Zarthani Knights. If that's not a big enough fight, I don't know what else I can do for them!"

"Prince Armanes, you will remain here"—Kalvan tapped a point on the Great Harph Road about three miles, or six Zarthani marches, north of Hestophes' most likely position—"and be prepared to move either to support either Hestophes or Harmakros at their request. Any request for help from them shall be treated as if it came from me personally."

"As Your Majesty commands." Prince Armanes was very much a book soldier, but he wouldn't do anything dangerously stupid as long as you handled him right. His twenty-four hundred Nyklosi were also about the best of the Princely armies, after Hostigos and Sask.

That took care of somewhat more than half the Army of the Harph, but it tied up the whole enemy army one way or another for long enough to let Kalvan move his remaining eight thousand more or less where they would do the most good—or damage, depending on whose viewpoint you took. Meanwhile, the rough wooded ground, mostly second-growth forest, between the West Gap and the Harph would hide the eight thousand from any scouts less determined than the Zarthani Knights, who would have to fight their way past Harmakros before they could do any good.

What was George Patton's description of a certain maneuver—"We're going to hold on to them by the nose while we kick them in the pants"? The first pants to be kicked would probably be the Harphaxi left's, already somewhat out at the seat after several hours of frontal assaults on Hestophes. After that, Kalvan intended to play the battle very much by ear, but he would have a good chance to get into the rear of the enemy's main column on the right, and they'd have next to no chance of getting into *his* rear.

The thought of rears gave Kalvan a final idea. One of the things the Ulthori had been looting across the Harph was clothing. They'd been mustered into service in what they'd owned as civilians; even when that had been half decent it had been a bit threadbare, and now most of it looked like rags destined for the bins of the new paper mill. Half of the men now looked like Ulthori peasants, except for their Hostigi red scarves and sashes.

Why not put a few hundred Ulthori in the captured boats and sent them downriver into the Harphaxi rear? Let them loot to their heart's content, looking as much as possible like a peasant uprising. Something every noble feared at the pit of his stomach. Maybe they could spark a real one if he gave them orders to turn captured weapons over to any local peasants who seemed anti-Styphon enough. Maybe, but that would be getting into delicate territory politically; enough for now that they just pretend to be a peasant army and scare the whey out of Philesteus.

Kalvan tried to think if there was anything more that didn't have to be left to the chance of battle, and decided there wasn't. One of his Princeton history professor's favorite remarks came to mind, a quotation from some Army manual: "No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy."

This Battle of the Heights of Chothros would be no exception. The number of things that could still go wrong was rather appalling. The best Kalvan could honestly say was that he'd disaster-proofed the Army of the Harph, given it a damned good chance of victory, and would have to leave the rest to Galzar, Duke Aesthes, Prince Philesteus and plain old-fashioned luck.

"Very well, gentlemen. I think it's time we stopped talking and prepared to start shooting. Oh, Harmakros!"

"Your Majesty?"

"If any of your tame Sastragathi take Prince Philesteus' head as a trophy, don't let them bring it to me!"

FIFTEEN

I

"Here they come again," General Hestophes said. He wasn't quite as calm as he was pretending to be;

Kalvan noticed that the pipe in his mouth was not only unlit but upside down.

The new Harphaxi attack seemed to be aimed at what Hestophes called Barn Hill, at the northern end of his position. Six guns and a thousand infantry held the slopes around the half-ruined barn; three thousand more and the cavalry held the saddle stretching diagonally from northwest to southeast. The southeastern anchor of Hestophes' position, where Kalvan now sat on his horse, was referred to as Tavern Hill, for the stone-walled inn that crowned it. Another thousand infantry and the other six cannon held the slopes or crouched behind loopholes knocked in the walls of the tavern itself. The ones in the upper-floor windows and on the roof had an excellent view of the lower slopes of Tavern Hill, strewn with the dead and dying from the first two Harphaxi attacks.

The third attack looked like about five hundred cavalry and a thousand infantry, wearing yellow sashes and plumes, carrying the flag of Hos-Harphax—a gold double-headed axe surrounded by a circle of eighteen stars on a red field, each star representing one of the princedoms that made up the Great Kingdom of Hos-Harphax. Only the flag was obsolete; more than a third of the stars depicted were now represented within the Army of Hos-Hostigos.

Most of the infantry were arquebusiers and assorted skirmishers with halberds, poleaxes, bills, glaives and various polearms sticking up at random intervals. Kalvan swore he even saw a long-handled scythe or two! This must have been how it looked when the first Roundheads went up against King Charles, before Cromwell turned them into the New Model Army.

They were marching raggedly enough, but they were also marching out of the range of the guns on Tavern Hill, with the additional shelter of a fold in the ground topped by a low stone wall.

Out of the dust behind the cavalry came three Harphaxi gun teams, turning toward the wall with the gunners jumping down from the horses or running up behind. The guns looked to be twelve and eighteen-pounders, great clumsy iron-hooped things that probably weighed more than a Hostigi brass sixteen-pounder and once off their traveling carriages would be about as mobile as the Rock of Gibraltar. However, they could reach the pikemen in Hestophes' center, who would have to stand there in massed formation and take their shot or risk inviting a cavalry charge.

Correction: they would have had to stand there and take it, except that when Kalvan came up to visit Hestophes he also brought a thirteenth gun. It was the newest of the sixteen-pounders, which Uncle Wolf Tharses had honored with the name *Galzar's Teeth*.

"May they be sharp," Hestophes said, as he looked back at the gunners digging the big piece into position.

Kalvan grinned. "I've heard it said that thirteen people at one table is unlucky. I've never heard that thirteen guns on one position is."

"If so, Your Majesty, it will only be unlucky for the Harphaxi."

From behind came a shout, Colonel Alkides trying to be respectful to his superiors even when they insisted on standing in his line of fire. The generals and their escorts shifted twenty yards to the left, then another twenty as the gunner shouted even louder. Finally there was a thunderous roar as *Galzar's Teeth* fired its first shot in action.

Here-and-now gunners hadn't had good enough field guns to learn the trick of aiming short and letting the shot ricochet into its target. Even if they had, the soft ground at the foot of the rise might have

defeated them, the way it had Napoleon's gunners at Waterloo. However, the slight downgrade helped. The sixteen-pound ball fell short but kept rolling fast enough to smash through the stone wall to the right of the enemy guns.

Stone dust and bits flew. The enemy artillerymen didn't even bother to look up. Mercenaries, undoubtedly—the Harphaxi artillery was even more of a joke than the rest of their army—but a good grade of mercenary. Kalvan mentally noted a need to find out their names and, if they were captured, to try and recruit them.

The artillery duel went on for a good ten minutes with a minimum of damage on either side. Several Harphaxi shot flew over the mercenary arquebusiers to the left of the First Foot and rolled back down into their ranks. Kalvan saw one damned fool of a new recruit stick out a foot to try stopping one of the rolling shot; a moment later he was on the ground with his foot missing, screaming loudly enough to make his comrades back away. Hestophes looked back at the crew of *Galzar's Teeth* with a get-your-act-together-*now* expression on his face.

Whether inspired or intimidated, the gunners succeeded. Their next shot fell close to the leftward enemy gun and must have done some damage, because the next time it fired the carriage split apart. With their own piece useless, its crew shifted to the other two guns, increasing their rate of fire. A couple of stone balls landed among Queen Rylla's Foot. Unlike the mercenaries, they held steady until the wounded were carried away, then closed ranks. Kalvan mentally noted down their Colonel for a commendation. *Time for something like the Presidential Unit Citation for regiments that did particularly well.*

In the next moment *Galzar's Teeth* slammed a roundshot squarely into the muzzle of the enemy's left-hand gun. It burst apart like an exploding boiler, and something hot must have skipped into an open fireseed barrel, because there was a crashing roar and a tremendous cloud of white smoke. When the smoke cleared away, both guns were wrecked and most of their gunners down; Kalvan saw riders in the cavalry of the attacking column struggling to control their spooked mounts.

"Good shooting!" Hestophes cried. "One could wish they'd done that sooner, but big guns are like women. They need careful handling and long familiarity before you can be sure they'll do what you want them to do." From the pained look on the General's face, Hestophes appeared to be speaking from personal experience on both topics.

Kalvan rode over to the gun to praise the shooting and to give the gunners ten Crowns with which to celebrate after the battle, while Hestophes organized his counterattack by the four Royal regiments. By the time Kalvan returned, three regiments were on their way downhill in alternating companies of pike and shot. Queen Rylla's Foot formed a column on the left and a skirmish line of three mercenary arquebusier companies was out in front.

"The wall ends on the left and the ground is firmer there," Hestophes said. "Any cavalry charge will come in there. "I'm going to take the First and Second Regiment of Horse down to where they can support Queen Rylla's Foot, and meanwhile stiffen those mercenaries who don't like hearing the cries of wounded men."

Major Nicomoth suddenly seemed to have developed an exceptionally severe case of the lice that had infested everybody in the last few days. Kalvan and Hestophes exchanged looks, then Kalvan smiled. "All right, Major. You may take thirty of the Royal Horseguards and ride with Hestophes, as long as you swear to obey him as you would me."

"With my life, Your Majesty."

Kalvan watched the cavalry forming up with the thought that Nicomoth was the classic well-born young cavalry officer who knew to perfection two of the operations of war: charging gallantly and dying gallantly. Kalvan liked the young officer, but would cheerfully have traded twenty of him for one more professional soldier like Harmakros, Hestophes or Count Phrames—who were about the sum total of *real* professional officers in the Royal Army. A pity that none of them had the rank to command the Army of the Besh, particularly Hestophes, who wasn't even a noble, just the son of a tavern owner in Hostigos Town.

That, at least, could be remedied. It would have to be remedied, in fact; Hestophes had been a colonel-equivalent at the Narza Gap, doing a major-general's job, and there'd been some grumbling about a commoner holding such an honorable post—mostly from Baron Sthentros and that crowd. *The Quisling faction, that's what I call them*, thought Kalvan. He kept wishing they'd do something overt so that he could hang the lot of them, or at least, stash them in the dungeon of Tarr-Hostigos—they'd make good company for the castle rats.

Skranga had half a dozen operatives keeping an eye on them to see if they made contact with any of Styphon's House's agents. Sadly, Skranga's spies had nothing to report, other than the usual dirty laundry: assignations with mistresses, tax fraud—almost a hobby here-and-now—bullying the servants and the occasional drunken brawl—pretty much standard fare for here-and-now nobility.

Well, if Hestophes finished off today's assignment and was still alive tomorrow, he'd be a Baron. Invest him with Tarr-Hyllos, there's a vacant seat there since the local baron's death during the action at Listra-Mouth. With the advantage that it's next door to Sthentros' barony. Plus, it would solve the problem of having him obeyed; Chartiphon had started from a lot farther down and nobody questioned his orders since Ptosphes ennobled him.

Handing out goodies to men who'd done well was one of the perks of being a Great King, a reward that sometimes *almost* made up for the headaches.

There was a sound like distant thunder when the Hostigi regiments stopped short of the soft ground, and the arquebusiers and musketeers of the three lines let fly almost seven hundred strong. Two more volleys and a couple of shots from *Galzar's Teeth*, and the Harphaxi were edging away toward Barn Hill and into range of *its* guns. Two salvos from those, and the Harphaxi infantry didn't even wait for the mercenaries on the hill to advance toward them. They retreated, not quite as a rabble but certainly as a unit with most of the pepper and a couple of hundred men shaken out of it.

The Harphaxi mercenary cavalry made a brief feint toward the left of the Hostigi force, but the arquebusiers let fly, their volley felling two score of horses and emptying a few saddles. Kalvan hated to see the horses get killed, but they were bigger targets than their riders and didn't wear armor. Smoothbores were good for mass fire, but not accurate enough to aim at anything smaller than a horse.

Then the pikemen and halberdiers covered their comrades, everybody moving so precisely that it was hard to believe they'd only been drilling since last fall, and then not continuously.

Hestophes and his two regiments rode forward ready to break the enemy to pieces, and Kalvan led the rest of the Royal Lifeguards down to stiffen the mercenaries, but neither of them had any work to do. The enemy cavalry sheered off, picked up the surviving artillerymen and departed as fast as the stableful of glue-factory rejects they were riding could carry them.

"Don't worry, Major," Kalvan said, as the Hostigi returned to their positions. "You'll be able to charge all

you want before this day's over."

Nicomoth tried to cover his disappointment, but his pale face flushed.

"Sooner than that if Your Majesty is planning to remain here," Hestophes added. "The lookouts on the tavern roof have reported sighting a new Harphaxi column approaching. They say it may number six thousand men, and the Royal Banner of Hos-Harphax is at its head."

Six thousand wasn't too many men for Hestophes to handle from his present position, unless the Harphaxi suddenly developed the ability to launch a coordinated attack, and if they did that, Prince Armanes was on call with more than two thousand completely fresh troops. However, it was definitely enough to surround the position and make it completely useless as a command post for Great King Kalvan.

After reminding Hestophes that if it looked as if the Harphaxi were about cut off his rear, to retreat as planned. "You've pinned the Harphaxi nicely here, so I'd like you to hold this position as long as you can. What will you need to meet them?"

"More fireseed—and soon. Also, some cavalry to take our prisoners from the first attacks to the rear." Hestophes did not add, "And for the Great King to take his royal arse with them so I won't have to worry about it!" but thought it very loudly.

"We'll send you the fireseed before the next attack, or in the first lull after it," Kalvan said. "As for the prisoners, my guards and I can escort them back as far as Prince Armanes' position." Kalvan managed to keep from laughing out loud at Hestophes' efforts to suppress a sigh of relief.

II

The scene at the south end of the Middle Gap over the Heights of Chothros reminded Phidestros of the struggles of a farmer he'd once watched, trying to get five pigs into a cart that anyone could have told him would hold three at most. The farmer had finally admitted defeat only after the cart collapsed and the ox hauling it broke loose and ran off, followed by four of the pigs.

Prince Philesteus and Duke Aesthes, it seemed to Phidestros, were much like the farmer. They had dimly grasped the notion that the way to win a battle was to get around the enemy's flank. They had not grasped in the least how to *find* that flank. Still less did they seem to know what to do with much of their army while they were searching.

So something like a third of the Harphaxi Army was either through the Middle Gap or on the way; the Iron Company would have been among that nine thousand if Captain-General Aesthes hadn't given them a rest as reward for their good scouting. Phidestros had taken the reward gladly, although he'd been surprised to discover that Aesthes could tell good scouting from bad.

The pace of the advance through the Gap made turtles look fleet-footed, when everything wasn't at a halt due to a gun losing a wheel or two sets of wagon traces getting tangled. Not to mention the places where the road's incline required eight animals to do the work of four. Phidestros recalled seeing one

entire team lying in the traces, dead from a futile attempt to pull an Agrysi nine-pounder back on the road.

After an eighth of a day of this, Phidestros realized that there was no reason for him to ride about in the confusion, trying to see what most likely wasn't there to be seen. He sent Banner-Captain Geblon and six of his toughest veterans over the Gap to scout, then rode back downhill.

He'd just reached the Iron Company's temporary camp when he heard peculiarly deep-toned trumpets blaring to the west. He hurriedly turned off the road and watched from the fields as a Lance of Zarthani Knights cantered past.

The Holy Order of the Zarthani Knights had been formed three hundred and fifty years before, when the civilized native Ruthani of the Lower Sastragath tried to drive out the Zarthani settlers encroaching on their tribal homelands. The Knights had broken the Ruthani alliance and afterward had become the defenders of the Southern Great Kingdoms against the barbarians of the Lower and Upper Sastragath and the Trygath. The Knights were also a priestly order of Styphon's House, and had helped spread Styphon's worship throughout Hos-Bletha and eastern parts of the Trygath.

The head of the Order was called the Grand Master and was an Archpriest of the Inner Circle of Styphon's House. He ruled a domain larger in territory than any two Great Kings combined. The current Grand Master, Soton, was the most feared and respected military commander in the Five Kingdoms. Under his rule, the Order had quelled several barbarian uprisings on the western frontier and built three new border tarrs to protect the marches.

As always, the Knights were marching in the formation in which they preferred to fight. At the head of the Lance went the flag of the Order, a large white banner bearing a black, broken sun-wheel with curved arms—Styphon's Own Device. The Lance rode in a wedge-shaped formation, with the oath-brothers riding ahead as skirmishers, and the fully armored Brethren forming the tip. The hundred Brother Knights had black armor with white and black plumes on their helms, and carried a heavy lance, a brace of pistols and a sword. Behind the Brethren were two hundred Confère Knights in three-quarter black armor with lance and pistols, followed by two hundred sergeants in back-and-breast with pistols and sword. A hundred mounted arquebusiers brought up the rear, followed by a hundred horse-archer auxiliaries.

This third Lance added to the other two that had already gone up the Gap would make more than two thousand Order horse ready for Aesthes' hand. Phidestros had the liveliest doubts that the elderly Captain-General would know what to do with them, and hoped their own Knight Commander in charge would be able to find something on his own.

The dust from the Knights' passage was barely starting to settle when Phidestros saw bright flashes of metal, then a solid mass of red emerging from a cloud of dust. A Temple Band of Styphon's Own Guard swung by, glaives shouldered, musketoon slung across their silvered breastplates, and most of them singing a hymn to Styphon in voices that would have knocked dead from the sky any birds who hadn't long since fled from the battlefield.

Phidestros backed his horse still farther into the field as Styphon's Red Hand marched by, and didn't return to the road until he could no longer hear their singing. He badly wanted to find out what might be going on toward the west, where he'd seen a good deal of smoke and heard more than a good deal firing, including artillery. He did not want it badly enough to call himself to the notice of a Temple Band whose grand-captain might have the ear of the Inner Circle.

He snatched a quick meal of bread, cheese and sausage washed down with warm flat ale, while the baggage boy changed the wet cloths bound around his injured knee. He no longer had to stifle a gasp when he put his weight on the leg, but he knew he'd best plan on running no footraces for a while and spending that day either lying, sitting or riding.

Several messengers rode by while he was eating. Two coming from the west stopped and accepted a few coins in return for their messages, but neither was able to tell him anything about the battle in the West Gap. They had not attacked, either. The second messenger added that the Royal troops of Hos-Harphax were coming up and seemed to regard this as good news, but then he spoke with a Harphax City accent.

Phidestros realized that if the Iron Company were to be thrown into the battle at the West Gap, their approach to it would be over open ground; he could at least send more scouts ahead to find what was going on. He had a feeling that he would need that knowledge fairly soon. Of course, this might leave him short of trustworthy petty-captains... But knowing the whereabouts of the Hostigi positions might be the difference between the Iron Company being shot into ribbons by Kalvan's *rifles*, or acquitting the field with valor.

He was just emptying his mug of ale when Geblon returned. His Banner-Captain's normally ruddy face looked pale with dust and something more that made Phidestros sit up and motion him to his side so that no one could overhear the Banner-Captain's message.

"The Hostigi barely tried to hold the far end of the Gap, let alone the crest. Their—*riflemen*—did some damage, their Sastragathi irregulars a little more, but that was all. They're holding Mrathos with hardly more than a thousand men, but in trenches with artillery. Everybody believes there must be more Hostigi, and half of them are scattered all over Yirtta's potato patch trying to find them!"

"Isn't Captain-General Aesthes trying to rein them in?"

Geblon took two quick puffs on his pipe before answering, "He's determined to reduce Mrathos before he moves a yard further. *Hemay* do that before nightfall. I couldn't get close enough to the lines around the town to ask him or anybody else who might know."

So if the Iron Company crossed the Middle Gap, it would find itself on a field where the enemy might or might not be present, and, if present, in unknown strength. Certainly a Captain-General who did not know his business would be present, and so would thousands of Styphon's finest troops. Not just on the field, but perhaps behind the Iron Company—and Styphon's Red Hand, at least, had a reputation for killing even allied troops, not just to keep them from retreating but to force them to stand and die to the last man.

"Did anyone recognize you or name the Iron Company in your hearing?"

Geblon shook his head. "Not that I remember."

"You're sure?"

"Almost sure."

"Sure enough to swear an oath?"

Geblon opened his mouth, obviously to ask what kind of oath, then shut it again. He knew of the

reputation of Styphon's Red Hand, and he'd been a mercenary long enough to know that no one could be punished for not obeying an order he hadn't received. The less he knew about what was in his captain's mind, the less danger he'd be in if by chance Styphon's House or the Harphaxi wanted a convenient scapegoat.

If the example was to come from the Iron Company, Phidestros was determined that it should be from him. He owed them that much—that, and not leading them into a battle on the ground of a lackwit's choosing. Not if he could avoid it, by Galzar!

SIXTEEN

I

"Remember, at all costs keep five hundred paces between you and Baron Euklestes' column. If the cavalry can't fit into a gap that big, I'll have them all sent to one of Yirtta's temple-houses for the blind!"

"It shall be done, Your Majesty," Baron Halthoth said with a grin. "That should also let both us and Euklestes shoot at any Harphaxi unwise enough to ride into the gap, without fear of hitting each other. Am I right?" Kalvan nodded. "Then—when do we march?"

Kalvan hesitated a moment over his answer. Great Kings weren't supposed to admit to being at the mercy of their subordinates, even when the subordinates were as good as Harmakros. On the other hand Euklestes seemed intelligent enough to benefit from a short lesson in generalship.

"As soon as I receive the next message from Count Harmakros on how the battle around Mrathos is going." They both looked at the eastern sky above the treetops and at the towering plume of black smoke trailing across the blue like a scarf.

It bothered Kalvan that Harmakros had troops that had arrived too late to hold the Middle Gap; it had been his plan to hold the Heights and pick the Harphaxi to pieces as they went against both gravity and the tide of battle. Instead of retreating Harmakros had stood his ground at the town of Mrathos, turning that insignificant piece of real estate into a critical defensive point.

Mrathos Town was the here-and-now site of Strasburg, where two years before he was picked up by the cross-time flying saucer he'd lost a good friend, Sergeant Joe Bonnetti. The Sergeant, Calvin Morrison's mentor during his first two years as a Pennsylvania State Trooper, had been run off a wet road and killed by a drunken driver, a drunk with so many political connections that he'd got off with a slap on the wrist. There was no way to talk about this memory, either; even if there'd been anyone around cleared for the "secret" of his origins, they might call it an evil omen.

What was more annoying, Kalvan wasn't entirely sure they'd be completely wrong. Was living among people who took gods and demons and sorcery for granted making him superstitious?

Wasn't this a hell of a thing to be worry over as the biggest battle of his life approached its climax?

Kalvan turned his mind to a more practical question. What should he do about Harmakros, who'd shown initiative—Dram-damnit, nearly disobedience!—by holding Mrathos instead of retreating and contacting his commander-and-chief, then holding back four fifths of his men while the garrison of

Mrathos drew most of the Harphaxi right on to itself? Certainly Harmakros had infected Captain-General Aesthes with an obsessive desire to reduce the town—to rubble and ashes, if nothing more—before moving on, or even bothering to control the rest of his troops. Some French general whose name Kalvan couldn't recall had the same bee in his bonnet at Waterloo and spent the whole battle attacking the Chateau of Hougoumont, leaving the rest of Wellington's right flank completely alone. The garrison at Mrathos didn't need to do nearly as much, and it looked as if they might have already done it.

More of Kalvan's friends might die today at Mrathos, but so would a lot of his enemies. He spurred his horse back toward the rear of the units lined up for the counterattack. He'd be riding back there, along with the artillery and the counterattack's own private cavalry reserve, the Royal Lifeguards and the First Dragoons. Kalvan might be commanding, but the counterattack would actually be led by Phrames.

This was unorthodox but made sense for several reasons, one of which was that Phrames knew his business. Another was the superior quality of the cavalry, mostly royal regulars and several squadrons of the Ulthori Household Guard. They were better able to take or deliver the first shock as long as they could be kept from charging massed infantry. The infantry of the counterattack included too many small mercenary units (it was being kind to call them companies) plus Halthoth's column of two—call them "regiments" to avoid being insulting—of Hostigi foot militia. The militia were the survivors of last year's battles who could be spared for field service. While the militia had smelled powder and this year carried handguns instead of crossbows, they'd hardly done a week's training between last fall and the day the Army of the Harph marched east.

In the rear, Kalvan would have the infantry under his eye. He'd also be clear of the scrimmage up ahead, able to move his reserves where they were most needed—or even move them to another part of the battlefield entirely. He might have to do that if Captain-General Aesthes pushed past Harmakros' Mobile Force and Armanes needed help—and where the Styphon *was* Harmakros' messenger, and what should he do to the Harmakros that would persuade him not to do this sort of thing again, without making him afraid to blow his nose without an order?

Another universal commander's problem: how to encourage initiative without losing control of your subordinates. Kalvan reflected morosely that the problem had probably first presented itself to some Neanderthal chieftain leading a raid on a neighbor's cave.

II

A shift in the breeze suddenly thinned the smoke pouring up from the burning farmhouse. It hadn't been much smoke, compared to what was pouring up from Mrathos two miles to the east, but it had been enough to screen Verkan's patrol of the Mounted Rifles from what lay beyond the hedges bordering the farmyard. Now the screen was gone, and Verkan was staring at more than a hundred of Styphon's Red Hand, and particularly at a mounted officer who was staring back as though one of Styphon's fireseed devils had suddenly materialized out of the haze.

Verkan was the first to break away. His pistol shot missed the officer but nicked his horse, which kept the Guard Captain busy enough for Verkan to shout, "No dismounting! We had orders to find the Styphoni and we've done it! Pull back!"

By the time the Captain of Styphon's Own Guard had his mount under control and was sending his men through the gate in the hedge, Verkan's twenty-five Riflemen were trotting away across the farmer's now well-trodden barley. They were on the far side of the field and approaching the boundary with the next farm before the Red Hand opened fire, at long range for musketoons.

Long range, but not impossible, with fifty men volleying at a single target. Verkan had just enough time to realize that he was the single target, when his horse screamed and reared violently, something went *wheet* past his ear, and something else went *whnnnnngggg* off his breastplate. Verkan flung himself to the left to avoid falling under his horse, smashed into something solid and hard enough to knock the wind out of him, then found himself suspended clear of the ground with what seemed to be blunt knives digging into his ribs.

He gulped in air, shook his head and discovered he was caught in the half-rotted framework of an overturned farm wagon. He must have been right on top of it when the Styphoni killed his horse, then smashed most of the way through when he leaped clear. For a long moment he wriggled like a child in the arms of a determined mother, then the rest of the framework gave way and he dropped through to the ground.

The timbers of the bed of the wagon were less rotted, a piece of good luck for Verkan. Bullets *thunked* into the wood as the Guardsmen blazed away with more enthusiasm than accuracy. The sound of incoming fire didn't drown out Ranthar's orders to dismount and return fire. The Mounted Rifles were falling into fours with the ease of long practice—three to open fire and one to hold the horses. Ranthar himself was staying mounted, his rifle still slung across his back.

Verkan couldn't see all his men, but from the sudden burst of rifle fire he knew everyone but the horse-holders must have let fly. Two more volleys were punctuated by a cry of pain and several gleefully triumphant shouts, then the massed fire gave way to individual fire. The *thunking* of bullets into the wagon bed became less frequent as the Styphoni found it prudent to keep their heads out of the sights of rifles, even rifles in the hands of despised heretics and demon-worshippers.

Then Ranthar Jard was riding toward Verkan and extending a hand down from the saddle. "This is a lousy place for a vacation, Colonel. The roof leaks, the plumbing's blocked up and the neighborhood is too noisy." A Styphoni bullet kicked up dust between his horse's hind legs, and another drove splinters into Verkan's left hand hard enough to draw blood.

"That's what comes of taking advice from tavern friends," Verkan said. He took the hand, gripped the saddlebow with the other and swung himself up onto the neck of Ranthar's bay. A few more bullets whistled by, then they were out of range and behind the team of Riflemen who took their Colonel's rescue as the signal to start mounting up.

They'd only lost one man, and from the back of the dead man's horse Verkan looked toward the Styphoni position. It was now decorated with a score of red-clad corpses and the body of the Guard Captain's horse. A few of the Red Hand were keeping up a sporadic fire, while the rest seemed to be either lying low or holding their glaives, ready to stand off the Mounted Rifle's charge.

Verkan hoped they'd have a long, hot, thirsty wait, and a royal reaming-out from the next Hostigi detachment to come along. He glanced back at his dead mount. It was a pity he couldn't retrieve the saddlebags, but everything compromising in it was in one simulated-leather pouch equipped with a dead-man timer and a charge nobody on Fourth Level, Aryan Transpacific could find, let alone disarm. When the timer ran out, the charge would give a remarkably good impression of a demonic visitation to anyone far enough away to survive.

Meanwhile, in spite of his own embarrassingly minor role in the skirmish, the patrol had done its job. It had found Styphoni so far west of Mrathos that it was obvious they'd be able to meet Harmakros' attack in force if he delayed it much longer. The advantage Harmakros had won from the stand at Mrathos and Captain-General Aesthes' lack of control over his wing of the Harphaxi could be lost—if not completely, enough to make the next stage of the battle on the Hostigi left a lot bloodier than it would be otherwise.

Then Harmakros might lose some of his reputation, and either try something foolish to restore it and get killed, or be shoved aside by rivals who also had a claim on Great King Kalvan. Either way, Kalvan would be losing one of his best field commanders, which would be the equivalent of losing a fair-sized battle.

To prevent that, Verkan Vall would have steered much closer to the line between contamination and noncontamination than he would have to now. After all, he was a trusted field officer reporting to the general who'd ordered him out on a scouting mission; he would be expected to offer advice. The rest could almost certainly be left to Harmakros' wits.

Nobody who knew anything about war could call that contamination. Of course, not everybody knew anything about war, a fact that Verkan Vall would have been resigned to as long as the ignorant didn't rise to high rank in the Paratime Police, Paratime Commission, Executive Council or the Outtime Trade Board. As things really were...

The thought of how things really were made him dig his spurs into his horses flanks, pushing it from a trot into a canter.

SEVENTEEN

I

When Captain Phidestros heard the sudden increase in firing from the far side of the Heights, he ordered the Iron Company to make ready to mount up. The most likely explanation for the new uproar was a Hostigi attack, and he wanted to be able to move out as quickly as possible through the Middle Gap to reinforce Captain-General Aesthes. Surely Aesthes, having through no gift of his own found the long sought Hostigi flank, would not hesitate to call up every man jack within reach of his messengers to attack it.

Instead the battle roar continued to mount, and white powder smoke climbed the sky above the Heights to join the black murk from burning Mrathos. Still no orders came from the Captain-General or anybody else, and no more messengers came along the road from the west. The battle there was still going on, which suggested that the Hostigi at the West Gap must have either been much stronger than anyone had suspected or else been reinforced since the fighting had opened some several candles ago. There could be no other natural explanation for their holding so long; Phidestros would believe other kinds of explanations when he saw evidence for them.

Without his injured knee, Phidestros would have dismounted and walked off his growing ill temper, striding up and down in front of the Iron Company, until either orders came or he felt better. With his knee still sore, all he could do was sit on his horse until Snowdrift sensed his rider's uneasiness enough to grow jittery, then dismount and sit on a stump high enough to be clear of the rank grass and horse

droppings.

It didn't help that the muck from the creek now reeked like a midden, and what had found its way through the chinks in his armor to creep next to his skin itched like all the fleas in Harphax City amusing themselves at once. Men who had business with him carefully stayed upwind, Phidestros noticed. He also realized he could do nothing about this until he could strip off his armor, boil his clothes and have a thorough bath—preferably in a proper Zygrosi bathhouse, with clouds of steam rising around him and a comely wench to ply him with soap, scraper, cloths, oil, sweetcakes, winter wine, a massage...

Phidestros ruthlessly kept his imagination from going any farther; instead he decided to light his pipe, only to discover he had no more tobacco. He sent his baggage boy to find some, and also to summon Geblon and Kyblannos. If the Iron Company was to sit around until it perished from boredom it might at least sit somewhere there was water and shade.

The nearest place to provide both turned out to be a chestnut grove already occupied by a gaggle of stragglers, deserters, servants and camp followers—as well as a few genuine sufferers from fever, flux or the heat. The Iron Company routed the able-bodied out of the grove at point of sword and pistol, took the casualties under its protection and settled down to wait with as much patience as they could muster.

His baggage boy finally returned with some tobacco and he was getting his pipe drawing nicely when a shout came from the lookout he'd posted in the upper branches of the tall sycamore at the west end of the grove.

"Captain! There's fighting south of the West Gap. I can see a lot of dust and some cavalry at the gallop!"

Phidestros cursed his injured knee which would keep him from climbing the tree to look for himself. "Can you see the cavalry's colors?"

"No, there's too much dust and smoke. I can see the Royal Lancers and their pennon though. They're well to the side of the new fighting."

"You've used your eyes well," Phidestros said, reaching into his purse for a coin and with the other hand a branch to pull himself to his feet. Fighting south of the West Gap, and cavalry at that, could mean hardly anything but another Hostigi attack. He didn't know who commanded the Harphaxi there—probably Prince Philesteus himself, if the Royal Lancers were present. But it would be certainly someone with enough rank to give weight to any praise he gave the Iron Company. It seemed to him that that West Gap was more than ever the place for his men now, and any messengers with orders to the contrary who might be in the way could break their necks for all he cared.

"Sound, 'Mount!'" he shouted to the nearest trumpeter and his groom moved to Snowdrift's head. Harness jingled and leather thumped as the men around him obeyed their Captain's shout even before the trumpet blew. Phidestros swung into the saddle and considered his best line of march to the West Gap.

Straight down the road would bring him within sight of the Harphaxi Royal Army and their captain; that would mean attacking with friends at his back and flanks. Not the best of friends, though, except in sheer numbers; the well-born heavy cavalry of Hos-Harphax were barely polite to mercenaries and were none too wise in the new kind of warfare Kalvan was going to teach everybody whether they liked it or not. No, the Iron Company would swing to the south of the road and move cautiously towards the fighting with scouts well out in front. Phidestros was even prepared to lead himself, in order to be the first to see how the battle was going. Once again, if the Iron Company retreated without need and there was an example to be made, he would be the one to provide it. But, on the other hand, if there was a need for

retreat—well, the Iron Company would have a clear road to Harphax City or even across the Harph.

"To Phidestros!" someone shouted.

The Iron Company took up the cry. Snowdrift began to prance and his rider didn't even try to gentle him. One way or another, the frustration of sitting by the road while the battle was mismanaged all around him was about to end, Galzar be thanked!

II

The Harphaxi gun bellowed and the twelve-pound cannonball THUNKED twenty yards to Kalvan's right, crashed through what was left of the fence behind him and rolled away out of sight without hitting anything.

"That's the last one!" Kalvan shouted. "Trumpeters, sound 'charge!'"

To their credit the Royal Horseguards actually waited until they heard the trumpets before they dug in their spurs. Kalvan knew the efforts they'd make to protect him if he rode too far ahead and the time this would expend. He reined in his horse until Major Nicomoth and the first two squads were out ahead, then urged his own mount up to a canter.

The four Harphaxi guns across the field would take at least five minutes to reload and Kalvan's cavalry would be on them before they were halfway done.

He wasn't sure what business a Great King had leading regiment-strength cavalry charges, but when the regiment was the only part of his army within reach and there was an enemy within striking distance, he couldn't think of anything better to do.

Dust billowed behind the Hostigi as they rode, horsepistols drawn, silver-plated armor gleaming in the hot sun, Kalvan's personal banner of a maroon keystone on a green field leading the way. Through the smoke ahead, he could already see some of the gunners running for the shelter of the trees behind their position. That would slow down the reloading even more.

Kalvan drew his sword and shouted "Down Styphon!"

The Hostigi counterattack had started well enough. Kalvan had finally led his force of two thousand horse, fifteen hundred foot without waiting for Harmakros' message about the situation in front of Mrathos. It was a gamble but one that had paid off. When Harmarkos' messenger, on a half-dead horse, finally caught up with his Great King, he reported that Harmakros was launching his own attack with all his men. Colonel Verkan reported that several bands of Styphon's Red Hand were moving west and it seemed wisest to attack Captain-General Aesthes before the Styphoni could strengthen his position.

Kalvan rewarded the good-news bearer, sent him off to rest his horse and rode on in a much better mood. Clearly, Harmakros could be trusted to use his initiative wisely, even if it did give his Great King ulcers in the process. He had a good sense for timing and a good eye for terrain, and he also knew enough to concentrate his forces. Harmakros was even honest enough to give credit to his subordinates

when they deserved it; Napoleon himself headed a long list of generals who'd lacked that virtue.

More importantly it meant that Kalvan's counterattack would not have to swing far to the west in order to avoid Harphaxi patrols coming from Mrathos. They would all be much too busy with Harmakros. This would save a good deal of time, and the sooner the pressure on Hestophes was relieved, the better. From the amount of firing around his position, he was still holding on, but Hestophes hadn't sent a messenger in over an hour—which said things Kalvan didn't like to hear.

Kalvan delivered his first attack on time and in more or less the intended place. Several thousand Harphaxi, including some of the Royal Pistoleers died, ran off or surrendered with gratifying speed. In the process a lot of fast moving horses and rapidly fired guns generated an appalling amount of dust and smoke. When some of the farms and orchards started burning, Kalvan began to feel he was back on the fog-shrouded battlefield of Fyk.

By the time Kalvan sighted the four Harphaxi bombards, he had under his personal command only a squadron of his Horseguards—about a hundred and thirty men—and slightly more than a hundred Ulthori heavy horse. With a little persuading, the Ulthori dropped back to guard the rear while Kalvan led his better disciplined Hostigi out to draw the gunners' fire, then charge.

The Harphaxi artillery was notoriously slow to re-load; it was safe to use against them tactics that would have been suicidal against Hostigi field guns. Besides, Kalvan knew the only chance of keeping any initiative he'd take with the counterattack was to hit the enemy whenever and wherever he popped up. The Hostigi couldn't lose this battle, Kalvan suspected, but he was damn sure he wasn't going to give the Harphaxi a chance to get too many of their men away.

Those thoughts took Kalvan halfway to the guns. At that point a light piece banged off on the left; the trooper riding behind Major Nicomoth suddenly had no head and Nicomoth had most of the troopers' brains splattered over his armor. The Major shouted, "Down Styphon!" again and put his horse up to a gallop.

Several pistols and arquebuses went off among the Harphaxi guns. One gunner jumped to the breech of his piece to rally his comrades and was promptly shot down. Then Nicomoth, who had drawn half a dozen horse lengths in front of Kalvan, was in among the gunners; he timed his reining-in so well that he sabered two of them before they realized he was within striking distance.

Kalvan swung wide to the left; Major Nicomoth was one of the best swordsmen in Hostigos and would need no help from his King. Somewhat to Kalvan's surprise the smoke and dust were not so thick here and he found himself with a clear shot at a cluster of frantic artillerymen. He aimed a pistol at the man holding the rammer and fired. Not entirely to Kalvan's surprise the gunner went down; here-and-now horsepistols had barrels nearly two-feet long and with rifling added they were more accurate than the Police .38s and Army .45s he'd used back home.

He emptied another saddle pistol and then his boot pistols, before he decided to cease fire and reload. There were no more targets anyway; his Horseguards were all around the guns, taking surrender oaths from the surviving artillerymen. Nicomoth was ordering latecomers to search for the gun teams and a troop of First Dragoons had ridden up from somewhere and was awaiting orders.

Kalvan told them to dismount and send patrols to the tree line behind the guns to see what lay on the other side. It probably wasn't a canyon a thousand feet deep, but Kalvan couldn't see or hear anything to prove otherwise. His scouts were good, but they were hampered by the lack of good local maps; he knew that in the area west and south of Lancaster there was no lack of canyons a hundred feet deep.

Note: As soon as the new University opens its doors, add a class on topographical maps to the curriculum—even if I have to teach it myself!

The appearance of Hostigi dragoons on the other side of the trees was greeted with a burst of musketry. Kalvan's men were closing up when two dragoons staggered back through the trees holding a wounded comrade between them and gasping, "Harphaxi! Harphaxi! The Household Guard and all the Lancers."

"Any other chief captains?" Kalvan was asking when another burst of musketry sounded, then went on to become the steady hammering of massed infantry fire.

Kalvan backed his horse away from the trees in case the Harphaxi were launching an attack and would suddenly burst out into the open at point-blank range. Then he grinned and relaxed. In between the spurts of firing, he could hear the unmistakable cries of "Down Styphon!"

Kalvan dismounted half his Horseguards to support the dragoons and led the rest towards the left in a search for a way through the trees. A cluster of mounted men materialized out of the dust ahead; Kalvan had his pistol drawn before he recognized Hestophes. The General was splattered with blood and his sword was caked with it; the edge looked as if he'd used it to chop wood. His face was covered with a dry reddish mud of blood and dust, but from the way he was grinning Kalvan doubted he was wounded.

"Your Majesty! It had come down to cold steel in the last attack when you hit the Harphaxi from the rear. The attack on Tavern Hill died out, which is just as well; some of the mercenaries found the wine cellar and I wasn't sure if they could tell friend from foe. We used the cavalry to clean out the center in Barn Hill and by then their horses were too blown to charge again. So I left them and the mercenaries in our position and marched the infantry to where I thought we might find you."

"Good work," Kalvan said. "But, please, Hestophes, try not to get killed in the rest of the battle. I'm going to make you a baron if it's the last edict I ever sign."

Hestophes' grin turn into a gape of surprise. After he regained his composure, he said, "Well then, I'll have to keep Your Majesty alive, as well. So, Sire, if you will—"

"Hestophes, if you start playing mother hen, I'll write out the edict here and now and give it to someone to take to Rylla. That way it won't matter if I survive or not."

Kalvan could make out the blush on Hestophes' face, even through the grime. "Very well, Your Majesty. I also picked up a Hostigi militia regiment, somewhere over there," he added, with a wave to the northwest. "Captain Lysentes met the wrong end of a halberd, I didn't want to leave them alone."

"Damn!" Kalvan said.

Lord Lysentes hadn't been any military genius, but he'd been intelligent enough to learn. He'd also kept his eye on his uncle, Baron Sthentros, to make sure the Baron didn't do something stupid out of jealousy of Kalvan. Lysentes had kept an eye on Sthentros without Kalvan, Skranga or Klestreus having to do anything that would ruffle the feathers of the Hostigi nobility.

This was no time to think about politics, not in the middle of a battle, even if he was Great King and politics was part of the job. Kalvan listened to the fight on the other side of the trees and discovered both the firing and the shouts of "Down Styphon!" were dying away.

"Let's join the infantry."

By the time they'd done that the Hostigi were no longer entirely infantry; a troop of the Second Royal Horseguards and most of the First Dragoons had joined in the final stages of the fight, helping to keep the enemy penned. The Hostigi musketeers fired volley after volley into the Harphaxi position, cutting them to pieces. Soon afterward, the last of the Harphaxi infantry died or surrendered; the halberdiers of the Harphaxi Household Guard mostly died. A few surviving infantrymen were running off to the south and Kalvan had to hold Nicomoth from turning his troopers loose on them.

"From the dust clouds I'd say the Harphaxi rearguard is somewhere off there." It struck Kalvan that this battle might be known forever after to its veterans as the Battle of Somewhere off There. "Besides, I think we're going to have visitors here in a little while." He pointed to a glittering mass of heavy cavalry on the hillside about a mile to the east. From this side of the copse, the fields hadn't yet been scoured bare by the marching armies and the dust was less choking.

"That must be the Royal Lancers of Hos-Harphax. Their honor won't let them leave the field without charging us."

Nicomoth's reply was a blissful smile. The idea of crossing swords with the highest nobility of a Great Kingdom was irresistible. Not even the treasures of Balph could have tempted him into riding off the field now.

Not that it would take some lobster-headed notion of honor to produce an attack on the Hostigi. As far as Prince Philesteus would be able to see, Kalvan's force of infantry was the primary obstacle to the retreat of thousands of Harphaxi to the north and east, not to mention being no match for a charge by heavy cavalry. Kalvan wished he had about a thousand more cavalry of his own, preferably under Phrames—and where was the Count anyway?

At least he could hope that knightly quarrels over precedence would delay the Harphaxi charge until he was ready to receive it. Certainly, Hestophes was trying to be in three places at once, organizing the position with five six-pounders and the Hostigi Militia on the right. Five regiments and ten to twelve mercenary companies to hold the center; Kalvan with the Horseguards and dragoons on the left by the trees. The infantry were arranged in lines of staggered squares of musketeers and pikemen, with the halberdiers in among the musketeers for stiffening.

Damn the smiths for dragging their feet on standard fittings for bayonets so that proper ring bayonets were at least a year away! Maybe plug bayonets would be worthwhile after all; every infantryman carried a knife of some sort...

Distant trumpets sounded and sunlight flamed on dancing lance tips and silvered and gilded armor suddenly on the move. The Royal Lancers were charging. Behind them came five squadrons of the Royal Harphaxi Pistoleers, each with a red-bordered yellow sash and an armored gauntlet holding a pistol followed by a thousand mercenary cavalry, half with lance and half with pistol and musketoon. The total was about thirty-five hundred heavy cavalry, most of it the cream of the Harphaxi Army. The front rank of the Harphaxi line was a riot of color; each lance had its own pennon and any nobleman of the rank baron or above had his own personal banner carried by a man-at-arms. Kalvan imagined the Harphaxi line looked very much like that of the French at Crécy or Agincourt before the English longbowmen went to work.

Hestophes had taken a position among the guns on the left. When the Lancers were eight hundred yards away his sword flashed down and all five guns let fly at once. *Long range for case shot*, Kalvan thought—then saw Harphaxi chargers bowled over in a way that told him that they were firing round

shot. Hestophes must have been gambling on the six-pounders' rate of fire to let him get off a few salvos of round shot before the Harphax rode up close enough to use case shot. Kalvan only hoped the gunners could do the job.

Hestophes hit the lancers with two salvos of round shot before switching to case. Between the roars of the cannons Kalvan could hear the screams of wounded men and horses. The Lancers left at least eighty men and horses behind and briefly spread out to avoid trampling their casualties. The more optimistic among them couched their lances.

Kalvan hoped Hestophes hadn't accidentally scared them into dispersing so much they'd make a less vulnerable target for the guns, then saw he needn't have worried. The first two ranks were thickening up again into a solid wall of flesh and armor, decorated with crests and coats-of-arms. Every noble house in Hos-Harphax must have a son or nephew in the charge, he thought, and every house must want its banner first into the Hostigi lines.

Five hundred yards, four hundred—Kalvan saw the Lancers wore full armor, like Fifteenth Century knights. They were magnificent; any back home museum director would have died of joy at the sight of such a collection of pristine armor.

The Lancers themselves were about to die of something else—being a hundred years out of date for a charge against massed, disciplined infantry with muskets and pikes. Three hundred yards, two hundred—

"Down Styphon!"

The six-pounders crashed. Sunlight blazed into Kalvan's eyes from pike points and halberd heads swinging into fighting position. Then a thousand muskets and five hundred arquebuses left fly so nearly at once that the sound hammered Kalvan's ears like single gigantic discharge. The Harphaxi line was a target a blind man couldn't have missed; it was so densely packed that it not only couldn't evade but also blocked the riders behind it when it went down. The whole leading third of the Lancers fell into a hideous tangle of men and horses, mostly fallen, many writhing and screaming, a few already silently being crushed to pulp under flailing hooves and rolling bodies. A suit of armor was little protection if a one-ton horse mad with pain rolled over it.

The Harphaxi left tried to wheel and face the guns. They took another salvo of case shot at no more than two hundred yards while they were wheeling, but the survivors continued to charge the guns. *What magnificent folly!* thought Kalvan. By then the rightmost infantry regiment, Queen Rylla's Foot was moving forward to support the battery and stiffen the militia. *That regiment is definitely going to get some kind of unit citation.* Its muskets tore up the Harphaxi flank while the artillery hammered them in front and the attack melted away.

This left a bend that was almost a gap in the Hostigi line and Kalvan saw Hestophes riding back and forth, shifting the King's Horseguards to cover the breaks. For about three minutes, only three of the five regiments were firing into the main body of the Harphaxi. Kalvan drew his sword, ready to lead the cavalry down to the aid of the infantry if the Harphaxi got to close quarters. Not all the dismounted men were dead or even disabled, and they were marching forth with a determination that would have been heroic if hadn't been so completely suicidal.

Kalvan quickly saw the infantry didn't need help. The halberdiers of the King's Lifeguard were moving out into the open, swinging their axe-heads enthusiastically. This kept the ranks of Hostigi arquebusiers and musketeers from shooting, but not the rifle-armed marksmen in each company. They dropped back and aimed fire on any Harphaxi who wasn't being engaged by a halberdier.

Meanwhile, the hammering of the Harphaxi continued, with the artillery now firing on the flank and the musketeers to their front. Kalvan saw one splendidly armored man-at-arms lose an arm to a case shot, have a leg crushed under his horse, crawl out to be hit in the face by a musket ball and blinded, and be finished off by a halberd blow that split both his helm and his head wide open.

Kalvan thought of five generations of Hapsburg and Burgundian knights dying miserably under the pikes and halberds of the Swiss; he hoped it wouldn't take the heavy cavalry that long to wise up here-and-now—even if their stupidity might make his job easier. He didn't want to watch too many more battles like this one.

The Royal Lancers had lost too many captains to allow them to organize for another charge, but their honor would not let them retreat. The Royal Pistoleers and most of the mercenary cavalry weren't so badly hit, although too far out of effective range to do much harm with their pistols and musketballs. Kalvan saw several of their captains organizing a charge, using the Lancers as a shield to cover their movement. He ordered the First Royal Horseguard to mount up.

The cannons were firing independently now. Kalvan hoped their fireseed was holding out.

As the Pistoleers and the mercenaries began to work their way forward, they began to add surviving Lancers to their strength. They were moving slowly; the carnage around them and the surviving Lancers absorbed most of the Hostigi firepower. Kalvan saw Hestophes signaling frantically to the trumpeters to sound the recall so they could pull the maddened halberdiers out of the line of fire.

The King's Lifeguards closest to the trumpeters responded first and quickly withdrew. Any of the other halberdiers couldn't or didn't want to hear and died in the first salvo. For once the Harphaxi got off lightly. Kalvan saw now that they were pressing home their charge at his center. Hestophes hadn't been sitting on his hands; the pikemen stood in ranks six deep, with the musketeers and arquebusiers in the rear. Hestophes guns fired a last ragged salvo; the Harphaxi line shuddered briefly, then crashed into the Hostigi pikes.

The pike line wavered, buckled for a moment at the center, then stiffened as the rear ranks reformed. The musketeers ran up and down the files, but their effect was diminished by their reduced fire. The artillery didn't dare fire for fear of hitting friend as well as foe. A few halberdiers were fighting in the front ranks, but too many had been killed during the withdrawal. Only the King's Second Lifeguards had any great numbers of halberdiers left but they were pinned down on the right, keeping the Harphaxi from taking Hestophes' six-pounders and turning them on the Hostigi.

The entire Hostigi center was being pushed into a giant crescent as the men in the middle slowly gave way before the point-blank fire of the Royal Pistoleers. Some of the musketeers were picking up fallen pikes or using swords like Spanish sword and buckler men, but not nearly as successfully. It said a lot for the *esprit de corps* and Hestophes' ability as a commander, but Kalvan could see they weren't going to contain the Harphaxi press for long.

Kalvan wished fervently that Count Phrames or *somebody* would come charging through the trees like the US Cavalry, but he knew it wasn't in the cards. It was up to him with his little cavalry force to turn the battle or face the first major defeat of the day. He didn't need to remind himself how little Hos-Hostigos could afford that.

Kalvan now commanded about two hundred of the Royal Horseguards as well as the First Dragoons with nearly their full strength of two-hundred mounted pikemen and two hundred mounted musketeers

and the surviving Ulthori heavy horse. He divided the dragoons, sending the pikemen behind the Hostigi lines to reinforce the beleaguered center, leaving two-thirds of the musketeers to remain behind to hold the present position. The sixty best riders among the musketeers were about to become temporary light cavalry. Kalvan convinced the Horseguards to give up their extra pistols by giving the musketeer captain the two from his boot tops.

In the few minutes it took to give the orders and mount up, the Hostigi center had begun to look like a classic double-envelopment. It would have been one, too, if the pike line hadn't been in so much danger of breaking. With reinforcements in the right places and Kalvan's small cavalry force to close the noose, they just might pull it off.

If they'd didn't—well, he hoped that Harmakros and Phrames had learned their lessons well. Rylla's and his unborn child's life depended upon it. For his big roll of the dice, Kalvan decided to ignore Nicomoth's protests and lead the charge himself. The sudden appearance of Great King Kalvan, or the "Daemon Kalvan" as the Styphoni were calling him, just might give the Hostigi a needed psychological edge. Dralm only knew, they needed any and every kind of edge they could get now!

He raised a saber in one hand and a rifled pistol in the other.

"Down Styphon!"

Thunderous shouts of "Kalvan!" and "Hostigos!" rose from behind him and then the even more thunderous sound of hundreds of horses on the move. The Hostigi and their horses were comparatively fresh; they hit the Harphaxi rear like a blacksmith's hammer striking soft steel. The Harphaxi line wavered and buckled as horse-pinned troopers tried to turn their mounts. For a moment, Kalvan's worst fear was that the Hostigi cavalry might push the Harphaxi right through the weakening pike line. Then he saw the Harphaxi rear going from tightly packed to crushed. The pikes were holding; the jaws of double-envelopment were closing.

Two or three companies of Harphaxi mercenaries managed to escape before the jaws snapped shut. "Dralm blast-it!" Kalvan cried. He'd wanted to trap them all.

Suddenly he was in the thick of it: the first four men Kalvan killed didn't even realize he was behind them; others knew but had no room to fight, nor any place to run. It was like one of the Old West buffalo hunts, with the buffalo hunters circling the herd and slaughtering them with Sharps' rifles, except the Harphaxi stayed in their saddles and kept fighting until they were shot off their mounts, falling and jerking to join the writhing and frozen bodies on the bloody churned ground—which to Kalvan looked like the dumping ground of every butcher shop and morgue in the Northern Kingdoms!

At some point, Hestophes ordered the surviving halberdiers of the King's Lifeguard into the press. Those mercenaries who could surrendered, but many couldn't make themselves heard through the screams of dying men and horses. What remained of the Lancers and Pistoleers refused to surrender; some cut down any mercenary within reach who dared take Galzar's Oath; since they wouldn't surrender and couldn't attack, they did the only thing they could do—they died in droves.

Hestophes rode up to Kalvan as the battle was grinding down to a close. He was no longer grinning, in fact, his face looked as if a grin would crack it. He shook his head slowly. "I feel like a boy drowning kittens." Then he added, "We do have a few prisoners. Two of them said they saw Prince Philesteus go down after a halberd struck his head and split his skull."

"We'll want to make a search for his body," Kalvan said. He was thinking of Charles the Bold of

Burgundy, who died in a similar fashion from a Swiss halberd at the Battle of Nancy. Kalvan didn't want a generation of pretenders, as had happened in Burgundy, claiming to be the 'dead' Prince and heir to the Iron Throne of Hos-Harphax, then raising armies, or at the least making trouble.

"If we find his body, I want it sent back to King Kaiphranos with all due honor."

No need to remind a veteran like Hestophes that Prince Philesteus might be a little hard to recognize after being hacked down and trampled. At least the Prince had died an 'honorable' death; he certainly wouldn't have wanted to live to mull over what an idiot he'd been.

III

Except for the search party, Kalvan and Hestophes kept their men in formation. This provoked some grumbling, since even the Hostigi veterans were tempted by the awe-inspiring amount of loot the dead Lancers and Pistoleers represented—to say nothing of possible ransoms for the wounded and captive noblemen. The grumbling ceased when a cloud of dust from the north signaled the approach of another large mounted force. Everyone was tired and thirsty, and the musketeers were down to about five rounds apiece. So if this was a fresh enemy force...

It turned to be Prince Armanes with his Nyklosi heavy cavalry and a thousand mercenary horse. Phrames was with him; he'd had his horse shot out from under him early in the counterattack and sprained a wrist as well, making it hard for him to catch another one.

Phrames' arrival also supplied the problem of what to do with Prince Armanes. The Prince had advanced to join Kalvan without waiting for orders from Harmakros, or even bothering to find out if Harmakros needed his help more than Kalvan. Apparently, Armanes thought that once Hestophes no longer needed his rear protected and Harmakros had attacked, he could go the most "honorable" part of the battlefield...under the eye of his Great King.

What Kalvan had here was a problem not of tactics but of diplomacy. It was a problem that he would have rather have put off until the shooting stopped. But there was no way to do that—and no easy solution, either. Sending Prince Armanes back in disgrace without his cavalry would be an impossible insult. Sending his cavalry with him would simply keep them marching for another hour, wearing out their horses without meeting an enemy. Keeping them here would leave Harmakros with no one guarding his back except for the reserves, which didn't have a first class commander. However, Kalvan now had one to spare.

"Count Phrames, you will ride back north and take command of the reserves, under Harmakros. He will be facing the Zarthani Knights before long, if he isn't already, so keep your men together and take them all."

"Except for enough to guard the baggage?"

"Of course." Kalvan said. *Great Dralm, I must be getting tired to forget that !* Sarrask of Sask had never stopped complaining about the looting of his baggage by mercenary company at the Battle of Fyk.

"Spare mercenaries, but take their Oath to Galzar. Regular Harphaxi troops are to be guarded closely. The Harphaxi levies—I believe the best thing to do is to strip them of arms and armor and send them home."

Phrames grimaced as if he smelled something bad. "That will be turning them loose on their own people, Sire."

"Not without weapons, it won't be. Besides, better them looting Harphaxi farms than eating our rations." He doubted that many would ever see their homes again; those that weren't shot by farmers would either die of starvation or at the hands of bandits and thieves. There would be little peace in Hos-Harphax this fall.

"Very true, Your Majesty."

Phrames turned away; Kalvan almost called him back to remind him to leave some men holding the West Gap to maintain communication between the two now widely separated wings of the Army of the Harph. Then he sighed and tried to spit in an unsuccessful effort to get the dust out of his mouth. A quick pull from his jack of wine helped more. If Harmakros and Phrames didn't know enough by now to do that without being ordered, then he was completely wrong about both of them.

Right now, what he wanted to do was sit down in some shade in soft grass and drink water until he could hear it slosh inside. He looked past the acres of Harphaxi corpses to the hillside beyond. The grass looked nice and green, and there were trees around an abandoned farmhouse that would surely have a well...

EIGHTEEN

I

"The ford is picketed, Captain."

"Styphoni?"

"None that I can see on either bank, sir. In fact, there's nobody at all on the far bank; on our side there's just a half company of Harphax City Militia."

Captain Phidestros felt he had cause to sigh with relief. With nothing but fifty or so apprentices and stableboys to bar the passage of the Iron Company and no sign of rain, the way across the Harph was as sure as a captain could hope.

Phidestros spurred Snowdrift down the road toward the riverbank, Geblon and his six guards falling in behind. He made no effort at silence or concealment; against these bunglers either would be likely to get him taken for an enemy. A clash of arms would do the Iron Company little damage, but might result in the wholesale slaughter of the Militia, and that might prove embarrassing when he returned to Harphax City. Besides, there was little sport in spearing fish in a barrel.

"Ho! Who—who is it?" came from the cluster of figures on the riverbank. Several of them were wearing surcoats with the Harphax City coat of arms, a black portcullis on a yellow field, but most of them were

dressed in worn leather jacks or peasant's garb. They looked like a flimsy collection of scarecrows that'd have a hard time not being blown away by the first stiff breeze.

"The Iron Company of Captain Phidestros in the service of Great King Kaiphranos. Let us pass."

This exchange took Phidestros over the best part of the remaining distance to the riverbank, where two men stepped out into the road. One carried an antique arquebus, the other worse a rusty back-and-breast and carried a drawn sword.

"I am Captain Habros of the Cordwainers Guild Arquebusiers. What is your business here?" He was looking beyond Phidestros as he spoke, at the head of the Iron Company now in sight on the road.

"To cross the Harph."

Habros took a deep breath. "I have orders to let no one pass without permission."

"Whose permission?" If Habros took too many deep breaths, Phidestros was going to demonstrate how meaningless permission was by shooting him dead where he stood. "Nobody is giving or withholding permission for anything. At least, I haven't heard that anybody who could is still alive and free."

It began to dawn on Phidestros that the Militia stationed here, far away from the fighting, might not have heard the full tale of the day's fighting and the utter destruction of the Harphaxi Army. So he told it briefly, without going into detail or venting his rage at the follies he'd seen, such as the advance through the Middle Gap and the mad charge of the Royal Lancers. He did not even mention that Prince Philesteus was known to be dead and Duke Aesthes, his tail tucked underneath like a cur, was riding flat-out back to Harphax City, merely saying that he had not been easy in his mind about the safety and location of either for some time.

By the time he had finished, Captain Habros was noticeably paler, even in the fading light. "I—we had not heard such..." He swallowed. "We had heard that the battle was not going well from some of the City Militia Bands retreating over the ford, about four candles ago. They said they'd gone far enough to see Styphon's Own Guard retreating or falling back before the False Hostigi, but no other friendly troops. We also heard tales of peasants being up in arms against us."

The "City Bands" must be part of the five thousand or so Harphaxi rearguard who'd turned around and started back toward the safety of the City without firing a shot, even in support of the Styphoni. They certainly wouldn't have seen enough of the battle to describe it clearly. Those Harphaxi who'd not only survived but also escaped from the north could tell the whole tale, but they'd be moving farther inland rather than toward the Harph where they risked being swept up by Hostigi cavalry.

As for the peasant uprising, there at least Phidestros could do these poor wretches a good turn. "We took two of those 'peasants' ourselves and questioned them—then hanged them. They're not even Harphaxi! They were Ulthori fishermen, little more than bandits, that King Kalvan sent downriver to make as much mischief as they could. Guard your horses and weapons, but don't fear the peasants."

At least, not until word of this day's disaster spreads. Even Great Kings have been overthrown by peasant uprisings after cock-ups like this.

"Thank you. But—how am I to let you pass, when my orders...? The Captain's voice trailed off as Phidestros drew his pistol and cocked it, along with his guard."

"By standing aside, and letting us do so."

Even a blind man could have counted the odds against the picket by listening to the stamping of horses and cocking of pistols all around the post.

"Pass, friend. May Galzar and Tranth be with you," Habros said with as much dignity as he could muster under the circumstances, then waved his men away from the crossing with his sword. A dozen Iron Company troopers rode down to the bank and dismounted. Those not told off for horse-holders began uncoiling ropes from their saddlebags and tying them into a single long line to be stretched across the Harph as a guide.

Phidestros would have given a good deal to be one of the line-stretchers. Not only would it be a good example for the Company, it would give him the closest thing to a bath he could expect for a moon-quarter. However, his knee would not let him do heavy work in the chest-deep water of the swift-flowing Harph, and that was the end of it.

Thank Galzar, there was also an end in sight to the Iron Company's ordeal. By the time night was halfway through they would be on the west bank of the river, free to ride anywhere their horses would take them—and with no Hostigi following behind.

That had been Phidestros' only goal since they'd ridden away from the crossroads where the Royal Lancers had died almost to a man. His company had been among the mercenaries who had followed the Royal Pistoleers over the ruins of the Lancers in their futile attack against the Hostigi pike line. Kalvan's ruse had been perfect; the Hostigi line gave way until the Harphaxi were almost surrounded, then he drew the noose tight. If the Iron Company hadn't been to the left of Kalvan's charge, they would be feeding the carrion birds right now. Instead he'd seen what was about to happen and escaped with about two hundred of his men, but he'd still left thirty good men behind, and some of Lamochares' men had deserted.

He'd made up for all the losses and then some, with a whole new company and fifty-odd men who'd ridden in by twos and threes, all looking for a captain who would take them to safety and was not disposed to ask too many questions. He'd had them all give oaths to Galzar and added them to the Iron Company's Muster List. The few that refused to swear to the Iron Company were sent packing with the flat of his sword against their horse's flanks.

Phidestros had entered the battle with three hundred men and one guns; he'd be leaving it with no guns, but four hundred men, reasonably well armed and well mounted. Above all, they were ready to follow him anywhere. The question now was—where?

The only friendly army within reach was Grand Master Soton's Army of the Pirsystros, and they were a five-day's ride across doubtfully friendly country. Yet Phidestros was not ready to turn bandit and see his command fall apart. He saw no hope of safety or employment in Hos-Harphax itself. It would be a notable gift from the gods if the Harphaxi got back from today's battle a single gun or more than one man in three. It was enough to make even a non-believer begin to *believe* in demons!

There was nothing and nobody left in Hos-Harphax to stop Kalvan from marching up to the walls of Harphax City and summoning Kaiphranos the Timid (probably after today destined to be known as Kaiphranos the Witless) to give him terms of surrender. Nor would there be a thing Kaiphranos could do but hide under his wife's bed.

Before that happened, Phidestros wanted to be well away from anyplace to be covered by Kalvan's

terms. He hadn't heard that Prince Sarrask of Sask rode with the Great King's host, but he knew that the Prince had a long memory and an unforgiving temper. The Great King was known for rewarding his friends, and if Sarrask asked as a reward the head of one Captain Phidestros, the man who'd looted his baggage train at the Battle of Fyk...well, so be it.

"Captain! The first man's across!"

Phidestros strained his eyes into the gathering darkness and saw a dim figure on the far bank shaking himself like a dog as he waved his arms. The Iron Company sent up a cheer until he and the petty-captains shouted them into silence for fear of attracting unwanted attention.

II

"That's all of them?" Kalvan asked. He'd counted no more than a thousand men in the line of bedraggled and mud-smeared Harphaxi prisoners standing in the torchlight.

"All the ones we fished out, Your Majesty," the mercenary captain said. "I think the Mobile Force picked up more somewhere over there." A callused hand pointed off into the darkness. "There's a lot more out in the swamp, but Regwarn's Caverns have them now." Which was a polite way of saying that even Great King Kalvan would be wasting his breath if he ordered the mercenaries any farther into the swamp.

Kalvan wasn't going to order anything of the kind; it must be nearly midnight, and from the way he felt himself, he was surprised that *anyone* in the Army of Hos-Hostigos was still on his feet or even awake. The heavy fighting had ended about three o'clock in the afternoon, except against the Zarthani Knights in the north; the mopping-up and pursuit had gone on until well after dark.

At least it had gone on in the south, against the left flank of the Harphaxi. In the north, the Zarthani Knights and Temple Guardsmen, surrounded and out-manned, had nearly died to the last man, but in the process they'd fought Harmakros and Phrames to a standstill. Most of the Harphaxi right who hadn't been bagged already had escaped through the Middle Gap, at least five thousand men. Not a single gun, though, and Harmakros' messenger reported that the Gap was choked with abandoned wagons as well as discarded weapons and armor. It was a rabble, not an army that was fleeing toward Harphax City from the Heights.

The one part of the Harphaxi left that got away did so in better order. Four or five thousand of the rearguard had been sighted on the Great Harph Road shortly after Phrames rode north. Before Kalvan could deploy to receive them, he'd had to finish the slaughter at Ryklos Farm. The only survivors of that engagement were a band of mercenaries led by a big man on a white charger who appeared to enjoy a charmed life.

By the time the massacre was complete, the Harphaxi rearguard had been warned of the danger. They'd turned and departed with more haste than dignity, although they didn't disintegrate into a rabble, thanks to a Temple Band of Styphon's Own Guard who stood fast and died to a man. By the time they'd finished dying, Kalvan's cavalry were too blown for rapid pursuit, his infantry nearly out of ammunition and there were too many miscellaneous groups of fugitives roaming about who needed rounding up.

With no commanders, half their number killed or taken prisoner, the Harphaxi Army was an army in name only.

One of the largest bands of Harphaxi survivors had decided that the dry weather of the past week had made it safe to try wading the swamp on either side of Hogwallow Creek. The ones who'd lived to learn they were wrong were now being fished out by the Hostigi and packed off to an improvised POW compound where Kalvan had captured the four big bombards.

Many of the mercenaries were oath-bound now and under light guard. He'd give them an opportunity to take Hostigi colors after things settled down. He needed to talk with Uncle Wolf Tharses to learn whether or not they would *beallowed* under here-and-now union rules to fight against the Styphoni on their way from Hos-Ktemnos. The Harphaxi mercenaries weren't directly under Styphon's House's authority since Kaiphranos and his nobles were paying their salary; however, the money was indirectly coming from the Temple. He just wasn't sure how Galzar's stewards would see it.

He looked around for someone to send for the Uncle Wolf and spotted Phrames. He hated to send a General to do a Lieutenant's job, but—with Nicomoth on his way to Tarr-Hostigos with a dispatch to Rylla chronicling their victory over the Harphaxi—the Count was his acting aide-de-camp. He gave Phrames his order and in less than a few minutes he returned with Uncle Wolf Tharses, whose mail shirt and surcoat were so blood splattered he feared the priest was wounded.

"I'm fine, Sire. I was tending to the wounded; no end to them this day. A great victory for Hostigos and a bad defeat for the vile priesthood of Styphon's House." The highpriest spat a wad of tobacco on the ground.

Usually, Tharses was usually more circumspect when describing the priestly competition, so Kalvan wondered what had gotten his goat. "What's bothering you?"

"Those damn-blasted Red Hand! They murdered a company of Hostigi prisoners when they realized their retreat was cut off. Styphoni dogs! And I'm oath-bound to treat *all* prisoners—even those devil-spawned heathen! While I was tending to one Guardsman, the blackguard tried to stab me with his poniard! He called me an impious worshipper of a false god—Galzar no less! A curse on Styphon and all his vile minions!"

Tharses was all but foaming at the mouth. Kalvan could see religious war that he feared reaching its roots into fertile soil.

"What we just fought was but the child of the army that's on its way from Hos-Ktemnos, Highpriest Tharses. I have a question for you regarding the Law of Galzar."

The Uncle Wolf visibly calmed himself down. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"We have several thousand Harphaxi mercenary prisoners who have surrendered and taken oaths not to fight against Hostigos. While according to the Law we are not allowed to use them to guard the Harphaxi regulars, I want to know if we can we swear them into Our service against the Styphoni army that now calls itself the Holy Host."

Tharses turned beet red. "Unholy Host would be a better name. Sire, Galzar's Law states that sworn mercenaries, once captured, may not actively take arms against their former employer, in this case Great King Kaiphranos of Hos-Harphax or his vassals. However, once captured the mercenaries are free to

swear oaths to their captives should this be done willingly and overseen by Galzar's priests—as has been done this day. The questions we must ask now are these: Is the army coming from Hos-Ktemnos, that calls itself the Holy Host, from Hos-Harphax? Or in any manner part of the Harphaxi Royal Army? Or under command of the Harphaxi Royal Army? Or being fought by Harphaxi Royal soldiers? Or being mustered out or paid for by the Great King of Hos-Harphax or his Princes? Are any of these questions true?"

"Not in any way that I can discern, Highpriest Tharses."

Tharses smiled, a grim tight-lipped smile. "Nor I, Your Majesty. Therefore, it is my Judgment, as Highpriest of Galzar of all Hos-Hostigos and the army of Hos-Hostigos, that the former Harphaxi mercenaries are not under the command of the Holy Host and are free to fight under Hostigi colors—Galzar's Judgment."

Phrames looked like someone who'd just seen a rabbit pulled out of a hat for the first time.

Kalvan returned the Uncle Wolf's smile with one of his own. "Thank you for your judgment, Highpriest Tharses. I will thank Galzar at the next shrine. You may return to your duties."

With that pronouncement from Tharses, the Army of the Harph has just replaced most of its casualties, and then some. Now, the next crisis: what to do with the thousands of regular Harphaxi prisoners?

He decided to carry out his original plan of releasing most of the disarmed Harphaxi prisoners tomorrow, after the Hostigi had brought up supplies, tended their wounded and policed up the battlefield. Right now it was littered with discarded weapons, which might tempt a disarmed Harphaxi soldier to rearm himself and make trouble—if not for the Hostigi at least for his own people. Phrames was right; there was no point in making the lot of the losing civilians any more miserable than it was already.

Kalvan sat on his horse as his soldiers bound their prisoners. Even allowing for their bedraggled condition, these regulars were like too many of the Harphaxi troops Kalvan had seen this day: "...discarded unjust serving-men, younger sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters and ostlers trade fall'n; the cankers of a calm world and a long peace; ten times more dishonorable ragged than an old-faced ancient" There'd been plenty of those all right, as well as a few boys not much older than Harmakros' son. Like Falstaff before them, the Harphaxi captains could say: "If I be not ashamed of my soldiers I am a soused gurnet. I have misused the king's press damnably"—not to mention losing their Great King a battle.

Kalvan didn't recall what a gurnet was, but he certainly recalled seeing some of the Harphaxi captains properly soused. Not just the captains, either; he'd helped round up about a hundred mercenaries who'd found a wagon load of beer and drunk until they could barely stand, let alone fight.

That was one of the few times Kalvan had to restrain his men from killing prisoners—when they discovered the beer was all gone!

III

It took Kalvan nearly an hour to grope his way through the aftermath of the battle to Army HQ. By the time he saw its campfires in the distance, he knew that either he was getting a second wind or he was too tired to sleep. Just as well—it never hurt royal dignity to stay awake until your generals had finished reporting.

Headquarters proper had been moved into the cellar of a Tudor-style manor house, once a fine, fortified dwelling—now little more than a ruin above ground. It stood in a patch of second-growth timber, and so many Hostigi had pitched tents and lit campfires in and around the trees that Kalvan had to dismount and lead his horse the last hundred yards for fear of treading on a sleeping soldier.

Kalvan groped his way down the dark stairs to the torch lit War Room and was pulling off his gloves when he noticed a pile of bloodstained bandages on the corner of the map table, and under it a pair of boots that had obviously been cut off someone's feet. A policeman's instinct for something being wrong, as well as a soldier's, had him uneasy before he saw the faces of the men in the room. The generals were all there except Hestophes, which was strange in itself considering how badly they must need sleep, and—

"What's wrong?"

Everybody looked at everyone else, waiting for someone to speak out. About the time the silence was beginning to grow uncomfortable, Count Phrames stepped forward. "We've just received a dispatch from the Army of the Besh."

Kalvan took a close look at the grim faces surrounding him and sat down upon an upended barrel.

"It's from Prince Ptosphes."

Kalvan sighed. *Praise Dralm!* he thought. At least he wouldn't have to tell his wife her father was dead or mortally wounded. Phrames looked as shaken as if were about to face a band of Styphon's Red Hand by himself. "Out with it, man!" Kalvan said, much louder than he'd intended.

"The messenger told us that Ptosphes lost a big battle to the Styphoni at Tenabra!" Now that it was finally out in the open, Phrames looked as if he'd just cast off a hundred-pound sack.

"It was no shame to the Prince," Harmakros said hastily.

"Of course not," Kalvan replied, moving his hand through the air as if to push the words away.

"It was treachery most foul," Harmakros continued. "Balthar the Black of Beshta broke out of our left flank and Soton saw the gap." Then they were all trying to talk at once, until Kalvan had to shout for silence. They looked at him with widened eyes, and he realized for the first time that his royal anger had the power to reduce these tough generals and noblemen to guilty schoolboys. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, still less so on top of Phrames' bad news.

"I think one of us should speak for all," Prince Armanes said. He had a bloody bandage around his right ear, and the hair of that temple had been roughly hacked off. "I will yield that honor to General Harmakros."

Kalvan threw the Prince a grateful look for his tact and nodded to Harmakros.

"As the Uncle Wolf told it, Balthar's treachery left a gap in our left flank when his Army turned and ran

from the battlefield. The cowards flew as if their horses had wings. The first troops Grand Master Soton sent through were his mercenary cavalry, but they held it open while he brought up the Knights. When the Zarthani Knights attacked, our left disintegrated. Meanwhile, Chartiphon and Sarrask of Sask drove back the Styphoni left wing under Lord High Marshal Mnephilos and Mnephilos was barely able to rally his Ktemnoi Squares against Chartiphon. Ptosphes ordered the infantry in the center to hold on to the death. They held firm, while the Prince pulled our right back, gathered in the survivors from the left wing, then ordered a retreat."

"Who brought in the news?"

"An Uncle Wolf with an escort. They stole fresh horses as their own died. The priest himself was wounded. He also brought the dispatch from Ptosphes."

"Has anyone read it?"

"No." Harmakros held the dispatch tube as gingerly as though it were filled with hot coals. "It is addressed to Your Majesty."

Kalvan mentally counted to ten, and when that didn't work, to twenty. "The next time Ptosphes, or anyone else, sends a dispatch with bad news, anyone who needs to know what it contains can read it. That means all of you. Please don't ever wait for me when a day or two can make the difference between victory and defeat."

The schoolboy expression was back on their faces as he removed the roll of parchment with Ptosphes' seal on it. "And wake up Hestophes. It's time for a Council of War." He drew his knife and cut through the red wax seal with Ptosphes' crossed halberds insignia stamped into it.

The dispatch told the same story as Harmakros, but in more detail. It struck Kalvan as odd to be reading the tale of a disaster in Ptosphes' usual firm, neat runes; horror stories ought to be scrawled and scribbled. It was a horror story, too, even if it seemed a little less horrible toward the end—

—must commend the good service of Sarrask of Sask. He fought most valiantly on the field, and has done further good work since. Thanks to him, several Saski castles will be properly garrisoned and fit to receive our wounded and defend them. Without his labors, we would have been forced to abandon more than three thousand of our wounded, including Prince Pheblon of Nostor.

I have with me, fit for battle, not more than ten thousand men, the greater part of them cavalry. Two-thirds of our infantry, apart from the loss of the Traitor Balthar's two thousand foot, is taken or slain. We have only six guns left. However, some three thousand mercenary cavalry have fled; some may return to their duty before we have crossed into Sask. Also, Sarrask's plans to defend several Saski castles will force Soton to slow his advance, to blockade them, storm them or even besiege them, a task for which he has as of yet no proper artillery train. Prisoners say that one may be among the reinforcements he is expected to receive in the moon-half, but they are not sure.

"They usually aren't," Kalvan muttered, then apologized when he realized he'd spoken out loud.

I fear that Sask and southern Hostigos will still lie open to the cavalry of the Holy Host, as the Styphoni are calling themselves, particularly the Zarthani Knights under Grand Master Soton. Both, I must admit, have lived up to their reputation. Therefore, I can see no hope for anything but a prompt retreat to Hostigos to prepare for a stand there. With the garrison troops and the reserve militia to add to my strength I may be able to meet Soton and Marshal Mnephilos with not less than fifteen thousand men, but it is clearly urgent that we receive additional strength from the Army of the Harph as soon as Your Majesty can spare them.

"He'll receive the whole Dralm-blasted army," Kalvan said, then read the last paragraph:

I have prepared a list of men who have done particularly good service in this battle, so that they or their families may be rewarded by the Throne of Hos-Hostigos. That list I am sending north at once with a messenger who will entrust it to Rylla for safeguarding if I do not survive the retreat.

With most earnest hopes for Your Majesty's continued good health and good fortune, I am:

*Your Obedient Servant
Ptosphes
First Prince of Hostigos
Commander, Army of the Besh*

"Here," Kalvan said, handing the letter to Phrames. "Actually, it's not as bad as I'd feared." This didn't seem to console anybody, but they all took turns with the letter while Kalvan tried to organize his thoughts so that when he had to speak he could give a convincing imitation of a man who knew just what he was talking about.

One decision he'd already taken: all future operations against the Harphaxi were going to have to be canceled. That was irritating to say the least, since that killed the best chance he'd ever have of dictating peace terms to Great King Kaiphranos. With his elder son dead, his younger son fit only to be King of Brothels, his Captain-General a prisoner and his brother, Lysandros, the scheming son of fifty fathers—not to mention an army either nonexistent or useless—Kaiphranos might actually be brought to make peace with Hostigos. Regardless of what Styphon's House wanted, or wished... A precarious peace, to be sure—it would last just as long as Kaiphranos did, and he could literally die any day. Still, peace was better than a war on two fronts—and now it was impossible.

"What I want to know is," Baron Halmoth asked, "who is this Sarrask of Sask that Prince Ptosphes praises so highly? Was this the son-of-a-she-wolf who was promising to impale Ptosphes' and Rylla's heads on pikes outside Tarr-Hostigos?"

"Right!" Phrames echoed.

The late Reverend Morrison would have said Sarrask had been touched by the spirit of the Lord. Any number of English teachers or psychiatrists would have called it "Identification with the Aggressor."

Kalvan thought it was the old adage whereby the schoolyard bully, after being thoroughly whipped by one of his victims, becomes best friends with the boy who beat him. Whatever the reason, it was good to know that Prince Sarrask could now be trusted—even if the price for this revelation was a bit steep!

By the time everyone who could read had finished the letter, Hestophes arrived, looking like a cross between a hibernating bear and a candidate for a vagrancy arrest. Since Hestophes could only read haltingly and Harmakros couldn't read anything other than map symbols and tavern signs, Kalvan read Ptosphes' dispatch to them. *Note: Find a way to get Harmakros and Hestophes to read without damaging their pride.* Kalvan couldn't afford to allow one of his most valuable generals to remain illiterate.

However, it might be difficult because of Harmakros' age, since reading was best taught at a young age. Here-and-now only the nobility and merchants could afford to hire scribes or priests as tutors for their children.

When Kalvan finished briefing Harmakros and Hestophes, he said, "I'd like to spend a day or two here regrouping and planning the best way to relieve Ptosphes and the Army of the Besh. It will also have the advantage of making the Harphaxi panic, since they will assume we are planning the siege of Harphax City. We'll just remain here long enough to pick our march routes, collect the wounded and see what we can do about the captured Harphaxi guns. We've collected something like forty guns, and Ptosphes just lost thirty. If we can bring back just twenty of them, it will help."

"We're going to need more horses for the gun-teams," Colonel Alkides said.

Hestophes was nodding slowly, either in agreement or because he was about to fall asleep again.

"I'll see what I can do, Alkides," Kalvan said. "*I think* we have more horses than we need to cover our own losses. We captured several hundred Harphaxi horses after the battle."

And ten times that dead or grievously wounded on the battlefield, he thought. I feel worse about the dead horses than I do the soldiers we killed; at least, they had a choice. These poor dumb animals—and their screams! I'll be hearing them for the next ten years...

Kalvan rose cautiously to his feet and bent over the map table. For a second he had to brace himself firmly on both legs and with both arms to avoid knocking the table over and setting HQ on fire with the lighted candles and oil lamps. "We'll have to use a march route well to the north of our old one anyway. I doubt there's enough forage left along that route to feed a scrawny pair of oxen. Not being able to go through southern Beshta isn't going to hurt much— But I swear on Dralm's Sacred Staff that Balthar's turn will come as soon as the Styphoni have been destroyed or pushed back to Hos-Ktemnos."

Then Kalvan thought of Harmakros' son, Aspasthar. If the Beshtans found out who the boy was and found Tarr-Locra weakly defended—

"Harmakros, you can send two squadrons of horse under a trusted captain to scout southern Beshta. Find out what the people think. Somewhere around here." Harmakros looked at the map—he was as good at map reading as he was bad at reading runes—then started when he saw where Kalvan's dagger was pointing.

Harmakros let rip with a series of curses that included everything but the kitchen sink in regards to Balthar's privy habits and his questionable family tree. Then he paused, to catch his breath and collect himself. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Harmakros couldn't turn his back on his King, so Kalvan looked away briefly by turning to Alkides and asking if there was enough powder to blow up the Harphaxi guns that were damaged or just plain rusted inside and out, badly enough that the next shot might blow the breech or barrel.

"We've got twelve wagon loads of Styphon's Best, some not worth the horsepower to haul it away."

"Good, use that. We're short of Hostigos fireseed. Save some of it for use with the field guns; we can double-charge them if we need to."

"We'll need to. It'll foul the barrels something awful, but if we have to—"

"For the time being." Kalvan said.

Alkides nodded.

"Now, Phrames, I want you to take two thousand of your best cavalry and four light guns and do a repeat performance of your spring raids. Only this time you'll swing northeast, toward the Agrysi border. Make enough of the spectacle, burn some villages and sack a few towns—"

"But, Your Majesty," Phrames sputtered.

"Yes, I know this isn't how we make friends, and the people losing their homes are not our real enemies. But, after the disaster at Tenabra, it might just keep King Demistophon from joining the fray. And, at the moment, we've got all the enemies we can afford.

"So, make enough of a mess to start the Agrysi worrying and tie down their garrisons, then swing back and rejoin Harmakros after—oh, no more than five days. A moon-quarter, if you can live off the land."

He might hear something from Highpriest Xentos if the raid provoked King Demistophon into action against the Great Council of Dralm. On the other hand, Xentos would also hear something from his Great King if he expected him to run military risks in order to let priests argue. He didn't like what he'd been hearing so far in Xentos' dispatches from Agrys City, but there was little he could do outside of storming the City.

Phrames nodded. His powder-blackened face set in the mask that meant he didn't like making war on civilians but would obey his Great King to the death. Phrames, Kalvan decided, was much too good a man for here-and-now; he really belonged at King Arthur's Round Table with Lancelot and Sir Gawain.

He decided to explain some of his reasoning to aid Phrames' conscience. "We want to make Soton worry about our crossing the Harph and hitting him in the rear, but we can't do that by staying here in Harphax. I'd like to have you lay siege to Harphax City, but I don't have enough troops for both the upcoming battle with the Holy Host and to invest the Harphaxi capital. However, we can help Ptosphes by scaring the Agrysi badly enough that all the Princes and merchants will scream if Great King Demistophon sends one more mercenary or one more pound of fireseed against Hostigos."

Phrames and the general staff either understood or didn't have the strength left to argue. Kalvan realized that if they didn't all get some sleep, the HQ staff of the Army of the Harph were going to be as useless as the beer-sodden mercenaries.

"Now, if you don't all want to be accused of attempted regicide, will one of you get me some food and

wine? Also a bed, if there's any straw left within a day's ride."

He was too tired to eat the unleavened bread and cheese when it arrived, but not to drink the wine or even notice that it was pretty awful. After the wine, he wasn't surprised to find himself falling asleep easily, but he was pleasantly surprised not to have any nightmares.

Apparently, "great murdering battles" were good for *something*.

NINETEEN

I

The Fifth Level conveyor-head rotunda that provided the direct paratemporal link with Fourth Level Aryan-Transpacific, Kalvan's Time-Line, was as large as some commercial depots that Sirna had seen. Inside the rotunda were five domes of metal mesh containing two thirty-foot conveyors, two fifty-foot conveyors and one hundred-footer, the standard for passenger or commercial transport. Baltrov Eldra was standing in front of one of the fifty-footers, giving the Kalvan Study Team new members their final briefing while the University technicians prepared the conveyor for paratemporal transposition.

"So Kalvan had to retreat, with twenty-two captured guns and a lot of other miscellaneous booty, including a hundred thousand ounces of silver, before he started back to Hos-Hostigos. He also added more troops than he lost in the battle; when most of the mercenaries he took prisoner swore oaths to Kalvan after he offered pay each one a signing bonus of five gold Crowns."

"What about the Hostigi mercenaries?" Aranth Saln asked. With his waxed moustache and shaved head, Aranth was so at odds with his companions' appearance he could have been easily mistaken for an outtimer, or a Paratime Policeman on assignment. His only concession to Kalvan's Time-Line was to wear a wig, although he refused to have it bonded to his scalp until they arrived. His specialty was Pre-industrial Military Science. "Weren't they upset about the bonus?"

"No as a victory bonus," Eldra answered, "Kalvan gave everyone in the Hostigi army—mercenaries included—ten Crowns. It made everyone happy—especially the camp followers. Well, everyone except Styphon's House."

"What do you mean?"

"Kalvan took almost half a million ounces of gold from the Styphon's House temples that he burned down and looted on his way through Hos-Harphax so he'll have more than enough gold to replace the bonus money. The desecration of so many of Styphon's temples, as well as the loss of so much gold, set up an uproar that was probably heard in the innermost chamber of Styphon's Great Temple!"

Saln shrugged his shoulders. "A bonus is good morale builders, but it could set a bad precedent."

"Kalvan is more worried about surviving this campaign season, than next years' fighting, since he has to run through the buzz saw of the Holy Host in a ten-day or two. Besides, his victory over the Harphaxi army was a great triumph and his victory speech was just as good."

Several of the Study Team members raised thumbs in appreciation, including Sirna who had watched the recording on the visiscreen with the rest of the team. Kalvan's generous praise for his commanders and soldiers had made every soldier there a part of the Hostigi victory.

When she had everyone's attention again, Eldra returned to her briefing, "Before he started back to Hostigos, Kalvan released Captain-General Duke Aesthes with only a token ransom, to escort Prince Philesteus' body back to Harphax City."

"Of course, of course," Gorath Tran, a tall man with spider-thin limbs, interrupted. "Kalvan couldn't release Aesthes without any ransom at all because that would be an insult, implying the Duke was so incompetent that his services were of no value at all."

"As it happened, they were of value only to Kalvan since over half of the Harphaxi Army is either dead, wounded, captured or surrendered! All Aesthes has to show Great King Kaiphranos for his *services* is his dead son." Eldra mimed Kaiphranos pulling out his hair in clumps.

Sirna thought she spoke somewhat brusquely. Eldra obviously didn't like being interrupted by pointless displays of erudition in her own field. Nor did she appear to like spindly University administrators who took up valuable space that could be better be used by historians or other trained scholars.

"Now Kalvan was free to start for home."

With the point of her dagger, Eldra traced the lines of Kalvan's homeward march on the map. "He didn't need to worry about the Harphaxi, but he took precautions against any move by the Agrysi or the Beshtans.

"To frighten the Agrysi—"

A series of clunks and clanks followed by a burst of electronic beeps and whistles interrupted her.

She thrust her dagger clear through the map into the wooden tabletop. "Can't you work more quietly?"

"Professor, do you want to leave, or don't you?" came the reply from inside the mesh dome. "Besides, that was the next to last test. One more and either this old lady will be ready to go or else you'll have to find another conveyor."

Eldra frowned and Sirna didn't blame her. Styphon's Holy Host was rapidly approaching the borders of Hos-Hostigos and the Hostigi were digging in for a last ditch stand. Any more delays, and the Kalvan Study Team might find themselves in the midst of a battle, or at least in a country overrun with cavalry patrols, from both sides, inclined to shoot first and ask questions later. A day more or less wouldn't have made any difference on a Styphon's House time-line where war was being conducted in the old leisurely pre-Kalvan way, but Kalvan's Time-Line seemed to have discovered—what was the Europo-America words for it—the *blitzkrieg*.

Nor was it helping Eldra's mood that the maintenance tech insisted she use a paper map; a screen display would affect his tests. He explained why and Eldra seemed to be convinced, but Sirna didn't understand more than one word in three. She understood the theory of the Ghaldron-Hesthor Paratemporal Field and the workings of a conveyor well enough to pass her Safety and Emergencies Procedures Test, but anything more, she knew, would always remain arcane knowledge beyond her grasp—rather like Hadron Tharn's financial affairs.

"Why did Kalvan send Count Phrames to the north?" Varnath Lala asked. She was an expert on Pre-industrial Metallurgy, a member of the University's Faculty Council and the oldest person on the Hostigos Kalvan Study Team.

"As I was about to say, Kalvan sent Phrames with a raiding force to frighten the Agrysi and keep them neutral. He did a good job, as far as we can tell. He blew up bridges and minor forts in Thaphigos, looted a Styphon's House temple-farm of forty thousand ounces of gold and ten thousand ounces of silver, freed and armed its slaves and finally met the Household Guard of Thaphigos under the Prince himself in a pitched battle just short of the Phaxos border. The Thaphigi lost about eight hundred men to Phrames' two hundred and Prince Acestocleus was badly wounded. If he dies that will be as good as winning another battle for Kalvan.

"Acestocleus is the son of the man who usurped the Principdom of Thaphigos twenty years ago. The kin of the old Princely House was either executed or driven to exile in Hos-Agrys. King Kaiphranos did nothing more than dither so they moved to Agrys City. They have about five candidates for the crown; two of them with marriage ties to the Agrysi Royal House which has always wanted to add Thaphigos to the Great Kingdom of Hos-Agrys. So, if Prince Acestocleus dies there may be a civil war interrupting the major trade route between Hos-Harphax and Hos-Agrys, possibly even a war between the two Great Kingdoms. This won't be the only case of this kind of trouble in Hos-Harphax, either. It's been thirty years since anybody took King Kaiphranos seriously and the Princes have fallen into the habit of doing more or less as they please."

"I still feel sorry for Kaiphranos," Sankar Trav said, the Team's medico and psychiatrist. "His favorite son is dead, his kingdom's falling apart—"

"And it's his own Dralm-damned fault, so don't waste any tears on him," Aranth Saln said. "Besides, Philesteus knew how to lead a cavalry charge and nothing else. He couldn't have undone the mess his father left behind in a hundred years, even without the Styphon's House/Kalvan war."

"Well, Kaiphranos doesn't exert much influence on events now. The Harphaxi Study Team reports that he's so grief-stricken that he's confined to his bed. There's a nasty rumor going around that a Styphon's House agent has poisoned him.

"But enough of rumors," Eldra went on. "Next, Count Phrames then moved still farther north, through Phaxos. Prince Araxes wouldn't provide him with supplies, but he was able to buy some with the temple-farm loot. Next, he crossed into Nostor, joined up with the reinforcements Prince Pheblon's captain-general was sending, and is now nearly back in Hostigos."

Eldra's dagger traced out another line of march, this one across the Harph into southern Beshta, up the west bank of the Harph and across the Besh River into Hostigos. "That was a detachment sent by Harmakros. They stopped for a day at Tarr-Locra, which is still in Hostigi hands since the castellan remained loyal to Kalvan, but otherwise kept moving. They lived off the land, since Beshta is now enemy territory, and I imagine Prince Balthar will be wanting to ride home and defend his lands."

"Will Soton let him?" Sankar Trav asked.

"My guess would be that Balthar will be expected to stay with his new 'allies' until he proves himself in one more battle," Aranth Saln put in. "Grand Master Soton is a professional soldier and isn't going to give up three or four thousand men to soothe the traitorous Prince's nerves. High Marshal Mnephilos might be more considerate of Balthar's desire to defend his lands, but

he's from Hos-Ktemnos where the Princes know their place in the scheme of things. I doubt if he will go strongly against Soton in this matter."

"That should keep Balthames of Sashta faithful to Kalvan," Sirna said.

"Absolutely," Eldra said. "Balthames hates his older brother so much he'd swear black was white to annoy him. Also, he may harbor hopes of being proclaimed Prince of Beshta after Balthar is deposed and executed, which he certainly will be if Kalvan wins the coming battle."

"What are his chances of that?" Sirna asked, hoping her question didn't sound too stupid.

Aranth Saln made a nasty little chuckle. "Not very good, since he's as big a weasel as Prince Balthar is a back-stabbing rat! From this point on, Balthames won't be able to go to the princely privy without one of Skranga's agents stepping on his cape."

Sirna shook her head. Great Kingdom politics was almost as complicated as the academic feuds in the Outtime History Department back at Dhergabar U.

Eldra was now discussing how Kalvan had sent Harmakros back to Hostigos with the Mobile Force to reinforce Prince Ptosphes when the maintenance tech let out a whoop of triumph.

"Done, Citizens! As soon as I call the operators in, you'll be ready to go."

Under his breath, but loud enough that everyone could hear, Lathor Karv said, "I doubt that Verkan Vall or his errand boy Ranthar Jard have to wait here three hours for an obsolete conveyor to be brought on line."

Sirna noticed that Aranth Saln's body language showed the only sign of disagreement among the knowing smiles and nodding heads of the Team. Eldra acted as if she hadn't heard Lathor's comment. Sirna wonder how Eldra viewed the Paratime cops and Home Time Line politics in general; probably only as it affected her opportunities to travel outtime. Like so many Home Timeliners, Eldra rarely returned to First Level, using it primarily as a supply base for her outtime forays.

The professor certainly appeared too much the maverick to be a Management Party supporter, with their devotion to the status quo and their complete support of Paratime Police policy. For the same reason one wouldn't expect her to be a member of the Opposition Party, who were just as predictable and rigid in their resistance to the Paratime Police as Management was in its support. At a guess, she probably leaned toward the Right Moderates with their theme of "the appeal to reason."

By the time the two conveyor operators had taken their seats at the controls, Sirna and her teammates were seated on the passenger couches. Sirna looked up at the metal mesh dome which would soon disappear into the indescribable flicker of a paratemporal transposition field. Then she looked at Eldra; the professor's long fingers were twined around the stem of the pipe she didn't dare smoke during the transposition, twisting and untwisting themselves into knots like a nest of snakes.

Sirna rubbed her right leg where the top of her riding boot chafed it and grinned. It was nice to know that she wasn't the only nervous member of this team.

II

Kalvan decided to call a halt for a meal in another half hour. Without a watch it was difficult to tell time here-and-now. Most people here-and-now used burning candles to measure time, but they weren't of much use on horseback. *Note: find some way to reinvent the clockwork mechanism.* He'd already introduced sundials, but he needed a more reliable clock. Next time he was at the University he would talk to Ermut who was probably the first *scientist* here-and-now.

His detachment was getting close to home, but not so close that he felt like riding all the way on an empty stomach even if it would save time. They could eat—what to call it? As the first meal of the day, it should be breakfast; measured by how long they'd been on the road it should be lunch, even if it wasn't yet midmorning. Anyway, they could eat and rest the horses before pushing on to Tarr-Hostigos, and Kalvan could close his ears to the well-bred grumbling about Great Kings who insisted on rising before dawn.

Kalvan was no longer afraid of what he might finally see when he rode into view of the heartland of Hostigos. Even before the Mobile Force arrived, Soton's cavalry hadn't pushed more than a few raids and a lot of patrols into Hostigos, and now that Harmakros and Phrames had reinforced Ptosphes, they weren't even doing that. The Holy Host of Styphon was camped in Sashta, laying it to waste as they foraged for the supplies they would need before they could fight another pitched battle.

That was hard on Prince Balthames and his subjects, but it was an undisguised blessing for Kalvan and the Princedom of Hostigos. The way Soton and Mnephilos drove their men after Ptosphes had been a little frightening even for Kalvan, reading it second-hand in Ptosphes' letters. If Ptosphes hadn't fought the Battle of Tenabra within reach of his supply magazines—so that for the first week he could retreat fast enough to break contact with the Holy Host—he might have been brought to battle and smashed before he could regroup.

Kalvan would not have been prepared to believe that here-and-now heavy cavalry could fight that well or infantry march that fast, but when you were dealing with the Zarthani Knights and the Sacred Squares, you had to be prepared to believe quite a lot that didn't apply elsewhere.

As it was, Ptosphes had done damned well to bring ten thousand men in fighting condition out of Sashta! The Styphoni had been on his heels all the way, scouting and raiding far into his rear, snapping up stragglers and every so often sending a weak van into an apparently vulnerable position to tempt him to turn and attack.

That was a trick that couldn't work twice—not with Prince Ptosphes. He had kept retreating, ignoring the curses and occasional desertions by men who thought more of vengeance or an honorable death than of the best way to win this war. Kalvan suspected that those curses hurt Ptosphes more than the careful phrases of his letters would ever show, but he knew his father-in-law would have sacrificed even his honor to bring his army back, a loss that would hurt more than merely losing his life.

The Styphoni paid the price for a swift advance across the Sashtan countryside whose major fortresses and walled towns were held against them. By the time they'd reached Hostigos they'd marched the shoes off their horses' hooves and the soles out of their soldiers' boots, and left behind most of their artillery because their half-starved teams couldn't haul it. They still might have won a battle against Ptosphes alone by sheer weight of numbers but for the arrival of Harmakros and the Mobile Force.

There was nothing for the Holy Host to do after that but forage in Sashta and hope the Sashtan garrisons wouldn't send out too many raiding parties against the convoys coming across from Beshta to the east and the Ktemnoi wagon trains coming through Syriphlon from the south.

It was a race between Hostigi reinforcement and Styphoni supplies, and at the moment the race was in a dead heat. Anything that gave one side or the other a major lead during the next week or two was likely to be political rather than military.

Politics was Kalvan's main reason for riding on ahead of his army. There were too many things he needed to know that couldn't safely be put in letters even by the people who could tell them. What was this new League of Dralm that Xentos had mentioned in his latest letter from Agrys City? From the name, it sounded as though the League would be a natural ally against Styphon's House, but would the League be willing to commit gold, arms and soldiers to the fight? Or was it another pointless debating society like the Council of Dralm?

What had Phrames heard or seen in Phaxos that might tell Kalvan which way Prince Araxes was likely to jump—and when?

What about the Beshtan situation: What did the people in Beshta think of their Prince's treachery, and could any of them be persuaded to rebel against him so that Balthar would have to worry about his back while the Army of Hos-Hostigos fought him in front? How was the loyalty of Sarrask's garrisons going to be guaranteed, assuming it could be, with their Prince off to war? And a dozen other questions, each defining a potential Great King's headache, none of them likely to be answered until Kalvan rode up to Tarr-Hostigos.

They were cantering up a slight rise when the Horseguards who'd already reached the crest shouted warning of a party of horsemen on the road ahead, coming fast. Kalvan reined in and drew his sword. The Holy Host wasn't supposed to be raiding this far north any more, but it if was—

The leading horseman, wearing a welcome red sash, was Prince Ptosphes. Kalvan sheathed his sword and rode to meet his father-in-law, not quite wishing he had a Styphoni patrol to fight instead but very much aware that too many eyes and ears would be taking in everything he said—or left unsaid. It was part of the job of being a Great King, he told himself firmly as he reined in and waited for Ptosphes to ride within conversational distance.

Ptosphes wore his well-battered combat armor and the expression of a man who's mortally ill but trying to hide it from the family. The dead eyes and all the new gray in the bushy beard spoiled the act for Kalvan.

"Your Majesty," Ptosphes began. "I have failed you and the Realm of Hos-Hostigos. It is within your right—"

Kalvan's determination to choose his words carefully vanished, and he said the first thing that came to mind. "I have the right to tell you not to talk nonsense, Father. You didn't fail me or anybody or anything. You just had the bad luck to be up against Styphon's varsity."

Ptosphes looked blankly at him, and Kalvan realized that he must have been more shaken by Ptosphes' appearance than he'd realized: for the first time in months, he'd spoken in English. "The varsity—it's a word in the language of my homeland. It means men who have sold themselves to evil demons in return for great skill in war or athletic games."

"Ah. Well, that is certainly one way of—explaining—the Zarthani Knights. We have all heard tales of their battle prowess, but facing them..." His voice trailed off, but some of the deadness was gone from his gray eyes.

Kalvan gripped Ptosphes by both shoulders. "We'll talk of this later. Thank you for coming out to meet me." He didn't know what Ptosphes had been about to offer, although he could guess. He hoped the matter would never be brought up again.

Ptosphes managed a thin smile and turned his horse.

Kalvan was about to do the same thing when he heard a familiar a voice saying cheerfully, "Welcome home, Your Majesty. Now we can start kicking those Styphoni dogs back to their kennels in earnest!"

The voice was Prince Sarrask of Sask's, except that it seemed to be coming out of thin air, because there was nobody in sight who looked like Sarrask except—

"Great Galzar's Ghost!"

The gilded armor was scraped and hacked almost down to bare steel, the ruddy face was tanned and lined and the jowls were barely respectable shades of their former selves. Kalvan tried not to stare, then gave up. A world in which Sarrask of Sask had grown thin was one in which all the laws of nature had been suspended.

No, not quite thin—there was still a lot of Sarrask. Still, he looked like a real warrior Prince instead of an overweight and overage character actor playing one.

"I hear you've been doing good work yourself, Sarrask."

Sarrask veritably beamed, a sight Kalvan had never thought he'd see.

Then more formally, he said, "You have Our gratitude, and you will have a lot more as soon as We are in a position to give it."

Sarrask grinned. "Thank you, Your Majesty. One thing you can do is come to a banquet I'm holding tonight. It's for the wives and children of my castellans, who sent them to Hostigos Town for their safety. They'd be greatly honored if you could attend."

And so will you, thought Kalvan. The idea of a banquet right now seemed like fiddling while Rome burned, but after some thought Kalvan decided to attend. He couldn't expect all of his loyal followers to have the moral fiber of old Chartiphon or noble Phrames. Besides, the castellans' families were hostages for their loyalty to Sarrask, and therefore to him. Knowing Sarrask, it couldn't be any other way. They probably knew it too, and they were far from home after being dragged up hill and down dale at the tail of a beaten army. At the very least, the families deserved a visit from their Great King.

"I'll be happy to attend, Prince."

"Wonderful, Your Majesty! My subjects will be most pleased."

"How's Rylla?" he asked, to change the subject to what he was really concerned with.

"As well as any woman who's the shape of a melon can be," Sarrask answered. "Despite her condition, she wants to go out and strangle Styphoni with her bare hands." Despite his customary rough speech, there was a note of fatherly pride in Sarrask's voice. Kalvan wondered how Rylla viewed her former hereditary enemy's new solicitude.

With great sufferance, undoubtedly. Kalvan forced back a laugh.

He also couldn't help thinking that Rylla might have to do exactly that if they lost another battle, and it must have showed on his face.

The next words out of Sarrask's mouth were: "You look as if you *needed* a banquet."

Sarrask lowered his gravelly voice to avoid being overheard by Ptosphes, some twenty yards in front. "Try to get Ptosphes to come, too. He needs it even worse. The first thing he heard when we crossed the border into Hostigos was some woman crying, 'Ptosphes, Ptosphes, give me back my man,' and he looked as if he were dying from a gut wound for the next three days. I hope he hasn't taken a fever on this campaign."

No, Sarrask, he's just a better man than you'll ever be, was what Kalvan wanted to say, but he knew it wouldn't make any sense to the Prince—and maybe wouldn't even be just. Sarrask would never be very likable, but by here-and-now standards he wasn't a particularly bad man—not a bad one at all, if you considered his loyalty to Hostigos had already cost him a good deal of treasure and men. And might yet cost him his crown.

Mental memo number three thousand, six hundred and two (give or take fifty): Put Sarrask of Sask on the next Honors List. Think about something appropriate like the Order of the Garter or the Order of the Golden Fleece to reward subjects who already have lands, titles and wealth—something useless but flattering to their sense of whatever they call honor.

TWENTY

I

"Urig, one silver, two phenigs."

The workman wiped his hand on a tunic that was even dirtier, then put it out for the money Sirna was holding in her hand. "One silver, two phenigs," he repeated, then took his knife out to scratch into the silver coin to make sure it wasn't counterfeit.

Sirna smiled at his surprised look when he discovered he hadn't been cheated by the new pay mistress. The Royal Foundry couldn't pay more than prevailing wages; over-paying would make even more trouble with the local guildmasters, to say nothing of contributing to an inflation problem that was already going from bad to worse. They could at least use their outtime resources to make sure their workers were paid in good coin that gave them a fighting chance of not starving when winter came.

In her role as pay clerk, she paid off the other eight workers from the Foundry warehouse and was going over the scribe's soapstone tally when she heard Eldra calling her.

"I'll be back in a little while," she told the scribe. "Don't put it on the parchment until then."

"Yes, ma'am."

Sirna hoped the scribe wouldn't disobey her orders by way of trying to see how much he could get away with under the nose of a new clerk. She didn't feel like punishing him or any other Hostigi when they might all be dead in a week, or arguing with the senior members of the University Study Team over her "weakness." Professor Lathor Karv would be leading the pack; to hear him talk, you'd think he'd invented the concept of wages.

As Sirna approached Eldra, she noticed that several other members of the Study Team were standing with her, and that a band of horsemen was cantering toward the Foundry from the direction of Hostigos Town—or Bellefonte as it was called on Kalvan's Time-Line. As she recalled, there was a university town just about where the Foundry was—it was some completely unoriginal name, State College, Pennsylvania—that was it!

She moved behind her teammates to keep them between her and the horses. She'd have to get used to those big beasts before too much longer, but right now the memory of the spill she'd taken when her barely controlled mount shied at a fast-moving field gun was much too vivid.

Eldra had remarkably little sympathy over her distaste for horses, but then Eldra loved the perverse beasts and had an outtime Fifth Level ranch where she raised the big devils in equine form. There was even a tale about how on one Fourth Level Franco-Byzantine time-line, Eldra had disguised herself as a man to win a famous cross-country horse race—the tale ending, naturally, with how the man who came in second found himself getting an unexpected but agreeable consolation prize.

The leading rider in the group was the Great King himself. Verkan Vall—Colonel Verkan—was just behind him, and on Kalvan's right! Her scream was strangled into a squeak, but it was still loud enough to make Eldra turn.

"What the Styphon?"

Sirna pointed with a hand she was proud to see wasn't shaking. "That—it's the Prince Sarrask of Sask! The Sarrask who sacked Hostigos Town—"

Eldra used First Level hand signals to signal her to silence, then stared hard at the big man in well-hacked armor that must have once been gilded. "It can't be—well, I'll be Dralm-damned! It's our Sarrask all right, the one who belongs here, but he's trimmed down to the twin of the one you saw on the Control Time-Line. Oh well, stranger things have happened outtime... And they'll happen to you, so get used to them and don't be so jumpy."

"Yes, ma'am."

Eldra ran her eyes over Sarrask again. "Definitely trimmed down. If he lost another twenty pounds, he'd be almost handsome. Not like Kalvan, of course, but not bad... And *this* Sarrask is exuding a definite masculine vitality."

The two rulers, unaware they were being discussed like a couple of prize bulls, sat on their horses while Kalvan's dismounted bodyguards took positions all around him. Half stayed mounted, but all looked very alert; some quietly drew their pistols without aiming them at anybody.

The two rulers, Verkan, and a man who seemed to be Verkan's bodyguard remained mounted and conducted a long discussion that seemed to involve lot of hand waving. The few words she overheard were all military technicalities, so she concentrated on studying the Great King Kalvan without appearing too disrespectful. "A cat can look at a king," was a saying that she'd encountered, but she wasn't so sure about the rights of free-traders' daughters.

Kalvan appeared tired but still in fine shape physically; he obviously wasn't hiding any wounds or sickness from the campaign in Hos-Harphax. The face was certainly handsome, although it looked better when he smiled, which wasn't very often, but then why should he be smiling at all, with everything he had to worry about? It was hard to tell much about his body, as he was wearing a back-and-breast, an open faced, high-combed helmet—*amorion* if she remember the term correctly—and bulky riding boots with pistols in them. A light cavalry trooper's outfit, from what she recalled, and probably the best combination of comfort and protection he could manage.

At last the Great King signaled, and guards came to hold horses as the four men dismounted. Kalvan turned to the Foundry people.

"I'm sorry to have kept you from your work so long," he began. As if a Great King needed to apologize for anything—but then Sirna recalled that Kalvan had lived most of his life on a time-line with all sorts of myths about equality. Maybe he thought he was being gracious—although Sirna had to admit that if he thought so, he was right.

"The Royal Foundry is going to be part of a second line of defense we're building to meet the Holy Host, as the Styphoni are calling themselves. We're also fortifying Hostigos Town itself, of course, and this side of the Tigos Gap. Tarr-Hostigos will keep anyone from getting through the Gap from the other side.

"We'll be wanting the Foundry workers to dig trenches and gun positions, proof against cavalry. We'll also be using the new warehouse to store supplies. No fireseed, naturally, so you'll be able to go right on working."

She thought it was polite and politic of Kalvan to act as if he were soliciting their cooperation, as though they were in charge of the Foundry, when in fact its status as the Royal Foundry made it quite clear who was in command. True, their credentials were as foundry 'contract' workers from Zygros City and Grefftscharr. Still, Kalvan didn't have to worry about any of them packing up and leaving for home—not with an army of Styphon's fanatical soldiers some thirty thousand strong out there!

"In fact," Kalvan continued, "I expect you'll be able to go right on working through the entire battle. We don't intend to let Styphon's Unwholesome Host reach the second line or anywhere near it. However, even Great Kings' intentions do not bind the gods. We will have to prepare for the worst and work for the best.

"Colonel Verkan of the Mounted Rifles has very kindly offered one of his best officers, Captain Ranthar, to command the defenses of the Foundry. He will choose positions for the trenches, train workers in arms and take command if it does come to a fight.

"I'm trusting the loyalty you've all shown so far to continue until Styphon's wolves are driven from the land."

"Down Styphon!" a foundry worker cried. The workers all repeated the cry, then someone—it sounded like Eldra—shouted, "Long Live King Kalvan!"

It started up another round of cheers from the Foundry workers; the Team Members joined in, not wanting to be conspicuous; although Sirna could see that several of them—particularly Varnath Lala and Lathor Karv—were having problems making the proper cheering noises and their faces looked as if they were chewing bitter lemons. A good thing the Hostigi workers weren't paying attention to anything but their gods'-anointed Great King. Still, not even Allfather Dralm could help them, if Kalvan saw those faces—being accused of treason would be the least of the Team's problems. And nothing Kalvan would do to them would compare, later, to what Paratime Chief Verkan Vall would do!

Kalvan acknowledged the cheers with a half salute, half wave, then Colonel Verkan helped him remount. A moment later the royal party was riding back the way they'd come, except for Captain Ranthar and his groom, who stood holding the reins of two horses with one hand and roll of parchment under the other arm.

Ranthar dismissed his groom, directing him to the stables, then turned to the assembled Study Team members. "The first thing to do is find a room where we won't be overheard—"

Talgan Dreth, the Outtime Studies Director and Team Leader, interrupted him. "The first thing you can do is explain by what authority—oh," he broke off suddenly when he saw the hand signals "Captain" Ranthar was making.

Eldra laughed out loud at the older man's embarrassment, and even Sirna couldn't help smiling. The Director took himself *so* seriously, even though it wasn't particularly funny that the Kalvan Study Teams were now under the watchful eye of one of Chief Verkan's most trusted—say *observers*, to be polite. Talgan must have thought he was an outtimer appointed by Kalvan! For the Director's peace of mind and the state of his health, it was a good thing that Captain Ranthar was undercover Paratime Police...

Sirna wondered how long Ranthar Jard had been Captain Ranthar on Kalvan's Time-Line. Some time, obviously, or he wouldn't be an officer in the Mounted Rifles. That was most likely a clue about what he'd been brought here to do—or prevent, but she couldn't be sure which.

She began to think that perhaps she should have insisted a little harder with Hadron Tharn that she wasn't the stuff of which good spies are made.

II

A moon-quarter after the meeting at the Royal Foundry, word reached Hostigos Town that the Holy Host was on the march again. Kalvan's General Staff held its Council of War at Prince Sarrask's temporary residence, an inn called the Silver Stag. The improvised council chamber, if not regal, at least had enough benches, as well as a table that if not exactly groaning was at least muttering darkly to itself under the weight of food and drink piled upon it. Sarrask, it appeared, was determined to be a gracious host to the end, if this was the end—and Verkan Vall was unpleasantly aware that it might be.

Not just for the Hostigi and Kalvan, either. This was the kind of situation that had killed many a Paratimer—a fast-moving battle that could go either way on very short notice. The only sure way to be safe was to leave so soon you'd obviously be deserting your friends. If they won, you'd lose all chance of working with them again, apart from the risk of being executed for treason or desertion. If they lost, you

still might not be able to deal with the victors—and you'd have to live with yourself whether you could or not.

All this was true even if you hadn't developed any deep loyalties to your outtime comrades. That happened more often than the Paratime Commission like to admit; in fact, it most often happened to the best outtime operatives—one reason why Verkan Vall had been Tortha Karf's third choice to succeed him. It was small consolation to Verkan that at least he'd never assumed he was immune to Outtime Identification Syndrome (as the Bureau of Psychological Hygiene's jargon called it) so he hadn't been surprised when he realized that his body might very well be one of those picked up after Kalvan's Last Stand.

Prince Sarrask was the only member of the Council present when Verkan arrived. He was seated at the far end, munching his way through a large plate heaped with sausages; it appeared he was well on his way to gaining back most of the weight he'd lost on the road back from Tenabra.

Sarrask waved Verkan to a chair, finished a sausage, then grinned. "I saw one of your new girls at the Foundry giving me the eye the other day," Sarrask said. "You know, the tall redhead with the big nose and the big—" His hands out outlined in the air two of Danar Sirna's most prominent features.

Verkan tried hard not to laugh. "I have to warn you, Your Grace, that Sirna is the daughter of a blood-brother of my father. So she must be considered under my protection."

Sarrask chuckled. "Under your—protection? Whatever would your wife Dalla say about you protecting Sirna?"

"She'd say Sarrask of Sask talks too much," Kalvan said, sticking his head into the room.

Sarrask grunted like a boar stuck in a bog, then shrugged. "She'd probably be right, too. Dralm-blast it! I apologize, Colonel Verkan."

"Accepted," Verkan said with a bow. Sarrask wouldn't be a problem after Kalvan's public reprimand, but it struck him that as the University Teams' strength increased, the Prince might not be the only man with an eye for their unattached females. *Suggest to Kalvan that the Foundry be formally declared part of the Royal Household?* That would solve the legal requirements, at least, and Rylla could probably help. In the long run, it would also set useful precedents for when—call it "international trade"—really began again in Kalvan's Time-Line after half a millennium of strangulation by Styphon's House.

That was as far as Verkan's thoughts took him before the rest of the Council started arriving. By the time everyone had arrived, it was the largest and most rank-heavy Council of War Verkan had ever attended in Kalvan's Time-Line, and was in the running for the prize in all the time-lines where he'd attended Councils of War.

There was Kalvan himself, four Princes (Ptosphes, Sarrask, Armanes and Balthames), six Generals (Chartiphon, Harmakros, Phrames, Klestreus, Hestophes and Alkides the artilleryman), the Ulthori Count Euphrades and at least a dozen noble and mercenary captains whom Verkan knew only by sight and name; First Level recall didn't help with information you didn't have!

It occurred to Verkan that if the Silver Stag collapsed, the rest of the Holy Host's campaign would probably be recorded as "mopping-up operations."

It also struck him that the Council was much too large to do more than give everyone a chance to be heard, whether they had anything to say or not beyond praise for Kalvan's victory and sympathy for Ptosphes' bad luck. Kalvan had almost certainly arranged for a smaller meeting to do the real business, either before or after this huge, unwieldy Council of War.

The Council ran on until all the food was gone and everybody had said his piece—or sometimes several of them. It also managed to hammer out a surprisingly complete strategy, and Verkan realized that perhaps he'd underestimated the hold Kalvan had over these people, particularly after his victory at Chothros Heights. That, it appeared, had been such a victory as no Great Kingdom had won over another in two centuries—since about the time Styphon's House really started clamping down on wars that threatened to create large and dangerous independent political units.

It also helped that the military situation was so simple that a nine-year-old child could probably have planned the campaign. Hostigos Town was something the Holy Host had to take and the Hostigi had to defend.

The Holy Host could not even stay where it had been camped much longer without sending larger and larger foraging parties farther a field. Long before Hostigos was eaten bare, the Hostigi could march on the weakened main body and force it to fight against odds, then cut off the foraging parties at their leisure.

After a while it became clear to Verkan that there weren't going to be any disagreements where his voice had to be heard, or even suggestions he needed to make about the best use of the Mounted Rifles. So he studied his fellow commanders.

Ptosphes: a man who looked as if he were being eaten alive by the shame of defeat. Sarrask: loud and lewd, but who seemed to be finding something in himself that hadn't been there before he had a leader worth following. The men Verkan had begun to call (after one of Dalla's favorite Fourth Level, Europeo-American novels) "The Three Musketeers"—Harmakros, Phrames and Hestophes. Chartiphon: big and bluff, and not quite up to the demands of the new kind of war that would be fought in Kalvan's Time-Line from now on, but useful within his limits and probably wise enough to know what they were.

Balthames of Sashta, looking daggers at his father-in-law Sarrask every time he thought he was unobserved—a prime candidate for a dose of hypno-truth drug. Alkides, who looked almost as grim as Ptosphes, after being ordered to blow up much of the captured Harphaxi artillery train at Chothros Heights—which to an artilleryman must have been like losing an adopted child. Verkan decided to keep a particularly close eye on Alkides, since he could be the key to victory in a battle where Kalvan's artillery superiority might mean everything.

Count Euphrades of Ulthor, thin and remote, with obvious plans of his own he was telling no one—another prime candidate for hypno-truth drugs. And three or four others who might prove as interesting as Euphrades once Verkan knew something about them.

A good company, not quite a "band of brothers" yet (and they were much rarer in fact than in fiction or hagiographical history, Verkan knew), but formidable enemies and fine friends.

Too fine to abandon, if it came to that. Verkan knew he wasn't going to deliberately put himself in a position where he had to go down with Kalvan. On the other hand, if he found himself in that position with no way out that let him keep a clear conscience—well, this time he was glad that Dalla was back on First Level. She wasn't Rylla, who would try not to outlive Kalvan by more than five minutes if she could help it, but she would have some hard decisions to make that he was just as glad she didn't have to face now.

TWENTY-ONE

I

Grand-Captain Phidestros looked at the eastern sky turning pale. In another few minutes it would be light enough for his men to see him. He stood up and walked back and forth beside Snowdrift, stopping now and then to rub his knee. It had healed enough so that he could fight on foot today, even in three-quarter armor if he had to.

Snowdrift whickered and nuzzled at Phidestros' belt pouch. "Very well, you godsforsaken brat unworthy of either dam or sire." He reached into the pouch and pulled out a half-slab of ration bread. Snowdrift whickered again and munched vigorously, while he scratched the big gelding up and down his neck the way he liked it. He hoped Snowdrift was fit to carry him through what would surely be a long and wearing battle, but hoping was all he could do.

He'd done all any man could do to make sure that his men and their mounts were properly fed after the ride from the Harph to join the Holy Host, but that "all" had not been much. He supposed he should have expected that Grand Master Soton, commander of the Host, would be pushing forward hard on the heels of the Hostigi, and that any company of horse that had held together in a moon-quarter and-a-half's ride across unknown country was worth having well up toward the front. Certainly both proved that Soton knew his business, and being toward the front had given the Iron Company several chances to fight under the Grand Master's own eye. Praise Galzar that that would make up for the wear on the horses and weapons!

It was most likely the major reason why he was now a Grand-Captain, commanding a band—the Iron Band—the three hundred survivors of those who'd crossed the Harph and the remnants of several other companies following the Holy Host. One had joined his banner on the ride north; the One-Eyed Boar Company whose Captain had lost a leg when his horse rolled while navigating the Vynar Pass. The others had joined a moon-quarter ago when Soton raised him to his present rank.

"Grand-Captain Phidestros." It had an agreeable ring to it, but the meeting with the Grand Master had hardly been all sweetness and light. Darkness had long fallen, the candles on the table between them burned almost to stubs, the hard planes and angles of Soton's face still harsher in the orange-red light, his voice rasping like a file with weariness and anger as he questioned Phidestros.

"Do you think yourself fit to lead a band?"

"Yes. That is, if they are horse and not too untrained or badly mounted." Something that was the truth and would also sound well, the best combination. "I would grieve to abandon the Iron Company on the eve of victory, though. We have endured much together and know each other's ways. The One-Eyed Boar Company is also proving itself to be good comrades in battle and in camp."

"You would not be giving up either company. You would be leading three more under-strength companies, the Silver Wolf Company, the Thirteen Moons Company and the Bloody Sabers. They meet your conditions, I believe."

"I am honored by your confidence, Grand Master, and by theirs—if they have asked me to lead them.

However, I know little about these companies or their commanders, other than that they are under the command of Prince Balthar."

"Were. They are three of the companies formerly in the service of Balthar of Beshta."

Phidestros was too tired to think of any subtle response, but anything was better than gape-jawed silence. "Am I to believe that the Massacre of Tarr-Catassa actually happened?"

"You thought it was a camp rumor?"

"I had no reason to think otherwise. Stranger tales have crawled out of barrels of bad ale and the terrors of men far from home."

"Well, you may rest easy," Soton said in a flat voice. "It is no rumor that Prince Balthar's castellan of Tarr-Catassa killed a hundred and twenty-five free companions who would not swear to join the Holy Host in the service of Balthar of Beshta—or Balthar the Black as he is called now after his treason at Tenabra." For the first time, distaste registered in the Grand Master's voice. "Their women were given to the Beshtans, then killed also."

Soton spit on the ground. "Styphon's gold bought his treachery, but I will not ride beside Balthar even though he turned traitor to a Usurper and enemy of the God of Gods."

Phidestros nodded in agreement: By the laws governing the employment of mercenary free companies and the Code of Galzar, when an employer changed sides during a war or battle, their oath to him was still binding until he released them or their term of service expired. A wise Prince usually released doubtful mercenaries as quickly as possible, since a thousand reliable men were worth two thousand who might surrender on the slightest pretext.

Soton explained, "If the mercenaries of Tarr-Catassa had sworn to serve under Balthar of Beshta 'against all enemies, in field or fortress, wheresoever he may find them,' then they would have been violating their oaths to Prince Balthar. As it was, they were a company sworn in only as the garrison of an isolated tarr. They could not have been a very good company, but nonetheless they had been slaughtered for refusing to do something their Prince's castellan had no right to ask of them.

"It's hardly surprising that Balthar's name now reeks to the Sky Thrones of the Gods. The six companies who placed themselves in his pay before he joined the Holy Host do not wish to be released from their oaths, however, or to leave our ranks."

That means one of two things, thought Phidestros, either they believe that Kalvan will lose the war against Hos-Harphax—well, really, Styphon's House—or they'd had no real choice. Not a safe bag of talk to open with the Grand Master.

"Three of these Companies no longer wish to serve under Balthar's banner, his Captain-General or their own elected captains. They say all are too friendly with Prince Balthar. At the end of this campaign, once word of their action reaches the High Temple of Galzar in Hos-Agrys, both Balthar and his castellan—who was in his pay—will be placed under the Ban of Galzar."

The Ban of Galzar meant that no free companion of the Brotherhood could swear an oath to Prince Balthar, under threat of expulsion. Thus, the only men Balthar would be able to command would be his own sworn vassals, outcasts and criminals. The only thing worse than the Ban of Galzar was the Interdict, where no man, vassal or not, could fight for a war leader and still receive the Rites of Galzar.

Had Balthar ordered the slaughter himself he might well have faced the Interdict, but no sane man—even a Prince of Princes or Great King—would so risk offending the Wargod or his priests. Only a madman would knowingly commit such an offense against Galzar; and while Balthar exhibited many characteristics of such—including fears of bathing and the outdoors—he appeared to be at worst a miser and skinflint.

"The three companies I offer, which allow you the rank of Grand-Captain, have voted to follow you if you are so willing. They have heard the tales of your ride from the Harph and of how under you the Iron Company won free of two lost battles—Fyk and Chothros Heights."

Was there a note of irony in those last words of Soton's? Phidestros didn't particularly care, since he'd also been freely given a gift he would otherwise have had to ask or even beg for. The three companies were not composed of men who wanted a safe road out of the war, or at least to the other side, and would shoot their Captain the moment they found him barring it. They were instead merely free companions exercising their ancient privilege of choosing who would lead them into battle—a privilege only fools like Balthar's castellan denied them.

II

It was now light enough for Phidestros to pick out the few dark hairs in Snowdrift's mane and tail. Plenty of light to see by—and to see in the distance the banners and lance tips of the approaching Zarthani Knights. Phidestros swung himself onto Snowdrift's back and waved to Banner-Captain Geblon. The banner of the Iron Band rose against the dawn sky: a gold thunderbolt breaking a black iron chain on a green field.

Some of the old Iron Company began to cheer. The orange sashes of the Hos-Ktemnos army made vivid splashes of color against their blackened three-quarter armor. Phidestros waved them to silence, then pointed to the banner.

"My brothers—that is the banner of the Iron Band. Those of you who have followed it before know what it means." Two well-conducted and profitable retreats, mostly, but let's not be too particular about the truth at a time like this.

"To our new comrades who are following the Iron Banner for the first time in this battle—rejoice in your opportunity. You have proven brothers on all sides and a chance to add to the honor of the banner you follow. Fight as I know you can, and before another moon we shall be drinking a toast from the skulls of our enemies. You are the Iron Band!"

He let them cheer freely this time. When the sound began to ebb, he cried, "To victory! To gold! To Galzar!" As an after-thought, in case Soton or an Inner Circle intelligencer was listening, he added, "To Styphon!"

His old troopers responded with a cheer of their own. "To Phidestros! To Phidestros! Phidestros! Phidestros!"

That rang even more agreeably on his ears, but he also knew it was the last thing Soton should hear at

this time. He quickly silenced his men. "The Iron Band will soon be the Iron Hand around the throat of Hostigos! Furthermore, no one who has faced us in battle will find that name a matter for jests."

It had not escaped his attention that some among the free companions, jealous of his success and rapid advancement, had already taken to calling the Iron Band the Yellow Hand, "First to retreat, last to advance."

"Galzar smite me if I do not speak truth!"

The Wargod, Phidestros reflected, seemed to turn a deaf ear to anything a captain said to his men before a battle. He had heard of captains being smitten down on the morning of battle by apoplexies or attacks of bile—but never by Galzar's Mace.

He could still wish most of them were better mounted, though. Even Snowdrift was showing a hint of rib under his creamy flanks. As a troop of Sastragath horse-archers cantered past, a thought struck Phidestros. *Could he earn enough of Soton's goodwill to be allowed to buy some of the archers' light mounts, which could feed by grazing where a charger would starve?*

Such horses could hardly carry a man in armor, of course, or even press home a charge with lances. *Was that so great a loss?* he began to wonder. With the new way of war Kalvan seemed to know and Soton seemed ready to learn, speed appeared likely to prove as important as armor.

It was something to think over if he survived today with both his head on shoulders and honor in Grand Master Soton's too-shrewd eyes.

III

Verkan Vall felt somewhat like an intruder as he climbed the last flight of stairs to the royal chamber at the top of the keep of Tarr-Hostigos. He also felt even more like a deserter from his post, which would normally have been at the head of the Mounted Rifles with the Army of Hostigos near the village of Phyrax to the southwest of Hostigos Town.

However, the battle of Phyrax wasn't going to be a "normal" battle, assuming there was such a thing even on Aryan-Transpacific. By the Great King's orders, the Mounted Rifles weren't going to spend themselves scouting against the superior and well-trained light cavalry of the Zarthani Knights. They were going to remain in the rear, wait for the Holy Host to attack, then work around its flanks and snipe at its captains. This *assignment* had nearly provoked mutiny among some of the hotheads in the Mounted Rifles—the few that still thought of war as an exercise in gallantry—but it made good sense considering the force Hostigos was facing.

Kalvan couldn't hope to fight a maneuver battle against the Holy Host. Soton was too good, and the Sacred Squares of Hos-Ktemnos and the Zarthani Knights were the best infantry and cavalry here-and-now. The Sacred Squares were twelve thousand men who would take a lot of killing, and the Zarthani Knights were six thousand of this world's best cavalry, not counting the four thousand Order Foot. The rest of the Holy Host included three thousand of Styphon's Own Temple Guard, two thousand of the King's Pistoleers and eight hundred Royal Guardsmen of Hos-Ktemnos, all well above average.

There were about four thousand mercenaries, mostly horse, and, while the motley array of several thousand "Holy Warriors of Styphon" might lack training, they wouldn't lack enthusiasm.

Kalvan would have a damned good chance to win this battle if he just sat still and let the Holy Host attack him. He nearly matched them man for man in numbers, and the best Hostigi infantry were as good as the Sacred Squares—although Kalvan would sorely miss the two thousand Hostigi infantry who perished at Tenabra. His cavalry horses were in better shape. He also would have a big edge in artillery fighting in his own backyard, where many of the old bombards, too heavy for campaigning, could be hauled out to the battlefield and dug in.

It wouldn't hurt either that Kalvan would have plenty of Hostigos fireseed for all his artillery and firearms, while the Holy Host would still be firing the old fireseed formula. Styphon's House was beginning to use Kalvan's formula in making fireseed, but some ecclesiastical Arch-bureaucrat had decided that none of the new formula could be issued until all of the old had been used up or accounted for.

However, even Styphon's new fireseed was inferior to the Hostigi formula by about a fifth of the explosive force. Kalvan's fireseed had a finer grain and more punch.

This piece of bureaucracy-in-action was the only intelligence sent so far by Verkan's on-the-ground agent with the Holy Host, a Paratime Policeman posing as an underpriest of Styphon, who'd finally come north with the reinforcements and supplies as part of what could laughingly be called the medical corps. Verkan had hoped for more intelligence before the battle, but even getting this little bit proved his man was alive, on the job and might provide more later.

It also wasn't going to hurt that many of Kalvan's men were fighting on ground they knew well, with their backs to the wall and no illusions about what would happen to their homes if they lost. The Holy Host had only committed the normal run of here-and-now atrocities on its way north. If Kalvan lost the Battle of Phyrax, this would change and probably very much for the worse.

Ptosphes' men had a score to settle with the Holy Host. Kalvan's veterans of the Army of the Harph had a tradition of victory a whole moon long to maintain; they too would take a lot of killing.

In fact, "a lot of killing" seemed to be the best description of the coming battle that Verkan could think of.

Meanwhile, Kalvan's ordering him back to Tarr-Hostigos gave him a chance to pay a visit to the University people at the Foundry. They were dug in about as well as could be expected with the labor and leadership available; Ranthar Jard couldn't be in two places at once. Talgan Dreth was grumbling a lot, but at least the Outtime Studies Director was cooperating to the extent of keeping some of his people from openly obstructing the work of fortification and cooperation with Brother Mytron's University refugees. Verkan had Scholar Varnath Lala mentally tagged as the leader of that faction, who appeared to have the delusion that if they maintained some sort of "neutrality," they could continue their work under the new management that would take over Hostigos if Kalvan lost.

Verkan seriously doubted that Archpriest Roxthar, who had accompanied the Holy Host but so far had been kept on a tight rein by Soton, would agree.

At the top of the stairs Verkan stopped and cleared his throat. There was no one on duty outside the royal apartments; the last sentry post was at the foot of this flight of stairs. He could hear the low murmur of voices through the thick door, but he knew that etiquette allowed him to knock only in an emergency, like the Holy Host storming the gates of the castles.

The door swung open so quietly that Kalvan was coming out before Verkan could step back to a proper place. For a moment he had a clear view into the chamber beyond, a view of something he was quite sure he hadn't been meant to see—Ptosphes kneeling on the floor in front of Rylla, with head on her lap as she stroked his tangled gray hair. Then Kalvan was past and swinging the door shut behind him, heading down the stairs without a word to Verkan.

Verkan saw in Kalvan's set face and slightly sagging shoulders a man who was suddenly feeling the full weight of being monarch and commander and husband who might lose his wife within a few days all at once. Verkan had planned to ask Kalvan how much palace duty he'd planned for him; royal aide was an honorable post but obviously an impossible one for him, and he'd rehearsed a set of arguments against the honor that sounded good—even to him.

Rather, they*had* sounded good. Now, if Kalvan needed a friend—make that*when* Kalvan needed a friend—at his back for a few days, Verkan wouldn't make any arguments against taking the job for at least that long. It didn't seem very likely that anyone would have the time to be jealous of an outlander's friendship with the Great King.

Verkan hurried down the dark stone stairs. He reached the bottom close enough to Kalvan to hear him talking with young Aspasthar, the new page who'd come into royal service from Count Harmakros.

"—says the horses are ready, Your Majesty. And a messenger came who requests word with the Great King."

"A messenger from whom, Aspasthar? You should always tell me who sent a messenger if he tells you himself. Also tell me if he doesn't."

"Yes, my—Your Majesty. It's a messenger from General Chartiphon at Phyrax Field."

Verkan saw Kalvan's grim smile. "I can guess what it says. Soton's scouts must be in sight. Thank you Aspasthar. Tell the scout to wait for me at the stables."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Aspasthar appeared to be waiting for a word of dismissal, until Kalvan gently took him by the shoulder and turned him around. "When the Great King says gives you an order, you are dismissed."

Aspasthar was too flustered to reply, and scurried off so fast he nearly stumbled. Kalvan laughed softly. "Harmakros was a little too kind with the boy's training, but he's bright. He'll learn."

"Now, Colonel. I only called you back to Tarr-Hostigos because I wanted somebody to ride up with me who'll make better conversation than Major Nicomoth. He's not stupid, but today he'll have half his mind on whether he'll get to ride in another cavalry charge. However, if you think the Mounted Rifles will need you at once..."

"If I'd thought that, Your Majesty, I would have sent a messenger. I'll gladly ride with you. I won't insult your army by expecting it to fall apart before we can get there or indeed at—"

The change on Kalvan's face warned Verkan to silence as Ptosphes stepped out of the doorway, buckling on his sword. He wore all his armor except his helmet and his gauntlets; the latter hung from his belt, and on his hands were new riding gloves with his device of crossed halberds on the back. Ptosphes' face was red from the exertion of chasing down the stairs and he appeared to be having trouble catching

his breath.

Ptosphes took a couple of deep breaths, then snarled, "Your Majesty, Colonel Verkan. Shall we go and kill some of Styphon's whelps?"

From the look on Ptosphes' face, Verkan only hoped it was Styphon's dogs that the First Prince of Hos-Hostigos intended to kill. Ptosphes commanded the left wing of horse, a choice forced upon Kalvan. There was no telling what Ptosphes might have done in his present condition if he hadn't been given a rank and post in the coming battle appropriate to his rank and title, as First Prince of Hos-Hostigos. Verkan was sure that Kalvan would rather have had someone else holding the crucial left wing—Harmakros, commanding the reserves, or Count Phrames, second in command of the right wing under Kalvan.

Ptosphes' mental state was going to be almost as much a factor in this battle as the morale of Kalvan's troops.

IV

Sirna saw another horse-drawn cart with big wooden wheels pull up and cursed to herself at the need to organize another work party to unload it. Then she saw Brother Mytron himself sitting beside the driver. She leaped down the embankment in front of the trench, hiked her skirts above her boots, and ran over to the cart.

"Brother Mytron! Are matters well?"

"I think we lack the necessary time for discussing the basic nature of the universe," Mytron said with a grin. "On a more material plane, I was the last man out of the University. It seemed to me that something important must have been overlooked and sure enough it had." He pointed to the canvas-wrapped bundles in the back of the cart, and Sirna saw the glint of metal mesh in the corner of one. Her heart skipped a few beats until she realized that this mesh was much cruder than the mesh of a Paratime transposition conveyor dome.

"What is it?" Mytron asked, pulling back his cowl. "Lady Sirna, you look as if you'd just spotted one of Styphon's demons!"

"No. Just worried about the real Styphoni devils in human guise only a few marches away."

"Verily," Mytron said, making a circle around the blue star over his chest.

Sirna pointed to the canvas bundles and asked, "What are they?"

"Two of the wire screens for the papermaking. I don't know how anyone came to overlook them. But there they were in one corner, all ready to be carted away and melted down by the Holy Host as demonical. We loaded them in the cart and were just turning around when we saw Nostori cavalry coming back in a rush. I decided they must know something we didn't and had the driver whip up the horses."

"Dralm and Tranth bless you for that, Brother." Sirna cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted. "Urig! Bring three men out here. Another cart to unload."

While Urig was rounding up his work gang, Sirna told Mytron that the other refugees from the University were safely bedded down in an empty storeroom. Then she asked about the battle.

"It hadn't started yet when I passed through our army. They were all drawn up, with King Kalvan and Count Phrames on the right, Prince Ptosphes on the left and more guns than I've ever seen in the center. I heard that Kalvan has plans for those guns and that Captain-General Chartiphon, with help from General Alkides, will command the center. I'm afraid I have no idea what the Great King's plans are—the gods didn't make me a man of war. I'm honest enough to be grateful that I'll be spending the next few days watching over Queen Rylla."

"Is her time near?"

"The chief midwife says so, and who am I to argue with a woman of fifty winters at that art? She also says the baby is coming early, which is not so good."

Sirna whistled. That could be a real problem with no crèche wombs or even an incubator. No wonder that contraceptive implants for women were a necessity for outtime University work.

"Will the baby be all right?"

"The chief midwife appears to believe so."

"But would she dare say otherwise about the Great Queen and her child?"

Brother Mytron looked perplexed. Shrugged his shoulders and said, "Amasphalya would not have it otherwise! She would speak her mind to the Red Hand if they were to accost her."

Sirna laughed; this Amasphalya sounded like a real harridan—maybe Rylla had finally met her match. She hoped the old dragon was as good as Mytron believed. She couldn't even imagine the pain of having a child die in childbirth; maybe that was why Sirna had never considered a live birth even when her husband pressed for it—they were all the rage ten years ago among the University elite.

"Hey!" a voice shouted from beyond the cart. "Either move that Dralm-blasted cart on or bring it over here and join the circle."

A mounted man was riding across the field toward the wagon, waving a cattle whip. "The Great King gave orders to—oh, your pardon, Brother Mytron!" he finished in an entirely different voice.

Sirna swallowed a laugh. Brother Mytron grinned. "In fact, after I get a horse from the stable, I'm on my way to Tarr-Hostigos to see the Queen."

"May the true gods give Her Majesty a safe birthing and an heir for the Great Kingdom," the trooper said. Then he turned his horse and rode back toward the huge circle of wagons, carts and baggage that penned in all the refugees' cattle. They were no longer bellowing as loudly as they had at dawn, but as it grew hotter an unmistakable smell was creeping across to the Foundry. Next year some Hostigi farmer was going to have at least one field *very* well fertilized.

"Add your prayers to his," Mytron said softly. "Much of the luck of Hostigos rides with our Rylla, may the Allfather keep her safe."

Sirna swallowed a sudden lump in her throat, then nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She cleared her throat and turned to meet Urig and his men. "Take these bundles from the cart into the driest corner of the new storehouse and wrap them well."

Urig looked dubiously at the wire mesh. "Is it—that a weapon?"

"It is something that the Great King thinks may become a weapon in time, but only against his enemies and the enemies of the True Gods."

Urig nodded, with an if-you-say-so-Mistress expression on his face, then started shouting to his work party.

That was only partly true, Sirna realized, or at least only partly true in the short run. If Kalvan succeeded in inventing paper and following it up with printing, the processes wouldn't remain secrets for long. Styphon's House could print its propaganda just as enthusiastically as its enemies. In the long run, though, Kalvan was working toward mass literacy and mass education, which were the most potent enemies of superstition and ignorance—and they were *his* worst enemies.

While the cart was being emptied, Mytron left on a small horse, waving farewell. Sirna made a Grefftscharri gesture of aversion. She didn't know whom she was trying to save from bad luck, but there seemed to be a lot of it going around, rather like fleas...

"You made that gesture as if you believed it," said a voice behind her.

Sirna whirled, ready to shove Lathor Karv into the nearest trench if he were mocking her tolerance toward the Zarthani. Instead she saw Aranth Saln, and she couldn't find anything to say to the expression on the Scholar's face.

In any case, before she could have said two words, they both heard a distant dull thudding off in the heat haze toward the southwest.

"Cannon," Aranth said. "That means the main armies are engaged, not just the skirmishers."

TWENTY-TWO

From the top of a small rise at the rear of the right wing, Kalvan could see that the entire center of both the Holy Host and the Hostigos army were lost in a steadily swelling cloud of white smoke. Kalvan was surprised by the number of guns the Styphoni had managed to haul up, almost equal to the Hostigi in numbers although decidedly inferior in rate of fire. Soton clearly learned fast.

Periodically the noise of the big guns rose as one side or the other fired a ragged salvo. It reminded Kalvan of scrap iron being dumped on a concrete floor.

Captain-General Chartiphon commanded the center, almost twenty thousand infantry with the recent Ulthori and Zygrozi reinforcements—men anxious for gold and glory. General Alkides was in command of the Hostigi artillery and Kalvan mentally wrote him down for the Battle of Phyrax Honors List, if there

was one. Alkides had done everything but haul bombards on his shoulders to assemble the Hostigi artillery and the Great Battery in particular. He had thirty guns in the Great Battery, his own three eighteen-pounders, four sixteen-pounders, assorted field pieces with defective carriages and a miscellany of heavy older pieces, mostly bombards, collected from every fortress within dragging distance of Hostigos Town.

Behind the Great Battery the Hos-Hostigos regular infantry were drawn up, with the Royal Army anchoring the right and the surviving veterans of Old Hostigos holding the left. The center was composed of the veterans of the Heights of Chothros, while four thousand mercenary Ktethroni pikemen from a distant Hos-Zygrosi Princedom held the rear.

The Ktethroni were a tangible sign of support from King Sopharar; Kalvan only hoped they were as good as advertised. They generally reminded him of the early Swiss pike squares and appeared to know their business. However, pike squares were vulnerable to well-handled artillery and, in any case, he wasn't about to commit untested soldiers too soon in the most important battle of his life.

If he lost this battle, his allies would melt away; there wouldn't be enough Hostigi manpower left to raise two companies. That is, if the Styphoni didn't raze every building in Hostigos to the ground and sow the earth with salt, as the Romans had done to Carthage.

So far it was a case of "things could be better, but then again they could be worse." Prince Ptosphes, in command of the Army of the Besh on the left, had on his initiative led his cavalry out against the right wing of the Holy Host under Grand Master Soton. Kalvan was sure that Ptosphes had been drawn out by insults from the Zarthani Knights; it was a disquieting demonstration of Ptosphes' shaken state of mind that he'd attacked without orders from Kalvan.

The Knights quickly broke Ptosphes' precipitous charge, and he was only saved from disaster by the veteran infantry of Old Hostigos, who'd quickly reformed their pike line along the left flank. They pinned the Zarthani Knights long enough for Harmakros to bring up the cavalry of the Army of Observation from the reserve. Suddenly facing the fire of fifteen hundred dragoon musketeers, Soton had retired quickly—but in good order. The major casualty of this action was the morale of the Army of the Besh and Prince Ptosphes, both suffering from a massive inferiority complex. Kalvan was either going to have to bolster their confidence or relieve Ptosphes of his command, something he did not want to do unless he had absolutely no other choice.

This artillery duel couldn't go on much longer; one side or the other was going to have to commit itself. It looked as if it was going to be up to him; either that, or wait for the Holy Host to run out of rations. He didn't know how long that would take, and in any case they might forage until Hostigos looked like Georgia after Sherman's march to the sea. Lord High Marshall Mnephilos wasn't about to march his Sacred Square up to the Great Battery, nor was Soton about to charge with his Knights through the Grove of the Badger King, where Hestophes and Harmakros' pet Sastragathi were holding back the Knights' auxiliary horse-archers.

General Hestophes had been wounded, but not before he'd smashed one attack by mercenaries and a second by horse-archers. His people were now digging in around the Grove of the Badger King. Its name might be seen as a good omen, while its trees would keep the heavy cavalry out of their hair. Hestophes' last message before he was surrounded was that he could hold out as long as he had fireseed and arrows, and that fortunately Soton's auxiliaries were being generous with the latter even if they were proving stingy with Styphon's Best.

Kalvan's remaining problem was tactical. Unfortunately, history was short on examples of pike armies

against bills. The bill had been an English national weapon during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, but they hadn't fought many major Continental battles during the Sixteenth Century. The only major pike vs. bill engagement he could recall was the Battle of Flodden Field, where the French-armed Scots knights under James IV were shorn of their nobility by the English bills.

Pikemen were most effective against other pole-armed infantry when moving forward in formation. Once they were halted, they could be chopped up far too easily by the shorter and more maneuverable bills. Thus at Flodden, the Scots took the initiative: King James, and the cream of the Scottish nobility, led fifteen thousand men downhill in a charge against the Earl of Surrey's dismounted men-at-arms and seven thousand Yorkshire billmen. The shock of impact drove the English downhill several hundred yards, but they held their formation and took a terrible toll of the front ranks of pikes. At close quarters, the Scottish pikes and swords were overcome by the heavier English bills. When the battle ended, King James and ten thousand of his subjects lay dead on the field.

The Holy Host of Styphon was also deployed with a bill-and-musket center with cavalry at both flanks. The Hos-Ktemnoi foot, under Mnephilos, were arranged in two rows, like the old tercios under Tilly. The first row was made up of the Royal Square of Hos-Ktemnos and two Great Squares, about ten thousand men. The second row held four thousand Zarthani Order Foot, three thousand of Styphon's Own Guard and three thousand assorted mercenary foot. No surprises there—but if Ptosphes could restrain himself and Soton didn't have anything up his sleeve, Kalvan just might have a surprise or two of his own.

A shout from the sentries made Kalvan turn. An armored barrel on horseback, decorated with red plumes, was approaching. A closer look revealed General Klestreus, an unwarlike figure—even if his three-quarter armor was blackened.

"What in the name of Styphon's Bollocks—"

Klestreus looked mildly insulted. "My place is beside my Great King, or I am no soldier." He wasn't, of course, but why be rude?

"A messenger has just arrived from Nostor. With luck and Dralm's Blessing, he may yet outlive his horse."

Kalvan nodded. "Yes, yes." Get on with it, man! There's a battle going on, or hadn't you noticed?

"He says there's a great host of Styphoni on its way through Nostor. He saw the banners of Royal House of Hos-Agrys, several Agrysi Princely Houses and Styphon's Red Insignia."

That was the reversed circular swastika (all too appropriate, Kalvan felt) of Styphon's device and the banner of the Red Hand and the Order of Zarthani Knights.

"How large is this army and did they bring their own supplies?" There would be neither food nor forage in battle ravaged Nostor—not after last year's campaigns.

"The scout said it would take two days for the wagons alone to pass. It was if the Styphoni had opened the very storehouse of Balph itself!"

Probably exactly what they did. That also explained all the ship traffic going up the Hudson; they'd been building up magazines of stores so that King Demistophon could fish in troubled waters at Styphon's expense. As long as somebody else was paying, his Princes—most of them worshippers of Allfather

Dralm—would have few objections to his taking sides.

"How many soldiers are in this army?"

"He had to be careful and there was not much time—"

"But?"

"He thought their force might be as great as fifteen thousand. Most were mercenaries."

"How much time do we have?"

"He doesn't know. He ran his first horse to death and had to walk three candles before he found another."

"Did he give you any kind of guess?"

Klestreus cringed, not wanting to be the bearer of bad news.

Under different circumstances it might have been funny, but now it was temper boiling. "Out with it, man!"

"They could hardly come upon us in less than five days."

That was good news, or better than he'd expected from Klestreus' expression. They could fight today's battle without the Styphoni receiving any reinforcements. If the Hostigi won, they could turn the Agrysi invasion with ease; if they lost, it wouldn't matter how many vultures came to pick over the corpse of Hostigos.

The one question remaining in Kalvan's mind was: why were the Styphoni fighting at all today, if they had a chance of being reinforced? Were they that short of supplies, or did they distrust Demistophon that much? It was likely that Demistophon had been pushed into this attack by the Inner Circle for allowing the Great Council of Dralm to meet in Agrys City. Or, had Soton and Mnephilos been carried away by the opportunity to smash Kalvan's force by their own unaided efforts?

No point in speculating too far ahead of the facts, and in any case Klestreus wasn't leaving now that his message had been delivered. Kalvan nodded, with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"There is more, Your Majesty."

I don't know if I can stand any more. "Continue, General."

"Prince Armanes has taken a gut wound."

Kalvan winced. Here-and-now that usually meant a lingering, painful death for a good and loyal man. It also gave him an excuse to tether Prince Ptosphes with the cooler head of Count Phrames—a much wiser counselor than poor Armanes.

"I need a favor."

Klestreus swelled until it looked as if he'd burst his armor like an over-burdened lady's corset.

"Anything, you command. Your Majesty."

"I want you to ride to Count Phrames and tell him that it is Our will that he replace the wounded Armanes on the left wing."

"It will be done, Sire."

"Then, I want you to personally escort the Prince to the field infirmary and see that he receives proper care."

"With great pleasure, Your Majesty. I shall see that he knows it is your will."

That was three things accomplished: a noncombatant sent out of the way; Armanes given a fighting chance to live, although he would doubtless not appreciate being carried away from the battle; and a trusted general sent to keep watch on one whose judgment was no longer reliable.

As he was turning on his horse, Klestreus spun around in the saddle. "Oh, I beg Your Majesty's pardon for forgetting. Six hundred Nyklosi peasant levies have arrived. I led them to the center before I learned of Prince Armanes' wound. And, there is word from Tarr-Hostigos; Her Majesty, Great Queen Rylla, has gone into childbirth pangs."

"WHAT?"

Kalvan spent a moment suppressing several unproductive but emotionally satisfying urges, such as having a heart attack or strangling Klestreus with his bare hands. Finally, he said, very slowly, "I wish you had told me this first."

"Forgive me, Your Majesty. It seemed to me—"

"Never mind what it *seemed* ." Although perhaps Klestreus had a point; the outcome of today's battle did make more difference to Hos-Hostigos than the outcome of Rylla's labor. Maybe even to him, but if some god came and told him that the price of certain victory today would be Rylla's life...

There were advantages to not believing in gods who struck that kind of bargain—or any other, Kalvan decided.

After a few moments of mulling over all the terrible things that might happen to Rylla and the baby, he realized that Klestreus had already left to carry out his orders. A breeze was blowing now, tearing the gray and white smoke into tatters, and he was able to see the entire Styphoni center. The huge royal Square flanked by the smaller Great Squares; Gustavus Adolphus might have seen such sights at Breitenfeld or Lützen.

A great many things could go wrong with his plans today, but somehow they seemed far less personal than what was going on in the royal bedchambers at this very moment.

He was wrenched out of his thoughts by the harsh coughing sounds of a badly winded horse making its way to the top of the rise.

"Did you give Alkides my orders?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Major Nicomoth said. "Though not before he wept and ranted as though it was

his children being dismembered!"

Kalvan wasn't surprised. It hadn't been easy for him to order a dozen of his mobile six- and eight-pounders spiked and rendered useless, but that was far better than having them turned and used on the Hostigi center. Besides, the Styphoni were a big fish, requiring bait to match.

"You gave Chartiphon his orders?"

"Yes. The Captain-General will order the center to advance as soon as you give the signal. General Harmakros is also bringing the remainder of the reserves into position."

May Dralm be with you, Harmakros, thought Kalvan. And Ptosphes, too; there would be nobody to pull the Prince's bacon out of the fire if he charged the Knights again and Ptosphes had to fall back. Still, if Prince Leonnestros in command of the Styphoni left wing continued to be as rash as he'd proven himself in the past... Kalvan was sure he knew what Soton's orders were: force the Hostigi to commit *their* army until it is worn out, then grind them into the earth without mercy.

Kalvan watched as Harmakros threaded his Army of Observation through the gap between the center and the right wing. Then the wind changed direction and all he could see was a white cloud streaked with gray ribs. When the smoke cleared again, he could see that Harmakros' heavy cavalry were already forming the shield for the mobile artillery.

It seemed to take an hour for the dozen artillery pieces to move into position on the knoll, but Kalvan knew it was really only ten or fifteen minutes. Already more than half of the three thousand dragoons had passed through the Hostigi lines. It was at times like this that he missed a good watch more than anything except a hot shower.

Kalvan was betting his last dollar (or in this case, Hostigos crown) that Prince Leonnestros, eager to succeed Mnephilos as Lord High Marshal of Hos-Ktemnos, could not sit still under the fire of a dozen Hostigi artillery pieces. If this ruse didn't come off, Kalvan didn't want to think about what would happen to the Hostigi gunners who in blind faith were standing behind guns that couldn't fire—and they wouldn't be the only casualties.

The Army of Observation and the mobile artillery were approaching their position now. Off to the left through all the smoke, Kalvan thought he saw the left wing shifting again. He couldn't see clearly, and in any case there was not time to find out or do more than hope the left would hold for a few more minutes.

Kalvan raised his arm, and the primitive Roman candle he'd had Master Thalmoth make exploded over the Hostigi center. Twelve thousand arquebusiers, musketeers and pikemen moved forward, each pikeman holding a buckler or shield as well as a pike. Some of the shields bore the devices of recently deceased nobles of the finest houses of Hos-Harphax. Behind them came fifteen hundred halberdiers, several thousand peasant militia and the four thousand Ktethroni pikemen.

Kalvan raised his other arm. The second Roman candle burst, while sunlight blazed off helmets, armor and gun barrels as the cavalry troopers of the right wing began to mount up.

TWENTY-THREE

I

Xykos was so tall and strong that in his home village his nickname was "the Bull." Still, the double weight of armor and shield was beginning to tell on him as he tramped across the rocky ground; he wondered how those without his strength were faring. To be sure, his shield was twice the average height, large enough that two musketeers were moving half-crouched behind it.

Halfway to the Styphoni lines and still not a shot fired from the blue and orange square ahead. *Excellent fire discipline*, he thought, *is how Kalvan would put it*. He'd been fortunate enough to partake in some pike drills led by the Great King himself; a great man, unlike many of noble blood, who was not afraid to get his hands soiled. *My brothers will not falter, even when the bullets come. We are the Veterans of the Long March.*

They were the survivors of four times their number of foot who had died at Tenabra and the days following when Grand Master Soton chased after them. Xykos himself had been only a member of the Hostigi militia before Tenabra; now he was one of the four hundred men of the Hostigos regiment, the Veterans of the Long March, so named by Prince Ptosphes himself.

Xykos had been blooded long before Tenabra; first at the Battle of Listra Mouth, then later at Fyk, where he'd liberated his armor from the dead body of a baron of Sask.

Tenabra had been his first battle where the Hostigi had lost, all thanks to that Dralm-damned traitor Balthar! After Balthar and his troops had bolted, leaving a gap that the Styphoni had quickly exploited; the Ktemnoi billmen had mowed down the Hostigi foot at Tenabra like a farmer's scythe in a field of barley. Somehow he knew that Balthar would not have done his foul treachery if King Kalvan had been in command. Prince Ptosphes was a fair ruler and a good leader of men, but he was no gods-sent Kalvan!

Xykos' bones would have been fertilizing the fields of Tenabra now if he hadn't been lucky enough to unhorse a Zarthani Knight with his two-handed sword and take his mount. The charger had proved to be a valued friend, once Xykos had proved who was boss, but the journey back to Hostigos had been a long one and his friend had given his life so that Xykos could see his newborn son again.

Vurth, his wife's father, had argued after his return from Tenabra that he'd paid his debt to their Prince and that he should remain and tend his farm. "Let the gods settle matters between Great Kings!" had been his father-in-law's advice. However, Xykos knew where his loyalty and duty lay; if they didn't stop these Styphoni dogs here and now there would never be any peace—or even a Hostigos. Besides, he was now one of the double-pay Veterans of the Long March; the extra silver would help greatly when it came to buying new stock for the farm after the war.

Then Xykos saw a most wondrous sight: from either side of the enemy Great Square ahead, a line of musketeers moved out like a hinged arm. Before he'd covered a dozen more paces, there was a thunderclap of muskets and the buzz of metal hornets in the air. He heard cries of pain all around and staggered as his shield slowed a bullet enough that it only dented his breastplate. He stumbled for a moment, then caught his footing and fell back into step with the men to either side.

Another volley! This time Xykos felt a bullet crease his helmet. How much longer before Petty-Captain Lytog gave the order to halt and return fire? Each musketeer was carrying two or three loaded smoothbores taken from a Hostigos armory filled to the rafters with the loot of Kalvan's victory at Chothros. A new ditty sung in Hostigos taverns told how Kalvan took cheese and bread to

Hos-Harphax and returned with steel and lead.

Two more Styphoni volleys, each more ragged than the last slammed, into the lines, then the petty-captains gave the order to halt. Xykos set his shield and caught his breath, while the musketeers planted their musket rests. In the third Hostigi rank, he was close enough to the enemy front to make out individual men. The Ktemnoi Sacred Squares were dressed in blue shirts and breeches, with brown boiled-leather jacks for the musketeers and polished steel breastplates for the billmen, set off by orange sashes. They all wore the high-combed helmets Kalvan called *morions* with orange and blue plumes. The Royal Square was dressed differently; they all wore silvered armor, like the Saski bodyguard, and orange stripes down their sleeves and the sides of their breeches.

"FIRE!"

The first Hostigi volley tore into the Ktemnoi front rank as if they were a battery of artillery guns firing case shot. A great cheer rose up from the Hostigi ranks. The second volley and third were almost as devastating; the fourth less so. Still the Ktemnoi squares held. Now the musketeers were supposed to sling their weapons and fall back; instead many picked up the bills of the wounded or dead, while others drew their swords and held their places.

"Pikes advance. CHARGE!"

As he began to run toward the Sacred Square straight ahead, he was amazed at how quickly the Ktemnoi rear ranks moved forward to replace their fallen comrades. It was an admirable display of courage. He would make a toast to Galzar after he buried their bones. The remaining Ktemnoi musketeers fired a last ragged volley at almost point-blank range, then fell back, leaving the billmen to take the Hostigi charge.

There was a cry from ten thousand throats—

"KILL THE DEMON SPAWN!"

The billmen began their charge.

The Hostigi reply came—

"DOWN STYPHON!"

The two armies collided with such a shock that the first two Hostigi ranks disappeared before Xykos' eyes. He was eight ranks deep into what had once been the Ktemnoi line before he came to a stop with his pike head buried halfway to the end of its iron head into a billman's hip. He dropped the pike and drew the two-handed sword Boarsbane from its scabbard across his back. He had the sword blade out in time to parry a blow from a billhead. His next stroke sent the edge through the billman's shoulder, splitting him down to his tripes.

Xykos was trying to free his sword from bone and sinew when another billman charged. The billhook was less than a hand's length from his face when a pikehead pierced the billman's neck and the billhook clanged harmlessly against his helmet. He wrenched his blade free, threw it up into the air and brought it down so hard it split the billman's head in twain, helmet and all.

He looked around to see who his savior was, but Ktemnoi and Hostigi were so tangled and blood-splattered it was difficult to tell friend from foe. And so jammed together there was no hope of

moving to a better spot. Maybe this place was good enough; he could kill Styphoni here as well as anywhere!

II

Count Phrames rode over to the left wing at the head of the King's Heavy Horse, two hundred and sixty volunteer noblemen "too thick-headed or well-born to fight in a reasonable fashion," as King Kalvan put it. All of the men-at-arms wore full-plate armor, vambraces, visored helms, heavy lances and at least one pistol in a saddle-holster—their one concession to Kalvan-style warfare. While Phrames realized their limited value, he still couldn't help but respect them for their loyalty to an older and more honorable way of war.

Warfare under Kalvan was more efficient, but also more deadly than before. Also, much of the pageantry, like that of several hundred men-at-arms in silvered or gilded armor on brightly caparisoned horses, was now all but gone.

It was the Great King's plan to use the Heavy Horse as an anvil to blunt the wedge of the Zarthani Knights, who had earlier cut through Ptosphes' Army of the Besh like a poniard through a wheel of cheese. By Dralm's Grace, Kalvan was familiar with this novel formation of the Knights and said there was insufficient time to school the Hostigi in the counter wedge.

So there would be only the anvil of the King's Heavy Horse and the stout hearts of the Hostigi to prevent the Zarthani Knights from dispersing the left wing and outflanking the center as they had at Tenabra. While he rarely wished ill for any man, for Prince Balthar of Beshta Phrames hoped there was an eternity of torture waiting in the Caverns of Regwarn.

Prince Ptosphes, ten years older from the day of Tenabra, rode out to meet Phrames with a small bodyguard.

"Reinforcements from Great King Kalvan, Your Highness."

"I pray to Galzar we can put them to good use. I also pray that King Kalvan did not give us that which he could not afford to spend."

"No, Sire. If Harmakros' artillery draws off Prince Leonnestros, as Kalvan believes, these men will not be needed. If not, it matters little where they fight so long as they kill many Styphoni and die well."

"Well spoken, Phrames!" Ptosphes said, with more fervor than the Count remembered seeing since he'd returned from the south.

Phrames outlined Kalvan's plan and Prince Ptosphes drew up the Heavy Horse into a single line, "*en haie*" as Kalvan called it. Then he formed up a second line with his own and Prince Sarrask's heavily armed bodyguard and a third line with the household and noble cavalry of Nostor, Sashta and Kyblos. The remainder of mercenary horse, mostly cuirassiers and lancers, and Princely cavalry were to follow in close order under Phrames.

At the flash of the fireseed signal, the King's Heavy Horse advanced at the center. When they had covered an eighth of the field, the heavy cavalry of Hostigos and Sask moved forward.

As the red and blue plumes of Prince Ptosphes' bodyguard began to recede, Phrames saw the Zarthani Knights begin their charge. From where he sat on his mount, the tip of the wedge looked like a black lance tip. It almost was, for it was composed of the forward element of eight hundred Brother Knights in blackened plate armor with heavy lances. The Brethren were followed by sixteen hundred Confrere Knights, as many sergeants and eight hundred oath-brothers with javelin and sword. Against light cavalry or scouts, the oath-brothers would have been leading the charge as skirmishers; today they followed at the rear to dispatch the wounded and guard ransom-worthy prisoners.

At the same moment the third Hostigi line began its charge, Phrames saw the Knights' wedge pierce the Kings' Heavy Horse. The gap grew wider as the Heavy Horse pressed home their charge, then Ptosphes and the second line hit the Knights. Now, Phrames could see that the entire wedge formation was being blunted and slowed down.

He signaled to his trumpeter who, who blew "Advance," and then cantered out ahead of his men. By the time he was a third of the way down the field the swirling gunsmoke was so thick he couldn't see his own bodyguard who'd quickly moved in front of him.

Phrames kneed his horse into a gallop and broke out of the smoke less than fifty rods behind the third line at the exact moment it struck the nose of the Knights' wedge. This time the forward Knights didn't break through at once, men and horses clumped together where the two lines joined in a swirl of lances and slamming swords. Slowly the tip of the wedge pushed through the third line, but it was no longer a point but more a truncated pyramid, obviously shaken and—Phrames devoutly hoped—at last vulnerable. He gave the signal and this time all the trumpets blew together.

"CHARGE!"

At first impact, Phrames' banner-bearer was hurled out of his saddle, slamming into a Knights' charger and bouncing to the ground—all the while still holding the banner with the Count's device of a golden eagle on a black field. He tottered on his feet for a moment until a passing Knight took off his arm at the elbow with a wicked sword slash.

Phrames had a moment to ponder that this was the third banner-bearer of his to be killed or mortally wounded since the Battle of Fyk. Suddenly he had a clear shot at the Knight and he shot the man out of his saddle even before he could raise his sword. He stuck the empty pistol into his sash, drawing another from his saddle holster, firing almost at once. Another Zarthani Knight dropped from his black-barded horse and disappeared under his destrier's hooves.

Some of the Knights began to return fire with their own pistols, then the lines crashed together with a resounding thud, so entwined that neither side dare fire for fear of hitting friendly troopers...

III

Harmakros watched with delight as Prince Leonnestros, leading several thousand Ktemnoi noble

cavalry, advanced from the Styphoni left wing toward the Army of Observation's forward cavalry skirmishers and their advanced battery. Now, by Dralm, they had a real fighting chance, and that was all he'd ever asked for. "Praise Dralm and Galzar!" he shouted, while to himself he promised the gods he would ask for no more miracles upon this day.

Leonnestros was leading eight hundred men-at-arms of the Ktemnoi Royal Guard, and two thousand of the King's Pistoleers forward with more contempt for his Hostigi opponents than was wise. He was about to be taught a hard lesson in respect.

Harmakros' trumpeters sounded the recall to the forward Hostigi mounted skirmishers; he was pleased to see most of them withdrawing toward their infantry support, two crescent-shaped ranks of shot with two ranks of pikemen behind them in support. A few of the Hostigi thickheads stayed to fight and were ridden over by the advancing Styphoni. Before Kalvan it would have been all or most of them; once more it was brought home to Harmakros just how much they owed this wise leader from beyond the Cold Lands.

By the time the retreating cavalry were safely tucked behind the supporting infantry, Leonnestros' vanguard was in arquebus range.

Harmakros gave the order for the shot to fire. Fifteen hundred arquebuses and muskets went off almost as one, blowing the Ktemnoi Royal Guard out of existence as an organized military unit. Even without Verkan's Mounted Rifles, the Hostigi dragoons were the best mounted troops in the Hostigos Royal Army and Harmakros—from the devastation he observed—was certain that every third shot had been a hit.

The Royal Guard might have been mortally wounded, but there was nothing wrong with the King's Pistoleers. They shook out their lines and charged the impudent Hostigi.

The dragoons got off a second ragged volley, then withdrew behind the pikemen to where their horses were being held. They didn't have to defeat Leonnestros, just tempt him to swallow a tasty piece of bait. In fact, if Leonnestros had any battle savvy that first salvo would have had him considering retreat, but not this commander—already the Royal Pistoleers and surviving Royal Guard were charging the Hostigi pike line.

The pikemen held off the initial charge, taking about as many casualties as they inflicted. Most of the musketeers and arquebusiers were already mounted and withdrawing in good order. Harmakros gave the order for the pikemen to form a hedgehog and begin their own retreat.

This was the trickiest part of the whole operation; the pikemen not only had to retreat, but they had to keep their formation, so as not to let the enemy know what was happening behind them, *and* avoid taking so many casualties that they ceased to be an effective unit. If they succeeded, Harmakros intended to recommend them for one of Kalvan's "Unit Citations."

As the Ktemnoi Pistoleers gathered for a second charge, Harmakros gave the signal for the advance of the Hostigi regular cavalry. *Now, my iron heads, you may die with honor.*

This sudden countercharge by a retreating enemy took Leonnestros and the King's Pistoleers by surprise. Leonnestros, conspicuous in his black and gold armor with orange and blue plumes, tried to rally his men, but they were suddenly thrown into disorder by a force less than a quarter their size. The Pistoleers took almost a hundred casualties before they rallied enough to push the Hostigi cavalry back.

By this time most of the dragoon pikemen had formed their hedgehog and were moving back to the Hostigi line. Harmakros gave the final signal, two sharp trumpet blasts, and about half the original force of Hostigi cavalry broke off and drove towards the Hostigi lines. The artillerymen, suddenly shorn of protection and support, were the last to leave. Harmakros hoped that someday Alkides would forgive him.

Waving and gesturing, Leonnestros directed his men toward the abandoned Hostigi redoubt. Harmakros was pleased to note that the Ktemnoi Pistoleers saw little honor or profit in chasing gunners and allowed most of them to evade and retreat.

The Pistoleers rode past and around the loaded field pieces and came to a halt. For a moment it was mass confusion, then it appeared the Harphaxi cavalry were reforming ranks to charge the Hostigi center! Harmakros couldn't believe that they would stop, but not turn the guns on the Hostigi center. A few of the Pistoleers pointed excitedly at the piled barrels of fireseed the *cowardly* Hostigi had left behind. In his mind's ear, Harmakros could *hear* Leonnestros mentally rehearsing his victory speech and gloating over the praise and gold he would receive from Styphon's House and Great King Cleitharses.

Enjoy the moment while you can, you strutting capon! Harmakros thought. If by some undeserved miracle Leonnestros survived this battle, the only reward he was going to get for disobeying Soton's orders would be the sharp end of the Grand Master's tongue—if not the blunt end of his mace!

IV

Grand-Captain Phidestros began to wonder if it had been a good idea after all to make his mad rush to join the Holy Host, when he saw Prince Leonnestros dash madly off toward the Hostigi battery. Grand Master Soton knew his craft, no doubt about it, but his lesser captains from High Marshall Mnephilos on down left much to be desired.

To do him justice, Phidestros had no idea of what he himself would have done in Leonnestros' boots, not with the Hostigi building an artillery redoubt from which they could hammer the left wing of the Holy Host at will! Great King Kalvan had turned what had once been a straightforward and honest profession into something that made the head hurt as much from thinking as the arse did from riding!

It was bad enough that the Hostigi seemed to have an improbably large number of heavy guns in the center. Worse still, the Knights' battery was too close to the left wing for even a drinking man's comfort. One of the former Beshtan companies under his command had already lost its banner-bearer and three troopers to *friendly fire*.

What was he supposed to do now that Leonnestros had all but deserted his post? Being Grand-Captain of the largest band in the left wing, Soton had put him in nominal command of the mercenary horse under Leonnestros. As he watched Kalvan's musketeers butcher the Royal Guard, he decided that it would be best to stay where he was. Men newly raised to Grand-Captain and given charge over five thousand horse did not make changes in Grand Master Soton's battle plans without a damned good reason.

Yet, everyone else—Leonnestros and the Kings Pistoleers, the Sacred Squares and even the Zarthani Knights on the right wing—were engaged with the enemy. Here he sat with Kalvan and more horse than

he liked to think about only a march away. *What is Kalvan waiting for? Leonnestros to piss his men away against the new battery? Something else that only Kalvan could imagine?*

Phidestros watched as the Hostigi suddenly began to retreat to behind the battery. They had hammered Leonnestros' cavalry: *why retreat now?* Meanwhile, Leonnestros was trying to regroup his Pistoleers and the surviving Royal Guards. Leonnestros was going to have to take out the battery quickly before all the Hostigi departed and the guns had an open lane of fire on Leonnestros' horse. If he didn't, he was in for a surprise; there wouldn't be enough of him and his command left for Soton to punish. Kalvan-style guns were like nothing any Ktemnoi army had ever faced.

He was surprised at how quickly the Hostigi pikemen formed into a hedgehog formation and retreated before Leonnestros' Pistoleers. Suddenly the Ktemnoi were at the enemy battery. He was surprised—and uneasy...something was wrong. He'd never seen Hostigi foot retreat so quickly after they had shot the Styphon out of their opponents, neither at Fyk nor at Chothros Heights.

It's a trap! He had to get a warning off to Leonnestros before he committed his command.

"Uroth!"

"Yes, Grand-Captain."

"No time for a dispatch. Warn Leonnestros to examine Kalvan's demicannon. I suspect treachery; the Hostigi yielded that battery far too easily. Ride like the wind!"

"Yhoo!"

As he watched the last of Kalvan's artillerymen run away and Leonnestros' men swarm over the deserted battery, Phidestros felt a hollow sensation in his stomach. Not only had he just ordered a good man to a needless death, but he was about to watch the Holy Host come apart at the seams.

"Great Galzar's Ghost!" He wildly signaled his trumpeter—caught his attention and shouted. "Play retreat!"

TWENTY-FOUR

I

Xykos turned around warily, Boarsbane raised toward the sky. Other than the twisted heaps of what had once been living men, some piled three and four deep, there was no one standing in any direction for a good twenty paces. He set his sword down and tried to clear his head of the battle-madness that possessed him when he fought. His lungs labored like bellows. For the first time, he noticed that his breastplate was dented in a score of places and there was a trickle of blood from above his eyebrow falling into his left eye. With this realization came the ache of bruised ribs and weary arms pushed far beyond ordinary duty.

He said a quick prayer to the Wargod; he knew this unexpected and unasked-for sanctuary would not last for long. Above the pikes and flailing bills, he saw the trees of the Grove of the Badger King. From where he stood, it appeared that the battle had passed over him and the surviving Veterans of the Long

March.

Within moments he had located a dozen Hostigi stragglers and battle-stunned. Three or four had risen from the piles of dead and wounded like Hadron awakening in the tale of the Lost Mountain. One of the stragglers was the banner-bearer of the Veterans, still carrying the ripped and slashed flag bearing an iron boot crushing a red winged serpent. With the help of some of the other Veterans, he had soon assembled a force of some fifty to sixty men, most with minor wounds but good spirits. Those who were battle-shaken he sent to aid the gravely wounded.

The main battle was far now far enough away so that Xykos could see what was happening. The troops of the right and left flanks had held, while the center had given way. The two Great Squares were no longer in any sort of recognizable formation and had been hammered badly by the Hostigi flanks. The Royal Square had shifted to the weakest point in the Hostigi center and was slowly chewing its way toward the Great Battery.

The Great Battery itself was eerily silent, with only an occasional flash showing that was still Hostigi-held. Xykos supposed that the two armies had become so entangled that the Hostigi gunners were afraid to fire on the Holy Host for fear of hitting their own men.

It would be sheer folly to attack the Ktemnoi with only thirty men, especially since that meant going against Styphon's Red Hand. Instead he decided to move quickly through the fallen tangle of friends and foes until they were in a position to help relieve the Great Battery. He hastily explained this plan to his little company. There were no arguments; indeed they moved out eagerly, when they saw a squadron of horse under a Ktemnoi banner looking curiously in their direction.

The squadron rode off without attacking, but they'd only covered a quarter of the distance to the Great Battery when a company of Red Hand broke out of the main battle and formed a line facing Xykos' men. Their first rank fired a ragged volley with their musketoons. Three of his men dropped. He measured the distance to the Styphoni with his eyes, threw up Boarsbane and shouted, "Charge!"

II

Kalvan watched with grim satisfaction as one of the distant Ktemnoi figures lit a torch and fired the first of the captured Hostigi guns. A bright flash was followed by a deep rumble as the ancient bombard exploded. Right behind it came another blast and then a fireball and roar that made Kalvan think of a nuclear explosion, as thirty tons of strategically buried Styphon's Best went off all at once!

The better part of three thousand Ktemnoi cavalry disappeared in the great fulguration and the sky filled with dark smoke as if thunderclouds had rushed in! For a few moments the entire battlefield froze.

Kalvan noticed that the mercenary horse appeared to have escaped the worst of the explosion; their commander must have guessed the nature of Kalvan's trap in time to steer his men away from the redoubt. He wasn't able to warn Prince Leonnestros, though, or else the Prince hadn't wanted to believe him. Three thousand Ktemnoi cavalry turned into mincemeat along with a third of the Hostigi field guns!

Moments later the black cloud settled and began raining pieces of equipment, leather, mangled iron and

human and horse parts so thoroughly mixed together that it would take a doctor to tell them apart. Then everyone started moving, fighting and Kalvan guessed screaming.

His ears were ringing despite the cotton he had stuffed in them. He'd expected that so he had set up a system of hand signals for the charge. He took a final look at the Hostigi center, still being squeezed by the Royal Square, then raised his hand. Major Nicomoth had attempted to persuade Kalvan to stay on the ridge with his Lifeguards and command the battle from there, but once again there were too many good reasons for him to lead the charge in person: too much of the battle was already in other hands—for better or worse.

Ptosphes, Phrames, Chartiphon, Alkides and Harmakros all had their own parts to win. Besides, whom else did he have to lead the charge, after sending Count Phrames to stiffen Ptosphes? Colonel Democriphon of the First Royal Lancers was a good commander, even if he did bear an uncanny resemblance to George Armstrong Custer, with his long blond hair and flowing mustache. Kalvan had his eye on the Colonel, but he needed more seasoning, and there was nobody else remotely good enough except—

Kalvan suddenly realized he'd been woolgathering with all eyes on him. Not time for speculation now. The die was cast. He raised his hand again, and this time the ringing in his ears didn't drown out the shouts all around him.

"Down Styphon!"

III

Grand Master Soton first saw a blast of light so intense it was as if Barzon, the Sun God, had smote the very earth itself. *Was it possible that the other True Gods were punishing Styphon's Servants for their work? No, impossible!*

A blast of thunder cleared his head of all thoughts. To his ears, it was as if his helm had been smacked by a mace.

All around him horses reared, Knights rocked in their saddles, some tumbled from their mounts. Fortunately, the Hostigi were having similar problems with their horses as well or they could have slaughtered his men like drunken sheep.

Already they were reforming to press their attack! Had they pre-knowledge of this catastrophe? *Is Kalvan truly a Daemon, capable of summoning help from Regwarn or Hadron's Hall?*

Then a great cloud rose up, turning the sky black. An arquebus barrel slammed into his breastplate, leaving a dent and a bruise underneath. He wouldn't have been surprised if Styphon's fireseed demons and devils had followed them.

Men and horses were milling all around him in confusion. Soton raised his war hammer and pointed to the Hostigi cavalry. Maybe this time they could break through Prince Ptosphes' desperate defense and come to the relief of the center.

IV

Harmakros' head reeled. Three thousand men and horses and a score of field pieces; all destroyed in the wink of an eye!

May Dralm forgive me, but maybe there is something to this fireseed-demon tale of Styphon's House's. Not that Great King Kalvan was any demon; he was human enough, as anyone who'd watched him suffer though one of Rylla's late-term furies knew. But this fireseed—that was another matter entirely! Enough of that in one place could destroy the whole world; if he'd doubted it before, he didn't now—after all, he'd just seen the proof with his own eyes.

Great King Kalvan's charge was now halfway across the meadow. Harmakros could make out the Styphoni mercenaries preparing the Hostigi charge. Most were having trouble calming their horses; they'd been a lot closer to the forward battery than Kalvan's forces. Plus, the Ktemnoi commander was dead along with several thousand Pistoleers and Royal Guard. There was little doubt about the outcome of that engagement. Kalvan's plan had worked out as well as anything, considering his words, "that no battle plan survives contact with the enemy."

If Kalvan wasn't going to need support, where should he commit his reserve? Harmakros had both Count Phrames in person and a messenger from Chartiphon appealing desperately for it. What he decided was likely to determine the outcome of the battle as much as anything that happened on this field today, including the fireseed surprise he'd just given the late Leonnestros.

"Harmakros, we need your help," Phrames said, as close to pleading as he would ever come. "When Soton hit us with his Knights, I thought we were finished. If it hadn't been for Prince Sarrask rallying the Saski horse, we would have broken. After Tenabra and today there won't be enough Old Hostigos cavalry to muster a full regiment. Yet, Prince Ptosphes is prepared to die with his last man rather than retreat; I'm afraid, without reinforcements, Galzar may grant him his wish."

Phrames would bend his knee and ask favors for the Prince that he would never ask for himself. Harmakros mentally re-shuffled his options. "Phrames, I can give you my two regiments of cavalry, but not one man more."

Phrames nodded.

"My dragoons are needed to reinforce the center. If the Great Battery falls, Soton will turn it on *our* army! We have to support the Battery until King Kalvan can cut his way through the Styphoni mercenaries and hit their center from the rear. I'm sorry, but that's the best I can do. May Allfather Dralm and Galzar guard you and our Prince today."

V

Xykos was the first to reach the Styphoni line; their short-hafted glaives were no match for a double-handed sword wielded by a giant. Within a few breaths his men had joined him with their halberds and pikes and captured bills. The Temple Guardsmen still outnumbered Xykos' men by four to one, and would have given better than they got if they hadn't been in three ranks instead of one.

Xykos was wrestling Boarsbane out of an enemy corpse with one hand and strangling another with his left, when an explosion blew him off his feet like a lightning clap.

Swords and enemies were forgotten for a moment; his ears felt as if they'd been beaten by clubs. He rolled around on the ground, his hand cupping his ears. As he tossed and turned, he saw the barrel of a big field piece fly end over end above his head. He stared with disbelief as it fell among the Red Hand, turning the company into a mob of writhing red figures. He knew from their gaping mouths they had to be shouting and crying, but he heard nothing.

When he stumbled back to his feet, one ear was bleeding and both were numb—almost deaf...

Xykos looked around him to see friends and enemies alike littering the ground like leaves shaken from a tree. Some had been struck by flying iron, others knocked down and stunned by the unholy blast. The ground was littered with body parts, twisted armor and splashes of blood. The banner-bearer was still gripping the Veterans' banner and Xykos trudged over and helped him to his feet, then started rallying the survivors.

Among themselves they were able to bring three hands of men to their feet. All around were stunned or wounded Styphoni, most unable to rise to their feet. Those still standing were lurching about as if they were drunk on winter wine.

"ATTACK!" Xykos shouted. Or at least that was what his mouth was doing. No one including himself appeared to hear his words.

Then it struck him that for this business no words were necessary.

"Down Styphon!" he cried, grabbing the hair of one of the Red Hand whose helmet had been blown off his head. As the man dangled, feet kicking above the ground, Xykos drew his dagger with his free hand and let his men see what needed doing.

VI

Prince Sarrask laughed until his sides ached, when his charger reared and fell upon the haunches of a Zarthani Knight's black horse, as though attempting to mount it for an entirely different kind of sport than war. How they would laugh when he told this story at the Silver Stag! The Knight was knocked off his saddle by the sudden display of equine affection, falling to certain death by trampling—if nothing else—on the gore soaked earth. *One less of Styphon's spawn to fight, but—Praise Galzar!—there appears to be no end to them today.*

The Knights were tough crayfish to pry open, especially the ones in full armor. His trusty sword and

mace were all that had kept him from entering Galzar's Great Hall this day. He'd fired both pistols until he'd run out of bullets and fireseed, then used them as clubs until they broke.

This was the fiercest fight he'd ever been in, as glorious a battle as man or gods might dream of. He'd have to thank Kalvan over some winter wine this eve for giving him such a gift. By Galzar's Mace, the Great King—now there was *aman* !

No wonder the Harphaxi had been trounced so badly at Chothros; their Great King was a musician, not a warrior!

Suddenly a roaring explosion swallowed the screaming of horses and men, the steady hammering of muskets and guns, even the clang of steel on steel. Through his saddle Sarrask felt a rumble as though Endrath, God of Earth, had shaken the ground itself!

Every horse in sight, including his own, tried to rear and bolt. Without room to run, pressed up together like cattle in the slaughterhouse chute, they dashed mindlessly against each other and their riders. Sarrask used his sword freely to keep the battle-maddened horses from crushing his legs; not even armor could withstand the press of a big destrier.

Sarrask knew in his mind that both men and horses must be screaming even louder than before the explosion, but he could hear nothing except a shrill ring in both ears.

The Knights' ranks suddenly opened and Sarrask was certain he saw Grand Master Soton, his helm raised, staring about in utter disbelief. Sarrask slapped his horse with the flat edge of his sword to get his attention, then charged toward the opening. He was pleased to note that a dozen of his Bodyguard were following close behind. Then the file closed and Soton vanished so completely that Sarrask wondered if he'd imagined it.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. Soton might have escaped today, but there were still plenty of Knights within easy reach to be killed. He whirled his sword over his head.

"Down Styphon!"

TWENTY-FIVE

I

For as long as he lived, Phidestros knew he would never forget the explosion of the Hostigi redoubt. More than a third of the left wing gone in one earth-shattering moment—men, horses, armor, weapons, everything! If intuition hadn't told him to withdraw his own command, ignoring Leonnestros' orders, the casualties would have been doubled, including himself and the Iron Band. As it was he'd lost almost a hundred of the men and horses, killed or panicked by the blast and flying debris, under this banner. It was going to be Hadron's own job getting them ready to receive Kalvan's charge.

Nor was everybody's temporary deafness—Galzar make it be so!—making his job any easier. Phidestros wasted a hundred heartbeats making hand motions to send a courier off to Grand Master Soton requesting reinforcements. It took him even longer to position the Iron Band in the middle of his command so that he could rally the shaken mercenary troops. The sight of their commander and his

Banner-Captain stiffened the ranks up and down lines.

When the Hostigi horse had covered two-thirds of the distance to the Holy Host, Phidestros knew he'd done everything he could and signaled for his men to receive the enemy. His flank was organized by companies, ten wide and three deep, with the lancers in front. He had no illusions about turning the Hostigi wing, but he believed he could hold them long enough for Soton and his Knights to come to his relief. Even a thousand fresh reinforcements—if there were such after Styphon's Own Explosion—could make the difference between victory and defeat.

He could see with his own eyes how the Sacred Squares were chewing up the Hostigi Center. Only the field guns held them at bay. Galzar grant him the chance to do the same to the Hostigi right!

The crash of arms and armor as the two cavalry lines met reminded Phidestros uncomfortably of the Slaughter at Ryklos Farm and the unseemly end of the ancient order of Harphaxi Royal Lancers. Let Ormaz, Lord of the Caverns of the Dead, condemn Leonnestros to eternal damnation in his lowliest Cavern for deserting his post and leading his troopers into Kalvan's deathtrap!

For a moment it appeared as if Kalvan's charge might be broken; there were few lancers in the Hostigi first ranks and too many of the Hostigi pistoleers had fired before the two lines met with clash of arms. Then from the Hostigi second and third ranks came point-blank pistol fire, tearing through his own front ranks.

Phidestros' pressed his knees into Snowdrift's flanks, raised his sword and led the Iron Band directly into the Hostigi lines. The Iron Band's first volley emptied fifty or more Hostigi saddles, including some of King Kalvan's bodyguards. For a moment, no longer than the blink of an eye, the two commanders were within sword distance, then the currents of battle tore them apart before either had a chance to break eye contact.

Phidestros looked down at his still loaded pistol and cursed. What had stopped him from firing, or even thinking of it? The entire battle could have been won in an instant. Maybe it had been the dawning of recognition on Kalvan's face of meeting an equal and his own confirming nod. Maybe the gods weren't finished with either of them—Kalvan could have shot him dead just as easily...

There was *something* between the two men—no doubt about that—but it was not 'something' to be settled in the heat and confusion of battle.

For not the first time, Phidestros wondered if he had picked the wrong side in this war to the death—and to the death it was, because Styphon's House would not rest until Great King Kalvan and Hos-Hostigos were no more.

There were worse ways to die than at the side of good and brave men in a noble cause. He was no Styphoni; the upper priesthood reeked of corruption and worshipped gold, not god. But there would not be—could not be—a parley with Kalvan until Prince Sarrask was dead. And, from all reports, the Prince led a charmed life—much like Kalvan himself. Maybe there was something to this notion of a War of the Gods?

Phidestros had no time or energy to do more than ask himself the question before a Hostigi captain with long blonde hair and no helmet was trying to skewer him with the longest and most pointed blade Phidestros had ever seen. His breastplate turned away several thrusts, then he found himself out of reach of the blond captain. He looked around and suddenly saw himself adrift in a sea of red sashes and red and blue plumes of Hostigos. He shot a Hostigi trooper aiming a musketoon at him and saw a red

blossom appear where the man's face had been. Turning his head over his shoulder, he was very relieved to see a score of green and black plumes and orange sashes of Iron Band troopers fighting their way to his side.

Suddenly Snowdrift screamed loud enough that it pieced even Phidestros numb ears, then he reared, coming down hard on all four hooves. Snowdrift tried to rear again, then his hind legs collapsed and tumbled backward. Phidestros leaped from the saddle, landing hard enough to make his bad knee complain loudly.

Blood was pouring out of Snowdrift's mouth and from his flanks; he was dying but not fast enough for Phidestros just to leave him. He pressed his pocket pistol to the gelding's head, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

That gesture almost cost him his life. Phidestros opened his eyes to see Snowdrift relaxing in death, but neither un-wounded horses nor friendly riders close enough to help him remount. Geblon was the closest, about forty paces away, trying desperately to control a wounded horse without dropping the Iron Band's banner.

While he was trying to attract Geblon's attention, a bullet sang past his helmet. He dropped to hands and knees behind Snowdrift and shot a Hostigi cuirassier off his horse with his last loaded horsepistol. He looked back to see an Iron Band lancer riding up, leading a blood-smeared but seemingly fit remount. Too small to carry him far, but better than standing in the midst of this carnage.

As Phidestros rode back to the Styphoni lines, he saw large groups of mercenaries—some entire companies!—raising helmets on sword points or holding out reversed pistols. His stomach sank. *What will Grand Master Soton say?* The only consolation was that none of them wore the green and black plumes of the Iron Band.

II

Brother Mytron clenched his hands tighter together each time he heard another scream from the Royal Bedchamber, now the royal birthing room. He knew Rylla well enough to know that only terrible pain could wrench such cries from her lips. It was just as well that King Kalvan had other matters of great importance to keep him occupied. It was obvious that all was not well in the birthing room.

If only he could see for himself! However, Amasphalya, the chief midwife, had refused him entrance, nor would she answer his questions the few times she'd come out into the antechamber. The next time he saw the old witch he'd have his answers if he had to shake her by the neck!

A moment later the door flew open and Amasphalya lumbered out, followed by one of her ladies. She would have made three of even Mytron's fairly considerable figure; suddenly, the thought of shaking her by the neck seemed as ridiculous as him leading the Royal Bodyguard!

She used her hip to shove him aside, then stopped and looked him up and down like a butcher deciding whether or not to condemn a side of beef as fit only for dogs.

"What is it?" he demanded, pleased to hear how steady his voice sounded despite the quaking in his knees.

"I need more help. Come. You'll have to do."

Mytron put a hand on her broad shoulder to stop her, but she brushed it off like a bothersome fly. She half pushed him into the birthing chamber, where Rylla lay sprawled on the royal bed. She was alive, praise Dralm! But Mytron could not look at her pale, pain-lined face long enough to tell more than that.

Amasphalya and the other midwife each grasped one of Rylla's arms, while the one who'd remained in the chamber stood back.

"Take her feet, priest!" Amasphalya snapped.

"Why?"

"No time for questions, priest!*Do it— NOW!*"

Mytron found himself obeying, even though he still questioned why. Rylla screamed, a terrible cry, as he gripped her feet. He felt his head grow light. "What do I do now?"

"Shake!" Amasphalya cried.

Without thinking, Mytron began to jerk on Rylla's feet in time with the two midwives holding her arms. Rylla's screams rose higher until he thought his ears would break. He fought an urge to faint.

I must stop them. They're killing her! What will I tell Kalvan—?

"Turn her! Turn her!" Amasphalya was shouting, apparently not to him. Then: "Don't stop now, priest! We've almost done it!"

Done what? Mytron asked himself, but like a puppet he kept his arms moving, shaking Rylla who was now lying on her side, right or left he didn't know.

"There, the Allmother be thanked!" Amasphalya said. She sounded almost as if she were praying.

"Is the baby coming?" Brother Mytron had to lick his lips three times before he could get the words out.

"Not yet, but now it's to where it can," the chief midwife answered. The next moment her face set as if she regretted having said even so much to a man about her profession, and she growled, "Be off with you now, priest! We've enough to do without picking you up off the floor, too."

Mytron started to snap off a reply, then took a step and realized his knees had turned to syrup. He had to hold onto the bedpost for a moment before he could weave his way to the door.

Looking back, the smirk on Amasphalya's face gave away all her thoughts about the male half of humanity. He looked away and at Rylla, her face no longer twisted in agony. The Great Queen was breathing more strongly; when the contractions came she groaned rather than screamed. Whatever had been done, it appeared to be a good thing. For the moment, at least, he need not fear the burden of having to tell Kalvan that his wife and child were dead.

One thing that he would always wonder for the rest of his life: why he'd been fool enough to want to know what went on in the birthing chamber!

III

"Where are my reinforcements?" General Alkides asked, his face and breeches black with soot. "What did Chartiphon say?"

"The Great King ordered him to hold back a reserve in case the Knights defeat or outflank Ptosphes," Verkan said. "Which is exactly what Chartiphon intends to do, Great Battery or no Great Battery."

Alkides—already at wits' end over the loss of his precious guns at the redoubt—appeared to be nearly beside himself at the thought that the Styphoni might soon be using his precious guns, Verkan noted. To make matters worse, the Hostigi and the Holy Host were so thoroughly entangled that the gunners of the Great Battery had been holding their fire for most of the battle.

Verkan understood why Chartiphon was holding back the last reserve, the Ktethroni pikemen. It was clearly the safest course of action. Verkan also knew that the safest course of action in a battle was not always the best strategy.

Harmakros' Mobile Force dragoons had brought the advance of the Royal Square to a halt, but now it was advancing again. It struck Verkan that the Ktemnoi infantry were living up to their reputation. For that matter, so were the Hostigi regulars, and in any case the time for the dispassionate evaluations of comparative military prowess was about over. The Mounted Rifles were the last line of defense for the Great Battery; they were either going to stop the Holy Host or die trying.

Verkan saw Harmakros lead another company of dragoon musketeers to a small barricade that had now become the next-to-last line of defense.

"Colonel," one of his subordinate captains, with only one eye, said, "We should be going down to join those dragoons."

"We haven't any orders, Captain Itharos."

"Sir, we haven't any orders not to, either."

Verkan frowned. The captain had been at Tenabra, where he'd lost his eye, and obviously wanted to avenge forty or so lost comrades badly enough to argue with his Colonel. By regular Aryan-Transpacific standards he wasn't committing a serious offense, particularly against an outlander, but for the Mounted Rifles, right here and now standards—

Another gun blast saved Verkan the trouble of replying. He looked down the slope. The Royal Square was still advancing, slowing in the face of fire from the barricade. Both the front ranks of billmen and the rear ranks of shot looked much neater from a distance than they doubtless did close up. The ground between the Ktemnoi and Harmakros' position was littered with discarded weapons, dead horses, and dead and not-so-dead men of both sides...

Verkan knew from First Level studies and his own battlefield experiences that many of the wounded had minor or survivable wounds, but by evening most would be dead of shock or just plain self-hypnosis—it was easier to die than to face the reality of losing, or even worse facing another battle!

On the other hand, some soldiers just didn't know when it was time to die, like the four battered and battle-stained Hostigi soldiers running just ahead of the enemy up the rocky slope toward their position. The big man in front was a giant in armor that looked as if it had been chewed on by wolves with metal teeth! He was holding upright, in one hand, a two-handed curvy bladed sword taller than Verkan. Right behind were two men with bloodstained halberds and a badly wounded banner-bearer, only just on his feet.

"Acting Petty-Captain Xykos reporting, Colonel," the giant said between breaths.

"Who ordered you here, Petty-Captain?"

"No one, sir. We're all that's left of the Hostigos regiment, the Veterans of the Long March—or all we know about. We fought our way out of a mess of the enemy, sir. I thought the Great Battery was where we might be needed."

Verkan shook his head in amazement. Most NCOs would have taken hours to answer that question, with blow-by-blow accounts of every skirmish. Here was a man with leadership potential; he'd have to talk to Kalvan about Xykos—that is, assuming all of them survived this killing field.

"Captain Xykos."

"Captain, Sir?"

"Yes, consider it a battlefield promotion. Why don't you and your men stay with me? I think we'll have all the fighting we want in less than a quarter of a candle." *Or sooner*, he thought. Most of the retreating Hostigi had dispersed to either side of the Great Battery. Verkan hoped Harmakros could rally and re-form them, but that couldn't happen soon enough to make up for the lack of the Ktethroni reinforcements. Verkan needed all the help he could get, and Xykos looked to be worth a whole platoon by himself.

"Yes, sir!" Xykos answered with a savage grin.

As if that was a stage cue, Captain Itharos came running up, followed by a messenger.

"What is it?"

"The Holy Warriors of Styphon are coming against the Great Battery," the messenger blurted.

The Captain's jaw dropped. "Great Galzar, have mercy!"

Verkan didn't bother replying. That meant that either Ptosphes and the Hostigi left wing were in retreat, or that Soton was so confident of victory that he'd committed what had to be nearly his last reserves to help the Sacred Squares take the Great Battery. Nether was particularly good news, although he preferred the latter to the former. If Ptosphes had to carry the weight of another defeat, he wouldn't be worth a thing either to himself, his daughter or Kalvan—who already thought of him as a surrogate father.

Verkan knew that with Harmakros' help they might be able to stop the Holy Warriors, who were more a rag-tag group of lower nobility and younger sons than a proper fighting force. Still, whatever the Holy Warriors lacked in tactics they more than made up for him fervor. Without Chartiphon's reserves or the Ktethroni pikemen, it was going to get *interesting*.

"It looks as if it's mostly up to us now. Let's see how those anvil heads deal with hot lead!"

Xykos smiled as if he'd just been given a free jug of his favorite winter wine.

Verkan moved through the ranks of the Mounted Rifles patting shoulders and giving encouraging little remarks while he mentally noted the number of walking wounded and near battle-fatigue cases. The Great Battery was firing more continuously, now that most of the Hostigi center was behind it or around the rise. The crowd of soot-blackened figures dancing in and out of smoke around the guns gave the impression of a horde of demons toiling at some sinister task—which wasn't far from the truth!

Verkan was glad he wasn't carrying any First Level gear in this battle; the odds were too good that the dead-man timer would detonate the security charge on his body among live comrades. He was willing to kill deliberately to protect the Paratime Secret; he'd be Dralm-damned if he would do it by simple chance if he could avoid it.

Verkan took his own position along with his bodyguard behind a boulder, shouted "Down Styphon!" and looked down the hill. The Holy Warriors of Styphon were mounted volunteers who'd come from all over the Great Kingdoms to fight for their god, Styphon. Not too well mounted, he noted, or else they'd been at the back of the line when supplies were distributed. Not too well armed either and fewer than he had expected were armored. If there were many nobles, they were mostly country squires and younger sons with cast-off armor and weapons. Still, some three thousand—according to First Level surveillance—or more fanatic cavalry against five to six hundred of Harmarkos' dragoons, a hundred and thirty or so rifled muskets, and the battlefield remnants—call it a thousand and some men—of the retreating center still wasn't Verkan's idea of safe odds.

Then the mass of Holy Warriors was coming up the slope at a trot, and Verkan stopped worrying about anything but finding a target. Harmakros' musketeers fired a solid volley; the front rank of the Warriors swayed and shivered.

"Fire at will," he ordered. He didn't bother to tell them to choose their targets with care—these were veteran Styphoni killers.

Verkan sighted on a thin man with gilded armor, wearing a back-and-breast with Styphon's stylized red swastika painted on it. He braced his elbow on the boulder, squeezing the trigger. The men-at-arms fell forward on his horse's neck, his horse reared and lost its footing, and two more lost theirs trying to avoid the fallen ones.

Petty-Captain Dalon—one of his Paratime operatives—picked off one of the fallen riders as he struggled to his feet. Dalon Sath had taken Ranthar Jard's place with the Mounted Rifles, now that Ranthar was busy 'babysitting' the Kalvan Study Team. "Having fun yet, Chief?" he asked in First Level sign language.

Verkan laughed despite himself. "It won't be so funny, Dalon, when I leave and put you or Ranthar in charge of this outfit."

Dalon gave him a jaunty smile. "Some good boys here. I won't mind. Besides, I've already done my duty

watching over those clucks at the University hen house! Ranthar can have that*job* ."

Verkan was too busy yanking out his ramrod, the next bullet from its leather pouch and fumbling for his powder horn to reply. He cursed the spectacle he must be making of himself—the outlander friend of King Kalvan who wasn't as well trained as his men! Even Petty-Captain Dalon had finished his re-load and was already beading in on a Styphoni horseman.

Suddenly his rifle was loaded and swinging down to firing position; he had a beautiful target in a rider turning broadside to avoid a patch of tough ground. This time he hit the horse, and someone firing wildly hit the top of his rock close enough to spray rock dust into his eyes. He found the old familiar motions coming back so perfectly that he didn't even wait to blink his eyes clear before he started reloading.

On his next reload he heard volley firing close at hand and looked around to find that his bodyguards had scrounged enough abandoned arquebuses, calivers and muskets to give each one of them several weapons apiece. He gave them a thumbs-up signal—an almost universal hand signal on every time-line—and felt pleased when they responded with wolfish grins. It was almost a shame he couldn't take them along with him the next time he had to appear before the Executive Council on Home Time Line!

When he looked down again, the Holy Warriors were at Harmakros' makeshift barricade, in the process of being repulsed by his musketeers and pikemen. Wielded by veterans who knew their strengths and weaknesses, the eighteen-foot pikes were deadly against the poorly equipped Holy Warriors, spearing some right off their horses. He saw one man take a pikehead though the mouth that came out in the other side of his head in an explosion of blood, teeth and gore. Others were speared out of their saddles and sent tumbling down to join the rocks under the horses' hooves.

At last the Holy Warriors retreated back down the slope out of range and dismounted. Someone with a lot of plumes and gilded armor was yelling and waving his arms at them, probably telling them to dismount. Most were beginning to follow his orders, when at almost point-blank range, a round shot took out a dozen or more men just to his right. To give him credit, the near hit didn't appear to faze the commander and he continued with his rant. Another half dozen cannons fired almost in a volley and shifted the entire front line of the Holy Warriors, scything down horses and men with equal impartiality.

The commander got back on his horse and the dismounted Holy Warriors advanced on foot over their own casualties and up the slope at a dead run. Harmakros' musketeers shot them down by the dozens, but that wasn't enough; hundreds of them reached the barricade and suddenly it was every man for himself. Verkan's riflemen continued to help thin their ranks, but more kept coming from behind. To make a difference here, Verkan's riflemen would have needed breech-loaders or Gatling guns!

The Mobile Force pikemen at the barricade dropped their pikes in favor of swords, mallets and pistols, while the musketeers swung their muskets like clubs. Over a third of his dragoons and reinforcements were dead or wounded before Harmakros began a slow retreat to the top of the ridge. Of the three thousand Holy Warriors, at least half their number littered the ground or had run away. Still, a formidable number kept charging.

Verkan fired five shots and hit four men before the first wave of dismounted Holy Warriors reached his boulder. He fired a sixth shot with his hide-away pistol, then used his rifle like a club, letting his unarmed-combat training take over his muscles and reflexes. He might look a little strange if anyone was watching carefully, but he'd not lay any bets on that and he did intend to stay alive.

The rifle wasn't quite balanced like the quarterstaff Verkan knew well, but the butt end's extra weight

made up for it. Designed especially for Verkan, his rifle—while looking like a perfectly ordinary flintlock—was almost indestructible. With ridiculous ease he brained the first man who ran at him, poked a second in the groin, smashed a short sword or long knife out of the hand of the third and knocked down a fourth with a butt-blow to his armored chest and finished him with another to the forehead under the rim of his morion helmet.

He turned to see Xykos decapitate a heavily bearded Holy Warrior with his two-handed sword. The Veterans' banner-bearer had lost one arm to an evil-looking polearm and was in the process of losing the other, when Verkan shot his attacker dead with his belt pistol.

Someone was shouting in his ear and tugging at his arm. It was Dalon Saln, pulling him back from the edge of the slope. Xykos and one of the halberdiers were coming with him, but the third Veteran was dead and the banner-bearer was dying, one arm gone, the other crippled, but his teeth locked on the banner pole.

They cleared the Great Battery's field of fire just in time, as a case shot from something heavier than a sixteen-pounder sprayed the slope. Two score of dismounted Holy Warriors and a few mounted ones behind them went down, and twice as many turned and ran; apparently even religious zeal had its limits.

Verkan and his bodyguards ran back another fifty yards, then stopped to make sure the rest of the Mounted Rifles were clear. They were. The number of Holy Warriors, both mounted and on foot, climbing the slope discouraged him from lingering to count the Rifles' casualties, particularly since the Holy Warriors were now being pushed ahead of the first ranks of the Royal Square. A company of billmen rose out of a draw, and a round shot smashed the first six of them into a bloody, screaming tangle.

Verkan began to reload his rifle on the move, and discovered the lock was hopelessly jammed with blood and gore. He made a mental note to suggest caltrops to Kalvan if he could find a non-contaminating way of doing so. Strewn over the slopes of the ridge, those multipointed hoof destroyers would have made Kalvan's Great Battery a lot more cavalry-proof.

The ground between Verkan and the Great Battery offered little cover or concealment, and he had the nasty feeling that the career of the Mounted Rifles was about to end here. A four-pounder had already been overrun, and an old-style eight-pounder was being defended by its crew against mounted Holy Warriors. What was left of Harmakros' three regiments of dragoons was manhandling two eight-pounders and the sixteen-pounder called *Galzar's Teeth* into a position where they could hit the Styphoni at point-blank range.

Alkides himself was standing on the breech of *Galzar's Teeth* in a fraction of his shirt and a smaller fraction of his trousers, defaming the ancestry and habits of his gunners for not moving faster. Behind the big gun rode Harmakros, and behind him was a line of men carrying objects the size and shape of round shot, but not quite...

Verkan suddenly realized he was about to see the first test of explosive shells in Kalvan's Time-Line. While he appreciated the honor, he hoped the fusing was reasonably accurate or the shells might burst right over the Mounted Rifles.

"Down!" he shouted, gesturing frantically. The Riflemen obeyed, searching for any fold in the ground large enough to give at least the illusion of safety. The two eight-pounders bellowed together, hammering the advancing Holy Warriors with grape shot. The line stopped and a good number of them dropped to the ground as well. The Riflemen opened fire, to encourage this notion.

With his rifle useless and the action just out of pistol range, Verkan was free to watch the entire process of loading the first shell, including the lighting of the fuse, the various rites of propitiation and Alkides firing *Galzar's Teeth*. Verkan kept his head up, following the shell all the way to where it struck the ground, bounced twice, rolled under the legs of a Holy Warrior's horse—and exploded!

It took only four shells to convince the Holy Warriors that they were facing something unusual. From "unusual" to "Demonic" was a short mental step for most of them. Contemplating the undignified speed of the Holy Warrior's retreat, Verkan had to admit that superstition could have its uses.

Verkan would have felt better if *Galzar's Teeth* hadn't fired a fifth shell, which burst over the Mounted Riflemen. When the smoke cleared away, he saw that the one-eyed captain would never argue with him again, and the captain wasn't the only casualty.

Then the massed billmen of the Royal Square topped the rise, still in their columns of march and with a self-confident swagger that said bluntly, "Clear the way, you amateurs. The professional soldiers have arrived."

"Move out!" Verkan ordered. There weren't enough guns the size of *Galzar's Teeth* to take a bite out of these men. He turned to Xykos and added, "When we reach Captain-General Alkides, you make sure he goes with us. I don't give a damn what he says, general or no general!"

The grin splitting Xykos' face told Verkan that Alkides would have an easier time avoiding the marksmen of the Royal Square than he would escaping his giant bodyguard.

IV

Sirna stepped out the door of the foundry warehouse, mopped the sweat off her forehead, and looked up at the roof where Captain Ranthar was still wearing a groove in the wood as he paced back and forth, looking off to the southwest. Sirna had been up there herself earlier in the day, but the steady drumming of gunfire and the vast cloud of gray smoke off toward Phyrax didn't tell her anything.

She doubted they told Ranthar very much either, and suspected that he was up on the roof because it was a way of not having to talk with the rest of the University Team. She was sure he'd sensed the hostility of some of them, and she also suspected that he felt guilty at not being in battle with his comrades—and whom did he see as his comrades, his Chief Verkan Vall or the Mounted Rifles?

Even their military advisor Professor Aranth Saln had admitted that it was hard to tell much from a lot of smoke and intermittent rumbling noises, without being able to see any troop movements. "At least there haven't been any wounded or fugitives coming back," he'd added. "That means *something*. Either Kalvan's army has gone into the bag without any survivors"—at which point Sirna felt the blood leave her head—"or else the Hostigi are still holding on and in good order. I'd say it's more likely the second. From what we know about Kalvan and his army, it would take more than the Holy Host to mop them up that fast."

That was typical of Aranth Saln despite his formidable appearance—polite to everybody, intelligent

whenever he spoke, but committing himself only on his own specialty of Pre-industrial Military Science. It was hard to trust him completely but harder still to really dislike him, even if he was a retired Army Colonel. He certainly didn't fit Sirna's image of a military professional.

"Hey!" Ranthar shouted, and ran toward the stairs from the roof. Sirna looked around and saw three bedraggled horsemen cantering toward the foundry gate. Two rode haltingly, as though they'd never been on horseback before. All wore the colors blue and gold, which she remembered were the colors of the Princedom of Ulthor, and the red sashes of Hos-Hostigos. She reached the gate at the same time as the lead horseman, a tall man with a young-looking bearded face.

"Run for your life, mistress! The Styphoni have broken through the center and turned the Great Battery on our own army. King Kalvan is missing—all is lost!"

"Is the whole army running?" a voice from behind Sirna asked, full of contempt and authority.

The young horseman looked as if he'd been slapped, then lunged for his sword.

Captain Ranthar had his pistol drawn and stepped forward. "I asked you a question."

The young man dropped his hand from his sword hilt and said, "I don't know, sir...I guess we didn't stay around to see. We saw some comrades get hit by case shot and decided we didn't want anything to do with it."

One of the horsemen cried, "I got a wife and son back in Ulthor! What do I care about Styphon's House or Hostigos?"

"That will be enough," Ranthar said.

By now the rest of the University Study Team and half the foundry workers had gathered around the gate. "Let the man speak!" Varnath Lala cried. "If the Army of Hostigos is losing, then we'd better get marching."

There was chorus of agreement from the rest of the Study Team faculty members.

The horseman looked encouraged and was about to speak, when everyone heard the sound of Ranthar's pistol being cocked. "You and I"—he paused and used his barrel to point to the horseman's two companions—"and these two—gentlemen—are going to go back and take another look to see what's really happening. And pick up any other stragglers we happen to find."

"You're here to take care of *us*, Ranthar, and don't you forget it!" Lala screeched.

"He can take care of himself," Lathor Karv said, "but I'm for getting out of here." He set off for the stables in a wide-loping gait followed by two-thirds of the Study Team, including Varnath Lala, who only paused long enough to give Captain Ranthar a withering glare.

Ranthar turned to Talgan Dreth, who looked as if he would have much preferred to be with the party heading for the stables. "Director Talgan, if you decide it's necessary, go ahead and prepare for Emergency Evacuation Procedure, Code Yellow. I'm going to reconnoiter the battlefield and find out first hand what is happening and whether or not we need to evacuate." He pointed to one of the undercover Paratime Policemen who acted as Foundry guards. "I'll send someone back if things look bad. I suggest you leave a few volunteers to watch over the foundry until you hear from me, or until it becomes apparent

that King Kalvan's army has really been routed."

Talgan was white as a Styphon's House lower priest's robe. He mumbled a response and walked as quickly as his tattered dignity would allow back to the foundry farmhouse they used as quarters.

Rather to her surprise, Sirna found herself volunteering to stay. So did Eldra, Aranth Saln and some of the others who weren't on their way to the stables. Ranthar put Aranth in charge of Foundry security and rode off with the three reluctant Ulthori horsemen and one of the lower ranking Paracops.

TWENTY-SIX

I

The last of the mercenary cavalry held out for nearly an hour, far longer than Kalvan had expected. Most of that resistance could be credited to the big mercenary captain whom Kalvan recognized as the same captain who'd escaped the envelopment at Ryklos Farm. How he had ridden from the Harphaxi disaster at Chothros to Phyrax had to be a story that might one day be sung by troubadours—if the man survived the day's battle.

The big captain had escaped, but the Hostigi still wound up with more than three thousand prisoners, all of whom had to be guarded and removed from the battlefield as quickly as possible. Kalvan assigned a regiment to escort them back to Hostigos Town where they could best be split up and kept out of mischief.

All this, only to learn that Harmakros and the center had been pushed back, and worst of all, the Great Battery lost! If Chartiphon had already committed the reserve and the center folded, well, the next battle might be at the gates of Tarr-Hostigos.

Not to mention no word about Rylla or the baby, either. Her delivery had come at the worst of all possible times. If only he knew whether she was alive and doing well, or... Hell and damnation, if something happened to the baby—! Well, they could always try again. Or adopt an heir if they had to.

This not knowing was the worst. Now was no time to worry, though...

He had to relieve the pressure on Harmakros before the center went into an uncontrollable rout—and all was lost. That, and pray that Ptosphes could hold back the Zarthani Knights a bit longer.

Kalvan looked back at his command; it was a smaller and less orderly group than he'd led across Phyrax pasture an hour ago. Yet, their spirits were high and most of the gaps in the ranks had been closed. Since he couldn't reach the Sacred Squares, he was going to do the next best thing: hit the mercenary foot on the flank, roll right over them and smash the Order foot.

"Major Nicomoth, signal advance!"

Kalvan checked the loads in his pistols, raised his sword and joined his voice to six thousand others in a single shout:

"DOWN STYHPON!"

The mercenary foot, attacked in the flank and from the rear, displayed little of the fight that the mercenary cavalry had. *Perhaps they're not as well led?* Kalvan wondered. A few of the pikemen put their helmets on their pikes and raised them in formal surrender, but most threw down their arms and cried "Oath to Galzar!" or simply took to their heels. About eight hundred were shot, run through or simply ridden down; twenty-five hundred surrendered.

The Zarthani Order Foot were made of stouter stuff and used the time it took Kalvan's cavalry to ride through the mercenary lines to wheel and face the Hostigi charge. Fortunately, the Order infantry had three pikes to every firearm and no artillery. And Kalvan had another surprise for them.

He gave the order for the caracole, a difficult maneuver the cavalry had practiced but never used in such strength, or on the battlefield. He knew it would take luck and the help of Galzar or *Somebody* to bring it off even with troopers he trusted completely. The caracole required both discipline and iron nerves for successive ranks of cavalry to ride within ten feet of the enemy line, fire both pistols, then wheel away to let the next rank to follow.

The endless hours practicing the caracole on the drill ground paid off. Despite the steady fire from the Order's shot, and the unearthly screams of wounded horses, the for-real caracole went off in a surprisingly good imitation of how it had been practiced on the parade ground. The Order's arquebusiers emptied more than a few Hostigi saddles in the beginning, but the cumulative effect of continuous heavy fire beat them down, then began to shred the ranks of pikemen. The pike ranks showed gaps, wavered and began to leak deserters. The Order Foot were brave men and veterans, but no unit could stand helpless taking casualties like this without something breaking. It was the pikemen who could not stand it any longer and charged the Hostigi horse wildly, in no particular order and hardly under the control of their officers.

Finally! thought Kalvan. Pikemen on the move who weren't keeping their ranks tight were comparatively easy meat for cavalry. He ordered the countercharge.

The Hostigi cavalry smashed through the disordered pikemen and rode them into the ground, sabers rising and falling. Few asked for quarter, fewer yet were granted it; these were Styphon's soldiers and killing them was like killing rattlesnakes. Most died where they stood. Kalvan watched from the rear, knowing that whoever won today, Grand Master Soton of the Order of Zarthani Knights would never forget the price his Order paid.

II

"Fire!"

Or at least that's what Harmakros thought his battle-numb ears had heard. A moment later the crash of the gun proved him right. After the redoubt explosion, he wondered if he would ever hear well again. If he survived this nightmare-of-the-gods battle, he might find out!

The ball gouged a huge clod out of the slope, spraying the Sacred Square of Imbraz with grass, dirt and pebbles. It bounced high, crashed through a cluster of billheads with a weird clanking, then dropped to

the ground out of Harmakros' sight. He couldn't see or hear if it did any damage.

That was probably the demicannon that had run out of case shot. It wasn't the only one, not after the Great Battery had been lost and retaken. The Ktemnoi infantry must be running short of fireseed and shot, too; their musketeers were only firing a half-company at a time and aimed fire instead of volleying by ranks. Not that aiming at two hundred paces with a smoothbore did much good, but it couldn't hurt. Harmakros had been knocked on his back once since they'd recaptured the Grand Battery. Fortunately, the cotton gambeson he wore underneath his breastplate—at Kalvan's recommendation—had left him with bruised, but not broken, ribs.

Harmakros wasn't exactly sure in the confusion what was responsible for the temporary retreat of the Holy Host. One messenger had claimed that Kalvan had attacked them in the rear, but if that were true, why had the retreat stopped so quickly? It was Chartiphon's tardy arrival with the Ktethroni pikemen who had brought the Sacred Squares to a standstill in the first place, giving the battered Hostigi infantry time to regroup and mount their own counterattack. It was during this counterattack that the Styphoni had begun to fall back.

Now the Holy Host was back on the march. So far the Hostigi had been able to hold them back from the top of the slope and the Great Battery until the Styphoni center now formed a gigantic arc with the Royal Square of Ktemnos now at Harmakros' right, stretching through the Second Great Square to the First on the left. Directly in front of Harmakros the ground was mostly defended by the fire of the Great Battery itself, but he could see the surviving Mounted Riflemen and his own Mobile Force dragoons tying in with the First Hostigos Royal Foot beyond.

Another gun fired, a sixteen-pounder from the sound of it, and this ball cut a bloody furrow in the Sacred Square of Cynthlos. Another far-off gunshot came like an echo to the first. The Great Battery's few remaining guns on the left were firing occasionally, to do what they could to discourage the Zarthani Knights. From what little intelligence Harmakros had been able to gather in this potmess of a battle, the Knights had run Ptosphes and most of the left wing into the forest. Phrames, Sarrask and maybe fifteen hundred heavy cavalry were all that was keeping the Grand Master from committing his Knights in support of the Sacred Squares. If that happened, neither Great King Kalvan nor Galzar himself would be able to save the Army of Hos-Hostigos.

Harmakros heard the sixteen-pounder fire again, then a great shout.

"Long live King Kalvan!"

He turned, raised his hands to shield his eyes, and saw in the distance the red plumes of Hostigos pushing into the black plumes of the Zarthani Knights.

Praise Allfather Dralm and Galzar Wolfhead, was Harmakros' one thought.

He watched for a moment long, then knelt and said sort prayer of thanks to gods who had clearly not forgotten Hostigos.

III

Soton muttered curses under his breath as he saw the shrunken line of Hostigi defenders once again re-forming to meet the Knights' charge. *Blast and curse them!* he railed to himself. He would have cursed at the top of his lungs, but after nearly a half day of continuous fighting, he had little voice left and needed to save that for giving orders to his messengers.

How in the name of all the gods, and everything else a man might swear by, could hardly more than a thousand men go on holding out against three times their number? Yet these Hostigi continued to do so; he'd lost count of the times the Knights had charged. When Soton had begun the attack he'd been certain that one or two would be enough.

There was that madman Prince Sarrask and the noblemen of his Household Guard, countercharging with sword, mace, warhammer and pistol butt! Soton remembered his first glimpse of the Saski at Tenabra, when their armor looked like table service. Now, if it looked like table service, it was the sort of ware provided for the lesser servants and slaves in a cheap inn. Sarrask and his men had been to the wars: so what was Almighty Styphon thinking of to let a warrior like this, who could have been a pillar of the God of Gods, become instead a bulwark of the Usurper's cause?

There was no answer to that question forthcoming. And none, Soton suspected, to be found on this battlefield. They were going to have to slug it out without divine intervention. He took a firm grip on his war hammer and guided his lathered mount to the left, where there seemed more room to swing his favorite weapon.

The two masses of horsemen collided with the sound of an anvil dropping on a stone floor. The clang of steel rose, and for perhaps an eighth of a candle Soton's world narrowed down to the man he was facing and perhaps the Knight on either side of him. When the two sides lurched apart again, he was pleased to see the Hostigi had left the better part of a hundred casualties on the ground as they withdrew from the melee to reform.

Soton was not so pleased to see that nearly the same number of Knights had gone down. At least the Knights were still mostly mounted, while the Hostigi had no more than one horse for every two men. The dismounted Hostigi were fighting with halberds and poleaxes picked up from the battlefield. Now if that messenger he'd sent to the rear for a few mule-loads of fireseed would just do his job...

Fireseed or no, another charge or two should be enough, unless they really were facing a demon in the shape of Sarrask of Sask. Soon the Knights would ride the Hostigi into the dirt and ride to support the Sacred Squares. With the Knights spurring them on, the Ktemnoi would finally break the Hostigi center and end this Ormaz-spawned battle!

"GRAND MASTER! Grand Master! We are doomed!"

Soton raised his warhammer and turned. He saw Knight Commander Aristocles, his face white with more than the day's accumulation of dust.

"What is it? Speak, man, speak!"

Aristocles paused to catch his breath, then said, "It's the Daemon Kalvan! He's ridden down the Red Hand and is attacking us from behind!"

Soton slammed his gauntleted left fist into the pommel of his saddle, causing his mount to whinny in surprise. "What about the Order Foot?"

"Dead. Crushed. Scythed to the nub! Not enough left to make a small band."

Soton sagged in his saddle. To himself he muttered, "All is lost." Then he straightened. "Summon the trumpets, old friend. Give the order to form up. It's time to retire."

Relief was written all over Aristocles' face as he turned to ride away and attend to orders.

Soton felt no such relief. His choice was clear: he could either stay here and fight to the last man, a disaster from which his Knights might never recover, or retreat and live to fight another day. As much as it stuck in his craw, he had no choice but to retire. Only the Order of Zarthani Knights stood between the fertile lands of Hos-Bletha and Hos-Ktemnos and the clans and tribes of the Lower Sastragath—and beyond. Word had it that the barbarians across the Sea of Grass were on the move. With the Order's losses at the Heights of Chothros and now the slaughter of the Order Foot, every man-at-arms he could bring back to Tarr-Ceros from this Ormaz-blasted battlefield would be needed—no matter the price to his pride.

And cost him it would—in other ways as well. Even if he went unpunished by Marshall Mnephilos and Great King Cleitharses, there were still many in the Inner Circle of Styphon's House who would savor his defeat and see it as a slap in the face to the First Speaker and his supporters, those Archpriests who had put him forward as the commander of the Holy Host.

Truth was he had seriously miscalculated both Hostigi resolve and Kalvan's military abilities. And he deserved whatever punishment they dished out. If he had to retire from his position, so be it. Let someone else reap this Hostigi whirlwind!

IV

From her post on the Foundry roof, Sirna was the first to see the six horsemen riding toward the Foundry gate with her disguised mini-telescope. She whistled to signal Aranth Saln and his Foundry guards, who were posted along the wall and watchtowers, strangers were approaching. She sighed with relief when she saw the riders were wearing the red colors of Hos-Hostigos. She whistled twice telling Saln that the unknowns were 'friendlies'—or wearing 'friendly' colors. She doubted that the Styphoni would bother with subterfuge to take a mere foundry. After alerting the farmhouse that 'friendlies' were on the way, she scaled down the ladder.

Sirna reached the gate just moments ahead of the leading horseman, a broad-beamed captain in yellow and gold Saski colors overlaid with a red sash.

"What is the word from the battle?" Aranth asked.

"They're sending back the captured mercenaries and the Foundry is to take five hundred."

"But what about the battle?" Sirna asked.

The Saski captain shrugged. "Well enough. We chewed up the Knights and sent them packing back to

Tarr-Ceros..."

The shrug did it; Sirna recognized him as Captain Strathos, the mercenary captain who on one of the Kalvan Control Lines helped Sarrask defeat the Hostigi! She had to fight the urge to scream; in her mind's eye she saw the heads of Ptosphes and the rest decorating Tarr-Hostigos.

"...Our Prince did the biggest share of that, let me tell you. If only you'd seen him after Prince Ptosphes fled the field, rallying the Saski and Nostori cavalry. Well, it's true that Count Phrames helped, but our Prince—"

The captain went off into a rambling litany of praise for that paragon of military virtues who was obviously supposed to be Prince Sarrask of Sask. This gave Sirna some useful insights into how romances of chivalry get started, but very little knowledge about whether the Foundry people should be prepared to celebrate or run for their lives. With Captain Ranthar still gone...

Finally Aranth's voice interrupted the captain's steady flow of praise for his Prince. "Is His Majesty sending the mercenaries back to split them up and protect them from any rescue attempts?"

"That's most likely the way of it. But the Great King doesn't sit down with me over the wine to tell me why, he just gives orders. Our own Prince has much the same—"

"We have no room to house all these soldiers! Kalvan will have to find some other place to quarter them," Talgan Dreth interrupted.

Sirna hadn't seen Talgan leave the farmhouse where he'd been cowering all day. Most of the Study Team had bugged out to Fifth Level; Talgan, as Team leader, had reluctantly stayed behind. Now that he knew Styphon's Holy Host wasn't on the way, he'd gathered his courage.

The captain, obviously shocked by such open disrespect for his Great King, started to draw his sword. Then he stopped, as though realizing he was dealing with outlanders who couldn't really be expected to know any better. "You are speaking of our Great King. Great King Kalvan to you!" He rapped his knuckles on his sword hilt for emphasis.

Talgan Dreth turned deathly pale, as if he'd suddenly realized how close he'd come to achieving a bad end to his long life. "My apologies, Captain."

Sirna and Eldra smiled at each other behind Talgan's back. She doubted they were the only ones enjoying the Director's predicament.

"It's not what you want or what I want that matters," Captain Strathos continued, as though the interruption had never happened. "It's what the Great King wants that matters, and what he wants is to split the mercenaries up and give some of them to you. They've sworn Oaths to Galzar, so they won't be troublesome."

He fixed Talgan Dreth with a singularly cold eye. "If you don't treat them right, they may think they're released from their Oath. If five hundred mercenaries run wild in Hostigos Town because you mucked up your job, you'd all better run like the flux before the Great King wins the battle and comes looking for you!"

"We shall do the Great King's will," Aranth Saln said. "Remember that if we treat the men well while we have care of them, we will find favor in the eyes of the Wargod and his priests. We shall then have reason

to expect honorable treatment."

"Please yourself, as long as you please the Great King," Captain Strathos said. "Now I'll assume you'll be ready for the prisoners and won't need any more dry-nursing. Farewell," he ended, with a wink at Sirna, then was off in a spray of dirt clods.

"He said '*before* Kalvan wins,'" Sirna began, "does that mean—?"

"Very little," Aranth said. "The captain didn't mention their having broken the Zarthani Knights, who won the decision at Tenabra. Meanwhile, we'd better get ready for our guests. Most of them can camp in the courtyard, but the wounded will need shelter."

"You take care of this, Aranth," the Director said. "I've got more important things to do than worry about somebody else's prisoners."

Eldra's lips twitched, then she whispered in a voice loud enough for the Director to hear. "Yeah, you need to get the rest of those cowards back from Fifth Level and at the Foundry before anyone learns the truth about how they ran away on your watch!"

The Director harrumphed, spun around and stomped back to the farmhouse with all the dignity he could muster.

Sirna and Eldra both laughed until Aranth Saln silenced them with a frown. "We've got more important matters to deal with your than infighting." Then he turned back to the guards and Foundry workers. "We'll need more guards here," he added. "We don't want anyone wandering inside the Foundry stealing tools."

The workers turned and headed back to the Foundry. Aranth directed the guards back to their posts, with, "The battle isn't over yet. Take your positions."

When all the Foundry workers and guards were out of hearing range, Aranth said, "It might be better if the prisoners saw everything except the papermaking equipment. We'll just have to keep an eye on them. The more they see, the more they'll realize that it's just an improved version of a regular cannon foundry. Not a fireseed devil or imp in sight."

Eldra looked ready to argue about 'betraying Kalvan's secrets' when Medico Sankar Trav broke in. "If we're going to be treating wounded, I suggest we start cleaning out one of the storerooms about ten minutes ago! Sirna, you'll be my assistant, although they'll probably have at least one priest of Galzar with them and some mercenaries trained in first aid. Break out the med kit of yours, then go to the kitchen and have every pot we have filled and put on boil."

Sirna looked a question. The medico shook his head. "Not full antisepsis, no. But you can boil the Styphon out of the instruments and dressings. Also, they understand removing foreign matter from a wound. But we're servants of 'the servant of demons,' and Mytron really hasn't persuaded even the Hostigi that antisepsis is a Dralm-sent blessing—yet."

He shrugged. "A pity Kalvan wasn't able to introduce distilling. Then we'd be able to sterilize, anesthetize and toast Kalvan all at once!"

TWENTY-SEVEN

I

Kalvan watched from the top of the Great Battery as the recently re-supplied Hostigi artillery raked red furrows into the Sacred Squares of Hos-Ktemnos. After Soton and the Zarthani Knights had retired, Kalvan had put Count Phrames in command of the cavalry with orders to hit the Squares from the rear. The time had come for him to return to the role of supreme commander, rather than the more exciting one of cavalry general.

As he watched an eight-pound ball roll through the Ktemnoi ranks, knocking men aside like bowling pins, Kalvan wondered just how much more punishment the Sacred Squares could take before retiring. Their claws were not yet blunted, he noted, as a cluster of Hostigi horsemen drew handgun fire from below. A couple went down; the rest dismounted and came toward Kalvan.

Prince Ptosphes, in his battered armor, was in the lead. Blood had trickled from a scalp wound down into his beard and caked there. He was carrying an antique battle-axe instead of a sword and his face was downcast.

"Welcome, father. Are you all right?"

Ptosphes looked around wide-eyes, as though waking from a dream. "I am still alive?"

"Yes. We are on the verge of a great victory."

"It is all yours, Your Majesty. Not mine. I failed you again, letting the Knights drive my command from the field. I am sorry—"

"You owe me no apologies, father. I couldn't expect you to hold the Knights for the entire battle. No man could have done any better with the forces you had."

In a low, toneless voice, Ptosphes said, "Phrames did."

Kalvan pretended he hadn't heard, then turned the conversation to a topic in which they both were in accord. "Have you heard anything about Rylla and the baby?"

"No. Has—she died?"

"No! She's gone into labor. At least she had, according to the last message I received from Brother Mytron several candles ago."

"Praise Yirtta Allmother! May the Goddess keep a watch over Rylla and the baby."

"Amen," Kalvan said. Under his breath, Kalvan heard Ptosphes add, "A better watch than She kept over her mother."

"Other messengers from Mytron could have been killed or lost their way, but I'm beginning to wonder..." Kalvan kept the rest of his worries to himself. If Mytron was hiding bad news to keep his Great King and

Prince in shape to win their battle, the priest might soon find himself guest of honor at a hide-pinning party. But, why assume the worst?

Why indeed? Nonetheless, Kalvan knew that if he could have sold his soul for Rylla's safety, he would have signed on the spot. If the deal had also included ten rifled sixteen-pounders and a thousand shells with reliable fuses, he wouldn't have bothered reading the fine print.

"I had hoped to die before I gave way to the Knights again," Ptosphes said with a moan. "But Galzar did not hear my prayer."

"Do not despair, father. You were not the only one today who gave way before the Holy Host. Harmakros was forced to give up the Great Battery."

Which Harmakros probably could have held if he hadn't had to wait so long for Chartiphon to commit the Ktethroni reserve. Memo: Find an honorable way of kicking Chartiphon upstairs to where he will no longer be commanding in the field.

The Duke appeared to be developing General Longstreet's problem: obeying orders in his own sweet time. Robert E. Lee had tolerated Longstreet and probably lost a war because of it; Kalvan I of Hos-Hostigos, on the other hand—

From below the rise the Ktemnoi trumpets reverberated. They had a deep bellowing tone, like the ancient *bucinae* of the Roman Legions.

Ptosphes hefted his axe. "That's their signal for a charge. They must know it is madness now."

Maybe, but what a magnificent lunacy, he thought.

Ptosphes' voice was lost in the rumble of musket volleys from below and answering fire from both muskets and artillery from above.

The Sacred Square of the Princedom of Imbraz was the one heading straight towards Kalvan. The musket bullets whistled about him, *spanged* off rocks, *thunked* into the ground and occasionally made the unmistakable *smack* of sinking into flesh. Ptosphes let out a yell as a bullet struck the head of his axe, jarring his whole arm. A Hostigi heavy gun fired; Kalvan saw the white smoke-puff of a shellburst in the oncoming Square. *Galzar's Teeth* would be a lot sharper for about ten or twelve more rounds—

Case shot smashed into the front ranks of the Imbrazi Square from several guns at once. Bodies and parts of bodies, weapons and hunks of armor flew in all directions. The front ranks were a mob, but they were an armed and dangerous mob—and they were still coming on.

Kalvan shot one arquebusier, felt a hammer blow across his ribs as another hit him with a glancing bullet, shot that man, then dropped his empty pistols and drew his sword. A billman swung a mighty blow in an attempt to part Kalvan's helmet, but misjudged his distance and sank the billhead into the earth. Kalvan slashed at him, but the soldier jerked up his weapon. The bill shaft knocked Kalvan's sword up and to the side, while another billman ran in, too close to swing at but not too close to thrust hard enough to dent Kalvan's breastplate—

Ptosphes charged from Kalvan's right side, swinging his axe and shouting what sounded like war cries. The first billman had his bill chopped in two with one blow, his arm chopped off with the next, his helmet and head split with the third. The old Prince was fighting like a man possessed. His fierce charge gave

Kalvan a chance to run in under the second man's guard, as he raised his bill hook, and stab him in the face. He fell, and both Great King and Prince gave ground with more concern for haste than dignity.

To the left the Imbrazi seemed to be carrying everything before them, although it was now bills and clubbed muskets, with nobody stopping to reload. Kalvan backed a way to the right without looking behind him until he tripped over a corpse and fell hard enough to knock the wind out of himself.

He sat up to see Ptosphes crouched beside him, shielding him and looking anxious. On the other side was Harmakros, lying behind a dead horse and carefully picking off Imbrazi with two pistols and a musketoon. A cluster of his troopers lay just behind him, reloading the weapons as fast as he emptied them and passing them back to him.

Improbably, Harmakros was smoking one of the royal stogies from the box Kalvan had presented him for his good work at the Heights of Chothros.

Then Kalvan's ears rang to the sound of massed musketry and the war cries of the Ktethroni pikemen as their countercharge went in. The dragoon pikemen were fitting themselves into the Ktethroni lines wherever they could, while the arquebusiers and musketeers darted along the flanks and between the files, firing their smoothbores as targets presented themselves.

Kalvan decided he'd better mount up and show himself, even if it meant withdrawing a short distance. Otherwise, someone would be sure to start a rumor that the Great King was dead or captured or missing or carried off by ravens—or something. He could imagine a number of consequences of such a rumor, all of them unpleasant.

It took less than fifteen minutes for the Ktethroni to halt the Sacred Squares and another fifteen to drive them back downhill. By the time they'd done that, Phrames was hitting the Squares from the rear. Kalvan waited until he saw that Phrames had thickened up his cavalry cordon enough to block any attempts to break out, then ordered the trumpeters to ride down with their helmets under a sword and sound for a parley.

Ptosphes stared.

"They can't get away, and I suspect their captains know it," Kalvan said. "I'll offer reasonable terms—honorable ransoms for the nobles and captains, good treatment for the men, an escort out of Hostigi territory after they're disarmed. It will be as big a victory as killing them all—and cheaper, too."

"Shouldn't we wait until the prisoner guards return?"

That would give the Army of Hos-Hostigos fresh fireseed, which it desperately needed, and six or seven hundred fresh cavalry, which it needed almost as badly. The victory was going to be sweet, but tallying the losses—well, many more victories this costly and there wouldn't be an Army.

"If we wait," Kalvan said, "the rain will hit and that may give the Ktemnoi ideas about trying to break out with cold steel, oath or no oath. The sky over the Bald Eagles had turned black in the last half hour, and it was no longer just his weary imagination that he saw lightning flashes.

Ptosphes signed. "Very well. If you've gone mad, I'll pretend to go mad along with you so that people won't talk."

"Or they may think the Great King's madness is catching," he replied. Kalvan couldn't admit now or

perhaps ever his real reason for the parley. He didn't want to kill any more of these men. They were too good—too much like the army he wanted to lead someday, that he would *have* to lead someday if he was to survive here-and-now. Already, almost a third of their number were casualties and with here-and-now medicine in its infancy most of the seriously wounded would die shortly.

Down the hill, bills and muskets were being lowered and helmets hoisted, while someone lowered a pole that held a Square's banner. Kalvan and Ptosphes took off their helmets and lifted them on their swords, then gathered Major Nicomoth and the escort troop of the Royal Horseguards and rode down the hill.

A large man in three-quarter armor that showed fine workmanship under the powder smoke rode out to greet them.

"Prince Anaxon...?"

The man's face seemed to work briefly at the mention of that name. "No, he's missing. He led the first charge..."

"What about Prince Anaphon, his brother?" Kalvan asked.

"Wounded...a bad leg wound. One of our Uncle Wolf's is treating him. Our Great King will be heartsick when he learns that his brave nephews—" He shut up, as he suddenly realized what he was saying. "I am Baron Phygron, Captain-General of the Sacred Square of Sephrax and Marshal of the Second Great Square of Hos-Ktemnos. Do you speak for the ruler of Hos-Hostigos?"

Kalvan grinned and held up his signet ring, ignoring Ptosphes and Nicomoth's startled gasps. "*I am* the Great King of Hos-Hostigos. In my Own name and that of the Princes, nobles, subjects and peoples allied with me in the defense of the True Gods, I offer you terms."

Baron Phygron swallowed and pushed up his visor. "May I hear those terms, Sir Kalvan?"

"The correct term of address is 'Your Majesty,'" Prince Ptosphes added with steel in his voice.

Kalvan nodded. "If I am not 'Your Majesty,' then obviously I can't be the Great King of Hos-Hostigos. If you are going to argue over names, we shall have no time to discuss more important matters, such as the surrender of your Squares. I assure you that there is no other alternative for them but complete annihilation."

Phygron looked like a man who wished the earth would open up and swallow him. "I do not admit that. But, King—I mean, Your Majesty—"

A musket blasted forth out of the Ktemnoi ranks, followed by two others. Major Nicomoth twisted toward Kalvan, one eye staring, the other replaced by a red-rimmed hole. Then he toppled from his saddle.

Kalvan heard shouts of "Treachery!" and "Down Styphon!" from the Hostigi lines, then another shout:

"They've killed the King!"

There the fat was in the fire, or would be if he didn't get back uphill and show those damned fools that he was still alive. In the twilight before an oncoming storm it was an easy mistake for tired men to confuse Nicomoth for their Great King, since he and Nicomoth were not only about the same size and

wearing similar armor but were now riding similar horses. If a king was going to go gallivanting into battle like a junior officer, it only made sense not to wear gilded armor and plumes to attract enemy fire.

Sometimes it could lead to problems.

Kalvan turned his mount and dug in his spurs. As he did, Baron Phygron clutched at his chest as three bullets punched through his armor—rifle bullets, they had to be, to be accurate at this range! He was going to have to speak to Verkan about discipline among the Mounted Rifles...

If I get back to Hostigi lines alive, that is. The Ktemnoi were cursing, shaking their fists and drawing swords. Kalvan and Ptosphes waited until the Horseguards were on the move, put their heads down and their heels in, and then galloped up the hill. At any moment Kalvan expected to feel a bullet smash into his back, or at least into his horse. Surprisingly, they reached their own lines in one piece, with less than a dozen Horseguard missing.

This, in Kalvan's mind, exonerated the Ktemnoi, although he doubted his generals—much less his common soldiers—would see it that way. To their minds it was clear-cut treachery and someone would have to pay. Kalvan was afraid it was going to be the wrong *someone*.

As they reined in, a heavy gun fired, followed closely by the distant rumble of thunder. Then the smoothbores started up again, an irregular spattering from the Ktemnoi as they desperately let fly, followed by solid volleys from the Hostigi. He suspected the lull in the fighting had allowed more fireseed to be brought up to the front lines...

Kalvan closed his eyes and wished he could close his ears to screams of dying men and horses. "Dralm-damnit!"

Ptosphes gripped his arm. "Kalvan, it was my fault, not yours. I should never have allowed you to approach the Ktemnoi battle line. It was my duty to parlay with the Ktemnoi—"

Kalvan shook his head. "It's not your fault. I jumped the gun! *I wanted* to end the slaughter. I wasn't even thinking about assassins wearing Ktemnoi uniforms. Maybe Styphon's Own Guard salted among the Squares to maintain discipline. When Phygron identified me, they saw an opportunity."

"Still, I should have stopped you, Your Majesty." Ptosphes looked even more down in the mouth than usual. "If I hadn't been thinking about my loss—"

"No. Forget it, father. I'm sure they would have recognized me—or you—sooner or later." Kalvan wasn't at all sure of the truth of those words, but he needed to switch Ptosphes off from this train of thought or he'd soon be blaming himself for every death on the battlefield. And there were going to be a *lot* of them after this snafu played itself out.

Side by side, they rode back toward the Great Battery.

II

The moon came out just after Verkan Vall sighted the Mounted Rifles' campfires. Trust my men to be as good at scrounging little comforts such as dry wood as at fighting or at caring for their dead and wounded. In the far distance he could hear the popping of smoothbores; it sounded like the shots were coming from the Grove of the Badger King. Somebody was mopping up the last of the Knights' light cavalry. As long as they didn't call on the Mounted Rifles for backup, he was happy to leave them to their work.

He rode slowly toward the fires, hoping the moonlight would keep his horse from stepping on dead bodies even if it did not do anything about his exhaustion. He felt that he needed about a week's uninterrupted sleep, preferably with Dalla—except that then it wouldn't be uninterrupted...

A sentry challenged him. "Halt! Who's there?"

"Colonel Verkan of the Mounted Rifles."

The man looked at him close up, nodded his head, saying, "Pass, Colonel."

It won't be long before we'll be needing codes and passwords, Verkan thought as he rode into the firelight. The faces it displayed were almost as dead as those he'd seen on the corpses, except for the red-rimmed eyes and the slowly working jaws as they munched salt pork and hard cheese. Someone took his horse's bridle and two other someones helped him dismount, which saved him the embarrassment of falling flat on his face.

Neither firelight nor moonlight lit the open ground between the foot of the slope and the woods. Verkan was just as happy about that. Before nightfall he'd seen enough of that field to last him a thousand-year lifetime. For hundreds of yards a man could walk from body to body without ever touching the muddy ground. Six thousand of the Sacred Squares lay there; about a third as many had escaped, including the Ktemnoi Royal Princes. According to one of his agents with the Holy Host—despite rumors to the contrary—both the Princes were still alive. Another fifteen hundred Ktemnoi had been taken prisoner after the Hostigi had worked off their fury at the treachery and both sides were too exhausted to lift their weapons in the downpour.

That was only the beginning of the casualty list for the Holy Host: three thousand of Styphon's Own Guard dead to a man (the Hostigi had left no wounded alive, nor taken any of Styphon's Red Hand prisoners), over three thousand Order Foot, a thousand to fifteen hundred Zarthani Knights, most of Leonnestros' Pistoleers and Royal Guard (along with Leonnestros himself), thousands of mercenaries dead and two thousand Holy Warriors who would never again fight for Styphon or anyone else.

Nor were all the bodies down there Styphoni—of course.

Half the Mounted Riflemen were casualties, close to two-thirds of Harmakros' Army of Observation, half of Phrames' troopers. Count Euphrades of Ulthor who'd charged a little too far, all his plots and schemes now forever beyond the reach even of hypno-truth drugs, unless one encountered him in his next incarnation. Thousands of Ptosphes' men, and far too many of the Hostigi regular infantry. Verkan recalled, toward the last the standards of five regiments flying over a body of men hardly large enough to make two. Much of the fighting nobility of Ulthor, Nyklos, Sashta and Sask were dead or wounded, and as for the Nostori—Verkan doubted there was enough left of the cavalry, infantry and militia put together to make a single respectable battalion.

Eleven or twelve thousand Hostigi casualties was the estimate Verkan had heard, and it matched his own. Many of the wounded would not last a ten-day. Too many more such victories and Kalvan would

come to ruin; no matter how many more opponents he smashed as thoroughly as he'd crushed the Holy Host and the Harphaxi before them. The Styphoni casualties might run to twenty thousand dead, wounded or missing—with another eight thousand taken prisoner. Some of the wounded would recover, but still Soton would be lucky to take a third of the Host he'd taken north with him back to Hos-Ktemnos!

And they would get away; the Hostigi were not only exhausted, but very nearly out of fireseed. In fact, Hos-Hostigos was practically where Old Hostigos had been pre-Kalvan—not enough fireseed in the entire Princedom to load all the artillery at once.

Great King Cleitharses the Scholar would have his sons back, but not his High Marshal or much else of what he'd sent north. Cleitharses would probably throw a royal snit, and Styphon's House's support within Hos-Ktemnos would be diminished and shaken—especially when the butcher's bill of Phyrax became public knowledge. He and his Princes would certainly have no illusions that making war on behalf of Styphon's House was a cheap way to win friends in the Inner Circle or annex new territory.

Nor Verkan thought there would be many smiles in the Inner Circle when that news arrived.

Over the crackling of the fire and the distant moans of the dying, Verkan heard a horse approaching. Kalvan or a messenger, probably. He forced himself to his feet, saw the rider take shape at the edges of the firelight, and then noticed that both mount and rider seemed oddly shrunken. The rider reined in and Verkan recognized young Aspasthar.

"Good evening, Colonel Verkan," the boy said. "I bear a message for the Great King. Do you know where he is?"

"Out there, somewhere," Verkan said, pointing along the ridge. He'd last seen Kalvan riding that way and hadn't seen him riding back, although it would have been easy to miss a whole regiment in the darkness before the moon came out. "If you'll tell me what the message is, I'll carry it. You don't want to be riding around in the dark on that pony by yourself."

Too late, Verkan realized he'd just mortally insulted the lad. Aspasthar bristled like a cat with its fur stroked the wrong way. "It is a message for the Great King's ears alone, Colonel. I cannot entrust it—"

Verkan felt his stomach drop to the level of his bootsoles. There was only one message he could think of that would be for Kalvan's ears only, and he'd be damned if his friend was going to learn about his wife's death from some pipsqueak—

Aspasthar underestimated the speed of Verkan's speed and the length of his arms; well, he wasn't the first to make that mistake. Suddenly the page found himself hauled from the saddle and dangling with his collar firmly gripped in two strong hands and his feet well clear of the ground. He kicked futilely at Verkan's shins, then used a number of words that suggested the boy had been associating with too many cavalry troopers.

Verkan waited until the lad ran out of breath, conscious of the snickers of the Riflemen, and not quite sure he wasn't making an awful fool of himself. "Let's compromise, Aspasthar. You tell me the message privately and I'll ride with you to find the Great King."

The peace offering fell flat. The boy took a deep breath and shouted: "Colonel Verkan has no honor, but his brave Riflemen do, so I will tell them. Great Queen Rylla is safe and well and delivered of a daughter!"

The Riflemen cheered.

Verkan's hands opened by sheer reflex, dropping Aspasthar to the ground. He bounced up in a moment, grinning impudently and bushing off his trousers. Verkan stood stiffly, now sure that he'd made a fool of himself, then was cheering along with everyone else. Someone started beating a drum, two or three men leaped to their feet and started a Sastragathi war dance, a few soldiers fired their guns into the air, someone else began to sing *Marching Through Harphax* in a voice that had to be drunk with fatigue because there wasn't anything stronger than water within miles—

"Long live Queen Rylla and the Princess of Hostigos!" shouted Verkan. He heard the cheering taken up as the word spread, and suddenly he felt as if he could ride twenty miles and fight another battle at the end of the ride. He knew the feeling was purely an adrenaline fantasy, but he did think his new strength might last long enough to find Kalvan.

"Aspasthar, if you don't mind the company of a man without honor—"

The lad bowed with positively courtly grace. "I have cast doubts on my own honor by doubting yours, Colonel." Then he was wide-eyed and eager again. "Don't worry about Redpoll, Colonel. He's very sure-footed."

III

The musketry was dying down as Harmakros' irregulars drove out the last of the Zarthani Knights' auxiliary horse-archers, the rearguard of the Holy Host. So far Kalvan could see only two or three small fires in the village; the heavy rain had soaked the thatch and shingles enough so that they would not burn easily. Not that either side was actually trying to set the village on fire, although the Ruthani mounted bowmen were devilishly hard to kill. Still, they were only fighting to give the survivors of the Holy Host a head start, while Harmakros was mostly trying to keep them from returning to Phyrax Field.

Torches glowed on the battlefield itself, where the Hostigi search parties were collecting enemy wounded. They also had orders to keep away the local peasantry until the fallen weapons and armor were gathered up, but so far the peasants didn't appear to be a problem. Maybe the sheer size and slaughter of the battle had scared them away; the usual here-and-now battle involved fewer men than were contained in one of the wings of either of today's two armies.

Against the torchlight Kalvan could see a rider making his way up the ridge. As he reached the crest, Kalvan recognized Phrames, undoing his red scarf. That scarf had been one of Rylla's name-day gifts to Phrames; on any other man it might have been a calculated insult to Kalvan, but on Phrames it was a symbol of his loyalty to his Great Queen.

"Well done, Phrames. In another moon you can have Rylla embroider the arms of Beshta on that scarf." Kalvan's mind shied away from the thought that even now there might not be any Rylla.

The silence was so long that Kalvan wondered if perhaps he'd overestimated the wits Phrames had left after today's fighting. The moon was disappearing again and another thunderstorm seemed to be building

in the southwest, so he couldn't make out the Count's expression.

Then he heard Phrames clear his throat. "Your Majesty—Kalvan. I—I am your servant in—all things. Then a soft laugh. "But don't you think this is selling the colt before the mare has even been brought to stud?"

"No. We are going to have to remove Balthar's head—if it is still on his shoulders. We haven't found his body, and most of the Beshtans ran like the blazes as soon as it was safe to do so. I suspect he'll be giving Our Royal Executioner some business, and all his kin and ministers—"

"Don't forget his tax gatherers."

"Especially his tax collectors. That means nobody of the House of Beshta left except his brother Balthames, who is going to have to remain content with Sashta, *or he'll* join his brother. That leaves the Princedom of Beshta vacant, and if there's anybody else who deserves it more, I'd like to hear who you think he is—"

"There are many, Your Majesty. Harmakros, Alkides, Hestophes, even Prince Sarrask—"

"Yes, Harmakros and Alkides were invaluable. So was Sarrask. But it was you who held the left wing together after Ptosphes' retreat."

Kalvan held up his hand to block further argument. "I know the First Prince did everything that was humanly possible. But you performed a miracle. If the Knights had rolled up the left wing and hit our center on the flank—well, right now we would not be having this discussion. Nor would there be a Great King of Hos-Hostigos to reward his brave and loyal subjects. Furthermore, to win this war with Styphon's House, Hos-Hostigos is going to need all the miracle workers we can get.

"Also, announcing the new Prince of Beshta before we've settled accounts with the old one has a few other advantages. First, it will keep people from worrying that I'm the kind of Great King who likes to collect vacant Princedoms. I understand they are not popular." *An understatement if there ever was one.* "We will expect a share of the vacant estates and the treasury, but that is traditional.

"Second, you're popular in Beshta, Phrames. The people and even some of the nobles may rise up against Balthar as soon as they know whom they're rising *for*. That may save Us the trouble of his execution. It will certainly save Us a good deal of fighting and some lives. If We asked the Beshtans to rise without naming a new Prince, it might look as if We like starting rebellions. That would Us even more unpopular. But naming a successor to a prince attainted for treason—again, that's traditional."

"There is wisdom in all that you say, Your Majesty, but— What's that?"

It sounded as if the battle were starting all over again for a moment—gunshots and shouts, then Kalvan recognized cheers. A short while later he recognized two familiar riders approaching at a trot, both carrying torches. One was Verkan, the other Aspasthar, and both of them had grins that practically met at the backs of their heads.

"The Great Queen and baby are safe!" hollered Aspasthar.

Kalvan was struck speechless.

Aspasthar gentled his pony, then dismounted to kneel before Kalvan.

"Yes, Sire. Both Queen Rylla and the new Princess of Hos-Hostigos are well."

"How—how did they choose you as messenger?"

Aspasthar blushed. "Your Majesty, they didn't exactly—you see, I was listening outside the birthing chamber. When I heard everybody being so happy, I knew what had happened. With all the excitement, I thought it might take a while before they told someone else to ride to you, and I was certain that you would want to know right away, so I got on Redpoll and rode off. But I became lost and had to ask Colonel Verkan for help—"

"And insult my honor into the bargain," Verkan added laughing. He told the rest of the story while Aspasthar blushed even brighter.

Kalvan wanted to run around waving his arms and shouting at the top of his lungs, but he did have his royal dignity to preserve. The boy also had a reward coming.

"Aspasthar. You have earned yourself a good-news bearer's reward. Ten Hostigos Crowns. It shall be paid to you tomorrow, and then you will take it to your—to Baron Harmakros and give nine Crowns of it to him for safekeeping. You are also to say that it is the Great King's command that you be thoroughly thrashed for riding out as you did with no authority or permission, putting yourself in danger and insulting Colonel Verkan as well!"

Aspasthar only had to gulp twice before he stammered, "Y-Yes, Your M-M-Majesty!"

Kalvan turned away and took a few stumbling steps. If there is anybody to thank—thank you for Rylla and our daughter. Now, what to name her—

Kalvan took the offered jug and swigged from it without thinking. For a moment, he felt as if he'd swallowed a mouthful from one of the Foundry crucibles. Nothing was this strong except high-proof corn liquor! Had they gone and invented distilling behind his back while he was off fighting the war?

He sniffed the neck of the jug. Not bourbon, not rye or any other kind of whiskey—just good winter wine. It was only fatigue and battle strain and not having eaten anything for twelve hours that made the winter wine taste so potent.

"Aspasthar demonstrated good sense in one thing," Verkan said. "The lad tied two jugs to Redpoll's saddle, and took some cheese and sausage as well. Probably stole them from the kitchen, of course. Drink up, Your Majesty."

Kalvan took another sip, then felt rain on his face and shook his head. If he drank any more, he'd either have to be carried back to Tarr-Hostigos or else stand here in the rain like a barnyard turkey, his mouth upturned until the rain filled it and he drowned.

IV

Very little of the morning sunlight penetrated into the keep and Kalvan had to hold up his torch to find his way up the narrow stone stairway. The door to the birthing chamber was closed when Kalvan reached the top of the stairs. One of the midwives and a maidservant were slumped on a bench outside the door; another maidservant was sprawled on a pallet under the bench, snoring like a small thunderstorm. The door opened a crack and the bulldog face of old Amasphalya, the chief midwife, peered out.

"You can't come in, Your Majesty. Both Rylla and the baby are asleep, and they need the sleep more than they need you."

Kalvan felt his mouth open and shut several times without any sound coming out. He was glad the antechamber was dark and the three women asleep, because he knew he must be making a thoroughly non-royal spectacle of himself.

He thought briefly of battering rams. He thought somewhat less briefly of summoning Brother Mytron and having him negotiate a passage for the Great King. Then he remembered that Mytron was also enjoying a well-deserved sleep after a day not as dangerous but certainly as long as his King's.

He was thinking that he really didn't know what to do next when he heard Rylla's voice from inside the chamber. "By Yirtta, Amasphalya, let him in! That's an order."

"Your Majesty—"

"*Let him in!* Or I'm going to get out of bed and open the door myself."

Kalvan would have very much liked a camera to record the expression on Amasphalya's face. If nothing else, he could have used the picture to blackmail her into better manners the next time she decided that she outranked a Great King.

Then he gave out a great whoop of laughter. Until now he'd only been *told* that Rylla was alive and healthy; in his exhaustion he'd had moments of believing that everyone was lying to him. Now he'd heard her voice, and more than her voice, her old familiar impatience with fools.

Amasphalya sighed and stepped out of Kalvan's path without opening the door any wider. Kalvan kicked it open all the way and ran to the bed. He kissed Rylla several times and ran his hands through her hair before he realized how fortunate he'd been to hear her voice before seeing her; she looked like a stranger, with dark circles under her eyes, pain-carved lines in her pale face and hair matted to the consistency of barbed wire.

No, not a stranger. Just a woman who'd been through a long hard labor, and he'd delivered numerous women in labor to the hospital in his squad car and seen what they looked like when they arrived—twice, even helping deliver babies. But he hadn't been married to any of them.

"Kalvan, look!"

He looked to where a too thin, too pale hand was pointing. At first he saw nothing but a pile of furs and linen, then—

"By Galzar's Mace! I didn't know babies came that big."

Rylla laughed and Amasphalya was bold enough to say, "Oh, she was a fine big lass, that's for certain. Almost three ingots. It's no great wonder that she was hard in coming, but all's well now. She's already

eaten once and—"

Kalvan wasn't listening. In fact, as he stared down at his nine pounds of daughter, he wouldn't have heard Dralm himself coming to announce that Balph had burned to the ground and Styphon's House was surrendering unconditionally to the will of Great King Kalvan. All his attention was on the baby, red-faced and wrinkled as she was, with a snub nose that looked more like Rylla's than his—

Under her father's scrutiny, the Princess of Hostigos opened large blue eyes that were her mother's and nobody else's. Then she opened her mouth and let out an earsplitting howl.

"She wants another meal, the greedy thing," clucked Amasphalya. "I'd best summon the wet nurse."

She bustled off to do that, while Kalvan held out his thumb to the baby. Her fingers curled firmly around it, but she went on squalling. He grinned.

"I suppose it's going to be a while before she can be impressed by Great Kings or anybody else who can't provide nourishment."

Rylla smiled and silently gripped his free hand. "Kalvan, you don't believe the gods will mind if we name the baby now like they do in the Cold Lands where you came from?"

Kalvan shook his head. Due to the high infant mortality, most here-and-now babies were not given proper names until they reached their third year, which was when their families celebrated their first Name Day. This was because of the high infant mortality rate here-and-now; he'd heard that in the Trygath it ran as high as fifty percent. Often, their Name Day wasn't on their real birthday, not even the one supplied by the lunar and solar Zarthani calendars.

It also meant that when someone gave his or her age you had to mentally add another three years to get their *real* age—or close to it! Some families didn't even keep track of the moon or day—just the year. Hestophes liked to say he was born in the first false spring of the Year of the Big Moon. It always got a big laugh.

Kalvan had discussed naming the baby before he realized all the implications. Now, he was stuck with it. *You'd better live a long time, little one*, he admonished his newborn daughter. "No, I can't see Allfather Dralm being unhappy because we named our baby after your mother."

Rylla smiled. "Little Demia. I like that her name honors a mother I never knew."

Kalvan smiled too and squeezed her hand. Then the door opened again as Amasphalya led a hefty peasant woman into the chamber. Kalvan was looking her over to make sure she'd bathed properly, when he saw two men silhouetted in the doorway. Something about them looked familiar—

"Count Phrames. Colonel Verkan. Welcome. Come in."

The two soldiers followed the wet nurse. Amasphalya took a deep breath, then appeared to think better of whatever she'd been about to say. Instead she looked toward the ceiling with an expression that was clearly a silent prayer to the Goddess to guard Rylla and the baby, since her own best efforts to keep the birthing chamber free of fathers and other useless men had failed.

Kalvan straightened up, although he was so weak that for a moment he wondered if he would need to ask for help. Something seemed to have happened to his spine.

"How is the army?"

"Harmakros, Ptosphes and Sarrask have things well in hand," Verkan said.

"I don't know what that Sarrask is made of," Phrames added. "He fought all day, worked all night; now he and his guardsmen are having a drinking party with some camp followers and some captured beer!"

"Maybe he wants to forget the battle," Verkan said softly. "The gods know I wish I could."

Phrames looked oddly at the Rifleman for a moment, then nodded slowly. "It could be." Obviously, the idea of Sarrask of Sask having some virtues was still novel, but no longer unthinkable.

The baby's howls had died to an occasional squeak or gurgle as she snuggled against the wet nurse's breast and went to work on her meal. Kalvan found himself swaying on his feet, even after Phrames put a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

"Come with me, Your Majesty. We've arranged a bed for you in the shrine-house. Many of the wounded are under tents in the courtyard and Verkan has twenty of his Riflemen guarding the shrine-house. You'll be able to sleep in peace."

Sleep sounded like an excellent idea, but he wanted to say goodnight to Rylla. He shook off Phrames' hand, turned, swayed so violently that he nearly fell—and saw that Rylla was asleep again.

A very excellent idea, for everybody. Kalvan cautiously placed one foot in front of another, then felt Phrames gripping him by one arm and Verkan by the other as they led him toward the door.

TWENTY-EIGHT

I

"At the trot—forward!" Baron Halmoth shouted. With a great thudding of hooves on stony ground and the rattling of harness brass and armor, Prince Ptosphes' Bodyguards put themselves into motion. Baron Halmoth looked behind him to make sure that nobody was moving faster than a trot, then pulled down his visor.

Prince Ptosphes left his own visor up. He had this whole wing of the battle to observe and command, not just a single cavalry regiment with a single fairly simple mission. He was riding with his Bodyguards, newly reinforced after losing half their strength at the battles at Phyrax and Tenabra, because that seemed to be the best way to move far enough forward to see what was going on without making himself easy prey to the Agrysi.

Of course, the Agrysi might have run out of either fireseed or the will to fight in the last two days, after the capture of their main wagon train. The loss of their train made three successive defeats for them in the moon-half since Ptosphes led the newly organized Army of Nostor into the Princedom to clear it of King Demistophon's 'gesture of friendship' toward Styphon's House—actually, a blatant land grab of some un-nailed-down Harphaxi (now Hostigi) territory! The gods knew that Kaiphranos the Timid was hiding somewhere underneath his bed-cloths in his Royal Bedchamber and not about to dispute Demistophon's

claims on the battlefield, the only place where they counted.

The Agrysi might be in full flight, but Ptosphes wasn't going to wager his life, or that of his men, on it. The Army of Nostor's sixteen thousand men had begun with no advantage in numbers, and those three victories had all been hard fought and fairly won; regiments that had been weak when he led them into Nostor were now mere skeletons. Yet, Allfather Dralm be praised!, winning those victories had made Ptosphes really want to go on living for the first time since that dreadful day at Tenabra.

Furthermore, it was too beautiful a day to die with work unfinished. There was so much more to be done, such as casting down Styphon's Foul House of Iniquities, watching his granddaughter grow up...

White puffs of smoke from the thicket of trees to the left were followed by the bee-hum of bullets passing close by. Three riders and two horses went down; Ptosphes heard Halmoth shouting, "Keep moving! Don't bunch up!" and saw the Bodyguards obeying. The mounted nobles and gentry of Hostigos still knew only one operation of war—how to charge—but they know several ways of making that charge more dangerous to the enemy. Teaching them more would have required the command of a god, not merely of a Great King.

Prince Ptosphes turned in his saddle and shouted to a messenger to bring up a squadron of the mercenary dragoons riding behind the Bodyguards and have them clean out the woods. If the Agrysi detachment there was more than a single squadron could handle, the rest of the mercenaries and the Bodyguards would be within what Kalvan called "supporting distance." Ptosphes hoped they wouldn't be needed in the woods; he wanted to push home this charge right into the Agrysi rear and that would surely need more than a single regiment.

By the time the messenger was gone, the Bodyguards were over the crest of the little rise and Ptosphes could see the entire Hostigi battle line—his own right-flank cavalry, seven to eight thousand infantry in the center and the mercenary, Saski and Ulthori horse on the right. The guns were barely visible at the rear of the infantry line, staying limbered up and well protected until they had good targets. Ptosphes would have given a couple of fingers for three sixteen-pounders to add to his mobile six and four-pounders, but Kalvan needed all the larger guns that had survived Phyrax to dispose of Balthar and the Beshtan tarrs.

A little further, and Ptosphes could see the Agrysi force—a thick but rather ragged line of mercenary infantry drawn up behind a farm and a stone wall, with old-fashioned guns, small bombards, and demicannon in the gaps and the cavalry behind either flank. Black-streaked white smoke rising from the farm told him of a concealed battery opening fire; a moment later whirrings and thumpings told him that its target was his cavalry. Then a solid mass of horsemen was shaking itself loose from the Agrysi right and coming toward the Hostigi.

The Agrysi cavalry weren't quite stupid enough to ride down their own gunners, but they did manage to mask the farm battery's fire completely. The hedges and outbuildings around the farm also broke up their formation, so that it was half a dozen separate squadrons rather than a solid mass that reached Ptosphes' wing. Skirmishers to either side rose up and fired arquebuses to keep the enemy horse bunched up as much as possible.

By Ptosphes' order, the Hostigos Bodyguards were a solid but flexible wall of steel and horseflesh, and another messenger was riding back to bring up the Hostigi Lancers.

The two cavalry forces collided with a sound like a cartload of anvils falling into a stone quarry. Ptosphes saw men hurled from their saddles by the impact of the collision, to die under the slashing hooves of their comrades' horses. He shot one of those horses, used up his other pistol on the horse's

rider, saw a knot of men growing behind the fallen horse and lifted his battleaxe.

"For Hostigos! Down Styphon's House! Down the Agrysi dogs!"

"Prince Ptosphes!" the shout came from all around, as his Bodyguards dug in their own spurs and drew steel. Now it was just a matter of straightforward fighting, and Ptosphes had no doubts as to who would win such a contest. Few of his Hostigi veterans did not owe Styphon's House a debt for dead kin or burned homes or both, and no one was disposed to be merciful to the Agrysi and their hired soldiers merely because Great King Demistophon had been stupid rather than evil.

How long the hewing and hacking lasted, Ptosphes never knew precisely. He did know that a moment came when he saw there were no enemies within reach who weren't shouting "Oath to Galzar!" and holding up helmets on sword points or snatching off green sashes. Beyond the surrendering cavalry Ptosphes could see the Agrysi infantry doing the same. Colonel Democriphon, recognizable by his unhelmeted head and flowing blond hair, was riding through the farm battery as if on parade. On either side and to his rear the Hostigi Lancers rode as if invisible ropes tied them to their Colonel.

Ptosphes hoped they wouldn't ride into more than they could handle, but that would be quite a lot. Democriphon loved to make a show of his swordsmanship and riding, but Kalvan said he was probably the best Colonel in the Great King's regulars.

Ptosphes dismounted to spare his horse and made sure that none of the blood that splattered his armor was his. Except for a nick beside his left knee, he turned out to be intact. He was drinking water laced with vinegar and refusing a bandage when he saw General Hestophes riding back around the farm. With him rode a handful of Agrysi horsemen in rich three-quarter armor and etched and gold-filigreed morion helmets, under the red-falcon banner of Prince Aesklos of Zcynos.

By the time the riders reached him, he was in the saddle again.

"Hail, Prince Ptosphes," the leading horseman stated. "I am Count Artemanes, Captain-General to Prince Aesklos of the Princedom of Zcynos. In his name, I yield all the men sworn to Great King Demistophon of Hos-Agrys on this field."

"Where is Prince Aesklos?"

The Count swallowed, letting Colonel Democriphon speak first. "He's about to have his leg taken off, back there around the hill, he said, pointing with his sword. "There's another whole wagon train back there, four guns and a lot of wounded. Five hundred at least."

"I'll send our Uncle Wolfs to help take care of them as soon as they're through with our own wounded," Ptosphes said. "They may be able to save the Prince's leg."

"With some demon-taught trick—?" the Count began, then quickly broke off as he saw faces harden against him. "Very well. I don't suppose a priest of Galzar can really be bought to harm a wounded man."

"Of course not," Ptosphes snapped. The last thing he wanted was to do was waste time discussing the drivel Styphon's House had been spouting about Kalvan's demonic wisdom. "Now. Is there anything else you need other than aid for your wounded?"

The Count looked around as if he wished he could speak to Ptosphes in private, then shrugged. "Just somebody to keep the Red Hand off our back. Three temple bands of Styphon's Own Guard from the

Great Temple at Hos-Agrys came with us. They're not more than half a march's ride north along the High Road to ensure we don't fall back. If they think we've surrendered without cause, they may try to retake the camp and kill any of our men, as well as yours, they find."

Ptosphes nodded to indicate he understood. Styphon's House's Red Hand hadn't done this sort of thing to friendly soldiers thus far during the Great Kings' War, but their reputation more than justified expecting or fearing it. "Is that why you fought us?"

"That, and not knowing how many you were. We thought we'd done enough damage in the last two attacks that you'd be licking your wounds. Has the Dae—Has Kalvan taught you how to make armies invisible?"

"Great King Kalvan, to you. And, to answer your questions, no he hasn't. Just how to move them so far and so fast that they're hard to see unless one is looking in the right place. You could learn those arts too, if you gave the Great King cause to see you as friend rather than enemy."

The Count's frozen face told Ptosphes he was in no mood to listen to that kind of suggestion. *Why, those words smacked of treason!*, it seemed to say. If the Count had any sense he'd desert that hunk of whale blubber that overflowed the Golden Throne of Hos-Agrys and cast his bones with the Fireseed Throne of Hos-Hostigos. Learn what it was like to fight with a real captain. Maybe a few more defeats like this might bang some sense into that stump of wood he carried on his shoulders? Ptosphes' wouldn't bet a half phenig on it happening, though...

"Colonel Democriphon," he ordered. "Take your Lancers, two companies of dragoons, two bands of mercenary cavalry and four guns up the High Road. Find the Red Hand and block the road against them, but don't engage them unless they advance. If they do, signal by rocket. Then I'll bring up the whole army and we'll see about collecting their heads as my Name-Day gift to Princess Demia!"

"My Prince!"

Ptosphes turned to General Hestophes and said, "Prepare your Mobile Force just in case the Colonel needs support." Hestophes smiled in a way that showed he'd very much enjoy mixing it up with the Red Hand.

Democriphon wheeled his horse and trotted off. The Count sighed and appeared to sit easier in his saddle. "Thank you, Your Highness. I wish—well, it seemed better to have my men die at your hands than at Styphon's bloody hands."

"Better still if they had not died at all," Ptosphes added. "Now, if you would care to sit down with me over some winter wine, I do believe we can put an end to this war in Nostor..."

II

Kalvan studied the distant walls of Tarr-Beshta as he strode back and forth in front of the Army of Beshta HQ, a former mansion of one of Balthar's favorites. From a distance the castle reminded him of a medieval painting of a siege he'd seen at The Louvre, except that the smell ruined the illusion. The siege

had been going on for several weeks and the air was tainted with the smoke of burning campfires, unwashed bodies and rotting food. Fortunately, he only had to stay there as long as it took to breach the walls of Tarr-Beshta and take the possession.

Harmakros' Army of Observation had cleared the passes and the roads of Beshtan opposition, what little there was of it! Now Harmakros was laying siege to the border forts and castles with Hos-Harphax before they could surrender to the Harphaxi—which except for a loyal few would be as soon as they learned Tarr-Beshta had fallen. Many of the castles surrendered outright; a few welcoming the Hostigi as liberators.

The majority of Balthar's subjects appeared to have little enthusiasm for their Prince and the resistance on the road to Beshta City had been minimal. Still, the old miser hadn't been a complete fool; he'd always paid his army—if not well—on time. Although now, that he was stitched up in his castle, the Beshtan Army was on short rations. According to Harmakros' latest dispatch, most of the border tarrs haven't received pay or provisions in over a moon-half. It appeared that Balthar's Princely authority was shrinking to the length of his sword arm.

"How much deeper, Your Majesty?" the Captain of Artillery asked.

Kalvan put Ptosphes' dispatch into his saddlebag, mounted his horse and trotted over to the mortar pit, which was about a hundred feet from the walls of Tarr-Beshta. After he dismounted, his shield bearers, four of them carrying a reinforced gun guard about the size of a one-car garage door, walked in front of him, shielding him from enemy fire. "About a third of a rod," he told the Captain. To the men digging he said, "Ankle high."

Then he returned to field headquarters, remembering the fate of Richard Lionheart, who'd ridden into crossbow range of a French castle he was besieging and paid for it with his life, leaving John Lackland as the next King of England. Nor did it make any sense to put his shield bearers at needless risk.

Once he was settled, he began to read Ptosphes' dispatch where he'd left off:

—on terms which you will see in the enclosed copy of the Truce Agreement. It is hard to believe that anyone not a minion of Styphon's House will consider them other than honorable, or even generous for a host so thoroughly defeated as that of Great King Demistophon's.

Kalvan quickly looked over the other sheets of parchment with Ptosphes' letter. The Agrysi were to retain all their small arms and such fireseed and food as they could carry on their persons or mounts; those taken prisoner in the earlier battles were to be released on oath to pay token ransoms before next spring; petty-captains and above were to retain their armor.

These terms cover the lawful subjects of Great King Demistophon and his Princes. The mercenaries have given their Oath to Galzar in the customary manner. It appears that not less than three thousand of them and perhaps more could be persuaded to take Hostigi colors. With the captured supplies and this addition to our strength, we are more than fit to stand against any treachery by Styphon's House, without eating Prince Pheblon's lands any barer than they are

already.

From the speed with which the Red Hand retreated, I much doubt that they were given orders to slay the Agrysi for yielding untimely. Such an act added to Prince Balthar's folly at Tarr-Catassa would drive many mercenaries into our service—or at least out of Styphon's House's—and hasten the end of the war. Grand Master Soton would have the wit to see this, if none of the Inner Circle did.

Kalvan's mouth made an O and a soundless whistle. A casual, even complimentary mention of the man who'd defeated him demonstrated just how much Ptosphes had recovered his morale. He wondered if he should include in his reply the rumors that the Grand Master was in serious trouble with the Inner Circle for pulling his Knights off the field of Phyrax instead of keeping them there to die to the last man.

Best not. Letters could be captured, and so far the rumor was just that, apart from also being something the Styphoni might not know had reached Hos-Hostigos. Right now Styphon's House appeared to be running around like the proverbial chicken with its head cut off, and any precaution that contributed to their confusion and ignorance was justified.

And speaking of precautions—Kalvan rose to his feet and shouted at the gunners who were digging a pit out of the side of the trench toward Tarr-Beshta. "That's deep enough, you Ormaz-spawned idiots! Any deeper, the gun will be firing straight up. And the shells will land on the heads of the men in the forward trenches! If they landed on *your* heads it might not be so bad, because I don't think you keep anything important there! But that's not true of your comrades."

"Your Majesty?" several bewildered artillerymen said at once.

Kalvan sighed, cursing Styphon's House for discouraging the art of siegecraft, and stood up. He spent a long moment studying the scarred gray walls of Tarr-Beshta for any signs of unusual activity that might mean a sortie, then scrambled down into the trench without regard to his dignity or the ability of his guards to keep up with him.

Five minutes with the artillerymen who were digging the pit was enough to give him some hope that they almost understood most of what he'd been trying to teach them. To be sure, the old twelve-pounder they were using as an improvised mortar would have a longer barrel and therefore more range than the mortars he had the Foundry working on, but why take chances? Only one or two shells on the heads of the infantrymen doing the dirtiest work of the siege, and the whole concept of indirect fire would be distrusted and despised so thoroughly that not even a Dralm-sent Great King could get it easily accepted.

On the other hand, if those shells landed inside Tarr-Beshta—it would take more than one or two, but not many more before it would be safe to storm the castle, end the siege and let a Great King who was also acting as his own Chief of Engineers get more than three hours' sleep a night! *Note: First thing, start a Dept. of Engineering at the new University of Hostigos.*

Kalvan finished Ptosphes' letter over lunch in his field headquarters. The letter concluded almost jauntily:

Prince Aesklos' leg is being treated with your new healing wisdom about cleanliness by Brother Cyphrax, an underpriest of Galzar. There is some danger in this, because if the Prince dies or loses his leg, we shall be blamed for setting demons upon him. However, Brother Cyphrax says that the bone of his leg is not so badly broken. If the flesh wound does not bring the fester devils and the Prince need fear neither for life nor limb. We are more likely to heal than harm him, as he is much respected both as Prince and as war leader in Hos-Agrys, we will have in our debt a man whose voice will carry much weight in the councils of Demistophon the Short-Sighted.

When the dangers from Styphon's Guardsmen is past, I intend to use such of the Army of Nostor as can be supported with our available supplies to rebuild and garrison some of Prince Pheblon's abandoned tarrs and strongholds, and after that root out the bandits who have become a veritable plague upon the countryside. Despite their wagon trains, the Agrysi soldiers fell upon Nostor like locusts, although most prudent men and women fled from their advance, abandoning their fields. However, what is more likely to prevent a proper harvest in Nostor this year, besides the number of farmers who died in the wars or protecting their holds, are the Agrysi deserters and the bandits, and it seems to me that the best work for me is seeing that they are destroyed.

With good fortune and the aid of the True Gods, I may return to Hostigos within a moon. Amasphalya should be warned that at that time I shall pick up my granddaughter and hold her, and Hadron take anyone who stands in my path!

Perhaps Amasphalya dares to stand against a mere Prince, but if she stands against a grandfather she shall suffer for it.

With best wishes for Your Majesty's continued health and success and for that of our well-beloved Queen Rylla and Princess Demia, I remain,

*Your obedient humble servant
Ptosphes
First Prince of Hos-Hostigos*

This time Kalvan whistled out loud. It was hard to believe this letter was written by the same man he'd seen off to Nostor a moon ago, who'd looked as if he were going to his execution. Kalvan had been torn between sending someone to keep an eye on his father-in-law and prevent him from getting killed unnecessarily, and fearing that doing this would be an insult that would make Ptosphes certain he was incompetent and dishonored even in the eyes of his son-in-law. After listening to Rylla, he'd decided to let Ptosphes go without a watchdog and keep his fingers crossed—a gesture that the here-and-now gods or Somebody seemed to have rewarded.

It was a pity that after so many men wound up being killed in the process of restoring Ptosphes' morale. Not that the war with Hos-Agrys was Ptosphes' fault—or Kalvan's, or anybody's but Styphon's House and to some extent King Demistophon, who had fallen upon Hostigos like a wolf on a wounded bear only to learn to his cost that the bear was still full of fight.

Kalvan saw no reason to quarrel with Harmakros' epitaph on Demistophon's campaign in Nostor:

"The stupid son of a she-ass should have known better."

Not to mention that some of his nobles apparently *had* known better, or at least were having second thoughts, and if antisepsis saved Prince Aesklos' life and his leg as well... Kalvan decided not to uncross his fingers until he heard how Aesklos was doing.

III

Later, back at the manor house he was using as the Army of Beshta HQ, Kalvan was reading Ptosphes' second enclosure, a list of booty collected and honors he wanted awarded, when he became aware of someone standing in his light. He looked up and stifled a groan when he saw Major-General Klestreus looming over the whale-oil lamp. The Chief of Intelligence could hardly have ridden down from Hostigos Town without neglecting his duties, so he'd better have a damn good excuse for the trip.

"Yes, Klestreus?"

"Your Majesty, the convoy with the shells for the—the *mortar* —has arrived. Great Queen Rylla rides with it, as well as Princess Demia, so it seemed to me that a man of more rank than the captain of the convoy should accompany—"

"Rylla? The baby! Here?"

"I just told Your Majesty—"

"Yes, you did. Now tell me—are they well?"

"I am no judge of such matters, having always believed that saddles were made for horses, not men, and that if the True Gods—"

"Get on with it, man!"

"Yes. Yes. The Queen rode all the way, and Her Royal Highness cries most lustily and keeps the wet nurses awake much of the night—and the drovers and guards as well. I suspect a trace of the croup."

"Kalvan thought of telling the life-long bachelor that he was not a lot of other things besides a judge of the health of babies, then decided to save his breath for the inevitable fight with Rylla. This time he was going to lay down the law, and if she threw tantrums or anything else, he'd just duck and go on until he'd spoken his piece.

He practically leaped down the stairs from his War Room and reached the door of the manor just in time to see Rylla dismounting from the big roan gelding that had the easiest gait of any horse in the royal stables. Rylla looked pale, but she was still so damn *beautiful* that before he could think of royal dignity he was running toward her.

She ran to meet him, and a moment later he was glad he was wearing a back-and-breast, because otherwise he would have felt his ribs cracking. He was hugging her back with one arm and stroking her hair with the other, saying things he hoped nobody else was hearing until he ran out of breath.

At last, Kalvan held her out at arm's length and saw beyond her grinning face most of his guards trying very hard *not* to grin. Farther out was a trio of horse litters and a long string of pack animals surrounded by at least two hundred mounted men all armed to the teeth. A fat, gray-haired woman was dismounting from one of the litter, carrying a wailing bundle as delicately as if it had been a basket of spiderwebs.

Rylla hadn't just ridden off on a whim; she had come with a proper escort and a regular traveling nursery and generally done things the way he would have told her to do them—assuming that he hadn't been able to keep her from coming at all, which knowing Rylla was a pretty safe assumption.

Besides, a second look told him that Rylla wasn't pale because she was sick. She'd been inside so long that she'd lost her usual tan. In fact, she looked even better close up than she had from a distance.

Not to mention that after he'd made this kind of spectacle of himself, she'd never believe a single harsh word he said. She'd break into giggles, and in the face of that, Kalvan doubted he could keep either the last shreds of his royal dignity or even much of a straight face.

IV

Tarr-Beshta was the oldest castle Kalvan had seen here-and-now; it reminded him of some of the Norman castles he'd seen after his discharge from the Army. He'd taken a month off to tour Europe, though he'd spent most of his time in England and France. Balthar might have been as miserly as Scrooge, but he still had spent enough to keep the old stone walls in good repair. With traditional here-and-now siege craft, it might have taken two moons to invest Tarr-Beshta; Kalvan hoped to do it in a quarter of that time.

From behind Kalvan and Rylla the converted twelve-pounder went off with a sound like that of a bull running into a wooden fence. They watched the shell train sparks as it soared overhead, rising toward the peak of its trajectory and then dropping toward the walls of Tarr-Beshta.

With the previous two shells, the spark trail had died on the way down as the fuse went out, and the shells fell as harmlessly as stones. At least that was better than the shell bursting over the Hostigi trenches, which had only happened once—a damned good record for the gunners, considering that the fusing of shells was still very much a matter of by guess and by gods.

The trail of sparks lasted all the way down to the shell's bursting just above the breach in the curtain wall. The Beshtans working in the breach didn't panic; they'd learned by now that shells were not a demonic visitation but only a new use of fireseed. They still hadn't learned one of the basic rules of night combat: when suddenly illuminated, *don't move*. Hardly surprising, either, since this was the first night bombardment with shells in here-and-now history.

In the glare of the bursting shell, Kalvan could see men with picks and sledges running for cover. He also saw the Hostigi in the forward trenches raising their rifles and arquebuses. Two volleys crashed out, the second fired into darkness, drawing a score of screams from the Beshtans. Two or three slow shooters let fly after the volleys; they drew the voice of a petty-captain describing explicitly where he would put their handguns the next time they fired without a target.

From the battered walls of Tarr-Beshta came only silence.

"They must be short of fireseed," Rylla said.

"That, or saving it for when we storm the walls."

"They still can't do much harm—seven hundred against six thousand."

"They can do enough," Kalvan answered. "Not to repel the attack, probably, but certainly enough to send our men out of control."

"Does that matter? The traitorous dogs have no right to quarter!"

Kalvan shook his head. "If it will save Our own men—"

"It won't, my husband. All it will do is make other rebels think that the Great King is too weak to punish them as they deserve. Then they will think that rebellion is perhaps *not* so foolish, and we will have more Balthars and more Tenabras. That is not saving Our men."

The hint was about as subtle as the chamber pot lid she's once thrown at him. Kalvan looked to his right and left along the earthworks. Count Phrames stood to the left, Captain Xykos, newly promoted and made a Royal Bodyguard for his work at Phyrax on Colonel Verkan's recommendation, stood to the right. They were keeping the guards out of earshot; Phrames would sooner be burned alive than embarrass Rylla, and Xykos had the intelligent peasant's common sense about ignoring the indiscretions of his betters. As long as he and Rylla didn't start shouting at each other, they would have it out right here.

"All right. I'll consider not giving them another chance to surrender."

It would be better not to do it at all."

"I'll think about it. Men who ignore three chances to surrender aren't likely to have the wits to recognize a fourth."

"That is certainly true."

"But *I won't* take Tarr-Beshta the way Styphon's Red Hand took that temple of Dralm in Sashta. I'll cut off my hand and cut out my tongue before I write or speak the orders to do that."

Rylla shook her head in exasperation. "What's more important to you, the Great King's tender conscience or the Great King's justice? And the Great King's head, and the Great Queen's and our daughter's? All of them will rest uneasy on their shoulders if you are weak toward traitors. This is a time for death warrants, not pardons!"

"Rylla—" Kalvan began, then stopped, shaking his head as he realized the futility of the argument. She was right, of course. He'd even said something like that himself, last fall when he considered how many kings had lost their thrones through signing too many pardons and too few death warrants.

That was before the Great Kings' War, though, with its hundred thousand or more dead or maimed between spring and autumn, not to mention only-the-gods-knew how many civilians. That was also before he faced the need to sign the death warrants himself.

"All right. I won't summon them to surrender again. Custom would require I give them a day to answer, and that means putting off the assault when we have a breach already. I still won't stand for a massacre of every living thing in the tarr, either. Let's figure out a way to prevent that, because I'm going to do so and Styphon fly away with anybody who argues the point."

He heard Rylla's hiss of indrawn breath and braced himself for anything from a curse to a slap. Instead he heard silence, then a small sigh.

"I'm sorry, Kalvan. I shouldn't have called you weak. You were just trying to do something new, or something old in a new way, as you always have. But if you'd seen my father's face the day he came home from Tenabra..."

Kalvan resisted rubbing in the fact that he'd seen Ptosphes even before that, and there wasn't much she could tell him about the price the First Prince had paid for Balthar's treachery.

A moment later she spoke as briskly as ever.

"There is a way. You can proclaim that the women and children are the Great King's personal charge, for his judgment. Anyone who rapes a woman or murders a child will be usurping the Great King's justice, and his own life will be forfeit. You can also have Uncle Wolf Tharses administer an oath to the storming parties."

Kalvan agreed. He would have liked to have Chancellor Xentos do the oath-binding as well, but Xentos was in Agrys City, involved in the interminable wrangling of the Council of Dralm. Xentos had provided useful information about Great King Demistophon's attack on Hos-Hostigos, but there hadn't been any formal denunciation of it the Council either: a fact that did not bode well for his future relationship with the Council—or even Highpriest Xentos.

He was beginning to think it had been a mistake to make the Highpriest of Dralm the kingdom's Chancellor—especially since it appeared Xentos had dual loyalties.

Chartiphon was with Prince Ptosphes, Verkan was on his way back to Greffa City, and in general too many of his best people seemed to be anywhere and everywhere except where he needed them! Oh well, at least he still had Rylla, and she was worth any two of the others, and he would have said that even if he hadn't been married to her in the bargain.

"I'll do that, Rylla. Then what will we do with the women and children?"

Rylla laughed. "The Sastragathi will probably be thinking you're planning to set up a harem. What I would suggest is that you turn them over to the new Prince of Beshta for his justice. That way you will assure the other Princes that you will not be taking away their right of high and low justice."

Kalvan had no intention of doing anything of the kind, but it was likely that some of them wouldn't believe that without tangible proof. After all, hadn't the new Great King taken away slaves, indentured servitude and private warfare? What might his fingers itch for next?

A moment's suspicion struck him. Of all the people who might have rights over the prisoners, Phrames was the one mostly likely to listen to Rylla. She was also the only person other than himself and Phrames who knew the Count was slated to be the next Beshtan Prince. What would she advise?

In the next moment Kalvan realized he was doing both Rylla and Phrames an injustice. Rylla might think that the only good traitor was one whose head was on a spike outside the Great King's gate, but she was hardly likely to order a cold-blooded massacre of women and children. If she did, Phrames would listen politely because of his regard for her, then refuse, because—well, because he was Phrames.

"Very well. Phrames is going to be leading one of the storming parties, though. It would be best if you took charge of the women and children until Phrames is free."

Rylla nodded. "My Lifeguard can protect them as well." She squinted her eyes. "This, of course, will also keep me off the scaling ladders on the day of the storming?"

Kalvan heard the strained laughter in Rylla's voice. "I couldn't help thinking of that, I admit."

"Don't worry Kalvan. I can ride and sit in council, but I can't wear armor yet, let alone climb a scaling ladder in it."

Kalvan kissed her and toyed with the idea of proclaiming a National Day of Thanksgiving in Hos-Hostigos: Queen Rylla, for the first time in her life, was careful of her own safety. Instead he changed the subject.

"What do you think of your father using the Agrysi mercenaries who've taken colors to reduce Nostor to order?"

"Something had to be done about all the bandits and brigands, but I've heard Harmakros complaining that he'd like about a thousand of the horse down here to reinforce the Army of Observation. I was surprised to hear he was short of cavalry. I thought the Beshtans ran rather than fought."

"After the Ban of Galzar stripped them of their last mercenaries, they were too weak to face us on the field of battle. They did run. But when they ran, we had to chase them, and chasing men running for their lives wears out horses faster than big guns use up fireseed. Harmakros informed me in yesterday's dispatch that half the Mounted Rifles were on mules, and he was going to have to dismount one regiment of dragoons completely.

"Some of the Beshta soldiers have already crossed the border into Hos-Harphax. If we allow much more of that, we'll be providing our enemies with a ready-made army."

"Then by all means let's give him a thousand Agrysi," Rylla said. "They'll have to bring their own supplies, because Sashta has been eaten bare and we have our own army to feed in Beshta."

Kalvan laughed. "I wish it were that simple—I give the order and fishes jump into baskets and loaves multiply... If Nostor is a desert and Sask has been 'eaten bare,' then Beshta has been devoured by locusts! If I order the Agrysi mercenaries into Beshta, where are they going to get the victuals to ride all the way to Beshta, through Nostor and Hostigos? No, they're better off where they are foraging off the bandits and robbers they find in Nostor and getting supplies from Hostigos. The line of supply from Hostigos which, Praise Dralm!, was spared most of the spoilage and damage of this war, is already stretched to the breaking point, feeding the Army of Beshta and the Army of Nostor. Harmakros will have to make do with mules and ponies, if need be."

"And what will we do when winter comes, my husband?"

"Now, you're thinking. Verkan will be shipping several convoys of dried fish and corn and barley from

Greffa, paid for with Styphon's gold. I've already made a deal with some Agrysi merchants to sell us potatoes and grain. Hostigos had a better harvest than expected and so did Kyblos and Nyklos. With a little luck, we'll get by..."

"You formulate our food stocks as if it were a battle plan!"

"It is. As one of the greats once said, 'An army marches on its stomach.' I plan to see the Army of Hos-Hostigos is as well-fed as it is well-trained."

TWENTY-NINE

I

"THE TIME HAS COME TO PUNISH THE FALSE GOD DRALM AND KILL HIS TOOL, WHO GOES BY THE NAME OF KALVAN, HERE AFTER TO BE KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE FIVE KINGDOMS AS THE 'DAEMON KALVAN.'

"ALL OF DRALM'S TEMPLES MUST BE PULLED DOWN, BURNED AND SOWN WITH SALT. HIS PRIESTS MUST BE BLINDED, CASTRATED AND STRANGLED. KALVAN, HIS WIFE AND SEED, MUST BE DRAWN AND QUARTERED, THEN SLAKED WITH LIME AND BURNED UNTIL ONLY ASHES REMAIN! THESE ASHES ARE THEN TO BE CAST INTO THE GREAT SEA. ALL THOSE IN HOS-HOSTIGOS WHO DO NOT FORSAKE THEIR FALSE GOD MUST BE HANGED AND THEIR BODIES THROWN TO THE WOLVES AND RAVENS. THOSE WHO ADMIT TO THEIR ERRORS AND FALSE WAYS WILL BE SETTLED IN THE SASTRAGATH TO LIVE AS BARBARIANS.

"THIS WILL BE DONE. I HAVE SPOKEN."

The great idol of Styphon, which had been moved on a wheeled cart into Temple Plaza, fell silent. From ten thousand voices in the Great Temple of Styphon's House on Earth came the reply:

"Kill the Daemon Kalvan! Kill the Daemon Kalvan! Kill Kalvan! Kill Kalvan! Kill Kalvan!"

Anaxthenes, who had once worked the mechanism that moved the mouth and talked into the speaker tubes that amplified the idol's voice, still felt a chill as the giant iron jaws, with teeth carved from Mammoth tusks, snapped shut. More than fifteen winters had passed since the last public Proclamation from Styphon's Great Image, and that had been nothing more than a short blessing to the underpriests and deacons for their good works in collecting Styphon's offerings. Never in his lifetime had the Great Image spoken to a lay crowd in Temple Plaza. It had to be wheeled on a cart from the Great Temple of Styphon, something done only in times of grave crisis. Times like now, with the Fireseed Mystery revealed and the armies of Styphon in tatters.

All of the Inner Circle's plans for the destruction of Hos-Hostigos gone to ashes because of their great defeats in the field of battle. Even Styphon's greatest champion, Grand Master Soton, had been humbled by the Usurper's sword. The entire world was trembling; Styphon's House Itself was on the edge of a precipice—unimaginable before the sudden appearance of this foreign prince, or renegade priest as some called him.

Some saw him as the avatar of Dralm—sheer nonsense, superstitious babble, as he ought to know. It was his specialty!

No, Kalvan, for all his battle savvy and leadership, was as mortal as himself. Yet, wise enough to use priestly prattle to advance his cause...*Kalvan is no more Dralm-sent than one of Thessamona's little vials is Styphon-sent!* It was unfortunate he couldn't have a little talk with this Kalvan and discuss a rapprochement with Styphon's House. After all, he'd proven himself a great leader; why not work for the Temple that could afford to make him—and*itself*—even greater.

He noticed that old Sesklos was getting impatient and stepped down from the dais, holding out his arm to support his elderly patron. Followed by six Temple Guardsmen, the two of them left through the secret trap door into the catacombs. From there it was a short walk to the tunnel that led to the lift tended by ten slaves.

As soon as they were alone in the carriage, Sesklos turned to Anaxthenes. "What are we going to do about Grand Master Soton? Archpriest Dracar and his followers want him stripped of his offices and expelled from the Inner Circle."

"Lickspittles, salivating morons, every one of them," Anaxthenes spat. "As if that temporary setback in Hostigos was all Soton's fault!"

"He lost didn't he?" Sesklos asked.

"Father, Soton almost won, if you read the reports. Which no one in the Inner Circle appears to have done!"

"Soton's propaganda."

"Father, you have lived too long in Balph among duplicitous priests. If you'd taken time to read—really read—Soton's final dispatch, you will see that he was much harder on himself than*any* of his critics. Only an honest man would impugn himself so. It's not his fault this Hostigos bumpkin—Kalvan as he calls himself—is some sort of military genius. Soton is the best military man we have and if he couldn't defeat Kalvan on almost equal terms, then no one in the Five Kingdoms can—as was proven in Hos-Harphax. Kalvan destroyed the Harphaxi! Next time, we'll have to guarantee that he has enough troops to squash Kalvan for all time."

"Maybe we can get Styphon's Own Image to proclaim Soton innocent of these charges of cowardice and treason."

Anaxthenes laughed. "The people that count know that trick; only peasants and naïve fools believe in gods who talk. Soton's only crime is that he cares too much about his soldiers. And even Ormaz turns a blind eye to that vice."

"You believe he is innocent?"

"Innocence has nothing to do with it. Certainly the charge of cowardice is absurd. The only thing Soton is guilty of is being a realist; he knows when it's time to pack up his lances and go home. All reports agree that at the battle's outset Leonnestros acted rashly and fell right into Kalvan's trap. That misstep put Soton on the defensive and the Hostigi gradually wore him down until Soton was forced to retreat to save the entire Host from being destroyed. He saved himself, too, which is a good thing since he's the

only commander we have capable of defeating Kalvan and his men on the field of battle. In truth, Styphon's House owes Soton a great deal for proving to the world at Tenabra that Kalvan's men *can* be defeated."

"I tell you, old son, Dracar is like a wolf on the scent of a blooded lamb. He will not stop until Soton is cast out of office, defrocked and put in chains."

"Then he and his bootlickers are even bigger fools than I'd thought! Excuse me, Father, but with Grand Master Soton they're not dealing with some backwoods Trygathi underpriest. The Grand Master rules more territory than two Great Kings, and with more unquestioned authority! If he gives up his offices, it will only be willingly and for the Temple he just might do it. We can't allow it. It's not in the Temple's—or our own best interest, that he leave in disgrace."

"There is much wisdom in your words. However, I doubt words alone will sway Dracar and his faction. They thirst for a sacrificial victim to slake their fear of Kalvan. Only Soton's blood will do. Even your allies among the Inner Circle blame the defeat on Soton for retiring from the battle. It would not be so had you accepted my Blessing. You alone are the son I never had."

Anaxthenes turned and looked at the old man, his slender fingers trembling with palsy, who had more than once offered him the highest and most exalted office within Styphon's House on Earth. He felt a trace of affection stir and promptly dismissed it. Sesklos' wits were declining, or he would have fallen into apoplexy before admitting such sentimental drivel.

"I declined because there are too many unpleasant things that need to be done and no one else to do them, because I have earned too many enemies, because there is too little time to do all that must be done if the House of Styphon is to triumph over Kalvan and its many enemies now that the Fireseed Mystery has been revealed. As Styphon's Voice there is too much ritual, too many meetings, too many audiences...Why go on? You know the burden much better than I."

Sesklos nodded wearily. "Yes, my son, there is a great weight upon the shoulders of He who is Elected Styphon's Voice. There are times when it seems only death itself will lift the great weight from my shoulders..."

Yes, that's why you've fought its advances lo these many years, you old hypocrite! thought Anaxthenes to himself. He truly did enjoy working behind Styphon's image, or he would have poisoned the old bugger ten winters ago. Although it was becoming increasingly wearisome *to play* son to Sesklos the father—a man old enough to be his grandfather. His own family was of noble blood and could trace its lineage back to the first kings of Ktemnos; he had no need for a surrogate father—as a youth he could hardly escape his real one fast enough!

"When will Soton be brought before the Inner Circle?" he asked.

"A moon-half. That is as long as I can put off Dracar and his followers and arrange for Soton to come from Tarr-Ceros. What will you do?"

"I don't know," Anaxthenes said, although even had he known it, he would have said the same. Maybe a miracle would happen—

Of course, said a voice in his head. And maybe Styphon's Great Image will speak on its own and walk off its pedestal too.

II

The sky was turning gray as Count Phrames rode up to the manor house where Kalvan had his headquarters. By the time he'd dismounted and climbed to the royal observation post on the roof, he could see occasional flickers of lightning in the gunmetal sky. Phrames hoped the storm would hold off until after they'd taken Tarr-Beshta; he had no wish to lead his men forward through flooded trenches with useless arquebuses and no artillery to keep the traitors' heads down.

The head of the stairs was held by Aspasthar the Royal Page and Captain Xykos, Rylla's new bodyguard. Xykos wore only a back-and-breast and an open-faced burgonet with a high comb; his famous two-handed sword and axe were nowhere in sight. The armor was richly decorated and Phrames wondered which former Harphaxi or Ktemnoi nobleman had donated it to sustain Xykos' new dignity and position.

Xykos certainly made a fine sight in silvered breastplate and tassels, dark-blue velvet breeches, slashed and paneled and red and blue striped hose; his burgonet was chased with gold and silver, sporting several long red plumes. He also seemed to have a natural instinct for dealing with his betters. Xykos would need every bit of that, and more, the first time Kalvan ordered him to keep Rylla from doing something she really wanted to do.

Guarding Rylla was not so much a matter of fighting off enemies; any who sought her life would first have to hack their way through the entire Army of Hos-Hostigos and Phrames himself if she had the sense to stay safely under their protection. If she went back to her old habits, on the other hand—well, if all else failed, Xykos was big enough to pick up Rylla under one arm and carry her out of danger.

If he did that, of course, he'd be wise to spend the rest of his life among the Ruthani of the Sea of Grass; anywhere closer Rylla might track him down. Phrames knew that he would love no other woman as he had loved Rylla till he'd drawn his last breath, but occasionally he found himself blessing the wisdom of the gods in sending Kalvan to protect both Rylla and Hostigos.

"Welcome, Phrames," Kalvan said. "Are the storming parties ready?"

"As ready as I can make them, Your Majesty," he answered. That was much readier than they would have been before Kalvan; the Great King had taught captains to see that their men each had a spare flint, a water flask, dry socks, a bandage and many other things that might not be needed if they were ready at hand, but infallibly would be needed if left behind.

Phrames thought of quoting Prince Sarrask's doubts about the brushwood and timber that were supposed to fill up the moat for his men's scaling ladders. Then he realized that he would be doing that for the dishonorable purpose of trying to make Kalvan doubt Sarrask's faith in the Great King's weapons. Kalvan didn't expect blind obedience, Phrames had his own doubts, and—Galzar moved in mysterious ways, but moved he had!—if the Saski storming party died in the moat, their Prince was very likely to die there with them.

After years of knowing Sarrask of Sask as a deadly enemy, it was not easy to turn around and accept him as an ally. He would have to try harder in the future to make Sarrask feel welcome. But the gods

have mercy on him if he turned out to be the kind of *ally* that Balthar of Beshta had been at Tenabra!

Rylla stepped up to Phrames. For a moment he felt his heart stop, then took a deep breath and disciplined his thoughts and body.

"Phrames, I wanted to give you a scarf embroidered with the arms of Beshta to wear today, but that seemed like tempting the gods. Xykos has something, though, I would like you to wear in place of any favor from me."

"Yes, my—I mean, Your Majesty." Phrames fought to keep the color rising to his cheeks.

The big man pulled a long strip of bloodstained, ragged cloth out of his sash. "My lord, this is what's left of the Banner of the Veterans of the Long March. It's not much, but then we aren't much either. Just enough to make three companies, with most of those too hurt to be fighting here today.

"If you could see your way to wearing this onto the walls—well, a lot of us who aren't here because of the pig-spawn Balthar will sleep easier." Xykos held out the cloth, and Phrames tried to ignore that both his hands and the big man's were not entirely steady.

"I would be honored, Captain."

Rylla stepped closer, bussed him lightly on the cheek, and helped tie the banner around his helmet. This time there were no betraying blushes or stammers. Rylla had just finished the last knot when Kalvan raised his hand to the signalers at the far end of the platform. A fireseed rocket spewed green smoke, then soared into the darkening sky, trailing more smoke behind it.

Phrames saw ripples of movement in the gun positions between the headquarters and the trenches—then involuntarily flinched as every gun in the Hostigi siege batteries fired as one. By the time he was mounted and riding back toward his men, the fireseed smoke had completely obscured the Hostigi batteries.

III

When Count Phrames and his banner-bearer took their place at the head of the breach-storming party, the combination of smoke and darkening sky had cast a sinister twilight over Tarr-Beshta. On Kalvan's orders the men of the storming parties had chalked or painted white squares on their helmets so they could tell friends from enemies when the fighting moved indoors; Phrames suspected those marks would be useful the moment battle was joined.

Meanwhile, the guns were falling silent one by one and a faint breeze was beginning to thin the smoke. It would have done more if the Beshtans hadn't been busy proving they weren't out of fireseed, guns or even determination. Marksmanship was fortunately another matter; most of the fire from the breach and the walls to either side was going a bit too high to hit Phrames' leading regiment, the dismounted Royal Musketeers, although his golden-eagle banner had a couple of new bullet holes.

The regiments to the rear were out of range of everything except a two-pounder in the breach itself, which was firing too slowly to be a problem once the Hostigi began their forward movement.

A final shell burst against the face of the keep itself, spraying chunks of masonry into the courtyard, then the guns were silent. Kalvan had spoken of the guns of his homeland, which could actually keep firing over the heads of the infantry as they advanced on the enemy, and General Alkides swore that his gunners could do the same if they were allowed to. Phrames had politely refused; Prince Sarrask had refused somewhat less politely.

"I know all you gunners think you can drop a ball into Styphon's chamberpot if you have the chance!" the Prince had growled. "Maybe you can. And maybe you'll just drop the ball on my head, and while maybe it isn't the greatest head Dralm ever made, it's the only one I've got!"

A minute later the Beshtan fire seemed to slacken and arquebusiers, musketeers and gunners shifted position to meet the attack they knew was coming. Most knew that there would be no quarter given in this fight—despite the Great King's promises; after all, Kalvan wasn't Lytris with eyes that could look in two directions at once. Phrames decided it was safe to climb out of the trench for a better view. He'd reached open ground and was rising to hands and knees when a bullet *wheeled* past his ear. A second *spanged* off a stone by his left hand—and then, with a crash of thunder louder than the Great Battery at Phyrax, the skies opened and poured rain.

Phrames had never been in such a storm; it was more like being under a waterfall than being out in the rain. He felt as if he were lifting a tangible weight as he struggled to his feet, his boot soles sinking into suddenly muddy ground. As the thunder rumbled away into silence, he heard someone squalling in panic:

"The gods are angry! This is a warning from Thanor not to fight today."

One such idiot could be more than enough to start a panic. Phrames drew his sword with one hand and gripped his banner-bearer's helmet to urge him upward with the other.

"Traitor! Fool! This storm is the gods themselves fighting for us! Dralm and Galzar and Thanor and Lytris have sent this storm to soak the Beshtan fireseed. We outnumber them ten to one; with no fireseed they're doomed. We can take the castle with our bare hands!"

Phrames gave one final heave to his banner-bearer, who struggled up to stand beside him. Then he raised his sword high and ran toward the breach without looking back to see if anyone was following him.

At first he didn't look back because he didn't want to give the impression of doubting his men's courage. Before long he didn't look back because he had to look where he was going to keep from falling over his own feet. He'd been noted both as a runner and a climber as a youth, but he'd never tried to do both at once, over muddy ground strewn with rain slick stones and shot, in a pouring rain, wearing three-quarter armor. He began to wonder if broken ankles would account for as many of his men as Beshtan fire would have otherwise.

By the time Phrames was actually at the breach, enough of his men had caught up so that while he was certainly the first there, it wasn't by much. He counted forty or more Hostigi scrambling over the rubble that had filled the moat, sometimes falling but helping each other up and always going on. The rain had brought Beshtan gunfire to an almost complete halt—something to thank Lytris for.

Suddenly his banner-bearer went down with a crossbow bolt in his leg halfway up the breach. Phrames caught the banner before it fell and made a mental note to set up a special fund in the Princely treasury to support the kin of his banner-bearers; the job seemed unreasonably dangerous.

Being one-handed because of his grip on the banner nearly cost him his life. Many of the Beshtans who'd lost their dry fireseed hadn't lost their courage; they swarmed down from the top of the breach, swinging swords, musket-butts, half-pikes and maces like madmen. Phrames had to use the banner pole like a spear, catching one swordsman in the throat, then he dropped it and laid about with sword and pistol butt. He made another mental note to carry a mace the next time he had to storm a breach. His sword was a fine weapon for use from a horse, but on foot he needed something that would stop an opponent as well as just kill him.

The second regiment of Hostigi came pouring up through the breach, and for a moment Phrames was wedged so tightly between his own men and his enemies that he couldn't have wielded a feather, let alone a mace. Finally the sheer weight of numbers pushed the Beshtans back. The gunners around the two-pounder gave up trying to find dry fireseed, drew swords or picked up their tools, and waded into the fight.

Phrames chopped through a rammer with one sword cut and through the gunner's raised arm with the next, then thrust the man in the face. *Thank Galzar most of these soldiers don't have swords with points!* In this kind of close-quarters brawl, the Hostigi ability to thrust was a large advantage. *Maybe I should be thanking Kalvan instead of Galzar*, Phrames wondered, *although Kalvan has obviously been blessed by the Wargod with these new ideas of his. So I suppose I can thank Galzar and thank Kalvan without blaspheming the gods.*

With lines being drawn now so that friend could be told from foe, the Beshtans on the wall were joining in. Some were leaping down to thicken the defenders' line, other adding bullets, arrows and even thrown stones from above. The number of fallen Hostigi began to increase at a rate that did not meet with Phrames' approval, and not all of them were men who'd slipped on wet stones or tripped over a comrade's foot.

Someone was shouting in his ear about bringing up the pikemen of Queen Rylla's Foot, the third regiment in the storming column. Without bothering to turn and face the man, Phrames bellowed, "Great Galzar, no! The pikes are the last thing we need until we're down in the courtyard. They won't have room to use their pikes or even defend themselves up here." A pikeman needed firm ground for both feet and both hands for his pike; if he lacked either, he was just an easy target instead of one of the deadliest kind of infantrymen ever to march.

The Beshtans were falling faster than the Hostigi; in places their dead and dying were strewn three deep. Reinforcements were still coming up; it looked as if the defenders were staking everything on holding the breach and the walls and not worrying about a second line of defense in the keep.

A man Phrames recognized emerged from the Beshtan line—a baron who'd commanded a Beshtan cavalry squadron on the Great Raid into Hos-Harphax in the spring. He'd done a good job, too; why had he chosen to follow his damnable Prince into treason? No one would ever know, most likely; all the man could be given now was an honorable death. Phrames shouted a war cry and raised his sword.

For about a hundred breaths it wasn't entirely clear who was going to give whom what sort of death. The baron's sword was heavier and his reach longer than Phrames'; three times the Baron beat down the Count's guard and would have finished him if Phrames' armor hadn't been sound. Finally, he hooked a foot behind the baron's leg and sent him crashing down on the stones, then thrust him in the throat through his mail aventail. When he stepped back from the dying baron, there appeared to be as many Beshtans as ever and he began to wonder if he hadn't been a little too hasty in dismissing the pikemen. They wouldn't help to get through the breach, but as for holding it against the Beshtans...

As Phrames completed the thought, a new uproar of screams, war cries, curses and the crashing and clashing of weapons and armor burst out behind the Beshtans. Somebody was hitting them in the rear. By the time Phrames had caught his breath, that somebody had opened enough of a gap in the Beshtan line to let him see men in Saski green and gold swarming across the courtyard. At their head was a bulky figure in freshly re-gilded armor, wielding a bloody mace and defaming the sexual habits of all Beshtans, their parents, and their illegitimate offspring by an astonishing variety of mothers—not all of them human or even earthly.

For a moment Phrames wanted to curse. To owe his success at the breach to Sarrask of Sask—! Then he sighed. His honor was one thing; the lives of his men another. He could not throw the second away because of some whimsical notion of the first. Besides, it was beginning to seem that Dralm and Galzar had so made Sarrask that there *was* some good in him—or at least a fighting man's courage that the right leader could bring out, and then Dralm and Galzar sent Kalvan...

No good ever came of questioning the judgment of Allfather Dralm or Galzar Wolfhead, even when one did not understand it.

So Phrames walked down the rubble over the outstretched bodies of the Beshtans to greet Prince Sarrask with outstretched hands. They touched palms and the big man grinned, then clapped Phrames on both shoulders.

Sarrask unhooked a silver-stoppered flask from his belt. "You look like a man who could use this."

"After we've cleared the courtyard, I won't say no."

"Then drink up, Count. We've got everything except the keep already. He swept his hand around to the broken Beshtans scattered around the courtyard, most surrendering and calling "Oath to Galzar!" with only a few clots still holding out against the Hostigi.

Phrames looked toward the keep and realized that the downpour had passed almost as quickly as it had come. He could see the whole castle and the trench-carved ground beyond it. The courtyard swarmed with Sarrask's men, and the walls were crowded with the Sastragathi irregulars who'd followed the Saski up the ladders. True to their habits, the Sastragathi were busily stripping what Phrames hoped were the corpses of the defenders and tossing them into the moat or onto the courtyard.

On top of one of the gate towers a little knot of defenders was still holding out, but below a gang of Saski with sledges was already trying to free the portcullis and lower the drawbridge, to let Alkides bring in his artillery and finish off the keep.

"Hope those poor bastards in the keep have the sense to yield before Alkides brings in a bombard," Sarrask said, waving the flask at Phrames again. This time the Count took it. "Otherwise you'll be a Prince with no place to sleep. I could knock that (guilty of fornication with a barnyard fowl) pile down with my mace! Drink up, Count!"

Yes, all this was going to be his soon! Phrames didn't know quite what to think of all that; he did know he owed Kalvan more than he could ever repay. *How was he going to turn this principedom into a loyal cornerstone of Hos-Hostigos?* He took a deep drink of what turned out to be a most potent winter wine and sputtered, with wine dripping it down his beard.

When he'd caught his breath, he took a more cautious swallow. It was extraordinarily good wine.

"Thank you, Prince. Your own stock?"

Sarrask shook his head. "Made in Hos-Agrys. Those Beshtans nobles and are taking everything with them but the cobblestones. This one was on his way to Syriphlon with a cartload of wine in a wagon train that passed too close to one of my foraging parties. Captain Strathos was out raiding that day and bagged the lot. He presented it to King Kalvan, who sent over a barrel last night. Come around tonight; there's plenty left."

Phrames drank again, considering that Sarrask of Sask accusing another nobleman of being too comfortable in the field was the pot calling the kettle black—as Kalvan liked to say—but hardly inclined to say it out loud.

Then a Saski captain was coming over to tell his Prince that the portcullis was hopelessly jammed; did he and Phrames think the gate should be blown up or did Alkides want to drag his guns through the breach?

"Galzar strike me dead if I know" Sarrask said. "I'm no damned gunner! Phrames, do you mind a few more holes in the wall of your new seat? I'll hand over a few ransoms to you and see that Balthames does the same, since the gods didn't finish the little bugger off at Tenabra or Phyrax! If you need to rebuild—"

Phrames wasn't listening. He was instead looking at the top of the keep, where a helmet was being raised over the battlements. A moment later a second joined it, then a third.

"Never mind, Prince. I don't think we're going to need any artillery in here at all. Just someone to parley with the men in the keep. Would you care to join me?"

"My pleasure, Count Phrames."

THIRTY

I

The screams and groans of the dying were fading behind Kalvan as he descended the winding stone staircase in the northwest tower of Tarr-Beshta. They weren't fading fast enough to suit him, but he couldn't move any faster. The stairs were crumbling and treacherous—more of Balthar's cheese-paring! Besides, Captain Xykos was just ahead and determined to slow his Great King to what he considered a proper pace. Since Xykos filled the stairs from top to bottom and nearly from side to side, his determination counted for a great deal.

After what seemed like enough time to reach the bottom of a mineshaft, they reached the tower cellar. Here, so it was said, lay the door to Prince Balthar's treasure rooms, whose riches had grown in soldiers' imaginations until they rivaled Styphon's Own Treasury in the Holy City of Balph—the here-and-now equivalent of King Midas' hoard. With all the tales of debauchery and poisoning and double-dealing and such goings on in Balph, it most resembled the Papal City sometime in the late Sixteenth Century.

Kalvan hoped the rumors were true; from first to last Balthar had cost Hos-Hostigos too Dralm-damned much to be paid for with nothing but his head and those of his kin who hadn't been able to cross into Hos-Harphax before the Army of Observation swept into Beshta.

The cellar was already crowded, with Phrames and half a dozen of the King's Lifeguards. They held either drawn swords or torches, except for one who was bending over a dying woman, trying to work a dagger out from between her ribs. Two men and another woman lay sprawled in a corner, already dead.

"Your Majesty," Phrames said. "One of the men seems to have been the keeper of the—of whatever lies beyond that door." He pointed to an oak door bound in tarnished brass to the left of the stairs. "He had a key to it. We unlocked the door but thought you should have the honor of being first to enter."

It was on the tip of Kalvan's tongue to remind them that men who'd seen Leonnestros' cavalry massacred by the explosion of the artillery redoubt at Phyrax should be aware of booby traps. The words died there; they were doing him an honor and besides, he'd be drowned in mare's milk if he'd abandon "Follow Me" leadership, even here in the bowels of Tarr-Beshta. Kalvan drew his sword, thrust hard against the door, and when it squealed open on rusty hinges stepped through the gap.

It took a moment for Kalvan's eyes to adjust to the thick darkness inside. It took several more moments to believe that what they were showing him was actually there.

Several tunnels ran off in different directions from a stone-walled circular room. On either side of each tunnel sacks, boxes, barrels and kegs were piled as high as a man, except where cloth or wood had rotted and let the piles collapse. There the tunnels were completely impassable, knee—or even waist—deep in fragments of rotting cloth or wood and gold and silver!

Kalvan heard blasphemous mutterings behind him as the Guardsmen pushed in through the door and stared around them. He also saw more gold and silver gleaming in the chinks and rents in the many boxes and canvas bags. The torches now lit one tunnel; he saw that not all the piled gold and silver were coins. Most of the silver was, but a lot of the gold was rings, cups, bowls, plates—even ingots; not to mention swords and daggers and armor plated with precious metals, bags of pearls, ornamental boxes inlaid with gold and mother-of-pearl, what looked like uncut emeralds—

Kalvan's head spun, and not just because so many torches were burning in an unventilated room. Now he understood how Cortez felt when he first saw the golden treasures of Tenochtitlán. The Treasure of Beshta was no soldier's tall tale. It was real; and enough specie to buy a Kingdom—or save the one he already had. Three generations of miserliness...

Kalvan took another step, to see if what looked like pearls really were, then saw for the first time the man sitting in the tunnel just beyond the emeralds.

Prince Balthar, his gray hair tousled and sticking up in clumps, sat cross-legged, with his back braced against a barrel. He was running gold coins through his fingers like a child playing at the beach with the pretty shells he had collected.

"Yes, yes, my pretties," Balthar said, in a cackling voices that made Kalvan's flesh crawl. "Dada will see that the evil Daemon won't hurt you."

Balthar wore nothing but one of his threadbare trademark black gowns, and even from a distance Kalvan could tell that both the gown and its wearer stank as if they'd been fished out of a midden pit. The only ornamentation he wore was the Princely gold circlet around his neck. Kalvan stepped forward to peer into Balthar's face, then turned away, very much wishing he hadn't or that at least his stomach would stop twisting ominously.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and heard Rylla's voice. "I came as quickly as I could. I see you found the

traitor and his hoard. It seems he will escape justice after all..."

Frustration filled Kalvan. What good would it do to put a madman on trial for treason? Balthar wouldn't understand what was happening to him, and would be more likely to end up an object of pity than anything else. Or a rallying point for enemies of the Throne. As for caring for him until his body was as dead as his mind—what would that accomplish, except insulting the memory of all the men that Balthar's treachery had murdered? Men whose widows and children would not be living nearly as well.

Balthar deserved to die, if only in the same way that a dog run over by a car but not yet dead deserved to be put out of its pain. Kalvan drew his flintlock pistol and was cocking it when Rylla gripped his arm."

"No, Kalvan."

"We can't have the farce of trying—"

"You don't understand. A Prince has to die by steel."

Kalvan nodded, half his mind wondering why he hadn't asked first and the other half replying that he'd never expected to need to know. He started to draw his sword, then doubted it would be heavy enough for the job. His stomach twisted again at the thought of hacking Balthar's head off or running him through. What he needed was a heavier blade—

"DOWN, YOUR MAJESTY!" Phrames shouted.

Kalvan twisted around, knocked Rylla off her feet, then looked up to see a yellow robed figure emerging from one of the darkened tunnels. His face was distorted by a triumphant grin and the muzzle of the horsepistol he was holding was aimed right at Kalvan's head; it looked as wide and deep as a well...

"For the God of Gods, die, Daemon, die!"

At the periphery of his vision, Kalvan saw Xykos, Phrames and two Guardsmen running toward the highpriest. They were going to be a few moments too late, he realized sadly. His mind seemed to be working faster and more clearly than ever before; he noted dispassionately that he'd dropped his own pistol out of reach when he'd fallen on top of Rylla. At least she would survive to raise Demia and maybe all of his work wouldn't be undone. So much to do and now no time—

A bright flash of light, then a sharp explosion reverberated through the chamber followed by a high-pitched scream. Suddenly the room was filled with fireseed smoke.

"Are you all right?" Rylla screamed.

"Fine, darling," Kalvan said as he patted himself to make sure. That was close, too close.

The highpriest must have been sent by Styphon's House to keep watch on Prince Balthar and make sure he didn't change sides again. Now he was waving all that was left of a hand peeled to the wrist by the explosion of his pistol. One of his cheeks was opened to porcelain bone from a flying fragment, leaving red streaks all down his yellow robe. A shot from Phrames' pistol cut off the screams.

A thunderstruck Xykos turned back to Kalvan, roaring, "A miracle! All bless the Great God Dralm. King Kalvan is unhurt!"

Phrames vanished into the tunnel, returning a moment later with a powder horn. He poured some on his hand, then tasted it.

"Hostigos fireseed. The poor fool probably thought it was Styphon's Best and overloaded the pistol. Praise be to Dralm and Galzar Wolfhead!"

"It is still a miracle," Xykos repeated.

Rylla rose shakily to her feet and nodded. "Xykos is right. The True Gods have shown once more that their blessing is upon Great King Kalvan and his war to rid the Great Kingdoms of false Styphon and his corrupt priesthood."

Kalvan started to disagree, but Rylla's hand cut off his voice.

"Let them think what they will," she whispered. "It's best for Our cause and Our daughter. Look at Xykos' smile."

Another instant legend, thought Kalvan. Now all I need now is my own press secretary!

"Who dares to blaspheme my Treasure Chamber?" Balthar cried, as if waking from a dream. "I command you to leave at once, on pain of my displeasure." Then he whispered to the jewels, "I told you I would protect you, my pretty ones."

"Xykos."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"You will adjudicate the Great King's Justice on Prince Balthar of Beshta for his treasonable conduct on the field of battle at Tenabra and for his armed resistance to the lawful summons of his Great King."

Balthar suddenly screamed in terror. Kalvan wondered if he was really insane, or had just been play-acting. If so, the Mystery Plays lost a great talent. Or was it possible that even a madman might understand and protest his death sentence?

Xykos would have drawn himself up if there'd been room overhead. Instead he nodded. "Gladly, Your Majesty."

Wrinkling her nose, Rylla approached Balthar and lifted the Princely circlet from his head. Then she and everyone else hastily drew back as Xykos drew Boarsbane from its sheath on his back. There wasn't room for Xykos to swing properly, but Boarsbane was sharp and heavy, while Xykos was strong as a bull and Balthar's neck was thin.

There was a sharp scream, then a sound like that of an automobile striking a big dog.

The Prince's head only stopped rolling when Rylla was handing the circlet to Kalvan. Kalvan wiped it off on his sleeve, then held out the gold ring with both hands. Nervously Phrames knelt.

"Count Phrames, from the hands of your Great King receive this, the token of Princeship over the Princedom of Beshta, truly earned by good and faithful service." The circlet settled into Phrames' chestnut hair.

"Arise, Prince Phrames of Beshta."

Then everyone was shouting, "Long live Prince Phrames!" Rylla was kissing both men impartially, while Xykos was waving Boarsbane around so close to those around him that he was sprinkling them with Balthar's blood.

Most of his mind was on one thing. The dirty work was done, Balthar was dead, and he could now slip off somewhere and be sick to his stomach!

II

Anaxthenes' mood was somber as he watched the yellow-robed Archpriests filing into the half-circular chamber at the heart of Styphon's Great Temple. Styphon's Great Image stood tall over the assembled Archpriests viewing all with impartiality. He had used all his influence, but this time with little success. The Inner Circle was as determined as a lodge of Mexicotál priests to have a sacrificial victim for the Temple's losses in Hostigos. It appeared that Grand Master Soton was chosen to be that victim. Nothing short of Styphon's Image moving off its pedestal and stomping the assembled Archpriests into bloody pulp on the stones beneath its feet would stop this miscarriage of justice.

Even Anaxthenes' usual supporters were wavering. This Council could very well see the end of his decade-long dominance of the Inner Circle and the Grand Master's reign over the Order of Zarthani Knights. Styphon's Voice Sesklos looked weary and refused to meet his eyes. Archpriest Dracar's face was set in a triumphant gloat, which did nothing to raise his spirits. Dracar's ascendancy at this Extraordinary Council could well mark the sunset of Styphon's rule over the Five Kingdoms.

When all the assembled Archpriests were seated at the triangular table, with Styphon's Own Voice at the apex, Grand Master Soton was brought into the chamber by two Temple Guardsmen. Soton's face was set in grim determination, but his eyes betrayed his nervousness, darting about the chamber. He strode ahead of the two Guardsmen as though he were leading them against the Trygathi. He still wore his badge of office, a large hammered gold sun-wheel suspended on a heavy gold chain and a plain white tunic over his armor with the red border that showed his office as an Archpriest of Styphon's House.

Soton stopped before the marble dais set at the foot of the Triangle Table. Anaxthenes noted that both his sword and dagger scabbards were empty. Some of the Archpriests were fingering their own knives as if they expected at any moment to rise up in mass and hack the Grand Master to pieces.

Sesklos' voice, thanks to the curvature of the walls behind his throne, boomed through the chamber as he brought the Council to order. "Soton, Archpriest of Styphon, God of Gods and Grand Master of the Holy Order of Zarthani Knights. You are brought here before us on charges of insubordination, cowardice in battle and desertion in the face of the enemy. What is your defense?"

Soton's weathered face paled—then reddened with rage. "My orders from the Inner Circle of Styphon's House were to support Lord High Marshal Mnephilos and do all in my power to ensure his defeat of the Usurper Kalvan of the False Kingdom of Hos-Hostigos. This I did and the Holy Host of Styphon fought and defeated Prince Ptosphes, the Usurper's father-in-law, in battle at Tenabra Town.

At the Battle of Phyrax the Holy Host was winning. Yes, winning, until that animal that eats its own droppings, Leonnestros, disobeyed orders! Fortunately for him, he died of his own folly, or I would have smashed him into pulp with my mace!"

Anaxthenes groaned. This was not the way to talk to Archpriests who'd never smelled fireseed outside of the Temple Alchemy Office. Such forceful words would only make Dracar's job easier. Nor were Soton's endless details of Kalvan's movements through the mercenaries into the rear of the center any more helpful to his cause. Anaxthenes had the impression that at this moment Soton would like to hack his way through the Inner Circle as though it were Kalvan's Bodyguards. If the others noticed it, Soton's fate would be sealed.

"...when I saw there was no more center to support and that it would be a waste of Styphon's soldiers to continue, I ordered the Knights to retire. That they did so in order and in no little haste, in my opinion, was the sole reason that over a third of the Holy Host escaped death or capture by the Army of the False Kingdom of Hos-Hostigos. I would not change my orders even now, regardless of my own personal safety.

"Usurper, Daemon or both, Kalvan is the greatest captain I have ever faced. We are going to need every man in our service to have any chance to defeat him and his perfidious ideas."

"Is that all you have to say in your defense?" Styphon's Voice asked.

"That it is."

"Is there anyone here who would like to remark upon these charges?"

"Yes," an older Archpriest said. "In my youth I fought as a captain in the Great Square of Hos-Ktemnos. Grand Master, is it not true that when you...*recalled*...your Knights, the Sacred Squares were still fighting Kalvan under the now deceased Marshal Mnephilos?"

As Soton replied, Anaxthenes remembered that the elderly Archpriest had once served as Mnephilos' personal healer and as a result considered himself an expert regarding matters of war. No one living that Anaxthenes could find ever remembered the elderly Archpriest serving in the Sacred Squares or any other army.

"Yes," Soton answered. "The Squares were still fighting. They were also trapped between Kalvan's battery on one side and his cavalry on the other."

"Is it not true that they wrested control of that battery you mentioned from Kalvan's gunners and turned it upon his army?"

"I do not know. I was engaged elsewhere."

"Then you really didn't know whether Marshal Mnephilos was winning or losing when your Knights deserted their post!"

"Of course, I knew." Soton raised his eyes upward as if to beg Styphon for more patience. "Battery or no battery, Kalvan had the center enveloped. Sooner or later it was going to be defeated. There were not enough men under my command to change that outcome. I ordered them to retire while I could still have my orders obeyed."

"There are a number of the late Lord High Marshal's captains who would willingly debate you on that point. Marshal Mnephilos himself would do so had he survived the battle!"

Archpriest Roxthar catapulted out of his seat. "Mnephilos was a doddering old fool and Leonnestros was an ambitious idiot who knew less about soldiering than I do! Had either survived the battle, I'd personally crack his joints on the rack."

"You are out of order!" Sesklos cried.

Roxthar's voice cut through the objection like a knife blade. "No! This entire Council is out of order! I was there at Phyrax: *Where were the rest of you?* I watched the entire battle from the baggage train, while you were no doubt counting the latest Temple offerings and lamenting at how small they were.

"I tell you all, if it were not for Grand Master Soton our defeat would have been complete—a final disaster. And Kalvan would now be knocking at the gates of Balph instead of Tarr-Beshta!"

As Roxthar continued, Anaxthenes was reminded of the pilot of a galleass he'd been aboard when she ran hard aground on a sandbar in what the pilot had thought was a clear channel. The same combination of fear, incredulity and surprise he'd seen on the pilot's face was now showing on the faces of most of the Archpriests.

If his own face had been allowed to reflect his feelings, it would have worn a triumphant grin. Clearly Roxthar was turning the tide and Soton would not be thrown to the wolves, leaving them free to rend Styphon's House any time Kalvan chose to whip the pack.

Anaxthenes' supporters were rallying, as were Roxthar's faction. Those who feared Roxthar too much to go against him over what they could easily persuade themselves was a minor matter would join next. Soon those who were hungry for their mid-day meal would follow since Roxthar had been known to continue like this for candle after candle—even late into the night.

Soon no one would be left opposing Soton except Dracar and his most determined supporters, who would gladly see Styphon's House fall into ruins as long as Anaxthenes were buried underneath.

When Roxthar paused for breath, he looked into Anaxthenes' eyes and a brief smile broke his lupine visage. Anaxthenes' urge to grin suddenly vanished. Roxthar would demand a price for today's work—and what that price might be, for him and for the Temple, Anaxthenes did not really care to contemplate.

THIRTY-ONE

I

Verkan Vall yawned and looked up at the chronometer over the control panel of the paratemporal conveyer. It showed that five minutes had passed since the last time he'd looked at it, which seemed to him like several hours ago. He yawned again.

Why was this trip to Kalvan's Time-Line seeming to last forever? He doubted if the fatigue he was feeling helped; he felt as if he hadn't slept in a week—and come to think of it, he very nearly hadn't,

making sure everything in Greffa would last through the winter without any further supervision by him.

The Upper Middle Kingdoms were in a bit of an uproar as there were rumors that the nomads on the Sea of Grass were stirring. Rumors in the streets of Greffa talked about a Mexicotál attack on Xiphlon. Verkan already had an agent setting up a Xiphlon trading firm as cover for his Greffan operation and, maybe, when the old coot Tortha got tired of shooting rabbits, he could persuade him to come for an extended visit. He had a feeling that the ex-Chief and the Kalvan family would hit it right off.

There were also tensions in Grefftscharr with Prince Varrack of Thagnor and further south with the Nythros City States City States over their growing influence in the Trygath and upper Saltless Seas. Volthus was another kingdom that was beginning to expand and flex its muscles at Grefftscharri expense.

Grefftscharrer politics had long been dominated by four power blocs: the king, the Greffan nobility, the Grefftscharrer Princedoms and the merchant magnates. Not one of the four was strong enough to enforce its will on the other three, and for centuries Grefftscharrer politics had been shaped by constantly shifting alliances among the four power blocs. This was typical of most of the Middle Kingdoms, like Dorg and Xiphlon. But, in fact, Grefftscharri rule had been further diluted by three weak kings in the last century, which had allowed their princes, such as Varrack, to act like independent rulers.

Unfortunately for King Theovacar, this power vacuum had allowed other peripheral kingdoms and princedoms time to build trade routes along with their own armies and navies. In a sense, this competition had created a thriving mercantile atmosphere and population boom, but—now that there was a strong ruler on the Greffan throne—war, and not just trade war, was on the horizon.

More changes were on the way. Kalvan's formula for fireseed was quickly spreading throughout an area that had few handguns and even fewer cannon due to Styphon's unpopular prohibitions against selling fireseed to the Middle Kingdoms. Of course, there had been fireseed smuggling going on for centuries, but there were few smoothbores in the Middle Kingdoms—and even fewer gunsmiths to make new ones. The crossbow was still the predominant missile weapon of choice.

Once the Fireseed War was over, Verkan saw opportunities for a steady trade between Hostigos and the Upper Middle Kingdoms in retired arquebuses, muskets and calivers. While lacking in firearms, the Upper Middle Kingdoms had much more history and were more sophisticated politically than the Great Kingdoms. Verkan expected there would be some interesting exchanges, both culturally and militarily in the coming decades between the two areas. He was going to enjoy watching it all unfold.

It bothered him to be leaving a friend before he'd done everything that could be done for him, even though his rational thoughts told him that he himself couldn't do much more for Kalvan and indeed not much more needed to be done.

Ptosphes was cleaning out Nostor very nicely; by the time winter came Prince Pheblon should be ruling over an untroubled Princedom—one still almost a desert, but a peaceful desert nonetheless. Prince Armanes was still recovering from his grievous wounds and his eldest son was acting in his place while his father recovered. It would be a year at least before Armanes sat in a saddle again.

In Hos-Agrys, Prince Aesklos was going to have to spend the winter by the fireside recovering, but he would be spending it with both legs—a near miracle for Aryan-Transpacific. His voice would be heard against the notion that there was anything demonic about Kalvan's knowledge. King Demistophon was blaming his disaster in Hos-Hostigos on incomplete intelligence and a lack of support by Styphon's House. Demistophon better be careful; he was making enemies on both sides of the conflict!

In Beshta, Prince Phrames was taking charge with a vengeance, and Harmakros and Hestophes were commanding the Army of Observation on the border with Hos-Harphax. Not that they had much to do; Galzar himself couldn't have made an army out of men who wouldn't stand and fight, guns that wouldn't shoot even if there was fireseed to load them and beasts who wouldn't carry or draw a load, which was all the Harphaxi had left.

The only man who might have tried, Grand Master Soton, was on his way back to Tarr-Ceros and his Knights for the campaign in the Sastragath next spring against the latest nomad incursions. Verkan had hoped Soton would be returning in disgrace with Styphon's House, although it would have been monumentally unjust to disgrace a fine soldier for common sense and loyalty to his soldiers. Instead, so rumors ran, the Inner Circle had done an about face and Soton was again considered the anointed champion of Styphon's House against the servant of demons. Once again pointing out the necessity to plant an agent at the top of the Balph hierarchy, although that was easier to say than to accomplish.

What bothered Verkan most was another rumor that Soton had been saved from disgrace at the price of an alliance with Archpriest Roxthar. If the best soldier and the most fanatical Archpriest—who was said to be a true believer in Styphon!—were now working together, the war would do worse than go on; it would very likely take an extremely ugly turn the next time Styphon's House marched.

He'd better send Ranthar Jard a few more men for his Paracop squad assigned to the Kalvan Study Team before that happened. Then he'd have enough people on the spot to take care of that majority of the University Team who couldn't take care of themselves, and meanwhile he'd be able to keep scholars like Varnath Lala and Gorath Tran from committing egregious follies—or at least he'd be able to try harder. If nothing really nasty happened, he'd at least have more people to carry messages, which would reduce the need to use possibly contaminating First Level techniques and leave the Paratime Police smelling a lot sweeter legally.

Whatever happened, Ranthar Jard was going to be much more on his own next year, because his Chief was going to have to spend most of his time on First Level until the Dralm-damned business of pulling out of Europo-American was settled, one way or another. The Study Group had been appointed, and was now sitting and talking. It showed signs of being willing to go on sitting and talking until entropy reversed itself, and meanwhile all Verkan Vall's enemies would be sharpening their knives and loading their guns to take advantage of this situation. He was just going to have to keep a close watch on the Study Group in order to get anything useful out of it, or look like a fool for appointing it in the first place.

What else could he do on Home Time-Line? Pick some more reliable subordinates who could be trusted to hold the fort when he had to go outtime, for one thing. Otherwise, it would be mostly a question of looking as though he were on the job, an image he could present much more effectively from behind his desk—a desk that didn't need a power excavator to be dug out from under accumulated paperwork.

The thought of that paperwork made Verkan look at the chronometer again, then at the display showing the parayears remaining to First Level. He'd thought of going straight to his office and making a start on at least sorting the backlog into broad categories. He'd be too tired to do even that unless he took a nap in the conveyor, and there wasn't enough time to make that nap a good one.

He'd do better to go straight home, get a good night's sleep in a proper bed and make his start at getting back to work in the morning. Sleep was something too precious to sacrifice to presenting an image, and if he ever forgot that, well, the Paracops would not only need a new Chief fairly soon, they'd deserve one.

II

Outside the keep of Tarr-Hostigos, the autumn wind rose until Kalvan could hear it moaning past the battlements. From somewhere a draft found its way around the wooden shutters over the windows. One of the candles on Kalvan's table flickered and went out. He contemplated re-lighting it with a coal from the brazier, then decided he could finish the letter with the light from the remaining candle.

Two wax candles would have been extravagant for anyone but the Great King of a victorious but battered Kingdom. Kalvan hadn't entirely mastered the art of writing the Zarthani runes with a quill pen, but he didn't want to risk spoiling parchment, and above all he couldn't entrust this letter to Colonel Verkan in Grefftscharr to a secretary.

Kalvan moved the wine cup and jug so that they stood between the nearest window and the candle, then went on writing:

The most recent shipment of grain has arrived safely in Ulthor and is now on the road to us. One of the shipmasters who rode ahead with the messenger said that the sailing season on the Saltless Seas may end before another convoy of potatoes and grain can make the voyage from Greffa, let alone go and return.

I have promised him, and through him his fellow masters, that any of them who are obliged to winter over in Ulthor shall have the wages and rations of their crews paid out of the Treasury of the Great Kingdom. I have also indicated that I will buy outright any sound ships whose masters may wish to sell them. The masters and crews may take Hostigi colors, or return home at the expense of the Throne.

That would be a start on the Royal Navy of Hos-Hostigos. Only a start, and indeed he couldn't hope for anything more as long as Hos-Hostigos didn't have a port on the Great Eastern Ocean, but it was better than nothing. Much better than nothing, considering that the grain route to the Upper Middle Kingdoms looked as if it were becoming the lifeline of the Great Kingdom, and that the Prince of Thagnor (here-and-now Detroit) was showing signs of taking his nominal allegiance to Hos-Agrys more seriously than before. Of course, that same Prince Varrack was also a vassal of King Theovacar of Greffa, which demonstrated a state of conflicting alliances and vassalage in the Upper Middle Kingdoms that would have fit comfortably in Otherwhen Renaissance Italy!

We will not be too badly off even if there is no more Grefftscharrer sausage, potatoes and grain this year. In those parts of the Great Kingdom not involved in the fighting, the harvests were good. The worst of the fighting was over before harvest time and we were able to release many more of the troops than we had expected. In addition, many of the mercenaries who remained in our service were willing to work in the fields for extra pay. We have been able to ship some of the surplus food to Sashta, Beshta and Nostor.

Prince Phrames is also hopeful he can purchase grain in Syriphlon through the same grain merchants who supplied the late lamentable Prince Balthar last winter. Phrames has been granted one-quarter of Balthar's hoard to begin his reign; he should be able to accomplish much with that.

Since Balthar's hoard had been counted at a million ounces of gold and more than three million ounces of silver, Kalvan was quite sure that Phrames would be able buy all the grain he needed with a portion of his share. What gold and silver couldn't do would be done by less polite means; it was no secret that most of the grain merchants had private stockpiles ready for the expected famines. Kalvan remembered listening from behind a tapestry to Phrames' explicit lecture to the grain merchants about the penalties for hoarders and speculators.

Afterward, he stopped worrying about Phrames being too noble to make a good here-and-now ruler. Where his new subjects were concerned, Phrames had the determination of an old mother cat with one kitten and the ruthlessness of an Archpriest of the Inner Circle.

It also seems unlikely that anyone in Harphax will be able to prevent Phrames from purchasing grain where he will. King Kaiphranos refuses to leave his bedchamber and hasn't conducted a Royal Audience since his son's death. Prince Selestros is no more fit to rule than ever, and Grand Duke Lysandros appears to rule Hos-Harphax in all but name. He is far abler than Kaiphranos, but it would take Styphon's Own Miracle for Lysandros to quickly restore order to a Great Kingdom with no army, no treasury, no revenue, many enemies and few allies.

From my intelligencers in Harphax City, I hear that the Elector Princes of Hos-Harphax would as soon put one of Styphon's fireseed demons on the throne as Lysandros. The succession crisis in Thaphigos, brought about by the death of Prince Acestocleus, is the most serious of the problems Lysandros faces, as it threatens to embroil the Harphaxi with Hos-Agrys, which also has claims upon the Princedom, but it is not the only one.

Lysandros has the open support of Styphon's House, to be sure, but this does not appear to be an unmixed blessing. A good many of the Harphaxi nobles and populace are convinced they lost at Chothros Heights because the Inner Circle would not send the Holy Host north to march with the Army of Hos-Harphax. On the other hand, Grand Master Soton is said to be bitter about the loss of his Lances through what he feels was inexcusable incompetence on the part of the Harphaxi. Since his word now carries more weight in the councils of the Inner Circle, his ill will toward the Harphaxi is not something Lysandros can ignore.

It was more than ever a pity that there was no way for Hostigos to take advantage of the mess in Harphax this winter, but the year's battles had cost too much. Half or more of the men who'd marched out under Hostigi colors in early summer were dead or wounded; not to mention the cost in gold, silver, weapons, fireseed, armor, cavalry horses and draft animals, even in things like bandages and canteens... Kalvan now understood exactly how King Pyrrhus had felt.

The second sheet of parchment was almost filled; Kalvan drew a third toward him, smoothed it out and checked it for tears or thin spots. Finally, the work at the paper mill was beginning to show tentative results; Ermut had kept at his experiments right on through summer and into fall, only leaving the mill when the Holy Host was less than an hour's ride away. He'd had all his results written down by a scribe, too, although Ermut was illiterate; work was already starting up again right where it left off. By next spring maybe, just maybe, they'd have usable paper.

Then they'd need iron or steel pen nibs, because if paperwork multiplied the way it usually did, there wouldn't be enough geese in the Six Great Kingdoms and Grefftscharr put together to supply quills! Not to mention more schools to produce literate clerks to do all the paperwork and those schools would need teachers, who could possibly be trained at the new University. That would mean more work for Mytron that wasn't connected with his duties to Dralm, and what Xentos would have to say about *that* —

"Kalvan are you writing a letter to Verkan or a chronicle?" Rylla's voice from the curtained bed had the note of a woman with a grievance.

Kalvan looked back over the pages to see if he'd left out anything. Nothing that couldn't wait, or that wasn't too sensitive to be written down in a letter even to somebody as trustworthy as Verkan. A letter could go astray on the way to Greffa, and it would do no good if the world learned, for example, that Chartiphon's elevation to the rank of Great Captain-General of Hos-Hostigos was intended to keep him off future battlefields.

No, there was one thing he'd forgot to mention, and not a little thing, either. He dipped his pen and wrote:

Prince Phrames has finished dividing the estates of the Beshtans who died without heirs or who were executed and attainted for their treason to Hos-Hostigos. He has granted one-third of them to the Great Throne—a useful step toward giving Kalvan his own lands—"one-third to loyal Beshtans and one-third to distinguished soldiers of the realm. These include Duke Harmakros, Baron Alkides and yourself.

Being able to promote Harmakros and give Alkides and Verkan titles had been the second happiest moment of the year. The only happier one had been when he first saw Princess Demia.

I have been assured that the patent of gift for your new Beshtan estates has been drawn up and should be on the way to me even now. If the weather holds so that the roads do not dissolve in the next two days, I may be able to send it along with this letter. If not

"Kalvan! My feet are getting cold."

—rest assured that you now have lands of your own in Hos-Hostigos, which you have served so well and valiantly, along with the rank of Baron. Her Majesty joins me in wishing you and your lady wife health and prosperity this winter and a swift return to us in the spring. Farewell.

Kalvan

The Great King sprinkled sand on the last few lines, then shook it off, slid all three pages into a pile, weighted it down with a wine cup and blew out the candle.

THE END

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