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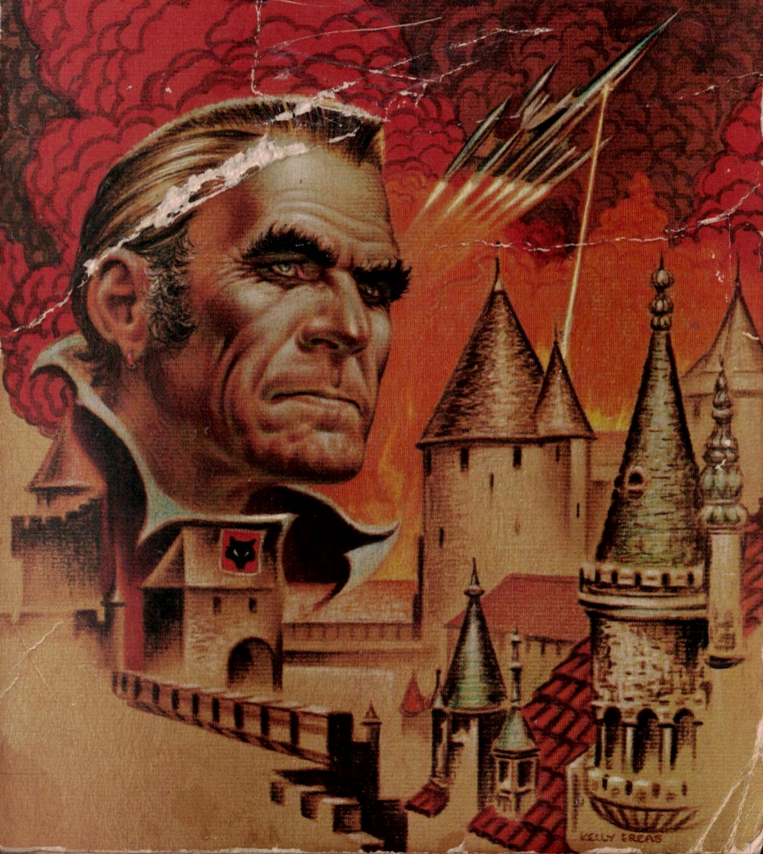
No. 42

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A SET OF BLUEPRINTS WAS
THE PRICE OF A WORLD'S FREEDOM

A SPACESHIP FOR THE KING

JERRY POURNELLE



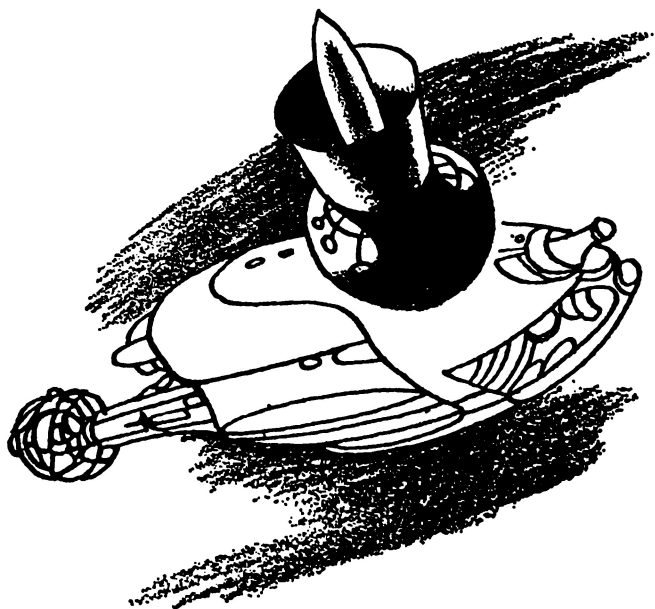
RELUCTANT COMMANDO

“That library is the key to it all. If we had the knowledge that must be there, what couldn’t we do? We could build our own spaceship. A starship, perhaps. And by their own rules, the Imperials would have to admit us as a classified world, not a colony. . . .”

That was what the king’s chief of secret police told Colonel MacKinnie. And though the defeated commander hated the king and all his men, he realized that hé’d have to do what was asked of him.

Because without a spaceship for the king their entire world would be under the exploiting rule of Earth forever—and MacKinnie’s home country doubly so.

So it was off to the stars to seize the most sacred treasure of a fiercely barbarian world.



A SPACESHIP FOR THE KING

by
Jerry Pournelle

DAW BOOKS, INC.

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The crowd was getting noisy in the Blue Bottle, although it was early in the evening. Tavern girls squealed as customers pinched them, gaily clad waiters brought round after round of drinks, and throughout much of the room everyone was shouting merrily. The reason was not hard to find, for in one corner of the crowded room three officers of the Imperial Navy held court, buying drinks for anyone on Prince Samual's World who would sit with them and laugh at their jokes. Some of the regulars held back, their distaste for the enforced association more evident with every round, but for each of them there were four others from Haven City more than willing to share the Emperor's humor and liquor. Before the night ended, the officers would doubtless gain some recruits for the Royal and Imperial Marines, young lads suddenly sobered to find themselves in an iron service out among the stars, never to see their homes and discovering that Imperial officers were not such jolly good fellows when you were under their command.

For the moment the whiskey, brandy, and Grua—distilled from a cross between a berry and a peach grown only on Prince Samual's northern continent—flowed freely; the jokes were new to the locals even if they had been told a century before in the barracks at New Annapolis, and for a few moments His Imperial Majesty's crimson and gold jacketed officers were relaxed, feeling as at home as they ever did on a barely civilized planet.

The three of them were classmates, not six years out of the Academy, the gold and silver stripes of lieutenants only recently sewn on their sleeves. Closer inspection would have revealed that one of them was a year younger than his

friends, a school prodigy admitted early to midshipman status as much because of his talents as his family influence, and that young, now lieutenant, Jefferson was very very drunk. His classmates had discreetly opened the top clasp of their stiff tunic collars, but Jefferson's was half unfastened, revealing a none too fresh shirt and the tiny breast pocket computer beneath. His natural shyness overcome by countless thimble sized glasses of Grua, Lieutenant Jefferson basked in the esteem of the flatlanders, almost forgetting that they were barbarians, that he and the tiny Navy outpost on Prince Samual were the only representatives of true civilization within ten light-years. The others were singing, and when his turn came he added a verse so obscene it shocked the tavern girls, looked wildly about for approval, and tossed off another glass.

Across from Jefferson a young native, browned by field work, too young to be in the Blue Bottle if he were not sitting with the Emperor's overlords, beamed at his new friend and shouted approval of the song. "Great, Lieu—uh, Jeff, great. Tell us more about what it's like out there. Tell us about other worlds. Are we the most backward place you've ever seen?"

Lieutenant Jefferson belched loudly, murmured an automatic apology, and focused dizzily on his admirers. "Oh hell no, Simom, not by a full broadside. Samual's got guns, and factories, and—and long-distance communications, and hydroelectric power; man, you've got nothing to be ashamed of. You've got no world government, and those wars you're always in stomp you down or for sure you'd be in Class Two status in the Empire instead of a colony. When I think how bad you got torn up in The War, it's amazing you got this far in a few centuries . . . standard centuries, that is. You're doing fine here. That right, lad-die?" he asked, digging his elbow into his classmate's ribs.

Lieutenant Clements turned his black face to Jefferson and grinned, his teeth sparkling. "Sure that's right, Jeff, you tell 'em this is the best duty we've had since we left the capital. Maybe better," he shouted, turning back to the tavern girl beside him.

"Here that?" Jefferson asked his companion. "Simom, we've been to places where they don't even have hydrocarbon power, no electricity, no pellet guns, nothing but horses and men running around in iron pants the way you see—well,

the way we see in Imperial history books, books about the time when Earth was all there was to it. Friend, you almost have space travel. Another hundred years, another fifty years even, you'd have been out to our planets. Another hundred and you'd have found us instead of the other way around. Too bad you didn't," he added, his voice changing. "Been better for you if you had. Class Two status for sure, maybe Class One, if you'd had real space flight before we got here. Not your fault, the survey ship just happened by looking for a gas giant to scoop some fuel from and decided to look you over. A real pity." He looked at his empty glass. "Host! Host! More Grual!"

Two of the regulars of the Blue Bottle made a point of walking past the officers as they stamped out of the tavern, their kilts swirling, but Jefferson did not notice them. As the headwaiter brought more drinks, Simom asked, "What was it like, that place where they wore iron pants? Is it far from here? Have you colonized it? Can we go there?"

"Ho, one at a time," Jefferson shouted. "Far? Not more than twelve light-years, one jump from here, I think. Let's see, yeah, there's nothing between the two suns and theirs is a big one; hell, it's that thing you people call the Eye of the Needle; you could see it right now if you went outside. And no, no colonies there, not enough there to make it worthwhile yet. And we're spread so thin. Keep a little observation post there to watch for outies, a first lieutenant and a couple of middies, few Marines. Not even a ship in orbit. Detection gear, message torpedoes, that's about all. Nothing important there, except, of course, their Temple."

Jefferson had allowed his voice to drop for a moment, a note of weariness creeping in as he thought of the immense task of the Imperial Navy, trying to reclaim the pieces of an Empire lost and shattered hundreds of years before in The War, the capital itself only reaching for the stars decades ago. His Majesty had hoped to knit together the fragments before another Secession War could develop and send mankind staggering back to primitive conditions again. There had been no winners of the last one, and the next would be worse. There must not be a next war, he said to himself. Not another one. Then he brightened, the raucous humor in the room reaching him, the obvious friendship of the natives. Best enjoy it now, they wouldn't be so friendly

to the Navy after the colonists arrived. But that was years away, and the night was young.

"The funny part, Simom, is that the Temple is worth more to them than the whole bloody planet, if they only knew it! They were right to make it a holy place and preserve it, but if they only knew! Why, there's a whole Old Empire subsection library in that rabbit warren they've built up around what used to be the Viceroy's Palace! The Service librarians almost went out of their minds, some of the history books and things they found there. Even a few science books, operating manuals for old Imperial Fleet stuff; you name it, it's there, or bits and pieces of it are. And they don't even know what it all is! Wouldn't do them any good if they did, no technology to understand it anyway. And my Sweet Savior, how they guard that stuff! Thought we'd never get any of it copied for the archives. If we'd taken just one of those spools out—yeah, spools, the library was geared to a computer that printed things like your books. Took a lot of work to get *that* fixed, I'll tell you. And those priests watched every second we were there. Never did make copies of most of the stuff; we'll get it some day. Be a great job for some historian. We had to sneak in, convince their bishops we were from the stars—they still haven't told the people in that city about us. And the chaplain had to get in on the act, convince them we were religiously orthodox, gave them some song and dance about how we too believed that God spoke from their archives. The chaplain said it was all right, the first thing they copied was a Bible, so he didn't lie about it. Couldn't harm a thing copying the stuff or they'd have boiled up so thick it'd take a battleship to kill them all. Can't do that, they're good people, need everyone out in this sector one day. Whoosh, I talk too much, pour me some more. That Grua's the best thing about this planet. Well," he added, looking at the tall blonde girl who stood at his elbow, "*one* of the best, anyway."

Lieutenant Jefferson was not the only drunken officer in the Blue Bottle, but he would hardly have recognized the gray-eyed man in plain kilts two tables away as a member of the officer class. Colonel Nathan MacKinnie, lately cashiered from service to the Committee of Public Safety of Orleans, preferred whiskey in large glasses; and had had

almost as many of those as Jefferson had of Grua. MacKinnie was tall, inches taller than usual for Samualites, but without the remarkably broad shoulders typical of the planetary dwellers. With his straw-colored hair silvering at the temples, he looked more akin to the senior Imperial Navy officers than the natives. He sat quietly, motioning effortlessly for a new drink from time to time, and smoking countless pipefuls of 'robac. At intervals a particularly loud shout from the Imperial table would bring a grimace to his face, but for the most part he sat emotionlessly, giving no sign of the enormous quantities of whiskey he poured down his gullet.

Hal Stark, MacKinnie's one-time sergeant, now servant, companion, and comrade watched his colonel anxiously, mentally computing the amount of whiskey Nathan had drunk, the time since they had eaten, and the earliness of the evening before he turned to his own drink, his second of the day. He was allowing the amber Grua to roll back over his tongue when MacKinnie snapped his pipe against the heel of his hand so hard that the stem broke.

"Damn!" he muttered. "Hal, look at those drunken excuses for officers. And those, those sots, are the rulers of Prince Samual's World, the 'representatives of civilization' as they call themselves, the men who can decree what will be done and snuff out the independence of Orleans like a candle in a hurricane. Babbling, shouting, the overlords of everything we've ever known."

"Yes, sir. Begging the colonel's pardon, but I seem to recall a young lieutenant some years ago couldn't hold his liquor no better than them, if it's all right to say so." It was difficult to tell just how much of Stark's apologetic air was genuine.

Colonel MacKinnie frowned for a moment, then burst into a loud guffaw. "I sure didn't, did I, Hal?" He looked at the ruined pipe in his hands, then signaled for the girl and bought cigars of genuine Earth Stock tobacco for a price he couldn't afford. "There were a few times when you had to roll me back to barracks, weren't there? You never missed, either. What are you best at, Hal? Batman, sergeant, or unemployed striker to a colonel with no command?"

"Best at whatever the colonel wants me at, that the right answer? Where are we going next, Colonel?"

MacKinnie shook his head slowly, looked around the

room as if there might be some answer to the question. "They haven't stopped the fighting on South Continent. Maybe we can pick up something there." He reached into his pouch, and added, "We'd better find something soon, or we starve. But it won't be the same, Sergeant. Just something to fight over, get the bills paid. What we do won't matter anymore, the future here belongs to them." He waved his cigar at young Jefferson, who held the blonde girl on his lap, her hands deep inside his open tunic, while he tried to force a glass of Grua between her body and his lips. She squealed.

"Worse for you than for me, Colonel. I never did know what we were after, not really anyway, not the way you did. Long as you know, it's good enough for the troops." Stark tossed down the last of his drink, then looked back at his officer. "Drink up, Colonel, there's plenty to do somewhere. We could raise up a fair sized regiment of men who'd follow you to Hell. Tomorrow, I'll round up some of old headquarters company and we'll go show the southies what war's really like."

MacKinnie grinned momentarily, methodically warmed his cigar before lighting it. The bar was pleasant, the company was good, and for a moment he forgot the hopelessness, even ordering a small Grua to dip the end of his cigar into. Inhaling the strong smoke, he leaned back in his chair, his feet stretched out under the table. Stark looked at him again, saw the lines leave Nathan's face, and ordered another round.

It was no good, MacKinnie thought, but there was no point in upsetting the big man next to him. He'd have to play the game out to the end, but by all the Saints he was tired now, tired in a way that the sleep and rest and soft duty they'd had for the last weeks could never cure. It was strange, he thought. Colonel of his own regiment at forty standard years, a full citizen of Orleans, inevitably to be senior colonel and then general before his last parade. Not bad for a wandering mercenary soldier whose city-state had been extinguished only months before his graduation from its tiny war-academy, set to wandering in search of a living until he'd ended in the ranks of Orleans' army. Promotion, merit, recognition, citizenship, a good career. And it was all over when the landing boats came down from the ship that still whirled in orbit above Samual. Ten years of brilliant

campaigning had insured that Orleans would not suffer the fate of his native Samand. No power or likely combination of powers could annex the Republic. And in a week the Imperial Navy had accomplished it, so that Orleans was now the Duchy of Orlean, subject to His Majesty King David Ninth of Haven, and no Orleanist officers wanted in the Royal Service, thank you. Honor, of course, and an inadequate pension to the hero of Blanthern Pass whose regiment had defeated the best that Haven could put in the field. Well done, old chap! Of course His Majesty has his own colonels, but we have a pension for you, sir. No hard feelings, and of course no retaliation against the Orleanists. Well, not much, anyway, and only against a few of the political officers. You were never in politics, were you, Colonel? No, of course not. Too good a soldier. Yes, you can go now. And Colonel Nathan MacKinnie was suddenly an old man, feeling his campaigns and ready to drink far too much. He had left the palace and walked aimlessly for kilometers before he noticed that Stark was behind him.

He could have fought, of course. Even after the Committee bowed to the inevitable power of the Imperial Navy, he could have taken MacKinnie's Wolves to the fields, wandered in the forests, cutting down Haven soldiers, fighting tiny actions with formations too small for the Navy to find and blast out of existence with their space weapons. But for how long? And what would the Imperials do to Orleans? How long would the people of the Republic have supported him? How long before the romantic gesture turned stale and the admiration of the citizens turned to hatred and disgust as town after town was bombarded from space, turned to a blackened cinder as Lechfeld was? MacKinnie inhaled his cigar, letting the warm smoke drift over his tongue, out his lips and into his nostrils, tasting the incredibly pleasing combination of real tobacco and Grua before destroying the delicate flavors with the harsh tang of whiskey. Across the next table, a couple rose and staggered toward the door, leaving him a clear view of Lieutenant Jefferson. The young Naval officer was telling an admiring peasant about a strange planet, a place where they had no guns, only swords, and they worshiped Christ in a temple which once was an Old Empire library. Both of us drunks, MacKinnie thought. But the boy's one up. He's going somewhere, and what he does won't be undone by something you couldn't

fight, couldn't even understand. Stark was right. There was a resemblance to the old Nat MacKinnie, but not to this one. The old one was going somewhere, and what he accomplished would be his. And so would that boy. Cursing bitterly, Nathan MacKinnie realized that he felt envy for the young men who had conquered his world.



The evening wore on. The first round of entertainers finished their acts, it was too early for the late performers, and for many of the customers it was several drinks too late for anything else. The room became less noisy as the early festive crowd departed, leaving the Blue Bottle to serious drinkers and tavern girls. Only the voice of Lieutenant Jefferson, punctuated by the giggles of the girls at the Navy table, was heard above the low buzz of conversation. MacKinnie decided that it was time to go.

He stood in sudden decision, but when he swept his hand behind him for the cloak he had left on a nearby chair he lost his balance, lurching heavily into a small round-faced man with a tiny moustache. The little man jumped backward with rabbit agility and began to mumble apologies.

"Not at all, sir," MacKinnie told him. "My fault entirely. No offense intended," he added unnecessarily. The little man was unarmed, and the thought of him issuing a challenge to Colonel MacKinnie was humorous. With an effort, Nathan suppressed the laugh that the image generated.

"None taken, of course," the man said. "Would you join me in a drink?" he extended his hand. "Malcolm Dougal," he said apologetically.

The grip was firmer than MacKinnie would have expected. He took a long look at the chap. Nothing out of the ordinary, he thought. A kilt of some family plaid, a muted version of a much bolder tartan no longer worn in public, well suited for business. Expensive jacket, minor jewelry in good taste, a heavy signet ring on the left hand, probably Prince Samuel University although there were other places which copied the design. Except for his small stature you could see a hundred like him in businessmen's dining clubs

any time you cared to. But MacKinnie noted that he wasn't really so small. He just appeared to be such a rabbit that you took him for a small man, and of course anyone standing next to Stark would seem small. There was something else about Dougal, an air that was faintly threatening when you looked at him closely, but that was ridiculous. MacKinnie shook his head to clear the whiskey.

"Thank you, I've had more than enough," Nathan said. "Nathan MacKinnie, I'm sorry, I'm forgetting my manners. Too much whiskey. No offense intended."

"And none taken. Perhaps we'll meet again. Good night."

"And a good night to you, Mr. Dougal." MacKinnie bowed and faced the exit, leaving Stark to collect their cloaks and pay the bill. Outside, they turned toward the harbor, walking slowly to the waterfront hostel where they had rooms more compatible to MacKinnie's meager pension than the brick and stone district around the Blue Bottle. MacKinnie had no objection to staying in cheap lodgings, but he was still sufficiently a colonel to want to drink in a gentleman's tavern.

A light rain began to fall, causing the few citizens out on the streets to scurry for cabs. An alcohol steam car whirled quietly by, slowing momentarily as the driver gazed at their faces before deciding they would not be customers. Then a horse-drawn two-wheeler clopped alongside, the coachman shouting at them. "Good rates, sirs. Anywhere you want to go. Anything you could want to find in Haven, I know where it is. Good rates. You'll get wet out there, sirs, you will."

MacKinnie nodded, and the coachman jumped from his bench to hold the canvas doors open for them. "Where will it be, sirs? Blackfriar? Hellfire? Want to meet some ladies? Not like the ones in Blue Bottle, though there's plenty that likes them; I mean real ladies, maybe not welcome back home no more but well brought up, you know." Examining Stark with an expert eye, he added, "And my ladies got real handsome young maids live right there in the house with them for your man there, sir."

MacKinnie snapped his fingers, ending the chatter, and the coachman climbed back to his seat. He started the team, leaned down to the window.

"Waterfront," Stark answered. "Imperial Landing Wharf."

He was damned if he'd give this garrulous old coachman the name of the cheap hotel they were forced to live in and let him someday say he'd taken Iron MacKinnie to a flyblown flophouse.

The rain came down harder, forcing the old man to raise the dodger on its carved wooden braces. "Wonder if he gets many customers in this rig," Stark asked.

The old man leaned down and cackled. "More than you might think, chum. Lots of gentlemen want to visit my ladies. And lots of real ladies still think cabs are better than steam buggies. We aren't as fast as those things, but there's people who remember the good old days when there weren't nothing but us and they don't forget old Benny, no, they don't."

MacKinnie snapped his fingers again, and the coachman turned back to the road, muttering to himself, before he again leaned down to his passengers. "Even those Imperial Navy boys, they like the cabs. You hardly see nothing else around Empire House but cabs; oh, they keep a few steam cars waiting by just in case they're in a hurry, but you watch, them young officer kids, they never rode in a cab with real horses before. Get the biggest thrill out of it, so they tell me. Been a big lift to the cabbies, the Imperials. Just them being here, that's better than taking over Orleans, not that the Kingdom isn't going to do right by itself out of the Duchy, no sir." Whistling to himself, the coachman looked to the road again, guiding the team through the twisting narrow streets of the old waterfront town until they emerged on the broad Dock Street, deserted except for a few drunken sailors reeling perilously close to the water's edge.

Across the narrow protected bay which had given Haven its name, brilliant lights played on Empire House and the hundred yard landing boat the Imperials used to ferry their people from the destroyer in its orbit. The light also played across the hemisphere that was Marine Barracks, but none was reflected from the sheer black surface. Imperial Marine Barracks was protected by what the Navy people called a Langston Field. MacKinnie knew nothing about it except that artillery shells fired at it were slowed to a halt, and the explosion was absorbed by the black shield and the metal walls beneath. The Navy announced that resistance was useless, nothing short of an Imperial Cruiser would be able

to penetrate Marine Barracks. And MacKinnie had reason to know that whatever a cruiser might carry for weapons, nothing MacKinnie's Wolves had been able to bring to bear would harm the fortress. It was one reason the Wolves surrendered.

The landing boats were vulnerable, though, he thought. He had damaged one badly during the short fight around Lechfeld, killing several of the Marines aboard before fire came from the skies, a flaming death which scorched the village and baked a half battalion of Wolves in an instant. But they could be hurt, MacKinnie knew. If only they could have taken Marine Barracks.

Wishful thinking, he told himself. Even if he captured the Barracks and destroyed the last of the landing ships the destroyer up there in the sky was safe from anything the entire population of Prince Samuel's World could do. Some of the professors at the university were experimenting with rockets which might, built large enough, go so fast they would never come back to ground, might get to the destroyer. They had built one great war rocket which used liquid fuels and went for a hundred kilometers, but there had only been the one. Even if they had another, how could you make it hit the destroyer? And the Navy said the destroyer was protected by another Langston Field, so that if the rocket hit it there would be no effect. A feeling of helplessness settled over Nathan MacKinnie. He closed his eyes, felt the whiskey reel his head around and around.

He had no idea how long he dozed, miserable, hoping to get to a rest room and then to bed before the full effects of all that whiskey did their worst. It could not have been long, he knew, because they were not around the bay to Empire House when the shouting woke him.

It took MacKinnie precious moments to rouse himself from the stupor of half-drunken sleep and realize that the coach had been stopped by several men. Robbers? he thought. Here in Haven, near Empire House? Bold robbers, desperate men!

He snatched open the cab door, tumbling out in a fighting stance, his pistol in his hands for a moment before a heavy cane struck his wrist, deadening it, causing the heavy service pistol to slip from his fingers. On the other side of the coach he heard Stark growl deep in his throat, the enraged sound of a deadly fighting man, and he heard the

sharp chunk, as his big sergeant's hand, arched into a blade that could crack baked clay, snapped into flesh. Someone over there would not get up again for a long time.

He hoped Stark was giving a good account of himself. Whatever Hal could do, MacKinnie was helpless. A pistol pointed at him from the shadows, and on either side were men with shortswords. With a shrug, MacKinnie raised his hands. There was nothing else to do.

He heard Stark strike another blow, then a dull sound which he could not recognize. Moments later, three men carried his sergeant around the coach. One dangled a sand-bag from his fingers and looked at the dim figure of the man with the pistol. "He's only out for a little while as you ordered, sir. I wish I could say the same for two of my men. They might never get up again."

"That will do," the voice from the shadows said. It seemed strangely familiar to MacKinnie, but he could not recall it. "Bring Colonel MacKinnie and the others with us, if you please." The figure vanished into a side street, and MacKinnie felt the point of a sword at his back. The weapon was similar to those still carried by the Haven police, and as he thought of it, MacKinnie remembered that shortswords had been standard equipment for Haven soldiers until the present king had increased the length of the bayonets his troops carried and relegated swords to dress uniforms. The men at either side of him seemed familiar with their weapons. Very useful if you wanted quiet work, MacKinnie thought.

They walked on for the better part of a mile, twisting through deserted streets and getting soaked by the rain before they entered a multi-storied building no different from the others they had passed. They descended two flights of stairs in utter darkness before one of the men struck a light and another produced an electric torch. Three men carried Stark down another flight of stairs.

MacKinnie decided his captors were military men. Their discipline, silent and efficient, was excellent, and it was obvious that this was not robbery. There had been ample opportunities to cut their throats and take what little remained of his monthly pension. Besides, the leader had known MacKinnie's name and rank, had even insisted on examining Stark himself before they started off. Thieves did not take such good care of their victims.

At the bottom of the stairs they entered a dank stone tunnel which seemed to stretch hundreds of feet before it turned, twisted, and ended at the bottom of another flight of stairs. MacKinnie was now genuinely interested in where he was being taken and needed no prodding from behind to climb vigorously, each step working off more of the whiskey until he was better able to handle himself. Without the fog of drunkenness he felt more in control of the situation, ready to take any opportunity to free himself.

He was halted in a wood-paneled hallway. The only light was from the small electric torch of the guard behind him. They stood for several minutes before a door was opened from the inside, bright light spilling out to blind him, and he was ushered into a large office. Around the walls hung red drapes of rich material, and over the desk was a large painting of King David Ninth.

Sergeant Stark was draped on a woolsh hide couch along one wall of the office, his shoulders so broad that nearly half of him was spilled over, one arm dangling to the patterned carpet. MacKinnie saw that his companion was breathing steadily, although not yet conscious.

Under the copper-edged painting of the king was a rich wood desk, fully eight feet by three feet, its gleaming top bare of papers or any other object, and behind the desk stood Malcolm Dougal, still resembling a rabbit, a nervous smile on his lips as he spoke.

"Welcome, Colonel MacKinnie. Welcome to the headquarters of His Majesty's Secret Police."



MacKinnie looked slowly around the room. Two young men, dressed in kilts as plain as those of Malcolm Dougal, stood against the door behind him, their pistols held carefully across their chests in a guard position. Plain kilts or no, they were soldiers, and under their dispassionate expressions MacKinnie detected a slight twitch, nervousness perhaps at the presence of the secret policeman, or, more likely, hatred for Nathan MacKinnie who had defeated their army three campaigns running.

The room was nearly bare, only the desk, couch, and chairs showing, although there might be anything behind the red drapes which ran from floor to high ceiling along two walls. When Nathan said nothing, Dougal motioned toward one of the woolsh hide chairs. "Please be seated, Colonel. Can we get you anything? A drink, perhaps? No, I suspected not. Something else? Earth Stock coffee, or chick-eest?"

There was a visible tightening to Dougal's lips as he offered Earth coffee, something which told MacKinnie it was a test. Without hesitation Nathan said, "Chickeest, thank you. Black, and lots of it."

Dougal relaxed. He waited until MacKinnie was fully seated, then motioned to the guards. "That will be all, Corporal. Remain on call." MacKinnie heard the door close quietly behind him. "They will bring the refreshments in a moment, Colonel," Dougal said. "And now, you are wondering why you are here."

"I'm more interested in who you are. I've never seen or heard of you before, and I know of most of His Majesty's officers."

"The two questions are not unrelated. Malcolm Dougal is

actually my name. My position is rather vague in the budgets presented to Parliament, but as it happens, I am the Director of His Majesty's Secret Police Service."

MacKinnie nodded. "I suspected that Lord Arindell was too stupid to operate as efficient a service as Haven's. So Inspector Solon reports to you when he wants his real orders."

"Yes. You see, I am being honest with you, Colonel. I expect you to be so with me. Had you taken my offer of a drink at the Blue Bottle, I might have brought you here in a more pleasant manner, but I could not take the chance of your refusal. Or of the Imperial Navy noticing either of us. Everything depends on their not becoming suspicious. Everything."

He leaned forward and regarded MacKinnie intently. "I now ask your word of honor that nothing said here tonight will ever be repeated to anyone without my permission except as it may conform to duties I have assigned you and you have accepted. Please," he said urgently.

MacKinnie longed for a cigar, but thought better of displaying the Earth tobacco he had in his pouch. There was something about the way Dougal had pronounced the words "Earth Stock" when offering the coffee that warned him. Dougal had leaned back in his chair, but his manner was alert, expecting an answer. MacKinnie said the only thing he could under the circumstances. "You have my word, Mr. Dougal. My word of honor."

"Thank you." There was a tap at the door, and one of the guards brought in a platinum tray with copper pots of chickeest, pewter mugs, and cigarettes of a popular Haven brand. MacKinnie noticed that everything he had seen since he entered the room was native to Samual.

Behind the guard, the tall thin figure of Inspector Solon, dressed in the midnight blue undress uniform of the Royal Haven Police, stood silently in the doorway. He made no move to enter, and Dougal did not speak to him. When the guard left, Solon went out behind him, closing the door.

"You saw the Inspector, of course," Dougal said. "There are two reasons for his being here. First, I wanted you to see that he obeys me so that you know I am who I say I am. But more important, I trust no one else to guard that door until we are finished." He smiled pleasantly. "I trust I

have impressed you sufficiently. Enjoy your chickeest, you will be here for some time."

"What about my sergeant?"

"He has already been examined by Inspector Solon, and the man who struck him was an expert. There is no permanent harm. He should be joining us in an hour, perhaps less."

"Then get on with it." MacKinnie sipped the bitter stuff, never as satisfactory as Earth Stock coffee. Only a few things were that you found among the stars. Men had colonized Prince Samual's World nearly a thousand standard years ago, but they had lived on Earth for millions.

"Tell me what you know of the plans the Imperial Navy has for Prince Samual, Colonel MacKinnie."

"Precious little. They appeared less than a local year ago, and almost immediately settled in Haven. At first they didn't interfere with the planetary governments, but then they made alliance with your King David—"

"Your king also, Colonel," Dougal interrupted.

"With King David. They helped you conquer the other city-states around Haven, and finally did for you what no Haven army had ever been able to do. They gave you Orleans. I don't know who's next, but I presume this goes on until Haven takes all of North Continent. After that . . . who knows, the southies, I suppose."

"And then what will they do, Colonel?"

"They keep telling us they'll help us, give us all kinds of scientific marvels, but I've yet to see any of them. You Havenites have kept them all."

"We haven't, because there have been none. Every assistance the Imperials have given us has been direct, with their Marines operating the weapons and none of my people even allowed to see their new technology. Go on, what after that?"

"Once you have conquered the whole blasted planet, I guess they take you into their Empire, with David Ninth as planetary king."

"And you find that unpleasant?" Dougal smiled.

"What do you want me to say, Dougal? You've told me you head the secret police. You want me to say treason out of my own mouth?"

Malcolm Dougal poured more chickeest, carefully, not spilling a drop, and took a long sip before replying. "Ap-

preciate your situation, Colonel. If I meant you harm, it would happen to you. I need no evidence, and there will be no trial. No one knows you're here but my most trusted men, and if you never leave this room, why, who will know it? I'm interested in what you think, Iron Man MacKinnie, and it's damned important to Haven and the whole planet. Now stop being coy and answer my questions." It was the first spark of emotion MacKinnie had seen in Dougal save for the slight tightening of the lips when he mentioned Earth. MacKinnie paused for a moment, then answered.

"Yes, I find that unpleasant. I can think of more unpleasant things, such as domination of the planet by one of the southie despots, but after what you've done to Orleans, you're damned right, I find it unpleasant."

"Thank you." Dougal was again speaking in his normal tone, an apologetic note to his voice, but the resemblance to a rabbit was gone. Now he merely looked like a businessman. "Would you find absolute domination by an Imperial Viceroy even less pleasant?"

"Of course."

"And why?" Dougal waved in an imperious gesture. "I know why. For the same reason that you drink chickeest, bitter as it is. Because he is an outlander, a foreigner, not of Samual at all, and we belong here. And I tell you, MacKinnie, we will never be dominated by that Empire. Not while I live, not while my sons live."

"So you hope to escape that by using the Imperial Marines and Navy to conquer the planet?"

"No. I had hoped to do so, but it won't work. Colonel, once their colonists and viceroy land here, King David will have no more influence over this planet than your sergeant. I thought you knew little of them. Few know anything at all." He reached under his desk for a moment. Within seconds, MacKinnie heard the door open behind him.

"Yes, my lord," a flat voice said. Before he turned to look, MacKinnie knew it was Inspector Solon. The voice fit him perfectly, cold and toneless, like a voice from a tomb.

"Bring that book, Inspector," Dougal said quietly.

"Yes, my lord." The door did not close, and seconds later Solon crossed the room carrying a sheaf of papers loosely held by a strange clasp.

"Thank you." Dismissing Solon with a wave, Dougal pointed to the papers. "This is the only Imperial artifact we

have been able to obtain. It appears to be some kind of work of fiction, about the adventures of a Naval officer on a newly settled planet. But it also gives us much information about the structure of the Imperial government, just as one of Cadace's best sellers would tell them a lot about the government of Haven even though there isn't a line in it intended to do so. Do you understand?" MacKinnie nodded.

"Then," the policeman continued, "understand this. The Empire has several kinds of planetary governments within it. There is Earth itself, which is the honorary capital, but is mostly uninhabitable because of the aftermath of The War. For their own reasons they keep some institutions including their Naval and Military academies there, but the real capital is in another planetary system. After the capitals, there are what they call Member Kingdoms, which are planetary governments strong enough to give the Imperial Navy a good fight if the Empire tried to interfere with their internal affairs."

"All monarchies?" Nathan asked.

"There is at least one republic. Many are monarchies." Dougal sipped his chickeest. "Then there are Class One and Class Two worlds. We can't tell the difference between them, but they have less authority over their own affairs than the Member Kingdoms. They do have representation on the capital in one house of a multi-house advisory council, and some of their people are officers in the Imperial services. The two classes refer to some differences in technology we do not understand, but the relevant factors are the technology level when admission to the Empire takes place. They both seem to have something called atomic power which fascinates the physicists at the university, and their own spaceships."

MacKinnie nodded, recalling some remarks by the drunken lieutenant in the Blue Bottle. He mentioned this to Dougal, who nodded.

"Good," Dougal said. "You are here because you overheard him. You see, Colonel, after the Class One and Class Two worlds, there's nothing left but colonies. And that's what we'll be."

"What's the status of colonies?" MacKinnie asked.

"They have none. Imperial citizens are imported as an aristocracy to impart civilization. A viceroy governs in the Emperor's name, and the Navy keeps a garrison to see that

no trouble develops. The colonists end in complete control of everything, and the locals do as they're told or else."

"How can they govern a whole planet against everyone's will? What good does it do them to burn half the world to ashes like Lechfeld?" MacKinnie drank the last of his now cooled chickeest, then answered his own question. "But of course they don't have to fight their own battles, do they? There's always a local government ready to toady to the Imperials. Someone to do their dirty work for them." He looked significantly at Dougal.

Malcolm pretended not to notice. "Yes. There is always one. If not King David, then one of the southie despots. But it won't happen, MacKinnie. I've found a way to win this fight and get Class Two status for Samual. I've found a way, a chance, but I can't do it alone. I need your help." Dougal leaned forward across the desk, looking intently at Nathan MacKinnie.

Colonel MacKinnie stood, slowly, stretching to his full height before lifting the copper pitcher and pouring another mug of chickeest. Still moving very carefully, he strode to the couch, examined Stark intently for a moment, then returned to his chair. "Have you a pipe and some 'robac, my lord?" he asked. "It promises to be quite a night. . . . Why me?"

"I hadn't intended it to be you until tonight. I had no real plan before, merely gathered a series of actions I might be able to take, made preparations for an opportunity, any opportunity, but now that young fool has told us how to save the state. You heard him, of course."

"If I did, I didn't understand. What are you going to do?"

"But you must have heard. You were there when he babbled about the Old Empire library on a planet at the Eye of the Needle."

MacKinnie thought for a moment, then said, "Yes. But I don't see how that can help us."

"You haven't thought about this for months as I have. We found that book not long after they landed, Colonel. It took only a few weeks to understand most of the language. It's not all that different from ours, at least the written forms, which is why the Imperials get around Haven so easily." The policeman lit a 'robac cigar, leaned back in his chair, and glared at the ceiling. "Ever since I could read

that thing, I've thought of little else but ways to get out of this trap. There's no way to escape being in the Empire, but by the Saints we can make them take us in as human beings, not slaves!"

"If you had the book so early, you must have understood what they wanted before Haven made the alliance with them."

"Of course. It was on my advice that His Majesty entered the alliance. Unless we consolidate Prince Samual's World under a planetary government, we have no chance at all of escaping colonization. And unless it's under King David, I won't have any influence over the planetary government, and you will pardon me if I think I may be better at this kind of intrigue than some of the, shall we say, more honorable men of the other city-states?"

"All right," MacKinnie answered. "So you're a master of intrigue. I still don't see what we can do."

Dougal laughed. "You've drunk too much whiskey, Iron Man MacKinnie. You're not above a bit of duplicity yourself. You used several very clever dodges on us. Your record, Colonel—I have it here—your record says you are more than just a simple combat soldier. But it's pleasing to be able to instruct you." Dougal poured more chickeest. "That library is the key to it all. If we had the knowledge that must be there, our people at the university, and the industrial barons of Orleans and Haven, and the miners of Clanranald—what couldn't they do? We could build a spaceship. A starship, perhaps. And by their own rules the Imperials would have to admit us as a classified world, not a colony. We'd still have to knuekle under to them, but we'd be subjects, not slaves."

MacKinnie took a deep breath. "All right. With knowledge, construction plans even, with a planetary government to bring together the technology of North Continent and the resources of South Continent, maybe it could be done. But we haven't the time. It would take years."

"We'll have years. The Imperials won't move until we consolidate the kingdoms. They're in no great hurry, and I can see that it takes time. It won't be easy, building a thing like that under their noses, but they don't have very many people on this planet and they won't suspect a thing until it's done."

MacKinnie shook his head. "I don't see how you keep

them from finding out, but you're better at that than me. But you can't get at the library without a ship, and we can't get a ship without the library. Even if we had one, we couldn't operate it. There's been nobody on this planet who ever saw the inside of a starship for hundreds of years. Until the Imperials came, most of the population thought that history before The War was just a lot of legends. How in hell do you propose we get to the Eye of the Needle?"

"That's the simplest part of the plan, Colonel MacKinnie. The Imperials have already offered to take us there." He smiled at Nathan's startled look. "They're not all Navy and Military, you know. Some Imperial citizens are traders. There's one batch of them negotiating with King David right now over the rights to Grua. They think our brandy will be worth a fortune on the capital. They want platinum and iridium too; those metals seem to be very useful to them and in short supply. But there isn't much they can give us in return, because the Navy won't let them sell us what we really want: technology. The Navy rule is, you can't trade anything more technologically advanced than what your customer has already without special permission from the Imperial Council. We offered to buy those little computers they all carry around like notebooks, but they can't sell them. So I've had the King offer to trade them for transportation to a world less advanced than ours, where we can try our luck at selling. They suggested a backward planet at the star we call the Eye of the Needle as the closest, and we've already started organizing an expedition to go there and try our luck at selling."

"The Navy will permit this?" MacKinnie asked.

"Under conditions. Stringent conditions, I might add. We can't take anything more advanced than the natives already have. The Navy inspects our trade mission before it goes to the planet. But they will let us go. It appears that the Imperial Trading Association has a good-sized block of votes in the Imperial Council. I don't pretend to understand capital politics, but the ITA seems to be very influential. They can force the Navy to let us trade with that planet, Makassar, it's called."

"Won't they be watching to see that we don't get near the library?" MacKinnie asked. The whiskey fog was gone from his mind now, but more than that, he felt useful again, as if there were something he might do which could

not be taken away by a whim of fate. He listened to Dougal with keen interest, not noticing that Sergeant Stark was stirring on the couch to his right.

"They haven't mentioned it before. Until that young lieutenant babbled about it in the Blue Bottle, I never knew it existed. I think the library's an anomaly in their records, not listed as an advanced artifact because it's so old and the people on Makassar don't know how to use it. But that's a guess. I do know they've been willing to let us go there."

Dougal paused and looked intently at MacKinnie. "That leaves me the problem of one Colonel MacKinnie, who knows about the library. I decided when I heard about it that we'd have to try to get the knowledge there, and since you know, I'd either have to kill you or send you on the expedition. I don't know how to get those books, and I'm not sure anyone on this planet does know. But I'd rather have you on our side than dead. You were very resourceful against Haven, Colonel. Will you swear allegiance to King David and work for Haven now?"

◆ IV ◆

MacKinnie woke to the sour taste of stale 'robac and the sick feeling of whiskey in his stomach. He lay for a few moments on the caltworm silk sheets, slowly recalling where he was. There were no windows to the room, and the only light was from a soft glowplate on one wall. To his right there was a rest room with marble appointments, and through it was a connecting door to a room similar to the one where he was lying. He knew it was there, because Sergeant Stark had lumbered unsteadily to it when they left Dougal's office. They were in the same building, but beyond that MacKinnie had no idea of his location. The only doors outside the suite were locked, and he had no doubt that Dougal's guards stood watch in the hall.

He raised himself on one elbow. To his left a closet stood open, revealing racks of rich clothing. His own kilt and jacket, freshly cleaned and pressed, hung neatly on the door, and with them hung his service pistol. MacKinnie wryly slipped from the bed to examine it, not surprised that there were no cartridges. His watch was in the pouch hanging with his clothes, but it had stopped. He had no idea of the time.

Now that he was up, he decided he might as well stay up. He took his time in the rest room, using luxurious shaving equipment and treating himself to a double dash of the most expensive lotions and powders he had ever seen. If all guests of King David's secret police fared as well as he, there would be long lines of people hoping to be arrested for high treason, but he suspected there were more dungeons in the building than guest suites.

As he finished shaving, Stark knocked at the door, then waited for MacKinnie to finish. The sergeant had shaved

and dressed by the time Nathan had put on his kilts and was buttoning his coat. Stark seemed no different from the hundreds of mornings they had spent in garrison before as he expertly straightened MacKinnie's jacket and made tiny adjustments in the kilt and fall.

"What have we got ourselves into, Colonel?" Stark asked. As he spoke he made tiny signals with his hands, indicating the walls, then his ears.

MacKinnie nodded. "I'm not sure, but it beats chasing southies. This could be a job worth doing. Tell me, can you round up some of the Wolves who can keep their mouths shut and act like Trader's guards?"

"Many as you want, Colonel. How many you think we need?"

"All of them, but I don't think the Imperial Navy will let us take a regiment to Makassar."

"We'll get as many as you want. Going to be funny calling you Trader, but I reckon I can get used to it." Stark looked around the chamber, noting the carved wooden furniture, crystalline rock formation patterns in the floor where it was not covered by carpets woven in the Archipelago, scarlet tapestries on the walls. "Fancy quarters, uh, Trader, sir."

"Yes. Well, I suppose we might as well get on with it. We wouldn't want to keep Dougal and Inspector Solon waiting."

"Yes, sir. Begging your pardon, sir, I hope he won't go with us to that crazy place. Going up high like that, off the world even, and then to some place where they don't have guns even, that's enough without that walking corpse to give me the creeps."

"He won't be along. Nervous, Hal?"

"No, sir, not if you say not to be. But I am having a little trouble getting used to the idea."

"That's two of us. All right, Hal, tell them we're ready for breakfast."

"Yes, sir." Stark found the speaking tube in a small recess under the dim light, uncapped it, and whistled. After a second there was an answering note. "Our respects, and the Colonel and I are ready for breakfast." Stark listened for a few moments, then turned to MacKinnie. "He says someone will be with us in five minutes, sir. Seemed polite, any-

way." When there was no answer from Nathan, Hal capped the tube.

Four guards were visible when the door opened, at least two of them from the party which had captured MacKinnie the night before. Their weapons were holstered, and they were extremely polite as they invited MacKinnie and Stark to accompany them, but Nathan noticed that as one led the way the other three fell in well behind, eyeing Stark nervously as they walked stiffly along. They were ushered into the big office MacKinnie had seen the night before. The curtains were drawn back along one wall to reveal a walled veranda beyond where Solon and Dougal sat at a glass-topped table sipping chickeest. As MacKinnie approached Solon stood, nodded to Dougal, and left without a word.

"Good morning, Trader," Dougal said. He stood, waited for MacKinnie to be seated, and indicated a place at a table a few feet away for Stark. "Your breakfast will be here shortly. I trust you enjoyed your sleep?"

MacKinnie smiled pleasantly. "A great deal more than I thought I would when I was first invited here."

Dougal nodded. "There have been others who did not enjoy their stay in this building at all." He dismissed the guards with a wave, turned back to Nathan. "The subterfuge starts from this instant, Trader MacKinnie. We will use your proper name, although we will change your first to Jameson. MacKinnie's common enough in Haven, and there is a great Trader family by that name."

"Are you sure the Imperials won't recognize me?"

"Reasonably. Besides, they aren't looking for a dead man. Colonel Nathan MacKinnie was killed at Lechfeld. Died of his wounds a few weeks after the battle. Tough old soldier, too proud to say anything when he turned over his sword to the Haven General Staff. The records already show that."

"But there was a young officer who interviewed me . . . and the paymaster will know my pension has been paid for months. Then there's the landlady at our flop."

"There were these people, Trader. Unfortunately, they all died last night in a series of tragic accidents. The Blue Bottle had another accident, I'm afraid. It burned to the ground, everyone in it killed shortly after the Imperial Navy men left. Nothing the Watch could do, the fire was so fierce. It almost seems as if someone deliberately set it, but

I'm sure His Majesty's Police will catch the scoundrels if that's true. More chickeest?"

"And my men? My former officers?"

"They're being recruited for an expedition to the Archipelago, with offers so generous I'm sure no one will turn them down. If anyone does, well, Trader's expeditions have been known to have reluctant members in the past."

Before MacKinnie could reply, the corporal arrived with their food, and Dougal insisted they eat before resuming the conversation. When they had finished the policeman signaled, and the corporal brought MacKinnie a pipe. It was one from the rooms where he and Stark had left their baggage. It did not seem necessary to comment on it.

"You haven't been very active since you left the Service," Dougal said. "It won't be hard to cover your tracks, at least enough to keep the Imperials from looking too closely at you."

"All right, what's the drill for today?" MacKinnie asked.

"Mind your aphorisms, Trader. We wouldn't want your military background to show through, although we will have your records show that you served honorably as a Company Commander in His Majesty's Home Guard during the Theberian War. You won't have to play a part for long, I intend that you leave as soon as possible. We'll send for the other members of the expedition now. Remember, this is a trading mission, and you are Trader MacKinnie. You've met none of them before. Here." Dougal held out a small box. On opening it, MacKinnie found it full of rings, brooches, and other personal jewelry, all in good taste and the kind of thing he might have worn if the military habit were not so strong in him. He selected a ring, brooch, and earring and put them on.

"Now you look more like a trader. I have more for your man." Dougal held out gaudier jewelry, flashier but less expensive than Nathan's, and waited until Stark had put it on before beckoning to the corporal.

As the others approached, MacKinnie asked quickly, "What are you to these people?"

"A high officer of the secret police. They are all trustworthy servants of the crown, but they do not know the real purpose of this expedition." Dougal stood, smiling expansively. "Welcome, gentlemen, freelady. This is Trader MacKinnie, who will manage King David's shares of this

expedition. He has financed much of it, I might add. Trader, here are your crew and advisors."

They sorted themselves out and stood expectantly, waiting to be presented. The first was broad-shouldered, of medium height, and stood stiffly erect. Dougal said, "Trader, this is Shipmaster MacLean of the Royal Merchant Service. He is qualified in both sail and motor vessels."

"Honored," MacLean mumbled, looking straight ahead. His grip was firm, testing MacKinnie's, and Nathan was pleased to note the surprise in the officer's eyes before he let go. The man was so obviously from the Haven Navy that MacKinnie could not understand how the Imperials would be expected to be deceived, but he said nothing.

"And this is Academician Longway, who studies social organization and primitive cultures as well as ancient history." MacKinnie studied him closely. The man was broad and short, typical of the people of Prince Samuel's World, black hair and dark eyes, and could have been a miner if it were not for the thick spectacles. His kilts were scholarly, dark with a thin red stripe, but the grip was firm and his voice steady.

"Honored to meet you, Trader, and I must say, pleased to be selected for an expedition as important as this. It's not often a scholar gets the chance to visit a really strange culture. I've been to the Archipelago, to many of the islands there, but it isn't the same, of course. I can't say how pleased I am to be going with you. It's an historic event."

"Let's hope you feel that way when we return," MacKinnie said pleasantly. He never liked men who chattered, but the enthusiastic friendliness of the scholar was infectious all the same. Longway motioned to the man who stood slightly behind him, shuffling his feet nervously.

The man was young, not more than twenty local years and, although no taller than Longway, was of slight build, and stood with a stoop which made him seem even shorter than he was. He also wore thick spectacles, and his kilt was plain, smudged with ink and foodstains. He carried a large book under his left arm, and the end of a bulky notebook protruded from his pouch.

"This is my assistant, Scholar-Bachelor Kleinst," Longway said. "Most brilliant student at the university, I might add. Does very good work."

"Honored, Trader," Kleinst mumbled, holding his hand

out perfunctorily and withdrawing it limply as soon as possible. His voice matched his appearance, and MacKinnie instantly disliked him. Nathan turned expectantly to the last member of the group.

"Allow me to present Freelady Mary Graham," Dougal said. "She will serve as your assistant and secretary. I might add that she is a graduate of the university."

MacKinnie had seen lovelier girls, the city of Haven being noted for the beauty of its women, but there was nothing wrong with Mary Graham's appearance. She had the typical brown hair and light eyes of the Haven population, although she was slightly taller than most of the city girls. She wore rather severely tailored clothes which could not hide a pleasing figure, and Nathan noted that she stood attentively, waiting for him to speak, her nervousness betrayed only by a slight motion of her fingers drumming against her skirt. She seemed to be about twenty-three local years old.

"Honored, freelady," he said, nodding slightly.

"My honor, Trader." Her voice was not unpleasant, MacKinnie decided. But her presence annoyed him. There was no need for women in an expedition as important as this, and he was surprised that Dougal would suggest it. In Nathan's world, women were divided into two groups: freeladies to be protected, and camp followers who served no less useful a purpose but who were more or less expendable. Mary Graham did not seem to fit into either category.

He was sure that he was being tested again, because a more unlikely group for saving the state could not be imagined. Dougal had explained the night before why MacKinnie himself should command the expedition. The Imperials were likely to know any of Haven's really top officers, yet a military background seemed required if anything were to be accomplished on Makassar. Still, MacKinnie did not look or act exactly like a Trader, and the crew assembled before him contained an obvious military officer, a talkative scholar of uncertain abilities, a weakling of almost effeminate appearance, and a girl. Surely, he thought, the Imperials would suspect—but even if they did, what would be gained by sending this group to Makassar?

Dougal ushered in two more young men, dressed in fatigue uniforms without insignia. "MacReedy and Todd, guards," Dougal explained.

MacKinnie looked them over carefully, decided they were the most authentic in appearance of any of his expedition. He indicated Hal. "This is your guards' leader, Stark. We'll add a few more guards for the expedition when we find out how many we can take. Guard leader, please take your men to your table and get to know them."

Hal nodded and led the men to the other side of the veranda. MacKinnie turned back to the policeman. "My lord, I am sure the others will excuse us a moment while we discuss the cargo. There are some difficulties about financing which I am sure would only bore them, so perhaps they can be working on their equipment lists while we discuss this in your office?"

"Certainly, Trader." The others bowed, and MacKinnie led Dougal through the veranda doors to the office beyond.

Once inside, MacKinnie exploded. "How in hell do you expect the Imperials to be stupid enough to pass that crew? This is a thin enough plan to begin with, Dougal. I can't begin to accomplish the mission if you saddle me with incompetents. My Savior, you give me an obvious Naval commander itching to learn anything he can about their starships, a weak-eyed little intellectual, and I don't know, maybe the Academician will do, but where did you find that girl? In your freshman spy classes?"

Dougal held up his palm briefly, stopping Nathan. "Sit down, Trader, and have something to drink. Calmly, now."

Still fuming, Nathan sat and stuffed his pipe. "And another thing, I don't appreciate murder. How many people did you kill last night, anyway?"

"As many as necessary, Trader," Dougal said coldly. "Think of them as martyrs to Prince Samuel's World, and we'll erect statues for them when this is over. If it works." He lit a Haven cigarette, calmly inhaled, and continued. "Now. As to your crew. First, of course MacLean's a Naval officer. The Imperials will know we intend to send a spy on the expedition. It might as well be a clumsy try so that they don't suspect you. They may even let us get away with it, keeping MacLean from getting near the ship's controls and engines. It's what I would do." He smiled briefly.

"Now, Academician Longway has been on several expeditions to the Archipelago, and he knows as much about primitives and ancient civilizations as any man on this plan-

et. He's fought his way out of situations in the past, so he may be more use to you than you think."

"All right," MacKinnie said. "I didn't object to him anyway. What about the scholar? A strong wind would blow him away."

"Kleinst is just what he appears to be, except for one small deception. He's not a historian, he's a physicist. The best we have who isn't prominent enough to be spotted by the Imperials. And the boy is sharp enough to learn Longway's patter sufficiently so that Longway says he can fool anyone not an expert. I admit his appearance is against him, but we can't be choosy. You'll need someone who understands what science we know if only to tell you what to bring back."

MacKinnie lit his pipe, watching Dougal intently. "And the girl?"

"The daughter of one of my officers. She really is a graduate of the university, she's reliable, and no one expects a girl to be intelligent. She may have an opportunity to learn something you don't. Women often do; they have methods not available to men." MacKinnie started to interrupt, but Dougal gestured him to silence. "You may keep your shocked proprieties to yourself," he said. "She's loyal and reliable, if somewhat young, and secretaries are usual on trading expeditions. Have you anyone better in mind?"

"Not—no. There's no one I'd trust. Which one is your agent watching me?"

"All of them. But you won't betray us. I have enough information on you to fill a small library. The Service has had you in mind as a possible servant to King David since we took Orleans. When you overheard that conversation, I already had enough to act on. I don't waste good men, MacKinnie. Haven needs all we can get for the great task ahead of us. You won't violate your oath."

"Thank you for the confidence." MacKinnie stood. "Just how much do they know?" he asked, indicating the group on the veranda with a wide sweep of his hand.

Dougal smiled. "Enough. They know this is to be an expedition to a primitive world, with the ostensible purpose of establishing a trade mission, and an ostensible secret mission of filling the war chest for planetary conquest. They think the real purpose of the mission is to learn anything they can about Imperial science, customs, military power,

that sort of thing. A straight intelligence mission. They've been ordered not to violate Imperial regulations without specific orders, but to keep their eyes open whenever they're around the Navy. You and your sergeant know about the library, you can tell them about it when you're on Makassar." Dougal lit another cigarette.

"They'll have to do, I suppose. All right, what about my cargo?"

"Primitive weapons, in large quantities. Axes, swords, the like. Armor. Gold and platinum, not too much, we can sell that to the Imperials. Cloth. Good tartan woven from winter sheared woolsh. Grua. Spices. Some trinkets. You'll get the list soon enough, and if you think of anything primitive the Makassarians might buy, or something you'll need, let me know. But don't try to smuggle in anything the Imperials would object to."

MacKinnie sighed deeply and stared at the ashes in the bowl of his pipe. He stood in silence, looking out at the veranda, then turned to Dougal. "It's insane. Oh, it's the best we can do, but you better have a plan B, because I think your main battle plan's got about as much chance of working as I have of swimming the Major Sea."



MacKinnie sat alone on the veranda. The others were off on their various errands, leaving him as the only member of the expedition with nothing to do. He finished his chickeest, wishing mightily for a good cup of coffee, when Stark arrived.

"Find any of the Wolves?"

"Yes, sir. We can get our pick of the noncoms. The officers are a little harder to find. But you sure you want any of the men? Being as how you're supposed to be dead? They're good at fighting, but they aren't long on keeping that kind of secret. Don't know how good at it I'll be, for that matter."

"What about those two Dougal furnished? Any use?"

"MacReedy's typical, uh, Trader. Served a hitch in a trading expedition guard unit on South Continent, another on a sea passage through the west end of the Archipelago. He'll do. Todd's another case. Officer cadet, I expect. Seems a good lad, probably make colonel some day, but his speech and manners don't come from the barracks. Keep him from talking too much, he'll pass."

"About what I expected," MacKinnie said. "No point in complaining. Dougal has his own ideas of how this ought to go, and we won't be able to change anything until we're off planet. Maybe not even then." He thought for a moment. "Hal, get us Dunston, Olsby, I don't know, you pick a couple of the available corporals. I have a hunch we may need some good noncoms, and I'd just as soon not have the whole fighting group made up of Haven people."

"Think we'll have to fight, sir?"

"I don't know. Dougal does, or he wouldn't have me in charge. I don't do anything else. I'll find out more when I

meet the Imperial Traders Association representatives, I suppose."

"Yes, sir. When do we get rolling, uh, Trader?"

"Soon enough, I expect. There's no point in waiting. Not enough time for any proper training of the troops, and not enough idea of what to train them for anyway. There's one hell of a job waiting if we do get back with what we're after, but that's Dougal's problem. He and Solon, and the Magnates." He looked up to see Mary Graham and Academician Longway approaching.

"That was prompt," he told her, forcing a smile.

The girl gave a thin answering show of teeth and said, "As soon as you approve the cargo list, Trader, I'll have the goods placed at Imperial wharf for loading. It's all in the warehouses. Have you any other instructions?"

"Yes. Get someone who knows how to make body armor and find out what dimensions he needs. I want a full suit of chain mail for each of us, and that includes you, freelady. And have a variety of swords of the best quality obtainable, all types available, brought for our inspection. We'll want to choose personal weapons. Guard leader Stark will instruct you on how he wants his men equipped."

"Yes, sir." She took a notebook from her pouch and wrote with tiny precise motions. "Is that all?"

"No. Join me for lunch."

"Yes, sir," she said in the same tone, then turned to follow Stark to his table.

MacKinnie turned to Longway. "Academician, is there any special equipment you will need?"

"I'm afraid not, Trader. There are many items we could use, but they are all technological in nature and forbidden. I would suggest you have plate armor made for yourself and your men. If the Makassarians have developed archery to any extent, you may need it."

"An excellent suggestion." MacKinnie lit his pipe. "But I don't intend to fight pitched battles with them. I hope we only need the armor to protect ourselves from thieves and the like. Still, some decent plate might be useful. I'll tell the freelady."

"As for the rest," Longway went on, "we know so little about Makassar that it is hard to tell what we should take with us. Notebooks and paper, of course. A few standard

reference works would be useful. Do you think the Navy will allow books? Does Makassar have movable type?"

"No books," MacKinnie said quickly. "Don't ask the Navy about them. Take only handwritten material, and don't ask the Navy about any specific item without my explicit permission."

Longway nodded thoughtfully. "If you say so, Trader. I still have some of my personal clothing and trading items to assemble. Am I excused?"

MacKinnie nodded dismissal and went to the table where Stark sat with his men. Todd and MacReedy were sitting quietly, drinking beer, while Stark issued instructions to Mary Graham. She wrote furiously in her book as he spoke.

Hal had a look of concentration, drumming his fingers as he thought of items of equipment needed for the expedition. "I'd like some crossbows, freelady. Good spring steel ones. There's an armory sergeant, Brighton, in the Orleans garrison knows how to make them; he used to supply them for special forces teams. Thirty of those, I reckon. They ought to have that many in stock somewhere." He paused for a moment, then added, "For underneath the armor we want suits of woolsh hide with the fur left on it, good thick stuff. If a man's going to pound on me with a sword, I want some padding under the steel. You go order all that, I'll have some more for you by the time you get back."

She nodded and left. MacKinnie sat at the table, poured beer for himself, and said, "She seems to get the job done, maybe she'll be useful."

"Never had much use for women on campaign, Trader, but she doesn't miss much. I'll make up my mind when I see the gear, but she got it all in that book of hers. What's the all fired hurry, anyway?"

"The Imperial Trader's ship is leaving soon. We have to be on it, or wait for another." There was another reason as well, but MacKinnie did not discuss it with Hal. Dougal was worried that the Navy officers familiar with the library might talk to the post commandant, or the Imperial Traders, or anyone, and the implications of the library be realized. It was not too likely, but it was possible, and the sooner the expedition left, the better its chances. In addition, of course, the task of constructing a spaceship could not really begin until the technological knowledge was obtained from

the library, if it could be obtained at all. Dougal and his group intended to begin construction of the hull immediately, and university scientists were secretly working on life support technology already, using hints from the stolen novel to guide them. Other industrial laboratories concentrated on techniques they thought might be needed, but the vital work could not begin until the engines and energy sources of Imperial spaceships were known.

Mary Graham returned for her luncheon engagement, her notebook bulging with subsidiary lists and scraps of paper. MacKinnie held her chair, then looked at her intently.

"You look like you have some sense; why do you want to come on this insane trip?"

"I think it's my duty, Trader," she said carefully. "My Lord Dougal says this could be one of the most important missions in Haven's history, although he wouldn't say why."

"And just what do you think you can do for us?"

"I don't know, whatever is necessary, I suppose. Most trading expeditions do have secretaries, and my education may be useful to you."

Nathan laughed softly. "I doubt it. And I doubt further if you'd do the only thing I think of that might really be useful. But leave it at that. Just what was it you studied at the university, and for that matter whatever possessed you to go there in the first place?"

"I studied a little of everything, Trader. Since there are so few girls in the university, I could study almost anything I liked. My professors didn't know what to make of me anyway. Such serious old men, you could almost hear them clucking their tongues when they discovered they were expected to listen to a girl read them papers. But since they didn't take my efforts to get an education seriously, I could study what I wanted to and go to the lectures that interested me. Really, it's a wonderful way to study."

"You still haven't said why you went, Freelady."

"Please call me Mary. After all, I do work for you. Don't I?" She sipped cold wine, and MacKinnie noticed that she did so gingerly, unused to it. "Now. Why I went there. I don't know, it just seemed the thing to do. Shocked all my friends . . . the few friends I had, anyway. They're all married now, and I'm a terrible old maid. You can just hear them, 'Poor Mary, she can't catch a man and hold onto,

him!" But I wasn't interested in that. There's so little for girls in Haven, anywhere on North Continent, I guess. No adventure. It was explained in one of Academician Longway's lectures, that The War left so few women on Samual that men kept them at home so no one would see them, and it's only recently we were allowed to go out on our own. I don't know if I believe it, but that's what he said. Anyway I'd like to do something more than just raise children and help my husband get promoted by flirting with his superiors. I thought the university would help, but it just made people think I was peculiar. That's why I wanted to go on this expedition so badly." She stopped, out of breath, and smiled nervously.

"What does your father think of this? Going off on another planet and entering the Service?" MacKinnie appeared to be relaxed, but he watched the girl closely, sure that she would be more hindrance than help. By her own account, her education at the university didn't seem to be anything which would be useful to the expedition.

"He gave his approval, Trader," she said stiffly. "I have all the necessary permissions, duly notarized. Are you afraid he might challenge you?" Her eyes flashed briefly, then she thought better of what she had said. "Oh, I didn't mean that. Please don't be angry with me, but I get so tired of having to ask father's permission for everything I do."

"I take it you would prefer some such equality of sexes nonsense like Therean."

"Not that equal, Trader. I've no wish for the life of a camp follower or a tavern girl. But—but surely there's a place for us in some honorable work. Not all of the secretaries in Haven were born in the charity wards. If freeladies can manage affairs for Magnates and Traders, why can't they own property themselves? Academician Longway says they did in the Old Empire. Why, there were even women in parliament and nobody thought anything of it."

"Do you believe that?"

"Well, it seems a little strange, but why not? We're not brainless, you know. Not all of us, anyway. Who managed the estates in Orleans when the men were off on campaign? You know as well as I do that not all of the wives and companions had guardians . . . if they could manage their property as long as the men were alive, even when they

were away for months, why couldn't they do it after their men were killed?"

MacKinnie laughed and turned his attention to his pipe. "Management is one thing, ownership is another, freelady Mary. If you own something, you can sell it. How far along is the cargo?"

She reached into her pouch and shuffled through papers until she found a bulky sheaf. "Here is the list. The items checked off have already been moved to the Imperial Landing dock."

"And the armor?"

"My lord Dougal has arranged for the Haven armory to prepare the chain mail. They seem to have found something which works, and one of their people will measure us this evening. The tanners will be along to measure us for the underpadding as well. And Duncan and Larue are forging swords to various patterns, and have sent over all the varieties they make. We've located crossbows, and they're making bolts for them."

"Duncan and Larue," MacKinnie mused. "I can remember when I was younger, there were whole regiments of cavalry armed with sword and pistol. Battles decided by them. There's one firm will profit by this expedition if we find something worth importing."

Hours later, Dougal arrived. "You will meet the Imperial Traders shortly," the policeman announced. "We have fresh clothing ready for you in your quarters. When you get changed, we'll go to Empire House." The policeman fell in beside MacKinnie, walking with him to his suite. "Be careful with these Imperial Traders. There are two of them, and they both look soft. Don't believe it, they didn't get rich by being stupid. Of the two, Trader Soliman is probably the actual leader although they claim to be equals. There is antagonism between the Imperial Traders and the Navy, but I wouldn't count on it too much. We don't know the real story, but the Traders seem to be with us against the Navy."

MacKinnie nodded. "As far as we know, the Navy wouldn't let us go on this trip if the Traders hadn't pushed them into it."

"Yes. They are eager for us to go. Quite generous in their terms. I'm not sure why."

"When a businessman wants to do you a favor," MacKinnie said, "I've found it a good policy to watch your

pocketbook." They arrived at the door to his suite, and Dougal waited outside.

MacKinnie found a dress kilt, doublet laced with gold and silver piping, and jewelry in the style of the great merchant princes of Haven. When he lifted the clothing, he found cartridges for his pistol laid discreetly on the bed. With something approaching relief, Nathan loaded the large caliber revolver and buckled it on before he realized how out of keeping it was with the rest of his clothing. A quick search of the small leather case he found on the bed with the kilts revealed a smaller dress pistol, its dragonwood handles inlaid with pearl and jade. He unloaded it and squeezed the trigger several times, pleased with the smoothness of its action. The proofmarks showed it to have been made by the Brothers of St. Andrew, reputedly the best gunsmiths on Samual and certainly the most expensive. Although he hesitated to carry a weapon he had never fired, MacKinnie buckled it outside his doublet, sadly leaving the big service pistol hanging in the closet.

Two sets of guards were on watch at Empire House. Outside the large walled courtyard, soldiers of King David's personal guard stood rigidly at attention. A junior officer in a tiny office just inside the gates examined their passes, collected their weapons apologetically, and directed them across the lava stone courtyard to the building itself. Two huge doors swung open as they arrived, and Dougal and MacKinnie were searched by Imperial Marines before being admitted to a large entry hall. Two more Marines in full battle dress lounged inside, and the entry hall seemed to be watched through gun ports at its end as well, although they could not see into the chamber beyond. They waited for several minutes, standing in silence in the presence of the Marines, until a young Naval officer appeared to escort them. MacKinnie recognized the officer as one of the three who had been at the party in the Blue Bottle, but if the man had noticed him there he gave no sign. They were led into a large room.

Two fat men in plain clothing, wearing trousers rather than kilts, undecorated coats, and only a few tiny jewels, their almost drab appearance contrasting strongly with MacKinnie and Dougal, rose languidly as they entered a large, plainly decorated room. The Naval officer waved

them in, looked sternly at the civilians for a moment, and left without a word.

As soon as he had left the room, one of the Imperials laughed. "God bless the Navy," he chuckled. "But may He grant that their lieutenants come of age soon. Good evening, gentlemen."

Dougal returned the greeting, then said formally, "Imperial Trader Soliman, I have the honor to present Trader Magnate MacKinnie, His Majesty's servant and manager for this expedition. Trader MacKinnie, Imperial Trader Soliman of the Imperial Capital, and as I understand it an officer of the Imperial Trading Association."

MacKinnie watched them narrowly and noted that the fat man made no movement to offer his hand. MacKinnie bowed slightly, was rewarded with an even smaller bow, and turned to the next man.

"Imperial Trader Renaldi, I present Trader Magnate MacKinnie," Dougal purred.

"My honor," Renaldi said. When Nathan began his bow, Renaldi matched him, bending to within a degree of MacKinnie but not quite as deep. The difference might have been measured with calipers.

"Gentlemen," Soliman said, "this room is at our disposal for the time. Let us sit and enjoy ourselves like civilized beings." He indicated couches drawn up in front of an open fire. As they sat, he continued, "Remarkable how peaceful it is to have a fire in the room with you. We haven't used them in the capital for so long; there are only a few houses with fireplaces. I can't remember when I last saw one lighted. I will have to have one installed on my return, a great aid to contemplation. Right, Chasar?"

"It would be pleasant," Renaldi said.

MacKinnie noted that both men spoke the language of North Continent almost perfectly, but with the careful pronunciation of words that indicated that it was a recently learned foreign tongue. Having never heard the Imperial language, he was not sure how close it would be to that used on Samual, although it would obviously be similar if Dougal were able to read the book his agents had stolen. Still, it must require some study, he thought, and therefore it followed that the Imperials either had some method of learning languages quickly, or that the Traders thought it

important enough to spend the time and effort learning the local tongue. Either alternative seemed interesting.

Soliman hovered around them, offering refreshments which he poured himself at a small stand at one side of the room before finally joining them before the fire. They sipped chilled wine from one of the islands of the Archipelago, and Soliman praised it highly. "I hope it travels well," he told them. "This will be worth a fortune on the capital. It is as good as the real Earth wines, or nearly so, and they command a price you would never believe. This is a very fortunate world, gentlemen, your wines and brandies are very close to those of Earth. And your Grua—do you think the peach plant would grow elsewhere? Ah, but it would never thrive as it does here. If only Earth had not been so devastated in The War." He lowered his voice confidentially. "That is why the Navy is so stern, you know. Their academy is there, and they grow up with the results of The War. They are determined that it will never happen again, even if they have to enslave the entire galaxy to see to it. And now that it is traditional for the Emperor to send the heir apparent to New Annapolis, the whole government is infested with their dedication." He sighed deeply.

"Have you visited Makassar yourself, Traders?" MacKinnie asked.

"Briefly, briefly," Soliman replied. "A desolate place, with little of value. Yet perhaps you will find something useful there," he added quickly. "Not so desolate as all that. And iron abounds there, although the costs of shipping will prevent you from importing it on any really large scale. There is little for us, but we believe you will find the voyage profitable. We did not venture from the city where the Navy has its base."

"Has the Navy decided on the details of the voyage?" Dougal asked. "Will your excellencies accompany us? A Naval officer, perhaps? Who will command the ship?"

"I have business beyond Makassar, but I will go with you there," Renaldi told them. "I am looking forward to the voyage, and Trader Soliman will guard my interests here." Renaldi's tone indicated that he and Soliman had tossed coins for the privilege, and Renaldi lost, although he was attempting to act in good humor. "As Soliman and I own the ship, it will be commanded by our own merchant captain and crew. One of the Imperial Navy officers will be

aboard as observer, to insure that none of their silly regulations are violated. We must caution you, Trader," he said, turning to MacKinnie, "they are very stern about their rules. Do not attempt to violate them, or you will never see your charming planet again. The Imperial prison world is not a pleasant place."

"No need to speak of such depressing matters," Soliman interrupted. "Better to think of the profits that can be earned. And of course, this will be the first time any of your people have been off this planet since The War, will it not?" His offhanded manner could not conceal his interest in the question.

Before MacKinnie could answer, Dougal asked, "And the language of Makassar? Will Trader MacKinnie find it difficult to deal with the natives?"

"The language is much like your own, or ours," Soliman answered. "Degenerate forms of Old Empire, with some local words. It requires study, but there will be no great difficulties. Tell me, Trader Magnate MacKinnie, are you looking forward to going off-planet?"

"With some anticipation," MacKinnie answered. "It will be a new experience for me." He emphasized the last word slightly, receiving an approving nod from Dougal. "But what are the conditions on Makassar? Are they likely to be friendly? Will we be allowed to wander about their cities, or must we remain in one place and let them come to us?"

"The Navy has no objection to your traveling about," Renaldi replied, "provided you take nothing more advanced than they already have on Makassar. Journeys on the planet with primitive equipment can be dangerous, you understand. The planet has no political system as even you on Samual might know it. Here, you have a few strong governments and many city-states in a complex of alliances—at least on the North Continent. On Makassar, there are dozens of kingdoms, free cities, small republics, leagues, and such, none very large by your standards. The kingdoms themselves are more fiction than fact, with independent baronies scattered about them. No doubt this is the result of their lack of technology, coupled with their primitive military organizations. All of this is huddled together on the coast of the one large continent. But it all comes to an end on a great grassland plain that stretches west for over two thousand miles. You will find none but barbarians there.

No one knows how many of them there are, they move around at will and raid the edges of the civilized lands. There are also island kingdoms of barbarians off the coasts of the civilized regions, and these stage raids even on the largest cities. You are welcome to wander the countryside, Trader MacKinnie, but do not be surprised if you are killed. The only safe place is in one of their large cities, and they are not entirely safe. The Imperial Navy maintains a fortified observation post, but no warships, so that even if you were able to signal the Navy, there would be little they could do to rescue you. Makassar is not altogether a healthy place."

"Ah, but there are never profits without danger," Soliman purred. "And who knows what you may find out among the kingdoms of the east? The Navy post is on the western coastline, and we know little about the planet."

MacKinnie nodded. "We will be very careful if we leave the Imperial fortress. Gentlemen, what I do not understand is why Makassar is so primitive. Why did they not retain any basic technology at all?"

"Ah," Soliman answered, "that is something we have speculated about without final answer. From our records, it was relatively unpopulated when The War began. The planet seems to have served mostly as a rest area for the Old Empire Navy and Civil Service . . . a park world, kept uninhabited and unspoiled. Little machinery. Few power installations. Then, as The War continued, for some reasons of strategy we do not know, parts of the planet were fortified. The fortifications were destroyed, and with them, much of the only city, although the old Palace seems to have survived. Then The War boiled on past Makassar. Perhaps there were not many people left on it. Many of them would be civil servants. Few artisans, and of the native inhabitants most would have been dedicated to service professions. Pleasure house operators. Prostitutes. What kind of civilization would you expect them to build, given the destruction of most of the machinery?" He paused thoughtfully, sipping his wine.

"And then too, much of the vegetation on the planet is native to Makassar. Not edible by us. Hardy stuff. A form of our wheat grows across the plains, but it is straggly stuff more fit for horses and cattle than men. Most of the crops of Makassar are Earth Stock; they have a very wide variety

of such foodstuffs but getting an edible crop takes constant attention. How natural for some of the population to become raiders, living off the cultivators! And so the cultivators divert part of their efforts into maintaining a warrior class. The warriors become an aristocracy. The warriors must have something to do in times of peace, and they will not toil in the fields. . . . Indeed, they can't, because the barbarians may sweep over them at any time, and the warriors must know their business if they are to do their job. The planet has known constant warfare, between the civilized people and the barbarians, among the warriors within the civilized area, between civilized cities and baronies. At least, we think that is what happens. Certainly they are fighting all the time."

"There was a period much like that on old Earth," Renaldi observed. "It would seem to have been ended by the development of scientific farming, which was a discovery of the Church. But Makassar has developed its own ideas of a church, not altogether to the satisfaction of New Rome."

"Ah, yes," Soliman added. "In addition to yourselves and the Imperial Navy observers, you will find one other group on Makassar. His Holiness has sent a bishop and a small group of missionaries to win these people back to the state religion. They are not having notable success."

Dougal finished his wine and set the glass down. In an instant, Soliman hauled his great stomach off the couch and gathered the other glasses on a copper tray, taking them to the cabinet to fill them. As he did, Dougal observed, "I am sure that Trader MacKinnie will be careful not to fall afoul of His Reverence the Bishop. May we here on Samual expect a similar visit soon?"

"Doubtless," Renaldi answered. "Of course, you seem to have developed along more orthodox lines than the people of Makassar, although the Church will find the multiplication of sects distressing. Still, you will find New Rome tolerant and willing to compromise. Do you anticipate much resistance to unification of the churches?"

"Not much," MacKinnie answered. "We had religious wars, over a hundred standard years ago. Not much zeal left on Prince Samual's World. The straight orthodox churches have been proclaiming their obedience to New Rome since the Imperial Navy landed, and the others don't

know quite what to make of it all. How much will the Empire interfere with local matters like religion anyway?"

"Oh, hardly at all, hardly at all," Soliman assured them. He served the wine carefully, and MacKinnie caught a stern look which Soliman passed to Renaldi. The latter quickly changed the subject, and the next half hour was passed discussing trade goods and the proposed cargo. They were interrupted by a knock at the door and, when Renaldi answered it, two Imperial Naval officers entered the room, strode over, and stood abruptly before MacKinnie.

◆ VI ◆

The contrast between the two officers could not have been greater. One was young, tall, of slight build, his hair an indescribable brown something like damp straw. The other was much older, lines of care etched around his expressionless eyes, his hair gray where there was hair at all. He was heavy and short, but he had in common with the younger man a look of hardness and dedication; yet, again in contrast to his junior brother in Service, there was none of the air of expectancy and anticipation the boy displayed.

"Trader MacKinnie." The older man said it factually. "I am Captain Greenaugh of His Imperial Majesty's Navy. I command the garrison here and the *Tombaugh* up there in orbit. This is Midshipman Landry, who will be my observer on this stupid voyage of yours."

MacKinnie stood and bowed slightly to Captain Greenaugh, even less to Landry, making no move to extend his hand when the others did not.

"Won't you sit down, Captain?" Soliman asked softly. "Some wine, perhaps? Grua?"

"No. Mr. Landry and I are on duty."

"Then please be seated," Soliman insisted.

"Very well." He turned his attention to MacKinnie. "As you are to be the local in charge of this expedition, sir, it is my duty to caution you that any infringement of Imperial regulations on the part of any member of this expedition will result in trial and punishment of both the crew member and you personally. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Captain," MacKinnie said. He elaborately inspected the large ring on his left hand, then looked up. "I understand perfectly. Tell me why you are so unhappy with me, if you would, please."

"I am not unhappy with you, sir. It is understandable that you would wish to travel in space. I am unhappy with Mr. Soliman for browbeating me into letting you do it."

"Browbeating, Captain?" Soliman said in an amused tone. "Why, I merely indicated—"

"You merely indicated the relevant passages in the Imperial regulations and reminded me of your influence on the capital. I don't give a damn about your influence, but I can't ignore the regulations. But I warn you, MacKinnie, if Mr. Soliman can be sticky about regulations, so can I. You'll get a copy of the pertinent sections before you go, but I decided to tell you personally to try to talk you out of this venture."

"If you please, Captain," Dougal asked, "why are you so opposed to our simple trading expedition? I thought it was Imperial policy to encourage trade among the worlds. Your ambassador has made it clear that the Empire will see to it that Prince Samuel's World profits highly through joining the Empire."

"Sir—" The captain paused and snapped his fingers.

"Lord Dougal, sir," the midshipman answered. "In the service of King David."

"Lord Dougal, I have all too few officers on this station. I am responsible for the protection of this world from all interference with its development and assimilation into the Empire. There's a nest of outies not twenty parsecs away; your King David is in one hell of a hurry to unify this planet against stiff opposition; the survey team keeps borrowing my people; and thanks to this expedition I have to send a junior officer off for the Saints alone know how long. There'll be reports to file, inspections to conduct. And for what? So Mr. Soliman here can add another mega-crown to his bank account, and you people can bring some kind of gimcrack new luxuries to absorb what little capital there is on Prince Samuel's World. I don't like it and I don't have to like it."

"Sorry you feel that way, Captain," MacKinnie said. Inwardly he sympathized with the man, as he did with any military man caught up in the details of government, until he reminded himself of the status of his home under the Empire, and the Navy's part in the subjection of Orleans. "But you said you understand our motives for wanting to

go. I hope we can get our work accomplished without causing you any trouble."

"You're damn right you will," Greenaugh snapped. "But before you make your final decision, let me acquaint you with the regulations. Item: you will be supplied with a basic Naval study of the planetary languages found in the chief city of Makassar. You will at no time teach any native your own language or the Imperial speech. All negotiations will be conducted in one of the planetary languages. Is that understood?"

MacKinnie nodded, suddenly realizing why all the Imperials he had met spoke a variant of the language of Haven. If you used a man's own language, you weren't likely to tell him anything he didn't know about. He wouldn't even have the words for most advanced concepts.

"Item: as Imperial subjects," Greenaugh continued, "you would ordinarily be entitled to protection from barbarians and arbitrary imprisonment. In your case we can't extend it. The garrison on Makassar is too small and there's no ship. If you get in trouble, you're on your own."

The captain took a small notebook-sized object from his pocket, touched a stud on the side of it and glanced at its face before returning it to his scarlet tunic. MacKinnie recognized it as one of the tiny Imperial computers, supposedly equivalent to hundreds of the best mechanical calculators in use in Haven's banks.

"Another thing, MacKinnie. Any technical innovation traced to you directly or indirectly can result in a charge of interference. If it results in any severe disruption of the development of that planet, you can get life imprisonment. Assessment of the effects of innovations and your responsibilities for them are up to the Emperor's Lord Judges."

"Why are the regulations so severe, Captain?" Dougal asked. "It is our understanding that the Empire intends only peace and friendship for its member worlds."

"Damn right. And sudden technical changes destroy both. I've seen worlds where some smart guy used a little technology and a lot of guts to set himself up as a planetary king. Half the population out of work, the other half in a turmoil. Took the better part of a fleet and a division of Marines to keep order on the place. It won't happen in my sector, Lord Dougal."

"The regulations are severe for a purpose," Renaldi added. "There is no telling what the effects of even the most innocent technical revelations can be. Even something as inherently benign as medicines can change the whole pattern of life. One place, back in the early days, the Church went in and taught them some practical medicine. Particularly how to save their children from infant diseases. They intended to give them some new agricultural and industrial techniques, but the people were not ready for them. They rejected the agriculture and industry, but they adopted the medicine. Within fifty standard years, there was famine all over that world. The results were horrible."

Greenaugh nodded. "Still were when I was young Landry's age. I served a hitch on an escort vessel conveying a provisions fleet. Silliest thing you ever saw. You ever think of how futile it is to try to ship food to a whole world that's starving? If you took every ship in the Navy and merchant service and put them on it, even if the food was free and waiting in the same star system, it wouldn't do any good. But the Emperor's sister got interested in the place and they had to have a try at 'helping.' Did no good at all. Population's thinned out a bit now on Placentia, but the planet'll never be the same."

"So you see," Soliman said softly, "it is important not to interfere. No matter what the reason. You can always say that things would have been worse if you did not interfere, but you can't know." He sipped his wine. "Besides, people will have adjusted to the evils they are accustomed to. Your attempts to help may introduce evils they don't know, which are always worse to bear and will probably retard their natural development."

"Thank you," MacKinnie said. "We will be very careful. What else must I know?"

"Still determined," Greenaugh said. "Thought you would be. Well, if I can't persuade you to give it up, I can't. Bring your crew here tomorrow for inspection. Midshipman Landry will tell you the rest of the details." Captain Greenaugh stood. "Just remember, MacKinnie, you were warned. The hell with it." He strode briskly out, followed by his midshipman.

MacKinnie started to speak to Dougal once they were in the cab and drawing away from Empire House, but Dougal

motioned him to silence. They returned to the Royal Guest House, where Dougal invited MacKinnie to shower, insisting that he do so in a manner that told MacKinnie it was an order. When he finished, he found fresh clothing, the elaborate Trader's kilts and doublet gone. Dougal joined him as he finished dressing, and MacKinnie noted that the policeman had changed as well.

"Sorry, Trader," Dougal said, "but we have found by bitter experience that the Imperials have devices so small you would hardly notice them which in some manner allow them to hear what you say over long distances. Our engineers did not believe it at first, but I tested the hypothesis by feeding them false information when we had reason to suspect. I proved it, and now my people have found one of the things. Not as big as the end of your thumb."

MacKinnie whistled. "Was there one attached to our clothing?" he asked.

"No, not this time. But the cab stood outside Empire House while we were there. They had ample time to do as they liked."

"Any idea of the range of these things?" MacKinnie asked.

"None. And as we do not know how they work, there is no guess. Some of our best physicists insist they have a theory of how one might be built, now that they know it is possible, but they say any such device would be very large and use much power. Still, it is a start." Deprived of a place to sit, the policeman locked his hands behind his back and paced the room nervously.

"By the way," MacKinnie asked, "what will our churches really do if their New Roman Church decides to take over here? I notice King David's bishops are thick as flies in Orleans."

"Better ours than the outlanders," Dougal snapped. "And all the more reason for the success of your mission, MacKinnie. Perhaps they are not as severe on the Classified worlds."

"Yeah." Nathan stood against one wall, patiently watching Dougal stride back and forth. "But after that interview I don't know any more about how to get those books—but they aren't books, are they? That Navy kid, the night he babbled about it all, said they were spools, whatever that

might be. That they could be made to print books, if we knew how to do it. Well, the sooner we start, the better chance we'll have. It's still a fool's errand, but by God at least I can feel useful again, win or lose!"

◆ VII ◆

Under MacKinnie's repeated urgings, the cargo was loaded in two days. Renaldi, anxious to depart so that he could, as he said, return to a civilized part of the galaxy, aided MacKinnie and his crew through the complexities of the Navy inspection. Nathan was surprised to discover the Navy paid little attention to him or his crew, but did inspect all the cargo to be shipped to Makassar. Young Landry was competent enough, but the civilian clerks assisting him had little concern for the affairs of the primitives. It was obvious to them that neither Makassar nor Prince Samuel's World was any threat to the Empire, and in particular none to their files. So long as the proper forms were properly filled out, the rest did not matter.

Three days after MacKinnie's first meeting with the Imperial Traders, they blasted off from Prince Samuel's World, rising on a jet of steam in the squat cylindrical merchant landing boat. The merchant craft was ugly, nothing like the slim Navy landing ships which floated near Imperial Dock, but it was serviceable, not built for atmospheric maneuvering, simply lifting weight.

There was a moment of terror when the jets cut and they were in orbit. The Samuelites had not been warned about free fall, and thought they were falling, falling endlessly. MacKinnie grimly faced death, reviewing the silly prayers the chaplains said over the dying. Somehow they did not seem silly at all. But then Landry told them all was well, responding to Mary Graham's near hysterical questions.

"We are in orbit," the midshipman said. "The sensation of falling is caused by—oh, the devil with it. The main thing you need to know is that we can't fall. Without

power, we'd never leave this orbit, just go sailing around forever like your moons."

The incident served to reassure MacKinnie about Kleinst. The young scholar had evidently known they were safe, but made no move to assure the others and thus break his cover as social historian. MacKinnie did not care for weaklings, but the young man seemed to have common sense as well as educated intelligence.

It took hours before they matched orbits with the merchant starship and were shown to staterooms, floating gently through the connecting passageways between the landing craft and the main ship, gingerly following the towlines the ship's officers had strung for them. Their staterooms proved to be minuscule cubicles, sparsely furnished at first sight, but when buttons were touched, various utilities such as beds and tables unfolded from the walls. Except for these, however, the Samualites were not permitted to examine any of the marvels of Imperial technology. Landry had explained that the landing jet worked by steam heated in something he would not explain, but this did not seem particularly helpful. MacKinnie was strapped into a chair, and slowly weight returned to him.

A ship's officer led him into the lounge, where some of the others were already assembled. The room was completely alien to MacKinnie. It was splendidly furnished, but in addition to couches, chairs, and tables on the deck beneath him, one large circular wall was also covered with carpeting and furniture, all bolted into place. The wall was not a complete disc, for a large central tube ran through it well over Nathan's head. More strange than the double furniture was the deck, which curved *up* both in front of him and behind him, yet, when he walked around it, it always felt as if it were *down*. After a few strides, he looked back to see that where he had been was now well above him. A few more steps brought him around the central column "overhead" to reveal Renaldi apparently hanging from the ceiling, relaxing in a large chair, a drink in his hand.

"Ah, Trader MacKinnie, please be seated. The others will be here shortly." Renaldi sipped his drink. "Pleasant to have weight again, is it not?"

"Yes." MacKinnie sat, again noting the eerie sensations in his inner ears whenever he made a sudden movement. "How have you accomplished this, uh, giving us weight?"

Renaldi looked startled for a moment, then smiled. "You truly don't know, do you? I'll wait until the others arrive and explain. Have a drink, Trader. We can only enjoy this for another hour before the captain gets under way, and we will all have to be in our staterooms for the transition."

MacLean, Longway, Kleinst, and Mary Graham joined them within moments. Midshipman Landry was a few minutes later, and explained that the guards and their leader were quartered on another deck with a lounge of their own. When all were seated, Renaldi told Landry, "The Trader is curious about our weight, Midshipman. Surely the Empire will not fall if we explain to our guests?"

"No, of course not, Trader," Landry said. "You see, gentlemen and freelady, the captain has caused the ship to rotate about its long axis. Thus, you are thrown toward the outside of the ship. When we begin our voyage, however, the ship will accelerate for long periods of time, and the rotation will cease. While we accelerate, you will feel weight, but 'down' will be that deck in front of you, and this deck will become a wall." The boy paused for a moment, then said suddenly, "If you have never been off-world, you have never seen your own planet. There are ports at that bulkhead there; allow me to open them for you."

Before any of the others could rise, Kleinst had charged across the deck, eagerly waiting until the port was uncovered. With a shrug, Landry uncovered several more, and the others took turns looking out. No one had the heart to remove Kleinst from his post.

They saw Prince Samual's World, although it did not appear to them as a sphere, as the orbit was not that high. Partly obscured by the clouds, they could nevertheless see much of the great mass of North Continent, a portion of the Major Sea, and several of the larger islands of the Archipelago. Except for masses of fleecy clouds, it looked exactly as globes and maps they had studied in school. The world below them appeared to be moving across their field of vision, however, and after it passed they would see the black of space, stars shining more brightly than they had ever believed possible.

For long moments there was no conversation. Finally, slowly, one by one they filed back to their seats, except for Kleinst, who stayed at the port until they were ushered to their staterooms for the beginning of the voyage.

MacKinnie was not allowed off the lounge deck except to go down a ladder to the deck below where Stark and the guards were quartered. His troops had far less luxurious quarters than his own, but somewhat more open space, and Hal was using the time to best advantage, training the men in unarmed combat, and experimenting with swords and shields from their personal baggage. The men seemed cheerful enough, and MacKinnie ordered a small daily ration of brandy for each man to relieve the monotony. He returned to his own quarters for the same prescription.

The days flowed by with a monotonous quality, relieved by their constant efforts to master the language of Makassar. MacKinnie and MacLean sent for wooden swords and put in an hour of practice daily, resulting both in bruises on their persons, and considerable respect for each other. They also trained with their men.

Longway and Mary Graham seemed to have a knack for languages, particularly the Academician, who passed from the main dialects to lesser ones he found in supplementary sections of the loose-leafed books the Imperial Navy had supplied. They were informed that the books would be collected before they made planetfall, and MacKinnie held his breath at the mention, but nothing else was said about them.

Eleven days out from Samual, they were again strapped into their chairs in their staterooms, experiencing another hour of weightlessness before normal weight returned. By constant pestering of Landry whenever the boy joined them, MacLean induced him to tell them that during the first part of the journey they had accelerated, and were now decelerating in order to enter faster than light travels. When he received only quizzical looks from the others, Landry explained further.

"There's two kinds of drive, normal space and hyperspace. In normal space, the fusion drive works into a Langston Field releasing photons which propel the ship. Never mind, I'm not allowed to explain it to you anyway. But this pushes the ship right along, and we experience acceleration from it. The hyperspace drive works on a different principle. It only works along the pseudo nuclear force path between two stars. I don't suppose that means anything to you. There are force paths between the stars similar to the forces that hold atomic particles together. They

fade off rapidly in an exponential relation to distance—oh, hell, that doesn't tell you anything either. What's important is that the drive won't work if you're near a sun or a planetary body. You have to get a long way out from the primary to get into hyperspace, and it kicks you out when you get close to anything. So once we get decelerated to a speed not too great relative to the sun we're leaving, we can get into the hyperspace path between stars. In there we can go faster than light."

Landry glanced about him, and Kleinst quickly assumed the blank stare typical of the others. The midshipman scratched his head, muttered that that was all he was allowed to say anyway, and asked for another drink. MacKinnie noted that the boy would usually have exactly three drinks, and would always leave their company as soon as he had consumed the third one. He also noticed that the midshipman seemed to be a great deal more talkative when Mary Graham was present, and decided she might be useful after all.

Days were measured by the ship's clocks, which were geared to a standard day somewhat shorter than that of Prince Samuel's World, as Samuel's years were slightly shorter than those of Earth. MacKinnie noted that the Imperials tended to use many expressions and physical devices traditional from Earth, and once Landry had told Mary Graham that this was because the Old Empire had been directly based from the mother world. His Majesty was determined that the new Empire would be as great as the old, but more permanent.

On the twenty-second day, they were once again warned to go to their cabins, and later each was personally inspected by Landry. "Don't panic, no matter what you think you see or hear," he warned each. "Hyperspace transition affects different people different ways. Just be calm and everything'll be all right."

An hour after the boy left them, MacKinnie was in a cold sweat, waiting with nothing to do. He hoped that the others would remember their instructions. As he inspected his mechanical watch for the twentieth time, there was a strong thrumming sound which seemed to permeate the ship. This went on for several minutes, then there was an imperceptible lurch, as if intolerable acceleration had been

applied for a time so short that it had no chance to affect them.

At once, Nathan was aware of a sensation of intolerable *wrongness*. He looked at the walls and other now-familiar objects, and they seemed the same in every detail, yet somehow different. Strange sensations crawled across his scalp. The thrumming sound was gone, but something of it lingered, and it did not sound like anything he had ever heard before.

Then there was a moment of silence. It was too brief to be completely perceived, but it seemed to be a silence which had a tangible quality, a deadening effect that sucked up sound, and perhaps heat and light and everything else. Then there was the sound again, which rose and died away, and after that weight returned, oriented toward the circular section which MacKinnie had come to think of as the walls of his cabin. With weight, his universe returned almost to normal, although, somewhere inside his brain, there was a tiny terrified awareness that everything was *wrong*.

The transition out of hyperspace was not as severe a wrench as the entrance, and as soon as it was over the feeling of wrongness was gone. "Down" became the main deck again, and with the Coriolis distortions gone it was no longer important to be careful not suddenly to change the height of the upper body with respect to the outer skin of the ship. MacKinnie noted that his crew seemed more relaxed, and redoubled the training with Makassar weapons.

The journey from their point of entry into normal space to Makassar took another twenty-four days, with the transition from acceleration to deceleration taking place in the middle of the night. They were gathered in the main lounge, with Stark acting as a serving man, on the "afternoon" of the last day when the hatch opened and they were joined by Landry and Renaldi.

"We have nearly arrived, gentlemen," Renaldi announced importantly. "I have requested Midshipman Landry to allow you to see the object of all your attention, and he has graciously consented. It will be visible through the ports over there." As Renaldi spoke, Landry removed the locks from the observation ports and opened them.

Makassar was a tiny ball, hanging in the dark of space. The most prominent feature, easily visible even from their distance, was a pair of enormous ice caps. Much of the

world between them was water, with a single continent, mostly in the Southern Hemisphere, swimming westward like an enormous whale. Two large islands, almost continental in size, hung above it in the Northern Hemisphere, and the shallow seas were dotted with smaller islands. There were two distinct colors to the seas where the sun shone upon them, and Kleinst remarked that it must be due to a dramatic difference in depth. Deep water was mostly in the Northern Hemisphere, with the continent surrounded by the pale blue marking much shallower depths.

"It's a lovely world," Landry remarked, standing next to MacKinnie and pointing out some of the more visible features. "Smaller than Earth. Gravity is about .87 that of Earth, which makes it about, oh, let's see." He withdrew his small computer and wrote directly on one face of it with an attached stylus. "I make it .79 the gravity you're used to, Trader. Your men are going to be very strong compared to the locals down there. That might be useful."

"It might indeed," MacKinnie muttered. "Are those ice caps normal in size? I seem to recall our maps of Samual show much smaller ones."

"Makassar is a bit colder than Samual. Orbit's more eccentric, enough to make some climatic differences. The inclination of the planet is also greater. Turns out it's summer—by planet inclination—in the Southern Hemisphere when the planet's farthest from the sun. I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised if the two big islands in the north were uninhabitable, or nearly so. It would be pretty cold there. You're arriving in the middle of spring on the continent."

MacKinnie recalled the maps they had been given. Except for a few sea trader towns, the entire population of Makassar was concentrated on the main continent, at least as far as the Imperials knew. The maps weren't very accurate, but at that they'd be the best obtainable.

They watched the planet grow larger and larger as the ship approached. Each member of the expedition stood in silence, lost in his particular fantasy, dreaming of other worlds. Then the alarm sounded, and they scrambled for the landing boat.

The Imperial base was located in a small trading town by a great bay at the western end of the planet's single conti-

ment. A scattered chain of islands led across the shallow seas to a series of large islands from which trading ships and sometimes pirate raiders came. Because of their depredations, the area around Jikar was largely uninhabited, which suited the Imperials well. Their presence in the town was disturbance enough; they had no desire to be seen by any large number of the people of Makassar.

Navy House was crude, a stone building constructed by the locals, and there were no Marine Barracks. Whatever defense the Imperials had installed was not obvious to MacKinnie as his little group approached. Behind them, the landing craft lay in the water, guarded by its crew and a group of hired locals.

Many of the locals were small men, brown and dark, reminding MacKinnie of the two officers aboard the trading starship. Their clothing was crude, some of the men wearing trousers, others dressed in long gownlike robes which hung to their knees. In sharp contrast to the passengers of the starship, everyone seemed to have a beard of some kind, although many of them were not well developed. Their hair was long, and it was obvious at a distance that they did not often practice bathing.

In the hundred yards from the docks to Navy House MacKinnie's party was approached by at least ten beggars, some of them proudly displaying truly horrible disfigurements. They shouted and pleaded, and MacKinnie was pleased to see that he was able to understand them reasonably well. The practice aboard the ship had been useful for learning the language, even if he did not care much for his first encounter with it. Stark tossed out a few copper coins, allowing them to escape as the beggars cursed and fought for the money.

They were permitted to stay in Navy House for a few days only, and MacKinnie's officers eagerly explored the small town, talking to the inhabitants and investigating the possible marketable goods for sale. At the end of the third day on the planet, they assembled in the one large room of the headquarters building. Renaldi, as usual, sat by the fire, a glass in his hand.

"Your Excellency, we have been unable to find a single thing worth transportation to Prince Samuel's World. We are beginning to think there is nothing here," MacKinnie

began. "Where are the spices, and exotic cloth, and the rest that you and your partner described?"

Renaldi laughed. "For all I know," he said thickly, "there may not be another valuable thing on the planet. Soliman cleans a place out pretty good when he gets the chance."

"But-but," stammered MacKinnie, "if there's nothing here, we're ruined. You've charged us an enormous price for transportation to this place. Surely there's something worth buying. How are we going to recover our expenses?"

"You probably won't. We never promised you a profit, Trader." Renaldi pronounced the title as if it were an insult. "In our business, you have to take chances. Perhaps you took an unwise chance."

"But we took it on your advice!" MacKinnie snapped, then changed to a pleading tone. "Surely you know of some way we can make this profitable for King David. Surely with your experience you can help us."

"Unlikely." Renaldi drank deeply. "But whatever it is you are to do, be quick about it. The ship leaves in three days."

"Three days! Why, that's impossible. You promised us sufficient time to arrange for trade, even to organize a permanent company here. We can't begin to arrange for trade in three days. You knew that before we started." MacKinnie looked down at the impassive face and had an urge to tear out the small moustache by the roots. He restrained himself and said, "I'm going to complain to the Navy. They'll make you honor your contract."

"Our contract, Trader, says that you will be brought here, and returned at a time mutually convenient. The ship leaves in three days. That's convenient to us. And you've nothing to complain about; we're going to two other star systems before we go back to your miserable planet. You won't be permitted out of your quarters while we're there, but think of the broadening travel you'll get."

"It is not mutually convenient if one party does not agree," Longway said softly. "We may have few rights, Imperial Trader Renaldi, but I suspect Captain Greenaugh will enforce those we have. He did not seem to be overly fond of Imperial Traders, Your Excellency. We will not leave in three days."

Renaldi shrugged. "Suit yourselves. The next ship we could schedule through this miserable system will arrive at

this port in something over a standard year. If you wish to wait for it, I will have the Navy compute the exact number of local days before it arrives. You can wander this poverty-stricken bail until you tire of it." He climbed with an effort and filled his glass from an open bottle on the great table which dominated the room. MacKinnie noted that the bottle was handblown, and crudely at that, but of an interesting color. Renaldi seemed to be fond of the local liquor.

"Three days or over a year," Nathan observed. "Neither is very convenient."

"Those are the times convenient to us. Which do you choose?" Renaldi backed away from MacKinnie nervously as the soldier approached him, fingering his belt as if grasping for a weapon which was not there. He managed to get back to this seat, where he regained his composure. "Come, now, we never promised you more. And think of the adventures you can have, wandering about on a planet of swineherds." He laughed for a moment, saw MacKinnie's face, and stopped short.

Nathan turned to MacLean and said, "Go get the lieutenant in command of this post. We may as well find out just what else this man can do to us." The group waited in a strained silence for several minutes before MacLean returned with Midshipman Landry and another officer.

Lieutenant Farr was a short, dark man who resembled the planetary locals. MacKinnie wondered idly if he were chosen for the post for his ability to blend in with the rest of the population. Nathan explained the situation, and Farr and Renaldi conversed in the Imperial language for several minutes, speaking too rapidly for even Longway to understand. Renaldi became more and more excited, but the lieutenant spoke with a deadly calm. Although he did not have the intense, dedicated look which MacKinnie had noted was common of the Navy men, he never seemed to smile either. Instead, his manner was coldly official with perhaps the merest trace of relief from the boredom of being commanding officer to a post without a mission.

When the conversation was finished, Farr turned to MacKinnie, speaking very slowly. "If he is correct about the details of the contract your king signed, then he can legally do this. We could examine it for you if you'd like, but it might take some time. There are no legal officers on this post."

MacKinnie canted his head to one side, realized the gesture was meaningless to the lieutenant, and said, "Thank you, no. I'm sure they drafted it carefully enough." He seized a glass, filled it and drained it off. "Is there any chance of our finding a decent trading community on this planet, Lieutenant? And will we be allowed to go and search for one?"

"The only place I can suggest is the main city, Batav. It's said to be wealthy, although what the locals mean by wealth is not likely to impress you. It is all you will find."

MacKinnie nodded. "Then I suppose we must go there. I can't return to King David without something to show for his investment."

"There are difficulties," Lieutenant Farr said slowly. "The Empire cannot transport you there. The entire countryside is in a state of war, and it is not likely you will survive to reach Batav. We can give you no protection. . . ." The officer paused. "But if you must go, perhaps you will find another party of Imperial citizens who set out for Batav. A group of churchmen defied our advice and departed months ago. We have not heard from them, and His Holiness will insist on knowing what became of his missionaries. If you find what became of them, it will make the job easier."

MacKinnie looked at the officer, realizing that if the Navy could not send troops to search for missionaries, it would never attempt to protect a group of colonial traders. Prince Samuel's World seemed far away, lost in the swirl of stars above them, and he knew he would never see it again. One thing, he thought, at least they would have no way of knowing what he intended doing at the old library, if he ever reached it.

"We'll look for them, Lieutenant," Nathan said. "Now, I suppose we must find quarters in the town, so that we can organize our expedition. I dare not return to my own world without a profit until I have done everything I can do." He turned to Renaldi. "As for you, I understand that the Empire preserves local customs in so far as this is possible. I will live for the day when you return to Prince Samuel's World and I can meet you on a field of honor. Presuming, of course, that you have any." When Renaldi made no reply, MacKinnie stalked away.

◆ VIII ◆

The tavern reminded MacKinnie of the Blue Bottle. Even the name was translatable into something close to Blue Wineglass, and it reminded MacKinnie of home. Although it was only an hour past noon, the place was full.

Blatt, Master Tanner, and Hoorn, Master of Drapers, were glad enough to enjoy MacKinnie's hospitality: They finished the first bottle of wine in silence, savoring the rich-flavored concoction the tavern keeper made from the sour local product. It sold at a price almost no one in the village could afford, making MacKinnie a popular man. Nathan watched the two men, once pleasantly stout but now disfigured with the folds of flesh which marked malnutrition. Other townsmen sat in brooding silence, many of them at tables empty of bottles. The tavern keeper had served his tithe, and they had no more credit; but there was no place else to go.

"Is Jikar often like this?" Nathan asked when the bottle was done at last. "Your pardon, Masters, but it would seem that no village could survive long in this state, even one blessed with harbor and fields."

Hoorn cleared his throat and glanced suggestively at the bottle, too proud to ask for more. MacKinnie signaled with a careless wave and was rewarded with a burst of activity from the tavern keeper. Except for a small boy of no more than eight years, MacKinnie had seen no one in service to the tavern, yet it was a large place, obviously once a prosperous one. As the new bottle was poured, Hoorn sighed deeply.

"Since *they* came," he whispered. Then in more normal tones, although still keeping his deep voice low, he added, "Our war fleet was destroyed when *they* landed. The pirates

will not accept tribute from Jikar, we have killed too many of them in battle. Our city is small, Trader, but we were once proud. Now what is there for us? The harbor is closed by the pirates, and the barbarians ravage our fields. Yet *they* will do nothing. They cannot interfere, they tell us." The Draper's voice rose to a shout tinged with tears. "In the name of the Immortal God, have they not interfered already? They have been the ruin of Jikar!"

"Aye," Blatt muttered. "Our fleet and our army were the same. Both lost. The pastures are burned off, the fields trampled. Oh, we are safe enough within the walls. *They* will not allow the town to be sacked. We could wish that they would. Then our young men might take courage and be ready to fight again instead of huddled at the steps of the church to receive alms they once gave, or drinking the tavern keeper's tithe before it can reach the priest. A curse on outlanders." He lifted his glass to toast damnation before he realized who his host was. "Pardon, Trader. You do not seem like one of *them*."

MacKinnie nodded absently, considering his predicament. On the next day, the landing ship would rise, leaving his crew stranded on the planet, but he had yet found no way to leave Jikar. Just outside its walls barbarian hordes prowled, ready to plunder anyone foolhardy enough to take either road, north or south. Outside the harbor, patrols of pirates based on the islands across the great shallow bay called the Sulawa Sea enforced the blockade of the port, demanding not only tribute but the head of the Master of each Guild in Jikar. It was to the credit of the people of the town that no one had ever been heard to speak in favor of dealing with the pirates, except two ancient Guildmasters who claimed they had few years left anyway. Their own councils refused to consider the proposal.

He was told that in the lands beyond the barbarians, their deep penetration into what was once civilized territory created chaos, and no one would answer for the safety of a small party setting out to the Old Empire city nearly two thousand miles away.

The Imperials had very little information about Batav. In hopes of finding a local who had journeyed there, Nathan approached the Guildmasters who ruled Jikar, only to find that few townsmen had ever traveled farther than a few hundred miles at best, and most of those had died in the

brief futile resistance to the Navy. To the Navy, the loss of three hundred and ninety locals was a regrettable incident. To Jikar, it was ruin.

"God is angry with you, Trader," Hoorn said. "A few years ago, Jikar was the busiest port on the coast of the west. Out here we don't have large cities as they do in the east, but there were over five thousand souls in our town, and as many more on the lands around. Trading was good. We had no need of lordlings to fight our battles for us. We were free men, bound to no one, our own protection. The Guilds rule here, not some boneheaded warrior capable of nothing but mounting with sword and lance."

"You speak too hard of the men of iron," Blatt said. The wine was warming him to the conversation, recalling pleasanter times he had been in the tavern. He lifted a blue tinted blown goblet, the kind which gave the place its name, and drank deeply. "They do nothing but fight, true, yet I think Jikar would never have been free if there were not the marshlands to our east. It was our curse that the iron men died in plague, their strongholds fell, and the hordes swept past. Before that we had only to fight the few raiders who passed the great houses like thieves in the night. When their full force fell on us we knew it."

"Knew it and won!" Hoorn shouted. "Ah, Trader, had you seen it. Our young men, the sailors from our fleet and the boys of the Guilds, standing with pikes leveled, never giving ground, while the barbarians dashed themselves against us. Glory to the Lord, the field was red with their blood. We took a hundred horses and many ayuks for our own." Evidently horses and cattle had been brought to Makassar by the Old Empire. Now both ran wild across the plains, hunted by local predators unless protected by men, but managing to survive.

Some of the barbarians also rode the ayuk, a native beast which resembled a moose with long semi-prehensile claws and an elongated prehensile snout. It lived on the hive-rat, warmblooded egg layers about seven inches long which lived in great colonies with only a few retaining active sexual powers. The hive-rat was one of the most dangerous creatures on Makassar, although it was not carnivorous. It ate the stone-hard local woods with ease, burrowed the ground, and found any plant life edible by humans quite nourishing. It would fight when trapped, and when one was

wounded, hundreds of them came to its aid in blind fury. More than one man had died through being caught by them in the open.

"A great victory." Blatt nodded. "One which Master Hoorn could tell you more of, for he commanded for the Guilds that day. Aye, we broke them, but we could not pursue them. Most escaped. Had we forty of the iron men to give chase, the victory would have kept the barbarians from our gates for a hundred years."

"Ah." Hoorn drank again. Then he smiled and shrugged. "We can agree the warriors know how to fight. Yet I have in my day seen them turned back from the gates of a city like ours. In open battle. The young men stood to their pikes, and the iron men Master Blatt is so fond of split about them on both sides, afraid to attack. They took no tribute from that city." As Hoorn finished, a young man, tall for Makassar, once quite muscular but now thin like the others, strode arrogantly across the room, his head high in contrast to the locals MacKinnie had seen. He could have been twenty-five Earth years, but he looked younger, and his clothes were subtly different. His trousers were of the rough texture worn by the villagers, but the jacket and cloak were of finer stuff, and Nathan noted that there were discolored lines at the collar, as if it had once been trimmed with something now lost. He recalled that cloth of gold collars and bands were the marks of the Guildmasters.

The tavern keeper gave the newcomer the glass of cheap wine and thick slice of bread which he served to all daily in lieu of his tithe to the church. The man began to eat without a word.

"That's who you should talk to," Hoorn told MacKinnie. "We should have sent for him. If there is a man in Jikar who can tell you what you'll find beyond the river and forest, Brett can. Or that warrior friend of his."

MacKinnie studied the dark features of the man in question and approved. He might be down on his luck, Nathan thought, but he wasn't defeated. Despite his youth he was more akin to the Guildmasters than the tavern loafers. "Call him over," he said in a moment of decision.

"Singer," Hoorn called. "At your pleasure join us. Our noble friend is a willing host."

MacKinnie learned that Brett was originally from the eastern part of the continent, and had made his way slowly

across the great land mass, carrying tales and songs. He declined to discuss his ancestry, although Blatt confided privately that the village suspected he was of barbaric descent. Sometimes young men of the barbarian tribes fell into the hands of townsmen or peasants, who kept them as slaves until they either killed them or their captives ran away. In Brett's case, if the speculation was true, he had probably been captured at an early age, for he spoke several civilized languages perfectly.

Other singers had passed through Jikar at one time or another, but Brett was unusual. He had not come on foot, but riding a great war horse, and with him came another about his age, not a singer, but one of the iron men, dressed in armor with a pennant on his lance. He made no secret that he was displaced from his lands to the south, and now rode with the singer across the world of Makassar, selling his services. When Brett returned, MacKinnie questioned him about his friend.

"You do not travel alone, singer?" he asked, pouring more wine.

"Not for a year. I teach Vanjynk poetry, he teaches me to fight. Now we are both good at both trades and the living is better." He stared ruefully about the tavern. "Or was. But we will not leave our bones here for Master Blatt to put to earth."

"You would like to leave Jikar, then?" MacKinnie asked.

"Trader, we would pay the man who allowed us to fight for him, be it only that he had sufficient men to cut through the maris. But the maris will stay until they have eaten and burned everything they can find, and as they are not so stupid as the Guilds hope, that will not be before the snows. Then they will leave. At that they will bring you a blessing, Guildmasters."

"What blessing could a horde of barbarians—maris, you called them?—what blessing can they bring?" Blatt stood, his wide shoulders almost blotting out the younger man, his great hands, hardened with brine and tanners' liquor, on his hips.

"Calmly, calmly, you will alarm our host and the wine will stop," Brett said softly. There was a hint of threat to the voice, a tone one did not take with Guildmasters. "I call them maris because that is what they call themselves. And the blessing is the destruction of the hive-rats. There will be

few enough of them when they move on—in fact, that is why they will move on. The ayuks must eat many of them, which keeps the maris moving about the great plains. When the ayuks don't eat, the maris don't eat. Even here they'll finish off all your Earth crops before the ayuks are done with the hive-rats."

MacKinnie listened with interest. "The maris live off their ayuks?"

Brett looked at him in puzzlement. "Your speech is unlike any that I have heard in any land," he commented. "Yet you are not native here, where the maris have not been. Where have you lived that you don't know about them? Ah, the cities of the mountains of the north. Well, know, northman, that the plantain of the great flatland is as poisonous to us as most of the other plants on Makassar. It must be true as the priests say, we came here from another star long ago, else why would God have put us where we cannot eat? But the ayuk can eat the plants, and men can eat the ayuk, and drink her milk and even as the maris do, drink the blood of their steeds. Their horses fare better, eating grasses which grow among the plantain, and some maris live from their horses alone, but the ayuk is better. It is not enough, though. Fed nothing else, they waste and die, even as these men here. In your north, you eat the tallgrass, which they say came from Earth, and you eat the grotka. But did you eat nothing but grotka, and the swimmers from the sea, you would die also."

MacKinnie nodded. The Imperials had told him of the dietary problems of Makassar. Most of the animal life was edible, but not all of it, and little of the plant life except that which came originally from another planet. The local plants stored up various metals, which gave them their hardness, but also made them deadly. The local animals separated out the metal, although some like the hive-rat which ate not only fruits and grains but woody stems were deadly. All lacked essential vitamins. Listening to the singer, he had an idea.

"I wish to return to the mountains of the north," Nathan said. His maps showed that Batav was nestled on the side—the wrong side from Jikar, of course—of the mountain range which ran down the great peninsula jutting from the north edge of the continent. The mountains then curled

west before they dwindled away to hills, still high enough to form a natural barrier to the great plains.

"North?" Brett asked incredulously. "How long has it been since you came from there? But you must have come by ship. The land route has been closed for two years, Trader. The High King of the Passes is dead, and the others fight for his place. No life is safe, no judges sit, and the people make do as best they can. With your wealth, you might hire enough men to take you south. With me to show the way you could fight through the maris and come to the city-states and kingdoms of the Kepul. But not to the north, Trader. We could never pass the Sangi." Brett tossed off the glass of wine, then waved at a smaller man, fair-haired and contrasting with the singer in every dimension, yet bearing the same manner of confidence. The newcomer came forward slowly.

"Trader," Brett said, "this is Vanjynk, the best friend a wanderer ever had, tragedy as it is that he must roam the lands." Brett poured his friend wine without asking.

Vanjynk nodded to MacKinnie and sat in silence. MacKinnie noted that he was younger than Brett, possibly by as much as two of the local years. Yet he was born of the nobility, while whatever Brett's origin it had not been in an iron and stonewood fortress. The relationship between the men must have been complex.

The others explained to the young warrior what MacKinnie had in mind. "But there is no way through the Sangi," Brett finished. "Or none that I can see."

"Nor I." Vanjynk drank slowly and deliberately, as he seemed to do everything else. "You will not find enough men to take the trail through the Forest. The coast is closed. I do not know the sea."

"The sea," Blatt snorted. "Were there a way by sea half the town of Jikar would be off trading. All your gold will not pay the pirates, Trader, and there is but one warship left in Jikar."

"There is a ship here?" MacKinnie asked. "Is it for sale?"

"For sale?" Hoorn thought slowly. "It belongs to the Ironsmiths. There is little in Jikar that is not for sale, including our daughters' virtue. I could save you money in the purchase, for a fee to my Guild."

"Not allowed." Blatt spoke positively. "To sell a man

that which sends him to his death is not allowed. Go back to your clothing, Hoorn, the Guilds cannot plunder this man from the stars."

Nathan noted the sudden look of interest Brett tried to hide, then turned to Blatt. "I buy it willingly, Master Tanner." Although he said nothing to show it, the man's honesty affected him more than MacKinnie wanted to admit to himself. "To return to our homes with nothing would be not only our ruin, but that of many others. Go with Guildmaster Hoorn and buy that ship for me, and we will do well by both your Guilds. Freeman Brett, Vanjynk, I will pay you for your advice, whether you come with me or not; but we are taking that ship out of the harbor of Jikar if every pirate on Makassar is lying in wait out there."

◆ IX ◆

MacKinnie and his party were inspecting their ship when the landing boat rose from the harbor and vanished from sight in the low clouds above. Nathan was not sorry to see it go. He had far too much work to waste time playing a role, pleading with Renaldi or demanding rights from the Navy. The ship was not in condition to be launched.

Midshipman Landry had left with Renaldi. The lieutenant in command of the Makassar station decided that the Navy could ill spare one of its young officers for a year, and it was more than likely that MacKinnie's party would never be heard from again. Landry was ordered to go to the next port and send a message torpedo back to Captain Greenaugh for further instructions. Before Renaldi left, the lieutenant also made it clear that the Navy was displeased with his treatment of MacKinnie, and would insist that no matter how remote Nathan's chance of survival was, Renaldi was obligated to provide transportation back to Prince Samuel's World. MacKinnie was privately convinced that the lieutenant was more upset about Landry's wasted time than the injustice of the situation, as Greenaugh had been led to believe the boy would be gone only a few months. However, he was now guaranteed passage home if he could return to Jikar.

Mary Graham remained on Makassar. She pointedly refused to be on the same ship with Renaldi without MacKinnie's protection, and she was legally correct by Haven law and custom. This was upsetting enough, but Nathan found she also insisted on accompanying the party on its expedition to Batav, and nothing MacKinnie could say would convince her that she could not go.

"What did you expect me to do here?" she insisted. "I knew there would be danger."

"Freelady," MacKinnie replied coldly, "my lord Dougal sent you without my request. We thought you could remain at the trading offices we expected to establish in the Imperial port and act as our agent. We see that would be useless now, but you will be a great inconvenience aboard ship. How can we provide you proper quarters? To be blunt, what of sanitary arrangements? This is madness."

Madness or not, she insisted, and was now busily clambering about the dockyard, following MacLean and hastily scribbling notes as the seaman happily inspected the craft. A gang of young locals, glad of employment, stood by under the supervision of the Shipwright Guildsmen. The Shipwrights had lost heavily in the brief and pointless battle with the Imperial Navy, and were willing to allow anyone in the town to work on MacKinnie's outfitting provided that they paid dues to the Guild and worked under its Masters. From the crowd inside and outside the dockyard, MacKinnie thought half the able-bodied men of the town were there, hoping for employment.

The boat itself was hardly impressive. Only about thirty yards long, it was drawn up out of the water on a primitive ways. MacKinnie saw a round bottomed boat with a small skeg running her length. The stem and sternpost were carried up high out of the water, and a great platform was constructed across the stern. On top of that was a cabin. The rest of the boat was undecked, with platforms for rowers along its sides. Over a hundred men could sit on the two sweeps half decks, but there was no chance of hiring that many for a long voyage, even if the pirates were not outside the harbor. At present, MacKinnie had no crew at all except his original expedition, although Brett and Vanjynk were on his payroll and probably would come if they thought there was a chance of getting through.

After MacLean inspected the vessel, MacKinnie took him to a sheltered space to hold a conference. Hal Stark stood by to be sure they were not overheard, and MacKinnie wasted no time. "Can we make it? It's vital that we get to Batav if we have to swim."

MacLean sucked on a pipe casually for a moment. Smoking did not seem to startle the villagers although they were never seen to smoke, but MacLean's lighter was for-

bidden on the planet. MacKinnie wondered how he had got it past the thorough inspection Mr. Landry conducted before they were allowed to unload their goods from the landing ship. The pipe gurgled for a few moments more before MacLean said, "Need some modifications to get that far. From what I've heard, this is sheltered water around here, but north a ways there's nothing to the west for four thousand miles. Big waves will come across there in a normal westerly. Sure as hell be bad in a storm."

"So we could make it?" When MacLean nodded, MacKinnie went on, "How big a crew will you need?"

"Way I intend to modify her, not much more than you've got if everybody lends a hand. Few locals would help if you can hire them. I'm going to make her sail, Trader. She's got that damned stubby mast on her; I'll yank that and put in a taller one. Stay it properly, deck the boat over and put some iron ballast in her. Nothing the Imperials can object to. And I'll mount leeboards."

The term meant nothing to MacKinnie, but he'd find out soon enough. "Sail up high will tip it over, won't it?" he asked.

MacLean shook his head. "Ballast will fix that, I hope. She's beamy enough, should be good for stability. I like the hull sections. They've ridden out some mean storms in those things. That big iron ram on the prow goes back almost amidships; it's the closest thing they've got to a keel." He sucked on his pipe. "You can tell there's a lot of shallow water here, and those weird tides from the two moons, must run aground a lot. That's why the boats have nearly flat bottoms. Beach them for the night usually, I expect. We can get there, Trader, but I don't know about the pirates."

MacKinnie nodded. "Suggestions?"

"Just fix the boat and hope we can outrun them. Sure as hell can't outfight them. Oh, this is a bigger boat than most of the pirate stuff. Faster. Warship, one of the best on the planet, I'm told. But there's a hell of a lot of pirates. Without a full crew, one of their ships boards us, we're dead."

"Yeah. Well, we cross that when it happens. How long to get the work done?" MacKinnie was impatient. Now that he was no longer watched by the Imperials every moment he had control over his actions again, and the new sense of purpose drove him impatiently. He glanced about himself,

took out his pipe, and borrowed MacLean's lighter to fire his pipe. "How'd you get this past?" he asked.

"This?" MacLean looked at the lighter as if he had never seen it before. It was an ordinary flint and steel device, not as elegant as the flameless units the Imperial Navy carried. "I just walked out with it. Landry saw it, but he didn't say anything."

MacKinnie nodded slowly. The lighter was primitive enough by Empire standards to be classed with Makassar technology. He wondered how many more Samualite devices were strange to Makassar but could be overlooked by the Navy. He asked again about the time to complete the ship.

"Not much. Few days, with luck. Decking's the hard part, but there's a lot of hands to do the work. Time you get the provisions and goods ready to board, we'll be on our way."

It took two of the local weeks. Although the Makassar day was somewhat longer than Samual's and quite a bit longer than the standard Earth day, MacKinnie noticed that he and his crew soon became accustomed to living by local time, which was measured by sundials or not at all. The Church insisted on Sabbath keeping, and in addition seemed to proclaim at least one Holy Day each week. These, and the inexperience of the locals with the construction methods MacLean insisted on caused the first delays. Then when the ship was completed, the second week was consumed in obtaining cloth suitable for sails and having the Drapers sew it. MacLean was the only man available to design the equipment needed, and found that he could not see to every detail at once. He designed and cast anchors more advanced than anything seen on Makassar since The War; installed windlasses and winches, cast in bronze by the Ironsmiths; and had the Drapers lay up ropes and cables from local fibers. MacLean had to attend to each detail personally, as the days dragged on and on.

MacKinnie watched nervously one day when a party of Imperial sailors led by the junior lieutenant of the planet walked around the dockyards, but they evidently saw nothing to disapprove of. Anchors and winches were things for primitives, and the Navy men did not even understand the purpose of some of MacLean's devices. As a precaution, MacKinnie had taught Brett the use of most of them, so

that if asked he would appear familiar with the equipment. The Navy might think it in common use elsewhere on Makassar.

By the time the ship was ready for launching, the trade goods and weapons they would carry were piled on the docks. A light drizzle driven by the strong westerly winds thoroughly soaked the party as they stood watching the locals launch the ship. The primitive ways did not permit much sophistication—half the young men in the town simply lifted and strained until *Subao* was in the water, then fell to carrying aboard the iron ingots MacLean had selected for ballast. MacKinnie expected to get under way immediately, but found that there was more to do.

"Now what?" he asked MacLean.

"Masts. Stays. Running the sails up to see how they fit. Securing the ballast. Trader, that ship may be on her ear in a storm one of these days, and you'll hardly want the ballast shifting around down there. And we still have the leeboards. You can save time by getting your gear aboard today, but don't plan on leaving for two or three days more."

MacKinnie cursed, silently so that MacLean would not hear him. There was little else he could do.

That afternoon, MacLean gave instructions on how to sail the boat. He discovered that young Todd had sailed small boats in the Haven harbor, and, under MacKinnie's questioning, the boy admitted to being a military cadet from one of the wealthier families of the kingdom. MacLean immediately appointed him midshipman and quartermaster.

They learned the language the locals used aboard ships, although MacLean had to adapt several local words for terms they would not be familiar with. Then he had Todd drill everyone else on the names of lines and gear on the ship. MacKinnie noted that Brett seemed very adaptable, learning faster than the outworlders, although his friend Vanjynk was almost uninterested. Stark, as usual, soon learned his tasks and drove the guardsmen to theirs, not a bit upset by Todd's sudden promotion over him. That night, Stark and MacKinnie sat in MacKinnie's small room at the inn overlooking the water.

"Best we get the men some action, sir," Hal said. "All that drill with sword and shield's fine, but they get restless

carrying stores and driving nails. Got some good pointers from that Vanjynk fellow, he's gifted with this armor and stuff. Reckon he's in the same business we are."

MacKinnie nodded. "From what I can see, it was all he ever learned until he lost his lands and had to go wandering with the singer. What do you make of Brett?"

"Don't know, sir. Takes my orders right enough, better than Vanjynk, but there's no understanding him."

MacKinnie nodded. "He's a tough one. That's a pretty strange partnership he's got with Brett. Vanjynk seems to be one of the iron men Blatt forever tells us about." He hoisted his glass and winked at his sergeant. "Iron MacKinnie's new troops. Few enough of them. Had any success at recruiting?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, sir. There's a shipmaster I've been drinking with, man named Loholo. He claims he can get us a crew for a price. Part of the price is he wants to go with us. Mr. MacLean wasn't too interested in having a native shipmaster aboard, said there was enough damned command problems already what with nobody knowing who ranked who. He's not happy with you being in charge, sir. But I can't tell about Loholo; the Guild people seem to think a lot of him. Should I send for him? He's in the Blueglass tonight waiting to hear."

"No harm in talking to him. Sure, why not."

Stark nodded and went to the door, said something in low tones to one of the guardsmen outside. "Be here in a couple of minutes, Trader. Be best if I were on duty when he came in." Stark took his glass to another table across the small room.

Captain Loholo was a short dark brown man, stocky and strong-looking, with a distinct slant to his eyes, reminding MacKinnie of the starship officers he had seen. He had seen many others of his type on Makassar, contrasting strongly to the tall blond men like Vanjynk. Loholo wore a golden skull ornament in his left ear, and carried a large curved knife in his belt. His clothing was of finer material than was usually seen on Jikar men, and everything he wore was freshly cleaned. He stood self-confidently in the doorway, coolly eyeing the star men.

"Trader," Hal said, "I want you to meet Captain Loholo, shipmaster and merchant. I'm told he's the only captain left in the port."

"Please have a seat, Captain," MacKinnie said, pouring a glass of wine. "My guard chief tells me you can raise a crew."

"Aye." Loholo fingered the glass, looked at MacKinnie for a moment, and drank. "Not a very good crew, Trader. The good men are at the bottom of the sea or run off to join the pirates. But there's men here who can pull an oar. Not seamen. Apprentices from all the Guilds, boys on tithes who'd like to be men again." He spoke so rapidly that MacKinnie had difficulty following him, and had to have Loholo repeat his words.

"I've seen them," MacKinnie said. "But Captain MacLean has not been able to recruit anyone."

"Nor will he." Loholo touched the wine bottle and looked at MacKinnie, who nodded. The brown man filled his glass and drank again before continuing. "Your Captain MacLean is a strange man, Trader. He puts decks over the ship so that the oarsmen can't breathe properly. He has taken out most of the rowing benches. What's left is up too high for proper leverage. You couldn't row that ship a hundred miles. And all the iron he put in the hull, dead weight to be carried along. The men won't sail with him because, even though they aren't seamen, they can see your man is no seaman. The ship will be too slow to escape the pirates, and it won't sail properly if it does get past them."

"But you're willing to come? And bring a crew?"

"Aye."

"Go on. Why?"

"You're not a beached captain, Trader. If you had the seawater in your blood, you'd know. My ship went out to fight with me ashore, laid out by plague. She never came back. Everything I had was on that ship, Trader. Nothing left to buy the Ironsmiths' vessel. Even if a warship is no good for trading, I tried to buy *Subao*, for a ship's still a ship. I figure you'll all come to your senses about the ship when you see it won't work. And you'll need a man who knows how to sail these seas. I expect to be your shipmaster a week after you leave port. If you live that long. But the chance is worth it to me."

One way or another, MacKinnie thought. The dagger at the man's belt had once had a jeweled hilt, but it wasn't meant for show purposes. With his own crew aboard, Loholo could make himself master of the ship if he were that

kind of man. He looked over at Stark, who obviously had the same thoughts. Still, there was a way to make use of the man, and perhaps he was honest.

"Your own crew went down with your ship?"

"Aye. Every man. It won't be real seamen I can get you, Trader, but they'll be willing."

"How will you get them to join, with the pirates outside the harbor?"

"Tell them the star men will protect them. They know what happened out in the harbor the day *they* landed. They'll believe."

"And you don't?"

"If the star men will help you, you don't need to have the guard captain out looking for men with free wine, Trader. So they won't."

MacKinnie nodded. "What of the pirates?"

"There's ways. I know these waters, Trader. When the moons come together, there's deep water over the reefs. It goes down fast. Get over them at the right time, ahead of anybody chasing you, they never catch you. I doubt the pirates know my waters like I do. We'll have a chance. That is, if you can row the ship. Got to put the benches back in."

"What if I told you," MacKinnie asked, "that after we have returned to Jikar from where we are going, we will make you master of the ship and our trading agent, with gold every month and part of the trading as well?"

Loholo looked at MacKinnie closely. "Do not tempt a desperate man, Trader. Do you mean what you say?"

"If you serve me faithfully. The first service is to find a crew of twenty men who can fight. Say that we are insane, but that you, Loholo, will get the ship past the pirates. Get us a crew without talk, and have them ready to come aboard by dark tomorrow."

"And you'll give me the ship when you return? Mine to sail and command?"

"Yours to sail and command. And the chance at carrying trade from starships all over Makassar. You will become the owner of many vessels if you like."

Loholo grunted. "One is all I need. You'll have your crew, Trader. But this man of yours commands this voyage?"

"Yes. He commands. He has a young apprentice who will be a ship's officer. And there is my guard captain But

if MacLean wants you as an officer, he'll tell you so. I expect he will."

"I was a crew master once, Trader. I can be again. Until you need me."



They sailed at dawn. Loholo, now crew master, had brought twenty young apprentices, all well armed. The stores were aboard, and MacLean had fitted the leeboards, huge fan-shaped wooden boards pivoted at the small end of the fan and fastened nearly amidships of the vessel. When raised they were like giant shields. MacKinnie got the crew and passengers aboard the night before they were to set out, and watched with interest as MacLean and Loholo helped the crew sling hammocks, cursing the men into place in the narrow space below decks.

MacLean had placed the quarters in a traditional manner, his own cabin right aft with smaller staterooms to each side for MacKinnie and Mary Graham. Just forward of them, Longway and Kleinst had even tinier compartments, really not much larger than bunks with doors to close them in; then Hal and his guards slung their hammocks in a compartment which stretched from one side of the ship to the other. MacLean insisted that two of Stark's men be on duty and armed at all times, posted on the quarterdeck near the great tiller which steered the ship.

In the first light, mist still rising from the water, the crew was turned out from their hammocks to man the sweeps.

Loholo clucked his tongue at the arrangement. There were no rowing benches; instead the men walked the decks with great oars dipping down to the water, two men to an oar. The ship moved slowly away from the shore out into the bay.

"Wouldn't it be better to go at night?" MacKinnie asked. They stood on the quarterdeck with the other Samualites, Hal and his guards in full armor. Armor for the rest of the crew was piled about the deck in convenient places, secured

with rawhide lashings. Just forward of the quarterdeck Brett and Vanjynk stood at the ready, also in armor. It was impossible to make Vanjynk man a sweep, and MacKinnie decided that it would be senseless to require Brett to do so, so the two were carried as guards. Their mounts were stabled in the hold with the cattle *Subao* carried as part of the food supply.

MacLean measured the distance to the rapidly vanishing shore, peering through the mists ahead and astern before answering. "No, my lord. The night would not keep the pirates from seeing us, and the wind dies away then. By mid-day, there will be a strong wind as the sea breeze and the prevailing westerlies lie together on this shore. Then we will have a chance to outrun the pirate ships."

"If you say so," MacKinnie said with a shrug. "It's the only chance we have anyway. Carry on, Mr. MacLean."

"Aye, aye, sir." There was a note of the contempt seamen have for lubberly owners in his voice, but Nathan saw no reason to make a point of it. He needed MacLean to reach Batav. Around him the dawn was already turning the dark water clear. Small fish-like creatures swam lazily near the boat, looking at it before they darted away, easily out-distancing the men at the oars in spite of Loholo's shouted oaths. The crew master counted strokes in a tireless voice, keeping a steady rhythm not interrupted when he fell to cursing one of the men.

MacLean left MacKinnie to stand near the tiller, his eyes on the compass mounted on the small mast just forward of the helmsman. Another mast, well forward, towered above the ship, and on both the sails were laced around the booms, their covers removed and stowed below decks. The sails were ready for instant action. MacKinnie could already feel the morning breeze, coming from the south before it shifted to the west in the afternoon.

Mary Graham and Longway made their way over the slowly rolling deck to stand at the starboard rail with MacKinnie. From the waist, Loholo's call was clear and slightly musical. "Stroke . . . step . . . back . . . back . . . stroke. . . ."

"Point to starboard, Mr. Todd," MacLean said softly.

"Aye, aye, sir."

"We should see the land over there as soon as it gets light," MacKinnie told his companions. "I understand Lo-

holo thinks we should hug the shore. There are reefs and rocks only he knows, and he swears he can get us through them without the pirates being able to catch us."

"Interesting," Longway said pensively. "Then why did he not take some other ship through there? Why has the pirate blockade been so effective?"

"You're not supposed to ask that," Nathan replied. "But MacLean thinks it's worth trying anyway. Add something to our chances, and the farther we get before the pirates intercept us, the better chance of coming ashore where there aren't any barbarians." It was getting light faster now, and the shoreline could be seen dimly ahead. Above the fog, fifty miles away, the peaks of mountains flashed whitely in the morning light.

"If we can get to those, the barbarians won't matter," MacKinnie said. "All we'll have to worry about will be the pirates. We could even beach and run for it."

Kleinst stood quietly at the rail, and MacKinnie thought he noted a slight tinge of green to the scholar's complexion. If the young fellow couldn't manage in the gentle swell they were experiencing, he was in for big trouble when the real wind came up, MacKinnie thought. Kleinst had kept out of the way the whole time they were on Makassar, although he seemed to have developed a strange friendship with Brett. Nathan had noted the scholar and the singer conversing over wine in the physicist's quarters at the dockside inn more than once.

"Where are these pirates, Trader?" Longway asked. "As a practical matter, should we be getting the oarsmen in their armor?"

"Not for hours," MacKinnie replied. "They stay well out of the harbor itself, probably afraid of the Navy boys. But they're out there, all right, just over the horizon. You'll see them soon enough."

It was fully light now. The Eye of the Needle had cleared the land to the east, sending its rays slanting across the sea. The early morning mists vanished rapidly as the ship moved quietly along at a surprising speed. There was no sound but the commands of Loholo, who had lowered his voice until he could barely be understood on the quarterdeck. "Stroke. . . ."

The harbor had dropped well out of sight when the sun burned off the last of the mists. The water was an incredi-

ble light blue, the bottom visible not more than three yards below the surface. Long thin fish darted about, pursued by tentacled monsters nearly a yard in length, green eyes glaring after their prey. Larger creatures of the same general form swam into view to look intelligently at the humans on the boat before swimming lazily away. MacKinnie wondered idly what they were when MacLean shouted from his post at the mizzenmast.

"Hands make sail!" he ordered.

MacKinnie watched with interest as the Samualites gathered in the waist, then were sent to the mizzen halyards. "Turn her into the wind, Mr. Todd," MacLean said quietly. "Stand by to raise the mizzen. Get those gaskets off, there."

Hal and one of the guards took the lacing from the sail, then seized the halyard. "Make sail," MacLean ordered. The big gaff rose jerkily, the men on the throat halyards pulling too fast, but eventually the throat and peak rose together. "Take a turn around the winch. Haul, men. Tauten it, that's it. Now belay it all." The gaff sail flapped in the wind, and the boat slowed noticeably.

"Now forward to the main," MacLean ordered. "Get it up, smartly now." The men ran forward, and the big main, almost twice the size of the mizzen, was hauled up almost as quickly as the smaller one had been. "Man the sheets," MacLean ordered. "You fool, that line over there," he added to a guard who stood looking blankly about. "Stand by to trim the sheets, Mr. Stark."

"Yes, sir," Hal answered. He gave MacKinnie a quizzical look and turned back to his soldiers now turned afterguard. The ship was barely moving through the water now, the men straining at the oars, and Loholo stood silent with his hands on his hips looking at MacKinnie as if to say he had told him so.

"Put the helm over, Mr. Todd. Bring her four points to starboard."

The boat turned, and the wind caught the big sails, pushing them off to the right. "Trim those sheets," MacLean ordered. "More. Bring them in. Strain, you blackguards. Enough. Mr. Stark, I'll have the starboard leeboard down."

The boat was skidding sidewise now, moving to leeward as fast as it was going ahead. The oarsmen struggled to keep steerage way, Loholo back to counting the pace when he saw no response from his silent appeal to MacKinnie.

Stark cast off the line holding up the great fan-shaped leeboard, and the heavy wood splashed into the water. An iron shoe along its lower edge sank it quickly.

"Mr. Loholo, get those oars in," MacLean ordered. "Quickly, man, and get your crew set." The boat heeled sharply to a gust of wind, almost tumbling the starboard crewmen over the side. "Any man can't stay aboard gets to swim ashore," MacLean said. "Stark, get those jibs up."

The gust heeled the ship, and the leeboard bit into the water. The boat began pulling ahead, slowly gathering way, until it was apparent that it was rushing along, faster than the oarsmen had been able to pull it, and still gathered speed. A white creamy wake appeared at the bow, and two quarter waves angled off from the stern. It seemed to MacKinnie that the wind picked up noticeably, and the boat was headed into it. *Subao* rose gently over the waves, rushing along until Loholo stood looking over the side with amazement before making his way aft.

"Yes, Mr. Loholo?" MacLean asked.

The former captain stood looking at his new master in silence, then brought his hand to his forehead in an awkward salute. "She's faster than oarsmen have ever been able to push her, Captain. This may be the fastest ship on Makassar."

"Let's hope so, Mr. Loholo. Faster than the pirates, anyway. Get your men to lookout stations if you please."

"Aye, aye, sir." Loholo turned to his crew. "Banta, up those shrouds. Move along there, lad, and keep your eyes open. Fast as we're going, we'll be in pirate waters soon." He strolled along the deck, expertly keeping himself erect, as he placed crewmen in the bow and sent the rest to the waist.

"How does she sail, Captain?" MacKinnie asked quietly.

"Well enough, Trader," MacLean answered. "A little better to windward than I'd thought she might. Doesn't point as high as a proper keelboat would, but we can go closer to the wind than anything the pirates have got. That's how I expect to outrun them. They'll have to use the sweeps, and I don't think they can catch us. We'll leave the bastards behind . . . uh, your pardon, freelady."

"Don't apologize on your own ship, Captain MacLean. I think it's wonderful what you've managed to do with this

primitive boat." She looked up at him, then at MacKinnie. "Can I get you anything, Captain? Trader?"

"Chickeest," MacKinnie said. "If you can cook in this."

"If she can't, we'll have cold food the whole voyage." MacLean snapped. "This is perfect weather, Trader. By afternoon we'll face some real waves. I'm not looking forward to the tide either. You may not have noticed, but we had a strong tidal current going out. It should be even worse when it turns. Best get some practice in the galley now, freelady. Take young Brett down to help you."

"All right, Captain," She stumbled across the deck, looking for handholds, then let Brett take her arm to guide her to the companionway. The boat was heeling sharply, the deck standing at perhaps 40° off the horizontal.

It took her nearly half an hour to heat last night's chick-eest, and she spilled part of it bringing the pot and cups up to the quarterdeck, but Mary Graham seemed proud of her achievement even so. Now she had the same slight green cast as Kleinst, and MacKinnie looked around to see the scholar grimly holding the rail and staring at the distant shore to starboard.

"Sail ahead," the lookout called. "Two sails."

Loholo scampered up the shrouds like a monkey, shading his eyes and staring off where the lookout pointed. He bounded down to the deck and trotted panting to MacLean. "Pirates right enough, off the port bow, Captain. Under sail."

MacLean nodded. The pirates were to windward, using square sails to run down toward *Subao*. "Steady as she goes, Mr. Todd. Mr. Loholo, it might be best if you stood with Todd at the tiller. Steering to windward's trickier than just watching the compass, and we'll need more helmsmen. Have you any of your crew who might have some ability?"

"None, Captain. They're all landsmen. Willing lads, but no sea legs."

"You'll have to do it, then. Take your post, mister." MacLean cupped his hands around his eyes and stood easily on the pitching deck. True to his earlier promise, the sea was running higher now, and *Subao* heeled farther, making it impossible for anyone but the three sailors to stand without something to hold on to.

"Best tack now and get sea room," MacLean said. "Stark, get your hands to the jibsheets. The gaffs will take care of

themselves. Snap to it, man, we haven't all year." Hal and his guards ran to the foredeck, motioning to some of the oarsmen sitting idle in the waist to join them.

"Stand by to let those sheets go," MacLean shouted. MacKinnie was surprised to note that the Navy man's voice carried easily into the wind, although Brett repeated the order from his post at the mizzen.

"Put her helm down, Mr. Todd." The ship swung into the wind, through it, the booms snapping across the deck. One of Loholo's men scrambled to get out of the way, flinging himself to the deck to allow the main boom to pass over him, while the quarterdeck crew, copying MacLean's example, ducked low. The jibs backwinded, pulling the bow around. "Let go the jib sheets," MacLean shouted. "Now trim them in on the port side. Snap to it. Man the leeboards! Smartly, men!" The port leeboard was pushed down, and tackles strained to raise the starboard one. MacLean stamped with impatience until the task was done, then turned to MacKinnie. "She's lively enough. Bit slow, easy to get caught in stays. If I end up out of action, remember that. Leave the jibs cleated until the bow's well around, or you'll be in irons." Nathan fervently prayed he would never have to work the ship himself. At least there was young Todd if MacLean were killed.

Now they were approaching the pirate ships rapidly, and the lookout called. "Five sail beyond the two ahead, sir."

"That'll be more of the pirate fleet," Loholo said. "Beg your pardon, sir, but the reefs are over there." He pointed off to starboard and ahead.

MacLean nodded coolly. "We can't make that course yet, Loholo. When we've sea room, we'll try your advice." He gauged the distance to the rapidly closing pirate vessels. As they watched, the enemy ships extended their oars, the sweeps working rhythmically, rippling down each of the vessels. The pirate ships were much like *Subao* had been before MacLean's modifications, with more beam to weather storms in the shallow sea but generally resembling her. On the bow of each was carved one of the large tentacled creatures MacKinnie had seen in the water, the stays to the stubby masts running into the nest of arms which jutted forward and upward.

"Idlers below," MacLean ordered. "Freelady, Professor Longway, Mr. Kleinst—go below and stay until you're

called, if you please. Mr. Loholo, I can spare you from the tiller until you get your men under arms."

"Aye, aye, Captain." Loholo padded forward to the waist to arm his men.

MacKinnie watched Hal break out crossbows, handing one to each of his Samualite guards and posting them along the waist. The pirates had noted that *Subao* was going to windward without oars, and adjusted their courses to intercept well forward of their present position, so the ships were not closing as rapidly now, but slowly they drew up to three crossbow shots away to port and as many forward.

"I doubt there will be a battle," MacLean said quietly. "Unless they are very much faster with those oars than I think, they cannot possibly catch us."

As if to make his captain a liar, the lookout shouted, "Three sails off the starboard bow. Three sails ahead, sir."

MacLean shook his head. "If they adjust to our strange antics as quickly as these did, we'll have to fight after all." He eyed the distance to the nearest pirate ship. "Mr. Stark, I'll thank you to go forward and stand ready to bring the ship about again. Don't cast off that jibsheet until I tell you. And give me five men on the leeboards."

"Aye, sir." Hal took his men forward, carefully seeing that each man stowed his crossbow along the rail on the low side. MacLean shook his head. "Put them on the starboard side, Stark. I don't need loaded weapons clattering about my decks when we go about."

"Stand by, Todd. I want to cut this as close as possible without letting them ram us." The pirate ships drew closer now, angling in toward *Subao's* bows. "Fall away a point," MacLean said softly. The ship gathered way, leaping through the water. "Stand by. . . . Put the helm over!"

Subao brought up into the wind sharply, hung for a moment, and fell off to the starboard tack. "Let go the jibsheets. Now get them sheeted in. Haul those leeboards, you sons!" MacLean was icy calm, watching the armored prow of the nearest pirate approaching. The sweeps on the enemy vessel were moving faster and faster, and they could hear a drum beating the count somewhere on the ship.

Zing! MacKinnie heard something snap over his head, and looking up saw a round hole in the mizzensail. Then there was a chorus of sounds, the bolts thudding into the bulwarks. "Get down!" MacKinnie called. Stark, crouching

low, half ran the length of the ship to seize his crossbow. All they could see was the great bow of the enemy thirty yards away, white water curling from each side, and the beak of the ram protruding slightly from the water in front of it.

Subao gathered way, and the pirate ship was no longer aimed amidships. "Hold your course," MacLean said quietly. As MacKinnie watched, the pirate ram fell behind, tried to turn more toward *Subao*, and caught her sail aback. "Steady as she goes," MacLean murmured.

The pirate ship passed astern so close they almost touched the oars. A cloud of arrows flew from it toward them, and Stark replied with his own volley of steel bolts. There was a shout from the pirate, then it was gone.

"He'll have to get that sail down before he can row to windward," MacLean remarked casually. "Never catch us now. Masthead! Where are those other ships?"

"Off the port bow ahead, sir!"

"They're directly to windward," MacLean said. "Let's see if they have any sense. Mr. Loholo, you can come back to the quarterdeck now."

"Aye, aye, sir." As Loholo approached, they could see blood on his hands. "One crew man dead, sir. Arrow in his throat. Some holes in your sails too."

"Yes. Where are those reefs of yours, and when will the tide be out?"

Loholo pointed to a cleft in the hills, along the shoreline. "Right off there, sir. Tide's full now. Going out starting in an hour."

"Excellent. Todd, steer for those reefs and get the picture of them from Loholo. We may make use of them yet. Mr. Loholo, how many men does one of those pirate vessels carry?"

"Seventy, maybe a few more, sir. Not all of them sailors."

"How many of them can fight?"

"Most all, sir. That's why they're aboard."

MacLean nodded. "As well they can't board us. Mind your luff there, Mr. Todd, you're too close." MacLean looked along the coast, then thoughtfully tossed a light line over the stern, watching the angle it made with the center-line of *Subao*. "Making more leeway than I like," he remarked to MacKinnie. "And that fellow out there seems to

have some sense. The others are trying to close with us, but he's standing well out to keep to windward of where we'll be. This could be rather interesting."

They sailed on. The afternoon sea breeze brought a shift in the wind, backing it around to nearly directly offshore, as the tide turned, running little trails of bubbles out to sea. The first group of pirate vessels was lost behind them, and they were easily outdistancing the second, which made the mistake of closing with *Subao* and ended up under her lee before trying to stroke back up to her in the heightening seas. Although they gained at first, the effort was too great for them, and they soon fell farther and farther behind. Now only one enemy vessel remained between *Subao* and open water.

As the chase went on, the shoreline fell away to northward, bringing the wind more directly off *Subao's* beam, and increasing her heel. The animals in the hold below screamed their protest, a shrill keening sound unnerving to anyone not familiar with it, causing Brett to rush below to comfort his horses. The pirate ship ran along the shoreline parallel to *Subao*, slowly drawing closer but taking no chances of losing her prey as the others had done. Her captain had trimmed the great lateen sails the boat carried, and kept only a few men at the oars. MacLean stood anxiously at his post, with Loholo now holding the tiller. The crew master learned the task far more easily than MacLean had thought he would, and now held the huge wooden bar easily, balancing himself against the rolling of the ship and watching the shoreline.

"Where are we now, Mr. Loholo?" MacLean asked.

"In shoal waters, Captain. With the tide running out, we'll come to ground in another hour."

"Yes." MacLean looked out at the pirate vessel. "Nothing for it but to work out some more, even if it lets him get closer. Hands forward to trim sheets," he called. "Take her a point closer to the wind if you would, Mr. Loholo."

"Aye."

On the new course they closed more rapidly with the pirate ship, the tide helping cancel their leeway. In minutes, the current was running so strongly that the line over the taffrail stood off to a 60° angle from *Subao's* stern.

"Going out fast, Captain," Loholo remarked.

"Mr. Todd," MacLean ordered, "get forward with a lead to call soundings."

The cadet perched himself at the shrouds, leaning out to cast the lead line and calling back in a clear voice. "Three meters . . . and a half two . . . three meters. . . ."

"He's closing with us now, Trader." MacLean looked at the pirate thoughtfully. "Guards in armor, please. He may be able to board." *Subao's* ability to point higher than the pirate vessel was almost negated by the strong tide off the lee bow, and the longer waterline of the enemy ship gave her an advantage in hull speed. MacKinnie looked around the horizon. There were no other ships in evidence.

"As good as we could expect, Trader," MacLean said softly. "We expected to fight a dozen enemies, now there's only one."

"And a half two . . ." Todd called. "Mark two . . . and a half one. . . ."

The tide was racing out now. MacKinnie had never seen anything like it, and asked MacLean how the current could be so strong.

"Those two close-in moons make for strong tides," MacLean answered, "and this big shallow basin doesn't really hold much water. Won't take a lot of vertical rise and fall to empty it." The captain looked carefully at the current. "We're going aground in a few minutes, Trader. If we try to run with the tide to keep afloat, that pirate will have us. At least if we're aground, he can't ram the ship. Might be quite a fight when he sees us high and dry. Or he might decide to run out with the current and get his friends. You'll have to decide whether to go ashore in that case."

MacKinnie nodded. It seemed to him the enemy ship was staying close to *Subao*, and it occurred to him that the pirate might be trapped as well. If they really didn't know these waters all that well, they might think *Subao's* crew intended to stay afloat.

The leeboard scraped bottom, heaving up ponderously before settling back to its position, then hit again.

"Hands to the halyards!" MacLean shouted. "Get those sails down. Move, damn you!" Then in a calmer voice, "Mr. Loholo, put your helm to weather if you will . . . ease her against the current . . . steady. . . . Sergeant Stark, get your men's backs into it!"

The sails were hauled down, the men pulling desperately.

Heavy canvas billowed across the decks, and the Makassar crew men leaped to subdue it. It was bulkily piled on the booms, and lashed in place. The ship swayed, blown against the current by the strong wind, held in place until there was no way on her at all, then began ponderously to make sternway. Loholo balanced off the helm without orders, obviously accustomed to taking ground with ships in the shallow seas of Makassar. As the tide raced away, she settled bow first, straightened, and came to rest on the sandy bottom, angled toward the shore.

"We're fast," MacLean said. He looked out at the pirate ship three hundred yards away. "By the Saints, he's caught! He can't make it against the wind."

The enemy crew was straining at the oars, while others gathered the lateen sail against the mast, but even as they watched the stern touched bottom. The tide race was incredibly swift, and within seconds the pirate was stuck as fast as *Subao*.

In the waist of the ship, Brett was struggling with the hatch cover, Vanjynk rushing to help him. MacLean shouted from the quarterdeck. "What in hell are you doing?"

"We must get our mounts up from the hold," Brett called. "Master Vanjynk and I would fight on our horses, Captain."

"Let them," MacKinnie told MacLean. "We're outnumbered, and having a cavalry force can help. Look there." He pointed to the pirate vessel. Men were boiling off its decks, but instead of rushing toward *Subao*, they formed ranks on the hard sand alongside their ship.

"My turn," MacKinnie said. "You men see to your armor. Hal, help Brett sway those animals up out of the hold."

The hatch cover was already off, and using the main boom held at an angle by the peak halyard, the two chargers were lifted by bellybands, swayed over the side and set in place on the sand. Brett and Vanjynk scrambled to saddle their beasts and cover them with chain mail skirts.

"What are they waiting for?" MacLean asked, pointing at the pirates.

"They don't know how many we are, or if we have star weapons," Loholo said softly. "They will listen to their leaders tell them of the rich loot, and the insults they have endured from Jikar, and finally they will attack. It will be

best if our men are already on the sands unless you intend to fight from the ship."

"Not from here," MacKinnie said. "They've got axes. Give one of them a few minutes unmolested and we won't float off here with the tide. Hal, form the men on the sand behind the ship so the enemy can't see what we've got!"

"Right, Colonel." Pleading and shouting, Stark managed to get the native crew into a semblance of order while his Haven guardsmen took places in a group at one end of the line. Shields glinted in the sun as the men stood nervously.

"Serve out those pikes, Mr. Longway," MacKinnie ordered as the Academician appeared at the companionway. "Then you and the others stay below."

"If you order us, Trader," Longway said. "But I can fight." He came fully out on the deck, and MacKinnie saw that the scholar's portly figure was cased in mail over leather. Together they took the pikes from their racks along the bulwarks and handed them over the sides to the waiting troops. Each of the Makassar natives wore a breastplate and greaves, a metal cap, and a shortsword, and held a round shield on his arm. The Samualites had mail as well. With their pikes in hand, MacKinnie's small force seemed more disciplined, ready to face an enemy.

"They can fight well if told what to do," Loholo said. "They are young men, but the Guilds begin their training early."

MacKinnie eased himself over the rail to join the small group, leaving MacLean and Loholo on the ship. He turned to face his men.

"The important thing is to preserve discipline," he said. "If you stay in ranks, there's not much they can do to you. Keep your shield wall up as long as they aren't close, so they can't bombard us with arrows, and advance when I tell you. I want to hit them with a solid force, not a ragged group of individuals. Hal, have your Haven men form a reserve group behind the main body, and keep their javelins and crossbows ready. I want a solid volley from the crossbows as soon as the pirates get in range, and keep that up until they're too close to reload. Then hold those javelins until I give the order to cast."

"Yes, sir."

"Then wait for my orders. Brett, you and Vanjynk stay with me until I give you the word."

"It is not proper that we stay behind and allow these groundlings the honor of opening battle," Vanjynk said slowly.

"Proper be damned. Vanjynk, if you or Brett start a charge without my orders I'll have Hal shoot you out of the saddle. I ask nothing dishonorable, Master Vanjynk, nothing save winning this battle."

"We have agreed to serve the star man," Brett said. "It is proper that we take his instructions, my friend." He clapped Vanjynk on the shoulder. "Besides, what honor have pirates? What is propriety to them?"

"Here they come!" Longway shouted from the quarter-deck.

MacKinnie strode to the bow of the ship and looked around. The pirate group, nearly a hundred strong, was moving slowly and in good order across the sand toward *Subao*. "Hal, get your crossbowmen out at the stern and stand by. Fire when you think they're in range."

"Yes, sir. Guardsmen, right face. March." Stark took his tiny group to the stern and deployed them just beyond it. This put them closer to the enemy than MacKinnie's detachment at the bow.

Nathan eyed the advancing ranks of pirates, now broken up by small tidal pools until there were definite gaps in the formation. There seemed to be no effort on the part of the pirate officer to reform his men. From what MacKinnie knew of similar groups on South Continent, it was a masterpiece of strategy for the pirates to have formed at all before starting a wild charge.

He waited until the enemy was in range, saw several fall to Hal's first volley, but still gave no signal. Behind him Brett and Vanjynk talked calmly to their animals, but their voices were rising in pitch, eagerness to join battle sounding through the soothing words.

A second volley cut down more of the pirates, and the ragged army of brightly clothed natives, armed only with swords except for a few with axes and shields, curled around toward their tormentors, presenting their flank to MacKinnie.

"Now, men. March out. Follow me and stay in good order. Brett, you and your companion remain behind the shield wall until I tell you."

The pirates were now caught between the two small de-

tachments, but seemed unworried. They began to break and run toward Hal.

"With me, troops!" MacKinnie shouted. "Keep your ranks. Watch the men to either side and stay next to them." He trotted his group away from the bow, angling away from the ship but moving sternward, keeping the pirate group between the two parts of his army. Some of the enemy turned to face him now, others still charging toward Hal, but most concerned about the new danger.

Stark fired one more volley of crossbow bolts and his men dropped the weapons, seizing their javelins. As MacKinnie's group closed with the pirates, Nathan shouted, "Now, Hal." Stark's group ran forward, casting their slender weapons, tearing holes in the ranks of the pirates, and then MacKinnie was upon them, his pikemen thrusting their weapons forward, as Hal and the Samualites fell on them with sword and shield from the other side.

On either flank a group of pirates now fought MacKinnie's troops, but the main body held back, unwilling to enter the dangerous area between. Then they suddenly broke directly toward MacKinnie's force, charged forward, ducking under the spear points, closing rapidly with the unarmored men, slashing with shortswords. Two of the young Jikarian sailors fell, opening a gap in the line of pikes.

On the other side of the formation, the pirates made no headway at all against Hal and his Wolves. Unarmored, with inadequate shields, they did well to hold Stark back, but by sheer numbers were able to do so. A third group darted between the two formations toward the ship itself, running forward to leap for handholds along the ship's railing.

MacKinnie charged into the gap in the line of pikemen, his sword slashing, shouting to his men to hold firm. A shortsword thrust at him, and he parried, beat hard in quarte, following with a cut to the pirate's neck. His enemy fell and Nathan brought his sword in a whistling moulinette to drive back a second attacker. The gap was too wide to hold with his saber alone, and another enemy tried to circle to his left, only to be impaled by the pikemen, his last stroke falling weakly on MacKinnie's mail. Bringing his men together to close the line again, Nathan was able to turn his attention to the group which had charged the ship.

The pirates were stopped at deck level by Longway, who

stood sword in hand, thrusting at the face of a pirate who had managed to raise himself almost to the level of the thwarts. MacLean stood with him, while Loholo, shouting in mad fury, jumped to the sands below with an enormous two-handed sword, whistling it around his head, screaming oaths.

"*Subao* is mine!" he shouted. "Filth, slime of the sea, spawn of unwashed carrion eaters . . . !" He lopped off a pirate's head at a blow, stood with his back to the ship, holding the rest at bay with the fury of his attack.

The pirate chieftain, his rank marked by bright gold bands around his neck and ankles, shouted commands to his men, breaking them away from combat to reform and make use of their superior numbers. At that moment, MacKinnie signaled Brett. Shouting curses, Brett and Vanjynk thundered down on the pirates, wielding their great swords to crash through feeble attempts to parry as the enemy tried to avoid being trampled by their mounts. The beasts themselves fought, rearing up to strike with sharp hooves, crashing down to crush men to the sand. A group of pirates broke and ran as Hal and his shieldsmen closed swiftly in a disciplined formation from the other side, hewing down the outer ranks. MacKinnie held his own detachment in place, their spears held out toward the pirates, forming a wall of points, while Loholo continued his mad rush, his great sword singing. The last of the enemy turned, running toward their ship.

Brett and Vanjynk pursued the enemy across the sands, but when a group aboard fired on them with crossbows, MacKinnie shouted them back. He reformed his little command behind *Subao* again, leaving them to rest easy in ranks while he surveyed the battlefield.

He had lost two native troopers, killed when the pirates broke his ranks. Several others had deep cuts, and one had a throwing knife through his shoulder. In addition, MacLean had caught a wicked cut across the back of his hand from the dying efforts of a pirate Longway spitted. The others were unharmed. The Haven detachment had been always on the attack and the pirates had little chance of closing with them, nor were their weapons heavy enough to do much damage through chain mail unless given more time than Hal had allowed them.

On the sand between the two boats MacKinnie counted

thirty-four bodies, some wriggling feebly. Most lay well away from *Subao*, cut down in flight by Hal's men or the cavalry on pursuit.

"It's always like that," he explained to Longway and MacKinnie as he climbed back on board. "I've never seen a battle where the loser didn't have enough strength at the decisive moment to do something, but once he loses the will to fight, he's finished. More men are killed in pursuit than battle every time."

"But it seemed so easy!" Mary Graham said.

MacKinnie turned, surprised to see her on deck. "I told you to stay below," he muttered. "As to easy, it wouldn't have been if they'd caught us on our decks, swarming around with our troops not in formation and no room to maneuver. They were fools to fight on our terms. What can you serve my men for lunch, freelady?"

She swallowed hard before she replied. "Will they come back?" she asked. "It will take time to prepare."

"I doubt they've the stomach for it." He turned to Loholo. "Will they try to attack again after we're afloat?"

Loholo shook his head. "We'll both have enough trouble staying off that shore, Trader. There won't be much time for fighting when the water wall comes."

MacKinnie noted that while they had been fighting, the officers had broken out one of the ship's anchors. At MacLean's request, MacKinnie had it carried out and laid in the sand on the seaward side of *Subao*. Without the anchor, the ship might be washed ashore by the rushing tide when it returned. This gave MacKinnie an idea, and he gave orders to Brett.

There was no further action, but Nathan kept his crew in ranks on the sand, allowing them to eat in place. An hour before the tide was due in, Vanjynk's horse was swayed aboard, and the rest of the crew then took their places on the ship, leaving only Brett and his mount on the sand behind the ship. A few pirates approached to within a hundred yards, but the sight of Brett thundering around the side of the ship toward them put them to flight, and Brett returned to his post as Vanjynk fumed in the waist.

"We'll have need of you, Vanjynk," MacKinnie said. "You stand by to carry out your orders." They waited.

"I see it!" Loholo shouted from the masthead. "The tide's coming."

MacKinnie waved to Brett. "Now!" he ordered.

The mounted rider galloped toward the enemy ship, passing it well out of arrow range, going around it until he found the anchor the pirates had laid out beyond their boat. With a quick slash of his sword, he cut the cable, and rode furiously back toward *Subao*. His armor and that of his mount had earlier been put aboard, and as Brett reached the ship, Vanjynk was ready with a belly sling. Rider and animal alike were swayed aboard, as the sound of the water thundering in could be heard.

Looking out, MacKinnie could see water no more than a mile away. It advanced at incredible speed, a wall of water three yards in height, boiling toward them. The pirates screamed, one standing in the stern of his ship and shaking his fist at *Subao*. There was nothing they could do: by the time they could reach *Subao's* cable, the wall of water would be on them, and it appeared that no pirate was willing to give his life to make trouble for MacKinnie. Their ship was carried relentlessly toward the rocks, as MacLean gave the order to raise sail and prepare *Subao* for her long voyage.

◆ XI ◆

The harbor at Batav was lined with stone steps leading to the waterfront, and patrolled by great warships flying the Temple flags and banners, saffron-robed acolytes standing in the bows to challenge newcomers. Loholo explained to the guard boats that they were from Jikar, but at MacKinnie's orders did not tell them the ship was commanded by men from the stars. One of the patrol boats escorted them past the chain which closed the harbor, stretched between huge rafts at the end of a log boom.

They were shown to a gray stone dock, a niche cut into the harbor and lined with log rafts so that the ship could be tied up without concern for the enormous tides on Makassar. The harbor was dredged out by convicts who worked ceaselessly at low tide, standing in water to their waists to scoop out mud and sand with large baskets, or straining at pumps to force the silt into barges where it was carried out to sea.

"The finest harbor on Makassar," Loholo told them when they had made *Subao* fast to the raft. "The Temple priests keep everything in good order here. There'll be one of their junior deacons along in a while to make you an offer on your trade goods. You'll do best to stall him until you find what the local merchants will pay for part of the cargo, but you'll have to sell some of it to their holinesses. If you don't, we'll never leave this harbor."

MacKinnie stood on the quarterdeck of *Subao*, watching the traffic along the harbor street in front of him. In contrast to Jikar, there was activity, but not as much as Nathan would have expected for a large city like Batav. There were not many ships moving about in the harbor, either. Draymen unloaded a cargo vessel four rafts down from *Subao*,

but the intervening docks were empty, and there was another large space before the next ship.

High above the harbor stood a chalk white building, flying the banners of the Temple, great red and blue crosses on a field of black, with a stylized portrayal of the Temple itself at the fly. The old Imperial Library had been built of native granite, and had formed a part of the Viceroyal Palace. Gargoyles and cherubim were carved in stately rows around its cornice, while Corinthian columns held the four porticos at the cardinal compass points. MacKinnie had seen nothing like it on Prince Samuel's World, and found the massive strength of the building impressive, despite its ugliness.

"That's the Temple," Brett said quietly. He was standing on the opposite corner of the quarterdeck from MacKinnie, with Kleinst and Longway eagerly asking him about the city. "God Himself built it before the Fall, when we were all star men here, and He put all wisdom and knowledge in it. But the men of Makassar were proud, and said that since they had all knowledge, they didn't need God. In wrath, He struck at the Temple—see, you can see on the side there where part of it was rebuilt. But before He could destroy it, the priests reminded Him of His promises to our people, and He spared the Temple, but took from us the knowledge of how to use the great wisdom in the Temple. Only the priests know, and they don't know how to translate the words of the angels when they can make them speak at all."

Brett sniffed loudly. "That's what the Temple priests will tell you. There was a time when they had believers in every city, and their deacons and acolytes controlled whole duchies and kingdoms. In most places, the true Christians like those in Jikar were a little band forced to hold meetings in secret. But now the Temple people don't control much more than Batav, and it's their followers in other cities who meet in secret and fear for their lives. All that happened in two men's lives, they tell me."

"But what would have caused such a rapid transformation of the religious values of a whole society?" Longway asked with interest. "My observation has been that such changes take a long time unless they come with technological changes. We experienced a comparable collapse of the established church on Prince Samuel's World, but gunpow-

der and discipline and money were more at the root of it than anything else."

"Star man, I don't know," Brett answered. "But strange things have happened to us for many years. The summers are shorter, and the winters colder, and the plainsmen move to the coasts and attack the cities because there is less and less to feed them and their herds in the plains. There are ice floes where there were none before. The people say that God has turned His face from Makassar."

"Ah," Kleinst said. Everyone turned to look at the thin-faced scholar, who appeared nearly normal for the first time since going aboard the ship. "Of course. The orbit of Makassar is highly eccentric, and its axial tilt is also high. The two have produced reasonable weather in the Southern Hemisphere for generations, but now they are getting slowly out of phase with each other. The winters will be worse and worse here, until it is the northern part which is inhabitable. Naturally the barbarians flock toward the equator."

"And of course as they move into the more temperate areas, they destroy the civilizations there," Longway added. "But this often produces an internal strengthening of the ruling church. Yet I have heard of cases where when there was already schism, the eroding of the civilization would cause many to turn away from the churches, or look to new ones for salvation. Yes." They stared across the harbor, watching the guard ship.

Mary Graham brought wine and chickeest, one of the guardsmen carrying the heavy tray for her. During the voyage she had developed amazing skill at producing hot meals, even when the ship was running before gales which MacLean estimated to be over sixty miles in strength. She had trained several of the young Makassar guards to assist her, and quickly became absolute mistress of the commissary department of *Subao*.

"Is that the Temple?" she asked, pointing to the huge structure dominating the city.

"Yes, my lady," Brett answered. "Five hundred priests and deacons, and two thousand guards are quartered in the cells carved in the walls of that building. Not that their army has done them any good against the plainsmen."

"But what can the barbarians do against the Temple guards?" Mary asked. "You tell me they have no equip-

ment, and the Temple must be wealthy if it has so many soldiers."

"They will not fight the way the Temple wishes," Brett answered. "The plainsmen run before the heavy armored men, and when the Temple horses tire, the chiefs bring their clans back with ropes and many of them ride around the iron men, lacing them to their steeds, pulling them to the ground. Or the plainsmen move aside and let the iron chargers thunder past, then attack from behind."

"Mobility against heavy cavalry," MacKinnie muttered. "And the Temple guards are drawn away from the walls so that they have no place to rest and reform their troops." He nodded. "But, Academician, I am concerned about the Temple. Can the priests hold this city and their relics against the enemy?"

"Not for long," Longway answered. "If my experience on South Continent is useful, the people of the city will be weary of the fighting, now that their church is no longer thought to be the voice of God. The priests will never be able to rally enough men to hold those walls if the enemy stays at the gates."

MacKinnie nodded. "I've seen the will to fight collapse before. They become concerned with their comforts and neglect their lives, and soon they lose both. We may have arrived at a critical time."

"But how dreadful," Mary said. "All these people. What will happen to them?"

Brett drew a long breath before he answered. "The men will be killed. The prettier of the women will be carried off and if they are fortunate will find places in the herds of one of the warriors. The youngest boys may be taken in by a clan to be raised as plainsmen. The rest, those who would not fight when the walls were taken, will die to amuse the women of the tribes."

Mary shuddered. "Trader, is there nothing we can do here?" she asked MacKinnie.

"I would not weep for all of the city people, my lady," Brett said. "You have not seen what they do when they find a small band of plainsmen. Life is hard out there, and men do what they have to do."

They were interrupted by Stark and two guardsmen who had been posted at the end of the pier. "Company coming, sir," Hal said. "Not what I expected, those deacons you told

me to look out for. Civilians, I'd say." He pointed to the end of the pier, where two obvious magnates approached, guarded by half a dozen well-armed men. "Should I turn out the guard, sir?"

"No, but get as many men as you have ready at the hatches and keep these here on deck. Then come back up when you get the troops posted. Quietly, I don't want to start trouble if there's none coming." MacKinnie watched the group move slowly down the stone pier.

"Greetings," the leading man said. MacKinnie suddenly realized that the tall, thin stranger was speaking the Imperial language. "Are there any here who understand me?" He switched quickly to a local dialect. "Peace and greetings."

"Welcome aboard," MacKinnie answered in what he hoped was the Imperial speech. "And what may I do for your honor?"

The man turned to his companion and said something quickly, then looked back at MacKinnie in obvious relief. "Thank the Savior, the Navy has come to find us. Our prayers have been answered. When we heard there was a ship from Jikar, we hardly dared hope."

MacKinnie stared at the small party. The two leaders were both tall and dark, looking nothing like the locals MacKinnie had seen. Their guards, by contrast, were all obvious locals, probably hired swordsmen of doubtful ability.

"Come aboard, please," MacKinnie said. "May we make your guards comfortable with wine and something to eat?"

"Thank you." MacKinnie nodded to Todd, sending him scurrying below to find Hal and arrange for refreshments for the guards. The two tall star men were helped aboard and led to the owner's cabin below. When they were seated and wine brought, they introduced themselves.

"I am Father Deluca, and this is His Lordship Auxiliary Bishop Laraine. We are representatives of His Eminence the Archbishop Casteliano, Missionary ruler of the Church on this forsaken planet. It is a miracle that you have found us."

"I do not understand, Your Reverence," Nathan said. "Surely you have means to call the Navy whenever you wish?"

"No, my son," Bishop Laraine said sadly. "The barbarians have destroyed our transmitter. Brother LeMoyne could

have repaired it had they not been so thorough, but we were fortunate to escape with our lives. Two other members of our mission, a brother and a priest, were not so favored, God rest their souls. We made our way to this city, and here we stay, besieged by barbarians, with little gold, no communicator, and afraid even to allow these heathen to know our true mission. They burn heretics here, and they believe us to be such. Not that martyrdom is so frightening, but it would hardly accomplish anything for the faith under the circumstances."

"I would not contradict His Reverence," Deluca said, "but in reality these are not heathen. They believe all of the doctrines of the Church except submission to the authority of New Rome. But they also believe they have a divine inspiration, holy relics, enclosed in that Temple of theirs, and that God speaks to them from their Temple. They even have records showing that their bishops have a direct continuity with the first bishops of Makassar. I believe New Rome might rule that they could be accepted in the Church without new baptism, would their hierarchy only submit to authority."

The bishop shook his head sadly. "What Father Deluca says is true enough, but there is no way to dispel them of their illusions. They truly believe these artifacts of theirs contain Holy Writ, which no doubt they do, there being copies of the Bible in the library, I am sure, but they believe their Temple to be a source of continuing and everlasting revelation."

"I see," MacKinnie told them. He drained his glass of wine, thinking of what to tell them. Nathan had no experience at lying to the clergy, his contacts with the priestly orders being limited to one or another of the many varieties of military chaplains who had served with him, and he was vaguely disturbed. He decided on a compromise. "I don't like to tell you this, Your Reverence, but only part of your problems have been solved by our arrival. We have no transmitter either." He used the unfamiliar word cautiously, but no one responded. "We do have gold and we can make your stay here more secure, but it will be some time before we can get you back to Jikar. The storm season is coming on, and my native shipmaster tells me there is no way to sail westward during that part of the year. We ran before

one westerly gale coming in here, and the seas were dreadful. I am told they get worse."

Laraine showed no emotion at the words, but Father Deluca half rose from his seat, only to strike his head on the low deck beams above him. He sat back down with tears in his eyes, as much from disappointment as the blow. "Then we must stay here in this awful place for another year." He sighed heavily.

"As God wills," Laraine said sharply. "Your offer of money is generous, my lord. His Eminence will be pleased. Will you come with us to tell him?"

"They tell me I should wait until the Temple people come to inspect my cargo," Nathan answered. "After that, I will be honored to meet His Eminence. What does the local priesthood think you are?"

"Merchants despoiled by the barbarians," Deluca answered. "We thought of fleeing to the nomads and trying to win converts among them, but there are few of us, and the barbarians never listen before they kill. Even the Temple has ceased to send missionaries among them. His Eminence ordered us to remain with him until we were sure there was no chance to win over the Temple hierarchy before sacrificing ourselves."

Nathan nodded, filling the wine glasses again. "You have had no success at convincing the Temple people that their holy relics are nothing more than leftovers from the Old Empire?" he asked. MacKinnie studied the priests closely, thinking that if they had not already lost the device with which they could communicate with the Navy, he would have had to arrange to destroy it. The Navy people must not be reminded of the library at the same time that they thought of Prince Samuel's World. It was only because Makassar was so primitive that they hadn't thought of it already.

Deluca shook his head. "We brought Brother LeMoyne, who is both a librarian and trained in physics, hoping to show them, but they will not let us near their sacred relics. No one but the priesthood can touch them, they say. And we, the representatives of the True Church, are turned away like pharisees."

The bishop smiled. "There is a certain, ah, humor, in the situation, my lord. That we are turned away from the center of this planet's religion. Or what was once the center,

because their authority is fast going. I think now it would have been better had we worked in Jikar first, but of course we couldn't know that."

Hal knocked at the doorway. "Sir, those deacon people are here to examine the cargo. They say they want to talk to the master of the ship, and also the owner. There's fees to pay for using the harbor, and they want to buy all our food and wine."

Nathan stood, carefully stooping to avoid the deck beams. He had learned that after several painful experiences during the voyage. "If you will excuse me, I will speak to the Temple representatives," he told them. "Please feel free to enjoy any of the facilities or refreshments. Your Excellency," he added, bowing.

"Drive a hard bargain with them," the bishop growled. He waved dismissal.

On deck, MacKinnie found three robed Temple deacons, with two uniformed guard officers, while a rank of ten swordsmen stood at rigid attention on the pier below. The guard uniforms were blue and crimson with silver decorations, the officers' hats plumed, and the sergeant of guards carried a gold-headed baton. The discipline of the men, and their weapons, made MacKinnie realize that the Temple commanded a reasonable fighting force. Or at least they could obey orders. He wondered why, with their discipline, they had not destroyed the barbarians. Too rigid in their tactics, he thought, remembering Vanjynk and the battle on the Tide Sands.

One of the officers stepped forward from the group around Captain MacLean and Loholo. "Are you the owner of this vessel?" he demanded.

MacKinnie nodded. The officer continued, "I present you to His Excellency, Sindabaya, Junior Archdeacon of the Temple of Truth."

"Peace and greetings," one of the gray robed men said. "It is customary to bow to me when receiving blessings, Trader. Are you ignorant of the proper forms, or merely a heathen?"

"Your pardon, Excellency," MacKinnie protested. "My thoughts were on the plight of our civilization, and not the more important things at hand." He bowed, receiving another blessing for his trouble.

"It is well. We have not seen you in Batav before, Trader, and when we last saw your shipmaster he had his own ship. Why is this?"

"Pirates, Your Excellency. In all Jikar, there are few merchant ships remaining, and few merchants to buy them, because the army of Jikar takes all the goods for the great expedition. They intend to fight their way through the barbarians before sending the fleet to destroy the nests of pirates."

The officer who had spoken looked up hurriedly, then conversed in low tones with another robed figure before speaking. "Jikar is not large enough to put forth such an army or fleet," he said flatly.

"Oh, that is true, sir," MacKinnie said. "But the Guilds have made alliance with other cities, and many of the people of the plains and hills have fled to Jikar for assistance. Then, the fleet captured many pirate vessels by surprise when they dared sail too close into the harbor and were left by the tide. The water ran red for two changes of tide after the battle on the sands, and the Guilds had a large fleet, but few with whom to man it. But when their war on the land is finished, they will turn to training the young men to be sailors, and there is talk of bringing the fleet north, east perhaps, bringing many merchant ships under the protection of fifty galleys of war. But, I thought, what use to go in such a number? Prices will be low, when there are so many goods for sale. But if now, when there are no ships from Jikar, if now I sail to Batav, and east, and south, why, then trading will be better, and my friends will remember me when the great fleet comes. . . . Or so I thought. And I was told that the Great Temple, the home of wisdom itself, was in need, and thus I brought my cargo, and my food-stuffs; I will sell them to the Temple saving only what must remain to feed my men, and I ask no more than what it has cost me to bring the goods."

The gray robed men muttered among themselves, and their spokesman said, "Your piety is noted. What have you for the Temple?"

It took hours to agree on the price of the cargo, despite MacKinnie's intention to be generous. The deacons were so accustomed to haggling with traders that even when it was not necessary they bargained and inspected, poking into the holds and looking in the deck boxes, disputing how much food could be kept for *Subao's* own consumption and what

had to be delivered to the Temple. From their concern with foodstuffs, MacKinnie knew the siege was more serious than the Temple would admit. Despite quantities of staple foods in the granaries, there was hunger in Batav, and the Temple priests were taking all precautions, insisting that every ship which called at their port unload all edibles to augment the city's supply. Loss of Temple influence across the land, and the arrogance of the priesthood, meant that few ships came to Batav in this time of need, and they seized all they could find. When the final bargain was struck, a gang of Temple slaves swarmed aboard, carrying away what the Temple had purchased, as the soldiers stood guard over them, searching each for stolen goods and weapons. The deacons watched coldly, noting on wooden backed slates what was taken and what was left aboard.

As the last of the goods was taken ashore, Sindabaya joined MacKinnie and his staff on the quarterdeck. "We guard more than the true faith," the priest said. He waved his hand to indicate the city and harbor. "For all time that we record, the Temple has been the source of wisdom and hope for the people of this world. When other cities fall, we bring the means to build them again. If the Temple falls, what will be the source of knowledge? When God brought men to this place from the stars above, He set the Temple to watch over them and give them truth. That is our burden, and we will not fail."

MacKinnie watched an officer drive one of the slaves into his place in ranks, and said nothing. Sindabaya noted Nathan's expression and continued, "The world has changed. Once they went singing to their tasks. Ships brought wealth to be laid at the steps of God's Temple. Now few ships come, and the barbarians wait outside the walls, and my officers beat the convicts as I watch. But there is no other way! They will not work without blows, and the work must be done! The Temple must be saved!" He turned to the group on the deck and raised his hand in blessing, watched them narrowly for a moment, and left the ship.

Deluca climbed carefully to the quarterdeck as MacKinnie watched the Temple party drive men and ayuks, both overloaded, down the stone streets toward the warehouses.

"Now that they have inspected your ship," Deluca said,

"it is lawful for you to leave it. Will you visit the Lord Archbishop?"

MacKinnie nodded, selecting Longway, Kleinst, and Todd to accompany them. Deluca assured them that his own merchant's guard would be sufficient, and would escort them back to the ship after their interview.

"But you will need our guards," Deluca told them. "The streets are no longer safe. Thieves have banded together in great numbers, and attack even armed men. Our own guards are trustworthy only when together, yet there is nothing to steal and no place to buy food with what gold can be found. The city feels no hope for the future. Only the Temple has the will to fight. The people of the city once ruled much of this world, but now they are ruled by the Temple."

They walked along the broad waterfront street, noting the empty dockyards, warehouses with the doors standing open, and everywhere the beggars and crowds of surly men who had once been the longshoremen of Batav, or owners of small farms outside the walls of the city. Away from the waterfront was little better. They moved through a series of narrow twisting streets overhung with buildings, lined with nearly empty shops. Men lay in rags even in the center of the smaller streets, blocking their way.

They emerged from this maze of alleys to broader streets, each with a stone-lined ditch running down its center. The ditches were partially filled with refuse, but surprisingly little for so primitive a system.

"The men on Temple charity carry away the garbage," Deluca explained, "and bring barrels of water to wash the sewage away in the few dry weeks of the year. There is heavy rain in this city almost daily, but it never lasts long. This is the cleanest city on Makassar."

MacKinnie remembered Jikar, which was swept daily by the Guild apprentices, but said nothing. Batav was cleaner than he expected a primitive city to be, certainly more so than the garbage strewn warrens of South Continent.

There were people in the streets, looking through the ground floor shops, although there was little to buy. Every shop had a large crucifix at its door, and a wind chime whose major feature was a replica of the Temple from which various shells and other sounding materials hung. Most of the population was small and dark, although

many were taller, fair-haired men like Vanjynk. The tallest were still smaller than MacKinnie and the two clergymen, and here and there someone would turn to watch the group before staring off at nothing again.

Once, MacKinnie saw a group of uniformed Temple guardsmen, with a bright yellow-robed official walking in their midst. He asked Deluca who the man was, and was told, "A tax collector. Some of them have taken minor orders beyond the deaconate, but are not full priests. They don't allow the priesthood to work directly on squeezing the population, but a lot of them have served a trick in that occupation before they take final vows."

They arrived at a small courtyard, behind which stood a massive stone and log house. Two swordsmen stood in the courtyard, and opened the iron gates when they saw the bishop, then went back to their posts, lounging carelessly against the gate pillars.

"Two weeks arrears in their pay," Deluca told Nathan. "It is strange. Many men in this city have nothing to eat, and you would think they would be glad of duties where they were well fed and had at least some money, but more and more throw themselves on Temple charity, work in the streets when they work at all, and refuse honorable employment. The city has lost its heart."

MacKinnie nodded. The barbarians were at the gates, but the men of the city either thought themselves lost already, or refused to think about it at all. Only the Temple kept the enemy at bay, providing whatever spirit Batav had been able to muster. Nathan doubted that even the iron-willed Temple believers would be able to hold things together for long.

The inside of the house was sparse, showing both the lack of funds which had furnished it, and, perhaps, the austere temperament of the Archbishop. MacKinnie was shown into the great hall, where His Eminence sat in ragged splendor, staring at the dying embers of a fire which was not really needed to heat the room.

"As we supposed, Your Eminence," Laraine said, "the ship was from the west. And more than we dared hope, it is owned by men from the Empire, although by their accents they are from a part I have never visited. A colony world?" he asked, turning to MacKinnie.

"I didn't ask your origin when I offered to help you, my

lord," Nathan replied. "Is it necessary to discuss mine? The Empire contains many worlds, and the citizens of some are more fortunate than those of others. But despite the contempt the Empire feels for my world, it is my ship and my gold which can save your lives. We may even be able to help you in the work you came to do."

Deluca gasped, but before he could speak the Archbishop said, "He speaks well. Let him continue, for God often sends help in strange disguises. Our work is with the souls of all men." The old man waved toward a chair. "I gather that you have no way of calling the Navy to assist us?"

"We were not permitted such devices, my lord," MacKinnie answered.

The Archbishop nodded. "A colony world." He nodded again. "The Navy could do nothing even if you could call them. Once we are dead, they will send a punitive expedition, and the Imperial Traders Association will be the loudest voice in demanding vengeance for the deaths of the priests of the Lord. The Church has more than once been used as a pretext for Empire."

"I do not understand, my lord," MacKinnie said.

"The Emperor has no wish to conquer these worlds." At MacKinnie's puzzled look, the old man halted. "Bring our guests something to drink." He turned to MacKinnie. "You know nothing of Imperial politics. Are you a member of the Church?"

"New Rome has not yet come to my world, my lord. We are Christians, more or less. I was baptized into the orthodox church, which I am told is acceptable to New Rome."

"Forgive my curiosity, it was not idle. It follows that you know nothing of Imperial politics. What are you doing on Makassar?"

"My king has sent me to head a trading mission, my lord. He rules the largest civilized country on my home world, and is allied with the Imperial ambassador. The Navy is aiding him in the subjugation of the planet."

The Archbishop nodded. "But you are not a trader. Nor are any of these with you. Please, do not protest. You cannot deceive a man of my years. You are a soldier, and these others, what are they, spies? It does not matter. And here you are, on this primitive planet, having come from a world which is itself primitive . . . and you talk of aiding us! It is

admirable, but I fail to see what you can do. Still, such courage should be rewarded, if only with information."

He paused as servants brought wine and additional chairs for the others. "This is not very good wine," Deluca said. "But it is all we have here. The Trader has far better on his ship."

"Wine does not make the day," the Archbishop told them. "It is only a vehicle. Look at them, Father Deluca. Barely able to speak the Imperial language, knowing nothing of the capital and its ways, voyaging across space in ships they cannot understand. . . . If the Church could bring men to as much faith in her teachings as these men have in themselves!" He tasted the wine and grimaced.

"You and I have the same mission, my lord Trader," he told MacKinnie. "We are agents provocateur, sent to aid the Imperial Traders Association. The difference is that I know it, and you do not."

"I do not understand."

"I did not expect you to understand. You believe you are here for some other purpose, some great mission to save your own kingdom perhaps, certainly something more important than bringing back gold for your planetary king. And we are here to bring these people back to God. But both of us will serve the ITA as surely as we would if they had hired us."

The room was still as they waited for him to continue. "The Navy will not permit the Traders simple conquest. I am sure that you know that no good military force will fight for a standard of living—their own or anyone else's. It takes God, not gold, to put heart in a soldier. The Navy fights for a cause, for the Emperor and the Church, for New Annapolis, but never for the ITA. The Navy will not simply come in here and set up kingdoms for the Traders.

"So they use us. They get us sent here, and prevent the Navy from giving us protection . . . but after we are slaughtered, it will be the ITA delegates who shout the loudest for vengeance. 'Have to teach the beggars a lesson,' they will say. And the same for you colonials . . . back on your planet there is opposition to the Empire. I don't have to know where you come from to know that. And Imperialism won't inspire much loyalty. The ITA will find them troublesome. But the really troublesome people will be the most patriotic. . . . Do you think they will not join when

the ITA recruits them for a merchant army to punish this planet? To revenge you? Neatly solving two problems, the conquest of Makassar, and the removal of leaders and soldiers from wherever you come from. It is an old and tested formula, and it works."

"Why do you permit them to use you, my lord?" MacKinnie asked.

"Whatever your reasons, would you have refused to come here if you had known?" the Archbishop answered. "I thought not. Nor could I refuse to bring the Word of God to the heathen." The old man coughed, his thin shoulders shaking violently. "Now go back to whatever plan you have, but remember the ITA. They have large resources, and they have power, but they have no virtue. One day the Navy will tire of being used and kill them all, but others will spring up in their place. There is always the ITA."

"I thank you for your frankness, my lord. Academician, have you anything to say?" MacKinnie added, turning to Longway.

"Not at the moment. I need time to think of all this. I am much afraid the Archbishop is correct. You see the counterparts of the ITA in King David's court. The money grubbers are everywhere."

"My lord," MacKinnie asked, "if we can aid you in bringing these people to the Church, and yet give the Traders no reason to demand Navy intervention here, can you help us?"

"With what?"

"At the moment, I can't tell you. It isn't my secret, and I'm not sure what you can do in any event."

"I am not unwilling to help you in principle . . . but before you ask it, remember to whom you speak. I am an Archbishop of the Church. I am cynical about some of the Church's officers and many of the Imperial advisors, but do not be deceived. I am a loyal subject of the Emperor and a servant of the Church."

MacKinnie nodded. "I would ask nothing dishonorable. We can talk about these things later; now I had better return to my ship."

The old man stood and offered his hand, and after a moment MacKinnie knelt to kiss the great ring. As they left they saw him raise his hand in blessing, muttering words in a language MacKinnie had never heard.

◆ XII ◆

For three days, MacKinnie studied the barbarians. He stood at the walls of Batav, looking out across the low rolling hills and fields, watching as the maris rode swiftly from gate to gate, watching them camp almost within bow-shot of the city, their tents and wagons contemptuously near the gates. Once a small party of armored men from the city attempted to attack the enemy camp. The heavy Temple cavalry charged forth, trampling the light-armored enemy beneath the hooves of their horses, swords hewing a path through the barbarians. But slowly the charge faltered as more and more of the enemy raced to the fray; then the Temple warriors vanished in a sea of swarthy men, and the plain was still once more.

After the disastrous battle, MacKinnie asked for audience with the Temple hierarchy, claiming that he had valuable information about the war which he could reveal only to a high officer. Meanwhile, Stark drilled *Subao's* crew, forcing them to practice with sword, pike, and shield, marching in formation to the beat of drums, throwing javelins and firing crossbows in volley, and always marching, holding formation as they quickstepped about the pier. Their activities attracted notice from the officers of the Temple guard, and on the tenth day in Batav a small party approached the ship.

"We are to conduct you to the Temple," MacKinnie was told. He was ushered to the gates by the officer, then turned over to two gaily clothed attendants who guided him through lavishly decorated halls, up stone steps to a cell set into the wall high above the Temple courtyard. A black robed priest sat at a small table, quill pen and inkpot before him. A litter of parchments was strewn about the room,

and on the wall behind the priest hung a large map of the city and countryside, roads and villages sketched in detail to a distance of fifty miles from the walls.

"Father Sumbavu, the outlander you asked to see," the Temple attendants said. "He calls himself Trader Captain MacKinnie." The man stumbled over the pronunciation but managed to say the name correctly.

Nathan had been told that Father Sumbavu served as minister of war for the Temple. There were others who ranked far higher, but few had more power. Sumbavu seemed to care little for the miter of a bishop, and less for the trappings of power, but his men served him without question. Nathan noted the contrast between the sparsely furnished cell and the richly decorated rooms of the Great Hall of the Temple. His cell was placed in the high battlements, and the narrow window looked across the city, to the wall, and beyond to the barbarian camps. Nathan could see small bands of them riding endlessly around the gates, staying just out of bow-shot. Low rolling hills, covered with grass and dotted with grainfields, stretched out to the horizon. A few roads crossed the plains, and the ruins of burned villages stood at their crossings.

The priest raised his hand perfunctorily in the ritual blessing, and MacKinnie bowed. Before he could straighten the priest asked, "Why do you waste my time?"

"But you asked to see me, father."

"You asked to see a member of the hierarchy. You say you have information about the war. Now you are here. What have you to tell me?"

"Your worship, I have some experience with fighting these barbarians. In the east, they have been driven from city gates. Although I am but a Trader, I have commanded men in battle against these plainsmen, and I wished to find if our methods have been tried. We drove them from the gates in the south." MacKinnie stood as stiffly as a cadet on parade, waiting for the man to speak again, but there was only silence. Nathan studied the priest at length.

He could not tell the priest's age. The face showed no lines, and there was no gray in the closely cropped hair, but the hands were worn, with work and perhaps with age as well. Sumbavu returned the intense gaze, then said, "Why do you think you can do what we cannot? We have the finest soldiers on Makassar, and they have done nothing

against these hordes. We have always beaten them back in the past, but there are too many of them now." He rose and stared out the stone window, his hands clinched tightly.

"It is not the quality of the soldiers, your worship, but their manner of fighting. Your guards have excellent discipline, but there are not enough to them. Your lords fight splendidly, but the cavalry is never properly supported to fight against these plainsmen. I have seen little of your cavalry—they have mostly been killed, have they not? I saw fifty of them taken."

"Those not dead live in the city. There were not many at any time, and they have lost hope. Three times the armored servants of the Temple and the men of the great families rode out that gate. Three times they charged and nothing stood before them. And three times they were defeated, cut off, scattered, driven like straws before the winds, the few riding back into the gates in shame. There are always more of the barbarians, but there are never more of the sons of the great families. And you say that you can do what our greatest warriors could not? Have you perhaps a thousand ships at your back, bringing a new army?" He looked closely at MacKinnie, then motioned to a hard wooden chair. "Enjoy what comforts I allow myself and my visitors," he muttered. "There are few enough. And tell me how the men of the south defeat barbarians."

MacKinnie sat and chose his words carefully. "It is a matter of combining the foot soldiers and the mounted men so that they support each other," he told the priest. "When they are combined properly, the barbarians cannot defeat them."

"There are not enough soldiers," Sumbavu said. "No matter how clever you may be, you cannot make a few win against thousands."

"True enough, father. But we can make each man do the work of ten. And there are the idlers of the city, the hireling swordsmen, the thieves, the people of the city. They can fight."

The priest shrugged. "If they would. But for each of them you drive into the battle you must have a loyal man to watch him and keep him from running. It is not worth it."

"If they are treated as men, and trained properly, they

can fight. We do not need many. But they cannot be treated like cattle or slaves. They must be free soldiers."

"You propose to give arms to the people? You would destroy the Temple?"

"No. I would save it. The Temple is doomed, Father Sumbavu. You are as aware of that as I." MacKinnie gestured toward the window. "The city will fall within the year. I have seen the empty docks, and I am told of the harbors closed against you. I see the people sleeping in the streets while the barbarians harvest the crops. You cannot drive the enemy away until he has eaten everything in your fields. Their supplies will last longer than yours. Your Temple is doomed unless you can drive away the enemy."

Sumbavu struggled to keep his icy calm, but his hands moved restlessly across the desk. "And only you can prevent this? You are indeed a man blessed by God. We have held this city for five hundred years. What have your ancestors done? Lived in dirt houses?"

"What we have done is no matter. It is what we can do."

"And how will you go about saving the city? What is your price?"

"I have no price for saving the fountain of all the wisdom on Makassar. I ask only what I will need. Weapons. Pikes and shields. Authority to recruit men. And I will have to inspect the soldiers, talk to the heavy cavalymen. I will require a drill field to practice my men. And the men on Temple charity must be brought to it, so that they can be armed. I have no price, but I have much to do. We can save this city and the Temple if you will but listen."

The priest spread his hands and looked intently at his palms. "Perhaps it is the will of God. There is no other plan. It can do no great harm to allow you to train this rabble, for when you and they are killed that will be all the longer our rations will last. I will see that you get what you need."

Gradually, an army was formed on the parade ground outside the Temple. In the first week, the men had to be driven to the drill field, stumbling through their paces, unable to understand and unwilling to work. But as they were given weapons, a new respect for themselves slowly pervaded the ragged group. Men who had recently been beggars found themselves alongside sturdy peasants from outside

the walls, and mixed among them were younger sons of merchant families ruined by the siege. Under MacKinnie's pleas and Stark's driving, they began to hold their heads higher, to thrust their pikes into the target dummies, even to scream war cries. After the third week of training, MacKinnie called a conference.

"We don't have long," he told the group. "Sumbavu is anxious to know what we are doing, and I have to report to him. You want to be careful of that man. He's a lot sharper than he looks or acts. What's the status of our army?"

"The infantry's so-so," Hal reported. "The Temple troops are fine, but they don't know what to do and they're so sure of themselves they don't want to learn anything new. The people's army can carry pikes and hold up their shields if you don't want them to do it for too long. Weak as cats, most of them. And we'll never get any archers out of that crowd. The Temple's got a fair number, and that's all you'll have."

"Can they hold against a charge of light cavalry?" MacKinnie asked.

"Don't know, sir. They'd never stop the heavy stuff, but they might hold against the plainsmen if they believed in themselves enough. But they have no confidence, Colonel."

MacKinnie noted Longway's start at Hal's slip, but said nothing. "What of the cavalry?" he asked Brett. "Can they fight in formation? Have they had enough of that cockiness beat out of them to make them a disciplined force, or are they going to go charging out into the enemy and scatter?"

"Vanjynk and I have talked to them, Trader," Brett replied. "But their honor is all they have left. Still, these were men who have been beaten before, and after all, it is only barbarians they fight. . . . But it will be difficult to call them back from victory."

"You'll have to," MacKinnie said. "It's the only chance any of us have. Those men have to be taught to charge home, reform, and get back to the shield walls. Any of them that try the grandstand act will be left out there dead. Try to drive that elementary fact through their heads. And add to it the fact that if they're killed their city falls and the whole honor system they're so proud of goes with it. They're fighting to preserve their honor."

"Yes, but by means which to them are dishonorable," Vanjynk said. "They listen to me as one of them, and I

have faithfully told them what you desire. I have even come to believe it. But it is strange to them."

MacKinnie nodded. "Strange or not, they'll have to learn. Now what about the commissary department?"

"We have some supply wagons," Mary Graham said. "And there is plenty of forage out beyond the walls. If you can protect our baggage trains, we can supply your men for a few days. There won't be a lot to eat, but something. We might even be able to harvest some grain if our farmers are protected."

"So we have a partially disciplined force of infantry, some cavalry who may be useful and may not, some Temple archers and guardsmen who are our best soldiers but don't understand what's needed, and one whole hell of a lot of barbarians. An interesting situation." He thought for a few moments, staring down at a copy of Sumbavu's map young Todd had laboriously made, then came to a decision. "We need a demonstration. I'll give each of you a week to select the best men you can, men you think won't break and run and who will obey orders. I'll need provisions for about two days for twice that number of people, and a group of your best disciplined cooks and camp workers," he added to Mary. "We're going to make a show of force against the enemy. The primary purpose will be to convince our own troops that we can beat barbarians." He stood, dismissing the meeting. "Hal, stay with me for a moment, please."

When the others had left, Stark said, "Sorry about the slip, Colonel. It's too much like a campaign, and I'm not used to being a spy."

"We'll survive. Have you picked the headquarters group?"

"Yes, sir. Using the troops we brought with us as a steadying force we've got a pretty loyal company. I think they'd fight the Temple people for us if they thought they could win. Anyway we can control them. You lead them to a victory, they'll be yours for sure."

"Excellent. We must have that headquarters group, or when this is over there won't be any point to it all. All right, Sergeant, you can go."

Hal stood, grinned for a moment, and saluted. "Old times, Colonel. Different Wolves, but old times."

MacKinnie carefully armed himself before visiting Sumbavu. He struggled into chain mail, threw a bright crimson cloak over his shoulders, donned gold bracelets and necklace, and fastened his surplice with a jeweled pin before buckling on a sword made on Prince Samuel's World. The mail and sword were better than anything they had encountered on Makassar, although reasonably similar in design, and their possession imparted some status to MacKinnie's group. Sumbavu was standing at the battlements above his cell when MacKinnie was brought to him.

"You betray true colors, Trader," the priest said. "You are more the soldier than the Trader, are you not?"

"In the south, father, Traders and soldiers are the same thing. At least live Traders are. There's little peace there."

"Or here. It was not always thus." The warrior-priest looked out across the great plain beyond the city wall. "They are more of them today. The grain is ready for harvest, and they are formed to protect it from our fire parties. We could burn the crop, but only at the cost of the balance of our knights. I do not think any would return to us alive."

"Yet there may be a way, father," MacKinnie said. When the priest glanced quickly at him, he continued, "I wish to take a small party outside the walls. We will not go far."

"You may take as many of your useless mouths as you please. You have made them march with their heads up, but they are not soldiers. They will never be soldiers."

"I need more than my peasants," MacKinnie said. "I will require fifty archers of the Temple, and fifty mounted men."

"A fourth part of the archers? And nearly as great a part of the knights? You are mad. I will not permit it."

"Yet, father, it is worth doing. We will show you how the barbarians can be defeated. And we will not go far from the walls. The archers and knights can seek shelter there if my men do not hold—and there can be no loss of honor if they retreat because others failed them."

"Where will you be?"

"With the spearmen at the van."

"You risk your life to prove these men? You believe, then. Strange."

MacKinnie looked across the plains, to see another band

of barbarians approach the walls. There seemed to be hundreds in the one group alone.

"You will take your men into that," Sumbavu said. "You will not come out alive."

"But if we do? It will put heart in the others. Remember, if we do nothing, the Temple is doomed."

"Yet if you slaughter my archers and knights the doom will fall the faster. . . ." The priest studied the camps below, watching knots of horsemen dart toward the walls, then turn away just outside the range of the archers at the walls. He fingered his emblem, a golden Temple with ebony black cross surmounting it, and turned suddenly.

"Do as you will. You are mad, but there are those who believe the mad have inspiration from God. It is certain that I have none." Sumbavu turned and stalked away, age showing in the set of his shoulders.

◆ XIII ◆

MacKinnie used a week training the picked men for the sally. Finally Hal reported that they were as ready as they could be in the time they had, and assembled them in the marshaling square just inside the gates. His cloak streaming behind him, Nathan mounted the small dais near the gates to address the men.

"You will win today a victory such as has never been seen on this world," he shouted. "There will be no end to the songs of this day. Your homes will be saved, and you will come to glory. Besides, what life is there huddled behind walls? What man hides from his enemies when he can go out and kill them? Today you are all men. You will never be slaves again."

There was a feeble cheer, led by Hal's picked guardsmen scattered through the ranks.

"It'll have to do," Nathan told his sergeant. "They won't believe much of anything until they see they can hold the enemy. But will they fight long enough to find out?"

"Don't know, Colonel," Stark answered. "We've done all we could with them, but most of the spirit was beat out of them before we got here. They might."

"They know what to do," MacKinnie said. "Now it's up to us to make them do it. Get them in ranks and open the gate."

"Yes, sir."

The army was formed as a wedge, spear and shield soldiers at the edges, the cavalry, archers, and supply wagons inside. Picked men held the point, which was rounded to be as wide as the gate would permit. They were to march out in a column, with the sides moving swiftly on the obliques to make the triangular formation they had practiced on the

Temple drill field. The crimson uniforms of the Temple archers and the gaily colored armor of the knights formed a brilliant contrast to the drab leather garments of the pikemen as they stood in ranks, waiting for the gate. Wherever possible, the men in ranks wore breastplates, helmets, greaves, but there were not enough to equip them all. Some had only spear and shield, with a small dagger in their belts.

At MacKinnie's wave, the gate opened. "Move out!" Stark shouted. "Keep your order. Just like on the drill field. Get in step, there."

Young drummers scattered through the reserves tapped cadence as the small force sallied out the gate. When enough of the spearmen had emerged to form a shield wall, MacKinnie sent out the cavalry, then strode swiftly through them to reach his post near the point of the formation.

They formed ranks within the protective fire of the archers on the walls. A few of the barbarians charged toward them, but were cut down before they could reach the sallying force. The rest of the enemy stayed well out of range, watching, while thousands more rode swiftly toward the gate.

"Lot of them out there," Stark remarked. "Looks like all of them. Too bad you don't have another sally set up for the other gate."

"There's few enough troops here," MacKinnie muttered. He was grimly watching as the last of the army emerged from the gates and swung across to form the base of the wedge. "All right, Hal, move them out."

Stark signaled to the drummers. The cadence changed, and a drum signal echoed down the line. The men ceased to mark time and slowly marched forward, shields held level, spears thrust forward. Behind each shieldman were two ranks of pikemen. They marched across the gently rolling plain toward the nearest enemy camp, slowly moving from the protective fire of the city walls.

"Here comes the first bunch," Stark said, pointing to a group of nomads charging across the field. "They're going right around to hit young Todd's section. Put the archers on them?"

"Two squads, Hal. Let the others fire at high angle to keep the rest away. Todd's men can hold that group."

"Yes, sir."

Volleys of bolts shot from the Temple archers, cutting some of the enemy from their wooden saddles. Then the first barbarians hurtled toward the shield line, not in a wave but in scattered groups.

Before they made contact, Todd shouted orders. The drum cadence changed, and the line of men sank to one knee, spears grounded, the pikemen thrusting over their heads. The maris hurdled closer, shouting, cheering.

A barbarian mare screamed as she was impaled on a spear. Other beasts whirled from the thicket of points, getting in the way of men charging behind them, stumbling within range of the thrusting pikes, until the barbarian group was milling in front of the right leg of MacKinnie's wedge. Archers poured fire into the mass of men and beasts. The enemy shouted defiance, broke against the shield wall again, again.

"They flee, they flee!" someone shouted.

"After them!" MacKinnie heard.

"Hold your positions!" MacKinnie shouted. "By the Temple God I'll have the archers cut down the first man that breaks rank! Brett, keep those damned knights of yours under control!"

"Yes, sir," he heard from among the cavalry in the center of the wedge. The knights were milling about, anxious to give chase to the fleeing enemy. The maris thundered away, wheeled to shout defiance again, then rode off when no one followed.

When calm returned, MacKinnie mounted a wagon. "You've driven off one small group. It wasn't much of a battle, but you see it can be done. Now don't let them make fools of you. If you break formation or leave the shield wall, they'll be all over you. Stand to ranks and you'll slaughter them. Remember, every man's life depends on each of you. No one must break, not for cowardice, and not for glory. And by God, raise a cheer!"

This time the response was great. As MacKinnie climbed down from the wagon, he recognized its driver, shouting at the top of her lungs.

"Freelady!" he called. "You have no business here."

"You gave me the commissary to organize, Colonel. I have done it. There was no one here fit to command my rag-tag group, and I will not have my work undone by incom-

petents. Your sergeant himself dismissed that oaf from the Temple who tried to drive my men like slaves."

He looked at her carefully. She wore the armor made for her on Prince Samuel's World, and carried a sword on the wagon box next to her. As he studied her, he saw one of the commissary cooks watching him, fingering his weapon, an enormous meat ax.

"You leave the lady alone," the burly man said. "She's a saint from heaven. You touch her, and commander or not, you die."

"Sumba, thank you, but I don't need protection," Mary protested. "At least not from him."

"That's all right, my lady, we'll watch them all," the stocky cook said. MacKinnie shrugged and returned to organize the battle.

The group marched forward again, the drums measuring a slow beat. From time to time a group of the enemy would gallop toward them, firing arrows, only to be driven away by the Temple archers. The barbarian's stubby bows were useless against even the leather of the unarmored men until they came to close range, and they did not dare come very close.

"They'll reform for another try," MacKinnie said softly. "This time they'll try a mass charge with everything they've got."

Stark nodded. "The men have some confidence now, Colonel. I think they'll hold. It was a good thing, their trying a small attack first."

"Clan rivalry," Longway said from behind them. "I've seen it on South Continent. Each clan wants to be the first to remove the insult of our presence. But they'll be back."

"Night's what worries me," Stark said. "We going to stay out here all night?"

MacKinnie nodded. "The whole point of this demonstration is to build up the morale of the troops back in the city. Just moving out and coming back won't do any good. We have to have a solid victory."

"I still do not see what we are accomplishing," Longway said. "Suppose you prove that you can take the field against the barbarians and move about in formations they can't break. All they have to do is avoid you."

"We'll cross that one later," MacKinnie muttered. "Here they come, Hal. Get the men ready."

A flood of the enemy galloped toward them across the low plain.

"Thousands, thousands," someone in the ranks shouted. "We'll never stop that charge!"

"Quiet in the ranks!" Stark ordered. "Beat to arms, drummers!" The tattoo thundered through the small formation. The shieldsmen dropped to one knee again, this time the entire perimeter sinking low, with the pikemen thrusting their weapons over the tops of the shields. A small knot of reserve pikemen stood at each corner of the wedge, while Brett's cavalry milled about. The archers fired into the oncoming horde as the cooks and camp followers struggled to load crossbows and pass them up to the bowmen. Every bolt took its target, leaving riderless horses to run aimlessly, bringing confusion to the enemy charge.

"They don't have what you'd call much formation to them," Stark observed coldly. "They'd do better to all come at once instead of in little bunches."

"Insufficient discipline," Longway said. "They've more than the normal on this world, but that isn't much."

As the drums thundered to crescendo, the charge hit home. On all sides barbarians plunged and reared, unable to penetrate the shield walls, milling about in front of the wedges, while crossbow bolts poured out.

"Swordsmen! Swordsmen here!" MacLean shouted from his station as commander of the rear section. At his order, a dozen men with shortsworads and bucklers ran to his aid, throwing themselves into a gap in the line, thrusting five dismounted barbarians out into the seething mass beyond. A knot of pikemen trotted to station behind them, while the formation closed ranks over the bodies of five shieldsmen, killed when one of their number turned to run.

The maris called to their companions, withdrew a space, and charged the weak spot in the line again.

"They're massing back there against MacLean," Stark reported. "Getting hard to hold."

"Prepare the cavalry," MacKinnie said softly. "I'll go get MacLean ready."

MacKinnie ran across the thirty yards separating the point from the base of the wedge. "Prepare to open ranks, Mr. MacLean."

"Aye, Colonel. Drummers, beat the ready." The drum notes changed subtly. "Fuglemen, pace your men!" The

seaman's voice carried through the din of battle, and they heard the orders rattle down the ranks. MacKinnie eyed the situation coolly.

"Now, Mr. MacLean."

"Open ranks!" MacLean commanded. The shieldsmen sidestepped, bunching up on each other, leaving a clear gap in the center. The enemy shouted in triumph, pouring toward the gap.

The rich notes of a trumpet sounded from the center of the formation. Slowly, gathering speed, ponderously, the heavy cavalymen trotted across the wedge from their gathering place at the point.

They built up speed, lances were lowered, and they drove into the advancing enemy, using the maris' own momentum to add to their own, sweeping everything before them, riding the enemy down under the hooves of their beasts. Brett and Vanjynk, at each end of the first wave of knights, sounded a cheer as the heavy armor of the iron men proved too much for the light armed maris. The barbarians scattered and swordsmen poured into the gaps, running alongside the knights, slashing down the enemy, killing the dismounted. The charge pressed onward, the knights scattering to pursue the enemy. The tight formation broke up, and the maris withdrew, formed in tight knots.

"Sound recall," MacKinnie ordered. The trumpet notes were heard again, this time plaintively, disappointed. "Sound it again." He turned to Stark. "This is the turning point, Hal. If Vanjynk and Brett can't control those brainless wonders, we've had it."

He saw his officers shouting to the knights. Slowly they began to wheel, first one, then another, then the entire group. For a moment they paused, and MacKinnie saw that Brett was actually dressing their ranks, before they rode in, proudly, contemptuously, in perfect order, their pennants fluttering from their lances, while the shield wall closed behind them over the bodies of a hundred foes.

MacKinnie drove them relentlessly on, across the plain toward the first of the nomad encampments. Twice more they withstood a massed assault from the maris, the column halting to plant spear points in the ground. The second attack was heavy enough to cause MacKinnie to order the cavalry charge again, breaking through the concentrations of the enemy before wheeling around to recover their posi-

tion within the shield wall. In each battle they left a pile of enemy dead to be crushed beneath the wagon wheels as the column marched on.

They reached the enemy camp, a group of leather tents stretched across wooden frames, a few wagons which the barbarians pulled to safety before the army arrived. A thin wall of men with light shields stood in front of the camp. Brett and Vanjynk rode forward to MacKinnie.

"We can scatter them with a single charge!" Brett shouted. "Open the ranks."

"No. I will not risk our cavalry in a charge beyond the shield walls. There are too few men for that, and we would never return to the city if something went wrong. We march together or we die together. Would your knights abandon us?"

"We would not leave you though you stood alone among a thousand enemies," Vanjynk said quietly. "I have been talking to the knights. Not one of us has ever seen the like of this day. We have left more of the enemy behind us than we number. Each time we fought them before, our charge would carry them away until suddenly they swarmed about us to cut us down. We will stay with you."

The column moved forward, cautiously but inexorably, the drums giving a slow step as the pikemen advanced. MacKinnie rotated the formation until the point was aimed directly at the enemy, then massed his reserve pikes behind the leading men. His archers were silent, their store of bolts nearly exhausted. MacKinnie spoke quietly to the Temple officer who commanded them.

"A full volley on the men to the right of our point," he said deliberately. "I want a hole driven in their formation. They can't fight as infantry, they aren't trained for it, and they don't like it. We'll break through and roll up their flanks."

As they approached nearer, MacKinnie gave a signal. The archers fired their volley as Todd led a knot of swordsmen forward, cast javelins at the enemy in front of them, and retired behind the forest of pikes. The leading elements of the column struck just behind the javelins, tearing through the thin line by sheer momentum, before the first rank of pikemen fell into a hidden pit behind the maris. Their screams echoed up from below.

"That's what you would have ridden into," MacKinnie

told Brett softly. "I thought there was a reason they'd stand like that. They were hoping for a full charge of cavalry."

The barbarians broke and ran, gathering their mounts from hiding places behind the tents and galloping away. Mary Graham's auxiliaries hauled the wounded men from the pits below, leaving five pikemen impaled on stakes set in the ground. She turned pale as she stood looking into the grisly trench, but Nathan had no time for sympathy.

"Bury them here," MacKinnie ordered. "It's an honorable enough grave. Send for the chaplain." He moved about, setting the shield wall in place.

A small scouting party entered the enemy camp, to return with excited reports. "There is much food here," one said. "But we must enter with great care, for they have tethered scarpias on the walls and ridgepoles." The scarpia was a warm-blooded lizard-like creature four to ten inches long. It faintly resembled the Earth scorpion, and its bite was nearly as deadly.

"We will camp beyond the enemy tents," MacKinnie ordered. "Use their ridgepoles to add to our stakes, and be sure to set the stakes carefully. They may attack at night. Bring as much food as you can carry for the city."

Under Stark's direction, the battalion built a fortified camp, digging ditches around the perimeter, throwing the earth to the inside and placing stakes at the top of the rampart they formed. They worked in shifts, every other man using his shovel while the rest stood in ranks holding the diggers' shields and weapons, but there was no renewal of the barbarian attack. The maris rode endlessly around the perimeter of the camp, just outside bow-shot, darting in to fire arrows and wheeling away before an answering volley could be launched. MacKinnie ordered the men to ignore the harassment.

"They'll get close enough to fight before the night's over," he told them. "They can't do us much harm from the range they're shooting from. You'll get your chance later."

It was dark before the cook fires were lighted, but MacKinnie would not allow any rest until the camp was completed. When the last stake was driven, the sun had set, and a thick overcast obscured the moons. From his command point atop Mary Graham's wagon, MacKinnie could

see dozens of fires dotting the plain, barbarian camps, each a band of hundreds of men.

"There are sure enough of them," he remarked.

"I don't see how we can win against so many," Mary answered. "No matter how many you kill, there will always be more."

"Not if there's nothing to eat. They're foraging pretty wide already. It's only the grain crops that keep them able to stay here. Without those, they'd have to go back into the interior. We'll drive them off all right."

"What were you a colonel of?" she asked. "I thought you were more than just a Trader from the time I met you, and I wasn't very surprised when your man let it slip."

"You've heard of me," he said. Out beyond the palisade, something was moving. The nearest enemy cook fire was obscured momentarily, then again.

"You mean your name is MacKinnie? Let me—" She looked up in surprise. "Iron MacKinnie? The Orleans commander? I should hate you."

"Why?"

"My fiancé was at Blanthern Pass. A subaltern in the Fifth."

MacKinnie climbed laboriously from the wagon, surprised at how tired he was even in the low gravity of Makassar. "The Fifth were good troops."

"Yes. They'd have won against anyone but your men, wouldn't they? I think everyone in Haven hated and admired you at the same time after that battle."

"It's done. Now we're all loyal subjects of King David. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She moved closer to him, trying to see his face in the dim light from the cook fire. "From these millions of miles away, the big important politics of Prince Samuel's World look pretty small. Until today I was sure we'd never get back home. Even now it doesn't seem very likely. But if anyone can do it, you can."

Nathan laughed. "You're beginning to sound like Hal talking to the recruits, Mary Graham. For now you'd best get the men fed, because we don't have very long before the barbarians try their hand with a night attack. I'll have the troops sent here in shifts so we keep a decent perimeter, and we feed the interior troops last. It's the pikemen and shield boys we want to take care of tonight."

"When do the knights eat?"

"After they've fed their mounts like any good cavalry. And after my pikemen. Your pardon, freelady, I have to see to my men."

The night wore on. MacKinnie was relieved when no attack came before his perimeter guards were fed, but did not relax until every man was back in his place, lying at ease with his weapons, while swordsmen stood guard to peer futilely into the darkness.

"They're coming," he told Stark. "I've seen them stirring around, and there's a feel about it. You get it too?"

"Yes, sir. And like you say, they're moving about some out there. We'll hear from them before morning."

It was nearly midnight when a sentry shouted, then vanished beneath a wave of dismounted men swarming toward the palisade.

"Trumpeter!" MacKinnie shouted. "Sound the alarm! To your feet, men!" He could see a knot of pikemen, kept awake in central reserve, rushing toward the area of the attack.

"To me! To me!" he heard Vanjynk shout. "Leave your mounts and rally to me!" Leading a party of knights with swords singing about their heads, Vanjynk charged to the perimeter, pushing aside shieldsmen struggling to their feet. The iron men stood at the top of the palisades, dealing terrible blows to the enemy attempting to climb out of the ditch. The night was filled with screams and shouts before MacKinnie had his shield wall formed properly and brought the armored men back to a central reserve.

"They're all around the perimeter," Stark told him. "They try one spot and then another, not much coordination to it, but nobody can rest any, Colonel."

MacKinnie nodded agreement. "It's a good tactic. They hope to tire us out and then cut us off from the city. It'll cost them enough."

In less than an hour the battle died away, leaving a quiet shattered at intervals with the groans of the wounded, but the enemy never left them alone. All night there were rushes against one part of the palisade or another, and the whistle of arrows fired randomly into the camp. Morning came slowly, to reveal hundreds of enemy dead and dying filling the ditches, or stretched on the ground where they had

crawled away from the battle. Bands of nomads rode slowly around the camp, silently watching the wall of shields.

"Here's the tricky part," MacKinnie said. "But I think they may have had enough for now. They'll want to see what we do next." He carefully moved his men out beyond the palisade, bringing the wagons and interior troops out of the camp before abandoning the other walls. The enemy watched, but there was no attack, as he marched his formation slowly back through the enemy campsite, burning everything he could find. As the maris' possessions blazed behind them, the battalion marched in quickstep back to the city.

◆ XIV ◆

The war minister was angry as he faced the assembled bishops of the Temple. "He has proved that he can fight the barbarians. He has remained a day and a night outside the walls of the city. He has killed hundreds of them. For this we are grateful. But I say that it is madness to take the entire army into the field. Let him carry on his raids with the troops he used before, not strip our walls of their defenders."

The council muttered approval. MacKinnie glanced around the great room, its walls hung with tapestries; above the woven hangings stone figures, representing heroes of an Empire dead so long its very existence was legend, stared down at them. On his dais high above the council table, His Utmost Holiness Willem XI dozed in starts, interest overcoming senility for moments before his head dropped again. His word was law, but the council of bishops wrote his words for him, and spoke them as well more often than not.

"Worshipful sirs," MacKinnie said, "I would do as Father Sumbavu asks if it were possible. But our expedition was a demonstration only. Without sufficient troops to replace the shieldmen who fall in battle, and more to allow the men to rest when they tire, we could never hold against the enemy for more than a day. But with enough men I can destroy their bases of supplies, bring them to battle against us, destroy many of them and send the rest to their wastelands. And do not be deceived, worshipful sirs. The plainsmen have studied our methods of fighting. They will even now be devising means to fight us, to use their great numbers and speed. The next battle will decide the fate of the city. Would you fight it now, or wait until hunger has reduced

our ranks to shadows? Will you fight outside the walls like men, or huddled inside waiting to be slaughtered?"

"He speaks well, Sumbavu," the Archdeacon said. He turned his blue eyes toward MacKinnie. "And how do you know you will have success? What manner of Trader are you that you know ways of fighting never seen on this world?"

"Your Reverence, my ways are but those of the Guildsmen of the south and west. We have fought these barbarians before, although never so many of them. As to success, what can be denied the army of God? If we go forth boldly, we must win, for God is with us."

"He was with us before, but it did not save our army," Sumbavu muttered. The old priest glanced quickly about, fearful of having spoken heresy.

"You wish to take all the knights and archers, and your beggars," the Archdeacon said. "This I understand from watching the fighting five days ago. But why do you also demand the swordsmen of the Temple? Of what use will these be to you?"

"The armored swordsmen will guard our camp," MacKinnie said. "They will fight in the nighttime when the shieldsmen are not of such great value. They fight against the barbarians when they leave their mounts and attack us on foot. The citizen army knows only one method of fighting; they are not trained soldiers. We must have a leavening of fighting men if we are to bring the enemy to the final battle."

"And, Sumbavu, what have you to say except that we should not allow this? What reasons have you?" the crimson-robed official asked. "He has done what you could never do." The Archdeacon turned to the others. "For myself, I see the hand of God in this man's coming. Who knows what instruments the Omnipotent may choose for our deliverance?"

Sumbavu measured his words carefully, speaking softly so that they leaned forward to hear him. "I do not know. Yet I do not like this. There is something of this man I do not understand, and I do not think he should be trusted with the army of the Temple."

"Then go with him to command it," the Archdeacon said. "For ourselves, we have heard enough. Let the Trader kill the barbarians, and may God's blessing go with him."

Sumbavu bowed in acceptance, but MacKinnie felt the war minister's intense gaze even as he left the room.

MacKinnie used two more weeks preparing for the battle. His entire force of citizens and peasants was trained, with his original group dispersed through the ranks as fuglemen. Stark drilled them relentlessly in the Temple courtyard, taking them again and again through the complex maneuvers which formed squares and columns, opened and closed ranks, brought their pikes to rest and present.

Brett and Vanjynk worked with the knights, shouting and cursing to try to make them understand that their great strength lay in a massed charge, and that they must return to the shield wall to regroup after each attack or they would be split apart and killed. Each evening they discussed the day's progress, talking late into the night, then rising early to drill the men once again.

On the night before the army was to go forth, MacKinnie held another conference. He looked intently at his officers seated at the thick wooden table in front of him.

"Mr. MacLean, what of my infantry?"

"Better than when we went out last, Trader. They've seen the way it's done now, and Stark sweated them until they're hardened up. Not like veteran troops, but they'll hold. Doubling the rations didn't hurt any."

"That was the Trader's doing," Mary Graham said. "He found someone who could be bribed at the warehouse."

MacKinnie shook his head. "Stark again, though I thought of it. I've never seen a commissary yet that didn't have a couple of people on the take in it."

"I hope there are none in mine," Mary said indignantly.

"There are, lady, there are," Stark injected. "Just hope their price is high and they're scared enough of you not to fill up the grain wagons with sand. It's been done to campaigns before."

"And your knights, Vanjynk?" MacKinnie asked.

"They drill well, they wheel to the trumpets, but they still do not like turning from the battle. Nor do I, but I see it must be done." Vanjynk lifted his cup and gulped the wine. "You fight strangely on your world, star man."

"Lay off that talk," Stark muttered. "We have enough trouble with the Temple people without that."

MacKinnie nodded. "Hal's right. But tell me, will the knights obey the trumpets?"

"I believe so," Brett answered. "They have little wish to be killed by barbarians. But there is no fear of death in these men, only of dishonor."

"Aye, so Brett made a song about foolish knights who abandoned their commander and were shamed forever," MacLean said. "Silly thing, but catchy. Seems to have helped."

"If songs help, sing your lungs out," MacKinnie told them. "The key to this whole battle is getting the heavy cavalry to bear on the barbarians while they're bunched up. Nothing on this world can stand up to a charge from those armored ironheads, but as soon as they lose their momentum and scatter, the maris can pick them off with no trouble at all." He turned to Mary Graham. "Do you have all the supplies we ordered?"

She nodded. "We've made thousands of bolts for the crossbows, and the grain wagons are ready. You don't really have very many provisions, you know."

"I know. You're rolling plenty of empty wagons, though. Either we find something to put in them, or we'll come back home for more supplies. This formation's slow enough without heavy transport gear in the square."

"Then we're ready," Mary Graham said.

"Not you. You aren't going," MacKinnie told her.

"Yes I am. It's no safer in here than out there. If your battle is lost, the city is lost as well and you know it." She looked around the room at the other men from her world. "I have a right to his protection, and I choose that he exercise it personally. Don't I have that right?"

"An interesting point," Longway said. "You cannot abandon her without finding a substitute guardian," the Academician told MacKinnie. "And doubtless she is entitled to someone of her own world. Who will you leave with her? Scholar Kleinst remains in the city, but for all his great value he is hardly a suitable guardian."

"I appear to be outmaneuvered, although why you should want to accompany an army in the field is beyond me, freelady." MacKinnie looked at her expectantly.

"I see no reason to stay here," she told him. "There are few enough on this godforsaken place that I can talk to, without being left with the Temple monks. Besides, I can be

useful, or can you spare anyone else to manage your commissary?"

"The point is made." He turned back to the council. "Our whole purpose in this expedition will be to either force the plainsmen into battle on our terms, or destroy their base of supply. Either will be sufficient, although I doubt they will let us simply march out and burn their harvests without a fight. . . ." He indicated the map spread out on the table. "As near as we can tell from watching their movements, they've been harvesting the crops for the past three weeks. The nearest big concentration of grain is here, about thirty miles from the gates, assuming they use the roads and village structures. I rather think they will. From what I've been able to learn they often do that. We'll make straight for that and burn what we can't load up."

"Then what?" MacLean asked.

"We see if they'll fight. If they won't, we keep marching from place to place until they're short of rations. But they'll fight all right."

"You may get more battle than you expect," Longway said. "You've hurt their pride with your last expedition, and they'll want to prove it was an accident. Next time, they'll press home their charge with everything they have."

"That's what I'm hoping for," MacKinnie answered slowly. "It will take them time to gather for the battle, and more to decide who leads it. By that time, we should have got to our objective and set up camp. They'll gather troops all night, and probably try to wipe us out in the morning."

"Then you're trying for one big battle," Mary said.

"Yes. One turn of the wheel, freelady. We haven't a lot of time." He glanced significantly at the Makassarians at the table, then stood to dismiss the meeting. "Rest well, and be ready tomorrow. They may not let us get to the first village."

The army formed outside the city walls after first light. MacKinnie placed his men in a triangular formation again, but this time the broad base of the wedge faced forward, its point to the rear. He doubled the men on the right leg of the wedge, using all the left-handed troops he could find for the forward elements of that line, and placing a large reserve force at the rear point. When he was satisfied with his

arrangements, the drums beat their slow march, and the army moved forward.

Clouds of maris rode madly around, darting toward them, withdrawing, waiting for any opening in the shield walls, patient in the knowledge that the city army could never pursue them. The slow cadence continued, wagon wheels creaked and men shouted at the oxen drawing supply wagons, while the knights in the center impatiently led their mounts. Mile after mile they marched toward the enemy camp, as more and more barbarians joined the forces riding around them. They were completely surrounded.

"Reckon the city can hold with what we've left them?" Stark asked, looking back at the city in the distance. "You didn't leave them much."

"They'll hold," MacKinnie replied. "The enemy has no heavy siege equipment, and as long as the walls are manned the barbarians can't do much. Give them enough time and they could throw up ladders or even stack their saddles against the walls, but the defense can slow that down, and I don't intend to give them any time for stunts like that. We seem to be attracting most of them to us, anyway. What's Sumbavu doing?"

"He's riding with the knights, Colonel. Keeping an eye on those pretty uniformed swordsmen and archers, too. He doesn't trust you much."

"I don't blame him, Hal. I wouldn't trust me much either if I were him. But what else can he do? Keep a sharp eye on him; I can't have him interfering."

"Yes, sir. You didn't make much protest about his coming."

"Maybe I didn't mind him coming. Now watch him."

"Yes, sir."

The march continued, drawing to within a mile of the enemy tents. MacKinnie looked closely at the cluster of enemy in front of him. "They're trying to make up their minds. They don't want to give up all that grain without a fight. Watch that group there," he said, pointing. "Here they come! Beat the alarm!"

The drums thundered, then went back to their steady pace. The column continued to advance until the enemy was within bow-shot. "Prepare for attack," MacKinnie said quietly, measuring the distance to the nearest of the plainsmen. "Form the wall." The drums beat again, and the Tem-

ple archers rushed to the perimeter, firing into the packed enemy. The charge hurtled toward the broad front of the wedge, then wheeled around to strike the left end of the line. Pikemen rushed to the corner as echelon after echelon of the enemy plunged against the left leg of the inverted wedge.

The shield wall held. A few of the barbarians leaped over the first rank to land among the pikemen, their shortswords slashing, but Temple guardsmen moved forward to cut them down. The battle was short, and when it was finished hundreds more of the enemy lay in front of the column. The men raised a cheer, cut short by the drummers' commands to resume the march.

"Not much of a battle," Stark commented. "Thought they'd try more than that."

"Testing us out," MacKinnie said. "They've found a way to get a few men into our lines now. They'll try that one again. Adaptable beggars."

"They have to be," Brett said from behind him. MacKinnie turned to see the singer walking patiently. "I left my mount with Vanjynk," Brett said. "You understand that there will be many more battles, each different from the last?"

"I understand. But how many more there will be depends on more than their intentions. For now, we take their supplies."

The enemy camp was deserted, the tents struck away. Huge piles of harvested grains, recently covered with hides but now left to blow about in the wind, and the scattered refuse of weeks of enemy life lay about them. Ditch, ramparts, and palisade rose around the campsite while the commissary workers began cook fires. A dozen singers strolled about.

MacKinnie moved through the camp, speaking to little groups of his men, encouraging them, testing their morale. It was hard to believe that only months before these had been the sullen slaves and beggars of the streets of Batav. Now they roared lustily at his jokes, shouted defiance at an enemy they could not see, and grimly held their weapons as if half afraid someone would take them. MacKinnie pitied anyone foolish enough to try.

The night was a turmoil. Under the two bright moons, masses of barbarians stormed forward, some mounted,

most on foot, trying to find a weak spot in the perimeter, keeping the men aroused. MacKinnie sent small detachments of his troops to the center of the camp, replacing them with others, so that each man was able to rest for part of the night. Toward dawn, the attack died away, and he let the men sleep until late in the morning. The Temple swordsmen had born the brunt of the night attacks, and were most in need of rest. MacKinnie did not call them to breakfast until everyone else had been fed.

A mile from the camp, a mass of barbarians waited, strung out in a vast semicircle between MacKinnie's army and the city. MacKinnie had never seen so large a group of plainsmen before. As he stood atop the commissary wagon peering out at the enemy, Stark joined him.

"This going to be it, Colonel?" the big sergeant asked.

"Possibly. Let's see if we can get out of this camp. They figure to hit us as soon as there are enough outside the gates to make it worthwhile." MacKinnie shouted orders, formed the men into ranks, then motioned to a trumpeter. The notes rang out, calling his officers to him. Moments later, the main gates opened.

MacKinnie sent a heavy detachment of shieldsmen angling forward and to the left from the camp gate. A second group angled off to the right, while others marched out to form a line between them, its ends anchored with the hard marching groups of picked men. When the left-hand group had left a large enough opening inside the wedge, the knights were sent forward until they were just behind the shield wall, at the extreme left corner of the inverted wedge the army was forming. Then MacKinnie sent the Temple archers forward, a line down each leg of his triangular formation, leaving none in the center. Whenever the maris approached the two legs of the formation, a shower of arrows greeted them, forcing them away. The enemy clustered around, moving toward the center where the resistance was least.

MacKinnie nodded in satisfaction. "Now comes the hard part," he muttered.

A charge of the barbarians struck the center of the triangle directly in front of the camp gates. The shield wall held, but gradually fell back, stretching thinner and thinner, bowing inwardly toward the gate as the heavier formations at the ends of the line held fast. More troops were sent for-

ward to fill the gaps, keeping a continuous line, but still the enemy pressed forward, forcing them back, back, as more and more of the maris joined the attack. The formation bowed still more, resembling an enormous "U" with its base almost at the palisade. Hundreds, a thousand, four thousand barbarians pressed forward toward the camp gates.

"Now!" MacKinnie shouted. The trumpet notes sounded above the shouts of battle, drums thundered. The knights formed inside their bastion; then, as the formation opened, they charged down the wing, rolling up the flank of the enemy. The shield wall quickly closed behind them; then the ends of the U drew together. Archers faced inward now, firing into the ranks of the enemy, while the heavy cavalrymen thundered over the barbarians, riding them down, breaking up all signs of organization until they rode directly into the camp gate.

MacKinnie signaled frantically to Brett. "Form them up again and be ready to protect the outer flanks!" he shouted. "The archers and spearmen can deal with the ones we've trapped."

The field in front of the gate was covered with blood. Barbarians pressed closer and closer together as the shield wall, bristling with pikes, closed in on them. Temple archers continued the rain of arrows into the helpless enemy, too crowded together even to use their weapons properly, the inner group not able to strike a blow. A few raced frantically out the end of the trap before the heavy knots of men MacKinnie had sent out first made contact with each other and closed all avenues of escape.

The remaining enemy outside the trap attempted to aid their fellows, to be stopped by shieldsmen facing outward, slowly moving back as the inner lines moved forward. Concentrations of the enemy were broken up by charges of cavalry, the knights thundering over them and around the ends, wheeling back to enter the camp and regroup, while the Temple swordsmen defended the ramparts of the camp itself. The huge mass of doomed men in the trap could have broken through the thinner lines of the camp, or even the outer defenses of the trap, but they could not escape to fight, while the smaller numbers remaining outside were unable to help them, frantically falling upon the spears of the

shield wall or trampled beneath the knights while their luckless fellows were relentlessly cut down.

The slaughter continued until midafternoon. At the end, hapless groups of the enemy threw themselves on the spears or clawed their way up the ramparts to be impaled by the swordsmen at the top, screaming desperately, their courage melted by the faceless mass of swords and the rain of arrows. As the pikemen passed over the dead, camp followers slit each throat and removed the arrows, passing them back to be fired again. Captive beasts were led through the lines into the camp to be tethered with the commissary oxen. The lines came closer together, closer, then touched. There were no more enemies in the trap.

"What do you propose for tomorrow?" Sumbavu asked the council clustered around MacKinnie's campfire. "You have left thousands dead on the field, more cut down in flight by our knights. We can return to the city."

"No." MacKinnie stood, a cup of wine in his hands. "Until their supply base is destroyed, there is no safety for the city. We must continue to burn their grain."

"It is not their grain, but ours!" Sumbavu snapped. "You cannot burn this great harvest. It must be carried back to the city. Surely this march can be delayed for a time to allow us to provision the Temple! The faithful are hungry, and they should be told of this great victory."

"You forget, there are many more of the enemy than we have killed," MacKinnie reminded the priest. "And we must not give them time to rest. We must pursue them endlessly until they go back to their wastelands in fear."

"I forbid this," Sumbavu said quietly. "We must take these stores of grain to the city. You will not burn them."

"Then I suggest you take them yourself, your worship," MacKinnie told him. "Now that we have thinned their ranks, I believe we can do without the Temple swordsmen. I will need some of the wagons to transport grain for the army, but you may have half of them, and three hundred of the camp servants as well. It is only thirty miles; each can carry half a hundred weight of grain. That will leave little to burn."

"So be it. We set forth immediately."

"At night, your worship?" MacKinnie asked. "Is that wise?"

"Wiser than being caught by them in the daytime. I see that you will not escort me with your army, though it would involve only a day's march. I will so report to the council."

"Two days' march, father," MacKinnie said quietly. "One each way. Not to mention the disorganization as each man ran in to tell his fellows of the glorious victory. We would lose many days, and for what? If the enemy is to be driven from the city, it must be done now."

"What need to drive them away, now that we have means to gather provision?" Sumbavu snapped. "We could return, and our Temple officers learn to command the soldiers, then set forth again. It would not be so great for you and your outlanders, would it? You must win yourself, for what purpose I do not know. But I tell you again, I know you do not have the good of the Temple first in your heart, soldier of the south. Were I not guarded by the faithful of the Temple, I do not think I would return from this march alive." He stalked off into the night, his bodyguard following him closely.

"Go pick the most useless slaves of your group," MacKinnie told Mary Graham. "The blunderers, the tired animals, the wagons ready to fall apart, get them all out of here."

She studied him closely. "I'd almost think that's why you brought all that useless junk. And you added that group of convicts to my picked men. . . . Did you expect this?"

"Freelady, just get them moving," Stark said. "The Colonel's got enough problems." He guided her to the granaries, set men to loading the wagons which were to go back to the city.

Two hours later, Sumbavu was ready to depart. He stood with MacKinnie at the camp gate, watching the sky. "In an hour the moons will be gone. You have not seen the enemy?"

"No, father," MacKinnie told him. "But they will have men out there."

"There is less chance they will attack me at night than by day," the priest said. "In the dark they will not know that I have only the Temple soldiers, and they will be afraid." He watched the setting moons in silence until darkness came over the plains.

"I leave you my blessing," Sumbavu told MacKinnie.

"Perhaps I have misjudged your intentions. May God accompany you."

"Thank you, father," MacKinnie said. He ordered the gates opened and watched the guardsmen and wagons leave. Each swordsman carried a bag of grain on his back in addition to his weapons, and the carts were creaking under the load. Convicts and slaves, lured on the expedition with promises of freedom and now sent back toward the city with staggering loads on their back, old oxen, carts with creaking wheels, all filed out with the proud guardsmen. A thousand soldiers and three hundred bearers left the camp before the gates were closed. MacKinnie returned to his tent. After a few moments, Stark and Longway joined him by his fire.

"They'll never make ten miles by morning," Stark said. "Not the way they loaded themselves."

"I thought the priest gave them reasonable loads," Longway said. "They did not seem excessive."

"Sure, but the Trader gave them the pick of the loot before they set out. Wasn't a man there wasn't carrying five, ten pounds of junk stripped off the dead or picked up in this camp."

"That was generous of you," Longway said. "Extraordinarily so."

"There will be other loot," MacKinnie told them. "We'll have plenty of chances to get rich, but they won't. They've earned their share."

"Or will," Stark muttered. MacKinnie looked quickly at him, then stared at the fire in silence as Mary Graham joined the little group.

"Best get some sleep," MacKinnie told her. "Start early in the morning, and it's late enough now."

"I don't really need it," she laughed. "I ride a cart, remember?"

"Lady, you can sleep in that cart under way, you'll be the greatest soldier's wife ever lived," Stark observed. "I'd rather walk, the way those things fall into every hole in the ground."

Mary laughed, looked around furtively, then said, "You wouldn't think the Empire would fall if we told them how to put springs in the carts, would you? But I guess it's too late now." She looked around her at the camp. The spear and shield troops were asleep in place around the perime-

ter, their shields propped up behind the palisade, pikes and spears ready at hand, while guards patrolled outside the perimeter. "I suppose I should start the breakfast fires. No rest for the cooks."

"Don't bother," MacKinnie said. "There won't be breakfast in the morning. Another hour and I'll rout out the men I'm taking with me. You can feed the rest when we're gone if the enemy gives you time. I'll leave MacLean in command here."

"You are dividing your force, Trader?" Longway asked. "That seems unreasonable. How long will you be gone?"

"One day should do it, one way or another. Don't worry about it, Academician, we won't leave you for long."

"What is all this?" Mary asked. "There's something strange going on here! I don't think I like this at all."

"Just go get some rest," MacKinnie told her. "Or if you can't do that, please excuse me while I sleep. We'll have to be up early, Hal. Have the guard call me an hour before first light. My apologies, but I can't think clearly when I've had no sleep, and the enemy is still far too dangerous for my mind to be fogged." He strode to his tent and closed the flap. After a few moments, Longway went back to his quarters.

"Hal, what is wrong with him?" Mary asked. "There's something going on, isn't there?"

"Freelady, he doesn't like what he's had to do. I can't say I like it much either, but we didn't see any other way. Now do as he says and go to sleep. I reckon I'd better lie down a couple of hours myself."

◆ XV ◆

An hour before dawn, MacKinnie woke the men and formed them into ranks. Half were detailed to guard the camp, returning to the walls. The rest, with the knights, were marched silently out the camp gates, striding briskly to the east, at right angles to the road to the city. MacLean waved to MacKinnie with a gesture that was half a salute, then went back into the camp.

A mile away from the camp, MacKinnie turned the detachment toward the city. They marched in silence without drums, Stark moving up and down the line to make each man keep his equipment from rattling. The formation was two columns of fours, the cavalry inside, the soldiers, moving swiftly along without wagons or noncombatants. The sky turned gray, then crimson as the first light fell over the field.

"Keep the pace up," MacKinnie told them. "Brisk, but not to tire yourselves out." He found it difficult to judge the capabilities of his men, although the months on the planet had softened his muscles. Even so, he had noticed that the Samualites were stronger than the natives of Makassar, and everything seemed easier to them, exactly as Midshipman Landry had predicted.

"Here's their tracks," Stark told him, pointing to the deep tracks left by Sumbavu's baggage carts. "Hard to tell how far they are ahead of us."

MacKinnie led them off a hundred yards from the trail, then marched the group parallel to it. They swung on in silence, now and again changing positions to send fresh men forward to break trail in the waist-high grass-like vegetation. The low hills of the plain closed around them, MacKinnie rushing forward each time they topped a rise. As

they approached one low hill, they heard shouts from the other side. Drawing closer, the sounds resolved themselves into the din of a battle.

"Deploy the troops," MacKinnie said softly. "Columns of fours to each side."

The parallel columns split apart, wheeling perfectly to form a straight line, then continued the advance up the hill, the men helping each other with their shields, readying pikes. The knights were at the center with MacKinnie when they reached the top of the rise.

A thousand barbarians had swarmed over Sumbavu's column. A few of the Temple swordsmen still lived, huddled in knots of ten or twenty around makeshift protection of the baggage carts, as the maris swept toward them firing arrows and leaping on them with their swords. As they watched, another tiny group of scarlet livery vanished beneath a wave of plainsmen.

"Make your charge straight through them," MacKinnie told Vanjynk. "Cut through and go past, then wheel, dress ranks, and charge home again. Don't stop to play with them, stay together as you've been taught. Now go."

Brett and Vanjynk waved the knights forward, gathering momentum as they rode down the gentle hill. The shield wall advanced at double-time, men trotting as the fuglemen shouted to keep them in line.

The maris saw the wall of horsemen plunging toward them, leaped for their mounts, scattering the loot they had been so anxious to gain, but it was too late. The lances came down, and now that they had been seen, MacKinnie waved to the trumpeters. The notes carried easily over the dewy plains as the knights charged home. Lances shattered, swords were torn from scabbards as the knights shouted in triumph. A few remained to fight, wheeling about until they were pulled from their saddles by the lassos of the maris, or their mounts were shot from beneath them. The rest galloped past, riding the enemy down, thundering down the entire line of barbarians before wheeling at the top of the next rise.

The horsemen had broken the enemy when the shieldsmen arrived. Once again the wings of the shield line closed inward, trapping the enemy between ranks, while the knights charged home again, throwing back into the trap any of the barbarians who had attempted to escape, crush-

ing all resistance. The plainsmen caught between the lines had no chance. They could impale themselves on the spears of the shield wall, or wait to be trampled beneath the knights. This time the slaughter was done quickly, for no one attempted to attack the infantry from behind. The plainsmen who escaped were glad of their lives.

They found Sumbavu at the head of the column, a group of swordsmen dead around his body. He clutched a sword with one hand and a crucifix with the other, and his eyes stared at the heavens. In his whole command, there were no more than fifty survivors. MacKinnie grimly formed his troops into columns and marched back to his camp, the carts rattling over the rutted plains, the groans of the wounded sounding over the creak of their wheels.

MacKinnie rested his men through the next day. In the late afternoon, a small party of plainsmen approached, wheeled outside arrow-shot, and waved feathered lances above their heads.

"He wants to talk to you," Brett said. "It doesn't happen very often with city people, but they do have ways of ending wars between clans. He's treating you as the chief of a very powerful clan. The men behind him are family heads."

"How do I meet him?" MacKinnie asked.

"Go outside the gate with a group of retainers. I doubt if he'll trust you not to shoot him down if he gets in range. It's what always happens when they deal with city people."

"Can you talk to him? Do you speak their language?"

"You know I do, star man, and you know why. I'll come with you if you like."

MacKinnie took Brett and young Todd, leaving Stark and MacLean in command. Longway puffed after them, insisting, and MacKinnie invited him along. They walked out from the camp until they were near the extreme range of a crossbow, then halted, still barely within covering fire if it were needed.

Three figures detached themselves from the group, dismounted, and strode purposefully toward MacKinnie. A few feet away they grounded their lances and spread their arms wide, speaking swiftly in a guttural language MacKinnie had never heard.

"He says he comes to speak," Brett said. "He says you

fight like a great chief. He says never before have the robed fools fought so well."

"Tell him I am a great prince from the south, and that I have come in a ship. Tell him a thousand more ships full of men like mine are coming, with many horses, and we will cover the plains. Tell him his brave people will kill many of us, but more will come, and soon there will be many dead on these fields."

Brett spoke quickly, waited for a reply, and said, "He says he is honored to meet a great prince from the south. He says he knew you could not be from the city. He asks how you will catch him."

"Say that we will come to his home in midwinter. We will burn his food and kill his beasts. But we do not wish to do this, for many of my strong men will die, and many of his brave warriors, and all for nothing."

"That ought to impress him," Brett said. He chattered to the plainsman, listened, then spoke again. "He's afraid of that walking wall of yours," Brett told MacKinnie. "He can imagine your troops pounding along in the snow, and it bothers him. He wants to know why you would do this."

"Tell him any way you want to," MacKinnie answered, "but here's my terms. They can have two days to get out of here. They burn nothing else, but they may carry whatever they can. At the end of that time, we'll kill every one of them we find. And if they make any more hostile moves after today, we'll follow him to the end of the continent."

"He's not responsible for all of the maris," Brett said. "Just his own clan. He can't promise for the rest."

"Is this the leader of the biggest group?"

"Yes."

"Then he'll have to figure out how to drive the others out. He ought to be able to do it, but anyway that's his problem, not mine. Tell him."

Brett looked pale for a moment, stared intently at MacKinnie, then spoke at length. The sinewy man answered, then another of the attendants shouted. Brett shouted back, and their voices rose angrily before the chief spoke again more calmly. Finally Brett turned back to Nathan. "He'll try. Some of the others have already left. He'll get the rest to go along. They wanted more time, but I told them you were a madman, you'd taken an oath not to stop fighting if this war didn't end now. I think they'll go."

◆ XVI ◆

They entered the city in triumph. MacKinnie marched his weary troops to the Temple courtyard, then had the commissary department serve a feast. As the soldiers were eating, he sent for Father Deluca and the Archbishop.

"Your Reverence," he told Casteliano, "you are now in command of this Temple."

"How is this?" the Archbishop asked.

"The only military forces left in this city are about a hundred and fifty archers, another hundred swordsmen, the knights, and my army there. The knights aren't any match for these lads in a street fight. There's nothing to stop you from taking over; my troops will stay loyal to me."

"Surely you do not expect to make a war on the Temple," Laraine said. "We have no wish to wade in blood up to the altar."

"You won't have to. While the rest of them were eating, I had Hal send a force of picked men to the key points. It's already ours; now we have to tell their ruling council and that Pope of theirs. Not all my men would fight for me against the Temple, but a lot of them would. I'd rather not fight over it, though, we'd have trouble controlling the looters."

"But you have not yet told the council? They still believe themselves the rulers of the city. And you have told them nothing about us." The Archbishop stroked his chin carefully, then turned to Laraine and Deluca. "Go quickly and get our vestments. The gold ones, and the most ornate trappings we have. Quickly, there is no time to be lost! My son," he asked MacKinnie, "can you lend us some loyal men as attendants? And if you would have your most regal clothing brought to you, it would help. I believe there is a

way this can be done without bloodshed." He looked down at the motley group in the courtyard, men shouting and drinking, the Temple guardsmen who had stayed behind joining in the merriment while grim-faced pike-and-shieldsmen stood guard on the battlements in knots of five.

The Archbishop nodded grimly. "You have brought back none of the Temple swordsmen, and not all their archers. Father Sumbavu—how did he die?"

"He was killed with his men in an ambush by the enemy," MacKinnie answered slowly. "He was bringing supplies back to the city. We arrived in time to revenge him, but not to save him."

"I see. A thousand brave men, who served you well. A high price to pay for a city."

"Damned high," MacKinnie muttered. "God help me, there was no other way. You've seen these Temple fanatics. We'd have had to kill every one of those soldiers before they'd let us inspect their holy relics."

"The relics," Casteliano said slowly. "What is your great interest in the relics?" The priest looked at Nathan carefully. "Whatever your reason, you have done the Church a great service. I will not forget it. Now I have to tell that council of theirs who really commands in this city. Your pardon, Trader, I must find a room where we can dress properly for our interview, and I would be most grateful if you could bring a dozen of your most loyal men."

Two days later, MacKinnie begged audience with His Ultimate Holiness, Primate of all Makassar, Vicar of Christ, and Archbishop of New Rome. He was led into a small office behind the council room where Casteliano was seated in his shirt sleeves examining Temple records. The Archbishop looked up and smiled.

"It was easier than you thought, was it not?" he said.

"Yes, Your Reverence. I still find it hard to believe that we had no bloodshed. But my men remain on guard, just in case."

"I told you there were few doctrinal differences, and these men are not only realists, but believers. If we had approached them from a Navy landing ship and demanded obedience, we would have had to demonstrate our power, but it would have been managed. As it was, arriving in the city like beggars, they would never listen to us. How could

they believe we were great lords of the Church from the stars? But with you at our side, and your soldiers commanding their Temple, they had little choice but to listen."

"You were highly persuasive, Your Reverence."

"As were your actions. It was not difficult to make them see the hand of God in your victory, and His wrath in the death of Sumbavu. Did you foresee that as well?"

"No, Your Reverence."

"It is as well. Now what may I do for you?"

"I don't know how to begin. Yet I must have your help. I see no other way."

"Colonel—do not be surprised, the title is commonly used by your soldiers—you hold this Temple, not me. You could depose me as easily as you created me, particularly if you supported the council against me. What is it I can do that you cannot do for yourself? Do you want to be crowned king of this city? They would do that for you."

MacKinnie laughed. "Nothing that simple. But—but may I speak to you in confidence? Have I earned the right to ask something which, if you refuse, you will not thwart me from attempting another way?"

The Archbishop took a small strip of cloth from the table in front of him, kissed it, and placed it over his shoulders. "My son, for thousands of years the confessional has never been violated. By tradition, by the laws of God, and by the most stringent of Imperial Edicts what you tell me in confession can never be revealed. Have you something to confess?"

Nathan MacKinnie breathed deeply, stared at the old man, and thought for a moment before beginning. "All right. As you surmised, we are from a newly discovered planet which will be a colony world when they get around to classifying us. They won't do that until we have a working planetary government, and King David's advisors are managing to delay that. We want to build a spaceship before they make us a colony world."

"A spaceship! Just how advanced are you? What makes you think . . . no, how does this affect me?"

"Father, I came here to get copies of every technical work I can find in that library. Our people think we can do it if we know how. I'm a soldier, not a scientist, and I don't know if they can do it or not, but we've got to try!"

The Archbishop nodded. "You would try. Tell me, Colo-

nel MacKinnie, are you typical of the people of your planet?"

"I don't know. In some ways, yes. Why?"

"Because, and I say it reverently, God help the colonists they send to your world if you are. You don't know when to give up. Yes, I'll help you." He thought for a few moments, then laughed. "And we'll stay within the letter of the regulations. Although I doubt that would impress the Navy if they found you smuggling copies of technical books. But Makassar is classified as primitive. Any art or craft found here can be taken to any other part of the Empire. It never occurred to them that anyone would use the library for its knowledge. Yes, we'll help you and gladly. Think what a splendid joke on the Imperial Trading Association this will make!" He struck a small gong on the desk, and told the servant who entered in response, "Go to the holy relics and bring Brother LeMoyne, if you please."

LeMoyne was a small man, with sandy hair and flashing blue eyes. He knelt perfunctorily before Casteliano, kissed his ring, and said, "And what may I do for His Ultimate Holiness other than refrain from letting New Rome know his present title?"

The Archbishop laughed. "You see why he will never be a priest. Tell me, can you make the holy relics speak yet?"

"The library is in amazingly good condition, Your Reverence. The Imperials fixed much of the equipment when they made copies of the tapes. The Old Empire used nearly indestructible plastics for those spools, and everything has been preserved with holy zeal. It only needs a power source to make it work."

"What kind of power?" MacKinnie asked.

"Oh, any good source of current. It would be no great trick to build one, but we couldn't let the natives see it operate."

MacKinnie sent for Kleinst, only to discover he had been assisting LeMoyne in the inspection of the library.

"It's a simple photoelectric recording," Kleinst told MacKinnie. "Not greatly different from the photographic equipment we use at home, although more compact, and I don't understand some of the electrical gadgetry. I think we could read the tapes if we had them."

"But of course you will never be permitted to take them back to your planet. . . . Wait, surely they can be hidden

among whatever trade goods you will carry," Casteliano said. "Now all that remains is to copy them."

"Brother LeMoyne has told me that is simple," Kleinst said. "There is a large stock of blank tapes in storage, and once the generator is constructed he can copy them." The scholar's eyes flashed as he spoke. "And there is everything here! Textbooks for children which tell of physical laws I never even suspected. Handbooks, maintenance manuals for equipment I can't describe. But with time, I'm sure I could learn how it works. If I can't, some of the younger students can be trained. Surely we can learn."

"We have to," MacKinnie said. "Learn it and use it. It's a long way to the stars, and we'd better get started." He turned to the Archbishop. "Thank you, Your Reverence. Now I'd better see to my ship. Before we can go to the stars, we first have to get back to Jikar."

As he left, Archbishop Casteliano looked to Kleinst, then at the retreating figure. "He'll get there. And his sons will be admirals. Now, young man, how is your generator? Will it be finished soon?"

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