

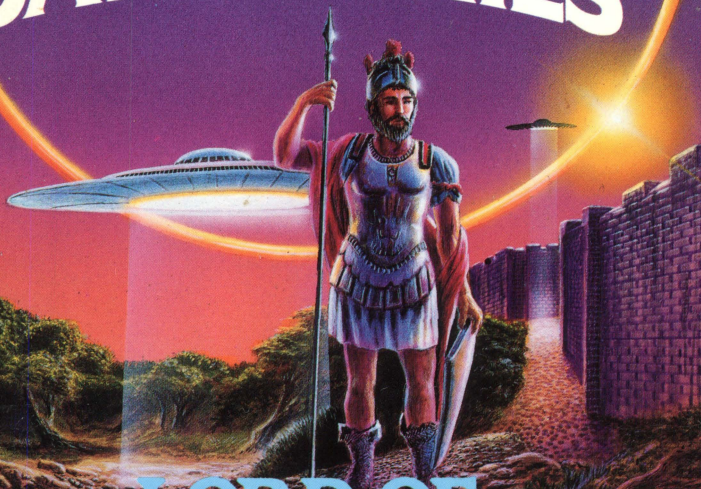
COMBAT COMMAND™

#7

TAKE COMMAND...
IN A NEW ROLE-PLAYING NOVEL

IN THE WORLD OF

JERRY E. POURNELLE'S JANISSARIES



LORD OF LANCES

BY

MARK ACRES

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The first sword stroke thudded against Nelson's side. He felt pain from the blow, but the blade didn't break his skin; the swordsman, startled by the sound of the pistol, turned his wrist, striking with the flat of the blade.

Nelson dug in his spurs and pulled back on the reins in his left hand, rearing the horse. As the horse rose, he fired his second shot at the bowman exposed in the woods.

Then the horse took a savage blow to its rear legs and stumbled; for a moment Nelson thought himself a dead man. But the beast retained its balance. As its front hooves crashed down to the ground again, he fired another round, and another, taking the targets at the front of the horse at point-blank range.

The burly men dropped with looks of pain and amazement on their faces, screaming wildly and clutching their wounds—except for the one who took a .45 slug square through the forehead.

Lord of Lances

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COMBAT COMMAND™

IN THE WORLD OF

**JERRY E.
POURNELLE'S
JANISSARIES**

**LORD OF
LANCES**
BY
MARK ACRES

with an introduction by
JERRY E. POURNELLE



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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LORD OF LANCES

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INTRODUCTION

by Jerry E. Pournelle

Janissaries wasn't supposed to be a series. It wasn't even supposed to be a whole novel.

A long time ago Tom Doherty and Jim Baen, then of Ace Books, got the notion for a series of "massively illustrated" works of about 45,000 words, a length technically known as novella.

It was a good idea. The novella is often the right length for a science fiction story. If it's shorter, the author may have to stint on either the science or the characterizations. The problem is that there aren't many places to publish works of that length. Magazines don't want them, because magazine editors want a lot of names and stories on the title page, and a novella takes up more room than three novelettes and two short stories. Books don't want them because they're too short. The illustrations were supposed to take care of that problem.

I was supposed to lead off the series, but I had a lot of other things going. I don't remember who did the very first one, but Larry Niven did *The Magic Goes Away* and *The Patchwork Girl* before I got started. By then Ace was getting anxious to have a book. "The illustrations take a while," they explained. "Please, can't you tell us what you're working on?" But I didn't have any notion.

Meanwhile, I was commissioned to do a series of articles on UFOs. I did interviews with senior officials of NICAP (which is a private organization

despite its name: National Investigating Commission on Aerial Phenomena, and has a number of members I respect); the late Professor J. Allan Hynek, who began as a complete skeptic and ended as a tentative believer; some of the former project officers of Blue Book, etc. Blue Book, incidentally, was the USAF investigation of UFO reports. The Air Force never wanted the job, and the post of Blue Book project officer was a "George job": "Let George do it," George being the most junior officer available. . . .

I didn't come to any conclusions. It is certain that men have been hanged after appeals to the Supreme Court of the U.S. on worse evidence than we have for the existence of flying saucers. On the other hand, we don't have any wreckage and bodies (and to the best of my knowledge, which is pretty good but not perfect, all the rumors that we do have are only rumors). We don't have any repeatable experiments or communications with extraterrestrials.

We also have some pretty good explanations for some of the most dramatic of the saucer sightings. For example, for the better part of three years people in South America saw some *very* strange aerial phenomena which no one could explain. The skeptics came out with the usual gup about "mass hysteria," although the observers were quite respectable and reliable: the kind of people juries would believe in a murder case; and there were a lot of them. But since no one could explain what was happening, it just had to be delusions—until finally some indisputable photographs were obtained.

The phenomena were real, all right. What was happening was that the Soviet Union was launching rockets that took them in a path over Argentina and Chile, and just at that point the not-quite-orbital rockets jettisoned fuel in some kind of military experiment. The Soviets didn't want anyone to know what they were doing, and so the local Soviet KGB agents

encouraged people to believe they were seeing “flying saucers.” Eventually the real story came out (from French Intelligence, as I recall).

The point is that while the phenomena sighted were quite real—people really were seeing Unidentified Flying Objects—the explanation, while dramatic, didn’t involve flying saucers or aliens.

About that time Isaac Asimov wrote a column in which he stated that flying saucers were impossible on logical grounds. His argument was that they couldn’t come from the solar system; NASA/JPL probes have visited all the planets, and there’s no place the saucer people could live. They therefore must come across interstellar distances, and that’s very nearly impossible. Assume that it is possible: the people capable of doing it will be so immensely powerful that they can’t be seen unless they want to be.

They clearly don’t want to be seen, since they don’t land on the White House lawn, or in Red Square, or on Lake Geneva, and announce their presence; yet we do see them, sometimes. Clearly they’re not so incompetent as all that. Therefore they don’t exist. There’s no possible explanation of those facts.

Now Isaac has long been a friend, and I admire him greatly, but he is heavily into “debunking,” and that did seem a pretty specious argument. Surely, I thought, there must be some logical explanation—and once I began to think about it, several such explanations suggested themselves.

The simplest is the “Cal Tech” hypothesis. Assume that some galactic university is studying primitive cultures, of which we are a prime example. They don’t want to contaminate the sample, so they forbid any contact with the natives, and usually they’re successful in enforcing that regulation. However, their study group includes students. Bright students.

The Pasadena Police Department cancels all leaves on the night after final examinations at the California Institute of Technology. The techies have been

known to do amazing things to amuse, startle, and generally irritate the citizens of their home town of Pasadena.

Surely students at Galactic U. wouldn't be all that different. . . .

Anyway, that was one possible explanation, and once I thought of that, others suggested themselves. Suppose the Galactics had a use for Earth people, possibly even as slaves. It would take some ingenuity to explain slavery in an interstellar civilization. Maybe some other use? And so forth.

Eventually I got the picture of a Galactic society not a lot different from ours. Some of the citizens want to be rich. Others want prestige. There are bureaucrats—indeed, given the trends of this civilization, the more advanced the technology, the more likely it is to be run by bureaucrats. Surely that's a plausible hypothesis? There will be traders. Smugglers. Gun runners. Drug smugglers . . .

About this time the story began to take shape. Captain Rick Galloway, contract soldier with the CIA, is trapped in Africa with a small command. His group is surrounded by Cubans, and is doomed. No one can save them. In a word, a group made to order to be kidnapped by interstellar brigands who want to recruit some fighting men. Only why in the world would the Galactics—even a semi-criminal group of Galactics—want soldiers? Well, in order to make some other primitive people do something. After all, the Galactics don't want to live on a primitive world. What might they want?

And so forth. Eventually the world of Tran took shape in my mind; and the instant that it did, I saw Tylara do Tamaerthon, descended from Celtic warriors and Greek mercenaries, raven haired, blue eyed, tall, strong willed, a twenty-year-old widow in command of a county. She sat at a council table in a high ceilinged hall with smoke-stained banners hanging

from the rafters and listened as her knights told of the coming invasion of her lands and what they must do.

I wrote some scenes involving Rick Galloway in Africa, and Tylara's first battles on Tran; and when Jim Baen, then editor for Ace, was visiting me here, he saw them. "This would make a terrific illustrated novella," said Jim.

"Deal," said I, little knowing what I had started; and a few weeks later I began to write *Janissaries* as a work of some 45,000 words. Since Ace was in a hurry to get the book, I sent in portions as I wrote them.

After I reached 60,000 words Ace called. "Stop! Please!" they said.

"But the story's not finished," I protested.

"We can't do any more in one volume. Wind it up and we'll do a second book."

I agreed.

I have now written three books in the *Janissaries* series, and foresee at least two more.

When Rick Galloway escaped a Cuban firing squad by climbing aboard a flying saucer, he didn't board it alone. The others included Lieutenant Parsons, who soon mutinied against Rick; Sergeant Major Elliot, a soldier's soldier who didn't care who commanded so long as the outfit did its job properly; Larry Warner, an intellectual who should never have volunteered for the CIA's expedition into Africa; and many others.

One of those others was Private Paul Nelson, veteran and wanderer.

This is his story.

—Jerry E. Pournelle

INTRODUCTION

by Bill Fawcett

You are in command, a modern soldier in a primitive world. With a hurriedly barked order, it's off to battle leading an elite force of lancers against overwhelming odds. Riding behind are nearly a hundred trained warriors whose lives depend upon the decisions you are about to make.

Combat Command books provide more than just another chance to read an exciting military adventure. You could simply "read" this book, tracing a route through the sections, but these books are also a "game" which lets you make the command decisions. This book is divided into sections rather than chapters. In each section of this game/book a military situation is described. Your choices actually write the book, the story and the ending both being determined by the combat decisions you make.

A careful effort has been made to make these adventures as "real" as possible. You are given the same information as you would receive in a real combat situation. At the end of each section is a number of choices for what to order next. The consequences of the action you pick are described in the following section. When you make the right decisions, you are closer to successfully completing your mission. When you make a bad decision, lancers die . . . men who are not going to be available for the next battle.

FIGHTING BATTLES

This book includes a simple game system which simulates combat and other military challenges. Playing the game adds an extra dimension of enjoyment by making you a participant in the adventure. You will need two six-sided dice, a pencil, and a sheet of paper to “play” along with this adventure.

COMBAT VALUES

In this book the force you command will consist of peasants, medieval knights and men at arms. Each type is assigned five values. These values provide the means of comparing the capabilities of the many different military units you will encounter. These five values are:

Manpower

This value is the number of separate fighting parts of your force. Each unit of manpower represents one man. Casualties are subtracted from Manpower.

Ordnance

The quality and power of the weapons used is reflected by their Ordnance value. All members of a unit commanded will have the same Ordnance value. In some cases you may command two or more units, each with a different Ordnance value.

Attack Strength

This value indicates the ability of the unit to attack an opponent. It is determined by multiplying Manpower by Ordnance ($\text{Manpower} \times \text{Ordnance} = \text{At}$

tack Strength.) This value can be different for every battle. It will decrease as Manpower is lost and increase if reinforcements are received.

Melee Strength

This is the hand-to-hand combat value of each member of the unit. In the case of a squad of mercenaries, it represents the martial arts skill and training of each man. In crewed units such as tanks or spaceships, it represents the fighting ability of the members of the crew and could be used in an assault on a spaceport or to defend against boarders. Melee value replaces Ordnance value when determining the Attack Strength of a unit in hand-to-hand combat.

Stealth

This value measures how well the members of your unit can avoid detection. It represents the individual skill of each soldier or the ECM (Electronic Counter Measures) of each spaceship. The Stealth value for your unit will be the same for each member of the unit. You would employ stealth to avoid detection by the enemy.

Morale

This reflects the fighting spirit of the troops you command. Success in battle may raise this value. Unpopular decisions or severe losses can lower it. If you order your unit to attempt something unusually dangerous, the outcome may be affected by their morale level.

THE COMBAT PROCEDURE

When your unit finds itself in a combat situation,

use the following procedure to determine victory or defeat.

1. Compute the Attack Strength of your unit and the opposition. ($\text{Manpower} \times \text{Ordnance or Melee Value} = \text{Attack Strength}$).
2. Turn to the charts at the end of this section. The description of the battle will tell you which charts to use.
3. Roll two six-sided dice and total the result.
4. Find the Attack Strength of the unit at the top of the chart and the total of the dice rolled on the left-hand column of the chart. The number found where the column and row intersect is the number of casualties inflicted on the opponent by the unit you were rolling for.
5. Repeat for each side, alternating attacks.

The unit you command always fires first unless otherwise stated.

When you are told there is a combat situation, you will be given all the information needed for both your command and their opponent.

Here is an example of a complete combat:

Hammer's Slammers have come under fire from a force defending a ridge that crosses their line of advance. Alois Hammer has ordered your company of tanks to attack. Your tanks have an Ordnance Value of 8 and you have a Manpower Value of 8 tanks.

Slammers fire using Chart B.

Locals fire using Chart D with a Combat Strength of 3

and Manpower of 12 (giving them an Attack Strength of 36).

To begin, you attack first and roll two 4's for a total of 8. The current Attack Strength of your Slammers is 64 (8×8).

CHART B

Attack Strength Manpower

Dice
Roll

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101+
2	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	4
3	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4
4	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4
5	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	5
6	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5
7	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5
8	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	6
9	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6
10	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	6
11	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	6	7
12	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6	6	7	8

Read down to the 60 to 70 Attack Strength column until you get to the line for a dice roll of 8. The result is four casualties inflicted on your opponents by your company.

Subtract these casualties from the opposing force before determining their Attack Strength. (Combat is not simultaneous.) After subtracting the four casualties you just inflicted on them, the enemy has a remaining Manpower Value of 8, ($12 - 4 = 8$). This

gives them a remaining Attack Value of 24 ($8 \times 3 = 24$).

Roll two six-sided dice for the opposing force's attack and determine the casualties they cause your Slammer's company. Subtract these casualties from your Manpower total on the Record Sheet. In this case they caused one casualty, giving the Slammers a Manpower of 7 for the next round of combat.

This ends one "round" of combat. Repeat the process for each round. Each time a unit receives a casualty, it will have a lower value for Attack Strength. There will be that many less men, tanks, spaceships or whatever firing.

Continue alternating fire rolls, recalculating the Attack Strength each time to account for casualties, until one side or the other has lost all of its Manpower, or special conditions (given in the text) apply. When this occurs, the battle is over.

Losses are permanent, and losses from your unit should be subtracted from their total Manpower on the Record Sheet.

SNEAKING, HIDING, AND OTHER RECKLESS ACTS

To determine if a unit is successful in any attempt relating to Stealth or Morale, roll two six-sided dice. If the total rolled is greater than the value listed for the unit, the attempt fails. If the total of the two dice is the same as or less than the current value, the attempt succeeds or the action goes undetected. For example:

Rico decides his squad of Mobile Infantry (M.I.) will try to penetrate the Bug hole unseen. M.I. have a Stealth Value of 8. A roll of 8 or less on two six-sided

dice is needed to succeed. The dice are rolled and the result is a 4 and a 2 for a total of 6. They are able to avoid detection by the Bug guards.

If all of this is clear, then you are ready to turn to Section 1 and take command.

THE COMBAT CHARTS

After you have made a decision involving a battle, you will be told which chart should be used for your unit and which for the enemy. The chart used is determined by the tactical and strategic situation. Chart A is used when the unit is most effective, and Chart G when least effective. Chart A represents the effectiveness of the Sioux at Little Bighorn and Chart F, Custer. Chart G represents the equivalent of classic Zulus with Assegai (spears) versus modern Leopard tanks. Even a very small force on Chart A can be effective, while even a large number of combatants attacking on Chart G are unlikely to have much effect.

CHART A

Attack Strength

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101+
Dice Roll											
2	0	1	1	2	2	3	3	4	5	6	6
3	0	1	2	2	2	3	4	5	6	7	7
4	1	2	2	2	3	3	4	5	6	7	8
5	2	2	2	3	3	4	5	5	6	7	8
6	2	2	2	3	4	4	5	6	7	7	8
7	2	2	3	4	4	5	5	6	7	8	8
8	2	3	3	4	4	5	6	6	7	8	9
9	3	3	4	4	5	5	6	7	8	8	9
10	3	4	4	5	5	6	7	7	8	9	10
11	3	4	4	5	6	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	4	4	5	6	7	7	8	9	10	11	12

CHART B

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101+
Dice Roll											
2	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	4
3	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4
4	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4
5	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	5
6	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5
7	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5
8	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	6
9	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6
10	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	6
11	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	6	7
12	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6	6	7	8

CHART C

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101+
Dice Roll											
2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2
3	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3
4	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3
5	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4
6	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4
7	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	5
8	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5
9	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5	5
10	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	6
11	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6
12	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6	7

CHART D

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101+
Dice Roll											
2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2
3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2
4	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2
5	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3
6	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3
7	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4
8	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4	4
9	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	5
10	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5
11	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5	5
12	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	6

CHART E

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101+
Dice Roll											
2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2
5	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2
6	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	2
7	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	2
8	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2
9	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2
10	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	3
11	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3
12	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3

CHART F

[illegible]

CHART G

[illegible]



— 1 —

“Soldiering is all I know, and this is no way to do it.” Paul Nelson grumbled in English as he prodded the frightened peasant family along the muddy path to Parson’s headquarters.

“Come on, come on, I haven’t got all day,” he barked, punctuating his command by poking the barrel of the M-16 in the man’s ribs. This time he spoke in the local Tran dialect. It had taken a while, but eventually Paul, like the rest of the mercs, had caught on to the local lingo.

“Please, please,” the man pleaded. “My wife has just given birth . . .”

True enough, Nelson thought. This peasant’s woman must have had a tough time, too. The filthy family barely inched through the ice-crustud mud, held back by the ragged woman’s slow pace. She held the baby cradled against her breast; the two other hungry children were crying quietly, clinging to the man’s legs. No way of knowing when they’d last had something to eat.

And no way of knowing when they’ll get much more to eat either, Nelson thought. Ever since Parsons got us into this war as allies of Sarakos, things have gone from bad to worse. The locals hate us; won’t work, won’t grow crops; they hide in the hills and the bush and pick us off every chance they get. Sarakos can’t even feed his own army. If we didn’t have “starweapons,” we’d be as hungry as these peasants ourselves.

“ . . . and we have not eaten in two days. There is famine, disease, and death. Please, mercy . . .” the scrawny farmer continued.

Now I’m out rounding up more of these miserable, hungry peasants to serve Parsons as work slaves, or worse. The woman, she could clean up to look okay; worse luck for her.

Well, the hell with this! Should have known Parsons

was no good when he threw out the captain. Seemed logical then; Parsons had more experience. But now he's nothing but a bloody warlord, a slaver, and coming unhinged to boot. Hasn't been right in the head since this guerilla war turned against us.

"Okay, okay, shut up and listen," Nelson said. "Do you have any food left at your village, any hope of getting food there?"

The man looked blankly at Nelson.

"Yeah. Won't tell me, and with good reason. Probably have a teenage son out in those woods somewhere, stealing food from us, don't you, you old beggar?"

The man made no reply, his filthy face frozen in a mask of fear.

"Go on, get out of here," Nelson said with disgust, dropping the rifle from firing position.

The man lifted up the younger of the two children, gripped his wife firmly by the arm, and began a slow trek back along the path. Nelson watched them for a moment, then walked toward the mercs' base, another click away over the rolling hill ahead.

Going to be hell to pay when I go back to Parsons empty-handed, he told himself. Elliot will back Parsons up on whatever he wants to do to me. But I'll be damned if I'm going to be a slaver for that conceited, power-hungry megalomaniac. By Yatar, I wish things could be different!

But things weren't different. One Tran year ago—1.7 Earth years—neither Nelson nor any of the other mercs had ever heard of Tran. They were busy fighting for their lives, CIA volunteers on a clandestine mission against Cuban troops in Africa. They were being beaten—badly—and when the moment came for the choppers to show up and pull them out, someone in Washington got cold feet about the whole operation. The choppers didn't show. The mercs figured they were sure to be Cuban dogmeat.

Then the flying saucer showed up.

The men got on board. Captain Galloway said it was a CIA ship. Maybe some of them believed that until they got on board. Maybe. All of them believed that whatever was on the saucer was a lot better than being killed by the Cubans—or worse, captured by them.

The aliens took them to Tran. In exchange for their rescue, the mercs were to set up shop on this human-inhabited planet with its medieval technology and grow a weed called surinomaz. The Shalnuksis, the aliens, promised to trade with the mercs, providing whatever was needed, if the surinomaz crops were good.

As soon as they landed, Lieutenant Parsons took over. He let Captain Galloway go free and even gave him a rifle and some ammo. A few of the men wanted to go with Galloway, and finally Corporal Mason was given the nod. Neither Mason nor Galloway had been heard from since.

Parsons led the group pretty well for a while. With their weapons—the locals called them “starweapons”—the mercs had things pretty much their way. They could take what they needed, and before long most of them had a wife or two and some kids on the way. They lived like petty kings.

Then Parsons had joined forces with Sarakos, a local king of some sort, and got them into this war between Sarakos’ Five Kingdoms and the feudal kingdom to the south, a place called Drantos.

The battles were fine—a few mortar rounds put an end to the mounted knights of the enemy. But the people, they were something else. They fought tooth and nail against the invaders. It was like ’Nam all over again, but this time there weren’t any medics, choppers, or resupplies of ammo.

As the situation worsened, so did Parsons. Everything that went wrong was someone else’s fault, not his. The men were starting to grumble. Sergeant Elliot stayed loyal and kept discipline, but Nelson knew that Larry Warner and Corporal Gengrich were quietly talking about a walkout against Parsons.

Section 1

Spring wouldn't bring any improvement in the food supply. The land had been ravaged by Parsons and Sarakos, and the locals would rather ambush Sarakos' troops than plant crops. Parsons was resorting to outright slavery to get the menial work done and generally behaved like some kind of tyrant. He'd probably dump Sarakos when this war was over and set himself up as a king.

If, that is, he could beat Drantos. The main army had been defeated, true, but there was another force in the country now, made up of hill tribes from a region called Tamaerthon. Sarakos' knights spent a lot of time wondering how this hill tribe army had managed to beat the Romans last year. The Roman legions were considered the best troops on Tran—except, of course, for the knights of the Five Kingdoms themselves.

Nelson had an idea that maybe those primitive hill tribes had a little help against the Romans. There was talk, too, about a university on Tran, and a few other developments that hinted at outside aid. Maybe, somehow, Art Mason and Captain Galloway were helping Tamaerthon and Drantos. Or maybe the hill tribes had just sprouted themselves a once-in-a-century genius. Nelson didn't know, and he didn't say anything about it. In a merc crew about to be torn in half by mutiny, it was best to keep your mouth shut.

At any rate, this wasn't Nelson's idea of soldiering. Nelson was a small-town Indiana boy, raised on corn-fed beef, mother love, and Republican patriotism. When Uncle Sam needed help in southeast Asia, Paul Nelson decided to skip college and answer the call. There'd be time enough for college after the Reds were kicked out of Viet Nam.

Nelson fought hard in Viet Nam, and volunteered for a second tour of combat duty there. The second tour was enough. After 1973 Nelson didn't want to watch any more good men die in a war the politicians weren't going to let them win. He came home and worked on a Bachelor's degree in science, with an eye to teaching

when he got out. By the time the piece of paper was his, he was bored with the schools and the soft life lived by those who attended and ran them. He longed for a life that would again combine action with patriotic duty.

The CIA was the answer, or so it seemed. Through some old Army buddies, Nelson heard about the need for "volunteers" in Africa. It was merc work, and the politicians would probably back out again when the chips were down, but Nelson was bored and patriotic enough to give it a try. Then there'd been that awful night in the bush, and the flying saucer. . . .

And now here I am on Tran, with nothing but the rank of private. I'm commanded by a crazy man who wants to be a feudal king, Nelson thought as he approached camp. God, or Yatar, or Vothan, only knows what I'm going to do now.

"Who goes there?"

The challenge came from a light copse just ahead on the perimeter of the merc camp.

"It's me, Nelson, returning from a 'recruitment' patrol."

"Okay. Hey, Elliot's been looking for you."

"Elliot has found him, now, soldier. Nelson!"

Paul Nelson looked up and saw Sergeant Elliot approaching from the woods.

"Report!" Elliot snapped.

"No slaves for the . . . lieutenant," Nelson said, staring directly into Elliot's eyes.

"There were locals in that village only three clicks away this morning."

"Well, there aren't any now." At least that was true in a way. "I got no beef with you, Sarge, you know that."

Elliot stared back at Nelson for a long moment. "Okay, soldier. Get some grub and get warm. I'll tell Parsons the villagers bolted. That is what you're reporting, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir." Nelson walked to a nearby tent, helped

Section 1

himself to a cup of hot wine, and stalked off into the deepening, cold dusk away from the encampment. None of the other mercs spoke; they were busy keeping warm and keeping themselves out of Parsons' doghouse.

It's time to make my move, Nelson thought. I can't stand Parsons any more. I like Warner, but he's tied in with Gengrich, and Gengrich will never be able to hold a unit together. I could try to get through to the Drantos troops and join up with Galloway, if Galloway is with them, but there's no way to know that for sure. And there's no guarantee the captain would take me in. He might decide to hang a mutinous merc or two to set an example to any others who come his way.

So, it looks like I'd better go it alone. I know Gengrich thinks a group under him could hook up with some of the City States southwest of here. If Gengrich can find work for a group there, I can sure find something for myself.

Private Joe MacAllister started to curse the cold of the Tran winter night, invoking the wrath of Yatar, Vothan, Hestia, and Christ against the criminal stupidity and maliciousness of all officers, especially Lieutenant Parsons, who picked him to stand perimeter sentry duty tonight. The curse died in his throat, unspoken, when he heard a rider approaching—coming from the camp, not toward it!

MacAllister readied his rifle and crept toward the one good path leading to the campsite, taking care to keep cover behind a large oak tree. Oaks weren't native to Tran, but neither were horses and mules. Somehow, they all fit into the crazy quilt ecology of this planet. Fortunately, horses on Tran still snorted in the air of a winter night, and that sound carried.

Peering down the path, MacAllister saw Private Nelson mounted and armed, approaching at a slow walk, with a pack mule trailing behind. MacAllister wasn't surprised. Nelson is a quiet one, he thought, but his eyes

tell you a lot. I've seen him listen to Gengrich and Warner, and he was interested. Now it looks like he's going to take out on his own. Better talk to him.

"Psst!"

Nelson heard the whispered sound and reined his mount to a sudden halt, eyes searching the surrounding trees.

"Nelson, it's me, MacAllister." MacAllister moved into full view, his weapon unslung but not pointed at Nelson. "You're getting out of here, aren't you?" MacAllister asked.

"Unless you shoot me."

The two men looked at one another, expressionless. Technically, this is desertion, Nelson thought. MacAllister should certainly raise an alarm, and would be within his rights to shoot me if I try to force my way past him. He knows that if he does nothing, he'll answer to Parsons by the time the True Sun rises.

"Parsons will have me for sure if I let you go," MacAllister finally whispered. And it's time, he thought, to see if Nelson is willing to get a good comrade in trouble.

Mac is a good soldier, Nelson told himself. There aren't many mercs in the outfit who don't owe Mac at least one life, thanks to his sharpshooting skills. Getting him in dutch with Parsons is slim thanks for his aid in combat and his friendship in the camp. Mac would be a good man to have.

"Come with me. Neither of us has rank, so we'd go as equals."

"No can do. I've got my own plans," MacAllister confided. He was glad to see that Nelson sought a compromise. That meant he was okay.

"When?"

MacAllister stood silent for a moment, thinking hard. "What are you taking?" he finally asked Nelson.

"My M-16 with two hundred rounds. A Colt .45 and a hundred rounds. Personal gear. Food, two blankets,

knife, compass, canteen, binoculars, two skins of wine. This horse and that mule.”

At least he's not stealing us blind, MacAllister decided. He's not taking more than would be his share. Less, actually, since he never picked up much of the loot from the battles. Well, the hell with Parsons.

“You asked when I was going. I guess the answer is sooner than I thought. But I'll stick with Gengrich.”

Nelson nodded to MacAllister and took up the horse's reins. The animal began slowly plodding forward. Nelson kept his eyes locked on MacAllister; after all, the man was a sharpshooter, a trained sniper. MacAllister's face broke into a broad grin.

Hell, MacAllister thought. Wait till Parsons sees what Gengrich and Warner are going to be making off with tomorrow. Most of his equipment and twenty-two, no, better make that twenty-one, of his men!

Nelson rode at a steady pace for several days, moving south and west as rapidly as possible in the winter weather. Drantos was largely a ruin of a country, and the natives were hostile, but his M-16 was usually enough to secure him food and convince someone to provide horse fodder. He didn't sleep in the villages, though: no one to watch his back. Night after night he spent in open fields or on rocky hillsides, rigging booby traps and alarms around his simple camp to guard his sleep.

Aside from necessary contacts to get food, he avoided people altogether. He didn't want reports of a “star lord” reaching Parsons, or Gengrich, or even Captain Galloway, for that matter. Rumors couldn't be prevented, but there was no sense in being obvious and turning a few rumors into confirmed intelligence.

By the time he emerged onto the plains of the City States, Nelson looked more like a Germanic tribesman than a star lord. His blond hair fell shoulder length over the furs he used to cover his camouflage fatigues. His three ten-days in the snow and the light of Tran's three

suns gave his broad face a tanned, weather-beaten look, and this appearance of roughness was accented by his thick blond beard.

Not that Nelson was normally unimposing. He stood five feet, eleven inches high—tall by Tran standards—and weighed one hundred eighty-five pounds. None of it was fat: he was large-boned and well-muscled.

He lead his pack mule, his knife showing in the belt around his outer furs. His rifle stayed hidden beneath a saddle roll. Nelson looked for all the world like a wealthy, healthy tribal chieftain. That's probably what caused the attack.

The lands around the City States vary from flat plains to gently rolling hills. Where the land has not been cleared, light forests alternate with large meadows. The land is well watered by rivers and their tributaries, and often crossed by trails leading from village to village. The trails are lined by scrub brush and tangles of Tran trees—perfect terrain for an ambush.

Nelson's mind wasn't on ambushes as he rode through the scrub. He pondered his ultimate destination. He knew that Gengrich and his crew were interested in the city republic of Kleistinos. And, he figured, once they have themselves established in the South, they'd make some kind of power play for either Viys or Rustengo, the two most dominant of the City States. That meant the cities of the Sunlands, south of the City States themselves, would probably be a safe haven for a solitary star lord who would prefer to avoid company.

Deep in thought, he ignored his horse's first warnings: a pricking up of the ears, a sniffing of the air with raised head. He didn't ignore what happened next. The arrow thudded into the side of his saddle, narrowly missing his upper right thigh. A war whoop sounded as the arrow hit, and six short, ugly, bearded men sprang from the cover of the scrub brush. A seventh stood, nocking another arrow while the six brutes rushed Nelson. Two of the attackers wielded long swords, one swung a flail, and the

Section 2

remaining three charged with crude clubs made from tree branches raised over their heads.

Nelson reached beneath his furs and produced the Colt .45 automatic. He got off a shot at the man with the flail just before the first sword stroke hit him. The man rocked back and fell stone dead, a red blossom growing on his chest. Then Nelson's world became a tangle of battering weapons, flailing limbs, and pain as he alternately struck and fired at his assailants.

The six bandits have a Melee value of 3 each. They attack using Chart E.

Nelson's Melee value is 6. This includes his ability to fire the pistol at close quarters. He attacks using Chart C.

Continue the fight until four bandits are killed or until Nelson becomes a casualty.

If four bandits are killed, go to section 2.

If Nelson is a casualty, go to section 3.

— 2 —

The first sword stroke thudded against Nelson's side. He felt pain from the blow, but the blade didn't break his skin; the swordsman, startled by the sound of the pistol, turned his wrist, striking with the flat of his blade.

Nelson dug in his spurs and pulled back on the reins in his left hand, rearing the horse. As the horse rose, he fired his second shot at the bowman exposed in the woods.

Then the horse took a savage blow to its rear legs and stumbled; for a moment Nelson thought himself a dead man. But the beast retained its balance. As its front

hooves crashed down to the ground again, he fired another round, and another, taking the targets at the front of the horse at point-blank range.

The burly men dropped with looks of pain and amazement on their faces, screaming wildly and clutching their wounds, except one man who took a .45 slug square through the forehead. He toppled forward, and his companions saw the exploded mass of bone chips, blood, and brains that were once the back of their comrade's head.

He was the fourth bandit to die in twice as many seconds. The rest decided they'd had enough; they bolted into the brush.

"Demons take us all! He has weapons of fire and thunder! Weapons of the gods themselves!" Nelson heard one man shout.

He decided to let that evaluation of his weapons and his person stand for a while; never interrupt an enemy while he's making a mistake! Nelson slapped his horse's rump and took off as fast as he could, dragging the fearful mule behind. He wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and the attackers before the stunning effect of his firearms wore off.

He covered three kilometers before allowing the exhausted horse to stop for a rest. Dismounting, he checked the horse's rear leg. The blow the horse had suffered was a bad one, and Nelson couldn't afford to lose the animal. The leg didn't appear broken, but it might be fractured; impossible to tell, Nelson decided. With his attackers scattered and more than three clicks behind, he played it safe and walked the horse a distance.

He'd gone about one more kilometer, topping a small hill and entering a broad meadow, when he heard the voice.

"Star lord! I come in peace!"

Peace or no, Nelson drew his .45 as he spun around, his eyes swiftly scanning a full circle. The speaker had apparently risen out of the ground from nowhere; he

Section 2

stood less than ten feet away. The ground in the meadow was still brown, the grass dead; however this man had concealed himself, he had done it very well.

The man looked brutish, like the bandits who had just attacked, with greasy long black hair and tawny skin covered with filth. He wore skins and furs tied with leather thongs in a seemingly random fashion around parts of his body. But beneath the furs, Nelson saw a dirty garment recognizable as a short tunic. No weapons showed, but several could easily be concealed in that random bundle of furs that kept the man warm in the winter cold.

"State your business with me, and that quickly, or die," Nelson shouted, leveling the pistol at the man's chest. Hope that sounds highblown enough for a star lord, Nelson thought.

The man smiled and extended both hands, palms up and open. "I am Critos, and I would speak with you, star lord, to our mutual profit. It would be foolish for you to kill me, for in the instant you do . . ." Critos turned and extended his arm in a sweeping gesture toward the light woods and brush. Six bowmen with arrows at the ready were watching Nelson's every move.

"Then speak. I do not fear your bowmen," Nelson said, "for even if they loose their arrows before I fire this weapon of the gods, you will still die."

"You are quite right, star lord. So let us talk in peace, avoiding both our deaths."

The man was either terribly brave or terribly stupid, Nelson thought. Let's find out which.

"The power of my star weapons is greater than that of your bowmen. If I wish, I can kill you all."

Critos continued to smile, but his response was delayed by more than a second. He's not sure, Nelson realized.

"Then you would never learn what I have to offer to your profit," Critos countered.

"If you have anything to offer after your companions

tried to kill me, you'd better offer it, and quickly. I don't have time for idle chatter with roadside bandits."

"We are bandits from necessity, not from choice," Critos said calmly. "And we can offer you ourselves. You are obviously a wealthy man, star lord, and you command much power. Yet you are alone on this path. You could use brave companions."

And the bandits could use food. Studying them more closely, Nelson saw not only the greed but the need in their eyes. Of course, it made sense, he realized. With Drantos and the Five Kingdoms at war, trade from the City States was slowed or suspended. That would mean slim pickings for bandits, especially in the winter.

But these are the primitive cutthroats who just tried to kill me. No way they can be trusted. Unless they can be completely overawed. . . .

"And if I refuse your offer?"

"Then give us a token payment for your safe passage down this road."

"My safe passage is in my hand, bandit." Nelson smiled and waved the .45 slightly.

"You cannot stay awake forever, star lord. You have money, and you can get food. My people may be bandits, but their bellies growl in the cold night no less than yours. Either take us to your service or give us money to buy what we need."

Nelson considered. I can probably kill all of them out of hand, but might take a nasty arrow wound doing it. Certainly Parsons would kill them; he'd lob a grenade and be done with it. So would Gengrich, for that matter. But I'm not Parsons and I'm not Gengrich. I'm a soldier, not a murderer. Besides, this Critos doesn't speak like an uncouth bandit—the man has some learning, even a sign of manners. He's actually making a moral claim on me! If I buy them off, will it last? If I take them into my "service," as they call it, that would give me a tiny fighting force to take south. But a damned untrustworthy one.

Section 3

If Nelson decides to give Critos and his bandits some money, go to section 6.

If Nelson decides to take Critos and his men into his own service, go to section 4.

— 3 —

Nelson awoke sputtering, gasping and choking, cold water streaming down his face and spewing from his mouth.

“Welcome, star lord. It is time for us to have a little talk.”

Nelson’s head throbbed with pain. He started to raise an arm, trying to feel the wound that must be near the base of his skull, but found his arms tied securely to his sides. His legs were bound as well.

He lay on some filthy straw in a three-sided lean-to made of a few small logs covered with animal skins. He saw his horse and mule, stripped of their loads, tied to a crude hitching post nearby. There were other lean-tos, similar to his, in a rough circle around a clearing in the light woods.

About a dozen men strode around, drinking, eating from the game that roasted over a central fire, and talking. There were women and children too; how many, Nelson couldn’t see, but he heard their voices.

The man standing over him was filthy, with straggly black hair and large brown eyes, but a face surprisingly gentle-looking beneath the dirt. He wore furs tied to his body with leather thongs, and beneath them Nelson saw the remains of a tunic.

The man had a wry, sarcastic expression as he studied the captive star lord.

“Come on, star lord, speak. Your wounds are light enough, compared to the ones you gave.”

“Why do you call me ‘star lord’?” Nelson asked.

"Let's not start with that. You'll not deceive me by playing stupid. And don't assume that I'm some simpleton. We'll waste a lot of time if you do. Waste too much, and I'll decide to kill you, like the rest of them want me to. Now, who are your kinsmen among the other star lords in Drantos?"

Nelson racked his aching brain, searching for the reasons for this line of questioning. Obviously this fellow knows something about the star lords, and the wars in the North, he thought. But kinsmen? Apparently he can't conceive of any other form of social organization. Why would he want to know about kinsmen? Ransom? That has to be it . . .

"I have no kinsmen among the star lords, but if I did, why should I reveal their names to you?"

"Hah!" The bandit laughed heartily and pulled a dirk from the tangle of furs on his body. He pressed the blade edge tight against Nelson's neck. "Because if you don't tell me, you're a dead man. Even star lords want to live, so I'm told."

"Kill me and you will all die. Do you think the star lords would let such a crime go unavenged?"

"I think you are alone, star lord, very much alone. There are no more of your kind within a day's ride."

"Nevertheless, they would know of my death and bring their star weapons to kill you."

"Perhaps. But I'd rather they'd bring gold or food to ransom you."

"The great star lords do not pay ransom to roadside bandits!" Nelson spit at the man for emphasis.

"Perhaps not. More's the pity for you. Because you, great star lord, bleed like any other man."

The blade of the dirk bit into the skin of Nelson's throat and slid across it. Then his captor lifted the blade so Nelson could see his own blood dripping from it.

"Shall I cut deeper next time? What will they give for your life?"

"They might let you keep yours," Nelson replied,

hoping no fear showed in his eyes. He didn't dare tell this killer that the other star lords would pay nothing for him, that at least some of them might be seeking his life as a deserter, and the rest would probably view him as unwelcome competition.

"He says nothing. Kill him, Critos, and be done." Nelson recognized the new speaker's voice—he was one of the swordsmen in the ambush. The gruff clod was a hulking brute of a man, and to judge by his appearance and accent, not nearly as bright as Critos.

"Shut up!" Critos shouted. "I lead here, and I will decide what's to be done with him."

The burly swordsman almost flinched at the rebuke. He lowered his head, turned away, and busied himself with a leg of roasted meat.

Nelson drank in the scene and quickly analyzed the situation. He was helpless, and they had his weapons. They were bandits, and obviously pretty impoverished ones at that. That made sense: with war between Drantos and the Five Kingdoms, there would be many fewer trade caravans heading north. There were few enough in the winter anyway. These people were hungry, even though they could secure food by hunting or stealing. And they needed money for weapons; Nelson remembered that some of his attackers were armed with tree branches wielded as clubs.

This Critos is their leader, and he rules by fear, Nelson thought. But his leadership must be threatened—the burly man dared to try to tell Critos what to do.

How can I use this?

"If you don't tell me, right now, who to contact for your ransom, I'll kill you, as Doron there desires."

"If you treat me with the courtesy one leader gives another, I will answer you to your advantage. But if you continue to act as crudely as Doron, I will die and you will all be killed," Nelson answered calmly. This guy is smart; will he pick up on the hint? Will he

see he can increase his own stature by treating me well?

Critos twisted his lips into a sneering smile, and Nelson saw the light of cunning gleam from the man's eyes.

"You are a bright one, aren't you, star lord?" Critos whispered so only Nelson could hear. "You bargain better than the merchants from the Sunlands."

Critos stood and wheeled about. "Doron! Bring food and warm wine to my quarters for myself and my prisoner." Doron looked at Critos, his large jaw hanging open in puzzlement. "Move, dolt!" Critos growled. Doron moved.

Critos looked back at Nelson and said loudly, "And I have your word, then, star lord, you will make no attempt to escape?"

"While we parley for my freedom and greater wealth for your people, I will make no attempt to escape," Nelson called out. "You have the word of the star lord, sworn by Yatar and Vothan!"

"Balquhor," Critos said, motioning to another of the bandits. "Remove his bonds and show him to my quarters."

The hulking Balquhor made no reply as Critos walked away slowly. He looked after Critos in puzzlement, then turned his attention to cutting the thongs that bound Nelson's arms and legs.

While Balquhor cut, Nelson thought. What can I offer him? He needs food and money. I have some money, but they've taken that already. And I've given him added prestige just to get cut loose. Now, do I try to escape, or . . .

An idea formed in Nelson's mind. Here's a small band of cutthroats, certainly used to hardship and to killing, he mused. With training, with discipline, they could be useful when I reach the Sunlands. They might even be flattered by an offer to be "taken into the service of a great star lord." But can they be trusted?

If Nelson decides to try to escape, go to section 5.

If Nelson decides to take Critos' small band into his "service," go to section 7.

— 4 —

"Do you swear, Critos, that you are the leader of these people and that they will obey you?" Nelson asked loudly. He wasn't going to take Critos at his word, and he certainly wanted the archers to know that if they welched on a deal, they'd dishonor Critos as well. Whatever that might mean to them.

"I swear it."

"By what do you swear?" An oath without a witness was a hollow oath: Nelson had learned that much watching the nobles of the Five Kingdoms playing politics amongst themselves.

"By Yatar-Opollos, I swear that I lead these people and that they will obey me."

Yatar-Opollos? That's a new one on me, Nelson thought. Have to look into that.

"Very well. How many are your people?"

"Four less than a short while ago. I have these six men you see, two others, and their women and children."

"Have them put down their weapons, and you and I will talk further about your people entering my service."

"You will also lower your star weapon?"

"I will, as I see the bows lowered."

Critos extended his arm and gestured broadly, up and down. Slowly, the bowmen lowered their bows and relaxed the tension on the strings. When Nelson was certain the archers couldn't raise their weapons to firing position faster than he could draw his gun, he slid the safety on his Colt and holstered it beneath his furs. He

rode the few steps over to Critos.

"Where can we talk? Alone. I'm not going to bargain in front of these thick-skulled killers."

"Follow me to my camp," Critos said quietly.

Ten minutes later Nelson rode into the bandits' "camp," a collection of crude, three-sided log lean-tos covered with animal skins. They were arranged in a rough circle in a light woods. Game roasted on an open fire near the center of the circle. Nelson counted six horses tied around the camp, and two mules. From behind the flaps on the lean-tos women and children peered out curiously.

About one hundred feet beyond the circle stood another lean-to, larger than the rest. "My quarters," Critos said. He walked to the lean-to and lifted the flap, revealing a dirty straw floor, a wood table with two benches and a chair, and an assortment of bows, swords, and knives piled in a corner.

Banditry must be a bad profession, Nelson thought. These people are living like medieval serfs.

"Doron," Critos called to one of his men as Nelson dismounted. "Bring food and drink for my guest."

Nelson watched a hulk of a man with a slightly puzzled expression walk toward the fire, then enter Critos' lean-to.

"Be seated, star lord," Critos said courteously, indicating the single chair. He himself plopped on one of the benches and rested an elbow on the table. He used his hand to prop up his tilted head and eyed Nelson with a mixture of curiosity and sarcasm.

"So, Critos, tell me of yourself. You have not always been a bandit."

"And you have not always been a star lord, is it not so? Is it true that you came from the stars?"

"Yes."

"I have seen the power of your star weapon. I had heard of such weapons of late, but never would have believed such tales. I trust your purse is as powerful."

"Powerful enough, if I choose to let you serve me."

Critos didn't answer at once; Doron came in with a roasted haunch of some local animal Nelson didn't recognize, and large cups of warmed wine. Critos continued after Doron left.

"I am surprised you are interested in us. I have heard that the star lords are cruel men who despoil whole villages, taking what they please. Why did you not simply kill us? I saw you fight our men earlier; you are not afraid of battle."

"Why did you risk open contact if you believed me a cruel killer? You could have let me go unmolested, or ambushed me again. Surely one of the six archers you would recommend to my service can hit a horseman at a range of twenty feet." Nelson was glad Critos had left him this opening. The man was intelligent and had a way of taking charge of a conversation instinctively. Nelson would have to remind him of who was to be the lord and who the servant if this arrangement was to work.

"Indeed, one of the six could have hit you," Critos said, smiling wryly. "I gambled that even your star weapon could not kill us all at once. If several died, I would have fewer mouths to feed."

"Tell me about yourself and these men."

"I was a soldier of Karinth, a fine city in the Sunlands. There was a girl . . . ah well, suffice to say I contracted debts greater than I could pay. I was placed in debt slavery. I didn't like slavery," Critos said, grinning. "I ran away. There are few careers open to a runaway slave. I became a bandit."

"But you have more than just a soldier's training."

"I can read, and write. My father raised me well."

"But he wouldn't pay your debts?"

"He disapproved of my taste in women, and my extravagant way of demonstrating my affections."

"And these people?"

"The men, all bandits out of some type of necessity. Not that they are learned. They are all barbarians, except one, a runaway slave like myself, Gaius Alba, from

Rome. The others come from different lands: Drantos, Chelm, Ta-Meltemos, the City States. Only Alba has any learning. The rest know only to ride, shoot, fight, and kill."

"Why should a star lord make enemies by taking runaway slaves, bandits, and murderers to his service?"

"Perhaps he shouldn't. Perhaps we could yet overpower you, rob you, and kill or ransom you. Many of the men would do that gladly; they can no longer believe that any other way of life is possible for them. By showing them something better, you would give them hope and earn their loyalty. Loyalty is difficult to find in hired men."

"And why do you think I need hired men at all?"

"The star lords war among themselves, I am told. All are now in Drantos—all except you. I think you need men."

"You hear much."

"In your service, lord, my ears would be yours."

"Terms?"

"You provide food, lodging, equipment as befits soldiers. Our women and children march with us, unless you settle us somewhere. We give you our lives, as bodyguards, soldiers, even workers in your household. But not as slaves."

"And you will obey. The organization is military, not that of a household. Women and children are bound to obey as well. Those who don't are subject to death. Those who do are subject only to honorable service. A man may withdraw at will, but only after four ten-days' of declaring his intention, and he may not bear arms against me, ever."

"Agreed."

"Can you bind the others?"

"Let us find out."

The True Sun had set by the time Critos and Nelson finished their parley, and the Fire Stealer, too, sank on the horizon. In the Fire Stealer's strange dusk light, Critos gathered his men by the central fire. He explained to them the Star Lord Nelson's offer. It would mean a

new and better life, he said, a life with less murder, and more food. A life with . . . honor. Whether moved by Critos' words, or simply because they could think of no other response, the eight men agreed.

Critos brought the camp's one chair and placed it before the fire, indicating that Nelson should be seated. One by one, with Critos going first, each man knelt before the Star Lord Nelson and swore by his gods to give the lord service, obedience, and loyalty under the terms of the agreement. In turn, each heard the star lord promise his care and protection in exchange.

When the strange ceremony ended, the Star Lord Nelson rose. "Critos," he said, "post sentries for the night, with relief every four hours."

Then the Star Lord Nelson retired to the large lean-to, ready to spend his first night in his new camp.

Go to section 8.

— 5 —

Nelson stood up. The pain in his head was as bad as ever, and it seemed to be centered in the huge knot on the back of his skull. Other than that, though, he seemed okay.

He took a few shaky steps toward the fire in the center of the camp, stopped, and warmed himself for a moment. The men eyed him cautiously. Apparently they aren't used to trusting people, Nelson thought. There's probably a good reason for that: those who aren't trustworthy are often untrusting.

But this time they're right. Nelson smiled dryly.

Balquhor grunted and pointed to a larger lean-to beyond the immediate circle of the camp. Must be the head man's quarters, Nelson thought. Now, how do I get out of here?

He walked slowly toward Critos' lean-to, his hands

buried inside his furs, feeling his own body. The bandits' search had been thorough: they'd found his hideout knife.

He stopped at the edge of the circle of lean-tos and rubbed his head again. His horse was tied nearby, stripped of saddle and bridle. He'd have to have the horse; this crew would track him down in no time if he tried to run on foot. The mule was by the horse; it, too, had been stripped. Have to give up the mule, he mused. No doubt the gold is already distributed. That leaves the weapons.

Nelson groaned, feigning worse pain than he felt. He stretched and rubbed his head yet again. The group began losing interest in him; as he continued to delay, only Balquhor really watched him.

If I want to escape without my weapons, he thought, now is the time. I can catch Balquhor by surprise with a good martial arts move. . . .

If Nelson decides to try to escape now, without his weapons, go to section 11.

If Nelson decides to wait and try to get his weapons back before escaping, go to section 9.

— 6 —

"Very well. To show you that a star lord can be merciful as well as powerful, I will give you gold. In return, you will swear to grant me safe passage, to hold me free from any further attacks by any of your people."

"A fair bargain. I swear. Now, show us the star lord's mercy," Critos said, sarcasm creeping into his voice.

Hope this works, Nelson thought, reaching his left hand around to dig in the coin purse hidden beneath his bedroll. At least gold is one thing I have enough of. Old

Section 6

Parsons made Sarakos pay through the nose, up front. About ten of the big coins from the Five Kingdoms should do the trick.

Nelson counted the coins carefully. All the while he never lowered the Colt and never took his eyes off Critos. He rode the few paces to where Critos stood.

"Here is sufficient gold to provide food and lodging for your people for half a ten-day; more, if you use it wisely."

"My thanks, star lord. Go in peace."

Nelson turned the horse sideways to Critos and the archers and walked it, sidestepping, until he was out of bow range. The Colt remained pointed at Critos the entire time. No point in taking foolish chances. As soon as he thought himself beyond accurate fire from the bandit's small bows, he turned the horse down the path and rode off as fast as he could with the mule in tow.

For three kilometers he didn't slow his pace, and this time he didn't stop. The horse will have to hold up a little longer, he thought. He kept the pace at a steady walk and constantly scanned the roadside for any signs of human activity.

He saw nothing, but that wasn't reassuring. Lots of hills around here, he observed. Horizon is pretty close. A small band of cavalry could flank a man on this path, staying behind those hills, and he'd never see or hear them.

He continued at a walk until the True Sun set. The Fire Stealer, too, inched toward the horizon, its strange, dusky light casting bizarre shadows as it set. Nelson looked more than once at every shadow that moved, at every piece of brush that rustled in the cold evening wind.

He was ready to think himself safe when he heard them coming.

They were directly behind him, on the path! He heard the hoofbeats of the galloping horses; possibly four, maybe more. He turned his horse around to look full behind him and cursed softly; the crest of the small hill he had just topped blocked his view.

Hurriedly, Nelson led the mule over to a small tree by the side of the road and tied it off. Making sure the M-16 had a fresh clip, he spurred back to the hilltop.

They hit him at the crest. Four came full tilt toward him up the hill on their scrawny mounts, and at the last moment three more from each side of the trail sprang out on foot to grab him.

Time for one good burst, Nelson thought.

The ten bandits have a Melee value of 3 each and attack on Chart D.

Nelson uses his Ordnance value of 10 in the first round and fights on Chart A. He uses his Melee value of 6 in each following round, and fights on Chart C.

Continue the fight until Nelson is killed or six bandits are killed.

If Nelson is killed, go to section 29.

If six bandits are killed, go to section 10.

— 7 —

The pain in his head exploded as Nelson stood up. He ran a hand over his skull to check the damage. Sure enough, there was a huge lump at the back of his skull. Amazingly, he found no other injuries.

He took a few steps, getting his bearings. Balquhor kept close watch on him; no matter what Critos ordered, the hulk of a man didn't trust the star lord yet.

Nelson stuck his hands beneath his covering furs and patted his body down carefully. The bandits' search had been thorough: they'd taken his hideaway knife.

Balquhor grunted and pointed to a large lean-to about a hundred feet beyond the smaller ones in the circle.

That hovel, apparently, was Critos' quarters. Nelson nodded aristocratically to Balquhor, then sauntered over to the fire. There he paused, warming himself, before walking slowly to Critos' lean-to.

"Welcome, star lord, to my quarters," Critos said sarcastically as he lifted the lean-to's covering flap of animal skin.

Nelson surveyed the bandit leader's collection of luxuries: a straw floor as filthy as those in any of the other lean-tos, a small pile of weapons in one corner, a wood table, two benches, and one chair. Doron crowded past Nelson to place a roasted haunch and two large goblets of wine on the table.

"That will be all for now, Doron," Critos said. "My lord, won't you be seated?" Critos gestured to the one chair; he himself plopped down on a bench. "Now, we're alone. Tell me something to my advantage."

Nelson sipped the wine. It wasn't good, but it wasn't that bad, and on a cold day it would do. The meat didn't look familiar, but he lifted the haunch and bit into it anyway. Gamey, but not inedible.

"You have not always been a bandit," Nelson observed. "Men of your insight did not grow up among murderers in the forests of Tran."

Critos seemed intrigued by this remark. "True," he replied. "But that's no concern of yours."

"Perhaps I would be interested to make your concerns mine."

"Say on."

"First I must know about you: your background, your training, and your skills. How you came to be a bandit." Nelson paused to add emphasis to his next words. "And your enemies."

"All men are enemies of bandits."

"Not all men are enemies of soldiers."

A gleam of understanding lit Critos' brown eyes. "I would not think a star lord would look among bandits for soldiers," he said cautiously. He sipped his wine and

looked away from Nelson, hoping to show his utter lack of interest in what the star lord had said.

"Almost anyone can be taught to be a good soldier. Your men have courage; they were willing to fight on after seeing the deadly effect of my star weapon. And you have taught them some discipline."

"They must be ruled by fear and guile."

"In time they would respond to better treatment. But at first, you are quite correct." Nelson took another slug of the wine, then spoke on as if lecturing a subordinate. "Once, though, they have tasted success in honorable battle, most men can be motivated by pride in themselves and loyalty to their lord. Of course, there can be neither if the men are used merely to kill and steal. That is why you must struggle daily to maintain your position with them."

"Hah. A prisoner wants my job. A star lord wishes to lead bandits."

"A star lord wishes to lead men who could become good soldiers."

"And why do you need men?"

"That should be obvious. You did take me prisoner."

"And the other star lords?"

"They will avenge me if our parley fails."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. What position would I have in this little band of soldiers?"

"I don't know yet. I don't know how good you are, or how brave you are. It takes no courage to murder a man from behind or slit his throat while he's tied." Nelson watched Critos carefully. He'd been riding the bandit chief hard; how would Critos take this insult?

"And it takes little courage to plunder Drantos with star weapons. It takes none at all to enslave peasants." Critos made the remarks coldly, but matter-of-factly. Good, thought Nelson.

"You hear a lot."

"I hear the star lords war upon one another in Drantos. They are all there—all but one. And why are

you here? You have fallen out with your star lord kinsmen. You are outcast. And now you seek to raise an army to avenge yourself."

So, Galloway is in charge of the Tamaerthon force! Parsons may be in for a big surprise, Nelson thought with a smile.

"The star lords do war among themselves. But I am not outcast. Our ways are not your ways, just as our weapons are not your weapons."

"I beg to differ, star lord. Your weapons, at least, are now mine."

"Not if you enter my service." Nelson scowled, then pounded his fist on the table. "I will no longer be bandied with! If you wish to serve me, tell me what you can do. Otherwise, this parley is ended."

"And your life with it."

"So be it."

Critos sat back, surprised. This star lord may be an outcast, the bandit thought, but he has courage. And honor. Things I once had, before Yatar-Opollos turned his face from me.

"I can read and write. I am a trained soldier who once marched in the ranks of the Guards of Karinth. I am not unused to command, and can wield the pike or the sword with equal skill. I ride well, but fight better on foot."

"How did you come to be a bandit?" Nelson asked, keeping his expression stern.

"I was placed in debt slavery. I didn't like slavery, so I escaped. There are few careers open to escaped slaves."

"And your men?"

"A mixed lot. Barbarians, all of them, of course, except the Roman, Gaius Alba. He can read and write and calculate. The rest . . . eight men, eight stories. Some are brutes, like Doron and Balquhor. Some are smarter. All are brave, and all are killers. There were more than eight before today. You fight well, too, star lord."

"You would be my second-in-command with the rank of . . . Sergeant."

"I do not know this term of rank."

"It is deemed honorable by the star lords."

"What would you give those who enter your service?"

"Discipline. Honor. Protection. More food and more shelter than they have now. Gold and booty as I can."

"And in return?"

"I would demand absolute obedience. Those who failed to give it would die. But any man would be free to leave my service four ten-days after declaring his desire. He would be sworn, however, never to take arms against me."

Critos' face went slack. He turned his head away from Nelson and drank deeply, draining his cup.

"I had never thought to have honor again," he said softly.

"Join me."

"I will."

"Can you speak for the others?"

"Let us see."

The True Sun had set by the time Critos and Nelson finished their parley, and the Fire Stealer, too, was sinking on the horizon. In the Fire Stealer's strange dusk light, Critos gathered his men by the central fire. He explained to them the Star Lord Nelson's offer. It would mean a new and better life, he said, a life with less murder, and more food. A life with honor. Whether moved by Critos' words, or simply because they could think of no other response, the eight men agreed.

Critos brought the camp's one chair and placed it before the fire, gesturing for Nelson to be seated. One by one, with Critos going first, each man knelt before the Star Lord Nelson and swore by his gods to give the lord service, obedience, and loyalty under the terms of the agreement. Each heard the star lord promise his care and protection in exchange.

When the ceremony ended, the Star Lord Nelson rose. "Critos," he said, "post sentries for the night, with relief every four hours. Return my star weapons to me in my quarters."

Then the Star Lord Nelson retired to the large lean-to, ready to spend his first night in his new camp.

Go to section 8.

— 8 —

The Star Lord Nelson rose before the True Sun was up, checked his star weapons, and walked into the center of his camp.

Critos was already there. The fire was well tended, and what meager fresh game the band had, already turned on a spit. A crew of haggard-looking, filthy women in rags and furs argued over the division of the food.

“Good morning, my lord!” Critos called.

“Critos,” Nelson said, nodding in acknowledgment.

Then the meaning of what he had done hit Nelson, all at once. By Yatar and Christ! I must have been mad, he thought. These people need everything at once: food, shelter, clothing, training in basic hygiene, discipline, military training, religious guidance, a set of rules to live by, a goal to strive for. And they need it now. What in the hell am I going to do? I’m just a soldier. A soldier with a B.S. degree, true, but a soldier nonetheless. I’m not even an officer, for Yatar’s sake!

And those are just the immediate problems. In the long run, what am I really going to do with these people? Nine men, two of them literate. Hardly an “army” to take south with me. Actually, more of a liability. How will I ever get any of the cities of the City States or the Sunlands to hire me when they learn some of my retainers are runaway slaves?

The squawling of a baby greeted the rising of the True Sun. The infant’s cries were soon joined by the sobs of older children. Nelson glanced around the camp. Most of the children huddled in the lean-tos, looking scared and keeping silent. Where? . . .

There, away from the camp in the open woods. Four women were trying to comfort a cluster of crying children. Obviously they'd slept in the open all night without furs or blankets of any kind. And why weren't those women with the others, dividing up the food?

"Critos?"

"My lord?"

"Those women in the woods. Why don't they come and get food for themselves and their children?" Nelson didn't bother to ask why the hags at the fire haggled only over the scraps and droppings from the roasted meat: the choice pieces were left for the men.

"They are outcast, my lord."

"Why so?"

"Their men are dead. These are the women of the men who were slain in yesterday's . . . uh, they are the women of our recently fallen comrades." Critos turned his head in fear and embarrassment.

"Call in the sentries. Assemble all the men in the center of the camp in half an hour. Have those outcast women brought over here, now. See that all the food presently cooking is divided in equal portions, with a half portion for each child. Are there enough lean-tos for each woman and her children to have one to themselves?"

"Yes, my lord, but—"

"See that the lean-tos are so distributed. And don't worry, whatever the men say. I have reasons for my orders, and my orders are not to be questioned." Nelson turned on his heel and walked back to his own lean-to.

"Yes, my lord," he heard Critos reply, puzzlement in his voice.

These people have a long way to go. And I can't even be myself with them, Nelson thought. I have to be the Star Lord Nelson, who speaks to command, seldom to commiserate. I can never, never let them see me hesitant, doubting, troubled. Oh well. Guess I'm an officer now.

Section 8

It took a ten-day to get them ready to reflect the form of society they might encounter in a small village. Critos, of course, was no problem; he had once had the manners of a man born to a middle station in life in a city republic. And the Roman runaway slave, Gaius Alba, proved trustworthy. At least the two of them could get some idea of what Nelson was trying to do.

The other men were a different matter. They didn't question Nelson's courage; they'd seen him fight. But they did question everything else, even if they didn't do it out loud after the first day.

Everything was a problem. The first day he needed two men to go to a village and procure food—the roads were too dangerous to send only one man, and even sending two was risky. He couldn't spare both Critos and Gaius, and he couldn't trust any of the others not to just take the food money, and join up with one of the countless other outlaw bands that infested the area. He finally sent Gaius and Doron. Doron's good behavior was secured by the fact that the brute could not believe the Star Lord Nelson would not be sneaking along behind him, watching him from a distance, ready to strike him down with his star weapons.

Sanitation was another problem. Nelson thanked all the gods of Earth and Tran more than once for the fact he still had his good old U.S. Army shovel. Teaching the men to dig latrines was a problem with only one shovel, but he managed. Teaching them why they should bother was another problem altogether.

Better shelter would have to wait for a short while, Nelson decided. In the meantime, he provided money for one new garment for every man, woman, and child, and additional large furs that could double as blankets and outer garment wrappings.

Weapons, too, were a problem. They had a collection of light bows, but their range was very short and their force puny; the arrows wouldn't penetrate good armor. They had only three swords and, of course, the flail. There were a few maces. Knives they had in abundance.

Nelson couldn't very well send them to buy weapons; that was something he'd have to do himself. And in the first days, he didn't dare leave the camp: there was always something demanding his attention, and without his personal presence the men would quickly revert to their old habits.

They were learning one new habit, though. They were learning obedience. It had been very, very rough that first day. Teaching them to march four abreast in two ranks with himself on one side and Critos on the other had taken more patience than Nelson thought he had. Of course, the men could see no reason at all for it. They were vicious, dirty fighters one-on-one, but the concept of any organized action other than an ambush, which quickly led to dirty one on one fighting, was beyond their comprehension. Nelson didn't know if the drill would be useful or not when it came to a fight, but it did teach them obedience.

In that first ten-day Star Lord Nelson also learned that to be an officer is to be a judge. At first there was constant bickering over who had stolen what from whom—not that anything they had was really worth stealing. Naturally, the concepts of property and honor meant little to men who had lived as bandits most of their adult lives. The problem vexed Nelson endlessly until he finally caught one man stealing red-handed.

The stern star lord had the man hung from a tree branch by his wrists and beaten within an inch of his life. He promulgated the law of the army: he who steals, dies. In this first case, he told them, he was granting mercy, because the man did not know the law. Then, in another firelight ceremony, he accepted the offender back into his service, formally “restored” the man's “honor,” and ordered that the incident not be mentioned again.

Finally, he cleaned them up. Knives could be used to cut hair as well as throats, he told them. And for two days the men who labored to make the large wooden tub had no idea what its use was to be. Little did they dream until the morning of that third day that it would be filled with

heated water in which they were expected to immerse themselves!

The reaction to bathing in warmed water was such that Nelson decided not to teach the men about cleaning wounds with boiling water. He did instruct Critos and Gaius in the technique, but with instructions not to use it until after their first fight.

The next problem Nelson faced was where to take this little band. There were, of course, many small villages in the lands of the City States, but each was claimed and ruled by one of those states. Someone would certainly recognize one or more of his men, and he doubted the governments would welcome them, given their background. Still, they couldn't spend the rest of the winter here in the woods. He didn't have enough money to support them forever, and he didn't want to turn them loose to rob; that would destroy the discipline he was instilling.

Finally, he decided to approach the priesthood of Yatar. He knew from experience in the North that the priests were well organized and respected by the secular powers. If his little band could get protection from the priesthood . . .

It took him three days away from the camp, a lot of talking, and most of the rest of his gold, but he finally secured pardons and the right to build additional structures by a small village. He also secured a promise of protection, but it was understood that this meant protection from the governing City State's own troops and nothing more. The gold was given as a donation to the Priests of Yatar to be used to fill the "caves" in preparation for the "Time."

Critos knocked smartly on the door of the Star Lord Nelson's wood hut. "My lord," he called, "a matter of some urgency requires your attention."

Nelson sighed. In the two ten-days it had taken to

move to the village, secure a food supply, and build some crude log huts, there had been a never-ending series of matters of urgency.

"Enter," Nelson grumbled.

"My lord, there are people here who would join with us."

"What people, how many, what skills, and why?"

"They are bandits, my lord. There are thirty men, plus their women and children. Their skills are varied, but mainly murder. They have heard of our . . . new way, and wish to join with us."

Nelson stared at Critos, thunderstruck. Thirty men! That meant at least ninety more, all told, counting women and children. How can I possibly feed and shelter that many? he wondered. The gold's almost gone, and the city would never give permission for such a build-up of criminals near one of its villages. . . .

"Do they have any gold? Any money?"

"None, my lord."

"How have they heard of us?"

"I fear word has spread through the forests and the hills of the great changes wrought by the Star Lord Nelson in the band of Critos."

"Then there will be more coming to join us."

"Perhaps," Critos replied, grinning.

"Critos, if I thought you were behind this—"

Critos burst out laughing. "No, my lord. I am not. But it appears your mercy and generosity will be sorely strained in the days to come. This is but the first trickle of a mighty stream."

"Great. Set Corporal Doron over the men to begin drilling them. See to the feeding of their women and children, and begin planning with Gaius how on earth, er, Tran, we can shelter them. Explain the oath to them too."

"The Councilors of Kleistinos will now receive the Star Lord Nelson," the page announced formally.

Nelson stood, checked to be sure his uniform was unwrinkled, and swaggered through the large double wooden doors into the council hall. Three men in tunics of white with gold trim and cloaks of deep blue sat at one end of a long table. Behind them stood the Captain General of Kleistinos. The general wore his best armor for the occasion: a gleaming breast plate emblazoned with the golden ram of Kleistinos, a tall helmet sprouting blue and red plumes, and a ceremonial short sword with a gem-encrusted hilt.

The man at the head of the table stood when Nelson entered. "Star Lord Nelson. I am Meletos, Headman of the Council of Kleistinos. I pray you be seated. Will you take refreshment?"

The only chair not taken was one at the far end of the table from the other men, a good ten feet away from Meletos.

Nelson nodded sharply at Meletos. "I am the Star Lord Nelson. It is my pleasure to be your guest. Thank you for your offer of refreshment, but it would be best for us to share wine together after we have reached agreement on the issues which bring us together." Nelson pulled out the chair, but refused to sit until Meletos did. A little research into local customs had taught him that in a formal meeting, the one who sat last was considered the most important. He timed it so he sat down at the same instant as the Headman of the Council.

"Captain General Aggamon would put some questions to you on behalf of the Council," Meletos said.

Aggamon stepped forward, but before he could speak Nelson interrupted.

"If the Council has questions to ask the Star Lord Paul Nelson, let the Council put its questions. I have come to negotiate as a friend, not to be interrogated as an enemy or a prisoner."

Aggamon's thin face flushed with anger. His blue eyes blazed and his mouth twisted in an angry sneer. Meletos stared back at Nelson, not certain what to say. The two

other Council members turned in their seats uncomfortably. Nelson knew he was gambling, running a bluff. But it's like Dad always said, he thought: If you're going to run a bluff, run it all the way until it's called.

"Friend Star Lord," Meletos replied after a lengthy silence, his voice smooth and mellow. "It has come to the attention of the Council that your settlement near our village of . . . ah, yes, our village of Piris, has, let us say, grown."

"It has, Headman. We take just pride in our accomplishment of feeding and sheltering those impoverished subjects who come to us. I accept the Council's thanks for providing law, order, food and shelter among so many who would otherwise roam Kleistinos' lands in wretched poverty and, let us be frank, lawlessness."

"Yes. Let us be frank, then. The Council does not recognize most of these impoverished as citizens and does not see why the Republic of Kleistinos should assume responsibility for their welfare."

"I have assumed responsibility for their welfare. The Republic of Kleistinos has graciously and wisely granted us use of a small parcel of land, a parcel worthless for any other purpose. No doubt the Council has perceived how Yatar has blessed the Republic as a sign of his approval of this generosity."

"Enough!" Aggamon snapped. "Star Lord, you have upwards of five hundred men on our territory, training in arms and supported by the credit of our merchants, which is granted out of fear. We demand to know your intentions. More to the point, we demand that you take this rabble and leave!"

"Captain General!" Meletos cautioned. "There is no need for such hostile language."

Nelson noticed the mildness of the rebuke. Aggamon spoke for the Council, no doubt of that.

"To leave is exactly what I intend."

The four men stared at Nelson, dumbstruck.

"However, I will need your assistance to do so."

"What manner of assistance?" Meletos finally asked.

"As your Captain General has noted, I can no longer support this group of people from my own resources. Nor can I abandon them. I am honor bound, by the most sacred oaths, to see to their care. Therefore, I will require an extension of credit for two ten-days' supply of grain, wine, and livestock for meat, six hundred horses, two hundred mules, and, oh yes, certain weapons that are to be made by your artisans, immediately, according to my design."

"Treachery and blackmail!" Aggamon exploded. "Let me cut him down now!" Aggamon's hand reached for his sword as he rushed forward. Nelson slipped his hand to his holster and loosened the Colt.

"Captain General! The Council gave most solemn assurance of safe passage to the Star Lord Nelson for purposes of this parley," Meletos said sharply.

Aggamon stopped, his hand trembling as it clutched his sword hilt.

"Star Lord Nelson," Meletos continued, "you do this Republic and its Council great dishonor to suppose we would submit to such blackmail from what is nothing more than a collection of bandits and murderers!" The old man was thundering now, his aged face turning red beneath his flowing salt-and-pepper mane. "You came to us for aid—quite cunningly, I might add—and you have abused our trust. Before I render the judgment of the Council, I give you one last chance to speak."

"I am surprised at your reaction. What I seek is no more than just recompense for the service I have already rendered this Republic. Are not the highways for miles around safe for travel? How many early spring caravans have been attacked within the boundaries of the Republic? How much revenue to the Republic, not to mention profit to her merchants, has been saved?

"Nor is this blackmail. What I ask would be a just reward for services I have already rendered you, but I do not even ask it as payment. I ask it as a loan, to be

secured by the word of a star lord sworn before Yatar, Vothan, Hestia, and Christ. And in return for this loan, you are rid of these people, whom you do not want. Your highways are secured, and your profits fattened.

"Further, the amount is not that great. Have you not already agreed to pay the Star Lord Gengrich much more simply to guard one caravan headed south this spring?"

Meletos flinched, then smiled in appreciation of Nelson's thorough intelligence. No doubt these star lords are all in communication with one another, perhaps alliance, the old man thought. Even though they appeared to war . . .

"As for you, Captain General Aggamon," Nelson continued, "I fully understand your feelings. But there is no dishonor in what I ask. Your troops will be much better spent serving the Republic on the battlefield than dying trying to slaughter the poor, when the poor are backed by star weapons."

They marched the first day of spring. The Star Lord Nelson's host consisted of five hundred fighting men, with another 1500 women, children, and hangers-on. Their horses and pack mules were heavily laden with food, weapons, and the portable wooden catapults the star lord designed. The mass was well organized: fifty horse bowmen formed the advance guard, with one hundred pikemen behind them. Then came the pack animals, followed by the women and children, and finally the rest of the pikemen, archers, and cavalry in the rear.

"My lord, the army is assembled as you ordered."

Nelson looked at the teeming mass waiting, well-ordered, behind him. He couldn't suppress a smile at his accomplishment over the winter. Now I have an army to hire out, Nelson thought. I'm back in the soldiering business.

"Well done, Critos. We march on my order."

"Yes, lord. But, lord . . ."

"What is it, Critos?"

"My lord knows that Karinth has rejected your proposal to hire ourselves to their city."

"Yes."

"Then where do we march?"

"To Karinth, of course!"

No doubt word has spread of the Star Lord Nelson and his bandit army, Nelson thought. Given the treacherous politics of the City States and the Sunlands, many probably believe my force is actually in the pay of Kleistinos. Truth is, I'm damned glad and lucky to be gone from Kleistinos before Gengrich and company arrive. They'll certainly find out where I am, but I hope they'll be too busy to worry about me.

No surprise, though, that Karinth rejected my offer of merc service. They're still the best place to be. High enough up from the coast that they won't get flooded when that third star comes near. Have to show them, though. Have to show them we're an army, not just a bunch of rabble. My last message should draw them out. . . .

"My lord, my lord!"

"What is it, Critos? Enter, and report!"

Nelson rested in his tent while the army drilled and his officers attended to the myriad matters of the administration of his force. They had marched south for two ten-days, supplementing their rations by foraging and occasional forced purchases. Now they were waiting, although the army didn't know it, for an answer to Nelson's most recent communication with the Tyrant and Assembly of Karinth.

"My lord," Critos panted. "The Karinthians have sent an army after us."

"How many men, and where?"

"They marched yesterday! Our rider only now arrived with word from our spies. By now they are but a day's march from us."

Nelson had been certain his last insolent message

would goad the proud Karinthians into a military response. Here it was. Now to find out if he'd overdone it.

"Send scouts—"

"Already done, my lord. Star Lord Nelson, do we fight them?"

"You bet. And if they have less than 4000 men, we'll beat them."

There were about 5000 of them, slightly more than Nelson had calculated there would be. The Karinthians were a proud people, but not overly militaristic, and terribly economy minded. They didn't usually field large forces. Nelson had expected a small force to deal with him, and he got one. It was just that the small force was a larger small force than he'd expected.

The star lord stood atop a small rise and viewed the enemy's deployment. "The opposing general, Hectris, knows his trade," Nelson remarked to Critos. "Rather than chasing after us, he's blocked the only decent road to Karinth at its narrowest point. No doubt he hopes to draw me into a foolhardy frontal attack."

The enemy's right, or east flank, rested on a bend in a broad river, near to flood stage from the spring rains and the melting of the snow in the western mountains. No way across that, Nelson noted. The enemy's left was secured by a large hill, on which he had posted slingers in skirmish order backed by swordsmen. Nelson didn't have enough troops to cover the center while mounting an uphill assault. Too bad, he thought. Cavalry with light troops . . . Oh well, no use wishing for the world.

The enemy's main body consisted of three pike blocks, or phalanxes, as the ancestors of the Karinthians would have called them. The enemy lacked large numbers, though, so his pikes were formed with more frontage than depth; each block was eighty men wide but only ten ranks deep. The three phalanxes sat in the center of the line, blocking the highway, with one forward and the two others echeloned on its flanks. The pikemen carried real pikes, eighteen-foot spears with iron tips. They were

well-armored, too, and the front of each block had a solid shield wall. Not up to Macedonian standards, Nelson mused, but damned near impervious to frontal attack and to arcing archery fire: the men in the back ranks held their pikes extended from their shoulders, forming a sort of protective “roof” over the formation, while those in front planted theirs forward to ward off charging infantry or cavalry.

About eight hundred cavalry were massed on each side of the pikes. They were more lightly armored, and carried shorter, twelve-foot spears and swords. Interspersed between these larger formations were small bodies of foot archers, armed with a short bow. Behind all the enemy troops stood a rear line of three small troops of swordsmen. The entire front was screened by a skirmish line of slingers.

Certain that the enemy intended to give him time to deploy, Nelson pondered his options. The enemy's forces consist mainly of massed shock troops, the pikes, and the cavalry, he thought. Any advance by my forces could be countered easily by either the enemy cavalry or his pikes; after all, my entire army is only five hundred men!

The way to beat massed shock troops is with firepower. Unfortunately, one M-16 won't do the trick, although the panic it'll cause might help. I'll have to break the pike blocks with the catapults. If the pikes break and run, the rest of his army will follow. Only his cavalry will be left, if they stand once the pikes are gone. They'll be vulnerable to archery fire and unable to break my own pikemen. I hope.

He ran a quick inventory of his own forces in his mind: two small troops of pike-armed infantry, 100 men each, 200 total; 100 light cavalry with only leather armor, twelve-foot spears, and shields; 150 archers, well-trained now, able to fire mounted or on foot.

Damn! No stakes—I didn't train them to use stakes, Nelson thought. Oh well, next campaign.

And the catapults. Designed for mobility, crewed by ten men each, capable of firing a twenty to forty pound stone out to a range of three hundred yards with reasonable accuracy.

The biggest problem of all is, I have to attack. The enemy can sit there for days; he can bring food out from the city. I have to win, and win fast, before my own food runs low and this "army" melts like snow in the sun. Or I have to goad Hectris into attacking me. . . .

Carefully, Nelson ordered his deployment.

Look at the two different deployments shown on the maps 1 and 2.

If Nelson chooses the deployment shown on Map 1, go to section 16.

If Nelson chooses the deployment shown on Map 2, go to section 17.

— 9 —

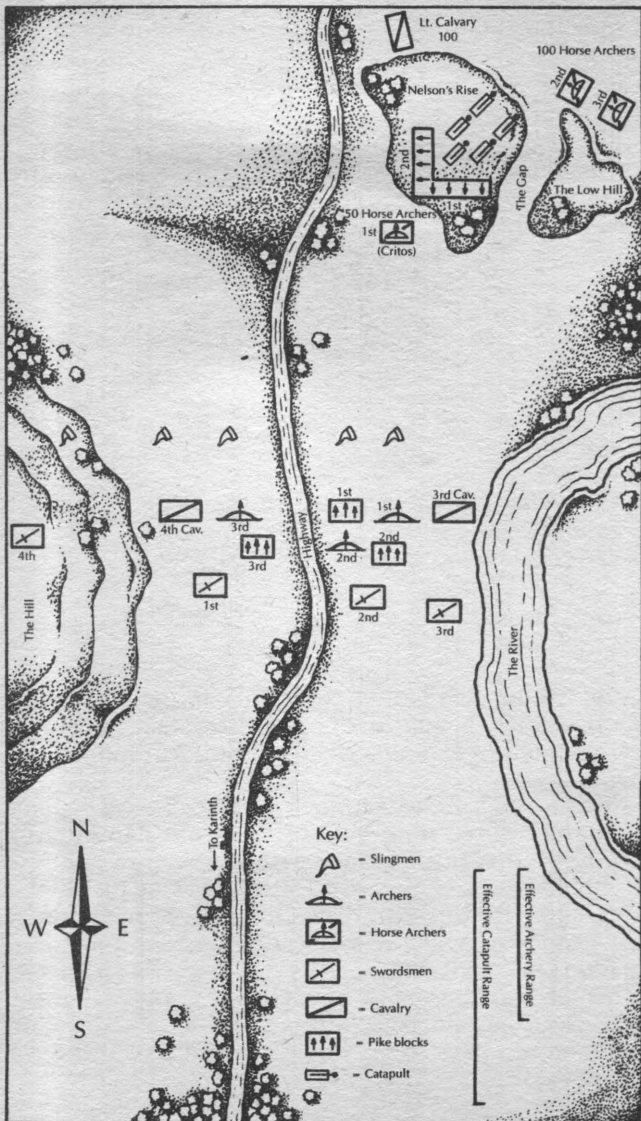
No, Nelson decided. I have to have those star weapons. Good Yatar! If a handful of bandits can take me out with them, I wouldn't stand a chance running around without them!

Sighing, Nelson walked to Critos' lean-to. The bandit chieftain awaited him, holding the front flap of animal skin up to reveal the luxury within.

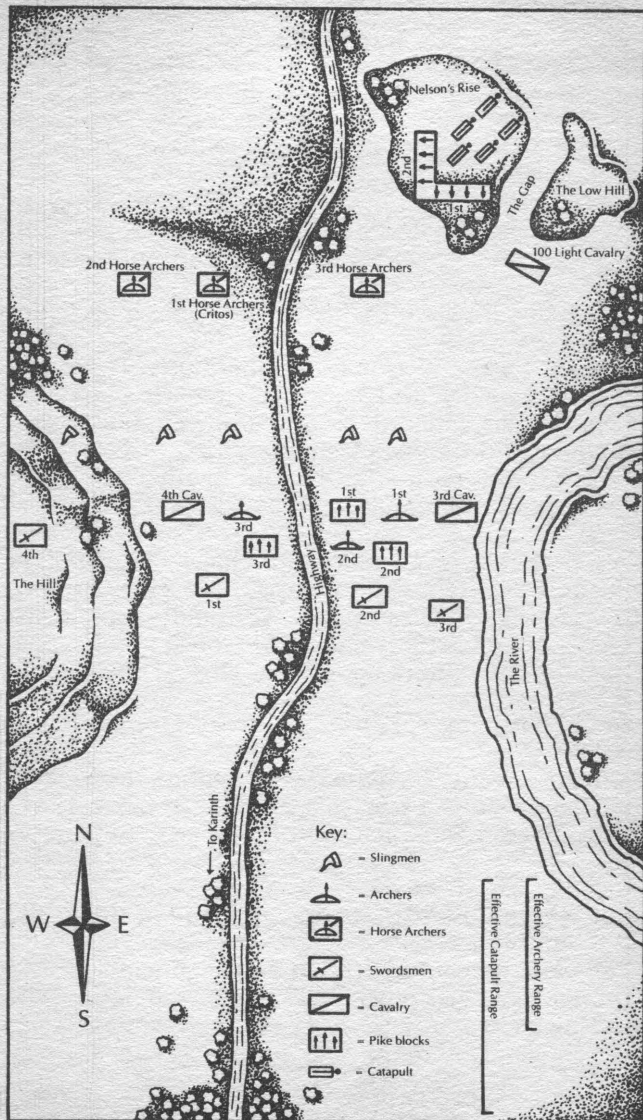
The floor was of the same filthy straw as the floors of the others. But this lean-to did have a wooden table, two benches, and a chair. Nelson noticed a pile of old weapons in one corner.

"Enter star lord, and be welcome," Critos said, his voice dripping sarcasm. "Please, let me seat you, lord." The man ran over to the one chair and pulled it out for

MAP 1



MAP 2



Section 9

Nelson, bowing and gesturing broadly for the star lord to take the best seat. Nelson did. It's the least he owes me, Nelson thought, for this lump on my head.

Doron appeared at the entrance to the lean-to, a haunch of roast meat in one hand and two goblets of wine clutched in the other.

"Ah, refreshment for my lord," Critos said with mock courtesy. "That will be all, Doron," he added, as the big man placed his burden on the table. Doron stalked off silently.

"Now, star lord. You will tell me something to my advantage."

"Indeed, I will," Nelson said imperiously. He paused to sip the warmed wine. It wasn't terrible. He studied the haunch of meat, failed to recognize the animal it came from, and decided not to taste it.

"With my star weapons," he said finally, "you could be a very powerful man."

"True."

Nelson waited to give Critos a chance to elaborate. The bandit chieftain said nothing. This guy's no fool, Nelson judged. He doesn't say a word more than he has to. That's not an art learned in the woods.

"I would know more about you, Critos. You interest me."

"Shall I finish my work on your throat? Or do you have something to offer me?"

"I have already increased your stature here. Your people have seen you receive a prisoner in the style of a Drantos bheroman. Such action imparts an aura of nobility."

"I cannot eat an aura."

"But you can use it to retain command of this ragtag band of cutthroats."

"You can't bargain with what you've already spent."

True enough, Nelson thought. Better come up with something good fast.

"Of course, you have one problem with my star weapons."

"And that is?"

"You don't know how to use them."

"I can learn."

"You can die trying," Nelson shot back, his face deadly serious. "Or you can learn properly. It will cost you everything else you've taken from me, plus, of course, my life."

"A deal. Come, instruct me."

"Not so fast. As you have pointed out, I cannot bargain with what has already been given away. If I teach you here and now the secrets of the star weapons, you can slay me when I have finished." And you would, too, you vicious scum, Nelson didn't add.

"Your proposal to solve this dilemma is . . . what?"

"You and I will leave this camp together, alone. You will bear the star weapons. When we have gone a sufficient distance, so that we are alone—"

"Then you will show me how the star weapons work, and it will be the last thing I see."

"You do not trust me?"

"Not at all. Two of my bowmen will accompany us and will have arrows at your breast at all times. Then you will show me the secret of the star weapons. And then, you may go free."

"No. Then you will put an arrow in my breast, or continue to hold me for ransom."

"We are at an impasse, it would seem."

"Not at all. I have made you a reasonable offer for my release. Knowledge of the use of star weapons is worth more to you than any ransom. That knowledge you may have. It's up to you to decide how I can teach you without placing myself in your power once I am done."

Critos glared at Nelson. This star lord was a stubborn man, and a smart one. Merchants were easily intimidated; fear clogged their minds, so that they could not see the most obvious traps. The star lord saw everything clearly. It would be difficult to deceive him.

Yet, he offered powers without limit! With star weap-

ons, what could Critos not do? Who could stand against them, properly used?

"Very well," Critos agreed grudgingly. "Let it be as you have said. We will go together, alone, away from here. And you will teach me."

"Agreed."

"But I will have my own back watched, star lord."

Critos rose, calling for his men and the star weapons. Seven bandits trudged out to his lean-to. One, more clean than the others, handed him first the M-16, then the Colt.

"There is more," Nelson said. "The little metal pellets . . ."

"Ah," said the cleanest-looking bandit. He ran back to one of the other lean-tos and returned with the ammo.

"Now," Critos said, "this star lord and I are going away for . . . How long?"

"It will take less than an hour, Critos."

"We are leaving camp for one hour. You are not to follow us. If I have not returned in that time, you are to find the star lord and kill him, at all costs."

The seven men nodded as one.

"Let's go," Critos said crisply.

"Not so fast. You've forgotten one point of our bargain."

"Oh?"

"My horse, my mule, and my goods. They go with us."

Critos grinned. "But of course."

It took several minutes to locate all of Nelson's gold; it had already been divided up, and not all seven of the men could quickly remember where they had stashed their share. Their memories returned after some prodding by Critos. In half an hour the two men were a good distance from the camp.

Critos slid off Nelson's horse and hefted the M-16. "Now, star lord, keep your word. How does this weapon work?"

"Here," Nelson replied, extending a hand toward the rifle. "I'll show you."

"Do you think me a fool, to hand you this?" Critos

shouted. "Tell me, but do not touch it!"

"Try to stop me," Nelson growled. The combat veteran launched a savage kick at Critos.

Critos has a Melee value of 4. He fights on Chart D.

Nelson has a Melee value of 6. He fights on Chart C. Continue the fight until Critos or Nelson is killed.

If Nelson is killed, go to section 29.

If Critos is killed, go to section 13.

— 10 —

One full burst from the M-16 did the trick. The bandits had already seen a star weapon in action and thought they were prepared for its effects. But they'd never seen a full automatic burst before. It was more than any of them could stand against.

As the first two fell, the remainder hesitated. That's all Nelson needed. He slung the rifle and brought the horse around in a sharp turn, drawing his knife at the same time. A slash across the throat killed one man outright, and with the same motion Nelson stabbed the adjacent man in the eye. The stunned assailant fell with the knife still in him.

From that point on it was easy. Nelson's horse became a weapon, shielding him from the majority of the bandits while he used the M-16 to shoot or bash the one nearest him. When they finally decided they'd had enough, the bandits left six dead on or by the path.

Nelson fired a parting burst after the fleeing ones. He was pretty sure now that most of the band were dead; altogether, he'd killed ten today, and if they had many more, they would have attacked in greater force. Besides, Critos was no fool. He'd think for a while before trying

an attack against star weapons again.

Nelson retrieved his mule and rode on until full dark. Then he set up his camp with the usual boobytraps and alarms and fell asleep, cradling his M-16.

Go to section 12.

— 11 —

Nelson turned quickly and struck with the flat of his palm against Balquhor's nose, trying to drive the cartilage straight into the ugly man's brain.

Balquhor wasn't an intelligent man, but he did have good animal instincts. He screamed as he saw the blow coming.

Balquhor has a Melee value of 3 and fights on Chart D.

Nelson has a Melee value of 6 and fights on Chart C.

Beginning on the third round of the fight, another bandit joins the melee every other round. The Melee value of each bandit is 3. If, at the start of any round, there is no bandit for Nelson to fight, Nelson escapes. If Nelson does not escape, continue the fight until all the bandits are dead (at which time Nelson escapes) or Nelson is dead.

If Nelson is killed, go to section 29.

If Nelson escapes, go to section 14.

— 12 —

Nelson rose early the next morning and rode at a faster pace than usual. No use getting caught one more time, he thought.

Besides, it was cold. Despite the added warmth of the Demon Star as it swung nearer the planet, the Tran winter was unpleasant. The sky above was growing thick with clouds; first signs of a snowstorm in the making. Nelson doubted that the cold and the snow would be as bad this far south of Drantos and the Five Kingdoms, but he wasn't anxious to spend another night in the open to find out.

He lodged himself for pay that night, staying with a peasant family in a small village. The village was ultimately ruled by one of the City States, but rule was lax in the winter. No one wants to send out valuable troops in bad weather just to protect a few huts and fields.

As he stared at the fire in the small hut, Nelson decided to settle down for the rest of the winter. Gengrich and his crew wouldn't be in Kleistinos until spring. Nelson had probably put enough distance between himself and them for now. Parsons would still be involved in his bloody guerilla war in Drantos. Nelson decided he had nothing to fear.

It wasn't difficult to trade some hard labor every day, plus a bit of gold, for room and board for the rest of the winter. The villagers were naturally curious about the stranger, but they avoided direct questions and Nelson avoided direct answers. Once he felt comfortable with the family boarding him, he carefully hid his star weapons in a hole hollowed out of the wall of an outbuilding and relaxed.

Working in the cold outdoors is good for me, he thought one day. Helps put everything in perspective. Simple tasks, a quiet life, enough food, and a work-hardened body. Guess that's the appeal of peasant life for you. At least you don't have to kill anybody.

And he didn't have to kill very often. The hard winter and the dried-up trade traffic were destroying the bandit groups that roamed the City States' territory. Finally one group worked up enough courage to try raiding the peasant village where Nelson lived.

Nelson wasn't able to get his star weapons in time, but he did manage to grab a sickle and, wielding it as a

clumsy knife, dispatch three of the raiders who had burned one home and driven off some livestock. For the villagers, this was the big event of the winter.

The ten-days passed. The snows began to melt and the spring rains came, turning the hills and plains into quagmires of thick, clayish mud. Despite the mud, traffic between villages and cities increased. Trade began to flow, albeit sluggishly in the muddy ruts that passed for roads. News made the rounds from village to village.

There was news that Drantos was at peace again and that many of the star lords had joined the Egeta of Chelm, the Star Lord Rick. Other star lords were on the march throughout Tran; Kleistinos had hired some to protect a great trade caravan going south to the Sunlands.

Nelson heard the news and decided it was time to leave.

Go to section 38.

— 13 —

Critos was a trained soldier, at one time one of the Guards of Karinth, but a Guard of Karinth was no match for a U.S. Army vet in unarmed, hand-to-hand combat.

Nelson's first kick hit Critos square in the chest. He fell backward, dropping the M-16. It was over in just a few seconds. Nelson dropped on the man's chest and heard bones snap; he grabbed the neck and twisted, and saw the silent body twitch.

Quickly, Nelson picked up the M-16 and checked it. It was undamaged; a piece of pure good luck. He made sure it had a full clip, then slung it. Next he retrieved his Colt, checked it, and soon had it back in his shoulder holster beneath his warm furs. Finally he took back his knife and was ready to ride.

None too soon. As he mounted his horse, the first arrow whizzed past his head.

Damn, Nelson thought. Critos must have known his men wouldn't obey that order to stay behind. And they hadn't. All seven were riding toward Nelson. Three more had bows at the ready, while the other four showed every intention of charging home.

Good thing they're coming in bunched up like that, Nelson told himself as he readied the M-16.

Nelson uses his Ordnance value of 9 for all rounds. He fights on Chart A.

In the first round, three bandits with an Ordnance value of 3 each fire. In the second round, four bandits, minus the number killed in the first round, attack by melee with a Melee value of 3 each. In all succeeding rounds all surviving bandits melee with a Melee value of 3 each. All bandit attacks use Chart D.

If all of the bandits are killed, go to section 15.

If Nelson is killed, go to section 29.

— 14 —

Nelson spun around kicking, expecting another assailant—and kicked thin air. No one was close to him!

He ran like mad for the hitching post, untied his horse, and leaped onto the animal's bare back.

"Heeyah!" he cried, kicking the horse to a gallop.

Nelson heard the shouts of the remaining bandits as he pressed his head close to the horse's neck, ducking the low-hanging branches of the trees.

"Balquhor let him get away!"

"Why didn't you stop him? You were right there!"

"Well, you were too—"

“Silence, you idiots!” The last voice was Critos’.
“After him! Mount up!”

Nelson listened intently as the horse sped back to the path and then galloped south. The bandits had no organized pursuit started by the time he was out of earshot. Good, he thought. That means they’ll never catch me. They may have been able to take me in an ambush, but I didn’t learn to avoid the enemy in the jungles of ’Nam for nothing.

Still, best to make time while I can.

He kept the horse at a gallop until it could gallop no more, then stopped, resting the horse and listening. Nothing. If they were coming, they were far behind, and their horses would tire at a gallop as rapidly as his.

He walked the horse until it got its wind back, then mounted and rode at a brisk walk, going to a trot whenever he felt the horse could take the pace, slowing down again as he observed the animal tire.

By the time the Fire Stealer set he thought that he was no longer being followed. But why take chances? He knew the bandits would hardly have the discipline to pursue him through the cold night. He rode on until morning, stopping only when the horse could go no farther.

He stretched out to rest himself as the True Sun rose on the chilly morning. Now what? No money, he thought. No weapons, no food, no fodder. Hell. Looks like I’ll have to start working for a living again.

Nelson forced himself not to sleep—Critos’ band wasn’t the only group of cutthroats working this territory. He rested as best he could without letting himself shut his eyes. At midday he moved on, and by early evening reached a peasant village.

The village headman was full of questions. Nelson said he was a free man from Drantos whose lands were ruined in the current war there. He sought food and shelter, and protection from the bandits. Better yet, he said, he would lead five or ten good men from the village in a raid against the bandits who had robbed him.

The headman wasn't impressed by Nelson's offer. Chasing bandits is the business of the City State that rules the village, the headman explained. No doubt the soldiers would come when a report was filed. In the meantime, Nelson could spend the night as the headman's guest, and look for work the following day. If he found none, he'd have to leave.

I'll take what I can get at this point and count myself lucky, Nelson decided. No point in pressing it. He dined that night at the headman's table, and slept for the first time in many ten-days in a real bed.

The next day Nelson discovered that life in a peasant village in winter can be boring. There was plenty of work, if you liked to work out in the cold. But most of it wasn't urgent work—a man could miss a day or two here or there and things would go on just as well. Winter was hard on the nerves, especially for the young men of the village, who longed for something to break the tedium of winter chores.

By the day's end Nelson had talked himself into a job in return for room and board, starting in three days. He'd also talked five locals into joining him on a bandit hunt, with the promise of a reward in gold if the hunt were successful. The youths agreed to keep the arrangement secret; no doubt the headman and the older villagers wouldn't approve.

The five youths with Nelson at their head rode out before dawn the next morning. With fresh horses and good planning, they reached the area near Critos' camp by the middle of the following night. Nelson led them the last ten kilometers off the path; he didn't want any wandering member of the bandit group to spot their approach. They tied off their horses a good kilometer from the camp: the boys were farmers, not trained cavalry, and whatever dreams of glory they might have would be better achieved on foot than in the saddle. Besides, their only weapons were daggers and a couple of hunting bows.

The scene near the camp was about what Nelson had expected. Obviously, some of his gold had been spent; drunken snores came from the lean-tos, and wasted scraps of food littered the area around the central fire.

Nelson considered the best plan of attack. His main concerns were to avoid casualties to his own force while getting his star weapons back. His own men were concerned about getting bandit heads; the City State paid a bounty on bandits. The village headmen frequently discouraged youths from getting themselves killed by chasing that bounty.

The problem is simple, Nelson told himself. Critos has the star weapons, and he's had time to learn how to use them. If he wakes up before the destruction is total, he could kill several if not all of my men. Solution: kill Critos first, get the weapons, and then let the kids go bounty hunting.

But that might not work, he realized. Critos isn't a complete fool. Wouldn't he have at least his own quarters guarded at night, somehow?

If Nelson chooses to lead his men into the main section of the camp, stealthily killing as many bandits as possible, go to section 26.

If Nelson chooses to hit Critos' lean-to first in hopes of killing Critos and retrieving his star weapons before dealing with the other bandits, go to section 28.

— 15 —

This is no time to be stingy with the ammo, Nelson told himself as he let rip a full auto burst from the M-16.

The bandits' horses screamed in terror as bullets tore into them and their riders. The burst cut one man in half. Another's horse took its last two steps stone dead before falling over and crushing its rider.

Still, the arrows sang over Nelson's head. Continuing

to fire, he wheeled his horse to present a narrower target to the bowmen. After his second burst he retreated at top speed, firing behind him. As the last of the bandits closed, he wheeled again and let loose yet another burst.

The bandits didn't lack courage, but they had no concept of how to fight this star weapon that could kill two, three, or four men in less than a second. That lack of knowledge proved fatal. Nelson counted eight bodies when the fighting ended; nine, with Critos. That meant there were only the women and children left from Critos' band.

Nelson collected his mule, reloaded the M-16, and headed back toward the path. He avoided the bandit's camp. He knew that if he entered it, he'd feel pity for the women and children. He couldn't afford pity. He needed rest and safety. The last thing he needed was a dirk in the back from a seven-year-old kid.

By the time the True Sun and the Fire Stealer had both set, Nelson was back on the path and had put another six kilometers between himself and the bandit camp. He halted for the night, set his usual boobytraps and alarms, and stretched out to sleep, cradling his M-16.

He fell asleep thinking about the bandits' children and wondering if he was so very different from Parsons and Gengrich after all.

Go to section 12.

— 16 —

"We'll deploy the catapults here," Nelson explained to Critos and Gaius, "back a distance on this rise." Nelson sketched a map in the dirt with a stick. None of his men were used to reading maps yet; Nelson was glad that in this first battle the field was small and relatively flat, so they could see exactly what he was talking about. "Array the catapults in a wedge. Put the front one here, right where I'm standing."

“A good choice of ground,” Gaius commented. “Although the slope to this rise is very gentle, a catapult commander can stand on the platform of his machine to gauge the range and spot his targets, seeing over the protecting pikes in front. Even this far back, the entire enemy army is visible.”

“Good, Gaius. You’re learning.” And he is learning, Nelson thought. Learning fast. “And you’re quite right. I want the pikes in front of the catapults, forming two sides of a square; one line of pikes running north to south, and a joining line, facing the enemy directly, running east to west.

“We’ll put fifty mounted archers out in front. Critos, you must take personal command of this force. I know you don’t like to fight mounted, but an officer’s job isn’t fighting, it’s leading. These mounted archers will have a special role.”

“What role?” Critos asked, puzzled.

“They’re part of the key to our battle plan. The Karinthians are proud—very proud. Their commander, Hectris, has deployed for a defensive battle. We have to use their pride against them, make them attack us. The mounted archers will advance to start the battle. They will march obliquely across the enemy’s front, taking care to stay out of bow range, until they reach the point where the river turns from north to northeast. From there I want them to riddle the cavalry on the enemy’s right with fire—goading them to advance and attack. When the enemy does advance, the mounted archers will withdraw, firing as they go, to take up a position near our light cavalry. Our remaining horse archers can come forward if needed to deal with the enemy cavalry.”

“I see the problem,” Critos answered, nodding. “If their charge overtakes our withdrawal . . .”

“Exactly. But we must make the enemy advance.”

“What if he advances his whole force at once, and executes a turning movement?” Gaius asked. “The cavalry on his left flank could ride to the north of this rise, turning our pikes, while his own pikes come up the rise

from the southwest. See, he could pivot his line, based on his right-flank cavalry.”

“Yes, and if he does that properly, we’re probably done for. But a pivot movement is difficult. The outside force has to move very rapidly, while the inside forces move slowly. Invariably someone moves at the wrong speed and the attack comes in piecemeal. That’s what we’re counting on. If our plan works, his right-flank cavalry, his pivot force, will already be committed when he begins his movement.

“The overall goal is to lure his pikes forward alone, so we can smash them with catapult fire. If his pikes are broken, the rest of his army will collapse.” I hope, Nelson thought. Oh, how I hope.

“What about the remainder of our cavalry?” Critos asked.

“The light cavalry I want at the north end of this rise, out of sight. The remaining one hundred horse archers I want on the north side of the low hill to our left. From there they can move to plug the gap between the low hill and our pikes, when the enemy’s right-flank cavalry advance. Or, they can support the light cavalry if the enemy does make a flanking movement to the north.

“One more thing. As the army comes up to deploy, keep all the cavalry out of the enemy’s sight behind the rise and the low hill, except the fifty horse archers. If he thinks we’re as tiny as we’ll look, he may be further tempted to a premature, piecemeal attack.”

“My lord, will you address the troops before we deploy?”

“Maybe I’d better.”

“Soldiers!” Nelson shouted to his assembled troops. “You have worked hard to earn that name. For many ten-days you have obeyed without question and labored without ceasing, learning many things that were strange and new. Some of you could see little sense in what you learned. Today, you will see the fruits of this labor!

“The enemy in front of you says you are not soldiers,

Section 16

but murderers, cutthroats, brigands, and slaves! Know this: if you falter today, you are surely doomed. But if you are obedient to your orders, no matter how strange they may seem, never again will you be labeled 'bandits.' And what is more, the spoils of victory shall be yours to share!

"Now, forward, for your futures and your honor!"

It took two hours to get the army in position. Thank Yatar, Nelson thought as his troops took their positions, that Hectris is a patient man. And now that we're deployed, ye gods of battle, make him impatient!

Nelson took his place inside the corner of the pike formation and surveyed the field one last time. What have I overlooked? And how in the world did I become an officer?

He raised high a large black flag, and his horse archers began their oblique advance to within range of the enemy's right flank cavalry.

Nelson's horse archers are advancing with their flank seemingly exposed to the enemy. The enemy's cavalry on the right flank must check Morale to see if they obey their orders to stay in position, or, in a burst of enthusiasm, charge.

Roll the two dice. The cavalry's Morale value is 7.

If the total of the dice roll is 7 or less, go to section 18.

If the total of the dice roll is 8 or more, go to section 20.

— 17 —

"We'll deploy the catapults here," Nelson explained to Critos and Gaius, "back a distance on this rise." Nelson sketched a map in the dirt with a stick. None of his men were used to reading maps yet; Nelson was glad that in this first battle the field was small and relatively flat, so they could see exactly what he was talking about. "Array the catapults in a wedge. Put the front one here, right where I'm standing."

"A good choice of ground," Gaius commented. "Although the slope to this rise is very gentle, a catapult commander can stand on the platform of his machine to gauge the range and spot his targets, seeing over the protecting pikes in front. Even this far back, the entire enemy army is visible."

"Good, Gaius. You're learning." And he is learning, Nelson thought. Learning fast. "And you're quite right. I want the pikes in front of the catapults, forming two sides of a square; one line of pikes running north to south, and a joining line, facing the enemy directly, running east to west."

"The light cavalry will hold the gap between this rise and that hill to our left. We can't afford to let the east-west line of pikes be turned."

"We'll put the First, Second, and Third Horse Archers out in front, in a skirmish line to the right of our pikes. Critos, you must take personal command of this force. I know you don't like to fight mounted, but an officer's job isn't fighting, it's leading. These mounted archers will have a special role."

"What role?" Critos asked, puzzled.

"They're the key to our whole plan. Hectris doesn't know what to expect from a star lord. I think he's afraid of our star weapons; that's why he's deployed for a defensive battle. We can't beat that deployment."

"Then why do we fight, my lord?" Gaius asked.

"Because we have to. And in order to win, we have to make them attack us. The key to winning this battle is smashing their pike formations with our catapult fire. If the enemy's pikes rout, his whole army will follow.

"That's where your task with the horse archers comes in, Critos. The Karinthians are proud soldiers. They won't like being harassed by an inferior force. Use the horse archers to skirmish. Ride into bow range, fire, ride back out again. Sting them. You don't have enough firepower to really hurt them unless you can deliver flanking fire."

"I see," Critos said. "When they're stung enough . . ."

"They'll advance. They'll probably charge with their cavalry from their left wing. That's fine. Withdraw firing, then lead them off. If you can, fall back around behind the rise to support the rear of our light cavalry. But don't do that unless the enemy's left-wing cavalry is spent.

"When his cavalry charge, Hectris will almost be forced to send the rest of the army forward. He'll probably try to pivot on his right, with his pikes coming at the corner of our half square. That's when we break them with the catapults."

"I understand, my lord," Critos said.

"Gaius, you will stay by me as chief of staff. You're in charge of transmission of all orders by messenger and signal flags."

"Good, my lord."

"My lord, will you address the troops before we deploy?" Critos asked.

"Maybe I'd better."

"Soldiers!" Nelson shouted to his assembled troops. "You have worked hard to earn that name. For many ten-days you have obeyed without question and labored without ceasing, learning many things that were strange and new. Some of you could see little sense in what you learned. Today, you will see the fruits of this labor!

"The enemy in front of you says you are not soldiers,

but murderers, cutthroats, brigands, and slaves! Know this: if you falter today, you are surely doomed. But if you are obedient to your orders, no matter how strange they may seem, never again will you be labeled 'bandits.' And what is more, the spoils of victory shall be yours to share!

"Now, forward, for your futures and your honor!"

It took two hours to get the army in position. Thank Yatar, Nelson thought as his troops took their appointed places, that Hectris is a patient man. And now that we're deployed, ye gods of battle, make him impatient!

Nelson took his place inside the corner of the pike formation and surveyed the field one last time. What have I overlooked? And how in the world did I become an officer?

He nodded to Gaius. The chief of staff raised high a large black flag, and Critos' horse archers began their advance.

"My lord general, the enemy moves."

The Lord General Hectris of Karinth squinted and stared, studying the advance of Critos' horse archers.

"Those are skirmishers only," the old man grumbled. A grizzled veteran of many campaigns, Hectris approached this battle cautiously. He had heard tales of the star weapons the star lords carry. He had heard of masses of men destroyed in a few seconds, and he did not intend for that to happen to this army.

"My lord, they open fire," his aide said, this time a bit more urgently.

"Patience. His main strength has not come up yet."

"My lord general, do you forget our scouts' reports?"

"How is that?"

"He has but five hundred fighting men. The bulk of his horde is women and children."

"Yes, I know. But where are his star weapons? We must not be goaded into too hasty a movement."

"No doubt, my lord general," the younger man said

with growing impatience, "his star weapons are concealed behind his pikes on that rise. We have sufficient mass to take the position easily by advancing and pivoting on our right."

Hectris considered the young man's words carefully. The proposed plan wasn't new to the Lord General of Karinth. It was exactly what he intended to do all along if the enemy failed to attack. He had hoped to wait until the power of the star weapons was revealed.

What was important to Hectris about the young man's speech was the attitude it revealed. The men were impatient to smash this force of bandit upstarts and return home. The younger commanders were gaining prominence in the Council; what if one of them were to break discipline, attack on his own, and sweep the field? Hectris' glory would go to the younger man, and his position in the Council would be weakened.

"Very well. I will take your insolent advice. Order the Fourth Cavalry to charge those gnats that sting them. The entire army will advance, pivoting on its right. Send word to Philemon not to charge until I give the order; our right must stay secure. . . ."

Five minutes later. The eight hundred horsemen of the Fourth Karinthian Cavalry lumbered forward, eight ranks deep, their twelve-foot lances thirsting for the blood of Critos' archers. Critos ordered his men to fire, then retire in good order. They repeated this process twice, but their fire wasn't enough to break the huge Karinthian cavalry unit. Eventually, Critos led his men away to the north, with the Karinthian cavalry in pursuit.

Nelson watched the cavalry action from the rise. Critos is doing well, he thought. At least he's drawn off a major portion of the enemy horses, and now Hectris is committed to an advance.

As the star lord watched, the three large pike phalanxes of the enemy slowly rolled forward, turning as

they came, so that the leading formation of the wedge was advancing directly toward the corner of his improvised half-square formation.

"Catapults, prepare to fire," Nelson ordered calmly. "Target their leading pike block."

This is it, the crisis of the battle, and it's coming quickly, Nelson thought. If this advance can be broken, the day is ours. It will take them about four minutes to close: we should get off three catapult volleys.

"Catapults, fire!"

In the following series of battle sections, each casualty inflicted on a unit subtracts 1 from its Manpower. (The Manpower values have been uniformly divided by 10; thus, the Fourth Karinthian Cavalry have a Manpower value of 80.) Manpower values (and all other values) for all units are given on the Troop Roster for the First Battle of Karinth on pages 177-180.

Every casualty inflicted on a unit of Nelson's force reduces that unit's Morale value by 1. Every 10 casualties inflicted on a Karinthian units reduces that unit's Morale value by 1.

Each time a unit's Morale value is reduced by 1 or more, roll the two dice again. If the total of this dice roll is greater than the unit's current Morale value, the unit routs. If not, the unit continues in the combat.

Now, Nelson's catapults fire twice at Karinthian First Pikes as the enemy pikes advance. The catapults fire on Chart C in the first round, and on Chart B in the second round. The enemy forces do not fight back in either round.

If the enemy's First Pikes rout, go to section 19.

If the enemy's First Pikes do not rout, go to section 21.

— 18 —

Nelson saw his first hopes dashed. In the best of all possible worlds, the flank march alone would have been enough to get the enemy to charge.

As Nelson watched from the rise, Critos led the horse archers to the exact spot the star lord had ordered. They turned neatly—a result of several ten-days of drill, and loosed their first volley of arrows.

Now it's an endurance contest, Nelson thought. Either Hectris lets us pepper his cavalry all day, or he moves some archers up and blocks his own cavalry. Good thing we extorted plenty of arrows from Kleistinos.

Roll the two dice.

If the total of the dice is 7 or less, go to section 39.

If the total of the dice is 8 or more, go to section 41.

— 19 —

Lord General Hectris sputtered and stormed in rage and amazement as he saw the flying boulders shred his First Pikes like a wet parchment. He exploded when the pikes first halted their advance, staggered by the catapult fire, and he became apoplectic when they turned and fled.

Little did he know that the horror show had just begun.

The two other Karinthian pike units naturally halted their own advance, uncertain of how to plug the large gap left by the rout of First Pikes. To make matters worse,



First Pikes routed right over Second Archers and Second Swordsmen, carrying them to the rear as well. First Archers stalled, the men looking around, ready to bolt.

A shout of victory erupted from Nelson's troops on the hill. Nelson saw that this was the moment, the crucial moment. The enemy was far from beaten, but if this rout of one unit could be turned into something more . . . Nelson remembered something Napoleon once said about the relationship of the moral and the physical.

"Second Pikes, face south!" Nelson ordered. "Cataapults, fire for effect at remaining enemy pike formations. Gaius! Order the light cavalry to charge the flank of the pike formation on the enemy's right!"

Nelson paused, waiting for his orders to take effect. Soon the stones began crashing into the remaining two enemy pike blocks and the light cavalry galloped from the gap, headed for the enemy flank.

Now, now is the moment, Nelson thought.

"First and Second Pikes, at the enemy, charge!"

Nelson ran pell-mell down the slope of the rise at the corner of the enemy's Second Pikes, his M-16 spitting death as he charged.

"For Nelson, our honor, and our future," his pikemen shouted, and seconds later followed him in waves.

Nelson had timed the moment properly. Both enemy pike formations, confused, their archers already starting to run, stones pelting them from the sky, their flanks exposed, broke and fled.

"Lord Commander," an aide to Philemon, the Commander of the Karinthian Third Cavalry shouted. "The army routs. Only a charge by our horses can stop the enemy. See, there! He overextends himself. We outnumber his whole force!"

"Young man, I am a commander in the Army of Karinth. My duty is to obey orders. The Lord General Hectris specifically ordered this unit not to charge without his signal."

"But my lord, the battle will be lost!"

And so, thought Philemon, will Hectris' position in the Council.

"Retire in good order," Philemon ordered his men.

Go to section 56.

— 20 —

Commander Philemon of the Third Karinthian Cavalry sat rigidly on his white steed, his emblazoned breastplate and small round shield glistening in the brilliant light of the Day Father, the Fire Stealer, and the Demon Star.

It makes no sense, he thought. We've sat here more than half the day; the men grow weary of this inactivity, this overcaution in the face of a few undisciplined bandits. If I were in command—

"Lord Commander," his aide called. "The enemy moves at last."

Philemon squinted and looked across the flat fields, recently sown with grain. A small troop of cavalry—horse archers, from the looks of them—were galloping forward from beside the low rise where the enemy had deployed his small force of pikemen.

Philemon grunted his disappointment. The movement of such a tiny force would hardly start the battle. No doubt the horse archers would come up to skirmish with the slingers. No matter. Karinth's own foot archers would soon put them to rout.

"It's nothing," Philemon replied to his aide. "They're merely preparing to . . ."

Philemon squinted again. His head jutted forward as he studied the enemy movement. The fools had turned and were riding toward the river! Their flank was exposed—and beyond them, the apparent main body of the enemy stood. Hitting the horse archers in the flank now could rout the entire enemy force. . . .

“Lord Commander!” The cry came from the ranks of the horsemen. “Behold! Our breakfast!”

Laughter rippled through the tight formation of lightly armored cavalry. The men stirred on their mounts; most were already raising their twelve-foot spears, used as lances.

“Let’s make short work of them, Lord Commander Philemon,” shouted a man.

“Aye, Philemon. Lead us to glory, booty, and then home to our beds!” called another.

The men are right, Philemon thought. And, as a commander, I have sufficient rank to act on my own authority as circumstances warrant. And the backing of the Council, if I need it.

Philemon’s knees pressed inward on the sides of his horse, and the fine steed strutted forward. The Lord Commander placed himself at the head of his eight hundred men, turned to face the enemy and raised his own spear.

“Men of Karinth,” he shouted over his shoulder. “Forward to victory!”

The Karinthian horses surged forward, a large column about one hundred men abreast and eight ranks deep with their lances extended, eager to taste the enemy’s blood.

Yatar-Opollos! That upstart Philemon disobeys my strict orders, the Lord General Hectris grumbled to himself. He charges—and by so doing, commits the army. That fool. I should let him go to his slaughter. . . .

“My lord general,” an aide called. “Philemon leads the Third Cavalry forward. He takes the enemy formation in flank—it may rout their whole force.”

“I have eyes, Achillos.”

Achillos moved closer and lowered his voice so only the general could hear.

“Star lord or no, these are rabble, and Philemon will soon have credit for this victory to add to the songs of his praise in the Council.”

"Will he now?" Hectris whispered back. "Aides!" the general shouted. "Take messages to all commanders. The entire army will advance, pivoting on its right! We'll throw this crew of murderers from the north into the river!"

A cheer rose from the staff as aides galloped off with the orders of the Lord General Hectris of Karinth.

Go to section 47.

— 21 —

"Catapults, reload!" Nelson shouted.

The huge stones had crashed down on the enemy's leading formation and torn gaping holes in the solid block of pikes, but the advance hadn't been broken; in fact, the enemy hadn't even slowed down! Worse, the enemy foot archers were coming within good bow range to start peppering Nelson's own pikes.

"Gaius!"

"My lord?"

"Any message from Critos? Will his cavalry be able to rejoin us?"

"There is no message, my lord. It would appear that both groups of horse—theirs and ours—have ridden off to the north."

"Tell the light cavalry to stand by to charge. Their target will be the right flank of that leading enemy pike block."

"At once, my lord!"

Nelson lowered his M-16 and moved forward to stand in front of his pike lines, at the corner of the formation.

Hate to waste ammo when I don't have that much, but this looks like do or die, he thought.

"Catapults," he shouted, taking aim at the front rank of the enemy formation. "Fire!"

Twenty-pound boulders flew high in the air, and



Nelson loosed a full automatic burst from the M-16 at the same time.

All five catapults and Nelson's M-16 fire at once. Their total Attack Strength is 101+. This fire is on Chart A for close range.

In addition to all other modifiers, subtract 2 from the Morale value of the Karinthian First Pikes to reflect their reaction to seeing the effect of star weapons for the first time. Make this subtraction before rolling any required Morale check.

If the enemy First Pikes rout, go to section 19.

If the enemy First Pikes do not rout, go to section 57.

— 22 —

It didn't go quite the way Nelson had hoped.

When the bandits saw spearmen coming on the run, they turned to countercharge them as individuals. The archers weren't much help; they were busy getting their breath and turning to deal with the enemy on the other side of the column.

Nelson slammed slugs into the bandits as fast as he could pull the trigger, but his mounted firing still left a little to be desired.

The spearmen got the idea pretty quickly, though. Their officer had the men halt and plant their spears forward to receive the bandits' mounted charge. Then he waded in, jabbing at their horses with the spear in his left hand and slicing open the falling riders with the sword in his right.

The last bandit turned to flee, hurling a dagger at Nelson as he wheeled.

Nelson answered with a bullet. "Eat death from the Star Lord Nelson!" he shouted, his anger up. The man's body flopped backward off his panicked horse.

"Flee, flee!"

The order was shouted from the other side of the column. Nelson cut the ropes tying two pack mules together and forced his way through the column, sending a parting volley after the routing remnants of the attackers.

The hard-pressed archers, taking heart from Nelson's aid and example, pursued the horsemen on foot to get in parting shots.

Well, that's that, Nelson thought, slinging the M-16. Now let's find a grateful wealthy merchant, preferably one with a beautiful daughter.

Go to section 40.

— 23 —

No time to waste, Nelson decided. Not if I'm going to be a big hero. And the bigger a hero I am, the bigger the reward may be. All I need is one good merc command contract. . . .

Nelson cradled the M-16 in one arm and galloped into the fray. His plan was to avoid melee; he'd ride down the length of the caravan, firing at the irregulars selectively in single-shot mode. A full automatic burst was too risky; he might hit some of the people he was trying to rescue. It was going to be tricky anyway; firing one-armed and mounted wasn't Nelson's favorite style. Too bad, he thought; it's a style I've been getting a lot of practice at.

He held his fire until he reached close range, about fifty yards from the head of the column.

"Men of Karinth," he bellowed. "Take heart. The Star Lord Nelson comes!"

There are ten mounted bandits on the side of the column Nelson is charging. Each has a Melee value of 5. All bandit attacks are resolved on Chart D.

Nelson fights with his Ordnance value of 9 and fires on Chart C.

In the first round Nelson faces only one bandit. In the second round and each following round, one more bandit joins the fight. Notice that if Nelson hits in the first half of each round, he will never be attacked: he's blowing them off their horses before they can close.

Continue the fight until four bandits are killed or Nelson is killed.

If Nelson is killed go to section 29.

If four bandits are killed, go to section 25.

— 24 —

If I want to get a job soldiering, Nelson decided, I sure don't want to be a private in an ancient army. Time to get used to commanding regulars.

"You men there, form a wedge of spears, two in front, three in back," Nelson shouted as he galloped over to the spearmen. "Officer, you stand by their left side."

The five soldiers stared at Nelson in surprised silence. But their officer could hold his own with any NCO in the U.S. Army when it came to gruff reactions.

"What Vothan-cursed son of a pig gives orders to my men? Stand down, barbarian, and I'll teach them how to fight by killing you."

"I am the Star Lord Nelson from Drantos, and I hold death at my fingertips. Deal with me, if you can, after

Section 24

your duty is done, soldier. You have men dying over there because someone didn't know what they were doing. Now get these cowards formed up and follow me!"

Nelson wheeled his horse toward the head of the caravan and didn't look back. That'll give the impression I expect to be obeyed, he thought. At least, it always gave me that impression.

"Now, extend those spears and charge behind me," he called, and rode forward at slow pace so the men could keep up.

"Well," the officer barked. "You heard the man. Are you going to let a stranger and a barbarian shame soldiers of Karinth? Move!"

Nelson smiled as he picked up speed, lowered the M-16, and took a potshot at the nearest bandit ahead.

There are ten bandits along the side of the caravan Nelson is charging, with a Melee value of 3 each. The bandits fight on Chart D and all attack at once.

Nelson has the six spearmen with a Melee value of 4 each. His own Ordnance value is 9. At the start of each round Nelson fires on Chart C. Then his spearmen melee on Chart D.

After both of the friendly attacks in a round, the enemy attack is resolved. Continue the combat until all on one side are killed.

If Nelson is killed, go to section 29.

If Nelson and the spearmen win, go to section 22.

— 25 —

“Flee! Flee!”

The bandit leader, at least, sees what’s happening, Nelson thought as the man shouted the order. He may not understand it, but he knows what it means: death.

“A star lord!” came a call from an archer, perched precariously atop a fully laden flat wagon. “A star lord fights for Karinth!”

As the bandits turned to gallop off, the regular defenders took heart from Nelson’s aid. The archers poured volleys after the fleeing brigands, many of the Karinthians running forward into the nearby field to pursue for a short distance.

So much for that, Nelson thought as he slung the M-16. Now, let’s find a rich and grateful merchant, preferably one with a beautiful daughter.

Go to section 40.

— 26 —

“Okay. Here’s the plan,” Nelson whispered in the cold darkness. “They’ve posted no sentries. We’ll slip in very, very quietly. Each of you go to one of the lean-tos. On my signal, step in and strike the man sleeping in it. Use your daggers swiftly and well. Got it?”

“Then what?” one of the youths wanted to know.

“Then run like hell to the other lean-tos and do the same thing. And don’t worry about heads. We’ll get those after I take out their main man.”

“Okay,” the youth replied. The others nodded agreement, grinning in the cold night air. They clutched their

daggers tightly and looked at one another with wide-eyed excitement.

Yatar, thought Nelson. Look at them. Green, completely green. One of them will screw up and make noise, and at least one of them won't be able to kill his man when he sees the women and kids all over the place . . . but I've got to get those weapons back!

"Let's go," Nelson whispered.

He led the way into the camp. The camp's fire cut the darkness, giving them enough light to see and enough darkness to avoid being seen, if any eyes were watching.

Each youth moved toward a lean-to, dagger at the ready. Nelson worked toward the edge of the camp nearest to Critos' quarters.

Nelson's unit has a Stealth value of only 6, because of the inexperience of the young men. Roll the two dice.

If the total is 6 or less, go to section 27.

If the total is 7 or higher, go to section 30.

— 27 —

Nelson reached the camp perimeter. In the distance, about a hundred feet away, he could just see Critos' lean-to. He turned and surveyed the ring of lean-tos around the clearing. His youths were all in position, and they hadn't been detected yet.

The star lord raised his arm in a broad gesture and lowered it quickly. The youths sprang into the lean-tos and Nelson took off running over the hard ground to Critos' quarters.

He heard the first scream as he reached the front of the shabby structure. Without pausing, he lifted the flap of animal skin and lunged inside.

Nelson has six men with a Melee value of 3 each. They attack on Chart A.

There are eight bandits with a Melee value of 2 each. (Their Melee value is lowered because they are unarmed.) In the first round no bandits can attack; Nelson's men get a free strike thanks to total surprise. In the second round, up to six bandits can fight, and in all succeeding rounds all surviving bandits can fight. The bandits fight on Chart F in the second round, Chart E in the third round, and Chart D in all following rounds.

Continue the fight until one side or the other is all killed.

If Nelson and his men are killed, go to section 29.

If the bandits are all killed, go to section 33.

— 28 —

“Okay, here’s the plan,” Nelson whispered into the darkness. “Their leader has a lean-to about a hundred feet west of the camp perimeter. We take that first.”

“Why don’t we just sneak in and slit their throats?” one of the youths asked.

“Yeah,” chimed in another. “We cut their throats, and then we get their heads!” He pointed to a large, coarse grain sack he had brought for precisely the purpose of transporting bandit heads back to the village.

Nelson sighed. “You’re better off getting their heads after they’re all dead. They have women and children in there. They’ll probably cower, but be careful; some of those kids will know how to use a dagger, and just might if you give them a chance. We go for the leader first because he has most of their weapons in his

lean-to. Also, killing him will demoralize the rest of them.”

“Oh,” the first youth responded. The others nodded, then looked at one another and grinned conspiratorially. They clutched their daggers gleefully.

Great Yatar, Nelson thought. These kids are green as grass. I’ll be lucky not to get two of them killed, at least. But I have to have those weapons back. And these kids are at least eighteen Earth years old; they’re old enough to know the score.

“Okay, we’re going to move out in a wide circle around their camp to the leader’s lean-to. For Yatar’s sake, stay quiet.”

“Yeah, stay quiet,” one of the youths muttered to his companions.

Great, Nelson thought.

He moved swiftly, circling through the light forest about a hundred yards away from the camp. If his green boys made slight noises, the sleeping drunks might not hear them at that distance. Finally Nelson moved closer to the camp, closing toward Critos’ lean-to.

Roll the two dice. Nelson’s unit has a Stealth value of only 6, because of the inexperience of the young men.

If the total of the dice is 6 or less, go to section 31.

If the total of the dice is 7 or more, go to section 32.

— 29 —

Tran is a hostile and unforgiving world. Those it rewards must be good tacticians, good politicians, and lucky. This time Paul Nelson wasn’t quite good enough in one or more of those categories.

But he's still a good soldier, and one of the characteristics of a good soldier is an iron resolve.

If you have that kind of iron resolve, go back to section 1 and try again. This time, Vothan may be with you!

— 30 —

Nelson reached the camp perimeter. In the distance, about a hundred feet away, he could just see Critos' lean-to. He turned and surveyed the ring of lean-tos around the clearing. His youths were still moving into position; they weren't trained in stealthy night movement.

Nelson flinched as the inevitable happened. He heard a soft thump, followed by a thud, and worst of all, a loud cry of "Aaaaggh! Oh, no!"

Oh no! is right, Nelson thought.

"Move it! Do it! Go! Go! Go!" Nelson screamed. Four of the youths sprang into the lean-tos. Nelson took off running over the hard ground to Critos' quarters. The fifth youth staggered, trying to pick himself up. He had tripped over a root and then panicked.

Nelson heard the first screams of real pain as he reached the front of Critos' shabby structure. Before he could lunge inside, the flap of animal skin flipped up and Critos came out, the M-16 already in firing position!

Nelson has six men with a Melee value of 3 each. They attack on Chart C.

There are eight bandits with a Melee value of 3 each. (Their Melee value is lowered because most are unarmed, but raised back up to 3 to account for what Critos can do with the M-16.) In the first round, only four bandits can attack. In the second round and in all following rounds,

all the bandits can fight. The bandits fight on Chart D in the first round, and on Chart C in all following rounds.

Continue the fight until one side or the other are all killed.

If Nelson and his men are killed, go to section 29.

If the bandits are all killed, go to section 34.

— 31 —

The youths followed Nelson. They were slow, but, thank Yatar, they didn't make noise. As they closed, he signaled to them to fan out around Critos' shabby quarters.

Once the boys were in position, blocking any attempt by the bandit chieftain to escape, Nelson crept to the front of the lean-to and listened. He couldn't believe his luck; no guards, and the man was snoring. He slipped inside and pounced on the body in the filthy straw, pinning the man with his legs and knees and clapping a hand over his mouth.

Critos awakened in panic. He saw the face of the enraged Nelson directly above his own.

"The next time you cut a star lord's throat, better finish the job!" Nelson hissed.

"Mmmph!" Critos squirmed and tried to cry out.

"Like this," Nelson said, expertly cutting Critos' throat from ear to ear.

The bandit's body still twitched as Nelson searched the dark lean-to, finally locating his M-16 and his Colt. There were only a hundred rounds or so left for the rifle, but most of the Colt ammo was still there.

Nelson slung the rifle, keeping the pistol in hand, and stepped outside. He could finish this job himself, but his youths were eager.

“Okay,” he whispered. “Let’s get them. And remember, don’t harm the women and children.”

Nelson took off at a run toward the bandit camp itself, and his youths followed close behind. As they poured into the clearing and headed for the lean-tos, a bandit woman, up in the middle of the night, saw them and shrieked an alarm.

Seconds later Nelson was already inside the nearest structure, ready to send another bandit to meet Yatar.

There are seven bandits, with a Melee value of 2 each. Only six bandits can fight in the first round; all bandits can fight in following rounds. The bandits fight on Chart E.

Nelson has a total of 6 men who, with his help, have a Melee value of 4 each. Nelson’s men fight on Chart C.

Continue the fight until all of the bandits are killed or Nelson and all his men are killed.

If all the bandits are killed, go to section 35.

If Nelson and his men are killed, go to section 29.

— 32 —

It’s going well, Nelson thought. It’s going to be okay. Then he heard the thunk, followed by a thud, and then a loud scream of “Aaaaggghh! Oh, no!” One of the clumsy kids had tripped on a root, panicked, and screamed.

“Oh no! is right,” Nelson shouted. “Hit that lean-to! Now! Move! Go! Go! Go!”

His feet were already pounding on the hard, cold ground as he shouted his orders to the youths. There was

Section 33

no way Critos hadn't heard that kid's scream, and if he had the M-16 handy . . .

He did!

Nelson saw Critos step out of his lean-to and spin around, the M-16 lowered in firing position. Nelson dived for the man as the first burst of bullets whizzed over his head.

"Get him!" one youth shouted, charging the gun-toting bandit.

"A star weapon!" another screamed, standing stupidly still, gawking.

Nelson has six men who, with Nelson flitting about assisting them, have a Melee value of 3 each. They fight on Chart D.

In the first round, Critos fights alone, firing the M-16. He has an Ordnance value of 7 and fights on Chart C.

In the second and all following rounds, a total of eight bandits, including Critos, fight, using a Melee value of 3 each. They all fight on Chart C.

Continue the fight until all the bandits are killed, or Nelson and all his men are killed.

If all the bandits are killed, go to section 36.

If Nelson is killed, go to section 29.

— 33 —

Critos wasn't ready for the attack. Nelson flew into the lean-to and dropped directly on top of the bandit leader just as he awakened.

"Wha—" Critos started to say.



"When you cut the throat of a star lord, you'd better finish the job," Nelson hissed. "Like this."

With one clean swipe he slit Critos' throat from ear to ear.

The bandit's body was still twitching as Nelson leapt up and ran back to the camp to check on the progress of his men. Already they seemed to have the situation in hand. Then Nelson spotted Doron rushing from his lean-to, a flail raised in his strong right arm. The green lads hadn't spotted the thug yet.

Nelson dropped back out of sight and then pounced on Doron from behind as the bandit closed on the nearest youth. The star lord's dagger plunged into the nape of the brute's neck. Doron gurgled. The youth he was about to attack spun around and without hesitation plunged his own dagger in the big man's belly, forcing the point in and then up. As Doron sank to his knees, Nelson finished him.

"Got 'em all," a youth called from a lean-to. Cheers arose from Nelson's green boys. But beneath the shouts of victory, Nelson heard the first wail of a child.

Go to section 37.

— 34 —

Nelson hit the ground rolling as Critos' first burst of fire shredded the night.

Thank Yatar and Christ! Nelson thought. He's not accurate with it yet!

Critos ran toward the clearing, firing madly, shouting orders that were drowned out by his own bursts. Nelson leapt up and chased him, trying desperately to catch Critos before the bandit reached the clearing and started cutting the green kids in half.

In the camp itself, Nelson's youths did well on the first strike despite the noise, but the rest of the bandit crew

were alerted in time to stir from heavy slumber and grab weapons. Now bandits and kids were mixing it up throughout the clearing.

Critos stared at the individual melees, confused. He feared that if he used the star weapon, he'd kill some of his own men. And that was the last thing he feared, except for Nelson.

The veteran merc grabbed Critos from behind and twisted him to the ground, knocking free the M-16. Nelson dropped to sit on top of Critos' supine form. He looked into the bandits' brown eyes; he wanted this man to know what was about to happen.

"The next time you cut a star lord's throat," Nelson hissed, "you'd better be sure you finish the job."

Critos' eyes grew wide with fear.

"Just like this," Nelson said, driving in the dagger and slitting the throat from ear to ear.

"Hey, hey, that's it—we got them all!" Nelson's farm boys raised a victory cry.

Nelson stood, picked up the M-16, and wiped the blood from his dagger. Beneath his boys' shouts of victory, he heard the first sobs of a child.

Go to section 37.

— 35 —

The man opened his eyes in response to the hag's screams, and Nelson squeezed the trigger on the Colt. The woman huddled next to the man awakened to find his corpse; Nelson stepped outside.

Already he heard screams coming from several of the other lean-tos. He spotted Balquhor lumbering from his sleeping place; the big man yawned as he raised a flail and glanced stupidly around the clearing. Nelson fired and the big man fell.

It was over quickly; the surprised bandits in their

drunken stupors were no match for the enthusiastic farm boys and their leader's firearm.

One of the youths raised a victory cry into the night and was soon joined by the others. Nelson grinned at their exuberance, remembering for a moment the thrill of victory in his own first combat. He grinned, until he heard the first child start wailing over the corpse of her slain father.

Go to section 37.

— 36 —

This is going be one hard fight, Nelson thought as he dived for Critos but fell short. Bullets whizzed over his head. Dagger in hand, Nelson continued to belly-crawl toward Critos as the bandit chief grinned and tried to aim the M-16 at the green kids.

The second burst went off as Nelson grabbed Critos by the leg and yanked him to ground. The two scuffled on the frozen forest floor. While they fought, bandit reinforcements came rushing from the main camp, to be met by Nelson's farm boys.

Nelson lost track of what was happening in the battle. He had his hands full with Critos. The bandit threw a knee to Nelson's groin; Nelson countered with a dagger slash at the bandit's throat. Luck was with the merc; blood spurted from a severed artery.

"Unngghh. Help me!" Critos called. Nelson took a sledgehammer blow to his lower back and was thrown forward off Critos' body. The bandit tried to leap to his feet; Nelson rolled onto his back and reached up to grab the man again. He saw Doron's unfriendly face over him, then blood dribbled from the big man's mouth as a dagger blade emerged from his neck.

The struggle seemed interminable, and then, as suddenly as it started, it was over. Critos was the last to die;

Nelson stabbed him through the throat with a lucky dagger blow.

The night was silent as Nelson staggered to his feet, retrieved the M-16, and began searching for the rest of his gear and money. Then a newly fatherless child's first cry pierced the cold night.

Go to section 37.

— 37 —

Nelson finished gathering his gear. The women and children still huddled, terrified, in their filthy shelters, watching him, waiting to die.

He went about his business methodically, first gathering his weapons and ammo, next his money, then each item of equipment: binoculars, canteen, compass. . . . He ran down his mental checklist. The last item was the gold.

Without hesitation, Nelson searched each body and combed through each of the dirty lean-tos, keeping a sharp eye out for vengeance-minded children. When he finished, he mentally tabulated the results: all equipment recovered. One hundred rounds left for the M-16; almost all the ammo for the Colt. About half the gold was accounted for.

Finally, he loaded his horse and mule. He had no words for those who helped him gain this victory, only the promised payment.

Before he rode out, Nelson led his horse to the still blazing fire in the center of the killing ground.

"Listen to me, you women," he called. A few of the crones looked at him blankly. "I'm leaving you some gold. There is a village two days' walk from here. Go there. Use the money for food and shelter. You may find honest work there, or at least learn where else you can obtain help."

And next time, he thought, try to pick some better men.

He mounted and rode out alone. His first taste of independent command was bitter; butchering bandits wasn't his style of soldiering any more than fighting for Parsons had been.

The next day he skirted the village and kept going south.

Nelson continued his trek until the coldest portion of the Tran winter hit. Then he stopped at the next village he came to, hired himself out as a laborer, and spent the rest of winter in peace.

Go to section 38.

— 38 —

Karinth occupied a unique position among the many small City States of the Sunlands, and although her citizens did not know why, Paul Nelson did. He had learned on the flying saucer that the third star in Tran's trinary system was swinging closer to the planet, as it did once every six hundred years. That meant that the oceans would rise. Many of the coastal cities would be swept away.

Karinth was near the coast, but it was situated in the foothills of the Westcarp, high enough, Nelson thought, that it would survive the cataclysm. He didn't know much about the city, but it was rumored to be prosperous and frequently engaged in minor wars with the other cities, republics, petty kingdoms and territories of the Sunlands. To Nelson, it sounded like the perfect place to settle down, practice his trade of soldiering, and maybe even make a small contribution to the locals by helping them prepare for the coming troubles.

Not that the troubles weren't expected. The priests of

Yatar were everywhere on Tran, preaching about the coming of the Time, when the seas would rise, multitudes would face famine, and demons or something would come from the skies. Fire would come from the skies too. Skyfire, the priests called it. They wanted everyone to hoard up food in caves for the Time. The problem, Nelson thought, is that only the priests of Yatar know where the caves are. Sounded to him like another holy scheme to get a free lunch.

The mud was drying by the time Nelson approached Karinth, far south of the City States. As he had traveled south, the landscape had gradually changed. The sea was to his left, its flat coasts dotted with trading cities and fishing villages. Two rivers ran parallel to the coast, flowing north, to the very low lands around Rustengo at the southern boundary of the City States. To the west the mountains rose abruptly, with a small buffer of steep hills between them and the plains below.

The fields in the plains were rich and fertile, producing grain, grapes, olives, and figs in abundance. The people seemed more prosperous than the peasants of the City States or the feudal kingdoms farther north. Their villages were cleaner, they seemed to have some basic notions of personal hygiene, and their buildings were both more elaborate and more beautiful.

Twice Nelson observed troops on the march. The main bodies seemed to be composed of armored pikemen, in the ancient Greek or Macedonian fashion. They carried great eighteen-foot spears, wore metal breastplates and greaves, elaborate helmets, and carried large, rectangular, curving shields. He also saw slingers, archers, swordsmen, and light cavalry, probably lancers, judging from the twelve-foot spears they carried.

From the villagers along the way Nelson learned the local heraldry; how to identify the troops of the various cities, and the names of the currently prominent generals. He also learned that mercenaries, while not held in high esteem, were often hired.

Two days' ride from Karinth he saw the attack. At first he could make out only clouds of dust kicked up by riders. Riding forward quickly, he soon distinguished the outline of the battle.

The attackers were irregular cavalry. Some of them wore leather breastplates, some none at all. They were variously armed, and, engaged in melee, they seemed to fight more as a group of individuals than as a coherent force driving toward a common goal.

The defenders were spearmen and bowmen trying to protect a long caravan of pack mules and several crude wagons. A banner flew from the midst of the caravan. Nelson dug out his binoculars and couldn't believe his good fortune as he brought the standard into focus: the caravan was from Karinth!

Let's go soldiering, Nelson thought. He tied off the mule to some brush, readied his M-16, and galloped toward the melee.

As he approached, he could tell from the positions of the forces in the melee what had already happened. Both sides had made critical errors. The defenders' spearmen had been in the front of the column, the archers at the rear. Bad move. About thirty or so of the bandit cavalry had charged from the flank, probably from behind the villa Nelson saw about one hundred yards from the main road. Stupidly, the cavalry had concentrated on the spearmen first. They'd hacked up the spears pretty well; obviously, they'd caught them trying to deploy. But fighting the spearmen first gave the archers time to disperse in a line down the flanks of the long column. The surviving spearmen were trying to deploy in front the archers, to cover them, but were having the devil's own time doing it. Meanwhile, the cavalry were fanned out around the column and were hacking away at spearmen and archers alike.

Any force left intact? Nelson wondered. Yes. About fifty yards from the head of the caravan column, an officer was trying to rally about five badly shaken spear-

men who had escaped the first attack but were now cut off from the caravan by the cavalry's encircling force.

Plan? I could get those few spearmen and lead them in a charge, Nelson thought. The M-16 will knock down the horses as the infantry close. They could polish off the riders, and probably run right down one side of the caravan, clearing it. But it will be hard to give these guys the idea in time.

I could just ride in myself, blazing away. . . .

If Nelson chooses to ride in by himself, firing, go to section 23.

If Nelson chooses to lead the rallying spearmen in a charge down one side of the caravan column, go to section 24.

— 39 —

"General Hectris, a message from Philemon," the messenger shouted, reining his horse to a sudden halt.

"Yes, yes, and I know already what he says," Hectris answered. The general was not pleased with the slow opening of this battle. "Very well, give me the message."

"Philemon respectfully requests permission to charge. The enemy confronting him are very small in numbers, no more than fifty horse bowmen. But, standing exposed, he suffers some minor loss to no purpose."

"Tell Commander Philemon that I'll be the judge of the purpose of his losses. The situation will be rectified shortly. He is, under no circumstances, to charge until ordered."

"My lord general! Hail!" The messenger spurred away in a cloud of dust.

"Aide!" Hectris called. "Take a message to the First Archery detachment. They are to advance to screen our

right-flank cavalry and return the fire of these gnats the star lord sends against us.”

“My lord general! Hail!”

From the rise, Nelson watched while Critos’ archers pecked away at the enemy cavalry.

“We simply don’t have the numbers to reduce his force quickly. We use but fifty bows against some eight hundred horses,” Gaius remarked.

“Yes, I know,” Nelson growled. “But wait a minute, wait a minute—look there! He’s moving up archers to screen his cavalry and return our fire!” Now, Critos, now is your chance, Nelson added in his mind, but not aloud.

Critos fretted as his horse archers poured volley after volley at the enemy formation with little effect. Then he saw the movement of the enemy archers. They are advancing, he thought. They’re going to screen his cavalry, so we’ll have no target at all except them—and they have twice as many bows as we do. Should I retreat before they cut us down?

No. The Star Lord Nelson wants the enemy provoked. Our flank march didn’t do it. Our firing hasn’t done it. How about something so brazen that it directly insults their courage?

“Horse archers! Sling your bows.”

Critos’ troops looked at him in bewilderment. What now?

“Horse archers, draw swords!”

The sound of fifty blades drawn from fifty scabbards answered Critos’ orders. He raised his own blade high in the air.

“At their archers—for the Star Lord Nelson, your honor, and your future—charge!”

The commander of the enemy archery unit saw the horse bowmen suddenly sling their bows, draw swords, and charge.

“Deploy! Deploy!” he screamed. But he knew there wasn’t time. The cavalry were less than one hundred fifty yards away. His archers would be lucky to get off one good volley. In panic he turned to Cavalry Commander Philemon and waved frantically.

Commander Philemon scowled, but sat rigidly on his horse like a statue, taking no action while disaster thundered toward the bowmen.

Enemy Archers

<i>Manpower</i>	10 (100)
<i>Ordnance</i>	3
<i>Melee</i>	2
<i>Morale</i>	6

There are 100 enemy archers, but for purposes of this combat, their Manpower value is 10. The archers may take one free shot on Chart E before the charge hits them. After that they melee normally, using Chart E. Reduce the archers’ Morale value by 1 after each casualty they suffer, and immediately roll a Morale check for them. If the total of the two dice is greater than their current Morale value, they rout. If not, they will fight another round.

Horse Bowmen

<i>Manpower</i>	5 (50)
<i>Ordnance</i>	2
<i>Melee</i>	4 (value has been doubled for charge bonus)
<i>Morale</i>	10

There are 50 horse archers, but for purposes of this combat their Manpower value is 5. After the enemy archers take their “free shot,” begin the melee. The Horse Bowmen fight on Chart B.

Reduce the Morale value of the Horse Bowmen by 1 for every casualty they suffer, and immediately make a Morale check for them. If the total of the two dice is

greater than their current Morale value, they rout; if not, they can fight another round.

Continue the fight until one side or the other either routs or is eliminated.

If Critos' Horse Archers win the fight, go to section 43.

If the enemy archers win the fight, go to section 45.

— 40 —

The wealthy merchant's name was Periclites, and the daughter was called Dianah. Periclites was grateful; Dianah was beautiful, and Paul Nelson was happy.

"And I say," the speaker droned on, "that the foolish policy of a trade embargo is responsible for this impending war. We have no legitimate quarrel with Delphos. Is it the fault of Delphos that barbarians sweep through their lands? Does the King of Delphos hire these brigands who trouble our trade there? No . . ."

Nelson leaned back on the cool marble seat of the Assembly's amphitheatre and conjured the image of Dianah. He had no need to pay attention to the argument; the points the old man was making were the same ones Nelson had heard every day for the past three days. He hoped that by mid-afternoon the Assembly might get around to a vote on his appointment. In the meantime, there was Dianah. . . .

Periclites had indeed been grateful. His caravan carried fish, salt, furs, perfumes, wines, dyes, and cloth gathered in a year's bargaining, bartering, and trading in the seaport towns and cities from Rustengo to the southernmost reaches of the Sunlands. Its loss would have placed him deeply in debt, a situation intolerable for one with power in the Council.

His gratitude hadn't been hurt any by the fact that

Paul Nelson was a star lord, with star weapons, who was willing to share not only his prowess, but his knowledge for a reasonable price. Nelson quickly learned that everything in Karinth had a price.

Karinth was a city of merchants, artisans, and landholders. Seldom did the interests of these three groups coincide. The city had developed a crude form of republican rule to deal with the constant clash of political goals, and bowed to military and diplomatic necessity by vesting what Nelson thought of as limited executive power in a king, or Tyrant.

All citizens were members of the Assembly, a deliberative body that apparently deliberated all the time. But real power was in the Council, a body of fifty men selected by the Assembly to deal with the real tasks of making law and policy. The Council annually named the Tyrant, who was empowered to carry out the Council's policies.

In a city made rich by trade and in control of considerable natural resources, the possibilities for corruption of the political system were endless and frequently exploited.

That was one reason Karinth was a bit touchy about its military. A standing army was a necessity, but also a threat. If one small group of wealthy men could seize the army, they could seize the city. The solution was practical and simple; all appointments to military command had to be approved by two-thirds of the Council and ratified by a majority in the Assembly.

Periclites had spent a lot of money to get his future son-in-law appointed a Commander of Cavalry, and today, Nelson hoped, his efforts would pay off.

Dianah was beautiful. She wore her curly black hair wreathed around her head. Her eyes were large, dark, and expressive, and she had the kind of features that on Earth would have been called classical: a small, well-formed nose, cheekbones slightly high, lips full, but not dominating the face, and a determined but not overly aggressive chin.

She was full figured but slender, still in the glory of young womanhood. Nelson loved the feel of her slightly tanned, smooth, oiled skin, and he could watch her movements for hours: she was naturally graceful.

Still, she wasn't exactly considered a prize by the local lads. She had a keen, aggressive mind, considered unbecoming in a woman, and she was not easily dominated. The man who took her to wife had best be strong and independent, for she certainly was, and she would tolerate weakness in no one.

Nelson had fallen in love with her in the first ten-day he'd stayed in the home of Periclites. Nelson had never been really in love before, and the new experience, coming after the hardships of the winter and a life of combat, thrilled him. Dianah, for her part, found him strong and independent enough to be genuinely attractive as a man, intelligent enough to be a friend, and surprisingly, liberal enough to treat her wants and needs as equally important with his own.

The father had extended his gratitude out of courtesy and curiosity, until he realized what a valuable protégé Nelson could be. The war that was brewing with Delphos was a merchants' war, and the merchants could use a good general or two to make sure the war was prosecuted with vigor.

That, of course, was just the beginning. As Nelson shared hints of his knowledge of technology—the skills of artisans, as near as Periclites could understand it—he opened new vistas of greed in the old man's mind.

Ah, Dianah, Nelson thought. To be back home with you now, sharing a hot bath or a plate of fruit. . . .

"War or no, we must approve a slate of candidates for the command," the Assembly chairman shouted. Nelson forced his attention back to business.

"Yes, yes, get on with it," the restless crowd called. Boos and catcalls finally drowned out the speaker, who was about to repeat his same arguments for the third time in one speech.

"First, the Council recommends to the Assembly the appointment of Philemon, son of Clysthenes, to be Captain General of Karinth for the coming year."

"No," a man shouted. "He's a tool of the artisans. We're going to fight a merchants' war."

"He's ambitious and therefore dangerous," another cried.

"He's also spent the most money to get the appointment this year," another voice chimed in. The Assembly exploded in laughter.

"I call for the vote," the chairman shouted. "Those in favor of the appointment of Philemon as—"

A shout of "Yes!" rocked the amphitheatre. Philemon didn't waste his money, Nelson thought.

"The Council recommends the appointment of the mercenary known as the Star Lord Nelson to the rank of Commander of Cavalry for the coming year," the speaker announced. "His expenses are to be paid from the revenues of the Council, and—"

"You mean from the taxes the Council squeezes out of us!" an angry man called.

"Yes, and pays back to us as bribes!" came an answer. Again the chairman was drowned out by the crowd's laughter.

"And he is to raise and train a special cavalry command for use in the event of war with Delphos. . . ."

"Then you will see about the casting of iron that is available in Rustengo, yes?" Nelson asked.

"Yes, yes, my son," Periclites grumbled. "I will send inquiries. But why must this matter be one of such secrecy? It will make my inquiries more difficult."

"Never mind why for now. And you mean more expensive, not more difficult."

"Ah, son Nelson, you have the directness of the soldier. It is well that you handle troops and leave the politics of the family to me."

"In that case, Father, you may deal with Philemon's

plots and spies," Dianah said as she joined them on the marble balcony overlooking the garden. "Just some wine, and perhaps some fresh bread and fruit," she called in to a household slave.

"Hmmm. Philemon. I do not trust him, Paul. He is an ambitious man, and he is in the pay of all the smiths and metal crafters of Karinth."

The old man's right, Nelson thought. Although why the man should hate me so is a mystery.

First, the Captain General had tried to remove Nelson completely from the upcoming campaign by posting him to command the irregular militia cavalry—a sort of summertime highway patrol that fought the increasing numbers of brigands and other barbarians in the Sunlands. Nelson flatly refused. His appointment by the Council specifically allowed him to raise a special troop of cavalry under his own command, and there was nothing Philemon could do about it.

Then Dianah had caught a household slave being paid to feed gossip and overheard conversations to the steward of Philemon's household. And most recently there had been a "training accident" during one of Nelson's drill sessions with the cavalry: the misplaced arrow had nearly cost Nelson his life. The arrow turned out to be poisoned. Before he was hanged, the man confessed to being in the pay of Aristides, one of Philemon's flunkies on the Council.

Neither Nelson nor Dianah thought it wise to tell these things to Periclites. The old man was fighting a savage political battle to drum up support for the war with Delphos. Nelson saw the war as critical to his survival in his current position, and Dianah saw it as vital to both her father's and her husband's financial interests. If Periclites knew the struggle within the Council was endangering his family, he might back off.

"I must go," Nelson said. "Special training requires my presence."

"Yatar-Opollos go with you, my husband," Dianah

responded, embracing him and kissing him softly on the lips.

And red Vothan, too, Nelson thought.

The King of Delphos could no longer tolerate the trade embargo enforced upon him by Karinth. Karinth enforced this embargo by its virtual monopoly on building stone. Those who traded with Delphos would receive no marble from Karinth. This was Delphos' punishment for prosperity and modest innovations in the field of buying and selling. Her merchants threatened Karinth's by a policy of consortium purchasing in bulk and consequent price cutting.

The king was wise enough to know that the landed class in Karinth opposed the embargo; it prevented them from exporting their surplus grain to a major consumer. So it was at them that he struck, hoping to intensify their opposition to the war. He calculated that the artisans would side with the gentry; for as the gentry suffered, the merchants would gain. The artisans would side with the gentry to prevent the merchants from dominating the Council. Eventually the hated embargo would be lifted.

This was only wise strategy: Karinth itself, a walled city set atop high hills and protected on all sides by steep slopes, was virtually impregnable to assault, and her vital place in the economy of the Sunlands guaranteed her allies in the case of siege.

In terms of operations, Delphos' armies would be aimed at Karinth's breadbasket lands, on the plains beneath the city. The troops had only to march; human nature would do the rest. The landed class would flee their estates in terror for the safety of the city. Unruly troops would loot the storehouses and fire the fields. Karinth would be humiliated by the presence of the invader and forced to respond by fielding her army. Then the invader could cheaply march away, avoiding the expense in blood and gold of a battle.

These were matters of common knowledge to all

involved in the politics of Karinth. None would suggest that a captain general strongly backed by the artisans would willingly let the armies of Delphos escape unpunished, the reward of Delphos for assisting the rise of the artisans to power. Such a suggestion would be tantamount to accusing the Captain General of treason. So it was never suggested that this would happen. It was, however, widely feared.

Delphos struck just before harvest time.

But before Delphos struck, Nelson trained his special cavalry unit. From observation and careful questioning of his fellow commanders, plus some information willingly supplied by Periclites, Nelson had learned that most of the Sunlands armies were similar. All relied on the heavily-armored pikemen as their main shock force. A body of these troops, formed in a deep formation, was virtually impregnable to arcing archery fire, for the men in the back ranks could use their eighteen-foot pikes to form a sort of roof over the entire formation. They were also impregnable to frontal cavalry attack; no horse would willingly impale itself on the wall of bristling pikes protruding from the front of the block, and the length of the pikes made it difficult for mounted men to close for one-on-one melee.

It was, of course, the Macedonian system, Nelson realized, but with one big deficiency: the pike blocks weren't trained to maneuver to cover a flank; they couldn't make the transition from primitive phalanx to a "square" formation. Of course, reaching the flanks of these moving walls of pikes was difficult; their flanks were protected, depending upon the circumstances, by foot or horse archers, swordsmen, or lightly-armored cavalry, usually armed with a twelve-foot thrusting spear.

The key to defeating such an army was firepower, a kind of heavy firepower that could wreak havoc in massed formations. Unfortunately, heavy firepower was

difficult to achieve without gunpowder. Archers were trained to arc their fire, and were vulnerable to cavalry. Tran's slingers were traditionally little more than armed rabble who melted at the first signs of a real fight. And catapults, in various forms, were awkward, immobile on the battlefield, and had a very low rate of fire.

Nelson's solution to the problem was twofold. First, he created what he called his "flying catapults." These new catapults were small, designed to fire only a five- or six-pound stone. They were also light enough to be pulled by a team of four horses. With his knowledge of basic physics, Nelson was able to design a series of pulley devices that made cocking the catapults easier, and he increased their short, effective range by reinforcing a light catapult arm with a thin band of iron. Finally, he had the "guns" mounted on a rotating platform above the wagonlike carriage. This enabled them to change their aiming direction with ease. A series of collapsible wooden supports could be attached to any side of the rotating platform to give the "gun" support for firing. And there it is, Nelson thought as he watched his "gunners" practicing one day: ancient/medieval horse artillery. Under his tutelage, good crews attained a rate of fire of one round every forty-five seconds.

But his flying catapult crews needed flexible protection. Nelson's solution was "dragoons," a kind of mounted jack-of-all-trades. He started with regular light cavalymen and began drilling them to fight dismounted, like a kind of miniature pike block. To this training he added rudimentary practice with the short bow. The result was a trooper trained to fight mounted and charging, like regular light cavalry, and on foot, like a sort of infantry, and able to deliver mounted fire.

By summer's end Nelson's unit consisted of 3000 trained men, slightly over the establishment voted by the Council and Assembly. He had ten of the flying catapults, crewed by ten men each. There were 2000 of the dragoons, organized into two units of 1000 each. The

remaining 900 men were variously trained as horse holders, messengers, and logistics troops.

Raising such a large force provoked outcries of fear and concern among members of the Council and jealousy among the other commanders. The specialized, somewhat secretive training of the unit didn't lessen the rivalry and suspicion. And, the size of the unit was a serious drain even on Periclites' gold supply. In the end, the Council would agree to pay for only 1500 men. Periclites made up the difference.

"It'll all be worth it when the war begins," Nelson told his father-in-law. Dianah backed him up: she didn't fully understand her husband's plans, but she had faith in his ideas. Periclites paid, and trembled.

As it turned out, the unspoken fears of Philemon's treachery were also ungrounded. As so often happens in war, treachery played a smaller part in Philemon's undoing than obstinacy, incompetence, and the invincible ignorance of the would-be great general.

Philemon, contrary to expectations, was ready when Delphos struck. No sooner was the army of Delphos ravaging the countryside than the forces of Karinth marched, a total of 15,000 men under Philemon's command. Among these were Nelson's 3000, now officially designated as the Third and Fourth Karinthian Cavalry and the Karinthian Flying Catapults.

The King of Delphos, surprised and dismayed at this sudden Karinthian response, prepared to withdraw. He had planned no expensive major battles; his strategy was as much political as military, and the political strategy needed time to work its effects. Philemon's quick response was denying him that time.

After a series of maneuvers, aided considerably by reliable intelligence reports from the fleeing population of the outlying districts, Philemon almost, but not quite, cut the Delphians' line of retreat. The hostile army escaped across the most westward of the plain's two great rivers only hours before Philemon's leading units arrived

to secure the great stone bridge which was the sole crossing point within several miles.

At a council of war that evening, Nelson made the mistake of congratulating Philemon on a swift campaign well brought to fruition.

"My compliments, Lord General," Nelson said as the council opened. "The enemy is already driven from the land, and will no doubt continue his retreat in the morning. He has no stomach for real battle; negotiations can begin soon. We'll guarantee by treaty what we have won without casualties by swift and intelligent maneuvers."

Okay, Nelson thought. Maybe I am laying it on a bit thick. But this guy is winning, and I don't want a successful Captain General of Karinth as a permanent political enemy.

Philemon had been laughing when he entered the great tent for the council of war, sharing jests with his commanders, and accepting their compliments. But when Nelson spoke, the Captain General became silent and his thin, bearded face twisted into an expression of disdain, if not disgust.

"Surely, the great star lord does not insult us by pretending that we would let the enemy escape, now that victory is within our grasp," Philemon said softly. "Surely he does not suggest that we are traitor to our Republic." The burning blue eyes of the Captain General burned into Nelson's face as the last sentence was spoken.

Too late, Nelson saw the error in the phrasing of his intended compliment. "My lord general, I meant no more than to compliment you on a campaign well fought. I meant no offense. How could anyone dare to call a victory treason?"

"There has been no victory yet, and thus the campaign has hardly been well-fought. I see already the form your slanders would take upon our return to Karinth!"

"My lord general," Nelson protested. "I assure you—"

"Silence!" Philemon commanded, his brow contorted

with rage. "Commander Creen, the army will stand to arms! We will attack across the bridge as soon as the enemy moves at first light. First Cavalry will lead the attack, followed by our pikes and archers. Pikes will form in echelon left once across the river. Second Cavalry will cross last, to form our left flank."

"No, my lord general!" Nelson blurted. "A river crossing in the face of the enemy without massive supporting fire, and preferably more than one, even more than two crossing points, is—"

"I said silence!" Philemon shouted. "You, Commander Star Lord Nelson, will hold your force on this side of the river, forming—what is your phrase? Ah, yes. Forming our 'reserve.'" Philemon was determined that in the glory of the morrow, Nelson would have no share. "This council is over." With that, the Captain General of Karinth turned on his heel and stomped off into the night.

"Now who's the traitor?" Creen hissed at Nelson. "Victory won without bloodshed, our crops saved, and you goad him to battle." Nelson's fellow commanders exchanged angry glances and then left him to stand alone in the great tent.

I've learned two things, Nelson thought. Leave politics to Periclites, and never talk sense to a pig-headed jackass.

The King of Delphos was an excellent strategist but a poor tactician. When he saw the Karinthians form up during the night, he feared to withdraw. His mind was filled with visions of the Karinthian horses riding down his rear guard, falling upon his precious army in march columns, tearing it to pieces before it could deploy. Determined that that would not happen, he deployed his forces for battle at first light.

Philemon observed this development with unease. Though he would never admit it aloud, Nelson had a point: a river-crossing battle was nothing to take lightly.

Philemon determined to outwait the enemy. And so the armies stood, facing one another across the great stone bridge for the better part of the morning.

Nelson, deciding to be politic, said nothing. His fellow Commanders also practiced silence, fearful to further upset Philemon. But, to the vain Captain General, the absence of voluble praise implied silent criticism. Dare I do nothing, Philemon thought, having come face to face with the enemy? Will it not be reported to the Council that having determined to give battle, I turned coward, or traitor, as the rumors current before this campaign implied? Thus, Philemon's own fears led to sacrificing lives to political considerations.

"Commander Creen!"

"My lord general! Hail!"

"The enemy sits. We must prod him on his way home."

"My lord general?"

"First Cavalry lead the advance across the bridge, screening the crossing of our pikes. As soon as the pikes are across, First Cavalry will charge."

"As you will, my lord general."

"And Creen . . ."

"My lord?"

"Order Star Lord Nelson strictly that he is not to move his . . . reserve without my specific orders. They are to take no part in this action. Understood?"

"My lord general! Hail!"

Nelson watched the developing slaughter across the river with horror. The Karinthian First Cavalry had moved across the bridge in the early afternoon. The Delphians let them cross, of course, unable to believe their good luck. They also let the pikes across: the more in the killing ground, the better. Finally, the Karinthian First Cavalry charged, and the slaughter began.

The result was predictable. The Karinthian plan was simple and obvious, and the Delphians had no problem

dealing with it. Their own light cavalry, supported by horse archers, met the Karinthian charge. The Karinthian horsemen fought valiantly but could not overcome both an equal melee force and the constant flights of shafts biting into their formation from both flanks. The First Cavalry routed for the bridge.

The effect on the remaining Karinthians couldn't have been more disastrous. Of course, the light troops routed toward the bridge. But they couldn't reach it in time; the Delphian cavalry had beaten them there. The mass of light bowmen milled around in panic. Hundreds of men dove into the river in an attempt to swim to safety.

Meanwhile, the Karinthian pikes held their ground. A foolish move, since their right was now hopelessly exposed. The enemy moved up more archers to lengthen his line.

By mid-afternoon the situation was approaching the hopeless. The Karinthian First Pikes were being pelted by archery fire from their right and engaged directly by enemy pikes to their front. The Delphian cavalry held the bridge and were reforming to charge the rear of First Pikes. Meanwhile, the enemy was bringing up his own Second Cavalry to charge the left flank of the Karinthian army. If nothing were done soon, the Karinthians would be ground to nothingness on the banks of the river.

Nelson debated his course of action. He had been ordered to do nothing. His "reserve" stood safely on the south or east bank of the river, near the bridge. His troops were in good order; their training had paid off. They hadn't flinched when the cavalry routed back practically on top of them.

The enemy's cavalry was preparing to charge the rear of the First Pikes. As they moved, they would present their flank to his force—but he'd have to risk charging across the bridge. Once across, he'd have a chance to ride down the enemy's line unit by unit from the flanks, combining his massed firepower with shock action, but if any more friendly units broke and ran before the effects of his charge were felt, his specially trained unit would be

caught up in the rout and devoured by the Delphians like a light breakfast.

As Nelson thought through the various factors, the enemy's First Cavalry formed up to charge.

Study the map on the following page.

If Nelson decides to charge, go to section 44.

If Nelson decides not to charge, go to section 42.

— 41 —

"General Hectris, a message from Philemon," the messenger shouted, reining his horse to a sudden halt.

"Yes, yes, and I know already what he says," Hectris answered. The general was not pleased with the slow opening of this battle. "Very well, give me the message."

"Philemon respectfully requests permission to charge. The enemy confronting him are very small in numbers, no more than fifty horse bowmen. But, standing exposed, he suffers some minor loss to no purpose."

"Tell Commander Philemon that I'll be the judge of the purpose of his losses."

Hectris turned from the messenger and conferred with his staff. "You see the situation. Should I let good cavalry be killed for nothing? By Yatar-Opollos, I do believe this enemy is so cowardly that one good charge could break him."

"My lord general," an aide replied. "You did want to fight a defensive battle. Our deployment is based upon that."

"Yes. And I also want to get this battle won and ended. I haven't seen more than three hundred enemy so far. He couldn't be hiding that much strength behind those hills—we must have him outnumbered by four-to-one, perhaps twice that much."

2nd Karinth
Situation: 2 pm

Compass: N, S, E, W

The River

Grid of units (circles)

Key:

- Pikes
- Cavalry
- Archers
- Horse Archers
- Swordsman
- Nelson's Flying Catapults
- Enemy Attacks (Planned)

= 1,000's of men
 1st, 2nd, etc. = Unit I.D.
 (-) = Negligible Manpower

Situation: 2 pm

Key:

- Pikes

1 - Cavalry

= Archers

- Horse Archers

→ Swordsmen

- Nelson's Flying Catapults

➡ - Enemy Attacks (Planned)

- 1,000's of men

1st, 2nd, etc. = Unit I.D.

(-) = Negligible Manpower

"I fear a trap," the staff officer cautioned. "Perhaps star weapons."

"And I fear darkness," Hectris replied. "If he waits until night and then steals away, we'll have to chase him down. Let's fight them now, while they're willing to take it. If they had star weapons, they'd be using them by now."

"Very good, my lord general."

"Messenger! Return to Commander Philemon. My compliments to him. He will charge at once, scatter these enemy gnats, and carry the rise if he can."

"My lord general! Hail!" the messenger replied. He spurred his horse off at the gallop.

"Aide!"

"My lord?"

"Send messages to all major formation commanders. When Philemon's cavalry charge, the entire army will advance, pivoting on the right."

"My lord general, hail!"

Go to section 47.

— 42 —

As Nelson had foreseen, the Karinthian First Pikes collapsed, precipitating a rout of the entire army. The enemy's Second Cavalry charged into the rear of the fleeing masses, trying to cut them off from the bridge.

Nelson could stand by powerless no longer. It was too late to win the battle, but he could still save some of the troops.

"Jason, swing the catapults to fire into the mass of their cavalry!"

"My lord general, they are at close quarters with our own men!"

"Those men are doomed already! It matters not whether their death comes from the sky or a horseman's

lance. We must allow some of our troops to make the bridge!"

The catapults launched their deadly missiles, striking friend and foe alike with deadly force. At the range of fire, there was no hope for accuracy, but the barrage of stones eventually forced the enemy cavalry to withdraw and regroup, allowing a few stragglers to claw their way through the panic-stricken mass and gain the safety of the opposite side of the river.

The Karinthian army returned home in small groups over the next ten-days, a dejected, demoralized mass of men who could not understand that their defeat had less to do with valor than with tactics.

The Council of Karinth did understand that point, however. Much to Nelson's surprise, Periclites was ecstatic.

"The war will continue next year, my friend, under your direction," the old man told the returning commander. "You are to be the next Captain General of Karinth!"

"What?" Nelson said, not believing his ears.

"Indeed. We Karinthians are a proud people. Had Philemon merely been beaten, the political pressure for a settlement of the war would have been tremendous. But he was disgraced completely, and the honor of Karinth demands vengeance. The dolt actually helped my cause by being beaten so thoroughly."

"I would think the Council would be less than happy with me. After all, I could have done something to prevent the rout."

"And disobeyed Philemon's orders? That would have betrayed ambition. No, my son, I couldn't be more proud of you. A warrior you have always been; now, I believe, you are developing a politician's instincts as well."

"By Yatar, I hope not."

"And I," Dianah said.

Nelson wheeled around to see her framed in an

archway, her graceful body both concealed and revealed by the tantalizing gown she had chosen. She seemed to glide into his arms.

"Welcome home, my warrior," she whispered in his ear. "The Council is not alone in offering you the spoils of victory."

Go to section 74.

— 43 —

"Horsemen of Star Lord Nelson, victory is ours!" Critos shouted. The last of the enemy foot archers were dropping their weapons in their haste to quit the field.

Yet Critos knew full well that his command was in serious danger. They were disordered after the brief melee, and stood not more than seventy-five yards directly in front of some eight hundred enemy cavalry!

Still, those cavalry weren't moving, yet.

What now, Critos wondered. What does it take to get them to move?

Directly to the west, the enemy slingers nervously eyed their flank. They were in loose order—they could easily be ridden down.

"Horsemen! Regroup! Regroup on me," Critos shouted.

"By all the gods, that is enough!" stormed Lord General Hectris. "I'll not have my entire front ridden down by gnats! Aides!"

"My lord," several aides answered, snapping to attention.

"You! Ride to Commander Philemon. His horse will charge at once. At once, do you hear me? Straight at their pikes—I doubt this impertinent rabble will stand against an honest charge!"

“My lord!”

“The rest of you, pass this order. The entire army will advance as Philemon charges, pivoting on its right. We’ll throw this rabble straight into the river!”

“My lord general! Hail!” the aides shouted as they spurred away with Hectris’ new orders.

Go to section 47.

— 44 —

“Flying catapults!” Nelson cried. “Prepare to follow the cavalry across the bridge. Cavalry, form for crossing! Officers, to me!”

Quickly, Nelson explained his plan to his troop commanders. “The cavalry will form in one mass and charge in a long column across the bridge, catching the Delphian First Cavalry as it wheels against our own First Pikes. The flying catapults will follow the cavalry across, then move slightly to their right, facing due north down the enemy’s open left flank. The catapults will open fire as soon as they are in position.

“Once our horsemen have finished the Delphian cavalry, we’ll reform and zigzag across to catch the enemy’s horse archers. They should already be softened up by our catapult fire. Then we’ll move down their line in a zigzag pattern, letting our catapults have a chance to fire before our horses hit each of their units in turn.

“As each enemy formation breaks, the catapults should advance to close the range.

“Any questions?”

“My lord?” the commander of the catapult force said. “What if our pikes rout before your horseman can make their presence felt?”

A good question, Nelson thought. And he knew the answer as well as the man who asked the question.

"A soldier's duty is sometimes to die where he's told, Jason," Nelson said softly.

The grizzled veteran smiled. "My lord general! Hail!" he responded, a grin spreading on his battered, tanned face.

Nelson's horsemen were formed just in time. As he took his place at the head of the massed double troop, Nelson saw the Delphian cavalry begin its turn, moving at a walk.

"For Karinth, and for glory!" Nelson cried, unslinging his M-16. "Charge!"

Nelson's charging cavalry have a Manpower of 2 and a Melee value of 5. They fight on Chart C.

The Delphian cavalry have a Manpower of 1 and a Melee value of 5. They fight on Chart E.

If Nelson's force wins, go to section 46.

If Nelson's force loses, go to section 64.

— 45 —

"Look there!" the Lord General Hectris called to his staff. "See? They flee, like chaff in the wind! Imagine, charging cavalry, even light cavalry, scattered by a handful of archers who weren't even deployed!"

"My lord, the battle is only beginning," an aide replied. "Perhaps their next attack—"

"Their next attack? Bah! We were fools to be so fearful of this so-called 'star lord.' He has shown us no more than three hundred men. He can't be hiding more than a thousand or two behind those hills. We have him."

"My lord general, what are your orders?"

"Send word to Commander Philemon to charge at once. He will ride down the fleeing remnants of the

enemy cavalry and then take the rise if he can. Tell him to charge straight at their pikes. I doubt they'll stand. As Philemon charges, the entire army will advance, pivoting on its right. We'll roll over this rabble, or drown them in the river."

"My lord general, hail!"

Go to section 47.

— 46 —

Nelson spurred across the bridge ahead of his charging horsemen, firing sporadically from the M-16, leading his wave of screaming warriors toward the enemy flank. One enemy fell, then another, and soon the entire enemy formation was in disarray. Some enemy turned to face their flank while others, not yet aware of the danger, cantered on toward the Karinthian pikes to their front.

Nelson slowed his gait to allow his galloping men to overtake him. After all, he reasoned, a general's place is in command, and you can't command from the midst of a melee.

The fighting was sharp and brief. Nelson's horsemen crashed into the disorganized mass of the enemy in short waves, driving a highway of blood and death through the confused Delphians. After less than a minute those Delphians who were still alive broke and fled, a routed column flowing through the gap between the enemy's First Archers and First Pikes.

"Reform! Reform!" Nelson shouted. He glanced to the north to check the status of the friendly First Pikes. The rout of the enemy cavalry interrupted the stream of arrows that had been pelting their flank. Still, they were hard pressed. If they should break now . . .

Roll a Morale check for the Karinthian First Pikes. Their current Morale value is 7. (This is lower than the normal

value of 9, to reflect the effects of the enemy's flanking fire).

If the total of the dice is 7 or less, go to section 66.

If the total of the dice is 8 or more, go to section 65.

— 47 —

The thundering, sudden movement of the Karinthian cavalry shook the ground—Critos could feel the hoofbeats of the enemy despite the pounding hooves of his own horses. He saw the forward surge of the Karinthian horses, eight hundred lancers eight ranks deep, flushed with the thrill of success.

"Horsemen, quarter turn right and halt!" he shouted, his order transmitted more by his broad arm gestures than his voice. His men wheeled as ordered, reined in their horses and raised their bows.

"One volley on my command, then retire toward the gap, halting midway to fire once again!"

Atop the rise Nelson, too, saw the Karinthian charge develop.

"Gaius! Send messengers at once to the light cavalry and the remaining horse archers. The light cavalry will swing around the west of the rise and charge the enemy horse flank, at my flag signal. The horse archers will move into the gap and prepare to fire into the enemy's right flank—but not until I signal. Nothing is to happen without my signal!"

"My lord!" Gaius rushed off to dispatch riders with the orders.

"Catapults, quarter turn left and prepare to fire!" Nelson shouted. "Doron, Balquhor! Pikes prepare to receive cavalry!"

The catapult crews busied themselves turning the multiple cranks and gears that allowed their strange

devices to rotate, changing their aim without the need to move the machine's base. Their turn accomplished, they loaded the first of their twenty-pound stones.

In the following series of battle sections, each casualty inflicted on a unit subtracts 1 from its Manpower. (The Manpower values have been uniformly divided by 10; thus the Third Karinthian Cavalry has a Manpower value of 80.)

Every casualty inflicted on a unit of Nelson's force reduces that unit's Morale value by 1. Every 10 casualties inflicted on a Karinthian unit reduces that unit's Morale value by 1.

Critos' horse archers should be reduced by the losses in its previous combat(s).

Each time a unit's Morale value is reduced by 1 or more, roll the two dice again. If the total of the dice is greater than the unit's current Morale value, the unit routs. If not, the unit continues in the combat.

Now, resolve the first fire attack by Critos' horse archers on the Third Cavalry. Critos' horse archers fire on Chart C. Record the results of this fire and go to section 48.

Manpower, Ordnance, Melee, and Morale values for all units are given on the Troop Roster for the First Battle of Karinth on pages 177–180.

— 48 —

“Fire!” Critos shouted.

A flurry of arrows arced skyward and down into the mass of the charging Karinthian horses. A few horses

and men screamed in panic and pain as the arrows struck home, but the mass of horsemen moved steadily forward, gathering speed.

"Retire!" Critos ordered.

His horse archers turned and fled at the gallop, keeping the distance between themselves and the Karinthian horses. Critos rode to the head of the fleeing lines of horse archers and led them toward the gap between the rise, where Nelson stood with the catapults, and the low hill.

Glancing back, Critos saw there was just time to turn, fire again, and flee before the Karinthian cavalry was upon them.

"Halt!" he ordered, his hand shooting into the air. "Turn and fire!"

Nelson watched tensely as his horse archers stopped in mid-flight and turned to fire again. It's time to support them, he decided.

"Catapults! Gunners, mark the enemy cavalry; range two hundred. Fire!"

The combined Attack Strength of the catapults and the horse archers is 100. Resolve this fire attack now on Chart B.

(Note: Critos has probably taken significant losses by this point. There is even a chance he may have been eliminated by now. His fire is "uncoordinated" and therefore ineffective.)

If the Karinthian cavalry rout, go to section 49.

If they don't rout, go to section 50.



— 49 —

The huge stones and the second flight of arrows struck the Karinthians at almost the same instant. The stones tore gaps in the Karinthian ranks; the boulders crashed down on the tightly-packed horsemen, crushing up to a dozen at a time. The horses behind those who were hit became entangled in the boulders and the fallen horses and men. The Karinthian mounts reared in panic.

“Steady men! Onward!” Philemon shouted, as if his voice commands could have any effect. Then his own mount was struck by an arrow. As the horse fell over, Philemon leapt off, only to see a boulder crashing down toward him. He rolled to dodge the huge missile. It smashed to the ground, crushing his left arm. Philemon tried to rise, but fell unconscious from shock and pain.

“Philemon is slain!”

The cry rippled through the ranks of the Karinthian horsemen, turning fear to panic and panic to rout. For a moment the horsemen milled about in confusion; then, as the boulders continued to fall from the sky, they turned and galloped, a routed mass heading back toward their own lines.

Atop the rise Nelson barked orders.

“Catapults, quarter turn right! Reload! Fire at the leading formation of enemy pikes!

“Gaius! Order the light cavalry to charge the left flank of their left pike formation. The horse archers will advance and fire into the right flank of their right pike formation!”

The commander of the Karinthian First Pikes watched, amazed, as Third Cavalry routed, leaving the right flank of the entire pike advance exposed. The light

"Steady! Steady!" Nelson urged.

Doron stepped to the front of the pike ranks. "Hold for your honor!" he shouted.

The pikemen continued to hold. Meanwhile, the rear ranks of the enemy formation became more and more jammed together as the frustrated, enraged lancers jostled one another, trying to get to the front rank, where they could fight. Those in the front rank became packed so tightly they couldn't maneuver.

Then all hell broke loose on the Karinthian flanks.

Nelson's light cavalry crashed into their left from around the rise. Critos, now at the head of all three sections of Nelson's horse archers, poured volley after volley into the Karinthian right from the slope leading down to the gap.

"Now, Balquhor! Second Pikes about face, pivot, and fill in behind First Pikes!" Nelson cried.

As Balquhor's men came to the aid of their comrades, the star lord checked the progress of the enemy's pikes. Their skirmish line halted as it saw the light cavalry swing around, but the pike wedge was still advancing slowly, trying to come to its own cavalry's aid. They were almost in catapult range. . . .

Continue the fight. Nelson's forces attack twice at the start of each round. First, all three horse archer sections fire on Chart B, total Manpower of 15 with their Ordnance value doubled to 4 each for flanking fire.

Then, after Karinthian casualties are noted and any Morale checks made, both pike units and the light cavalry make a melee attack. Double the Melee value of the light cavalry for a charging flank attack. Total the Attack Strengths of the pikes and the cavalry, and resolve the melee as one attack on Chart B.

The Karinthian cavalry fight only Nelson's pikes. They continue to melee on Chart F. All casualties they inflict come off of First Pikes. If First Pikes are eliminated, excess casualties come from Second Pikes.

Remember to make the Morale value adjustments and Morale checks as instructed in section 47.

Continue the fight until the Karinthian cavalry routs, or one of Nelson's pike unit's routs, or all of Nelson's pikes are eliminated.

If Nelson's forces win, go to section 54.

If the Karinthian cavalry win, go to section 55.

— 53 —

The wave of horsemen came crashing toward Doron's pikemen. The huge man urged his troops to hold steady, and Nelson shouted encouragement from the point of the square. This was it, and Nelson knew it.

Nelson's troops held. The Karinthians' charging horses veered off at the last moment: no horse will willingly impale itself, no matter how well-trained. The lancers seethed in frustration; most were unable to get close enough to the pikemen to use their twelve-foot lances.

But only moments after the first rank of horses turned, the succeeding ranks piled in behind them. Chaos ensued as some of the front-rank horses were crowded onto the pikes. Inevitably this allowed the second rank of lancers to strike a few blows.

Casualties mounted on both sides.

"Steady! Steady!" Nelson urged.

Doron stepped to the front of the pike ranks. "Hold for your honor!" he shouted.

The pikemen returned his shout, "For honor, and for Doron!"

Then a sudden inspiration seized the reformed giant. Not ten feet away he saw the enemy commander, re-

splendent in his gold-trimmed white cloak, feinting and striking. Doron shouldered his pike and hurled the giant weapon like a spear, knocking Philemon from his horse, badly wounded. Philemon writhed on the ground, trying to avoid being trampled by his own men. A brave pikeman broke ranks and slashed at him with his dagger. The dust rose, and when it passed, both men lay still.

"Philemon is slain!"

The cry rippled through the ranks of the Karinthian horsemen, turning frustration to fear and fear to panic. For a moment the cavalry milled about in confusion.

"They are ours!" Doron cried. "Pikemen, advance!"

The emboldened pikemen took two steps forward as a cohesive unit, and the enemy cavalry broke. The horsemen streamed down the rise, fleeing for their lives.

Seeing the rout, and watching the slow advance of the enemy pikes, Nelson barked orders.

"Catapults, quarter turn right! Reload! Fire at the leading formation of enemy pikes!"

"Gaius! Order the light cavalry to charge the left flank of their left pike formation. The horse archers will advance and fire into the right flank of their right pike formation!"

The commander of the Karinthian First Pikes watched, amazed, as Third Cavalry routed, leaving the right flank of the entire pike advance exposed. The light troops began to melt away too; without cavalry support, they couldn't stand against the enemy horses which now appeared from behind the rise. A second body of hostile cavalry, horse archers, poured through a gap between the rise and the low hill.

The commander halted the advance of First Pikes. The other two pike formation commanders didn't

grasp the developing situation as quickly; they advanced their men adjacent to First Pikes, then halted as well.

Critos saw his opportunity. His horse archers closed on the exposed right flank of the enemy, coming to within twenty yards and firing by lines, level volleys rather than arcing fire. The Karinthian pikemen began falling.

The catapults released a volley directly into the center of First Pikes.

"Retreat in good order," the commander of First Pikes urged.

The men of the Third Pikes saw the First begin to retreat. At the same time, they realized the enemy light cavalry would hit them square in the flank. From the sides and rear of the formation men began to run toward the rear.

"Catapults, fire everything you've got, as fast as you can!" Nelson ordered.

The star lord rushed to the front crest of the rise, lowered his M-16, and unloaded a full burst into the front of First Pikes.

"Star weapons!"

The cry ran through the Karinthian lines. The field was small enough that suddenly every man saw death coming from every direction. Within five minutes the Karinthian army was a disorganized mass of men, fleeing for their lives.

"Pursue! Pursue! Victory is ours!"

Nelson waved his M-16 in the air as his pikes formed to charge down the rise.

Go to section 56.

— 54 —

The top of the rise became a perfect killing ground. The Karinthians fell in scores, beset by the cavalry from their left, the pikemen to their front, and the withering archery fire from their right.

Two pikemen began yelling that they saw Philemon being struck down.

“Philemon is slain!”

The cry rippled through the ranks of the Karinthian horsemen, turning fear to panic and panic to rout. For a moment the horsemen milled about in confusion; then, as Doron led the pikes forward, pressing the advantage, those who could escape the slaughter fled, a routed mass heading back toward their own lines.

Seeing the rout, Nelson barked orders.

“Catapults, reload! Fire at the leading formation of enemy pikes!

“Gaius! Order the light cavalry to reform and advance on the left flank of their left pike formation. The horse archers will advance and fire into the right flank of their right pike formation!”

The commander of the Karinthian First Pikes watched, amazed, as Third Cavalry routed, leaving the right flank of the entire pike advance exposed. The light troops began to melt away too; without cavalry support, they couldn't stand against the enemy horses which now turned on them, advancing against their left. A second body, the enemy horse archers, advanced toward the opposite flank.

The commander halted the advance of First Pikes. The other two pike-formation leaders didn't understand the developing situation as quickly; they advanced their

men adjacent to First Pikes, then halted as well.

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"Pursue! Pursue! Victory is ours!"

Nelson waved his M-16 in the air as his pikes formed to charge down the rise.

Go to section 56.

— 55 —

As Nelson studied the enemy pike formations' advance, he failed to see the impetuous Balquhor rush to the fray in the front ranks, leaving his own unit. Then, disaster struck in a sequence of events.

First, a Karinthian lance was jammed through Doron's barrel chest. Blood spurted from the big man's mouth. For a moment Doron stood grasping the shaft of the spear that impaled him. Then he fell backward, dead.

The pikemen around him were gripped by fear at the sight of their leader's death. First one dropped his pike, then two more, and then . . .

Then Balquhor rushed to avenge his fallen friend. He shouldered his pike and drove it into the chest of the man who killed Doron, but in so doing, stepped forward two paces. An enemy lance was quickly plunged through his side.

The pikemen, seeing both leaders slain, stepped back, causing the men behind them to lose the proper angle of their pikes. The crowded, milling front ranks of the enemy dashed into the sudden opening. The gap grew. . . .

"Rally! The Star Lord Nelson is here!" Nelson screamed, suddenly seeing this disastrous turn of events. He raised the M-16, ready to spend precious ammo to restore the situation.

But it was too late. The pike line suddenly broke. The flood of enemy horses poured through. Nelson was cut down as he fired his first burst.

Go to section 29.

— 56 —

"And I say we need a Captain General who can win battles, who can win wars, for the glory of Karinth!" The old man thundered his speech at his fellows on the Council, his thin red lips belying the depth and power of his voice.

"But, Periclites," the sly Aristides countered, "surely you do not suggest that this great city should surrender to the demands of a bandit lord? Really, it is too amusing."

Aristides looked around the Council chamber, waiting for laughter. There was only silence.

"Come, come!" Aristides tried again. "He has only beaten old Hectris!"

"Yes," boomed Hectris. "He has beaten me. Once. Thanks to the insubordination of your candidate for Captain General, Philemon."

"Philemon fought honorably in that engagement!" Aristides shrieked.

"Enough!" Periclites shouted, standing. "It is enough. I demand that the Council agree to the appointment of the Star Lord Nelson as Captain General for the coming term."

"And his army of bandits? Shall we give them housing within the city walls? Pray tell, Periclites, who shall protect us from the core of this new Captain General's army?" Aristides asked sarcastically.

"His bandit army," interjected the usually silent Orphos, "must be disarmed. The Council will provide land for them to settle."

"Then it is done. Let us vote," Periclites said.

Nelson's force had pursued old Hectris to the very gates of Karinth. The fleeing army had barely gotten inside ahead of Critos' horsemen, and Nelson had per-

sonally flung another verbal gauntlet at the city from the back of his steed in front of the main gate. But he'd also extended an olive branch. He knew the wealthy men of Karinth might decide to have a skilled fighter on their side, inside the city, rather than aiding their enemies on the outside.

Karinth was ruled by three classes: the merchants, the artisans, and the landowners. At the time of Nelson's arrival, the merchants favored war with Delphos, a major rival in the Sunlands trade. The artisans preferred to let the conflict simmer, and the landowners didn't want the conflict at all. However, the merchant class's monopoly on building stone, which they used to impose a trade embargo on Delphos, made war inevitable. In that case, the landowners would as soon take the offensive rather than see a Delphian army marching across their fertile fields.

"And that means," Nelson told Critos, "that they'll hire us. Two of their biggest generals are under a cloud: Hectris, because we beat him; and Philemon, because the defeat just might be attributable to him in the popular view."

Negotiations started swiftly, but went on and on. In the end Nelson was only half right.

"Karinth is the richest, most cultured, most civilized City State in the Sunlands," Periclites explained to Nelson. The two stood on a marble balcony overlooking beautiful gardens below, and with a view of the soaring mountains to the west. Nelson had become a semi-permanent house guest of Periclites' as the negotiations dragged on.

From what he'd seen, the old man was right. In fact, Karinth was the most civilized place Nelson had yet seen on Tran. Its spacious markets offered fine wares from as far as Rome and from unnamed regions even farther south. The city's temples were in the ancient Greek style, as pleasing to the eye as to the spirit. And its wealthy

citizens lived lives of grace and refinement. Even the household slaves seemed well-treated.

Militarily, the city was virtually impregnable. It nestled high in the hills which rose abruptly to become the mountains and the Westcarp. Access was up winding, hilly roads, easily defensible against a force much larger than any of the neighboring cities could raise. Siege was almost unthinkable; Karinth's leading position in the Sunlands trade made allies inevitable should the city be threatened.

And there was another attraction as well. Her name was Dianah, and she was Periclites' daughter. Beauty, grace, and charm reached a kind of classical perfection in her, Nelson thought. The fact was, he had fallen in love with her almost from the first, and old Periclites hadn't failed to notice this fact.

That Dianah was available, Nelson considered a small miracle. Apparently the local lads liked their women to be subservient and obedient; Karinth hadn't reached the women's lib stage yet. And Dianah couldn't fit that mold. She was intelligent and articulate, almost unforgivable sins in a Karinthian wife. Worse, she was independent in spirit, and expected no less from those she liked and admired.

She came to return Nelson's affection. She had never before met a man who would let her speak her mind, and who would answer her with logic rather than commands or rebukes. Nelson seemed comfortable with her independence, and that made him all the more attractive in her sight.

Periclites' attraction was hardly romantic. As the wealthiest merchant on the Council, and perhaps the wealthiest man in Karinth, he favored war with Delphos and wanted that war to be won. He thought Nelson could do the job, after the treatment old Hectris had received at the star lord's hands.

"We are near to agreement," Periclites continued as Nelson admired the view and sipped from a silver goblet

of the area's finest red wine. "In fact, the Council is prepared to offer you the position of Captain General of Karinth, commander of the city's entire military force, with only one condition."

Nelson braced himself. In the ten-days he had passed in the man's home, he had seldom heard Periclites speak so directly. The condition must be a real clinker.

"Okay, what is it?" Nelson asked.

Periclites smiled. This young general was very good on the battlefield, no doubt about that. But he was too direct, and lacking political subtlety. He would need a political mentor to succeed in the high command. Oh well, the old man thought. One could do worse than to have a Captain General as a son-in-law.

"The wealth and culture of our city flow naturally from our way of life as a free people. The Assembly allows every citizen a forum to speak his mind. The Council, elected by the Assembly, balances the interests of our various classes to arrive at policies—"

"I know, I know. Okay, you're a sort of democracy, or a republic—and a very corrupt one, I might add. I've sat in your Assembly and listened to the open jokes about vote-buying."

"Consider it a means of assisting the survival of a strong class with a vested interest in keeping the city alive," Periclites said, grinning.

"Get to the condition," Nelson grunted.

"A republic must have a military loyal to the state, not to any one man. For this reason, all military officers are nominated by the Council and approved by the Assembly."

"So?"

"The Council could not nominate a man if it felt the core of the army would be loyal to his person, rather than to the interests of the city."

Periclites paused, hoping the implication would sink in. It did.

"My people . . ."

"Must be disbanded, disarmed. The Council will provide land in the plains for them to settle as part of your . . . fee."

"I can't."

"You must. Or you can go elsewhere. Do not think that because you have won one victory over a force from Karinth that your tiny band could survive against the city's power forever. Sooner or later numbers would tell, even against your superior skill, my son."

"I swore an oath . . ." Nelson noted the use of the word "son"; apparently Periclites approved of his romance with Dianah.

"And they can leave of their own free will. This is a good thing for them, to lay down the burden of arms and take land as free men. It is more than they could have hoped when they first tried to ambush you."

Nelson looked at the steep mountains rising to the clouds above. After a long silence he said, "I'll talk to them. But I'll have one condition of my own."

"Name it, my son."

"Your war with Delphos will have to wait until next year. Stall it however you can, but your army won't be ready until then."

Critos didn't mind having a village named after him. Gaius was perfectly happy with the administrative work of running the place, and Balquhor and Doron found they almost enjoyed the mentally taxing job of being the Captain General's personal police force in the hamlet of Critos.

"The rest of the army has settled in pretty well," Critos told Nelson. "After all, they only turned to banditry out of desperation, and they turned to soldiering to get out of being bandits. This is a bigger chance than any of us have had before, and we're grateful."

"Still feels like I'm welching on a deal," Nelson said.

"No, my lord general," Critos said with a grin. "The bargain we struck has been more than fulfilled. Fifteen hundred people with their honor restored is no mean accomplishment."

Go to section 74.

— 57 —

We've had it, Nelson thought as the enemy continued to advance.

"Prepare to receive infantry attack!" he shouted. "Stand firm, men!"

"My lord, the light cavalry are ready."

"Tell them now, Gaius! Tell them now!"

As Nelson spoke, the enemy's arrows flew in clouds to descend on his own First and Second Pikes. Seconds later the enemy First Pike hit the corner.

For the first round of this fight, follow these instructions:

1. *The Karinthian First, Second, and Third Archers fire as one combined Attack Strength on Chart E. Casualties are distributed evenly between Nelson's First and Second Pikes. Make any required Morale checks.*

2. *Nelson's Second Pikes melee against the Karinthian First Pikes, attacking on Chart D. Note casualties and make any necessary Morale checks.*

3. *Karinthian First Pikes melee Nelson's Second Pikes on Chart D. If Nelson's Second Pikes have routed, the attack is made against his First Pikes. Note casualties and make any necessary Morale checks.*

Continue the fight, repeating steps 2 and 3, until Karinthian First Pikes rout, both of Nelson's pike units rout, or two rounds have been completed.

If Nelson's pikes rout (or are wiped out), go to section 58.

If the Karinthian First Pikes rout (or are wiped out), go to section 60.

If neither side is routed or wiped out, go to section 59.

— 58 —

The hail of arrows stung Nelson's forces, the enemy's infantry charge truly awesome. Nelson retired behind his lines—a commander's duty is not to die in the front ranks—and shouted encouragement to his men.

“Stand fast! Our cavalry comes! Stand fast!”

But in his heart Nelson knew this battle was lost. Using the horse archers to draw off the enemy's left-flank cavalry was a mistake; those horse archers were sorely missed now!

Nelson's men fought valiantly, slaying many of the enemy, but they were badly outnumbered and he knew they couldn't last much longer. In another minute, two at the most, the enemy's two additional pike formations would hit the line on the flanks of his First Pikes. The only remote hope was the light cavalry.

But the cavalry didn't charge in time. His men watched, horrified, as both Balquhor and Doron, the commanders of his First and Second Pikes, were pierced and killed exhorting them to their duty.

Exhausted, frightened, and fearful the battle was lost, Nelson's remaining men gave way. The line wavered, then broke. The enemy flood washed over Nelson as he vainly fired round after round from the M-16.

Go to section 29.

— 59 —

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Nelson glanced to his right just as his horsemen emerged from the gap to crash into the side of the Karinthian First Pikes.

If this doesn't break the enemy's formation, he thought, all is lost.

Continue the melee for one more round. Double the Melee value of Nelson's light cavalry for a flank attack and charge. Combine their Attack Strength with that of Nelson's Second Pikes (First Pikes, if Second have routed or been eliminated). Nelson's forces melee on Chart C. The enemy First Pikes melee on Chart D.

If Nelson's forces all rout or are eliminated, go to section 61.

If the enemy First Pikes rout, go to section 62.

If both sides still have unrouted forces after one round of combat, go to section 63.

— 60 —

Nelson's Second Pikes, under Balquhor's command, fought like demons, inspired not only by Nelson's shouts of encouragement but also by Balquhor's example. The huge brute of a man waded into the thick of the fighting, mindless of personal safety, wielding his pike almost with the ease with which lesser men would thrust with a longsword. He stabbed, drew back, stabbed and slew again.

The Karinthian pikemen hadn't expected flying rocks, star weapons, and now bandits who should have run but instead stood and fought with undinted determination. As their losses mounted, men begin to slip away from the Karinthian flanks and rear ranks, until suddenly the entire formation broke.

Lord General Hectris sputtered and stormed in rage and amazement as he saw the flying boulders shred his First Pikes like a wet parchment. He exploded when he saw his troops finally collide with the enemy, only to turn and flee. Little did he know that the horror show had just begun.

The two other Karinthian pike units naturally halted their own advance, uncertain of how to plug the large gap left by the rout of First Pikes. To make matters worse, First Pikes routed right over Second Archers and Second Swordsmen, carrying them to the rear as well. First Archers stalled, the men looking around, ready to bolt.

A shout of victory erupted from Nelson's troops on the hill. Nelson saw that this was the moment, the crucial moment. The enemy was far from beaten, but if this rout of one unit could be turned into something more . . .

Nelson remembered something Napoleon once said about the relationship of the moral and the physical.

"Second Pikes, face south!" Nelson ordered. "Cataapults, fire for effect at remaining enemy pike formations. Gaius! Order the light cavalry to charge the flank of the pike formation on the enemy's right!"

Nelson paused, waiting for his orders to take effect. Soon the stones began crashing into the remaining two enemy pike blocks and the light cavalry galloped from the gap, headed for the enemy flank.

Now, now is the moment, Nelson thought.

"First and Second Pikes, at the enemy, charge!"

Nelson ran pell-mell down the slope of the rise toward the corner of the enemy's Second Pikes, his M-16 spitting death as he charged.

"For Nelson, our honor, and our future," his pikemen shouted, and seconds later followed him in waves.

Nelson had timed the moment properly. Both enemy pike formations, confused, their archers already starting to run, stones pelting them from the sky, their flanks exposed, broke and fled.

"Lord Commander," an aide to Philemon, Commander of the Karinthian Third Cavalry, shouted. "The army routs. Only a horse charge can stop the enemy. See, there! He overextends himself. We outnumber his whole force!"

"Young man, I am a commander in the Army of Karinth. My duty is to obey orders. The Lord General Hectris specifically ordered this unit not to charge without his signal."

"But my lord, the battle will be lost!"

And so, thought Philemon, will Hectris' position in the Council.

"Retire in good order," Philemon ordered his men.

Go to section 56.

— 61 —

The light cavalry crashed into the enemy flank, dealing death, but too late. The enemy's pikemen withstood the charge and their front ranks continued to press the attack against Nelson's thinning line.

Doron and Balquhor, Nelson's pike commanders, both fell attempting to rally their men. When a Karinthian pike was jammed through Balquhor's skull, the line suddenly snapped.

Nelson went down firing his M-16, calling the men to rally.

Go to section 29.

— 62 —

Nelson's light cavalry gave him his miracle.

Hooves thundering and riders screaming "For Nelson, honor, and the future!" they plunged into the flanks of Karinthian First Pikes, turning that unit's almost certain victory into sudden defeat.

The Karinthian pikemen hadn't expected flying rocks, star weapons, bandits who should run but instead stood and fought like demons, and now an attack against their flank. As the Karinthians' losses mounted, men began to slip away from the flanks and rear ranks, until suddenly the entire formation broke.

Lord General Hectris sputtered and stormed in rage and amazed frustration as he saw First Pikes drop their weapons, turn and flee. Little did he know that the horror show had just begun.

The two other Karinthian pike units naturally halted

their own advance, uncertain of how to plug the large gap left by the rout of First Pikes. To make matters worse, First Pikes routed right over Second Archers and Second Swordsmen, carrying both those units to the rear as well. First Archers stalled, the men looking around, ready to bolt.

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"The entire line will charge as a flying wedge. At their flanks!" Nelson ordered. "Catapults, fire for effect at fleeing enemy formations. Gaius! Order the light cavalry to reform, then pursue!"

Now, now is the moment, Nelson thought.

"First and Second Pikes, at the enemy, charge!"

Nelson ran pell-mell down the slope of the rise, toward the corner of the enemy's Second Pikes, his M-16 spitting death as he charged.

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"But my lord, the battle will be lost!"

And so, thought Philemon, will Hectris' position in the Council.

"Retire in good order," Philemon ordered his men.

Go to section 56.

— 63 —

The Star Lord Nelson's army battled valiantly to the end. Two more enemy pike formations hit the thin pike line and crashed through. Nelson's light cavalry was taken in its flank by a charge of the enemy's Third Cavalry.

"My lord, the battle is lost," Gaius shouted. "You must give the order."

Yeah, thought Nelson. Have to give the order.

"Every man for himself!" Nelson shouted.

He died proud; despite that final order, his bandit army chose to go down fighting, his men purchasing the name "soldier" with their blood.

Go to section 29.

— 64 —

Nelson spurred ahead of his charging horsemen, firing sporadically from the M-16 as his wave of screaming warriors approached the enemy flank. One enemy fell, then another, and soon the entire enemy formation was in disarray as some men turned to their flank while others, not yet aware of the danger to their flank and rear, cantered on toward the Karinthian pikes to their front.

But Vothan the Chooser was not with Nelson that day.

Too late he realized that he should fall back, let his charging wave overtake him—a general's place is in command, not at the head of a melee. Nelson slowed his pace to let his men catch up.

At that moment a desperate Delphian horseman, seeing ruin riding down upon his entire unit, reacted with unusual initiative. He spurred his mount forward, and as Nelson turned to wave his own men forward, charged the Commander.

The leading lines of Nelson's cavalry watched in horror as the enemy spear pierced Nelson's side, emerging, gore-covered, from between his right ribs. The Commander fell from his horse.

The charging horsemen wavered. The Delphians, trained veterans, seized the moment to overcome their confusion. First in a handful, then in clusters of ever-increasing size, they turned and came riding down on Nelson's men. Nelson's force, demoralized, broke with the rest of the Karinthian army.

Go to section 29.

— 65 —

To his horror, Nelson saw men starting to stream away from the ranks of First Pikes even as his loyal cavalryman halted their pursuit of the enemy horsemen and rallied to him, trying to reform for another charge.

It all happened in less than a minute. The Karinthian pikemen routed in disorganized clusters, intermixing with the cavalry, preventing them from forming ranks. As First Pikes routed, Second and Third wavered, then began falling back, with more and more men deserting their ranks as they retreated.

The coup de grace was the charge of the Delphian Second Cavalry, 2000 strong. Their mass broke through the vainly rallying Karinthian Second Cavalry and

ploughed into the retreating pike masses, sowing destruction as they mowed the flanked men down in ranks.

Nelson stood his ground, vainly trying to rally his men, who saw as well as he that the battle was lost. In the end he died with a cluster of loyal men as the enemy waves converged from all sides.

Go to section 29.

— 66 —

First Pikes wavered, and a few men streamed to the rear, but the mass held its ground.

Nelson smiled—a grim smile of determination.

He wheeled his horse again, and saw Jason placing the last of the catapults into position on the flanks of the enemy's First Horse Archers.

"Fire!" he cried, waving a hand signal. Jason looked up, saw the signal, and acknowledged it with a wave of his own. There still wasn't much time; the enemy horse archers were turning their bows away from First Pikes to pour their volleys at Nelson's cavalry, which now stood reformed to their front.

But the Delphians reacted too slowly. "Fire!" Jason cried to his catapult crews, echoing Nelson's order. Boulders flew into the sky and came crashing down on the ranks of the horse archers. They loosed only one ragged volley as death rained from the sky, crushing men and horses alike. The Delphian mounts, unaccustomed to such strange fire, reared in panic. Their riders did little to control them; men and animals alike were fearful of the deadly fire from the flank.

Jason's second volley was wasted; his target was already running. The rout of the Delphian First Horse Archers left open the flank of the Second, and Nelson wasted not a second.

"Aide!" he called. "Take a message to Jason. Tell him

the flying catapults are to advance due north as planned, at once."

"My lord!" The aide galloped away.

"Horsemen of Karinth, at the enemy bowmen's flank, charge!" Nelson cried.

Once again the Karinthian mass moved forward. Nelson guided the well-drilled ranks into a gentle turn to the left and brought them crashing into the left flank of the Delphian Second Horse Archers.

All remaining Manpower of Nelson's cavalry attacks with a Melee value of 5. Double the Manpower value to reflect the effect of the flank charge. Nelson's men fight on Chart C.

The enemy has a Manpower value of 1 and a Melee value of 2. The enemy fights on Chart D.

Continue the fight until one side is eliminated.

If Nelson's force wins, go to section 68.

If Nelson's force loses, go to section 67.

— 67 —

Damn! Nelson thought. Vothan the Chooser must want me today!

The charge, which had started so well, was turning into a muddle.

The nearest enemy stood their ground, slung their bows, and meleed with short swords against Nelson's well-trained lancers. Those enemy farther down the ranks, not immediately in the melee, loosed fire as individuals on the rear ranks of Nelson's men.

Then, suddenly, the enemy horsemen loosened and

scattered, scampering off just out of reach of the cavalry's lances, firing arrows at individual men.

It's their horses, Nelson realized. They're lighter, faster, maneuver more quickly.

Then an arrow pierced his chest. Vothan the Chooser had spoken.

"The Star Lord Nelson is hit!" came a cry from his men. For a moment the lancers paused in their bloody work. It was a pause from which they never recovered. Feathered shafts and cold steel bit into them. They died with the rest of the Karinthian army.

Go to section 29.

— 68 —

Nelson's trained lancers cut through the Delphian Second Horse Archers as if they weren't even there. The surprised archers, taken in flank, scattered in panic as the lancers pursued them, stabbing men from their horses, lances biting into backs.

The momentum of the charge was so great that Nelson saw his men literally go through the enemy unit and straight into the front of the Delphian First Archers.

Foot archers in the Sunlands armies were never meant to stand against charging cavalry, and the Delphian First saw no reason to change this time-honored understanding. A few loosed arrows before running; most dropped any impediment and fled.

Now, training will tell the story, Nelson thought. If my men can be recalled from pursuing their broken enemies, they'll rest on the flank of the enemy's First Pikes. The flying catapults were already rumbling forward in the victorious cavalry's wake, the gunners anticipating the glorious target they would see when they reached the direct flank of the enemy pike mass at a range of less than a hundred yards.

“Reform!” Nelson screamed at the top of his lungs, trying to make himself heard over the din of the rout. “Reform!” An aide with a trumpet began blowing the command signal to halt and reform the victorious horsemen.

Nelson's light cavalry have a Morale value of 10, currently lowered to 8 to reflect the heady effects of a victorious charge. Cavalrymen pursuing a routing enemy are notoriously difficult to recall.

Roll the two dice. If the result is 8 or less, go to section 70.

If the result is 9 or more, go to section 69.

— 69 —

Nelson watched in horrified disbelief as his great victory, so near at hand, dissipated in a cloud of dust moving northward. His men were too fired up, he realized; they ignored the recall. Filled with battle lust, they sped after their fleeing foes, killing enemies who no longer had the will to fight.

But there were other enemies who did have the will to fight. The Delphian First Pikes held firm despite the rout on their flanks and continued to press the Karinthians. The Delphian Second Cavalry charged, passing through the Second Karinthian Cavalry as easily as Nelson's men had sliced through the horse archers just minutes before. Suddenly a fresh, still-charging enemy formation was rampaging in the Karinthian rear.

This was too much for the Karinthian First Pikes. The men had been heartened by the star lord's victories on the flanks, but even they knew that a fresh threat from the rear could not be answered. The great pike block broke, and within minutes the Karinthian army was a routed mass, streaming toward the bridge as the

Delphians pursued relentlessly, killing the fleeing men with lance, pike, and sword.

Nelson vainly tried to bring his flying catapults to safety across the river. He died in the horrid killing ground by the bridge, an enemy pike thrust through his belly and out the base of his skull.

Go to section 29.

— 70 —

Pride.

That's what Nelson felt.

Pride.

At the trumpet's call his zealous cavalry performed flawlessly one of the most difficult maneuvers a commander can ask of horsemen. They halted their pursuit of the fleeing foes, turned, and rallied back to their commander.

Now this, Nelson thought, is the way to soldier!

As the men formed ranks again on the flank of the enemy pikes, the flying catapults lumbered up. Jason wasted no time; as soon as the first wagon was near position, he ordered it to halt and deploy.

"Halt! Halt there! Horses to the rear. Wheel that thing around, there's your target!" he cried, wheeling his horse, barking at his exhilarated gunners.

Meanwhile, Nelson noticed that the effects of this massive rout had not gone unnoticed by the Delphian king. Before crossing the bridge, Nelson had been certain the Second Delphian Cavalry would charge the Karinthian left flank. Now he noticed that they stood their ground, no doubt while their king awaited the outcome of the pike engagement.

But his own horsemen were tired, and their horses more tired. The beasts had already charged twice, and horses are short-winded, making cavalry a fragile battle-

field instrument. As the horsemen formed their ranks, Nelson led them to stand on the north flank of the flying catapults. Perhaps, he thought, this battle can be won with firepower alone from here on out.

It would still be close, Nelson knew. The Karinthian First Pikes had suffered horrid casualties, and his success on their flank was all that had kept them from routing already.

“Jason! Aren’t those men ready to fire yet!”

“Almost ready, my lord general! We have half the units ready to fire.”

“Then let’s do it. There’s no time to lose. The other catapults can join the firing as they deploy. Fire!”

Nelson’s flying catapults have a Manpower value of 5 and an Ordnance value of 10 each. They fire on Chart B.

The enemy First Pikes do not return fire.

Roll one fire attack against the Delphian First Pikes. If this attack inflicts three or more casualties, go to section 72.

If the attack inflicts fewer than three casualties, go to section 71.

— 71 —

The gunners gleefully released the catapult beams, and the first volley of stones ripped into the flank of the enemy pike block. Men fell in clusters of scores. The center and flanks of the Delphian block wavered; a few men began to leave their positions, looking to the rear. More and more stones poured into the mass, and confusion spread in the center of the formation.



For a moment Nelson thought the devastating fire had brought victory for Karinth. But then he saw the winning volley had come moments too late.

The front ranks of the enemy's pikes held firm despite the withering fire. And the Karinthian pikes, who had fought valiantly, could stand no longer. They broke, only moments before the Delphians would certainly have turned to flee themselves.

With a shout, the survivors of the Delphian mass surged forward. With nice timing, the Delphian Second Cavalry began their charge.

In five minutes the battle was all but over. Nelson tried a desperate, exhausted charge for the bridge with his winded horsemen, hoping to hold it open so his catapult unit could escape, but it was no use. Already the fleeing masses of infantry clogged the only escape from the killing ground.

Nelson was among the last to die, his life ended by a Delphian pike that pinned his twitching body to the hard-packed ground.

Go to section 29.

— 72 —

The gunners gleefully released the catapult beams, and the first volley of stones ripped into the flank of the enemy pike block. Men fell in clusters of scores. The center and flanks of the Delphian block wavered; a few men began to leave their positions, looking to the rear. More and more stones poured into the mass, and confusion spread in the center of the formation.

As the flanking fire riddled the ranks of the enemy, the exhausted Karinthian First Pikes held firm, only their determination standing between their army and total ruin. For a moment the decision teetered in the balance.

The Delphians broke first.

"Now, horsemen, after them!" Nelson shouted, waving his M-16 high in the air, loosing a few rounds randomly into the routed mass of the enemy.

His horsemen spurred forward—not exactly at the gallop, but fast enough to drive lances into the backs of the fleeing footmen. The victorious First Pikes surged forward.

It was enough for the King of Delphos. His army's flank was turned, and already the rout was spreading to remaining foot archers. The king discreetly turned his mount to leave the field, issuing orders for a general withdrawal.

But there was no such thing as a general withdrawal from a close-quarter battlefield. The Karinthian troops up and down the line, seeing the enemy ready to withdraw, roared a victory cry and moved forward to slaughter their fellow men with unhindered abandon.

Nelson heaved a sigh of relief as his men sped past him to the fray. His gambit had worked. This, he thought, really was his kind of soldiering. Maybe he wasn't going to make such a bad officer after all.

Of course, there was still a matter of politics to be settled. Because when the Karinthian Army had voiced its victory cry, the words had not been, as tradition demanded, "For Karinth and Philemon!" The cry had been, "For Nelson and Karinth!"

Go to section 73.

— 73 —

The army's cry was prophetic.

The Council of Karinth quickly heard, as did every private citizen of Karinth, how the Commander Star Lord Nelson with his special cavalry unit had turned

certain defeat into victory, routing the army of Delphos and sending its king packing home much chastened.

Periclites was ecstatic.

"The war will continue next year, my friend, under your direction," the old man told the returning Commander. "You are to be the next Captain General of Karinth!"

"What?" Nelson said, not so shocked at his elevation to the supreme command, but hardly believing the war would be renewed the next year.

"Indeed," Periclites replied, beaming broadly. "Delphos will never let such a defeat go unavenged. They will certainly march against us next campaign season. And this time we will have a Captain General who can carry the war into their very streets!"

"Then the Council has already decided. . . ."

"The Council is ecstatic. But there is one small problem, a matter you need only be aware of. . . ."

"And that is?"

"We are proud of our democratic institutions. There are a handful, Philemon no doubt among them, who—"

"Who fear an army more loyal to its commander than to Karinth's somewhat corrupt institutions," Nelson finished for the old man. "Don't worry. I'm no Napoleon."

"Eh?"

"Uh, nothing. I mean, I have no political ambitions. The army will remain an instrument of the Council, not its ruler."

"I knew you would understand," Periclites said slyly. "Then . . ."

"Yes, yes. I'll order that the public demonstrations on my behalf by the troops cease. And I'll stop the nasty rumors about Philemon's abilities. Actually, he did pretty well until his fear of losing status overcame his military judgment."

"Ah, my son. Always you were a warrior. Now, you are developing the instincts of a politician. I am pleased."

"A politician!" Nelson exclaimed, laughing. "By

Yatar, I hope not!"

"And I," Dianah added.

Nelson wheeled to see her standing gracefully framed in an archway behind him. Her lovely body was both concealed and revealed by the clinging, long gown she had chosen for his homecoming. She glided into his arms, and he breathed in the soft scents of her.

"Welcome home, my warrior husband. The Council is not alone in awarding you some spoils for your victory."

Go to section 74.

— 74 —

"And so you'll keep our contact secret?"

"You have my word," Nelson replied. "And that's the word of the Captain General of Karinth." He couldn't suppress the laughter that sprang to his lips.

"Then that's the word of one Captain General to another, who also happens be Eqeta of Chelm, and who knows what else by the time I get back," Larry Warner replied, a smile playing around his own lips.

"Well, it beats being tortured by Cubans," Nelson said.

"Rog. I'll be leaving today, then," Warner said.

"Anything you need?"

"No. You've been a gracious host. Whatever you decide, good luck."

"Thanks," Nelson said, showing Warner to the door.

Nelson pondered long and hard on all that Warner had explained to him. One way or another, the people of the plains were doomed. Nelson had known that; but he hadn't expected it to start so soon. He knew Warner was right, though. He knew that from the army reports.

Throughout the winter months the stream of "barbarians" from the south had ever increased. Neither Delphos

nor Karinth could stem the flow. For the most part the cities were happy to let them pass on north, into the City States territories. But soon their numbers would increase. And then the seas would rise some more and the people of Karinth themselves would be forced to swell the tide of humanity streaming north, seeking high ground and food.

Food—that would be the problem. He could probably hold the city against the refugees, but where would the city get food? With the plains gone, the crops were gone. The kingdoms to the north would suffer famine themselves; no way to trade for food with them. To the west?

And that was just the beginning. Warner's revelations changed everything. The Shalnuksis had no intention of allowing human progress on Tran beyond a primitive technological level. Humans with technology were a threat! So, after they traded for their drug crop, which only grew for a few years out of every six hundred, they casually A-bombed Tran back to the Stone Age. Warner said they'd done it maybe three times, and they'd be sure to do it again.

What were the chances the city of Karinth could survive a few A-bombs tossed by the Shalnuksis? Not good, unless the place looked so deserted or so desolate that it wasn't worth bombing, Nelson decided.

Now Nelson understood the legends of the priests of Yatar, or Yatar-Opollos, as he was locally known. The "fire from the sky" made sense when you translated it into megatons.

First order of business: get some more financial support behind the Yatar people. Help them get those caves stocked for "the Time." The food would be needed. They'd never get enough stockpiled, but any surplus would help.

In the meantime, more immediate problems faced the Captain General of Karinth. Delphos was determined to wage war come spring, and Karinth had to be ready.

Nelson's spies, of course, were everywhere, and anywhere Nelson didn't have spies, his father-in-law Periclites did.

The reports they received weren't encouraging. The star lords from the north, those who weren't with the increasingly famous Lord Rick, Eqeta of Chelm, were now in the City States. Gengrich was establishing himself near Viys and sporting the title Lord of Zyphron; Mort Schultz had apparently set up shop in Rustengo as a leader of the local forces there.

Problem was, Gengrich and company might still be for hire. And Delphos would be hiring. Nelson knew better than to approach Gengrich with a proposal for a truce unless he could offer Gengrich better terms than Delphos. He couldn't.

True, Karinth was richer than Delphos and would be much harder to conquer. But if Gengrich knew all about the plans of the Shalnuksis, he'd realize that Karinth just might be a good place to be when the seas came up and the fire came down.

Too bad we can't work out an accommodation, Nelson thought. But the chances weren't good. The Council was already jumpy enough with Nelson around; star lords made great generals, but they were too hard to control to keep the politicians happy. No, the Council would never want Gengrich and his band in Karinth, he thought.

It all boiled down to one fact: in the spring Nelson must be prepared to lead an army against a foe that might include Gengrich and some of his other old comrades. It wasn't a pleasant prospect.

"My lord general, the artillery are ready for your inspection."

Nelson walked down the row of twelve cast-iron primitive cannon which had finally arrived—after much secret negotiating—from Rustengo. That city's iron crafters were renowned, and with the help of Periclites' gold, Nelson had succeeded in having cannon cast and

transported all the way to Karinth. They were a state secret—that meant that only half the army and all of the Council knew about them.

Gunpowder had been no problem; a small, well-guarded establishment in the heart of the city was turning out all that could be needed. But the impact of gunpowder on tactics was another problem.

First, Nelson had to train Jason so Jason could train the gunners. That meant Nelson had to figure out smoothbore cannon. Then he had to find men who could believe their use was honorable—some of the troops considered gunpowder weapons beneath contempt.

That problem was compounded when Nelson tried to recruit musketeers. It took the iron discipline imposed on the entire army by the Captain General to get the men to use the damned smoky things, much less learn the drill of firing, reloading, and cleaning the primitive weapons.

Then, some of the musket men had to be trained as skirmishers. This was an entirely alien kind of warfare for men who had spent a lifetime learning close-order drill with a pike and whose idea of battle was gutting another man hand-to-hand.

Finally, there were the grenadiers. Nelson wondered if Gengrich had thought of grenades, or worse, if he had any of the real thing left over. Nelson's grenades were simply hollow iron balls filled with powder with a simple wick-type fuse. They'd be useless in wet weather, and the grenadier unit had to have a number of specially-trained fire bearers. Most of the rest of the army considered the grenadiers nothing less than murderers and bandits: somehow the idea of tossing a small bomb at the enemy before closing with the sword seemed even more repugnant than mowing down his ranks at longer range with cannon and musketry.

The problems of tactics devoured most of Nelson's time. But there was still time for intrigue.

“I tell you, I did all I could to block his appointment. The artisans insisted. Without his approval, they would

withdraw their support from your husband's food-stockpiling scheme, the Yatar-tithe, or whatever he calls it. He assured me that that was of primary importance, although not even Yatar knows why."

"That man has tried to plant spies in our very household! How could you support him to retain a command?" Dianah snapped back at her father. "I wonder every day if Paul will be assassinated by one of Philemon's henchmen, or perhaps one of Aristides' paid thugs."

"My dear, I only did what I was told," Periclites responded weakly. Not that I liked it one bit, the old man thought. The military *was* going to remain subservient to the Council—but even with the captain general as my son-in-law, and even with the council virtually under my control, I can't seem to control him. So don't blame me for his mad schemes. "Your husband can be most insistent," he finally added.

"Dianah," Nelson called. "Your father has done the right thing."

"Don't tell me you want Philemon to have a command this spring?"

"No, I don't. I don't trust him at all, especially since I now hold the job he wants more than anything else on Tran. But if Philemon's appointment is the political price for the Yatar-tithe on food, then we just have to pay that price."

"Why? Why do you care how much food is stored in some priests' secret caves? I have worshipped the god faithfully all my life, but I see little sense in this imposed fanaticism. It sets the landowners against you, and the merchants and the artisans all resent the tax. . . ."

"The landowners owe my army their land, darling. And the rest will see my reasons soon enough." Nelson turned his head to avert his wife's questioning gaze. He had not yet had the heart to explain to her the dire cataclysm that was soon to end her world, a world of grace and beauty, perhaps the best world he had known, on Tran or on Earth.

Nor did he want to face its end himself. He wanted Karinth to survive, corrupt politics and all. He wanted his son or daughter, soon to be born, to grow up a Karinthian. Perhaps by shielding her from the awful truth, he shielded himself as well.

"My husband, your explanation is not sufficient. You know what Philemon has tried to do to you—to us!" Dianah's face pleaded with him to take strong action against this foe, a man who threatened the security of the new life that stirred within her. "Would you see me widowed, with you slain by treachery on the battlefield?"

"That won't happen, Dianah!" Nelson barked. "And I forbid you to speak of this matter to me again!"

"My lord general!"

Nelson didn't look up to acknowledge the aide; he was too buried in the administrative details on the papers before him to spare the time. At least, he told himself he was buried. In the quiet hours of the night he wondered if his preoccupation with work was an escape from the reality of his estrangement from Dianah. Since that winter day when they had talked of Philemon, an unbridgeable chasm had developed between them. They still spoke, still touched, still sometimes made love in the dark. But there was an intangible gap that Nelson could not bridge.

"Report," Nelson said crisply.

"My lord! Delphos marches!"

"Where and in what strength?"

"They approach our borders near the very spot where last we fought them, the great bridge at—"

"Yes, yes. What strength?"

"Some scouts report 15,000, though some others say as many as 20,000."

Nelson sighed. Accurate intelligence gathering was something it had proved impossible to teach.

"Are there star lords among them?"

"Our scouts did not say."

"My lord general!" a second aide cried, rushing into their presence. "The Council commands your attendance. They wish to know when you will march."

"Tell the Council for me, boy, that I march now. You, send me Jason, Philemon, Hectris, and the unit commanders."

Nelson surveyed the field carefully. The King of Delphos had learned a lot about maneuver somewhere, Nelson thought. Despite the Captain General's best efforts to place his own army between the Delphian force and their lines of communication with Delphos, the enemy had been able to pick the battlefield. That meant it held some advantage for them.

It didn't take Nelson long to discover the advantage. In the flat plains, even the gentlest of rises could become an obstacle to vision. The enemy had found a series of small rises, hardly worthy to be called hills, behind which his force could be largely concealed.

Nelson surveyed what he could see. To Nelson's extreme left was a small, twisted woods that anchored the enemy's right. A slight rise formed a hill to the right of the woods, and there Nelson could see a few clumps of musket-armed men in skirmishing order, interspersed between three primitive cannon not unlike his own. Beyond the hill, to the right, a long ridge extended along the enemy's front. It, too, was occupied by enemy skirmishers and artillery. In the gap between the hill and the rise, the enemy had placed a skirmish screen in front of a mixed force of musket-armed infantry and armored pikemen.

The enemy's left flank extended to a swollen stream and was held by typical light cavalry.

In front of his line the enemy had thrown out musket-armed skirmishers in two locations: an orchard, which stood well forward from the hill, and a villa, which stood about two hundred yards from the center gap that was apparently the center of the enemy position.

Behind the skirmishers and the guns, behind the hill and the ridge, Nelson had no way of knowing what enemy forces were deployed.

One thing's certain, Nelson decided. The muskets and the cannons mean that Gengrich is here.

Nelson's own force was drawn up in parade order, well back from the enemy front. He disposed of four large masses of mixed musketeers and pikes, with 4000 men in each formation. His musketeers formed a hollow square around his pikemen, and the pikes had been drilled in forming a kind of square to repel cavalry attacks. A few hundred musketeers from each of these blocks were trained to skirmish in open order, similar to the formation the enemy had strung across his own front. He had three bodies of 2000 light cavalry, and his ten cannon and 1000 grenadiers. As for star weapons, Nelson still had the Colt and the M-16, although he was almost out of ammo for the rifle.

The enemy's artillery were strung along his front. Nelson doubted that the enemy had many more guns; Delphos and Gengrich combined could hardly have afforded more than Karinth had bought. That probably meant the enemy intended to fight a defensive battle, nailing himself to his ridge line, forcing Nelson to launch exploratory attacks.

The ground was soggy; it was a bad field for cavalry maneuver, and the guns would be hard to work forward.

Political problems complicated Nelson's thinking: Jason, completely reliable, was in charge of the artillery. But Philemon had command of the Fourth Infantry and Third Cavalry. That Philemon hated Nelson was no secret; would he let his hatred influence his decisions on the battlefield?

Normally, Nelson would choose to open the battle by advancing a skirmish line and moving his artillery en masse toward the enemy center. Now he considered having Philemon launch a quick attack against the enemy's left flank, just to see early in the day how Philemon would perform.

Study Map 4 on following page.

If Nelson decides to send Philemon to attack the enemy right flank, go to section 75.

If Nelson chooses to advance on a broad front with skirmishers, massing his guns toward the enemy's apparent center, go to section 76.

— 75 —

“Tell Lord Commander Philemon to advance with Fourth Infantry and Third Cavalry against the enemy’s left flank,” Nelson ordered an aide. “He may take with him two guns.”

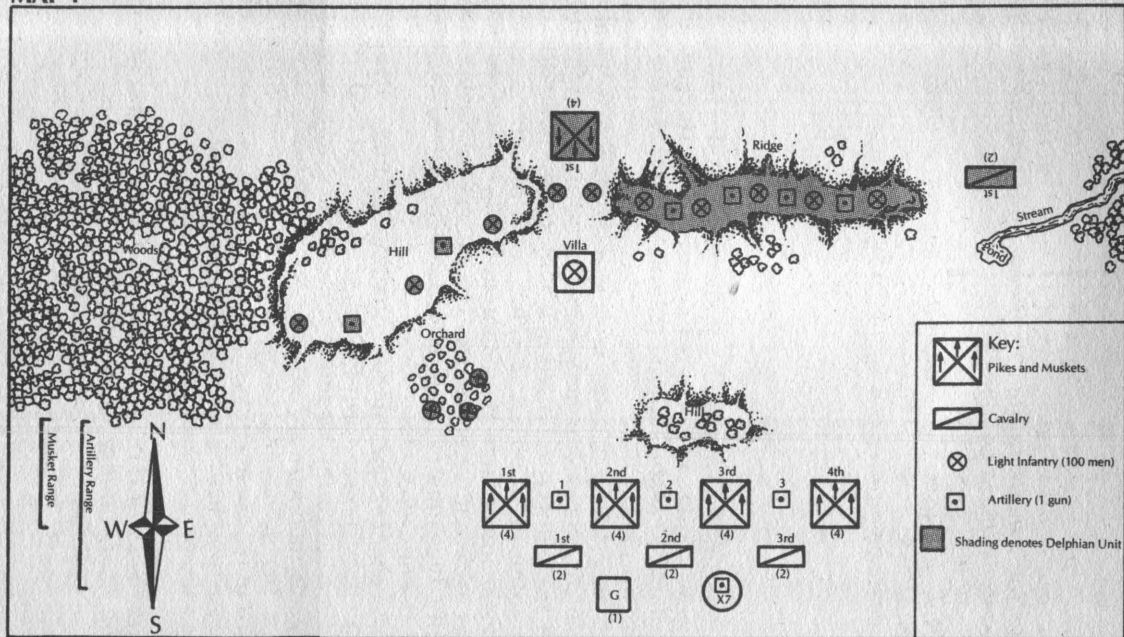
Twenty minutes later Nelson observed Philemon’s advance. His skirmishers came forward first from the Fourth Infantry, followed at about a hundred yards by the infantry mass itself. The large formation made directly toward the pond, intending to screen its own right with that water barrier. The cavalry followed to the left of the infantry, slightly echeloned, but still behind the skirmisher screen.

The enemy began his cannonade as the mass advanced into effective range, but Philemon never wavered; riding at the head of the infantry, he used his drawn sword to urge his men forward into the desultory fire.

As the advancing troop came within four hundred yards of the enemy lines, the enemy’s cavalry charged. As Nelson watched, his own troopers spurred forward to meet them.

At the start of this combat two enemy guns (Manpower value 2, Ordnance value 15) fire once on Chart C at the Fourth Infantry. Resolve this fire and record any casualties on the Battle of the Delphian Decision troop roster.

MAP 4



Then resolve melee combat between Nelson's Third Cavalry and the enemy First Cavalry. Nelson's cavalry attacks first. Continue this melee until one side or the other is eliminated.

If Nelson's cavalry is eliminated, go to section 77.

If Nelson's cavalry wins, go to section 79.

— 76 —

Carefully, Nelson ordered an advance against the enemy center. Skirmishers went forward from all four infantry formations, followed by the massed guns of his army. In effect, the entire army paraded forward, bringing the artillery to the front and center as they advanced. The advance took close to one hour and was not opposed by the enemy until the guns unlimbered within two hundred yards of the villa.

"My lord general!" an aide reported. "Skirmishing fire has broken out between our troops and the enemy in the villa. Our men report the villa is lightly held by musket men only."

"Jason, ignore the villa," Nelson ordered. "Pour your fire into their exact center. Aide, send word to all units to be ready to converge upon their center, depending upon the enemy's reaction to our fire."

Jason's cannon bombard the enemy's First Infantry. The cannon have a Manpower value of 10, an Ordnance value of 15, and fire on Chart D.

Resolve the fire. Note the number of casualties inflicted on the enemy and go to section 78.

— 77 —

The cavalry decision came quickly. As the equal masses collided, the sound of the shock rang across the field. The big guns were stilled; Philemon's cannon were still advancing slowly on the muddy ground, and the enemy guns couldn't fire into the melee.

But even at a distance from the action, Nelson heard the familiar crackle of small-arms fire over the din of clashing spears and shields.

He wasn't surprised, then, when despite Philemon's best efforts to rally them, the Third Cavalry turned and ran, leaving the Fourth Infantry horribly exposed to the wrath of the enemy's horsemen, or, if the enemy chose, his artillery.

"Order Philemon to withdraw in good order if he can," Nelson told an aide dryly.

A messenger spurred toward the scene of the fighting. Nelson heard a crash of musketry as Philemon's men poured a volley into the enemy cavalry.

Surprisingly, the enemy cavalry retired back to their original position, where they began to reform. Within minutes Fourth Infantry retired in good order back to its guns, which Philemon deployed on each side of the infantry mass.

"Well, what now?" Jason asked.

"Let's try the center," Nelson responded. "We'll advance the guns, massing just to our right of that villa. Second Infantry will clear out the villa, Third will support the guns. Second Cavalry will advance to support the infantry."

Nelson was surprised a second time. The enemy made no movement as his own center advanced. Second Infantry reached contact first, and moved forward behind its skirmishers toward the enemy-held villa.

Once again Nelson heard small-arms fire as his mas-

sive formation plunged forward out of sight into the smoke.

Second Infantry attacks the enemy in the villa. The enemy can fire once with an Attack Strength of 10 on Chart E before the Second Infantry attack.

Second Infantry have a Manpower of 4 and Melee value of 7. They attack on Chart C.

The enemy has a Manpower of 1 with a Melee value of 3. He attacks on Chart E.

Continue the fight until one side or the other is eliminated.

If Nelson's Second Infantry is eliminated, go to section 81.

If the enemy is eliminated, go to section 82.

— 78 —

Nelson scanned the confused mass of the enemy through the haze of powder smoke, trying to determine the effect of the artillery fire on the massed formation in the enemy's center. From his vantage point the formation looked almost shattered. But it was hard to tell through the smoke.

Nelson knew he faced a great decision. If the enemy formation was broken, a quick charge now could take the center.

But if the enemy wasn't broken, if he had willingly sacrificed this unit to lure Nelson into an overeager attack, disaster could await his men behind the ridge and the hill.

The choice was simple: a sudden thrust to end the

battle quickly, or a long battle of attrition until the enemy revealed more of his strength. The latter choice was more conservative, but carried the possibility that his own attacking forces would weaken and rout.

If Nelson orders an all-out, immediate assault on the enemy center, go to section 86.

If he chooses a conservative approach, go to section 80.

— 79 —

As Philemon's horse collided with the enemy mass, Nelson heard the sound of small-arms fire. The big guns were stilled; the enemy's dared not fire into the melee, and Philemon's guns were still advancing, their crews urging the heavy wooden carriages forward over the soggy ground.

The clash ended quickly; from what Nelson could see, Philemon's lancers outclassed the enemy cavalry completely. But how could the small-arms fire be explained? Had Gengrich developed some kind of dragoon musket?

He watched and worried as Philemon led his victorious horsemen onward, disappearing finally behind the enemy's ridge.

Minutes later a single rider spurred at the gallop back around the ridge, heading straight for Nelson.

"My lord general! They have no force behind the ridge. Commander Philemon sends his compliments and word that the enemy commander, Gengrich, wishes to parley!"

Go to section 83.

— 80 —

Slowly, Nelson's forces advanced toward the enemy center, fanning out and making a cautious, combined-arms attack.

The battle dragged on for two hours; artillery thundered, cavalry charged and countercharged; the villa changed hands twice.

Finally Nelson sent forward his last reserve, his grenadier formation, to hit the front of the enemy's last remaining undamaged infantry block.

"Grenadiers, this is the moment of decision. Follow me to glory!" Nelson shouted above the constant din of artillery, small arms, and the screams of dying men.

Placing himself at the head of the small unit, Nelson led them forward.

First, the enemy's Second Infantry fires once at Nelson's force. Any casualty result eliminates Nelson's force. The enemy fires with a Manpower value of 4, and an Ordnance value of 5 on Chart D.

If Nelson's force isn't eliminated by the fire, the grenadiers lob their grenades. The grenades have a Manpower value of 1 and an Ordnance value of 10. Their result is obtained from Chart B.

Reduce the enemy infantry's Morale value by 1 for each casualty they suffer. Then roll two dice.

If the result is greater than the adjusted Morale value, go to section 85.

If the result is lower than the adjusted Morale value, go to section 84.

— 81 —

A few minutes after Second Infantry entered the clouds of smoke around the villa, Nelson saw routed elements of the unit streaming back toward him.

Damn it! What is going on? I've got to see for myself, he decided.

He gathered a small troop of one hundred horsemen from First Cavalry and galloped forward, intent on observing the enemy's deployment in the villa for himself.

He thought it odd as he entered the smoky haze that the enemy was holding his fire. Then, in the distance, he saw the answer.

It was the last thing he saw.

Go to section 29.

— 82 —

Ten minutes after his infantry disappeared into the haze around the villa, Nelson saw a single rider, an aide, gallop out of the black mist straight toward him.

"My lord general!" the aide cried. "Commander Hectris of the Second Infantry sends his compliments and word that our advanced skirmishers have seen the enemy's deployment. There is no force behind the ridge! Commander Hectris has taken the enemy leader Gengrich, who pleads to parley with you!"

Go to section 83.

— 83 —

“Hey, Nelson. How’s it going?” Gengrich laughed as Nelson approached.

“Mind explaining how you made me and my scouts think you had some 15,000 troops, Arnie? And why?”

“The king of Delphos was willing to pay good money up front for a star lord force. We told him we couldn’t beat a large army; he knew the score. But he wouldn’t listen. So we gave it our best shot.

“Remember how Rommel fooled the British with cardboard dummies back in North Africa in World War Two? We did the same thing. We’ve got maybe a little more than 2000 troops here, but aside from the gunners, they’re all junk.

“So, whatcha’ gonna’ do with us, Nelson? Remember, I got rank!”

Nelson burst out laughing.

Go to section 87.

— 84 —

The charge of the grenadiers was the last effort for Nelson’s tired army. When the remaining troops heard the cry go up announcing Nelson’s death, they panicked and ran, with the usual results. The Delphians finished the slaughter by nightfall.

Nelson didn’t live to see the end; a musket ball took him in the chest and he died minutes later.

Go to section 29.

— 85 —

Nelson never knew how his grenadiers survived the withering fire from the enemy muskets. Somehow, a handful of them did, and closed to within fifteen yards of the enemy.

Their fire bearers lowered their sheltered torches, the grenadiers lit their fuses, and even as another volley of musketry felled dozens, they tossed their grenades. They waited for five seconds, then charged forward with swords drawn.

"I tell you, Nelson. We never expected them grenades," Gengrich said.

"Nevertheless, you fought a hell of a battle."

"Yeah. But when our pike boys heard those explosions and saw their buddies flying into pieces all around them, they broke. You carried the field, and you captured me."

"Sure beats being captured by the Cubans, doesn't it, my Lord of Zyphron?"

"Sure as hell does, my lord general."

Go to section 87.

— 86 —

"Second and Third Infantry, and Second Cavalry, at the enemy center, charge!" Nelson ordered.

This was it, an all-out assault that could carry the day in minutes or . . .

Nelson galloped to place himself at the head of the Second Cavalry and lumbered forward with them. They entered the haze of smoke that hid the enemy's heart from view, and then Nelson let out a cry of victory!

"Wheel left and attack!" he shouted.

The enemy's center had been decimated by the artillery fire, and the remnants of the infantry formation were streaming to the rear as the Second Cavalry advanced. Once behind the ridge and the hill, Nelson saw the open flanks of the enemy's army stretching before him.

As his cavalry wheeled into the nearest unit, Hectris brought up the Second Infantry and instinctively wheeled them right to broaden the rip in the enemy's center.

The slaughter went on until nightfall, when Gengrich came forward from the enemy's remnants to surrender.

Go to section 87.

— 87 —

"And so you see, darling, why I couldn't bring myself to tell you—"

"Hush," Dianah said softly, cradling Nelson's head in her arms. Nearby, Nelson's son made happy gurgling sounds.

"What do you think we should do?" Nelson asked.

"What do you think we should do?" Dianah repeated the question, kissing him gently on the lips.

"Well," Nelson began, pulling himself to his feet. "The settlement with Delphos increased the food stockpiles considerably. We might have enough to last a population of several hundred for two years. You can see that's nowhere near enough.

"My scouts who've gone west over the mountains report a rough and strange land, with semi-nomadic warriors who seem to be pretty skilled in their own style of warfare. But the land might support a larger population. Of course, if we sent colonists there, we'd have to

find a way to transport food over the mountains—not a great prospect.”

“And if we accept your former captain’s offer?” Dianah asked.

“Then we head for Drantos and join the others. Galloway expects that sooner or later Gengrich will join him; Schultz too. Especially now that Rustengo is going underwater. We’d be well-treated.”

“And what would you be?”

“A husband, a father, and a soldier, like I’ve always wanted to be.”

“But not a Captain General?”

“Well, no . . .”

“I am a Karinthian,” Dianah said softly. “My son, our son, is a Karinthian. We belong here. We should share the fate of the city. And you should take the burdern of leadership, which you have borne so well already.”

“Dianah, I just don’t know.”

“Then know this, my Captain General. Whatever you decide, whether our fate be the west lands, the cold castles of Drantos, or death from the sky fire when it falls, you will be with me. I am independent and proud. But a Karinthian wife knows her duty.”

“Thank you,” Nelson said quietly.

He walked onto the balcony and surveyed the mountains to the west.

I don’t know anything but soldiering, he thought. Or do I?

APPENDIX A

FIRST BATTLE OF KARINTH TROOP ROSTER

Star Lord Nelson's Host

First Horse Archers (Critos)

Manpower	5	(50)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	2						
Melee	2						
Morale	10						

Second Horse Archers

Manpower	5	(50)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	2						
Melee	2						
Morale	10						

Third Horse Archers

Manpower	5	(50)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	2						
Melee	2						
Morale	10						

Light Cavalry

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	5						
Morale	10						

First Pikes (Doron)

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	7						
Morale	11						

Second Pikes (Balquhor)

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	7						
Morale	11						

Catapults

Manpower	5		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	20						
Melee	3						
Morale	11						

KARINTHIAN ARMY—Lord General Hectris, Commanding

First Pikes

Manpower	80	(800)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	7						
Morale	9						

Second Pikes

Manpower	80	(800)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	7						
Morale	8						

Third Pikes

Manpower	80	(800)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	7						
Morale	8						

Third Cavalry (Philemon)

Manpower	80	(800)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	5						
Morale	7						

Fourth Cavalry

Manpower	80	(800)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	5						
Morale	7						

Slings

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	2						
Melee	1						
Morale	6						

First Archers

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	3						
Melee	2						
Morale	6						

Second Archers

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	3						
Melee	2						
Morale	6						

Third Archers

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	3						
Melee	2						
Morale	6						

First Swordsmen

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	4						
Morale	6						

Second Swordsmen

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	4						
Morale	6						

Third Swordsmen

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	4						
Morale	6						

Fourth Swordsmen

Manpower	10	(100)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	4						
Morale	6						

APPENDIX B

SECOND BATTLE OF KARINTH TROOP ROSTER

NOTE: This roster shows only the troops needed to conduct those portions of the battle in which Nelson's force participated.

KARINTHIAN ARMY

Philemon, Captain General of Karinth

Commander Star Lord Nelson's Reserve

Third and Fourth Karinthian Cavalry

Manpower	2	(2000)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	2						
Melee	5						
Morale	10						

Flying Catapults

Manpower	10	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	10					
Melee	–	Negligible				
Morale	10					

DELPHIAN ARMY

King of Delphos

First Cavalry

Manpower	1	(1000)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	5						
Morale	7						

First Horse Archers

Manpower	1	(1000)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	2						
Melee	2						
Morale	7						

Second Horse Archers

Manpower	1	(1000)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	5						
Morale	7						

First Archers

Manpower	1	(1000)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	3						
Melee	2						
Morale	6						

First Pikes

Manpower	3	(3000)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	8						
Morale	10						

APPENDIX C

TROOP ROSTER—Section 74

Use these values for troops in the battle beginning in section 74, unless otherwise instructed.

KARINTHIAN FORCES ENGAGED

ALL CAVALRY UNITS

Manpower	2	(2000)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	0						
Melee	5						
Morale	10						

ALL INFANTRY FORCES

Manpower	4	(4000)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ordnance	5						
Melee	8						
Morale	10						

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